

WHAT COULD IT BE?

A STORY OF L'ACADIE.

BY J. H. CANDIDE.

"Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble."

I HAVE a circumstance of so remarkable a character to relate to you, that I feel it is necessary to inform you something of the history and character of the writer, so that you may be the better able to judge of the amount of credence to which it is entitled.

I was born in London, in England, in the year 1816, so that I am now just thirty-one years of age; I, therefore, think I may say, that I am in the prime of my life, and neither in my nonage nor my dotage. My parents were people of good, plain, common sense; religious, but not superstitious; who always made their children go to bed, undress, and say their prayers, *without a candle*, and never allowed them to be terrified by bogle, hobgoblin, or any other fanciful and frightful fiction of a diseased imagination; so that I certainly was not brought up a timid, or easily frightened child.

When a lad, I was brought up in the midst of gas-lights and policemen, and was forced, from a very early period of my life, to mix in all the stern realities of that bustling and very practical city, London. I, therefore, was not likely to become a fanciful or superstitious dreamer. I am naturally of a strong mind, rather inclined to doubt, and inquire into the truth and reality of all things which fall under my observation—especially if they partake of the marvellous—than to wonder, and take such things on mere hear-say. As I grew older, and my mind and my knowledge increased, and I obtained some insight into natural, physical, and philosophical science, I became a confirmed and professed *disbeliever* in ghosts, apparitions, and supernatural appearances and influences, of every kind. I took a particular delight in discovering and exposing all those strange, mysterious, and, hitherto, unaccountable circumstances, both ancient and modern, which had excited the wonder and fear of the great mass of mankind; always shewing them to arise from perfectly natural causes, and the wonder and alarm to be merely the results of ignorance of

the causes which produced the effects; and as I am tolerably well versed in experimental chemistry, pneumatics, acoustics, and all those arts, sciences, and appliances, which have furnished the material for the mysterious, marvellous, and supernatural appearances and circumstances of all ages and all times, I have frequently dispelled the doubts, and calmed the fears, which, even in such a practical and bustling place as London, will still linger in the hearts of some of the weaker specimens of humanity. Nay, Sir, I have even gone farther than this; for, by a species of ratiocination, or logic, with which I will not trouble you, as I have no doubt you have heard such, I have often proved, at least to my own satisfaction, that *there could not be such a thing* as a ghost, or supernatural appearance; and that where the parties relating it had not been imposed on by a trick, or a cheat, they were the victims of a *diseased brain* or imagination, or some simple circumstance, which their fears had magnified, and the causes of which they had never discovered; and so firmly did I myself believe this, that even now, when the recollection of that which I am about to narrate to you sends a chill through all my veins, and although *I cannot* doubt of the truth of what I have myself seen and felt, still my old feelings and convictions linger about me, and I endeavour, but in vain, by the aid of all my knowledge, my experience, and all my reasoning powers, to explain, in a rational and natural way, that terrible appearance, the recollection of which haunts me every hour of the day, and which I do not doubt I shall carry with me to the grave.

Sir, you will perceive that, by nature, education, and all the circumstances of my life, I am one of the last persons in the world from whom you would expect to hear of anything at all savouring of the supernatural; and, to say the truth, if it were not for a faint hope which I entertain that your knowledge and experience may afford me some clue to the solution of this hor-