# THE WAGES OF SIN: A NOVEL. VOL. III

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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 III.

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## BOOK V.—TWO IDYLLS.

### CHAPTER V.

LEFT alone Mary Crookenden fell into a considerable meditation, the immediate effect of which was that she went across the sunny pasture, through the plantation into the ugly whitewashed rectory (for all the world just like the house a child draws on a slate) and up to her bedroom. There, from an inner pocket of her travelling bag, she extracted a flattish oblong box of old Dutch silver. Armed with this, and having ascertained that the Rector was still out in the parish and not likely to be back till near dinner time, she sallied forth again; made her way down into the deer-park, crossed the stream and turned up the grass path which, after passing across the hillside, showing like a winding ribbon of green amid the darker tones of the heath and gorse, dips over the shoulder of the hill to Red Rock Mouth.

She walked slowly, as was indeed only seemly, for she was about attending a funeral. The oblong silver box was, in point of fact, a coffin, containing a body symbolizing much. But whether that body was already a corpse or not Mary was not quite certain. Yet uncertainty only



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made her more anxious to complete the obsequies; for it appeared to her if a measure of life were still left in it, burial, deep, uncompromising, final, was even more necessary than if it was already well dead.

The subtleties of the feminine mind are infinite, its capacities of playing hide-and-seek with its own motives and desires not to be gauged. Yet even in the case of that most complex development of female humanity, the modern young woman, there is, more often than not, an underlying simplicity and, when it comes to a push, an innate rectitude with which the casual male observer would certainly not credit her. She has suspiciously liberal and cynical fashions of speech, as she has, too frequently, suspiciously loud and dashing fashions of dress; but beneath these are a pure mind and fair well-favoured body, singularly unspoiled and undistorted by the cut of the garments in which the taste of the hour has impelled her to clothe them.

And it was precisely this abiding simplicity and inward rectitude which prompted Mary to set forth now, and do her best to bury that little corpse (as she trusted) and all which it symbolized. Upon good resolutions it is sadly easy to go back, especially for a young lady proverbially prone to change her mind. But upon an outward act, however quaintly parabolic, it is not so easy to go back. Shave your head when you swear, and you are much more likely to keep your oath, be sure, than if, trusting to the

compelling power of your own high sense of honour merely, you remain unshaven.

So far Mary had regarded her lover, Cyprian Aldham, from the negative rather than the positive standpoint. Had thought less of the positive consequences of her engagement to him, his claims upon her, than of certain not inconceivable developments, from which she believed that engagement would deliver her. But in their late conversation Aldham had ranged the positive consequences very clearly before her. Not what his relation to her enabled her to avoid, but what it made incumbent upon her to undertake—the thought of obligations rather than safeguards—these began to impress Mary Crookenden. And to fulfil those obligations conscientiously, it appeared to her she was called upon to make a very clean sweep of some interesting episodes of the past.

And so, about half way across the pleasant open hill-side, the great network of wooded valleys lying below, carrying the little silver coffin, or shrine—which was it ?—Mary left the grass path, and went up over the heather to the edge of the cliff. There she sat down, on a mossy spot amid the heath, threw aside her hat, and paused, watching.

Along the extreme verge, just here, grow some leggy tufted furzes; their stems for ever shaken by the draught sucking up the cliff face from the beach, nearly three hundred feet below. Their rounded heads are clipt as close by the wind as by any pruning-hook, still