



## A Talk with "Lucas Malet."

BY MARY ANGELA DICKENS.

**I**T is eight years, and more, since the name of Lucas Malet was in everyone's mouth, since everyone read, argued over, condemned, or applauded "The Wages of Sin." After the publication of "The Wages of Sin" Lucas Malet disappeared. Newspaper paragraphs reported that her health had given way, and her place in the literary world knew her no more for some five years; and then the silence was broken by the slight volume entitled, "The Carissima," which failed to make any great stir. So long a period of silence usually involves the passing of an act of oblivion in the public mind. It is necessary to make a pretty thick score on the life of your generation if any other than a most blurred and confused trace thereof is to be left by the passage of a much shorter space of time. "The Wages of Sin" made just such a mark as is by no manner of means to be obliterated. You were perfectly free to love it or loathe it, according to your individuality; but it was possible to no man to ignore it. And hence it comes that Lucas Malet's place remains to her, and her public waits—as a public very seldom does wait—until she shall choose to fill it once more.

To convey any just or adequate idea of Lucas Malet, the woman—in contradistinction to Lucas Malet, the vague entity associated in the public mind with "The Wages of Sin"—is a more or less hopeless task. Like her own Colthurst she is heavily charged with "demonic influence," and when you wish to put her into a nutshell, it becomes confusing.

To begin at the very beginning, however, Lucas Malet has one grave and fundamental quarrel with Fate. It turned her out a woman, and not a man! She herself is of opinion that Nature jumbled things up altogether in the construction of her whole family and distributed male and female characteristics at random!

And yet—that fundamental mistake once condoned—Lucas Malet should be rather grateful to Nature for her uncertainty. It has resulted in the balancing of a feminine nature with some of those qualities which a woman too often lacks. Courage, grip, force—join these masculine qualities to womanly intuition, delicacy of perception, and sympathy, and you get something probably finer and certainly rarer than the isolated masculine or the isolated feminine personality.

Lucas Malet's parentage is an open secret, probably, by this time. Everyone knows that she is Charles Kingsley's daughter, and everyone understands why she chose to present herself to the public under a pseudonym.

Brain power and ability come to her through both parents. Her mother's people were "bankers and that kind of thing," she says, and their capacity for shrewd, clear-headed common-sense is a noticeable heritage of their descendant. There was no lack of cultivation for this side of her nature in Lucas Malet's early girlhood; but one important factor was left out in its development—knowledge of that human nature on which common-sense must eventually be exercised.

"There were heaps and heaps of people always coming and going," Lucas Malet tells



you; "but I never really knew any of them. I had no friends of my own age, and just at the time when I should naturally have been going out, my mother was out of health. She could not go with me herself, and she did not like me to go with anyone else. I knew all the beasts about the place, and loved them dearly, dear things! but I knew nothing about my fellow-creatures."

And the deficiency was not made good—as it is in the case of many a girl who lives a far more lonely life than Kingsley's daughter ever did—by knowledge acquired through novel-reading. Novels were absolutely forbidden to Lucas Malet until she was over twenty years old. Theology, philosophy, science—anything and everything she might and did read, except novels. She was on intimate terms with all kinds of heresies, she had a considerable scientific training, she had made excursions into magic and the black art. It seems surprising that after all this she found her first introduction to fiction in the shape of the works of Miss Yonge and writers of the same school.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this absence of contact, either actual or vicarious, with the life of men and women. It is Lucas Malet's opinion that such isolation is wholly undesirable, and disastrous in its effects. And she speaks of the "tumbling, neck and crop, into life," which is bound, she says, to come sooner or later, with a vehement horror eminently characteristic of her. It is always very much easier to criticize the experience of another than to go through with it oneself, and it is only with a certain amount of tentative diffidence that

one questions whether this curious training—and even the subsequent pain which it involved—were not actually to the advantage of Lucas Malet's remarkable personality; whether she does not owe to this something of that singular and total absence of the commonplace in her mental equipment which is her leading characteristic.

Freedom from the commonplace, and courage—these two traits should perhaps be linked together in an outline portrait of Lucas Malet. For courage, when all is said

and done, is in her eyes practically the one thing needful.

"Everyone can have what he wants in this world," she says, "if he only wants it hard enough, and if he only has the courage to take it when it comes. It doesn't do to hesitate. And if you're afraid—why, it's all over with you. Keep your head, and know what you want when you see it. That's where women fail as a rule; they lose their heads and get confused, and then the moment goes by and never comes back again. Or they're afraid—there's a risk attached, and they daren't face it.

That's the mistake. There's a risk attached to every venture, though it's forgotten afterwards. You must face the chance of going to the bottom if you want to come to the top!"

Lucas Malet, as distinct from Charles Kingsley's daughter, came into existence with the production of "Mrs. Lorimer." Up to this time it had seemed probable that her power would find an outlet on other lines—that she would become a painter. She studied as a girl in the Slade school, and did very well there.



"LUCAS MALET."

Photo by Elliott & Fry.



She had never tried her hand at fiction until she began "Mrs. Lorimer." She began it because she was dreadfully dull, and wanted a little money; and she knew at once that she had found her line. She has written only a few books as yet, partly because Nature has enclosed her powerful personality in a delicate body, and she has had much ill-health. And she declares that she has no rush of plots. But the plots always have been, and probably always will be, ready to her hand when she wants them.

"Where do they come from?" she says. "Ah, who knows? I sometimes wonder whether our plots belong to people who have lived before us—our ancestors, you know, or something of that kind. There's no such thing as spontaneous generation, we know. They must have a beginning. They must come from somewhere. How are they suggested to us?"

A very fascinating theory is this, and in its curiously scientific tone, and in the matter-of-fact directness with which it is propounded, one traces the result of that early training in science which has had a distinct influence on Lucas Malet. It is very curious to see it working hand-in-hand with the imaginative faculty, but it presents itself again in connection with her characters.

"I never take my characters from real people," she says. "I suppose nobody ever does. But, of course, I often found a character on some trait or mood that I have observed, perhaps, in a casual acquaintance. And it has happened to me over and over again when I've done this that people have come to me and said, 'Oh, but you must have meant So-and-so in that character, because I've actually heard him say such-and-such a thing'—something which I had certainly never heard So-and-so say, but which had come naturally to the character, founded on some other slight trait which I had noticed in him. I suppose it comes of a scientific reasoning faculty—one argues things out with a deadly precision. Given certain premises, certain results are inevitable."

As to her methods, Lucas Malet is very simple and infinitely painstaking. She spends a day or two with her plot, and then she begins to write. The whole thing grows together, so to speak, and though the characters develop as the work goes on, she never changes, or wishes to change, the lines of the plot. She writes and re-writes as she goes; and then when the book is finished she writes it over again, and yet again, until she

finds herself as near her own ideal as an artist may ever hope to be.

When she has finished her story, she takes her holiday after her own fashion—she travels. The true spirit of the traveller is in her, inasmuch as she is never so happy as when she is wandering over the face of the earth. But the true spirit of the traveller is not in her, inasmuch as she has no inclination whatever to rough it. She likes to go comfortably. She has been over the usual European ground, of course, and she has also spent some time in India, seeing the country and the people, not only on the surface, but "from the inside," as she herself expresses it.

With reference to her book, "The Carissima," she has a very distinct recollection of the manner in which the idea of the haunting dog, by whose presence the fever-ridden hero is cursed, occurred to her.

"I was standing in the doorway of the rectory at Clovelly one night," she says, "and I saw, galloping up the drive towards me, two green eyes. It was quite dark, and I couldn't see anything else for the moment but just these eyes moving towards me. Directly afterwards I saw it was my own dog, but it was very ghostly at the time, and I tried to see how it would work into a story. I couldn't get it then; but afterwards, when I had been ill myself, and knew what fever and delirium meant, I saw what would come of it."

One good gift—supremely good, as she herself would be the first to own—the gods have given to Lucas Malet. She is blessed with a keen sense of humour. The ridiculous appeals to her at once, and she laughs at herself or at other people with equal readiness.

"It's such a safeguard," she says. "I don't know how people go through life without it. It keeps one's sense of proportion in order, and carries one through when nothing else will."

It is a theory of Lucas Malet's that as men and women mature they revert to their hereditary instincts. Of herself she says that she finds herself grow nearer to her father with every year she lives; and she believes, moreover, that certain Irish traits which are her family inheritance grow stronger and stronger with her. But she has one pronounced characteristic, which is by no means Irish—she is the neatest woman, in all her works and ways, on the face of the earth.