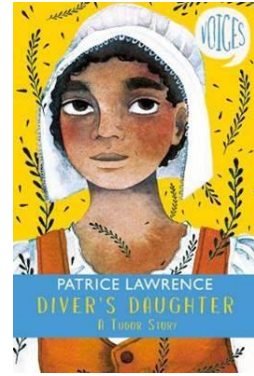


## Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

### Visitors in the Night



The dyer's son was called Valentine. He looked like one of the fat-faced apprentices who roamed through Southwark after twilight. Pockmarks were scattered across his cheeks as if an enemy had thrown a fistful of small pebbles at his face. He licked his lips as if they were covered in London's best salt. When he saw us, I thought a nail had come loose in his jaw because his mouth fell open and stayed that way. When he talked, his breath came in whistles and with too much spit. I was glad it was George Symons sitting opposite him, not me.

Valentine was the person who would carry us down to Southampton. I started to think that we'd be better travelling by boat. The deal was easier than expected. The dresses were ready for collection, but Valentine owed money – he'd been to Bartholomew Fair and had been caught out by the card sharps. He would be happy to take us if George Symons paid the seamstress and his bill at the Old Swan. George Symons wasn't happy, but the day was passing and we had only reached London. He didn't have time to argue. So we went to Cloth Fair to collect the dresses and then back to the Old Swan to pay his bill. Valentine also needed money for lodgings on the way – enough for two rooms because it wouldn't be decent for him to share a room with Mama and me - for three nights, just to be safe.

"How come George Symons is paying for everything?" I asked Mama.

"Because he expects us to make his fortune."

The sun was high and Valentine insisted that we ate before we left and also got extra food to take with us – again George Symons paid. The landlord served us bowls of pottage and boiled eels, and wrapped three meat pies for us to take away. Valentine reached out his hand for them, but Mama got there first. Valentine narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

Valentine's horse was called Succour. He was pale brown with thick legs and a long, knotty mane. It took a while to fit the harness. Succour had been enjoying his freedom in London as much as his owner had and didn't take kindly to being reminded that he was a carthorse. I wasn't sure if it was because he didn't like the harness or he didn't like Valentine. The cart was a box on a platform balanced on a shaft between two big wheels with a canopy to pull over if it rained. As it bumped and lurched around the courtyard, I knew that Mama and I would be thrown around like sacks of wheat.

Still, the adventurer inside me gave a little excited shiver. We would soon be on our way. Well, as soon as we'd finished waiting for the farmer to herd his cows across the bridge. They were thin creatures with sad faces as if they knew they were heading to market. George Symons walked to the end of Long Southwark with us. He pressed a purse of money into Mama's hands. I saw Valentine's eyes flick towards it and away again.

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George Symons bent towards Mama. "You know what's expected of you?"

Mama nodded.

"Good. I'll be with you soon after May Day."

He bent down and cupped his hand to help Mama scramble into the cart, then lifted me up and plonked me next to her. He went up to Valentine and I saw his thick, rough finger jab Valentine's shoulder.

"Do not forget your deal!"

Valentine nodded, then pulled at Succour's reins. George Symons strode back towards Bankside. We were finally off.

Mama and I took turns sitting on the package of dresses, but it didn't do much to cushion the bumps. The going was slow, not much faster than we could have walked, even though Succour was pulling at his reins like he wanted to gallop away. I'm glad he didn't. Southwark was still in sight and my bottom was already bruised.

Soon we were passing through fields, bare branches and tufts of grass. The mud on the highway was frozen into ridges and the cartwheels jolted over every one. Mama sat me on her lap in the hope it might weigh us down. Instead, it just hurt her more as she landed harder every time we bumped. In the front, Valentine was whistling away to himself. He had a thick leather cushion underneath *his* bottom.

We stopped once before nightfall because I needed to go to the toilet. Mama was cross. She thought Valentine wouldn't wait for us. Just in case, she took the pies with her. Later, when I tried to eat one, the jolting meant my mouth was never where I expected it to be and I kept poking myself in the cheek. It didn't matter. I wasn't hungry anyway. I was starting to feel sick and I was too hot, even though Valentine was now wearing a cape over his coat. Mama touched my forehead and glanced towards Valentine. There'd been plague in London six years before I was born. Folk continued to be suspicious.

Twilight was turning the world into shadows again. The air seemed to freeze across my hot face. Mama wrapped me tight in my cloak and stroked my back as I lay across her lap.

"There's an inn ahead," Valentine called back to us. I'd thought he'd forgotten we were there. "I stayed there on my way up to London." He steered Succour into the yard. "I'll go and enquire about rooms. "

He climbed down from the seat, stretched and tied Succour to a post.

"Pass me the money so I can secure our rooms."

"I thought we paid the bill afterwards," Mama said.

"We want two rooms," Valentine said. "Good rooms too, as Master Symons instructed. I need to show the innkeeper that we can pay."

The purse clanked in Mama's hands. "How much do you need?"

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"I don't know. Pass me the purse and I'll return it."

My mouth wouldn't open. My lips wouldn't move or I would have shouted *no!* Mama saw me trying to speak and felt my forehead again.

She handed Valentine the money. "Go. And come back quickly."

He strode off towards the inn. I felt like I'd been lying too close to the fire while an angry cook pummelled me with a cudgel. I wasn't sure I could get out of the cart even if he found us a room fit for the Queen.

Mama lay next to me and covered us both with her cloak.

"Be patient," she said. "You'll be in a soft bed soon."

An owl called and further away I could hear the tinkle of water. There must have been stables too, as Succour was answering faint whinnies with a jerk of the cart. I fell asleep and woke up to voices. One was Mama's, the other was a man's. The tips of my fingers were stinging with cold and every time my body moved, I thought lightning had struck my head.

"The horse is to be stabled," the man said. He must be the ostler.

"And what about us?"

"He didn't tell me had passengers."

"Then please go and find him, sir. He had instructions to find us lodgings."

"He's long gone to his bed. He enjoyed the landlord's kegs very well indeed."

I must have groaned because they stopped talking and a pool of light fell over me.

"Is she sick?" the ostler asked.

"Just a chill." There was a quiver in Mama's voice. "She fell into the river a few months ago and it weakened her chest."

I saw the ostler shake his head. "We cannot bring London sickness into the house."

"It's just a chill," said my mother.

"It always starts with just a chill," he replied.

"She does not have the plague! It's just a chill!"

"You cannot come into the house."

"Then what are we to do?"

The ostler untied Succour from the post and led her-and me over to the stables. He opened a wide door and we went in. I could hear Mama following behind.

"We are not vagrants." Her voice sounded harsh and loud. "We can't sleep in a bush! We have money!"

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"Where is your money?" the ostler asked.

"It's with that rogue!" Mama said.

The ostler started to unbuckle Succour from the harness. "Then your argument is with him."

Mama's voice was very quiet. "I don't want an argument. I just want a warm place to stay for the night."

I closed my eyes, though it was more like my eyes were sinking into my head and the skin was closing up over them like a scab.

We slept in the stable's hayloft. The ostler brought us blankets, bread and a little soup. I know now that it was his wife's doing. She'd come into the stables to find him, seen us and berated him for refusing to help. She even brewed up medicine and made a poultice for me, though Mama said she wouldn't come close enough to touch me even though Mama showed her my neck to prove I was free from plague boils.

I should remember more of those hours, but my memories are like smoke from the merchants' houses on the bridge. They curl up out of my head and disappear. I remember smells – hay, dung, horse sweat. There was my sweat too because my clothes were wet, just like I'd been pulled out of the river again. If Mama had tried to take those clothes off me, my skin would have peeled away with them. Mama sang, I remember that. Her face was close to mine, her hand stroking my hair. I remember a cockerel crowing and another one answering its call before I closed my eyes.

I woke up in full light. I lay there in my damp hay-covered shroud and tried to work out what was missing. Of course – it was Mama. My body was still tender and heavy, but I managed to drag it over to the hatch to look down the stable. She wasn't there. Nor was Succour. They must be attaching him to the cart again. I knew from yesterday that Succour would be putting up a fight. Mama must be with Valentine, telling him exactly what she thought of him makingus sleep in a stable.

Unless they'd left me. No, Mama would never do that, not even if I really did have the plague. I touched my neck. I couldn't feel any lumps, but maybe there were other signs I didn't know about. Maybe Mama was persuading the ostler's wife to brew me up more medicine?

Hooves clattered in the yard outside. Someone shrieked. Was that Mama? My heart beat harder. I wriggled over to the ladder that led down into the stable and grasped the top rung, but the inside of my head was curling smoke again. My eyes were blurry and the sweats had returned. I lay on my back. I could hear shouting now and the voice was Mama's. The hooves grew quieter and quieter until they were gone.

"Eve?" Mama's head poked out from the hatch.

I turned my head and opened my eyes. "Are we leaving now?"

She climbed up and dropped on to the hay next to me.

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“He’s gone, Eve. He’s left us. The ostler’s wife came to warn me, but he would have run me down rather than stop for us. He has all our money.” She lay down. “He has everything.”

I knew then that she was sinking. When I fell out of the wherry, it felt like I was being pulled to the bottom of the river. When Mama sank, it was like everything was being pulled back inside her. She couldn’t talk or eat, and I don’t think she always knew who I was. Sometimes it lasted for a day or two. One, it was nearly for a month. *Please don’t sink. Please don’t sink.* When she was falling, I knew I couldn’t catch her. We lay side by side and I listened to the comings and goings in the stable below while the sky changed from pale grey to dark.

At twilight, the ostler’s wife brought us soup and a little bread. My head was hurting and my legs were heavy, but I knew I was getting well again. Mama though, had barely moved. Was this how our big adventure ended? Abandoned and penniless in a stable? No! I was an adventurer! Adventurers had to be difficult and dangerous. I couldn’t call myself an adventurer if everything went well. So, what was I going to do? First, I needed to make sure we had food and board until we could travel. Second, I had to work out how we would travel. Would we continue to look for treasure in Southampton or return to Southwark and the grain store?

The next morning, the ostler’s wife brought us some apples. I offered to help her in the garden as payment for the food and board, but she said there was little to do in February. But she was happy for me to help with the sewing and brought me a big baskets of sheets and aprons to mend. I asked Mama if she would sew with me, but she tucked her knees under her chin and closed her eyes. I worked for as long as there was light, peeping down from the hatch to check who was bringing in horses to stable. When it became too dark to sew, I tried to feed Mama a little bread, but she refused.

“Please, Mama,” I whispered. “Just enough to keep you strong.”

The stable door opened. I peered down. A man was leading a horse with one hand and holding a lantern with the other. He wore a heavy riding cloak over a dark doublet and hose and a high soft-crowned cap. He was humming to himself as he unsaddled his horse and filled a trough with feed. As he lifted his head, his cap dropped into the trough. I squeezed back a giggle. He held up the lantern, but missed me in the shadows. I saw then that the man’s skin was as dark as Mama’s. The man was black, like Mama and me. I had seen people like us in Southwark; musicians playing at the fairs or servants following behind rich people’s carriages. But this man wasn’t wearing servants’ clothes and I couldn’t imagine him playing the trumpet for tokens. He finished settling his horse then made his way to the inn.

“Mama?”

Her eyes were open, but she was as still as if she was sleeping.

“I’ve just seen a man like us! His horse is below. Should I talk to him?”

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She said nothing.

"Mama?" I squeezed a handful of hay and felt a sharp end pierce my palm. I let it go. "Do you think he may be the man we're looking for? Do you think God brought luck to us?"

Mama turned on her side and rolled away from me. I had to be patient. Mama always surfaced again in the end.

"Mama?"

*"Deixe-me dormir."*

She wanted me to let her sleep. Her eyes closed and she curled tighter. I wasn't ready to sleep, though. I climbed down into the stable. My knees were wobbly and I clung to the ladder so hard that chips of wood splintered into my skin. I eased open the stable door and ran across the dark yard.

"Sir!" I called. "Sir!"

The man slowed but did not stop. I pushed my aching body to make one last burst of speed and almost threw myself in front of his feet. He looked for a moment like he was going to step right over me. He bent down and helped me up. His eyes widened when he saw me and he let me go so quickly I almost fell over again.

"I've no money," he said. "Do not bother trying to beg it from me." How many people did he see that looked like us but he still thought badly of me. Tiredness and anger took over.

"I'm not a beggar!"

"So what do you want?"

"I..." Was this the moment to ask him about a wrecked ship and its treasure? What if it wasn't Jacques Francis? "My Mama and I are staying in the stable," I said. "And I saw you and..."

"So you're a spy, then. Or a thief, watching to see where I leave my valuables."

"No, I am not a spy!" Or a thief! I just thought.... I thought I might know you."

He bent down, his face close to mine. His skin was coated with the grey dust of travel. His eyes were tinged with red. A small pearl earring was like a spot of light on his right ear.

"You don't know me," he said.

He walked towards the inn, pushed open the door and went inside. I crept over to the window and watched as he sat down at a table close to the kitchen. Was it really Jacques Francis? If George Symons was right, the diver would definitely have to travel this way.

"Why are you out her?"

I jumped so hard I almost separated from my skin. It was a girl. He had a round face that looked pale under the moonlight. Her smile touched her eyes and she cocked her head

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sideways. I realised that she was waiting for an answer. Behind her, the ostler had taken charge of a couple of horses and was leading them to the stables.

"Because she's outstayed her welcome," he muttered. The girl giggled. The hem from her hood was falling crooked over her face. She pushed down her muffler to talk to me. I stared at her. I'd seen that face before! I was sure!

"If you give me a penny," she said, "I can ask my brother, Griffin, to read your charts."

That's when I knew who she was. It was the drummer girl!

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"I saw you before. At Bartholomew Fair."

"Did Griffin read your charts then?"

"No."

"That's why you've had bad luck."

"How do you know I've had bad luck?"

"Because you're sleeping in the stable."

"Gina!" A man's voice came from the door to the inn. "Where are you?"

"That's my brother. He's like a dragon when he's hungry." She turned her head, shouting, "Just coming!"

"Your name's Gina," I said.

"No. It's Elizabeth, like Elizabeth Regina. But everybody's Elizabeth, so I'm Gina. What's your name?"

"Eve."

Gina looked me up and down, thoughtfully. "Do you have a skill, Eve?"

"A skill?"

"Can you juggle, sign, walk the tightrope?"

"No."

"Ah," she said. "That's a pity. I thought perhaps we could be of help to each other."

"Gina!" Griffin really did sound like he was ready to breathe fire.

"Sorry I can't help you." Gina moved away.

"Mama has a skill," I said quickly. "She can dive into the deepest water and survive."

"Is your mother a fish?" Gina clapped her hands. Because if she is, that would make you a mermaid."

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She looked down at my legs. "We could always make you a fish tail. We could charge half a penny to see you and –"

I laughed. "'I'm not a mermaid. I fell into the River Thames and almost drowned. Mama dived in to save me."

"You fell into the Thames? And you lived?"

"Yes, right by the bridge. At high tide."

Her eyes widened. She pinched my cart-bruised arm and I shrieked.

"No, you're definitely not a ghost," she said. "Not many people come out alive from there. That is a skill indeed. Where are you headed?"

"Towards Southampton. Well, we were before the wicked dyer's son rode off with all our money." My mouth carried on moving even though my brain wanted to hold it back. "We've been told there's treasure in the waters nearby. Mama's going to dive in and find it."

"Your mama's diving for treasure in Southampton?" Gina said it like it was an everyday matter. "How does your mama know where to look?"

I opened my mouth again and glanced towards the window. The man had gone.

"It's probably just a sailors' tale," I said.

"But you're still going down there?"

"We have to keep moving around all the time. We thought it would make things better for us. We would do anything to have our own home."

"If the wicked dyer's son left you how will you get there now?"

"Gina!" Griffin really did roar.

She gave me a wide smile. "If I don't go, Griffin will come looking for me. You really don't want to meet him, the mood he's in."

She ran off towards the inn. I stayed by the window watching as Gina and Griffin settled themselves at a table. Griffin had a thin face and reminded me of the cows we'd seen being driven over the bridge. Though something about him made me think that he wouldn't be the one who ended up at market. They turned to look at me, then leaned in close to talk.

I made my way back to the hayloft. The horse looked up from the trough as if it was wondering why I was disturbing its peace. I climbed up and set next to Mam. She was curled up tight, sleeping. The moon had shifted so it cut across half her face. I stoked flecks of straw out of her hair.

"We are adventurers, Mama. We are adventurers."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Next chapter The Bag of Beads.....*



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### Glossary

- berated** (page 4) - **tell someone off angrily (scold)**
- cudgel** (page 3) - **a short, thick stick used as a weapon**
- doublet** (page 5) - **a man's short close-fitting padded jacket**
- plague** (page 2) - **an infectious disease**
- pockmark** (page 1) - **scars left by spots or boils**
- poultice** (page 4) - **a soft, moist mass of material, containing herbs, applied to the body to relieve soreness, kept in place with a cloth**
- pummelled** (page 3) - **strike repeatedly**