

# The Silver Collar

*Antonia Hodgson*



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 61513 7  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 61514 4  
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 61512 0

Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

*For my sisters, Debbie, Michelle and Kay, with love*

Lord, how long shall the wicked,  
how long shall the wicked triumph?

*Psalm 94*

## Prologue

*Winter, 1728*

Jeremiah Patience begins his journey in darkness, far to the east of the city. He walks with his shoulders rolled, in a thin coat made for a milder season. It is mid-November, and bitter: the wind as sharp as a blade. This is his third winter in England, each one colder than the last. His lips are chapped and his toes throb with chilblains.

He walks, and the city wakes around him, bolts drawn back, candles gleaming in garret windows. This is the hour of servants and street sellers, rising before dawn with tired faces and smothered yawns.

A nightwatchman trudges wearily up the road towards him, lantern pole balanced on his shoulder. Jeremiah lowers his hat and tugs his neckerchief until it covers his mouth. The gesture makes him feel like a villain in a play. He starts to sweat, despite the cold.

*It is no theft, he reminds himself, to take what is mine.*

Jeremiah studies the watchman closely as he approaches. His vigilance is a legacy of his life on the plantation. Even in quiet, drifting moments, some part of him always remains alert to trouble. *I should be the one called watchman.* A brief, darting look is enough for him to read the man's expression. Indifference – weary indifference. A man with sore feet, who wants only to collapse upon his bed, and have his wife take off his heavy boots for him. But still

Jeremiah holds his breath, until the watchman disappears around the corner.

Quiet roads and alleyways now, all the way to Jermyn Street and a house with a green door – so dark a green it could be black. The knocker is a lion’s head, lips pulled back in an iron snarl. He is tempted to walk up and knock. More than tempted – he has to grip the railings to stop himself. He has waited three years for this day. He can wait a little longer.

A cart turns on to the street. He puts his hands in his pockets and follows in its wake, head down, scouting for a place where he might watch the house unseen. A narrow alleyway leading to the Bell Inn suits his purpose. Two ancient beggars lie stretched out at the alley’s mouth, side by side as brothers. He offers them a farthing and joins them on the damp cobbles, breathing through his mouth until he grows accustomed to the smell. London stinks, even on Jermyn Street: it still surprises him.

He watches and waits.

It is past noon when a chair arrives at the almost-black door. The street is busy – it is not ideal, none of this is how he’d hoped it would be. But since when has life been ideal? He stands, his legs cramped from long hours of sitting, and crosses the road. His chest thrums with anticipation. So close.

The chairmen settle the sedan to the ground and stretch their backs and shoulders, roll their wrists. One says something and the other laughs. German, Jeremiah decides. He has an ear for languages, for their cadence, hears scores of them at the docks.

The door opens and a woman steps out in a fur-trimmed riding hood. She is followed by a servant, a sturdy fellow with a rough complexion, dressed up in gold buttons and lace. The finery doesn’t suit him, and he knows it. His face is set in a rigid mask, barely concealing his ill-humour.

*There are worse punishments*, Jeremiah thinks. And in the next instant forgets the servant entirely.

A young black girl steps out carefully in new shoes. Her tight black curls are wrapped in a stretch of orange silk, finished with a peacock feather. Around her throat, a wide silver collar.

Jeremiah's heart lifts and opens out to fill the world. *Affie. Affiba.* He breathes her name and the word forms a cloud in the freezing air.

She is no more than ten paces away.

Jeremiah's plan is simple: pick Affie up and run. She is small for her age, and delicate (*she was not delicate once, what have you done to her?*); she will be light in his arms.

No one has noticed him yet. There is no need to say anything.

He needs to say something.

The conflict squeezes his heart.

Take her and run.

Speak. *Speak.*

This is what he wants to say to the woman in the fur-lined riding hood:

*Lady Vanhook – do you remember me? I am alive: do you see? I am alive. I have come to take back what you stole from me.*

His tongue falls heavy in his mouth, his throat closes around the words.

She looks at him, then. No, he is mistaken – she looks through him. He is a stranger, a ghost, air. Nothing. She smiles, vaguely, and permits her servant to guide her into the chair, gloved fingers curled over his hand. Such elegance, such grace. Such wicked charm. He remembers it all now and it chills his blood, colder than the ice wind. She is Medusa and he is transformed to stone.

*I have made a mistake, he thinks. A dreadful mistake.* His simple plan, which had seemed so safe and sensible back home in his Limehouse lodgings, now feels like dangerous folly. What if the chairmen chases after him? What if the servant has a pistol tucked beneath all that silk and lace? What if Affie were hurt? He cannot risk her life, or his own. If he is killed, who will save her?

*I cannot do this alone.*

The truth hits him like a fist in the stomach. To be so close . . .

He must retreat – but he cannot move.

Affie, oblivious, steps into the chair, still admiring her new shoes. Lady Vanhook lifts her on to her lap, wrapping her arms around the girl's tiny waist. The chairmen pick up their poles.

Three years he has waited for this moment. Now he is trapped within it.

He fights – and at last two words escape from his throat, like birds.

'Affie. Daughter.'

No one hears him. They are gone.



PART ONE

*The List*

## Chapter One

*Six weeks earlier*

We had no warning, Kitty and I, of the troubles to come. It had been a quiet summer – golden and easy after months of violence and threat. When the hot stink of the city became too much to bear we left it behind, renting a house in the country at Greenwich. Our days were spent on the river, on the bank, in bed. In stolen, solitary hours I completed my account of our trip to Yorkshire, and when my quill summoned old ghosts and bad memories I strode into the yard and pounded a sack of corn until my knuckles bled. It was, as I say, a peaceful time.

In early September we returned home to Covent Garden, and to Kitty's bookshop, the Cocked Pistol – an establishment of such ill repute that a brief glance through its window could tarnish the soul. Half the town loved it, the other half wished it burnt to the ground. And half of the half who wished it burnt to the ground secretly wished no such thing, sidling in when the shop was quiet to buy armfuls of filth. We liked hypocrites at the Pistol – they were some of our best customers.

Over the summer, Kitty had devised a new stratagem to increase the shop's profits. She was very much a planner, one might even say a *schemer* – constantly searching for ways to improve her business. The reason for this was no mystery.

Kitty had been born into middling wealth, the only child of Nathaniel Sparks, a respected physician, and his wife, Emma. Then,

when she was thirteen, her father died. Her mother – through a mixture of greed and bad choices – frittered away the family fortune in less than a year. Imagine the misery, the profound shock of such a swift fall from comfort to destitution. I say *imagine*, as Kitty refused to speak of it. I knew that she had been forced to abandon her mother, in order to survive. I knew also that Emma Sparks had died a lonely, squalid death, selling her body on the streets. But I had not learnt this from Kitty.

This much she would tell me: the night she ran away from her mother, she vowed she would never rely upon another soul again. She would be her own mistress, forge her own path through life. And the next time Fate came to ‘kick her up the arse’, she would be ready to kick back.

Which returns me to her stratagem for the Cocked Pistol.

Kitty had been inspired by the frontispiece of our most popular book, *The School of Venus*, in which a clique of goodwives clustered around a market stall festooned with dildos. We sold the book faster than we could print it, so why not the objects themselves?

From here it was a mere half-step to condoms, whips and medicines for the pox – desire, fulfilment and consequence, all under one roof. Kitty insisted upon the best quality and charged accordingly. Her condoms were made from sheep’s gut instead of the inferior pig’s bladder and were guaranteed fresh and never previously used. Her fine leather dildos were available in diverse sizes from the modest to the alarming. She placed advertisements in the newspapers, kept the shop open until eight o’clock at night, and within a month had increased the Pistol’s profits fourfold. In short, the venture was a triumph. Kitty was richer than ever.

I – alas – was not, having been stripped of my inheritance some years before, following a regrettable\* incident at an Oxford brothel. I had perhaps eight pounds to my name, a watch with a stranger’s

\*not entirely

initials engraved into the case, and a reputation for trouble. Why Kitty loved me was a mystery.

‘For his legs,’ she laughed, when we were in company.

‘For your cock,’ she breathed in my ear, as she pulled me upstairs to bed by my breeches.

‘For your heart, Tom,’ she murmured, late at night, only half awake in my arms. ‘I love you for your heart.’

Being a great planner, Kitty was very keen on lists. Sometimes she would count things out upon her fingers, sometimes she would turn a group of chores into a little song (‘today we wash the sheets, tra la, today we scrub the floors, tra la’ et cetera), and sometimes she would write a list IN CAPITALS and pin it to the wall. These TERRIFYING LISTS were always addressed to me, THOMAS HAWKINS, and involved things I had PROMISED TO DO MOST FAITHFULLY, and yet somehow, *dearest*, they were not done, NOT AT ALL, not even VENTURED.

So I would not be surprised if Kitty had pondered the question *Why do I love Tom?* (perhaps after I drank that quart of brandy and mistook her hat for a chamber pot) and decided to write down the reasons:

*Q. Why (on earth) do I love Tom?*

*i) Legs*

*ii) Cock*

*iii) Heart*

While I would not argue with her answers – one certainly wouldn’t wish to see any of them *removed* – I could not help feeling the list was rather short – desultory, even. I mention this because it dissatisfied me, at the time. I remember thinking, *Tom, you really must find something to add to this list, because those three items are not enough, she will grow tired of you, you will grow tired of yourself, Kitty is now a very rich woman who refuses to marry you because she will not be*

*dependent upon anyone, and because she thinks – for some mysterious reason – you will gamble away her fortune.*

My point is that while I was fretting over such nonsense, I failed to notice the one thing that mattered: we were happy. Other people *had* noticed, however – and they were most decidedly *not* happy. Envy snaps its teeth at the heels of good fortune, and there is nothing in the world more destructive than a man who wants what he cannot have.

Our troubles began on Sunday 13th October, 1728. I remember the date because of what followed, but also because of what preceded it. Kitty and I had met the previous autumn, when I was tossed into the Marshalsea prison for debt. I almost died in that hellish place, and while I was recovering, my oldest friend, Charles Buckley, told me that Kitty was dead. He thought he was saving me from a shameful liaison – Kitty was a servant at the time, and I was a gentleman (disgraced, but no matter). I mourned her for weeks, while she thought I had abandoned her.

We were reunited the day after the coronation, 12th October, 1727, just after nine o'clock in the evening, at Moll's coffeehouse in the piazza, by the fire. Seeing Kitty alive and well (and furious with me, but never mind), remains the happiest and best moment of my life.

Kitty and I decided to mark the occasion by returning to Moll's a year later to the very day. I had intended to propose to her by the fire, as the clock struck nine, but on our way to the coffeehouse Kitty squeezed my hand and said, 'Darling Tom, please don't ask me to marry you tonight, I shall only say no and you will sulk and it will ruin the evening.' I assured her the thought had not entered my head.

Our table was waiting for us by the fire, and the first bowl of punch was on the house. Kitty and I toasted one another, and made bets over which gang of drunks would start the first fight. Moll's had a wicked reputation, which drew a particular crowd – men craving spectacle, riot and debauch.

Not that anyone would dare start a fight with me. Six months ago I had been found guilty of murder and sent to hang at Tyburn. I had long since proved my innocence, and received a royal pardon – but my reputation went before me, as the saying is. I was Half-Hanged Hawkins – the man who died upon the gallows and was then returned to life. When I walked into Moll's that evening, men stared and nudged one another. Whether they considered me a miracle or something much darker, they certainly did not wish to provoke me. This awe and wonderment would surely fade in time, but I was content to rely upon it while it lasted. I had spent ten minutes choking on that damned rope, legs kicking the air while the crowds cheered me to my death. If I gained some benefit from that, I had earned it a thousand times over.

'I shall buy you a pie,' I shouted over the din.

'Not from here,' Kitty said, alarmed.

'Heavens no.' I wished to treat her, not poison her. I sent a boy out to Mr Kidder's pie school at Holborn. Within the half-hour he returned with trout pie, fried oysters and a beef pasty. Watching Kitty eat, I felt very pleased with myself. How many women could boast that their (almost) husband not only remembered the anniversary of their union, but bought them supper to celebrate? A lucky handful at best, I would wager.

When the clock struck nine we raised another toast to ourselves, and then another, and Kitty sat upon my lap and kissed me, as she had done a year ago, and then I may have fallen asleep at some point, as I had also done that first night. I certainly remember Kitty digging me in the ribs as if to wake me, and saying we must go home, as she had a present for me.

Assuming this was code for some wickedness in the bedchamber, I jumped up from my chair at once. But when we arrived at the Pistol she presented me with an ebony walking stick, its gold top shaped like a fox's head, with twin emeralds for eyes.

‘Kitty,’ I said, dismayed. ‘This must have cost . . . I have not bought you anything.’

‘You bought me a pasty,’ she said, and hugged me. ‘I love you, Tom.’

I assured her that I loved her too. ‘But this is too fine a gift.’

Her face fell. ‘If you do not like it . . .’

‘No, no.’ I gripped it tight, and as I did so the gold head separated from the stick. The ebony cane was in fact a long case, housing a narrow steel blade. The fox head was the blade’s handle. A sword-stick. I swished it through the air, appreciating the quality. I had never seen its like. I felt strange and almost shabby accepting a gift of such value, but Kitty looked so pleased with it, and so anxious that I liked it, that I smiled, and swished it again before sheathing it back in its ebony case. Naturally this led to a joke about where I should like to sheath my own sword. It was not very funny, but we had drunk those two bowls of punch at Moll’s, and a further bottle of claret.

In any case, we went to bed laughing.