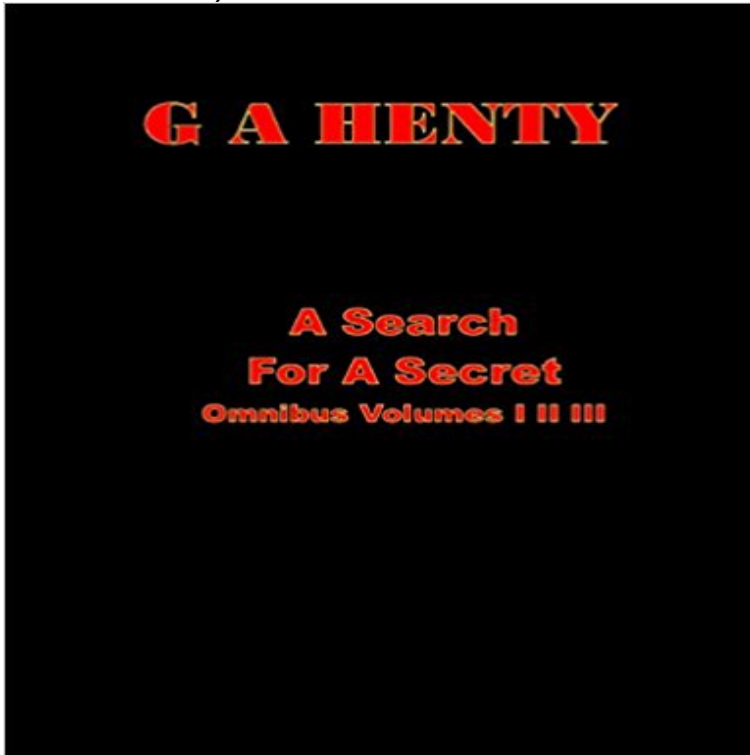


A Search For a Secret Omnibus Volume I II III: (G A Henty Masterpiece Collection)



There are towns over which time seems to exercise but little power, but to have passed them by forgotten, in his swift course. Everywhere else, at his touch, all is changed. Great cities rise upon the site of fishing villages; huge factories, with their smoky chimneys grow up and metamorphose quiet towns into busy hives of industry; while other cities, once prosperous and flourishing, sink into insignificance; and the passer by, as he wanders through their deserted streets, wonders and laments over the ruin which has fallen upon them. But the towns of which I am speaking and of which there are but few now left in England, and these, with hardly an exception, cathedral towns seem to suffer no such change. They neither progress nor fall back. If left behind, they are not beaten in the race, for they have never entered upon it; but are content to rest under the shelter of their tall spires and towers; to seek for no change and to meet with none; but to remain beloved, as no other towns are loved, by those who have long known them assimilating, as it were, the very natures of those who dwell in them, to their own sober, neutral tints. In these towns, a wanderer who has left them as a boy, returning as an old, old man, will see but little change a house gone here, another nearly similar built in its place; a greyer tint upon the stone; a tree fallen in the old close; the ivy climbing a little higher upon the crumbling wall; these are all, or nearly all, the changes which he will see. The trains rush past, bearing their countless passengers, who so rarely think of stopping there, that the rooks, as they hold their grave conversations in their nests in the old elm-trees, cease to break off, even for a moment, at the sound of the distant whistle. The very people seem, although this is but seeming, to have changed as little as the place: the same names are over the shop door the boy who was at school has taken

his grand-sires place, and stands at his door, looking down the quiet street as the old man used to do before him; the dogs are asleep in the sunny corners they formerly loved; and the same horses seem to be lazily drawing the carts, with familiar names upon them, into the old market-place. The wanderer may almost fancy that he has awoke from a long, troubled dream. It is true that if he enters the little churchyard, he will see, beneath the dark shadows of the yew-trees, more gravestones than there were of old; but the names are so similar, that it is only upon reading them over, that he will find that it is true after all, and that the friends and playfellows of his childhood, the strong, merry boys, and the fair girls with sunny ringlets, sleep peacefully there. But it is not full yet; and he may hope that, when his time shall come, there may be some quiet nook found, where, even as a child, he may have fancied that he would like some day to rest. Among these cities pre-eminent, as a type of its class, is the town in which I now sit down to recount the past events of my life, and of the lives of those most dear to me not egotistically, I hope, nor thrusting my own story, in which, indeed, there is little enough, into view; but telling of those I have known and lived with, as I have noted the events down in my journal, and at times, when the things I speak of are related merely on hearsay, dropping that dreadful personal pronoun which will get so prominent, and telling the story as it was told to me. Although not born at Canterbury, I look upon it as my native town, my city of adoption. My earliest remembrances are of the place; my childhood and youth were spent there; and, although I was then for a few years absent, it was for that stormy, stirring time, when life is wrapped up in persons and not in places, when the mere scene in which the drama is played out leaves barely an impression upon the mind, so all-absorbing is the interest in the performers.

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