

THE SCAR GATHERER

Extract from *Slaves for the Isabella*

This extract is from chapter 4. Joe is staying at Lucy's house, having been mistaken for her French cousin, Josiah de Courson. Now he joins her for her lessons:

The governess pulled a wooden tray across the desk towards her on which were three small glass pots. One was filled with something white and had lots of holes in the lid like a pepper shaker; another had four larger holes in the lid, two of them with broken feathers sticking out of them; and the third had a lid with no holes and something black inside. Miss Waters opened this last pot.

"Have you another quill for Master Josiah?" she asked Lucy.

Lucy opened a drawer in the desk and brought out a feather. She handed it to Joe with a knife and a wooden board. They seemed to be expecting him to cut his own pen.

Joe placed the feather across the board, and sliced the blunt end off it. Then he cut a bit more off one side. He inspected it. If this were a fountain pen, it would have a short slit down to the tip. He cut one in the longer side, then took the quill in his hand and looked up, hoping very much that he'd got it roughly right.

For a moment, there was absolute silence.

Then Miss Waters said, "Perhaps Miss Lucy could show you how it's done."

Without speaking, Lucy took the feather from Joe. In a series of deft moves, she cut a large section from the back of the shaft, hooked something out from inside, cut curves either side of the nib, slit it, scraped it, and trimmed it to length, then broke off the upper part of the feather.

"I suppose you have someone to do this for you at home," she said scornfully, handing him the finished quill.

Joe looked at it. Whichever way he answered would be wrong. "Thank you, Lucy," he said quietly.

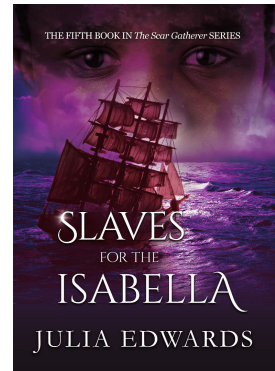
A flicker of confusion passed across her face, but she didn't reply.

Miss Waters pushed a sheet of paper towards each of them. Joe imitated Lucy, shaking white powder from the first pot onto the paper. He'd always thought this was done afterwards to dry the ink, but it seemed not. They brushed the powder into the surface of the paper, then tipped what was left back into a dish.

Miss Waters took up the Bible and began to read slowly aloud. Writing must mean dictation, Joe guessed. He followed Lucy's example, dipping his quill in the ink pot. Before the tip touched the paper, however, a large black drop splashed right across the middle. Lucy's head was down but Joe could feel her disdain radiating across the desk.

As he began to scratch out the first few letters, a cloud of fine drops sprayed out. Pointedly, Lucy moved her paper away from him.

When it happened a second time, she hissed, "Ruin your own work by all means, but don't ruin mine!"



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"I'm sorry," Joe mumbled. "I'm no good at this."

"You've noticed!" she retorted. But her voice was less sharp than before.

The next hour felt like an eternity. It wasn't difficult to make marks on the paper with the quill, not like it had been scraping letters into wax in Roman times. But Joe's pen left a trail of black spots every time he dipped it in the inkwell, and he only seemed to manage one or two awkward letters before he needed to dip it again. Miss Waters had to read every sentence twice or three times before Joe had got it down. Lucy, on the other hand, wrote each line smoothly, and then sighed loudly while she waited for Joe to catch up.

By the end of the lesson, the page in front of Joe looked as though a dozen spiders had swum in the ink and then danced themselves to death across the paper. He could hardly bear to look at Miss Waters as he handed it over.

She pinched her lips together. "I see there is work to be done, Master Josiah," she said drily. "The Master at the grammar school will not be impressed by this."

Joe hung his head.

"I shall give you the benefit of the doubt and say that the pen Miss Lucy cut for you didn't suit your hand." She held up a finger to silence Lucy's immediate protest. "Of course, that is all the more reason to learn to cut your own quills."

Joe nodded mutely.

Miss Waters looked at Lucy's work. "There are errors here, here, and here, Miss Lucy. And you've entirely missed the sense of this part here."

"But it's much better than Cousin Josiah's!" Lucy cried.

"Clearly. But Master Josiah read much better than you. Now," Miss Waters went on, "we would usually do painting next. But after this last disastrous hour, I hesitate to embark on something Master Josiah won't have learned." She turned to Joe. "Are you quite sure you wouldn't prefer to do French instead?"

"No, really, let's do painting!" Joe said desperately. "I have done some. Actually, I've had more practice with a paintbrush than a quill."

The dumbfounded expressions on the others' faces told Joe he shouldn't have said this. He hurried on. "We do things differently where I come from. If you don't mind me having a go, I'm willing to try."

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