

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Molière
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle
Baum Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Willis
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Bunner Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Hale James Hastings Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Pushkin Alcott
Swift Chekhov Newton



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Fenton's Quest

Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Imprint

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FENTON'S QUEST

by M. E. BRADDON

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CHAPTER I

THE COMMON FEVER

A warm summer evening, with a sultry haze brooding over the level landscape, and a Sabbath stillness upon all things in the village of Lidford, Midlandshire. In the remoter corners of the old gothic church the shadows are beginning to gather, as the sermon draws near its close; but in the centre aisle and about the pulpit there is broad daylight still shining-in from the wide western window, across the lower half of which there are tall figures of the Evangelists in old stained glass.

There are no choristers at Lidford, and the evening service is conducted in rather a drowsy way; but there is a solemn air of repose about the gray old church that should be conducive to tranquil thoughts and pious meditations. Simple and earnest have been the words of the sermon, simple and earnest seem the countenances of the congregation, looking reverently upwards at the face of their pastor; and one might fancy, contemplating that grand old church, so much too spacious for the needs of the little flock gathered there to-night, that Lidford was a forgotten, half-deserted corner of this earth, in which a man, tired of the press and turmoil of the world, might find an almost monastic solitude and calm.

So thought a gentleman in the Squire's pew — a good-looking man of about thirty, who was finishing his first Sunday at Lidford by devout attendance at evening service. He had been thinking a good deal about this quiet country life during the service, wondering whether it was not the best life a man could live, after all, and thinking it all the sweeter because of his own experience, which had lain chiefly in cities.

He was a certain Mr. Gilbert Fenton, an Australian merchant, and was on a visit to his sister, who had married the principal landowner in Lidford, Martin Lister — a man whose father had been called "the Squire." The lady sat opposite her brother in the wide old family pew to-night — a handsome-looking matron, with a little rosy-

cheeked damsel sitting by her side—a damsel with flowing auburn hair, tiny hat and feather, and bright scarlet stockings, looking very much as if she had walked out of a picture by Mr. Millais.

The congregation stood up to sing a hymn when the sermon was ended, and Gilbert Fenton turned his face towards the opposite line of pews, in one of which, very near him, there was a girl, at whom Mrs. Lister had caught her brother looking very often, during the service just concluded.

It was a face that a man could scarcely look upon once without finding his glances wandering back to it afterwards; not quite a perfect face, but a very bright and winning one. Large gray eyes, with a wonderful light in them, under dark lashes and darker brows; a complexion that had a dusky pallor, a delicate semi-transparent olive-tint that one seldom sees out of a Spanish picture; a sweet rosy mouth, and a piquant little nose of no particular order, made up the catalogue of this young lady's charms. But in a face worth looking at there is always a something that cannot be put into words; and the brightest and best attributes of this face were quite beyond translation. It was a face one might almost call "splendid"—there was such a light and glory about it at some moments. Gilbert Fenton thought so to-night, as he saw it in the full radiance of the western sunlight, the lips parted as the girl sang, the clear gray eyes looking upward.

She was not alone: a portly genial-looking old man stood by her side, and accompanied her to the church-porch when the hymn was over. Here they both lingered a moment to shake hands with Mrs. Lister, very much to Gilbert Fenton's satisfaction. They walked along the churchyard-path together, and Gilbert gave his sister's arm a little tug, which meant, "Introduce me."

"My brother Mr. Fenton, Captain Sedgewick, Miss Nowell."

The Captain shook hands with Gilbert. "Delighted to know you, Mr. Fenton; delighted to know any one belonging to Mrs. Lister. You are going to stop down here for some time, I hope."

"I fear not for very long, Captain Sedgewick. I am a business man, you see, and can't afford to take a long holiday from the City."

Mrs. Lister laughed. "My brother is utterly devoted to commercial pursuits," she said; "I think he believes every hour wasted that he spends out of his counting-house."

"And yet I was thinking in church this evening, that a man's life might be happier in such a place as this, drifting away in a kind of dreamy idleness, than the greatest successes possible to commerce could ever make it."

"You would very soon be tired of your dreamy idleness," answered his sister, "and sigh for your office and your club."

"The country suits old people, who have played their part in life, and made an end of it," said the Captain. "It suits my little girl here very well, too," he added, with a fond glance at his companion; "she has her birds and her flowers, and her books and music; and I don't think she ever sighs for anything gayer than Lidford."

"Never, uncle George," said the girl, slipping her hand through his arm. And Gilbert Fenton saw that those two were very fond of each other.

They came to the end of a shady winding lane at this moment, and Captain Sedgewick and Miss Nowell wished Mrs. Lister and her brother good-evening, and went away down the lane arm-in-arm.

"What a lovely girl she is!" said Gilbert, when they were gone.

"Lovely is rather a strong word, Gilbert," Mrs. Lister answered coldly; "she is certainly pretty, but I hope you are not going to lose your heart in that direction."

"There is no fear of that. A man may admire a girl's face without being in any danger of losing his heart. But why not in that direction, Belle? Is there any special objection to the lady?"

"Only that she is a nobody, without either money or position and I think you ought to have both when you marry."

"Thanks for the implied compliment; but I do not fancy that an Australian merchant can expect to secure a wife of very exalted position; and I am the last man in the world to marry for money."

"I don't for a moment suppose you would marry any one you didn't like, from mercenary considerations; but there is no reason you should make a foolish match."

"Of course not. I think it very doubtful whether I shall ever marry at all. I am just the kind of man to go down to my grave a bachelor."

"Why so, Gilbert?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you, my dear. Perhaps I am rather difficult to please—just a little stony-hearted and invulnerable. I know that since I was a boy, and got over my schoolboy love affairs, I have never seen the woman who could touch my heart. I have met plenty of pretty women, and plenty of brilliant women, of course, in society; and have admired them, and there an end. I have never seen a woman whose face impressed me so much at first sight as the face of your friend, Miss Nowell."

"I am very sorry for that."

"But why, Belle?"

"Because the girl is a nobody—less than nobody. There is an unpleasant kind of mystery about her birth."

"How is that? Her uncle, Captain Sedgewick, seems to be a gentleman."

"Captain Sedgewick is very well, but he is not her uncle; he adopted her when she was a very little girl."

"But who are her people, and how did she fall into his hands?"

"I have never heard that. He is not very fond of talking about the subject. When we first came to know them, he told us that Marian was only his adopted niece; and he has never told us any more than that."

"She is the daughter of some friend, I suppose. They seem very much attached to each other."

"Yes, she is very fond of him, and he of her. She is an amiable girl; I have nothing to say against her— but — —"

"But what, Belle?"

"I shouldn't like you to fall in love with her."

"But I should, mamma!" cried the damsel in scarlet stockings, who had absorbed every word of the foregoing conversation. "I should like uncle Gil to love Marian just as I love her. She is the dearest girl in the world. When we had a juvenile party last winter, it was Marian who dressed the Christmas-tree—every bit; and she played the piano for us all the evening, didn't she, mamma?"

"She is very good-natured, Lucy; but you mustn't talk nonsense; and you ought not to listen when your uncle and I are talking. It is very rude."

"But! I can't help hearing you, mamma."

They were at home by this time, within the grounds of a handsome red-brick house of the early Georgian era, which had been the property of the Listers ever since it was built. Without, the gardens were a picture of neatness and order; within, everything was solid and comfortable: the furniture of a somewhat ponderous and exploded fashion, but handsome withal, and brightened here and there by some concession to modern notions of elegance or ease—a dainty little table for books, a luxurious arm-chair, and so on.

Martin Lister was a gentleman chiefly distinguished by good-nature, hospitable instincts, and an enthusiastic devotion to agriculture. There were very few things in common between him and his brother-in-law the Australian merchant, but they got on very well together for a short time. Gilbert Fenton pretended to be profoundly interested in the thrilling question of drainage, deep or superficial, and seemed to enter unreservedly into every discussion of the latest invention or improvement in agricultural machinery; and in the mean time he really liked the repose of the country, and appreciated the varying charms of landscape and atmosphere with a fervour unfelt by the man who had been born and reared amidst those pastoral scenes.

The two men smoked their cigars together in a quietly companionable spirit, strolling about the gardens and farm, dropping out a sentence now and then, and anon falling into a lazy reverie, each pondering upon his own affairs—Gilbert meditating transactions with foreign houses, risky bargains with traders of doubtful solvency, or hazardous investments in stocks, as the case might be; the

gentleman farmer ruminating upon the chances of a good harvest, or the probable value of his Scotch short-horns.

Mr. Lister had preferred lounging about the farm with a cigar in his mouth to attendance at church upon this particular Sunday evening. He had finished his customary round of inspection by this time, and was sitting by one of the open windows of the drawing-room, with his body in one luxurious chair, and his legs extended upon another, deep in the study of the *Gardener's Chronicle*, which he flung aside upon the appearance of his family.

"Well, Toddlekins," he cried to the little girl, "I hope you were very attentive to the sermon; listened for two, and made up for your lazy dad. That's a vicarious kind of devotion that ought to be permitted occasionally to a hard-working fellow like me.—I'm glad you've come back to give us some tea, Belle. Don't go upstairs; let Susan carry up your bonnet and shawl. It's nearly nine o'clock. Toddlekins wants her tea before she goes to bed."

"Lucy has had her tea in the nursery," said Mrs. Lister, as she took her seat before the cups and saucers.

"But she will have some more with papa," replied Martin, who had an amiable knack of spoiling his children. There were only two—this bright fair-haired Lucy, aged nine, and a sturdy boy of seven.

They sipped their tea, and talked a little about who had been at church and who had not been, and the room was filled with that atmosphere of dulness which seems to prevail in such households upon a summer Sunday evening; a kind of palpable emptiness which sets a man speculating how many years he may have to live, and how many such Sundays he may have to spend. He is apt to end by wondering a little whether life is really worth the trouble it costs, when almost the best thing that can come of it is a condition of comfortable torpor like this.

Gilbert Fenton put down his cup and went over to one of the open windows. It was nearly as dark as it was likely to be that midsummer night. A new moon was shining faintly in the clear evening sky; and here and there a solitary star shone with a tremulous brightness. The shadows of the trees made spots of solemn darkness

on the wide lawn before the windows, and a warm faint sweetness came from the crowded flower-beds, where all the flowers in this light were of one grayish silvery hue.

"It's almost too warm an evening for the house," said Gilbert; "I think I'll take a stroll."

"I'd come with you, old fellow, but I've been all round the farm, and I'm dead beat," said good-natured Martin Lister.

"Thanks, Martin; I wouldn't think of disturbing you. You look the picture of comfort in that easy-chair. I shall only stay long enough to finish a cigar."

He walked slowly across the lawn—a noble stretch of level greensward with dark spreading cedars and fine old beeches scattered about it; he walked slowly towards the gates, lighting his cigar as he went, and thinking. He was thinking of his past life, and of his future. What was it to be? A dull hackneyed course of money-making, chequered only by the dreary vicissitudes of trade, and brightened only by such selfish pleasures as constitute the recreations of a business man—an occasional dinner at Blackwall or Richmond, a week's shooting in the autumn, a little easy-going hunting in the winter, a hurried scamper over some of the beaten continental roads, or a fortnight at a German spa? These had been his pleasures hitherto, and he had found life pleasant enough. Perhaps he had been too busy to question the pleasantness of these things. It was only now that he found himself away from the familiar arena of his daily life, with neither employment nor distraction, that was able to look back upon his career deliberately, and risk himself whether it was one that he could go on living without weariness for the remainder of his days.

He had been at this time a little more than seven years in business. He had been bred-up with no expectation of ever having to take his place in the counting-house, had been educated at Eton and Oxford, and had been taught to anticipate a handsome fortune from his father. All these expectations had been disappointed by Mr. Fenton's sudden death at a period of great commercial disturbance. The business was found in a state of entanglement that was very near insolvency; and wise friends told Gilbert Fenton that the only hope of coming well out of these perplexities lay with himself. The

business was too good to be sacrificed, and the business was all his father had left behind him, with the exception of a houseful of handsome furniture, two or three carriages, and a couple of pairs of horses, which were sold by auction within a few weeks of the funeral.

Gilbert Fenton took upon himself the management of the business. He had a clear comprehensive intellect, which adapted itself very easily to commerce. He put his shoulder to the wheel with a will, and worked for the first three years of his business career as it is not given to many men to work in the course of their lives. By that time the ship had been steered clear of all rocks and quicksands, and rode the commercial waters gallantly. Gilbert was not a rich man, but was in a fair way to become a rich man; and the name of Fenton stood as high as in the palmiest days of his father's career.

His sister had fortunately married Martin Lister some years before her father's death, and had received her dowry at the time of her marriage. Gilbert had only himself to work for. At first he had worked for the sake of his dead father's honour and repute; later he fell into a groove, like other men, and worked for the love of money-making—not with any sordid love of money, but with that natural desire to accumulate which grows out of a business career.

To-night he was in an unusually thoughtful humour, and inclined to weigh things in the balance with a doubtfulness as to their value which was new to him. The complete idleness and emptiness of his life in the country had made him meditative. Was it worth living, that monotonous business life of his? Would not the time soon come in which its dreariness would oppress him as the dulness of Lidford House had oppressed him to-night? His youth was fast going—nay, had it not indeed gone from him for ever? had not youth left him all at once when he began his commercial career?—and the pleasures that had been fresh enough within the last few years were rapidly growing stale. He knew the German spas, the pine-groves where the hand played, the gambling-saloons and their company, by heart, though he had never stayed more than a fortnight at any one of them. He had exhausted Brittany and the South of France in these rapid scampers; skimmed the cream of their novelty, at any rate. He did not care very much for field-sports, and hunted and shot in a

jog-trot safe kind of way, with a view to the benefit of his health, which savoured of old bachelorhood. And as for the rest of his pleasures—the social rubber at his club, the Blackwall or Richmond dinners—it seemed only custom that made them agreeable.

"If I had gone to the Bar, as I intended to do before my father's death, I should have had an object in life," he thought, as he puffed slowly at his cigar; "but a commercial man has nothing to hope for in the way of fame—nothing to work for except money. I have a good mind to sell the business, now that it is worth selling, and go in for the Bar after all, late as it is."

He had thought of this more than once; but he knew the fancy was a foolish one, and that his friends would laugh at him for his folly.

He was beyond the grounds of Lidford House by this time, sauntering onward in the fair summer night; not indifferent to the calm loveliness of the scene around him, only conscious that there was some void within himself which these things could not fill. He walked along the road by which he and his sister had come back from church, and turned into the lane at the end of which Captain Sedgewick had bidden them good night. He had been down this lane before to-night, and knew that it was one of the prettiest walks about Lidford; so there was scarcely anything strange in the fact that he should choose this promenade for his evening saunter.

The rustic way, wide enough for a wagon, and with sloping grassy banks, and tall straggling hedges, full of dog-roses and honeysuckle, led towards a river—a fair winding stream, which was one of the glories of Lidford. A little before one came to the river, the lane opened upon a green, where there was a mill, and a miller's cottage, a rustic inn, and two or three other houses of more genteel pretensions.

Gilbert Fenton wondered which of these was the habitation of Captain Sedgewick, concluding that the half-pay officer and his niece must needs live in one of them. He reconnoitred them as he went by the low garden-fences, over which he could see the pretty lawns and flower-beds, with clusters of evergreens here and there, and a wealth of roses and seringa. One of them, the prettiest and most secluded, was also the smallest; a low white-walled cottage,

with casement windows above, and old-fashioned bow-windows below, and a porch overgrown with roses. The house lay back a little way from the green; and there was a tiny brook running beside the holly hedge that bounded the garden, spanned by a little rustic bridge before the gate.

Pausing just beside this bridge, Mr. Fenton heard the joyous barking of a dog, and caught a brief glimpse of a light muslin dress flitting across the little lawn at one side of the cottage. While he was wondering about the owner of this dress, the noisy dog came rushing towards the gate, and in the next moment a girlish figure appeared in the winding path that went in and out among the flower-beds.

Gilbert Fenton knew that tall slim figure very well. He had guessed rightly, and this low white-walled cottage was really Captain Sedgewick's. It seemed to him as if a kind of instinct brought him to that precise spot.

Miss Nowell came to the gate, and stood there looking out, with a Skye terrier in her arms. Gilbert drew back a little, and flung his cigar into the brook. She had not seen him yet. Her looks were wandering far away across the green, as if in search of some one.

Gilbert Fenton stood quite still watching her. She looked even prettier without her bonnet than she had looked in the church, he thought: the rich dark-brown hair gathered in a great knot at the back of the graceful head; the perfect throat circled by a broad black ribbon, from which there hung an old-fashioned gold cross; the youthful figure set-off by the girlish muslin dress, so becoming in its utter simplicity.

He could not stand there for ever looking at her, pleasant as it might be to him to contemplate the lovely face; so he made a little movement at last, and came a few steps nearer to the gate.

"Good-evening once more, Miss Nowell," he said.

She looked up at him, surprised by his sudden appearance, but in no manner embarrassed.

"Good-evening, Mr. Fenton. I did not see you till this moment. I was looking for my uncle. He has gone out for a little stroll while he smokes his cigar, and I expect him home every minute."

"I have been indulging in a solitary cigar myself," answered Gilbert. "One is apt to be inspired with an antipathy to the house on this kind of evening. I left the Listers yawning over their tea-cups, and came out for a ramble. The aspect of the lane at which we parted company this evening tempted me down this way. What a pretty house you have! Do you know I guessed that it was yours before I saw you."

"Indeed! You must have quite a talent for guessing."

"Not in a general way; but there is a fitness in things. Yes, I felt sure that this was your house."

"I am glad you like it," she answered simply. "Uncle George and I are very fond of it. But it must seem a poor little place to you after Lidford House."

"Lidford House is spacious, and comfortable, and commonplace. One could hardly associate the faintest touch of romance with such a place. But about this one might fancy anything. Ah, here is your uncle, I see."

Captain Sedgewick came towards them, surprised at seeing Mr. Fenton, with whom he shook hands again very cordially, and who repeated his story about the impossibility of enduring to stop in the house on such a night.

The Captain insisted on his going in-doors with them, however; and he exhibited no disinclination to linger in the cottage drawing-room, though it was only about a fourth of the size of that at Lidford House. It looked a very pretty room in the lamplight, with quaint old-fashioned furniture, the freshest and most delicate chintz hangings and coverings of chairs and sofas, and some valuable old china here and there.

Captain Sedgewick had plenty to say for himself, and was pleased to find an intelligent stranger to converse with. His health had failed him long ago, and he had turned his back upon the world of

action for ever; but he was as cheerful and hopeful as if his existence had been the gayest possible to man.

Of course they talked a little of military matters, the changes that had come about in the service—none of them changes for the better, according to the Captain, who was a little behind the times in his way of looking at these things.

He ordered in a bottle of claret for his guest, and Gilbert Fenton found himself seated by the open bow-window looking out at the dusky lawn and drinking his wine, as much at home as if he had been a visitor at the Captain's for the last ten years. Marian Nowell sat on the other side of the room, with the lamplight shining on her dark-brown hair, and with that much-to-be-envied Skye terrier on her lap. Gilbert glanced across at her every now and then while he was talking with her uncle; and by and by she came over to the window and stood behind the Captain's chair, with her clasped hands resting upon his shoulder.

Gilbert contrived to engage her in the conversation presently. He found her quite able to discuss the airy topics which he started—the last new volume of poems, the picture of the year, and so on. There was nothing awkward or provincial in her manner; and if she did not say anything particularly brilliant, there was good sense in all her remarks, and she had a bright animated way of speaking that was very charming.

She had lived a life of peculiar seclusion, rarely going beyond the village of Lidford, and had contrived to find perfect happiness in that simple existence. The Captain told Mr. Fenton this in the course of their talk.

"I have not been able to afford so much as a visit to London for my darling," he said; "but I do not know that she is any the worse for her ignorance of the great world. The grand point is that she should be happy, and I thank God that she has been happy hitherto."

"I should be very ungrateful if I were not, uncle George," the girl said in a half whisper.

Captain Sedgewick gave a thoughtful sigh, and was silent for a little while after this; and then the talk went on again until the clock

upon the chimney-piece struck the half-hour after ten, and Gilbert Fenton rose to say good-night. "I have stayed a most unconscionable time, I fear," he said; "but I had really no idea it was so late."

"Pray, don't hurry away," replied the Captain. "You ought to help me to finish that bottle. Marian and I are not the earliest people in Lidford."

Gilbert would have had no objection to loiter away another half-hour in the bow-window, talking politics with the Captain, or light literature with Miss Nowell, but he knew that his prolonged absence must have already caused some amount of wonder at Lidford House; so he held firmly to his good-night, shook hands with his new friends, holding Marian Nowell's soft slender hand in his for the first time, and wondering at the strange magic of her touch, and then went out into the dreamy atmosphere of the summer night a changed creature.

"Is this love at first sight?" he asked himself, as he walked homeward along the rustic lane, where dog-roses and the starry flowers of the wild convolvulus gleamed whitely in the uncertain light. "Is it? I should have been the last of men to believe such a thing possible yesterday; and yet to-night I feel as if that girl were destined to be the ruling influence of my future life. Why is it? Because she is lovely? Surely not. Surely I am not so weak a fool as to be caught by a beautiful face! And yet what else do I know of her? Absolutely nothing. She may be the shallowest of living creatures—the most selfish, the falsest, the basest. No; I do not believe she could ever be false or unworthy. There is something noble in her face—something more than mere beauty. Heaven knows, I have seen enough of that in my time. I could scarcely be so childish as to be bewitched by a pair of gray eyes and a rosy mouth; there must be something more. And, after all, this is most likely a passing fancy, born out of the utter idleness and dulness of this place. I shall go back to London in a week or two, and forget Marian Nowell. Marian Nowell!"

He repeated the name with unspeakable tenderness in his tone—a deeper feeling than would have seemed natural to a passing fancy. It was more like a symptom of sickening for life's great fever.

It was close upon eleven when he made his appearance in his sister's drawing-room, where Martin Lister was enjoying a comfor-