Chapter 1

In the days when spinning wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses, and even great ladies, dressed in silk and lace, owned toy spinning wheels, there lived a type of man who was pale and small. Compared to the brawny country folk, such men looked like the last of a forgotten race. Dogs barked fiercely whenever one of these alien-looking men appeared on their owner's land, carrying a heavy bag. Indeed, these pale men rarely left home without that mysterious burden. Shepherds usually thought that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread or long rolls of linen. But they were never sure that this trade of weaving, important though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One. In that far-off time superstition

surrounded every person or thing that was unwelcome, or even rare, like the visits of the peddler or the knife grinder. No one knew where wandering men came from. 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 full of vagueness and mystery. They did not understand the wanderer's life. They even distrusted a settler, if he came from distant parts and was knowledgeable, or skilled in a craft. All cleverness, whether in speech, or in some other art unfamiliar to villagers, was in itself suspicious. Honest folk, raised in an upright manner, were only clever enough to know the signs of the weather. To be quick or good at anything else was attributed to magic, and this is why the scattered linen weavers—emigrants from the town to the country—were always regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbors, and acquired the eccentric habits of the lonely.

In the early part of the century, such a linen weaver, named Silas Marner, worked in a stone cottage that stood among the hedgerows near the village of Raveloe, close to a deserted stone-pit. The strange sound of Silas's loom fascinated the Raveloe boys, who would often stop hunting birds to peep in the window of the stone

cottage. They felt both awe and a sense of superiority at the mysterious action of the loom and the weaver. But sometimes Marner, pausing to correct his thread, became aware of the small scoundrels. Though he hated to take the time, their intrusion annoyed him so much that he would leave his loom, and, opening the door, would give them a look that always made them take to their legs in terror. Those large brown bulging eyes in Silas Marner's pale face seemed made less for seeing than for cursing a boy with cramp, rickets, or a deformed mouth. Perhaps they had heard their fathers and mothers hint that Silas Marner could cure folks' rheumatism if he had a mind, and that if you praised the devil, he might save you the cost of the doctor. Such examples of the old demon-worship could be heard among the elder peasants, for uneducated people do not associate power with a good heart. Neither could they imagine a higher being who was full of goodness, for they had no religion, and their lives of hard labor taught them that pain was more frequent than pleasure.

Many of the old ways lingered in Raveloe, unchanged by new ones. Yet it wasn't one of those forgotten places on the outskirts of civilization, inhabited only by sheep and shepherds. On the contrary, it lay in the rich central plain of Merry England, and held highly profitable

farms. But it was nestled in a snug well-wooded hollow, an hour's journey on horseback from any turnpike, and off the beaten path. 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 homes standing close to the road. However, the village showed at once the limits of its social life, and told the experienced observer that Raveloe had no great park and manor-house, but only several people who farmed quite badly and still made enough to have a jolly Christmas and Easter.

It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had come to Raveloe. Back then he was simply a pallid young man, with prominent nearsighted brown eyes, whose appearance would not have surprised people of average culture and experience. But his new neighbors thought his looks were as mysterious as his occupation. So, too, his homeland called "North'ard" and his way of life: he never invited visitors, or strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow or gossip at the wheelwright's. He sought no man or woman, except for matters of his business, and it was soon clear to the Raveloe lasses that they were as safe from his attentions as from those of a dead man. This comparison stemmed from more than just his pale face and strange eyes.

Jem Rodney, the mole-catcher, swore that

one evening as he was returning home, he saw Silas Marner leaning against a ledge with a heavy bag on his back, instead of resting the bag on the ledge as a sane person would have done. On approaching him, he saw that Marner's eyes were set like a dead man's. Jem spoke to him and shook him, and his limbs were stiff, his hands clutching the bag as if they'd been made of iron. But just as he had decided that the weaver was dead, he returned to normal in the blink of an eye, said "Goodnight," and walked off. All this Jem swore he had seen, saying also 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 used to explain things that were not understood. But the argumentative Mr. Macey, clerk of the parish, shook his head, and asked if anybody could have a fit and not fall down. Since a fit was a stroke, it should partly take away the use of a man's limbs. No stroke would let a man stand on his legs, and later walk off. But a man's soul might be loose from his body, going out and in, like a bird out of its nest and back. That was how folks got too wise, for they went to school in this exposed state, learning more than they could normally.

And where did Master Marner get his knowledge of herbs from, and spells too? Jem

Rodney's story was not surprising, considering 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 more than two months under the doctor's care. He could cure more folks if he wanted to, but people thought you shouldn't speak badly of him, if only to keep him from doing you harm.

It was partly because of this vague fear that Marner was not persecuted as he otherwise would have been. But the fact that the old linen weaver in the neighboring parish was dead also made Marner valuable to the richer housewives of the district. Even for the wealthier cottagers, who had a bit of yarn at the year's end, his usefulness balanced out their suspicions of him. The years had rolled on without changing anyone's impression of Marner, except that he became less and less of a novelty. At the end of fifteen years the Raveloe men said just the same things about Silas Marner as at the beginning. They did not say them quite so often, but they believed them much more strongly when they did say them. There was only one important addition, which was that Master Marner had saved up a lot of money somewhere, and that he could buy up "bigger men" than himself.

But while opinion concerning him had remained nearly the same, and his daily habits had

not seemed to change, Marner's inner life had been complex, as that of a passionate person must be when he has been condemned to solitude. His life, before he came to Raveloe, had been filled with the social connections that are part of the life of an artisan belonging to a small religious group, where the poorest man can distinguish himself by speaking well and participating in the decisions of his community. Marner was highly regarded in that little hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard. He was believed to be a young man of exemplary life and intense faith. People had developed a peculiar interest in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer meeting, into a mysterious and rigid state, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death. To look for a medical explanation would have been seen as a spiritual mistake.

Silas was evidently a brother selected for a certain service, though he experienced no spiritual vision during his trance. A less truthful man might have been tempted to make up a vision, and a less sane man might have believed in such a creation. But Silas was both sane and honest, though, as with many honest and passionate men, culture had not given him a way to cultivate his sense of mystery, and so he tried to acquire knowledge. He had inherited from his

mother some experience with preparing and using medicinal herbs, but in recent years he doubted whether it was right to apply this knowledge, believing that herbs could not work without prayer, and that prayer might be enough by itself. So the old delight in wandering in the fields in search of foxglove, dandelion, and coltsfoot, began to seem like a temptation.

Among the members of his church there was one young man, a little older than himself, who was his close friend. This friend, named William Dane, was also regarded as a shining example of youthful piety, though somewhat given to bullying and arrogance. But whatever blemishes others might see in William, to his friend's mind he was faultless.

Marner had one of those gullible self-doubting natures that admire other people's confidence. The look of trust and simplicity in Marner's face strongly contrasted the smugness and pride that lurked in the narrow slanting eyes and compressed lips of William Dane. The two friends often talked about the assurance of salvation. Silas confessed that he felt nothing more secure than hope mingled with fear, and listened with wonder when William boasted of being confident ever since he had dreamed that he saw the words "calling and election sure" standing by themselves on a white page in the open Bible.

Silas thought that nothing could hurt their friendship, not even his other attachment of a closer kind. For some months he had been engaged to a young servant-woman, waiting only to save up a little more money before getting married. He was delighted that Sarah did not object to William's occasional presence at their Sunday appointments. It was around this time that Silas's fit occurred during the prayer meeting. Afterward, everyone supported Silas with sympathy and interest, except for William, who suggested that his trance looked more like a visitation of Satan than proof of God's favor. He urged Silas not to hide the evil in his soul. Silas, thinking William was only doing his duty as a friend, felt no resentment, but only pain that William doubted him.

But his anxiety grew as Sarah seemed to shrink from him. He asked her if she wished to break off their engagement, but she denied this. Their engagement was known to the church, and had been recognized in the prayer meetings. It could not be broken off without strict investigation, and Sarah did not have a good reason for doing so.

At this time the senior deacon became dangerously ill, and, being a childless widower, he was tended night and day by some of the younger church members. Silas frequently took

his turn in the vigil with William, the one relieving the other at two in the morning. The old man unexpectedly seemed on the way to recovery, when one night Silas, sitting up by his bedside, saw that he had stopped breathing. The candle was burning low, and he lifted it to see the patient's face distinctly. Examination convinced him that the deacon was dead—had been dead some time, for the limbs were rigid. Silas asked himself if he had been asleep, and looked at the clock: it was already four in the morning. How was it that William had not come?

Anxious, he went for help, and soon several friends assembled in the house, the minister among them. Silas left for work, wishing he had found out why William hadn't shown. At six o'clock, as he was thinking of going to find him, William came, and with him the minister. They summoned him to Lantern Yard, to meet the church members. When Silas asked why, the only reply was, "You will hear." Nothing further was said until Silas was seated in the vestry, in front of the minister, with the eyes of the congregation solemnly upon him. Then the minister, taking out a pocketknife, showed it to Silas, and asked him if he knew where he had left that knife. Silas, trembling at this strange interrogation, said he did not know that he had left it anywhere out of his own pocket. He was then told not to hide his

sin, but to confess and repent.

The knife had been found in the departed deacon's dresser, where the little bag of church money usually lay, which the minister himself had seen the day before. Some hand had removed that bag, and whose hand could it be, if not that of the man to whom the knife belonged? For some time Silas was silent with astonishment. Then he said, "God will clear me: I know nothing about the knife being there, or the money being gone. Search me and my house. You will find nothing but three pounds and five shillings of my own savings, which William Dane knows I have had these six months." At this William groaned, and the minister said, "The proof is heavy against you, brother Marner. The money was taken last night, and only you were with our departed brother, for William Dane fell ill suddenly. You yourself said that he did not come, and, moreover, you neglected the dead body."

"I must have slept," said Silas. Then, after a pause, he added, "Or I must have had another visitation like before, so that the thief came and went while I was out of my body. But, I say again, search me and my house, for I have been nowhere else."

The search was made, and William Dane found the well-known bag, empty, tucked

behind the chest of drawers in Silas's chamber! Then William urged his friend to confess, and not to hide his sin any longer. Silas looked reproachfully at him, and said, "William, for nine years you have known me, have I ever told a lie? Indeed, God will clear me."

"Brother," said William, "how do I know what you may have done in the secret chambers of your heart, to fall under Satan's power?"

Silas's face flushed, and he seemed about to speak, when some inward shock touched him. His flush drained away, and, trembling, he spoke to William.

"I remember now—the knife wasn't in my pocket."

William said, "I know nothing of what you mean." The other people asked Silas where the knife had been, but he would not tell. He only said, "I am deeply wounded, and I can say nothing. God will clear me."

The members returned to the vestry to deliberate further. The principles of the church forbid using legal methods to deal with the problem. But the members had to find out the truth, and they decided to pray and draw lots. Silas knelt with his brethren, hoping that God would prove him innocent, and feeling that he had lost trust in his fellow man. The lots declared that Silas Marner was guilty. He was

solemnly suspended from church membership, and ordered to return the stolen money. Only after confessing could he be received once more within the folds of the church.

Marner listened in silence. At last, when everyone rose to depart, he went to William Dane and said, in a shaking voice, "The last time I remember using my knife, was when I took it out to cut a strap for you. I don't remember putting it in my pocket again. You stole the money, and you have woven a plot to lay the sin at my door. But you are likely to get away with it. There is no just God, who governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, who persecutes the innocent."

The members shuddered at this blasphemy. William said meekly, "I leave our brethren to judge whether this is the voice of Satan. I can do nothing but pray for you, Silas."

Poor Marner went out with despair in his soul, his trust in God and man deeply shaken almost to the point of madness. In his bitterness, he said to himself, "Sarah will reject me too." And he reflected that, if she did not believe the testimony against him, her whole faith must be as destroyed as his was.

Marner went home, and for a whole day sat alone, stunned by despair, without any desire to go to Sarah and attempt to convince her of his

innocence. The second day he escaped his thoughts by getting into his loom and working away as usual. After a few hours, the minister and one of the deacons delivered a message from Sarah, that she had ended their engagement. Silas received the message in silence, and then turned away from the messengers to work at his loom again. A little more than a month later, Sarah married William Dane, and not long afterward Silas Marner left town.