

MR. WILBERFORCE, MP

Plays by Alan Thornhill

THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR

With Peter Howard

THE HURRICANE

MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT

Mr Wilberforce, MP

A Play by

ALAN THORNHILL

LONDON

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PREFACE

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL summed up the central conflict dramatised in this play in a passage in his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. He describes the Prime Minister, William Pitt, 'incorruptible and hard-working', set between two powerful influences: on one side Henry Dundas, 'a good-humoured, easy-going materialist, embodying the spirit of eighteenth century politics, with its buying up of seats, its full-blooded enjoyment of office, its secret influences and its polished scepticism'; on the other, William Wilberforce, Pitt's closest friend, 'the keeper of the young Minister's conscience, who belonged to the new generation which questioned this cheerful complacency. . . . Between these contrary characters stood Chatham's son.'

William Wilberforce was born in 1759. When he was ten, James Watt took out a patent for something he called a steam-engine. When he was twenty, the first iron bridge in Britain was built across the Severn. Before he was sixty he could travel by steam-ship to France at twelve miles an hour. The wonders and horrors of the Industrial Revolution were in full flood. By that time, also, Wilberforce, as a Member of Parliament, had had to face financial crisis at home, revolution in France, a major war, the imminent threat of invasion by Napoleon, and a shattering rise in the cost of living. People were worried over automation and the population explosion. Perhaps Wilberforce would feel more at home today than we think.

He would also understand today's fierce drive to destroy God. In France in his day a prostitute was enthroned on the altar of Notre Dame as 'The Goddess of Reason'. In England, in a more suave and polite manner it was the fashion to worship the mind of man and sneer at faith in God. Samuel Butler

wrote, 'It had come to be taken for granted that Christianity is not so much a subject for inquiry, but that it is now discovered to be fictitious.' It was an age also of extreme callousness and cruelty. A pleasant Sunday afternoon jaunt at that time was to go to the asylum at Bedlam and poke sticks at the wretched inmates behind bars. Certain films and *avant garde* plays today probably provide somewhat the same sensations. There was a flood of pornographic literature – some modern publishers are diligently digging selections of it up again. The horrors of the slave traffic appal us. Yet we are coming to accept savagery and organised crime as part of our own way of life.

And yet at the same time hope and a new current of change were setting in. It was an age of young men in the ascendant. Pitt and Wilberforce were both Members of Parliament at twenty-one. At twenty-five Pitt was Prime Minister and Wilberforce one of the most influential men in Parliament. John Wesley and his followers were giving back to thousands of Englishmen a sense of calling and of their dignity and destiny under God, with far-reaching social consequences.

The time was ripe for a new conception of statesmanship and the young Wilberforce was ready.

He was small but incredibly tough. In February 1805 he introduced his annual motion for abolition of the slave trade for the thirteenth time. Once again he was defeated. 'Mr Wilberforce,' said the Clerk of the House of Commons, 'you ought not to expect to *carry* a measure of this kind.' 'Mr Hatsell,' replied Wilberforce, 'I *do* expect to carry it, and, what is more, I feel assured I shall carry it speedily.' Two years later he did so by a huge majority.

The characters of Pitt, Dundas, Newton, Thornton and Trotter represent the real men at the heart of the struggle. Even Mrs Wilberforce (since the publication of the charming

memoirs of Thornton's daughter, Marianne) may be recognised as nearer to the fluttery yet formidable creature of the play than to the self-effacing paragon of the official biographies.

Sinclair is an invention, but if sea captains become parsons why should their chief mates not become their vergers?

More important than these details is the challenge of Wilberforce himself. He so lived and fought as to put England in the forefront of the moral leadership of the world.

Admiration for past greatness does not justify acceptance of present smallness. Today we face the unpalatable truth that our nation, linked for generations with standards of character and excellence that led the world, is increasingly recognised as an exponent of laxness, godlessness and the second rate.

Yet, even in these recent days, in honouring Churchill's memory, we have again shown our deep longing for something more. We sense, though dimly, that we are still meant to walk with destiny and to be indomitable for the right. Every Member of Parliament, every citizen of the realm, could, if he chose, display something of the courage, the unrelenting energy, the love of country, the humanity and the readiness to stand alone for great causes which we justly admire in others.

Wilberforce had the grace and courage to tackle frontally the two thorniest issues of his day: the reformation of manners in Britain—then as now, moral re-armament was the paramount need in the nation; and the abolition of the slave trade. In doing so he risked his reputation, he sacrificed his career, he brought on himself the dislike of the King, the wrath of the Establishment and the fierce opposition of politicians, church leaders and businessmen. He endangered his life, impaired his health and spent his fortune. And he lived to see his work accomplished, whereby humanity took one of its boldest and best steps forward in the whole of our history.

MR WILBERFORCE, MP was first produced at the Westminster Theatre, opening on 11 February, 1965, with the following cast:

JOHN NEWTON	Richard Warner
SINCLAIR	Hugh Futchcr
SAILORS	Antony Higginson Donald Simpson
ALEXANDER TROTTER	Geoffrey Colville
HENRY DUNDAS, later Lord Melville	Bryan Coleman
WILLIAM WILBERFORCE	Colin Farrell
WILLIAM PITT	John Forrest
HENRY THORNTON	David Bird
BARBARA SPOONER, later Mrs Wilberforce	Valerie Hermanni
ADMIRAL	Robert Hartley
THE SPEAKER	Noel Carey
A SERVANT	Gary Brighton

Directed by Henry Cass
Settings by W. Cameron Johnson
Lighting by Louis Fleming

Characters

JOHN NEWTON

SINCLAIR

SAILORS

ALEXANDER TROTTER

HENRY DUNDAS

later Lord Melville

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

WILLIAM PITT

HENRY THORNTON

BARBARA SPOONER

later Mrs Wilberforce

ADMIRAL

THE SPEAKER

SERVANT

Prologue The Trading Ship "Venus" – 1755

ACT I 1784-5

Scene 1 An ante-room in Parliament

Scene 2 Mr Wilberforce's study

Scene 3 The crypt of St Mary Woolnoth Church

Scene 4 A street in the City of London

ACT II 1796

Scene 1 The ante-room in Parliament

Scene 2 Mr Dundas's office – some days later

Scene 3 The ante-room in Parliament – a week later

ACT III 1805-7

Scene 1 Mr Pitt's room in Walmer Castle

Scene 2 The crypt of St Mary Woolnoth Church

Scene 3 Parliament

Scene 4 The crypt of St Mary Woolnoth Church

PROLOGUE

1755

It is night at sea on the deck of the trading vessel "Venus" bound from Africa to the West Indies with a cargo of slaves. We hear the sound of the wind in the sails and the creaking of the timbers. Captain John Newton, a weather-beaten sailor in his thirties, is on the bridge. Moonlight.

NEWTON (*Sings to himself in lusty bass*)

O, Mary, my Mary, see the Pole Star glow
And as I watch her shining, it's balm to me to know
That far away in England, O best beloved, you,
Faithful to our tryst tonight, watch the Pole Star too.
Mary! Mary! (*He shouts the name fervently and we hear his voice echo across the water*)
(*Sinclair, the Chief Mate, has appeared on the bridge*)

SINCLAIR Aye, sir.

NEWTON Ah, Mr Sinclair, I didn't see you.

SINCLAIR You gave an order, sir.

NEWTON Not an order, sir – merely an expression of my feelings.

SINCLAIR Aye, aye, sir. That's a ripe and rich bass, Captain Newton, if I may say so.

NEWTON Salt air and a lazy crew, wonderfully good for the lungs, Sinclair.

SINCLAIR I wish I could raise a tune to the dusky little teaser I left on the Gold Coast. She was a . . .

NEWTON I was singing to my wife, sir.

SINCLAIR To your wife! Pardon me, Captain. I didn't know gentlemen sang to their wives.

NEWTON Why not? They say a sailor has a mistress in every port.

SINCLAIR That's it, Captain. Every stinking port! (*Laughing coarsely*) Safety in numbers.

NEWTON (*Curtly*) Wherever I go mine is the same – sir – my wife.

SINCLAIR (*Unconvinced*) Aye, aye, sir.

NEWTON Better to be slave to one, than to a hundred.

SINCLAIR (*Laughing*) Better not to be a slave at all I'd say – judging by those blacks down below.

NEWTON Tell me, Mr Mate, how is the cargo?

SINCLAIR Seasoning well, Captain – on the whole seasoning very well, though I'm afraid we are likely to throw out three more dead'uns before morning.

NEWTON I'm sorry. Which are they?

SINCLAIR (*Consulting list*) Number 92 (male) – cost us 80 bars – in very fine condition when we bought him. Number 63 (a tiddler) ten year old boy, three foot four. Not much lost there. And number 29 (a woman) – cost 65 bars, though she was ill-made and had a very bad mouth.

NEWTON That's twenty lost already on this voyage, isn't it?

SINCLAIR Twenty-two, Captain. Five of us and seventeen blacks –

NEWTON (*Troubled*) Five of us. That's bad. (*More cheerful*) And seventeen – well . . .

SINCLAIR About average, sir.

NEWTON (*Pompously*) Mr Sinclair, it's not for us to question the ways of the Almighty.

SINCLAIR The owners question it all right. Dead'uns cost 'em twenty to thirty pounds a head. Risky business, the slave traffic.

NEWTON Yes, full of anxieties.

SINCLAIR But a big profit, sir. The country would be ruined without it.

NEWTON That's true enough.

SINCLAIR (*Cheerfully*) And what I say is, Captain, taking it all in all, it's a good life. When you've finished your day's work and you stand on deck like we are doing now, the sea around you, the sky above you and the merchandise all nicely stowed away under your feet. It's a shipshape life, if you know what I mean.

NEWTON I do, sir. Everyone and everything in its proper place. That's the secret of a happy ship.

(*There is the sound of a heavy splash*)

NEWTON What's that?

SINCLAIR Another gonner, I'm afraid. We've been expecting it. And here comes another. (*Two sailors dragging a man can be seen dimly down stage*)

NEWTON What's going on there? (*The men stop and there is silence*) Speak up, you crawling vermin. What are you doing?

SAILOR One for the fishes, sir. We're getting rid of him.

NEWTON I ordered these people decent burials, Mr Mate. (*Examining the body*) Looks young.

SINCLAIR Pity! With a bit of fattening and a bit of painting on them sore spots he'd have fetched a goodish price.

NEWTON Let us pray. 'For as much as it has pleased Almighty God to call this . . . our brother . . .'

SINCLAIR (*Under breath*) He ain't no brother of mine.

NEWTON 'out of the miseries of this sinful world into . . . er . . . into whatever state Thou in Thy infinite mercy has prepared for him . . .' (*The corpse suddenly lets out a loud groan*) That man's not dead! He's not dead I tell you.

SINCLAIR (*To himself*) That's finished it.

NEWTON (*Examining him*) His heart's beating.

NEGRO (*Gasping*) Mercy! Mercy!

SINCLAIR Better take him down to the hold.

NEWTON No! Take him – take him to my cabin.

SINCLAIR (*Horried*) Your cabin, sir?

NEWTON You heard what I said. Give him plenty of brandy and wrap him in blankets. If that man dies tonight you'll go overboard with him. Do you understand? (*The sailors, terrified, pick up the slave and carry him away*) Are you responsible for this, Mr Sinclair?

SINCLAIR Me? How could I be, Captain?

NEWTON How many times has it happened before? Speak up if you don't want to swing for murder.

SINCLAIR Pardon me, Captain. That's not murder – not by the laws of England. Damage to property if you like. But there's not a judge in England who'd call it murder.

NEWTON Well, that's what I call it.

SINCLAIR I suppose the whole business is murder, by that way of reckoning.

NEWTON Not at all, sir. The black man is made to serve and obey the white man. That's good Bible teaching. He is an inferior being, sir. It may be said that we are rescuing him from barbarism and bringing him under the benign influence of the Christian religion. But there's no sanction in Holy Scripture for drowning him. Why do you allow it?

SINCLAIR Look, Captain, you know as well as I do, it's a matter of money. If a slave dies below, the owners lose. But if for the safety of the ship some of the merchandise has to be thrown overboard alive, then the underwriters have to pay the damages. It's the law of the land.

NEWTON It's murder, Mr Sinclair.

SINCLAIR It's frequently done, sir, in the event of a storm. And there's a storm coming up now. The poor devils complain of overcrowding. They're tightly packed, and

the chains are heavy. If we get rid of a dozen or so it's better for them, better for the rest and better for the trade. It's a humane act really.

NEWTON I'll have no murder on my ship.

SINCLAIR No, sir.

NEWTON See to it that the slaves who are sick are given an extra ration of water.

SINCLAIR Aye, sir.

NEWTON Rub them down with beeswax and Florence oil. I want this cargo delivered in good condition.

SINCLAIR Aye, sir.

NEWTON And Mr Mate, give orders to shorten sail. Make those rum-sodden bastards jump to it, or the last man down gets the cat.

SINCLAIR Aye, Captain.

NEWTON I want special prayers offered tonight against stormy weather in all quarters of the ship before the men retire.

SINCLAIR Special prayers – Aye, Aye, sir. *(He goes. We hear the sounds of the wind and the sea rising. Newton comes forward and starts to sing)*

NEWTON 'When all Thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view, I'm lost
In wonder, love and praise.'

(His voice is punctuated by the storm and by another sound – the cries for help and groans from the slaves below)

NEWTON *(Continuing song)*

'Through every period of my life
Thy goodness I'll pursue.'

(The cries for help from the slaves below rise louder)

NEWTON (*Starts to sing again*)

'And after death . . .' (*He pauses, listening to the cries below, then takes up his song again*)

'In distant worlds . . .'

(*There is a pandemonium of sound from the storm and the slaves below. Suddenly Newton falls on his knees and joining in with the cry of the slaves he shouts*):

'Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.'

Curtain

ACT ONE

1784-1785

SCENE ONE

The pandemonium at the close of the prologue gives way to another sound – the noise of bagpipes, distant at first but gradually coming nearer. Lights come up on a room in Parliament. It is an ante-room to the Prime Minister's private offices, close to the debating chamber – crowded with books and papers – a heavy crate full of papers, ink stand, etc. not yet unpacked. A young man is unpacking the crate and arranging the desk. He is Alexander Trotter, clerk in the Navy Department. He pulls out a big broadsheet inscribed 'Progress, Principle and Pitt' – then another 'Tear the enemy in pieces'. Hearing the bagpipes getting louder, he cautiously, then more boldly, executes a little Scottish dance. Suddenly the music dies and Henry Dundas, an older Scot (about 40) walks in carrying bagpipes. He watches Trotter.

DUNDAS (*Robust, loud*) My dear wee Trotter!

TROTTER (*Embarrassed*) Oh, Mr Dundas. I'm sorry. I forgot myself.

DUNDAS No, no, laddie. On the contrary, you've remembered yourself at last. You're still a Scot.

TROTTER But in Parliament!

DUNDAS There's scarcely a soul in the place. In any case, don't you worry about Parliament, laddie. You can do anything you like in here – get drunk, sleep it off on the back benches, entertain women, sing, dance, fight, play the pipes – so long as you do it with a kind of a flourish – and so long as when the bell rings and they call out 'Division', you can walk straight enough to go through the right door.

TROTTER But Mr Pitt – he's in there now.

DUNDAS Of course. This is his second home. He's built himself a nice little nest right close to the floor of the House of Commons. And I'll tell you a secret. We're building ourselves a nice little nest right close to Mr Pitt. Come on now: show us your paces. (*They dance a little*) If we Scots are going to run the country we must let 'em see what we're made of. We've won, Trottie. 'Tear the Enemy in Pieces'.

TROTTER 'For Progress, Principle and Pitt'.

DUNDAS I've been playing a reel to celebrate all the way from Wimbledon – (*Picks up pipes – then hands them to Trotter*) Come on, you have a go.

TROTTER (*Cautious*) Me! Oh no! Mr Pitt was up most of the night. He is taking one of his quick naps.

DUNDAS What more glorious experience than to be awakened from a refreshing sleep by the sound of the pipes!

TROTTER I should think Mr Pitt has had that glorious experience by this time, sir.

DUNDAS (*More soberly*) Well, I'll go and see – give him the latest figures. Do you realise Fox and North have lost more than 100 seats already and they're still falling like flies. (*Pauses at door*) Fox's martyrs!

(*Exit Dundas*)

(*Trotter, now alone, fingers the pipes longingly but thinks better of it. Enter Wilberforce – elegant, gay, small and pale – aged 24*)

WILBERFORCE Good morning.

TROTTER Mr Wilberforce, sir. I am delighted to see you.

WILBERFORCE Well, I am very glad to see you, but I don't think I know you.

TROTTER Alexander Trotter, sir, of Dreghorn. I am a clerk in the Navy Department and giving a helping hand to Mr Dundas for a while.

WILBERFORCE I see. Part of the Scottish invasion, eh!

TROTTER (*Grinning*) That's right, sir. My family are friends and neighbours of Mr Dundas north of the border, sir. He's taken me on, you might say.

WILBERFORCE You're lucky! Mr Dundas is a great patron. By the way, where is he?

TROTTER With Mr Pitt.

WILBERFORCE Celebrating the victory, eh? They have organised it brilliantly by all accounts.

TROTTER You did your fair share in Yorkshire, sir.

WILBERFORCE Well, we won, Trotter. In spite of the Earls and the Lords and the big County families. We won. In fact, I'll tell you something. We got such a thumping, whacking show of hands before the election – our enemies accepted defeat without even daring to ask for a poll at all.

TROTTER Very gratifying. No-one will venture to oppose you in Yorkshire after this. (*Dundas has re-entered*)

DUNDAS I should think not, Willie, my bonny bairn. (*Slapping him on the back*) You know what they call me. 'The Uncrowned King of Scotland'. They say I keep the whole of Scotland in my pocket.

WILBERFORCE Just so long as you don't try and put England in the other one.

DUNDAS We've done it, Willie. We've set the heather ablaze for Pitt. Do you have heather in Yorkshire?

WILBERFORCE We have everything in Yorkshire, Henry – especially votes.

DUNDAS We must have a drink to celebrate. Trotter, how about some of your very, very special? You know. He smuggles it into the country in the diplomatic bags – superb stuff!

TROTTER Oh not smuggled, sir. Not smuggled! Despatched! (*Producing official despatch case*) I'll fetch glasses. (*He goes*)

DUNDAS Useful man, Trotter. Don't tell him but I'm going to make him Paymaster of the Navy one of these days. He's an adept at acquiring things.

WILBERFORCE He seems to have found a fine field of operation. I would like to see Mr Pitt – give him my congratulations – and my news.

DUNDAS (*Hearty – but guarded*) Of course, Willie, of course. You're his best and oldest friend. He'll want to see you very much – at the right and proper time.

WILBERFORCE At the right and proper . . . I see. So Pitt has a watch-dog now.

DUNDAS You know how it is, Willie. If he's going to take care of England, he needs someone to take care of him.

WILBERFORCE And that someone is you, eh?

DUNDAS He's asked me to move in here for a wee while. I've been of some service to him through the election. I'll not deny that. We have inherited a terrible mess from our predecessors. The country's a run-down, rotten estate choked with debts and decay. We've Ireland on our hands and India, the Exchequer . . . (*Trotter has returned with glasses*) Oh good, Trotter. (*Fills glasses*) To the newly elected Member for the County of Yorkshire. (*Drinks*)

WILBERFORCE To the Treasurer of the Navy – and his chief cr . . .

DUNDAS Smuggler!

WILBERFORCE (*Drinks*) It's good!

DUNDAS Make the most of it. Billy Pitt's going to stop all this smuggling and pay off the National Debt. (*Drinks*) Quite right too! (*To Trotter*) So you be careful, my lad. Don't get caught.

TROTTER No sir. There's a gentleman in the lobby who specially asks to see you.

DUNDAS What does he want?

TROTTER He won't say. He wants to talk to you. He looks like a seaman but he's dressed like a minister.

DUNDAS Lord preserve us! A preaching sailor! Tell him to come back in a month.

WILBERFORCE What is this fellow's name?

DUNDAS 'The Rev John Newton, Rector of St Mary Woolnoth Church.'

WILBERFORCE I've heard of him. He's written some poems that interest me, I'd like to see him.

DUNDAS Well, you see him then. I haven't time for a seaman or a clergyman.

WILBERFORCE Yes, but the combination might be interesting. He might command votes.

DUNDAS (*Alert*) You think so? You really think so? Bring him in, Trotter – but not for long. In exactly ten minutes I want you to return and summon me urgently to Mr Pitt. Then get rid of the fellow.

TROTTER I understand. (*He goes*)

DUNDAS If I'm the watch-dog, who's going to watch dog me?

WILBERFORCE Would you like me to try the pipes? That should keep people away.

DUNDAS You – the pipes! (*Laughing*) My dear wee laddie, they're very difficult to play.

WILBERFORCE As Dr Johnson so wisely said (*Mimic*) 'Would God, sir, they were impossible.' (*They both laugh*) Which end does what?

(*Enter Trotter with Newton, now about sixty, dressed as a clergyman*)

TROTTER The Reverend John Newton.

DUNDAS Good morning, sir. You know Mr Wilberforce?

NEWTON By name and by fame. I have always wanted to

hear you sing, sir. The nightingale of the House of Commons.

DUNDAS Be careful. The nightingale is also a parrot. Mr Wilberforce is a deadly mimic. Now, sir, what can I do for you? Time presses.

NEWTON You are right. Time presses. I have not come here to preach a sermon. I do that five times a week or so in St Mary's Church. I come to you as a simple seaman, knowing that you, as Treasurer of the Navy, have a special concern with all our ships.

DUNDAS Everything to do with our country is my concern.

NEWTON I congratulate you, sir. Then you will know that as we talk here some two hundred ships of ours are plying the seas on a degrading and hideous trade. Every single year there are fifty thousand living, breathing human beings thrown into those ships like so much manure. They are chained together ankle to ankle and wrist to wrist. Sometimes they are packed so tight they can only lie on their sides. They lie on the bare planks and with the motion of the ship their skin and their flesh are worn away down to the very bone. Sometimes they lie in heaps, the living on top of the dead, rotting together in indescribable filth.

DUNDAS Come now, I know the conditions.

NEWTON You know nothing. You have never heard the crying of the children, the screams of the women, the sobbing of the men. You don't know the sound of the whip or the look of terror in a man's eyes when he sees the thumb screws. Fifty thousand men, women and little children this year. Next year, unless you act, there will be fifty thousand more.

DUNDAS To a profit, don't forget, to this nation of some million and a half pounds per annum. That's a lot of trade. Works out at about thirty sovereigns a head.

NEWTON Our Saviour was sold for thirty pieces of silver.
We evidently reckon to do better.

DUNDAS Do you realise this trade provides employment for more than five thousand of our sailors, and some 160 thousand tons of extra shipping. You see, I can quote figures too.

NEWTON You know your facts, Mr Dundas. I know mine.
We can talk business.

DUNDAS I know what these things mean to our prosperity and to our command of the seas. Go on.

NEWTON Have you ever seen a slave-ship, Mr Dundas?

DUNDAS Of course. I can see them riding to anchor in the Thames any day of my life.

NEWTON But have you ever been aboard?

DUNDAS I fancy I have dined with a captain now and then.

NEWTON Not when the slaves are below, I wager. It wouldn't make for a good appetite.

DUNDAS I know the conditions, Newton, and I want to improve them. At the same time I may have figures even you do not know. An Admiral of the Fleet – an Admiral mark you – who has made a careful investigation into this whole business. He calculates that a Negro in a slave ship has nearly twice as much cubic air to breathe as a British soldier in a regulation tent.

NEWTON What kind of air?

WILBERFORCE (*Mimicking*) Regulation sea air, I imagine!

NEWTON (*Vehemently*) I wish to God you gentlemen could have breathed it – been sickened with the stench, the foulness, the corruption; with dysentery, smallpox, typhoid raging like a fire. Do you know you can smell a slave ship from a mile off if the wind's that way. Men are rotting to death in that regulation sea air.

DUNDAS I know the losses are somewhat heavy.

NEWTON Somewhat! Did you read of the trading ship Zong whose Captain threw overboard 132 slaves alive – merely to cheat the underwriters.

DUNDAS Shameful! But such scoundrels are exceptional.

NEWTON It happened on my ships too. Once a baby who cried in the night was snatched from its mother by one of my sailors and thrown into the sea . . . (*He is overcome*) God forgive me.

(*Enter Trotter*)

TROTTER Mr Pitt wants you immediately, Mr Dundas.

DUNDAS (*So absorbed that he scarcely hears*) Go on.

NEWTON What better monument could there be to Mr Pitt's victory than . . .

TROTTER (*Interrupting*) Sir, you said . . . I mean it's urgent.

NEWTON By God. It's urgent.

DUNDAS Gentlemen, you must excuse me. (*He rises*)

NEWTON What are you going to do about this curse?

DUNDAS We shall deal with it eventually – by stages.

WILBERFORCE What stages?

DUNDAS (*To Newton*) There is doubtless unnecessary hardship on the Middle Passage. Mind you, some of the reports are exaggerated.

NEWTON (*Passionately*) Exaggerated! That's what they all say – the merchants of Bristol and Liverpool, the shipowners, all the little shareholders, the middle men, the bankers and the bishops. It's all exaggerated.

TROTTER Mr Pitt is waiting, sir.

DUNDAS I think you have made your point, Mr Newton.

NEWTON Then will you press it home to Mr Pitt?

DUNDAS I'm sure he will want to consider the matter.

WILBERFORCE (*With a wicked mimic*) 'At the proper time, no doot.'

DUNDAS (*Annoyed*) Mr Pitt is concerned with the ship of state. He cannot pry and peer into every ship on the seven seas. Trotter, you will see that Mr Newton's carriage is at the door. Good day to you, sir. (*He goes*)

TROTTER This way, sir.

WILBERFORCE (*Stopping him*) One moment. (*Trotter goes but Newton turns back*) Mr Newton, I chanced upon a verse of yours the other day:

‘Thou art coming to a king;
Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.’

WILBERFORCE I wonder. You seem to be asking for the impossible.

NEWTON My God delights in the impossible, Mr Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE Tell me – how could you, as a captain, have allowed these terrible things you have described?

NEWTON Sin blinds, Mr Wilberforce, and binds. There has been no man in the whole black machinery of the trade who has sunk lower than I have. I have bought men and women and children for baubles – I have sold them for rum, and thrown them away as trash. Then with it all I became a hypocrite, holding up pious hands to God while I put men and women in the thumb-screws below. I would lash them for punishment and then pray with them and scrub their wounds with brine to fight the gangrene.

WILBERFORCE Then what in Heaven's name has happened to you?

NEWTON One day, please God, I will tell you.

(*Re-enter Trotter*)

TROTTER Your carriage, Rector.

(He goes, leaving Wilberforce in deep thought. Then a voice is heard off)

PITT'S VOICE William, where are you?

(Enter Pitt)

PITT Why haven't you come in to see me, you idiot?

WILBERFORCE I didn't want to intrude.

PITT Why, you couldn't intrude. This is Parliament – your home. This room is for you and for our followers. I'll need you at all times.

WILBERFORCE *(Pleased)* Thank you. Dundas thought that perhaps . . .

PITT Dundas is a prize ass – but a useful ass all the same.

WILBERFORCE If he's helped you to come to power, I'll forgive him anything.

PITT William, you know up till now my hands have been tied, but with this majority I feel we can do anything.

WILBERFORCE I believe it too – with all my heart.

PITT How shall we celebrate?

WILBERFORCE *(Handing him the bagpipes)* How about it?

PITT God forbid! I'll come out to you at Wimbledon and we'll make a night of it.

WILBERFORCE Your room's ready – always.

PITT I'll be there. In this job I'll have to learn to be haughty and cold and aloof – and 'statesmanlike'. But every now and then with you I can be myself. Tell me, what have you been doing out here?

WILBERFORCE Talking with one of the most disturbing and interesting men I have ever met. Didn't Dundas tell you?

PITT Oh he said something about a funny old parson with bees in his bonnet.

WILBERFORCE Pitt, if you're going to rule England you'd better get your intelligence system in better order than that.

That funny old parson was the celebrated John Newton – poet, sea captain, city rector and a supreme authority on the cause of Abolition.

PITT He is also, let me tell you, an avowed Enthusiast, almost a Methodist. Perhaps my intelligence system is better than yours.

WILBERFORCE What does it matter what he is. He knows what he's talking about. I shall see more of him.

PITT William, I've always said you are a fool. Now I know it. Don't you realize yet, or hasn't it dawned on you, that you are the closest friend – yes, I mean it – to the First Minister of this country? Anything is open to you now, anything, any office, any power, any preferment, provided that . . .

WILBERFORCE Provided what?

PITT Do you think in Britain as it is I could afford to have an avowed Methodist in my Cabinet?

WILBERFORCE Good God, I'm no Methodist.

PITT Or one who associates too freely with them? Only a warning, William, a friendly warning. Take up Abolition if you want to. I'll even back you in my own way and in my own time. Make it your cause if you must, but for God's sake remember you can win a cause and lose a country. Ask Dundas.

WILBERFORCE (*Angrily*) Dundas. Always Dundas. That man sticks to you like a leech.

(*Enter Dundas*)

DUNDAS (*Overhearing*) Leeches are good medicine, I'm told.

WILBERFORCE Wear them too long and they suck the life out of you.

PITT All right! What have you brought for me this time?

DUNDAS Just two items. Here is this summary of the proposals for new taxation which we discussed.

PITT Let's see it. 'Hats, ribbons, horses, linens, candles, paper, servants – male . . .'

DUNDAS I was wondering about servants – female.

PITT One can hardly tax the totally insignificant. What would you say to a tax on annual income – say sixpence in every pound?

DUNDAS Horrible! The British public would never stomach it.

PITT I expect you're right – it would be a temporary measure, of course. Just a year or two. Now what's your other item for me?

(Dundas has been pouring drinks)

DUNDAS Something rather special. *(Hands drinks)*

PITT Dundas, I must admit you do understand the requirements of a . . .

DUNDAS A Prime Minister.

PITT I'm not sure I like the title. It's new-fangled.

DUNDAS What better description of one who is in his prime.

WILBERFORCE The Prime Minister!

DUNDAS The Prime Minister!

SCENE TWO

Wilberforce sits at his desk, reading from his Journal.

WILBERFORCE (*Reading*) Up at six. Private devotions half an hour. To town on business. I feel quite giddy and distracted by the tumult. To church. Felt much devotion and wondered at a man who fell asleep during the psalms. During the sermon I fell asleep myself. I thought seriously last evening of going to converse with Mr Newton. Walked in the night . . . Resolved again about Mr Newton. It can do no harm. . . . Enquired for old Newton, but found he lived too far off for me to see him. . . . (*Wilberforce sighs with satisfaction*) Had a good deal of debate with myself about seeing Newton. (*He pulls out paper to write a letter*) To the Rev John Newton, December 2nd, 1785. Sir, I wish to have some serious conversation with you, and will take the liberty of calling on you. But my visit must be kept secret. (*Writing more rapidly*) I have had ten thousand doubts . . .

SCENE THREE

Lights come up on the crypt of St Mary Woolnoth Church. Enter Sinclair, the former Mate, now a verger of the church. He carries a taper in his hands, from which he lights various candles and lamps in the crypt. He settles down to count the collection. He rings a gold sovereign on the table to test it.

SINCLAIR (*To himself*) Wrong 'un! Chuck it overboard!

(As he works he sings a salty sea ballad. During this interlude Newton enters, the Bible in his hand)

NEWTON Sinclair.

SINCLAIR Aye, aye, Captain. I mean, yes, Your Reverence.

NEWTON Sinclair. Can you try and recall from time to time just where you are.

SINCLAIR Aye, aye, Captain.

NEWTON Sinclair.

SINCLAIR Yes, Your Reverence.

NEWTON You may still imagine you are at sea. You may, in fact, be very much at sea. You are not Mate of the 'Venus' now. You are Verger of St Mary Woolnoth Church. Please remember that.

SINCLAIR Yes, sir. (*He has been counting the collection*) Quite a tidy sum here. Not bad for a night as black and wild as Cape Horn in mid-winter.

NEWTON Rich and poor, saints and scoundrels, they all come.

SINCLAIR Talking of scoundrels, Captain, I caught one of 'em tonight in the dark, with his hand in this 'ere collecting plate a fair bit longer than seemed necessary to me.

NEWTON What did you do?

SINCLAIR I caught him a good hard 'un across the knuckles with my verger's staff. I swear to God I see two or three

golden sovereigns drop out of that hand and glintin' in the dark.

NEWTON (*Amused*) A rare and generous soul, no doubt.

SINCLAIR He'll be rare, all right, next time he sees me and this 'ere (*brandishing staff*) 'andy little instrument when it comes to a rough and tumble. You don't have no objections, do you Captain?

NEWTON Well, Sinclair, it isn't exactly the purpose of this staff.

SINCLAIR What is the purpose, sir?

NEWTON It's a symbol of the high dignity of the office you hold.

SINCLAIR Aye, aye, Captain. But aren't you ever supposed to use the thing? – When those dirty, sneaking, land-lubbering louts come and try and take away the lamps in your church so as to stop you laying about in that 'ere pulpit as befits a Christian gentleman? Well, I tell you, this 'ere stick ain't enough. I wish I 'ad the cat o' nine tails.

NEWTON I'll tell you a secret, Sinclair. Sometimes I wish I had 'em too.

SINCLAIR Nothing but a lot o' lazy land-lubbers.

NEWTON They are sons and daughters of God, Sinclair. That reminds me, I'm expecting a visitor.

SINCLAIR It's late at night for a caller.

NEWTON He wants his visit to be private.

SINCLAIR Another old hulk, I'll be bound, needin' the barnacles scraped off him.

NEWTON I'd say, rather, a fine ship finding it a little difficult to come into port. Well, God knows, it is difficult. I'd be the last to deny that.

SINCLAIR Good luck to you, Captain.

(*He goes, and Newton prepares the room, singing as he does*

Sinclair's sea ballad, which he quickly changes into an appropriate hymn. Then there is a knock and he goes to the door.)

NEWTON Come in, Mr Wilberforce. You are welcome.

WILBERFORCE (*Entering in considerable agitation*) Dr Newton, Sir?

NEWTON I have tried to observe the precautions laid down in your letter.

WILBERFORCE You're sure. Good! (*He paces around nervously*) You must excuse me for being so cautious . . . but . . .

NEWTON My dear sir, you are in good company. Bishops fear me, church wardens run away from me. They use a terrible word about me. They say I'm plagued with 'enthusiasm'. And so with a certain enthusiasm of their own they do everything they can to obstruct me. They even take away the lamps so that on many a night I've had to stand in that pitch black church, a candle in one hand, and the Bible in the other.

WILBERFORCE A light of hope in a dark world.

NEWTON Not I, sir. Not I. The Gospel, yes. But the preacher, just an old African blasphemer pulled up out of the slime by His Lord and Master, and set here to proclaim to this City of London, liberty. But you'd better sit down. This is a rough and ready cabin, but you are welcome aboard.

WILBERFORCE I feel rather ashamed of my timidity, but we can't be too careful.

NEWTON You be as careful as you please. Mind you, an old slaver like me has knocked around with so many ruffians he doesn't mind who he's seen with. (*Laughing*) Even a Member of Parliament.

WILBERFORCE (*Embarrassed*) I thought you could tell me more about this hideous slavery business. I may make a speech about it in Parliament.

NEWTON Good! I can give you fuel for twenty speeches.
(Pause) Is that all?

WILBERFORCE Isn't that enough?

NEWTON Speeches are all in the day's work. But when it comes to the great issues, like slavery, no, speeches are not enough.

WILBERFORCE (*Impatient*) What is required then?

NEWTON A lifetime of battle. It needs the cunning of a snake, the courage of a fighting cock, the stubbornness of a bulldog – and the faith and simplicity of a little child.

WILBERFORCE And where do you expect to find all those?

NEWTON In the man God chooses.

WILBERFORCE And you believe He has chosen you?

NEWTON No! No! No! I'm not the man to end slavery. I haven't the brains or the standing. I'm just an old barge raised by God's grace out of the mud, and set afloat on the tide for ferry work – helping people across the river. What this job needs is a ship of the line. No! I'm not the man, but God may want me to find that man. Once I thought it was Dundas.

WILBERFORCE Are there such men in Britain?

NEWTON There must be: there have to be.

WILBERFORCE Mr Newton, I've been thinking. Perhaps I should do what you have done, leave the corrupt and evil traffic of my profession.

NEWTON (*Firmly*) Mr Wilberforce, if one of my sailors talked like that in a storm, do you know what I would do? I would lash him to the mast and give him twenty strokes of the cat.

WILBERFORCE Why?

NEWTON Because he would be a coward, sir. In your case I'll go further and say it would be blasphemy – the sin of denying the sovereign power of God.

WILBERFORCE But if *you* left your evil connections . . .

NEWTON For me to leave the slave business was right. Surely you see that! For you to leave politics would be wrong. How are we ever to end the buying and selling of slaves? How are we to end the corruption of our country? Have you thought of that?

WILBERFORCE You must understand, Mr Newton, to undertake the cause of abolition in Parliament would mean splitting the Party in two and incurring the wrath and hatred of the King.

NEWTON If God be for you . . .

WILBERFORCE It would remove all hope of office for ever.

NEWTON It might remove a millstone sufficient to sink our nation to the bottom of the sea.

WILBERFORCE For a Member of Parliament to do what you have described would require as great a revolution of character as even you have experienced.

NEWTON Well, why not? Why not? I wonder which is worse – to be in charge of a slave ship – or to be in charge of a nation which owns hundreds of such ships and year by year grows fat on their cargoes?

WILBERFORCE You cannot hold individuals responsible for that. It's a system that has grown up over 200 years.

NEWTON I hold everyone of us responsible, especially a Member of Parliament. I see gentlemen such as you driving to Westminster in a fine rig, with sleek shining horses, far better kept and cared for than any slave – or even most of the wretches that come to my church. I see gentlemen like you tending their stocks and shares – shares, perhaps, in human flesh and blood. I see the princes of fashion, the dandies, the favourites at Court, drinking away the night and gambling away their fortunes – and then I think of ships in the Middle Passage and I hear again the wind in the

sails, the shrieks and the cries and the rattle of chains below. No, Mr Wilberforce, we are all responsible.

WILBERFORCE (*Troubled*) We seem to be involved in a great spider's web of evil. Touch it at one place and the whole web quivers.

NEWTON That's true. Yet cut that web of evil boldly at its strongest place – the Slave Trade, for example – and the whole evil begins to shrivel away.

WILBERFORCE Yes, but it's too much to ask of any man. I must go. It's late. Make sure, will you, that there is no one lurking outside.

(*Newton laughs*)

WILBERFORCE What is it now? I came here for help, for consolation for my soul. You ply me with politics and ribaldry.

NEWTON Forgive me, my friend, forgive me. But here we are talking about the freeing of a million slaves and yet we can be slaves ourselves – to the fear of what people think.

WILBERFORCE How can any man be free from what people think?

NEWTON There was a man once who prayed for courage, and he went out into the street and met a lion. That was the answer to his prayer.

WILBERFORCE He was probably torn in pieces.

NEWTON Probably.

WILBERFORCE Mr Newton, you promised once to tell me what happened to you.

NEWTON One night at sea, in the middle of a storm, I suddenly realised two things – one, that I am a great sinner and two, the exuberant goodness of God. That's the true basis for reform in this land – be it Abolition or any other. God can take a murderer, Mr Wilberforce – remember, men died on my ships – and make of him a minister of the

Gospel. He can take a Member of Parliament and make him . . .

WILBERFORCE Yes?

NEWTON Who knows? Both a Christian and a statesman – how seldom do those characters coincide. Goodnight, Mr Wilberforce. God bless you. (*Wilberforce goes*)

SCENE FOUR

A street – Wilberforce walking hurriedly, looking back occasionally over his shoulder. Suddenly, Dundas enters from the opposite side, striding towards him. They run into one another.

DUNDAS Watch out, man. Can't you look where you're going. Bless my perishing soul, it's Willie Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE (*Embarrassed*) Ah, Dundas. What are you doing in this part of London at this hour of night?

DUNDAS My dear sir, surely a gentleman has enough discretion not to ask another gentleman that question?

WILBERFORCE (*Relieved*) Yes, of course. Goodnight.

DUNDAS So you keep a mistress too, eh Willie?

WILBERFORCE Now, now.

DUNDAS That furtive, guilty look. It's unmistakable. It's a first attachment, I'll be bound. Shame has not worn off ye yet.

WILBERFORCE (*Troubled*) You're right. Shame has not worn off me – yet. Oh God, it's the lion!

DUNDAS What's that?

WILBERFORCE Never mind. (*With growing confidence*) Dundas, you may as well know it. My visit tonight is a very special attachment.

DUNDAS Don't say you are getting married?

WILBERFORCE No, it's a much more serious vow.

DUNDAS Well, well.

WILBERFORCE I have had laid upon me two things. I know it now. First, the reformation of manners in Britain.

DUNDAS Well, well, that's a big mouthful for a young man.

WILBERFORCE It's a big undertaking. There's far too much dishonesty throughout the land and we are all in it. There's corruption, Dundas. Money finds its way into the wrong pockets, even in our Government.

DUNDAS Come now. If morality's your tune you are walking down the wrong street. Britain prefers honest sinners to sneaking hypocrites. But let's leave this subject. It's not suitable for gentlemen.

WILBERFORCE There is something more. I intend to raise in Parliament the abolition of the slave trade.

DUNDAS What? (*He laughs*) Oh that! Well, that's all right. Many are for the idea of abolition. You'll make a fine speech. It will resound to your credit in Yorkshire.

WILBERFORCE And then?

DUNDAS Then? Well, the matter will be shelved, of course, postponed, modified out of existence and dismissed.

WILBERFORCE Suppose then that I raise it again?

DUNDAS Useless. The merchants of Liverpool and Bristol supply us with certain funds. Need I say more?

WILBERFORCE And again?

DUNDAS But the King is against it, you know that.

WILBERFORCE (*With mounting passion*) And again?

DUNDAS So are most of the Cabinet. How exactly would you propose to embark on such an enterprise?

WILBERFORCE I am going straight to Pitt tonight.

DUNDAS No.

WILBERFORCE Why not? I happen to know Pitt is wholeheartedly for abolition.

DUNDAS Of course he's for it. He's a good man and a humane man but that doesn't mean he should promote it. I forbid it.

WILBERFORCE You forbid it?

DUNDAS Yes, I. You may not know it. Pitt may not fully

know it himself. But his existence in office depends on me. I procure his money and votes.

WILBERFORCE Pitt can fend for himself.

DUNDAS Willy, without money and votes no politician can fend for himself. Remember that. No, you can afford a lost cause or two, Pitt can't. He is a serious politician. I warn you, you are meddling with bigger issues than you know. Keep your hands off William Pitt, or you will be broken.

WILBERFORCE You mean you will try to break me.

DUNDAS There's no need. If you really persist in this business of the trade, you will batter against a stone wall until you break yourself. Mr Wilberforce, goodnight.

WILBERFORCE Oh Mr Dundas! (*He goes – then turns back*)

DUNDAS Yes!

WILBERFORCE I'm going to become a serious politician too – a man who counts votes and procures money and (*his voice rising*) who doesn't care a damn what others think. Goodnight. (*He goes, leaving Dundas in thought*)

Curtain

ACT TWO

1796

SCENE ONE

The ante-room in Parliament. On the table is coffee, port wine and an enormous pie. Enter Henry Thornton, MP, Wilberforce's friend and associate. He is supporting Miss Barbara Spooner (in her 20's). The sound of a debate can be heard going on in the distance.

THORNTON (*Assisting her to a couch*) You must rest here – allow me. (*Offering smelling salts from his pocket*) This will help you.

MISS SPOONER Thank you. Oh dear! I was suddenly so giddy standing on a chair and peering down onto the floor of the House of Commons.

THORNTON Now let me see, I'll get you water – better still a glass of port wine.

MISS SPOONER No, no – a little water. I'm afraid with so much oratory I must have got carried away.

THORNTON (*Chuckling*) I had to carry you away. It's rather a shame the way we banish our women visitors from the Public Gallery of Parliament and put them up in that dirty attic to stare down at us through the ventilator, as though we were so many frogs in a pond – croaking away. (*Hands Miss Spooner a glass of water*)

MISS SPOONER Thank you. The fumes and the candle smoke were terrible.

THORNTON Too much hot air, I assure you.

MISS SPOONER But it's exciting. I could just see the Speaker's feet, and I declare I detected the bald patch on top of your head, Mr Thornton.

THORNTON There are several bald heads in Parliament.

MISS SPOONER You rescued me just in time, or I might have lost my balance and slipped down through the chandelier and landed on the floor of the House right at the feet of Mr Wilberforce.

THORNTON A shock to you both, no doubt. But what more appropriate place could Miss Barbara Spooner land?

MISS SPOONER Thank you. (*With sudden realisation*) Oh, but I shouldn't be here at all. Where are we?

THORNTON This is a private ante-room of the House, used by Mr Pitt and lent by him to friends like Mr Dundas or Mr Wilberforce.

MISS SPOONER Then we must go at once . . .

THORNTON Wait until you feel strong again. After all, it's an entirely appropriate place for the future Mrs Wilberforce.

MISS SPOONER Oh, please say it again, Mr Thornton.

THORNTON Mrs William Wilberforce.

MISS SPOONER I think I'm going to feel giddy again. It's such a lovely sound. Will you help me, Mr Thornton?

THORNTON Every way in my power. You know that.

MISS SPOONER You know Mr Wilberforce so well. He has lived in your home, and you've done so much together. I feel I know so little yet of his habits and requirements. Does he – let's see – does he like coffee for his breakfast?

THORNTON Yes, when he remembers to take it, he likes it. He gets up very early, you know. I can offer you coffee now.

MISS SPOONER No thank you. How early?

THORNTON At six, or even five o'clock.

MISS SPOONER Are there such hours, Mr Thornton? But why?

THORNTON He studies Scripture, he prays, he writes in that great journal of his – long conversations with the Almighty.

MISS SPOONER They converse! How odd! Almost blasphemous.

THORNTON Some people call him a saint, you know.

MISS SPOONER I know. Is it easy to be married to a saint?

THORNTON I should think almost impossible.

MISS SPOONER Tell me, does he . . . does he like sugar in his coffee?

THORNTON He's very indifferent to things like that. If it's there he'll probably take it.

MISS SPOONER It will be there.

THORNTON But not West Indian sugar. That's very important. That's slave-grown sugar. You must serve East Indian sugar.

MISS SPOONER How inconvenient! How will I ever remember!

THORNTON Oh, you'll have a dozen or more to breakfast to remind you, as likely as not.

MISS SPOONER A dozen at . . . But why?

THORNTON Discussing slavery business.

MISS SPOONER At breakfast!

THORNTON Certainly. And until late into the night.

MISS SPOONER Thank goodness it will all be over very soon. Mr Wilberforce has promised me that this time his Bill is going to succeed.

THORNTON We sincerely hope so. But do you realise the courage of the man? Every year for seven years he has brought the matter up in Parliament, and every year he has been defeated, but yet he goes on.

MISS SPOONER How can they treat him like that?

THORNTON Slavery is a great industry. Many grow fat on it. To abolish it, they say, would lose us our Colonies and land

us all in bankruptcy and ruin. All the same, it looks at last as if Mr Wilberforce is going to succeed.

MISS SPOONER Oh, but he will! This is a close secret, but we plan to celebrate its triumph and our marriage all in the same breath as it were.

(Enter Wilberforce)

WILBERFORCE My dear Miss Spooner. I thought you were listening to the debate.

THORNTON It's my fault entirely. Miss Spooner was overcome by the heat. So I brought her here.

WILBERFORCE My dear, are you all right?

MISS SPOONER Thank you, Mr Wilberforce. I am all right now. In fact I must return to the Gallery in good time to hear you speak.

WILBERFORCE I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it may not be necessary for me to speak again tonight. You see this is the second reading only. No one opposes too fiercely. We should win comfortably tonight. When it comes to the third reading – then we shall have all guns firing – and then – then you shall join us here to celebrate, perhaps with Mr Pitt himself. How about that?

MISS SPOONER Oh, Wilby, I'm so proud of you.

WILBERFORCE I'm glad of that. Others seem to think differently. Listen to this – a letter to *The Times* – 'Dear Sir, Mr Wilberforce may be a great philanthropist in public, but I happen to know a little of his private history and can assure you that he is a cruel husband and beats his wife.'

MISS SPOONER Shameful! Who dares to write that?

WILBERFORCE A gentleman who signs himself 'Pro Bono Publico'.

MISS SPOONER Never heard of him.

THORNTON Ah, but he did not go unchallenged. It was

well answered a few days later in the same journal – ‘Dear Sir, Mr Wilberforce is a bachelor and does not have a wife.’

WILBERFORCE Yet . . . ! Did you write that, Thornton?

THORNTON It was a reader entitled ‘Valiant for Truth’.

WILBERFORCE Excellent! I’m afraid, however, ‘Mr Valiant for Truth’ does not have the last word. Listen to this – signed ‘Plain Facts’. ‘Dear Sir, I happen to know Mr Wilberforce’s wife is a Negress, and what is worse, a lady’s maid.’

MISS SPOONER A lady’s maid!

WILBERFORCE Before we’re finished, I’m afraid they may call you much worse. I’m sorry, my dear. All I can say is that you in person will give the lie to every idle rumour.

MISS SPOONER How can they be so cruel! I don’t know how you can endure it.

WILBERFORCE It has its compensations. (*Takes letter from pocket and reads*) ‘Dear Mr Wilberforce, Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but if God be for you, who can be against you? Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it. Your sincerest friend and brother in Christ, John Wesley.’ I always carry it with me. But now, my dear, we have one of the Members, an Admiral, coming to see us. We want to try and win his vote. I suspect he is of the old school and may have strong views about skirts on the Quarter Deck, and so. . . .

MISS SPOONER Yes, yes, I’ll do as you say.

VOICE OF ADMIRAL (*Heard outside*) Nothing but free thinking, sir, straight out of France.

WILBERFORCE This way – quick. (*He rushes her out of the other door*) (*To Thornton*) Try him with the pie.

VOICE OF ADMIRAL What I say is, as far as slaves are concerned, leave well alone. . . . (*Enter Admiral, in uniform*)

THORNTON Ah, Admiral, come in, come in. Mr Wilberforce will be here in a moment.

ADMIRAL (*Stops and sniffs*) Very strong smell of scent.

THORNTON Smelling salts, I think. You'll have coffee, Admiral, and a glass of port wine?

ADMIRAL Why not, why not? All the same, pure waste of time you talking to me, my lad. I'm as dead set against your measure as a man can be. Revolutionary clap-trap, sir, not worthy of the dignity of the House.

THORNTON Mr Wilberforce thought you might like to partake of some pie.

ADMIRAL Pie?

THORNTON Yorkshire pie, sir, a speciality of the county. Mr Wilberforce has it sent regularly from his constituency. Try some.

ADMIRAL Well, I did dine early (*taking large slice*) and sparingly. Excellent odour, very tasty. I mind my belly very studiously. The man who will not mind his belly will scarcely mind anything else.

(*Enter Wilberforce*)

WILBERFORCE It's all right. It's Manners still droning on. Half the House is asleep and the other half out at dinner. Admiral, I'm glad you've torn yourself away from the Debate.

ADMIRAL Thank you, my boy. I dislike your sentiments but I like your pie. I call it an uncommonly good little tidbit to top off a meal.

WILBERFORCE I serve this often in the private diningrooms to Members. It has helped us win many a good vote. I hope it will win yours, Admiral.

ADMIRAL Not a chance, my boy. Not a chance. My reason and my stomach stay leagues apart.

WILBERFORCE (*Aside to Thornton*) I wish to God the one was as great as the other.

THORNTON (*Passing the sugar*) Some sugar, Admiral, for your coffee.

ADMIRAL Thank you. (*He examines the bowl and reads a legend on it*) 'No slave-grown sugar served in me.' Damn it, Sir. Do we have to have this wretched slave business even in our coffee?

WILBERFORCE We are selling thousands of these bowls.

ADMIRAL Don't you ever leave the subject alone? You people just keep on and on.

WILBERFORCE Perhaps when we are dead that will be our only epitaph. 'They just kept on and on.'

ADMIRAL Damn nuisance, I'd say.

WILBERFORCE Admiral, if you want to do things in this world – big things – you must make up your mind to be a damn nuisance. You must out-think people, out-work them, out-manoeuvre them, outrage them. Then you may get them to shift just a trifle.

THORNTON (*Passing a gold snuff box*) A pinch of snuff, Admiral?

ADMIRAL Thank you. Charming box. An excellent inlay.

THORNTON It's a cameo specially executed by Mr Wedgwood himself. It's beautifully done, an African boy kneeling in chains piteously entreating the world – 'Am I not a man and a brother?'

ADMIRAL (*Exploding*) Good God! You mean we are not to be allowed even to snuff in peace?

THORNTON These little fellows are going on the snuff boxes and jewel cases, bracelets and brooches by the thousands. Men will wear him on their cravats and women in their hair.

ADMIRAL Your women, perhaps. Not mine, damn it! Though

God knows they go far enough already with these damn ridiculous mountainous coiffures they effect nowadays. They're just walking steeples. But do you really believe all this tomfoolery has any effect on hard-headed men?

WILBERFORCE Hard-headed is right. To inject a new idea, any new idea, into the head of an Englishman, you must hammer until the hammer is sore.

ADMIRAL So you want my vote on the second reading to-day? Well, you won't get it. Mark my words, young man, the negro slave is far better off than ever he was in Africa. They tell me the Middle Passage is often the happiest time in a nigger's life.

WILBERFORCE Is that so, Admiral? But we have no right to make people happy against their will.

(Dundas puts his head around the door of the dining room)

DUNDAS Good evening, gentlemen. Whitbread the brewer is speaking now. He's good for an hour yet. There's all the small fry to speak yet and then one or two whales are bound to want to spout.

THORNTON I suppose we'll be lucky if we get to bed tonight.

DUNDAS Damned lucky. The early hours maybe. Well, I shall return to my place and listen to the worthy Whitbread – he's as thick and fruity as his beer and full of froth and bubble. I have no objection, Willie, if you win tonight. Later there may be the need of certain amendments . . .

WILBERFORCE Full abolition on March 1st next year, Dundas. That allows of no amendment.

DUNDAS Willie, it must be a wonderful thing to be as steadily, as stubbornly right as you are. Forgive me, gentlemen. Admiral, I would be glad of a word with you in the House.
(Dundas goes)

WILBERFORCE It doesn't matter what he says. At least he knows we are going to carry the second reading.

THORNTON And as things look now, the Committee stage also, and the third reading as well.

WILBERFORCE I dread the House of Lords.

THORNTON Even they know which way the wind is blowing.

WILBERFORCE Think of it, Henry. March 1st, 1797, little more than a year away. If we hold firm now there can sound forth such a cry of relief and rapture from the Ivory Coast to the Indies . . .

ADMIRAL (*Rising*) Leave it for the debate, young man.

(*As he walks towards the door we suddenly hear loud cries from the House of 'Divide' - 'Divide'*)

ADMIRAL Well I'll be . . . (*He stops in his tracks*) You hear that. They're calling for a division.

THORNTON But that's impossible. They promised us a long debate.

WILBERFORCE (*Hurrying to door*) It may be impossible, but it's happening. Listen. (*Further cries of 'Sit down. Shut up. Divide, divide!'*)

THORNTON But all our men are still away at dinner. They're scattered all over town.

WILBERFORCE Yes, Thornton. And you may wager all *their* men are back in their places. We have been tricked.

THORNTON Out-manoeuvred by as foul a device as ever . . .

WILBERFORCE Don't talk. Act. We're not beaten yet. I'll go in and catch the Speaker's eye if I have to pluck it out with my hands. I'll keep the debate going. You, Thornton, get in our supporters. Send to every club and tavern in town. I'll hold the House.

(*He dashes out. We hear continued cries of 'Vote. Sit down.' Then we hear Wilberforce's voice*)

VOICE OF WILBERFORCE Mr Speaker, Sir. I rise on a point of order. (*Yells of 'Sit down. No.'*) Mr Speaker I claim the right to be heard in this matter.

VOICE You've been heard again and again.

VOICE OF WILBERFORCE Mr Speaker.

VOICE OF SPEAKER Mr Wilberforce.

VOICE OF WILBERFORCE Mr Speaker, it is with a sense of extreme indignation, coupled, I may say, with a certain indigestion (*Roars of laughter come from the House*) that I rise to intervene in this debate. I do so because . . . (*His voice continues inaudibly*)

THORNTON (*Listening*) He's done it. He'll be good for an hour if necessary.

ADMIRAL By God, I like that young fellow. I disagree with all he says. I've fought him before and I will fight him again, but knavery and trickery I can't abide and I'm damned if I'll fight him today. He's a little shrimp of a fellow but by gad he's a Christian with fire in his belly and there aren't many of them around. Well, what are you waiting for? Where's Arden and Elliott and all your crowd?

THORNTON Goosetrees Club, as likely as not.

ADMIRAL (*Adopting a Quarter Deck manner*) Get 'em! Drag 'em from their food if you have to. I'll send to White's and Boodle's. Fox is on your side in this, isn't he?

THORNTON Yes, he is.

ADMIRAL Well, I know where to find *him* all right. How many of your fellows have mistresses?

THORNTON Too many.

ADMIRAL Comb them out. Tell them to get their breeches on – or come without 'em. (*Yelling at Thornton*) Jump to it you, jump to it! (*They rush out. Sound of the Division bell*)

VOICE OF SPEAKER The second reading of the Bill moved by the Honourable Member for the County of Yorkshire. The ayes – 93. The noes – 61. The ayes have it.

(*Sound of cheering*)

SCENE TWO

Lights come up on chair and desk representing Dundas' Office. Trotter is at desk pouring over a list. Dundas looks over his shoulder.

TROTTER I don't like it, Mr Dundas. Count as you will, we don't have enough to defeat this measure on the third reading.

DUNDAS Try again, Trotter. Try again.

TROTTER (*Counting up names*) Two Cavendishes, three Manners, Gage, Yorke, most of the Navy men – I've seen to that.

DUNDAS Don't forget the Scots.

TROTTER They say Wilberforce, Thornton and Co. have never been so active buttonholing men in the lobbies and the clubs. They even send their people into the taverns and brothels.

DUNDAS If they'd only just stick to their prayer meetings, we'd be all right. The trouble is they're learning the art of politics. And when Christians take to politicking, Trotter, it's as bad as Parliament taking to Christianity.

TROTTER If they can persuade Mr Pitt to intervene again on their side, nothing will stop them.

DUNDAS Don't worry, Pitt won't. He's for them but he won't speak for them this time. He's cooling rapidly.

TROTTER After all, Mr Pitt knows where the money comes from.

DUNDAS Aye, and talking of money, Trotter, I see India bonds are up again.

TROTTER So I believe, sir.

DUNDAS I'm investing all I can lay my hands on.

TROTTER Very wise, I should say, sir. If I can be of temporary . . .

DUNDAS Thank you, Trotter, thank you. But for God's sake watch yourself.

TROTTER Never fear, sir.

DUNDAS Mr Pitt was asking me the other day about some rumour that had come to his ears from the Governor of the Bank of England. It concerned the withdrawing of certain Admiralty funds from the Bank for private speculation.

TROTTER Really, sir. We wouldn't know anything about a thing like that, would we, sir?

DUNDAS That's what I informed Mr Pitt.

TROTTER An idle rumour, I should say. Some people are never happy unless they are meddling.

DUNDAS Aye. Meddling with matters of trade and finance can wreck everything. That's what these Abolitionists never understand. Good God, don't they realise there's a war on! Now go through the list again. I'm relying on you, Trotter, to get the votes of the Navy men.

TROTTER (*Going through the list*) Yorke, Manners, Gage . . . You see?

DUNDAS You're right, Trotter. We don't have enough votes. And the others have too many. You know, with things as bad as this we may have to take precautions.

TROTTER What precautions?

DUNDAS Well, Trotter, I was thinking. On the night of the debate for the Third Reading . . . (*As he starts talking confidentially the light fades*)

SCENE THREE

Lights come up again on the ante-room in Parliament. We hear loud snoring and then see the Admiral, somewhat the worse for wear, stretched out on a couch. Enter Trotter.

TROTTER (*Rousing him*) Admiral, wake up, sir! Wake up!

ADMIRAL Leave me alone, dammit.

TROTTER The ship's sinking, Admiral, with all hands aboard.

ADMIRAL What's that? (*Struggling up*) Man the pumps, blast you! (*Recovering himself*) What's the matter? What ship?

TROTTER I refer to the ship of state, sir. Mr Dundas sent me to find you with an urgent message. He noticed you were not in your place in the House. Mr Wilberforce is up making the closing speech in the debate on the third reading.

ADMIRAL Well, well. (*Guilty*) How time has slipped away.

TROTTER The division will follow immediately. Mr Dundas wants to be sure that you are . . .

ADMIRAL On deck and sober, eh?

TROTTER He didn't say that, sir, but it's clear it's going to be a very tight squeeze. Every vote counts and seeing that the slave trade provides an essential nursery for the training of our seamen, Mr Dundas is sure that you won't let the Navy down.

ADMIRAL (*Still a bit fuddled*) That's right. Mustn't let the Navy down. Now where the devil's my hat?

TROTTER Here, sir.

(Newton enters. He is accompanied by Barbara Spooner. She is excited and coy)

NEWTON Ah, Admiral. I'm delighted to see you.

ADMIRAL _Who the devil are you, sir?

NEWTON The Reverend John Newton at your service, another old seadog like yourself, sir. And Miss Barbara Spooner of Bath.

ADMIRAL Good God, have they come to letting women and preachers into Parliament?

NEWTON No! No! Gentlemen, I need not say more by way of explanation than that you are meeting the future Mrs Wilberforce.

MISS SPOONER You must pardon a woman's excitement. I can scarcely contain myself.

NEWTON Do you mind if I sit down, gentlemen?

TROTTER Please.

NEWTON Miss Spooner and I have been listening to the debate all day, but it looks like the end now. Mr Wilberforce wants us to meet him here immediately after the division.

MISS SPOONER He said he couldn't enjoy his triumph without us.

NEWTON I sincerely trust you are going to vote for this measure, Admiral.

ADMIRAL What's that? Certainly I am, if you give me my hat.

TROTTER Here, sir. (*Urgently*) But you were going to vote to the contrary, were you not, sir?

ADMIRAL (*Confused*) Was I? Of course I was. Can't give up the freedom of the seas.

NEWTON Freedom for whom, Admiral? The Negroes?

MISS SPOONER Surely no true British seaman would endure to be on the losing side, Admiral?

(*Sound of bell. Cry of 'Division! Division!' is heard outside*)

NEWTON It's a Division.

TROTTER (*Handing the Admiral his hat*) Allow me to escort you.

NEWTON Just a minute before you go. I know that you oppose this measure, Admiral. Like other good patriotic men, you love the old ways and the old days. But changes must come. If we don't have an English revolution of freedom, we will have a French revolution of bloodshed. Make your choice.

(Bell and shout of 'Division!')

TROTTER *(At door)* You'll have to come quickly, sir.

MISS SPOONER I know Mr Wilberforce is counting on you, Admiral.

ADMIRAL *(Unable to make up his mind)* Damn you, damn you, damn you! You think I can't make up my own mind. To hell with the lot of you. I shall . . . *(Making great effort to decide)* I shall . . . *(Giving up)* I shall abstain. *(Sinks exhausted on to the couch)*

NEWTON Well. We must be thankful for small mercies. Mr Trotter, you are an expert, I believe, in calculation. Some of us have spent much time and thought in calculation on this debate and we appear to be safe by at least ten votes.

TROTTER Is that so, Mr Newton?

NEWTON We can count on definite pledges to that effect.

MISS SPOONER Oh yes, indeed. Mr Wilberforce has promised me that we will win.

ADMIRAL I hate the measure, but dammit, I can't help loving the man.

TROTTER They're filing back into the House now.

NEWTON Seven years' hard labour and now the final release.

MISS SPOONER There's still time for you, Admiral.

(The Admiral hesitates but still does not move)

ADMIRAL *(Stubbornly)* I tell you, I'm going to abstain.

TROTTER There won't be much in it, I'm sure of that.

MISS SPOONER Not much, but just enough.

NEWTON Pray God it's just enough.

(The Speaker's voice is heard in the far distance)

SPEAKER'S VOICE Vote for the third reading of the Abolition Bill. The ayes – seventy votes.

NEWTON *(Alarmed)* Seventy! Is that all?

SPEAKER'S VOICE The noes – seventy-four votes. The noes have it.

(Cheers off)

TROTTER So the Noes have it!

MISS SPOONER But it's not true! It can't be true.

ADMIRAL I'm truly sorry for young Wilberforce.

NEWTON There must be a mistake. We canvassed and counted and counted again. Only seventy in favour – it's impossible.

TROTTER *(Smirking)* All things are possible, Mr Newton, to him who takes precautions.

(He goes. There is a moment's silence. Then Wilberforce enters, slowly and heavily)

WILBERFORCE Lost by four votes in a dull House.

MISS SPOONER But you promised!

(Wilberforce says nothing)

NEWTON What happened? Surely we had foreseen everything.

WILBERFORCE *(Bitterly)* Oh, yes, everything. Everything except what actually occurred. *(He sways with exhaustion)*

NEWTON Get him something. He's all but dead on his feet.

(Thornton enters)

(Newton helps Wilberforce to a chair)

ADMIRAL Here, take this.

NEWTON But I still don't understand.

THORNTON It's very simple. This will explain. It's come by

urgent messenger from Drury Lane. Too late, unfortunately.

NEWTON What does it say?

THORNTON Tonight was the first performance of a new opera, *The Two Hunchbacks*. Vignoni was singing. It was evidently a large and splendid audience. Among that large and splendid audience were at least a dozen Members who had personally pledged themselves to us only a few hours ago.

MISS SPOONER Traitors.

WILBERFORCE God help me, there's something to be said for the whip and the lash.

THORNTON They intended to come back, of course, but the opera was long, the excitement was great, the after-curtain celebrations were intoxicating. So the division came and our friends did not. And so for yet another year tens of thousands more wretches go into life-long bondage.

WILBERFORCE (*Dully*) What makes you think it is just another year?

THORNTON We'll win next time, never a doubt.

WILBERFORCE Let's be real, Henry. Not one year, ten. In fact, if we couldn't win today I doubt if we'll ever win at all.
(*Enter Dundas full of high spirits*)

DUNDAS My dear Willie, I had to look in to offer you my congratulations. That was without doubt your finest oratorical effort yet. We missed you in the division, Admiral. Ah, Miss Spooner. Wasn't he superb, Madame? Don't you agree? You should be proud.

MISS SPOONER I've never been so embarrassed and ashamed.

DUNDAS Not of Mr Wilberforce, Madam!

NEWTON And I, too, am ashamed of the men who can trifle year after year with the life and liberty of hundreds and thousands of men and women.

DUNDAS Mercy on us, you good righteous abolitionists always behave as though you were the only people with feelings. Believe me, I am in favour of abolition. I have said so again and again. I am also in favour of winning this war. The triumph of Bonaparte won't do your precious Africans any good, I can assure you. But I didn't come here to talk about that. Willie, Mr Pitt wants to see you. He's looking in here on his way out of the House. He asked me to tell you to wait for him.

WILBERFORCE Waiting for Mr Pitt has become almost a habit.

DUNDAS I want a word with you first, Willie, in private.

THORNTON Surely not now, Dundas.

DUNDAS Yes, now. Do as I say. It's urgent –

WILBERFORCE (*To the rest*) You'd better leave us. I'll be out later.

THORNTON Are you sure you'll be all right?

WILBERFORCE I'm all right. I want to talk to Dundas.

NEWTON I don't like it.

MISS SPOONER But, Mr Wilberforce . . .

WILBERFORCE (*Shouting*) Do as I say, all of you.

(*They look at one another and then reluctantly start to go*)

NEWTON Better go along my dear.

(*Newton, Thornton and Miss Spooner go*)

ADMIRAL (*To Wilberforce as he goes*) I feel pretty ashamed of myself. Not all the traitors were in Drury Lane.

(*Exit Admiral*)

DUNDAS Don't take it too hardly, Willie. You put up a magnificent fight. People will never forget it.

WILBERFORCE What do you want to say to me, Dundas?

DUNDAS It's about Mr Pitt. He wants to ask for your help –

WILBERFORCE That he has always. You know that.

DUNDAS Think what the man carries – the Treasury empty, the Navy seething with unrest and mutiny, the Indies, Spain, Italy, Austria, Ireland.

WILBERFORCE Do you think I am insensitive to any of these things?

DUNDAS Above all he needs unity, in the Government and in the country. He needs the merchants of Liverpool and Bristol to win the war. He needs men who will lift his burdens and not add to them.

WILBERFORCE Come to your main point.

DUNDAS Drop the slavery business, Willie. You've had a good run for your money. Seven times in Parliament. But you've lost. It was a crusade once. Now it's just a bore. People have other things to think about, more urgent, nearer home. Look at tonight's vote. Your own pledged supporters prefer Vignoni to Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE More shame to them.

DUNDAS They're human, Willie, like the rest of us. Offer them seats in Drury Lane right under the Royal Box and a few niggers in Africa seem a long way away.

WILBERFORCE (*The truth dawning*) Dundas, who offered them seats in Drury Lane?

DUNDAS (*Laughing*) A friend, no doubt –

WILBERFORCE (*Furious*) Did you do it?

DUNDAS Let's say a Christian. Wouldn't it be a Christian thing to do, Willie?

WILBERFORCE My God, Dundas, if you did that may you rot in hell!

DUNDAS Well, well, so the saint has a temper after all. You're learning, my friend. You're learning the art of politics. Look, Willie, why don't you come in with us. Postpone abolition and concentrate on winning this war. We'll do what we can to regulate the trade and make it

more humane. Why, I have a new proposal right now that can solve the whole issue eventually.

WILBERFORCE What's that?

DUNDAS A proposal to put a bonus on the traffic in female slaves as opposed to male. I will personally guarantee its passage through Parliament.

WILBERFORCE I don't understand.

DUNDAS Don't you see, with more females, existing slaves will multiply more rapidly by natural processes, thereby making the importation of fresh slaves less and less necessary.

WILBERFORCE You call that a natural process?

DUNDAS Very natural. Breed 'em instead of buy 'em, eh!

WILBERFORCE You mean ravish the women, then brand the babies.

DUNDAS I didn't say that.

WILBERFORCE What a great humanitarian you are, Dundas!

DUNDAS Well, you want to end the trade, don't you?

WILBERFORCE I want to end the exploitation of man by man.

DUNDAS You really think you can end cruelty and greed – the strong crushing the weak, the weak stifling the strong – men lusting after women and women enticing men. You think you can get rid of human nature – (*Laughs*) you won't do that by Act of Parliament or any other act – not in a hundred years.

WILBERFORCE And so I'm to come in with you and sprinkle a little prayer and rose water, some nice, harmless, sweet-smelling religion to make you feel better and happier, while we piously murder the world. That's your idea of Christianity. It's not mine.

DUNDAS I'll tell you your idea. It's being saved. It's all just your own miserable pride. You wouldn't care really if all

the slaves in the world were damned, provided you saved your own soul.

WILBERFORCE For God's sake . . . stop.

DUNDAS I must leave you. But think of Mr Pitt, man. D'you want to kill him? Remember once upon a time, he was your friend.

(Dundas goes – Wilberforce is in great distress. Enter Miss Spooner)

MISS SPOONER Wilby . . . I had to come to you, Wilby. I want to be with you. I want to comfort you. *(Putting arms around Wilberforce)*

WILBERFORCE I should be the one comforting you. I'm more used to these – these betrayals than you are.

MISS SPOONER I can't bear to see you humiliated. Wilby, some of them out there were laughing at you. One called you 'the Niggers' dying friend', and another said, 'Dying! He's dead!'

WILBERFORCE Maybe they're right. If they are, Barbara, I can't ask you to marry a dying man.

MISS SPOONER Must you go on with this? Look what it's doing to you.

WILBERFORCE It's no good. I can't make them see. I can't even make you understand.

MISS SPOONER Oh, but I do.

WILBERFORCE No! Otherwise you would be proud of the laughter, the insults. But I don't blame you. It's not fair. You must not have to face perpetual interruption, disappointment, danger.

MISS SPOONER I don't mind. I only want you.

WILBERFORCE *(Passionate)* You have me, my darling, always – always. But you're right. Dundas is right. There must be a more practical way. I shall talk to Mr Pitt now. *(He takes the notes of his speech and tears them up)* There! Do you

understand? Dundas says it's the best speech I ever made on Abolition. Well, perhaps it's the last.

MISS SPOONER Oh, Wilby! (*They kiss*)

(*Sinclair looks into the room, then enters. He carries a large parcel in his hand*)

SINCLAIR Mr Wilberforce, sir.

WILBERFORCE (*Angrily*) Who are you?

SINCLAIR I'm sorry, sir. I should never have come in here, sir, except for Captain's orders.

WILBERFORCE What are you talking about? Who sent you?

SINCLAIR Captain Newton, sir.

WILBERFORCE Oh! Mr Sinclair. What do you want?

SINCLAIR I've got something for you, sir. Something I've been making. The Captain thought you ought to see it tonight.

WILBERFORCE Well hurry, man. Mr Pitt's coming to see me any minute.

SINCLAIR (*Unwrapping parcel*) Bit of a 'obby of mine, you might say. Something to occupy my mind on the long winter evenings and during the long sermons, sir, to tell you the truth. (*He opens the parcel and shows a large model of a wooden sailing ship*) There you are.

WILBERFORCE (*Fascinated in spite of himself*) Well!

SINCLAIR See what it is, model of a slaver. For all the world like the 'Venus' which me and the Captain sailed more than 30 years ago. There must be a lot like them still sailing under the British flag.

WILBERFORCE (*Grudgingly*) It's well made, but I know all that.

SINCLAIR The slaves all laid out in batches of fifty, chained together, pretty as you please. You see. It's a well-packed cargo – not an inch o' space wasted. They're nicely graded according to size, too.

WILBERFORCE Yes, yes – I know, I know.

SINCLAIR Them's the males – females there. Them shelves there are for the women with little 'uns. You never heard such a hollerin' – mothers worse than the babies –

WILBERFORCE I know, I tell you! (*In spite of himself*) What's that section in the stern?

SINCLAIR Them with the plague on 'em get thrown there – to try and keep 'em separate. But you can't stop the plague from spreading – not in those conditions.

WILBERFORCE (*Wrought up*) Of course, of course! Would you leave us now. Good night.

SINCLAIR (*Hurt*) Aye, aye, sir.

WILBERFORCE Goodnight.

MISS SPOONER Wait! Let me see it! You mean that's for human beings – for women and children?

SINCLAIR That's it, ma'am. Five hundred or so in a good cargo.

MISS SPOONER But this is terrible. Why didn't you tell me, Wilby?

WILBERFORCE My dear. I've told you little else.

MISS SPOONER Oh yes, you've talked – but you've never *told* me. I never dreamed . . .

WILBERFORCE But I've given you all the measurements.

MISS SPOONER Oh that! How could I grasp measurements?

WILBERFORCE You mean it makes a difference – to see?

MISS SPOONER Difference! Wilby, we can't leave these poor wretches to lie and die in a place like that.

WILBERFORCE I've been saying it for seven years.

MISS SPOONER Saying it, yes. But if people don't see, they don't want to know. Do you vouch for the accuracy of all this, Mr Sinclair?

SINCLAIR Bless your 'eart, ma'am. I know every splinter of

them decks and shelves like they were me own home. Many a night with me lantern I picked me way among the tiddlers to stop 'em groaning, or look after the dead 'uns.

MISS SPOONER To see it in model before your eyes . . .

WILBERFORCE That's it! You never understood, you never cared until you saw. That's what they must all do – see it before their eyes.

SINCLAIR Mind you, that's how it is at the beginning of a trip. You might lose anything to a third on the way if you are unlucky. One thing about the model, you can see it, but you can't smell it, thank God.

WILBERFORCE (*More and more excited*) There are at least a hundred British holds somewhere in the Middle Passage this very night just like that.

MISS SPOONER (*Crying*) It's so terrible, Wilby. I can't even bear to think . . .

WILBERFORCE I'm doing the thinking. You've given me the key. What we've got to do is to *show* them.

MISS SPOONER Please be careful, I didn't mean to start you off again.

(*Enter Trotter*)

TROTTER Mr Pitt asked me to tell you he will be with you in a minute, sir.

WILBERFORCE Tell him I'm ready. (*Trotter goes*) (*Wilberforce's excitement rises during the rest of the scene*)

WILBERFORCE Mr Sinclair, may I borrow this most valuable piece of work?

SINCLAIR It's yours, sir. It's for you I did it. It's little enough a man can do to make amends for the past. But as I always say . . .

WILBERFORCE (*Trying to hurry him off*) Yes, yes, indeed, Mr Sinclair. Now, I'll take great care of it, and put it to good use right away. Oh, and Mr Sinclair, will you be so good

as to wait for a little? I may need you to explain your model.

SINCLAIR A pleasure, sir. After all, as I always say, sir . . . (*He sits down*)

WILBERFORCE Outside.

SINCLAIR Aye, aye, sir.

WILBERFORCE And you, Barbara, go with him.

(*Exit Sinclair*)

MISS SPOONER I love you, Wilby.

(*She goes. Wilberforce doesn't even notice her.*)

WILBERFORCE And I with God's strength and help will take my stand right here.

(*He takes his stand in the middle of the room firmly, with the model of the ship in his hands*)

Curtain

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

Pitt's room in Walmer Castle. Pitt is looking out through a telescope. He is lame with gout.

DUNDAS And how is the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte looking this morning? In rude health, I hope?

PITT (*Restless*) He's looking damnably close, Dundas. Only a ditch between us.

DUNDAS But what a ditch! Twenty-five miles of precious wind and wave. It's saved us before. It'll save us again.

PITT From the top of the Downs on a clear day you can see the smoke of his camps. He's got hundreds of barges there and thousands of troops. It's an Armada.

DUNDAS The Armada came to an unfortunate end, I'm told. You must watch that gout.

PITT (*Wearily*) It's more than gout, Dundas. Has Wilberforce come yet?

DUNDAS Yes – a while ago.

PITT You should have told me.

DUNDAS I suggested to him that he and his blacks could wait just another half hour, while some of us get on with this war.

PITT What did he say?

DUNDAS He smiled and said, 'My blacks have been waiting 200 years already.'

PITT I only wish my Cabinet would fight as persistently as that man does. Tell me, which way is the wind?

DUNDAS South-west again.

PITT Do you realise the whole future and freedom of this land could depend on a puff of wind? Villeneuve and the

French fleet have only to control the Channel for twenty-four hours and get the right wind, and we'd have Bonaparte ravaging our countryside.

DUNDAS Never fear! Our Navy'll take care of that. All the same, I'm off on a tour of inspection of our shore defences, just in case.

PITT Report back to me what you find – Oh, and send me Wilberforce.

DUNDAS Mr Pitt, sir, why don't you send Wilberforce on a tour of inspection of our slave ships? He might never come back.

(*Knock*)

PITT Enter.

(*Enter a Servant*)

SERVANT Excuse me, sir. It's an urgent despatch from London. The courier said you would want it immediately without fail.

PITT (*Taking bulky despatch and tearing it open*) All right. You may go –

SERVANT Yes, sir (*Exit*)

PITT (*Gravely*) Dundas, it's arrived – sooner than I thought. 'Report of the Commissioners of Naval Enquiry set up to investigate charges of misconduct levelled against the Right Honourable Henry Dundas, now the Viscount Melville, that, as Treasurer of His Majesty's Navy, he was privy to and connived at the embezzlement of official funds . . .'

DUNDAS The wee book of all ma crimes, eh! Some people have terrible long noses.

PITT Some people have long and sticky fingers, Dundas.

DUNDAS Don't tell me you're going to take all that blather seriously.

PITT If one of my associates is accused of embezzlement, of misappropriating Government money, I take it deadly seriously. Now you'd better go – I need time to study this.

DUNDAS It's true the wee Trotter may have acted a shade unwisely . . .

PITT Unwisely! Twenty-five thousand pounds removed illegally from the Bank of England! And you lied to me. The Governor of the Bank and I taxed you with this to your face, and you denied it.

DUNDAS Now look here, Billy Pitt, let's discuss this over a glass of wine.

PITT Not now! I am more worried by the effect of this report than I am by the whole of Bonaparte's fleet. Now you may go!

DUNDAS (*Defiantly*) Certainly. I will go and attend to the prosecution of this war.

(*He goes – Pitt devours the Report, not even waiting to cut the pages. Enter Wilberforce*)

WILBERFORCE (*Picking up a paper-knife*) Allow me! (*Pitt hides report behind his back*) Please don't worry. With my sight I can't even read the title.

PITT I'm sorry. Forgive me. Welcome. (*Returns to Report. To himself*) The fool! The damned unmitigated jackass!

WILBERFORCE Fox?

PITT No! You can stomach your enemies. The people who make you want to vomit are your friends. Dundas.

WILBERFORCE So this is the report of the Commission you set up.

PITT It looks as if they've done their work too damned well.

WILBERFORCE I don't believe he embezzled funds. Impossible.

PITT Official funds were embezzled – no doubt about that. Dundas' deputy, Trotter, has drawn at least twenty-five thousand for private speculation.

WILBERFORCE But don't tell me that Dundas knew.

PITT It's his business to know. Of course he knew. He even borrowed from Trotter to invest in India Bonds.

WILBERFORCE What does the report say?

PITT It looks like 247 pages of 'yes - buts', 'supposing - ifs', 'far be it from us-es'. You know reports! But it doesn't look good. 'How the mighty are fallen!'

WILBERFORCE 'And the weapons of war perished!'

PITT That's the point. Dundas is in charge of the weapons of war. I can't afford to lose him. He's the only man I have with any intestines. You know that.

WILBERFORCE What does he say about all this?

PITT Flatly denies his guilt - tries to make light of the whole thing. He'll have his work cut out with this report, though. My God! Fox and Co. will use it to tear us in pieces. Not that their hands are clean, mark you. They might even pull the Government down. That's why we must somehow cover this over.

WILBERFORCE Cover it over!

PITT You know what I mean - ask for further evidence, more enquiry. We might have another committee.

WILBERFORCE In other words, prevarication.

PITT Postponement, William - the politician's best friend.

WILBERFORCE Or enemy. I have had some experience of parliamentary postponement, you know. Just about eighteen years. That's why I am here to see you again.

PITT I know you have every reason to hate the man. But will you help me?

WILBERFORCE How?

PITT This thing will have to come to debate. Our enemies won't allow it to be forgotten. Will you help me to - er - soften the blow?

WILBERFORCE I will study the Report.

PITT Study by all means, but just remember that Napoleon has already struck medals celebrating his conquest of England.

WILBERFORCE And you remember that the strength of Britain is her spirit and her honour. Yet the country is riddled and rotten with this kind of corruption.

PITT Then why condemn one man?

WILBERFORCE Because someone, sometime has to begin – to clean house.

PITT At the expense of the life and safety of the land?

WILBERFORCE Because of the life and safety of the land.

PITT I cannot say this to many men – but sometimes the burden is heavier than I can bear. Don't forget that, William, my friend.

(They have never been so close and yet never so separated)

WILBERFORCE I wish to God I could help you more.

PITT The crocuses must be springing up in Clapham now. Soon we shall hear the nightingale again.

SCENE TWO

The Crypt of St Mary Woolnoth Church. Sinclair sits at the table to count the collection, as Newton comes in from taking Service.

NEWTON Sinclair.

SINCLAIR Yes, sir?

NEWTON You can leave the Collection until we have said the dismissal prayer. Stand up. (*Shouting*) Jump to it! (*He bows his head*) You will be expected to participate. Let us pray. God bless our sovereign Lord, King George.

SINCLAIR Amen.

NEWTON God bless our gracious Majesty the Queen.

SINCLAIR Amen.

NEWTON God bless His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

SINCLAIR Amen. But not that female vampire, Mrs Fitzherbert.

NEWTON (*Severely*) Let us pray! God protect our shores from the evil designs and assaults of the enemy.

SINCLAIR Amen. And may that blackguard Bonaparte roast in hell.

NEWTON I think the Almighty is already aware of the state of the Emperor Napoleon's soul. God grant strength and wisdom to the First Minister of our land, William Pitt.

SINCLAIR (*Fervently*) Amen.

NEWTON God protect and preserve our fighting ships, our naval officers and seamen.

SINCLAIR Amen.

NEWTON And the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Melville.

SINCLAIR Lord Melville! He's just plain Dundas to me. What's he ever done to earn the title of Lord?

NEWTON A great deal. Be fair to the man, will you. Besides, he's in trouble. You should always pray for a man in trouble, Sinclair.

SINCLAIR Well all I can say is, God help us all.

NEWTON That's better. Amen, Sinclair, amen.

(There's a knock at the door from the church. Sinclair is about to go but Newton checks him)

NEWTON The Lord be with you.

SINCLAIR And with thy spirit.

NEWTON Let us depart in peace.

SINCLAIR In the name of the Lord, amen. *(Hurriedly on his way to the door. The knock is repeated)*

NEWTON Now see who it is, will you. I thought all the congregation had left. It's nearly six o'clock.

SINCLAIR *(At the door)* Please come in, Madam. I'm sure Mr Newton will want to see you. It's Mrs Wilberforce, Captain, Mrs William Wilberforce.

(Mrs Wilberforce enters. In her thirties, stately and beautifully dressed. Under a formal and polite manner she is seething with feelings)

NEWTON Why, this is a surprise. Come aboard. I mean, come in. I never saw you at the service.

MRS WILBERFORCE With such a crowd of worshippers, how would you? It's remarkable to find so many on a week day.

NEWTON All right, Sinclair, you can leave the Collection until later.

SINCLAIR I'll go on deck and tidy up a bit.

NEWTON And see that we're not disturbed.

SINCLAIR It's always good to see the likes of you, Madam, and Mr Wilberforce.

MRS WILBERFORCE Thank you.

(Sinclair goes)

NEWTON Please sit down.

MRS WILBERFORCE I know it's indelicate to come to the Crypt alone.

NEWTON You should see some of the flotsam and jetsam washed up in this Crypt.

MRS WILBERFORCE It's not for myself that I'm here, but for my husband. Sometimes I think you are the only person he will listen to.

NEWTON Surely he listens to you.

MRS WILBERFORCE Oh no he doesn't. Not at all. He nods and smiles and pats my cheek and cracks a joke – then he goes on doing exactly what he intended doing anyway.

NEWTON (*To himself*) Thank God for that!

MRS WILBERFORCE You don't have to see him as I do, coming back from those awful debates, too tired to stand, his eyes too weak even to read the notes of his own speeches.

NEWTON They have been some of the great speeches of Parliament.

MRS WILBERFORCE What's the good of speaking when you never win your point?

NEWTON You and Mr Wilberforce seem to be in the same fix.

MRS WILBERFORCE I know he's the conscience of England, but can't the conscience of England ever get to bed at nights?

NEWTON The conscience of England spends most of its time in bed. That's the trouble. Very occasionally it wakes up. I pray to the living God that this be one of those times, or we could lose our freedom.

MRS WILBERFORCE Bonaparte?

NEWTON Invasion from without, corruption from within. Many a great empire has fallen from that combination. But

that's not any reason why William Wilberforce should kill himself. Mr Pitt seems to be working himself to death. We can't afford to lose the two best men in Britain. I'll talk to your husband. That is, if he'll let me.

MRS WILBERFORCE After all, it was with you he began his life's work.

NEWTON Well, if I can stop him ending it, I'll try.

MRS WILBERFORCE (*Rising*) Thank you. And please don't tell him I've been here. That will only make it harder. If he'd just come home early occasionally and miss the late debates in Parliament. Tonight, for instance. I know it's terribly on his mind.

(*Wilberforce has entered from the outside door*)

WILBERFORCE My dear Mrs Wilberforce. What a surprise!

MRS WILBERFORCE Mr Wilberforce!

WILBERFORCE And what is so terribly on whose mind, my dear? (*To Newton*) Pardon me, my friend. I didn't know you were ministering to a soul in distress.

NEWTON That's my calling. You should have knocked.

MRS WILBERFORCE (*Brightly*) I'm so glad you came to fetch me, Wilby. I was just having a little chat with the Rector after the service. Now we can go home together.

WILBERFORCE Nothing I'd like more, my dear. Except that you have had your turn in the confessional – confessed your own sins, I hope – now I need mine. I've given them all the slip in Parliament. I just had to come. This is the one place in the whole world where I can be honest, except of course with you, my dear.

MRS WILBERFORCE (*Bursting out*) You're not honest with me, Mr Wilberforce. You never have been.

WILBERFORCE (*Restraining her*) Barbara, please.

MRS WILBERFORCE No! I have to say it. You said we would share the triumph together.

WILBERFORCE And the toil, Barbara, and the toil.

MRS WILBERFORCE Well we've had the toil all right – midnight meetings, flickering candles, acres of paper and ink. Defeated fourteen times and no end in sight. Your poor eyes! Can you even read your own hand any more? (*She thrusts a paper Wilberforce is carrying right under his nose*) Can you?

WILBERFORCE Not without my spectacles, my dear. I wager it's scarcely worth reading anyway. Notes for the speech I might have to make tonight. They are certainly not worth reading. They don't even make sense.

NEWTON What's the matter? You usually make sense.

WILBERFORCE It's the debate censoring Lord Melville.

NEWTON Dundas! I didn't know it was coming so soon.

WILBERFORCE Pitt has hurried it on to get it out of the way before too many rumours fly. I wish to God it wasn't coming at all. I tell you man, I still don't know which side I am on.

MRS WILBERFORCE Come home. Let them hammer it out for themselves.

NEWTON It might be wise, you know. Show them you won't even soil your hands with the rotten business.

WILBERFORCE A quiet drive home to Clapham with my wife . . . an evening with the children.

MRS WILBERFORCE You so seldom think of the children.

WILBERFORCE I sometimes have nightmares about the children!

MRS WILBERFORCE That they'll come to some harm?

WILBERFORCE No! That they'll grow up to be bishops and write dull, sanctimonious books about their old father.

MRS WILBERFORCE You might at least come home and see them sometimes.

WILBERFORCE A friendly supper – I hope – reading aloud, some music – Oh God, it's a long time since we have had music – our family prayers, then untroubled sleep, and up in the morning to find that it's all safely settled without me. Do you suppose that doesn't tempt me?

MRS WILBERFORCE Let it. Does one little vote make all that difference?

WILBERFORCE It could. And I hate to say it because it sounds like boasting, but they tell me that in this matter of Dundas my little vote could influence forty more. So what am I to do?

MRS WILBERFORCE Dundas is evil. But let him rot!

NEWTON Dundas is First Lord of the Admiralty at a time of supreme national emergency.

WILBERFORCE Exactly. You couldn't have put the dilemma more perfectly. That's what I've got to decide. Do I betray my own principles, all my sense of right and wrong, or do I imperil England? That's why I have come to you.

NEWTON Can an old rector tell a Member of Parliament what to do?

WILBERFORCE Good, pious friends of mine talk very easily and so glibly about the will of God. Is it always as easy as that to find the will of God?

NEWTON Jesus wrestled in a garden until the sweat poured down like drops of blood.

WILBERFORCE Help me wrestle, old friend. Wrestle against me if need be.

MRS WILBERFORCE (*Restraining him*) Please Wilby. It's bad for you. (*Wheedling*) Do the black clouds always have to come across the horizon and spoil our happiness?

WILBERFORCE When the black clouds are black people, yes – every moment, every hour, every day. Yes – so long as one slaver sails the Middle Passage, yes.

MRS WILBERFORCE Oh Wilby, I wish I could help you more.

WILBERFORCE You do, my dear. You turn me to Almighty God a dozen times a day.

NEWTON Tell me, what do you think is going to happen about Dundas?

WILBERFORCE (*Fumbling with papers*) Here are the words of the motion tonight. I think this is the order paper. (*Neither he nor Newton can see to read*) Will you read it for us, my dear?

MRS WILBERFORCE (*Taking the paper*) 'Resolved that the Right Honourable Lord Viscount Melville having been privy to and connived at the withdrawing from the Bank of England of sums issued to Lord Melville, the Treasurer of the Navy, has been guilty of a gross violation of the law and a high breach of duty.'

NEWTON Well, if that passes the House of Commons it will be the end of him.

WILBERFORCE The trouble is it might be the end of Pitt too.

NEWTON It could be the end of England.

WILBERFORCE If only this could come at a more convenient moment.

NEWTON Is there ever a convenient moment for dealing with evil?

(*Sinclair rushes in in great excitement*)

SINCLAIR Captain, Captain.

NEWTON Sinclair! I told you we were not to be disturbed.

SINCLAIR But you don't know who is here. It's Mr Pitt.

NEWTON Mr Pitt – impossible!

SINCLAIR And Lord Melville. They're getting out of the carriage now. The coachman came into the church to ask if Mr Wilberforce was here.

WILBERFORCE They've tracked me down, I'm afraid. They must be pretty desperate.

SINCLAIR But Mr Newton, sir, they're here –

NEWTON Look after them, Sinclair. Bring them in. We will receive them with such dignity as we can muster.

(Sinclair goes)

NEWTON I expect you would like us to leave you alone with them?

WILBERFORCE No, stay. This is your church and you have the right to be here. Besides, I need you. You stay too, my dear.

(Sinclair enters followed by Pitt and Dundas)

SINCLAIR The Prime Minister, Captain, and Lord Melville.

NEWTON Gentlemen. This visit is unexpected but very welcome. Do please be seated.

PITT *(Abrupt)* Thank you, it isn't necessary. I'm sorry to intrude but I have urgent business with Mr Wilberforce and I discovered he was with you. *(To Wilberforce)* I want you to come back with us immediately.

WILBERFORCE If you have something to say to me you can say it here.

DUNDAS Don't be a fool, man. This is an affair of state.

WILBERFORCE This is an affair of conscience and I prefer to deal with it here.

DUNDAS In church?

WILBERFORCE Yes, in church, Dundas.

PITT It's an extremely private matter and immediate.

NEWTON Anything said here will be private. I can promise you that. Sinclair, get back on watch.

(Sinclair goes)

PITT *(Impatient)* This is ridiculous, Wilberforce, but if you really insist . . .

WILBERFORCE I insist.

NEWTON Well, gentlemen, perhaps we had better sit down

after all. I'm afraid I can't offer you anything except Communion wine.

PITT Thank you, we don't need anything. Wilberforce, we have to know where you stand on tonight's motion concerning Melville. By every canvass the outcome is extremely close and every indication shows it could all depend personally on you. The news from abroad is graver than ever. By rights we should not be debating personal affairs at all.

WILBERFORCE Then why do you do it?

PITT Because the Opposition insists.

NEWTON The conscience of the nation insists.

DUNDAS For God's sake stop all this cackle about conscience. The fact is you've got me where you want me, eh Willie? Let's not beat about the bush. The old fox who has killed so many of your precious chicks is at bay at last. He's trapped in his lair. What are you going to do? Let the hounds loose on him?

PITT I've told Melville here that I think he's been a fool – an irresponsible fool. I shall say so in the House if I have to. But the fact is I can't afford to lose him.

WILBERFORCE So what will you do?

PITT I shall propose a further inquiry. I have to think of the country.

DUNDAS That's right. It's the country.

WILBERFORCE Do you imagine that I'm not thinking of the country?

DUNDAS Then we agree. That's ma man. I knew as much. So you'll pocket your thirst for revenge, and all your righteous wrath, eh, and give us all another run for our money?

WILBERFORCE (*Scornfully*) Did you say *our* money, Dundas?

PITT You'd better stay quiet and let me deal with this.

(*To Wilberforce*) Which way are you going tonight? You have to let me know.

WILBERFORCE I'll tell you what I think. I think we ought to admit frankly and honestly the wrong that is in this report, take responsibility for it – all of us – tell Parliament and the people that we will put right anything for which we are to blame, that this will be the beginning of a true cleaning of house in the Government and throughout the nation. We are fighting against lies abroad, why not fight for honesty at home?

DUNDAS You're talking political suicide.

WILBERFORCE I'm talking national rebirth, something you little understand, Dundas.

PITT I'm eager to fight corruption, you know that, but at the right time, man.

DUNDAS Be real, for God's sake. You'll never get rid of corruption. The nation reeks with it. You can't get a fair verdict in the courts or a commission in the Army without greasing somebody's palm or paying court to somebody's mistress. Why, this so-called Melville Report is a flea bite.

PITT A considerable flea and a considerable bite.

WILBERFORCE Don't you see the chance we have together? The people are sick and weary of defeat abroad and dishonour at home. Be frank with them. Everyone knows you personally are incorruptible. You'll probably die a pauper.

PITT I'll die over my head in debt. But you want me to throw Dundas to the wolves?

DUNDAS Of course. That's all he wants.

WILBERFORCE No, we need Dundas. But Dundas must lead the way. It takes a courageous man to do it. And he's never lacked courage.

DUNDAS Dundas leading a reform of manners! (*Amused*) It has its possibilities.

WILBERFORCE I can't think of anybody in the world more suitable. You might throw away an office, it's true. But you might save a nation. What do you say, Mr Prime Minister?

(There is a pause)

PITT The government of the saints. It's a fascinating conception.

WILBERFORCE Not saints, Pitt! Just sinners who are honest enough to admit where they are wrong.

PITT It would be worth trying one day.

WILBERFORCE One day! One day! That has been your weakness all along! The time to try it is now. You could transfigure the life of England.

PITT I wonder. *(Pause)* I really wonder. *(Making up his mind)* Unfortunately at present it is neither politic or possible. So we come back to our original question – which way are you going tonight?

WILBERFORCE If that's your final word, Pitt, I can only say that I don't know. I haven't decided.

PITT You haven't much time, man. The debate starts in an hour.

WILBERFORCE I still need that hour.

DUNDAS It's no use. You'll never budge him. He's got us on the rack and he knows it.

MRS WILBERFORCE My husband is the one on the rack. You have tormented and tortured him for years.

WILBERFORCE Quiet, my dear. Have you gentlemen anything further you want to say to me?

PITT *(After a pause)* Yes, one thing. And it's the last. Wilberforce, we all know the cause dearest to your heart, the long bitter fight against the slave trade. Perhaps the time has come to settle this matter forever, to put the whole weight of the Government behind Abolition immediately.

WILBERFORCE (*Amazed*) Is that a serious proposition?

PITT Deadly serious. You can have my word on it. Provided – that my Government can remain intact. It would need Dundas to push the measure through this session – you understand?

WILBERFORCE Dundas for Abolition! (*To Dundas*) Do you realise what he is saying?

DUNDAS I can smell a bargain. So can you. You lay off me tonight. Abstain at least if you can't come out on our side and in return we will free your precious niggers by next year. Could you put it plainer than that?

PITT Dundas, you have a genius for making the rational sound revolting.

WILBERFORCE But is that what you mean? In return for my silence you guarantee me my Bill.

PITT If you want to put it that way, that's what I mean.

MRS WILBERFORCE Wilby, you've won. You've beaten them at last.

NEWTON Be quiet, woman.

(*Wilberforce rises from his chair*)

WILBERFORCE Gentlemen. Thank you for coming. Thank you for the clarity of your proposition. I will give you my answer within the hour.

DUNDAS Give it now, you old humbug. Your struggle of a lifetime ended within the year. The slave ships scuttled forever, and Wilberforce, the great Emancipator, hailed and lauded throughout the world – in return for one night's silence. You're never going to refuse that. But you have to exact your price – one more hour of torture in return for all the hurts and wounds I have inflicted on you. Well, I suppose I don't blame you. I might have done the same.

PITT (*Rising*) Wilberforce, this is no mere bargain as far as I'm concerned. This is a promise fulfilled. We have

brought astonishing, almost irreparable mischief on the continent of Africa. How can we possibly be forgiven unless sometime, somehow we wipe away our guilt and our shame. So if in this way we could bring matters to a happy conclusion, remember, it will be almost as great a satisfaction for me as it will be for you. Good night, Mr Newton. I have long looked for the privilege of attending your church.

NEWTON Thank you, sir. I will reserve my sermon for the next occasion. (*Calls at door*) Sinclair.

PITT I shall await your answer, Wilberforce. Good night, madam.

MRS WILBERFORCE Good night. Perhaps we will all sleep well now.

DUNDAS I wonder – (*To Wilberforce*) You and I have always fought each other for the soul of Pitt. He'll have to choose between us yet.

(*Sinclair shows Pitt and Dundas out*)

MRS WILBERFORCE Oh Wilby, it's come at last. Everything we've hoped for and longed for. You can come back home with me now after all.

WILBERFORCE Home!

MRS WILBERFORCE All you have to do is to keep quiet and the slave trade is finished for ever. It's the triumph you promised.

WILBERFORCE Is it?

MRS WILBERFORCE Of course it is – the triumph we will share together. You have kept your word to me after all.

WILBERFORCE Have I?

MRS WILBERFORCE Willy, you're in one of your exasperating moods and I can't bear it. They don't even ask you to vote for them. All they want is for you to abstain. It's so easy.

WILBERFORCE Yes, it's so easy. Do nothing tonight and free 50,000 slaves next year.

MRS WILBERFORCE And every year after that. Remember that terrible ship you showed me. It haunts me still.

WILBERFORCE I'd do anything to end it – almost.

MRS WILBERFORCE Well then!

WILBERFORCE You still don't understand. I have not fought the slave trade just because it's terrible or because it haunts me. I've fought it because it's wrong. I have done it for the sake of this nation and our people just as much as for the African slaves. I have done it because I know that God will not allow a people to prosper who deliberately condone evil and hide their faces from His judgments.

MRS WILBERFORCE But you can end the wrong next year.

WILBERFORCE Yes, by condoning wrong tonight.

MRS WILBERFORCE Oh, fiddlesticks! You'll be a traitor to every one of those poor negroes if you refuse this offer. Wilby, you may never get another chance. Twenty years of failure! Twenty years of humiliation. Isn't that enough?

WILBERFORCE It's more than enough. Twenty years and nothing accomplished, not a slave set free, our country more corrupt than ever. They'll say I attacked Dundas out of spite. Perhaps that's true. Even one-tenth part true. And yet somewhere in this land of ours a man must cry 'Halt! Thus far and no further. Right is right and wrong is wrong. Defy that law and you perish.' It will not be easy to withstand Pitt's penetrating eye. God, this could break him. I who revered him so much, can I be the one to hold the dagger? (*He turns to Newton in his chair*) Please tell me, old friend, as you helped me in this very room twenty years ago, help me now. What am I to do?

(*Newton does not move. He lets out a very faint snore*)

WILBERFORCE (*To himself*) There's no one...no one to lean on.

(Mrs Wilberforce makes a move toward him but Wilberforce turns away. He knows he must stand alone. Sinclair enters)

SINCLAIR I know I wasn't to disturb you but it's hours since you ate, Captain, I think you ought to let me get you something.

WILBERFORCE Sh!

SINCLAIR The Captain's like that now, sir. He comes and he goes, you might say, at the end of a busy day – more goes than comes sometimes. I'll rouse him.

WILBERFORCE No, let him be. He has fought well. *(He sits, buries his face in his hands)* Oh God!

SINCLAIR Don't give up, Mr Wilberforce. You're going to win.

WILBERFORCE What makes you say so?

SINCLAIR I'm an old sailor, sir, and I can smell the weather. You may know Parliament but I talk to the people in the wharfs and the streets and the shops. They've got their money on you. Believe me, Mr Wilberforce, when the people of England make up their minds about something, then sooner or later that something comes about. And, believe me, the people have made up their minds about you. It won't be long now before you hear the bells of London ring out for Abolition.

WILBERFORCE If that were really true we'd reform everything – the wretches in the mines, the children in the factories – we'd do away with slavery altogether. But is it true? I've hoped so often.

SINCLAIR It's true all right, sir. Here's another little something I made for your, sir.

WILBERFORCE Another ship?

SINCLAIR Not this time, sir. *(He hands Wilberforce a black charred crucifix)*

WILBERFORCE A crucifix. Look Barbara. It's black. A black

Christ, why not? He was the colour of us all – the whole human race.

SINCLAIR It had to be black, Mr Wilberforce. That 'ere charred wood was all I had to work with. I'll get you your supper, sir.

WILBERFORCE (*Looking at the crucifix*) Jesus the carpenter – and us the charred wood – all He has to work with. (*Praying*) Help me to speak honestly and justly without fear of men. (*As he prays, the lights dim out and he steps forward into a brighter light and is making his speech in the House of Commons*)

SCENE THREE

The House of Commons during the debate on the Melville Report. The lights come up on Wilberforce addressing the House.

WILBERFORCE No, Mr Speaker, we are not a nation of saints. We do not merit even to be called a Christian people, but in this fierce and terrible war we dare to claim that we are in the right, that we are on the side of freedom and justice, not only for ourselves but for all mankind. We even dare to invoke the blessing of Almighty God on our endeavours. And so in this fearful hour, as we gird ourselves to summon up our total strength, how can we knowingly and deliberately shut our eyes and cover over a deadly disease and weakness here at the very heart? How can our gallant ships be seaworthy with so many rotten timbers at home? How can we win a war when we lose the battle every day against our own selves? You may say that this is not the time to talk of right and wrong, but if we postpone the day of reckoning now – on the grounds of extremity or national necessity – then in every corner of the land a man who robs, who murders, who commits adultery, who covets, may say, ‘This is my hour of necessity; this is my extremity; so like my rulers I will demand God’s blessing today but deny His commandments until tomorrow.’ We it is who are now truly on our trial before the moral sense of England, and if we shrink from it, deeply shall we hereafter repent our conduct.

(The lights fade)

SCENE FOUR

1807

The Crypt. Late evening. Newton is in his chair sleeping. Sinclair walking up and down. Sound of church bells. Sinclair listens and then rouses Newton.

SINCLAIR Captain. Do you hear them bells, Captain?

NEWTON (*Rousing*) Yes, Sinclair, I hear them. Is it Sunday?
(*Trying to rise*) My sermon is scarcely prepared . . .

SINCLAIR It's not Sunday. I think it's the day we have all been waiting for. They promised to ring them bells when Parliament gets rid of the slave trade. It's come, Captain. It's come at last.

NEWTON I can't believe it. Pitt dead, Dundas disgraced and now . . . But how will we know for certain? Go out in the street, Sinclair, and find out the news.

SINCLAIR No need, sir. Mr Thornton promised to come here. He said he'd drive straight from Parliament to see you.

NEWTON It's hard to wait. So much of life is just waiting now. I am packed and sealed and ready for the post. I am like a person going on a journey in a stage-coach who is always looking out for its arrival.

SINCLAIR (*At door*) I think I hear it coming now.

NEWTON Praise God, I am ready.

SINCLAIR Hold 'ard, Captain. This ain't the chariots of fire. It's Mr Thornton's rig.

(*Enter Thornton in great excitement*)

THORNTON We've won. It's settled. I rushed straight from the House to tell you. 283 votes to 16.

NEWTON 283!

THORNTON It was a scene scarcely to be imagined. Half the

House seemed to be on their feet vying with one another to strike a blow at the dying trade – our enemies too cowed and sullen to speak. Almost every speaker ended with a tribute to Mr Wilberforce, and all the time the temper of the House was rising and rising, until at last Romilly spoke. He spoke of Bonaparte surrounded by pomp and at the height of his power, yet haunted and sleepless at the blood he has spilled, and then compared him with Mr Wilberforce in his pure happiness today at having preserved the lives of so many millions. It was like a spark on gun powder. The House was on its feet giving him an ovation such as has never been given to any man.

NEWTON It's nothing but the hand of God.

SINCLAIR That's true, Captain. But it's something more beside – if you'll pardon me – it's the people of England. We're a funny lot. We'll go for a while with crooked men and crooked ways, but in the end we'll decide for a man who sees straight and acts straight and stands on his own two feet.

(Enter Wilberforce. With great difficulty, but with great dignity, Newton struggles to his feet)

WILBERFORCE Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next?

Curtain