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PREFACE

IN the graveyard of one of the pleasantest villages in Bedfordshire, standing in the undulating, beautifully wooded country that is typical of that part of the Ouse Valley, there lies buried a certain Joseph Betts, late husband of my maternal grandmother's sister Mary Ann, herself the most exquisite cook of a floury potato, with butter sauce, that ever lived in that district. This Joseph Betts, born at the very beginning of the Hungry 'Forties, brought up to a Church in which the serpent was still part of the Sunday morning orchestra, able to recall the arrival of news of the Crimea by a messenger from London on a white horse, was the original of my Uncle Silas.

I have always thought it a fatal policy for an author to set out to explain his own work, but there are points about my Uncle Silas, and his original, in which the reading public may be interested. It is not often that a short-story writer succeeds, even by accident, in producing a character which continues to develop an existence through several stories, unless that character happens to be himself. And when, five or six years ago, I wrote the first of these stories, *The Lily*, it did not for a moment occur to me to repeat or develop this picture of a rural reprobate. When I did repeat it, in *The Wedding* and *The Death of Uncle Silas*, I was astonished to find that a large public had already acclaimed it and was apparently ready to go on acclaiming it enthusiastically.

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The Death of Uncle Silas produced, in fact, a larger volume of correspondence than any full-length book of mine has done before or since: a delighted but protesting correspondence, in which Americans and Colonials, English and Irish, critics and all kinds of unknown people, demanded the resurrection of Uncle Silas as soon as possible.

The ultimate result of that demand is this book. The English character still contains in it, generally, very strong elements of the Puritan. You see it at its fiercest, in conflict, in artists like D. H. Lawrence, at its pettiest in magistrates who remonstrate with young ladies who appear in court without stockings or reprove young men who appear in sports coats. But now and then the stream of the original Adam, rich and lusty and robust, comes straight through, undiluted and unpurified. This strong original devilishness spouts up in characters like my Uncle Silas, who, it is significant to note, spent his life of more than ninety years in a district which still flaunts its sprig of oak-leaves for King Charles on the 29th of May: an unconscious protest against the Puritanical poison in the English blood. Certainly there was no strain of the Puritan in my Uncle Silas, who got gloriously and regularly drunk, loved food and the ladies and good company, was not afraid to wear a huge and flamboyant buttonhole, told lies, got the better of his fellow-men whenever the chance offered itself, used a scythe like an angel, was a wonderful gardener, took the local lord's pheasants, and yet succeeded in remaining an honest, genuine and lovable character.

Silas is, therefore, an authentic figure. The scenes and

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incidents in which he appears are, too, very close to life. The picture of his small thatched house, the sun-steeped garden with its flowers and gooseberry-trees, the Maiden's Blush rose flowering by the open door, the scarlet lily itself, the wood with its wild strawberries, the surrounding meadows rich with meadowsweet and pink orchis and moon-daisy, are all things which have the dearest associations for me in memory. Consequently certain stories, in particular *The Lily*, *The Wedding*, which my sister and I still remember as one of the golden days of our childhood, *The Revelation*, since Silas in plain truth never washed himself, *Silas the Good*, which is almost as he himself related it to me, and *The Death of Uncle Silas*, are all so near to reality that they needed only the slightest recolouring on my part. Others, notably *The Race*, *A Funny Thing*, and *A Happy Man*, have been inspired by that sort of apocryphal legend which is the inheritance of every country child who keeps his ears cocked when men are talking. To those who find these stories too Rabelaisian, far-fetched or robust, my reply would be that, as pictures of English country life, they are in reality understated.

Finally, since memory is inexhaustible, there seems to be no reason why, within proper limits, this happy, lusty and devilish character, who was up to all the tricks for nearly a hundred years, should not have spirit enough to fill another story or two beyond these pages. If that should happen it is my great hope that I shall again be lucky enough to have the collaboration of Mr. Edward Ardizzone, whose crabbed and crusty pictures are so absolutely and perfectly in the spirit of every page they illustrate.

H. E. BATES