

The Blind Beggar of Odessa

By Catherine Crowe

An old blind man of Odessa, named Michel, had, for many years, been accustomed to get his living by seating himself every morning on a beam in one of the timber yards, with a wooden bowl at his feet, into which the passengers cast their alms. This long-continued practice had made him well known to the inhabitants, and as he was believed to have been formerly a soldier, his blindness was attributed to the numerous wounds he had received in battle. For his own part he spoke little, and never contradicted this opinion.

One night Michel, by some accident, fell in with a little girl of ten years old, named Powleska, who was friendless and on the verge of perishing with cold and hunger. The old man took her home, and adopted her, and from that time, instead of sitting in the timber yards, he went about the streets in her company, asking alms at the doors of the houses. The child called him father, and they were extremely happy together. But when they had pursued their mode of life for about five years a misfortune befel them. A theft having been committed in a house which they had visited in the morning, Powleska was suspected and arrested, and the blind man was left once more alone. But, instead of resuming his former habits, he now disappeared altogether, and this circumstance causing the suspicion to extend to him, the girl was brought before the magistrate to be interrogated with regard to his probable place of concealment.

“Do you know where Michel is?” inquired the magistrate.

“He is dead,” replied she, shedding a torrent of tears.

As the girl had been shut up for three days, without any means of obtaining information from without, this answer, together with her unfeigned distress, naturally excited considerable surprise.

“Who told you he was dead?” they inquired.

“Nobody!”

“Then how can you know it?”

“I saw him killed!”

“But you have not been out of the prison?”

“But I saw it, nevertheless!”

“But how was that possible? Explain what you meant!”

“I cannot. All I can say is that I saw him killed.”

“When was he killed, and how?”

“It was the night I was arrested.”

“That cannot be; he was alive when you were seized.”

“Yes, he was; he was killed an hour after that. They stabbed him with a knife.”

“Where were you then?”

“I can’t tell; but I saw it.”

The confidence with which the girl asserted what seemed to her hearers impossible and absurd, disposed them to imagine that she was either really insane or pretending to be so; so, leaving Michel aside, they proceeded to interrogate her about the robbery, asking her if she was guilty.

“Oh no!” she answered.

“Then how came the property to be found about you?”

“I don’t know; I saw nothing but the murder.”

“But there are no grounds for supposing Michel is dead; his body has not been found.”

“It is in the aqueduct.”

“And do you know who slew him?”

“Yes, it is a woman. Michel was walking very slowly after I was taken from him. A woman came behind him with a large kitchen knife; but he heard her, and turned round; and then the woman flung a piece of grey stuff over his head, and struck him repeatedly with the knife; the grey stuff was much stained with the blood. Michel fell at the eighth blow, and the woman dragged the body to the aqueduct and let it fall in without ever lifting the stuff which stuck to his face.”

As it was easy to verify these latter assertions, they despatched people to the spot; and there the body was found with the piece of stuff over his head, exactly as she had described. But when they asked her how she knew all this, she could only answer, “I don’t know.”

“But you know who killed him?”

“Not exactly; it is the same woman that put out his eyes; but, perhaps, he will tell me her name to-night; and if he does, I will tell it to you.”

“Who do you mean by he?”

“Why, Michel, to be sure!”

During the whole of the following night, without allowing her to suspect their intention, they watched her; and it was observed that she never lay down, but sat upon the bed in a sort of lethargic slumber. Her body was quite motionless, except at intervals, when this repose was interrupted by violent nervous shocks, which pervaded her whole frame. On the ensuing day, the moment she was brought before the judge, she declared that she was now able to tell them the name of the assassin.

“But stay,” said the magistrate; “did Michel never tell you, when he was alive, how he lost his sight?”

“No; but the morning before I was arrested, he promised me to do so; and that was the cause of his death.”

“How could that be?”

“Last night Michel came to me, and he pointed to the man hidden behind the scaffolding on which he and I had been sitting. He showed me the man listening to us, when he said, ‘I’ll tell you all about that to-night’; and then the man—”

“Do you know the name of this man?”

“It is Luck. He went afterwards to a broad street that leads down to the harbour, and he entered the third house on the right—”

“What is the name of the street?”

“I don’t know; but the house is one storey lower than the adjoining ones. Luck told Catherine what he had heard, and she proposed to him to assassinate Michel; but he refused, saying, ‘It is bad enough to have burnt out his eyes fifteen years before, whilst he was asleep at your door, and to have kidnapped him into the country.’ Then I went in to ask charity, and Catherine put a piece of plate into my pocket, that I might be arrested: then she hid herself behind the aqueduct to wait for Michel, and she killed him.”

“But, since you say all this, why did you keep the plate?—why didn’t you give him information?”

“But I didn’t see it then. Michel showed it me last night.”

“But what should induce Catherine to do this?”

“Michel was her husband, and she had forsaken him to come to Odessa and marry again. One night, fifteen years ago, she saw Michel, who had come to seek her. She slipped hastily into her house, and Michel, who thought she had not seen him, lay down at her door to watch; but he fell asleep, and then Luck burned out his eyes, and carded him to a distance.”

“And is it Michel who has told you this?”

“Yes: he came, very pale and covered with blood; and he took me by the hand and showed me all this with his fingers.”

Upon this, Luck and Catherine were arrested; and it was ascertained that she had actually been married to Michel in the year 1819, at Rherson. They at first denied the accusation, but Powleska insisted, and they subsequently confessed the crime. When they communicated the circumstances of the confession to Powleska, she said, “I was told it last night.”