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## THE "MINIONS OF THE MOON."

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### CHAPTER I.

AT the time of which we write, lawlessness had reached a high pitch in the ancient city of Madrid. A band of young men, composed of members of the best families and headed by no less a personage, as was strongly suspected, than the heir-apparent to the throne, the Prince Don Pedro, had leagued themselves together under the title of "Minions of the Moon," for acts of violence and oppression.

The name was chosen from the fact that their lawless deeds were done in the still hours of the night. The worthy burghers had learned, from sad experience, to tremble at the name, and to the Jewish portion of the community, they became a perfect scourge. Many a rich store was plundered, many a strong box rifled, and the daring perpetrators escaped undetected to squander their plunder at the gaming table, for though strongly suspected, yet from the fact of the dark visors and cloaks they wore, identification was almost impossible.

In various encounters with the watch, they had invariably proved victors, being always well armed and prepared for resistance. None of their number had been captured. Though several had been severely wounded, they had been invariably borne off by their

comrades. If a young noble was brought to his father's house, as had often been the case, upon one of the nights when the "Minions of the Moon" had encountered the city watch, bleeding from many wounds, a duel with a comrade was the excuse for his condition.

The high station of these offenders was another cause for their immunity, the sufferers were afraid to take measures against them. Nor were strong boxes the only object of their depredations. Many a maiden's chamber had been entered at midnight and her honor ruthlessly sacrificed. Woe to the fair wife or daughter of a citizen! her beauty made her soon a victim. Many bore the dishonor in secret, hiding their shame from their neighbors, but others proclaimed the outrage and loudly called for redress. They were only laughed at for their pains.

At last an outrage more daring and high-handed than any that had preceded it, brought matters to a climax. Don Velasco de Silva, a young and valiant captain in the Spanish army, being appointed to the office of commander of the king's household guard, took up his residence in Madrid. Though of high and almost royal lineage, he possessed but little inheritance besides his sword. It may have been from this fact that he selected an old and somewhat dilapidated chateau in the

suburbs of the city he designed for his abode. He mixed little with the gay profligates, of his own age who glittered about the court as gaudy as butterflies. He was grave almost to sternness, quiet and reserved in his manners, forming no intimacies, seeking no friendships. It was soon noised about among the revellers of the court, that the old chateau which De Silva inhabited, contained a treasure which he was jealously guarding from all inquisitive eyes—his sister, or a mistress (report was in doubt), a maiden of sweet seventeen, said to be of surpassing loveliness.

The court gossips found this an inexhaustible topic. Many were the attempts made to extract some information from the young captain upon the subject, but they all proved futile. De Silva received these impertinent inquiries in no amiable mood, and the nervous manner in which he twirled his long mustachios with one hand while he grasped his sword hilt with the other, foreboded a danger which the boldest had not the temerity to intrude too far upon. But the subject was discussed among themselves daily with increasing interest.

"Is she really so beautiful?" questioned Manuel De Gama, of his friend and boon companion, Sylvie De Moena.

"Lovely as an angel—or what I have always imagined an angel to be, judging from the paintings I have seen of them," was the response.

"You have seen her then?"

"I have."

"How—might I ask?"

"Attracted by the reports of the beauty of this girl whom De Silva keeps so jealously immured, for the past week, closely muffled in my cloak for fear I might be met and recognized by that haughty don who handles his sword-hilt so readily, I have loitered about the old chateau which he inhabits, and which he keeps as carefully barred and locked as a prison. The week was nearly expired and the only discovery that I had made was that the household of De Silva consists of an old couple, evidently man and wife—and a crabbed couple I found them. I waylaid each in turn, as they came out to purchase necessaries, dazzled their eyes with some broad gold pieces in the hope to gain some information, but not a word could I get from either. I was almost in despair and about to give up the undertaking, when it suddenly occurred to me that though doors and windows were barred in front, yet there must be some win-

dows in the rear of the house looking upon the garden. But how to gain access to that garden, which was protected by a high stone wall, was a question more easily asked than solved. It was of considerable extent, reaching to the river's bank. I prowled along it, seeking for some accessible place. I was fortunate enough to find one. A tree, growing within the garden, had thrust forth its branches in the course of time, displacing the crumbling stones and making a breach which a nimble foot might climb, by grasping the overhanging branches. I determined to attempt it."

"It was a bold undertaking."

"It was that, for I knew if detected by De Silva, or his old servitor, my life would not have been worth the toss of a maravedi. But danger gives a spice to all adventures. In the gloom of the evening I returned to the broken wall, glanced around to see if I was noted, and finding all quiet, clambered over and gained the garden. Long neglect had made the ornamental trees and shrubbery like a forest. There was little likelihood of discovery in the dense gloom. I moved cautiously toward the chateau, guided on my way by a single light, which gleamed like a star. Suddenly the notes of a lute, skilfully touched, fell upon my ear. I paused to listen. The prelude ended, a voice of exquisite melody took up the refrain, and warbled a Moorish love ditty with a ravishing grace."

"It was the caged beauty?"

"It was. I had paused beneath an orange tree, and there she was, scarcely an arrow flight from me, sitting upon a little balcony, which jutted out from the window, the rays of the light within streaming full upon her face. I could distinguish every feature. The fair oval face, the long, straight nose, the raven tresses, and the dark, languishing eyes, the pointed chin, and white throat and neck descending to a bust that might have served a sculptor for a model. She sang several other simple ballads with exquisite skill and taste, and, when I had feasted my eyes and ears sufficiently, I withdrew as cautiously as I had come, and made my way out of the garden, undiscovered."

"It was a bold hazard. Have you related this adventure to the prince?"

"I have."

"What said he?"

"He laughingly exclaimed, that the 'Missions of the Moon' might visit this fair maiden some dark night."

"Umph! De Silva is not the man to tamely submit—he is a noble, not a burgher."

"Pshaw! what could one man do against us."

## CHAPTER II.

DE SILVA sat with his fair sister one summer's eve, upon the little balcony which overlooked the garden, as the sun sank slowly behind the western hills.

"Do you tire of this life of loneliness and solitude, sister mine?" he asked.

"It is wearisome," answered Julina, plainly. "I long for the freedom of our old home. Why do you never suffer me to go abroad?"

"Simply because I dare not. You smile—you cannot comprehend either the danger or my fear. You have never breathed the atmosphere of courts, your innocence is unconscious of the foul pollution that taints the air. Your beauty would expose you to a peril which I but hint at, as I would not shock your purity with its utterance. Even here you are scarcely safe. Prying eyes have seen you, how I cannot imagine, for I know that Pablo and his wife are as true as the steel of my trusty sword. Some popinjay from the court has been buzzing around our secluded dwelling. Pablo and Theresa have both been met and questioned, offered gold—the old device—to betray their master. Every night I fear a visit from those lawless wretches the 'Minions of the Moon.' By all the saints! if I detect them in the act of invading the sanctity of my dwelling, were they the highest in the land they should not escape chastisement!"

Julina's curiosity was aroused, and De Silva was obliged to explain, which he did as delicately as possible, who these men were, and the danger he apprehended at their hands. Julina's cheek paled as she listened to the fearful deeds, done by these wretches, which her brother recounted.

"Now, Julina," he said, in conclusion, "you know the cause of your seclusion from the world, and why I so jealously watch over you. We are two orphans left alone and almost friendless in the world, possessing only our proud, unsullied name. You have your honor, and I my sword to guard it. I had rather see you a corpse at my feet, than know you had forfeited that brightest jewel in the crown of womanhood. Now I must say good-night and away to my duty at the palace. Remember my words and be on the alert for

danger. I have a strong suspicion that you will be visited ere long." With these words De Silva took his departure.

The shades of night drew slowly over surrounding objects. Julina lingered upon the balcony watching the stars peep forth one by one, and singing fragments of old forgotten Moorish legends, which her nurse, Theresa, had taught her. And so the night wore slowly on. Theresa lighted the lamp in her chamber, and cautioned her against remaining too long exposed to the dews of night. The moon came forth resplendent in beauty, and Julina saluted her with fresh minstrelsy. At length her eyelids drooped, and she felt the languor of sleep creeping slowly over her. She could maintain her vigil no longer. She arose, entered her chamber, and, in a few moments, the extinguishment of her light was a signal that she had retired to rest.

As if in answer to that signal three dark figures, closely muffled in their cloaks, stole from the shadow of the trees, into the open space illuminated by the moonbeams, and cautiously approached the balcony.

"She has sought her couch," whispered one. "Now is the time for action."

"But how to gain access to the balcony?" questioned he, who appeared to be the leader in the affair.

"I have provided for that," returned he who had first spoken. "I have here a ladder of ropes. I can cast it upon the balcony, and the hooks will grapple in the railing."

"Let us see you try it. Be careful, though, or the maiden may awake and alarm the household ere we can gain access to her chamber."

At the third trial the hooks grappled, and several strong pulls showed that the ladder was securely fastened. He who had cast it, mounted lightly to the balcony and arranged the ladder for his companions, who quickly followed. One by one they entered the chamber, a dark lantern was unclosed and its fiery eye falling full upon the face of Julina, aroused her from her first slumber.

She started up in affright to behold three muffled figures in her chamber.

"The 'Minions of the Moon!' " she shrieked, in terror, recalling her brother's words.

"Faith! sweet one, thou hast guessed it," cried the leader of the three, and clasping her in his arms he imprinted hot kisses upon her lips, thereby stifling her efforts to call for assistance.

With frantic struggles she sought to free

herself from his embrace. Her white night-garment was rent by her efforts, and the purity of her virgin bosom exposed to the gaze of these lawless intruders. Her feeble strength availed her little against her assailants, and soon, exhausted by her own efforts, she lay panting, helpless, in his arms. No cry of alarm had been suffered to escape her lips, and now a handkerchief was bound over her mouth.

"Pity to cover such sweet lips," laughed he, who held her; "but we must have no screaming. Nay, struggle not—you cannot escape me."

"Nor you me, miscreants!" thundered De Silva, as he burst suddenly through the window into the chamber, his drawn sword in his hand.

A wild scene instantly ensued in the chamber. One of the Minions was struck down at the first onslaught by De Silva, but the others, though taken by surprise, threw away their cloaks, and drawing their swords, furiously encountered him. The lantern was extinguished and darkness reigned in the chamber. Julina's screams mingled with the clashing of sword-blades—a fearful discord.

The Minions encouraged each other with their voices, and to prevent mistakes in the dark. De Silva had the advantage being alone, and he prudently held his peace, answering each call of his antagonists with a sword thrust. He soon discovered by their voices, that the one he had stricken down upon his first entrance was on his feet again. He was contending against three men, but not a sword-blade had touched him as yet.

"Is it you, Sylvio?" he heard one say, and as the answer was promptly given, he continued, "make your way out of this, Sir Moon; we are enough for our friend, the captain."

At that moment there was a heavy fall in the chamber, simultaneously a voice cried from the balcony.

"The ladder is gone!"

"Leap then, in heaven's name!" was the answer, "Manuel is down—and I am bleeding from a dozen wounds!"

There was another fall in the chamber, and the sound of a heavy body falling upon the ground beneath the window, mingled with a cry of pain. Julina remained silent—she had fallen into a swoon at the commencement of this fearful struggle. At this moment old Pablo opened the chamber door, bearing a light in his hand, whilst old Theresa peeped tremblingly over his shoulder. Pablo beheld

De Silva leaning upon his sword. Two bodies lay upon the floor.

"Are you hurt, master?" asked Pablo, anxiously.

"A scratch or so," answered De Silva, "but nothing serious. Hold the light, that I may see who these gallants are. Ah! I thought so—Manuel De Gama and Sylvio De Moreno. They killed each other in the dark—I scarcely struck a blow. But there is another beneath the balcony too badly hurt to get away. See to your young mistress, Theresa—she is only frightened—for I was just in time. Bring the light into the garden, Pablo."

They descended to the garden, and found the third Minion there. He had broken his leg in leaping from the balcony. De Silva started back in surprise, as he beheld the pale visage of this man.

"Do you know me?" groaned the sufferer.

"I do," answered De Silva, with conflicting emotions. "Don Pedro, Prince of Spain, you have entered my dwelling this night, for as vile a purpose as ever filled the brain of man, and were I to mete out to you your just deserts I should, as I feel strongly tempted, kill you like a wounded wolf caught in the sheep-fold, but you are my prince, and the reverence of loyalty restrains my hand. You shall be kindly cared for here, until you can be removed to the palace, and I trust the lesson of to-night's adventure will make an impress on your mind."

Lessons are thrown away upon the naturally vicious. Had De Silva ended the career of "Pedro, the Cruel," then and there, history would have been spared many a dark page.

De Silva's timely arrival is easily explained. Suspecting danger, he had kept one of his soldiers on the watch over his premises, with orders to notify him of any suspicious circumstance. The bodies of the young noblemen were sent to their respective homes. It was given out that they had fallen in a duel, and no stir was made over their deaths. Don Pedro never recovered entirely from the effects of his fall, having a limping step, for which he is distinguished in history ever after. The 'Minions of the Moon' never troubled anybody after that night.

De Silva resigned his commission and took service in France (where Julina was married), and only returned to Spain, to help Henry of Franstamara pull the crown from Don Pedro's head and place it on his own. An undertaking which proved highly successful.