

SILAS THE GOOD

by H. E. Bates

In a life of ninety-five years, my Uncle Silas found time to try most things, and there was a time when he became a gravedigger.

The churchyard at Solbrook stands a long way outside the village on a little hill of bare land above the river valley. And there, badly dressed. My Uncle Silas used to dig perhaps a grave a month

He used to work all day there at the blue-brown clay without seeing anyone. With no one for company except birds picking the worms out of the thrown-up earth. Wickedly ugly, small and misshapen, he looked like a stone figure that had dropped off the roof of the little church, something like a little man who had lived too long and might go on living and digging the graves of others for ever.

He was digging a grave there once on the south side of the churchyard on a sweet, hot day in May, the grass already long and deep, with golden flowers rising everywhere among the gravestones.

By noon he was fairly well down with the grave, and had fixed his board to the sides. The spring had been very dry and cold, but now, in the shelter of the grave, in the strong sun, it seemed like the middle of summer. It was so good that Silas sat in the bottom of the grave and had his dinner, eating his bread and meat, and washing it down with the cold tea he always carried in a beer-bottle. After eating, he began to feel sleepy, and at last he went to sleep there at the bottom of the grave, with his wet, ugly mouth falling open and the beer bottle in one hand and resting on his knee.

He had been asleep for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes when he woke up and saw someone standing at the top of the grave, looking down at him. It was a woman; or so it seemed.

He was too shocked and surprised to say anything, and the woman stood looking down at him, very angry at something, making holes in the grass with a large umbrella. She was very pale and thin, with an ugly face. She seemed to have very big boots on, and frown under her thick, black dress. Silas saw a great brown leg, about the size of an airship.

He had not time to take another look before she attacked him. She waved her umbrella and shouted, blaming him for idleness and lack of respect. She moved her head from side to side and stamped one of her feet. At last she demanded, her thin neck stretching downwards to him, why he was drinking beer down there on holy ground, in a place that should be sacred to the dead.

Now at the best of times it was difficult for my Uncle Silas, with ripe, red lips, red eyes and nose, not to look like a drunken sailor. But there was only one thing that he drank when he was working, and that was cold tea. It was true that it was always cold tea with whisky in it, but the basis remained, chiefly, cold tea.

Silas let the woman talk for almost five minutes, and then he raised his hat and said, " Good afternoon, madam. Aren't the flowers nice? "

" Not content with behaving like that on holy ground; ' she said, " you're drunk, too! "

" No, madam," he said. " I wish I was."

" Beer: " she said. " Couldn't you leave the beer alone here. Of all places? "

Silas held up the beer bottle. "Madam" he said, " what's in here wouldn't harm a fly. It wouldn't harm you."

" It is responsible for the ruin of thousands of homes all over England! " she said.

" Cold tea," Silas said.

She gave a cry of anger and stamped her foot. " Cold tea! "

"Yes, madam, cold tea." Silas unscrewed the bottle and held it up to her. " Try it, madam. Try it if you don't believe me."

"Thank you. Not out of that bottle."

"All right. I've got a cup," Silas said. He looked in his dinner basket and found a metal cup. He filled it with tea and held it up to her. " Try it, madam. Try it. It won't hurt you."

"Well! " she said, and she reached down for the cup. She took it and touched it with her thin lips. " Well, it's certainly some sort of tea: "

"Just ordinary tea, madam; " Silas said. " Made this morning. You're not drinking it. Take a good drink."

She took a real drink then, washing it round her mouth. " Refreshing, isn't it t " Silas said.

"Yes," she said, " it's very refreshing."

"Drink it up," he said. " Have a little more. I suppose you've walked a long way? "

" Yes," she said, " I'm afraid I have. All the way from Bedford. Rather farther than t thought. I'm not so young as I used to be: "

" Oh," Silas said " Young? You look twenty " He took his coat and spread it on the new earth above the grave.

" Sit dawn and rest yourself. Sit down and look at the flowers."

She surprised him by sitting down. She took another drink of the tea and said, " I think I'll unpin my hat."

She took off her hat and held it on her knees.

" Young? " Silas said. " Madam, you're just a chicken. Wait till you're as old as I am, and then you can begin to talk. I can remember the Crimean War! "

" Indeed? " she said. " You must have had a full and interesting life."

" Yes, Madam."

She smiled thinly, for the first time. " I am sorry I spoke as I did. It upset me to think of anyone drinking in this place: "

" That's all right, madam; " Silas said. " I haven't touched a drop of strong drink for years I used to. I've not always been good: "

Old Silas reached up to her with the bottle and said, " Have some more, madam," and she held down the cup and filled it up again. " Thank you," she said. She looked quite pleasant now, softened by the tea and the smell of flowers and the sun on her bare head. She looked more like a woman.

" But you're a better man now? " she said.

" Yes, madam," Silas said, with a slight shake of his head, as if he were a man in real sorrow. " Yes, madam, I'm a better man now."

" It was a long fight against the drink? "

" A long fight, madam? Yes it was a very long fight." He raised his hat a little.

" How long? " she said.

" Well, madam," said Silas, settling back in the grave, where he had been sitting all that time, " I was born in hungry times. Bad times, madam, very bad times. The food and the water were bad. Very bad. There was disease too. So we had beer, madam. Everybody had beer. The babies had beer. I've been fighting against it for eighty years and more."

" And now you've conquered it? "

" Yes, madam," said my Uncle Silas, who had drunk more in eighty years than would keep a water-mill turning. " I've conquered it." He held up the beer bottle. " Nothing but cold tea. You'll have some more cold tea, madam, won't you □ "

" It's very kind of you," she said.

So Silas poured out another cup of the cold tea and she sat on the side of the grave and drank it in the sunshine, becoming all the time more and more human.

" And it wasn't surprising," as Silas told me afterwards. " It was the winter tea that we were drinking. You see, I had a summer tea with only a little whisky in it, and I had a winter tea with a great deal of whisky in it. The weather had been cold up to that day, and I hadn't changed from winter to summer tea."

They sat there for about another half an hour, drinking the cold tea, and during that time there was nothing she did not hear about my Uncle Silas's life; not only how he had left the beer and left the bad language, but how he had given up the ladies and the horses and the doubtful stories and the lying and everything else that a man can give up.

Indeed, as he at last climbed up out of the grave to shake hands with her and say good afternoon, she must have believed that he was a very religious and pure man.

Except that her face was very red, she walked away a proudly as she had come. That was the last he ever saw of her. But that afternoon, on the 2.45 train out of Solbrook, there was a woman with a large umbrella in one hand and a bunch of flowers in the other. In the warm, crowded carriage there was a smell of something stronger than cold tea. The woman appeared to be a little excited, and she talked a great deal.

Her subject was someone she had met that afternoon. " A good man," she told them. " A good man."