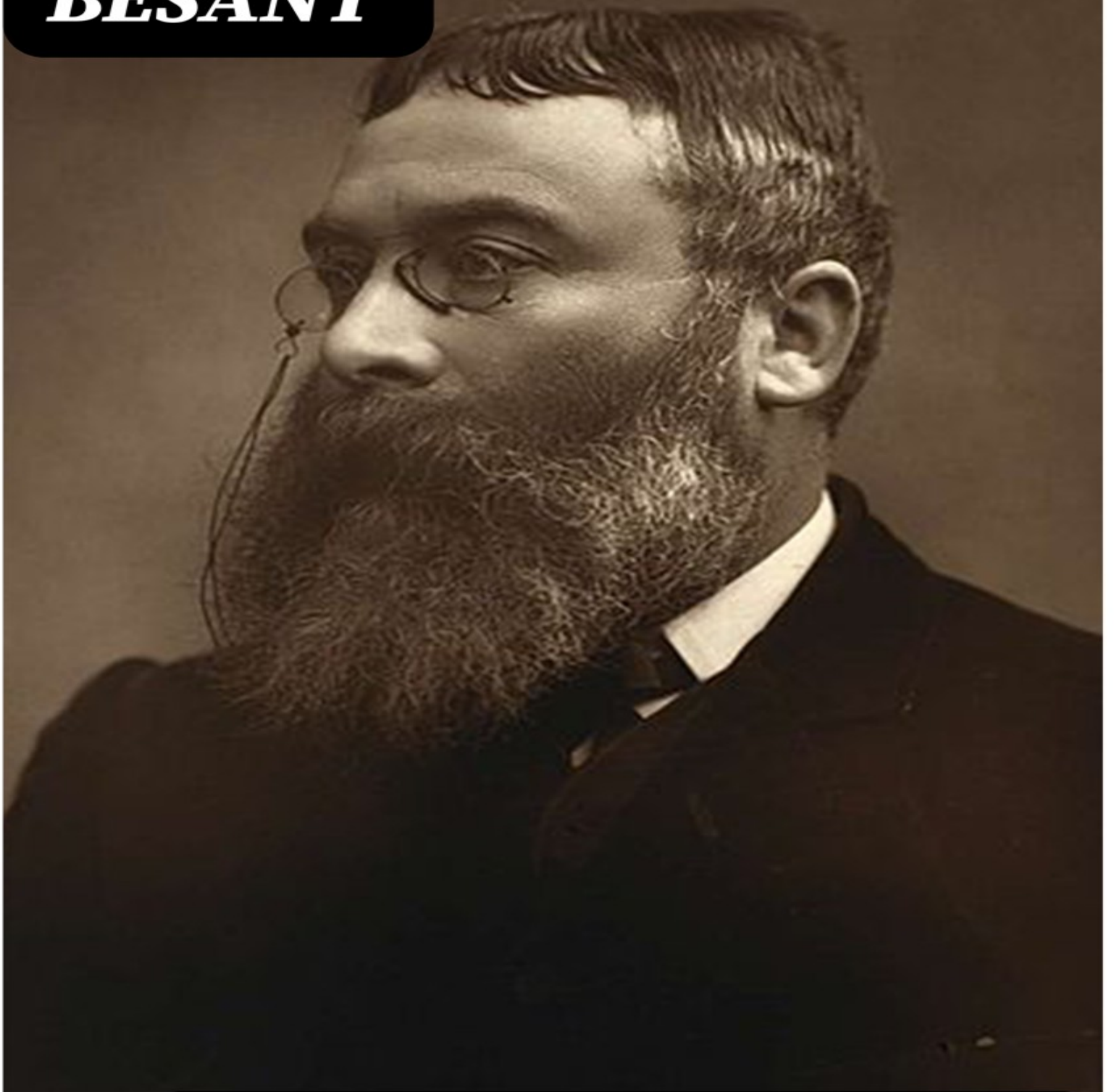


***WALTER  
BESANT***



***THE CASE  
OF MR. LUCRAFT***

**Walter Besant**

# **The Case of Mr Lucraft**

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# **(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 packet for a couple of years; then clerk to a bogus auctioneer in New York; cashier to a store; all sorts of things, but nothing long. Then I came back to England,

and not knowing what to do with myself, joined a strolling company of actors in the general utility line. It was not exactly promotion, but I liked the life; I liked the work; I liked the applause; I liked wandering about from town to town; I even liked, being young and a fool, the precarious nature of the salary. Heaven knows mine was small enough; but we were a cheery company, and one or two members subsequently rose to distinction. If we had known any history, which we did not, we might have remembered that Molière himself was once a stroller through France. Some people think it philosophical to reflect, when they are hard up, how many great men have been hard up too. It would have brought no comfort to me. Practically I felt little inconvenience from poverty, save in the matter of boots. We went share and share alike, most of us, and there was always plenty to eat even for my naturally gigantic appetite. Juliet always used to reckon me as equal to four.

Juliet was the manager's daughter--Julie Kerrans, acting as Miss Juliet Alvanley. She was eighteen and I was twenty-three, an inflammable and romantic time of life. We were thrown a good deal together too, not only off the stage but on it. I was put into parts to play up to her. I was Romeo when she played her namesake, a part sustained by her mother till even she herself was bound to own that she was too fat to play it any longer; she was Lady Teazle and I was Charles Surface; she was Rosalind and I Orlando; she was Miranda and I Ferdinand; she was Angelina and I Sir Harry Wildair. We were a pair, and looked well in love scenes. Looking back dispassionately on our performances, I suppose they must have been as bad as stage-acting could

well be. At least, we had no training, and nothing but a few fixed rules to guide us; these, of course, quite stagey and conventional. Juliet had been on the stage all her life, and did not want in assurance; I, however, was nervous and uncertain. Then we were badly mounted and badly dressed; we were ambitious, we ranted, and we tore a passion to rags. But we had one or two good points--we were young and lively. Juliet had the most charming of faces and the most delicious of figures--mind you, in the year 1823, girls had a chance of showing their figures without putting on a page's costume. Then she had a soft, sweet voice, and pretty little coquettish ways, which came natural to her, and broke through the clumsy stage artificialities. She drew full houses; wherever we performed, all the men, especially all the young officers, used to come after her. They wrote her notes, they lay in wait for her, they sent her flowers; but what with old Kerrans and myself, to say nothing of the other members of the company, they might as wen have tried to get at a Peri in Paradise. I drew pretty well too. I was--a man of seventy and more may say so without being accused of vanity--I was a good-looking young fellow; you would hardly believe what quantities of letters and billets-doux came to me. I had dozens, but Juliet found and tore them up. There they were; the note on rose-coloured note-paper with violet ink, beginning with "Handsomest and noblest of men", and ending with "Your fair unknown, Araminta". There was the letter from the middle-aged widow with a taste for the drama and an income; and there was the vilely spelled note from the foolish little milliner who had fallen in love with the Romeo of a barn. Perhaps ladies are