

The Warlow Experiment

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'It is human nature to hate the man you have hurt'

Tacitus, *Agricola*, 42

A Reward of £50 a year for life is offered to any man who will undertake to live for 7 years underground without seeing a human face: to let his toe and fingernails grow during the whole of his confinement, together with his beard. Commodious apartments are provided with cold bath, chamber organ, as many books as the occupier shall desire. Provisions will be served from Mr Powyss's table. Every convenience desired will be provided.

– Herbert Powyss, Moreham House, Herefordshire
January, 1793

Chapter 1

DOWN AND DOWN. He sniffs dank air, listens to the man. Powyss.

'I'm providing plenty of fuel and kindling, Warlow. You'll have four baskets of wood a day and a scuttle of sea coal. They'll come down in the morning. There's a tinderbox, oil lamps, boxes of candles in that cupboard over there. The jar of lamp oil will be refilled each week, but that'll depend on your use of it. Send a note if you need more.

'I've tried out everything myself and it all works perfectly. Samuel, get a fire going for Warlow.'

'I makes my own fire!'

'Yes, of course, of course. But let's warm the place while I'm showing you round.'

White cloth. Fork, spoon. Them's silver. Wine glass! Chair legs like bent knees; never sat on one of them. Look at it! Candlesticks all shone up. Brass. Pictures.

Who's that in the mirror? Me is it? Him?

'Three meals a day, as I said. When Jenkins carves at table he'll dole out a serving for you and send it down by lift. I'm rather pleased with this. Over here. Look: you open it up

and inside are two shelves. It's just a dumb waiter table but without legs and fixed to a pulley. Like hauling sacks up into the barn.

'Don't look dumbfounded, Warlow! It's quite big enough for trays, strong enough for the fuel box. Has to come a long way down but with covers the food should remain hot. Pull the cord to send back empty dishes. Ring the bell first to alert them in the kitchen.'

Powwyss moves to the other side of the room. He follows, doglike.

'Here's the organ.'

Organ?

Powwyss opens the doors of a cupboard.

Not a cupboard. Metal pipes stand in order. Big ones, little ones.

Powwyss lifts the lid on the keys. His fingers are thin, very clean.

What's him want me to do now?

'The case of this chamber organ is walnut. Beautifully made. I hope it will amuse you, Warlow. It's a good one; I tried several and this was certainly the best. While you play you pump with your feet to keep the air going through the pipes. Not too heavily. You don't want to crack the underboard.'

He sits. Feet up and down, treading. It wheezes like an old woman.

'See?' He plays a tune, humming with it. 'The conquering hero! That'll keep you in the right mood.'

'Couldn't never do that.'

'Mm. Well, you can sing, can't you? You could pick out the notes of a tune with one finger.' *I sings in the Dog. The others'd laugh at this!* Looks away, sheepish.

'Of course I didn't know who would take up the offer. There's a whole folder of music: more Handel, hymns, J.C. Bach. But no matter.

‘Now, come this way. This little room’s the bathroom. Water comes into the bath from the cistern. Turn the tap.’

‘Bath? Sir?’

‘I know there’ll be no one to see you, but you’ll want to wash yourself. Even without grime from fields and horses and so on. Your beard and hair will grow long. Remember? No cutting. There are no scissors, no knives. You couldn’t cut your own hair anyway, could you?’ *Gabble, gabble. Him’s gabblin like a goose can’t stop. Not drunk though. Don’t get drunk not him.*

Powyss looks him up and down. ‘Hmm. You may find the bathtub a tight fit, Warlow. But look, here’s the soap, Military Cake, nothing too perfumed. Toothbrush, powder. When you need replenishments you must ask. Do that by writing a note, then ring the bell and send it up. The water’s cold of course. At one time that was thought to be very good for the health, but the bath’s not so far from the fire. The cistern’s over there to one side. Keep an eye on it, please.’

They wander back. Fire’s blazing merrily.

‘Send up your dirty linen. Send up your pot from the close-stool.’

Pot! Close-stool! He looks down. Sees his feet, his great clogs. Powyss’s leather shoes. Small for a man.

‘What work’ll I do, sir?’

‘Living here will be your work. Living here for seven years. For the sake of knowledge, of science: to see how you fare without human society. Your name will become known, Warlow! You’ll become famous.

‘Think of hermits who choose to live on their own for the rest of their lives, let alone seven years. Still, hermits spend their days in prayer and I’m not employing you to do that.’ He breaks off.

‘Do you believe in God, Warlow?’

‘I goes to church Christmastide.’

‘Well, never mind, I’m not quizzing you. Rarely go myself.

I've put a Bible here among the books, though. That could occupy you for seven years at least!' He laughs, uneasy-like. *Wish him'd go, let me get on with it.*

'Keep the place tidy and swept, won't you. There are brooms, everything you need of that nature. Wind the clock every eighth day and note the date or you'll lose track of time. This is the date hand. See, it shows which day of the month it is. If the chimes get on your nerves stop winding that side.' *Can't remember all that.*

'Read the books and ask for any others you fancy. I've chosen them carefully. But I have a large library; you can ask for anything you like.'

'Never read a book.'

'*Blessed is he that readeth!* And now you'll have the time to do it. You *can* read, can't you? You said you could. And write? Of course you can, you signed the contract. There are pens, ink, paper and a journal. See, here's the first, 1793. Please keep the journal. I'll send a new one each year. Keeping it will help you and be crucial for me when I write everything up to send to the Royal Society.'

'Journal, what is that, Mr Powyss, sir?'

'You write in it what you do each day. First you write the date, then what has happened that day or you write what you're thinking. Nothing very difficult. It's a good thing you had *some* schooling.'

'It were long years afore.'

'It'll all come back to you, I'm sure.'

Powyss shakes his hand. *Him's had enough too.*

'Good luck, Warlow! Don't forget, your wife and children are taken care of. You'll do it! We meet again in 1800.'

He smiles. Goes off in his fine black velvet breeches and coat. Locks the door. Instructs the footman Samuel on the other side.

Planks nailed across. Four of them. Hammering. The sound of metal sinking into the frame.

Herbert Powyss walked straight out of the house into the orchard. He was elated. He hadn't spoken so much in such a short time for years, being normally silent; solipsism a tendency from his youth. Now, having showered the man with instructions, he couldn't keep still; paced between young trees, touching them with careful fingers as if in greeting. He felt propelled from the small of his back. Light wind pelted him with plum blossom.

At last he would contribute something important to the sphere he so admired: natural philosophy, science. He'd spent too long treading the margins. Reading, always reading, travelling when younger, attending to his small estate in middle age. Soon he would be forty-five, his hair, when he cared to look at it, was turning grey. He was pleased with the improvements made to the house, successful cultivation of flowers, trees, fruit. He bought wisely on trips to nurseries in Turnham Green, Shepherd's Bush or Loddiges in Hackney, seed shops in Fenchurch Street. Filled books of notes. He'd built a hothouse, his own design but based on those he'd seen in Chelsea and elsewhere. Nine foot wide, sixty foot long, it was heated by a boiler that ran on sea coal, lit in November, extinguished when all danger of frost had passed. Sea coal burned with little smoke, wouldn't choke tender seedlings.

Over the years he'd tested seeds, especially the newest imports from South America and the Antipodes, experimented with the grafting of pear stock. He'd sent several short papers to the Royal Society. A favourite was his recent *Investigation into the Effectiveness of Chevalier de Bienenberg's Method of Preserving Blossoming Fruit Trees from Spring Frosts, in the County of Herefordshire*. His were minor papers, it's true, but contributions all the same. Yet Benjamin Fox had asked a question some years ago, a question that pulled him up, that he couldn't quite forget. *Who is it all for?*

Well, he'd replied, a few plantsmen might read my papers on the Chinese Lily Tree or on the nervous Cape Horn Pea. A few of the Fellows might remember my name. But Powyss had no children, not even a wife, no siblings, no family at all. Everything he did was for his own satisfaction.

He both enjoyed and resented the dialogue with Fox, conducted entirely by letter. It had become a habit. They'd attended the same school, where they'd disliked each other. But an epistolary relationship that required no physical presence suited both, grew after they'd left school. It was a diversion for the intellect. Powyss entertained Fox with botanical and architectural details, Fox wagged his Unitarian finger. They quoted morsels of their latest reading and Latin tags dragged up from their schooling, exchanged political opinions, Powyss tentatively, since he wasn't really interested, Fox with vigour. Fox would insist on comparing the condition of the poor in London with the poor in the Marches, though Powyss saw little enough, ensconced as he was most of the time in his house and garden. Even when Fox walked on the Heath he encountered tinkers and gypsies. Powyss could walk for miles and meet nothing but sheep.

Only once had Powyss, on a seed-and-plant-buying excursion to London, visited Fox at his house in Hampstead. It had been a mistake.

The house was a pleasant modern design, though almost too small for Fox's large person and ebullient personality. He showed Powyss into his study.

'This is where I write my epistles to wild Herefordshire! The desk was my father's. Vicar of St Mary at Finchley. Fortunately he died before I abandoned the Trinity, else he might have cut me out.'

Comfortably if randomly furnished, the centre of the house was the dining room, in which a large oblong table apparently seated a good crowd of Fox's friends.

'Yes, here and at each other's houses, turn and turn about,

we feast on ideas. And feed ourselves too, you can be sure of *that*. How we chew on the constitution, Powyss! How we dice up the monarchy into a ragout, chop the government into a salmagundi! Of course the best gatherings are John Tooke's in Wimbledon, for which, however, the distance obliges me to rise much earlier than I should like.

'But you say you do not ever entertain, Powyss?'

'Never.'

'And you persist in your agnosticism? Think it's all flam.'

'Yes.'

'Then I insist that you accompany me to Newington Green one Sunday, for, you know, we Unitarians have the only rational religion in existence. It ought to suit you.'

Fox was overbearing, his sociability, his certainty oppressive. At any moment Powyss felt he'd be tripped up by a verbal foot, gouty though Fox's actual feet undoubtedly were. There appeared to be no common ground between them. In letter form it mattered not, but facing the man was intolerable. Behind Fox's fat back, Powyss strongly desired to slip away.

But now, at last, he had an excellent answer to Fox's question and a firm counter to the implicit criticism of his way of life. His experiment was *not* just for himself. It was for science, for mankind. For all who would learn how it might be possible for a human being to live without the company of others, without seeing another human face. For all who were curious about the resilience of the human mind. What could be more important than that?

He stopped to inspect a group of trees. New gages. If the spring weather remained clement and the bees continued their work there might be a small harvest of fruit even in their first year.

★

He stands unmoving. Hears Samuel's boots ascend the stone steps. Then nothing.

Well! Well, John, well! These 'apartments' be mine. All for me. Everythin here be for me. And soon there be food comin. Well!

He pulls the chair out from the table, presses its upholstered seat with his palms, smoothes it. Sits down, hands on knees. Wipes his cuff over his forehead. Wet with anxious sweat.

What to do? What to do first. How to begin it. What to *do*?

Just have to live, Powyss said. *Live*. That means eat. Sleep. Not cut his hair. Wind clock. *What else him want me to do?* Write journal, but he'll not do that *yet*. And the reward! Hannah, childer 'taken care of'. Shan't trouble about *them*. Then soon as he's out, fifty pound for the rest of his life. Fifty pound *every year*. *Very good!*

He takes Powyss's lamp by its ring to survey the place. Useful thing. Flame inside the glass chimney; won't set fire. Better than rushes. Better than tallow.

Sets off down a short corridor: bedroom. Look at that! Brass bed all shone up. Pats it like a horse's flank. Touches everything in turn: chest, mirror, press, carved-leg chair, more pictures on the wall. Covered wooden box in the corner. Lifts the lid: pisspot. What *him* calls *close-stool*. *Got to carry my own pot of piss from here to the waiter thing!* He tries to piss in it but nothing comes.

He sits on the bed, jumps up as if stung on the arse. *I've dirtied it. But no: it's mine!* Sits again, fingers the pillows, three and a bolster. Prods them gently: *feathers* not straw. Soft. Pushes his great face into them. Can hardly wait to sleep.

But not yet. Back again to the big room, then the small room. *Bath*. Wood round it painted green. Chair, painted cupboard. What's inside? Soap. Holds it to his nose. Ooph! Box of, what's it say? *Tooth Pow der*. Pats the iron cistern. Keep an eye on it, he said. What'd he mean?

Turkey carpet covers the flags in the big room, muffles the

clumping of his clogs. He puts the lamp on the table. Lights up the place set for his meal.

He sits. Look: lamp be reflected in the glass bookcase. He grips the silver spoon and fork one in each hand. Waits for a dish to appear like magic. What will it be? Huge meat pie on a golden plate. Steaming. Meaty. He salivates.

But there's no dish, no pie.

He stands. Blinking. Listening. Waiting. The clock strikes but he forgets to count.

What to *do*. Fire's dying down. He puts on more coal, banks it up. Picks up the irons one at a time, replaces them carefully as if not to disturb. Straightens up, notices a picture hanging above the mantle shelf. Bearded man in hat and jacket of animal skin from the looks of it, tying something. Sewing? No! Can't tell. Looks at another picture. Flowers. Old leaves. Apple going bad. Another, bigger. Men forking hay in a field. Seen *that* enough times. Children at the edge of the field in torn skirts.

He feels dizzy from peering. From strangeness. Sits in the chair by the fire, high-backed, more comfortable than any he's ever sat in in his life. Stares into the fire. Wide-eyed, rigid.

*

In fact the last thing Powyss had in mind when the experiment took root was hermits. Hermits were men who chose to live away from others for a spiritual purpose, often with extreme privations. From a sense of such sinfulness that mortification of the flesh became the only path.

Powyss had long stopped believing in God. His boyhood prayers were never answered. He knew that events happened in the world, in Moreham, in his garden, in the hothouse, that had nothing to do with any deity. And he didn't see this view as a lack; didn't *think* about it except when pushed into argument by Fox, when he usually took an agnostic position,

though occasionally, for the sake of the fight, an atheist one. But he was not intolerant. If someone chose an emaciated life of repentance then let him. He wouldn't spend any time thinking about it.

No, this experiment of his had nothing to do with the spirit. Nor was there anything ornamental about it. He'd heard of estates with hermit's caves, others where the owner had huts built specially out of tree trunks, even roots, to some poetic design. Of pebble floors, walls craftily half ruined. Of bearded old men employed to mutter and scurry away from grinning visitors. He loathed the Gothic manner, its darkness of thought, its tedious novels stuffed with castles, monks, madmen, passions. There were no false battlements, minstrel galleries, sham ruined chapels at Moreham House. No castellated follies clad in ivy.

There was a real and fascinating thesis to test: that a man could survive alone, without others.

The trigger had been a brief newspaper report of a man released from confinement alone in Dorchester Castle. No information was given about why he'd been imprisoned in a cell on his own for four years, but what had delighted Powyss was the moment of the man's release. After all that time without company he'd turned to the gaoler and spouted Virgil. (Annoying that the report hadn't given the actual words: perhaps they'd been *Non equidem invideo*, if he truly bore his gaoler no grudge. On the other hand *Nunc frondent silvae, nunc formosissimus annus* would be *my* choice, he thought, assuming it was spring and trees blossoming.) But the point was that the man had retained a sprightly mind despite removal from the world.

Of course Powyss had read about Alexander Selkirk, the model for Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. It was an irresistible story, as was *Crusoe* itself. Selkirk's story was true, Crusoe's fiction. Their trials were great: thrust onto unknown lands, they had to construct shelters, make clothes, shoes, hunt for

food. The details fascinated him as they did all readers who lived in houses with fires laid and lit for them and regular meals cooked by others. But as one who shunned his fellows, had avoided them even from earliest childhood, Powyss saw in Robinson Crusoe the supreme solitary. The book had haunted him all his life.

How could such resilience be tested? Selkirk had been abandoned, Crusoe survived shipwreck. What if physical danger were removed? What if there were none of the self-imposed privations of the ascetic, none of the guilt or remorse of the prisoner? What if all emotional burdens were removed, no spiritual regimes of prayer and penitence demanded? The human mind was capable of infinite journeying within itself. It needed a body in which to live, a body in health. But what need had it of other minds? How long could it survive *solus*, in solitude, feeding on its own riches? One year? Seven years? A lifetime? Could a man survive *in comfort* with the company of himself alone?

*

Waits. Waits.

Nothing happens.

What will I . . . ? Him said. Him said what?

He stands up. Walks round the table. Twice. Round the other way, slowly. Hands hang down, heavy like sacks.

Not goin in them other rooms.

He sits. Stares at the flames. Closes his eyes but there's yellow dots from the flames.

He listens to his breaths.

Tries breathing faster. Tries stopping. Gasps for air. Yawns till his jaw seems to crack.

No sound. Nothing. Nobody.

John! He's glad to hear his own voice. *John Warlow. I be here. Down here.*

What else can he say?

He thumps the table, bang, a good sound. And whack again with both hands. Whack, whack.

Quiet, terrible quiet.

He strains to hear. *Somethin. Must be somebody.*

Them be gone home then.

No! Them's sittin outside waitin to hear me move about! That's it!

He clears his throat heavily. To let them know. Spits the gob from his throat into the fire with a good fizzle.

No sound. *Them's not hearin.* Moves over to the door, stands next to it. Gives it a push. What if it be open all the time!

Coughs loudly, very loudly.

Nothing. Nothing except ticks, damned clock. *Do I wind im? Niver did have a clock.*

What will I . . . ?

Quiet. Like a weight on his head, back of his neck.

Day must be gone. Be night then. Must be. Why there's nothing to do. He turns out the lamp, snuffs the candles to see if it's night.

Dark!

But it weren't nearly night afore, when I come down. Or were it?

His heart begins to thump. *Be it night? Were it?* He doesn't know, can't remember. His mind buzzes like flies on a dead dog.

Lights a candle at the fire and it's day again.

Sits in the armchair once more. Thumping slows.

Silence pounds in his ears instead.

He pulls at his fingers, kneads swollen knuckles.

Pokes up flames. Stares till the yellow dots.

*

Powyss's experiment would be entitled *Investigation into the Resilience of the Human Mind Without Society*. Of course it was strictly limited: there was neither classification nor system-making. He'd not be remembered among the greatest natural philosophers.