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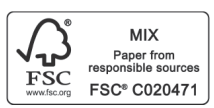
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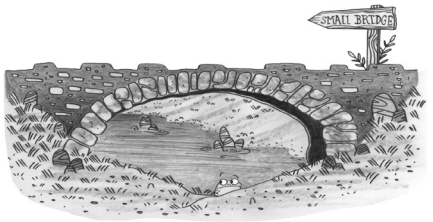
KAYE UMANSKY

Witches (Un)welcome!



Illustrated by ASHLEY KING


MAGENTA SHARP'S THREE
RULES OF WITCHCRAFT
1. Read Instructions
2. Follow Recipe
3. Make It Work



SOME THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE WE GET STARTED...

There are three important things you need to know about Elsie Pickles:

1. Elsie lives in Smallbridge – a boring country town with a small bridge. Smallbridge is not a magical sort of place. When magic occurs, people don't approve. They like an uneventful life. No surprises. No upsets. There are unspoken rules about noise, meal times, clothes, respectable occupations and the proper times to get up and go to bed. Hair is only let down on approved

bank holidays. Even then, the fireworks are over by ten. No need to go mad.

2. Elsie helps her dad, Albert, in the family shop, called Pickles' Emporium. Despite the grand name, the Emporium is a small shop down a side alley, full of cheap, boring things. People go there to chat and not spend much. You don't get rushed, like in other shops. That's because Albert is very hot on customer service. Elsie knows all his rules by heart. She doesn't mind her job. There are worse things than working with your dad. But not long ago she started wishing things could liven up a bit, like in books. Just something *different*. And then Magenta Sharp blew into town and definitely made things *different*. Because now…

3. Elsie is learning to be a witch. She didn't expect that last one. It just kind of happened after Magenta's visit.

Known locally (and rather sniffily) as 'that Red Witch Woman', people disapprove of Magenta Sharp for the following reasons:

1. She's a witch.
2. She wears red. If you must be a witch, at least look like one.
3. She wasn't born and bred in Smallbridge. Acts snooty.
4. She brings bad weather with her. On purpose.
5. She lives in Crookfinger Forest, which is lawless, sprawling and untidy.
6. She resides in a mysterious



tower that is rumoured to *move about!* Moving towers are against Smallbridge planning laws.

But Elsie finds Magenta fascinating. After their first meeting, Elsie agreed to look after the tower while the witch was away. Nuisance, the town's stray dog went with her to make sure she was OK (and also because he thought Elsie might have sausages to give him – sausages are his favourite) and now his heart belongs to Elsie. He does his own doggy thing during the day, but at night he sleeps in the doorway of the Emporium. (He won't come in, though. He's an outside dog.)



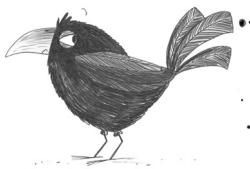
Other important things that you need to know are:

MAGIC

Elsie didn't mean to mess about with magic. But now she's started, she doesn't want to stop. Of course, magic is unpredictable and things don't always turn out as planned – but Elsie has a knack for it.

THE TOWER

The tower is wonderful. Sometimes, it seems almost alive. There is a magical larder that produces endless cakes; a wardrobe containing new clothes; a spelloscope on the roof, so you can spy on your neighbours (who include the Howler sisters – two sweet little old ladies with tails and a thing about buckets!) and a room of



stars containing a sparkling wheel, which you turn to make the tower move. (Actually, you don't have to bother with that. It's all an illusion – but the tower likes to put on a show.)

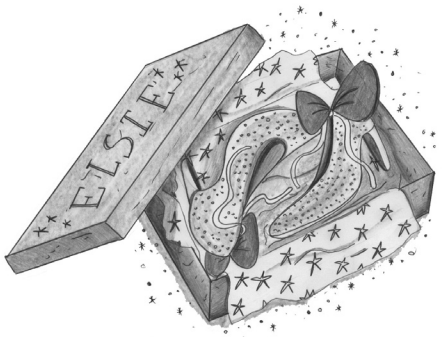
CORBETT

Corbett is the traditional raven that comes with a tower. He's surly and grouchy and looks down his beak at other birds, especially pigeons. But Elsie can always get round him.

JOEY AND SYLPHINE

When she was tower-sitting Elsie became great friends with Joey the post boy, and Sylphine Greenmantle (real name: Aggie Wiggins) who dresses like a wood sprite and dances barefoot in the moonlight, although she probably shouldn't. At the end of her week at the tower, Elsie went home with a bulging purse, a pair of magic dancing shoes and a whole new set of magical skills that she had to keep a secret because the people of Smallbridge just wouldn't approve at all.





Her life went back to normal … boring days … weeks … months…

Then, on May Day, one of the few fun days of the year, the Red Witch showed up again! This

time, she wanted Elsie's help sorting out her mail order business, *Sharp Spells On Tap*, which was *not* going well. Lots of angry customers, a chaotic list of orders and a very grumpy Magenta. Well, Elsie jumped at the chance to help and learn more magic. So she spent another exciting week at the tower where she saved the business, learned new spells, visited a magical superstore, put a very rude genie in his place and dealt with some tricky crowd/animal control.



Elsie also learnt the secret of *taking a shortcut*. That's witch talk for vanishing on the spot and popping up somewhere else. A very useful trick…

And, now that we're all caught up with the important things, let's find out what's in store for Elsie this time…





Chapter One
DON'T DO IT TOO OFTEN

'The trouble is,' Elsie said to Joey, 'I do it too often.'

It was opening time on a sunny Saturday and they were both leaning on the counter, deep in conversation. Nuisance was sitting upright in the doorway, eyes fixed lovingly on his two favourite people. Elsie's dad was upstairs ironing his apron.

Joey had come to deliver the shop's post – two coupons, some bills and an advertisement for rivets – although it was just an excuse to come



and see Elsie really. Smallbridge wasn't officially on his round. Usually he stuck to Crookfinger Forest. Elsie had given a happy squeal when she'd opened the shutters and seen him waiting outside with Nuisance.

Elsie was always happy to see Joey. He was one of the few people she could talk to about magic. He wasn't disapproving in a Smallbridge way. He lived in the forest, where they did things differently.

'How do you do it?' he asked. 'Is it easy?'

'Very. You simply close your eyes, picture where you want to go, think the secret word and there you are.'

'Brilliant!' said Joey. 'Talk about useful. I'd do it all the time if I could. What's the secret word?'

'I can't tell you. A witch has to whisper it in

your ear.'

'Well, you're a witch, whisper it to me.'

'I'm still learning. And it's not just about the *word*. You have to be able to picture where you're going, to think carefully about where you want to be.'

'Oh, well, I'd be no good at that,' said Joey. 'I never notice what's around me. I used to do my round with my eyes closed, when I got bored. That was before I got Bill to keep me company.'

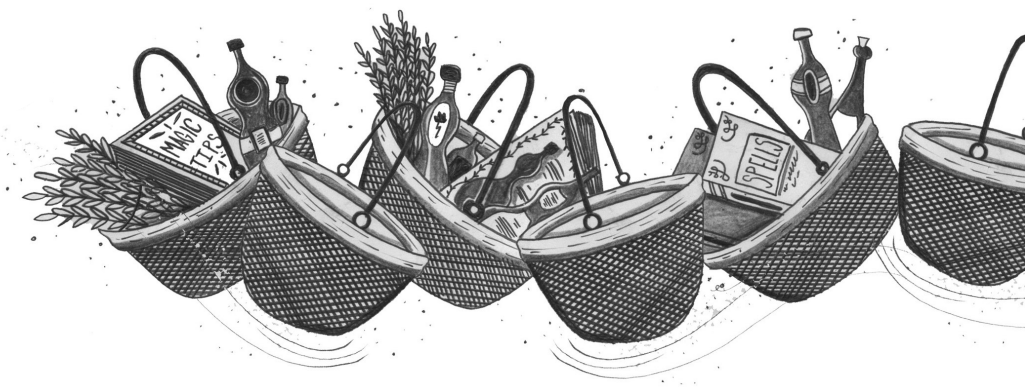
He looked down fondly at the wire shopping basket at his feet. It was just sitting there being a basket – but there was something about its basketiness that wasn't quite normal. It looked … *alert*. Eager. Like it was waiting for someone to throw it a ball.

Joey had fallen in love with this particular basket on a never-to-be-forgotten trip to the magical superstore called the Sorcerer's Bazaar, where all the baskets floated. He had taken it home claiming that it would be a big help on the post round. But really he had thought it would be fun to have around. It was always up for a game. It could do tricks. It had personality. Nobody knew why he called it Bill.

'Anyway,' said Elsie. 'I'm stopping. No more shortcuts. Magenta says it's lazy.'

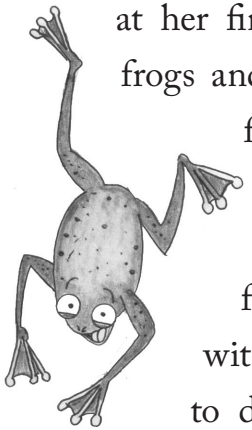
'What's so bad about that? Personally, I've done enough walking to last me a lifetime.'

'I think she meant you shouldn't overuse magic just because it's easy,' said Elsie. 'Some things should be done the slow, normal way. Like making soup or walking up stairs or tidying your bedroom.'



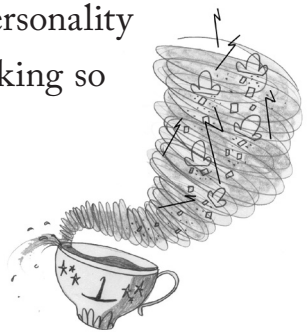


Taking a shortcut wasn't the only thing Elsie could do. She had three solid little spells at her fingertips. Showers of eggs, rains of frogs and storms in teacups. They were the first spells she'd learned and now she could do them perfectly, with fancy variations. And there were a few new spells she was experimenting with. Of course, she was careful not to do any of this where people might see. Smallbridge wouldn't be comfortable with it.

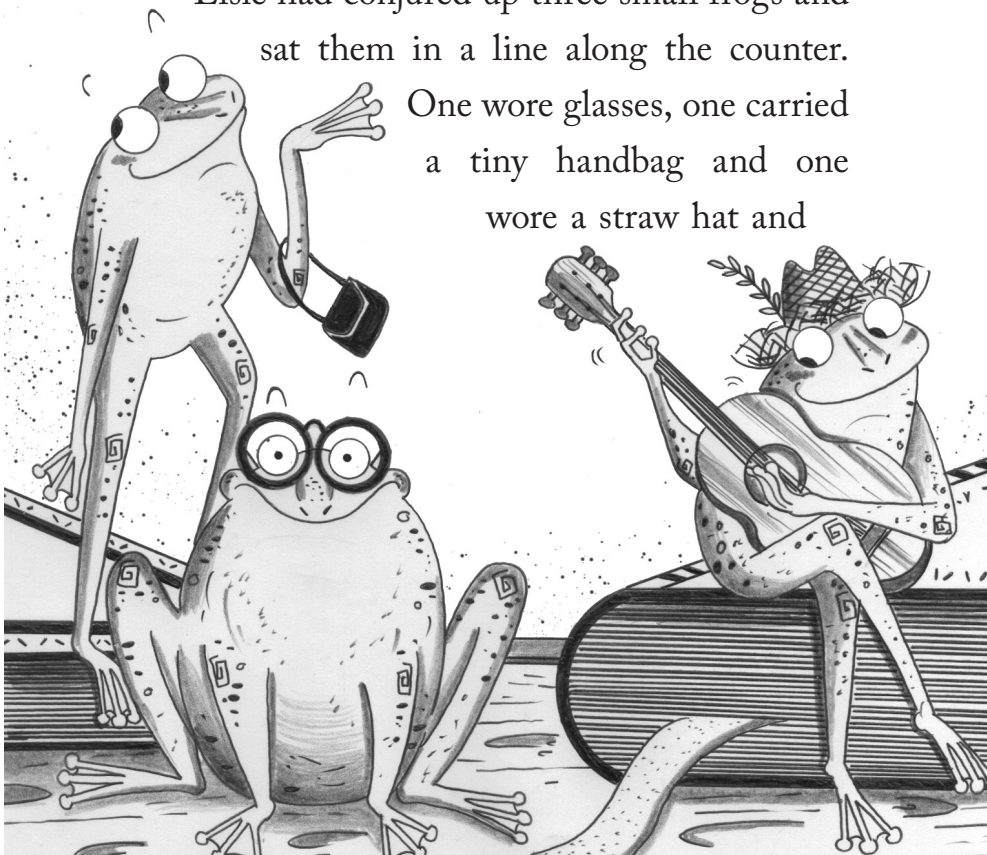


But …

Only the other day she had set off a tiny storm in a mug of tea, just for fun, and Mr Sourman had seen. He wasn't one of Elsie's favourite customers. His personality suited his name. He had been taking so long to choose his exciting purchase (a box of matches) that Elsie had forgotten he was still there. She'd given a hasty cough to disguise the tiny rumblings of thunder and got rid of the storm with a snap of her fingers. But Sourman saw all right.



Another time, alone and bored in the shop, Elsie had conjured up three small frogs and sat them in a line along the counter. One wore glasses, one carried a tiny handbag and one wore a straw hat and



played a guitar. She was getting really good at frogs. She had looked up to see Mrs Snoring standing in the doorway, her mouth an 'O' of horror. Elsie managed to convince her it was a trick of the light, but it was a near thing.

Then there was the time she had made a chocolate egg appear out of thin air to stop her brother, baby Todd, crying, and got some very odd looks from a group of people queuing for the butcher's.

Magic had become so automatic that sometimes Elsie forgot it was supposed to be a secret and just did it.

'Don't do it too often,' Joey mused. 'People always say that about fun stuff. Don't eat sweets too often. Don't stay up all night too often. Don't eat ice cream for breakfast or send off for a camel too often.'

'Exactly— send off for a *camel*?'

'Actually, I don't want one now. Not now I've got Bill. But, look, don't feel guilty. Enjoy yourself.'

'Hm. Anyway, tell me what's going on in the forest. How are Magenta, Corbett and Sylphine?'

'I've only been to the tower once since you left,' said Joey. 'There hasn't been any post and Her Witchiness doesn't appreciate friendly visits.'

'There's been no post?' Elsie frowned. 'None?'

'Nope. A couple of days after you went home, I got summoned. She gave me a bunch of letters that needed sending, yelled something about *having had enough* and slammed the door in my face.'

'Don't tell me,' said Elsie with a sigh. 'They were rude notes telling the customers that



Sharp Spells On Tap was no more, so get lost and never contact her again?'

Sharp Spells On Tap was a good name for a magical mail-order business. It implied an efficient concern that would guarantee a fast, steady stream of well-priced spells, with no cause for complaint. In reality, it was a disorganised mess, run from a chaotic office in a magical moving tower, and Magenta was a hopeless businesswoman. Her spells were excellent, but they hardly ever arrived because the parcel had the wrong stamps, blew up or simply disappeared. As orders backed up and the complaints began arriving, she just got angrier.

'I'm sorry, Elsie,' Joey said. 'After all you did. All that tidying. All those letters you wrote and

potions you brewed up.'

'I left it all organised,' said Elsie.

'I know.'

'The bills were paid, the backlog of orders was cleared and the Magic Board didn't take away her licence.'

'I know.'

'I made sure she had everything she needed to make up the next batch of spells. And she had Corbett to help her. All they had to do was keep up with the orders and not throw customers' letters on the fire.'

'You know Her Witchiness,' said Joey. 'She gets bored. Suddenly loses interest. But now it seems she's bored with doing nothing. Impossible to live with, Corbett says.'

'You've seen Corbett, then?' asked Elsie.

Joey nodded. 'Yesterday. He saw me doing my

round and flew down to share my sandwiches.'

'How about Sylphine? Have you seen her?'

'Not for a while. She's visiting her grandma.'

'That's nice.'

'Not really. Her granny's really strict. She tells her to stop with the airs and graces and change her silly made-up name of Sylphine back to plain old Aggie. She makes her wear sensible clothes and take the flowers out of her hair. She forbids barefoot, moonlit dancing and any talk of unicorns. And she's not allowed cake.'

'Poor Sylphine. All the things she likes best,' said Elsie. 'Talking, dancing, unicorns and cake.'

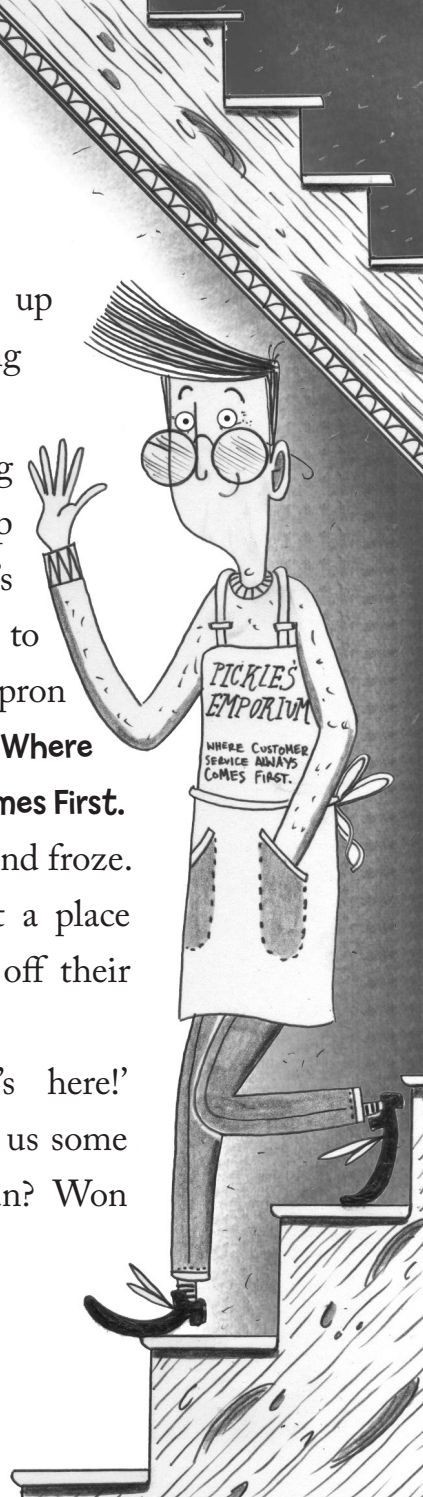
'Anyway, I'd better go, I have to get home and fix Bill. One of his wires is loose, it's making him float lopsided.' Joey gave the basket a little nudge with his foot. 'Show Elsie your loose wire.'

Obediently, Bill bobbed up and hung in the air, wobbling slightly.

Footsteps came clumping down the flight of steep stairs from the attic. Elsie's dad, Albert, was coming to work in his newly-ironed apron that said: **Pickles' Emporium. Where Customer Service Always Comes First.**

Bill dropped to the floor and froze. This was Smallbridge. Not a place for baskets to be showing off their floating skills.

'Well, now, look who's here!' exclaimed Albert. 'Brought us some mail, have you, young man? Won



the lottery, have we? Are we millionaires?' He gave a little chuckle.

'Hello, Mr Pickles,' said Joey. 'No, 'fraid not, ha ha.'

'No message from a Certain Someone needing our Elsie to help out again?'

Albert missed his only daughter when she went off into the forest, on what he thought of as those *mumbo-jumbo jaunts* of hers and came back home with funny new ideas. But on the other hand, she clearly enjoyed herself and Albert couldn't deny that she was well paid for her efforts.

'No,' said Joey. 'No message, Mr Pickles. I just dropped by to say hello.'

'Well, good to see you, lad. Need anything while you're here? Nails? Soap? Pencil with a rubber on the end? Or maybe one of these lovely vases for your mum?' He pointed to a stack of

hideous green glass vases.

'No, thanks, Mr Pickles.' said Joey. 'She's already got one. Best be off. Bye, Elsie.'

And with that, he picked Bill up by the handle, just as you would a normal basket. The bell above the door tinkled – and he was gone.

Elsie gave a sigh. Seeing Joey reminded her of all the things she missed. If she could make a list, it would go like this:

I MISS:

My friends
Living in a magic tower in a forest
Corbett
Genies and elves and old ladies with wolf tails
My own room
My own bed
Cake for breakfast