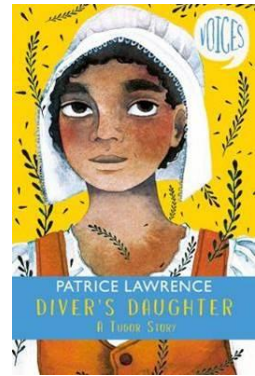


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A Gold Coin on the Common



Mama is beautiful. She is not beautiful like the rich ladies in their ruffs and furs and jewels, though she would be so much more beautiful than them if she ever had a chance to wear pearls and silk. She has brown skin, warm beneath the dust and dirt of our lives. She has marks from the smallpox and each scar reminds me that I am lucky to have her alive. Her eyes are almost the same colour as her skin, and her lashes are black and long. They twitch in her sleep like they can hear music and are longing to dance. Her hair, when it's free from her **coif** cap, is thick and tied in one or two plaits.

As March tipped into April, I spent every moment I could with her. I'd be tidying Claire's chamber while Mama helped Claire eat, or I'd be sitting with Claire on her bed as Mama told us stories or sang us songs in her own language. I'd stand side by side with Mama as we chopped vegetables and I'd help her sweep away the old rushes on the floor and lay down new ones. I hurt if I couldn't see her because I knew that each day a new bead would drop into Griffins's bag. I wondered how often he counted them and smiled at the fortune he saw coming his way. Then I'd remember the woman in the pillories. Her face would fade away and it would be Mama's instead.

I still walked around the town but I kept my head down. Folks had always glanced at Mama and me wherever we went, although less so in Southwark, where all manner of people made their home. Now I did not want to meet anyone's eye. Mama and I were foreigners. Did they think badly of us? The day before, I had seen two young women coming towards me. Servants, I'd thought. They'd turned to each other and one whispered. Did they believe I was a witch about to curse them? Did the priest in St Lawrence's Church see me pass by and wonder why I hadn't attended service on Sunday? Did he think Mama had been baptized a Catholic and wonder if she'd converted? Did he question whether I'd been baptized at all? The path that Mama and I were treading felt so delicate.

Sometimes I would see Jacques Francis down by the wharf. We would nod to each other, but we wouldn't speak. He would never change his mind, I knew that now. But, I had to remind myself, I was an adventurer. Adventures always went wrong before they ended well. It just meant making a different plan. One day I was sitting by Biddles Gate trying to work out what that plan could be when a voice called up to me.

"You!"

I looked down. It was the young fisherman who'd been there the day I first saw Jacques Francis. He was standing by an upturned boat. He rubbed his hands together.

"I'm still seeing your *dada* about," he said. "Doesn't he want to go back with you?"

"He's not my father."

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The fisherman rubbed his hands again. His palms were so black with pitch, I was surprised they didn't stick together.

"That's a pity. I heard he's got a room full of gold." He started to climb the steps towards me. "They say he goes out into the river at night and doesn't need a lantern because he can see in the dark. He swims right out to where the treasure is and when we're all sleeping, he picks it off the bottom of the river and takes it home for himself."

The fisherman's head was now level with mine. His cheek was streaked with black and there was a lump of pitch knotted in his hair.

"There's a richer harvest than eels in that water," he said. "I'd take a boat and look myself, if I could swim. But if I tried, I'd just be another load of bones sitting on the river bed." He smiled at me. His teeth looked like he'd been rubbing pitch on them too. "But if someone else could swim, I'd show them where all the gold was and we could share the bounty."

I gave him a sideways look. This was just another sailor's tale.

"I suppose you know where the boat went down," I said.

"The Sancta Maria and Sanctus Edwardu?"

He nodded hard. "Yes. That one."

"How do you know?"

"Everyone does. Do you want me to show you?"

"I..."

You're an adventurer, Eve. You need a plan.

"I can't swim but I know someone who can. If there really is treasure, they might be able to help."

"Well, how about you come back this evening and bring them with you?"

This evening? Mama would never come out with me. I'd even stopped reminding her about her promise to George Symons. She said she'd tell him the truth when he came to Southampton, that there was no treasure. But how did she know when she hadn't even tried to look?

"She won't be able to come this evening," I said.

"How about you? I can show you where it is."

If I went with him, I could find out the exact spot where Mama had to dive. Maybe the fisherman would help me find out how deep it was too, so she'd be able to prepare herself. We didn't need Jacques Francis after all. We could make our fortune by ourselves. Except...

"How big is your boat?" I asked.

He waved his hand towards the quay. "It's a fishing boat."

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It was even smaller than a wherry. The river here was calm, though, and there were no arches for it to rush through. Could I take a boat out into the river at night to find treasure? That would be a real adventure! But what if I couldn't do it? What if I took one step into the boat and had to jump back on to the shore?

"I'm ... not sure. I don't really like boats."

He smiled again. "No matter. If you can't see where we found the gold, I can still show you some to prove I'm not lying."

"You've already found gold?"

How could he be rich and still be a fisherman? He was wearing patched breeches and stockings and a smock that was stiff with dirt.

"Just a few coins. They came up in my net. That's how I know it's there."

Real, actual treasure! What if I could take some and show Mama? Then she'd *have* to agree to dive.

"When can I see it?" I asked.

The fisherman thought. "We need to be away from prying eyes. There are enough rumours already. We don't want others knowing they're true. I've also got to look after myself. I can't take you to the place where I keep it, in case you tell other people."

"I won't tell other people." Apart from Mama, of course. "Would I be able to borrow one of your coins?"

"Borrow my coins...." He frowned. "I don't think I could allow that."

"It's just.... Just so I can show the person who can help us get the rest of it. They might not believe me unless I show them."

"I understand. Can I trust you?"

"Yes!"

"How about you meet me on the salt marsh, right by the bowling green? I'll bring some coins and maybe I'll let you take one away."

"Thank you! When shall I be there?"

"I have to finish with the boat then go and collect my coin. Then I'll be there."

I ran home. Would I tell Mama where I was going? Once I was sure there was treasure, we'd go out together and maybe the picture I'd seen in my head would be true – Mama rising from the water with gold glittering around her neck.

As I opened Widow Primmer's door, a cat shot out from inside. It stood by the doorway across the street. It was the grey one with the dark blotch on its back. He'd grown fat in the last month. I wasn't sure if it was because of the scraps Mama fed him or the rats he hunted down in the yard. He cocked his head and blinked at me as if he knew my secrets.

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Inside, Mama was whisking a pot. The smell of spices wafted towards me. She tipped the pot so I could see inside. There were yellow bits that looked eggy, and white liquid that could be milk or cream. I wasn't sure about the dark brew it was all floating in. I sniffed again.

"Is that wine?" I asked.

"I'm making **posset**," Mama said. "Claire was up and wandering the room last night. I hope it might calm her. There may be some extra left over if you would like it."

"I didn't know you could make **posset**," I said.

Mama stared at the mess in the pot. "I'm not sure I can either." She held up the spoon. Egg lumps plopped back into the pan. "Like to taste it?"

I wiped my finger across the spoon then into my mouth. Mama had used a lot of honey. That was a good thing and it almost made me forget the chewy egg bits.

"Where's Widow Primmer?" I asked.

"Visiting some friends." Mama laughed. "Now we're here to care for Claire, she can do as she wishes." Mama poured the **posset** into a cup. A few egg lumps dropped in as well. "She said that we can stay as long as we like if we can find employment. Your poppet really did bring us luck!" She smiled, then stared into the cup. "I think I'd better strain this." She took the sieve from the shelf and drained the **posset** back into the pan, then once more in the cup.

"That's better," Mama said.

"Shall I come up with you?" I asked her.

"No, Claire is calmer when it's just me."

"Will you be long?"

"It depends if she wants to talk a while. Are you jealous?"

"No, Mama. I just ... it's just we told George Symons we'd find the gold. He'll be here soon, won't he?"

Mama held up the pot. "We already have treasure. I'm queen of the kitchen and we are dry and warm with a roof over our head. Do we need more?"

Yes, Mama. There is a boy with a bag full of brown beads and the bag is getting heavier and fuller. He only has to open his mouth and they will come for you.

But how could I tell her this when I knew that her happiness could crack any time?

I said, "This is good for now, Mama, but it might not be for ever."

"Nothing is for ever, Eve. But do we want to test God's patience and be greedy with our luck? She wrapped a cloth round the hot cup and took a spoon for a jar. "Instead of

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questioning our destiny, please go and scour the pots. I promised the widow they would be done by the time she returned.”

Perhaps Mama was right. Perhaps luck flowed through our lives like water through the **conduits**. If you tried to draw more than your fair share of water, there'd be a washerwoman standing behind you ready to poke you hard in the back and toss you aside. We didn't want our luck to turn on us. But – what if there was a real chance of something better?

I went out into the yard. A stack of plates and pots was waiting to be scoured. These weren't just from yesterday. Mama and the widow must have been saving them for a while. I picked up a large, misshapen pot. The bottom was so burnt it looked like the widow had been making charcoal in it. A couple of plates were crusted with gravy so old it was almost part of the design. How was I going to get this off. Back in Southwark, I'd seen Mama use sand or horsetail she'd picked from the fields by Broadwall. I poked around the yard and checked in the kitchen. I could see neither sand nor **horsetail**.

Where could I find **horsetail**? I laughed to myself. On the common, of course! I was sure I'd seen goats nibbling it there. And I could go down on to the mudflats to get sand and small stones to bring back for the hard scrubbing. I wouldn't even have to lie to Mama about where I was going. I'd hide my treasure underneath it all on my way home too. I took a pitcher and a knife from the kitchen shelf and went back out.

I walked outside the town walls, along the orchard lane. Down here the walls stretched up high above me. I couldn't imagine anything breaking through, especially as they'd filled the ditch alongside the walls with holly and bramble. I had never wanted to live inside London's walls. London was so busy, it wanted to burst out from behind the stones. For Mama though, I think the walls and gates and watchmen made her feel safer. Soon, we would have enough money for her to have her own house with her own door with as many bolts and latches as she wished.

I reached the end of the orchard and skirted around the bowling green. I spotted a clump of **horsetail**, took my knife out of the pitcher and bent towards them. A **ladycow beetle** climbed a stalk as if to greet me. I counted seven black spots like holes on its red shell. Was seven a lucky number? As I reached out my hand, its shell clicked open and its wings emerged. As it landed on my finger, my world went dark and I stopped breathing.

* * * * *

Next chapter: A Splash in the Dark...

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GLOSSARY

- coif** (page 1) - a woman's close-fitting cap
- conduits** (page 5) - a channel or a pipe that water runs through
- horsetail** (page 5) - a plant, used in Tudor times for scouring pots and pans
- lady cow beetle** (page 5) - a ladybird
- posset** (page 4) - drink made of hot milk curdled with ale, wine, or other alcohol flavoured with spices.



horsetail plant



coif