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The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce

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Extract

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One

I stepped out of the taxi too quickly. I rocked back on my heels to slow myself down and found that the best way to maintain my balance was to lean against the side of the taxi and look up. The sky was hard and black and a few stars glittered, though I could not see as many as I used to see. Once I had looked up, it was hard to look down again.

'Are you all right, squire?' asked the driver. A younger man might probably have abused me for bumping against the side of his taxi; this man belonged to an age when drivers were called 'cabbie' and customers were called 'squire' or 'guv'nor'.

The question was difficult to answer. Was I all right? It was a very good question. It required thought before I could answer. I gazed at the stars and thought about the question.

'That'll be fifteen pounds, squire,' the driver said.

I realised I had not managed to answer him. I peeled some notes from a bundle I kept in a money clip and paid him a sum of money. I cannot remember how much it was, but he seemed pleased.

'God bless you, guv'nor,' he said, as he drove off.

I rocked on my heels again. It was a pleasant feeling. I took in a bit more night sky, while I found my balance, and a bit of the front of the restaurant as my weight shifted back to my toes. A small, discreet sign announced: 'Les Tripes de Normandie'. It was a very successful restaurant, I had heard. I had never been before. I did not like to go to the same

restaurant more than once; perhaps twice if it was very good. There always seemed to be issues, these days, when I went back to places where I had eaten before. I liked the sign. I thought the font used was probably Arial, and the lighting was clever: the lettering was done in neon tubing in an off-white, almost a cream colour, against a polished black-marble fascia.

They said the chef was brilliant. He had constructed a menu which took rustic French dishes and elevated them to art forms. He had appeared on a number of television programmes and was admired and loved by the public. I am quoting from the restaurant's web site. I am not especially interested in cooking. It is the wine list in a restaurant that catches my attention. When I had inspected Les Tripes's web site, I'd clicked straight away on to the wine list and seen that they offered a Château Pétrus 1982. I don't remember the weather in 1982 in western France, but I have read about it. It was a cool spring and then a warm summer that extended into September: long hours of sunshine and not much rain. Conditions were ideal for the Bordeaux vineyards that year. As a result, 1982 is a vintage that seems to have lasted practically for ever. It is a classic. But, you will not be surprised to learn, it is becoming harder and harder to find.

Finding Pétrus 1982 on a wine list is like discovering a diamond lying on the ground. The vineyard only covers 28 acres and produces about twenty-five thousand bottles annually. The grapes are picked, then fermented for twenty-four days, then macerated in concrete tanks. After that the young wine is aged in oak barrels for twenty months, and then bottled. After that, all you have to do is wait between fifteen and twenty years, and it will be ready to drink. It is rare now to come across a Pétrus 1982 or indeed any of the earlier vintages; but if you do find a bottle, you need to make the most of the opportunity. It is not cheap: the restaurant

web site indicated a price of £3000 a bottle; but, if you are an enthusiast, the price is irrelevant if you find what you are looking for. That is what I always say.

It wasn't as if I could drink that particular year of Pétrus at home. I have rather a large amount of wine now, which I obtained from Francis Black. Some people would say it is an incredible amount of wine. But it did not include Château Pétrus 1982.

I found I had finished rocking on my heels and decided to enter the restaurant. As I came through the door, they took my coat and said, 'Mr Wilberforce?'

I nodded and the waiter asked if he could show me to my table. The restaurant was quite empty. It was still opening up, it being just a few minutes after seven in the evening. I liked to go to restaurants early. It meant that I could stay in them a very long time, if I felt like staying – for example, if there were several different wines on their list which I wanted to try. Then again, if there was only one wine I was interested in, I liked to eat my dinner and drink my bottle or two of claret and be out again before the place filled up and I risked being distracted from what I had come to taste.

I entered a warm, softly lit room. The tables were of dark oak, with squares of white linen laid upon them. Two waiters were still lighting the candles on the tables. Another waiter was straightening the knives and forks with microscopic attention to their alignment, and picking up and inspecting the great, bowl-like wine glasses for specks of dust. A girl was putting the final touches to a large flower arrangement in the centre of the room. An important-looking person in an immaculate navy-blue suit, whom I took to be the head waiter, was standing at the double doors into the kitchen and talking to the chef. A waiter in a white shirt and black waistcoat was standing behind the bar, arranging the bottles on the shelves and flicking them with a duster, so that they gleamed and

sparkled in the reflected light from the mirrors behind them. The bar counter was a deep pool of mahogany, on which crystal ashtrays sparkled. This too was given a final polish as I watched, and the ashtrays, which were already clean, were picked up and wiped again.

'Would you like a drink at the bar, sir, or shall I show you straight to your table?'

I realised I had come to a standstill in the middle of the empty restaurant, drinking in its potent spell, as one does when the curtain rises on a stage set, revealing a perfectly ordinary drawing room which is yet latent with a drama that will soon unfold. I love the early evening in a nearly empty restaurant. I love the hushed silence, the whisperings of the waiters as they wait to be called, the distant clatter and shouts that come from the kitchen as the doors swing open for a moment, and then swing closed again, cutting off the intrusion of noise. I love the glitter of the glasses and the cutlery in the candlelight, the purity of it all, the orderliness.

'I'd like to go straight to my table,' I said.

The waiter led me to a corner table and drew the chair back so that I could be seated. Then he gave me a copy of the menu and asked if I would like anything to drink. I asked for a glass of water and the wine list.

'The sommelier will be with you in a moment, sir,' said the waiter. I looked anxiously around the room. So much of my happiness depended on the sommelier. Did he really know how to keep his wine? Did he know how to open it? how to decant it? how to pour it? I have known a perfectly good bottle of Margaux be ruined by a careless wine waiter who managed to slosh it into my glass, accompanied by small pieces of cork, as if he were pouring out lager.

My eye chanced upon a large man in a black apron, with a tasting bowl on a chain around his neck. He was advancing slowly in my direction, carrying the leather-bound wine list.

As he approached I could see he was a serious-looking man, with a thick grey moustache, and his complexion bore the noble tints of a man who has spent much of his life engaged with the subject of wine. I felt sure he would look after me. He handed me the list, bowed and withdrew.

After a moment's thought I selected some things to eat, and then sat and turned the pages of the wine list. My heart was thumping. The possibility had just occurred to me that the Château Pétrus 1982 might still be on the web site only because no one had bothered to update the list. When I thought of it for a moment, it seemed very likely that all the 1982s would long ago have been ordered and drunk. In that case, what was I going to do? I turned the parchment-like pages of the wine list rapidly until I found the page headed 'Red Bordeaux'. I saw that the Château Pétrus was still listed and breathed out in my relief. I had been holding my breath. I beckoned to the sommelier. Supposing someone else were to come in, and decide to order it, and took the last bottle?

The sommelier came back to my table and asked, 'Monsieur has decided? Or perhaps I may advise you on something?' He was French – another good sign in a wine waiter.

'No, I'd like the Château Pétrus. The 1982.'

The sommelier took a step back from the table. He looked at me. I could see him looking at my clothes, which were not of the newest. I have not been paying much attention to personal grooming recently, though I still do wash. Then he looked at me again and decided I meant it. He said, 'The Château Pétrus? Monsieur is quite certain?'

'Yes, very certain.'

'And, excuse me, but Monsieur has seen the price? It is our most expensive wine.'

'I have drunk the 1975, the 1978 and the 1979. I have never drunk the 1982.'

The sommelier gave me a very deep bow and said, 'I must

go and bring up the wine. It is a very great wine. It is not to be drunk in a hurry.'

I smiled at him and he smiled back. We understood one another. Price meant nothing. This was a great wine, one of the great classics of the last century, perhaps of all time. Drinking it was in itself an act of passion, of great artistry. The money was irrelevant.

'One moment,' I said, and put out my hand again for the wine list. 'I am going to start my dinner with escalope de foie gras. So I think I shall have half a bottle of a good Sauterne to accompany it. The Château Rieussec 1986.'

'Of course, monsieur,' said the sommelier, bowing low again. Then he took the wine list from me and took a few steps backwards, as if retreating from the presence of royalty, before treading softly away. I saw him having words with the head waiter on the other side of the restaurant, and I saw the head waiter look sharply across the room at me.

A moment later he was at my side, all smiles. 'Have you decided on what you would like to eat?' he asked me. 'Or is there something I could recommend? I understand you have chosen the wine already.'

I ordered the foie gras and something else. I think it was rack of lamb and the menu said '(min. 2 persons)', but I wasn't going to eat much of anything I might order. It was just that I felt the savoury lamb would set off the taste of the glorious claret I was soon to drink.

The head waiter tried to make conversation for a moment. 'I imagine you are a great connoisseur of wine,' he said. 'We sell very few bottles of that particular vintage. As a matter of fact, if I remember rightly, there are only two bottles left in the cellar and Jacques will be bringing one of them up for you now.'

'I don't know about that,' I said, 'but I do collect wine. I have quite a few bottles in my cellar now.'

'A large collection, I imagine, as Jacques says you are already familiar with several vintages of the Pétrus.'

'I don't know what you would call large,' I said. 'Perhaps one hundred thousand bottles of one sort or another.'

When I tell people this – and I don't go out of my way to mention the fact – I find they often think I am joking, or that I might be mad. If it is mad to own one hundred thousand bottles of wine, then I am mad. But I look on it as an investment: not so much a financial investment as an assurance that I will spend the rest of my life drinking delicious wine whenever I want to. I inherited most of it from Francis Black.

The head waiter certainly thought I was mad. He straightened up and the smile left his face. 'Indeed, sir,' he said. 'That is certainly what I would call a large collection. Enjoy the rest of your evening with us, sir.'

He left, which was a relief. I find on evenings like this it takes all my concentration to get the most from the experience of drinking the wine. Conversation can be a tremendous distraction, and anyway I have got out of the way of small talk these days. But then the head waiter came back, with a little silver tray.

'If I could just take an impression of your credit card, sir,' he said apologetically. 'I wouldn't normally trouble you, but as the sum of money is so very large . . .' and his voice trailed away into a deferential whisper.

'I don't use credit cards,' I said, and I pulled out my roll of banknotes. I knew I usually had between five and ten thousand pounds in cash when I went out. The bank always had an envelope full for me when I called on them once a week for my walking-around money, and I would make sure I had a bit extra if I thought I might come across an interesting wine. I put the roll on the plate. 'Take what I spend out of that and give whatever's left back to me when I go,' I told him.

The head waiter looked appalled and handed me back the roll of notes. 'That won't be necessary, sir,' he said. 'I did not appreciate you would be paying in cash . . . Sorry to have disturbed . . . Quite unusual . . .' and again he faded away.

I put the roll of notes back in my pocket. I hadn't realised it, but they were all fifties. I must have given the taxi driver a hundred pounds for a fifteen-pound fare. I had thought they were tens or twenties, but then of course the bundle would have been inconveniently large. No wonder the taxi driver had blessed me.

I sat undisturbed and watched the restaurant come to life around me. One or two couples had come in and been seated. Two well-dressed women were sitting at the bar drinking champagne. It seemed like a nice place. I liked the sommelier.

A waiter came up and offered me a small plate and said, 'Compliments of the chef, sir; a morsel of eel pâté on a gooseberry brioche.'

I waved it away. 'Nothing before the foie gras, thank you.'

Then the sommelier came back and together we looked at the bottle, which he reverentially cradled in his hands, turning it so that I could see the ornate red letters declaring the name of the château, and the appellation Pomerol, and the year. Then there was a considerable amount of business with decanters and corkscrews, and the extracting of the cork, which was conducted with a surgeon's care, and the decanting of the wine, which was poured as gently as if it were nitroglycerine. Then the decanter was turned gently in front of the flame of my candle, so that I could admire its lustrous colour. The sommelier's face was lined with care as he carried out these tasks and it was only when the cork had been duly sniffed, and presented for my inspection, and the wine was safely in the decanter, that he relaxed and looked towards me for my approval.

I looked longingly at it. I almost wished I had not complicated matters by ordering another wine to start with. Then I reflected that the anticipation could only heighten the pleasure I knew I would feel at the first sip.

The foie gras arrived and with it the sommelier came again, with the Château Rieussec. He treated it, not with contempt, but with something less than awe. Although this, too, was a great wine, it was a minor princeling in the hierarchy of Bordeaux compared with the imperial pedigree of the Pétrus.

I ate a few morsels of the foie gras, and sipped at the sweet white wine.

Because I knew or, at any rate, had hoped that I might be drinking Pétrus that evening, I had prepared myself as best I knew how for the event. I had read my wine gazetteer to remind myself of the provenance of the wine. Pomerol lies east of Bordeaux, on the northern side of St Emilion. Its wines are described by Robert Parker, the great wine writer, as 'the burgundies of Bordeaux' because of their 'power and opulence'. I therefore felt it was appropriate to saturate myself in the wines of Pomerol that day, while I read about them and thought about the evening that lay ahead.

After breakfast I drank, very slowly, a bottle of Château La Fleur de Gay; and with lunch I drank a bottle of Château Trotanoy 1990, the last bottle of that wine and that year that I had been able to find in the undercroft. I ate, as usual, very little: just enough to bring out the flavour of what I was drinking. I usually get something sent up from the restaurant around the corner. I lingered over the Trotanoy well into the afternoon. I thought about opening another bottle, but decided against it. I came to the restaurant with the tastes of Pomerol still lingering on my palate: two great wines from the district which yet, in the wine drinkers' map, were as

foothills to the great peak of Pétrus on whose summit I soon would tread.

It was inevitable that the wine affected me. My balance, which has been deteriorating these last few months, was not good. I have also developed a distasteful tendency to perspire heavily when I am not drinking wine, and I find my hands tremble. As I am no longer inclined to drive, since the accident, it matters less than it might otherwise have done. I have a Screwpull corkscrew and that opens all but the very oldest bottles without trouble, no matter whether my hands are shaking or not. And when I drink wine I find I become very peaceful, very reflective, sometimes even devotional in my moods. When I am not drinking it, I become restless, prone to unhappy memories of events earlier in my life. I walk around my flat in Half Moon Street, which is on the edge of Mayfair, in the West End of London. I pick up books and put them down unread. I go out into Hyde Park and try to blow the memories away in the fresh air. I walk down Piccadilly and look into the shop windows, or prowl among the bookshelves of Hatchards, or stare at the mountains of crystallised fruit in the windows of Fortnum's. The memories won't go away, and so I go back to my flat and bring up a bottle of wine from the small cellar of perhaps a thousand bottles that I keep there, and drink it. My main collection of wine is still in the undercroft at Francis Black's old house in the North of England, which I acquired when I bought his house from his executors when he died. From time to time I go up there to gaze at my wine and make sure everything is all right, and I check that the temperature controls are working, and the security alarms are correctly set. I ship another few cases back to Half Moon Street to keep me going. The quantity of stock never seems to lessen, though – as if, when I am not there, the wooden cases and the racked bottles are secretly multiplying themselves. But I

never linger for more than a few hours there: too many ghosts.

When I have opened the wine, rotated it this way and that in the glass, and savoured its aroma, and when I have sipped the first sip, then peacefulness gradually returns.

I finished the foie gras and sipped at the Rieussec. It was a good wine, with a delicious honey flavour, almost too powerful. I knew I would forget its taste instantly with the first glass of Pétrus. They took the plates away and I was left in peace for a moment, to glance about me. This was a restaurant for the rich and famous. It had taken quite an effort on my part to reserve a table, some weeks ago. Now there was scarcely an empty place in the room. The restaurant had filled up. But it was not noisy. There were perhaps only a dozen tables in quite a large room, well apart from each other so that one could neither overhear nor be overheard. I supposed that if I ever read the newspapers, I would recognise some of the people in here. There were three men ordering their dinner at the next table, and one of them was, I am fairly sure, a government minister. But I felt no real curiosity and I am sure I was invisible to them – not smart enough, sitting on my own, an object worth only a moment's glance until the eye moved on to something more rewarding to look at elsewhere in the room.

The lamb arrived underneath a huge silver dish cover, and then one or two people did glance my way, their attention caught by the theatre of the waiters removing the dish cover with a flourish, to show the rack of lamb underneath with its little paper crowns on each cutlet.

The sommelier was at my elbow asking if I would like to taste the wine. I dared not speak, but simply nodded my head in assent. A very little was poured into my glass, and the waiter warmed the bowl with his hands and moved it just

enough so that the dark, almost purple liquid lost its meniscus for a moment. Then he handed the glass to me. First I inhaled the scent of the wine and then, when its flavour had filled my nose and lungs, I sipped it.

I knew what to expect: flavours of truffles, spices and sweet fruit. Then those tastes receded and it was like entering another country, a place you have always heard of and longed to go to but never visited. It was an experience almost beyond words, not capable of being captured by the normal wine enthusiast's vocabulary. I sipped the wine and I was so happy, all of a sudden, that a huge smile came over my face. I think I laughed.

The sommelier smiled too. 'Is it wonderful, sir?'

I handed him the glass and he too inhaled it. 'It is wonderful,' I told him.

He smiled again and said, 'There is nothing else on earth like it, monsieur.' Then, with true grace, he poured me a full glass of wine and left me alone to enjoy it. The waiter presented me with two cuts of lamb from the rack, and I ate part of one of them – just enough to allow its taste to complement that of the wine.

I ate morsels of lamb, and sipped from my glass. And in that other country, where the wine took me, was Catherine. Not exactly sitting at the table with me; it was more subtle than that. She was somewhere behind my left shoulder and, although I could not see her, I knew how she looked. Twenty-five years of age, and pretty as a picture, just as she had been for the last two years. I could smell the perfume she wore, and it smelled the same as the wine. Then, above the clatter of the knives and forks and the growing din of conversation from the tables around me, I could hear her humming. She had once been a member of a choir and it was an air from Bach that she was singing. I don't remember which one but I remembered the tune very well, and the pure sound of her

voice. I hummed along with her, as I sometimes used to, even though she said I had no ear for music.

The head waiter appeared at my elbow: 'Excuse me sir, but would you mind not humming so loudly? It might disturb the other guests.'

The image of Catherine vanished in a moment, and I felt dislocated inside my head. The wine tasted suddenly flat and insipid. 'Was I humming?' I said, restraining my annoyance at having my tranquil mood disturbed. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

I bent my head over my plate and ate another forkful of lamb, in order that the head waiter would go away.

He bowed his head and said, 'So sorry to disturb you, sir. Most considerate, sir. Thank you so much.'

The sommelier came and poured a little more wine and I noticed I had drunk more than half the bottle. I said to him as he filled my glass, 'I think you said this was the last bottle but one?'

'Yes, monsieur, that is correct. One last bottle and then it is gone. I do not know that there are many bottles of that vintage left in the whole of London now.'

'Then bring it up and decant it, please.'

The sommelier replied, 'Are you certain, monsieur? Two bottles of a wine like this in one evening, for one man. Is it not too much sensation at one time?'

The thing is, I knew he was right. It was, without a doubt, overdoing it. I could not possibly enjoy the second bottle as much as the first. My palate would become dulled and furred with the wine. Moreover it would be the fourth, possibly the fifth bottle of wine I had drunk today, and that was before I found my way home and drank the bottle of Montagny that I always had as a nightcap.

The fact remained that I could not bear the thought of anyone else having that bottle. It had to be mine. It was as simple as that. 'Please bring it, anyway,' I said.

The sommelier bowed but there was doubt in his eyes, and I saw him go and have a conversation with the head waiter. I think they were wondering whether I would make more of a scene if I drank the wine than the scene they knew I would make if they did not bring it up for me.

Then he disappeared and after a few minutes came back with the second bottle of Pétrus, and whilst he went through the same rituals as before, he found time to refill my glass from the first bottle. I noticed some curious glances from around the restaurant. One man, more inquisitive or ill-mannered than the others, arose from the table of three that I had noticed earlier and walked across to me.

'Forgive me for intruding,' he said, 'but I noticed the label on that bottle of wine. Is that Pétrus you're drinking?' Without waiting for an answer he bent over and examined the label, which the sommelier instinctively turned so that he could read it.

'My God. The 1982,' he exclaimed, and then turned and said to me with some admiration, 'I say, you really know how to push the boat out. Well done, old boy. Enjoy yourself!' He went back to his table and there was a little extra buzz to their conversation. I tried hard to ignore their looks and after a while the wine absorbed me again in its powerful and aromatic embrace. I found that I was drinking wine from the second bottle. It was nearly the same, but not quite: once again the sense of being in a different place, but now seeing the landscape of this unknown country from a new vantage point. And Catherine came back, somewhere nearby, and together we sang a few bars of 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring'.

This brought the head waiter back. 'I really must ask you not to sing quite so loudly, sir,' he said. 'It is disturbing the other customers.'

'And I really must ask you not to interrupt me while I am

drinking my wine,' I replied. 'It is impossible to enjoy it properly if I keep being distracted like this, and I feel I have paid a fair price for the goods in question and am entitled to a proper enjoyment of them.'

It sometimes happens that my mannerisms of speech become a little strange under the influence of a lot of wine. I find my language tends to become ornate, almost flowery, and sometimes bends and even breaks under the weight of the complex ideas I wish to express. I stopped humming for a while, and after a moment the head waiter went away again. But by now I was the object of some attention around the restaurant. I think that, by then, everyone in the room knew that I was sitting drinking my way through more than six thousand pounds' worth of expensive wine on my own.

I heard, or I imagined that I heard, snatches of conversation: 'He doesn't look like he could afford a can of Special Brew, let alone one of the most expensive wines in the world.' 'He's probably a hedge-fund manager having a blow out after making a few million quid.' 'Or after losing it, more likely.'

'What an odd-looking creature,' said a woman's voice.

'He's so pale,' said another. 'I hope he's not going to be sick all over the place.'

'*Darling!* I'm trying to enjoy my dinner, thanks very much.'

It was too much. I stood up and turned around to try and catch sight of Catherine, to ask her what to do. My chair fell over backwards. I raised my glass of wine in the direction where I thought Catherine might have been standing a moment or two ago, before I turned around, and sipped it and said, 'Darling, come and try some of this. It's really very good.'

The room moved sideways and I found the head waiter had put his arm around me affectionately. That was very nice of

him. I had begun to form the impression he did not really like me.

'Get him a taxi,' I heard him say to someone, as we both slid towards the floor. He was trying to hold me up, I realised, but I was just a bit heavy for him.

'Where do you live?' he asked me. Now he was staring down at me from somewhere far above, and his voice sounded very remote. The great claret was exercising a strong narcotic effect on me. My eyes felt heavy.

'What do we do about the bill? We're down more than six grand if he doesn't pay,' whispered another man nearby. I realised it was the sommelier's voice, and he was no longer French, but from Birmingham.

I reached into my pocket. I didn't want any trouble. It was odd how often these difficulties arose when I ate out. I thrust the bundle of notes in the direction of the voice and managed to say, 'Do take what I owe from these notes. And do remunerate yourselves for the trouble and inconvenience I may be causing you. Please convey my sincere apologies to my fellow guests for any disturbance.'

How much of this I actually managed to speak out loud, I do not know, but the notes were snatched from my hand. I found that if I moved my head a little to the left I could pillow it on the head waiter's shoes. They were black and well polished and surprisingly comfortable to nestle against.

'What's his name?' someone asked.

'Table booked in the name of Wilberforce.'

'Do we know his address?'

'No, he's never been here before.'

'I think we would have remembered if he'd been here before,' said a sarcastic voice.

'Has he got any ID?' asked the first voice. I think it was the head waiter's.

A hand snaked its way into the inside pocket of my suit

jacket and found my wallet. 'Found a card here in the name of Wilberforce, address Half Moon Street.'

Then everything went black.