

CHAPTER 1

Bad dreams

October 1797

It was a rainy, windy October afternoon. A carriage was moving up the hill. Inside it sat William Wilberforce and his cousin, Henry Thornton. Suddenly their carriage slowed down and Thornton woke up. There was another carriage across the road in front. One of its horses had fallen down.

The driver was shouting, 'Get up, you lazy horse! Get up!' He was hitting the horse again and again with a stick.

'Stop a moment,' Wilberforce said to his driver. 'That horse is in pain.'

'Don't, Wilber,' Henry said. 'You're ill.'

But Wilberforce got out of the coach. He was coughing and he looked terrible, but he went up to the angry driver.

'Your horse is extremely tired,' he said. 'If you leave him alone for an hour, he will probably be able to get up again.'



'Who do you think you are?' shouted the driver.

The man with the driver whispered in his ear, 'I know who he is. It's William Wilberforce. I saw him speak in London. He's famous.'

The angry driver dropped his stick on the wet road. Wilberforce looked at it for a moment, then turned and walked back to his carriage.

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When they arrived at Henry's home, Marianne Thornton ran out of the house to welcome her husband.

'I've got a surprise for you, Marianne,' Thornton said. Wilberforce climbed out of the carriage.

'Is that you, Wilber?' asked Marianne. She was surprised to see him. He looked so tired and ill.

'I've brought him home to make him better,' said Thornton.

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That night, Wilberforce dreamed he was running through the House of Commons. The Prime Minister, William Pitt, was running after him.

'I'm sorry, Prime Minister,' Wilberforce shouted as he ran, 'I need to be alone.'

Then, suddenly, he was at the theatre. Four of his ministers were there, laughing and drinking. In his dream, Wilberforce knocked all the bottles and glasses off the table with a loud crash.

Wilberforce woke up when he heard a knock at the door. Henry came into the bedroom.

'It's three o'clock,' he said. 'Time for your medicine. Your laudanum*.'

'Laudanum gives me terrible dreams,' said Wilberforce. 'I don't want to remember the past. I'm angry about all the things I didn't do.'

'Wilber, it's not your fault that your last bill against slavery was defeated,' said Thornton. He put water in the laudanum and gave it to Wilberforce.

'Four of my ministers didn't vote because they had free tickets for the theatre,' said Wilberforce. 'I wanted

* A medicine once used for pain and to help people sleep.

to stop them from going, but I didn't. I dreamed about them tonight. Why didn't they use their power to change people's lives? Instead, they just wanted to drink and have fun.'

Wilberforce drank his medicine. 'But do you know the worst thing, Henry?' he said. 'I can't sing any more. I used to sing really well. Do you remember?'

'Don't worry, Wilber,' said Thornton. 'Marianne and I will help you find your voice again.'

* * *

One day, Thornton took Wilberforce to the Pump Rooms*. He and his wife, Marianne, had a secret plan to introduce Wilberforce to a friend of theirs.



'Inside this place, you will find the secret to happiness and health, Wilber!' Henry said.

* The Pump Rooms, in the city of Bath, were a popular meeting place for rich and famous people. You could drink special, healthy water there.

'Where – in a glass of water?' asked Wilberforce.

'Did you know, Wilber,' said Henry, 'that married men are much happier and healthier than single men? Oh, look! That's Marianne over there! The woman with her is Barbara Spooner. She's very interested in improving the world, too, like you. And she isn't married ...'

At the same time, Marianne looked up from her table and saw Henry and Wilberforce on the other side of the room.

'What a surprise!' she said to her friend, Barbara. 'There's my husband with William Wilberforce! He's such a wonderful man. *And* he isn't married!'

At exactly the same moment, Barbara and Wilberforce understood Henry and Marianne's plan. They were not pleased with their friends. Barbara got up and left the room angrily.

Wilberforce told Henry, 'I don't need you or Marianne to find me a wife!' He left the room through a different door. But as he reached the outside of the building, he met Barbara. She was waiting for her carriage. To end the silence between them, Wilberforce spoke.

'I can't forgive Henry for doing that,' he said.

'And I can't forgive Marianne,' said Barbara.

After a moment or two of silence, Barbara said, 'But imagine this ... if we met in a different way, I would tell you that I think your fight against the slave trade is wonderful.'

'And I would tell you that I don't discuss politics,' said Wilberforce. 'And that I'm more interested in trees and flowers.'

'And I would say that I find trees and flowers a very boring subject,' said Barbara.

'Then conversation between us would be a problem,'

said Wilberforce.

Barbara looked at him. Then her carriage arrived. 'Goodbye,' she said, and left.



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One day Henry and Wilberforce went for a walk in the hills.

'I've received a letter from my friend, James Stephen, in Jamaica,' said Wilberforce. He showed Henry an unopened letter. 'I wrote to James and asked him to describe life for black people on the sugar plantations. I hoped it would arrive before the vote in Parliament but ...'

'But it arrived too late,' said Henry, 'and there's no reason to open it now.' He reached for the letter, but Wilberforce put it in his pocket.

'We've invited some people to lunch tomorrow, Wilber,' said Henry, 'and Barbara's coming too.'

Wilber smiled. 'You still go on hoping, don't you?' he said. Then he shouted out loudly to the hills, 'If we could put hope in our tea instead of sugar, we wouldn't need sugar plantations!'

Henry said, 'Wilber, you have changed so much already. Isn't that enough?'