

WIZARD'S APPRENTICE

By Delia Sherman

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THERE'S AN EVIL WIZARD living in Dahoe, Maine. It says so, on the sign hanging outside his shop:

Evil Wizard Books

Z. Smallbone, prop.

His shop is also his house, which looks just like an Evil Wizard's house ought to look. It's big and tumbledown, with a porch all around it and fancy carving on the eaves. It even has a tower in which a light glows balefully red at hours when an ordinary bookseller would be asleep. There are shelves and shelves of large, moldy-smelling, dusty leather books. Bats nest in its roof, and ravens and owls nest in the pine that huddle around it.

The cellar is home to a family of foxes.

And then there's the Evil Wizard himself. Zachariah Smallbone. I ask you, is that any kind of name for an ordinary bookseller? He even looks evil. His hair is an explosion of dirty gray; his beard is a yellow-white thicket; his eyes glitter behind little iron-rimmed glasses. He always wears an old-fashioned rusty-black coat and a top hat, furry with age and broken down on one side.

There are rumors about what he can do. He can turn people into animals, they say, and vice versa. He can give you fleas or cramps or make your house burn down. He can hex you into splitting your own foot in two instead of a log into kindling. He can kill with a word or a look if he has mind to.

It's no wonder, then, that the good people of Dahoe, Maine, make a practice of leaving Mr. Smallbone pretty much alone. Tourists, who don't know any better,

occasionally go into his shop to look for bargains. They generally come out faster than they went in, and they never come back.

Every once in a blue moon, Mr. Smallbone employs an assistant. A scruffy-haired kid will appear one day, sweeping the porch, bringing in wood, feeding the chickens. And then, after a month or a year, he'll disappear again. Some say Smallbone turns them into bats or ravens or owls or foxes, or boils their bones for his evil spells. Nobody knows and nobody asks. It's not like they're local kids, with families people know and care about. They all come from away foreign—Canada or Vermont or Massachusetts—and they probably deserve whatever happens to them. If they were good boys, they wouldn't be working for an Evil Wizard, would they?

Well, it all depends what you call a good boy.

According to his uncle, Nick Chanticleer was anything but. According to his uncle, Nick Chanticleer was a waste of a bed and three meals a day: a sneak, a liar, a lazy good-for-nothing.

To give Nick's uncle his due, this was a fair description of Nick's behavior. But since Nick's uncle waled the tar out of him at least once a day and twice on Sundays no matter what, Nick couldn't see any reason to behave better. He stole hot dogs from the fridge because his uncle didn't feed him enough. He stole naps behind the woodpile because his uncle worked him too hard. He lied like a rug because sometimes he could fool his uncle into hitting someone else instead of him.

Whenever he saw the chance, he ran away.

He never got very far. For someone with such low opinion of Nick's character, his uncle was strangely set on keeping him around. Family should stick together—which meant he needed Nick to do all the cooking. For a kid, Nick was a pretty good cook. Nick's uncle also liked having somebody around to bully. In any case, he always tracked Nick down and brought him back home.

On Nick's eleventh birthday, he ran away again. He made a bologna and Wonder Bread sandwich and wrapped it in a checked handkerchief. When his uncle was asleep, he let himself quietly out the back door and set out walking.

Nick walked all through the night, cutting through the woods and staying away from towns. At dawn, he stopped and ate half the bologna and Wonder Bread. At noon, he ate the rest. That afternoon, it began to snow.

By nightfall, Nick was freezing, soaked and starving. Even when the moon rose, it was black dark under the trees, and full of strange rustling and squeakings. Nick was about ready to cry from cold and fear and weariness when he saw a red light, high up and far away through the snow and bare branches.

Nick followed the light to a paved road and a mailbox and a wooden sign, its words half veiled with snow. Beyond the sign was a driveway and a big, shadowy house lurking behind the pine trees. Nick stumbled up the porch steps and banged on the heavy front door with hands numb with cold. Nothing happened for what seemed a very long time. Then the door flew open with a shriek of uncoiled hinges.

“What do you want?”

It was an old man’s voice, crotchety and suspicious. Given a choice, Nick would have turned right around and gone somewhere else. As it was, Nick said, “Something to eat and a place to rest. I’m about frozen solid.”

The old man peered at him, dark eyes glittering behind small round glasses. “Can you read, boy?”

“What?”

“Are you deaf, or just stupid? Can you *read*?”

Nick took in the old guy’s wild hair and wilder beard, his old-fashioned coat and his ridiculous top hat. None of these things made Nick willing to part with even a little piece of truth about himself. “No. I can’t.”

“You sure?” the old man handed him a card. “Take a look at this.”

Nick took the card, turned it upside down and around, then handed it back to the old man with a shrug, very glad that he’d lied to him.

The card said:

Evil Wizard Books
Zachariah Smallbone, proprietor
Arcana, Alchemy, Animal Transformation
Speculative Fiction
Monday-Saturday. By Chance and by Appointment

Mr. Smallbone peered at him through his round glasses. “Humph. You’re letting the cold in. Close the door behind you. And leave your boots by the door. I can’t have you tracking up the floor.”

That was how Nick came to be the Evil Wizard’s new apprentice.

At first he just thought he was doing some chores in return for food and a night’s shelter. But next morning, after a breakfast of oatmeal and maple syrup, Mr. Smallbone handed him a broom and a feather duster.

“Clean the front room,” he said. “Floor and books and shelves. Every speck of dirt, mind, and every trace of dust.”

Nick gave it his best, but sweep as he might, the front room was no cleaner by the end of the day than it was when he started.

“That won’t do at all,” said the Wizard. “You’ll have to try again tomorrow. You’d best cook supper—there’s the makings for scrapple in the icebox.”

Since the snow had given way to a breath-freezing cold snap, Nick wasn’t too unhappy with this turn of events. Mr. Smallbone might be an Evil Wizard, ugly as homemade sin, and vinegar-tongued with it. But a bed is a bed and food is food. If things got bad, he could always run away.

After days of sweeping, the front room was, if anything, dirtier than it had been.

“I’ve met dogs smarter than you.” Smallbone yelled. “I should turn you into one, sell you at the county fair. You must have some kind of brain, or you wouldn’t be able to talk. Use it, boy. I’m losing patience.”

Figuring it was only a matter of time before Mr. Smallbone started to beat up on him, Nick decided it was time to run away from Evil Wizard Books. He took some brown bread and home-cured ham from the icebox, wrapped it and his flashlight in his checked handkerchief, and crept out the back door. The driveway was shoveled, and Nick tiptoed down it, toward the main road...

And found himself on the porch again, going in the back door.

At dawn, Mr. Smallbone found Nick walking in the back door for the umpteenth time.

“Running way?” Mr. Smallbone smiled unpleasantly, his teeth like hard yellow tiles in his bushy beard.

“Nope,” Nick said. “Just wanted some air.”

“There’s air inside the house,” Mr. Smallbone said.

“Too dusty”.

“If you don’t like the dust,” Mr. Smallbone said, “you’d best get rid of it, hadn’t you?”

Desperate, Nick used his brain, as instructed. He started to look into the books he was supposed to be cleaning to see if they held any clues to the front room’s stubborn dirt. He learned a number of interesting things, including how to cast fortunes by looking at a sheep’s liver, but nothing that seemed useful for cleaning dirty rooms. Finally, behind a chair he’d swept under a dozen times before, he found a book called *A Witch’s Manual of Practical Housekeeping*.

He stuffed it under his sweater and smuggled it upstairs to read. It told him not only that there was a spell of chaos on the front room but how to break it. Which he did, taking a couple of days over it, and making a lot of noise with brooms and buckets to cover up his spell-casting.

When the front room sparkled, he showed it to Mr. Smallbone. “Humph,” said Mr. Smallbone. “You did this all yourself, did you?”

“Yep.”

“Without help?”

“Yep. Can I leave now?”

Mr. Smallbone gave Nick the vilest smile in his repertoire. “Nope. The woodbox is empty. Fill it.”

Nick wasn’t at all surprised when the woodbox proved as impossible to fill as the front room had been to clean. He found the solution to that problem in a volume shoved out of line with the books around it, which also taught him about carrying water in colanders and filling buckets with holes in them.

When the woodbox was full, Mr. Smallbone found other difficult tasks for Nick to do, like sorting a barrel of white and wild rice into separate jars, building a stone wall in a single day, and turning a branch of holly into a rose. By the time Nick had mastered these skills, it was spring, and he didn’t want to run away anymore. He wanted to keep learning magic.

It’s not that he’d gotten to like Mr. Smallbone any better—Nick still thought he was crazy and mean and ugly. But if Mr. Smallbone yelled and swore, there were always

plenty of blankets on Nick's bed and food on his plate. And if he turned Nick into a raven or a fox when the fit took him, he never raised a hand to him.

Over summer and fall, Nick taught himself how to turn into any animal he wanted. November brought the first snows and Nick's twelfth birthday. Nick made his favorite meal of baked beans and franks to celebrate. He was just putting the pot to bake when Mr. Smallbone shuffled into the kitchen.

"I hope you made enough for three," he said. "Your uncle's on his way."

Nick closed the oven door. "I better move on, then," he said.

"Won't help," said Mr. Smallbone. "He'll always find you in the end. Blood kin are hard to hide from."

Round about dusk, Nick's uncle pulled into the driveway of Evil Wizards Books in his battered old pickup. He marched up the front steps and banged on the door fit to knock it down. When Mr. Smallbone answered, he put a beefy hand on the old man's chest and shoved him back into the shop.

"I know Nick's here," he said. "So don't go telling me you ain't seen him."

"Wouldn't think of it," said Mr. Smallbone. "He's in the kitchen"

But all Nick's Uncle saw in the warm, bright kitchen was four identical black Labrador puppies tumbling under the wooden table.

"What in tarnation is going on here?" Nick's uncle's face grew red and ugly. "Where my nephew at?"

"One of these puppies is your nephew," said Mr. Smallbone. "If you choose the wrong puppy, you go away and don't come back. if you choose the right one, you win two more chances to recognize him. Choose the right one three times in a row, and you can have him."

"What's to stop me from taking him right now?"

"Me," said Mr. Smallbone. His round glasses glittered evilly; his bushy beard bristled.

"And who are you?"

"I'm the Evil Wizard." Mr. Smallbone spoke quietly, but his words echoed through the uncle's brain like a thunderclap.

"You're a weird old geezer is what you are," said the uncle. "I oughta turn you in to the county authorities for kidnapping. But I'll be a sport." He squatted down by

the puppies and started to roughhouse with them. The puppies nipped at his hands, wagging their tails and barking—all except one, which cringed away from him, whining. Nick’s uncle grabbed the puppy by the scruff of the neck, and it turned into a wild-looking boy with black hair and angry black eyes.

“You always was a little coward,” his uncle said. But he said it into thin air, because Nick had disappeared.

“Once,” Mr. Smallbone said.

Next he took Nick’s uncle to a storeroom full of boxes, where four identical fat spiders sat in the centers of four identical fine, large webs.

“One of these spiders is your nephew.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Nick’s uncle. “Shut up and let me concentrate.” He studied each spider and each web carefully, once and then a second time, sticking his nose right up to the webs for a better look and muttering angrily under his breath. Three of the spiders curled their legs into knots. The fourth ignored him.

Nick’s uncle laughed nastily. “This one.”

Nick appeared, crouched beneath the web, looking grim. His uncle made a grab for him, but he was gone.

“Twice,” Mr. Smallbone said.

“What’s next?” demanded Nick’s uncle. “I ain’t got all night.”

Mr. Smallbone lit an oil lamp and led him outside. It was cold and dark now, and the wind smelled of snow. In a pine tree near the woodpile was a nest of four fine young ravens, just fledged and ready to fly. The big man looked them over. He tried to bring his face up close, but the young ravens cawed raucously and pecked at him with their strong, yellow beaks. He jerked back, cursing, and pulled his hunting knife out of his pocket.

Three of the raves kept crawling and pecking; the fourth hopped onto the edge of the nest and spread its wings. Nick’s uncle grabbed it before it could take off.

“This one,” he said.

Nick struggled to shake off his uncle’s embrace. But when Mr. Smallbone gave a tiny sign and said, “Thrice. He is yours,” Nick stopped struggling and stood quietly, his face a mask of fury.

Nick's uncle insisted on leaving right away, refusing to stay for the baked beans. He dragged Nick out to his battered pickup, threw him inside, and drove away.

The first town they came to, there was a red light. They stopped, and Nick made a break for it. His uncle jerked him back inside, slammed the door, whipped out a length of rope, and tied Nick's hands and feet. They drove on. Suddenly it began to snow.

It wasn't an ordinary snowstorm—more like someone had dumped a bucket of snow onto the road in front of them, all at once. The truck swerved, skidded, and stopped with a crunch of metal. Cursing blue murder, Nick's uncle got out of the cab and went around front to see what the damage was.

Quick as thinking, Nick turned himself into a fox. A fox's paws being smaller than a boy's hands and feet, he slipped free of the rope without trouble. He leaned on the door handle with all his weight, but the handle wouldn't budge. Before he could think what to do next, his uncle opened the door. Nick nipped out under his arm and made off into the woods.

When Nick's uncle saw a young fox running away from him into the trees, he didn't waste any time wondering whether that fox was his nephew. He just grabbed his shotgun and took off after him.

It was a hectic chase through the woods in the dark and snow. If Nick had been used to being a fox, he'd have lost his uncle in no time flat. But he wasn't really comfortable running on four legs, and he wasn't woodwise. He was just a twelve-year-old boy in a fox's shape, scared out of his mind and running for his life.

The world looked odd from down so low and his nose told him things he didn't understand. A real fox would have known he was running toward water. A real fox would have known the water was frozen hard enough to take his weight, but not the weight of the tall, heavy man crashing through the undergrowth behind him. A real fox would have led the man onto the pond on purpose.

Nick did it by accident.

He ran across the middle of the pond, where the ice was thin. Hearing the ice break, he skidded to a stop and turned to see his uncle disappear with a splash and a shout of fury. The big man surfaced and scabbled at the ice, gasping and waving his shotgun. He looked mad enough to chew up steel and spit out nails.

Nick turned tail and ran. He ran until his pads were sore and bruised and he ached all over. When he slowed down, he noticed that another fox was running beside him—an older fox, a fox that smelled oddly familiar.

Nick flopped down on the ground, panting.

“Well, that was exciting,” the fox that was Mr. Smallbone said dryly.

“He was going to shoot me,” Nick said.

“Probably. That man hasn’t got the brain of a minnow, tearing off into the dark like that. Deserves whatever happened to him, if you ask me.”

Nick felt a most unfoxlike pinch of horror. “Did I kill him?”

“I doubt it,” Mr. Smallbone said. “Duck pond’s not more than a few feet deep. He might catch his death of cold, though.”

Nick felt relief, then a new terror. “Then he’ll come after me again!”

Mr. Smallbone’s foxy grin was sharp. “Nope.”

After a little pause, Nick decided not to ask Mr. Smallbone if he was sure about that. Mr. Smallbone was an Evil Wizard, after all, and Evil Wizards don’t like it if their apprentices ask too many questions.

Mr. Smallbone stood up and shook himself. “If we want to be back by sunrise, we’d best be going. That is, if you want to come back.”

Nick gave him a puzzled look.

“You won your freedom,” Mr. Smallbone said. “You might want to use it to live with somebody ordinary, learning an ordinary trade.”

Nick stood up and stretched his sore legs. “Nope,” he said. “Can we have oatmeal and maple syrup for breakfast?”

“If you cook it,” said Mr. Smallbone.

There’s an Evil Wizard living in Dahoe, Maine. It says so on the sign hanging outside his shop. Sometimes tourists stop by, looking for a book on the occult or a cheap thrill.

In the kitchen, two men bend over a table strewn with books, bunches of twigs, and bowls of powder. The younger one has tangled black hair and bright black eyes. He is tall and very skinny, like he’s had a recent growth spurt. The other man is old enough to be his father, but not his grandfather. He is clean-shaven and his head is bald.

The doorbell clangs. The younger man glances at the other.

“Don’t look at me,” says the older man. “I was the Evil Wizard last time. And my rheumatism is bothering me. You go.”

“What you mean,” says Nick, “is that you’re halfway through a new spell and don’t want to be interrupted.”

“If you wont respect my authority, apprentice, I’m going to have to turn you into a cockroach.”

The bell clangs again. Mr. Smallbone the older bends over his book, his hands already reaching for a pile of black dust. Nick grabs a top hat with a white wig attached to it and crams it over his black curls. He hooks a bushy beard over his ears and perches a pair or steel-rimmed glasses on his nose. Throwing on a rusty black coat, he rushes to the front room, where he hunches his shoulders and begins to shuffle. By the time he reaches the door, he looks about a hundred years old.

The door flies open with the creak of unoiled hinges.

“What do you want?” the Evil Wizard Smallbone snaps.