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Series Fifteen

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JOHN COWPER POWYS

(1872-1963)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Cowher Powys". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and 'P'.

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Version 1

The Complete Works of
JOHN COWPER POWYS



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Complete Works of John Cowper Powys



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The Wessex Novels



Shirley, a small village in Derbyshire — John Cowper Powys' birthplace



St Michael's Church, Shirley — where the author's father, Rev. Charles Francis Powys, served as vicar

Wolf Solent (1929)



Wolf Solent was first published in New York by Simon and Schuster in the spring of 1929, followed by a British edition released two months later by Jonathan Cape. It was the author's fourth published novel and his first commercial success as a writer. It sold well in America and Britain and was translated into multiple European languages in the early 1930's. Powys began writing the novel at the start of 1925 while working as a lecturer in America. He had commenced his long teaching career in the mid-1890's at a girls' school in Hove, Sussex before being appointed a lecturer for Oxford University Extension at the turn of the century. In 1905, he moved to America, where he would remain for more than twenty-five years.

The first of Powys' 'Wessex Novels', *Wolf Solent* forms part of a series of books inspired by the changing culture and landscape of rural southwest England in the twentieth century. The novel centres on the eponymous Wolf Solent, a thirty-five-year-old teacher in London, who at the start of the narrative returns to the small fictional town of Ramsgard in Dorset, having suffered a nervous breakdown. He is despondent about modern life and hopes to find solace and refuge in an environment that will shield him from the complexities of human society. However, his inner struggles only intensify as circumstances violently encroach on his personal 'mythology' and attempts to escape the realities of the external world.

WOLF
SOLENT

By

JOHN
COWPER
POWYS

The first edition

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Sherborne, a market town in north west Dorset, c. 1900 — the model for the fictional town of Ramsgard

VOLUME I.



AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

TO

FATHER HAMILTON COWPER JOHNSON

THE FACE ON THE WATERLOO STEPS



FROM WATERLOO STATION to the small country town of Ramsgard in Dorset is a journey of not more than three or four hours, but having by good luck found a compartment to himself, Wolf Solent was able to indulge in such an orgy of concentrated thought, that these three or four hours lengthened themselves out into something beyond all human measurement.

A bluebottle fly buzzed up and down above his head, every now and then settling on one of the coloured advertisements of seaside resorts — Weymouth, Swanage, Lulworth, and Poole — cleaning its front legs upon the masts of painted ships or upon the sands of impossibly cerulean waters.

Through the open window near which he sat, facing the engine, the sweet airs of an unusually relaxed March morning visited his nostrils, carrying fragrances of young green shoots, of wet muddy ditches, of hazel-copses full of damp moss, and of primroses on warm grassy hedge-banks.

Solent was not an ill-favoured man; but on the other hand he was not a prepossessing one. His short stubbly hair was of a bleached tow-colour. His forehead as well as his rather shapeless chin had a tendency to slope backward, a peculiarity which had the effect of throwing the weight of his character upon the curve of his hooked nose and upon the rough, thick eyebrows that overarched his deeply sunken grey eyes.

He was tall and lean; and as he stretched out his legs and clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head over his bony wrists, it would have been difficult to tell whether the goblinish grimaces that occasionally wrinkled his physiognomy were fits of sardonic chuckling or spasms of reckless desperation.

His mood, whatever its elements may have been, was obviously connected with a crumpled letter which he more than once drew forth from his side-pocket, rapidly glanced over, and replaced, only to relapse into the same pose as before.

The letter which thus affected him was written in a meticulously small hand and ran as follows:

My Dear Sir: —

Will you be so kind as to arrive at Ramsgard on Thursday in time to meet my friend Mr. Darnley Otter about five o'clock in the tea-room of the Lovelace Hotel? He will be driving over to King's Barton that afternoon and will convey you to his mother's house, where for the present you will have your room. If it is convenient I would regard it as a favour if you will come up and dine with me on the night of your arrival. I dine at eight o'clock; and we shall be able to talk things over.

I must again express my pleasure at your so prompt acceptance of my poor offer.

Yours faithfully,

John Urquhart.

He re-invoked the extraordinary incident which had led to his "prompt acceptance" of Mr. Urquhart's "poor offer."

He was now thirty-five and for ten years he had laboriously taught History at a small institution in the city of London, living peacefully under the despotic affection of his mother, with whom, when he was only a child of ten, he had left Dorsetshire, and along with Dorsetshire all the agitating memories of his dead father.

As it happened, his new post, as literary assistant to the Squire of King's Barton, brought him to the very scene of these disturbing memories; for it was from a respectable position as History Master in Ramsgard School that his father had descended, by a series of mysterious headlong plunges, until he lay dead in the cemetery of that town, a byword of scandalous depravity.

It was only the fact that the Squire of King's Barton was a relative of Lord Carfax, a cousin of Wolf's mother, that had made it possible for him to find a retreat, suitable to his not very comprehensive abilities, after the astounding *dénouement* of his London life.

He could visualize now, as if it had occurred that very day instead of two months ago, the outraged anger upon his mother's face, when he communicated to her what had happened. He had danced his "malice-dance" — that is how he himself expressed it — in the middle of an innocent discourse on the reign of Queen Anne. He was telling his pupils quite quietly about Dean Swift; and all of a sudden some mental screen or lid or dam in his own mind completely collapsed and he found himself pouring forth a torrent of wild, indecent invectives upon every aspect of modern civilization.

He had, in fact, so at least he told his mother, danced his "malice-dance" on that quiet platform to so abandoned a tune, that no "authorities," in so far as they retained their natural instincts at all, could possibly condone it.

And now, with that event behind him, he was escaping from the weight of maternal disapproval into the very region where the grand disaster of his mother's life had occurred.

They had had some very turbulent scenes after the receipt of Mr. Urquhart's first answer to his appeal. But as she had no income and only very limited savings, the sheer weight of economic necessity drove her into submission.

"You shall come down to me there when I've got a cottage," he had flung out; and her agitated, handsome face, beneath its disordered mass of wavy, grey hair, had hardened itself under the impact of those words, as if he had taken up her most precious tea-set and dashed it into fragments at her feet.

One of the suppressed emotions that had burst forth on that January afternoon had had to do with the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners. He recalled the figure of a man he had seen on the steps outside Waterloo Station. The inert despair upon the face that this figure had turned towards him came between him now and a hillside covered with budding beeches. The face was repeated many times among those great curving masses of emerald-clear foliage. It was an English face; and it was also a Chinese face, a Russian face, an Indian face. It had the variability of that Protean wine of the priestess Bacbus. It was just the face of a man, of a mortal man against whom Providence had grown as malignant as a mad dog. And the woe upon the face was of such a character that Wolf knew at once that no conceivable social readjustments or ameliorative revolutions could ever atone for it — could ever make up for the simple irremediable fact that it *had* been as it had been!

By the time the hill of beeches had disappeared, he caught sight of a powerful motor-lorry clanging its way along a narrow road, leaving a cloud of dust behind it, and the sight of this thing gave his thought a new direction. There arose before him, complicated and inhuman, like a moving tower of instruments and appliances, the monstrous Apparition of Modern Invention.

He felt as though, with aeroplanes spying down upon every retreat like ubiquitous vultures, with the lanes invaded by iron-clad motors like colossal beetles, with no sea,

no lake, no river, free from throbbing, thudding engines, the one thing most precious of all in the world was being steadily assassinated.

In the dusty, sunlit space of that small tobacco-stained carriage, he seemed to see, floating and helpless, an image of the whole round earth! And he saw it bleeding and victimized, like a smooth-bellied, vivisected frog. He saw it scooped and gouged and scraped and harrowed. He saw it hawked at out of the humming air. He saw it netted in a quivering entanglement of vibrations, heaving and shuddering under the weight of iron and stone.

Where, he asked himself, as for the twentieth time he took out and put back Mr. Urquhart's letter — where, in such a vivisected frog's-belly of a world, would there be a place left for a person to think any single thought that was leisurely and easy? And, as he asked himself this and mentally formed a visual image of what he considered "thought," such "thought" took the form of slowly stirring, vegetable leaves, big as elephants' feet, hanging from succulent and cold stalks on the edges of woodland swamps.

And then, stretching out his legs still further and leaning back against the dusty cushions, he set himself to measure the resources of his spirit against these accursed mechanisms. He did this quite gravely, with no comic uneasiness at the arrogance of such a proceeding. Why should he not pit his individual magnetic strength against the tyrannous machinery invented by other men?

In fact, the thrill of malicious exultation that passed through his nerves as he thought of these things had a curious resemblance to the strange ecstasy he used to derive from certain godlike mythological legends. He would never have confessed to any living person the intoxicating enlargement of personality that used to come to him from imagining himself a sort of demiurgic force, drawing its power from the heart of Nature herself.

And it was just that sort of enlargement he experienced now, when he felt the mysterious depths of his soul stirred and excited by his defiance of these modern inventions. It was not as though he fell back on any traditional archaic obstinacy. What he fell back upon was a crafty, elusive cunning of his own, a cunning both slippery and serpentine, a cunning that could flow like air, sink like rain-water, rise like green sap, root itself like invisible spores of moss, float like filmy pond-scum, yield and retreat, retreat and yield, yet remain unconquered and inviolable!

As he stared out the open window and watched each span of telegraph-wires sink slowly down till the next telegraph-post pulled them upward with a jerk, he indulged himself in a sensation which always gave him a peculiar pleasure, the sensation of imagining himself to be a prehistoric giant who with an effortless ease ran along by the side of the train, leaping over hedges, ditches, lanes, and ponds, and easily rivalled, in natural-born silent speed, the noisy mechanism of all those pistons and cog-wheels!

He felt himself watching this other-self, this leaping giant, with the positive satisfaction of a hooded snake, thrusting out a flickering forked tongue from coils that shimmered in the sun. And yet as the train rushed forward, it seemed to him as if his real self were neither giant nor snake; but rather that black-budded ash-tree, still in the rearward of its leafy companions, whose hushed grey branches threw so contorted a shadow upon the railway bank.

Soon the train that carried him ran rapidly past the queer-looking tower of Basingstoke church, and his thoughts took yet another turn. There was a tethered cow eating grass in the churchyard; and as for the space of a quarter of a minute he

watched this cow, it gathered to itself such an inviolable placidity that its feet seemed planted in a green pool of quietness that was older than life itself.

But the Basingstoke church-tower substituted itself for the image of the cow; and it seemed to Solent as though all the religions in the world were nothing but so many creaking and splashing barges, whereon the souls of men ferried themselves over those lakes of primal silence, disturbing the swaying water-plants that grew there and driving away the shy water-fowl!

He told himself that every church-tower in the land overlooked a graveyard, and that in every graveyard was a vast empty grave waiting for the "Jealous Father of Men" who lived in the church. He knew there was just such a church-tower at King's Barton, and another one at Ramsgard, and yet another at Blacksod, the town on the further side of Mr. Urquhart's village.

He sat very upright now, as the train approached Andover; and the idea came into his head, as he fixed his gaze on his fellow traveller, the bluebottle fly, who was cleaning his front legs on a picture of Swanage pier, that from tower to tower of these West Country churches there might be sent, one gusty November night, a long-drawn melancholy cry, a cry heard only by dogs and horses and geese and cattle and village-idiots, the real death-cry of a god — dead at last of extreme old age!

"Christ is different from God," he said to himself. "Only when God is really dead will Christ be known for what He is. Christ will take the place of God then."

As a sort of deliberate retort to these wild fancies, the tall spire of Salisbury Cathedral rose suddenly before him. Here the train stopped; and though even here — possibly because his absorption in his thoughts gave him a morose and uncongenial appearance — no one entered his third-class carriage, the stream of his cogitations began to grow less turbid, less violent, less destructive. The austerity of Salisbury Plain yielded now to the glamour of Blackmore Vale. Dairy-farms took the place of sheep-farms; lush pastures, of bare chalk-downs; enclosed orchards, of open cornfields; and park-like moss-grown oaks, of wind-swept naked thorn-bushes.

The green, heavily-grassed meadows through which the train moved now, the slow, brown, alder-shaded streams, the tall hedgerows, the pollarded elms — all these things made Solent realize how completely he had passed from the sphere of his mother's energetic ambitions into the more relaxed world, rich and soft and vaporous as the airs that hung over those mossy ditches, that had been the native land of the man in the Ramsgard cemetery.

His mother's grievances, posthumous and belated, but full of an undying vigour, had never really made him hate his father; and somehow the outburst that had ended his scholastic career had released certain latent instincts in him which now turned, with a fling of rebellious satisfaction, to the wavering image of his sinister begetter.

Children, he knew, were often completely different from both their progenitors, but Wolf had a shrewd suspicion that there was very little in him that did not revert, on one side or the other, to his two parents. He was now thirty-five, a grim, harassed-looking, clean-shaven man, with sunken eye-sockets; but he felt his heart beating with keen excitement, as, after an absence of a quarter of a century, he returned to his native pastures.

What would he find in that house of "Darnley Otter's mother?" Who was this Darnley Otter? What had he to do with Mr. Urquhart? And what would Mr. Urquhart reveal that evening as to the form his own services were to take?

As the train drew up at Semley, he read the words, "For Shaftesbury," upon the notice-board; and very soon the high grassy battlements of the great heathen fortress loomed against the sky-line.

Staring at those turf-covered bastions, and drawing into his lungs lovely breathings from damp moss and cold primroses — breathings that seemed to float up and down that valley on airy journeys of their own — he found himself gathering his mental resources together so as to face with a concentrated spirit whatever awaited him in these pleasant places.... “Christ is not a man; He never *was* a man,” he thought. “And He will be more than a god when God is dead.... Three church-towers... three. Ramsgard... King’s Barton... Blacksod... it’s quaint to think that I’ve absolutely no idea what I shall be feeling when I touch with my hand the masonry of those three towers... or what people I shall know! I hope I shall find some girl who’ll let me make love to her... tall and slim and white! I’d like her to be *very* white... with a tiny little mole, like Imogen’s, upon her left breast.... I’d like to make love to her out-of-doors... among elder-bushes... among elder-bushes and herb-Robert....”

He pulled in his legs and clasped his hands over his knees, leaning forward, frowning and intent. “I don’t care whether I make money. I don’t care whether I get fame. I don’t care whether I leave any work behind me when I die. All I want is certain sensations!” And with all the power of his wits he set himself to try and analyze what these sensations were that he wanted beyond everything.

The first thing he did was to attempt to analyze a mental device he was in the habit of resorting to — a device that supplied him with the secret substratum of his whole life. This was a certain trick he had of doing what he called “sinking into his soul.” This trick had been a furtive custom with him from very early days. In his childhood his mother had often rallied him about it in her light-hearted way, and had applied to these trances, or these fits of absent-mindedness, an amusing but rather indecent nursery name. His father, on the other hand, had encouraged him in these moods — taking them very gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of infant magician.

It was, however, when staying in his grandmother’s house at Weymouth, that the word had come to him which he now always used in his own mind to describe these obsessions. It was the word “mythology”; and he used it entirely in a private sense of his own. He could remember very well where he first came upon the word. It was in a curious room, called “the ante-room,” which was connected by folding-doors with his grandmother’s drawing-room, and which was filled with the sort of ornamental débris that middle-class people were in the habit of acquiring in the early years of Queen Victoria. The window of his grandmother’s room opened upon the sea; and Wolf, carrying the word “mythology” into this bow-window, allowed it to become his own secret name for his own secret habit.

This “sinking into his soul” — this sensation which he called “mythology” — consisted of a certain summoning-up, to the surface of his mind, of a subconscious magnetic power which from those very early Weymouth days, as he watched the glitter of sun and moon upon the waters from that bow-window, had seemed prepared to answer such a summons.

This secret practice was always accompanied by an arrogant mental idea — the idea, namely, that he was taking part in some occult cosmic struggle — some struggle between what he liked to think of as “good” and what he liked to think of as “evil” in those remote depths.

How it came about that the mere indulgence in a sensation that was as thrilling as a secret vice should have the power of rousing so bold an arrogance. Wolf himself was never able to explain; for his “mythology,” as he called it, had no outlet in any sort of action. It was limited entirely to a secret sensation in his own mind, such as he would have been hard put to it to explain in intelligible words to any living person.

But such as it was, his profoundest personal pride — what might be called his dominant *life-illusion* — depended entirely upon it.

Not only had he no ambition for action; he had no ambition for any sort of literary or intellectual achievement. He hid, deep down in his being, a contempt that was actually *malicious* in its pride for all the human phenomena of worldly success. It was as if he had been some changeling from a different planet, a planet where the issues of life — the great dualistic struggles between life and death — never emerged from the charmed circle of the individual's private consciousness.

Wolf himself, if pressed to describe it, would have used some simple earthly metaphor. He would have said that his magnetic impulses resembled the expanding of great vegetable leaves over a still pool — leaves nourished by hushed noons, by liquid transparent nights, by all the movements of the elements — but making some inexplicable difference, merely by their spontaneous expansion, to the great hidden struggle always going on in Nature between the good and the evil forces.

Outward things, such as that terrible face on the Waterloo steps or that tethered cow he had seen at Basingstoke, were to him like faintly limned images in a mirror, the true reality of which lay all the while in his mind — in these hushed expanding leaves — in this secret vegetation — the roots of whose being hid themselves beneath the dark waters of his consciousness.

What he experienced now was a vague wonder as to whether the events that awaited him — these new scenes — these unknown people — would be able to do what no outward events had yet done — break up this mirror of half-reality and drop great stones of real reality — drop them and lodge them — hard, brutal, material stones — down there among those dark waters and that mental foliage.

“Perhaps I've never known reality as other human beings know it,” he thought. “My life has been industrious, monotonous, patient. I've carried my load like a camel. And I've been able to do this because it hasn't been my real life at all! My ‘mythology’ has been my real life.”

The bluebottle fly moved slowly and cautiously across Weymouth Bay, apparently seeking some invisible atom of sustenance, seeking it now off Redcliff, now off Ringstead, now off White Nore.

A sudden nervousness came upon him and he shivered a little. “What if this new reality, when it does come, smashes up my whole secret life? But perhaps it won't be like a rock or stone... perhaps it won't be like a tank or lorry or an aeroplane...”

He clasped his bony fingers tightly together. “Some girl who'll let me make love to her... ‘white as a peeled willow-wand’... make love to her in the middle of a hazel wood... green moss... primroses... moschatel... whiteness...” He unclasped his fingers; and then clasped them again, this time with the left hand above the right hand.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the train drew up at Longborne Port, a village which he knew was the last stop before he reached Ramsgard.

He rose from his seat and took down his things from the rack, causing, as he did so, so much agitation to his only travelling-companion, the bluebottle fly, that it escaped with an indignant humming through the window into the unfamiliar air-fields of Dorsetshire.

A young, lanky, bareheaded porter, with a countenance of whimsical inanity, bawled out at the top of his voice, as he rattled his milk-cans: “Longborne Port! Longborne Port!”

Nobody issued from the train. Nothing was put out of the train except empty milk-cans. The young man's voice, harsh as a corncrake's, seemed unable to disturb the

impenetrable security which hung, like yellow pollen upon a drooping catkin, over those ancient orchards and muddy lanes.

And there suddenly broke in upon the traveller, as he resumed his seat, with his coat and stick and bag spread out before him, the thought of how those particular syllables— “Longborne Port!” — mingling with the clatter of milk-cans, would reproduce to some long-dead human skull, roused to sudden consciousness after centuries of non-existence, the very essence of the familiar life upon earth!

What dark November twilights, what drowsy August noons, what squirtings of white milk into shining pails, would those homely syllables summon forth!

He lay back, breathing rather quickly, as the train moved out of that small station. For the last time he took from his pocket Mr. Urquhart’s letter. “Darnley Otter!” he said to himself. “It’s odd to think how little that name means now, and how much it may mean tomorrow!” Why was it that, when the future was very likely all there already, stretched out like the great Wessex Fosse-way in front of him, he didn’t get some sort of second-sight about it by merely reading those words in Mr. Urquhart’s neat hand? What kind of man was Darnley Otter? Was he a plain, middle-aged man like himself or was he a beautiful youth? The idea of beautiful youths made his mind once more revert to “peeled willow-wands,” but he easily suppressed this thought in the excitement of the moment.

Ay! There were the ruins of the great Elizabethan’s castle. And *there* was the wide grassy expanse where the town held its Annual Agricultural Show, and where the Ramsgard schoolboys were wont in old days to run their Steeplechase!

How it all came back! Twenty-five years it was, since he left it, frightened and bewildered by his parents’ separation; and how little it had changed!

He let his gaze wander over the high tops of the park beech-trees till it lost itself in the blue sky.

Millions of miles of blue sky; and beyond that, millions of miles of sky that could scarcely be called blue or any other colour — pure unalloyed emptiness, stretching outwards from where he sat — with his stick and coat opposite him — to no conceivable boundary or end! Didn’t that almost prove that the whole affair was a matter of thought?

Suppose he were now, at this moment, some Ramsgard boy returning to school? Suppose he were Solent Major instead of Wolf Solent? And suppose some genial house-master, meeting him on the platform, were to say to him: “Well, Solent, and what have *you* made of your twenty-five years’ holiday?” What would he answer to that?

As the train began to lessen its pace by the muddy banks of the river Lunt, he hurriedly, and as if from fear of that imaginary master, formulated his reply.

“I’ve learnt, Sir, to get my happiness out of sensation. I’ve learnt, Sir, when to think and when not to think. I’ve learnt...”

But at this point his excitement at catching sight of the familiar shape of the Lovelace Hotel, across the Public Gardens, was so overwhelming, that the imaginary catechism came to an end in mid-air.

“I shall send my things over in the bus,” he thought, standing up and grasping his bag. “And then I shall go and see if Selena Gault is still alive!”

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End of Sample