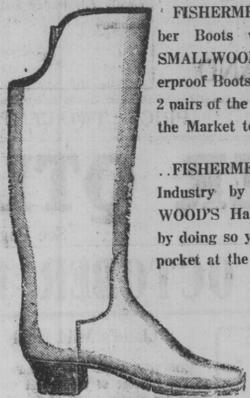


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True Worth

The Reward of Those Who Play Square

CHAPTER III.
LADY NORAH.

"He might," said Mr. Petherick, in response to his truly Christian reflection, "but—"

"It is not likely," said the earl. "Really, your candor is charming, Petherick! Oh, pray don't apologize, as the old lawyer grew red and stammering. 'Let us finish our wine in peace.'"

Meanwhile, the gentlemen strolled up and down the terrace with their cigars, talking together, and as they passed the window of the drawing-room, in which Norah was sitting, and in which the lights were lit, they lowered their voices.

"Poor girl!" said Lord Ferndale. "My heart aches for her! Great Heaven! fancy her position to-night! To be welcomed by a father whom she had never seen, in such a cold-blooded fashion! Old friend as he is, I had hard work to keep from flying into a rage with him!"

"Such a lovely young creature!" said the rector. "One wouldn't have been surprised if he had caught her in his arms and burst into tears. They were very near my own eyes, I know."

The squire laughed grimly. "I can't fancy the earl doing that," he remarked. "I often think that he was born without a heart. Why, it isn't only with his wife that he quarreled. There isn't a soul belonging to him that he hasn't parted from. Look at the young viscount. Having quarreled with his father, the earl has actually never seen the young man. Never seen the heir to the title and the estates, by George!"

"And such estates!" murmured the rector, looking out across the park, thoughtfully.

"Ah, and there's something more than the estates," remarked the squire. "The earl can't have been living up to half—ah, a quarter—of his income, and must be rolling in money!"

"That will all go to Lady Norah," said Lord Ferndale.

"Yes, and she'll be the richest heiress in the country, or thereabouts," assented the squire. "Poor girl, what a change it is for her!"

"I wish there had been some ladies here to-night," said the rector. "It would have been easier and pleasanter for her."

"What was the earl's idea in having us here to-night?" asked the squire, puffing at his cigar, with a puzzled frown.

Lord Ferndale shrugged. "Who can say? To try her—to see how she would carry herself."

"Ah, and how well she did it!" exclaimed the rector. "Didn't you think so Mr. Berton?"

Guildford Berton was leaning on the coping of the terrace, smoking slowly and thoughtfully, and taking no part in the conversation; he looked up, and inclined his head.

"Remarkably so," he said, in a uterly inexpressive voice.

Lord Ferndale glanced at him curiously, and with something like coldness, and with something like coldness.

"I think we had better go in," he said. "It must be lonely for Lady Norah," and they flung their cigars away, and reentered the dining room.

The footman had lit the candles in the drawing-room, on which the tea service had been laid, waiting for them to come in. Her gaze wandered round the vast room, with its gilded carvings and costly hangings, its priceless pictures and rare and curious bric-a-brac, and a sense of unreality seemed to possess her. It all appeared like a dream. This her home, and that cold and stately personage her father! Surely she would wake up presently and find herself in the tiny room of Cliff Cottage, and hear Mrs. Jordan's sing-song voice buzzing in her ear!

Lady Norah! She had not even yet got used to the title, which sounded so strangely in her ears that when it was spoken, she half looked round to see who was addressed by it. Lady Norah! She was Norah Frere no longer, but an earl's daughter, and she had come home to this vast place with its palatial rooms and army of servants.

"Lonely! No Arab in the centre of the desert ever felt lonelier than did Norah at that moment, and the desire for one soul upon whom she could lean, to whom she could pour out her heart, was so intense that her heart actually ached with it.

Then the door opened, and the gentlemen filed in.

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Lord Ferndale went up to her at once, thinking, as he spoke to her, and looked down at her, that of all the beautiful things in the room, she was the most beautiful; and he noticed with admiration, how promptly she had taken her place at the table, just as if she had been accustomed to it for years.

"We have been away so long that we scarcely deserve any tea, Lady Norah," he said, with his kindest smile.

"I am afraid it will be rather cold," she said. "I have been looking round for a cozy to put on the teapot—we always had one at home—"

"I think it is hot enough," said Norah, just raising her eyes to her father's face.

He bowed.

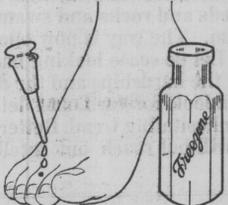
"It rests with you," he said, in his courtliest fashion.

She poured out the tea, and Guildford Berton came and stood beside her, and silently took the cups and handed them round, his dark eyes downcast and guarded, but once Norah happened to look up suddenly, and found them fixed on her hands as if he were studying them, or found something curious in their white shapeliness.

Lord Ferndale seated himself in a

CORNS

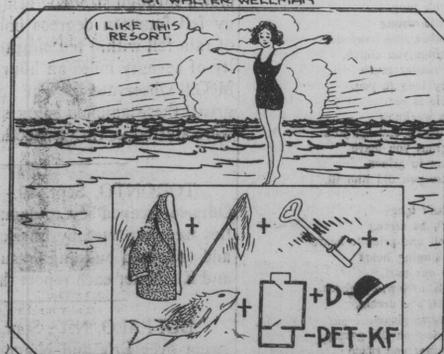
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