

THE CASE OF MR. LUCRAFT

Attributed to Walter Besant and James Rice

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I HAVE more than once told the story of the only remarkable thing which ever happened to me in the course of a longish life, but as no one ever believed me, I left off telling it. I wish, therefore, to leave behind me a truthful record, in which everything shall be set down, as near as I can remember it, just as it happened. I am sure I need not add a single fact. The more I consider the story, the more I realise to myself my wonderful escape and the frightful consequences which a providential accident averted from my head, the more reason I feel to be grateful and humble.

I have read of nothing similar to my own case. I have consulted books on apparitions, witchcraft, and the power of the devil as manifested in authentic history, but I have found absolutely nothing that can in any way compare with my own case. If there be any successor to my Mr. Ebenezer Grumbelow, possessed of his unholy powers, endowed with his fiendish resolve and his diabolical iniquity of selfishness, this plain and simple narrative may serve as a warning to young men situated as I was in the year 1823. Except as a moral example, indeed, I see no use in telling the story at all.

I have never been a rich man, but I was once very Poor, and it is of this period that I have to write.

As for my parentage, it was quite obscure. My mother died when I was still a boy; and my father, who was not a man to be proud of as a father, had long before run away from her and disappeared. He was a sailor by profession, and I have heard it rumoured that sailors of his time possessed a wife in every port, besides a few who lived, like my mother, inland; so that they could vary the surroundings when they wished. The wives were all properly married in church too, and honest women, every one of them. What became of my father I never knew, nor did I ever inquire.

I went through a pretty fair number of adventures before I settled down to my first serious profession. I was travelling companion and drudge to an itinerant tinker, who treated me as kindly as could be expected when he was sober. When he was drunk he used to throw the pots and pans at my head. Then I became a cabin-boy, but only for a single voyage, on board a collier. The ship belonged to a philanthropist, who was too much occupied with the wrongs of the West Indian niggers to think about the rights of his own sailors; so his ships, insured far above their real value, were sent to sea to sink or swim as it might please Providence. I suppose no cabin-boy ever had so many kicks and cuffs in a single voyage as I had. However, my ship carried me safely from South Shields to the port of London. There I ran away, and I heard afterwards that on her return voyage the Spanking Sally foundered with all hands. In the minds of those who knew the captain and his crew personally, there were doubtless, as in mine, grave fears as to their ultimate destination. After that I became steward in an Atlantic sailing packe