

"There is a wolf coming towards us, Mistress Malca!"

"Woe is me! Mosh Nichifor, where can I hide?"

"Hide where you are, for I can tell you one thing, I am not afraid of the whole pack."

Then poor Malca, terrified, clung round old Nichifor's neck, and stuck to him like a leech, and as she sat there she said, trembling:

"Where is the wolf, Mosh Nichifor?"

"Where is it? It crossed the road just in front of us, and went into the wood again. But if you had strangled me, young lady, and then the mares had bolted, it would have been a fine look out."

He had scarcely ceased speaking when Malca said softly:

"Never tell me again that a wolf is coming, Mosh Nichifor, I shall die from fright."

"It is not that I say so; there is one just coming; there you have one!"

"Alas! What are you saying?"

And again she hid close to old Nichifor.

"What is young is young. You want to play, young lady, isn't that it? It seems to me you're lucky, for I keep my self-control. I am not very afraid of the wolf, but if some one else had been in my place----"

"No more wolves will come, Mosh Nichifor, will they?"

"Oho! you are too funny, young lady, you want them to come too often. You mustn't expect to see a wolf at every tree. On St. Andrew's Day many of them prowl together in the same place and the huntsmen are on the watch. During the great hunt, do you think it's only a few wolves that are put to shame by having to leave their skins as hostages? Now we will let the mares get their wind. Look, this is 'Dragon Hill.' Once an enormous dragon alighted here, which spouted flames out of his mouth, and when it whistled the forest roared, the valleys groaned, the wild beasts trembled and beat their heads together with fear, and no one dared pass by here."

"Alas! And where is the dragon, Mosh Nichifor?"

"How should I know, young lady? The forest is large, it knows where it has hidden itself. Some say that after it had eaten a great many people and peeled the bark off all the oaks in the wood it expired at this spot. By others I have heard it said that it made a black cow give it milk, and this enabled it to rise again into the skies whence it had fallen. But how do I know whom to believe? People will say anything! Luckily I understand witchcraft, and I am not at all afraid of dragons. I can take serpents out of their nest as easily as you can take a flea out of your poultry-house."

"Where did you learn these spells, Mosh Nichifor?"

"Eh? My dear young lady, that I may not tell. My old woman--she was just on twenty-four when I fell in love with her--what hasn't she done! How she has worried me to tell her, and I wouldn't tell her. And that's why she'll die when she does die, but why hasn't she died long before, for then I could have got a younger woman. For three days I can live in peace with her, and then it's enough to kill one! I am sick to death of the old hag. Every minute she worries and reproaches me by her manner. When I think that when I return I have got to go back to her, I feel wild--just inclined to run away--nothing more nor less."

"Stop, stop, Mosh Nichifor, you men are like that."