



Silas Marner

GEORGE ELIOT

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Silas Marner, past and present

In the early years of the nineteenth century, strange-looking little men were often seen on the country roads, usually with a heavy bag on their shoulders. They were linen-weavers, taking the linen they had woven to the women in the villages. Unlike the strong, healthy country people, they were small and thin, with tired white faces, bent backs and round shoulders. They were often shortsighted too, because they had to look so closely at their work. To the villagers the weavers looked almost foreign, and quite frightening. Where did they come from? Was it the devil who sent them? Who were their parents? How could you trust a man if you didn't know his father or mother? Country people used to be very suspicious of all strangers and travellers. They were also suspicious of clever people, people who could do something they themselves had not learnt to do. That is why the linen-weavers, who often moved from towns to live and work in the country, were considered strangers all their lives by their neighbours, and were sometimes very lonely as a result.

Silas Marner was one of these weavers. He lived in a small cottage near the village of Raveloe. Every day he worked at his loom in the cottage. The small boys of Raveloe had never heard the sound of a loom before, and sometimes they used to run up to his house to look quickly in at the window. If Silas noticed them, he lifted his shortsighted eyes from the loom to stare at the boys. There was something terrible about his stare, which made

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the boys run away at once, screaming with fear. The villagers believed that Silas had an almost devilish power, which he could use to harm them if he wanted, and so they were all afraid of him. Raveloe was an important-looking village with a fine old church and a number of large farms. But it was at least an hour away from any other village, and very few strangers visited it, which explains why the villagers' opinions were so out of date.

Silas Marner had first come to Raveloe fifteen years before, as a young man. He and his way of life seemed very strange to the villagers. He worked long hours at his loom, and had no friends or visitors from the village or anywhere else. He never talked to his neighbours unless it was necessary for his work, and he never looked at any of the Raveloe girls. 'Who would want to marry him anyway?' the girls laughed to each other. 'Marry a dead man come to life again, with that unhealthy white skin and those insect-like eyes of his? Certainly not!'

One of the villagers had had a strange experience with Silas. One evening he had discovered the weaver resting on a field gate, his eyes open but unseeing, and his body cold and hard, like a dead man's. After a few moments Silas appeared to wake up, said 'Goodnight', and walked away.

When this was discussed in the village, some people thought that Silas had had a fit. But others, like Mr Macey, the church clerk, refused to accept a medical explanation.

'No, he isn't ill, that weaver,' said old Mr Macey, shaking his head knowingly. 'If he had a fit, he'd fall down, wouldn't he? I think his soul flies out of his body sometimes and that's why he

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looks so strange. He doesn't come to church, does he? And how does he know so much about medicines? You all remember how he made Sally Oates better, when the doctor himself could do no more for her. That's the devil's work, believe me!

However, the housewives needed Silas to weave their linen, and they could find nothing wrong with his work. The years passed, and Raveloe villagers did not change their opinion of the weaver. At the end of fifteen years they said exactly the same things about him, but they believed them more strongly. They also said that he had saved up a lot of money since he had come to Raveloe.

Silas had come from a large town to the north of Raveloe. Here he had lived a very different life. Because he was one of a large number of weavers, he was not considered strange, and he belonged to an enthusiastic religious group. They met every Sunday at the chapel in Light Street. Once, at a chapel meeting, Silas had become unconscious and had sat without moving, hearing or seeing, for over an hour. This experience made him specially interesting to the rest of the group.

'We should not call this strange unconsciousness a fit,' the minister, Mr Paston, told them. 'No, it's much more than that. In that moment, when he is absent from us, our young friend Silas's soul is *open*, open to a possible message from God. I believe he has been chosen by God!'

Silas's best friend at chapel was William Dane, a serious young man who was, some people thought, a little too sure of his own goodness and cleverness. Silas, however, could see no fault in him, and trusted his friend completely. They remained

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*Once, at a chapel meeting, Silas had been unconscious
for over an hour.*

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good friends, when Silas became engaged to a young woman, Sarah, who belonged to the same chapel. In fact Silas was delighted that Sarah did not mind if William joined them sometimes on their Sunday walks.

Strangely, when Silas had his fit at the chapel meeting, William was the only one who disagreed with the minister.

‘To me it looks more like the devil’s work than God’s,’ William had said. ‘Look deep into yourself, friend Silas. Is there any evil hiding in your soul?’

Silas was hurt that his friend doubted him, and he began to be worried, too, about Sarah. She seemed to be showing signs of dislike towards him, but when he asked her about it, she did not give him any answer.

At that time one of the chapel leaders was dangerously ill, and because he had no family, some of the young men offered to sit with him at night. One night Silas was sitting alone at the old man’s bedside. Time seemed to pass slowly in the quiet, dark room. But suddenly he realized that the man was no longer breathing. He was dead.

‘Strange!’ thought Silas. ‘His body’s cold! He’s been dead for some time! Why didn’t I notice? Perhaps I’ve had another fit. And it’s already four o’clock in the morning. Why hasn’t William come? He promised he’d come at two o’clock!’ He hurried out of the house to call the doctor and the minister, and then went to work as usual, still wondering why William had not arrived.

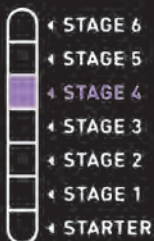
But that evening, after work, William came to his room, with the minister. They were both looking very serious.

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In a hole under the floorboards Silas Marner the linen-weaver keeps his gold. Every day he works hard at his weaving, and every night he takes the gold out and holds the bright coins lovingly, feeling them and counting them again and again. The villagers are afraid of him and he has no family, no friends. Only the gold is his friend, his delight, his reason for living.

But what if a thief should come in the night and take his gold away? What will Silas do then? What could possibly comfort him for the loss of his only friend? (Word count 16,065)



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