

Carl Büchsel, Protestant Pastor, Describes Rural Courtship and Marriage (1865)

Abstract

In this passage from his multi-volume memoirs, *Reminiscences of a Rural Clergyman* (1865–), the popular Protestant pastor and theologian Carl Büchsel (1803–1889) describes courtship, wedding customs, and the persistence of popular superstition in rural areas. The author clearly opposes marriages between Christians and Jews and also cautions against—though does not condemn—marriage across social boundaries. Even greater prudence, he feels, is required if a practicing Christian and a secularized partner are to wed and begin a new household.

Source

No other occasion offers more free play for superstition than a wedding. Weddings are not supposed to take place on Fridays because on this day no happy matrimonial union can come about. If, on the eve of the wedding, an owl can be heard, then one of the betrothed will die soon; and if a bat appears, then things look bad with respect to the groom's fidelity. If it rains on the wedding day, not to mention on the way to the church, this points to many tears. If the rooster crows early in the morning, it is taken to mean blessing and fortune, but if the ring falls on the ground during the wedding ceremony, people view it as an alarming sign. One should not assume that superstition is only to be found among peasants; it is also found in otherwise enlightened and highly sophisticated educated circles. It is almost incomprehensible how people can believe with such confidence in this kind of foolery and nonsense, providing numerous bits of evidence from their own experience with the most serious mien. How deeply must the need for belief be anchored in the soul, if even those who do not believe in God's word and His promise use such things to set themselves into state of fear and terror or to deceive themselves.

It is rather rare that a firmly committed engagement is reversed. However, the engagement often takes a long time until it comes about, the reason usually being that the fathers cannot agree on how to provide for their children's future. When betrothed, the respectable girl lives in a state of seclusion and avoids conversation with other young men, and when she is invited to a wedding or christening together with the groom, she sits beside him and dances only with him—just as the married man dances only with his wife. Of course, the man has the exclusive prerogative to woo the woman; however, he seeks to ascertain whether the girl is interested. If she accepts little gifts from him at the fair, or a rake decorated with elaborate carvings at harvest time, or a colorful distaff, often skillfully and diligently executed, in autumn; and if the present is reciprocated with a handsome ribbon on the scythe or a bouquet on the hat when harvest time begins, he knows that his intentions meet with approval. To be turned down flatly gives plenty of cause for mockery and gossip. Usually a girl regards a man's courtship as a sign of God's will and suppresses any other inclination she might have. It's as though she is not supposed to think of marriage at all until the man who pursues her shows up. One hardship is when she must decide immediately for or against the suitor, particularly when the candidate is barely known to her or hasn't attracted her attention. It certainly is an expression of despicable carelessness, absolute unreliability, and most malicious infidelity when the man withdraws after the engagement and leaves the girl in the lurch. On the other hand, though, one should not judge quite so harshly if a girl—pressed to make a quick decision—subsequently wavers as she gets to know the prospective groom and becomes convinced that they would not make a good match. The deserted bride is very unfortunate and is the object of grave suspicion, even though she is often completely innocent. The young man seeks to excuse the wanton carelessness with which he has disturbed the serenity of another heart—but her tears condemn him

before God. Every pastor who enjoys the trust of the village youths knows full well about the inner struggles many a poor bride has to endure when a man other than the one she had yearned for and chosen in her heart comes along to pursue her. The divine order and customs forbid her expressing her own wishes; she has to wait until the man takes the first step. But love and affection cannot be commanded; they evolve in complete freedom and according to absolutely incomprehensible laws. The advice that a girl had better not marry at all, except when true affection exists, is much easier given than heeded. The institution of marriage was created in paradise, and thereafter came days full of toil and full of pain. So it is also a wonderful thing when marriage finds its paradise in a happy state of betrothal. — The question of whether a religious girl may marry a secular man or vice versa is much more difficult to answer than it seems at first glance. That a Jewess or a heathen marries a Christian, or vice versa, clearly contradicts not only the scripture, 1 Corinthians 7, but also the Prussian Civil Code, which no one has ever accused of being petty when it comes to marriage; at any rate, when such cases have occurred in recent times, they have been met with general disapproval. However, it is very clearly laid down that when Paul speaks of infidels in the chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians mentioned above, he only means heathens and Jews, not secularized Christians. Nevertheless, there are bounds that cannot be overstepped. If the prospective husband is decidedly disposed against the church and ridicules that which is sacred to the virgin, and if he absolutely will not and cannot maintain a household that is Christian, she ought not to enter into marriage with him; and it will not be difficult to refuse the proposal. [...]

Overall, one should not overlook that marriage has two sides to it: the natural civil one and the divine Christian one. Even in cases of complete agreement on religious matters, people disregard at their own peril the civil side of things: education, class, rank, and age. A degree of civil equality is part of marriage. In the past, marriages between nobles and bourgeois were rare, and some aristocratic families disapprove of such unions. True and honest affection is determined by something that is difficult to define and, once awakened, it can overcome many barriers. One cannot presume to make a final judgment on this point. Reasonable parents ought to pray and discover God's will and appeal to Him that He rules the child's heart. They should also acknowledge that paternal power has real limits, and that an engagement, even though dependent on the parents' consent, certainly comes close to this limit. The children have to have the distinct sense that they themselves assume responsibility for this step, which substantially loosens the bonds to their parental home. This means that any compulsion in one direction or the other is, at least, very questionable and easily causes dissonance and aberrations of the worst kind, as experience has amply shown. — It is more permissible that a younger girl marries an older man than the other way around, for the husband is supposed to guide the wife and not vice versa; it's usual that the younger partner more easily takes on a subordinate role to the older one. Likewise, a happy marriage is easier to imagine if a rich man marries a poor girl than the other way around. Living on his wife's fortune infringes on the natural sentiment of the hard-working man because he has an inherent obligation to support his wife and children. It is also quite wonderful and desirable if the families of the bride and the groom are on friendly terms with each other. [...]

Source: Carl Büchsel, *Erinnerungen aus dem Leben eines Landgeistlichen*, 10th ed. Berlin: Gustav Warneck Verlag, 1925, pp. 242ff.; reprinted in Werner Pöls, ed., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1815–1870. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 4th ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988, pp. 75–78.

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