Signet Classic

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With a New Introduction by Frederick R. Karl

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A SIGNET CLASSIC

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GEORGE ELIOT (Mary Ann Evans Cross) was born on November 22, 1819, at Arbury Farm, Warwickshire, England. She received an ordinary education and, upon leaving school at the age of sixteen, embarked on a program of independent study to further her intellectual growth. In 1841 she moved to Coventry with her father, where the influence of "skeptics and rationalists" swayed her from an intense religious devotion to an eventual break with the church. The small legacy she received upon her father's death, in 1849, allowed her the freedom to pursue her literary inclinations. In 1851, she became the assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*, a position she held for three years. In 1854 came the fated meeting with George Henry Lewes, the gifted editor of *The Leader*, who was to become her adviser and companion for the next twenty-four years. Her first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), was followed by *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861). Her next two novels, largely considered to be her masterpieces, were published in installments: *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874–1876). The death of Lewes, in 1878, left her grief-stricken and lonely. On May 6, 1880, she married John Cross, a friend of long standing. After a brief illness, she died on December 22 of that year, in London.

Frederick R. Karl, Professor of English at New York University, has written several biographies, most recently *George Eliot: Voice of a Century.*

INTRODUCTION

When George Eliot began to write *Silas Marner* in early 1861, she was, as this short novel reveals, in a difficult position both professionally and personally. She had in rapid succession published *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), a group of three novellas; *Adam Bede*, her first novel, in 1859; and *The Mill on the Floss*, her second novel, in 1860. In a brief time, she had achieved enormous success, monetarily and artistically. Her fame had come so suddenly, in fact, that it created a psychologically trying period in which she had to evaluate carefully who she was and what she would do with her gifts. In this respect, *Silas Marner* was to become a pivotal fiction in her career.

Eliot claimed she began it tentatively, calling the book a "sudden inspiration" and worrying whether it would be "short enough" for her to complete before Easter. Yet *Marner* was not really a "sudden inspiration," but rather a profound probe into the shadows of her own life. Silas Marner and George Eliot may appear very different, but her life by 1861 required close examination, and this short novel was the result.

George Eliot was born in 1819, as Mary Anne Evans, at Arbury Farm, near Nuneaton, in Warwickshire, an area not too far from Robin Hood country. Before she became George Eliot, her Christian name was, variously, Mary Anne, Mary Ann, and Marian; then Marian Lewes, after her elopement with George Henry Lewes, although she could not legally claim such a married name—another Mrs. Lewes existed; and, finally, after Lewes's death, as Mrs. Marian Cross, wife of John Walter Cross.

The youngest of five children from Robert Evans's two marriages, she was the sole Evans with intellectual

interests. Obviously a brilliant child and adolescent, Mary Anne was provided by her estate manager father—fathers, not mothers, controlled their daughters' education—with tutors and private day and boarding school. In 1828, she was at Mrs. Wallington's boarding school, near Nuneaton, and was deeply influenced by the Evangelical Maria Lewis, the chief governess. In 1832, she went on to Miss Franklins' School, in Coventry, and there started the prodigious reading in literature, philosophy, and theology which she maintained for the remainder of her life. She also moved away from the Anglican Church of her father, creating a split with the devout Evans; a schism only partially healed when Mary Anne, even though a nonbeliever, acquiesced to attend church. With her father disapproving, she made friends in Coventry with the Hennells and Brays, social, political, and religious progressives. In 1844, she took over the translation from the German of David Friedrich Strauss's very important *Life of Jesus*, with its debunking of a divine Jesus; and, later, Ludwig Feuerback's *The Essence of Christianity*.

When Robert Evans died, in 1849, Mary Anne was freed from caring for him so she travelled first on the continent, and then to London, where she lodged in the house of John Chapman. Chapman, a publisher and man about town, was about to restart the prestigious *Westminster Review*, and Mary Anne (now Mary Ann) became his invaluable subeditor. She helped draw up the prospectus for the quarterly, arranged for contributors, and reviewed widely. It was here, in London, in the world of high journalism, that she met George Henry Lewes, now in a failing marriage, the father of four sons. After they eloped to Germany, it was Lewes who encouraged her to write fiction, and under the name of George Eliot—George after Lewes, and Eliot as a common English name—she published her first book in 1857.

Her third novel, *Silas Marner*, was subtitled *The Weaver of Raveloe*; originally, the words "A Story by George Eliot" were considered, then deleted. The novel proved to be, in imagined episodes and characters, the embodiment of qualities intimately linked to Eliot herself, especially a growing obsession with money. She and

Lewes were building a fortune, mainly in investments, comparable to Marner's stacks of coins; but alongside that was the appearance in the couple's life of Lewes's sons from his marriage, a foreshadowing of the introduction of a child into Marner's. Equally compelling is Eliot's positioning of Marner as a marginalized figure, isolated from the rest of mankind, intent on solitary work at his loom: not at all distinct from the situation of the writer herself, at her desk, socially marginalized by her decision to run off with the married Lewes, a solitary figure whose own family treated her as an outcast.

Eliot and Marner were not duplicates or twins, but as we delve deeper into the novel we can see how she transformed personal considerations into fictional representation. An abiding belief in Eliot—the residue of her earlier Evangelicalism—was her interest in regeneration of a lost soul, or in the restoration of spiritual life in someone who had focused on hard, unyielding matter. In still another respect, she was eager to castigate the class of squires for their dissolution and lack of productivity, their thievery, their failure to maintain moral principles, in this case a failure even to recognize a daughter. By this means, she could laud the working class, who appear as honest, hardworking, and focused; qualities that nation-building required. In a third way, she was attempting to reveal how guilt must eventually be confronted and resolved: that the really evil are punished—Dunstan in drowning, Molly in freezing during an opium stupor—while Godfrey is saved by facing the truth.

In a related matter, she was interested in textures themselves: soft versus hard and solid, gullible versus strident, the warmth of the cottage hearth versus the coolness of the large house on the hill. As a corollary—and here we find the engine that drives the novel—Eliot used the material as a personal myth or quest, as the myth of Marian Evans–Mrs. Lewes–George Eliot: who she was, what she believed, both consciously and unconsciously, and how she could emerge in the face of a theft.

The theft does seem linked to Eliot's uncertainty about her work, her inability to listen to even the slightest criticism, her sense of her writing as falling beneath

the highest achievement, and her more generalized fear that everything was precarious. The theft, to this extent, is connected to deep inner anxieties that it all might vanish, that something—destiny, circumstance, Nemesis—was waiting to dispossess her of her gifts, and it would all be swallowed up as rapidly as it appeared.

That could be one area of theft which parallels Marner's loss of his treasure trove, but perhaps not the major one. A more central view would be that Eliot saw herself as part of a "theft." She had stolen Agnes Lewes's husband; she was the thieving receiver of someone else's children, Lewes's boys; she had stolen a particular kind of life in the face of harsh social opprobrium. If we read her remarks and asides correctly, we know she felt profoundly distressed about her social ostracism and isolation and had developed several defenses to protect herself. Her perception is of someone who has stolen what clearly does not belong to her.

Related to theft is guilt and, not too distant from that, the tale of a person sinking, hanging on, and reshaping. Money—the treasure, the hoard, the mystique of a kind of power—is part of that other world which provides a false or artificial sense of security. It turns Marner into a commodity, someone less than human. The condemnation of money does not take the form of a Marxist or other social criticism of materialism, but is based on a Christian view of Jesus driving the moneylenders from the temple, and by so doing condemning the accumulation of a hoard as a "commodification" of the hoarder.

The classical myths of a warrior chasing after a treasure—Jason and the golden fleece, Aeneas and the treasures of Rome—are brought into play in Marner's humble cottage, and there subjected to a Christian criticism. We observed that Eliot was an adherent to a form of humanized religion without miracles, divinity, or spiritualism. The staging of elements in the novel is compelling: the idea of a treasure as compensation for past injustices to Marner; an absorption in the hard, very dead matter of coins, the fascination with the golden glitter; the character's withdrawal and isolation as the hoard accumulates; the compensatory life which comes essentially from fingering dead matter, the despair and

depression implicit in this solitary activity, the manipulation of stacks of coins, the need to keep touching so as to create a "reality"; the perversion implied here, of an unconscious drive to accumulate power even as one's position loses it; the perverse act of writing itself, the self-absorption and even narcissism translated into money, whether in the shape of glittering coins or in securities and bank accounts. The treasure has almost limitless potentialities.

Much of the activity occurs at the hearth of Marner's cottage—with the hearth taking on its classical role as a holy place where the gods of hearth and home (the Roman Lares and Penates) are honored for their protection. Here, Marner fingers and counts his money; here he compensates for the loss of money with the child Eppie; and here he redeems himself as a social being. That Eliot has cast the novel back in the early part of the century, and even before that for Marner's expulsion from Lantern Yard, is fitting for its near allegorical narrative. Also fitting is her deployment of the Eden myth, the expulsion, the entrance into a wasteland of sorts, the gradual accommodation to the world beyond the Garden, a world full of conspiracy and criminal activity. Within such contexts—the murky past, the sacred hearth, an innocent child—Marner can transform himself from a falsely accused guilty person, and from a bizarre, marginalized, almost lunatic weaver into someone who can give and receive love. An almost Kafkaesque situation resolves itself as a Christian allegory.

Since the child Eppie is compensatory for Marner's monetary loss, we must move back into Eliot's shadowy, unconscious response to her position. As she approached her forty-second year—she would die at sixty-one in 1880—she recognized the impossibility of childbearing. By this time, she may well have been menopausal, in itself a difficult time psychologically for a woman without her own children. But her growing desire to acquire money and fame cannot be discounted as compensatory—in *her* perception—for her failure to fulfill traditional wife and mother roles. Tellingly, Marner becomes as much a mother to Eppie as a father and, pointedly, the child is female, so that he must assume more of the

conventional maternal role than with a male child. In a gender switchover, he serves as a father in his earning capacity as a weaver, but as a traditional mother in his way of raising Eppie as a fine young woman. Also, to be factored in the equation is Eliot's new role as stepmother to Lewes's three surviving sons—a maternal role she had to balance with her own work, not at the loom, but at her desk.

Her hortatory, moralistic tone has increased considerably over her previous work. Money, such a desirable reward, has clearly become an evil element. But more than money is involved in this internal struggle for which moral advice seems a palliative. She was reaching a critical point in her writing. Now that she had arrived as a literary force, she found herself on the threshold of a new, potentially perilous venture, the Florentine-based *Romola*. As her first novel set outside what she knew personally, it would involve the historical recreation of an era in which religious values were paramount. Not only was she full of doubts about *Romola*—her letters bear this out—but she was going to have to confront the very religious elements she had forsaken. The chief religious force in *Romola*, Savonarola, was both salvational and demonic, and Eliot's need to get beyond him with her own branch of positivism, evolution, humanitarianism, and realism would put her under enormous strain. That strain emerges in the preliminary to, or first act of, *Romola*, and in the heuristic *Marner*: a repeated caution to herself as well as to society, in almost sermonistic tones, that only conflict gives life.

Not disconnected to the above internal struggle shaping up was Eliot's artistic effort to make *Marner* more than realistic without forsaking realism. She adopted several strategies. Marner's "gaze" suggests a mystery, not only demonic but otherworldly, as though his head and his body moved in separate directions. He also suffers an epileptic fit during a prayer meeting, which associates him with devil worship, or with the nether world. Raveloe is itself shrouded, "a village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices." Once in Raveloe, where Marner has arrived in the 1780s, he experiences reveries, part of that "other world" he inhab-

its. He is described, at his loom, as a spider, a "spinning insect," suggesting his linkage to the natural, rather than human, world. Then in his association with treasure, he takes on the mythical connotations of the keeper of the hoard, like Alberich in the Wagner Ring cycle. And when he emerges into the light—that is, when his life is illuminated by Eppie—he assumes a certain Jesus-like quality.

All of this heightens Eliot's supra-realism even while allowing her to maintain, withal, a strong social realism: the townspeople and the tavern scenes, and subsidiary figures like Godfrey and Dunstan Cass, old Squire Cass, Nancy Lammeter, the peasant Dolly Winthrop, and the doomed Molly. This part is consistent with *Silas Marner*'s Wordsworthian qualities—that unity of people and non-human elements is evident. Woods, hearth, quarry, plants, flowers, and seasons are all continuous with human activity, and underscore the interwoven quality of the lives and their environment. Marner weaves, and Eliot encloses him in one woven web after another, nearly all of them connected to lowerclass or workingclass life. It is fitting that Marner's adopted daughter should marry a gardener. Nowhere else has Eliot tried so hard to dramatize the drab life of people for whom startling events are almost unknown, even as those lives push against an "unreal" or mysterious world.

At every stage, she revealed deep inner struggles, most of all personal and artistic conflicts which the novel resolves with Christian humanism. Yet even as she created it—and then as she enjoyed the extraordinary reviews *Marner* garnered—she suspected it didn't suffice; that such humanism by itself fell short. *Romola*, with its fanatical Savonarola, would have to carry her forward. Her difficulty with that novel was rooted in this immense struggle, not only for *Romola*, but for her two supreme novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. *Silas Marner* helps us understand not only who Eliot was and what she was trying to resolve, but also the major fault lines in Victorian religious and social thought.

—*Frederick R. Karl*

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

IN THE DAYS when the spinning wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses—and even great ladies, clothed in silk and thread lace, had their toy spinning wheels of polished oak—there might be seen, in districts far away among the lanes, or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid undersized men who, by the side of the brawny countryfolk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race. The shepherd's dog barked fiercely when one of these alien-looking men appeared on the upland, dark against the early winter sunset; for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?—and these pale men rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden. The shepherd himself, though he had good reason to believe that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread, or else the long rolls of strong linen spun from that thread, was not quite sure that this trade of weaving, indispensable though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One. In that far-off time superstition clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted, or even intermittent and occasional merely, like the visits of the peddler or the knife grinder. No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother? To the peasants of old times, the world outside their own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery: to their untravelled thought a state of wandering was a conception as dim as the winter life of the swallows that came back with the spring; and even a settler, if he came from distant parts, hardly ever ceased to be viewed with a remnant of distrust, which would have prevented any surprise if a long course of inoffen-

sive conduct on his part had ended in the commission of a crime; especially if he had any reputation for knowledge, or showed any skill in handicraft. All cleverness, whether in the rapid use of that difficult instrument the tongue, or in some other art unfamiliar to villagers, was in itself suspicious: honest folk, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever—at least, not beyond such a matter as knowing the signs of the weather; and the process by which rapidity and dexterity of any kind were acquired was so wholly hidden, that they partook of the nature of conjuring. In this way it came to pass that those scattered linen weavers—emigrants from the town into the country—were to the last regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbours, and usually contracted the eccentric habits which belong to a state of loneliness.

In the early years of this century, such a linen weaver, named Silas Marner, worked at his vocation in a stone cottage that stood among the nutty hedgerows near the village of Raveloe, and not far from the edge of a deserted stone pit. The questionable sound of Silas's loom, so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine, or the simpler rhythm of the flail, had a half-fearful fascination for the Raveloe boys, who would often leave off their nutting or birds'-nesting to peep in at the window of the stone cottage, counterbalancing a certain awe at the mysterious action of the loom by a pleasant sense of scornful superiority, drawn from the mockery of its alternating noises, along with the bent, treadmill attitude of the weaver. But sometimes it happened that Marner, pausing to adjust an irregularity in his thread, became aware of the small scoundrels, and, though chary of his time, he liked their intrusion so ill that he would descend from his loom, and, opening the door, would fix on them a gaze that was always enough to make them take to their legs in terror. For how was it possible to believe that those large brown protuberant eyes in Silas Marner's pale face really saw nothing very distinctly that was not close to them, and not rather that their dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth at any boy who happened to be in the rear? They had, perhaps, heard their fathers and mothers hint

that Silas Marner could cure folks' rheumatism if he had a mind, and add, still more darkly, that if you could only speak the devil fair enough, he might save you the cost of the doctor. Such strange lingering echoes of the old demon worship might perhaps even now be caught by the diligent listener among the grey-haired peasantry; for the rude mind with difficulty associates the ideas of power and benignity. A shadowy conception of power that by much persuasion can be induced to refrain from inflicting harm is the shape most easily taken by the sense of the Invisible in the minds of men who have always been pressed close by primitive wants, and to whom a life of hard toil has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith. To them pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment: their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear. "Is there anything you can fancy that you would like to eat?" I once said to an old labouring man, who was in his last illness, and who had refused all the food his wife had offered him. "No," he answered, "I've never been used to nothing but common victual, and I can't eat that." Experience had bred no fancies in him that could raise the phantasm of appetite.

And Raveloe was a village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices. Not that it was one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilization—inhabited by meagre sheep and thinly scattered shepherds: on the contrary, it lay in the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England, and held farms which, speaking from a spiritual point of view, paid highly desirable tithes. But it was nestled in a snug, well-wooded hollow, quite an hour's journey on horseback from any turnpike, where it was never reached by the vibrations of the coach horn, or of public opinion. It was an important-looking village, with a fine old church and large churchyard in the heart of it, and two or three large brick-and-stone homesteads, with well-walled orchards and ornamental weathercocks, standing close upon the road, and lifting more imposing fronts than the rectory, which peeped from among the

trees on the other side of the churchyard—a village which showed at once the summits of its social life, and told the practised eye that there was no great park and manor house in the vicinity, but that there were several chiefs in Raveloe who could farm badly quite at their ease, drawing enough money from their bad farming, in those wartimes, to live in a rollicking fashion, and keep a jolly Christmas, Whitsun, and Easter tide.

It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had first come to Raveloe; he was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent, short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation, and his advent from an unknown region called "North'ard." So had his way of life—he invited no comer to step across his doorsill, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelwright's; he sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries; and it was soon clear to the Raveloe lasses that he would never urge one of them to accept him against her will—quite as if he had heard them declare that they would never marry a dead man come to life again. This view of Marner's personality was not without another ground than his pale face and unexampled eyes; for Jem Rodney, the molecatcher, averred that, one evening as he was returning homeward, he saw Silas Marner leaning against a stile with a heavy bag on his back, instead of resting the bag on the stile as a man in his senses would have done; and that, on coming up to him, he saw that Marner's eyes were set like a dead man's, and he spoke to him, and shook him, and his limbs were stiff, and his hands clutched the bag as if they'd been made of iron; but just as he had made up his mind that the weaver was dead, he came all right again, like, as you might say, in the winking of an eye, and said "Good night," and walked off. All this Jem swore he had seen, more by token, that it was the very day he had been mole-catching on Squire Cass's land, down by the old saw pit. Some said Marner must

have been in a "fit," a word which seemed to explain things otherwise incredible; but the argumentative Mr. Macey, clerk of the parish, shook his head, and asked if anybody was ever known to go off in a fit and not fall down. A fit was a stroke, wasn't it? and it was in the nature of a stroke to partly take away the use of a man's limbs and throw him on the parish, if he'd got no children to look to. No, no; it was no stroke that would let a man stand on his legs, like a horse between the shafts, and then walk off as soon as you can say "Gee!" But there might be such a thing as a man's soul being loose from his body, and going out and in, like a bird out of its nest and back; and that was how folks got overwise, for they went to school in this shell-less state to those who could teach them more than their neighbours could learn with their five senses and the parson. And where did Master Marner get his knowledge of herbs from—and charms, too, if he liked to give them away? Jem Rodney's story was no more than what might have been expected by anybody who had seen how Marner had cured Sally Oates, and made her sleep like a baby, when her heart had been beating enough to burst her body, for two months and more, while she had been under the doctor's care. He might cure more folks if he would; but he was worth speaking fair, if it was only to keep him from doing you a mischief.

It was partly to this vague fear that Marner was indebted for protecting him from the persecution that his singularities might have drawn upon him, but still more to the fact that, the old linen weaver in the neighbouring parish of Tarley being dead, his handicraft made him a highly welcome settler to the richer housewives of the district, and even to the more provident cottagers, who had their little stock of yarn at the year's end; and their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or the tale of the cloth he wove for them. And the years had rolled on without producing any change in the impressions of the neighbours concerning Marner, except the change from novelty to habit. At the end of fifteen years the Raveloe men said just the same things about Silas Marner as at the beginning: