

JOHN K. (KINDER) PRICE

by Gene Wolfe

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Born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, April 3, 1873. The family moved to Dalton, Massachusetts in 1878. Price left school in 1889 and took a job in the shoe factory where he worked for 47 years before retiring as a foreman. In 1894, he married Amy (Prescott) Price. A son, James, died in 1895 shortly after birth, Mrs. Price in 1938.

Following her death, Price seemed to be at loose ends and experimented with a number of activities and hobbies; these included building ship models and stamp collecting. In 1939, he announced to a friend that he had discovered a pastime that would hold his interest for the remainder of his life: searching for a book of spells mentioned in a pulp magazine he had happened upon in a barbershop (believed to have been Ray & Bill's in Dalton). When the friend ventured to point out that the book so mentioned might not in fact exist, Price told him he was sure it did not, and it was this certainty of its non-existence that underlay the charm of the search. Because the book did not exist, he could neither fail nor end the search by discovering a copy.

During the following years, Price became a familiar figure in all the libraries and book stores within a hundred miles of Dalton. He often traveled as far as Adams and was said to go at times to Springfield. Postal employees have reported that he frequently sent mail to (and received mail from) such little-known localities as the Congo Free State, Persia, and Bithynia. The entry of the United States into World War II must have made Price's activities more difficult, but he appears to have continued them.

In 1952, a neighbor reported to the police that she had not seen Price in over a week and that there were no lights in the windows of the Price house in the evening. The door was forced, but no body was discovered. Left vacant, the house was vandalized several times; it burned in 1959. Earlier, in 1957, a retired sole-cutter who had known Price as a foreman had reported seeing him near the Dartmouth campus, and he was said to have been spotted in 1961 and 1962 (and later) at garage sales in and around Boston.

The most recent sighting (1977) was in the stacks of the British Museum Library, from which he vanished before he could be apprehended. It is conjectured that Price has still not discovered the book he seeks; but he appears to have found something.