

THE SPELL SINGER

By Anna Lewins

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“I CAN’T read it.” Katy winced up at the faces—embarrassed, pitying, bored faces. “I’m sorry, Mrs Batsleer. I can’t make the words keep still. If the Spell goes wrong . . .” She shuddered. “I don’t know what might happen.”

Fifty girls sighed together and Mrs Batsleer sank deeper into her chair. Behind her, the school motto glittered in gold on old stone. . . . “Our magic can move the stars.”

“Katherine, please try. One word at a time, like Miss Henbane showed you.” She smiled encouragement. “Follow your finger, remember. Please try, Katherine. I want everyone to have a chance at this. We’ll all duck and you read what you think it says. I’ll worry about the Spell going wrong.”

The fifty girls stopped sighing and began to shuffle in the direction of the hall doors. A Batsleer frown stopped them. When Mrs Batsleer frowned and stretched her bats’ wings behind her, no one dared move. She could fly faster than any broom in the school.

No way out, then. Katy licked her lips, dragged her finger along the giggling mess of letters and started to read the Dragon Spell. “I call thee now. Come . . . Come.” So far, so easy. “Dragon. Come give thy fire . . .” It had to say that, anyway. That was what they wanted. Now the Spell Words. “Hinn ketyr monti . . . monti . . . Pesto?”

“The wrong words. The wrong Spell!” Mrs Batsleer yelped as blackbirds clattered out of the trophy cupboard. “Close the hall doors! Don’t let them out! Canta bellos!”

Blackbirds swooped under the high, hall roof, darting between the wooden beams. “Canta bellos!”

Flapping, feathers falling . . . And a metal echo when the second Spell caught them from behind. A hail of silver cups bounced on the hall floor, black wings twitching back

to curved handles. The potion trophy was luckier. It escaped, a blackbird with a silver beak swinging over the bicycle shed to freedom.

Katy's finger ached and glued itself to the paper but she had to go on. "Fire the gift. Fire the luck. Donna eti . . . eti . . ." She blinked and looked into Mrs Batsleer's eyes. "Flump?"

"Oh no!" Mrs Batsleer leapt up in a jumble of wing and long skirts. Girls screamed as their headmistress's chair groaned into a dinosaur. Small head, big eyes, neck like a python and a tail that reached to the far side of the hall. The dinosaur lumbered backwards and its roar of alarm rattled the windows.

"Don't panic, girls! He won't hurt us." She hovered above its long neck. "I hope . . . Katherine, dear, I think you'd better stop. We can't really afford to lose any more furniture . . . Go back to your place." She managed a hollow smile. "You tried very hard."

Somehow, Katy forced a shaky nod but her lips could not smile. At the side of the hall, several girls rolled their eyes scornfully, and she made herself look at them until they stopped. Other girls picked themselves up, white with shock. She had really frightened them, this time. Head down, she slid into the front line and hoped that none of her friends tried to cheer her up. That always made it worse.

Mrs Batsleer and the dinosaur studied each other. As dinosaurs go, it seemed quite harmless. Bits of chewed grass hung from its mouth so Mrs Batsleer decided that it was vegetarian and settled on its warm back.

"Now, has everyone read the Spell? I haven't missed anyone? Good." She patted the dinosaur's neck. "In that case, Assembly dismissed. We'll meet here at three this afternoon and go to the dragon's cave together. I don't have to tell you, girls, how important it is that one of you calls the dragon."

She did not say, "If none of you can, the school closes. The town's luck leaks away. Something terrible happens." But everyone knew what she meant. Her glossy wings folded too flat and they only did that when she was very, very worried.

Whispering and pulling faces, the girls trooped into the corridor. Katy followed too fast and slid to a halt, Janice Parker's long back right in front of her face.

"Honestly, she's a real dumbo," Janice sniggered, remembering the blackbirds. "I don't know why Batty lets her stay here. I mean, if she can't spell words, how's she

going to Spell magic? One of these days she's going to do something really stupid. That dinosaur might have been a meat-eater. We might have been its next meal."

Janice's three friends gulped embarrassment, glancing at Katy and away. They coughed and twitched their noses at Janice to stop her but Janice didn't take any notice. She never took notice of anyone.

"And Louise says Dumbo's dad's always behind on her school bills. If I was Batty, I'd throw her out."

With no space to walk around Janice's big feet, Katy had no choice. She touched the girl's shoulder.

"Excuse me, Janice."

Janice's mouth fell open and Katy smiled and squeezed past her. When she had turned the corner and was out of sight, she put her head down and ran.

It wasn't fair. She *could* read, maybe not easily, but Miss Henbane's lessons had helped her to put letters into words. Now letters played their games with her but she was ready for them and fought back. A "b" might try to look like a "d" and double letters wiggled from side to side and pretended to be triples. Or the same word made a different shape every time she squinted down at the paper. And then she sometimes saw the words well enough but said them back to front, anyway. She had called Mary Helen, "Hairy Melon." Oh yes, Katy could read but when the whole class watched, she could not stop the letters dancing and everyone waited for her to be stupid and turn the floor into treacle. Being dyslexic was hard enough. Being a dyslexic witch was horrible.

Mr Meers heard her run around the gravel path to the herb garden and his flock of starlings stopped weeding to watch. The crows re-planting the lettuces croaked a hello.

Maybe she had wanted to come here. Katy was not sure, but she was suddenly glad to see Mr Meers and his birds.

"Hello, crows." She rubbed her nose, hard, and grinned at Mr Meers' hat.

A pair of sparrows had nested in Mr Meers' hat for as long as anyone could remember. Bits of twig and white globs of droppings smothered the old felt. The baby sparrows had just started to fly. One missed and landed on Mr Meers' nose. Its sharp claws dug into his nostrils and his eyes watered, but he did not mind.

"Mr Meers—" Katy fought to get her breath back. "Did you hear what I did?"

“Everyone heard. Like a brass band in a jam jar.” He shook his head, careful not to upset the baby bird. “Dinosaurs! It’ll be terry . . . terrydactyl-thingies next. You’re dead risky to have around.”

“I know.” Katy’s grin crumpled. “But I’ve got to keep trying, even if they say I’m stupid.” She shuddered and dug her chin into her chest so that he wouldn’t notice. “I’m not stupid. I know I’m not. If I could remember them, I wouldn’t have to read them.”

“As Mr Meers turned to his starlings and they gave him a knowing look. “Remember, is it? And what about that rule-thingy? About how many words it’s safe to remember? If you’re after Spelling up a dragon, you’d better not say the wrong thing.”

“I wish that tourist hadn’t sneezed.” Katy bit her lip. “Stupid man. Why couldn’t he put his hand in front of his mouth? He sneezed the flame right out.” It’d been there for years and years...

Mr Meers humphed a laugh. “And a sneeze blows it out!”

Everyone knew the old story. A hundred years ago, the town had had a run of bad luck, trees falling through roofs, floods in summer, plagues of monster insects. They had blamed the witch school for letting unluck escape from a Spell lesson. After a terrible Council meeting, when some people had wanted to tear the school down, the Mayor had ordered the school to put the town’s luck back or leave. None of the teachers had known what to do and they had got ready to evacuate the school. Then, one of the youngest girls had had an idea. A brave, dangerous idea. She had crawled into the cave on the hill and asked the cave dragon for some of its fire. To everyone’s amazement, the dragon had not eaten her. It had given her fire and she had carried it in her sock to the town hall.

As long as the green flame burned, the town let the school stay on, rent-free, and enjoyed good luck. Now the flame was dead. If it was not burning again in a day and a night, the people would close the school and the girls would have to go home half-taught. That meant that they would never be allowed to be real witches.

“Fancy your chances, then?” Mr Meers watched her, guessing her thoughts. “Even if you could remember a Spell that long . . . Well, dragons aren’t what you’d call friendly. The one in the cave’s in the middle of its five-year nap and that makes them really snappy. It might not want to lend you its fire.”

“If I can’t say the Spell, I’ll never know, will I?” Katy’s throat hurt and she looked away. “I wish I could read like everyone else.”

“I used to think that, myself.” He prodded the sparrow back on to his hat, waiting until it scrambled over the twigs and settled. “I’ve never managed to read at all, you know. That’s how I lost my Wizard’s Licence. I got one Spell too many wrong. Turned the vicar into a schmoo. People didn’t like that much.”

“Mr Meers!” Katy gazed at him, horrified. “You lost a Wizard’s license! I didn’t know!”

“Not many people do.”

“But all this . . . You’re a magic gardener.” She pointed to the weedless rows of vegetables, the prize-winning fruit. “You know all the Garden Spells, and some of those are pages long. If you can’t read . . .?”

“I remember them.” He winked at his pair of crows and they chuckled back. “And I’ll tell you how, young Katy Wells. I sing ’em.”

“Sing ’em?” Katy stared at him. “Sing Spells?”

“It’s easy, once you’re used to it. Just think up a good tune and put the words to it.” Mr Meers scowled at the school roof for a moment. “You know, it’s funny. I can’t recite any poetry-thingies but I can remember every song I’ve ever sung. You sing that Spell, Katy. And we’ll see what the dragon says to that.”

Katy sniffed. “When he hears my voice, he’ll probably burn me to a crisp.”

AT THREE o’clock, the girls jiggled into pairs behind Mrs Batsleer’s dinosaur, for once too scared to play around or even talk. Fingers crossed, necks hung with as many good-luck charms as they could carry, the girls said goodbye to the other teachers and set off through the town centre, a blue-uniform caterpillar. The people pushed out of their houses to watch or pressed their faces to office windows. No one was sure whether to wave and smile or not, it was so serious. The dragon might decide that they were its supper and not wait to hear the Spell.

Along the canal path, through the thousand-year-old wood where Mrs Batsleer cut mistletoe. Up the hill to the black triangle of the cave mouth. Mrs Batsleer lined the girls up in the order of their last Spelling test. The best first, so that the dragon didn’t

eat the bad Spellers for nothing. She would have tried herself, but the rules said only a girl between ten and thirteen could charm a dragon.

Mrs Batsleer turned the dinosaur towards the waiting girls and smiled down on them. “Now, one by one. In you go, Janice.”

Janice Parker cringed. “Yes, Mrs Batsleer.” She crept into the darkness.

Five minutes later, Janice crept back out, her straw-hat swirling in soot flakes, like a halo. “It didn’t work,” she said, and sat on the grass.

“No. Well, if at first you don’t succeed . . .” Mrs Batsleer shrugged. “Next.” Her dinosaur’s tail lassoed the girl before she could run away and pulled her back. Mrs Batsleer showed her teeth. “In you go, Lucy. Try smiling at him.”

Five minutes . . .

“I smiled.” Lucy opened her mouth and bared soot-black gums. “I don’t think he liked it.”

The sounds of a tired dragon losing its temper got louder as each girl crawled through the low crack in the rock. In the end, the girls had to yell the words at the top of their voices and the dragon’s snarls made the rocks shudder.

“By the time I get in, it’ll be deaf,” Katy moaned. “I can’t even remember the tune, I’m so scared...”

“Well.” Mrs Batsleer peered down from her dinosaur. No one else was unsooted except Katy Wells and her mouth twisted with worry. The other girls blinked up at her from the grass like a line of toasted crumpets. Finally, she cleared her throat. “Well, we didn’t do all that well, did we, girls? Katherine, do you still want to try?”

“Yes, Mrs Batsleer.”

“Good girl. Very good girl.” Mrs Batsleer cleared her throat, again. “In you go, then. And good luck.”

Luck! A fifty-girl sigh, gritty with singed school uniforms, followed Katy into the black tunnel. The low roof meant she had to lie on her stomach and wriggle over the crunch of soot and cinder. Dragon caves ponged. Or maybe cave dragons ponged? Katy slid on a shoe that one of the other girls had left behind, the leather furred with ashes. Then something humphed. At the far end of the dark hole sat a very angry dragon, nostrils snorting sparks, tail twitching against the rock. It was a fine animal, green-scaled with a short beard under its chin and red, burning eyes. Its five-clawed feet

glinted pure gold when they crunched the stones. Then the dragon saw her and muttered something unfriendly.

“I’m sorry. But I’m the last one . . .” “The dragon blew green fire through its nostrils, stubbornly refusing to listen. “All right then. Be like that. But I’m still going to try” Katy closed her eyes and croaked into song.

The words of the Spell echoed around the cave to the tune of “There’s a Worm at the Bottom of my Garden”, because it was the only song that fitted. Ten verses, Katy’s fingers locked under her chin, eyes aching to open and peek. Every time she breathed in, she tasted soot.

Silence. Katy slowly opened her eyes and squinted into the darkness. The dragon had gone.

“It’s not fair . . .” She swallowed and had to cough and spit soot. “It isn’t. He could have stayed and listened . . .”

“Who told you to sing?” the dragon asked.

“Yiii! Hoo . . .” Katy’s voice died.

Nose to nose with her, the dragon gave a smoky humph. Like Mr Meers. “None of the others did.” It plodded back to its nest of branches and burrowed into them, muttering, “Like twittering birds. And they all missed the bit about the great cold and the great fire. I like that bit best.”

Katy spluttered. “Do you?”

The dragon’s long mouth curled, nastily. “Want some fire, then?”

“Please.” Katy tried not to sound desperate, in case it was playing with her. She did not trust that curly mouth. “It’s for the town. To stop their luck running out.”

“Hen piddle.” The dragon snorted a cotton-ball of smoke. “Superstitious twaddle. Luck from dragon’s fire? You might as well get gold from a turnip”

“But it must be true!” Katy slumped back against the wall. “The little girl brought the fire . . . And the fire brought the luck . . .”

“Hen piddle.” The dragon made itself comfortable. “But I suppose that’s what people want. Something they can see with their own eyes . . . It’s you who has the luck, you know.”

“Me!” Katy goggled. “Got luck?”

The dragon nodded. “Like she had, all those years ago. But she was only a skinny little girl, like you. She couldn’t even read and no one would have believed her if she’d said she could give them luck. So, she gave them dragon’s fire and they believed that. As soon as the fire blew out, they stopped believing.” It scratched behind its left ear with one claw. “Funny, you both singing the Spell...”

Katy smiled, thinking about that little girl, a hundred years ago. A little girl who could not read . . . like Katy, now. “No it isn’t funny. It’s because that’s how we remembered the words. She was dyslexic, like me. I know she was. Thank you for the fire . . .” She looked at the red eyes. “If you haven’t changed your mind?”

She took her sock off and the dragon humphed.

“Just as long as you don’t make a habit of it.” He looked at her, rudely, hot eyes running from her sooty hair to her ash-dusted shoes. “No, I don’t suppose they’ll believe you’ve got luck, either. You’re another skinny little girl. But we’ll know, won’t we?” He breathed a small, green flame into the bottom of the sock, then watched Katy slither away. When she was almost invisible, he sniffed. “How did that song go . . .?”

Mrs Batsleer’s dinosaur plunged, wildly, as a roaring, gargling howl echoed from the cave—like a concrete mixer eating a tree.

“What’s that?” She clung to the dinosaur’s neck. “Katy? Did you get the fire? . . . What on earth’s that dragon doing in there?”

Katy tied a knot in the top of her sock to stop the fire going out. And grinned. “He’s just singing.” And she started to walk back towards the town, the sock tucked into her skirt pocket, singing, “There’s a worm at the bottom of my garden . . . And his name is Wiggley Wooooo . . .”

She would sing all of her Spells from now on and be a good witch and give the town all the luck it needed. And suddenly she knew no one was going to think she was stupid anymore, just because she couldn’t read. From now on, she would tell them. I’m not stupid! She had brought the dragon’s fire and she had luck inside her and what was inside her was what counted. Dragons knew that. Only people could not understand.