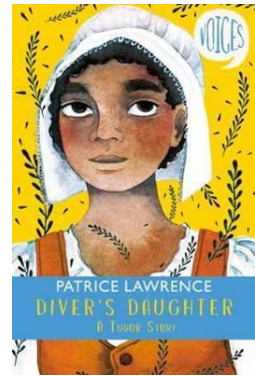


## Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

### May Day

I was flipped on to my back so my face was out of the water. Somewhere behind me, I could hear shouting and splashing, but it was getting further away. This must be the moment before I died. God was preparing me to take my soul. It wasn't so bad, rocking on the water. I let my eyelids sink down. Soon, it would be just calm water and me gliding towards Heaven.



A hand slapped my face, not hard, but the sting made my eyes snap open. My body folded itself into itself like an arrow shooting down towards the bottom of the harbour. My legs kicked and my head went under. My mouth was like a ladle scooping up river water. I coughed hard and felt myself sinking again.

I was hauled to the surface.

"It's me," a voice said. "Jacques Francis. Be calm or we'll both drown."

Jacques Francis? I tried to lift my head to see, but my body rolled sideways.

"Calm," he said. "Stay calm."

He tilted me so I was on my back again. I took a deep breath and tried to stretch myself across the top of the water. Above me, the sky was blurry with stars. Below me, the river was rising and falling in its own quick tide. I breathed out, slowly. I was moving. No, I was being moved.

"You're doing well," Jacques said. "Can you kick your legs a little? It will help us move faster."

I tried, but my skirt was weighing them down. The cold, the fear, the sodden wool of my clothes, it was all too heavy for me. I closed my eyes again.

"Stay awake, Eve! You're nearly there, You'll be with your mama soon."

"Mama?"

"I heard you singing, Eve," he said. "As you walked down French Street. I followed you and waited. I hadn't heard that song for so many years. Portuguese mothers sing it to their children when they're trying to make them sleep. Can you sing it now for me?"

Could I sing it now? My throat was rubbed dry and my tongue was a dying fish, flapping around in my mouth.

"Let me help you," he said.

He sang the first few words. His voice was rough and he had to stop to cough out water. I mouthed the words. No sound came, but I carried on, making the words come alive in my head. Soon my heels were dragging against stones and mud and I was lying still. It was as comfortable as the best bed I'd ever slept in. I let my eyes close again.

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"Stand up, Eve!" he said. "We can't stay here."

Jacques Francis's voice seemed to come from a faraway place. Stand up? I just wanted to lie, slowly sinking into the mud.

"Eve! Come on!" His voice was sharp but I still couldn't move. He stooped down and lifted me up from under my shoulders. "We have to walk to stay warm."

We had come ashore by the salt marsh. Jacques Francis propped me up as I tried to stumble beside him. Night pressed the cold into my skin. I was shivering again, so hard I must have made his bones rattle too. My feet were too numb to feel for the ruts and holes beneath them. My foot jarred against the bottom of a ditch and I almost brought us both down. Jacques snapped a long stick off a bush and swept the way ahead of us.

"One more step, Eve. Just one more."

*Left, right. Left, right. Just one more step. Just one.*

I was sunk into a hollow of warmth with blankets tucked around me. I tried to raise my head, but my neck was tight and sore. It had been two days now, with Widow Primmer and Mama taking turns to sit by my bedside. This was the first time I'd woken up and found myself alone.

"I've made some porridge," said Widow Primmer, appearing at the doorway.

She came and sat on the chair next to my bed and held the bowl out to me. I shook my head. The thick rough mixture would grate my tender sin.

"You have to eat."

I knew that even if I swallowed a small spoonful, I wouldn't be able to keep it in my stomach.

"Try it," she insisted. "There's half a jar of honey on it. That should help it go down."

She brought the spoon to my lips again. I opened my mouth and let her feed me. It was very sweet and my stomach seemed to like that.

"Where's Mama?" I said.

She leaned in close. I realised no sound had come out of me.

"Mama?" I tried to say again.

"Oh! Your mother! Don't worry, she's eating breakfast with Claire." Widow Primmer sighed. I'm so sorry that she won't be able to care for Claire much longer.

I tried to push myself up, but my arms were as weak as a baby's. Widow Primmer smiled and shook her head.

"Lie down, Eve. If your mother can care for my daughter, I can care for you." She pulled the blanket back round me. "The priest at All Hallows has recently lost one of his

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servants. I suggested that your mother might like to take her place. She'll receive wages and if she stays living here, I'll charge for lodging though it will be within her means."

My mouth moved again. Widow Primmer recognised the word.

"Claire? Yes, Claire will miss her. But your mother will still see her every day. They won't be separated yet. More?"

She wiggled the spoon in front of my mouth. The porridge was so solid it didn't move.

I mouthed, "No, thank you."

Widow Primmer let the spoon thump back into the bowl.

"Well, you've eaten more than yesterday."

She stood up and took the bowl back downstairs. I forced myself to sit up. I didn't want to sleep all the time. In my dreams I was either locked in the vault with the scurrying coming closer and closer or I was in the cabin of the ship, with nothing but the sound of water around me.

Later on, I learned that the fisherman was called Luke Wolverton. He was sixteen and lived with his father and four sisters in a tumbledown house near the old friary. He'd managed to right the boat and been heard calling for help the next morning, as he tried to paddle it back to shore with his hands. I never saw him again. I believe that he travelled to Portsmouth to work in the dockyards there.

Antonio's ship had been heading to Lisbon. It was against the law to take slaves from England, but Mama said that if he's been caught, he could have claimed that Mama and I had run away and that he was just recovering his master's property. Widow Primmer had laughed. She'd said that she couldn't imagine Mama running away from anyone. There had been a short moment before Mama had laughed along too. If Jacques hadn't stopped them, I would have been on that ship. I thought of how hard Mama would have searched for me, running from gate to gate, from Houndwell down to the mudflats, knowing that every day her chance of seeing me again grew slimmer. Even worse for Mama, she'd have known exactly what was in store for me.

One good thing happened though: Mama and Jacques finally met. After we arrived back at the apothecary's in French Street, he'd found a set of the apothecary's wife's old clothes for me to wear. She'd died many years ago, but the apothecary still kept all her belongings. Jacques built up a fire and, after changing his own clothes, went off to fetch Mama. I was terrified about him leaving me alone. Every time the shadow of a flame flickered across a wall, I was sure it was Antonio or the fisherman, creeping round the house, ready to take me again.

It felt like I had waited all night, but Mama said that she'd left Widow Primmer's straight away – after she'd received from the shock of seeing Jacques Francis at the door.

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She had run almost the length of the town to be with me. I was taken up to sleep in the bedroom while Mama and Jacques sat on the hard wooden chairs and talked all night.

Time passed. After three days, I was well enough to get out of bed and it was back to helping Widow Primmer with the chores. I had even more chores than before, now that Mama was working at All Hallows and Widow Primmer cared for Claire. Thanks to Mama, Claire spent more time out of the chamber now and her hair was growing back. It was red like her mother's, but curlier. Claire helped me to stack wood by the hearth and sometimes she take turns with me to churn the butter.

April came. Jacques Francis left for London. He had been waiting for a ship from the Lowlands bringing ceramic bottles. He also took with him a letter that Widow Primmer had written on Mama's behalf. I'd been in the room as they composed it. Jacques promised to deliver it by hand direct to George Symons at the Tabard.

*Dear Master Symons,*

*I hope this letter finds you in good health.*

*I fulfilled our agreement and spoke to Jacques Francis. He has assured me that all the gold and other valuable cargo was taken from Southampton Water and returned to their legal owners. There is nothing there.*

*Master Francis will deliver this letter directly to you. If you are in any doubt, you can speak to him for confirmation.*

*Thank you for the pains you have taken to help me. All monies owed will be paid to you by Michaelmas.*

*I commit you to God's protection.*

*Your humble servant,*

*Mistress Joan Cartwright*

I think Mama was sadder to see Jacques Francis leave than she wanted me to know. In the days before he left for London, he would meet Mama at All Hallows after she'd finished working and walk with her back to Widow Primmer's. Hed sit by the fire while Mama was in Claire's chamber and when she came out they'd sit there; sometimes they would talk, sometimes they'd just sit there silently. I'd watch them for the top of the stairs and wonder if they were talking to each other without saying words aloud.

I still hadn't told Mama that it wasn't just George Symons who'd hoped to make a fortune from her. Griffin and Gina would be on their way back soon. He must have started a new bead bag by now. There was no treasure. I couldn't give him what didn't exist but I would find work to make sure he was paid. I was good at scrubbing pans and well-practised with a sewing needle. There were almshouses in East Street and more outside the walls by St Mary's Church. Perhaps they needed help in the scullery or with washing and mending

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the bed linen. I would offer my services and use the money to pay off our debt to Griffin. It would take time, but there was no quick fortune for him to find.

April ended and the town prepared for May Day. Mama and Widow Primmer were to take Claire – it was the first time she'd been allowed to attend. Widow Primmer had ordered new outer gowns called kittles for both of them, one in pale-green damask for Claire and a sky-blue one for herself. Mama had embroidered a mantle for me to wear over my shoulders to brighten my old clothes. It was made from cloth left over from the kirtles, blue on one side and green on the other. I wore it with the green showing to celebrate the start of summer. As we came out of the house, the whole of East Street seemed to be flowing towards the square. Claire tipped her face up towards the sun as if she had never felt its warmth before. Perhaps she hadn't. Before we arrived, her world had been her chamber.

There had been a spatter of rain earlier and we had to dodge the mud and muck in the street. It looked like an army of geese had marched this way before us. Widow Primmer looped her arm through Claire's right arm, Mama through Claire's left, and they made a game of dodging round the dirt. The May Day dancing had already started in the square, weaving the ribbons flowing from the maypole in and out. Some of the dancers were very serious, while others were laughing so much they were tangling themselves up. A piper and a drummer accompanied them, though the dancers seemed to be moving to different tunes in their own heads.

Outside the church, an acrobat bent over backwards until his hands smacked onto the cobbles. He scuttled from side to side like a crab while giggling children surrounded him. He stopped by a group of young men and invited one to stand on his stomach. Just as I persuaded Mama to come over with me for a better look, a juggler threw three red clubs into the air and Claire laughed out loud.

"I think we'll be staying here," Mama said. "You go and look round then come and find us."

I walked back past the acrobat. He was still scuttling around but now he had a young man sitting on his stomach, laughing and waving a tankard of ale. In the far corner was a table bearing three big boxes. A crowd was stooping low looking into them. They were cabinets and in each one were miniature rooms, furnished like a rich man's home – if the rich man had been very small. The dresser looked so real that I was sure the doors must open. There were even tiny pots and pans in the kitchen and a shelf of bowls and plates. It looked like the craftsman had shrunk down to the size of a beetle to make them.

A drum started up. The May Queen must be on her way. Widow Primmer had said that the cart would be decorated with garlands of flowers and that the queen handed out posies as she went. I couldn't see the cart yet, but the drumming was getting louder.

"Ladies and gentleman!" *Bang! Bang! Bang!* It's time for the stars to foresee your luck."

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Gina? It was her. The white costume was a little too small now and had grown grubbier since Bartholomew Fair. I searched around for Griffin, but I didn't see him. That was because he was right behind me. I heard his voice in my ear.

"Has our fortune been made, Eve Cartwright?"

I shook my head. I heard a sound that I knew was wooden beads knocking against each other.

"Are you keeping all the gold for yourself?"

I turned to face him. He looked even thinner than before. He was wearing midnight-blue breeches and a doublet. A dove-grey cape hung from his neck. The costume was frayed and looked like it had been pulled straight from a sack on his cart.

I said, "There is no gold, Griffin. Nothing at all."

His shoulders hunched down as he bent towards me. "I don't believe you Eve Cartwright. We had an agreement."

"No," I said. "*You* had an agreement. You gave Mama the medicine first and told us there was a price. You brought us to Southampton, even though you were coming this way anyway, and then told me that we were in debt. You have told me that we owe you money, but never told us the prices for your services! I will pay you back but there is no treasure."

"Hear ye! Hear ye! The town crier strutted into the square. "Prepare for the queen!"

The crowd cheered and a piper started a tune. When I looked back, Griffin was gone.

We returned home soon after the May Queen was crowned. I kept peering through the crowd expecting to see Griffin appear next to Mama holding his bag of beads. He didn't. He must have been busy with his star charts. We ate supper together, Claire, Mama and I, a real feast of roast mutton and cabbage. I loved Mama, but this was how it felt to be in a real family, something bigger than the two of us. I had always known I wanted to be safe and warm at night, but I hadn't realised before that I'd wanted more than one person to care about me. Someone who could help me catch Mama if she started sinking again.

I don't remember my dreams that night. Perhaps I didn't have time to have any. A few hours later, before it was light, Widow Primmer shoved me so hard I almost fell out of bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Next chapter Two Stones and a Rope*

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