

The Experiment

January 12, 1796

Bristol, England

Dear Mrs. Phipps:

You don't know me--and I don't know you 'cept it's the talk that Mr. Jenner is going to use your boy James for an 'experiment'. Mrs. Phipps, you mustn't let him!

I saw Mr. Jenner quite a few years ago ('66 I think it was), when he was still an apprentice at the surgery in Sodbury. I can't remember what was ailing me but I do remember a little chat we had about the pox. I had told him that I couldn't catch smallpox because I'd had cowpox. My mother had packed me off one day to a 'cowparty'--whenever a cow on one of the farms had the pox, all the children in the village went to milk the cow--we'd stay past tea, play a bit o' tag or King's Statue--we'd have our 'cowparty', then all of us would get the cowpox (which is nothing, a few warts is all), and because of that we'd never get the smallpox (which as you know can be fatal).

Now I recall Mr. Jenner was quite interested in my belief. I told him it was not just 'my' belief--everyone I knew knew it--it was common knowledge, I told him. He insisted that it was perhaps, at best, a common 'belief'. That irked me, it did. So I asked him, what's the difference between belief and knowledge? He ever so kindly explained that when you *knew* something, it was true; but if you just *believed* it, well it could be nonsense. So I told him again that all the children who went to cowparties and got cowpox did not get smallpox---so it was true, wasn't it! He muttered something about old wives' tales, and I said simply the men knew it as well as the women. He stood up in frustration then and said, not without a touch of anger, 'but has it been *proved*? You haven't got *proof*!' 'What proof?' I asked. He paced around the room quite excited, 'proof, my dear, comes from intelligent observation and logical deduction,' he stopped to look down at me, 'that's *science*!' Well it seemed to me then that my belief had as much as proof as any--and was therefore knowledge--even science. But as Mr. Jenner seemed more

and more overcome by emotion, I wasn't about to stay and tell him that. He did seem a bit balmy then, off his chump, like.

Well now I hear he's going to do an experiment, to *prove* that getting cowpox stops you from getting smallpox. Well at first I laughed--if he only wants to find out *that* it's true and not *why* it's true, well he's not doing anything of interest, is he? And an experiment? Why what's an experiment but observation? The only difference I can see between what he's going to do and what we've been doing is he's going to observe something *he rigs* up, not something that's already happening in the normal course of things. And perhaps what with his lists of figures and dates, his notes--what does he call it, his 'data'--maybe he thinks *his* observations will be better. But of course *that's* nonsense, isn't it? Writing down what I see doesn't make what I see any different--better or worse. I could still see it wrong, or miss something altogether, couldn't I--I could even write it down wrong.

Just today I heard one of the lads say that if his experiment works, he'll surely be famous for discovering the smallpox vaccination. I asked what a vaccination was, and then he told me exactly what the experiment was all into. Well I laughed, the man's absurd isn't he to say he's going to *discover* a vaccination, since we've been 'vaccinating' against smallpox for years. After I thought a bit, I got angry--I should like to know if Mr. Jenner is going to give his vaccinations away--not bloody likely--I'll bet he's going to try to *sell* them, and make a pretty penny out of it! Doesn't seem proper, does it.

But then the horror hit me! If Mr. Jenner knows for certain that a cowpox vaccination will stop the smallpox, then why is he doing the experiment? And if he doesn't know for certain, then he's risking your boy's life! Mrs. Phipps, you must stop him! Ask him why he's not doing the experiment on himself! Go on, ask him!

Sincerely,

Ellen (the milkmaid)