

"I am ready, Master Shtrul; I have only to water the mares. Go and get your daughter-in-law ready."

Old Nichifor was energetic and quick at his work and he rapidly threw some fodder into the carriage, spread out a couple of leather cushions, put to the mares, flung his sheepskin cloak round his shoulders, took his whip in his hand and was up and away. Master Shtrul had scarcely reached home when old Nichifor drew up his carriage at the door. Malca--that was the name of Master Shtrul's daughter-in-law--came out to take a look at the driver.

This is Malca's story: it appeared that Peatra was her native place; she was very red in the face, because she had been crying at parting with her parents-in-law. It was the first time she had been in Neamtzu; it was her wedding visit as they say with us. It was not much more than two weeks since she had married Itzic, Master Shtrul's son, or, it would be better to say, in all good fellowship, that Itzic had married Malca. He had quitted his parents' house according to the custom, and in two weeks' time Itzic had brought Malca to Neamtzu and placed her in his parents' hands and had returned quickly to Peatra to look after his business.

"You have kept your promise, Mosh Nichifor?"

"Certainly, Master Shtrul; my word is my word. I don't trouble myself much. As for the journey, it's as well to set out early and to halt in good time in the evening."

"Will you be able to reach Peatra by the evening, Mosh Nichifor."

"Eh! Do you know what you're talking about, Master Shtrul? I expect, so help me God, to get your daughter-in-law to Peatra this afternoon."

"You are very experienced, Mosh Nichifor; you know better than I do. All I beg of you is that you will be very careful to let no harm befall my daughter-in-law."

"I did not start driving the day before yesterday, Master Shtrul. I have already driven dames and nuns and noble ladies and other honest girls, and, praise be to God, none have ever complained of me. Only with the nun Evlampia, begging sister from Varatic, did I have a little dispute. Wherever she went it was her custom to tie a cow to the back of the carriage, for economy's sake, that she might have milk on the journey; this caused me great annoyance. The cow, just like a cow, pulled the forage out of my carriage, once it broke the rack, going uphill it pulled back, and once it nearly strangled my mares. And I, unhappy man that I am, was bold enough to say, 'Little nun, isn't it being a penny wise and a pound foolish?' Then she looked sadly at me, and in a gentle voice said to me, 'Do not speak so, Mosh Nichifor, do not speak thus of the poor little cow, for she, poor thing, is not guilty of anything. The anchorite fathers of St. Agura have ordained that I should drink milk from a cow only, so that I may not get old quickly; so what is to be done? I must listen to them, for these holy men know a great deal better than do we poor sinners.'

"When I heard this, I said to myself, that perhaps the begging sister had some reason on her side, and I left her to her fate, for I saw that she was funny and at all events was determined to drink only from one well. But, Master Shtrul, I do not think you are going to annoy me with cows too. And, then, Mistress Malca, where it is very steep, uphill or down, will always get out and walk a little way. It is so beautiful out in the country then. But there, we mustn't waste our time talking. Come, jump in, Mistress Malca, that I may take you home to your husband; I know how sad it is for these young wives when they have not got their husbands with them; they long for home as the horse longs for his nose-bag."

"I am ready to come, Mosh Nichifor."

And she began at once to pick up the feather mattress, the soft pillows, a bundle containing food, and other commodities. Then Malca