

A WILL AND A WAY

THE old man sat over the tap-room fire at the "Cauliflower," his gnarled, swollen hands fondled the warm bowl of his long pipe, and an ancient eye watched with almost youthful impatience the slow warming of a mug of beer on the hob.

He had just given unasked-for statistics to the visitor at the inn who was sitting the other side of the hearth. His head was stored with the births, marriages, and deaths of Claybury, and with a view of being entertaining he had already followed, from the cradle to the altar and the altar to the grave, the careers of some of the most uninteresting people that ever breathed.

"No, there ain't been a great sight o' single men hereabouts," he said, in answer to a question. "Claybury 'as always been a marrying sort o' place—not because the women are more good-looking than others, but because they are sharper."

He reached forward, and, taking up his beer,

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drank with relish. The generous liquor warmed his blood, and his eye brightened.

"I've buried two wives, but I 'ave to be careful myself, old as I am," he said, thoughtfully. "There's more than one woman about 'ere as would like to change 'er name for mine. Claybury's got the name for being a marrying place, and they don't like to see even a widow-man.

"Now and agin we've 'ad a young feller as said as 'e wouldn't get married. There was Jem Burn, for one, and it ain't a month ago since four of 'is grandchildren carried him to the churchyard; and there was Walter Bree: 'e used to prove as 'ow any man that got married wasn't in 'is right mind, and 'e got three years in prison for wot they call bigamy.

"But there used to be one man in these parts as the Claybury women couldn't marry, try as they might. He was a ugly little man with red 'air and a foxy face. They used to call 'im Foxy Green, and 'e kept 'appy and single for years and years.

"He wasn't a man as disliked being in the company o' women though, and that's wot used to aggeravate 'em. He'd take 'em out for walks, or give 'em a lift in 'is cart, but none of 'em could get 'old of 'im, not even the widders. He used to say 'e loved 'em all too much to tie hisself up to

any one of 'em, and 'e would sit up 'ere of a night at the "Cauliflower" and send men with large families a'most crazy by calkerlating 'ow many pints o' beer their children wore out every year in the shape o' boots.

"Sometimes 'is uncle, old Ebenezer Green, used to sit up 'ere with 'im. He was a strong, 'earty old man, and 'e'd sit and laugh at Foxy till 'is chair shook under 'im. He was a lively sporting sort o' man, and when Foxy talked like that 'e seemed to be keeping some joke to hisself which nearly choked 'im.

"'You'll marry when I'm gone, Foxy,' he'd say.

"'Not me,' ses Foxy.

"Then the old man 'ud laugh agin and talk mysterious about fox-hunts and say 'e wondered who'd get Foxy's brush. He said 'e'd only got to shut 'is eyes and 'e could see the pack in full cry through Claybury village, and Foxy going 'is 'ardest with 'is tongue 'anging out.

"Foxy couldn't say anything to 'im, because it was understood that when the old man died 'e was to 'ave 'is farm and 'is money; so 'e used to sit there and smile as if 'e liked it.

"When Foxy was about forty-three 'is uncle died. The old man's mind seemed to wander at the last, and 'e said what a good man 'e'd always

been, and wot a comfort it was to 'im now that 'e was goin'. And 'e mentioned a lot o' little sums o' money owed 'im in the village which nobody could remember.

"'I've made my will, Foxy,' he ses, 'and schoolmaster's takin' care of it; I've left it all to you.'

"'All right,' ses Foxy. 'Thankee.'

"'He's goin' to read it arter the funeral,' ses 'is uncle, 'which is the proper way to do it. I'd give anything to be there, Foxy, and see your face.'

"Those were 'is last words, but 'e laughed once or twice, and for a long time arter 'e'd gone Foxy Green sat there and wondered at 'is last words and wot there was to laugh about.

"The old man was buried a few days after, and Foxy stood by the grave 'olding a 'andkerchief to 'is eyes, and behaving as though 'e 'ad lost money instead of coming in for it. Then they went back to the farm, and the first thing the schoolmaster did was to send all the women off before reading the will.

"'Wot's that for?' ses Foxy, staring.

"'You'll see,' ses the schoolmaster; 'them was my instructions. It's for your sake, Mr. Green; to give you a chance—at least, that's wot your uncle said.'

"He sat down and took out the will and put on 'is spectacles. Then 'e spread it out on the table

and took a glass o' gin and water and began to read.

"It was all straightforward enough. The farm and stock, and two cottages, and money in the bank, was all left to Josiah Green, commonly called Foxy Green, on condition—

"There was such a noise o' clapping, and patting Foxy on the back, that the schoolmaster 'ad to leave off and wait for quiet.

"'On condition,' he ses, in a loud voice, 'that he marries the first Claybury woman, single or widow, that asks 'im to marry her in the presence of three witnesses. If he refuses, the property is to go to 'er instead.'

"Foxy turned round like mad then, and asked Henery Walker wot 'e was patting 'im on the back for. Then, in a choking voice, he asked to 'ave it read agin.

"'Well, there's one thing about it, Mr. Green,' ses Henery Walker; 'with all your property you'll be able to 'ave the pick o' the prettiest gals in Claybury.'

"'Ow's that?' ses Joe Chambers, very sharp; 'he's got to take the first woman that asks 'im, don't matter wot 'er age is.'

"He got up suddenly, and, without even saying good-bye to Foxy, rushed out of the 'ouse and off over the fields as 'ard as 'e could go.

"'Wot's the matter with 'im?' ses Foxy.

"Nobody could give any answer, and they sat there staring at each other, till all of a sudden Henery Walker jumps up and goes off if anything 'arder than wot Joe Chambers had done.

"'Anything wrong with the drink?' ses Foxy, puzzled like.

"They shook their 'eads agin, and then Peter Gubbins, who 'd been staring 'ard with 'is mouth open, got up and gave the table a bang with 'is fist.

"'Joe Chambers 'as gone arter 'is sister,' he ses, 'and Henery Walker arter 'is wife's sister, as 'e's been keeping for this last six months. That's wot they 've gone for.'

"Everybody saw it then, and in two minutes Foxy and the schoolmaster was left alone looking at each other and the empty table.

"'Well, I'm in for a nice thing,' ses Foxy. 'Fancy being proposed to by Henery Walker's sister-in-law! Ugh!'

"'It'll be the oldest ones that'll be the most determined,' said the schoolmaster, shaking 'is 'ead. 'Wot are you going to do?'

"'I don't know,' ses Foxy, 'it's so sudden. But they've got to 'ave three witnesses, that's one comfort. I'd like to tell Joe Chambers wot I think of 'im and 'is precious sister.'

"It was very curious the way the women took it. One an' all of 'em pretended as it was an insult to the sex, and they said if Foxy Green waited till 'e was asked to marry he'd wait long enough. Little chits o' gals o' fourteen and fifteen was walking about tossing their 'eads up and as good as saying they might 'ave Green's farm for the asking, but they wouldn't ask. Old women of seventy and over said that if Foxy wanted to marry them he'd 'ave to ask, and ask a good many times too.

"Of course, this was all very well in its way, but at the same time three Claybury gals that was away in service was took ill and 'ad to come 'ome, and several other women that was away took their holidays before their relations knew anything about it. Almost every 'ouse in Claybury 'ad got some female relation staying in it, and they was always explaining to everybody why it was they 'ad come 'ome. None of 'em so much as mentioned Foxy Green.

"Women are artful creatures and think a lot of appearances. There wasn't one of 'em as would ha' minded wot other folks said if they'd caught Foxy, but they'd ha' gone half crazy with shame if they'd tried and not managed it. And they couldn't do things on the quiet because of the three witnesses. That was the 'ardship of it.

"It was the only thing talked about in Claybury, and Foxy Green soon showed as he was very wide-awake. First thing 'e did was to send the gal that used to do the dairy-work and the 'ouse-work off. Then 'e bought a couple o' large, fierce dogs and chained 'em up, one near the front door and one near the back. They was very good dogs, and they bit Foxy hisself two or three times so as to let 'im see that they knew wot they was there for.

"He took George Smith, a young feller that used to work on the farm, into the 'ouse, and for the fust week or two 'e rather enjoyed the excitement. But when 'e found that 'e couldn't go into the village, or even walk about 'is own farm in safety, he turned into a reg'lar woman-hater.

"The artful tricks those women 'ad wouldn't be believed. One day when Foxy was eating 'is dinner William Hall drove up to the gate in a cart, and when George came out to know wot 'e wanted, 'e said that he 'ad just bought some pigs at Rensham and would Foxy like to make fust offer for 'em.

"George went in, and when 'e came out agin he said William Hall was to go inside. He 'eld the dog while William went by, and as soon as Foxy 'eard wot 'e wanted 'e asked 'im to wait till 'e'd finished 'is dinner, and then he'd go out and 'ave a look at 'em.

"'I was wantin' some pigs bad,' he ses, 'and the worst of it is I can't get out to buy any as things are.'

"'That's wot I thought,' ses William Hall; 'that's why I brought 'em to you.'

"'You deserve to get on, William,' ses Foxy. 'George,' he ses, turning to 'im.

"'Yes,' ses George.

"'Do you know much about pigs?'

"'I know a pig when I see one,' ses George.

"'That's all I want,' ses Foxy; 'go and 'ave a look at 'em.'

"William Hall gave a start as George walked out, and a minute afterwards both of 'em 'eard an awful noise, and George came back rubbing 'is 'ead and saying that when 'e lifted up the cloth one o' the pigs was William Hall's sister and the others was 'er nephews. William said it was a joke, but Foxy said he didn't like jokes, and if William thought that 'e or George was going to walk with 'im past the dog 'e was mistook.

"Two days arter that, Foxy, 'appening to look out of 'is bedroom window, saw one o' the Claybury boys racing 'is cows all up and down the meadow. He came down quietly and took up a stick, and then 'e set out to race that boy up and down. He'd always been a good runner, and the boy was 'alf-blown like. 'E gave a yell as 'e saw

Foxy coming arter 'im, and left the cow 'e was chasin' and ran straight for the 'edge, with Foxy close behind 'im.

"Foxy was within two yards of 'im when 'e suddenly caught sight of a blue bonnet waiting behind the 'edge, and 'e turned round and went back to the 'ouse as fast as 'e could go and locked 'imself in. And 'e 'ad to sit there, half-busting, all the morning, and watch that boy chase 'is best cows up and down the meadow without daring to go out and stop 'im.

"He sent George down to tell the boy's father that night, and the father sent back word that if Foxy 'ad got anything to say agin 'is boy why didn't 'e come down like a man and say it hisself?

"Arter about three weeks o' this sort o' thing Foxy Green began to see that 'e would 'ave to get married whether he liked it or not, and 'e told George so. George's idea was for 'im to get the oldest woman in Claybury to ask 'im in marriage, because then he'd soon be single agin. It was a good idea, on'y Foxy didn't seem to fancy it.

"'Who do you think is the prettiest gal in Claybury, George?' he ses.

"'Flora Pottle,' ses George, at once.

"'That's exactly my idea,' ses Foxy; 'if I've

got to marry, I'll marry 'er. However, I'll sleep on it a night and see 'ow I feel in the morning.'

"I'll marry Flora Pottle,' he ses, when 'e got up. 'You can go round this arternoon, George, and break the good news to 'er.'

"George tidied hissself up arter dinner and went. Flora Pottle was a very fine-looking gal, and she was very much surprised when George walked in, but she was more surprised when 'e told 'er that if she was to go over and ask Foxy to be 'er 'usband he wouldn't say 'No.'

"Mrs. Pottle jumped out of 'er skin for joy a'most. She'd 'ad a 'ard time of it with Flora and five young children since 'er 'usband died, and she could 'ardly believe 'er ears when Flora said she wouldn't.

"'E's old enough to be my father,' she ses.

"'Old men make the best 'usbands,' ses George, coaxing 'er; 'and, besides, think o' the farm.'

"That's wot you've got to think of,' ses her mother. 'Don't think o' Foxy Green at all; think o' the farm.'

"Flora stood and leaned herself up agin a chest o' drawers and twisted 'er hands, and at last she sent back word to say that she wanted time to think it over.

"Foxy Green was very much astonished when George took back that answer. He'd thought

that any gal would ha' jumped at 'im without the farm, and arter going upstairs and looking at hissself in the glass 'e was more astonished than ever.

"When George Smith went up to the Pottles agin the next day Flora made a face at 'im, and 'e felt as orkard as if 'e'd been courting 'er hissself a'most. At first she wouldn't 'ave anything to say to 'im at all, but went on sweeping out the room, and nearly choking 'im. Then George Smith, wot was a likely young feller, put 'is arm round 'er waist, and, taking the broom away from 'er, made 'er sit down beside 'im while 'e gave 'er Foxy's message.

"He did Foxy's courting for 'im for an hour, although it on'y seemed about five minutes to both of 'em. Then Mrs. Pottle came in, and arter a lot of talk Flora was got to say that George Smith might come agin for five minutes next day.

"Foxy went on dreadful when 'e 'eard that Flora 'adn't given an answer, but George Smith, who liked the job much better than farming or making beds, told 'im she was coming round, and that it was on'y natural a young gal should like to be courted a bit afore givin' in.

"'Yes,' ses Foxy, biting 'is lip, 'but 'ow's it to be done?'

"'You leave it to me,' ses George Smith, 'and it'll be all right. I sit there and talk about the farm as well as wot you could.'

"'And about me too, I s'pose?' ses Foxy, catching 'im up.

"'Yes,' ses George; 'I tell 'er all sorts o' lies about you.'

"Foxy looked at 'im a moment, and then 'e went off grumbling. He was like a good many more men, and because Flora Pottle didn't seem to want 'im 'e on'y fancied 'er the more. Next day 'e sent George Smith up with an old brooch as a present, and when George came back 'e said 'e thought that if it 'ad been a new one it would 'ave done wot was wanted.

"You can't keep secrets in Claybury, and it soon got round wot Foxy Green was arter. That made the other women more determined than ever, and at last Foxy sent up word that if Flora wouldn't ask 'im to let 'im know, as 'e was tired o' being a prisoner, and old Mrs. Ball 'ad nearly 'ad 'im the day afore.

"It took George Smith two hours' 'ard courtin' afore he could get Flora Pottle to say 'Yes,' but at last she did, and then Mrs. Pottle came in, and she shook 'ands with George, and gave 'im a glass o' beer. Mrs. Pottle wanted to take 'er up to Green's farm there and then, but Flora said

no. She said they'd go up at eight o'clock in the evenin', and the sacrifice should be made then.

"Foxy didn't like the word 'sacrifice' at all, but if 'e'd got to be married 'e'd sooner marry Flora than anybody, and 'e 'ad to put up with it.

"'There'll be you for one witness,' he ses to George, 'and Mrs. Pottle is two; wot about the third?'

"'I should 'ave 'alf a dozen, so as to make sure,' ses George.

"Foxy thought it was a good idea, and without letting 'em know wot it was for, 'e asked Henery Walker and Joe Chambers, and three or four more 'e 'ad a grudge against for trying to marry 'im to their relations, to come up and see that 'e'd been able to pick and choose.

"They came at ha'-past seven, and at eight o'clock there was a knock at the door, and George, arter carefully looking round, let in Mrs. Pottle and Flora. She was a fine-looking gal, and as she stood there looking at all them astonished men, 'er face all blushes and 'er eyes large and shining, Foxy thought getting married wasn't such a bad thing arter all. He gave 'er a chair to sit on, and then 'e coughed and waited.

"'It's a fine night,' he ses, at last.

"'Beautiful,' ses Mrs. Pottle.

"Flora didn't say anything. She sat there shuffling 'er feet on the carpet, and Foxy Green kept on looking at 'er and waiting for 'er to speak, and 'oping that she wouldn't grow up like 'er mother.

"'Go on, Flora,' ses Mrs. Pottle, nudging 'er.

"'Go on, Flora,' ses Henery Walker, mimicking 'er. 'I s'pose you've come to ask Foxy a question by the look of it?'

"'Yes,' ses Flora, looking up. 'Are you quite well, Mr. Green?'

"'Yes, yes,' ses Foxy; 'but you didn't come up 'ere to ask me that.'

"'It's all I could do to get 'er 'ere at all, Mr. Green,' says Mrs. Pottle; 'she's that shy you can't think. She'd rather ha' 'ad you ask 'er yourself.'

"'That can't be done,' ses Foxy, shaking 'is 'ead. 'Leastways, I'm not going to risk it.'

"'Now, Flora,' ses 'er mother, nudging 'er agin.

"'Come on, Flora Pottle,' ses Bob Hunt; 'we're all a-waitin'.'

"'Shut your eyes and open your mouth, as if Foxy was a powder,' ses Henery Walker.

"'I can't,' ses Flora, turning to her mother. 'I can't and I won't.'

"'Flora Pottle,' ses 'er mother, firing up.

"'I won't,' ses Flora, firing up too; 'you've

been bothering me all day long for ever so long, and I won't. I 'ate the sight of 'im. He's the ugliest man in Claybury.'

"Mrs. Pottle began to cry and say that she'd disgraced 'er; but Foxy Green looked at 'er and 'e ses 'Very well, Flora Pottle then we'll say no more about it. Good evening.'

"'Good evening,' ses Mrs. Pottle, getting up and giving Flora a shake. 'Come along, you tantalising mawther, do. You'll die an old maid, that's what you'll do.'

"'That's all you know,' ses Flora, smiling over at George Smith; 'but if you're so fond o' Mr. Green why don't you ask 'im yourself? He can't say "No."'

"For half a minute the room was as quiet as a grave, and the on'y thing that moved was Foxy Green's eyes as he looked fust at the door at the other end of the room and then at the window.

"'Lor' bless my soul!' ses Mrs. Pottle, in a surprised voice. 'I never thought of it.'

"She sat down agin and smiled at Foxy as if she could eat 'im.

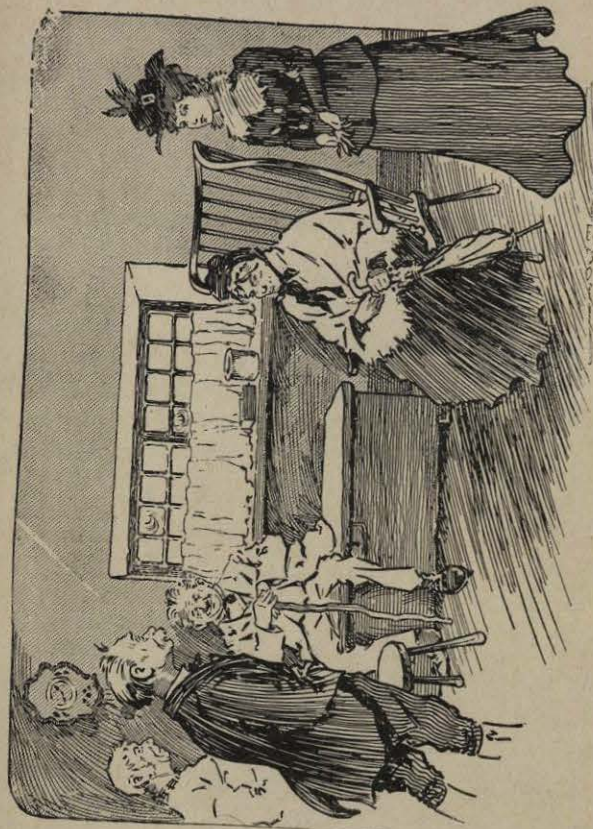
"'I can't think why I didn't think of it,' she ses, looking round. 'I was going out like a lamb. Mr. Green—'

"'One moment,' ses Foxy, 'olding up 'is 'and. 'I should be a terrible, bad, cruel, unkind husband

to anybody I didn't like. Don't say words you'll be sorry for arterwards, Mrs. Pottle.'

"'I'm not going to,' ses Mrs. Pottle; 'the words I'm going to say will be good for both of us; I'm far more suitable for you than a young gal—Mr. Green, will you marry me?'

"Foxy Green looked at 'er for a moment, and then 'e looked round at all them grinning men wot he'd brought there by mistake to see 'im made a fool of. Then in a low, 'usky voice he ses, 'I will.'"



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