

The Mage

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The old mage approached the edge of the village, having walked from distant lands. He was old, bent, and leaned heavily on a staff that was as old and bent as he was, and worn smooth where he had gripped it for uncounted years. As he moved slowly through the village, people who saw him knew him at once for a traveling mage. Traveling mages were few but people who saw one always told the tale, so traveling mages were known.

He approached the end of the market street. The village lacked a market square, but the market street served the same purpose. Along one side, it was lined with shops of many kinds and sizes. On the other side was a wide verge, always cleared on the evening of the day before market day. It was used for stalls of wares and pens of animals, for sale or for trade. Some locations on it had been used by members of the same family for many generations. The verge was always cleared by sunset, for it was used on the following day for sacred observances. These long-held customs were never violated.

As the old mage made his slow way along the market street, people moved respectfully out of his way, and watched in respectful silence as he passed. He moved in an island of silence. Whispers followed. Near the center of the market street was a shop filled with objects of wood, objects large and small, decorative or useful, utensils, cabinets, all manner of things made from wood. The shopkeeper, a master craftsman, and his apprentice, worked at benches at the back of the shop. From there, they could watch the front of the shop, at which there was a long table, on which were displayed various objects for sale.

The shopkeeper and his apprentice heard the island of silence as it reached the front of the shop. The old mage approached the table, laid his old staff on it, and leaned on the table, tired. He sighed in relief. The shopkeeper and his apprentice rose from their work and made their way through the cluttered shop to the front. The shopkeeper stopped a respectful distance from the mage. His apprentice stopped a respectful distance behind his master.

The old mage rested for a few moments, then raised his gaze to look around the shop. The shopkeeper and his apprentice stepped aside, to give the mage full view. The mage was impressed by the work. Indeed, the shop was well known. It's fame had traveled far. Occasionally, even visiting lords or famous warriors had visited the shop. The mage looked around for a few moments and then his gaze fell on a staff, long and straight, finely made, covered with beautiful carvings. It leaned in the back corner of the shop. When the shopkeeper saw where the mage looked, he felt a pang of regret, for he had hoped to get a goodly price for that staff, maybe from a visiting lord or a famous warrior. But, one does not say no to a mage. Hiding his sorrow, the shopkeeper made his way through the clutter, to the back of his shop. He handled the staff carefully, so as not to mar its perfect finish, the result of uncounted hours of careful work. He laid the staff gently on the table, in front of the mage. The mage reached out and touched it with the end of a finger.

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“This,” he said, “is a wonderful staff. Much could be done with it. Much power could it hold.” Hiding his disappointment at its loss, the shopkeeper said, “It is yours, mage.”

For the first time, the mage showed some animation, and straightened slightly “No!” he exclaimed, and again, “No! I would never take such a thing as this from its rightful maker, unless I first paid him its fair price! What is your price, shopkeeper?”

The shopkeeper, taken aback by the outburst, gulped and tried to speak, but didn’t have a ready answer. The mage glanced to the side, where the shopkeeper of the adjacent shop was watching. At the glance from the mage, that shopkeeper wished that he had been elsewhere, but too late. “You!” the mage exclaimed. “You know this man! What price would he ask for such a treasure as this?” That shopkeeper, too, hesitated. “Well now,” asked the mage in exasperation, “Have we here a market of mutes? What price?”

The shopkeeper next door found his voice, for it wasn’t his own price that was asked, but that of the master craftsman in wood. “I think,” he announced, “that he would take no less than 60 pennies for such a prize!”

The mage turned back to the maker of the staff. “Is that your price? Sixty pennies?” The shopkeeper nodded confirmation. The mage reached within his worn and tattered garment and took from some hiding place therein a leathern bag, drawn and tied with a small cord. He opened the bag and pored onto the table top some pennies. He counted out 60 of them, put what remained back into the bag, pulled and tied the cord, and returned the bag to his garment. He picked up his new staff and stood it on its end. He thumped it against the ground once, just for good measure.

The shopkeeper handed the coins to his apprentice, who dropped them into a pocket of his work apron. “Take them,” said the shopkeeper, with a gesture. The apprentice looked uneasy at having so many pennies in his possession, and under the gaze of so many people in the large crowd that had gathered. Nevertheless, he walked back to his bench and brought forth a cudgel. He made as if to walk around the end of the table but the mage leaned his new staff sideways, blocking the way. “Wait,” he said, and reaching out, he touched both the cudgel and the arm that held it. They both sparkled for a moment. There was a murmur of wonder from the crowd. After the story was told around the region, none of the local toughs would be so foolish as to confront this particular apprentice, not when both arm and cudgel had been touched by a mage.

The apprentice, no longer nervous, strode away toward whatever secret place he and his master used to hide their coins. The mage reached out and pushed his old staff across the table, toward the shopkeeper. “Here,” he said. “In addition you

shall have this. It has been depleted of magic these many years but, even so, it was the staff of a mage and so might have some small value to you.”

The shopkeeper was astonished at such a gift, an actual staff of an actual traveling mage, and a whole street full of witnesses to verify it! He reached for his wonderful staff but the mage said, “Wait,” and he touched the staff with the end of a finger. It sparkled briefly, and there were more murmurs from the crowd. He said, “Now, you may sell it if you wish, but nobody will be able to steal it from you.” The shopkeeper picked it up and carried it carefully past the many items of wood that cluttered his shop, and leaned it in the same corner that had held the other staff. He turned, trying to think of some words that would adequately thank the mage, but the mage had already turned and was walking away. It seemed that he walked a little faster than before, and stood a little straighter. It seemed that he leaned less heavily on his new staff than he had leaned on the old one. It was a topic of debate for many years thereafter.

As he made his slow way to the other end of the market street, people moved respectfully aside, and watched in respectful silence as he passed. He moved in an island of silence. Whispers followed.

The old mage made his way to the edge of the village. There, he stopped and rested for a while, under a tree. Some people believed that he slept. Others believed that he meditated. For years thereafter, it was a subject of debate. After a while, he stood, turned, and without a backward glance, walked away from the village, toward distant lands.

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