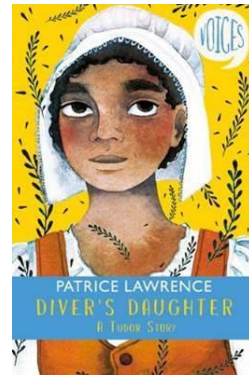


Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

The Carpenter's Tale



Time stopped. As the river reached up from its bed to drag me down, I heard the children asking me to tell them my story. Suddenly an arm as tight as a belt circled my waist and drew me upwards. It was an angel, I was sure. Mama said I had been baptised, so when I opened my eyes, I knew I would be in Heaven.

I broke the surface of the river. I coughed. The roast pork and river water shifted in my stomach. I wanted to open my eyes and move my arms and legs, but the river had made me heavy. Water swilled in and out of my ears. I could hear the heavy, dull thud of my heart, then came the sound of watermen calling for trade and the rush of the tide. I stopped moving. I hadn't thought that Heaven would sound like Southwark.

"Eve?" Was that Mama's voice?

Then a man. "Pass her up!"

Strong hands on my waist lifted me and other hands grabbed my wrists and heaved. The wind bit through my wet clothes and my face and arms prickled with the chill. My knees knocked something hard and the pain made me open my eyes. The world was a blur. They laid me across cold, wet wood and I curled myself into a ball.

"She's alive!"

That wasn't Mama. I wanted her. I didn't care if we were in Heaven or still on Earth, but I wanted Mama now.

"Help me." *That* was Mama.

My floppy neck wouldn't let me turn to see her. My heavy arms wouldn't let me help her. I heard a scrambling and the boat rolled to the side. I tumbled off the bench and into a pool of water at the bottom of the boat.

"Mama?" My voice was too weak to come out of my mouth.

"Eve? *Mpendwa*. I'm here."

A stub of candle glowed on the dresser. I breathed in its meaty tallow smell. I was in bed, Mama's and my bed. I recognized the dip of the mattress. Even if Mama and I started off at opposite edges of the bed, we always ended up cuddled together in the middle. I stretched out my foot. My toe touched the small rip in the linen that I dared not poke in case I made it bigger. Gradually my eyes became used to the light. A small fire flowed in the hearth.

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

We didn't often have fires. It was cheaper to warm ourselves downstairs and then race back to our room, bringing the warmth with us. I caught the thick, sweet smell of drying clothes.

There was a shadow sitting by the dresser, a Mama-shaped shadow. I'd always know that shape. Mama raised her arm and wiped her eyes. I heard her sniff and make a tiny sound like a sob. I wanted to shrug off the blanket, roll off the bed and go to comfort her, but my legs felt like they were still under water, my eyes too. My eyelids drooped and when I woke up it was light.

My clothes were draped over the bedstead. I touched them. They were dry and smelt of wood smoke. I managed to sit up, though the inside of my head was still watery and when I breathed in, it felt like I was being poked with pins. I lay back down and stared at the brown water marks spreading down the walls from the eaves. I licked my dry lips. I tasted salt. Someone had fought the river for me. That someone was Mama.

I must have fallen asleep again because this time when I opened my eyes, Mama was sitting on the bed looking at me. She smiled.

"How are you?"

My stomach churned every time I moved and my mouth tasted like I'd eaten a dead rat. I was alive, though. She stroked my cheek.

"Perhaps this will help?" She handed me my poppet. Its clothes were streaked with dirt and it had lost its hair and bonnet. "You dropped it in the boat before you went over."

I took it. "I told you it was lucky," I said.

Mama smiled. "Hopefully, more luck will be coming our way. Get dressed, Eve. We have to meet someone.

"Who?"

"Just get dressed, my darling."

My shoulders were stiff from the river's mud even though Mama had tried to beat it out. She sprinkled a little of the scent she'd found in one of the rooms a few weeks ago over them. She made me wash my face in the bowl on the dresser, then washed her own.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

She turned to me. Water dripped off her hands and chin and for a moment I shivered, thinking of her throwing herself into the river after me.

"To see a man who would like to say sorry."

"Mama?"

"Get dressed, Eve."

The streets were busy and last night's rain had left the cobbles covered in slops. We headed towards Long Southwark and away from the river. I was happy with that. Just

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

hearing the splash of it against the bridge and the watermen's calls was making my stomach churn again. We stopped outside the Tabard Inn. He was waiting for us there. Who else could it have been? Of course, the man. *The* man. The man who had made me fall in.

He was older than Mama, much older. Maybe as old as Mistress Horstead's mother, who Mama said must be at least sixty. He was wearing dark leather breeches, woollen stockings and short leather boots that looked like they'd travelled more than even Mama. His shirt was white and stained, with a leather jerkin over the top. His grey curly hair was topped with a dark cap. The face underneath looked like someone had grabbed its skin and crumpled it together with an extra hard pinch for its nose. It was as red as sunset. The man's hands hung by his side and I noticed that half the little finger on his right hand was missing.

He nodded at Mama and she nodded back. He looked down at me.

"I'm glad you're recovered," he said.

He was glad? He should be glad! It was his fault that I'd nearly died in the first place! If he'd stayed in his seat my head wouldn't be throbbing and I wouldn't be tasting river. I dropped my eyes and stepped behind Mama. She had taught me good lessons about hiding my anger.

He gave me a little smile.

"I hope your mother told you that I want to make amends for yesterday. But first, let's eat."

Let's eat. At any other time, those words would have made me very happy. But this morning, my stomach seemed full of sludge. I didn't think I could ever eat again. We followed him across the courtyard into the inn. The landlord looked Mama up and down, then turned to the man.

"God save you, sir. How can I be of help to you and- your guests?" Another look at Mama and me.

"We need food. Didn't you say last night that you had bread and herrings?"

The landlord scurried away. Perhaps it was only me that noticed a woman who must have been his wife and a serving girl peering round the barrels at us. We sat down at a table, the man on one side, Mama and me on the other. A couple of moments later, the serving girl thumped three tankards of ale on the table. I took a sip of mine. It was weak and bitter.

The man said, "I didn't have an opportunity to introduce myself yesterday. My name is George Symons currently of Southwark, previously of Portsmouth. "

Of course, I knew where Southwark was. But Portsmouth? Perhaps it was one of the villages further down the Thames. He looked at me.

Mama nudged me. "Where are your manners, Eve?"

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

I wanted to say that they had floated away from me when George Symons had tried to kill me.

"You're too old to be shy, Eve," Mama said.

I wasn't shy. I was furious. Mama should know the difference.

"How old are you?" George Symons asked.

Mama nudged me harder. "Twelve," I said. Another nudge so hard I almost fell off the chair. "Sir," I added.

The serving girl thumped down a board with half a loaf of dark bread and a platter of fried herrings. George Symons picked one up and started to peel the flesh away from the bones. He piled it into a heap on the side of the platter. He turned the fish over and worked on the other side. The fish's head bobbed around, its eyes white and glazed. He pushed the platter towards us. Mama took a pinch of the fish and put it in her mouth.

"Eat," Mama said.

I shook my head.

George Symons carved a slice off the loaf and offered it to us. Mama tore the slice in two and gave the bigger piece to me. I nibbled the crust. The crumbs settled in my queasy stomach.

"Yesterday, in the river," George Symons said, "if it wasn't for your courage, you would be preparing for your daughters funeral today."

My throat closed up. I lay the bread down.

He leaned toward Mama. "It was like a miracle. You dived into the water like – like a porpoise. And I've seen porpoises." He laughed. The lines in his face smoothed out a little. "I have never seen a woman swim like that. Or indeed a man. Did you learn in your own land?"

Mama gave the tiniest of nods.

"A miracle." He stared out the window. "Even though I was born by the sea and raised by the sea, I cannot swim. Even though I knew my destiny was to sail on a ship, I still did not learn how to swim. Though why should I? It's better to drown quickly than splash around waiting for a ship that will never turn back for you.

He turned to look Mama in the eye. "I'd always known that there were dangers in the deep sea, far away from any known land. But once I ... I was tipped into the water so close to shore, I swore I could see my mother and young sister crying out for me.

He banged his cup on the table. The serving girl brought another flagon of ale. "And butter," he called after her. "Have all the cows gone dry?"

The butter was slammed down next to the flagon and the girl walked away.

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

"Yesterday, in that boat, I was frightened," he said. "And I'm a grown man. Shouldn't admit that in front of women."

I'm a woman now?

"But I have nearly drowned before."

"How so?" Mama had taken the words from my mouth.

"Do you know the story of King Henry's *Mary Rose*?" he asked.

"No," Mama said. "Was she another of his wives?"

George Symons gave a smile so quick and bright I thought I'd imagined it. "She was a warship, Madam one of his favourites. She fought many a battle for King Henry."

"And you were a sailor on her?" Mama asked.

"I'm a carpenter by trade. My father died when I was a child and I lived with my Uncle Francis. He was a carpenter, like my grandfather before him. My grandfather made a good living before King Henry moved his shipyard to Deptford, but there was still work enough for us in Portsmouth."

He filled his tankard and offered the flagon towards Mama, but we had barely sipped ours.

"The *Mary Rose* was built in Portsmouth. My grandfather helped fit her hull. If she hadn't sunk, she would have been an old woman now, nearly seventy. I saw her when she returned to Portsmouth after many years' service, heavier, stronger, ready for new wars."

I heard the clatter of horses outside in the yard. The room would fill up soon with thirsty travellers and the man still hadn't got to the bit where he said sorry to me. He took another gulp of ale. Mama echoed him by taking a sip of her own drink. I followed, just letting the liquid touch my tongue.

"I was taken on as an apprentice carpenter on the *Mary Rose*. My uncle was the carpenter's assistant. I understand!" He lunged forward. I shot back. He leaned away and buried his face in his hands.

"I just want you to know that I understand how it feels when the water's got hold of you and is sucking you under. I understand what it's like to see every moment of your life before you, when you're sure that you will die."

Mama gave him a long look. She said, "How do you know this?"

"I was on board when the *Mary Rose* went down. The French were coming for us, more than two hundred ships sailing across the Solent towards us. We were one of eighty ships, waiting in Portsmouth harbour for them proudly flying King Henry's banner. The king had spent his riches on us. His rose was even stamped into the cannon. And they were mighty cannon too. How could we ever be defeated?" He laughed. "The king himself had come down to see the spectacle. And it was a spectacle. The fields were filled with the royal pavilions and the brewhouses were working hard to keep the tankards full. The cannon

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

were stoked and ready, the bill men were thumping their staffs on the earth, waiting for the chance to impale a Frenchman. I remember looking back and thinking that no man could break through our defences." He laughed again. I didn't know why. He didn't see to find his tale funny.

"I should not have tested God," he said. "At first the wind was too slow and the sails were slack, but then it was like God sent us speed. We moved towards those French galleys."

As he spoke, the man's eyes were like the fish's, glazed to the outside world, as he fought the battle inside his head. Mama squeezed my hand under the table.

"My uncle's saw snapped and he sent me back to the carpenter's cabin for a fresh one. That saved my life but not my uncle's. As I opened the cabin door, the boat tipped. I fell sideways and the water came."

"Was the boat hit?" Mama asked.

"No one knows why we went down. Some say a cannonball hit us, but I didn't feel the impact. Some say the men were unruly, but they were all good men. My uncle, he was good at his trade and proud to be serving the king. I do know that there were nets at the side of the ship. They were meant to stop the invaders boarding us, but the nets stopped our men getting out."

"How many men were lost?"

He threw back the rest of his ale. "Nearly five hundred boarded. Less than forty lived. The carpenter's cabin was on the main deck so I had more time to reach the upper deck. I clung to the mizzenmast until a rowing boat came to rescue me. Those on the decks below had no chance."

I thought of Mama's grip round me, pulling me back up to life. I wanted to ask who helped him, but when I thought about being in the river yesterday, the water was pressing against my eyes again. I wondered if he felt the same when he told his story.

Mama said, "I'm sorry."

As he looked at Mama, his eyes came alive again. "I knew you would understand the pain."

He turned his gaze on me. "And you understand don't you, Eve? That thin line between life and death?"

I realized I was nodding. I stopped myself. He had been the one who drew that line.

"I'm glad you agree." His sudden smile made me jolt. His teeth were the colour of underwater. "We do not know when our lives will be cut short, so we must make the most of this life before passing on to the next."

The travelers came into the room and pulled out chairs around the biggest table. The serving girl was summoned for ale and she still couldn't resist having a peep at me. I was

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

tempted to make a face at her. My dead-dog face was especially ugly, but Mama had told me off last time she caught me doing it. She'd said that people look at us enough already.

George Symons had leaned in so close to Mama that his forehead almost touched hers.

"I need your help, madam."

"My help?"

"To make our fortune?"

One of the travellers laughed loudly and scraped back his chair. Mama turned to look at him then back at George Symons.

"My fortune?"

"Your feat yesterday was astounding, madam. Please believe me. It's your pathway to riches."

Mama's face didn't change, but she tore bread from her slice and used it to scoop us some fish. She washed it down with a good sip of ale.

"There's treasure to be found," he said.

This time I really did make my dead-dog face. You cannot live in Southwark without hearing every lost-treasure tale there is.

Mama said, "Would you have me dive back into the Thames to find gold? It's rich in horse carcasses but I would not call that treasure."

George Symons laughed so loudly that some of the travellers looked round at him. Mama's joke wasn't that funny.

"No," he said. "I'm not talking about the Thames. You would need to leave Southwark."

Mama grasped my hand again. "This is my home," she said. "I will not leave it."

"Home, madam? A home is where there is more than this" – he held his forefinger and thumb close together as if he was going to pinch Mama – "between having a warm bed and sleeping on the street. Home is where you have food in your pantry and a fire in your hearth. That is the home that riches will bring you."

Last year, some minstrels set up a puppet show next to the baiting ring by the river. Every time I decided to leave, the story would catch me again and I knew that I'd have to stay until the end. I'm not sure if Mama fully believed him, but her face said that she couldn't stop listening.

"You can travel with your daughter, of course," George Symon said.

"Travel where?" Mama asked.

"Southampton."

Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

"Where's Southampton?" I hadn't mean the words to come out. Mama was always reminding me that I should never interrupt adult when they were talking together. Mama and George Symons looked at me then at each other.

"It's where you will meet the guide to our treasure," George Symons said.

"You want me to go to an unknown place and seek out a guide to help me find hidden treasure. That's not a plan. That's a children's tale." Mama stood up. "Come on Eve. Mistress Horstead will be missing us."

"Madam, please." George Symons stood too and placed a hand on Mama's shoulder. Her eyes narrowed and he quickly removed it. "Just hear me out."

He sat down. I watched to see what Mama would do. The travellers were quiet, watching us too. She lowered herself, slowly, to make sure that he knew she was doing him a favour.

He continued. "When the Mary Rose sank, she took some of the kings best cannon. There were chests of pewter plat and, some said, gold. Some Venetians were paid to lift her soon after she'd sunk, but the mast snapped and she tipped back into the water. It didn't stop the men drinking Portsmouth dry. Two years later, another Venetian came – Peter Corsi. He brought with him three black men from Guinea in Africa."

Mama frowned. "Three black men?"

"Black." He tapped Mama's hand. "As coal."

I had once seen Mama slap a drunk man for doing the same. Mama removed her hand from the table. "What did he bring these black men to do?"

George Symons smiled again. This smile was slower so I was ready for it. "To dive, of course."
