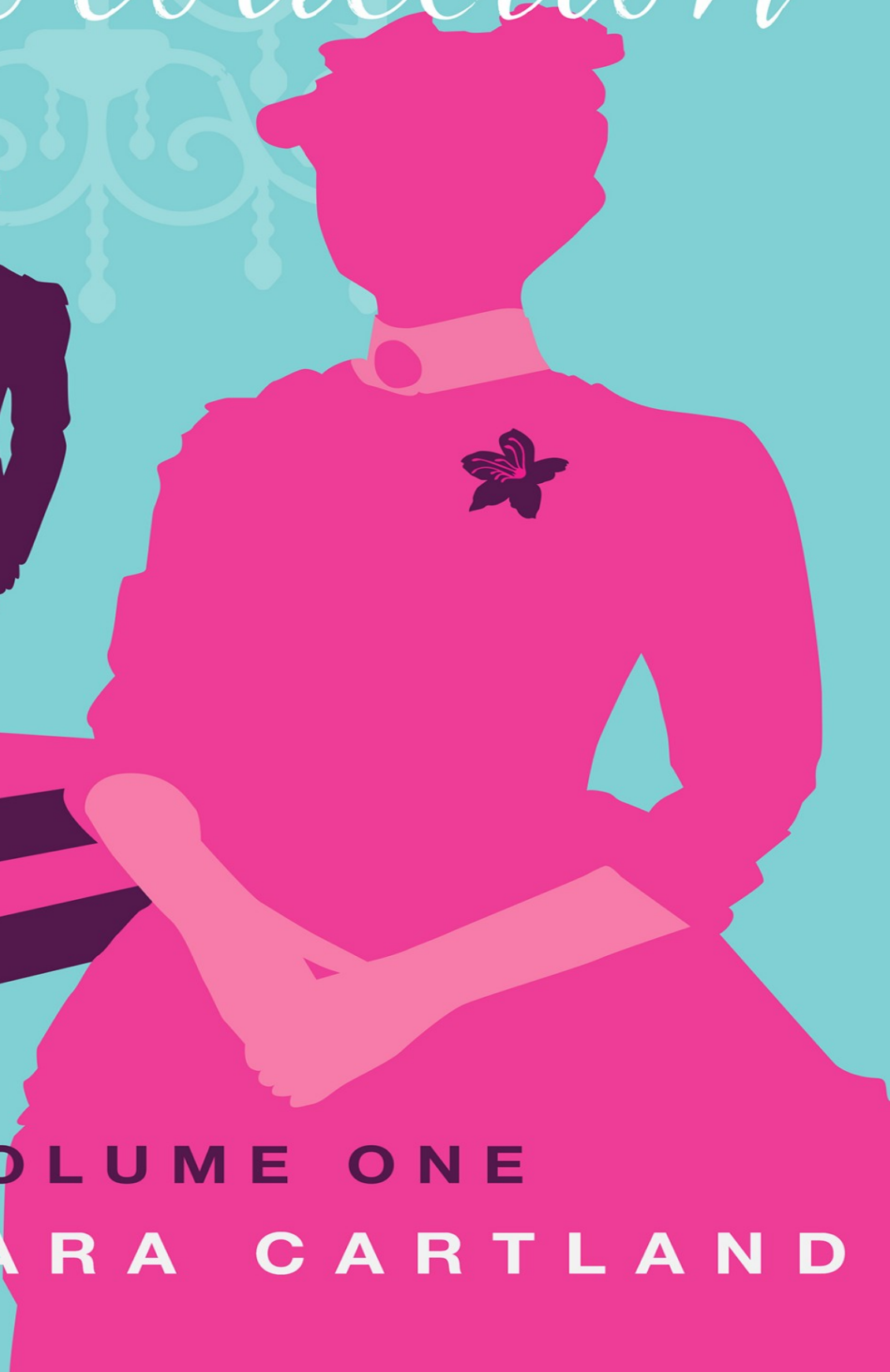
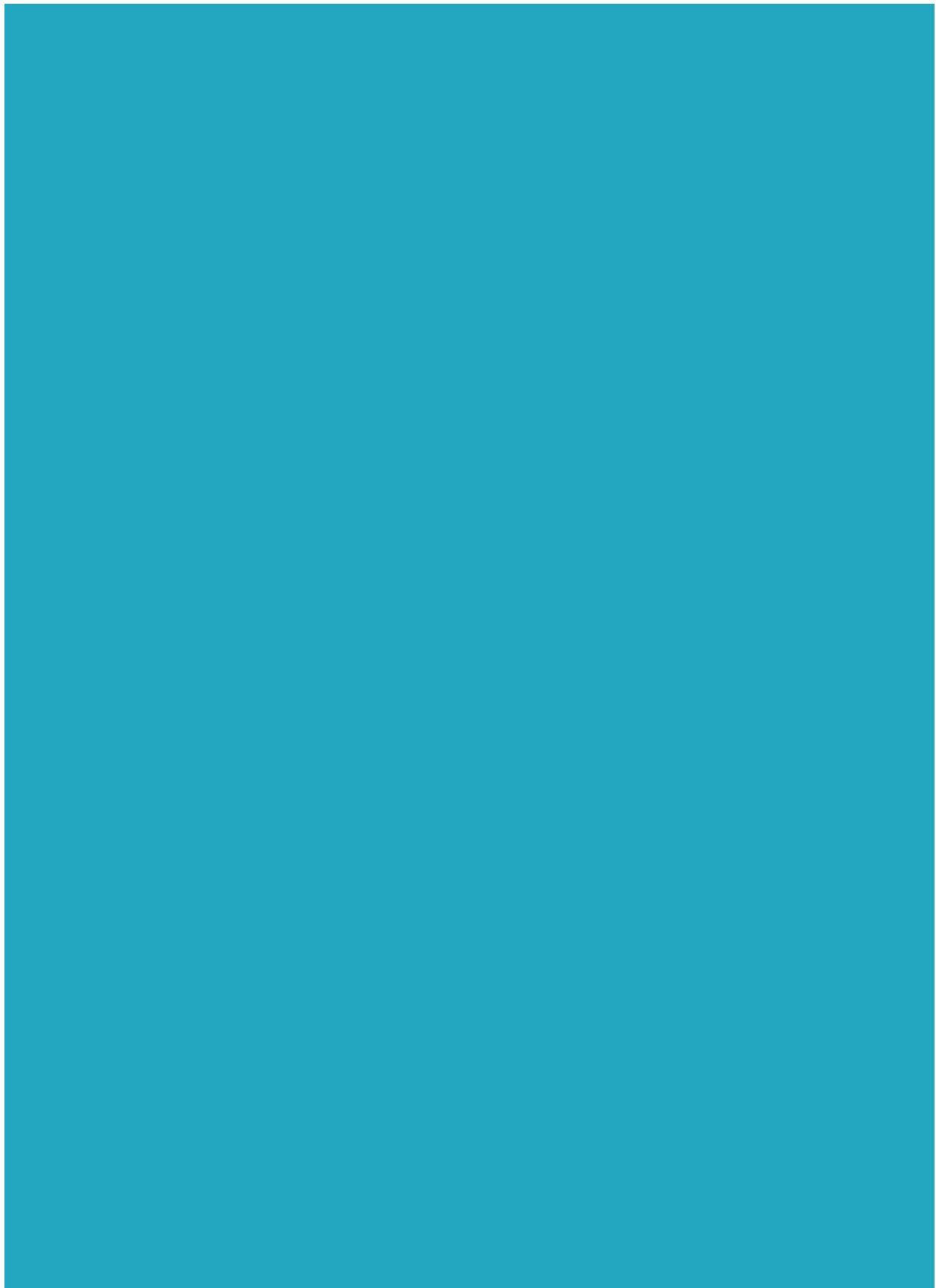


The Love Collection



VOLUME ONE

BARBARA CARTLAND



Barbara 1 Cartland

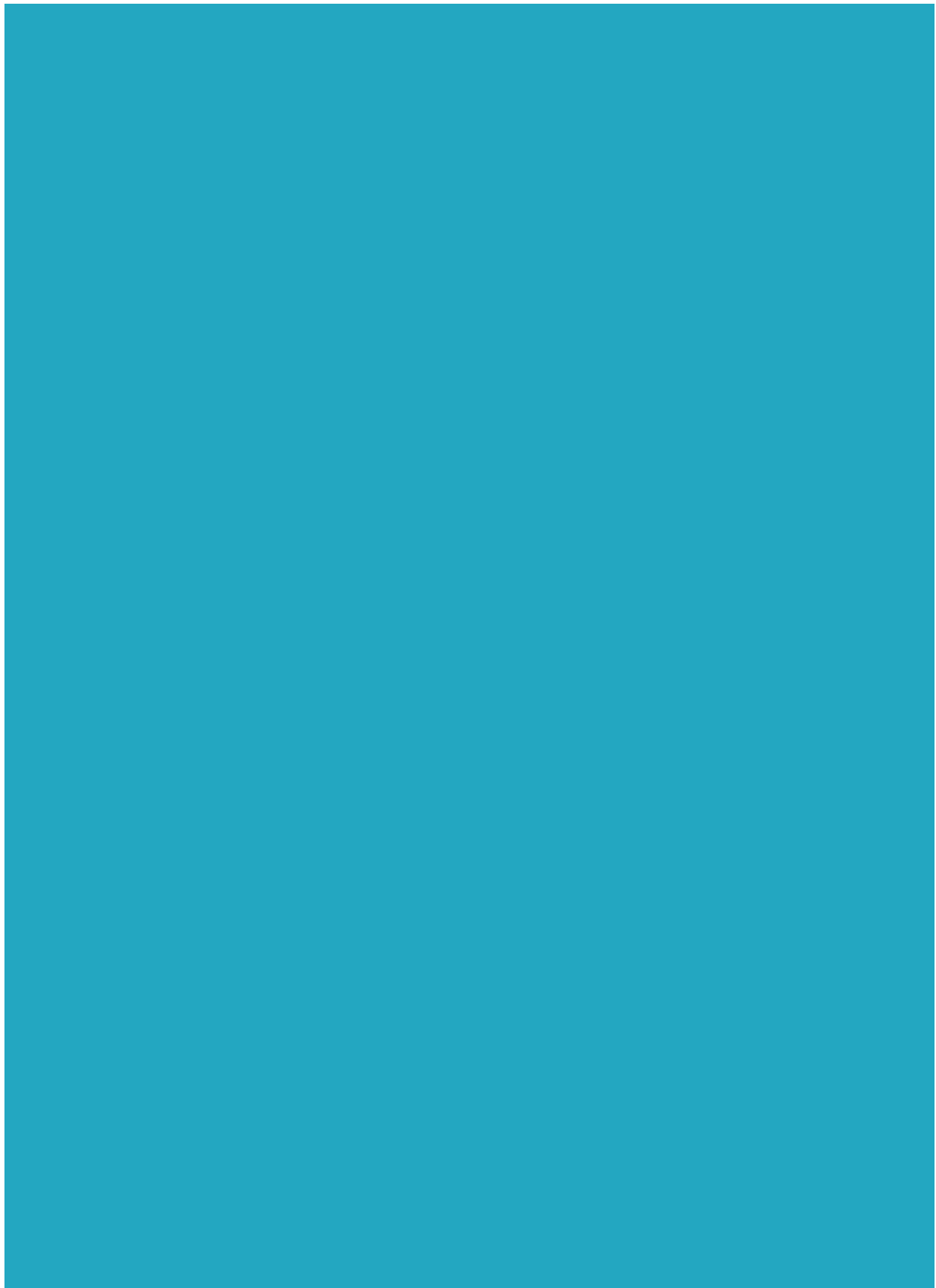


Elizabethan Lover



the Barbara Cartland Eternal Collection

www.barbaracartland.com



Elizabethan Lover

Rodney was looking at Phillida and did not at first notice Lizbeth's entrance; and then, as Sir Harry turned towards her, he glanced up and recognised instantly the girl he caught hiding in the lilac bushes and whom he had kissed light-heartedly for spoiling his hat. She walked towards him and felt both embarrassed and amused. 'This is my daughter, Elizabeth,' Sir Harry announced, and two green eyes were raised to Rodney's face. He had the strangest feeling that this moment was important to him, though why and how he had not the slightest idea.

*To WONDERFUL MOTHER this my 50th novel,
with all my love*

The author wishes to express her most grateful thanks to Mr. C. Christopher Lloyd of the Navy Records Society and Royal Naval College, Greenwich, for his valuable help and advice on ships and armaments of the Elizabethan era, and also to Mr. C. A. Lillingston of Harrow School for historical research.

1

The road was dusty and deep-rutted from the snow of the past winter. The horse had to pick its way warily, but his master raised his face to the green budding of the trees overhanging the road and drew a sudden deep breath as they came upon a wood carpeted with bluebells.

He had forgotten the miracle of spring in England, Rodney Hawkhurst thought. After months at sea it was breathtaking. It made him feel almost absurdly sentimental and at the same time excited as he had been years ago when he first set out on a life of adventure. Now at twenty-nine he thought himself old and blasé only to find that the spring could arouse his emotions as easily as a woman might have done.

He drew his plumed hat from his head and felt the breeze upon his forehead. He had ridden hard and fast and had long since left behind his servants and the packhorses carrying his luggage.

He felt the need to be alone. He wanted to think and to plan in his own mind what he was to say when he arrived at Camfield Place. He had heard many conflicting reports of Sir Harry Gillingham at Whitehall, but the majority had been reassuring. Sir Harry was rich and generous and there was no reason to doubt that, were a proposition put to him in a proper manner, he would agree to it.

It meant so much to Rodney, more than he dared allow himself to think, and if Sir Harry refused, where else could he turn for help? As he thought of failure, his lips set themselves in the hard line of obstinacy and his chin squared itself.

Failure was something he had not previously encountered in his life and he did not intend to anticipate it now. He must succeed, of course he must succeed, as he had done in so many other ways.

Deep in his thoughts he had almost reached a pair of high, imposing iron gates before he realised where he was. He had arrived – here was his destination and here was the beginning of his quest – a quest for gold!

The gates were open and the horse passed through them. The drive ahead was bordered by great trees and a profusion of flowering shrubs. There were lilac bushes heavy with purple and mauve blossom whose fragrance

seemed to scent the air and made the traveller forget once again his anxiety as he glanced around him.

Laburnum trees were fountains of gold, chestnut blooms starred the trees like Christmas candles, pink and white. An early cuckoo called from the dark boughs of the cedars, there was a glimpse of lawns ahead, soft and lush as green velvet.

It was spring! and Rodney felt light-hearted and assured at the beauty of it.

Then, as his horse carried him forward slowly, something flew swiftly through the air, striking his hat and casting it violently from his head.

He turned startled, yet with that alertness to danger which comes to men who have lived close to it for many years. He looked not to where his hat had fallen in the dust, pierced by a fine arrow, but in the direction whence it had come. The lilac bushes were swaying as if someone moved behind their screening leaves.

With a swiftness that bespoke an athletic body, well trained and utterly subject to the man, Rodney Hawkhurst leapt from his horse and in three strides reached the bushes, plunging into them he seized hold of someone who was hiding there.

He had moved so quickly that he himself had not expected that the fierce hardness of his hands would encounter anything so soft as a white shoulder. But before he had time to consider, he had gripped it fiercely and dragged its owner out on to the grass which bordered the drive.

He saw then that it was a woman he held captive, or rather, a girl. She was twisting and turning in his grasp and for a moment it took all his strength to hold her. Then, as his fingers tightened against her struggles, she was suddenly still.

“Let me go!”

She raised her face to his, throwing back as she did so a cloud of golden-red hair which hung loosely around her small oval face. Her eyes were strangely green, set beneath arched eyebrows which were drawn together now in an angry scowl.

“Did you loose that arrow at me?” Rodney asked.

Her lips pouted for a moment and then suddenly she smiled.

“’Twas but a jest.”

Her smile was irresistible and Rodney found himself smiling back. She was a lovely, roguish child and he imagined she must be the daughter of some employee on the place, he could see that she wore a white apron and her loosened hair told him that she had no social position. But she was pretty – her breasts were round beneath the tightness of her gown, and at sea one had only dreams of fair women with which to relieve the loneliness of the long nights when one's arms ached to hold something warm and soft within them.

"If it were a jest," Rodney said severely, "'twas a costly one, for my hat is ruined and I bought in it Cheapside but a week ago."

"I could perhaps mend it for you," the girl suggested.

There was no apology in her eyes and her mouth still curved in a smile which had grown mischievous, and strangely enticing.

"By Heaven you shall pay for it!" Rodney exclaimed.

"Pay for it?" She echoed the words in surprise as his arms tightened round her and he drew her closer to him.

His kiss was something she did not expect, for his lips found hers unprepared, unarmed, and for one long moment she was still beneath his strength. Her mouth was sweet and very soft. He could feel the beat of her heart against his, and then with a little cry and with a sudden violence which caught him unawares she had wrenched herself from his grasp.

Before he could stop her, before, indeed, he realised what she was about, she had run away from him through the thick leaves of the lilac bushes and was gone.

He knew it would be impossible to follow her and he felt, too, that it might prove a little undignified. Smiling, he returned to the drive and, picking up his hat, drew the sharp-pointed arrow from the crown.

For a moment he held the arrow in his hand, undecided whether to keep it or to throw it away, then he chucked it down on the grass and, mounting his horse, continued his journey down the drive.

The interlude had been unexpected and amusing. If Sir Harry's daughter was as attractive as the red-haired wench he had just kissed he would not regret the decision he had made before he left London. It was his god-father who had put the idea of marriage into his head.

"I have known Harry Gillingham since he was a boy," he told Rodney. "He is, if it pleases him, as generous as he is rich, but he expects value for his

money, and as far as I know he has always obtained it. If you want him to finance you, you will have to offer something in return.”

“He will get paid a good dividend right enough,” Rodney replied.

The Queen’s Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham, smiled.

“Let us hope that you can give us the four thousand seven hundred per cent that Drake paid after his voyage round the world!”

“Tis not as easy as it was,” Roger admitted. “The Spaniards are growing wary, the gold ships are guarded, but if I can get my ship, I will bring home the booty even as Drake has done. I have not sailed with him for these past ten years without learning something of the trade.”

“I would put up all the money myself if I had it,” Sir Francis sighed, his sallow, thoughtful face regretful. “The last venture in which I invested brought me ten thousand pounds, but at the moment I cannot spare more than two. You can have that with my blessing, and an introduction to Harry Gillingham, asking him to supply the rest.”

“What will he expect of me?” Rodney asked.

“Yes, we must not forget that.” his god-father said, smiling. “Harry has a daughter of marriageable age. There are rumours that he won’t bring her to London because his new wife is jealous of her. Try your hand there, my boy. A man with a young wife is always ready to be rid of the tangles and burdens of family life.”

Rodney Hawkhurst had not been displeased with the idea. Most men, when they returned from the sea, wanted a home to be waiting for them. They were not concerned with the long, weary months that a wife must wait, lonely and anxious, when her husband was away. They thought only of the peace and comfort of their own homecoming.

“Besides,” Rodney told himself, “when I am rich enough, I shall settle down.”

He was shrewd enough to realise that a corsair’s life was a precarious existence and though fortune might favour one for many years, sooner or later the tide would turn and one’s luck would run out. He was far-seeing enough to plan not only for the present, but for the future, Like Drake, he wanted to buy a house and estates. Like Drake, he would take to himself a wife, but unlike that intrepid sailor, once he was rich, he would settle down and make a good husband and an indulgent father.

A turn in the drive brought Rodney in sight of a great home built of red brick and glowing in the sunlight of the afternoon. It was a house of gables with an exquisite oriel thrown out like a wing, a house of high mullioned windows, each of their diamond panes sparkling iridescent as a jewel.

Before the house were well-laid out flower-beds, edged with rosemary, lavender, marjoram and thyme, while dark yew hedges were decorated with topiary work.

Someone must have been looking out for Rodney, for as he neared the front door servants came running out to take his horse and to assist him alight, and before he could enter the house, Sir Harry came out on the steps to welcome him.

Large and portly, Sir Harry cultivated his resemblance to King Henry VIII, not only in his appearance, but also in his private life.

He led Rodney through the rush-strewn Hall into the Great Chamber and introduced him to his Lady.

“This is my wife, Master Hawkhurst,” he beamed. “My third wife, as it happens, and who knows how many more there will be before I die?”

It was a jest that must have been made often before, for while Sir Harry shook with laughter, Lady Gillingham showed not by so much as a flicker of an eyelash that she heard what he said. She was dark and pretty, Rodney noticed, and could not have been a day over twenty-one. She glanced at him from under her eyelashes and it seemed to him that her hand lingered a little longer than was necessary in his.

There was something in the expression in her eyes and the faint turn of her lips that was familiar. He had seen that look and that expression on a woman’s face all too often these past months since he had been ashore.

He turned to look at Sir Harry again and saw that he was nearing sixty and knew that those at Whitehall who had called him an “old reprobate” were not mistaken.

“A glass of Charneco, my boy,” Sir Harry said. “Do you find the journey from London wearisome?”

“Not in the least, sir,” Rodney answered, taking a goblet of the dark red wine which a servant poured from a jug of Venice glass. “My horse was fresh and it took a surprisingly short time. I am afraid my servants and the luggage are left far behind.”

They will turn up,” Sir Harry said. “My wife has made every preparation for them, haven’t you, Catherine, my love?”

“Of course, my Lord,” Lady Gillingham answered in a voice which purred like a well-fed cat. “We only hope that Master Hawkhurst will be comfortable here, although after his exciting adventures with Sir Francis Drake, it is to be expected that he will find us country folk dull and staid.”

“On the contrary, Mistress,” Rodney replied. “It is a joy to be on shore again and more than that to see the countryside at this moment. I had forgotten how lovely England – and all it contains – could be.”

He looked boldly at Catherine Gillingham as he spoke. She caught the innuendo, as he intended that she should. Her eyes dropped before his. Rodney realised all too well what she wanted of him. A young wife with an old husband – how banal and hackneyed a plot it was, and yet his instinct told him he must be careful. He must get Lady Gillingham on his side so that she would not influence Sir Harry against him, and yet at the same time he must not arouse Sir Harry’s jealousy.

It was not going to be easy, he thought – and then the door at the end of the Great Chamber opened and a girl came in. At his first glance at her Rodney caught his breath. Surely this was the woman he had dreamed of all his life, the woman who would wait for him in that legendary house and estate which was to be his when he was rich.

Sir Harry bustled across the floor.

“Oh, here you are, Phillida, my dear!” he said, “and here is Master Rodney Hawkhurst, whom we have been expecting.”

There was something in the way Sir Harry led his daughter forward, in the expression on his face, and the way his eyes were suddenly crafty and calculating, which told Rodney that Sir Harry already knew what proposition was to be put before him. His god-father must have hinted at it, Rodney thought, in his letter of introduction.

But now, as he looked at Phillida, everything that he had come for, everything that he had planned, seemed for a moment unimportant. She was lovely – lovelier than he had ever imagined or anticipated that she might be. Very fair, with a creamy white skin, her hair beneath a cap of pearls lay like liquid gold against her head. She was tall for a woman, but her body was slim and delicately curved beneath a close-bodied gown of satin, yellow flowered.

The sleeves were drawn close to the wrists and a lace wisp of a ruffle lifted above her shoulders to frame the round column of her neck.

Her eyes were the translucent blue of a thrush's egg, the nose between them was very straight, her lips drooping a little as if she were shy or afraid.

Rodney took her hand with an eagerness he was unable to repress and then felt rebuked because her fingers were cold and stiff in his, giving him no response and seeming rather to rebuff his impetuosity. Yet nothing mattered from that moment save that he could look at her.

He felt that his eyes must tell her all that his lips dare not say. That he wanted to take her into his arms, to feel the soft loveliness of her close against him, to find her mouth and hold her captive with his passion.

He was aware of a fire rising within himself at the thought of it. His veins were tingling and he knew the thrill of being the hunter with his prey in sight.

"I love you," his eyes told her. "I love you. You are mine. You shall not escape me."

But aloud he spoke conventionally even while there was a depth and a resonance in his voice that had not been there before.

Phillida said very little, uttering only monosyllables with downcast eyes while Sir Harry talked and Lady Gillingham strove to attract his attention.

How long they sat in the Great Chamber with its ornamental plasterwork ceiling and tall mantelpiece of mixed marble Rodney did not know. His thoughts and concentration were bemused by Phillida's beauty, and when finally Sir Harry drew him aside into another room where they could talk undisturbed, he asked first, not for the gold for which he had come from London, but for Phillida's hand in marriage.

"I thought it was for another reason you honoured my house with a visit," Sir Harry boomed, his eyes twinkling.

"That is true, sir. My god-father will, I think, have given you some idea why I sought an introduction to you."

"There is a ship you wish to buy, I believe."

"Yes, sir. Sir Francis has advanced me two thousand pounds towards it. I can put up two thousand of my own money, and I need another two."

"And your aim?"

"To do as I did with Sir Francis Drake on our voyage round the world – bring home the treasure of Spain for the glory of England and the

discomfiture of our enemies.”

“You hope to find another *San Felipe!*” Sir Harry smiled.

“The cargo was valued at one hundred and fourteen thousand pounds sterling, sir”

“And you aim to be as successful?”

“If I am a quarter as successful, sir, the shareholders in my ship will not complain.”

“God’s life, no! You think you have enough experience for command?”

“I am sure of it, sir. For two years I served in the Queen’s ships. I bought myself free to sail with Drake on the *Golden Hind*. I was with him last year when he captured the *San Felipe*. Now I crave to be on my own. I wish to make a fortune – and to make it quickly”

“Surely there is plenty of time? You are a young man”

Rodney hesitated for a moment and then spoke the truth.

“I have a feeling, sir, that things will not be as easy in the future as they are now. If the King of Spain sends an Armada against us, we shall be at war, and war is never conducive to great profits or indeed to the finding of a large treasure trove.”

“Yes, I see your point,” Sir Harry said, “but do they really believe at Whitehall that the Armada will come?”

“From what I have heard, sir, there is no doubt at all that the Spaniards are planning an invasion of this country. Every seaman is convinced that sooner or later an attack will be made.”

“Why, truly, you may be right,” Sir Harry said. “Yet, personally, I am optimistic enough to hope that the Queen’s diplomacy will be able to prevent it, even at the last moment.”

Rodney did not answer. He was among those who thought that Elizabeth’s desperate searchings for peace were completely useless. Spain intended war and the best thing England could do was to realise this and be ready to meet her.

“If I give you this money,” Sir Harry said, “and, mind you, I have not made up my mind yet whether I shall or not, how soon could you put to sea?”

“In under a month, sir. The ship I wish to buy belongs to some London merchants. They will sell it for five thousand pounds, and I require the other thousand for provisions and weapons.”

“I see.” Sir Harry scratched his chin. “You spoke of marriage. Was it your intention to be married before you sail?”

“No, sir,” Rodney answered. “I intend to return from this voyage rich. With my share of the treasure I shall buy an estate and it is then I need a wife to share it with me.”

“By St. George! You are a very determined young man. You seem to have made up your mind exactly how your life shall be planned. Suppose you are killed?”

“In which case, sir, I would rather not leave a widow.”

Sir Harry chuckled.

“That is what I have always thought myself – that I would rather not leave a widow, so instead I have been a widower twice. Phillida is the child of my first marriage. Her mother died a year after she was born, begetting another child. She was a lovely creature, but perhaps too young when I married her to know the duties of a wife. She was but sixteen when Phillida was born.

“Indeed, sir?”

“I married again the following year. I am not a man to live alone, and that I gather is your feeling, too?”

“I think a man needs to be married after he has seen the world and sown his wild oats.”

Sir Harry laughed – a great, rich laugh that seemed to echo round the room.

“By King Hal, I’ll wager your wild oats were sown thickly! What were the women like in the Azores and in the Indies? Were they pretty? One day you must tell me about them.”

Sir Harry rose from his chair, moving his bulky form with difficulty.

“I will agree to your request, Master Hawkhurst. I will lend you two thousand pounds to buy your ship and provision her, and I’ll take a third of your prize money.”

“How can I thank you, sir? ... and, my other request?”

“You speak of Phillida? There I can also give you a favourable answer. You may be betrothed to her, my boy. Your god-father has been my friend for many years – we were boys together – and I have the greatest respect for him. He speaks highly of you and that, combined with my own instinct where you

are concerned, is enough. You shall be betrothed and Phillida will await your return as anxiously as I shall do.”

“I thank you, sir.” Rodney smiled, and there was a lightness and gladness in his heart such as he had never known before.

Phillida was his, that fair, golden beauty would belong to him. She was like a lily, he thought, a lily whose soft gentleness he could protect from the roughness and coarseness of the world.

Yet he would not be able to protect her from himself. He was afire for her, and his breath came quickly as he imagined making her his own. He would be kind to her – but, God’s mercy, how he would love her!

It was her beauty that he worshipped – beauty for which he had been starved for so long. But he would make Phillida’s cold, pale perfection glow with a new loveliness. Beneath his hands and in his arms she would come alive. Her lips would be warm and her eyes heavy with passion.

He would teach her to love him, to thrill to him, to desire him, Phillida! Phillida! He felt crazed with the need of her.

Sir Harry’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“There is time before supper for you to come and inspect my horses,” Sir Harry said. “I have a mare which I consider the finest mount in the whole of Hertfordshire. Would you like to see her?”

“I would indeed, sir.”

Sir Harry led the way from the house into the sunshine outside. As they walked through the gardens towards the stables, Rodney was aware that someone was watching him from the bushes. He turned his head quickly and saw a small face which was hastily withdrawn, and he thought in that fleeting second he recognised the red-haired girl he had kissed in the drive.

He considered asking Sir Harry who she was, and then decided against it. There might be some rule against the children on the estate playing in the pleasure grounds, in which case he might get the girl into trouble.

For the moment he could feel again her lips, soft beneath his, and the springing youth of her slim immaturity. It had been like holding a fluttering bird within his arms. She had been still for an instant and then she had fought herself free and fled.

Strange that the memory of her kiss should linger on his lips. He had kissed so many women, but this had been different – the lips of a maid, unawakened,, as yet, to love. He could swear that this was the first kiss she

had ever known. There had been a freshness about it that he had never known before.

He had a sudden urge to see the young woman again, to find out if he were mistaken and she was just a merry wanton. No – he was sure of one thing – she was pure, and still a virgin. He could feel the quiver of her mouth, bear the quick intake of her breath, smell the fragrance of lilac – the perfume of spring.

Sir Harry was talking about his horses, his voice booming out monotonously so that there was no need for Rodney to answer him or even to follow what he was saying. As they reached the end of the path, he glanced back, but there was no one in sight and he wondered to himself if the girl with the red hair was still watching him.

Actually, she was waiting till the two men reached the end of the path and then, as they disappeared in the direction of the stables, she turned to the boy lying on the smooth grass of the bowling green which lay hidden behind the lilac bushes.

“They have gone now,” she said. “Do you think I can get into the house without being seen?”

“You had best be careful. If m’lady Catherine sees you looking like that, there’ll be the devil to pay.”

The boy spoke languidly, his eyes closed against the sun, his head supported on his crossed arms, while the girl stood hesitating.

It was obvious that they were brother and sister; they had the same red hair, the same fine bones and clear-cut features; but there the resemblance ended, for what was lovely and feminine in the girl was weak and effeminate in the boy.

“You might go ahead of me and see if there is anyone about,” the girl suggested.

“I might,” he agreed, “but I am going to lie here and think about my new poem – you know visitors always bore me.”

“What has he come for anyway?” she asked.

She spoke almost fiercely, and then one small hand touched her mouth and her green eyes looking straight ahead of her, were suddenly wide and apprehensive, as if she were remembering and savouring again that kiss, the first she had ever known.

The sun coming through the branches of the tree glinted on her hair and made it seem alive, a glory of riotous curls. It was red and yet it held in it the burning gold of the heart of a fire. She was not exactly beautiful but, although she did not know it yet, her face would torment and haunt a man so that he could not forget her.

Suddenly she sat down on the grass beside her brother.

“Francis,” she said in the imperative tone of one who wishes to be attended to, “I am restless. If only we could go away, if only we could get to London.”

“You know Catherine won’t allow that,” he answered.

“Catherine! Catherine! Everything revolves round Catherine.”

“You are jealous of her,” he said. “She is not too unpleasant at times.”

“You say that because you are a man. She is always nice to men. Heaven knows why Father does not see through the way she makes eyes and postures at them. Not that I care, but when I remember how gentle and dignified our mother was and I see Catherine sitting in her chair, lying in her bed and running her house, it makes me sick.”

The girl’s voice broke suddenly. She put up her hands to her eyes.

“Poor Lizbeth,” Francis commiserated. “Do you still miss Mother so much? ‘Tis four years now since she died.”

“Yes, four years, and Catherine has been with us for two of them,” Lizbeth answered in a bitter voice, then she took her fingers away from her eyes and wiped away the tears that hung on her long dark lashes.

“It is no use crying, I know that,” she said. “What can’t be cured must be endured. Wasn’t it Nanna who used to say that when we were children? ‘Tis true enough. One can fight and struggle for things which are obtainable, but it is no use doing any of those things when people are dead. Nothing we can do can bring them back.”

“Oh, Lizbeth, you torture yourself,” Francis said. “You have always been the same. You feel things too much. Let life take its course. It is no use fighting Catherine and it is no use fighting Father. Not openly, anyway. Just take things as they come. That’s what I try to do.”

He sighed as if he confessed his failure.

“Yes, I know,” Lizbeth exclaimed impatiently, “but where does it get you? Mother always used to say you ought to have been a girl and I ought to have

been a boy. That is why she asked me to look after you before she died. She didn't ask you to look after me."

"She knew you could do it very well for yourself. I'm lazy, Lizbeth, and I hate rows. I do everything I can to avoid them. And at the moment I don't want to do anything except lie in the sun and enjoy myself."

"Yes, dear Francis, you are lazy," Lizbeth said fondly, "and if you were not, I dare say I should not be so energetic. 'Tis your fault that I have shot an arrow through our guest's hat. If you had been practising your archery, as Father told you, instead of lying on the grass, I should not have put up your bow and been tempted by that bobbing red plume going down the drive."

She paused for a moment.

"Do you think he will tell Father?"

"If he does, he's a babbling knave," Francis replied, "but then you can never tell with these rough, savage men who sail the sea."

"A lot you know about them," Lizbeth laughed scornfully. "Why don't you take a ship and go out and plunder the Spanish Main? That is what I would do if I were a man!"

"And a bloodthirsty sailor you would be," Francis retorted. "Hadn't you better be getting back to the house?"

"Yes, I suppose I must," Lizbeth said. "It means a scolding anyway. Catherine told me not to wash my hair and I washed it. She told me I was to stay in the store cupboard and put away her saffrons and cinnamon, and of course I did not do so, and she is certain to be furious."

"Well, don't let her see you with your hair all over the place," Francis continued. "Remember what a lecture she gave you last week for not looking ladylike."

"The foul fiend seize all ladies!" Lizbeth exclaimed. "I want to be a man and ride away from here. I want to sail with Drake and go to Court and fight in the Netherlands and kill the Spaniards."

"A delightful programme for a young lady of quality," Francis teased.

Lizbeth stamped her foot, but only for a moment, and then throwing herself on her knees beside him, she ruffled his hair.

"And I hate you at times," she said, "and yet I really love you. You are the nicest brother in the world when you are nice, but when you rile me I want to fight you."

“Keep that for our guest,” Francis answered. “If, as you say, you ruined his best hat, he has every reason to be annoyed with you.”

“And yet he was not annoyed with me,” Lizbeth replied; “. . . he kissed me!”

She spoke the last words so low that Francis did not hear them.

He had closed his eyes languidly and when he opened them again he was alone, and Lizbeth, creeping from bush to bush, was making her way towards the house.

She reached it without being observed and ran upstairs to her own bedchamber. She opened the door expecting an empty room, but instead, her nurse was there, laying out a dress and muttering to herself as she did so. Nanna was old and her once rosy cheeks were wrinkled now like a shrivelled apple.

“Oh, there you are, Mistress Mischief!” she exclaimed as Lizbeth entered. “Where have you been, I should like to know? Her Ladyship was crying your name all over the house and exceedingly vexed she was when you could not be found. And a good thing for you she didn’t find you like that. What have you done to yourself?”

“I ran out of the store cupboard, washed my hair and went outside. It was a lovely day. Why should I be kept indoors looking at ginger, cloves, raisins, almonds, spices and figs, and all the other dull things which Catherine keeps in the store cupboard?”

“Her Ladyship’s a good housekeeper, I’ll say that for her,” Nanna replied.

“Not as good as my mother,” Lizbeth said quickly.

“Now, dearie, you know as well as I do that your sainted mother was ill for three years before she died, and there was a lot to be seen to in the house when her Ladyship came here. She’s got her faults, I’m not saying she hasn’t, but she’s house-proud and that’s a virtue in any woman, and well you know it.”

“I hate her,” Lizbeth said.

“Hush Hush!” Nanna looked over her shoulder as though she feared someone might be listening.

“I hate her and she hates me,” Lizbeth cried.

“Why you can’t be more like your half-sister I don’t know,” Nanna grumbled, unlacing Lizbeth’s dress as she spoke. “Now Mistress Phillida gets on happily with her Ladyship. Never a cross word between them.”

“Oh, Phillida ! Phillida would get on with anyone,” Lizbeth said. “You know that as well as I do. Why, she lives in a world of her own. And she doesn’t care what happens to any of us. If the house fell down, I believe she would just walk quietly out and sit among the ruins. She doesn’t like anything, she doesn’t hate anything, she just exists. If I were like that, I would throw myself in the lake.”

“’Tis a pity you are not a little more like it,” Nanna answered severely. “But there, you were always the same as a baby – screamed yourself into a fit if you didn’t get what you wanted the moment you wanted it. Many a time I have told your mother, ‘That child will take a lot of rearing, she will’, and sure enough, you were the difficult one. Master Francis was as placid and happy a baby as ever there was, Mistress Phillida as good as gold, and you a little limb of Satan himself.”

Lizbeth laughed.

“Oh, Nanna, you would have hated me to be any different. You know you would.”

“I’m not saying I don’t love you as you are,” Nanna answered, “but I’m not so old that I’m blind to your faults, and there’s plenty of them for those who look for them. Now hurry or you will be late for supper. ’Tis ten minutes to six and you know what your father says if people are late.”

“I will not be late,” Lizbeth said confidently. “Why have you brought me my best dress? I thought that was to be kept for very special occasions.”

“This is a special occasion,” Nanna replied. “With Sir Francis Walsingham’s god-son staying in the house and as fine set-up a young man as ever I did see, too. You should be thinking of your appearance instead of complaining about her Ladyship.

“Thinking of my appearance?” Lizbeth asked. “Why particularly?”

“Because there is a handsome young man to look at you. It’s time you were thinking of such things and not ramping about like a veritable tomboy.”

“Handsome?” Lizbeth repeated. “Yes, I suppose he is handsome, but strong and cruel I should think, if he wants to be.”

“You have seen him then?” Nanna enquired, and then gave a sudden cry. “And you like you were just now, with your hair all over your shoulders and that dirty apron over your gown? Heavens, child, what must he have thought?”

“I care not what he thought,” Lizbeth answered.

But she did! He had kissed her! She could still feel the sense of shock, the surprise and indignation which she had felt as his arms enfolded her. She had known the strength of him and then, before she could cry out or, it seemed to her, even breath, his lips possessed hers.

Never before had she known the nearness of a man and suffered his touch. She would have had her mouth like iron to defy him, but her lips betrayed her. He was like a conqueror and she could not resist him.

His kiss was unlike anything she had imagined or dreamed. It seemed in some indefinable way to strip away all her pretences and leave her vulnerable and at his mercy. It was not only physically he conquered her, but spiritually, for he took something that had never been given before. She had been kissed! She was no longer an innocent, or as young as she had been this morning.

A kiss from a stranger and a veil was wrenched away from her eyes! She saw herself not as a wild, irresponsible girl, but as a woman – a woman with a depth of feeling she had hitherto never even suspected.

Lizbeth was silent as Nanna finished arranging her hair so that it was drawn back from her forehead and set demurely under a small velvet cap. Her dress of green velvet seemed to echo the colour of her eyes and made her skin very white as it was revealed by the low-cut bodice.

She looked demure and not without dignity as she came slowly into the Great Chamber where her father, stepmother, Phillida and Rodney Hawkhurst were assembled before supper. Rodney was looking at Phillida and did not at first notice Lizbeth's entrance and then, as Sir Harry turned towards her, he glanced up and recognised instantly the girl he caught hiding in the lilac bushes and whom he had kissed light-heartedly for spoiling his hat.

She walked towards him and he felt both embarrassed and amused.

"This is my daughter, Elizabeth," Sir Harry announced, and two green eyes were raised to Rodney's face.

He had the strangest feeling that this moment was important to him, though why and how he had not the slightest idea.

2

The dew was still heavy on the grass as Rodney walked from the house through the formal gardens and down towards the lakes. The cows were busy grazing the fresh spring grass and the deer lay under the trees watching him with suspicious brown eyes as he strode past them, too intent on his thoughts even to notice their presence.

He had been awake long before the first pale fingers of the dawn crept between the curtains which shrouded his windows. He had, though he was ashamed to acknowledge it to himself, been too excited to sleep well last night. It was not the excellent wines at Sir Harry's table, nor the rich abundance of courses which had made him restless, but the knowledge that he had succeeded in his quest and what he had longed for so ardently and for so long was within his grasp.

A ship of his own! He could hardly believe that it was true. Tomorrow he would go post haste to Plymouth and set down the money which was required for the purchase of the *Sea Hawk*. So thrilled was Rodney by the thought that he had with difficulty prevented himself from springing out of his bed and then and there leaving for the coast.

Already fears were beginning to torture him. Suppose the Merchants did not keep their word and sold the *Sea Hawk* to some richer and more influential purchaser? Suppose the reports on her were not as satisfactory as he believed them to be? Suppose she was not as swift or as easily navigable as he anticipated?

Such doubts and problems were enough to bring him from his bed to the open window. He drew back the curtains and looked out. For a moment he did not see the garden below him, the great trees bursting into bud and the birds twittering from bush to bush, but instead he saw a grey, empty horizon and fixed his eyes on that indefinable point where the sea meets the sky.

How often had he watched for hours, days and weeks, longing for the first sign of an approaching ship which might prove a prize. The lowing of a cow recalled him to the knowledge that he was not yet at sea but in a rich guest-chamber where the silk curtains were embroidered by hand and the

furniture polished until it shone almost as brilliantly as the mirror of burnished metal.

He dressed then and, creeping silently from his room, let himself out of the house before there was any sign of anyone else stirring. As he walked across the park, his mind was already busy with calculations of what he would require to provision his ship and, what was more important still, how he should man her.

It was not going to be easy to find the right crew with Drake and a dozen other redoubtable commanders laying hands on all the best men, especially those with experience. But somehow, now that the night was past, Rodney could not be cast down for long by the thought of the difficulties which lay ahead.

It was in itself such a miracle that the most difficult part of his task was achieved – the raising of the money for the ship itself. He might have appeared confident enough of his success, but underneath there had always lain with him the fear of failure. His god-father, Sir Francis Walsingham, had been kinder than he had dared to hope. Rodney had not realised until he arrived at Whitehall that every adventurous sailor could count on the Secretary of State's backing and support. Ill-health kept Sir Francis at his desk, but there, tortured by recurring attacks of the stone, he had, as so often happens with sick people, an insatiable desire for war and violence. The prudence of Burleigh and the unceasing manoeuvres of the Queen to keep peace with Spain troubled and distressed him.

He believed that the only way to deal with Spain was to fight and conquer her. He had helped Drake with all the influence that lay within his power and he was equally ready to help Rodney, although he had decided at that particular moment to do no more than put his hand in his pocket towards the cost of the ship.

Drake was in favour again with the Queen and although publicly she still held out the hand of peace towards Philip of Spain, she was giving to the man whom the Spanish Ambassador had called "The Master Thief of the World" a fleet of ships with which he could challenge the growing might of the Armada.

It was not the moment, Sir Francis Walsingham knew, to introduce another interest in the shape of a good looking, attractive young man. The

Queen, however much she tried to close her eyes to the truth, had her hands full with the preparation for war.

There was time enough for Rodney to come to Court when things were not so tense or so turbulent as they were at the moment. Accordingly, Sir Francis gave his god-son two thousand pounds, his blessing, and an introduction to Sir Harry Gillingham.

Six thousand pounds in all – Rodney wondered with a sudden, piercing anxiety whether it would be enough. Had he under-estimated what he would require? And then swiftly the worry that had come to him disappeared again. What did anything matter – provisions, hardship, even hunger, so long as he could know that the ship was his and he could be at sea, sailing across the white-topped waves of the Atlantic Ocean?

“Are you dreaming of a woman or your ship?” a gay voice asked him.

He started violently as he turned to see behind him Lizbeth perched upon the saddle of a white horse. She was in the shadow of a chestnut tree and so intent had he been on his thoughts that he would have walked right past her had she not spoken to him.

“My ship!” he replied and found himself smiling in response to the smile on her lips.

“I thought so,” she answered. “Poor Phillida!”

There was something mocking in her voice which made him flush almost angrily.

“The two are indivisible,” he said quickly, “for on the success of my sailing depends the comfort and luxury of Phillida’s future.

Even as he spoke he cursed himself for being so weak as to explain himself to this girl. And as if she sensed his irritation, she laughed softly, then with a quickness he had not anticipated she dismounted from her horse’s back.

She was dressed for riding like a boy, in a doublet, short breeches, and long brown boots fitting close to the legs and reaching up to her thighs. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling, and her hair was like a fiery halo above her white forehead.

“Come,” she said gaily, “I will show you a wild duck’s nest. The chicks have just hatched out. Everything is very early this year, but that is to be expected.”

“Why in particular?” Rodney asked.

“Surely you know the prophecies that this year of 1588 is to be a year of wonders! Old Amos, who will be ninety next birthday, says local people have talked of it since he was a boy, and Widow Bellew, who lives in a cottage on the other side of the wood and who everyone says is a witch, prophesies that great marvels will come to pass and England will prove herself the greatest country in the world.”

“Let us pray such tales come true,” Rodney said, and he was not laughing, for like all seafaring men he was incurably superstitious.

“They say, too, that Her Majesty’s astrologer, Dr. Dee, has told of these things to the Queen’s Grace,” Lizbeth went on.

They had reached the edge of the lake by now and she pulled back some rushes to point to the wild duck’s nest of which she had spoken. There were a dozen chicks, bright-eyed and open-beaked precariously near the water’s edge.

“Are they not sweet?” Lizbeth asked.

But Rodney was thinking of something else. He was wondering how the prophecies of which Lizbeth had spoken would affect him personally. He had known, when he sailed with Drake, how tremendously luck, either good or bad, could affect a ship’s company, how fanatically the men believed in good omens; how even the strongest of them shivered at the thought of witchcraft. He had half a mind to ask Elizabeth where this woman who was reported to be a witch lived, and then, as he thought of it, she turned from contemplation of the wild duck’s nest to look straight into his face.

She was much smaller than he was so that she must look up to him, and yet as her eyes met his he had the impression that she was taller and stronger than he had imagined her to be. It was not a mischievous or teasing child who looked at him, but a woman who, in her glance, held some eternal wisdom at which he could only guess.

“You will succeed,” she said quietly. “Why are you so troubled?”

“I am not – ” he began blusteringly, and then his voice died away beneath the honesty of her eyes.

“You will succeed,” she said again. “I am sure of it. I have seen many men come here to talk to my father and somehow I have always known those who would return successful or empty-handed. Last year someone came who, I was sure, would not come again. I was right!

“But how do you know this?” Rodney asked.

“I cannot answer that question,” Lizbeth replied, “but I have always known things about people since I was a little child. I used to be whipped for telling lies until I learned to keep my mouth shut and say nothing. I only know that what I see about people comes true.”

“And you are sure I shall be successful?” Rodney asked earnestly.

“With your ship, yes,” Lizbeth answered, “but perhaps not in other ways”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked quickly, impressed despite himself.

But Lizbeth had turned away and was walking back to where she had left her horse cropping the grass. She walked quickly so that he had to hasten to catch her up. As he reached her, he put out his hand and taking her by the shoulder, swung her round to face him, and then, as he looked at her, the words died on his lips.

She was only a child. He was making himself ridiculous in taking her seriously. Her hat had fallen from her head and hung down her back, secured round her neck by a brown ribbon which should have been tied demurely under her chin. Her hair was curling rebelliously round her forehead and it had escaped the nape of her neck from the pins which secured it.

She was only a child – an untidy child who should be at home studying her lessons rather than roaming unattended through the woods at this early hour of the morning. Rodney released her shoulder and put his hand under her chin, tipping her face up to his.

“You almost deceived me into taking your predictions seriously,” he said. “Come, it is time we went back to the house.”

Her chin was smooth and soft beneath his fingers. For one moment she looked at him and then her lashes veiled her green eyes and she twisted from his hold.

“Breakfast and Phillida will be waiting,” she said.

“Yes, of course, and I am hungry,” Rodney replied with a false heartiness.

Lizbeth turned to her horse and then, as she took the bridle reins between her fingers, Rodney set his hands on either side of her small waist and swung her up into the saddle.

“You are light enough,” he said, looking up at her. “How old are you, Lizbeth?”

“I shall be eighteen next Christmas,” she replied, and he looked surprised, for he thought she was younger.

She wheeled her horse round and before Rodney had time to say more she galloped away across the park in what he knew to be the direction of the stables.

Slowly he walked back the way he had come. So Lizbeth was nearly eighteen, he thought, and her brother Francis was a year or two older. He remembered Sir Harry telling him that last night, which meant that Phillida was twenty-one or twenty-two. He did not know why, but the idea annoyed him. She was old for an unmarried girl and he wondered why, with her exquisite beauty, she had not been married before.

It was one of those questions to which he realised he would not get an answer because there was no one to whom he could put it, and yet it troubled him persistently, like the buzzing of a mosquito. A lovely girl, with a rich father, near enough to London to be assured of the company of many young men – it was extraordinary, whatever way one looked at it, that someone like Phillida had not been betrothed before.

Then he remembered the glances that Lady Gillingham had given him and the manner in which she had shown all too clearly that she was not particularly interested in either of her step-daughters. That, of course, was the explanation! Rodney felt the frown easing from between his eyes. Catherine Gillingham had kept both Phillida and Lizbeth in the background and had done nothing to help their chances of matrimony.

Something that had happened at supper came to Rodney's mind. He had turned to Lizbeth who was sitting silent at the other side of the table and asked.

“Why are you called Lizbeth?”

“I was christened Elizabeth,” she said, “but found it a difficult name to pronounce as soon as I could talk. My mother had the same name and it was thought to be too complicated to have two of us answering when somebody called “Elizabeth” Now it does not matter, I am the only one left.”

As she spoke, she looked up the table at her stepmother as if she challenged Catherine, and the older woman must answer her.

“One Lizbeth is, I assure you, quite enough to bear with.”

The words were spoken lightly, but there was a touch of steel behind them and Rodney saw that in response Lizbeth was smiling that mischievous, mocking smile which he knew had been directed at him when she came into the Great Chamber earlier in the evening.

It was as if she had known that he was embarrassed at finding her a daughter of the house rather than the lodge keeper's daughter. At the same time she had made it a bond between them, a secret bond, so that instead of saying openly they had met before they greeted each other formally as if they were strangers.

Phillida's beauty delighted him, and yet, again and again during supper, he found himself watching Lizbeth. Her face was unexpected. It was pretty and yet there was so much more in it than mere prettiness. Her voice, too, was engaging. He found himself listening while she was talking with her brother, a languid youth to whom Rodney took an instantaneous dislike.

He was not alone in this, he discovered, for later Sir Harry spoke disparagingly and almost apologetically of his son.

"He likes writing poems! Poems! God's truth, at his age I was full-blooded – either chasing a woman or seeking an opportunity for a fight. I know not what the young men of today are coming to, but an ode to a bullfinch was never my idea of amusement!"

"Nor mine, sir," Rodney agreed.

He could detect anger and a sense of frustration behind Sir Harry's voice. He could understand what a bitter disappointment such a son must be to a man who had always lived rapaciously and to a great degree gluttonously; yet there was a vitality and strength about Sir Harry which made Rodney understand why so many people compared him with the late monarch.

He had a vast sense of humour and when something amused him his laughter would seem to come from the very depths of his protruding stomach. He would stand with his legs apart, his hands resting where his hips had once been, and he would throw back his head and the roar of his laughter would go echoing round the room. One would understand then that he enjoyed life, that living was to him a continuous feast of experience and interest.

Little wonder then that he found it difficult to understand a son languid and effeminate, whose interest was in scribbling on parchment with a quill pen.

There was another side to Sir Harry too. He was shrewd where money was concerned and with regard to obtaining an advantage for himself. Just before they retired for the night Rodney had caught a gleam in his host's eye as he spoke of the marriage settlement which must be made upon Phillida before the actual ceremony took place.

It was then, for a fleeting second, that Rodney had regretted that he had been so precipitate. There had been no reluctance on Sir Harry's part to give his daughter's hand to a man of whom he knew nothing save that he was the god-son of an old friend. Rodney had a sense of disappointment that it had not been difficult. He would like to have fought for Phillida as he had fought all his life for something he desired, and while he told himself he had still to gain her love, he was conscious of feeling cheated and also of being suspicious of Sir Harry's motives, whereas before he had believed him to be overwhelmingly generous.

"Breakfast and Phillida!" he repeated Lizbeth's words to himself now as he skirted the lawn and came through the rose garden on to the terrace of the house. Why had Lizbeth said just those words? There had been a sting in them, he was well aware of that, and even as he wondered, the woman of whom he was thinking came through the open door of the house across the terrace to his side.

Phillida was looking almost lovelier this morning than she had looked the night before. Her ruff was starched stiffly behind her fair hair and even her farthingale detracted nothing from the grace of her movements.

"You are up early, Mister Hawkhurst," she said softly as Rodney bowed before her. "I saw you from my bedroom window and hurried so that we could speak together before the others appeared."

"You wished to speak to me alone?" Roger asked, and his tone was caressing.

Her skin was flawless in the sunshine. She turned her blue eyes upon him.

"Yes," she replied, "there is something I would ask of you."

"Tell me what it is," Rodney enquired, "and I promise to give you anything you ask of me – if it is within my power."

Phillida looked away from him across the garden to the park.

"My father spoke of our marriage last night," she said nervously. "It is just that I beg of you that it should not be too precipitate." Her tone was quite expressionless and yet Rodney felt chilled.

"There is no question of it being soon," he replied. "I thought you understood that first I am going to sea. Your father has interests in my ship and I believe that what he has entrusted to me I shall be able to return a thousand fold. It is only when I return that we can be married."