

AMAZING GRACE
Written by Steven Knight

By the late 18th century, over 11 million men, women and children had been taken from Africa to be used as slaves in the West Indies and the American colonies. Great Britain was the mightiest superpower on earth and its empire was built on the backs of slaves. The slave trade was considered acceptable by all but a few. Of these, even fewer were brave enough to speak against it.

WILBERFORCE

Oh, it is, half of me. My idiotic body is playing games with me again.

THORNTON

I promised we'd make him well. Eat something. Breakfast, perhaps.

WILBERFORCE

What time is it?

THORNTON

This is your 3 a.m. dose.

WILBERFORCE

So, cousin, you're waking me up to give me medicine to help me sleep.

THORNTON

Ah. Now you're taking on the medical profession, as well as everyone else. Did you sleep?

WILBERFORCE

Sleep is more exhausting than being awake.

THORNTON

The laudanum will sharpen your dreams.

WILBERFORCE

It replays my life to mock me and shows me things I should have done but didn't.

THORNTON

Wilber, Parliament doesn't deserve you. Your last bill was defeated because four of your loyal supporters took free tickets to a comic opera. rather than stay to vote.

WILBERFORCE

In my dreams, I turned over their tables. But you know the worst thing? I can't sing any more. You remember how well I used to sing?

THORNTON

Marianne and I will find a way to restore your voice.

MARIANNE

The Romans believed this water would restore the dead to life.

BARBARA

Most pump water I've investigated works in the opposite direction. Marianne, are you expecting someone else?

THORNTON

Inside this building, you will find the secret of health and happy life.

WILBERFORCE
In a glass of water?

THORNTON
You may have noticed, since I married Marianne, I have been a picture of health.

WILBERFORCE
I'm very happy for you.

THORNTON
It is almost a scientific fact. Marriage and health are twins. Inseparable. Single men wither away and die in rooms that smell of feet and armpits.

WILBERFORCE
Henry, what are you babbling on about?

THORNTON
Love, Wilberforce. Come. Come, we're late.

WILBERFORCE
The water has been here a million years. How can we be late?

MARIANNE
So, what shall we discuss next?

BARBARA
I don't know.

MARIANNE
The abolition of the slave trade. How about that?

BARBARA
Marianne, if I'd known you were so starved of political conversation, I'd have wrapped up a Tory and sent him to your home by mail for you to shout at.

MARIANNE
Ah, now, look at that. Here we are discussing the abolition of the slave trade and in walks my husband with William Wilberforce himself, the most committed abolitionist in England and also, of course, the most unmarried.

THORNTON
Oh. Look over there. It's Marianne. And who's the charming-looking woman with her?

WILBERFORCE
Marianne's here?

THORNTON

Never mind about her. Look at the woman she's with. Barbara Spooner. Very committed to very many good causes. And also entirely unmarried.

BARBARA

Marianne, you're outrageous!

WILBERFORCE

I do not need you or anyone else to find a wife for me!

BARBARA

Carriage! Carriage over here.

WILBERFORCE

I'll never forgive him.

BARBARA

I'll never forgive her. However, Mr Wilberforce, if we had met in other circumstances, I would have told you how deeply I admire your tireless efforts to force our ridiculous Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

WILBERFORCE

If you had, I would have changed the subject and talked about botany.

BARBARA

Botany? Why botany?

WILBERFORCE

Anything but politics. I'm in Bath to be cured of politics.

BARBARA

Well, I would have been bored by botany. So, even in other circumstances, it would have been a disaster. Good day to you.

WILBERFORCE

Good day to you.

WILBERFORCE

Some simple truths about this horrendous war need to be restated for the benefit of my honourable friends. Simple fact. We have the rebels in the anvil and a hammer in our hands. There is no question that our military force is far superior to that of the Americans. But we must distinguish between force and justice.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

Where did this terrier spring from?

TARLETON

I believe he's a Yorkshire terrier, My Lord.

WILBERFORCE

Surely it is time for the fat fellow and his friends opposite to make way for others who consider the good of their country of greater moment than their own personal interests.

DUNDAS

Doesn't he know what dangers await anyone who talks sense in this place?

PITT

Oh, I think he's equal to the dangers.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

My honourable friend suggests we surrender to the revolutionaries. Revolution is like a pox. It spreads from person to person.

WILBERFORCE

I bow to my honourable friend's superior knowledge and experience in all matters regarding the pox.

TARLETON

Why would we withdraw from America when half of the Americans are loyal to the Crown?

WILBERFORCE

Less than one in four Americans are loyal. If he calls that half, I'd hate to be his wife and share half his bed.

FOX

Mr Foreign Secretary. My honourable and young friend should explain to the House the difference between appeasement and surrender.

WILBERFORCE

The difference between appeasement and surrender is merely a matter of time and perhaps 10,000 more young lives wasted for no reason.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

In or out, Wilberforce? A pencil and paper.

PITT

No, no, no. Brooks's Club house rules. No IOUs. You gamble with what you have with you.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

Wilberforce, will you take my IOU?

WILBERFORCE

We split the pot and call it evens.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

To hell with that. Payment in kind.

WILBERFORCE

There's nothing you have I'd want, Your Grace.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

Tarleton, fetch my nigger. My coach driver. Go and wake him up and bring him in now. I bought a nigger in Port of Spain. He eats better than I do, so he's strong as an ox. He'd fetch at least 25 guineas at the West India Dock.

WILBERFORCE

The game is over.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

What's wrong, Wilberforce? If I hadn't brought the boy to London, he'd have been worked to death in a sugar cane field. I saved his miserable life. There. I raise the stakes. Wilberforce? In the game or out?

WILBERFORCE

Evening.

PITT

You act as if you'd never seen slavery before.

WILBERFORCE

For me it's like arsenic. Each new tiny dose doubles the effect.

PITT

You're not afraid of Clarence.

WILBERFORCE

Because he's the son of the king?

PITT

So, you want - "bloody noses and cracked crowns"?

WILBERFORCE

Shakespeare, Henry IV.

PITT

A play about England changing.

WILBERFORCE

As it will soon change.- Only if we change it.

PITT

You don't believe you and I could change things?

WILBERFORCE

I would change myself first. Do you remember, Billy, at Cambridge I had a reputation as something of a singer?

PITT

I do remember.

WILBERFORCE

So I think I'm going to go and sing them a song.

PITT

You sound like a chorus of bloody tomcats. Now, let me introduce you to somebody who does it properly. I dedicate this song to my honourable friend, His Grace, the Duke of Clarence. It was written by my old preacher. He was captain of a slave ship for 20 years. He repented his sins and then he wrote this song.

WILBERFORCE # Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch

Like me

I once was lost

But now am found

Was blind

But now

I see

WILBERFORCE

Dear God, I know this is utterly absurd, but I feel I have to meet you in secret. Sorry to interrupt, sir.

RICHARD

There is a beggar at the kitchen door. I would turn him away, sir, but you insisted I always check.

WILBERFORCE

Just give him breakfast.

RICHARD

Very good, sir.

WILBERFORCE

Richard?

RICHARD

Sir?

WILBERFORCE

I know that lying down on the wet grass is not a normal thing to do.

RICHARD

None of my business, sir.

WILBERFORCE

Truth is, uh.....I've been even more strangethan usual lately, haven't I? It's God. I have 10,000 engagements of state today, but I would prefer to spend the day getting a wet arse, studying dandelions and marvelling at bloody spiders' webs.

RICHARD

You've found God, sir?

WILBERFORCE

I think he found me. Do you have any idea how inconvenient that is, how idiotic it will sound? I've a political career glittering ahead of me and in my heart I want spiders' webs.

RICHARD

"It is a sad fate for a man to die too well-known to everybody else and still unknown to himself." Francis Bacon. I don't just dust your books, sir. When I was 15, I almost ran away with the circus. They said I could have been an acrobat.

WILBERFORCE

You read my letter.

PITT

The man who wrote that letter was not you. It was written by some wild preacher man that has gotten into your head.

WILBERFORCE

No.

PITT

So did he reply?

WILBERFORCE

Who?

PITT

God. You were going to ask God whether you should take up politics or religion.

WILBERFORCE

You're always too direct, Billy.

PITT

I urgently need to know where your heart lies, Wilber.

WILBERFORCE

What's urgent?

PITT

I...I'm planning to become prime minister.

WILBERFORCE

Some day.

PITT

No, I mean soon. Very soon. Thanks to your performances in the House, Fox and North will resign. Lord Rockingham will become prime minister. Lord Rockingham's health is not good. When he dies, I will make my move.

WILBERFORCE

You've worked it all out.

PITT

I want you beside me, Wilber. All the way.

WILBERFORCE

You've read my letter but not taken in a word.

PITT

I would have you in my government in whichever capacity you choose.

WILBERFORCE

Billy, no one of our age has ever taken power.

PITT

Which is why we're too young to realise that certain things are impossible. So we will do them anyway. I need an answer, Wilber. Do you intend to use your beautiful voice to praise the Lord or change the world?

RICHARD

Marjorie, Mr. Wilberforce is on his way down.

WILBERFORCE

Marjorie, I'm expecting some people for dinner. Marjorie? Marjorie?

RICHARD

She's been run off her feet, sir.

WILBERFORCE

How so?

RICHARD

Well, take today, for example. You have 25 guests for lunch.

WILBERFORCE

Do I?

RICHARD

If you remember, you decided to reward various volunteers who worked for some quite precariously financed charities. Some brought deserving children. Others brought less deserving relatives.

WILBERFORCE

I really should get some sort of...

RICHARD

Diary, sir. Yes. Or more cooks.

PITT

No, that's His Grace, the Duke of Clarence. Wilberforce, the Reverend John Ramsay. Reverend. Edward Hope. And Michael Shaw. Both friends. This is Olaudah Equiano.

WILBERFORCE

Mr Equiano. Please. You've travelled far to be here?

EQUIANO

No distance would be too great.

PITT

And this is Hannah Moore.

MOORE

Mr Wilberforce.

PITT

Who has travelled all the way from Clapham. Finally, let me introduce Mr Thomas Clarkson.

CLARKSON

Beautiful house. Sweet little rabbit.

WILBERFORCE

It's a hare, actually.

WILBERFORCE

Please. So come on. Who are they?

PITT

Why don't you ask them?

PITT

Well, I hope the goose is tender.

WILBERFORCE

She was rather old.

PITT

I find the older I get, the more tender I become.

WILBERFORCE

So, Miss Moore, you live in Clapham. I hear it's very tranquil there.

MOORE

When certain issues are raised amongst my friends and I, it is anything but tranquil.

WILBERFORCE

Ah. And, uh, which issues are those?

MOORE

Issues regarding the making of a better world.

WILBERFORCE

Better in which way?

MOORE

If you make the world better in one way, it becomes better in every way. Don't you think?

WILBERFORCE

Mr Equiano, what business brings you to London?

EQUIANO

My business in London is you, Mr Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE

What? You wish to discuss something with me?

EQUIANO

No. We do not want to talk because we hear that you are a man who doesn't believe what he hears until he sees it with his own eyes. These are for the legs. These for the arms. This is for the neck. Works like so. When the slaves leave port in Africa, they're locked into a space four foot by 18 inches. They have no sanitation, very little food, stagnant water. Their waste and blood fills the holes within three days and is never emptied. These irons and chains are to keep them from throwing themselves overboard. The chains are not unlocked until you reach the plantation in Jamaica. Around half of the slaves are dead already. When you reach the plantation, they put irons to the fire.....and do this. To let you know that you no longer belong to God, but to a man. Mr Wilberforce, we understand you're having problems choosing Whether to do the work of God or the work of a political activist. We humbly suggest that you

can do both.

WILBERFORCE

You planned this.

PITT

I've seen the literature you've been reading.

WILBERFORCE

You've stooped to searching through my desk?

PITT

Sir William Dolben told me you'd asked to be shown round the East India Docks.

WILBERFORCE

So, you would use my private concerns for your own political ends.

PITT

Yes, exactly that. The principles of Christianity lead to action as well as meditation.

WILBERFORCE

Allow me to meditate on it before I decide on any action.

PITT

Just think about this, Wilber. The slave trade has 300 MPs in its pocket. It would be just you against them. But you could do it.

WILBERFORCE

You would do it.

PITT

Oh, stop moaning.

BEGGAR

Excuse me, sir. Do you have a penny for a boy that went to fight the Yanks and came back half a man?

WILBERFORCE

Hello, Mr Newton. It's me, William. Hello, John. How are you? Hello, John. It's me, Wilber. I'm here to seek your... The beggar at the door assures me that I'm now old enough to call you John. You're dressing very simply these days.

NEWTON

I'm a simple man. I try to pretend I am a monk, but I don't have the willpower. I'm a monk Mondays, Wednesdays...When I read your name in the papers, doing these great things, I still see a tiny boy with his hair a mess and ink on his fingers. So, what do you want with an old creature?

WILBERFORCE

I'm here to seek your advice.

NEWTON

When you were a child, you used to ask God for advice.

WILBERFORCE

Then I grew up. And grew foolish.

NEWTON

And now?

WILBERFORCE

Now... slowly, my faith is returning.

NEWTON

How slowly?

WILBERFORCE

No bolts of lightning.

NEWTON

God sometimes does his work with gentle drizzle, not storms. Drip... drip... drip.

WILBERFORCE

My friend William Pitt has declared an interest in me.

NEWTON

William who?

WILBERFORCE

He's offering me a place in the world.

NEWTON

Just make sure you're in the world, not of the world.

WILBERFORCE

There'd be no escape from power once I have it. I would have to see things through.

NEWTON

Why wouldn't you? Are you contemplating a life of solitude? Wilber, you have work to do. Besides, people like you too much to let you live a life of solitude.

WILBERFORCE

Haven't you chosen solitude?

NEWTON

You, of all people, should know I can never be alone.

WILBERFORCE

There now.

NEWTON

There now what?

WILBERFORCE

You're the reason I came. You told me that you live in the company of 20,000 ghosts. The ghosts of slaves.

NEWTON

I was explaining to a child why a grown man cowers in a dark corner.

WILBERFORCE

I need you to tell me about them.

NEWTON

I'm not strong enough to hear my own confession.

WILBERFORCE

I thought time might have changed you.

NEWTON

It has. I'm older.

WILBERFORCE

Pitt has asked me to take them on, the slavers.

NEWTON

I'm the last person you should come to for advice. I can't even say the name of any of my ships without being back onboard them in my head. All I know is 20,000 slaves live with me in this little church. There's still blood on my hands.

WILBERFORCE

Will you help me, John?

NEWTON

I can't help you. But do it, Wilber. Do it. Take them on. Blow their dirty, filthy ships out of the water. The planters, sugar barons, Alderman "Sugar Cane", the Lord Mayor of London. Liverpool, Boston, Bristol, New York. All their streets running with blood, dysentery, puke! You won't come away from those streets clean, Wilber. You'll get filthy with it, you'll dream it, see it in broad daylight. But do it. For God's sake.

RICHARD

Sir, I have Mr Thomas Clarkson. Forgive me. Mr Wilberforce was here a moment ago. I'd

better go and find him.

WILBERFORCE

Good afternoon. Sorry if I alarmed you. I had this box made up in the exact dimensions of a slave berth. I thought you could use it in your practical demonstrations.

CLARKSON

Why did you wait until your butler had left before you got out of the box?

WILBERFORCE

They all think I'm mad already. As will most people in the House of Commons when I present my bill.

JAMES

Wilberforce, conditions in Jamaica are far more brutal than I could have imagined. Many children are scalded to death by the molten lava. Others die of exhaustion or roll into the fires in their sleep. The result in the morning is a few pounds of pure, refined sugar.

THORNTON

Wilberforce, are you all right? Sit up for me. Here, drink this. What happened?

WILBERFORCE

I read James's letter from Jamaica. When I fell asleep, it was as if I were living inside it.

THORNTON

Perhaps the laudanum the doctor gave you is badly mixed.

WILBERFORCE

I know the effects of opium, Henry. This isn't the medication.

THORNTON

What, then?

WILBERFORCE

I was chosen for this task and I failed. Some part of me does not accept the idea that I've given up.

THORNTON

I'll dilute this.

WILBERFORCE

Can you dilute what I feel?

THORNTON

You've given your youth and your health for this cause. It's time to let someone else try.

BARBARA

So, Mr Wilberforce...I understand you have an interest in botany.

WILBERFORCE

Botany, Miss Spooner? Whatever gives you the idea that I might be interested in something as tedious as botany?

BARBARA

Sorry. It's a private joke.

THORNTON

Now, Wilber, I know you're not interested in botany, but there's a fascinating creeping ivy up the far end of the garden.

MARIANNE

Barbara, you really must go and see it too. Go on.

BARBARA

To irritate them, let's pretend to argue.

WILBERFORCE

What about?

BARBARA

Something we disagree on. Think of something.

WILBERFORCE

The war in France.

BARBARA

I think we should settle with Napoleon right now.

WILBERFORCE

So do I. Schools.

BARBARA

I'm a member of your movement for free education. I agreed with every word you said on the Dales factory debate.

WILBERFORCE

You read every word?

BARBARA

No.

WILBERFORCE

Neither did I. Gin.

BARBARA

Replace it in the cities with beer.

WILBERFORCE

Absolutely. I'm definitely alone in my opinions about animals.

BARBARA

No. I joined your society for the prevention of cruelty.

WILBERFORCE

Well, I'm extreme. I have a pet fox, a pet rat and a crow that can't fly. I used to have a pet hare, but it died of kindness. America.

BARBARA

We must reassess the power of the collective political process.

WILBERFORCE

Agreed.

BARBARA

Oh, and, of course, we are agreed on slavery.

WILBERFORCE

I'm against flowers in church. What do you say to that?

BARBARA

I am for them.

WILBERFORCE

As am I.

BARBARA

I shouldn't talk about the slave trade?

WILBERFORCE

I've spent so many years talking about it.

BARBARA

So, what are a few more minutes? When Mr Pitt first became prime minister, the two of you were like meteorites shooting through our imagination.

WILBERFORCE

Whose imaginations?

BARBARA

Girls my age.

WILBERFORCE

You stopped taking sugar in your tea?

BARBARA

I wore an abolition badge made by Josiah Wedgwood.

WILBERFORCE

He was a good friend to us.

BARBARA

And I travelled 30 miles in the rain to hear Thomas Clarkson speak.

WILBERFORCE

Did he deafen you?

BARBARA

He opened my eyes. - I met the African. - Equiano. He came to town with a hundred copies of his book. They sold in an hour.

WILBERFORCE

You signed our petitions.

BARBARA

A hundred times.

WILBERFORCE

A hundred times. Three million names, a million candles to read them by.

BARBARA

Must have been so exciting.

WILBERFORCE

Exciting?

BARBARA

It seemed that every spring the daffodils came out, every summer the cherries ripened and every autumn William Wilberforce would present his bill to the House.

WILBERFORCE

And still...

BARBARA

And still...?

WILBERFORCE

And still, after all the badges, the petitions, all the speeches and the bills, ships full of human souls in chains sail around the world as cargo! I'm sorry. This is why I shouldn't talk about it.

BARBARA

I think you should. There. We've found something we disagree on.

WILBERFORCE

"Am I not a man whose soul is drawn to heaven like water from the dark well of Africa?"

BARBARA

From Equiano's book.

WILBERFORCE

He was a man like no other.

BARBARA

Please, tell me about him. It seems to me that if there is a bad taste in your mouth, you spit it out. You don't constantly swallow it back.

WILBERFORCE

Not long after I first met him, he asked me to come to the East India Dock. He said there was a ship I should see. A ship he knew well. Mr Equiano.

BARBARA

They make you lie in this space. The shackles dislocate your hip or your shoulder. You are in pain all the way around the world.

WILBERFORCE

How long is the journey?

BARBARA

Three weeks, if the weather is good. In stormy weather, they take the very sickest and throw them into the sea to lighten the ship's load.

WILBERFORCE

How did you survive?

BARBARA

Your life is a thread. It breaks or it doesn't break. Before I travelled in a ship like this, I was a prince, in many ways not unlike you. It was a beautiful day like no other, the last day I saw my home in Africa.

WILBERFORCE

It is with a heavy heart that I bring to the attention of this House a trade which degrades men to the level of brutes and insults the highest qualities of our common nature. I am speaking of... the slave trade. I know that many of my honourable friends in this House have interests in the Indies. Others have investments in plantations. Others are ship owners. And I believe them to be men of humanity. I believe you all to be men of humanity. If the wretchedness of any one of the many hundreds of slaves stowed in their ships could be brought to view...

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE
Order! Order!

TARLETON
I can hardly believe my ears.

SPECTATOR
We can hardly believe your mouth.

TARLETON
It seems my young friend opposite has a long-term strategy to destroy the very nation that spawned him. While I was in Virginia losing my fingers in battle with the Americans, he was busy appeasing them. Now he would hand over the riches of the Indies to the bloody French! If... If we didn't have slaves, there would be no plantations. And with no plantations, how would we fill the coffers of the king? Does my honourable friend really believe that if we left off the trade, the French wouldn't immediately step into our place and reap the rewards?

MARJORIE
All this food. There's only a handful of people in there.

RICHARD
He's an optimist. Completely incurable.

WILBERFORCE
Our defeat in the House today was not unexpected. But our intention was to flush out the opposition and discover how many people would support us.

CLARKSON
Yes, well, we certainly found out who our friends are. All 16 of them.

THORNTON
... I sent a note of thanks to everyone who voted for us.

CLARKSON
How sweet of you.

THORNTON
Some of us know how to take defeat graciously.

CLARKSON
Something to with with breeding?

THORNTON
On this occasion, it probably is.

WILBERFORCE
Everything that is said at this meeting is being taken down for our records. My friend James

Stephen has agreed to be our secretary.

STEPHEN

You were saying?

WILBERFORCE

As you can see, not many MPs have responded to our invitation. Indeed, outside my own family, there is only one: Sir William Dolben. Sir William, what brings you to this gathering? I recently took passage from Sierra Leone aboard a slave ship. What I saw during those 15 days... But I believe there are plenty of others in the House who share your feelings. They're just afraid to show it.

CLARKSON

Shame on them!

DOLBEN

No shame. No shame. Were I the representative of a port city, how could I tell those whom I represent that I'm voting to end their livelihood?

THORNTON

Exactly so.

CLARKSON

How can human beings be commerce?

[MURMURINGS];- It's exactly this pursuit of lofty...

- Nothing lofty about simple humanity.

WILBERFORCE

Please! Perhaps we should begin this journey with the first step. We are talking about the truth. So we should hand it out to people. Drop it from church roofs. Paint pictures of it. Write songs about it. Make bloody pies out of it. There is a slave ship at dock in Tilbury with twice the slave berths it is insured for. I know that for a fact. But how do we prove it?

CLARKSON

Wilber.

WILBERFORCE

Dear God.

FOX

Well, almost. I've spent 18 months being torn apart by you in the House, Mr Wilberforce. I thought I'd find out what it feels like to be on your side. I see you've got plenty of food. Any of you saints drink?

CLARKSON

Well, this one bloody does.

FOX

Thank you very much.

WILBERFORCE

Not fair! Not fair. I'm not well. My belly.

PITT

What's wrong with your belly?

WILBERFORCE

Oh! Besides, you're prime minister. It is my ministerial duty to let you win.

PITT

So, what will we do with Fox?

WILBERFORCE

Put him in a box?

PITT

Let him throw the heavy rocks.

WILBERFORCE

Provide the shocks.

PITT

Put Lord Tarleton in the stocks.

WILBERFORCE

Oh! Oh, if the House of Lords could hear the idiotic way we carry on, they'd ban anyone under the age of 30 from holding high office ever again.

PITT

Well, at least with Fox on board, the world will know we mean business. The world doesn't know yet.

WILBERFORCE

Nor will it, not until we're ready.

PITT

You were born for this, Wilber.

WILBERFORCE

Sometimes I get giddy.

PITT

Why is it you only feel the thorns in your feet when you stop running?

WILBERFORCE

Is that some sort of heavy-handed metaphorical advice for me, Mr Pitt?

PITT

Yes, I suppose it is. We must keep going, keep going fast.

DOLBEN

Gentlemen, would you stop the music, please? Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed our little tour of the estuary. But now our sojourn is almost over, I have a confession to make. This trip wasn't purely arranged to reward those MPs who have supported me in the past year, nor am I the only sponsor.

- What's he doing?

WILBERFORCE

Ladies and gentleman, this is a slave ship. The Madagascar. It has just returned from the Indies where it delivered 200 men, women and children to Jamaica. When it left Africa, there were 600 on board. The rest died of disease or despair. That smell is the smell of death. Slow, painful death. Breathe it in. Breathe it deeply. Take those handkerchiefs away from your noses. There, now. Remember that smell. Remember the Madagascar. Remember that God made men equal. All that winter, we spread out across the country gathering evidence for Parliament. Thomas rode to Bristol, Liverpool, Plymouth, talking to men who'd worked the slave ships, ships' doctors who'd treated them, slaves themselves who'd been whipped and branded. Equiano published his account of his years as a slave. He sold 50,000 copies in two months.

BEGGAR

Spare a coin, sir?

WILBERFORCE

Our supporters began to only buy sugar produced without slaves in India. Or they stopped using sugar altogether. It seemed our message was everywhere. At least now there was hope. Real hope. We had a year to collect enough evidence to convince Parliament of our case. The planters and the ship owners began to spread rumours about us. They called us seditious, secretly working to bring down the government. Clarkson sat in a coach to Birmingham and overheard someone claim that I'd secretly married a slave woman. But the weight of our hope made it all seem like glorious infamy.

BARBARA

How long have you been taking laudanum? I recognise its presence.

WILBERFORCE

My illness and my crusade were born around the same time.

BARBARA

What is your illness?

WILBERFORCE

The doctors tell me it's called colitis. They don't really understand it, but I do. You see, sometimes my stomach gets bored of being a stomach and decides it's a sailing ship. Then my heart gets jealous and decides it wants to be a see-saw. And before you know it, my lungs are arguing with one another whether to be lungs or sponges full of seawater. Well, at least that's what I tell my nieces and nephews.

BARBARA

Marianne tells me you like children. My poor father almost went mad when I told him I'd stopped taking sugar in my tea. I was 14, reading your name in the papers, willing you to win. I told my friends there was actual slave blood in every lump of sugar. Has this been so painful to talk about?

WILBERFORCE

It's only painful to talk about because we haven't changed anything. But, unlike the slaves, I have opium for my pain.

MAID

Begging your pardon, sir. I thought everyone was in bed.

WILBERFORCE

She brings the breakfasts. What time is it?

BARBARA Does it matter?

WILBERFORCE

That year we should have won. With the evidence we had collected, by natural justice we should have won.

MP1

Winds blow ships from Africa to the Indies naturally, as if the route were blessed by God. Another argument in defence of the trade is that the Newfoundland fishing industry is kept afloat by the fact that slaves in the West Indies consume that part of the fish which is fit for no other consumption.

WILBERFORCE

I do feel that if my honourable friend continues to scrape the bottom of the barrel for objections, he is in danger of getting splinters under his fingernails. Now, if I may continue with my argument...

TARLETON

As representative of the great and flourishing commercial town of Liverpool, I must once again remind the House that we have no evidence that the Africans themselves have any objection to the trade. I have here an account written by a... Mr Clutterbuck.....which states that most slaves in the Indies have a snug little garden with plenty of pigs and poultry. There are many

poor families in Liverpool who do not have as much. Which... Which is why, apart from a few mendicant physicians and itinerant clergymen, the ordinary people of Britain are not at all exercised by the whole issue of slavery.

WILBERFORCE

My honourable friend, the member for Liverpool, seeks evidence of people's concern. In the past year, I and my itinerant clergymen friends have been gathering just such evidence. We have taken a petition calling for the abolition of the slave trade to all the great cities of this country. It has been signed by over 390,000 people. However, this petition is not yet complete. There is one more person who wishes to add his name.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

Do something.

TARLETON

Mr Speaker, I humbly request a suspension while we take time to examine the signatures on this document.

WILBERFORCE

There is something very provoking in the calm way my honourable friend seeks delay.

TARLETON

Mr Speaker, will he not give way?

WILBERFORCE

Is the desolation of Africa suspended?

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Please, gentlemen.

WILBERFORCE

Is the work of death suspended?

TARLETON

You bring petitions into the House...

WILBERFORCE

Mr Speaker...we cannot insult the forebears of Heaven

TARLETON

...as if this country should be governed by the rule of the mob, - rather than its natural rulers!

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Order!

TARLETON

That roll of paper reeks of rebellion!

WILBERFORCE

No matter how loud you shout, you will not drown out the voice of the people!

TARLETON

The people?

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

This session will be suspended while the petition is examined.

PITT

Wilber.

THORNTON

My spies tell me that Tarleton and Coconut Clarence have gone to see the Home Secretary.

WILBERFORCE

What would they want with Lord Dundas?

CLARKSON

He's one of ours, isn't he?

WILBERFORCE

James. James. Where does Lord Dundas stand?

JAMES

Probable, I think. We have him down as a probable. Last year he stopped the deportation of a Jamaican slave from Scotland, so his heart's in the right place.

FOX

Be wary of Dundas.

WILBERFORCE

If he's capable of compassion once, why not twice?

CLARKSON

What damage could he do if he's turned?

FOX

He controls the Scottish vote, 34 MPs.

WILBERFORCE

We'll have to have faith in his integrity.

FOX

Integrity?

WILBERFORCE

Where are you going?

FOX

To look up the word "integrity" in Dr Johnson's Dictionary.

PITT

Come.

Prime Minister, Lord Charles Fox to see you.

PITT

You look more at home when doing something devious.

FOX

Prime Minister, your friend Wilberforce doesn't play cards any more.

PITT

No. He resigned from all five card clubs when he saw the light. Pity. He was good.

FOX

Well, I think there's a hand you should play for him.

PITT

Against whom?

FOX

Someone who stands in his way.

PITT

So name him.

DUNDAS

Good evening. Billy, did I not win enough money from you on Saturday evening?
Really, I have no time for cards. I have urgent business in the House.

PITT

As prime minister, idle gossip collects around you like scum in slack water.

DUNDAS

What have you heard?

PITT

Lord Tarleton's throwing East India Company money at people who are speaking against abolition tonight. Of course, no true friend of mine would accept such an offer.

DUNDAS

I appear to have three jacks.

PITT

I've always ensured that you have been dealt a favourable hand.

DUNDAS

Are you threatening me?

PITT

You are threatening our friendship.

DUNDAS

It isn't money that has made me decide to oppose Wilberforce.

PITT

His enemy is my enemy.

DUNDAS

You are sleepwalking hand-in-hand with a bloody rebel. Wilberforce follows no leader but the preacher in his head.

PITT

How much were you offered?

DUNDAS

Keep your jacks. The planters still have the king, and I, at least, am still loyal to him.

PITT

Don't force me to put a pistol to your head.

DUNDAS

Well, if you do, there will be two pistols, one from each side. And perhaps if I duck, you'll shoot each other.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Order. Order.

DUNDAS

First, let me be clear. After long consideration and much consultation, I am in favour of the abolition of the slave trade. There's no doubt in my mind that this trade in human beings is an almighty calumny and is a disgrace to this nation. However... I also take the point of my honourable friend, the member for Liverpool. If we were to outlaw the trade tomorrow, it would bring financial disaster to many cities and industries in this country. I therefore suggest a period of reflection.

WILBERFORCE

After a year and a half of privy council investigations, what good would it do to delay the

inevitable?

TARLETON

Inevitable? Is my honourable friend counting the votes before they are cast?

WILBERFORCE

I didn't mean that.

TARLETON

If the trade were to be abolished, I suggest that we do so gradually. Violent storms sink ships. This great ship of state must not be sunk by a wave of good intentions.

WILBERFORCE

They are cleverer than us, Thomas.

CLARKSON

And yet...outside the House of Commons, the mood is with us.

WILBERFORCE

And what good is that?

CLARKSON

I have friends in France. Our counterparts. Men of principle, like you and I. They bring me only good news.

WILBERFORCE

News of what?

CLARKSON

Revolution. They're certain it's coming. In Paris they speak openly in the streets of emancipation. Freedom for all men, and women too. The Americans pulled the cork out of the bottle, Wilberforce. Now the French share the wine.

WILBERFORCE

You talk about revolution as if it were a safe thing.

CLARKSON

It's just a word.

WILBERFORCE

Every day we change things, by degrees. Education, factories. By degrees.

CLARKSON

You sound like Dundas! Gradually.

WILBERFORCE

An imperfect order's better than no order.

CLARKSON

We must fight for a perfect order!

WILBERFORCE

I've pledged an allegiance to the king.

CLARKSON

You know as well as I do...the king is insane. He shakes hands with oak trees and claims he can see Germany through his telescope. I know you have your loyalties, Wilberforce, but underneath it you're more radical than any of us. You see, you never doubt you're right. What we say of the slave is true of the worker in the field, the weaver, the miner. Shouldn't they be free to prosper too, instead of the fruits of their labours going to men like Tarleton? Men who spend their money on whores and comic operas. Young girls debauched. Soldiers forced to beg. It's a natural wave that's flowing, Wilber. First Boston, then Paris. Next London.

WILBERFORCE

Thomas...you must never speak of revolution in my presence ever again.

CLARKSON

I'm going to Paris to see for myself. Why don't you come with me? Drink some of that wine?

WILBERFORCE

Africa, your sufferings have been a theme that has engaged and arrested my heart. Your sufferings.....no tongue can express, no language impart. Agh! God has set before me two great objects: The suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of society. Agh! Agh!

RICHARD

Sir! Marjorie.

PITT

The trouble is, Doctor, he doesn't believe he has a body. Utterly careless of it. He, um...he thinks he's a disembodied spirit. Perhaps you should spend some time away from London.

WILBERFORCE

What's this?

PHYSICIAN

Laudanum, for the pain.

WILBERFORCE

An opiate? No, no, no. I need my mind sharp.

PITT

You need to rest.

WILBERFORCE

My bill is before the House in three weeks.

PITT

Would you leave us a moment, Doctor?

PHYSICIAN

Yes, Prime Minister.

PITT

It's now five years since you first brought this bill to the House.

WILBERFORCE

And each time we get a little closer.

PITT

Wilberforce, there are other MPs who could carry the debate.

WILBERFORCE

Who? Name one. The only man I would trust is you. Well?

PITT

I can't be seen to openly oppose the king when the streets of Paris run with blood.

WILBERFORCE

You've read too many lurid newspaper articles.

PITT

The French Republic plans to declare war within the year.

WILBERFORCE

On who?

PITT

On who? You're locked inside your own head! Us, Great Britain, everything we stand for! Considering the situation, you mix with the wrong people.

WILBERFORCE

Who do I mix with?

PITT

Clarkson, for one.

WILBERFORCE

Who introduced me to Clarkson?

PITT

In different times. They say in the cafes that Clarkson's a French spy. And Equiano, they say he was born in Carolina, and as an American, therefore must be a revolutionary. Others say they've seen with their own eyes letters addressed to you from Thomas Jefferson.

WILBERFORCE

On matters to do with abolition.

PITT

War changes everything.

WILBERFORCE

Even friendships?

PITT

Especially those! So you will keep your precious conscience intact and let the rest of us do the war's dirty work.

WILBERFORCE

Conscience is indeed precious.

PITT

I am warning you as your prime minister that when war comes, opposition will soon be called sedition!

WILBERFORCE

By who? By you?

PREACHER

This evening I would like to return to the theme of abolition. In these dangerous times, it is easy to put aside our concerns for those in need simply to confirm our loyalty to the nation. But the issues of war and the issues of slavery must not be confused. Our fear of an unknown enemy must not be allowed to erode our long-cherished liberties. If this is to happen, how bitter will our history be?

WILBERFORCE

We must not prohibit all political discussion of political subjects. The issue of slavery is not made any less important by the unrelated issues of war! In war or in peace, the buying and selling of human beings is equally abhorrent! This is not a seditious statement!

BARBARA

Where is your laudanum? I'll prepare it for you.

WILBERFORCE

No. No, I want to tell you how it ends.

BARBARA

I already know. Your bills were easily defeated. Equiano... died in his bed. Thomas Clarkson found a cottage in the hills to hide away in. Charles Fox watched and waited. The Quakers still sent their letters. No one replied. Is that the end of your story?

WILBERFORCE

You think not?

BARBARA

No.

WILBERFORCE

Why not?

BARBARA

Because after night comes day. The people aren't so afraid now the war with France is being won. And when they stop being afraid, they rediscover their compassion.

WILBERFORCE

So the people have their compassion back.

BARBARA

And you still have passion. That matters more.

THORNTON

Good morning, Wilber.

WILBERFORCE

Morning.

THORNTON

Get much sleep?

WILBERFORCE

Not much.

THORNTON

What time did Barbara leave?

WILBERFORCE

Late. I mean, early. I'm afraid I'm going back to London.

THORNTON

So soon?

WILBERFORCE

Yes. I think the waters worked their magic on me. But I need to send a letter to James Stephen. To ask him to come back to England.

THORNTON

For what reason?

WILBERFORCE

To put his evidence before a select committee. Also, Barbara and I have discovered that we're both impatient and prone to rash decisions. But she wants to tell you about it herself.

PREACHER

Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin,
we will sing the hymn requested by the bride.

Amazing Grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost
But now am found
Was blind but now I see....

WILBERFORCE

How are you coping with the new kitchen?

RICHARD

"Great changes are easier than small ones." Francis Bacon.

WILBERFORCE

Well done.

HANNAH MORE

Have you forgiven us yet?

WILBERFORCE

Never.

HANNAH

It'll be wonderful to have you both living so near.

WILBERFORCE

Thank you.

HANNAH

I do hope you didn't come to Clapham for the tranquillity. We're very noisy neighbours.

WILBERFORCE

I'm counting on it.

PITT

Barbara. You have my deepest condolences.

BARBARA

Thank you so much.

PITT

But please, I beg of you, do this for me. Make him eat some of his pets.

BARBARA

Oh, I rather like them.

PITT

I like them too. In brandy sauce.

BARBARA

If you'll excuse me...

PITT

There's no need, Barbara.

BARBARA

You're discussing politics with your eyes. You may as well do it with your mouths.

PITT

I, uh... didn't think you'd invite me.

WILBERFORCE

Didn't think you'd come. You well?

PITT

My mind's well. The rest of me is fraying at the edges.

WILBERFORCE

I'm going to try again. Well?

PITT

It's your wedding day. I agree with everything you say.

WILBERFORCE

I never changed. - I don't change.

PITT

Well, hurrah for you. The mood may even be swinging back in your favour.

WILBERFORCE

How can we live in houses like this when others are living in boxes? Is that still sedition?

PITT

As your prime minister, I urge caution.

WILBERFORCE

And as my friend?

PITT

Oh, to hell with caution.

NEWTON

When the slaves are flogged on the wharfs, their arms are tied to a hook on a crane and weights of 56 pounds applied to their feet. The crane is raised so that their feet barely touch the ground. The slaves are then whipped with ebony bushes, comma.....to let out the congealing blood. I don't hear the nib scratching the page.

CLERK

We have company, sir.

WILBERFORCE

John, it's me, Wilber.

NEWTON

Leave it.

WILBERFORCE

They only told me your sight was fading.

NEWTON

Well, now it's faded altogether. I never did things by halves. God decided I'd seen enough.

WILBERFORCE

So it's true.

NEWTON

What's true?

WILBERFORCE

You're writing your account.

NEWTON

Uh-huh. I wish I could see your face. How are you looking?

WILBERFORCE

The same.

NEWTON

Still too thin.

WILBERFORCE

A little fatter lately.

NEWTON

She feeds you well then, this wife of yours?

WILBERFORCE

She's given me an appetite.

NEWTON

An appetite to change things? This is my confession. You must use it. Names, ships' records, ports, people. Everything I remember is in here. Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly: I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great saviour. You must publish it. Blow a hole in their boat with it. Damn them with it! I wish I could remember all their names. My 20,000 ghosts, they all had names. Beautiful African names. We called them with just grunts. Noises. We were apes. They were human. I'm weeping. I couldn't weep till I wrote this. "I once was blind, but now I see." Didn't I write that too?

WILBERFORCE

Yes, you did.

NEWTON

Well, now at last it's true. Now go, Wilber. Go. We have lots of work to do, you and I.

CLARKSON

"Strange treasures in this fair world appear, strange all and new to me." That is a poem by Thomas Traherne, and I have absolutely no idea what it's about. But when I was small, I was made to learn it by heart, so I don't see why you shouldn't suffer too.

WILBERFORCE

Clarkson! Clarkson!

CLARKSON

Good God, he's got his voice back. We need you back in London straightaway!

STEPHEN

Wilber! You look fine. Fine.

WILBERFORCE

I look wet and feeble. You, however, look disgustingly like a lusty adventurer from a storybook. Come on. I've got a coach. The others are waiting for us at Palace Yard.

STEPHEN

Don't I get to wash or sleep?

WILBERFORCE

Sleep?

STEPHEN

You haven't changed at all, William.

WILBERFORCE

I called this meeting to welcome back our good friend James Stephen from the Indies. But he

should speak for himself.

STEPHEN

I have here diagrams, first-hand accounts and transcripts of trials where innocent Africans have been convicted of crimes they did not commit and were then burnt alive. There are pages and pages and pages of first-hand accounts and figures and statistics. On every island now, there are rebellions. Haiti is in the hands of slaves. And the slaves are anxious. They're impatient for their freedom. They hear about your work here. I saw a woman and her child being beaten... in a coffee field. Afterwards, I heard the woman tell her daughter that someone was coming across the sea to save them. She said it was King Wilberforce. So this time, gentlemen, we must not fail them. What is it, James?

WILBERFORCE

This is not a game for them.

CLARKSON

We know that.

STEPHEN

What I mean is, it's not enough. If we go to Parliament with this evidence, there'll be sympathy, there'll be concern, but it'll be just the same as every other time.

CLARKSON

Have you come back to preach hopelessness?

STEPHEN

No. No, I've had an idea. In my law books I might have stumbled across something and I want to propose it as a strategy. *Nosus Decipio*. It's Latin. Loosely translated, it means... "we cheat".

PITT

I don't care how important this is. I'll finish my shot. Oh, for God's sakes, what is it?

WILBERFORCE

We've decided... We think... We've decided not to bring forward an abolition bill.

PITT

No?

WILBERFORCE

Indeed not. We're going to address the issue of the use of neutral flags on cargo ships.

PITT

How unutterably dull.

WILBERFORCE

Exactly. We're going to suggest that French cargo ships sailing under the American flag of convenience be liable to seizure by privateers.

CLARKSON

Part of the war effort. Patriotism, all that.

PITT

Since when have you been interested in the war effort, patriotism and all that?

CLARKSON

I'm not.

PITT

So... I'll continue with my game?

CLARKSON

You don't see anything sinister in that measure?

PITT

No.

WILBERFORCE

Then neither will they.

PITT

What the hell are you talking about?

WILBERFORCE

80% of all slave ships sailing to the Indies are flying the neutral American flag to prevent them from being boarded by privateers. If we pass a law removing that protection, no ship owner will allow his vessel to make the journey.

PITT

This will only apply to French ships, not British.

WILBERFORCE

That's the beauty of it. Once any ship raises the American flag, by law it is neither French nor British. So our slave ships will be just as liable to seizure as French ones. The privateers won't care whose booty they're taking, as long as they're operating within the law. Without the protection of neutral flags, 80% of the trade will be finished overnight.

PITT

Dear God.

CLARKSON

But Prime Minister, we need to...tuck this bill away somewhere. Disguise it. Oh.

WILBERFORCE

I won't even get on my feet in the House.

PITT

This would still fall short of abolition.

WILBERFORCE

With their profits cut, half the slavers will be bankrupt in two years. Then we'll pick off their MPs in the House one by one.

PITT

Whose idea was this?

WILBERFORCE

A lawyer.

PITT

Anti-French bill which is also anti-slavery. Don't know why I didn't think of this any sooner.

WILBERFORCE

But we can't let anyone know that we're behind this. Instruct someone to put this bill forward who's seen as a patriot. We don't want any fuss.

CLARKSON

We just need someone really, really... boring.

MP1

Typically, a French ship will change its registration to raise the American flag and pick up a cargo of sugar in Havana. It will then sail to Carolina or Virginia or Florida or New York City or even Boston. The cargo will then be unloaded onto a second ship carrying the American flag and set sail for France. As things stand, neither the Royal Navy nor licensed privateers have power to seize such a ship. My proposition is that all the ships flying the American flag be liable to search and seizure to put an end to this lamentable deceit on the part of the French and their Dutch and Spanish allies.

TARLETON

Mr Speaker! I believe the abolitionists are coming at us at a side wind.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

A side wind? What kind of side wind?

TARLETON

I'm not sure what kind of side wind. I just know there's something going on. - The Jacobites are in.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

The Jacobites? Really, I do think you might update your invective to reflect changing times.

TARLETON

Am I too late to call for an adjournment?

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Of course you are. Now, will you let the honourable gentleman proceed?

MP1

As I was saying...my proposition is that all ships flying the American flag be liable to search and seizure to put an end to this lamentable deceit on the part of the French, Dutch and Spanish.

TARLETON

Jackson, get into the chamber.

JACKSON

Right, sir.

TARLETON

Camber, chamber! Move your arse!

CAMBER

What's going on?

TARLETON

Just do it! Where the hell is everyone?

FOX

Everybody's at the races in Epsom. They were given free tickets. I saved one for you. A free gift from William Wilberforce.

BARBARA

Wilby? What on earth is happening? The poor maids are terrified. - I'll bring your laudanum.

WILBERFORCE

No! No! I've poured it all away this morning. Every drop.

BARBARA

Then I'll fetch more.

WILBERFORCE

No. I'm finished with it. I can't even feel the joy of this victory. This new baby will find me as myself. What will be his name?

BARBARA

Who says it's a boy?

WILBERFORCE

Just tell me some names. Please, just keep talking.

BARBARA

William, if it's a boy. Emma, if it's a girl.

WILBERFORCE

It's... it's a boy. I'm sure of it. How will he look?

BARBARA

Sweet. He will be strong with curly hair, but dark, like yours.

WILBERFORCE

He's inside you now.

BARBARA

Yes, yes, he's inside.

WILBERFORCE

I can almost hear him. He's singing to us.

BARBARA

Yes, he will have a fine voice like you.

WILBERFORCE

Yes, yes, a strong voice.

BARBARA

And you will play with him in the garden every morning.

WILBERFORCE

Yes.

BARBARA

And soon we'll have a girl and a boy.

WILBERFORCE

And a girl and a boy and...

BARBARA

Wilby! Come quickly! Come on!

PITT

Please leave us now.

WILBERFORCE

They tell me you're improving, Billy.

PITT

Bull. We cracked crowns, didn't we?

WILBERFORCE

We left the heads intact.

PITT

Because we're so pathetically English. We have agreed on a succession.

WILBERFORCE

You're not gone yet.

PITT

I will be replaced by Lord Granville as prime minister, and the foreign secretary will be Charles Fox. And Wilber, Fox has already secured a guarantee from the palace. They will remain neutral in the issue of the slave trade. Next time you will be pushing at an open door. I'm scared, Wilber.

WILBERFORCE

Of what?

PITT

At this moment, I wish I had your faith. No more excuses now, Wilber. Finish them off.

WILBERFORCE

As you know, Equiano, I rarely drink. But today's an exception. Today we're drinking to victory. Wish you were...here to see all this... unfolding.

PHYSICIAN

Just one more push. One more.

WILBERFORCE

I say to this House that there is now no reason why my bill should not be commended to the king. And I urge my honourable friends to vote once and for all for the abolition of the slave trade throughout His Majesty's empire.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Order! Order! On the Home and Foreign Slave Trade Act, the unamended bill calling for the abolition of the slave trade throughout the entire British Empire. No's to the left: 16. Ayes to the right: 283. I declare the bill of abolition of the slave trade to be passed.

DUKE OF CLARENCE

Noblesse oblige.

TARLETON

What the bloody hell does that mean?

DUKE OF CLARENCE

It means my nobility obliges me to recognise the virtue of an exceptional commoner.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Order! Order! When people speak of great men, they think of men like Napoleon. Men of violence. Rarely do they think of peaceful men. But contrast the reception they'll receive when they return home from their battles. Napoleon will arrive in pomp and in power. A man who's achieved the very summit of earthly ambition. Yet his dreams will be haunted by the oppressions of war. William Wilberforce, however, will return to his family, lay his head on his pillow and remember the slave trade is no more.