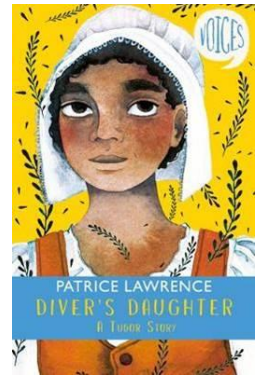


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A Boat and a Cart



George Symons had a plan. I wonder now if his plan was even bigger than I had realised. Perhaps he had seen Mama in London long before we shared a boat with him on the Thames. Perhaps he had been following her, hoping for a chance to talk to her and had paid our fare so we would travel with him. Perhaps he'd made the boat wobble on purpose, so he could test her skill. But then I remembered his voice and the look on his face as the boat rolled in the current and I knew that part wasn't faked.

That morning in the Tabard, he told us the story of Jacques Francis. He'd been the best of the three black divers, going deeper than any other. Mama interrupted him. "Are you telling me this because you want me to dive into the harbour for cannon?"

"The *Mary Rose* sank in Portsmouth," George Symons said. "But there was another boat that sank in Southampton a year later. She was called the *Sancta Maria and Sanctus Edwardus*. She belonged to a Venetian merchant and carried rich cargo. Peter Corsi organized the salvage for this ship too. Jacques Francis dived there again. It didn't end well."

I saw the flicker of disappointment cross Mama's face before her expression went blank. "He died."

"No." George Symons smiled, the sort of smile that people often hid behind their hands. "He lived, but the merchants who lost their cargo claimed that Corsi had not given them everything the divers had taken from the ship. I believe that not only did Corsi keep hold of some of the cargo himself, but there are still riches to be taken from that boat."

"Why would you believe that?" asked Mama.

"They were rich merchants, Mistress Cartwright, but they would not have spent all that money on divers if all they had lost was leather and tin. "There's gold down there Mistress Cartwright. Gold."

Mama's face said nothing. "So why didn't they get it back?"

"There was a court case. The merchants accused Corsi of stealing their cargo. Corsi made Jacques Francis swear before the court that Corsi was an honest man and would do no such thing. The rich merchants didn't like this. They denounced Jacques as a slave and an infidel and said his testimony wasn't to be trusted."

Mama muttered something under her breath. It was something about knowing those words well herself.

"Jacques knows where that ship lies," George Symons continued. "He knows how deep the water is and what treasure waits for us in the wreckage. If we can win his trust, he will be our guide."

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"I feel that we should leave him be," Mama said.

"Perhaps we should," George Symons agreed. Perhaps we should leave the gold to sink into the river bed and never be claimed. Or perhaps, *you* could be rich?"

A look flickered across Mama's face. She was always saying to me, *Trust no one*. As George Symons shoved a wad of bread in his mouth, I wondered how much she was starting to trust him.

"What is expected of me?" she asked.

What *was* expected of Mama? Well, George Symons explained that there was a man who assisted an elderly apothecary in a shop near Christ's Hospital in London, and he was sure that this man was Jacques Francis. George Symons had tried to talk with him but the man had insisted that he had never been a diver. He claimed his name was Anthony and he'd been a gentleman's servant in Winchester. George Symons had recognised him, though. After the Mary Rose had sunk, he'd spent hours sitting on the wall of Portsmouth harbour watching the men dive and surface. It may have been more than twenty years ago, but George Symons said that he could not forget that face.

The apothecary was called Nicholas Balcombe. When George Symons had made enquiries, he'd found out that Master Balcombe had a second ship in Southampton that had been closed for a while. He'd instructed Jacques Francis to bring the remaining medicines and equipment to London and then wait for a shipment in Southampton before returning to London.

We were to head to Southampton in February when "Anthony" would be there. George Symons would organise lodgings for us with his cousin, a widow with a sick daughter who would welcome our help and company. We were to continue with our usual lives in London until he came to tell us that all the arrangements were complete.

Five months passed. I had almost forgotten about the plan. Then Mama shook me awake in the middle of the night, or at least, it seemed like it was in the middle of the night to me. I was happy to be roused. I had been dreaming that I was back on the river, in the boat, rolling from side to side. I sat up so quickly I almost bounced my head against my mother's.

"George Symons is waiting," she said.

"How do you know?"

"He came to find me last night to tell me all was ready."

"It's still night."

I could feel her smile in the darkness. "No, *mpendwa*, it's close to morning. Get dressed."

Mama had already packed our scant possessions- the chemise she'd bought at the rag fair, a comb, a small blanket and, of course, my lucky poppet. We sat side by side on the saggy bed, pinning up our curls and tucking them beneath our bonnets.

"Now we're respectable," she said.

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As Mama straightened the bed, I could hear her small purse of coins clinking. I looked out of the window. It was that moment at dawn when the stars are bright, but there's a faded edge around the darkness. The moon looked like someone had clipped a chip off its side, but it was bright enough to see the shadow of George Symons waiting below. I hoped Mistress Sleet wouldn't choose that moment to open her window and empty her chamber pot.

Mama and I crept downstairs. We went carefully because the steps are noisy. Also, Mama said that sometimes guests had so much ale they couldn't make it up to their rooms, and the last thing we wanted to do was to kick a sleeping merchant who would shriek so hard that it brought Master Horstead running. Thankfully our passage that morning was clear.

Downstairs, Mama told me to stay by the door. I would rather have crouched over the embers of the fire to take as much warmth from them as I could. Even I knew that February was no time to travel. But the best time to dive is May and George Symons had said that we had to be sure we had enough time to make Jacques Francis trust us. That gave us three months. Three months until we'd have riches beyond our imagination, he'd said. Beyond my imagination? As I did my best to imagine them, Mama returned with the kitchen boy stumbling behind her. She opened her purse and gave him a coin. When she closed the door, I heard him bolt it behind us again.

This was it. This was the end of our time at the Boar's Head. I'd lived in enough places to never feel sad when I was leaving them. It was the same this time, except I couldn't help thinking – when we returned to Southwark, would we be rich enough to buy our own tavern?

I whispered to Mama, "Everything will be fine, won't it?"

She bobbed down and kissed my head. "It's a new adventure, Eve."

Yes, I was an adventurer.

George Symons greeted us with a grunt and hurried ahead. As we scurried after him, through the dark streets of Southwark, I repeated it to myself. *I am an adventurer! I am an adventurer! When I return, I will be rich!*

Then I realised that we were heading towards the river. Wasn't that the wrong way? We were supposed to be heading south, not across to London.

"I am an adventurer! I am an adventurer!" I said the words out loud as the smell of the river grew stronger, but the words weren't loud enough to hide my thumping heart."

George Symons was moving quickly through the grey morning shadows. Mama hurried to catch up with him. We passed a baker's shop. The oven must have been lit already because I could smell warm bread. The mastiffs were baying by the bear garden, where people watched dogs fight captive bears for fun. And I could hear the river whispering to me, the waves lapping at the jetty and the creak of ropes as boats tried to free themselves and float away.

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The stars were fading into the morning sky as we came on to Bankside. I found Mama's hand and squeezed it.

"Are we going on a boat?" I asked.

She nodded. "But don't worry, *mpendwa*. It's a big one. It belongs to a rich merchant who's sailing back home via Southampton. Master Symons says that it's our quickest route.

My stomach started bumping around just thinking about it. It wasn't just wherries that threw you into the sea. We were here because George Symons had told us about a big warship tipping over.

"Wait here." He walked towards the wharf.

We were at the steps near Paris Gardens. I could see the bigger boats anchored across the river, while the wherries and rowing boats bumped against each other and the wharf. The sailors were already busy, calling to each other in languages I didn't understand. *Laranjas*. Was that oranges? Maybe Mama would know.

"Mama?"

"Shush!" She seemed to be stretching towards the river, listening with her whole body.

"We're ready." George Symons was back. He was with a short man whose head barely reached the carpenter's shoulder. In the dawn gloom, it was easier to smell him than to see him. I wished Mama hadn't sold all her little lavender bags, though it would take a whole cartload of lavender to make the short man smell good. He was staring at Mama. As usual, she stared back. The way he looked at her made me want to turn back to the Boar's Head. She put an arm around my shoulders and I felt the solid strength of her body. I had to be more like Mama and remember that adventurers didn't give up simply because they didn't like the look (or smell) of people.

The sailor said something to Mama. It was in a different language and the words didn't sound like anything I knew. Mama didn't reply. Why should she? She only spoke English to strangers. He laughed loudly and I was hit by the smell of his breath. He came up closer to Mama and said something else.

Mama grabbed my hand, spun round and marched away. What? Adventurers didn't....

George Symons raced after us. If I ever repeated the words he shouted, Mama would have taken me to the edge of the city and left me there. Mama just carried on walking. George Symons grabbed her arm and we jolted to a stop. Mama didn't like anyone to touch her and I saw her warning-face flash on. George Symons wisely let her go.

She said, "I'm not travelling with Portuguese."

"Not all the crew are Portuguese."

"The Portuguese stole me from my family. I will not travel with them. I do not believe that they will take me where I want to go."

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George Symons dared to touch Mam's arm again, but gently. "Please take the boat. You will be safe. You're only travelling to Southampton."

"I would not travel across to London with them."

"You have my word."

"I don't trust your word. I don't trust anybody's word."

She started walking again, pulling me after her.

"Then our whole plan is ruined," he said.

"Yes," Mama said. "Our whole plan is ruined if there is only one way to travel to Southampton."

"He already has my money! I had to pay him extra too, because you're a woman."

Mama laughed. "Yes, a woman on a boat is supposed to bring bad luck, unless you've stolen her away from her family."

A little smile played on George Symons' lips. "But you've already given up your lodgings. Will you and your child walk the streets?"

Mama stared him down. "It wouldn't be the first time."

That was true, but I had hoped that fighting the giant rat in the grain store would be the last time. We once stole into a sheepcote and I'd spent the night cuddling up to a ewe for warmth. That hadn't been so bad, even if the owner was most displeased to see us in the morning.

Mama walked quickly like she already knew our destination. George Symons puffed by the side of us.

"Please," he said. "Stop."

Mama stopped. The bridge was up ahead. The tide was low and the water between the piers seemed almost still. Grey smoke curled from the merchants' houses above the arches. The gates into London must have been open because there was already a queue of carts waiting to cross over.

Mama turned to face him, hands on her hips. "I have stopped, Master Symons. What do you wish to say to me?"

"There's a dyer's son," he said. "I met him in the Saracen last week. He'd come up from Winchester to deliver alum to Cloth Fair. He was waiting for some dresses to be made up for his sisters and mother. If he hasn't already left, perhaps I can persuade him to deliver you to Winchester. From there, it's an easy journey on to Southampton. Does that route suit you better?"

"Yes," Mama said. "It does."

"He's lodging at the Old Swan. Shall we take our chances on the bridge?"

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I nodded so hard, I'm surprised my head didn't bounce off and hit a wherry man.

I only had to take one step on to the bridge to know that I wasn't in Southwark any more. Southwark looks like a giant has wrapped his arms around it and squeezed. The houses lean towards each other, squashed in the middle and bulging out at the top so you can almost reach out from the top storeys and touch each other's hands over the road. The alleys wind and wriggle between the houses sometimes barely wide enough for a starving dog, sometimes leading to a sudden dead end. These are the haunts of vagabonds and thieves and those with no bed, or even a sheepcote for the night.

The houses and shops on the bridge are different. It's like the giant clapped the buildings into a block and poked a stick through the length of it to make a pathway. The top storeys of the houses swell over the road, and over the water as well.

The gateway loomed above me. A few years ago, we were lodging in an attic off Long Southwark. Our tiny window faced out towards the river and the first thing I'd see as the sun came up was the dark circles of the traitors' heads on their long stems sprouting out from the roof of the gate. I had never longed to get any closer, but here I was staring up at the bulging shapes. I used to think that traitors turned that black colour when they died, but Mama said the heads were preserved in tar to make them last longer. Birds swooped around them, looking for, well, untarred bits and left their own white decorations. Today there were five heads. When we lived in Tooley Street, I once counted more than twenty.

I looked away towards the rainbow house in the middle of the bridge. That's not its proper name, but it should have been. It covers the whole width of the bridge with an arch in the middle to pass through. Two carts were jammed in front of the arch. They had been trying to edge past each other, but their wheels had become locked together. The carters were yelling and so were all the people trying to get past them. George Symons went to push his way through the crowds, but Mama didn't follow. I was happy to wait, staring at the colourful house and its strange onion-topped towers and gold weather vanes. If I was a good adventurer, would I have enough money to buy a house like that? If I did, it wouldn't be over a river.

The carters finally decided to take action. The one heading south persuaded his horse to back up to let the other one pass. After they'd exchanged a few more curses, the way was clear. Well, clear apart from all the other carts and people on horseback and beggars and customers weaving their way in and out of the shops.

"Hurry up!" George Symons threw the words back at us. "He may have already left."

* * * * *

Next chapter: Visitors in the Night...