



William Wilberforce

1759 – 1833

On the 24th of February, 1793, a tired eighty-eight year old man wrote Wilberforce, “Unless God has raised you up . . . I see not how you can go through with your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy. . . . You will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but if God is with you, who can be against you? Oh, be not weary in well-doing. 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.” One week later John Wesley was dead. It was the last letter he would ever write.

William Wilberforce entered the world sickly and nearly blind. When he was only nine his father died; his mother, unable to care for him, consigned him to the care of relatives. These people took him regularly to their evangelical Anglican parish church. What the youngster heard there, especially the stories and sermons of his favourite guest-preacher, the Reverend John Newton, went deep. For Newton had been captain of a slaveship, but had by the grace of God been rendered preacher, hymnwriter (“Amazing Grace”) and spiritual counsellor. His influence upon the boy was incalculable: “I revered him as a parent when I was a child,” Wilberforce would later write.

Slaves were picked up in West Africa and brought in chains to England in ships without sanitation facilities. Once put ashore, they were fattened up to disguise the ravages of months of poor nutrition and seasickness. Then they were oiled (dull skin being a sign of ill-

health) and paraded naked before buyers so that their physique could be assessed and market-value assigned. In the ten years following 1783 one British seaport alone (Liverpool) shipped 303,737 slaves to the New World. In no time Britain, the world's leader in the trade, had supplied three million to French, Spanish and British colonies.

The captain of a British slaver threw 132 slaves overboard during a mid-ocean storm in order to lighten the vessel. Upon returning to England he made an insurance claim on the lost cargo! Sensitive people were outraged. The Attorney-General, however, insisted that the captain was without "any show or suggestion of cruelty"; it was his privilege to do with the cargo as he pleased. In any case, no public outrage was going to overturn anything unless a Member of Parliament, championing the welfare of slaves, could persuade fellow-politicians. Besides, slaves were economically essential as a cheap source of labour, even as the trade was militarily necessary in training personnel for the Royal Navy.

In the meantime Wilberforce had found his way to Cambridge University, where he did little besides play cards. Soon his talent for eloquence got him elected to Parliament. He was twenty-one, and newly immersed in upper-class degradation. His earlier Christian formation appeared to recede as he groped and stumbled in gambling and intemperate drinking. By now he had scorned his Methodist upbringing as "vulgar" and "uninformed."

Then, while he holidayed in the south of France, a devotional book by Philip Doddridge, an English clergyman, found its way into his hands and heart. Soon he was reading the New Testament in Greek. Torment consumed him as he became convicted of his depravity. Now he deplored the "shapeless idleness" of his frivolous life, speaking of it in terms of "deep guilt" and "black ingratitude." With gospel-quicken insight he acknowledged "a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Saviour."

Assurance of his salvation turned the badge of "Methodist" from contemptible disgrace to glorious declaration. Immediately he resigned from five fashionable clubs, renounced gambling, and found himself fired with an intellectual zeal unknown at university. For the rest of his life he would labour ceaselessly on behalf of the earth's wretched.

Wilberforce's first target was the abolition of the trading in slaves. (He felt that if trafficking in black people ceased, slave-owners would have to treat their "property" more humanely, there being no replacements.) Admiral Nelson wrote from his ship, *H.H.S. Victory*, that as long as he could speak and fight he would resist "the damnable doctrines of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies." An irate sea-captain pummelled Wilberforce on the street. It was whispered slanderously when he was yet unmarried that his wife was black and that he beat her. His friends were accused of being spies in the service of the French.

While petitions poured into government offices to end slavery, the petitioners themselves were not at risk. Wilberforce was, for his position was never going to advance his political career even if he survived assassination. In 1793 he advanced a bill in the House of Commons advocating gradual abolition. It failed by eight votes, most members absenting themselves from the House so as not to have to vote. Next he brought forward a bill prohibiting British ships from carrying slaves to foreign territories. It lost by two votes in a near-empty House. Promised the support of some Members of Parliament, he found himself abandoned. Nevertheless his resolve never abated even as his courage and eloquence never diminished. The tide began to turn. In 1807 Britain outlawed trading in slaves. Wilberforce incessantly lobbied the governments of other nations and was rewarded by seeing them do the same.

One task remained: the freeing of those already enslaved. That task absorbed all his energies for the next twenty-five years. The night that Wilberforce died, his supporters in the House of Commons were passing the clause in the Emancipation Act that declared all slaves free in one year and their masters given twenty million pounds in compensation.

The villainy, as vile as it was execrable, was over.

