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ON LOCATION WITH 'SILAS MARNER'

By Kathleen Adams

If you have ever regarded the life of an actor to be a glamorous one, it would have been something of an eye-opener to have visited the location of the BBC Television film of 'Silas Marner' on a cold March day. The day had followed one of almost continuous rain, and I have never seen such mud, nor so much of it. The setting was in the Cotswolds, chosen because this area remains one of the last almost totally unspoilt regions in England. The production team, eager to be as authentic as possible, had travelled the length and breadth of George Eliot's own North Warwickshire but nothing remotely resembling early nineteenth century Raveloe could be found. The Cotswolds, however, yielded up a 'stone cottage that stood among the nutty hedgerows' (Chap. 1); or, at least, three stone walls and a pile of rubble. The BBC set to and rebuilt the cottage, and now it as nearly as possible resembled Silas's home on the edge of the village of Raveloe. The cottage is a single room with a bed, a table by the window on which lies a dish of vegetables ready for the pot, two cupboards, a stone fireplace with a cheerily burning fire, and two other features without which this could not possibly be the setting for George Eliot's tale – the 'toal-hole' and the large loom on which Silas earned his gold pieces. The hole in the floor is there, too, from which Dunstan took the miser's treasure. The garden surrounding the cottage is wild and overgrown but for a vegetable patch where leeks and cabbages were 'growing'. Silas's washing hung on a washing line which was suspended between the trees, and in the cottage itself we met 'Silas', played by the very distinguished actor,

Ben Kingsley. What a far cry from his recent famous portrayal of Gandhi!

Up to the entrance to the cottage garden lies a rough track and it was here where we encountered the thick sea of cream-coloured Cotswold mud. The crew were heavily protected by substantial 'wellies'; we had not been so far-sighted and almost sank to our ankles as we picked out way to where the filming was taking place. Louis Marks, the film's producer, clambered down from the high bank from which he had been watching the latest 'take', and he welcomed representatives of the Fellowship most warmly. We climbed up after him to a vantage point from which we could see a barouche drawn up by the cottage gateway. In the barouche sat Nancy and Godfrey Cass. Nancy, played by an actress who has earned popular acclaim with many fine performances since she was a child – Jenny Agutter – was attractively dressed in a striped skirt with a brown bodice, a shawl around her shoulders and a brown bonnet upon her head. Godfrey in top hat and frock coat completed the portrayal of the 'gentry'.

In front of the carriage and on two tall step-ladders stood two of the film crew with a camera. The camera seemed to be festooned with greenery, and the reason for this will, no doubt, become apparent when we see the finished film! On the bank at our side was another member of the crew holding the boom – a microphone on a long stem which he moved as the actors spoke. Miss Agutter's make-up was adjusted, we were instructed to be 'quiet, please', someone shouted 'action', and down the cottage path ran the grown-up Eppie. She greeted the visitors, and Godfrey stepped down from the carriage and went up the garden path to meet Silas who had come out of the cottage holding a large tabby cat. Nancy leaned

forward and spoke kindly to Eppie, who seemed a little overcome by her grand visitor. This scene, which will probably take only a few seconds in the film, took over an hour to perfect. Only the slightest error in the acting of one of them, or the sound of a plane in the 20th century sky or a lorry ascending a nearby tarmac 20th century road made the previous take unacceptable. With great patience and good humour the whole thing was done all over again until the director was satisfied. Then close-up shots had to be taken, and these, too, had to be perfect before the director was happy with the morning's work. Two fine black horses were brought up the muddy lane and were backed carefully into the shafts of the barouche so that the carriage could be filmed in movement. When that was not quite right, the horses were removed from the shafts and turned around in the lane while the carriage was manhandled back into position, since there was insufficient room to turn the carriage and the horses! What patience to get everything just right.

Of course, if one were to be a purist, then one could argue that this scene was not as George Eliot wrote it. In Chapter 19, she wrote 'At that moment there was a knocking at the door; and Eppie was obliged to rise without answering Silas. Beautiful she looked, with the tenderness of gathering tears in her eyes and a slight flush on her cheeks, as she stepped to answer the door. The flush deepened when she saw Mr. and Mrs. Godfrey Cass. She made her little rustic curtsy, and held the door wide for them to enter'. But does it really matter that the 'little rustic curtsy' was made in the lane before the Casses descended from the carriage? I think not; surely, if the script-writer had been George Eliot herself, she would have been happy to change things just a little to get a pretty effect in a different

media from her own.

We saw only a very tiny piece of the filming – a minute part of what will be a long film. It is impossible to judge the final effect until we have seen the film, but from conversations with the producer and some of the crew, one received a strong feeling of integrity for George Eliot's story in their approach. It will not be word for word from the book – these productions never are, but I feel one might repeat Dolly Winthrop's words with a fair measure of confidence . . . "For if us as knows so little can see a bit o' good and rights, we may be sure there is a good and rights bigger nor what we can know – I feel it i' my own inside as it must be so."



RAVELOE VILLAGE
'SILAS MARNER' BY GEORGE ELIOT