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Opening extract from

Buckle and Squash and the Monstrous Moat-dragon

Written & Illustrated by

Sarah Courtauld

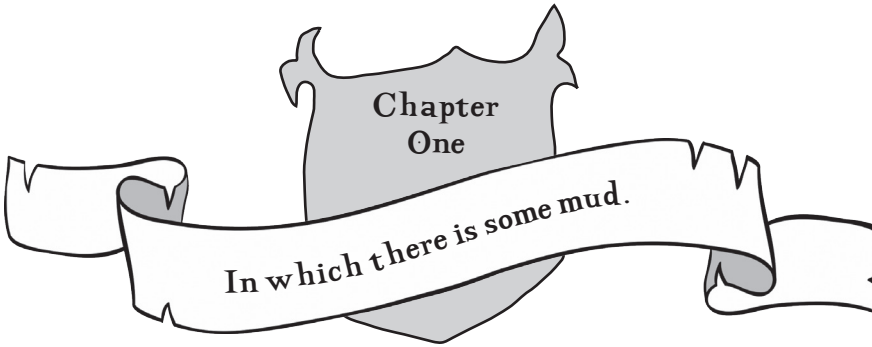
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Once upon a time, when the world was full of princes and princesses, knights and damsels, dragons and lady dragons, it was also full of mud.

Squelchy, squishy, gurgling, sticky, stinky, endless, mud-coloured mud.

To the two young girls cleaning out their goat pen, it seemed as if there was an infinite supply of mud in the field behind their old tumbledown farm, which was called Old Tumbledown Farm, in their village in the middle of nowhere, which was called The Middle of Nowhere, in a forgotten corner of the kingdom, which was called The Forgotten Corner of the Kingdom, deep in the realm of Squerb.

I said that they were both cleaning out the goat pen, but that wasn't totally true. Eliza was inside the goat pen, shovelling the mud, while her older sister Lavender was *outside* the goat pen 'supervising' her (if by 'supervising' you mean 'reading an enormous book of fairy tales, while wearing a pointy princess hat'). Occasionally, Lavender put the book down and burst into song:

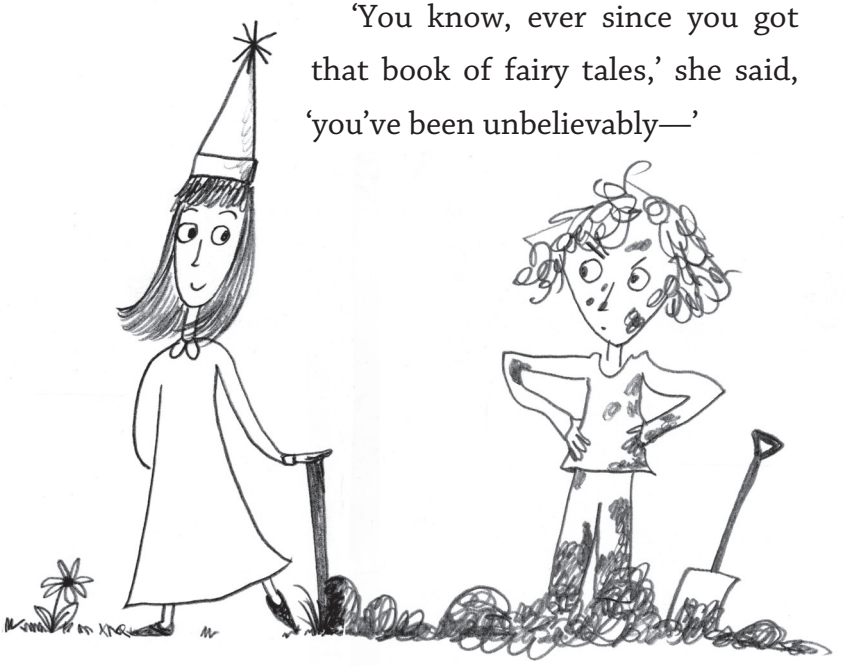
'*Ooh, Prince Charming*
How handsome you are!
With a steed so shiny
And your hair so shiny
And your teeth so shiny
And your nose so shiny
Oooooh, Prince Charming . . . you are a prince.'

Inside the goat pen, Eliza gritted her teeth.

She was used to the way her sister's songs rhymed 'prince' with 'prince', 'shiny' with 'shiny', and 'princess'

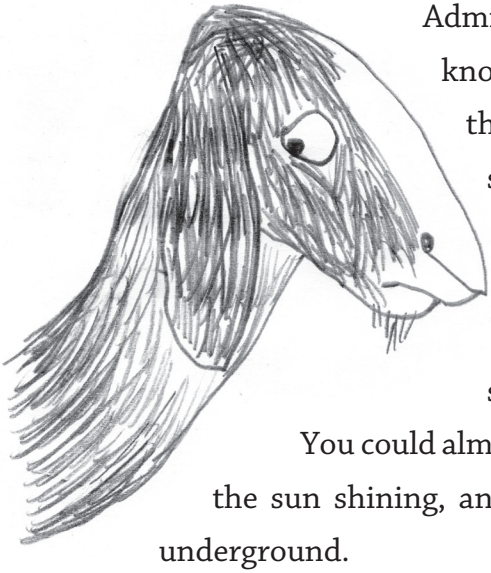
with 'bucketful of hens'. But that didn't mean she liked it. As Lavender started on the second verse, Eliza stopped shovelling mud and stuck her spade into the ground.

'You know, ever since you got that book of fairy tales,' she said, 'you've been unbelievably—'



'Princess-like?' said Lavender. 'I know! When I learn French, I'm going to sing all my songs *en français*, and then they'll sound even better.'

Eliza exchanged a look of despair with Gertrude, their goat, who was sitting at the other end of the pen, quietly chewing.



Admittedly, Eliza didn't really know what Gertrude was thinking. But she was pretty sure they understood one another.*

Then, for one beautiful moment, Lavender's singing stopped.

You could almost hear the grass growing, the sun shining, and the moles playing Snap underground.

* What *was* Gertrude thinking really? Was she thinking: 'I couldn't agree more. Lavender is the worst singer since Sister Margaret released her album *Songs for Phlegmy Voices*'? Or was she thinking: 'I am a magical time-travelling goat from outer space and, WOW, do I regret landing here rather than my intended destination in the year 215346B, where goats are worshipped and float around on silver cushions in the sky'?

Or was she just thinking 'Yum' because she had just gobbled one of Eliza's socks off the washing line?

We'll never know.

It didn't last.

'A knight!' Lavender cried, looking out across the field. 'A knight upon the high road! I may faint!'

Eliza looked up, and saw a small, bald man ambling down the path towards them from the direction of their local village, The Middle of Nowhere.

'That's not a knight,' said Eliza. 'That's Bob.'

'It is a knight, riding upon a steed!'

'No, it's Bob. Carrying some post.'

'It *is* a knight,' Lavender hissed. 'I'm going to faint!'

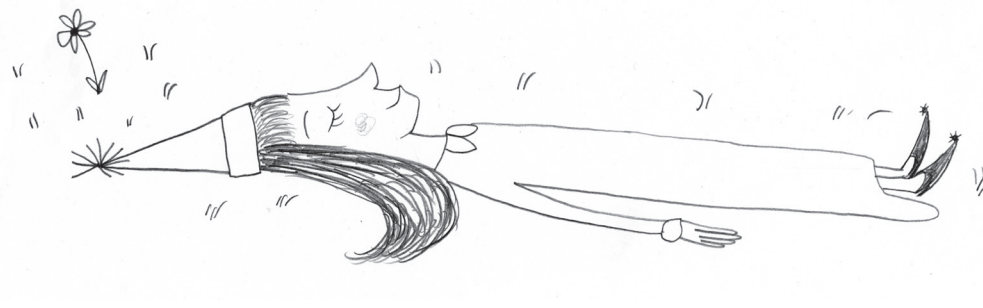
As Bob ambled along the path past Old Tumbledown Farm, he whistled at Eliza and chucked her a scroll. And, true to her word, Lavender sighed and fell to the ground at the sight of him, as if she had just been tapped on the head by a large, invisible spoon.

'Well?' Lavender whispered to Eliza, as she lay sprawled on the grass with her eyes firmly shut. 'How would you rate my faint? Out of ten?'

'I thought you had fainted,' said Eliza.

'I have!' Lavender hissed back. 'I'd just like some

feedback, that's all. How was the faint, overall? Out of ten? Maybe a seven? Do you think that yonder knight is in love with me?'



Eliza looked at her sister, and then looked at Bob, who was walking away down the path, scratching his bum.

And she knew the scroll she was holding in her hands was only going to make things worse.

'He's probably in love with me,' said Lavender. 'I must compose him a poem, telling him how sad I am to reject his love, for I am destined to marry a prince.'

Eliza *really* didn't want to give her sister the scroll in her hands. She knew it was only going to encourage

her. Perhaps if she just quietly gave it to Gertrude, Gertrude would gobble it up, and Lavender would never—

'What's that? Is it for me?' said Lavender, springing to her feet and plucking the scroll from Eliza's hands. She broke the seal, and the scroll sprang open.

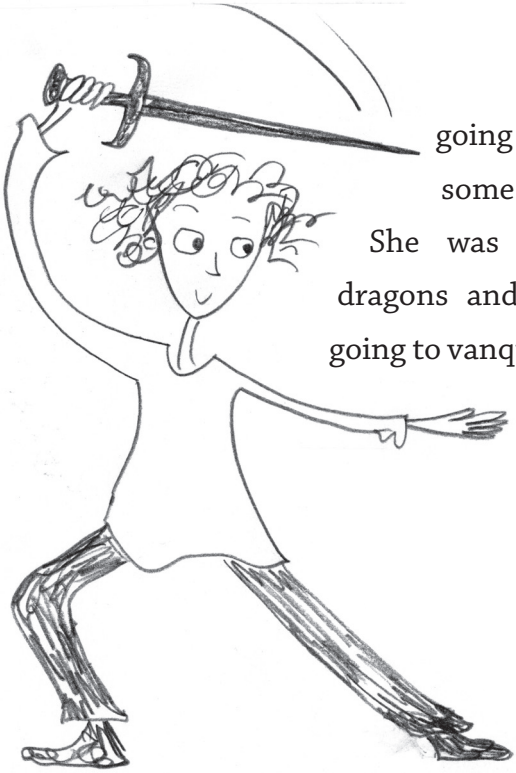
'Oooh – Prince Rudolph!'

As Eliza had predicted, it was a portrait of a prince. Lavender already had seven in her collection.

'Lavender,' said Eliza. 'Do you think you could just help me clean out the goat pen? Because after we do that, we need to feed the chickens. And then the pigs. And then we have to cut the grass . . .'

But Lavender had already skipped into the house to stick the prince's portrait to her bedroom wall. She spent the rest of the afternoon there gazing at it and daydreaming about her destiny, which was almost certainly going to feature a handsome prince.

And Eliza spent the rest of the day working in the fields, daydreaming about *her* destiny. *She* wasn't



going to fall in love with some boring prince. She was going to battle dragons and giants. She was going to vanquish monsters and travel to distant mountains.

And she was going to solve mysteries like:
Who ate all the food in the pig pen?

