

Legends

When you first start making up legends it's important you're the only surviving witness. After a while the respect of those at court wanes and another quest or holy deed must be undertaken. Knight Sâledâr finds he must live up to his reputation but now has to have companions that requires a change of plan. How do you slay a non-existent Welsh dragon everyone locally knows is an excuse for sheep stealing?

He finds a noble lady with chronic depression and 'rescues' her by marriage. He's a sympathetic old soul really. From a lonely wanderer he becomes a family man. The strange thing is that his youngest daughter has his boldness and very quickly acquires a legendary reputation as a general which is her strength.

The Kingdom is vastly improved as Sâledâr's devious imagination and insight are put to good use.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems and short stories. Visit vulpeculox.net/books for details



Preview

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by

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Truyps : When you see slashes on two lines like this /
/ it indicates is an interruption. A double slash like this // is someone
changing their subject in mid-sentence.

Historical accuracy : This is *not* a history book.

Even though we know legends are tissues of lies, we do like a good story, and a good story is worth telling.

Part 1

Chapter 1

Sâledâr was a brave knight. Everyone had seen him in immaculate armour with plumes and well-dressed retinue. He paid pedlars to spread word of his deeds. He was pious and keen to give thanks to God for protecting him. Purity was his shield and faith was his sword.

It was Sâledâr who broke the enchantment freezing the forest of the three maidens. That had been a close thing by all accounts. Firstly an old woman asked help with carrying her wool to market. When the wool turned out to be perfectly spun and dyed the scales fell from Sâledâr's eyes he ran her through with his lance. Her scream was like a thousand crows and the sun momentarily darkened. He went to her cottage with the intention of burning it but when he came upon it, instead of the peasant's dwelling was a chapel and hanging in the tower was a gleaming brass bell. When he burned the tainted wool it smelled of roses and honeysuckle. Ever afterwards honeysuckle and roses grew in profusion around the chapel.

Then, as he was continuing his journey, while reflecting on his close call with enchantresses there was a child on the track ahead with nothing but a bag of pine cones. She called to him to stop and tell her the way out of the forest. "I am lost. The only thing I have in the world is this bag of pine cones. Please show me the way sir."

"Fear not child. I have cheese and bread. We will follow this road and stop at the next ford to eat."

"Please sir. Do not drink the water at the next stream. It is enchanted with violet poison."

"Thank you dear young lady. As travellers together we must help each other." So Sâledàr climbed down from his horse, hoisted the sack of cones across his saddle and spent a pleasant hour walking with the child. It was like a fresh childhood for him, recalling the days when every flower had a butterfly and clover covered fields like snow.

A while later they sat beside the delightfully clear stream and shared the Knight's plain bread and cheese. Sâledàr sat so his back was firmly against a tree with his sword stuck in the grass within arm's reach.

"What do they call this steam child?"

"Karzil Brook. Remember you mustn't drink its water Sir however clear it looks."

"That's a worry. I'm thirsty and only have a little left in my water bag. Do you know how far to the next spring or stream?"

"Four leagues."

"That's too far. I shall have to fill my bag with this and hope for a miracle."

As the girl pleaded with him not to drink from the stream he stood-up, pulled his sword out of the grass and with one sweep cut off her head! The sun momentarily darkened and there was a grinding of a mountainside of rocks. Where the girl had been was a pile of stones! Wasn't he clever to realise that the girl wasn't lost at all. When he looked inside her sack of pine cones it contained nothing but the tiny skulls of children. Without a spade all he could do was cover them with a mound of stones and place a cross made of yew branches on the top. Without the means to build a bridge, all the wise knight could do was lay out a few score of the many in the pile where he'd slain the second maiden in the shape of the arches of a bridge to encourage future travellers. He knelt and drank from the stream and it refreshed him like the cool wind after a summer's heat.

Now the official story and what supposedly actually happened become *unbelievably* different. As he went on his way he reflected on the strange turn of events. He had offered the second maiden food and she'd taken it. How evil was she to take precious food and water from a traveller knowing she was going to betray him! As the shadows began to lengthen it was a pleasure passing along the track beneath the spreading boughs of beech and oak. Each limb with a ten smaller branches, a hundred shoots and a thousand dancing green leaves. The sunlight dappled on the ground and the scented air was soft and humid. The daytime woodland birds are usually quiet but he could hear woodpeckers attacking trees and yaffling. He saw jays swooping and butterflies fluttering, sometimes in bunches, like flags at a tournament, sometimes dancing like waterfalls. As the track descended into a village, on the wood's edge he heard a sound that sent a shiver through him. He'd never heard the sound before but it was human and horrible. His sword was ready. Oh! There was a woman swinging from a rope no more than twenty paces away! The rope around her neck made her face a livid devil mask. What was this? Murder or suicide? He might be able to save her. Woah. This must be the third maiden. The swinging gradually stopped. Her face became horrible. The sun didn't momentarily darken. Nothing happened except villagers began running up the hill. Sâledâr waited and watched the body become a corpse. What had been living features were now nothing more than drum-skin over flints in a face of pain.

He said to the peasants. "Do I leave you to your grief or stay?"

"Go! This is none of your business."

"It is my business. She is the third maiden who held this forest in enchantment." Somebody snorted. Another made a gesture. "One swing of my sword will bring her down. Shall I?"

An old man came forward and asked for a dignified cutting-down. Perhaps it is forgivable in the circumstances that Sâledâr should smile a victor's smile. Now could they use his horse to carry the body back to their village? Hmm. She seemed to be dead but he would walk ten paces behind with his sword ready. Anything could happen in the next few minutes. They met a monk who gave prayers for the girl, prayers for the crowding villagers and a specially obsequious prayer for the knight. Sâledâr was deaf to prayers and focussed on the body. He knew she was the most evil of them all and having no doubt heard by the devil's

trumpet that he'd slain her deceiving sisters and would be more brazen and more subtle than an old vixen. She was clever. He admired her for guile. He couldn't put his sword through her heart in front of the villagers. The corpse and the knight shared a secret. He could love that slim body with it's long blond hair, and... A face that started like an apple then became wormy-rotten in five minutes.

Five leagues further on Sâledâr stayed at the castle of an old friend, Polonet where the lord welcomed him. They feasted and drank as old friends do. Sâledâr described his adventures with the three maidens.

Polonet said "My days with maidens are over my friend. Four days ago I married Lunial. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes Polly. I envy you." Perhaps Polonet was drunk already but there were fires in Lunial's eyes and open arms in her lips for Sâledâr. Though Sâledâr was pious he was a knight. Knights were of course expected to follow the code of chivalry. This code was in two parts. For them was one version and for the rest, that is us, another. Fine fellowship was part of the code. Helping your mates not so much, but if you listened you might pick up something.

As the two knights drank alone in front of the fire, the subject became fixed on Lunial's features. Her emerald eyes. Her perfect breasts. How she sang and played the harp. Such grace and perfection.

Sâledâr said "Between the two of us Polly – I thought you were scared of women. When we smashed that saracen town you weren't as keen as the rest of us to enjoy the fruits of war."

"Well I was feeling rotten. You know what the food was like."

"You fought all right."

"Well that's it. Used up all my energy sticking the sword into Johnny Musselman."

"Good times eh Polly?"

"Oh yes."

"Great women. The look on their faces!"

"Er Yes. To be honest I was more for conquering the Holy Land than enjoying the spoils of war."

"Well you've got yourself a wife now and that was a long time ago."

"It seems like yester...day. All us mates to...gether. God's arm...e. All mates... Hey Sal. You know about these things. I'm in a fix. How do you..."

Sâledâr was not as pure as you might imagine. As he'd slain the three maidens there was no danger and also Lunial couldn't be a maiden after her wedding night. There was no doubt that Sâledâr was a welcome guest.

The moral of this story is that many men who show-off their morals are lying. It was as well Polonet was so enraged to find Lunial and Sâledâr enjoying the spoils of cuckolding that he cleft her head in two with his axe. And so the Frozen Forest became a place of happiness and prosperity again.

Chapter 2

Sâledâr was a brave knight. Everyone had seen him in immaculate armour with plumes and well dressed retinue. He paid pedlars to spread word of his deeds. He was pious and keen to give thanks to God for protecting him. Purity was his shield and faith was his sword. It was Sâledâr who slew the dragon of Cader Idris, for which, God be praised.

Gewno the dragon lived in the Welsh mountains where every lake was like a black mirror between sharp pinnacles of grey rock. It made its nest of stones perched high upon Cader Idris. Like an eagle with a rat's tail it could swoop into the pastures and be back in the clouds, nothing more than a rosy glow, in the time it takes to describe it. Frequently shepherds became nervous wrecks after the beast that belched the foul privy-odour of ill-bellies had plucked one or two sheep. Or they might be found dead with the 'mark of four claws'. Three slashes in one direction and a tear like a billhook in the other. What good were stones and arrows against the monster? The land bailiff even posted notices, even at the top of poles ten feet high where even the blindest dragon was bound to see them, offering a reward of two gold pieces for the capture of sheep stealers (dragons included). The bailiff sent word to his Lord, Sir Treadthorne who was an important man at Court.

Many ladies consulted Sir Treadthorne privately about how to manage their estates. Some ladies didn't have much in the way of estates, but who better to consult than the successful Sir Treadthorne. Poor man, his two wives had died but he was still 'game'. Orin Treadthorne shared a day's stag hunting with Sâledâr. While they were waiting for the quarry to be called Orin asked. "You have the guile of a woman Sâledâr and the strength of a knight and you owe me a favour for that Suffolk strumpet."

"Ask away mate. I like to return favours but won't be held by them. You're a good friend and I'll help you if I can. Out of friendship not obligation."

"As you wish. This is a bit urgent friend. I hold you as a friend too. I'm sorry to speak like that but you must realise that to a man of money everything has a price."

"Alright Ori – If you insist on paying me then what's the challenge."

"The challenge is get off your horse now and wrestle." Stripped to the waist they grappled. Being knights they took care not to dig or kick except inadvertently. The birds of the forest flew away from the shouts and insults. Sâledâr gained the upper hand but let Orin escape. Together, as grinning friends, they ran to the river to purge their sweat and hug. When they sat naked in the sun to dry Orin said "That'll be fourpence for the wrestling lesson."

Sâledâr replied "Fourpence! Tuppence is my last offer." They laughed. Big men can stretch their talons without actually tearing mutton.

Hardly a week later Sâledâr decided that, in view of the pressure of husbands with particular views about chastity, it might be worth seeking adventure in far places. Or at least places unknown to bee-swarm courtiers. Without a better plan he, a shy youngster Paston recommended as an apprentice by Orin, two pages, four baggage horses and his war horse, (any man was a gutter-knight without his war horse), set off for Wales. It was summer, the days were long and warm, the nights short and warm, the countryside busy with harvests and the roads firm. Sâledâr enjoyed playing swords with Paston. He was tall, broad in the shoulders, and wrestling with him was a matter of Sâledâr's skill against Paston's strength. When they were like this Paston's confidence and aggression shone. During those two weeks Sâledâr became an uncle to a boy who would soon be a great knight. Well done to Orin for this pleasure. Sâledâr couldn't write but he would have it written to Orin what a joy it was to have charge of such a strong and honest boy. Paston began to win their play-fights. Sâledâr gave him chores and trusted him with wisdom acquired over twenty years.

On what would be their last night on the road, Sâledâr said to Paston "I don't know your father or mother – yet you are one of my breed. We are strong and gentle. Sometimes – when our betters ask – or when our mates don't ask – that's important – we volunteer everything for them. I shall treat you as a sou-knight and by the time we're back at court we'll be comrades in arms and you a knight proper."

"Uncle Orin said you would make me a man. I was insulted then but now I understand. He meant you would make me a knight."

"No he meant MAN. Eighteen is a good age to have a sharp edge and a strong arm but twenty-one is a good age to use it."

"Please sir? Uncle Orin said you'd tell me about women."

"Steer clear until we're on the way back. Remind me then. This dragon may be a woman under a spell. We must have our swords ready. Oh by the way Pasty – I don't mind left-handers at all. They confuse and have an instant advantage in a fight if it's kept secret until the last second. In a way we might be going into this fight left-handed if you see what I mean."

"No sir."

"We won't show our clever strength at first. I will pretend you're an idiot – I know you're not an idiot – but if our opponents think you are a blindfolded buffoon then they may think you are weak and stupid."

"But why demean me?"

"Because the dragon may be a ruse. Play the idiot and see if anyone tries the Boozlebam."

"How does that help sir?"

"Suppose you walk into a village leading your lame horse. You could ask for the smith to get a new shoe or the butcher. That would be two different yous. The one who understood there was a limit to what flesh could bear and an angry youth with no brains. Which do you want to be?"

"The first sir."

"Of course. You see an attitude makes you a different person. First impressions are vital. Tomorrow I shall ride as a pompous knight seeking a dragon and you will be tripping up over your spurs. I shall be fishing one way and you another."

"What are we fishing for sir?"

"Information and profit. Do you believe in dragons Pasty?"

"Yes sir."

"Good."

The town of Fshillowog (Sâledâr and Paston called it 'Fishy'.) appeared quite prosperous for its two hundred inhabitants. The bailiff showed them to the manor house which, as the Lord was never there, had become a convenient barn downstairs and hostel for rats upstairs. As there was no other accommodation they had no choice but to throw out

hay from the stables to accommodate their horses. Sâledâr confided to Paston "I think we may sleep in the stables tonight but don't whisper that to anyone."

"Shouldn't we make the leading citizens accommodate us?"

"Good question. Keep asking questions Pasty as when you get good at it you'll realise you're the one with more answers than the others. In this case we'll show we don't care about their lack of hospitality. That will make them all feel a bit queer. When we smile and they cringe then we can lead them however we like."

When Sâledâr's mission to deal with the dragon had been explained it was left to the bailiff to describe the sheep-stealing. Paston asked "Did it steal anything else Ow! (That was Sâledâr's kick under the table) ...like maidens."

"Bless you no sir. We don't have the same customs as you have at Court."

"Oh really what//Ow!"

"Forget him Bailiff. What I want to know is where does this dragon live?"

"In a cave just under the summit of Cader Idris."

"I can walk up your mountains in a day. I may look like a soft courtier to you but I can walk up your hills."

"They're dangerous on their own sir. Sudden fogs have trapped many unwary travellers."

"What was the name of the last person to be trapped heading up towards the dragon's den?"

"Er. I can't quite remember. There have been so many. John Boyce springs to mind."

"Was he an innocent traveller or seeking out the dragon?"

"Innocent traveller sir."

"Where was he travelling to and from?"

The delay in answering was clear to Paston. "Please tell us everything you know so we can slay the beast."

"I'm trying to think."

Sâledâr said "We're tired after our long journey. Please send warm pies to the stables as soon as you can and we will no doubt be refreshed tomorrow."

"Ow!"

Five minutes later, when they were alone in the stables, Paston asked. "Why did you kick me! We had him in our grasp."

"Because firstly he couldn't give any details of any attacks. Secondly the words 'I'm trying to think' tells you that your victim is scurrying around to find an answer like a mouse with no holes."

"So why didn't you follow it up? Spring that trap!"

"Because if he was really innocent he'd have told us what he knew without hesitation. Now we know he'd part of the sheep-stealing conspiracy."

"But why not arrest him?"

"He's betrayed himself already so perhaps if we pretend we've missed it he will be like a moth to a flame and betray the whole plot."

"So... I thought you had to apply a candle flame to the sole of their foot to make them confess."

"Then that's another thing you've learned Pasty. I make people spew up their guts all on their own."

"Eh?"

"They are so frightened that I don't have to torture them. I was looking forward to this and now all the bad men know I'm a lot badder than they are. One of us will be on guard tonight with a drawn sword and covered lamp while the other is getting an hour of sweet sleep."

"Please sir? I thought we were here to help the bailiff."

"The bailiff may be innocent but I'll wager a purse of gold crowns he's made a comfortable living for himself while Threadthorne is absent."

"Oh. What about the dragon sir. I haven't got a clue."

"Look Paston. If we make enemies then we know we're following the right track. Wake me before you fall asleep and I will do turn-about."

The next day Paston was paraded in his best clothes. Many times Sâledâr had to call him away from the attention of ladies. Somehow he seemed to always be talking and smiling while Sâledâr was failing to get any useful information from the men. Sâledâr stomped around with a fierce face and snappy words. Paston floated along behind like soft rose petals. His voice was deep and slow, rich as honey. Sâledâr learned nothing useful about the stealing of sheep and was sure people pretended they didn't understand English. At last he had three witnesses who admitted they'd seen the dragon. In separate rooms he gave them paper and charcoal to draw the dragon. Paston was no use at all! When he had the three drawings he folded them up and went to the mayor's house and demanded food and lodging for the rest of the day and coming night. Somehow nobody in 'Fishy' was particularly worried about the dragon. They *said* they were scared. They *said* it made a noise like thunder. They *said* something must be done but they were helpless.

"Look at these drawings Pasty. Three eyewitnesses. One draws it like an eagle, another a cat with bat-wings and the third as a snake snorting fire and really tiny wings like a dragonfly. They must think we're idiots. Well done Pasty for making me look like a dusty skeleton. Even when I was your age I didn't have your smooth ways with the women. I'm really pleased you had the courage to make me look a crusty idiot. Tomorrow we go and have a parley with the dragon. Get your lady-friends to bake you luck-cakes. I'll take some gold off the wealthy burghers as dragon bait."

Paston said "You sir are a wicked man. I see your plot. If the town pretends there is a dragon covering for crime then you fine them without the law."

"Exactly. See if you can entice any maid to be dragon-bait. By your side. You'll protect her – and I've smote three before – did they think Lord Treadthorne would send any old knight? I'm sure you'll add 'and any old apprentice'."

The next day at dawn a party of a guide, Sâledâr, Paston and a girl half his size, two servants and five pack ponies started up the track that would eventually lead to the top meadows and from there further upwards to the supposed location of the dragon's lair. One of the ponies carried valuables donated by the townsfolk. Another a sheep's carcass. The third their food and the fourth a rudimentary tent. The fifth was for

the weapons (excluding armour) of the knight and his apprentice. When they left the top fields and entered onto the bare moor they sang hymns. Paston's choice, or lucky volunteer, was a wild redhead in a short rainbow cloak who strode boldly along the track. Her name was Hreean. [Rhiain] Sâledâr saw she had a staff for walking and was an independent and wayward girl. Clearly Sâledâr would have to tell Paston about women sooner rather than later.

Sâledâr said to Paston "One of us has to tell her we know there isn't really a dragon. Do you volunteer?"

"Yes Sir. Isn't she marvellous?"

"Yesterday you were a soft jester. Today you can tame that dragon striding ahead up there."

"You mean Hreean?"

"I do. If you want her and she wants you then this will be a fine day. Look at her bravery and determination. She's strong and what better companion for life could you ask for?"

"I don't know sir. I wasn't thinking of marriage."

"Think of it now. Is she a soft dragon or a spitting one?"

"I'm too young to get married sir. I have no money to give her a home."

"Of course you have money. What was I collecting yesterday? I will give you that as a dowry."

"I don't see the plan sir."

"The plan is we return telling the townsfolk we've dealt with the dragon and so any further stealing is obviously by sheep stealers with two feet and no wings. The sheep guards may find they have a lord who doesn't believe in dragons."

"I know you too well sir. You wish me to settle here to be that lord."

"I do. And I don't want you being in every lady's bedroom. If you have a wife then for a year you can be a big man in a little place and learn how such places work. Then return to Court with your wife and a reputation for management like 'uncle' Orin would wish. There are many towns in the kingdom in need of a firm hand."

"But sir! That means accounts and you know I'm mazed by numbers."

"Yes I know. Perhaps by 'firm hand' I meant Hreean. The base of the cloud is nearly upon us. I'll bid the guide wait as the three of us carrying our own packs and weapons go up into the fog for the final tournament.

After fifteen minutes surrounded by fog Sâledâr called a halt. He explained to Hreean that they knew the dragon was a legend used to excuse sheep stealing. "Come and be a brave daughter for an old man. Let me put my arm around you." She sat on the grey rock beside Sâledâr. "Either you are stupidly brave and an idiot or brave and very clever. I think you're bold – strong – take opportunities – oh and by the way beneath your brown face you're prettier than you know." (Sâledâr lied sometimes. She had his own sharp nose and lips that were so thin they were hardly more than a puffy scratch.) She looked at Paston. "I want you and Paston to be man and wife and bring honesty to this town. When you've done that here as a child plays with toys then there will be real towns where Pasty will be a lord and you will help him collect uncollected taxes, bring offenders to the court and see profit is turned to fashion for the ladies and alms for the poor."

Hreean said "I no talk England much".

Paston said "I will teach you." He was in front of her, down on one knee. "Sâledâr has shown me wisdom as we came here. Now he shows me something wonderful. You as mistress of a whole town. Watching the aldermen fiddle their taxes and telling me to do something about it. If you will be a woman-knight then I will be your squire."

So that's how the Welsh Dragon was conquered. Deception at every stage except the last. Paston and his new wife took over the lordship of the manor. With valuables extorted from the townsfolk they knocked-down Uncle Treadthorne's house and built a modern one with slates instead of thatch on the roof. In the two years Paston and his wife stayed in Wales they had visits from Orin. Thanks to Sâledâr's suggestion, the King sent a young, efficient, but rather too exuberant, clerk with instructions to teach Paston the essentials of administration, and if the Welsh women were as feisty and homely as Sâledâr painted them, then follow Paston's example.

Chapter 3

The king and Sâledâr shared a private evening by the fire of a hunting lodge as the rain teemed down outside. "Did you really know the dragon didn't exist Sâledâr?"

"It was a guess sir. I was ready if it wasn't. I would have made friends with the beast or at least started some trust. Is a dragon just a wild animal like a flying wolf or a creature that has feelings? I had thought to bring it back to court in a cage but then I was wiser. What would happen if it escaped again?"

"Yes. I see. But it could be good sport. Hunting deer and hawking can be boring at times."

"I think Paston will be a great and good lord. Hreean is a fierce bitch who will not let him rest. We both know of a burgh in the North where there is a need for defence of the borders but where the lords are always bickering or scheming over small things."

"God's Truth Sâledâr! I let you wander my realm and you see it like it might be tomorrow."

"I wander alone sir. I see strengths and weaknesses but it's all in my head. I see real dragons of war and real witches of barren land in my head. You see Treadthorne is a wizard when it comes to making a profit from estates. Perhaps you should ask him to write a plan for improving the estate that is your realm. Lock him in a castle for a week or two and then we look at his suggestions and pick on one and get him to visit that part of the realm and get details."

"Ha! I know you Sâledâr. You want him out of the way so you can swank around yourself."

"Not so sir. We do not compete. I combine bravery and expedition with occasional cleverness which is only understood by a few. He is a schemer of schemes and nobody knows his master."

"So who is your master Sâledâr?"

"Not me. I follow your wishes and ask God for guidance. If I roam for any reason it is for my children."

"You don't have any children."

"I meant all of our children. Anyway I have slept with enough women to have one or two secret babes. One more thing sir?"

Then...

Sâledâr invents legends if necessary. In doing so he gathers a younger generation of helpers and finds a wife and step-children. These daughters begin to create their own legends from reality and so the Kingdom is re-connected with new friendships as rebel lords and invaders are dealt with.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.