THE WAGES OF SIN. A NOVEL. VOLUME I

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LUCAS MALET

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Trieste

THE WAGES OF SIN

A NOVEL

BY

LUCAS MALET

Author of 'Col. Enderby's Wife,' 'A Counsel of Perfection,' etc.

'Did we think victory great?
'So it is.—But now it seems to me, when it cannot be helped, that defeat is great,
'And that death and dismay are great.'

VOLUME I

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THE WAGES OF SIN.

BOOK I.—MAN AND MAID.

'Things are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be; why then should we desire to be deceived.'—BISHOP BUTLER.

CHAPTER I.

ONE September day towards sunset, when the world was younger by some fourteen or fifteen years than it is now, a small family party was gathered together in the long, narrow strip of turf and flower-garden known as the bowling-green, that lies under the old wing of Slerracombe House.

The individuals composing this party were not, with one exception, very remarkable at first sight. A lady of about five-and-forty, seated in a low wicker chair, near a tea table placed on the gravel just outside the open doors of the conservatory. She was large, sleek, rather heavy-featured. Arrayed in wig and robes, she would have made an impressive judge. Her presence would have added dignity, as well as material weight, to the bench. She was not, however, arrayed in official robes, but merely in mourning—mourning, it may be added, of the order which, among sober-minded persons of the upper classes, denotes

widowhood in the passive and permanent rather than the active stage. At the table, two little girls—in brown holland frocks and straw hats of the kind known to contemporary fashion as 'limpet-shaped,' and fondly believed to compensate by successful preservation of the complexion of the wearer, for the immediate disadvantage of extreme unbecomingness—were sitting silent, absorbed in the assimilation of liberal supplies of cake and grapes, and bread and jam. Further, a handsome, black-headed boy, also consuming cake, but taking his meal in an ambulatory and episodic manner, in the intervals of driving away a tame doe, with a bell round her neck, whose feminine inquisitiveness prompted her to ill-judged inquiries regarding the contents of teacups and sugar basins. Finally, a clergyman, Kent Crookenden by name, Rector of Brattleworthy with Slerracombe, a bachelor of about fifty, brother-in-law of the lady in the wicker chair, and guardian of her only son, Lancelot—the boy already mentioned.

The Rector had refused to have any tea. He leaned back in another wicker chair, his legs crossed, his coat thrown open, and his thumbs stuck in the armholes of his waistcoat, surveying the scene before him with an expression of half-contemptuous though not unkindly amusement. Sometimes his eyes wandered from the group in the foreground to a wide stretch of open park, dotted with fallow deer, lying north and west below the terraced garden. The park dipped to the left towards a wooded stream in

the hollow, and swept up again into breezy hillside, red and yellow with withering bracken. Beyond it the sea, crossed by wandering tide-lines of the palest azure, spread away calm and oily, under a sky of filmy white cloud, to the high faint line of the horizon.

The view was extremely pleasing in its dreamy quiet, specially to one with a taste for the characteristic features of West Country scenery. And Kent Crookenden was sincerely attached to the West Country. All the same he was not of the temper of mind that finds its highest and most constant satisfaction in the contemplation of the outward aspects of nature. Hill, wood, stream, moorland, sea, values of light and shade, splendours of colour are, no doubt, immensely elevating objects of attention in their way; but they do not, as a rule, minister largely or directly to the spectator's sense of humour. And Kent Crookenden's sense of humour was almost undesirably keen and persistent. To this, his face—it had no hair on it—bore ample testimony. A square forehead. Bright, steady eyes, set rather far apart. A hooked nose, with a noticeable downward inclination of the tip, the nostrils deep cut and open. A mouth thin-lipped and under hung; the corners of it also with a downward inclination, and with queer twitchings and puckerings about them suggestive of thoughts a trifle too merry or too caustic for ordinary conversation.

After some years of travels both in the East and the

United States, at about thirty, Kent Crookenden had suddenly decided to enter the Church. In one respect the decision was, certainly, a wise one. For a strong sense of humour necessarily demands a good supply of raw material, in the form of human nature, upon which to exercise itself; and whatever the more serious privileges of the clerical profession may be, there is no question but that it offers to any man, with the wit to use them, singular facilities for intimate and varied study of the ways and habits, the weaknesses, the appetites, the endless touching little stupidities in thought and conduct of that most inimitable invention, the human animal.

In due time his elder brother, Zachary Crookenden, had presented him to the living of Brattleworthy with Slerracombe. For that gentleman had bought the advowson of the living when, his fortune having reached very considerable proportions, he married Miss Caroline Hellard—niece of the late and cousin of the present Lord Combmartin—retired from active participation in the affairs of the well-known firm of Crookenden, Manserge and Co., merchants, shipping agents, and bankers, of Bristol and New York; and, having purchased Slerracombe House and some three or four thousand acres of land adjoining, settled himself down to live the leisurely life of an English country gentleman.

Kent Crookenden had ceased to entertain any dreams of ecstatic personal bliss by the time he took up his resi-