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Chapter Five

That winter I went back to the Midlands; it was wet and harsh; sea-winds of cutting bitterness came down off the North Sea and across our high and naked valley; I hated more than ever the dreary little streets and I walked with an increasing stubborn solitariness about the fields, thinking out cloudy and splendid projects and above all the novel that was now begun. For a greater part of the time I was not well.

I worked on the novel, to be called *The Voyagers*, all that winter, spring and summer. As my first book had been about two sisters, this was about two brothers. It was epic in scale; it flowed in great rhythms; it was tragic in portent. When it was completed, a few days before I went on a holiday of the most crazy itinerary with Rhys Davies, the Welsh novelist, and some others to Germany, it had swollen to more than a hundred thousand words.

Sometime before this I had walked over into Bedfordshire with the girl I was to marry and we had called one golden afternoon on my grandmother's sister, Mary Ann, who lived in the tiniest of thatched cottages, in an aura of wood-smoke, drying cowslips and geraniums, at the edge of a

primrose wood by the lovely River Ouse. On both sides of my family there are records of great longevity accompanied very often by great rascality, and it is pleasant to think that my grandmother's other sister, Matilda, ruby as a cherry and taut in bearing as a hazel-whip, is still with us, walking where other people ride in buses, drinking when others abstain, and generally going strong at something over ninety.

In this cottage, sunk in its luscious garden of fat gooseberries, Maiden's Blush roses, tiger lilies and rootling pigs, lived Uncle Joe. He too was going strong at something over ninety and had long since achieved, within the family circle, a reputation for being the greatest reprobate unhung. At some unstated period he had severely damaged an eye: very possibly, I shouldn't wonder, by putting it to the keyhole of a bedroom and having it poked out; and the result was to give him an appearance of evil and bloodshot cunning that was intensely fascinating. All through Victorian times he had lived a life of rapsallion robustness, plentifully soaked in country beer and home-brewed wine and spiced with dark adventures at feasts, hirings and fairs, which makes our State-jacketed world of today look very anaemic indeed. There was about him a fine fruitiness, an earthy sagacity and deep-humoured cunning that we cannot match today; and he delighted us so much that afternoon as a diabolically enchanting figure out of a lost age that I knew he would have to be captured, sooner or later, within the pages of a book. Five years later he became *My Uncle Silas* and grew, in a small way, to an endeared legend.