SILAS MARNER: THE WEAVER OF RAVELOE

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Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe by George Eliot

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GEORGE ELIOT

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IN TWO STYLES OF BINDING, CLOTH, FLAT BACK, COLOURED TOP, AND LEATHER, ROUND CORNERS, GILT TOP.

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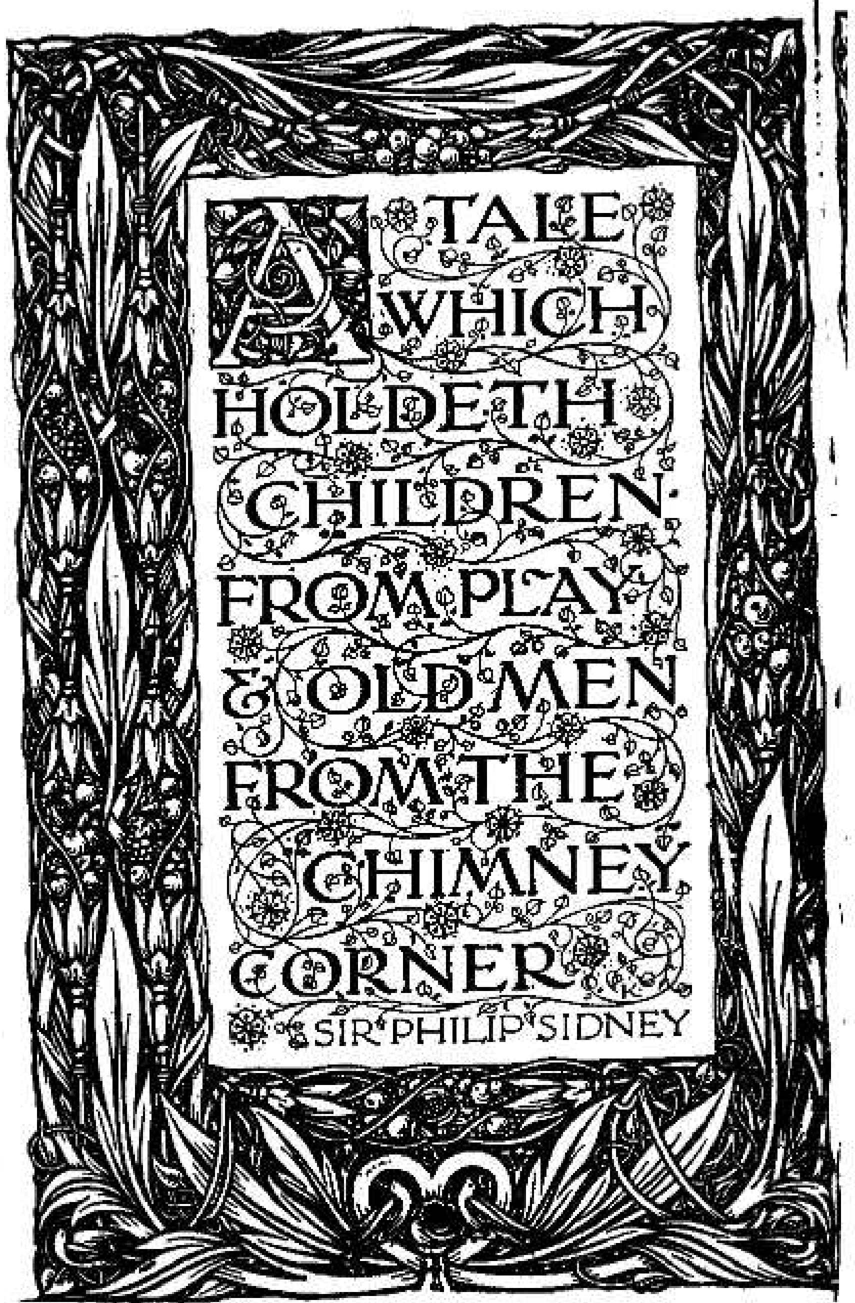
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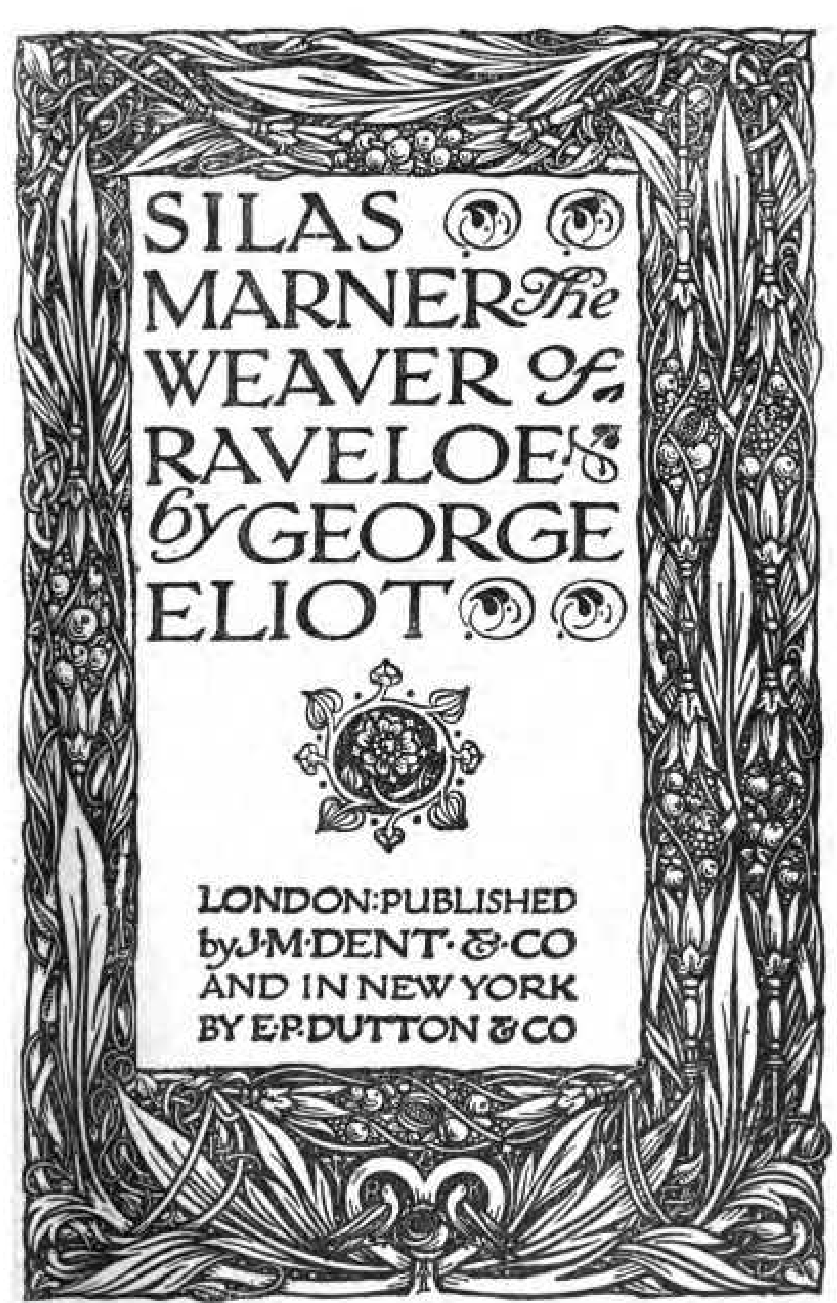
WHICH
HOLDETH
CHILDREN
FROM PLAY
& OLD MEN
FROM THE
CHIMNEY
CORNER
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY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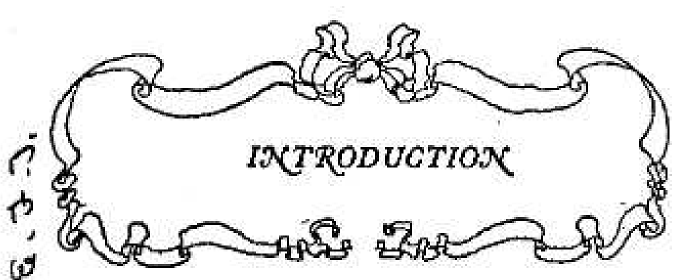

INTRODUCTION

ASSOCIATIONS are "chancey" and unreasoning things. I seldom find myself thinking of *Silas Marner* without hearing a line of Browning with which it has no definite or obvious relation, and which even now is murmuring, with a steady and unexpected claim upon attention:

"One star, its chrysolite—"

So haunting and insistent is this caprice of memory that it seems impossible to write even the briefest "appreciation" of the book without finding it somewhere upon the page.

Is it that in this long-ago story there is a flawless and crystalline unity, as pure and illuminating as it is convincing, and touching the recollection with that same sense of divinity in everyday things which is felt sometimes in the coming of the stars at evening or the quivering music of the aspen-leaves at noon?

Certain it is that we find in this homely tale a quaint humour, a tender religious charm, which Mrs Ewing in after days might rival, in her own very different and much more limited, field, but which even she could hardly surpass, and of which

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Thackeray himself—to name no other—might have been justly and modestly proud. There may well be a lifting of eyebrows at the juxtaposition of Thackeray's name in such a comparison, yet for true and intimate seriousness in the primal relations of life, the great satirist had a master-touch, and, while he differed from George Eliot as widely as each differed from their contemporary, the great humourist who gave us *Oliver Twist*, there was in both—in him who wrote *Philip* and *Esmond* and *The Newcomes*, no less than in the creator of Dinah Morris—a gentleness of heart, a generous amplitude of nature, a sanity and fine restraint, which made it impossible to treat either their ethical ideals or their spirit of worship and of faith with any touch of mockery or of disrespect. Perhaps it would be difficult to find any two novels, both, like *Silas Marner* and *Vanity Fair*, representing life in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which differ more than do these two works of fiction, in material and in method; but both embody powerfully one part at least of the meaning of that great seventeenth-century allegory from which *Vanity Fair* took its name. And in this story of peasant life, it is driven home with a perfection of masterly self-effacement worthy of those immortal lines of Mr George Meredith in praise of the music that is

> " . . . free
> Of taint of personality."

Full of sunshine and of neighbourly love, yet

enfolding at the outset that deepest tragedy which is loss of faith in God and man, it evolves, unswervingly and inextricably, that far-reaching discipline of life and self-created retribution, which elude the crude methods and coarse reckoning of the time-server and the hypocrite. It faces wrongs and inequalities which might well fill even the strongest with despair, were it not for that Power, whose Love and Guidance, full of sympathy with ordained renunciation, Dolly Winthrop believed men ought to "trusten" through all the perplexity of what, to a gross and limited perception, so often looks like purposeless and inequitable sacrifice. Dolly's unconscious philosophy is wide enough and deep enough to support the whole burden of our earthly mystery. It is through her unlettered wisdom that the weaver's mournful early story and ever-mellowing happiness of later life, are beheld in that clearly-mirrored divine radiance which exalts and purifies human drama, whether of tragedy or comedy. And it is not men and women alone who live and move before us in that wondrous light. What is it that enables George Eliot by a few brief sober touches to evoke with such extraordinary vividness, not only certain features of the landscape, but the very spirit that breathes through them? Is it that in her long country drives with her father, these English lanes and hedgerows, these quiet pools and silvery "runlets" and deep delicious meadows, gave to her some effluence of their very being, such as enabled

her to write of them ever afterwards with the delicate reserve and divining magnetism of a lifelong love? It is, for instance, no mere description which enchants us in that singularly beautiful passage on p. 170, in which she speaks of "a certain awe . . . such as we feel before some quiet majesty of beauty in the earth or sky—before a steady glowing planet, or a full-flowered eglantine, or the bending trees over a silent pathway."

With no forgetfulness of her reluctant surrender of the ancient creed, it must yet be maintained that George Eliot was at once too rational and too religious—too humbly and exaltedly conscientious in every task she undertook—to have anything to do with that pseudo-romance of over-strained fancy against which our modern "laughing philosopher" of a later generation—serious and ardent under his ironical mask—is for ever running a-tilt. The naturalness and inevitableness of that often-quoted scene at the Rainbow, in which slow bovine vanity and sheer ineptitude so nearly lead to a quarrel, give to the villagers there a fitting niche beside the classic Dogberry. The humour of that scene—as indeed of the whole book—"too animate to need a stress"—is as different as possible from the self-conscious epigrammatic sparkle of many later imitative scenes among nineteenth-century novels of agricultural life.

The weaver himself is a triumph of delicate in-