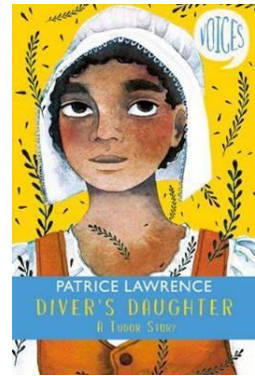


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The Pearl Earring



February was passing. Sunrise came earlier and sunset later. I had more time to search the town. I grew to know every crossroads and corner as well as I had done in Southwark. My favourite place was the Watergate. I'd sit on the steps searching the sailors preparing for high tide. Sometimes I'd imagine my mother breaking the surface of the water with a gold chain around her neck. She'd hand me a rope tied to a sack of gold that I'd help her lift out of the water. One day as I sat dreaming I saw a face as brown as mine. My heart beat so hard, it nearly made the waves move. I started to rise, then I saw clearly that it was a sailor, a younger man with long hair and the start of a beard. Our eyes met, we smiled at each other and then he went about his business. Sometimes I'd walk round by the East Gate, though I was always more careful there. The houses were patched together, leaning against the wall. A strong storm would easily blow them away. Cows and pigs wandered between the homes, and it seemed to me those creatures were not the only ones leaving their waste along the pathways.

I was just coming from Biddles Gate when I spotted him. I had been watching the crane load chests on to a ship. The men working the treadmill had been singing a song I recognised from Bankside. The man I spotted was walking along the quay, hugging close to the wall. I would have missed him if he hadn't glanced up. Gun ports ran across the top of the **ramparts** and Widow Primmer had told me that once an explosion there had killed a man and left several injured. *Everybody* looked up at the guns when they walked by. As his face tipped up, I was looking down and I knew straight away that it was him – the man from the inn. He was wearing the same high-crowned cap, and I wasn't sure, but I think I spotted a small, cream pearl earring. He saw me, his eyes widened and then he looked away. He spun round and strode off.

No! He couldn't disappear again! I jumped up and stumbled down the slippery stairs on to the quay. He *had* disappeared. A group of fishermen were scraping pitch over their boats by the shore.

I stopped in front of them. "Excuse me, sirs!"

They looked up.

"The man – " I pointed to the empty space where he had been. "Do you know him?"

"I see no man," one of them laughed. He was young, not too many years older than me and trying to grow a beard. "Are you looking for a ghost?"

"He walked past here a moment ago," I said. "He has dark skin, like mine."

"I've seen him about." This was from an older fisherman. He scratched his ear. "I think he's waiting for cargo."

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"Do you know where he lives?" I asked him.

The fisherman frowned. "Why does that interest a child?" Then he laughed. "Of course, I see it! The family resemblance!" He nudged the younger one. "Don't you see it?"

Family resemblance? Oh, they thought he was my father! We looked nothing alike, but...

"I need to find him." I bowed my head and tried to look **meek**. "My mother sent me from Southwark to fetch him back."

"He used to lodge with Nicholas Balcombe," the older fisherman said. "At the apothecary shop on French Street. I've heard old man Balcombe isn't coming back from London, but you could try there."

They turned back to their work, joking about my "abandoned" mother. French Street was back near the Watergate. I had to be quick if I was to catch him.

*

He was standing in the street by the closed door of the apothecary shop, scraping mud from his boot. I waited behind him hoping he would turn around. I'm surprised my thumping heart didn't alert him. He carried on scraping his boots though they seemed clean to me.

"Sir," I said.

Scrape, scrape.

"Please hear me, sir."

He turned around. I thought there would be anger on his face but it was just weariness. "Are you following me?"

"No, sir."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is it just coincidence that I saw you in the inn and then on the **rampart**? And now you appear outside my lodgings?"

What could I say? Did I tell him that I thought he could lead us to treasure? Did I lie? Mama had said *trust no one*, because everybody lied. Perhaps he was tired of lies too.

I said, "My mother can dive deep. She learned it in the country where she was born, before she was brought here."

Scrape, scrape. "Why should this interest me?"

"I thought perhaps you were Master Jacques Francis, the diver."

He surveyed me without blinking. It made me look away and stop talking.

"My name is Anthony," he said. He inserted his key into the door, pushed it open and banged it shut in my face.

I stood there for a moment, my nose touching the wood. Suddenly, my anger was so bright I could almost see it. It was like the fireworks that sometimes glitter in the sky on the

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other side of the Thames. We would see an explosion of light then a big bang. My fury was like that, bursting behind my eyes then thundering through my head. Mama and I, we did not have easy lives. People like us died in the streets from the cold or from hunger or from burning fever or swelling. But we weren't dead yet. We'd been given a chance to improve our situation and this rude man, who could so easily help us, had slammed a door in my face.

I hammered on the door and waited. Nothing. I thumped it so hard, I felt the wood tremble.

"If you don't let me in," I shouted, "I'll sit here until nightfall."

I must have made a strange sight, sitting on the doorstep of a closed apothecary shop. I think every dog in Southampton came up to sniff me, and a stray pig too. As evening fell, a sharp breeze knifed off the sea. I could hear merriment from a tavern across the street and could smell – was that frying fish? Yes, frying fish. My stomach gurgled. Mama would be worried about me, but I couldn't leave, not after all this time. I wondered if *Master Anthony* was enjoying a hearty meal in front of a roaring fire.

I stood up and kicked the door. "I'm still here!"

Nothing. Did he have a back way out? Was he long gone? No, there was a flicker of a candle behind the glass. I stretched up to tap the window, then pulled my hand back. If he hadn't answered when I'd kicked the door, a mere tap wouldn't bother him. I had to make sure he really heard me. There was a pebble in my pocket. I'd found it down by the quay and picked it up because it was the shape of an arrowhead. I knocked it hard against the glass. Once. Just once. The glass cracked, fell apart and fell inwards. It was only a small pane, but there was a reason why only rich people had glass windows. Glass was very expensive. I stepped back, the pebble still in my hand. I could run. I *should* run. Right now!

The door flew open. The man was standing there. He looked over my head, up and down the street, as if he'd expected that someone grown up had done the damage. Then he looked down and saw me. He pointed to the hole where the glass had been.

"Was that you?"

I nodded. Just like the fireworks, my fury had burned bright then disappeared. The anger must have been keeping me warm, too, because now I felt the coldness of the evening. The wind felt like it wanted to slice my skin away. I shivered.

"Come inside," he said. "Warm yourself up while you explain how you're going to fix the window."

The front room was the shop. Three candles burned on the counter and their flames reflected off the shelves of glass bottles. I could just make out the shards of glass from the window on the floor. I crouched over them, trying to brush them together with my hands. I wasn't sure what I intended to do with them.

He bent over me. The flame flickered in his eyes. "Leave it, before you cut yourself."

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He straightened up and I followed him into a back room. There was little in there apart from a table, a wooden chair tucked under it and another chair drawn close to a small fire. A basket of **kindling** and small logs sat in a basket at the side of the hearth.

He pointed to the chair. "Sit there."

The chair was warm from the fire. I reached down, grasping the arms to try and warm my palms. He prodded the fire with a poker, but the flames seemed to become even smaller. I thought it needed more **kindling**, but my teeth were chattering too much to tell him. I stretched my feet out towards what little hearth there was and my toes started to uncurl.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Sorry does not pay for glass," he replied.

"I'll I'll pay."

"Do you have the money to pay?"

"I I would like to earn money."

"I have no means to employ you."

He threw a handful of **kindling** into the fire. It flared up and he quickly laid a log on top of it. For a moment I wondered if he's collected his wood from the common lands. Had he been there and I missed him? I'd asked some of the women washing their linen on Houndwell if they knew of him. They hadn't.

I said, "You have the means to help Mama and me make our fortune."

"You're mistaken"

"Mama and I are poor," I said. "We've lived in more places than I can name. Sometimes we have nowhere to sleep at all."

"Do you have a roof over your heads now?"

"Yes. But it won't be forever. Mama didn't ask to come to England, but she still has to suffer hardships."

He drew the other chair from beneath the table and placed it across from me. "None of us ask to be here," he said. "But once that choice has been made for us, we have to make the best of it."

"That's what Mama wants to do."

"Perhaps so, but I can't help you or your Mama."

He was staring into the fire. He reached forward and lifted the burning log with the poker. Flames roared under it, then up around it as if the fire was swallowing it whole. A blast of heat hit my face. The earlier cold made it feel even hotter. He let the log drop again.

"Mama was born on an island far away," I said. She told me they called it Mozambique."

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She had told me how she'd lived in a small house with a roof made from palm leaves. She'd had to draw palm leaves for me as we didn't have palm trees in Southwark. Some of the leaves were so big, she'd said, she could wrap me up in them. The Portuguese had been there for as long as she could remember, and she could speak Portuguese as well as her own language of Swahili. Now she only spoke Portuguese when she was sinking and her own language never, except for calling me *mpendwa*. When she'd first seen the Tower of London, it had made her think of the big stone fort that she'd seen the Portuguese starting to build on one side of her island.

"Mama said she was a child when she was taken," I said.

He still didn't speak.

"Her island was surrounded by rocks and she would swim out to them with her older brothers. One morning, she swam back to shore by herself. That's when she was stolen. She says that she hopes her brother told their mother that she'd drowned. She didn't want to imagine her mother standing by the shore hoping she would return. She won't talk about her journey, though she once told me she was put on a boat with a chain around her neck, then taken to a market square in Lisbon in Portugal and sold. After that she was taken to a city built on water."

"I know it," he said.

I waited. I'd learned that it was best to let Mama tell her stories in her own time, especially as she often struggled to find words that I would understand.

"The city is called Venice. I spent many years there. It was not where I wanted to be, but I didn't suffer like some. I..." He gave me a sideways look. "I had skills they found useful."

"My mama was a maid," I said. "She has a scar across her back from where her mistress poured hot wax across her."

The fire flared and crackled. I would have to return soon. Mama would be starting to worry.

"Are you are you Jacques Francis?" I asked.

"I've had many names. That was one of them. But it does you no good to know that. I still cannot help you."

"They say...."

"I am old. I know what they say. Would I be an apothecary's errand boy if it was true? I would be living the life of a rich man surrounded by gold."

I couldn't see his face to read his expression.

"Is there no treasure at all?" I asked.

"I did not say that there was no treasure. There are plenty of secrets below those waters and some of those secrets may be gold, but I would not risk my life to find them."

"But you risked your life for others."

"And I made a decision that I would never do it again."

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"You wouldn't have to. All you'd have to do is tell Mama where to dive. That's all."

"And even if she came back with bags of gold, do you think they would let her keep it? Do you think your mother's life would be easier? If she is happy now, let her stay happy."

She was only happy because she knew nothing about Griffin's bag of beads. Soon there would be so many the drawstring would not pull tight. Then what? I thought of the woman in the pillories, her hem damp with slops and her ear nailed to the post. I had looked out for her in the town since then, but perhaps she had gone elsewhere.

Jacques Francis stood up. He went back into the shop and I heard the sound of a chest opening and closing. He came back with a cloak draped over his arm.

"Put this on as best as you can."

I slid off the chair and tied the cloak around my neck. It brushed the floor. He opened the door and the cold pushed past him into the back room. I wrapped the cloak tight around me. He was already striding away. I ran after him.

"Where are we going?"

He didn't answer. We were the evening's entertainment for many in Southampton that night, especially me trotting along, trying not to trip over the cloak or let it drag in the dirt. We turned into St Michael's Square. The church was dark and empty, the traders long gone. Lanterns flickered in the windows of the merchants' house surrounding us.

Jacques Francis raised his arms. "This is where the Venetian tried to sell me."

Sell him? I thought of conger eels on the fishmongers' slabs and bundles of dented spoons or poppets and pallets piled with old clothes. There were markets that sold chickens, horses and cows. Those were the markets I knew. But I also knew that there were other markets that sold people. But Jaques Francis was a diver, the best. He couldn't be a sl--- I hated even thinking the word.

"Was he seeking payment for your services?" I asked.

"For my services?" His voice lowered. "No, he was seeking payment for me. In Venice and other countries, people like me and your mother are bought and sold like a wool blanket. Except, merchants care for their blankets better than their slaves."

Mama had said that in Portugal, slaves were worked until they dropped dead. They were owned like a horse, but fed less.

"Mama said that there is no slavery in England. Isn't Southampton in England?"

"Yes, Southampton is in England, but there are Englishmen on Portuguese soil who own slaves. Perhaps that's why that rogue, Corsi, stood here as bold as the moon above us and offered me for sale to the highest bidder."

"Did anyone bid?" I clapped my hand over my mouth. That was a question I should have kept inside.

Jacques Francis didn't answer. I looked up at the moon. It was definitely brighter without London's smoke. I wished it would shine some light into my head and help me see what I

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was supposed to do next. He leaned forward. He reminded me of the archers practising on the salt marsh. When they pull back their bow, it seems that their whole body, not just their arms, are bent forwards making that arrow hit its mark.

He said, "Can you hear it?"

I could hear the bagpipes from a tavern in a neighbouring street and singing coming from down by the waterfront.

"Hear what, sir?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I think it's only me who hears it. So many men were lost beneath the water that sometimes I wonder if they're calling to me. When we dived for the *Mary Rose*, I went into the water with my head full of pewter plate, gold coins and my rewards for bringing up the king's guns, but all I saw at first were the bones. We had to reach between them to take what we could find. Even in the men's death, there was no rest. Sometimes, a mother or wife would come up to us as we **disembarked**. They wanted to know if their son or husband was at peace. But people don't care about boys and men when there's tin and lead and cannon to find.

I imagined the sea sweeping back like a curtain to show the bare bed and the wrecks of boats and everything in them. The *Mary Rose* was only one ship. Standing there, in the cold moonlit square, with the smell of pitch and the scream of a gull, and the river not far away, my stomach heaved as if it was filling with water. I could feel the suck of the river in and out of my ears and then my face, head and my whole body was **submerged**. I had forgotten about the things floating in the Thames, brushing my cheeks, brushing against my arms and wrapping around my ankles. Then I remember the voices, asking me my story.

"You learn not to look," he said. "You've come from London?"

"We live in Southwark."

"Then you've seen death."

It was everywhere in our streets. Mama had once nursed a young woman who died as her baby was being born. Mama had seen me peering around the door and closed it gently. Last winter, I had seen a young man who had frozen to death in a butcher's doorway.

"I would feel the dead's presence," he said, "as I was scavenging for the merchants' riches. I was the best diver of all of them. The sea around my island had been my first home. It was a strong, wild sea that beat against our shore. Boats tried to land and soon our waters were full of their cracked hulls. My friends and I used to dive among the wrecks looking for treasure. The only treasure we ever found was fish hooks and coins that were no use to us."

He looked up at the moon. "They stole us at night. Our island was already not our own, but at first they didn't bother us. I wonder now if they were watching us, thinking about how much money we could bring them. First, they made me bring up oysters for pearls. When there were no more oysters, I was taken to Portugal and handed over to Corsi in Lisbon. He baptized me and gave me my new name."

I wanted to ask him what his name had been before. I had asked Mama that too, but she would never answer me. It was like she saved that little bit of her old life just for herself.

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"There were three of us," he said. "From what, in these countries, they call Africa. I was the youngest. Then there was George Blacke, a short man with a chest like a wine barrel. I think it held more breath than anyone else's, because he could dive for the longest. John Iko was little more than a child, tall and thin, like he'd been turned on the rack. He drank more beer than George and I together."

"Where are they now?"

"To survive, we must scatter. When they believed I brought shame on them, all my friends disappeared."

He started walking again, tracing the perimeter of the square. He was still talking. I trotted along beside him.

"I was the one Corsi said he trusted the most, the one who went the deepest." He rubbed his ears. "Diving isn't just a matter of holding your breath. You must know how to balance the weight of the water. You cannot just drop down there like a stone and carry on about your business. You have to learn how to see in those dark depths. You have to feel with your fingers, to understand what you are touching and not flinch away. Your ears burn, deep inside. Your face feels like an eagle has gripped it with hungry claws."

I touched my own ears. Would that have happened to me if I'd carried onto the bottom of the Thames?

We stopped walking. I thought he was going to go round again, but he turned back towards French Street.

"I was the best," he said. "And even after Corsi tried to sell me, I still was loyal. I **testified** in a court of law in London that Corsi had not stolen tin from another merchant. I said that the tin was found far away by the rocks. My English wasn't good then. I had to trust the wine merchant to **interpret** correctly. Do you know what they called me?"

"No, sir."

"**Infidel**," he said. "That was their name for me. They said that because I was born in a different land, I was a slave and a liar."

"When I dived," he continued, "I was filled with calmness. I would feel my heart beating. I would understand how much air to hold inside me and how much to release." He held his fingers near his eyes. "I would feel the water pressing me as if I was caught between two heavy stones, but I stayed calm, because if I didn't, I would die. But afterwards, after those merchants ganged together to question my word, I became angry. I tried one more dive, but my breath wanted to burst out of me. For the first time since I was a child, blood poured out of my nose and my ears felt as if they had been pierced with heated pins."

"Are you still angry?" I asked.

"Yes. Now go to your mother. She will be worried."

* * * * *

Next chapter: A Gold Coin on the Common...

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GLOSSARY

- disembarked** (page 7) - to leave a ship, aircraft, or train.
- infidel** (page 8) - a person who does not believe in a certain religion.
- interpret** (page 8) - translate the words of a person speaking a different language
- kindling** (page 4) - small sticks or twigs used for lighting fires.
- meek** (page 2) - patient and mild; not easily angered or upset, even when treated unfairly.
- rampart** (page) - a defensive wall of a castle or walled city, having a broad top with a walkway
- submerged** (page 7) - cause (something) to be under water.
- testified** (page 8) - to give evidence as a witness in a law court.

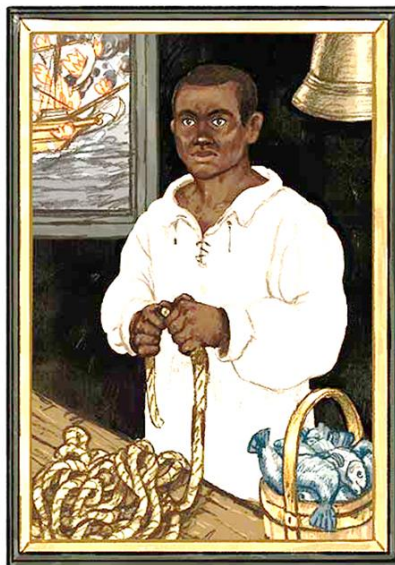


Image of Jacques Francis

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