

In the yard at Barbuda House Abraham tugs my hand.

‘Will you come in, Miss? Just for a little while.’

‘I can’t. Not without an invitation from the lady of the house.’

‘Oh, please,’ he wheedles. Away from Mrs Tuffnell his recovery is swift. ‘I’ve something that will amaze you, truly. The servants are on their half-holiday, none will know. Wait here for me.’ He indicates a small tiled passageway leading to the offices. Then he darts inside and I can hear his footsteps clatter up the stairs.

When he reappears my heart leaps into my mouth. He bears a silver collar, engraved with ‘Abraham’ in large capitals.

The boy unclasps the fastening. ‘Won’t you try it on?’

‘I had rather not,’ I say, laughing, but to please him I stoop and he carefully places the collar about my neck.

The silver is cold and heavy and exceedingly uncomfortable.

‘I can’t see my feet,’ I say, as my jaw catches on the rim. The collar is four inches wide, and not generously made; it pinches my throat.

‘Last time she tried to make me wear it I struggled until she gave up and had me whipped.’

‘Take it off, please, Abraham. It will look very bad if Mrs Tuffnell suddenly returns.’

‘Ha! She has the key.’ He sees my face and looks ashamed. ‘I have a spare, Mistress, here it is. Keep still.’ He stands on tiptoe, unlocks the catch with a tiny silver key, and removes the device, taking care not to snag my hair as he does so.

‘Come while I put it back. Don’t be afraid, no one will see us. Mr Tuffnell has a pair of elephants carved in ivory that you would like very much, and a book of tinted pictures of all kinds of animals found in Africa.’

It seems so long since I saw a book, never mind one with pictures in it, that I cannot resist.

‘Very well, only we must be quick.’

He leads me up to a small parlour furnished with two carved chairs, a small round tea-table, a green plush sofa, and a shelf of books, among them the Bible and Foxe’s *Martyrs*, but also a volume as handsomely bound and gilded as any I have seen. Abraham takes it down as casually as if it were his plaything.

‘Be careful, Master. I hope your hands are clean.’

He casts up his eyes, props the book on the table, and with his tongue between his teeth turns the pages until he finds what he is looking for.