

Joseph Betts, (H.E.'s maternal great uncle).

(1841-1937)

H.E. based the character of Uncle Silas on his Great Uncle Joe. *The Watercress Girl* and *The Cowslip Field* are also set in Joe's cottage and include portraits of several other great aunts and uncles including Sarah-Ann, Aunt Pru and Aunt Turvey, who he says was not a real aunt, but a widow who looked after his great uncle, and most likely came from the village of Turvey.

Joseph Betts was born in Knotting and lived most of his life in Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire. He was married to Mary Ann Bird, sister to H.E.'s grandmother, Priscilla. Joe worked as a farm labourer, thatcher, railway worker, and later in life as a grave digger at St Peter's in Sharnbrook.

The character of Silas in H.E.'s *My Uncle Silas* stories began as a direct portrait of Joseph: *'I did not create him at all. He existed. He was the living flesh-and-blood brother-in-law of my maternal grandmother and, among other things, the biggest reprobate who ever lived. It is not, happily or unhappily, my privilege to have created him, any more than it was Dickens' privilege to have created Micawber. The best characters in fiction are almost invariably lifted straight out of life. I did that with Silas. In his cottage, sunk in its luscious garden of fat gooseberries, Maiden's Blush roses, tiger lilies and rootling pigs, lived Uncle Joe, he was going strong at over ninety and all through Victorian times he had lived a life of rascalion robustness, plentifully soaked in country beer and home-brewed wine and spiced with dark adventures at feasts, hiring and fairs. There was about him a fine fruitiness, an early sagacity and deep-humoured cunning...and I knew he would have to be captured within the pages of a book.'*¹

In 1933 H.E. wrote to Edward Garnett to say he was sending a story about 'a rakish uncle of mine, old devil, robust and warm and sinister, winning prizes for flowers and peas at the age of ninety'. The story was *The Lily* and was followed shortly after by *The Wedding*, the most clearly autobiographical of all the stories.

¹ *Edward Garnett* by H.E. Bates