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WHEN HOWARD MET GEORGE
A Play in Two Acts
By Susan Ryley Hoyle

Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance)

Marian Evans (Mrs Lewes) (George Eliot) (left) was born near Nuneaton in 1819 to a prosperous land agent and his (second) wife. She has lost whatever regional accent she may have had, and has often been complimented on her melodious voice. She speaks quite slowly, rarely with emphasis, nearly always with a shy earnestness and a dry sense of humour. At the time of this play, only her husband and (very recently) her publisher know that she is 'George Eliot', the author of the huge best-seller Adam Bede (1859), and of the only slightly less famous Scenes of Clerical Life (1857). (She is of course a real person, although she did not make this journey on this day [if she ever did] and never met any of the other people in this play.)

Mr Millington (Percy) is a porter at Nottingham Station. A small man, he is much the same age as Helen and Marian, but looks older. He is a younger brother of Mary Foxton, and has a Nottingham accent. His job keeps him reasonably fit; he is rather short-sighted but cannot afford spectacles. (He is a fictitious character.)

Helen (Macfarlane) (Proust) Edwards (Howard Morton) is Scottish, born of wealthy mill-owners in Glasgow in 1818, and is thus much the same age as Marian; she has not lived in Scotland for nearly twenty years, but she still has a definite accent. She is forty, thin and tired, but a good-looking woman who can summon up a fierce glance. It is typical of her that while she often begins her speeches slowly, as though testing her ground, she soon speeds up, becoming increasingly passionate (and witty). (She is also a real person; she might have made this journey on this day, but it is very unlikely indeed that she did and, if she did, certain that she didn't meet Mrs Lewes.)

Mary Foxton (née Millington) is the attendant in the First Class Ladies' Waiting Room at Nottingham Station. She is a tall pleasant-looking woman, a little older than Percy, a widow, and a Friend (Quaker). She has a Nottingham accent. (She is a fictitious character.)

Act I: Monday, 2nd May 1859, the day after the General Election in Nottingham

We are in the First-Class Ladies' Waiting Room at the Midland Station in Nottingham. Upstage just off-centre is the half-glazed door between the Waiting Room and the up-platform. Stage left of it is a grubby window through which we can make out people passing, but we only hear anything when the door opens — when the noise is furious and loud, of people rather than trains. On the back wall stage right of the door is a railway poster and several timetables. In
front of the window is a sturdy library table with a sturdy plant on it, and next to it a couple of sturdy uncomfortable-looking armchairs.

Downstage right is an even more uncomfortable-looking high-backed settle, facing the audience squarely.

(Mrs Lewes can be seen, just, through the dirty rear window, approaching the Waiting Room. She has to rattle the handle to open it, as everyone does, and, as everyone does, she eventually succeeds, backing into the room. The door opens wide enough for its prominent label to be seen: First-Class Ladies Waiting Room. Perhaps we can see it backwards through the glass of the window.

Mrs Lewes is wearing a delicately-coloured travelling gown, sans crinoline but with plenty of petticoats, and a matching bonnet. There is a hint of mourning in some black lace on her bodice and bonnet. She is carrying a holdall and an umbrella, and across her chest is a strap, attached to which is a large handbag — a satchel in effect — evidently with several books inside. Over her arm is a plain shawl. At last through the door, she sets the holdall on the floor and kicks the door shut behind her. She then shoves the holdall along the floor for a couple of yards, and looks around her, peering uncertainly. She clears her throat noisily, and tries not to look annoyed. She does not quite succeed.)

Mrs Lewes: (Quite loudly) Excuse me! (Rather quietly) Excuse me?

(There is no response. She sighs, and lugs her baggage towards the settle, finally kicking it into position in front of it. She sits on the bench, settling herself carefully, stowing her umbrella [but not very well], and taking out a book to read. Meanwhile, through the window, two other characters are seen approaching. After some rattling, the door opens and we hear that they are talking in an urgent, angry but friendly way. Mr Millington backs in, dragging his sack-truck, on which is Mrs Edwards' baggage. Mrs Edwards follows closely behind him. Mr Millington is dressed like the railway porter that he is, chiefly distinguishable by his cap and its badge. Mrs Edwards is wearing a well-cut but fairly plain outfit, also sans crinoline and plus petticoats; over one shoulder is a large, rich, red Paisley shawl, which helps to cushion the large bag she is carrying, evidently with books inside. Her bonnet tones with her dress. She closes the door behind her, and looks round, and sees no-one else in the room.

Mr Millington has lain his truck down in order to shut the door, and realizes he is too late. [Mrs Lewes is able to see the sack-truck from where she sits, though she cannot see the people who have just come in, just as they cannot see her.] He gesticulates a mild irritation with Mrs Edwards for having done what is his job: she smiles and flaps a dismissive hand at his irritation. Clearly, they know each other. They have also been talking throughout this business.)

Mrs Edwards: .... whatever you say, Mr Millington, whatever you say. You live here, and you know the mood in Nottingham far better than I, and you have spoken with Ernest Jones much more recently than have I. But you know I have been a great friend of Mr Jones, and his rank failure in this election is a sad day for Chartists. Twelve years ago they elected that rogue Feargus O'Connor to this seat, and yet this year could not bring themselves to do the same for Ernest Jones, a better man by any measure. It would break my heart but that as far as Chartism is concerned, my heart is long since broken.
(Mrs Lewes becomes very alert at the mention of Ernest Jones. She leans forward hoping to hear more.)

Mr Millington: Mine too, Mrs Edwards, mine too, which is not a reason to be too sentimental about what has happened. There is no helping it or him, my dear. You know me, I began as a physical-force Chartist and have not moved so very far from where I began; it is Chartism that has moved. As for me, I still look for the action that will cure. But in the matter of the election in this city, I am convinced that there is no help for it. No help. You might say that O'Connor ruined it for Chartism in Nottingham, as he ruined so much else everywhere he turned. But then I'm sure your friend Mr Engels would find a lesson in it for us all.

Mrs Edwards: Ha! It is a long time since Freddy Engels looked to Chartism for lessons in anything other than disappointment and schism. It is a great pity that it should be so, but he is right, and it took me far too long to acknowledge not only that he was right, but that he always has been. It is all the greatest pity, for what other hope for justice is there than Chartism, here and now, and what good is greater than justice?

Mr Millington: What indeed? Though as my sister would say, if it's justice you want it's not the Charter you need, nor even Mr Jones in Parliament, it's a law against lawyers. Not that she or I have ever had truck with lawyers, but it is the kind of thing Mary Foxton says. Her notion is that being a Quaker gives her that licence, and it seems it does. But to be fair, she would more likely say that what is needed is truth-speaking. Justice is too rigid, I can imagine her saying that: temper it with truth. She could make a Quaker hymn out of that, if Quakers had hymns.

Mrs Edwards: Aye, so she could, and she would also cluck at my anger. But I am so angry about this election. I did not know I still had it in me, Mr Millington. I had no idea. I suspect that half my anger is rage that my anger is still there—don't laugh at me!—and only half at what has happened to Mr Jones. I am thinking also of his wife. Ah—I'm speaking as though Jane were still alive. This failure would hurt her so, but she could have helped him and she would have helped him. Poor Jane Atherley as was, little thanks she got until she was dead and then of a sudden he knew what he had lost. Oh, is that fair of me? It is an illness he has: these manias, these despairs!

(Mrs Edwards pauses; Mr Millington knows she is thinking of her first husband, moves towards her)

Mr Millington: There, there, Helen.

(He pats her shoulder). At his words [she cannot see his action, but she has seen his sack-truck and heard his uneducated accent, and has guessed that he is a porter], Mrs Lewes turns abruptly in her seat)

Mrs Edwards: Ah, Percy, you are very kind! Thank you for that 'Helen'!

(Mrs Lewes turns front, bewildered, embarrassed, aware that she is eavesdropping. She covers her ears and immediately uncovers them as her umbrella drops to the floor. Mrs Edwards' hand goes to her mouth, Mr Millington snatches his cap off: they go rigid and stare in the direction of the clatter. When they start to speak again, they are flustered.)
Mr Millington: If there’s anything else, Mrs Edwards, tell me now — it is a fine chaos out there and who knows when I shall pass this way again?

Mrs Edwards: No, nothing, thank you. But is Mary Foxton in today?

Mr Millington: She certainly is! I will get a message to her that you—

(he peers around the corner of the settle, tugging his forelock)

Mr Millington: — and another lady, begging your pardon ma’am — are here.

Mrs Edwards: Thank you, Mr Millington. Thank you.

(Still in some confusion, Mrs Edwards sits down rather heavily on one of the armchairs by the table. Mr Millington approaches Mrs Lewes)

Mr Millington: I had of course no idea that there was anyone else in this room, ma’am, or I should have come sooner to inform you of the state of affairs. I assume you were on the down-train, ma’am?

(Mrs Lewes nods, not trusting her voice to speak)

Mr Millington: Yes, of course you were. The train from London had to turn short here because all the other lines out of this station are blocked at the moment. One train has hit a cow, another has broken down, and the signalling is in a rare muddle towards Crewe. We would use the up lines, towards London you know, but there is a jam of trains that cannot get into this station because nothing can get out and make room for them.

Mrs Lewes: (clearing her throat) Thank you. I think what I should like is to catch the first London train, if there is such a thing.

Mr Millington: There will be such a thing, ma’am, but I cannot yet say when it will be. You will want a train with first-class accommodation, I suppose?

(Mrs Lewes nods, smiling faintly)

Mr Millington: The train you came up on would be the obvious answer, but for the fact that the brakes became faulty just as it was pulling into the platform, and it has become as much an impediment to general movement as the dead cow at Bottesford. The brakes are now in course of repair and I will be sure to tell you immediately they are put right, but as I say, I do not know when that will be. Within the hour, I would hope, but my hopes, alas, do not mend brakes. I regret the inconvenience to you, ma’am.

(Mrs Lewes nods again, smiling more broadly [she liked the reference to the dead cow], and Mrs Edwards, having somewhat recovered her composure, rises from her seat and moves forward)

Mrs Edwards: Mr Millington, I declare you should have the running of this railway, you are so very clear and helpful as to its doings, and its not-doings. It is doubly unfortunate that these calamities are visited upon Nottingham Station just as the election has finished, and the crowd is clamouring to leave. At last we find an advantage in being women: we have the Waiting Room to ourselves! Women, of our class at least, are scarce at election times.
Mr Millington: Ha! Think what a horrid crowd there would be in here if ladies too had had the vote this past week! I should count it among the reasons not to give it to them.

(Mrs Edwards glares at him, only half playfully, and recollecting himself, he offers a slight bow to Mrs Lewes)

Mr Millington: As it is, begging your pardon, ma’am, you have some comfort here—which will be augmented by the arrival of Mary Foxton. I have not forgotten, and I shall be about that business now.

(Exit Mr Millington. Mrs Edwards is embarrassed)

Mrs Edwards: I believe I owe you an explanation...

Mrs Lewes: Oh please, Mrs Edwards, it is I who owe you an apology. I did not deliberately hide myself from view, but I should have made my presence obvious much sooner, and in a more elegant way.

(Mrs Lewes rises and moves towards Mrs Edwards)

Mrs Lewes: And since in my less elegant way I have come by knowledge of your name, I should at the least introduce myself to you. I am Mrs Lewes.

(Mrs Lewes offers her hand, which Mrs Edwards takes. It is a friendly handshake, if brief. The two women have taken a preliminary liking to each other. Mrs Lewes goes back to her seat on the settle and with a gesture invites Mrs Edwards to join her there, which Mrs Edwards does.)

Mrs Edwards: I am very pleased to meet you, Mrs Lewes, and I decline your apology—in the sense that it is unnecessary. It was I who burst in upon you, and I will give you some explanation. I sense in you a friendly curiosity which I sense in myself a friendly impulse to satisfy. Will you accept that?

Mrs Lewes: Well, if I was not curious before, I am now! I admit that I have not often heard a lady express Chartist sentiments, and never to a railway porter. I do not mean to sound censorious, and I am not censorious: I merely explain my curiosity.

Mrs Edwards: You can be assured that I do not go about imposing my political opinions upon complete strangers, not these days, at least. You must have gathered that Percy Millington and I are old comrades, as is Mary Foxton, whom you will shortly meet, and who is Mr Millington’s sister. You have heard that she is a Quaker: she was not born to it, but she did become infatuated with it, one might say, as a very young woman, a child really, and exceptionally they did allow her in, and I should imagine she is an ornament to their meetings. Not that the Quakers approve of ornaments, but I cannot think of a better word just now. Percy, her brother, is not a Quaker. He is a Chartist.

Mary is the attendant upon this Waiting Room, a situation she sought after the death of her husband George, a fellow professed Quaker of course (only lately are professed Quakers allowed to marry birthright Quakers, and even now none can marry ‘out’) —

Mrs Lewes: ‘Birthright’? ‘Professed’? ‘Out’? I am lost!
Mrs Edwards: Of course. I apologize. I am no expert, I assure you, but I am thus far familiar with the language: a birthright Quaker is born to Quaker parents and is by that very fact accounted a Quaker, while a professed Quaker is one who as we might say has converted. They are very happy for birthright Quakers to marry, but they have long been suspicious of professed Quakers wanting to marry 'in', while not allowing them to marry 'out'. Somehow, though when you meet her I believe you will understand how, Mary convinced them that her love was pure, and they were permitted to marry. George Foxton was an engine-driver with the railway who was killed some five or six years ago—a very sad affair—and after that, with children to feed, Mary sought employment here. You may know that a few women are employed by railway companies, almost always widows of former employees?

Mrs Lewes: I did not know—I knew none of that. Somehow I have never had anything to do with the Society of Friends; although there was a meeting house in Nuneaton I never thought about it, I who was obsessed with religion. How odd... And all those rules about marriage: why are they so worried about it? Nor have I ever thought deeply about the employment of women on the railways—but it is very interesting. One knows of women working in mills, of course, and front of shop, and of course I have been attended by women in railway Waiting Rooms—but I blush to say that I have never considered the matter in such terms. It is very generous of the railways, is it not?

Mrs Edwards: I doubt it. It coincides with their interests in some way or other, you may be sure, but since it certainly helps Mary Foxton, and other women in her position, I do not object as far as it goes. I would however need a good deal of persuading that the railways are motivated by charity in so doing—it would be the first instance of open-heartedness on their part of which I have known, and it is the kind of thing I keep a close eye on. No, it's not generosity, it's more like what Mr Marx called that 'fühlend-sentimentalen Schleier' concealing a 'reines Geldverhältniss'. Excuse me, I will translate—

Mrs Lewes: No—I have some German. Let me try, please.

(Mrs Edwards nods, intent, leaning forward. Mrs Lewes takes off her bonnet as though to clear her head, and speaks slowly as she constructs her translation)

'Schleier' is a veil, so a 'fühlend-sentimentalen Schleier' is a ... poignantly sentimental veil, covering a pure, a mere money relationship—a cash-nexus, as Mr Carlyle has it—am I right?

(Mrs Edwards nods again, still intent. She leans back with an appraising look, and takes off her bonnet. They both put them down on the settle, and both pat their hair)

Mrs Edwards: You are an artist, I think, Mrs Lewes. Forgive me, this is not flattery: those phrases which you just dealt with so fluently, I know them very well, I translated them myself, though not as well as you have. I should like to say that you went straight to the poetry of the meaning, and I believe that that is the method I should have used. My excuse is that I came to a proper grasp of the German language not through poetry, but via chemistry and philosophy.

Mrs Lewes: Well, thank you, you are kind, but I think 'poignantly sentimental veil' is weak, sentimental even. For my part, I learnt my German from translating Strauß—
Mrs Edwards: Strauß? David Strauß? Who wrote Das Leben Jesu? Did you translate all of it?

Mrs Lewes: All of it. And a hard labour it was too, I assure you!

Mrs Edwards: Then it was you who wrote the published English version?

(Mrs Lewes, increasingly startled, nods to each question)

Mrs Edwards: You are the translator?!

(Mrs Lewes, now looking blank, nods again)

Mrs Edwards: I am astonished to meet you! I have loved that book and, having first read it in German, I can say that I also love your translation. I do not speak lightly of loving something: I mean a deep attachment to it—even lately, in my present life, I have taken out those volumes and found them inexpressibly comforting. I would have written to the publisher to thank you, but of course I did not know who the translator was, and I have always thought that if an author, or translator as may be, chooses anonymity, then I should in no wise seek to penetrate that mask. But now I can thank you—

Mrs Lewes: I assure you, you are not as astonished as I am. The only readers of my Life of Jesus whom I have ever met read it out of longstanding friendship with me. And now I meet you here, and such a very discerning reader too! I humbly accept your thanks, one translator to another. We are sadly neglected, we metaphrasts, and dare I say it, underrated. Do you know I earned just £20 by all that work? For the time it took, and had money been the object, I should have done better to pursue your Mrs Foxton’s occupation! We are indeed drudges in such labour—I am reminded of Dr Johnson saying that lexicographers are harmless drudges, but we translators are actively harmful drudges. We drag wicked ideas across the world, sieve and mangle them through our half-educated brains and set them under the noses of the innocent...

(Mrs Edwards giggles, and then throws back her head and laughs)

Mrs Lewes: ... I speak of my own brain at least. I have not your knowledge of chemistry, for example. And that is what I should like to hear of, if you would.

Mrs Edwards: That is a request swiftly met, for I am no chemist. My family, the family of George MacFarlane and Helen Stenhouse, in its Royal-Crescent, Glaswegian pomp, owned and managed dye mills. If you wore Turkey Red kerchiefs in your childhood—

(Mrs Lewes nods and gasps slightly, smiling, and Mrs Edwards indicates also her own Paisley shawl, with its Turkey Red background)

Mrs Edwards: —you may well have worn a MacFarlane or, even more likely, a Stenhouse bandanna.

(Mrs Lewes claps her hands)

Mrs Edwards: Aye. I am the youngest of that proud brood, the last of eleven children. The boys of course were brought up to enter the business, and one of my brothers, William,
became fascinated with the chemistry of dyeing and went to Germany to study it. When the family's once considerable fortune vanished—poof!—with my father's death in 1842—when I was twenty-four and all set for ladyhood—I travelled to Gießen (where William then was) and he helped me find myself a situation as a governess in a kind and liberal family, who however had not a word of English. I had perforce rapidly to improve my German. My first teachers were chemistry textbooks by Justus Liebig and Friedrich Wöhler, whose volumes littered my brother's attic rooms—

Mrs Lewes: I must interrupt—I met von Liebig, almost exactly a year ago! My husband and I were in Munich, you see, and he, my husband, writes about such matters—Liebig and Wöhler's books litter our house also—and so we went to see the Freiherr von Liebig (as he now is of course), who was such an enthusiast for his subject that I envied him his delight. But this is wonderful is it not? That you and I, thrown together in this grim room, should have such arcane connexions?

Mrs Edwards: Yes, yes, and the Freiherr is, or at least was, a great friend of Mr Marx, who wrote the words which brought us to this point. It all suggests to me that there is more to discover between us. In fact ... may I presume to ask you, Mrs Lewes, whether your husband is the Mr Lewes who wrote Seaside Studies?

(Mrs Lewes looks rather haunted)

Mrs Lewes: He is, indeed.

Mrs Edwards: I know that it is not written especially for young people, but my step-children are very fond of that book. But—I know I am rushing at this, but this is my version of your excitement—you must therefore also be married to the author of The Life of Goethe.

(Mrs Lewes nods and gasps slightly, smiling, looking relieved)

Mrs Lewes: Yes. Yes.

Mrs Edwards: I am still going headlong, forgive me. I believe that Mr Lewes was once the editor of a weekly periodical, the—oh!—The Leader?

(Mrs Lewes looks haunted again, and speaks quite faintly)

Mrs Lewes: He had charge of the literary side, yes, some eight or nine years ago.

Mrs Edwards: I feel I am intruding too far. Indeed, I know I am, and perhaps I should simply withdraw—

(Mrs Lewes swallows hard, reaches out towards Mrs Edwards, and speaks anxiously)

Mrs Lewes: No, please. Do not mind my nervousness. I am intensely interested in our conversation.

Mrs Edwards: As am I. My head is tumbling with things I wish to say, to investigate with you, so that I am actually afraid that Percy Millington will come too soon to say that our trains are restored to us! But I will retreat just a little, as I have no wish to distress you.... You asked about my knowledge of chemistry, and briefly and frankly, I have none. I jumped across all those long compound nouns in William's text-books. You who live with Mr Lewes
must know far more about how to perform experiments and about elements and their reactions
than I. Truly.

Nor have I been a translator for more than a few days or weeks of my life. My passion,
to be bold, and I think we are both being bold today, was for politics. You translated the whole
of Strauß (thank you, thank you), while I translated some paragraphs of Hegel and then a
small work of Messrs Charles Marx and Freddy Engels—Mr Engels, the man Mr Millington
and I were talking about when we burst in here. As I say, it was from them, Messrs Marx and
Engels, that I quoted those words about the rise of what you so aptly called Mr Carlyle’s cash-
nexus, about the decline of the ‘Familienverhältnisse’, of the relationship based on family and
friendship. That small work was entitled *The Communist Manifesto*, and I am certain that you
have not read it.

*Mrs Lewes* (shakes her head) I regret to say I have not.

*Mrs Edwards*: No, sadly hardly anyone has. Even the readers of the journal for which
I produced it seem to have skimmed only the surface. It would have been better had I had
your skill, but the whole matter of the rise of the cash-nexus, that is to say the substitution
in our economic activities of a money relationship for the old family-, community-based
relationships, is a deep matter. You know this as well as I do, I think, even while we may well
take very different views of it.

Thus the failure of my translation of the Manifesto was not caused by my feeble
rhetoric. It lies rather in the actual state of the working classes of this country: are they simply
backward in their appreciation of where their interests lie—backward because they have been
so ground down by their experience of the capitalist system?—Or are they much wiser than
their continental brothers and sisters? Do they have deeper, truer, more rational aims than the
French, or the Germans, or the Poles?

I used to believe that the failure stemmed from backwardness—which was itself a
symptom of immiseration—but now, for years now, I have wondered. Britain was the cradle,
and the nursery, and the school, of what Fred Engels calls the ‘Industrielle Revolution’, and one
expected Britain to progress to being the university of that industrial revolution, but instead
the ‘Universität’ turns out to be in Germany. At least it is there, or more accurately, in the German
language, that the philosophy, the *theory* of what has been happening to people’s lives this
last century, is being hewn, and tested. There, not here, not in Britain, not in English. Percy
Millington, who is not only a dear man, but a clever shrewd man, a man well-read beyond
what anyone who does not know him intimately could imagine, even Percy is not interested in
theories of history, or theories of revolution, or theories of anything else that I can tell.

*Mrs Lewes shakes her head again, pauses, and then smiles*

*Mrs Lewes*: Neither am I, in truth. I will be bold in turn, and explain myself more
clearly. I am very attracted to the work of Monsieur Comte, to his Positivism. I have read
widely and deeply in his books, and they have illuminated a great deal for me. The emphasis
on humanity’s needs and the rôle of science, its methods and its laws, in defining and achieving
progress for humanity, the close inspection of obscurantist religion—all of this speaks to me
very powerfully.

Now—I have recently made a new friend of a close neighbour—we have both only
lately moved to Wandsworth—and already she is dear to me. We talk together very freely—
almost as freely as you and I today! This lady and her husband have invited my husband and me to join a Positivist community which they wish to establish—and I cannot do it. Fond as I am of my friend and her husband, great though I accept Auguste Comte to be, it is quite beyond me to serve a theory. I do not like dogma. I fear not understanding enough, I fear the sin of pride.

I have never said any of that before—

(We have been aware over the last few seconds of someone approaching the Waiting Room door along the station platform. The figure reaches the door and bends down, disappearing from our view. It reappears and the usual rattling of the door-handle commences with Mrs Lewes’s last line. The door soon opens, and is held open by Mary Foxton’s bottom while she leans down again and picks up a laden tea-tray, and then enters the room to place the tray on the table and to go back to close the door. On the tray is the china needed for pouring and drinking tea with milk and sugar, with plates for displaying and eating small elegant sandwiches; napkins; and a small vase with lilies of the valley in it. Mrs Edwards looks around and sees which it is and rises to move forward to the table; after a second or two, Mrs Lewes does the same)

Mary Foxton: Tea is served, ladies, and those are freshly-made ham sandwiches and here are also freshly-made egg sandwiches. The bread and the meat are good.

(Mary Foxton sets out the items on the table as she speaks, and then folds her hands in front of her. Mrs Lewes murmurs her thanks and takes a seat, while Mrs Edwards stands still, her hands clutched before her in pleasure)

Mary Foxton: Good afternoon to you, and welcome to Nottingham, which I fear is not at its best today. The exertions of the late election have exhausted the town, and the general failure of the railway this morning could, were I more poetic than I am, be seen as a good description of its results: motors devoid of motion, obsolete nay misleading points, and dead cows. Not that I would go so far, but the possibility is there.

Right, that is done. So—Why, Helen MacFarlane! Brother Percy did tell me, of course, and I did see thee standing there, but I needed first to attend to my duties. Thou art looking well, but not as well as thou ought. I fear that John Edwards does not look after thee as he should.

(Mrs Edwards waves a dismissive hand, and moves hurriedly towards Mary Foxton, as if to embrace her. Just before doing so, she checks herself)

Mrs Edwards: I am so sorry—Mary, this is Mrs Lewes, who is also stranded here by the factors you mention, and whom I have only just met. Mrs Lewes, this is Mary Foxton, who is an old friend of mine, since the days when Feargus O’Connor was a member of Parliament for this city and I was newly returned from my years in Gießen and Vienna, and writing against O’Connor in the Democratic Review and the Red Republican. And promoting the views of Ernest Jones. Ah me. Not that Mary has much truck with politicians, disappointing as they so often are.

Mrs Lewes: I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs Foxton.

(Mrs Lewes shakes hands with Mary Foxton, but looks confused, which she is)
Mary Foxton: As am I. And disappointing though politicians are, Helen, thou know'st that I hold them all in the light, which is to say, I neither dismiss nor despise them; I try to hold them in loving kindness. We are all equal before God.

Mrs Lewes: (struggling to make general conversation with an articulate servant) Indeed we are. And thank you for the refreshments, which are most welcome. Breakfast was a long time ago! And while I understand that Nottingham may well be exhausted, its interest, to me at least, is not...exhausted. I have family here, indeed...

Mary Foxton: Perhaps thou shouldst apply to your family to rescue thee! The railway may be a while returning to its senses.

(Mrs Lewes looks rather startled)

Mary Foxton: Thou must excuse me, Mrs Lewes, if thou feel'st that I overstep. I am a plain woman, and speak as I find, honesty truly being the best policy. Helen, I shall return soon. You should find everything here in order: if not send a boy in search of me. There are many about the station and most of them are good lads. I am very glad to have seen thee, after missing thee several times these last two days. Percy naturally reported seeing thee at the hustings, but I was despairing that I would see thee at all. However, I must go for now. The platforms are mobbed, and the kitchen is overwhelmed.

(Mary Foxton leaves, carrying her now-empty tray)

Mrs Edwards: I trust you did not mind my introducing you to Mary: she is like a sister to me, but of course she is not a sister to you.

Mrs Lewes: No, she is not, through no fault of hers—or mine! I have sisters myself, as must you, I am sure, with your large family. I have now just one sister left, she who lives in this town, and I thought of visiting her, but when it came to it, I saw that it would not do. She does not expect me, and has not seen me for many years, and would not wish to anger my brother, any more than I should wish to.

Mrs Edwards: This is a complex matter, and you should sit down here at the table, and have some tea, and eat something too, and take your own counsel.

(Mrs Lewes sits as requested and gingerly inspects an egg sandwich. Mrs Edwards pours two cups of tea and hands her one)

Mrs Lewes: Thank you. You fear I will utter words I will later regret, and dislike you as a consequence? That is a wise thought in most cases, though I hope that in this case, I should be even wiser, and be pleased to have cleared my mind to you. I am in some turmoil. Mrs Foxton's allegory of the motor devoid of motion, baulked by obsolete points, and perhaps even by dead cows: I could work them into a tale of how I find myself today.

But where to begin? Already in this Waiting Room we have both of us begun half a dozen histories of our lives and then been diverted by a discovery of this or that shared enthusiasm or hatred or mere connexion—so if I start this tale, I must be quick, I must say it all before we rush off in another equally dense direction.

But first—I have to say that I do not know why I feel I owe you an account of myself—we both it seems feel that we owe this to each other—and I feel it strongly, just as I feel
a strong trust in your judgement, even though it is also clear that there are many arguments we could have about many important matters and never convince the other that she is wrong.

Mrs Edwards: Aye, indeed: the density of what we feel impelled to say—it is unco strange, especially given, as you say, how great we suspect our differences to be. But then friendship—it is rather soon to speak of it, but here we are!—friendship does not require unanimity, I have never thought that, despite my political tenacity. It only requires sufficient mutuality, and that we do have. So—begin! Be quick!

Mrs Lewes: Ha! Thank you! This is the tale I will tell now: I am a writer, who has recently had unforeseen and gratifying success. It was a great reward to have my efforts acknowledged in that way, but much more important was it to know that I can gain my living in this way, and support my wider family. I have no children myself, and am not likely to, but my husband has several boys to educate and place, and I have nieces and nephews who look to me for help. However, I am estranged from my family, and there is nothing I can do to remedy that—my marriage is not approved of—and that in itself is distressing beyond words. My closest sister, in age and in fondness, died a few weeks ago, having a few days earlier sent word that she regretted our estrangement, but not asking to see me. I think she too feared my brother's wrath. Perhaps I should have gone to her anyway. And I thought I had more time. We always think we have more time. I have been so saddened by Chrissie's death, and by her sad life, and her poor orphaned children, whom I am allowed to help, whom I will help, but whom I may not see. Then last week my husband collapsed—he is quite recovered now, and it was almost immediately as though it had never happened—but in a few days everything became so very alarming.

Last night I resolved that this morning I would take the earliest train I could from Euston Town in this direction—but just to Nuneaton, near which I grew up, and near where my late sister lived—but when I had got that far, as the train slowed down coming into her village of Attleborough... (she waves in the vague direction of Attleborough) ... my heart failed me. What if I had left the train there and walked into the town, and happened upon my brother? Which would be worse, that he ignored me or that he spoke to me? What possible good would either outcome do me, or him, or Chrissie's children?

So I did not stop there, thinking that instead I would look at the river Trent, where I want to set a story which I will start to write soon. I intended to go further if I could, perhaps to Gainsborough—and my first, strange thought when I realized I was trapped here was of visiting Mrs Houghton (my half-sister, Fanny who lives here)—but that, as I say, would not do at all: a sort of madness even to think of it. So here I was, and all I wanted to do was to go home.

But now I have met you, full of a life which is so near and at the same time so far from any I have known—you, thinking so deeply about great things, things about which I also care deeply, although from a perspective which feels so different from yours as to be almost from another planet, as though I have been on the moon while you were in—I don't know—Africa!

Mrs Edwards: (laughing) I have indeed lived in Africa, but you have not been on the moon, my dearest Mrs Lewes.

Mrs Lewes: Africa?! Africa?!
Mrs Edwards: Indeed, I went to southern Africa—emigrated with my husband, my first husband that is, Francis Proust, a Belgian... That is to say, I emigrated. My husband became ... ill, before we were clear of the Thames, and then the wild weather blew us into Deal for several days, and he got worse, and ... we had to leave him there, while I went on, with our daughter. The captain was not kind to us, and we could not afford to forfeit my ticket as well as Francis’s—my brothers had paid for us, and expected us at Durban. Ah me .... having said so much I will end this episode quickly: the first news I had at Durban was that I was a widow, and then within the week my bairn died. Poor wee Consuela Pauline Roland. A few minutes ago I would have presumed to explain her name to you, but now—

Mrs Lewes: —Consuela for George Sand’s Consuelo—how I loved that book! It meant a great deal to me when I was a young woman, and for that reason if no other, does still—and now I have also the thought of you and your child, which I shall cherish. And Pauline Roland—I know the name, and that she was a friend of George Sand and of St Simon, and that she was something like the living exemplar of the great Consuelo. It is a beautiful, hopeful name.

Mrs Edwards: It is and it was meant to be. Now, in my second marriage, I have two little boys, and the eldest is named for my parents. I have often wondered whether calling him Herbert Stenhouse Macfarlane Edwards (rather than say Herbert Ernest Jones Edwards, or better still Herbert Louis Kossuth Edwards) tells how I changed in the brief years between Consuela and Herbert. Chiefly, I think, I am tired.

(Mrs Edwards sips her tea, not for the first time, but this time she does it in order not to have to say anything further just then)

Mrs Lewes: My dear.

Mrs Edwards: (straightening her posture and carefully following a new train of thought) I have always been fond of Milton. You smile—you love him too, of course. But I will predict that you love him in a different way from me, different at least from the way I loved him as a girl. For me, he was the being who believed most in God, who invested most in him and who, even when God disappointed him so badly, remained true to his first love even as he sought to overthrow him. As a girl—and indeed now, but with much less energy—I saw myself as of Satan’s party. Like him I had better things to do than to stand around playing a harp in eternity, and I found it next to impossible to believe that God thought that was the best use of my, or Satan’s time, not that Satan existed in time, but you know what I mean (and didn’t Milton get in a muddle over that?). I, like Satan, like anyone worth their salt, I wanted to do something amazing. (She lays her hands flat on the table in front of her, a characteristic gesture of hers to emphasize delight, but she has seen Mrs Lewes’s expression and is concerned) And I have shocked you.

Mrs Lewes: A little, yes. But not dismayed, may I put it like that? I am surprised at your trust, but delighted at it too. As a girl, Milton was to me—I don’t know—the licensed poet of evangelicalism. (I was very evangelical; (she smiles as she sees Mrs Edwards is reassured) it was my amazing thing.) I was very wrong about that, of course, wrong, I mean, about Milton’s religion. (I was wrong about evangelicalism too, of course, but we need not dwell upon that, I think—where would be the end of our confessions of childish errors?) And I
was rather too late to an appreciation of his language: I was afraid to love it then; my rigorous religion strove to teach me to dislike, to shun, to avoid, sensory pleasures—only intellectual ones would do. (My mentors clearly did not know how sensual intellectual pleasure can be!) Anyway, now I find I need to consider Satan in a quite different light! I do not promise to come to quite your position, but I shall enjoy the exercise.

**Mrs Edwards:** I am delighted to have been of use! And you have given me something too. You spoke of your recent success in proving that you can gain your living by your own efforts, by your writing, and that brought back to me how much it meant to me to pay my way. Now I suppose I do it differently... And of course you also gave me, and to many others, the Jesus of David Strauß. That is a great thing. That is radical!

**Mrs Lewes:** Radical! My, my! As theology it certainly was radical—it still is—but I understand you always to mean something political by that word. Do you know—can you credit it?!—when I was a child no-one told me that politics were important: and somehow the idea that it might be has never properly taken root in me. As I turned twenty, my father, poor man, was increasingly exasperated by my intellectual and, even worse, theological pretensions, and as a result he became even clearer that politics weren't for the likes of me. He was a conservative of the old type, a highly competent land agent, a happy servant of aristocratic men, flattered by their patronage, yet a proud man in the best sense—and so for him, government was almost a sacred thing, beyond the understanding of most people, especially, I am sorry to say, of women—though I am also sorry to say that there are some very silly women about, whom I would not trust with a penny let alone a ballot paper. However—my father, for him it followed, as night the day, that to have the franchise was a privilege justly and fairly reserved for the few, all of them, naturally, men. I have moved beyond this position, but not, I am afraid to tell you of all people, not very far. Above all, I remain doubtful of the suitability of the great majority of our working-class men to see beyond their own short-term advantage in casting a vote.

**Mrs Edwards:** For my part, I do not see why they should be blamed for that. I have not seen middle-class men voting against their perceived short- or long-term interests, and I certainly have never seen a duke do such a thing, unless it was to annoy the middle classes, which I quite understand is a pleasant recreation.

**Mrs Lewes:** (laughing) But you are of the middle class, surely? Forgive me.

**Mrs Edwards:** Forgive you for what, Mrs Lewes? How can we have a sensible conversation about these matters if we are forever apologizing for saying what we think and for asking where we seek clarity? To answer your well-mannered question: No. At least I was not middle-class when I was working as a journalist. I was making my own way, I was not living off others' labour, or rents. And I work now, in my household, and am only middle-class if you assign to me my husband's status, and I do not think I like that.

**Mrs Lewes:** Well, I will follow your instructions and not say that. But your analysis does not sound very communal to me, not very communistic, should I say? It sounds to me like the justified pride of the self-made man!

**Mrs Edwards:** Ha! I remind you of your father, is it? Or, I dare to suggest, of yourself?
Mrs Lewes: Touche!

Mrs Edwards: (she lays her hands flat on the table) Pax. I wish I had about me a copy of the article about which I am most conceited: it was entitled ‘Middle-class Dodges and Proletarian Gullibility’.

Mrs Lewes: (laughing) What? Excuse me, but ‘dodges’ and ‘gullibility’?

Mrs Edwards: Just so. ‘Middle-class Dodges and Proletarian Gullibility.’ You can see that I was not one to flatter indiscriminately, and my little essay was not calculated to make converts. Nor did it. But it did show some of my comrades the error of their ways, and at the time I set great store by that.

Mrs Lewes: (still laughing) It is a dangerous talent, to be sure. The delightfulness of being right can blind us to the loss of a friend. I do not criticize you—I speak of myself. Two or three years back I wrote the review of which I am probably proudest, and it was entitled ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, and I think now that perhaps I should have been more careful of the feelings of some innocent readers.

Mrs Edwards: (she lays her hands flat on the table) In the Westminster Review, was it not? And that was you! Once more, I find a bone to pick with this habit of authorly anonymity. There really are times, many times, when one wishes such articles were not anonymous. I loved that piece, even though I thought a man had written it—you worked to make me to think that, did you not?

(Mrs Lewes frowns, half-smiles, waggles her head, shrugs, indicating that she both did and did not mean it)

Mrs Edwards: ...and I was annoyed by that, since I preferred it to be a woman who took silly women to task, rather than a man who could thereby tar us all with the same stick. I was also annoyed by the fact that ‘he’ was right. And witty.

Mrs Lewes: Well, I am surprised but gratified that in all your annoyance at my male pretence there remained room for love of what I actually said. Of which I do confess I remain proud. But I never thought to send out your species of invective: middle-class dodges and proletarian gullibility, forsooth! Very fine!

Mrs Edwards: Thank you kindly. (She bows ironically in her seat) It did hit the mark. I was appalled that working men were giving money for a monument to Sir Robert Peel—money which would have been much better spent on food for their table, or on funeral insurance, or on ribbons for their wives! Peel of all men, to be celebrated as their saviour and helpmeet! Talk about turning the other cheek! Those poor deluded, gullible people were definitely not acting in their own interests then and perhaps you would have applauded them, did applaud them, and perhaps I should change the subject if we are to sit here alone much longer.

(Mrs Edwards has become increasingly agitated in the course of this speech, and ends sitting on her hands and firmly shutting her mouth)

Mrs Lewes: No, no. We shall not fall out over this. You will not be surprised to learn that my father was no great admirer of Peel. The phrase ‘Liberal Tory’ made no sense to
him, and I would be astonished to learn that he had contributed to any monuments to him. But truly, these are not my concerns, and I will neither praise nor condemn you, not because you have pleased or dismayed me, but simply because my—what shall I say?—perspective is not political. Once upon a time, it almost was: the height of my political enthusiasm came in 1848—and so great was my disappointment in the weak performance of the Chartists at Kennington Common that I rapidly withdrew from espousing any political hopes at all, meek though mine had been.

It was then that I remembered what I had almost forgotten, that in 1832, following the Reform Bill, the child I then was witnessed an election riot, which showed me clearly what public disorder must always be: I have never forgotten that the disturbance was brought about chiefly by dishonest men professing to be on the people’s side.

**Mrs Edwards:** Perhaps. I have already told you something of my opinion of the gullibility of the masses, but that gullibility consists more of an inclination to believe that their friend is the rich man rather than the radical. Perhaps in your ‘neck of the woods’, as the Americans say, the workers trusted the radical message, but my experience is that it is very hard to rouse the English working-man to public anger, even against the most flagrant of assaults upon their dignity and lives. Dishonest men, as you call them, the Radicals, are at best laughed at, or ignored.

**Mrs Lewes:** But I saw the agents of the so-called Radicals treat the miners from the pits around Nuneaton to free beer, and urge them to gather bricks and worse to hurl at the candidates, and I saw the miners of the district accept the beer and gather up the bricks. Even then, aged eleven, was I? I could see that they were not helping the cause of Reform.

**Mrs Edwards:** That cause was already lost. I was still at home, in Scotland, at that time, the time of the English and the Scottish Reform Acts—our Act increased the vote by far more than did the puny English bill, did you know that? Not that it made much difference to the people who really needed the power and of course did not get any of it: the poor and the women. All my brothers, however stupid, had only to move out of our house and each into a modest set of rooms, and the vote was theirs—which was soon enough the case, as they were forced to leave our home by the failure of my father’s business at his death almost exactly ten years after the bill was passed. But my sisters and I?—clever as we were—at least as clever as the best of the boys, I do not hesitate to say—we might have owned Edinburgh Castle, and still could only dream of a vote.

**Mrs Lewes:** I confess I have never dreamed of it. I have thought about it, naturally, admiring as I do Mary Wollstonecraft (I think we can agree on her too, no?)...

**Mrs Edwards:** *(Mrs Edwards nods enthusiastically)* Oh yes. And you will like to know that Mary Foxton was named for her—and that her brother was named Percy for Shelley. The Millingtons are an interesting family. But I interrupted—you admire Miss Wollstonecraft but...

**Mrs Lewes:** My goodness. But—oh there is so much to say—but despite Miss Wollstonecraft’s arguments, the thought of the ballot did not thrill me. And having seen that riot, I remain frightened by hustings and, more importantly, I am not convinced that the ballot confers a fraction of the power attributed to it.
Mrs Edwards: Do you know, I increasingly suspect the same? But nevertheless, I find myself still demanding it—after all, if it isn’t as vital a point as we thought, surely it matters less who has it? Oh—I’m just being flippant, though not about the dubious power of the ballot. You remember the riot in—Nuneaton, was it?...

(Mrs Lewes nods)

Mrs Edwards: ...I remember something else. We Scots had had our own wee rammy over Reform over a decade before England (I was a wee bairn then) and it failed, we failed, and good men were hanged and mutilated. My mother made sure I knew of what was called the Radical War when I was old enough to understand: which was when those who had not been executed were given a free pardon, in ’36. I was seventeen, and it was a great moment in my political education. Aye, the Stenhouses, my mother’s people, were famously radical then. I fear that now they only visit the poor to collect for monuments to Sir Robert Peel.

Mrs Lewes: I think a grand difference between us is that you are brave. That tale of good men hanged would have terrified me. I am not brave.

Mrs Edwards: (after the briefest of pauses) But you are brave, good madam, you are. Forgive me, but I know something of you....

(Mrs Lewes gasps, and her hand goes to cover her mouth)

Mrs Edwards: ...nothing but good, I do assure you, if, that is, you are the former Miss Evans who was the presiding genius at the Westminster Review seven or eight years ago?

(Mrs Lewes only stares, white as a sheet)

Mrs Edwards: ... Well, I shall take your silence as permission to say that you are she. But, goodness, why are you so shocked that I, a fellow female journalist working within a mile of where you toiled in The Strand, should not only know your name and admire your work—but be convinced of your bravery? Come, come! If I cannot recognize the courage which a woman needs in such a case, who could? You must take my word for it, if you cannot believe your own sense!

Mrs Lewes: (faintly) You are very kind.

Mrs Edwards: I am kinder than I was, but I have never been exceptionally so. You see, I am trying to show you how wise a judge of character I am. So you are brave. I know it, and so do you.

(They have both stopped eating, and their tea-cups are empty. Mrs Edwards leans forward and takes Mrs Lewes’s hand and smiles into her eyes. Mrs Lewes, after a pause on the brink of tears, smiles back)

Mrs Edwards: I did not mean to reveal so much, indeed I cannot say how it is that I have done it. I think you know that. I feel exposed, but I do see you as a friend, someone who understands something of my situation and who knows that I have not promiscuously sought either your sympathy or your friendship. I, we, have simply found it. I am not sure how that is, but I will ask you to match my exposure with more of your own story. It will allow me to feel less foolish, and it will also further satisfy my deep curiosity about you.
I cannot pretend to your power to read minds, but (she speaks gently) I will tell you that I have noted how often you refer to failure in your life, and speak wistfully of ‘that time’—‘at that time I was engaged thusly’ and so on.

Mrs Edwards: Ha! How we do betray ourselves! My dear Mrs Lewes, it is you who read minds, not I. I simply recall the stars of the firmament of my heyday (‘that time’, as you note)—and really it is not hard to identify you. You are clearly not Miss Harriet Martineau—you have not delivered me a moral lecture, you do not have an ear-trumpet, you have not told me the latest gossip—so you must be Miss Evans as was. That is not hard for me to discover.

I will tell you more of myself, all the same. Where to begin?

(Over the last few seconds, we have once again been aware of a figure approaching the Waiting Room door along the station platform: Mary Foxton. She reaches the door and the usual rattling of the door-handle commences with Mrs Edwards’s last line. Both the women in the Waiting Room fall silent and turn towards the door, which soon opens to Mary’s more expert touch. She comes in with her empty tray)

Mary Foxton: Good cheer! There is talk—talk only, mind—of trains moving, and moving in the direction set down in the timetables. There are even rumours that passengers will be permitted to board. I can of course promise nothing, but I thought the news would be welcome.

Mrs Edwards: It is welcome. It will feed our hopes of release for a short while at least—not, to be frank, that I feel captive just now. We are having a high old time! And thank you for the even more welcome refreshment. We seem to have demolished the sandwiches, which is a great compliment.

Mary Foxton: I will tell the kitchen, and they will be pleased. Is there anything else you require? There are still some sandwiches, and a party of gentlemen for London have called for veal chops, some of which I could bring you.

(Mrs Edwards shakes her head at the mention of veal chops)

Mrs Lewes: Nor for me, thank you. But I did enjoy the sandwiches. Thank you.

Mrs Edwards: Can I press you to join us for a few moments, Mary? I was about to speak to Mrs Lewes about why I left London.

Mary Foxton: I should like to stop, and I will, but I cannot sit with you—the supervisor would have something to say if I did. And do not allow me to let you go before you have paid—here is the account—but do continue your talk. I will collect the crockery slowly enough, but then I shall have to go....

(Mesdames Lewes and Edwards glance at the bill. Mrs Lewes looks for her bag and opens it for her purse, and sorts the coins. She waves aside Mrs Edwards’s attempt to do the same. Mrs Foxton starts to clear the table, but is chiefly simply moving the things around)

Mary Foxton: ....Now, thy leaving of London, Helen. That would be the spring or summer of 1851. We saw you, thee and Francis Proust, poor man, and my poor George was still alive: I remember thy sister Agnes coming to see you at my brother Percy Millington’s
house. That was a bad business—not thy coming to Nottingham, of course, but thy leaving London like that.

Mrs Edwards: It was certainly a shock to me. I had thought I was settled in London, writing at that time for Mr Harney’s journals, the Democratic Review and then his Red Republican and finally Friend of the People. They all failed, one after another, in a matter of months: they failed financially of course, but they also failed to convince the masses, perhaps because for the vast part they never even read them. It can be depressing, pouring out sterling philosophy into deaf ears, trying to keep faith not only with what I know to be the truth, but also with the people who have helped and encouraged and educated me.

And my undoing was the pure spite of Harney’s wife. All I can think was that she was jealous of her position as one of the few women active in London socialism and hated me for joining them. Possibly she believed that I was scheming for her husband’s affections, but she knew well enough of my relations with Francis: we were engaged to be married. Indeed, it was that that Mary Harney used to insult me.

Poor Francis, as you say, Mary. Mrs Lewes, you should know that he was a brave, kind, good man, a radical and a refugee. He was also occasionally subject to mania and fits, but I was usually able to help him in those states. We nearly did not go to the banquet on New Year’s Eve, because large noisy occasions, such as that promised to be, were apt to distress him. But it had been a long time since he had had an attack, and he wanted to go. In truth, I think he went because he knew I wanted to go. It was the great event of the socialist year in London. George Julian Harney organized it, as he always did, and everyone was there. Ah well, but Francis was overcome early in the evening, and I believe that it was she, Mary Harney, who brought it on, or at the very least made it worse. To judge by what she said to other people that evening, I would guess that she told him I was flirting or worse with her husband. Francis certainly got that idea from somewhere. I spent most of the time trying to calm him, and more or less succeeding.

When I returned to my place at the table, Mr Harney made to introduce his wife to me—we knew each other only by sight—and she declined the honour, saying terrible things about Francis. She implied that I was besotted with her husband, and even tried to involve Mrs Marx in some daft-like lie that Francis had insulted her, Jenny Marx, that is.

It broke something in me, or damaged it so badly that gradually I too failed. I ran away from it all, and took Francis with me. It has not escaped me that Mrs Harney cannot have dreamed that her silly rudeness would be so successful: that I would collude with her to end my effective political life.

Mary Foxton: Thou art too hard on thyself, Helen. I have heard this story before, of course, and not only from thee, and I venture to say that thou didst the right thing in separating yourselves from such people. For example, thou hast told me that Mr Marx, who witnessed much of this episode, thought the Harneys had acted very badly by thee.

Mrs Edwards: I had forgotten that. How strange that I should! Yes, Mr Marx asked Freddy Engels to tell me that he was very sorry about what had happened. But, as you see, it made no difference to me then, or now. My belief in a socialist community, where men like Francis could flourish in spite of such illness, where men and women would help each other through the various catastrophes of life, that belief, which I somehow thought to find exemplified that night of all nights, at a socialist celebration of the Old and New Years—that
trust, that hope, never has fully recovered in me. Indeed much that I experienced later has served only to reinforce my fear that, although socialism is the answer to the real problems of the world—the problems of power, of poverty, of justice—it will need centuries more of education, of action, of thought, to become an active force. And I will not live to see it, and nor would Francis have.

Mrs Lewes: It is very difficult to maintain such hopes even in the best of conditions. A utopian view is pleasant to imagine, but attempting to live it—I think it has never succeeded, and it surely requires great strength to try it.

Mrs Edwards: You are right, but I never thought of my socialism as utopian—as opposed to Robert Owen’s, say, or St Simon’s. Theirs was a romantic, naïve fairy-tale. I know that struggle, class struggle, is needed for the changes I seek, or perhaps I should say sought. The people who create wealth need actively, forcefully, to assert their power against the capitalists who steal it from them. I knew this then, and I still know it. I began learning about the possibilities of such change from Hegel; learning about the need for struggle came a little later—in a general way through my experience of the 1848 revolutions, more particularly through my reading of Messrs Marx and Engels, and then my friendship with Freddy.

Mrs Lewes: Your experience of the revolutions? You were still in Germany in 1848?

Mrs Edwards: Madam, I was in Vienna in 1848, and saw not a mere riot—forgive me, I am not trying to cap your experience, but to state a fact—not a mere riot, but a true revolution, and my heart soared. It was my first epiphany. Today we are in Nottingham: do you know that the castle, whose ruins you may have noticed from the train on the way in, was burned down in 1831—after the House of Lords defeated the Reform Bill? (Mrs Lewes shakes her head) No, I think the English do not care to remember such episodes. Who knows anything here about the Civil War? The Scots remember it, I assure you, as the French remember their great revolution, imperfect though it was. What Englishman stops to wonder what England would be like had the country not rid itself of kings for a space, had there not been that interregnum of Oliver Cromwell? Thomas Carlyle has pondered the matter, but he is of course Scotch, and not subject to the delicacy of the English about revolutions; however, the tendency of his thought is not wholesome. I do not like to deal in Great Men. Even when I think I may have met one.

Mary Foxton: I am of a mind with thee there.

Mrs Lewes: You speak of Mr O’Connor, or of Mr Jones?

Mrs Edwards: I do not! More’s the pity, perhaps, though I do seem to contradict myself there. No—I was thinking of Mr Engels: he has the intellectual grasp, less than Mr Marx has, certainly, but still considerable, and he also has a real gift of connexion and sympathy with the people whom he wishes to serve. Neither the great Feargus nor the great Ernest has ever lost their enormous sense of noblesse oblige in their approach to the ‘lower orders’. Freddy on the other hand lives among them at his ease. Clearly, he does not think of himself as a Great Man, and so I do not have to deal with him as one.

Mrs Lewes: I see you are a harsh critic!
Mrs Edwards: You already knew that, so I make no apology this time. Instead, I will now say something nice about Ernest Jones. (I fear Mr O'Connor will have to linger in the outer darkness.) Mr Jones is a sincere man, and capable at times of great insight and acuity.

(Mrs Edwards stands up and moves away from the table)

Mrs Edwards: Ladies, I am about to perform for you one of the great poems of our working-class literature, ‘The New World’ by Mr Ernest Jones, friend of the people. In fact I give you only the greater part of the second stanza of the third part, because regrettably we have not time for more. Ladies, I crave your attention: Ahem!

(Mrs Edwards has spoken ironically so far, but her declamation of the verse is serious)

Nations, like men, too oft are given to roam,
And seek abroad what they could find at home.
They send their armies out on ventures far;
Their halt is—havoc, and their journey—war;
Destruction's traders! who, to start their trade,
Steal, for the bayonet, metal from the spade.
The interest's—blood; the capital is—life;
The debt—is vengeance; the instalment—strife;
The payment's—death; and wounds are the receipt;
The market's—battle; and the whole—a cheat.

(Mrs Edwards performs it well. At the end, she drops her arms, and stands a moment. There is a brief silence, and then she returns to her seat)

Mary Foxton: Thank you, Helen. Thou know'st I have always liked those lines. There is much of truth in them.

Mrs Lewes: I did not know he was a poet, or if I heard it, I gave it no credit. Is it published?

Mrs Edwards: It appeared in his old newspaper, Notes to the People, about the time I was in London. It may be in a book now, I know not. I have heard him perform the whole thing several times, and he always brought the house down. I think it very fine. But he is not a great man, and as far as that goes I am glad of it.

Mary Foxton: Yes, I also think it a wise course to avoid Great Men—but now I must step into the world outside this room. Those Great Men for London will have their veal chops, and I must help my fellow attendants to serve them. I have delayed here too long, though I cannot regret it. I hope to return very soon, if I may.

Mrs Lewes: Pray do, Mrs Foxton.

Mrs Edwards: Mary, of course.

(Mary Foxton nods, finally gathers up the tea things, and makes her departure)

Mrs Lewes: That was an impressive rendition, Mrs Edwards. I would not say that you have missed your vocation, because you have been telling me how thoroughly you
succeeded in finding it, but I can say that should you ever need another string to your bow, you
have found it. Indeed I might get word to Mr Dickens, that he might have you for one of his
plays.

Mrs Edwards: I fear that Mr Dickens is amongst those whose middle-class dodges
I have lampooned. I doubt he is aware of it, but I do not think he would employ me if he did.

Mrs Lewes: (she is smiling) I begin to suspect that it is only that you did not know my
name which has spared me similar treatment!

Mrs Edwards: (she is smiling too) Likely so, and perhaps that is a lesson to me.

Mrs Lewes: Oh dear—just as you were beginning to convince me that I might deserve
such treatment, you begin to take my old position! Are we good for each other?

Mrs Edwards: To speak seriously, I think we are. At the least, I know that you are
good for me, and I think that you will not mind my saying as much. It is rare to find a kindred
spirit—rare?!—unique for me! I am gushing. I will stop.

(Mrs Lewes shakes her head, still smiling; she makes as though to speak, but doesn't manage
it. Mrs Edwards leans forward and touches her hand, but does not linger)

Mrs Edwards: So I will change the subject, or, rather, return to it. Mrs Lewes, have
you read Mr Engels’ study of the Manchester working classes? (I assure you that I do have
other acquaintance, and I have certainly read other authors, but Freddy Engels seems the
man of this moment.) It is in German, but you have the German, I know. I mention it to you,
because I have lived in Manchester and, even before I met him, his book taught me to see what
I was looking at, all around me, and I know that it has taught others the same, and not just in
Manchester. You will not need to travel there to benefit from it!

Well, what I learned from Freddy’s researches into the condition of the poor I added
to what my experience had already given me. As a child I lived in a grand enough house in
Glasgow, so that even if I visited my father’s mills, and I often did, I could retreat back to
Royal Crescent and—not forget it, never that, my mother saw to it that I did not—but continue
to live almost as though all that did not exist. In Vienna I learned very differently. I learned
that living in a grand house, and it was a grand house where I was a governess, provided only
so much protection. When violence erupts and angry people rush through the streets, your
grand house is very far from protecting you. But my employers invited the mob in—yes, they
did!—and we spoke to them. Their leaders ate at our table, and sometimes slept in a cupboard
while the police searched the city. A friend of my employers, a lawyer, a journalist, a good
man, was hanged for his part in the revolution: his part being to write newspaper articles
supporting the insurgents. Others whom we had sheltered were shot. My employers had to go
into exile for their own safety.

I suspect that you deprecate anger: it is a vice, you will say. But I see it as an
indispensable weapon against people who seek to kill you and who at any rate do not care
if you die by their malevolence or mere neglect. Christ threw the moneylenders out of the
Temple, did he not? If he did not do that in a fit of anger, I should be most surprised. And
do not say that what he meant was that there was a place for everything and that everything
should be in its place. Nothing so anodyne, please. For does not the New Testament also tell
us that the love of money is the root of all evil?
Mrs Lewes: The King James version does, true. The Greek probably does not, that is disputed, but I will grant you your point about the need for anger in politics, while not acceding to your greater toleration of violence. I now see that anger as an extension of the warmth with which you tackle all your subjects. Such passion! Truly, I do not have that, and yours continually surprises me, and sometimes makes me uneasy.

Mrs Edwards: (after a brief pause) There are many strange aspects of sitting here talking thus with you, but perhaps the greatest oddity is that I am exerting myself to convince you of political views from which I myself have resiled. I’m sure you have noticed, you whom nothing escapes, that I still hold those beliefs and truths dear, but I no longer actively pursue them. Indeed, I have put myself in such a position that I cannot imagine what would happen were I now to go home and announce that I wished to attend the meetings of the Nantwich Chartists in the shop of the shoemaker there.

Mrs Lewes: Would you wish to attend them?

Mrs Edwards: Indeed I would, assuming I had the invisibility of Ali Baba! Not otherwise.

Mrs Lewes: I too would relish that opportunity, and I would go home to write a Chartist story, in which they discover that their real task is to make themselves into a class that will shame the other classes out of their vices. Artisans, factory hands, miners, and labourers of all sorts will vow to become skilful, faithful, well-judging, industrious, and sober. They will see how without these qualities there can be no wisdom or virtue in their cause. And, in my Chartist tale, this will happen, and the middle and upper classes will learn from them, and we shall have better members of Parliament, better religious teachers, more honest tradesmen, and fewer foolish demagogues. And no Great Men. Hurrah!

Mrs Edwards: Hurrah, indeed. However I am bewildered, for the first time here, or have I misunderstood you? The poorest amongst us, the most oppressed, and most ill-educated, with the least resources to support their weaknesses—you say that these people should somehow transform themselves into paragons of virtue, such as the other classes have never been, nor ever will become—and that they must do that not so as to procure for themselves political power, but rather to gain some vague moral power which will inspire the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, as one, to reform themselves, thus making any sharing of political power unnecessary?

I hesitate to say it, but that is not even utopian.

Mrs Lewes: It was a mere jeu d'esprit, and I have not expressed myself well. It is further proof (if such were needed) that my perspective is not political. I have now revealed, to myself as much as to you, how little I like politics, how much I distrust political power, how greatly I desire to see a society grow in the way I have sketched out, where inherently noble men and women prosper through honest work, and without the interpolation of real or imagined class-difference or, as you called it, class-struggle.

Mrs Edwards: And yet you would not yourself dwell in such a society! Even the Positivists cannot tempt you to their ranks. (She smiles to soften her words)
Mrs Lewes: Touché. (*Her smile is weaker than Mrs Edwards's*) You overstate my position, but I see that I am not on as strong ground here as I would wish. I must work on it. I do not abandon it, however: I rather move off for now. (*Her smile is rather wider now*)

Mrs Edwards: As long as you do not feel that I have pushed you off your ground. You spoke rightly when you spoke of my warmth: it has always been a fault of mine to let myself be carried away by the self-generated heat of my argument, without thought of who might be burnt thereby.

(There is another pause. A train whistle is heard, muffled by the door. It is a reminder of the world Mary Foxton mentioned before she left them)

Mrs Lewes: Mrs Foxton is a remarkable woman, I think. She has a depth of character combined with a kind of deft drollness that I would not look for in a Quaker, and certainly not in a waiting-room attendant. Or perhaps I should widen my acquaintance?

Mrs Edwards: I daresay we should all do that, but you are right that Mary Foxton is unusual. She has something of the Mrs Poyser about her, I think, don’t you?

(Mrs Lewes is very startled. She glances at Mrs Edwards, who is watching her intently, and she [Mrs Lewes] blushes; and recollects herself)

Mrs Lewes: Mrs Poyser? You mean the farmer’s wife, is it, in that new novel, what’s it called?

Mrs Edwards: It is called *Adam Bede*, my dear Mrs Lewes. Everyone I know has read it, and loves it, and so do I. (*She is smiling broadly. Mrs Lewes is not*)

Mrs Lewes: I believe you said that you lived in Africa for a time? In Durban, did you say?

Mrs Edwards: (*Still smiling*) No, my daughter and I landed at Durban in what was for them the early autumn of 1854, springtime here of course, but after Consuela died, my brothers escorted me to Pietermaritzburg, where they were farming, and where the plan had been that Francis and I should work too. We did not have any experience, knowledge or skill for agriculture of any kind, but my brothers had assured us that that was not necessary: we would quickly learn what little we needed to know. That turned out to mean whipping the blacks who actually did the work in order that we could reap the rewards of their labour. At first I was surprised that my brothers thought that this arrangement would appeal to me: they did not share my politics—only my brother William, the chemist, and my sister Agnes have any radical tendencies—but they knew well enough what they were.

What distressed me even more, however, was seeing *Chartists* arriving from England, settling on their dusty acres and immediately behaving like slave-drivers towards their labourers as to the manner born. It made me weep. More importantly, it made the labourers weep. And such is the complexity of life, even those that wept hardest did not respect me: not only was I a woman, I was a soft-hearted woman, to be robbed and cheated. It took me over a year to save up the money for my return home, and to repay my brothers the outward fare they had advanced to Francis and me, and I had to fight for every penny while I doubted my right to even a farthing.

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Mrs Lewes: We are again with Mr Jones' great poem, are we not? It seems to me that all this taking over of other people's land halfway across the world, and the consequent disruption or destruction of their way of life is a terrible mistake. It develops the worst in the characters on both sides, and who will reap the whirlwind?

Mrs Edwards: Indeed—I must agree with you. Mr Jones wrote before the late Indian Mutiny, but the main thrust of his poem was against the British in Hindustan. He showed great prescience there. My first-hand experience of foreign adventure only confirmed his vision. I feared for my soul if I stayed. 'Soul' is not the word, not my word, but you understand me, I think. Nor do I mean to suggest that the most important aspect of what goes on at the Cape is the offence to the delicate sensibilities of such as I. But it matters to me. It mattered to me.

I crawled back to England. It felt like that. I had nothing. The injury to my hopes which Pietermaritzburg represented was possibly greater than the injury Mary Harney had dealt me; I need not mention the loss of my beloved husband and beloved child. I finally landed in England in the late summer of 1854, and I went to my sister's house in Manchester. I stopped here on my way north: my memory of the kindness shown to Francis by Percy Millington and George and Mary Foxton had sustained me on the veldt, and on the ship home. George was dead by then, I discovered, a terrible accident in the shunting yard; Mary was badly taken by his death, but she was already working here at the station—already, one might say, (smiling) changing one's notion of what service might be.

To tell the truth, I came to Nottingham yesterday more to see her and her brother than to see how my old comrade Ernest Jones would fare at the hustings.

Mrs Lewes: Loyal old friends are a joy. Ha! That's fit for a Christmas book of pieties, with pansies around the saying. But it is true. You, who feel so much like an old friend now, must tell me what happened next.

Mrs Edwards: And so afterwards you must tell me more. The rest of my story is rapidly told: Agnes, my sister, lives in Manchester, in Moss Side, a near neighbour to Freddy. I had known him in London—Mr Harney introduced us—and had become friendly with him in the period after I fled London and before Francis and I took ship for Africa—we were in Liverpool for a time, and with Agnes in Burnley and Manchester, and so on, writing, doing political work, and he was helpful to us.

About a year after I had returned to Manchester, I am talking now of about four years ago, Freddy introduced me to a friend of his. An unlikely friend perhaps, for he is the rector of Baddiley, a parish over which the Cheshire Hunt rides—and Freddy rides with the Cheshire Hunt. The Revd John Edwards naturally does not ride with the Hunt, but he does read radical newspapers, and he admires Freddy, and had sought him out some time since. He was but lately widowed, with eleven children bouncing around the Rectory, and I think Freddy thought we could help each other. Perhaps we do. I married John Edwards a year later, not without a great deal of thought and discussion between us beforehand. His political opinions are not so very far from mine, although his political activities have been negligible, and I suspect he is more than a little shocked by mine. I suppose that is to be expected of a rector in the church of England.
Mrs Lewes: You are a clergyman's wife! I should never have guessed that! Goodness. Forgive me, it is rude of me I know—but then I see that you know it is a shocking thing, from you. You knew it would shock me! So I will say a shocking thing: does your husband know that you are still of Satan's party?

Mrs Edwards: (smiling) Not in those terms, no. But we have discussed the politics of Milton's Satan, or at least we did during our courtship, in great amity. There is not so much time for such chatter now, I fear.

Mrs Lewes: I imagine not. How old is the oldest child?

Mrs Edwards: Catherine is now twenty-one and, as perhaps you were hinting, she and her next youngest sister are a great help to me; as is my sister Agnes, who is on a visit to us just now. Agnes is better at directing servants than I: she had more practice in our Royal-crescent days than I did, being much older. So my escape for a brief couple of days to Nottingham was difficult, but not impossible, you see. Though I must find a train home soon.

Mrs Lewes: I have to persevere with my impudent questions. Do any of your husband's parishioners know of your—

Mrs Edwards: —my past? They know that I am of a good Scotch merchant family, and a widow lately returned from the Cape. Anything more of the truth would be a scandal to the respectable women of the parish, most of whom are bored to the limits of endurance and who would fall upon the details of my life like famished wolves. In all honesty I owe Mr Edwards a deal of discretion.

(Mrs Lewes leans her forehead on her hand and sighs. She is aware of Mrs Edwards's keen inspection, but this time she is for a space unable to recollect herself)

Mrs Edwards: I will tell you that I am still surprised at where I am and what I have done. Twelve children is a very large household to maintain (poor sweet Gracia died last year, and as you know I have added two to the tally), even on the comfortable income which Baddiley provides. Five sons to educate! The daughters do not cost so much, of course, though it is expensive to dress them for the marriage market. The younger girls I teach; the older ones are past that help, but they are handy with their sewing needles and that is useful.

All said, and despite my large experience of the world, there is little in that experience which prepared me for this. Mr Edwards is a vigorous man, as the number of his children testifies, and he finds it hard to understand why I am so very tired most of the time. These are not complaints: they are an answer to your question. At least I hope they are. I have forgotten what the question was. And now it is your turn.

Mrs Lewes: It is, and I will try to come up to your mark! But your life has been so full of incident, so riven by tragedy: my poor mundane existence offers nothing comparable. I must however make you a gift of something worthy of what you have given me, but its worth can be measured only by what the gift means to me. I cannot hope that it will mean as much to you, if it means anything at all.
(Over the last few seconds, we have been aware of two figures approaching the Waiting Room door: Percy Millington and Mary Foxton. They reach the door and there is the usual rattling of the door-handle. Mrs Lewes rushes to finish, but they are in the room before she can say more, Percy Millington with his sack-truck)

Mrs Lewes: Oh dear, I cannot speak it before them!

Mr Millington: (addressing Mrs Lewes) Ma'am, urgent news. The London train is about to depart. You must come at once. Allow me to get your luggage. (He addresses Mrs Edwards) How now, Howard—you will wait here for me, won't you? No sign of the Crewe train moving yet awhile, I fear!

Mrs Lewes: (rising and looking around her for her bonnet and bags, but addressing Mrs Edwards) Howard?

Mrs Foxton: Oh, didst thou not know? Helen MacFarlane used the pseudonym Howard Morton for some of her best writing. It has been Percy's little joke thus to address her at times.

Mrs Edwards: (she has been rummaging in her book bag) A male name has its advantages, as I'm sure you know, Mrs Lewes.

Mrs Lewes: (with a sudden friendly emphasis) I do, yes, I do. How d'ye do, Howard. (She offers her hand to Mrs Edwards, who shakes it warmly) Do call me George. And thank you. This is too quick, too hurried. We always think we have more time....

(There is a flurry of business getting Mrs Lewes's luggage on the trolley and out of the room. Mrs Lewes dons her bonnet, embraces Mrs Foxton, and finally Mrs Edwards, and leaves the room in a rush. As the door slams shut, Mrs Edwards at last manages to haul the book she sought out of her bag)

Mary Foxton: Well, what was going on here? Don't tell me. I am not supposed to know, and I will not know. But why art thou waving that volume in the air?

Mrs Edwards: Volume three of Adam Bede. I wanted her to sign it.

Act II: Epilogue, eleven months later

The scene is once more the First-Class Ladies Waiting Room at Nottingham Midland Station. The room is as it was the year before.

(There are no waiting passengers, but Mary Foxton is cleaning the room. We can see through the window Percy Millington making his way along the platform. He rattles the handle and eventually gains entry. In his hand there is a letter on black-edged paper. He looks ill. Mary gives a double-take.)

Mary Foxton: Why, brother! What is wrong? Come sit! (She drags one of the heavy chairs around for him)

Mr Millington: No, sister, it is you who should sit down. I have come directly I heard the news—your Margaret brought the letter but thought I should be the one to tell you.
Mary Foxton: Oh say it is not a child of mine! But who would write on such paper to me?

Mr Millington: It is not family, Mary, though she was like a sister. It is Helen, Mary, it is Helen MacFarlane who is dead. (Mary sinks into the chair and covers her face with her hands) Helen MacFarlane who was Howard Morton, and then Mrs Proust, and then Mrs Edwards. How you women do play with names. She is dead, Mary, just the day before yesterday, of bronchitis, it says. Her husband was good enough to write to you. He says she asked him to, and that she.... (he passes the letter to her, unable to continue)

Mary Foxton: He says (she reads from the letter) ‘My dearest wife declined rapidly, weakened as she was by two miscarriages in the course of last year. She was expecting a child again and she wished me to tell you, my dear Mrs Foxton, that we had agreed to name the child Percy or Mary, as it was a boy or girl. I would not have burdened you with these sorrowful details but that my wife was most insistent that you should know of the circumstances around her death and of the plans she had. I will also tell you that she did not seek death, knowing that she had much to live for in her loving family; but that when she knew she would die she said it was in the hope of going to a place of greater justice. To which I say Amen.’

‘May I add that my wife has told me something of your kindness to her over many years, and that I am grateful to you for your care of her. You will be in my prayers as she, I am sure, will be in yours.’

Mr Millington: (who has sunk into the other chair) How now, Howard, eh? Is there greater justice where you are now? There is as certain as hell no justice here.

Mary Foxton: (gently) Now, now, Percy. It is a terrible thing to know she is gone, that is certain. Such vigour she had! Dost thou remember her in this room, not a year ago, when she met up with that odd woman from London, Mrs Lewes, and they became fast friends in a minute, or so it seemed? All that life, gone. It is hard to bear. We always think we have more time. Helen said that to me that day, after thou hadst taken Mrs Lewes to the London train. I think it will help to tell thee what she told me then about that occasion.

(Percy makes no sign. He does not move. He is staring at the wall.)

Mary Foxton: She, Helen that is, said that she could not remember such an exhilarating day. Mrs Lewes was in so many ways unlike her—English where she was Scottish; shy where she was—not; a rural childhood compared with hers in a great city; above all a set dislike of politics as against Helen’s passion for it—and yet they had so much in common. I saw that in the little time I had with them both in here.

Helen said to me that she had met her dearest friend that day, and I believed her—we, thou and I, were family, she said, which was kind of her—and she said that she feared she had now lost her. Lost her because they would not meet again. That day had been their chance, and they had taken it, and it would not come again. I found that altogether an odd thing to say and said as much, but she said that they had both been in a state of mind which had meant that they could speak to each other as neither had spoken to another before—and as they never would again. It was Mrs Lewes, not she, who kept saying ‘We always think we have more time’.

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Mr Millington: So we do, fools that we are. We idly expected to see her again. I loved her, Mary. That wretched man. The Reverend Edwards! He wears women out! He kills them! The man is a monster! Watch him marry again within a year or two, and murder the next one!

Mary Foxton: Hush, Percy! Be calm. That poor man needs a mother for his children at least as much as he needs a woman in his bed. (Percy looks up at her in utter shock at her mention of bed) Don’t look at me like that. I speak as I find. He is not a monster, but it is a crying shame that Helen ever met him, or having met him, accepted him. She was of a mind to turn him down, I know that. But she was tired, even then, and I grant thee that life with him did not bring her rest.

I will tell thee something else Helen told me. I did not repeat it before because she asked me not to, and in any case it felt at the time like gossip. But now, for various reasons, it no longer seems so. May I be forgiven if it is. I say it now because it was part of that day, which for us is I suppose Helen’s last day.

Dost thou remember the conversation we had just before Mrs Lewes left? Thou hadst said ‘How now, Howard!’ to Helen, and Mrs Lewes had been puzzled by the name, and I explained the pseudonym—and then Mrs Lewes offered Helen her hand and said ‘How d’ye do, Howard’ and they shook hands on it—and then Mrs Lewes said ‘Call me George’. Dost thou recall that?

Mr Millington: I remember the first bit, but not the hand-shaking part. I was busy getting the luggage on board my sack-truck. I do remember Mrs Lewes hugging you. That was something to see—I’m not sure which of you was more surprised at it! But that’s not what you’re getting at is it? What’s this about?

Mary Foxton: Dost thou remember that as you went out to the train, Helen was waving a book in the air?

Mr Millington: No. No, I don’t.

Mary Foxton: Well, that’s a great pity, because that’s what I’m getting at, as thou say’st. And now it feels like gossip again, and somehow not part of what I wanted to recall about Helen. But I cannot leave it hanging in the air. The book was a volume of Adam Bede, which Helen had been about to ask Mrs Lewes to sign, because she was nigh certain that Mrs Lewes was George Eliot. And Helen was right, that is clear now. What think’st thou of that?!

Mr Millington: I think I have no idea what you are talking about!

Mary Foxton: For a man who prides himself on being well-read, Percy, thou hast some strange blind spots. If I, a Quaker, may read that book, why can’t not thou?

Mr Millington: Because no-one asked me to, I suppose. You know I do not read novels, Mary. Life is too short for fictions. But what do you mean, Mrs Lewes was John Eliot?

Mary Foxton: Now thou art deliberately silly. How canst thou not have heard of George Eliot? One of our most distinguished Friends read a passage from Adam Bede to us at meeting not two months ago! How canst thou not know the name?!
Mr Millington: Easily, it would seem, dear Mary. But I still do not understand the story. You are surely not telling me that Mrs Lewes was a man?

Mary Foxton: (throwing up her hands in disbelief, and then calming herself) Really. The book is accounted very great by all the newspapers, and I have read it, and I think it of deep worth. Thou know'st I never rate anything 'great', but those who deal in such terms are very sure of its merit. And that is why there was much discussion in the world about the identity of the author, whose name was given as George Eliot, the same who wrote Scenes of Clerical Life—around the time of the previous election, now I think of it, but never mind, because of course thou hast never heard of that book either.

(Percy shakes his head slightly)

Mary Foxton: What would Helen say to thee now! But it is I who must educate thee in this. It meant a lot to Helen to meet Mrs Lewes and to become her friend—thou seest that, surely?

(Percy shrugs, but also nods his head)

Well, so prithee take note that 'George Eliot' was known to be a pseudonym. There was a foolish man called Liggins, Joseph Liggins it was, down near Nuneaton, who allowed people to say that he was George Eliot, and other foolish people believed it, although I have been told that anyone who had read the book and met the man would know at once that the latter could have had no hand in the former.

Eventually, rather than allow such silly and damaging rumours to stay in circulation, the real author announced herself. Her name was Mrs Lewes. And now I worry yet again about gossip, but it is the last of the tale. It is apparently common knowledge that Mrs Lewes is not married to Mr Lewes, who has a wife whom it is said he cannot divorce, he having been complaisant in her adultery and having recognized as his own her children by another man. I do not know the law but, if that is true, I am not surprised that it is so unreasonable. And I confess to finding it interesting that Mrs Lewes, who is not acceptable in 'good society', writes novels which are judged suitable to mention at length at Meeting. I like that, I must say. It tends to confirm my view of 'good society'.

I think it confirmed Helen's view of it too. As I read that awful letter just now, I recalled Mrs Lewes's last words to Helen, and I thought I knew why that day had been 'exhilarating' for Helen. That shy woman with a secret she was trying to hide from a silly world, poor Mrs Lewes, had recognized Helen for what she was.

'How d'ye do, Howard? Do call me George. .... We always think we have more time....'

THE END