

FENTON'S QUEST

A NOVEL

BY

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FENTON'S QUEST.

CHAPTER I.

Missing again.

GILBERT FENTON was very glad to have made his escape from Lidford at last, for his mind was full of anxiety about Marian. Again and again he had argued with himself upon the folly and uselessness of this anxiety. She, for whose interests he was so troubled, was safe enough no doubt, protected by a husband, who was most likely a man of the world, and quite as able to protect her as Gilbert himself could be. He told himself this; but still the restless uneasy sense that he was neglecting his duty, that he was false to the promise made to old Jacob Nowell, tormented and perplexed him. He felt that he ought to be doing something—that he had no right to remain in ignorance of the progress of Marian's affairs—that he should be at hand to frustrate any attempt at knavery on the part of the lawyer—to be sure that the old man's wealth suffered no diminution before it reached the hands of his heiress.

Gilbert Fenton felt that his promise to the dead bound him to do these things, and felt at the same time the weakness of his own position with relation to Marian. By what right could he interfere in the con-

duct of her affairs? what claim could he assert to defend her interests? who would listen to any romantic notion about a promise made to the dead?

He went to Queen-Anne's-court upon the night of his return to London. The silversmith's shop looked exactly the same as when he had first seen it: the gas burning dimly, the tarnished old salvers and tankards gleaming duskily in the faint light, with all manner of purple and greenish hues. Mr. Tulliver was in his little den at the back of the shop, and emerged with his usual rapidity at the ringing of the door-bell.

"O, it's you, is it, sir?" he asked in an indifferent, half-insolent tone. "What can I do for you this evening?"

"Is your late master's granddaughter, Mrs. Holbrook, here?" Gilbert asked.

"No; Mrs. Holbrook went away on the morning after my master's death. I told you that when you called here last."

"I am quite aware of that; but I thought it likely Mrs. Holbrook might return here with her husband, to take possession of the property, which I suppose you know now belongs to her."

"Yes, I know all about that; but she hasn't come yet to take possession; she doesn't seem in such a desperate hurry about it. I daresay she knows that things are safe enough. Medler the lawyer is not the kind of party to be cheated out of sixpence. He has taken an inventory of every article in the place, and the weight and value of every article. Your friend Mrs. Holbrook needn't be afraid. I suppose she's some relation of yours, by the bye, sir, judging by the interest you seem to take in her affairs?"

"Yes," Gilbert said, not caring to answer this question directly; "I do take a warm interest in Mrs. Holbrook's affairs, and I am very anxious to see her placed in undisputed possession of her late grandfather's property."

"I should think her husband would see after that," Mr. Tulliver remarked with a sneer.

Gilbert left the court after having asked a few questions about Jacob Nowell's funeral. The old man had been buried at Kensal-green, followed to the grave only by the devoted Tulliver, Mr. Medler, and the local surgeon who had attended him in his last illness. He had lived a lonely friendless life, holding himself aloof from his fellow-creatures; and there were neither neighbours nor friends to lament his ending. The vagabond boys of the neighbourhood had clustered round the door to witness the last dismal ceremony of Mr. Nowell's existence, and had hung about the shop-front for some time after the funeral *cortège* had departed, peering curiously down into the darksome area, and speculating upon the hoards of wealth which the old miser had hidden away in coal-cellars and dust-bins, under the stone flags of the scullery, or in the crannies of the dilapidated walls. There were no bounds to the imagination of these street Arabs, who had been in the habit of yelping and whooping at the old man's heels when he took his infrequent walks abroad, assailing him with derisive epithets alluding to his miserly propensities. Amongst the elders of the court there was some little talk about the dead man, and the probable disposal of his property, with a good deal of argument and laying down of the law on the part of the graver and wiser members of that com-