

Old Nichifor had a whip of hemp twig, plaited by his own hand, with a silk lash, which he cracked loud enough to deafen you. And whether he had a full load or was empty, old Nichifor always walked up the hills and usually pulled together with the mares. Down the hills he walked to avoid laming the mares.

The passengers, willing or unwilling, had to do the same, for they had enough of old Nichifor's tongue, who once rounded on one of them like this: "Can't you get out and walk; the horse is not like a blockhead that talks." If you only knew how to appreciate everything that fell from old Nichifor's mouth, he was very witty. If he met a rider on the road, he would ask: "Left the Prince far behind, warrior?" and then, all at once, he would whip up the mares, saying:

"White for the leader, white for the wheeler,
The pole lies bare on the one side.
Heigh! It's not far to Galatz. Heigh!"

But if he met women and young girls then he sang a knowing song, rather like this:

"When I took my old wife
Eight lovers did sigh:
Three women already wed,
And five girls, in one village."

They say, moreover, that one could not take the road, especially in the month of May, with a pleasanter or gayer man. Only sometimes, when you pretended not to see you were passing the door of a public house, because you did not feel inclined to soften old Nichifor's throat, did you find him in a bad mood, but even on these occasions he would drive rapidly from one inn to the other. On one occasion, especially, old Nichifor coveted two mares which were marvels on the road, but at the inns, whether he wanted to or no, they used to halt, for he had bought them from a priest.

My father said that some old men, who had heard it from old Nichifor's own lips, had told him that at that time it was a good business being a cab-driver in Neamtzu town. You drove from Varatic to Agapia, from Agapia to Varatic, then to Razboeni; there were many customers, too, at the church hostels. Sometimes you had to take them to Peatra, sometimes to Folticeni, sometimes to the fair, sometimes to Neamtzu Monastery, sometimes all about the place to the different festivals.

My father also said he had heard from my grandfather's grandfather that the then prior of Neamtzu is reported to have said to some nuns who were wandering through the town during Holy Week:

"Nuns!"

"Your blessing, reverend Father!"

"Why do you not stay in the convent and meditate during Passion Week?"

"Because, reverend Father," they are said to have replied with humility, "this wool worries us, but for that we should not come. Your Reverence knows we keep ourselves by selling serge, and though we do not collect a great deal, still those who go about get something to live on...."

Then, they say, the prior gave a sigh, and he laid all the blame on old Nichifor, saying:

"I would the driver who brought you here might die, for then he could not bring you so often to the town."

They say old Nichifor was greatly troubled in his mind when he heard