



Witchstruck



VICTORIA LAMB

She cannot deny her power . . . or her passion.

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About the Book

When the power falls on me, it buzzes in the warm, dark spaces of my skull. It stings like nettles at the tips of my fingers.

Meg Lytton has always known of her dark and powerful gift. Raised a witch from early childhood, concocting spells from herbs and bones is as natural to Meg as breathing. But there has never been a more dangerous time to practise the craft, for it is 1554, and the punishment for any woman branded a witch is death.

Sent to the isolated palace of Woodstock, Meg discovers her magic is of interest to the banished princess Elizabeth, who is desperate to claim the throne. But Meg's life is soon thrown into turmoil by the ruthless witchfinder, Marcus Dent - and the arrival of a smouldering young Spanish priest, Alejandro de Castillo.

The first pulse-quickenning book in a bewitching new series.

Witchstruck



VICTORIA LAMB

RHCP DIGITAL

*For my daughter Becki,
whom I hold entirely responsible
for turning me to the dark side.*



Much suspected of me,
Nothing proved can be:
Quoth Elizabeth, prisoner



*Reputedly scratched on a window
at Woodstock Palace, 1554*

ONE

Full Moon

WHEN THE POWER falls on me, it buzzes in the warm, dark spaces of my skull. It stings like nettles at the tips of my fingers. The power is a fever I have felt since early childhood, a heat in the blood that leaves me flushed and unsteady, dreaming in daylight. My aunt once told me the power came from being born on the spring equinox under the martial sign of the Ram, with baleful Saturn rising. And truly my power is often strongest when Mars and Saturn clash in the heavens, as they did the day I was sent to serve the imprisoned Princess Elizabeth. Yet on that occasion I was unable to influence my own fate.

I felt the power that evening of the full moon in June though, sitting cross-legged in the ruins of the old palace at Woodstock. I stared across the candlelit circle at my aunt's narrow, slant-eyed face and *hungered* to be a witch, just like her.

Aunt Jane leaned forward, her fair hair wild and unbound about her shoulders. With her witch's dagger, a black-handled athame, she cut a jagged gash across a dead lamb's belly.

'By Hecate,' she chanted under her breath, widening the gash with her fingers until the lamb's entrails began to spill bloodily onto the floor, 'by our Lady of the Forest, strengthen our spell tonight. Let this dumb creature answer the question: *Shall the Princess Elizabeth be Queen?*'

Beside me, Elizabeth shuddered. The lamb had been dead three days and the smell from its innards was disgusting. Her pale, bejewelled hand gripped mine compulsively.

Though the princess was five years my senior, tonight I knew more than her, for this was her first attendance at a moon ritual. Elizabeth looked younger than her twenty years, even if the dark shadows under her eyes suggested otherwise. Yet she held herself very regally considering her recent stay in the grim Tower of London, accused of conspiring with the rebels against Queen Mary. Half-sister to the Queen, Elizabeth always looked as though she were holding court in one of her own great houses, when in truth she was little better than a prisoner in this ruined old palace in the middle of nowhere. Her gown of black velvet, no doubt splendid when new, looked worn and dowdy as she kneeled in the dust beside me. Yet the princess did draw the eye with the elegant length of her neck, and her hair - fair, though with a strong reddish glint - which peeped out from under her hood.

Her small dark eyes, hooded like a hawk's, were staring fixedly at my aunt through the smoke. Her mouth was also small, pinched at the corners, and her high forehead spoke of tremendous learning, though she knew little of the witch's craft her own mother had been accused of practising.

'Is the magick not working?' the princess demanded, her voice sharp with frustration.

'Hush, my lady, give it time.' I looked back at my aunt, the fine hairs on my neck rising in horror. My head was spinning in the fragrant smoke from the candles, my mouth uncomfortably dry. Already I could see the blank stare of my aunt's eyes as the spell worked its magick on her. Soon Aunt Jane would fall into a trance and there would be no chance of questioning her after that. The princess squeezed

my hand again and I spoke, catching her urgency. 'What do you see in the lamb's innards, Aunt Jane?'

'I see a coronation,' my aunt replied in her hoarse voice. Slowly, with delicate, bloodied fingers, she probed the slimy coiled intestines of the lamb. Its liver glistened in her hand and she bent over it, staring. 'I see good fortune following bad, and a reward for long years of patience. I see the Lady Elizabeth walking through a great doorway with a crown on her head, and all the people on their knees.'

'But what of my sister?' Elizabeth demanded. The exiled princess sat back on her heels, her face pale and tense, her usual caution abandoned. 'Is the Queen going to die? When will my coronation come to pass?'

My aunt did not reply. She trembled, swaying where she sat, lost in the grip of prophecy.

'There is danger for all of us,' she managed at last. Her voice grated in the silence. 'No one is to be trusted. Beware a traveller who comes over water, over land.'

Elizabeth and I both stared at her in horror, unable to move. Danger for us all? Then something tugged at the far edges of my hearing and I stiffened.

Turning my head, I caught the echo and scrape of booted footsteps downstairs in the old palace. Then the sound of a man whistling to keep away the spirits of the dead.

The Lady Elizabeth had heard him too. She looked round at me apprehensively, her eyes darker than ever. 'It must be one of Bedingfield's guards, making his patrol. We must leave at once. I can't be seen here.'

'Better to wait until he's gone, my lady.'

'The fire!' My aunt suddenly gasped, terrifying me. 'The fire . . . it burns me!'

The vision in her head must have changed, for her thin face had contorted with horror. My aunt's watery blue eyes were no longer staring at the bloody coiled innards, but over my head. She lifted her shaking finger to point, as

though someone were standing behind me in the shadows. I glanced back over my shoulder, unnerved. But the three of us were alone in the dusty room.

Then my aunt gave a sudden, high-pitched cry and fell backwards on the soiled floorboards. She began flailing about and shaking as violently as the village idiot in one of his fits.

I gawped at her like an idiot myself, momentarily lost for what should be done.

'Keep her quiet!' the Lady Elizabeth urged me, her eyes wide with panic. 'The guard will hear us!'

Tripping on the hem of my gown, I scrabbled round to where my aunt still lay thrashing, spittle on her lips, her eyes almost white in the shadows.

'Hush, Aunt Jane, for pity's sake,' I told her urgently, my heart thundering at the possibility that we might be discovered. I stroked the hair back from her face, hoping to comfort her, and leaned close to her ear. 'One of the princess's guards is downstairs. He may hear you.'

For a moment I despaired of silencing her. But some grain of sense must have filtered through, for Aunt Jane's wild tossing gradually slowed and then ceased altogether. Her body lapsed into a kind of restless unconsciousness in my arms.

Shivering now, I stared about the old palace chamber. If we were caught here tonight, with these unholy instruments strewn about, we would be accused of witchcraft. And rightly so, for we were far from innocent. Even the princess would face execution if discovered like this, as her poor mother had gone to the block when Elizabeth was but a small child. Being the Queen had not saved Anne Boleyn from an accusation of witchcraft, any more than being of royal blood would save her daughter now.

I looked at the Lady Elizabeth. She was still on her knees, frozen in shock.

'My lady,' I said softly, 'these candles must be put out and all traces of the circle rubbed away before we leave. Will you help me?'

Elizabeth nodded, though I could see she was badly frightened. She leaned forward and began frantically rubbing at the circle my aunt had drawn in the dust, her hands soon filthy.

Ignoring the foul stench, I dragged the bloodied lamb back to the sack and pushed it inside, along with its entrails. My aunt's soiled knife lay on the floorboards beside her. The cup of ceremonial wine we had shared was empty now but its dregs were still potent if anyone should think to taste them.

Downstairs, the whistling had stopped. I listened intently for a while, but could hear nothing.

'Meg?' my aunt moaned, stirring as she came back slowly to herself.

I looked down into that white, drawn face. What had caused Aunt Jane to lose control like that? I had never seen her so wild. Perhaps she was growing too old to control the spirits we had invoked. I rubbed her hands gently between my own to warm them, as though she were the child and I her guardian.

'Better now?' I asked my aunt softly. 'Are you able to walk? We must get out of the palace.'

'No,' she groaned, pushing me away. 'Not yet. The spell was not finished in proper fashion.'

Struggling weakly to her knees, my aunt cast about for her instruments. Then she saw the circle erased and the candles extinguished.

'Why have the candles been put out?' she demanded. 'Where is my sacred knife? Help me, we must appease the spirits.'

'Aunt, there is no time to relight the candles. We must return to the lodge before they discover that the Lady Elizabeth is missing. If anyone should find us with these' -

and I indicated the remains of our magickal work - 'it will be we who burn. Don't forget the Lady Elizabeth is a prisoner under threat of death. If her sister the Queen should ever hear of this . . .'

Aunt Jane seemed to grasp the truth in what I said, the crazed light slowly fading from her face.

'Yes, you are right,' my aunt agreed reluctantly, and began to gather up her various tools instead. 'But the spirits will not be happy.'

I helped her tidy the last objects away, cleaning her ceremonial knife before wrapping it in its stained leather sheath.

Flashing me a weary smile, my aunt tucked the knife inside the bodice of her gown. 'You are a good girl, Meg,' she whispered. 'If only my sister could have been more like you. But she had no time for the power once she met your father, only for marriage. And look where that brought her. To an early grave, never to see her daughter grow up so gifted and fair.'

'I'm hardly fair, Aunt.'

She laughed then. 'Fair to me, Meg. And you do have beauty of a sort—'

I shushed her, holding up a hand. I shot a warning look at the Lady Elizabeth too, who had stood up now and was shaking the dust from her skirts. I had heard a faint sound from the other side of the thin wall. No whistling this time, but the quiet protesting creak of a floorboard.

My skin crept in warning. I felt certain that someone was outside the chamber, listening to our conversation. Yet when I crept to the door on tiptoe and looked out through a crack in the wood, there was nobody there. All I could see was the dark, empty corridor and the stairs down to the ruined great hall, lit with pale patches of moonlight.

Elizabeth came silently to my shoulder. 'What is it?'

'I thought I heard . . .'

I shook my head. 'Nothing. It was just my imagination. We must return to the lodge without

being seen. My aunt will walk home across the fields. Are you ready, my lady?’

Elizabeth nodded, but looked petulant. ‘I wish we had not been interrupted tonight. I want to hear more of this vision of my coronation.’

‘Perhaps we should wait a few months before meeting again, my lady, just to be sure we are not being watched. Sir Henry Bedingfield will be suspicious if we are caught out of bed at the full moon.’

‘Bedingfield may be my gaoler,’ Elizabeth snapped, ‘but he’s a round-faced fool and can prove nothing. Besides, why should I not seek knowledge through magick? To know the future is a mighty weapon for a princess.’ She gave me a sharp stare. ‘Your aunt will visit us again at the next full moon. I wish to hear more of her vision. Though we can meet in the forest behind Woodstock if you find the old palace too dangerous.’

I curtsied, recognizing the determined note in the Lady Elizabeth’s voice. ‘Yes, my lady.’

Cautiously, I opened the door a few inches and peered out, listening for any signs that we were not alone.

The ruined palace was an eerie place to walk at night, room after empty room draped in deep shadows. My aunt carried her instruments and the blood-stained sack containing the dead lamb. I knew she would have to bury it in the forest before making her way home. We descended the staircase, the only sounds the swish of our skirts against the crumbling walls and the faint cooing of a wood pigeon in the rafters above us.

I thought of what my aunt had said about my mother. Catherine Canley had been a beautiful lady of the court, my aunt had always told me, who had given up her power as a witch to marry my father and bury herself alive in this remote corner of Oxfordshire. My unmarried aunt had come to live with her and my father as a companion, and had stayed on after her death to care for me. I could not

remember much about my mother, for Catherine Canley had died of pneumonia when I was only five years old. Whenever I thought of her, I had a vision of laughing blue eyes and a rustle of silk as a woman bent to pick me up. But I could not even be sure that was a true memory of her.

There were no portraits of my mother in our house, or none that I had seen. It hurt me to think I could not even remember her face. However, I have never been a girl to cry, but rather to nurse hurts deep inside in silence. Besides, I had my dear Aunt Jane to love and hold, and thought of her as my mother instead, the woman who had cared for me and secretly taught me her craft once I was old enough to cast a spell.

I parted with my aunt at the side entrance, kissing her fondly, and we met no more guards on our way back to our dilapidated rooms in the old palace lodge. The lodge was where the princess had been installed on her arrival at Woodstock, for the palace itself was deemed too ramshackle to be inhabited, with part of the roof missing in places and the whole building unsafe. The lodge itself was little better though, a damp heap of stones barely warmed by the fireplaces which smoked incessantly, bats living in the eaves, the rooms dark and cramped with most of the narrow windows open to the wind and rain. Though at least the weather had been good to us this past month. The summer night was still and warm now, a fleeting hint of lavender on the air from the kitchen courtyard.

At the back door to the lodge, I caught Elizabeth glancing round at the ruined palace, her face pale and wide-eyed. Yet despite her fear, there was always a calmness about Elizabeth, as though she stood constantly at the centre of a storm.

I was a little scared myself, truth be told. But I was accustomed to fear. Ever since I had first discovered my power, I had wanted to be a witch - just as other girls my age wanted to be wives and mothers - and not even the

threat of death could deter me from that path, now that I was finally beginning to test the extent of my powers.

When I was seven years old, out on a walk with my older brother, our nurse had given us a scolding for hiding among the bushes. Suddenly, a rook had swooped down, screaming and flapping great black wings, and begun to peck at her eyes. We all ran back to the house, pursued by the furious bird, and no one was hurt. But my nurse avoided scolding me after that, even crossing herself whenever I looked at her sideways.

That was when I first knew that I was different from other girls, and over the years I grew determined to discover just how much power I possessed. I could never forget that the punishment for witchcraft was the most painful of deaths. Yet it seemed like death to me to own a gift and never use it out of fear.

TWO

The Red Cross Knight

THE LADY ELIZABETH had not liked me when my father first brought me to the old palace of Woodstock from our home at Lytton Park, perhaps sensing with her inherited gift for magick that I was not like other girls.

But as the Queen's prisoner, forbidden all her ladies except Mistress Parry, Elizabeth had not been given much choice in the matter. She had looked on frostily as my father and I were introduced by her gaoler, Sir Henry Bedingfield, who had promised my ambitious father that, in exchange for my services, I would be allowed to accompany the princess back to court if she was ever found innocent of the accusations levelled against her.

I had not wanted to leave Lytton Park, not least because I would miss my beloved aunt and also my brother William, with whom I had been close before he left for university.

But serving Elizabeth would at least help me to escape the unwanted attentions of my suitor, Marcus Dent, whose fits of temper and reputation for cruelty frightened me. Not only was he far older than me, but he was also the local witchfinder, which made it both ironic and desperately uncomfortable that he should have fixed his interest on me as a possible bride. Though Marcus had travelled to Germany that spring, I knew he would want to see me on his return. And he was not a man who could easily be rejected.

Much to my father's relief, the Lady Elizabeth spoke of how my long-dead mother, Catherine Canley, had been kind

to her at court after Anne Boleyn had been executed, and gestured me to step forward.

Standing by the crumbling fireplace with a mildewed book in her hand - I later learned that she had been allowed to bring none of her own books to this prison - the young Lady Elizabeth considered me in silence.

I curtsayed, waiting for her verdict. It was hard not to feel uncomfortable under the princess's penetrating stare. Had I forgotten to lace up my gown? Or perhaps my best cap was on askew?

'I shall take the daughter for the mother's sake,' the princess decided, and signalled me to rise from my curtsey, as regally as though she were the Queen herself.

Soon after I arrived at Woodstock, I tried to influence Elizabeth into sending me home. All my life, I had been able to persuade others to do my bidding with only the power of my voice, sending my brother to steal sweetmeats from the cook's pantry for us to gorge on, or persuading my nurse to bark like a dog to amuse me in an idle hour. It was a gift, my aunt had said, that could become a power if strengthened by witchcraft. Yet however many spells I tried on the Lady Elizabeth, from a simple charm muttered behind her back to a ritual incantation with candles and a black mirror, it was no use. My power had no effect on the princess, and I had a good idea why.

My aunt had told me once that a witch is often proof against another witch's spells, which is one of the mysteries of witchcraft and nature's way of limiting a witch's power in this universe. I did not believe that the Lady Elizabeth was a witch. She showed none of the signs of it, though she had a power of sorts - I knew that from her face alone. But her mother, the executed Queen Anne, had been a powerful witch to the end, everyone was agreed on that. And it seemed this latent power from her mother's magick was what prevented me from influencing her, even though the gift lay dormant in the young princess.

So it was that I found myself put into service at Woodstock and was unable to magick my way out of it. Much of the work was drearily menial: darning holes in the Lady Elizabeth's stockings, washing out her underclothes, even fetching and carrying her food. Some days were more entertaining though, such as when she talked of her life at court, or played word games in the evenings. When the sun was not too hot, we were even permitted to take rambling walks about the boundaries of the ancient estate, listening to the distant shrieks of peacocks, once bred there as ornamental birds, now living wild amidst the tumbledown buildings.

Elizabeth was never allowed to forget that she was a prisoner though. A guard would accompany her everywhere, even out in the summer sunshine - keeping his distance out of respect for her rank but always watchful.

'I have done nothing to merit my imprisonment here,' the Lady Elizabeth complained bitterly to me one day, having been refused permission yet again to send for books from her library at Hatfield. 'Nothing - do you hear me? Yes, that fool Wyatt led a rebellion against my sister the Queen, and it was rumoured that I had agreed to take the throne if his rebels were successful. But it is all lies! There is no proof whatsoever. No letters exist with my signature on them that might confirm my involvement, and Wyatt himself admitted on the scaffold that I was innocent. Yet still I am held against my will in this dark, gloomy ruin, where I shall probably die of a fever - or some poison administered by my enemies!'

'Hush, my lady,' Blanche Parry warned her, and hurried to the door to make sure no one was listening. 'You must say nothing that could be taken for treason. That is what they watch for.'

Frustrated, Elizabeth scratched out these words on her chamber window:

*Much suspected of me,
Nothing proved can be:
Quoth Elizabeth, prisoner*

Elizabeth was a difficult mistress to serve, especially in my first weeks as her maid. Sometimes she would toss a heavy book at my head for not fetching her meals quickly enough, or pinch my arm cruelly if I dozed off during Holy Mass - which took place every day at Woodstock, and often very early in the morning. Yet the princess often overlooked faults in her servants that another mistress might have punished severely.

I discovered this when I had been at Woodstock only a week.

Blanche Parry came across me secretly reading one of my aunt's books on witchcraft, and dragged me before the princess.

I was terrified. I had been caught with a forbidden book on the dark arts in my hand. I fell on my knees, expecting to be condemned as a witch there and then.

Instead, to my astonishment and huge relief, the Lady Elizabeth had asked me searching questions on the craft: which spells and rituals I had performed, and whether I possessed any special magickal powers. She seemed a little disappointed when I admitted to being only a novice, but asked instead to meet my aunt, who had been training me in the ways of witchcraft for the past few years.

'For there is much in the world of darkness that could bring me light in this prison,' the princess had whispered in my ear.

That was how our sabats at each full moon had begun, with the two of us creeping out to meet my aunt in the ruined palace. There we would light the four candles and sit within a circle to work out spells. We did not perform dark magicks though, for my aunt followed the path of the hearth fire and refused to work any of the unmentionable

spells that are found in the charmbooks of dark witches. But she allowed the Lady Elizabeth to learn a harmless spell of white magick - to extinguish and relight the candles in our circle, one by one - and this she was able to do with a little practice.

My aunt clapped as Elizabeth relit the last candle, giving the princess one of her rare smiles. 'You have a gift, though I cannot be sure how strong it is,' she told Elizabeth. 'Only remember your mother and beware how you use it. Witches work best alone and in darkness. To be a witch in the light is to invite enemies.'

It was a strange, isolated life at Woodstock. But as I listened to Elizabeth's whispered tales of how potential Catholic husbands had been presented to her regularly since her sister had ascended the throne, I felt an even greater relief that I was beyond the reach of my own persistent suitor, Marcus Dent.

It seemed almost comical that I should have attracted a man like Marcus, whose passion in life was exposing and executing witches. Marcus was about thirty years of age, a wealthy and influential man in Oxfordshire with a vast library of books. He was always travelling abroad, searching for arcane tomes on the subject of witchcraft. Indeed, I am sure that if Marcus had been at home more often, rather than off hunting books and witches in far-off countries like Germany, I would have been forced into matrimony with him at the age of fourteen when he first began to take a special interest in me. For although my father hated and feared the witchfinder, who had been known to laugh out loud at the sight of proven witches twitching on the gallows, I suspected he did not wish to cross Marcus either.

I had watched Marcus Dent preach to an eager crowd once, while a young witch was led out from the courthouse to the gallows, barely fifteen years of age, thin as a cat in her white cotton shift, her face terrified and streaked with

tears. Marcus had called on God for her damned soul to be cast into the smouldering pits of Hell, then encouraged the crowd to shower the poor girl with rotten fruit and stinking cabbage as she shivered, waiting for the noose to be placed about her neck, not even allowed the dignity of a hood to conceal her last throes of agony from the crowd. I had seen men hanged as thieves or murderers before, but this was my first experience of a woman's execution. I turned away in horror when the girl's body twisted and rocked, her legs flailing helplessly as the rope strangled her. But Marcus strolled over afterwards to check that she was dead, then coolly asked the executioner to cut off a few locks of her hair as a trophy for his collection. Watching secretly from under my hood, it was hard not to imagine the witchfinder triumphing over my own corpse one day.

I knew Marcus Dent was desperate for an heir. His first two wives had died horribly in childbirth, and their poor babies with them. But I had no intention of becoming dead wife number three. A witchfinder for a husband would be a very poor choice indeed for a young witch. For even if I did not die giving birth to Marcus's child, I would almost certainly dangle at the end of a noose myself if he ever discovered my powers.

Much to my relief though, the witchfinder did not ride over to visit me at Woodstock, no doubt too busy hunting witches to pursue his hopes of matrimony. Indeed, it was such a quiet life we led there, at times I almost forgot my aunt's vision of approaching danger.

One scorching day in the month of July, the Lady Elizabeth decided we should take a walk about the grounds of the estate. She had been unwell for several weeks, barely able to rise from her bed. This was a sickness she had suffered since a child, according to Blanche Parry, which struck hardest when her nerves were stretched to their limit. So when at last Elizabeth felt strong enough to leave her

bedchamber, she insisted that we escape the confines of the lodge and take a walk around the boundary of Woodstock.

It was a sunny morning, and the birds were singing gloriously in the leafy green trees about the estate. Elizabeth stood at the window, chafing to be out in the fresh air.

'You will make yourself unwell again,' Blanche Parry warned her, wrapping a cotton neckerchief about the princess's exposed throat. 'The sun is too strong today, and there are stinging cattle flies everywhere.'

'Oh, don't fuss!' Elizabeth snapped irritably. 'You may stay here, if that's your wish, and I shall take only Meg. We do not need your company if you are going to be a sour-faced puss.'

'Now, my lady,' Blanche replied comfortably, 'you're talking nonsense now, and you know it. Young Meg is not a suitable companion for a walk in the countryside. Would she know what to do if you took a tumble down a rabbit-hole, or if a great cow tried to attack you?'

'It is you who is talking nonsense. Of course she knows such things. She is a country girl.' Elizabeth looked at me sharply. 'Are you not, Meg?'

I curtsied low to the princess, nodding my agreement without speaking. I had learned early on not to get involved in these arguments, for I knew better than to waste my time trying to influence the princess.

Blanche Parry was less of a problem, thankfully. She would slap me and speak harshly behind Elizabeth's back, cursing what she called my 'evil eye'. For that, I sometimes took my revenge.

I would make sure Blanche was a little clumsier than usual, once spilling the bowl of heated water for the princess's morning ablutions. Another time, Blanche tripped over some invisible obstacle, the clean linen in her

arms ending up on the dirty rushes, much to Elizabeth's annoyance.

Mischievous rather than harmful, these little tricks made Blanche Parry's cruelty easier to bear.

That day, we took a track we did not commonly follow, for it was narrow and overgrown in places, and we crossed the river at a shallow fording-place downstream from the palace, leaving our shoes and skirts damp.

Elizabeth was in a difficult mood, bored and restless, and determined to make her guard sweat. A thick-set man, he was approaching his middle years, and none too athletic. Her small mouth pursed in a tight smile, Elizabeth encouraged us to walk at a brisk pace, leaving the poor man to puff after the three of us in the hot sunshine, his heavy leather jerkin weighing him down.

Despite our good speed, it was late morning before we came back round to the River Glyme, which sank at that point to a swift but shallow race across a rocky bed, the marshy banks on either side thick with clustered brown rushes and the sunny yellow flags of irises.

Elizabeth paused to look back over her shoulder, her expression calculating.

The guard was nowhere in sight, perhaps having mistaken the path we had taken on descending the slope, and thinking we were making for the old stone bridge across the river. Indeed, we could see the bridge from the riverbank, not five minutes' walk upstream.

Elizabeth clapped her hands in delight. 'We lost him!'

'Sir Bedingfield will find us at fault for this, my lady,' Blanche Parry warned her without any heat, and did not bother to restrain a chuckle. 'Still, it is good to walk without a spy constantly on watch.'

'It is good indeed,' Elizabeth agreed with a gurgle of laughter, and whirled in a circle, spinning out her skirts so that the grasses on either side of the path trembled, sending up bees and butterflies above our heads.

Then the princess darted forward to the water's edge, slim and graceful in her simple gown. The path across the river was made of stepping stones, some set further apart than others, and it took some skill to be able to cross without a foot or a hem slipping into the water.

'The water is a little high for fording, my lady.' Her lady-in-waiting stood uncertain on the bank, eyeing the swirl of water about the rocks. 'If we keep walking, the bridge is not far. See?'

'But the bridge is not as much of a challenge,' Elizabeth countered, and set her foot experimentally on the first stepping stone. It rocked slightly, unsteady on its glistening bed of pebbles. Blanche tut-tutted at her back, though she rarely tried to curb Elizabeth's wild behaviour, and her charge tossed her head defiantly. 'You take the bridge then, old fusspot. Meg and I will cross here. Won't we, Meg?'

I looked at the river dubiously. 'Yes, my lady.'

'Don't forget you have not been well, my lady,' Blanche reminded her, but it was clear from her tone that she was resigned to Elizabeth using the stepping stones. 'If you should miss your footing—'

'Then I shall get wet, and you may crow about it all the way back to the house.'

Without waiting for further arguments, Elizabeth began to hop from stone to stone, light as a butterfly across the sunlit water. Blanche and I both watched her progress in silent apprehension, afraid the princess would slip, or turn her ankle and be hurt.

She had almost reached the other side when one of the stones wobbled furiously beneath her, and Elizabeth cried out, casting her arms wide for balance. A tiny glint of light spun away like a jewelled bee and fell with a splash into the middle of the river.

'Oh no! My ring!'

Elizabeth reached the other bank and jumped onto the grass, turning back with a horrified expression. She raised

her eyes from the dazzling water to our faces.

'I must get it back. My father gave it to me.'

Blanche Parry made an anxious noise under her breath, and turned to stare at me.

I stared back. 'But it fell right in the middle,' I pointed out resentfully. 'I shall be soaked!'

She gave me a sturdy push towards the first stepping stone. 'Better you than me.'

Elizabeth, watching this exchange but perhaps unable to hear us above the noisy rushing of the current, called out, 'Be careful, Meg. The water is deep there.'

As if I couldn't see that with my own eyes!

Gingerly, I placed my foot on the first stepping stone, and was not reassured when it wobbled violently beneath me. Though it mattered little if I slipped now and got my feet wet; I would soon be soaked to the skin, retrieving the ring for her. So I ignored the perilous movement below my foot and stepped onto the next stone, then the next, until I stood at the heart of the river, gazing out across the bright water.

There was nothing for it but to walk through the water, cold or not. The sun beat down on my back as I lowered my foot into the swift current, gasping with shock. I moved my other foot and sank fully into the river. The pebbles, slippery with green weed, grated under my thin-soled shoes. Now the hem of my best gown was sodden with water, even held up above my ankles.

Reaching the spot where I guessed the gold ring must have fallen, I whispered, 'Gold from the earth, no longer hide your light but show yourself.'

At first I thought nothing was going to happen. Then there was a rippling shift at the bottom of the river, and a sudden glint of gold as the ring tugged itself free of the muddy silt.

I smiled, exultant that my simple summoning spell had worked. But there was still a problem. To reach down for

the ring would mean relinquishing my hold on one side of my skirts, unless I was to tuck them up over my belt.

If anyone should happen along and catch me in such an indecorous position . . .

Well, there was no choice for it. I hooked my skirts up into my belt and bent forward, hot-faced and embarrassed, my soaked woollen stockings on show.

The golden ring lay glinting at the bottom. As I straightened up, the ring in my hand, I lost my balance and fell backwards into the water.

For a moment, I could do nothing but sit and gasp, my legs and behind thoroughly immersed in cold water, then I struggled back to my feet, dripping and close to tears.

But at least I had the Lady Elizabeth's ring.

That was when I looked up and realized we were no longer alone at the river.

Shame flooded my cheeks.

Three figures were staring down at me from the stone bridge. It was too far for me to be able to see them properly, but I knew they had seen me and were no doubt enjoying the spectacle immensely: a girl standing in the middle of the river, gown tucked almost up to her waist and dripping with weeds.

One of the strangers was fully armoured and on horseback. Another lay in an elaborate, covered horse litter which the third man was driving, this one standing up to see me better and gesturing insolently with his long-handled whip.

Slowly, red-faced and shivering, I waded to the marshy river bank, scrambled out through the waist-high sticks of reeds and handed the ring back to my mistress with a curtsey.

The man on horseback reached us first, approaching at a steady trot across the field. As he drew nearer, I realized he was younger than he had looked from a distance; I guessed

he must be a year or so older than me, maybe seventeen years of age.

He sat tall and relaxed in the saddle, wearing a fine suit of armour with a white surcoat decorated with a red cross over the top, its fine silk rippling in the breeze. He wore a black velvet cap with a feather instead of a helmet, and the jewelled hilt of his sword suggested nobility - though he was clearly not of English descent. His skin was deeply bronzed, as though he was constantly in the sun, his hair black and his eyes too, lowered to examine our faces as we examined his.

His mouth unsmiling, his look sombre, the young man reined in his horse. He glanced at my sodden skirts, and then at Elizabeth's plain gown and cap.

'Well met, ladies,' he addressed us at last, inclining his head. From his accent it was clear he was a foreigner, though his English was perfect. 'I was told on the gate that this was the road to Woodstock. But I fear we may have taken the wrong turn, for it has been half a mile at least and still no sign of the palace.'

'This is the road to Woodstock, sir,' Elizabeth replied, standing straight before him, her chin slightly lifted. 'You will see the palace towers beyond those trees. But you would do well to turn back now, before you are seen by one of Bedingfield's guards. Indeed, I am surprised you were allowed to pass through the gate. Visitors are not allowed here, by order of the Queen.'

He studied her face again, more slowly, his gaze lingering on her reddish hair under the plain cap.

'Forgive my intrusion, madam. My name is Alejandro de Castillo, and I have been sent by the Queen's Majesty as a servant and companion to my holy master here' - he indicated the old man lying on scarlet cushions in the horse litter, which was approaching more slowly over the bumpy ground - 'on a visit of instruction to her sister, the Lady Elizabeth.'