

## MINIONS OF THE MOON.

Our story is of the time when George the Third was king; and our scene of action lies only at an old farmhouse, six miles or so from Finchley—a quaint, ramshackle, commodious, old-fashioned, thatched farm-house that we see only in pictures now, and which has long since been improved off the face of the earth.

It was a farm-estate that was flourishing bravely in those dear, disreputable days when the people paid five pence a pound for bread and only dared curse Protection in their hearts; when few thrives, and many starved, and younger sons of gentry, without interest at court or Parliament, either cut the country, which served them so badly, or took to business on the king's highway, and served the country badly in return.

The Maythrope Farm belonged to the Pemberthys, and had descended from father to son from days lying too far back to reckon up just now; and a rare, exclusive, conservative, bad-tempered, long-headed race the Pemberthys had the reputation of being, feathering their nests well, and dying in them fat and prosperous.

There were a good many Pemberthys scattered about the home and midland counties, but it was generally understood in the family that that the head of the clan, as it were, lived at the Maythrope Farm, near Finchley, and here the Pemberthys would fore-gather on any great occasion, such as a marriage, a funeral, or a christening—the funeral taking precedence for numbers. There had been a grand funeral at Maythrope Farm only a few days before our story opens, for Reuben Pemberthy had been consigned to his fathers at the early age of forty-nine. Reuben Pemberthy had left one son behind him, also named Reuben, a stalwart, heavy-browed, good-looking young fellow, who, at two-and-twenty, was as well able to manage the farm, and everything in it, as his father had been before him. He had got rid of all his relatives, save two, six days after his father's funeral, and those two were stopping by general consent, because it was signed, sealed and delivered by those whom it most concerned, that the younger woman, his cousin, pretty Sophie Tarne, was to be married before the year was out to the present Reuben Pemberthy, who had wooed her, and won her consent when he went down to her mother's house at King's Norton for a few days' last summer. Being a steady, handsome fellow, who made love in downright earnest, he impressed Sophie's eighteen years, and was somewhat timidly but graciously accepted as an affianced suitor. It was thought at King's Norton that Mrs. Tarne had done a better stroke of business in the first year of her widowhood than her late husband had done—always an unlucky wretch—Timothy—in the whole course of his life. And now Sophie Tarne and her mother were staying for a few days longer at Maythrope Farm after the funeral.

Mrs. Tarne having been a real Pemberthy before her unfortunate marriage with the improvident draper of King's Norton, was quite one of the family, and seemed more at home at Finchley than was the new widow Mrs. Pemberthy—a poor, shaky lady, a victim to a chronic state of twittering and jingling and twitching, but one who, despite her shivers, had made the late Reuben a good wife, and was a fair housekeeper even now, although superintending housekeeping in jumps like a palsy-stricken kangaroo.

So Sophie and her bustling mother were of material assistance to Mrs. Pemberthy, and the presence of Sophie in that house of mourning—where the mourning had been speedily got over, and business had begun again with commendable celerity—was a considerable source of comfort to young Reuben, when he had leisure after business hours—which was not always the case—to resume those tender relations which had borne to him last autumn such happy fruit of promise.

Though there was not much work to do at the farm in the winter time, when the nights were long and the days short, yet Reuben Pemberthy was generally busy in one way or another, and on the particular day on which our story opens, Reuben was away at High Barnet.

It had been a dull, dark day, followed by a dull, dark night. The farm-servants had gone to their homes, save the few that were attached to the premises—such as scullery-maids and dairy-maids—and Mrs. Pemberthy, Mrs. Tarne, and her daughter Sophie were waiting early supper for Reuben, and wondering what kept him so long from his home and his sweetheart.

Mrs. Tarne, accustomed, mayhap, to the roar and bustle of King's Norton, found the farm at Finchley a trifle dull and lonely—not that in a few days after a funeral she could expect any excessive display of life or frivolity—and, oppressed a bit that evening, was a trifle nervous as to the whereabouts of her future son-in-law, who had faithfully promised to be home a clear hour-and-half before the present time, and whose word might be always taken to be as good as his bond. Mrs. Tarne was the most restless of the three women; good Mrs. Pemberthy, though physically shaken was not likely to be nervous concerning her son, and indeed was at any time only fidgety over her own special complaints—a remarkable trait of character deserving of passing comment here.

Sophie was not of a nervous temperament; indeed, for her eighteen years, was apparently a little too cool and methodical. And she was not flurried that evening over the delay in the arrival home of Reuben Pemberthy; she was not imaginative like her mother, and did not associate delay with the dangers of a dark night, though the nights were full of danger in the good old times of the third George. She went to the door to look out, after her mother had tripped there for the seventh or eighth time, not for appearances' sake, for she was above that, but to keep her mother company and to suggest that these frequent excursions to the front door would end in a bad cold.

"I can't help fearing that something has happened to Reu," said the mother; "he is always so true to time."

"There are a great many things to keep a man late, mother."

"Not to keep Reuben. If he said what hour he'd be back—he's like his father, my poor brother—he'd do it to the minute, even if there wasn't any reason for his hurry."

"Which there is," said Sophie archly.

"Which there is, Sophie. And why you are so quiet over this, I don't know. I am sure when poor Mr. Tarne was out late—and he was often very, very late, and the Lord knows where he'd been either! I couldn't keep a limb of me still till he came home again. I was as bad as your aunt in-doors there, till I was sure he was safe and sound."

"But he always came home safe and sound, mother."

"Nearly always. I remember the time once, though—bless us and save us, what a gust!" she cried, as the wind came swooping down the hill at them, swirling past them into the dark passage and puffing the lights out in the big pantry beyond, when the maids began to scream. "I hope he hasn't been blown off his horse."

"Not very likely, that," said Sophie, "and Reuben the best horseman in the county. But come in out of the gale, mother. The sleet cuts like a knife, too, and he will not come home any the sooner for your letting the wind into the house. And—why, here he comes, after all. Hark!"

There was a rattling of horses' hoofs on the frost-bound road: it was a long way in the distance, but it was the unmistakable signal of a well-mounted traveller approaching. Of more than one well-mounted traveller, it became quickly apparent, the clattering was so loud and incessant and manifold.

"Soldiers!" said Sophie; "what can bring them this way?"

"It's farmers coming the same way as Reuben, for protection's sake these winter nights, child."

"Protection?"

"Haven't you heard of the highwaymen about, and how a single traveller is never safe in these parts? Or a double one either—or—"

"Perhaps these are highwaymen?"

"Oh, good gracious! Let us get in doors and bar up," cried Mrs. Tarne, wholly forgetful of Reuben Pemberthy's safety after this suggestion. "Yes, it's as likely to be highwaymen as soldiers."

It was more likely. It was pretty conclusive that the odds were in favor of highwaymen, when, five minutes afterward, eight mounted horsemen rode up to the Maythrope farm-house, dismounted with considerable noise and bustle, and commenced hammering at the stout oaken door with the butt-ends of their riding-whips—hammering away incessantly, and shouting out much strong language in their vehemence. This, being fortunately all bawled forth at once, was incompressible to the dwellers within-doors, now all scared together and no longer cool and self-possessed.

"Robbers!" said Mrs. Tarne.

"We've never been molested before—at least not for twenty years or more," said Mrs. Pemberthy, "and then I mind—"

"Is it likely to be any of Reuben's friends?" asked Sophie, timidly.

"Oh, no; Reuben has no bellowing crew like that for friends. Ask who is there—somebody."

But nobody would go to the door save Sophie Tarne herself; the maids were huddled in a heap together in the corner of the dairy, and refused to budge an inch; and Mrs. Tarne was shaking more than Mrs. Pemberthy.

Sophie, with the color gone from her face, went boldly back to the door, where the hammering on the panels continued, and would have split anything of a less tough fiber than the English oak of which they were constructed.

"Who is there? What do you want?" she gave out in a shrill falsetto; but no one heard her till the questions were repeated about an octave-and-a-half higher.

"Hold hard, Stango, there's a woman calling to us. Stop your row, will you?"

A sudden cessation of the battering ensued, and some one was heard going rapidly backward over cobblestones amid the laughter of the rest, who had dismounted and were standing outside in the cold, with their hands upon their horses' bridles.

"Who is there?" asked Sophie Tarne again.

"Travellers in need of assistance, and who—" began a polite and even musical voice, which was interrupted by a hoarse voice.

"Open in the King's name, will you?"

"Open in the fiend's name, won't you?" called out a third and hoarser voice, "or we'll fire through the windows, and burn the place down."

There was a pause, and the polite gentleman began again in his mellifluous voice:

"We are travelers belated. We require corn for our horses, food for ourselves. There is no occasion for alarm; my friends are noisy but harmless, I assure you, and the favor of admittance and entertainment here will be duly appreciated. To refuse your hospitality—the hospitality of a Pemberthy—is only to expose yourselves to considerable inconvenience, I fear."

"Spoken like a book, captain."

"And as we intend to come in at all risks," added a deeper voice, "it will be better for you not to try and keep us out, d'ye hear? D'ye—Captain, if you shake me by the collar again, I'll put a bullet through you. I—"

"Silence! Let the worthy folk inside consider the position for five minutes."

"Not a minute longer, if they don't want the place burned about their ears, mind you," cried a voice that had not spoken yet.

"Who are you?" asked Sophie still inclined to parley.

"Travelers, I have told you."

"Thieves, cut-throats and murderers—eight of us—knights of the road, gentlemen of the highway, and not to be trifled with when half-starved and hard-driven," cried the hoarse man; "there, will that satisfy you, wench? Will you let us in, or not? It's easy enough for us to smash in the windows and get in that way, isn't it?"

Yes, it was very easy.

"Wait five minutes, please," said Sophie.

She went back to the parlor and to the two shivering women, and the crowd of maids who had crept from the dairy to the farm-parlor, having greater faith in number now.

"They had better come in, aunt, especially as we are quite helpless to keep them out. I could fire that gun," Sophie said, pointing to an unwieldy old blunderbuss slung by straps to the ceiling, "and I know it's loaded. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be of much use."

"It might make them angry," said Mrs. Pemberthy.

"It would only kill one at the best," remarked Mrs. Tarne, with a heavy sigh.

"And the rest of the men would kill us, the brutes," said Mrs. Pemberthy. "Yes, they'd better come in."

"Lord have mercy upon us," said Mrs. Tarne.

"There's no help for it," said Mrs. Pemberthy. "Even Reuben would not have dared to keep them out. I mind now their coming like this twenty years ago. I was—"

"I will see to them," said Sophie, who had become in her young brave strength quite the mistress of the ceremonies. "Leave the rest to me."

"And if you can persuade them to go away—" began Mrs. Tarne; but her daughter had already disappeared, and was parleying through the keyhole with the strangers without.

"Such hospitality as we can offer, gentlemen, shall be at your service, providing always that you treat us with the respect due to gentlemen and your hosts."

"Trust to that," was the reply. I will answer for myself and my companions, Mistress Pemberthy.

"Give me your word of honor?"

"My word of honor," he repeated; "our word of honor; and speaking for all my good friends present: is it not so men?"

"Ay, ay—that's right," chorused the good friends, and then Sophie Tarne, not without an extra plunging of the heart beneath her white crossover, unlocked the stout oaken door and let in her unwelcome visitors.

Seven out of the eight seemed to tumble in all at once, pushing against each other in their eagerness to enter, laughing, shouting and stamping with the heels of their jackboots on the bright red pantiles of the hall. The eighth intruder followed—a tall, thin man, pale-faced and stern and young, with a heavy horseman's cloak falling over his shoulders, the front of which was gathered up across his arms. A handsome and yet worn face—the face of one who had seen better days and known brighter times—a picturesque kind of vagabond, take him in the candle light. He raised his hat and bowed low to Sophie Tarne, not offering to shake hands as the rest of them had done who were crowding around her; then he seemed to stand suddenly between them and their salutations, and brush them unceremoniously aside.

"You see to those horses, Stango and Grapp," he said, singing out to the most obtrusive and blackest of the gang. "Mistress Pemberthy will perhaps kindly trust us for a while with the keys of the stable and corn-bins."

"They are here," said Sophie, detaching them from a bunch of keys which in true housewifely fashion hung from her girdle. "The farm servants are away in the village, or they would help you, sir."

"We are in the habit of helping ourselves—very much," said the highwayman dryly. "Pray don't apologise on that score, mistress."

Two of the men departed, five of them stalked into the farm parlor, flourishing their big hats and executing clumsy scrapings with their feet while bowing in mock



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