

hours and a half! That's what comes when one begins to talk.

"Let some one get my horse!"

"Who? The ostlers have gone to bed."

"I will go to the stables myself."

"They have bewitched you at Pocovnicu!" said the lady with a ripple of laughter, as she barred my passage through the door.

I put her gently on one side and went out on to the veranda. It was indeed a dreadful night. The drivers' fires had died down, men and animals were sleeping on the straw, lying one against the other on the ground, while above them the wind howled wildly.

"There is a great storm," said Mistress Marghioala, shuddering as she seized me firmly by the hand. "You are mad to start in such weather. Stay the night here: start at daybreak to-morrow."

"That's impossible."

I forcibly withdrew my hand. I proceeded to the stables. With great difficulty I roused an ostler and found my horse. I tightened the girths, fastened the horse to the steps, and then went to the room to bid my hostess good night. The woman, immersed in thought, was sitting on the bed with my cap in her hand. She was turning and twisting it about.

"How much have I to pay?" I asked.

"You can pay me when you come back," replied my hostess, looking intently into the lining of my cap.

And then she rose to her feet and held it out to me. I took the cap, and put it on my head, rather on one side.

I said, looking straight into the woman's eyes, which seemed to shine most strangely:

"I kiss your eyes, Mistress Marghioala!"

"A safe journey to you."

I threw myself into the saddle, the old servant opened the gate for me, and out I rode. Resting my left hand on my horse's flank, I turned my head round. Over the top of the fence could be seen the open door of the room, and in the opening was outlined the white figure of the woman with her hand above her arched eyebrows.

I rode at a slow pace whistling a gay song to myself until I turned the corner of the fence to get to the road, when the picture was hidden from my sight. I said to myself, "Here we go!" and crossed myself. At that moment I plainly heard the banging of a door and the mew of a cat. My hostess, unable to see me any longer, went hastily back into the warmth and doubtless caught the cat in the door. That damned cat! It was always getting under people's feet.

I had gone a good part of the way. The storm increased and shook me in the saddle. Overhead, cloud after cloud hurried across the valley and above the hill, as though in fear of chastisement from on high; now massed together, now dispersed, they revealed at long intervals the pale light of the waning moon.

The damp cold pierced through me. I felt it paralysing legs and arms. As I rode with head bent to avoid the buffeting of the wind, I began to feel pains in my neck; my forehead and temples were burning, and there was a drumming in my ears.

"I have drunk too much," I thought to myself, as I pushed my cap on to the nape of my neck, and raised my forehead towards the sky.