

**BARREN HONOUR.
A TALE. IN TWO
VOLUMES. VOL. II**

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Barren Honour. A Tale. In Two Volumes. Vol. II by George Alfred Lawrence

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GEORGE ALFRED LAWRENCE

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A TALE.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'GUY LIVINGSTONE.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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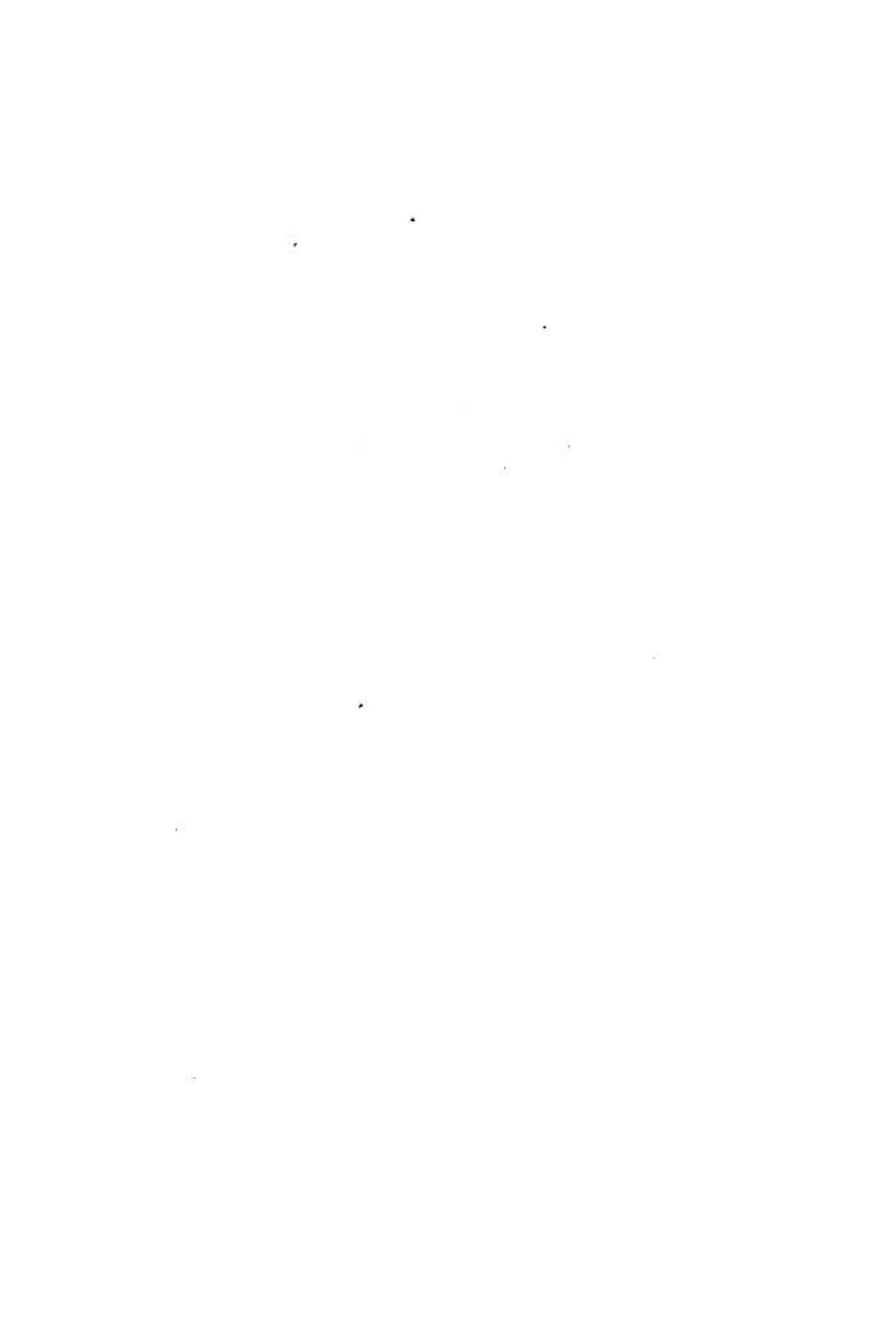


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BARREN HONOUR.

CHAPTER I.

THE LETTERS OF BELLEPHON.

WYVERNE'S valedictory note to Mrs. Lenox, though kindly and courteous, was brief and decisive enough to satisfy Helen perfectly. The answer came in due course; there was no anger or even vexation in its tone, but rather a sad humility—not at all what might have been expected from the proud, passionate, reckless *lionne*, who kept her sauciest smile for her bitterest foe, and scarcely ever indulged the dearest of her friends with a sigh. A perpetual warfare was waged between that beautiful Free Companion and all regular powers; though often worsted and forced, for the moment, to give ground, she had never yet lost heart or shown sign of submission; the poor little Amazonian target was sorely dinted, and its gay blazonry nearly effaced, but the dauntless motto was still legible as ever—*L'Empire c'est la guerre.*

So for awhile there was peace at Dene, and yet, not perfect peace. Miss Vavasour's state of mind was by no means satisfactory; though it seemed, at the time, to recover perfectly from the sharp shock, it really never regained its healthy elastic tone. Miserable misgivings, that could hardly be called suspicions, would haunt her, though she tried hard not to listen to their irritating whispers, and always hated herself bitterly afterwards for her weakness. She felt how unwise it would be to show herself jealous or exacting, yet she could hardly bear Alan to be out of her sight, and when he was away, had no rest, even in her dreams. Her unknown correspondent, in a nice cynical letter, congratulated Helen on her good-nature and long-suffering, and hinted that Mrs. Lenox had been heard to express her entire approval of Alan's choice—'it would be very inconvenient, if there were bounds to the future Lady Wyverne's credulity.' She did not dare to confess to her cousin that she had read such a letter through, and so only took her mother into the secret. Lady Mildred testified a proper indignation at the spitefulness and baseness of the writer, but showed plainly enough that her own mind was by no means easy on the subject. All that day, and all that week, Miss Vavasour's temper was more than uncertain, and though no actual tempest broke, there

was electricity enough in the atmosphere to have furnished a dozen storms. 'My lady' had always indulged her daughter, but she took to humouring and petting her now, almost ostentatiously; the compassionate motive was so very evident, that instead of soothing the high-spirited demoiselle, it chafed her, at times, inexpressibly.

The change did not escape Alan Wyverne. He felt a desolate conviction that things were going wrong every way, but he was perfectly helpless, simply because there was nothing tangible to grapple with; he did not wish to call up evil spirits, merely to have the satisfaction of laying them. Helen's penitence after any display of waywardness or wickedness of temper was so charming, and the amends she contrived to make so very delicious, that her cousin found it the easiest thing imaginable to forgive; indeed, he would not have disliked that occasional petulance, if he had not guessed at the hidden cause. The only one of the party who failed to realize that anything had gone amiss, was the Squire; and perhaps even his gay genial nature would scarcely have enabled him to close his eyes to the altered state of things, if he had watched them narrowly; but, having once given his adhesion frankly and freely, he troubled himself little more about the course of the love-affair, relying upon

Alan's falling back on him as a reserve, if there occurred serious difficulty or obstacle. The troubles threatening his house, were quite enough to engross poor Hubert's attention just then.

A few weeks after the events recorded in that last chapter, Wyverne came down late, as was his wont. His letters were in their usual place on the breakfast table; on the top of the pile lay one, face downwards, showing with exasperating distinctness the fatal scarlet monogram.

Seldom in the course of his life had Alan been so intensely provoked. He felt angry with Nina Lenox for her folly and pertinacity—angry with the person unknown, whose stupidity or malice had put the dangerous document so obtrusively forward—angry, just a very little, with Helen, for betraying, by her heightened colour and nervous manner, that she had already detected the obnoxious letter—angrier than all with 'my lady,' whose quiet bright eyes seemed to rest on him, *judicially*, not caring to dissemble her suspicion of his guilt. It is always unwise, of course, to act on impulse, and of all impulses, anger is supposed to be the most irrational. Such folly was the more inexcusable in Wyverne, because his power of self-command was quite exceptional: it only enabled him, now, to preserve a perfect outward composure; he acted just as stupidly and

viciously as if he had given way to a burst of passion. In the first five seconds he had fully determined to burn that letter, unread—a most sage resolve, certainly—the only pity was, that he could not bring himself to execute his purpose there and then, or at all events confide his intention to the parties most interested therein. But you must understand that Alan—with all his chivalrous devotion to womankind—held orthodox notions (so *we* should say) as to the limits of their powers, and by no means favoured any undue usurpation of the Old Dominion; he held, for instance, that the contents of the post-bag, unless voluntarily confided, should be kept as sacred from feminine curiosity as the secrets of the Rosicrucians. In the present case, he could hardly blame Helen for betraying consciousness of a fact that had been, so to speak, ‘*flashed*’ before her eyes; but he felt somehow as if she ought to have ignored it. He would not make the smallest concession. I have told you how obstinate and unrelenting the frank, kindly nature could at times become: the shadow of a great disaster was closing round him fast, and his heart was hardened now, even as the heart was hardened of that unhappy King, predestined to be a world’s wonder, whom the torments of nine plagues only confirmed in his fell purpose—‘*not to let Israel go.*’