

"Good-night, Nickolai," he said quietly.

"Good-night, Paul," returned the newcomer, and looking across the table, said merrily, "Hello, little girl!"

"Hello, Nickolai!" replied the woman. "You're late on the roads tonight."

"Yes, a little," said Nickolai, removing his gloves. "But you're not waiting for me, are you?"

"No, I'm not," she replied, "but I saw one tonight who was."

"Yes?" enquiringly.

"That's refreshing news. We don't have them looking for us very often. We usually have to look them up when we want them," and he smiled significantly at the woman. "Well, and who was she, pray?" he asked.

"Oh, no one of any account to you, Nickolai," she replied. "She didn't seem very pleasant, you know."

"Who, then?" persisted Nickolai.

"Dark eyes, a rosy cheek, and eighteen——can't you guess?"

"Oh, yes, I know now. But what did she want?"

"She wanted you, of course," returned the woman. "She was crying and said she had been looking for you since last week."

"Last week,——yes?"

"We just made fun of her," continued the woman, smiling. "You see, we have known you longer than she has. But she seemed to take to it rather seriously, you know."

"Well, I could be sorry if I had time, but I can't help it now, and I've business with Paul that'll keep me going for the next hour. After that, well, I don't mind if she does come."

"Ah, Nickolai," said the woman, with a cunning look over her shoulder at him as she went out in company with the man who had been seated at the table with her.

"And now," said Nickolai, turning to Paul, "let us get to business. It's late. Just a moment: I want to see the hag."

He went to a door leading from the room and cried:

"Ho, mother!"

"Yes!" came a shrill answer from a distant room.

"Come," said Nickolai, going back again to the table, and seating himself opposite to Paul.

The old woman came in hurriedly, and advanced to the table.

"What is it, dearie?" she asked.

"It's late," began Nickolai, "and I have some business to arrange with Paul. In the meantime, I've a little errand for you."

"Yes, dearie."

"I want you to find something for me."

"I'll find it."

"Now, listen," he continued, with a smile. "The richest Jewess and the fairest woman awake, do you understand?"

"The richest Jewess——and the fairest woman," repeated the hag, "and both in one."

"And both in one," said Nickolai, "and——and not too virtuous, do you understand?"

"And not too virtuous," repeated the hag, as she turned and left the room.

III.

Nickolai turned again to Paul and assumed an air of seriousness.

"Well," he began, "I have pressing business with you, Paul."

"Had you any trouble with the tenants?" asked Paul.

"Oh, no, nothing serious," he replied. "On my way back, I rode over a crazy old devil, and I guess if he had any brains they are spilled in the road by this."

Paul moved uneasily.

"Well, your business, Nickolai," he said, rather abruptly.

Nickolai looked about the room carefully, and then leaned across the table towards Paul.

"You see," he began, lighting a large pipe, "I've run into a deuce of a muddle. Now, as it happens, I need your help to get out of it."

"My help!" exclaimed Paul, in surprise.

"Yes, your help, and pray do not be surprised. I've one or two things to tell you that may startle you more."

He looked about the room cautiously.

"I got rid of the hag for a purpose," he began again. "I have a story to tell