

A NOVEL IN A NUTSHELL

THE MARRIAGE OF JEAN BEURRE.

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER.

AT exactly noon the wedding procession reached the village church of Champrond, and good Pastor Merlon let a smile of greeting wrinkle his usually stern face. At the head of the procession marched Pierre the Drummer, making all the noise he could, and then followed Jean Beurre himself with his bride, Marie Oeuf, on his arm, and after them came fathers and mothers and cousins and friends. It was just such a wedding procession as Champrond had seen many a time before, and may see this very year, except that now the bride wears a wreath of artificial orange-blossoms and a veil and white ribbons. In 1561 there were no veils, nor artificial orange-flowers, nor white ribbons, especially for peasant girls like Marie Oeuf: she was lucky to have wooden shoes and a whole garment to wear.

To-day, too, the groom manages to find a black coat and a high hat, even if he has to borrow them, but Jean Beurre wore only his homespun and home-made breeches and smock, and a hat of coarse straw. He was not handsome, but he was happy, and so was Marie.

There was no doubt whatever about the stupidity of the bride and groom. They were dull and heavy, as only peasants of France can be when all circumstances are favourable, and in Champrond in 1561 circumstances were as favourable as possible, for Jean Beurre and his forefathers for centuries had been mere serfs, and were given a little less education than a good, steady cow received. To this artificial stupidity, Jean Beurre added a splendid stock of his own natural sense. It had struck him that Marie, for she seemed the only maiden near Champrond whose stupidity was equal to his own.

The Huguenots had just obtained from Charles IX. the privilege of meeting for worship, but not within the walls of cities or towns, and for that reason the village church was built a mile beyond the edge of Champrond, not because Champrond had walls, but because Pastor Merlon was a man of peace, and would not break even the most broadly stretched spirit of the laws, and because a mile from the village there was a small wood, in which the worshippers could hide should the King change his policy suddenly while the worshippers were in the church. Such things were not unknown in those days.

So stern-faced Pastor Merlon said the words that made Jean Beurre and Marie Oeuf man and wife in the opinion of at least half of the people in the neighbourhood of Champrond. As to the other half—well, no one can satisfy everybody, and no man can be both a Huguenot and a Catholic at the same time; and Jean Beurre was satisfied that he was sufficiently married to serve all practical purposes. He considered that he had done unusually well in meeting the scruples of even half of the neighbours. He was as married as he ever wanted to be. So the wedding procession wended homeward, and after drinking more than enough of the wine of the country, Jean and Marie began their housekeeping.

They were pretty well fixed for a young couple. They had a thatched hut the size of a large dry-goods box, with a door on leather hinges on one side and a mud fireplace on the other, and a neat hole in the middle of the roof through which the smoke could go out if it wanted to. They had an iron kettle with a crack that was not very serious when stopped with clay and ashes, two earthenware bowls, and two wooden plates, and a knife filed out of a broken scythe-blade. In one corner of the hut they had as good a bag of straw to sleep on as any in the neighbourhood, and above all, they had such excellent prospects, of health and youth, that they had no doubt that in forty or fifty years they would be able to own a real copper kettle. Not a new one, of course, but one that was not very badly patched. When they were left alone, after the guests had departed, they spoke of this, and Jean said that perhaps pride was wrong, but he couldn't help saying that they were just about as nicely fixed as any young couple that had begun housekeeping in those parts in the last fifty years; that they started out with every possible necessity supplied, and that the only thing that they had to look forward to was the day when they could afford luxuries; and he did think that a nice copper kettle—a good red one, that would shine in the firelight—would make their home absolutely complete.

Then Marie said that she was well enough satisfied with things just as they were—that she was perfectly happy and contented; but that, of course, a copper kettle was a thing every woman looked forward to owning. So they both agreed to go barefoot except when they had company, in order to save wear-and-tear on their wooden shoes, so that they might own a copper kettle the quicker. Jean said he knew where there was one that was only two or three

hundred years old; it needed a couple of patches, but that was all the better, for he could probably get it for less, and they might be able to own it in thirty years, instead of forty or fifty.

They immediately began saving money, and, by eating only chestnuts and drinking only pure spring-water, they were able, that year, after paying their taxes, to put aside a whole sou—half an English penny—towards the copper kettle. But those were stirring times in France, and Jean was not so sure about putting aside so much the next year. The Duke of Guise was provoked because the King had given the Huguenots the right to set up churches, and in 1562 he started a war against the Huguenots, and things looked pretty black for those who were saving money to buy copper kettles and other luxuries. There was no telling where a war of that kind would wander to next, for it wandered all over France, and first one side won and then the other. There were fourteen armies in different parts of France, and when one would be chased by another, it was pretty sure to run into still another; and they were like fourteen red and white billiard-balls shaken about in a tub—they caromed one against another, and advanced and retreated; and the only thing they were unanimous in was living off the country.

Just about the time when Jean and Marie Beurre were ready to celebrate their first wedding anniversary, they found that Champrond had been chosen as the quarters of one of the Huguenot armies, and there was a terrible to-do in the village. The soldiers demolished the Catholic church, and the priest only saved his life by hiding in the woods. The people of the village and the neighbourhood were greatly distressed, for they all liked the priest, whether they were Catholics or Huguenots. The fact was that Champrond was a rather neutral village, being right on the border between the real Huguenot country and the real Catholic country; but this was a disadvantage rather than an advantage. Whenever one of the opposing armies wanted to get at the other, it marched through Champrond and ate everything in sight; and when it was defeated and marched back, it ate everything in sight again, and then the opposing army would follow it and eat everything that was left.

One evening, shortly after the Huguenot army had deposited itself in Champrond, Jean and Marie were sitting before their hut wondering whether they could save a sou that year or not, when they heard bugles and the tread of horses, and saw the advance guard of an army slowly coming over the rise of the hill. "Catholics," said Jean. "We're liable to have a battle near here, if the army down at Champrond isn't careful. I wonder if I hadn't better run on ahead and tell them?"

"Certainly not!" said Marie. "Why should you bother your head about such things? I suppose a battle is just what the army at Champrond wants, isn't it? Why should you bother your head about them?"

"Well," said Jean, scratching himself behind the ear, "I had a notion a minute ago that I had an idea why I should be fonder of the Huguenots than of these others, but I have forgotten what it was. It was something about—something about— Yes, I know what it was! We were married by the Huguenots."

"What has that to do with it?" asked Marie. "Nonsense! The thing for you to do is to take the bag of chestnuts out into the field and bury it, so these fellows can't eat us out of house and home."

So Jean went into the hut and dragged out the bag of chestnuts, and went into the field to hide them. While he was gone the head of the column reached the hut, and the leader reined in his horse.

"Well, my girl," he said.

"Thank you," said Marie saucily. "I'd have you know I'm a married woman—Marie Beurre, and no girl, but married as firm as can be by the Pastor Merlon himself in the—"

"Pastor?" said the tall man, frowning. "Married by a pastor? That's no marriage, my good woman. You're the very kind of married women we are looking for—the kind married by pastors. But we'll fix that as soon enough. Where is your so-called husband?"

"Here," said Marie, as Jean came around the rise of the hut.

Jean stood stupidly while the soldiers tied his hands, and as stupidly while they tied Marie's hands with the same rope, and then the column moved on towards Champrond, a horseman leading the couple by the end of the long rope.

The soldiers were a little careless about peasants in those days, and about everything else, and Jean and Marie did not know what awaited them at Champrond; but they trudged along in the dust in

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stolid silence. Whatever was going to happen would undoubtedly happen.

At the small wood where the Huguenot chapel stood the line halted long enough for the soldiers to strike fire from flint and steel and burn the chapel neatly to the ground, and then Marie and Jean and some dozen other peasants that had been collected on route were passed to the rear of the army, a line of battle was formed, and the advance on Champrond continued. When the village was reached there was a little skirmishing, a few shots were fired, and the victorious Catholic army entered the village. Marie and Jean were put in a large room in a house on the village's only street, and the other collected peasants were locked in with them, and there they spent the night.

At the first glow of morning the door opened and the good old Catholic priest entered.

"My children," he said, "I come on a duty that is a pleasant one for me. I am happy to say that I am commissioned to rescue you from a—state of sin, which, you, in your ignorance, have been living in. You are all to be made very happy. You are all to be united in holy wedlock."

"He??" said all the imprisoned peasants.

"But we are married," said Jean. "Ain't we, Marie?"

"Of a certainty," said Marie.

"Not at all," said the old priest, firmly but kindly. "I cannot expect persons of your limited intelligence to understand me should I undertake a thorough explanation of the origin of holy matrimony and the manner in which it was confided to the hands of such as I; but I assure you you are not married."

"Marie," said Jean, "don't you remember being married?"

"But, surely!" said Marie. "Only last year."

"Yes," said Jean, "I was sure I had not made a mistake. A man doesn't forget such a thing."

"My children," said the good old priest, "do not worry your minds trying to understand what is beyond your comprehension. You are not married. You may have passed through a form which you thought was marriage; but it was not. I am commanded by the General of the army which has brought you in to marry you properly."

It was true. He was constrained by the victorious troops to pass through the nuptial ceremony all who had been united by the parson Merlon.

"And if we refuse?" asked Marie.

The priest drew his finger across his throat.

"Very well," said Jean, "I will be married."

By the time the banns had been properly read in the temporary village church Jean and Marie had become pretty well accustomed to the idea of being married again, and they would not have minded at all had it not been for the necessary expense, for one cannot be married without expense; but this time they were well and soundly married, and they felt they were now as properly married as any couple in the world, and they set their minds firmly on the task of saving money with which to buy a copper kettle. The troop moved on just Champrond, and the country settled down to its normal pursuits.

Unfortunately, one of its normal pursuits was the pursuit of one army by another, and before the year had ended Jean was awakened one night by the clatter of hoofs on the East Road, and, going quickly to the door, he saw it was the Catholic army in full retreat. In the morning he was awakened by a tap at the door.

"Jean Beurre?" inquired the soldier who stood there.

"The same," said Jean. "And you want?"

"I want you," said the trooper gruffly, "and your consort, one Marie, called Marie Beurre, born Oeuf. Hurry up and get your clothes on and get married."

"Married?" exclaimed Jean Beurre. "But I am married!"

"Nonsense! Foolishness! Fiddlesticks!" said the trooper. "Don't talk to me about being married. Do you call a rigmarole by a priest being married? We don't. Hasten, and in half an hour you will be properly married by the good Huguenot method, right and tight and for ever."

"What is it, Jean?" asked Marie.

"Oh, nothing, nothing much," said Jean with a sigh. "It's just another wedding day for us. We're to be married."

It was useless to protest. It was useless to explain that they had been married twice already; they had admitted that their last marriage was by the priest—very well, that had to be corrected. In the grey light of the morning Jean and Marie walked down to Champrond, and were snugly married and paid their marriage tax.

As the long war went on, the fourteen armies swung hither and thither, and every once in a while one would sweep bravely into Champrond and marry Jean and Marie properly. On an average, they were married about once a year, and it kept up until they began to hate the sound of a bugle, and if old father Clabot happened to blow his nose loudly as he passed on his way to market in the early morning, Jean and Marie would scramble out of bed and dress and put on their wedding clothes. It was a regular nuisance. Some days, when the war was particularly lively, they would not be able to get out of town after being through a Catholic wedding before they would be halted and made to go through a Huguenot one.

They got so confused and mixed up that after a while they lost track and did not wait to be called to Champrond, and as soon as

they heard bugles they would go and be married, and sometimes they were married three times in succession by different Huguenot parsons in one week. It was bad for their agriculture, for Jean had to spend more time getting married than farming.

As the war continued and the years passed, and they had six strong, healthy, stupid children pretty well grown up, things began to wear on Marie's temper, for she saw that if weddings kept on she would never have a copper kettle; and there was no hope of anything else, for Jean was as strong and healthy as ever, and she was getting more and more solidly married to him every week or so. She began to be sharp-tongued and to say spiteful things.

Matters went on this way, and they kept going from bad to worse. Sometimes Jean and Marie would not be married for over a year, and then, again, they would be married twice in a month; but all the time Marie grew more sharp-tongued and crabbed, and Jean grew more and more discouraged. He thought she might at least be pleasant during the honeymoon, but she wasn't. She made Jean's life a perfect burden to him, she was so ugly-tempered, and at length he felt he could stand it no longer—he would just end it all.

That was easy enough. All he had to do was to refuse to be married the next time an army swept through Champrond; the army would do the rest for him.

He did not have to wait long; armies were always passing that way; and one came into the village with banners flying and drums beating soon after he had made up his mind. All that was necessary was to refuse to be married again—he remembered how the good old priest had drawn his finger across his throat that day.

The swashbuckling Captain stood in the public square of Champrond and curled his long moustache.

"Well, well!" he said impatiently, shaking the list he held in his hand, "where is this Jean Beurre and his wife Marie? Here we have all the rest of the happy couples; why are we kept waiting for them?"

"Pardon, Sir," said his attendant, "but this Jean Beurre is coming very unwillingly. He is refusing to be married."

It was evident, when Jean Beurre appeared, that he was refusing to be married. Three stout troopers were pushing him, and Jean Beurre, his sullen face set in a frown, was holding back whenever his feet touched the ground.

"Now what does this mean?" asked the Captain, when Jean Beurre had been pushed and pulled to a spot before him. Jean looked sullenly at the ground.

"Oh, well," said the Captain carelessly, "you know you have the choice. You can be married or not. Married or not?"

"Yes?" inquired the Captain. "Well, Jean Beurre, you shall have your choice: be married, or be boiled in oil."

"I have been married enough," he muttered.

"You are not a married man at all," said the Captain. "Your last marriage was contrary to the laws of our Church. You—"

"Good, then," said Jean Beurre; "I'll be a bachelor."

"Married, or boiled in oil," said the Captain.

Jean Beurre stood with his head cast down. Suddenly he looked up.

"I'll be married," he said. "But this marriage business is getting so monotonous. Always the same thing. This time I'll marry someone else."

Marie Beurre stepped forward with her hands clinched. The trooper pushed her back.

"Married to the same woman, or boiled in oil," said the Captain.

Again Jean Beurre hesitated. He looked at Marie and opened his mouth to speak, but Marie had torn away from the grasp of the trooper and had flung herself at the Captain's feet.

"Oh, Sir!" she cried. "Think, think! If he is killed, I shall be a widow! I ask but one boon."

"What is it?" asked the Captain.

Marie cast a glance of hatred at Jean Beurre.

"Sir," she cried, "if you boil him in oil in a copper kettle, may I have the kettle? I shall be a widow, Sir."

The Captain hesitated.

"Yes," he said at length, and Marie arose. She turned her face toward Jean Beurre, but he kept his steadfastly turned away. He did not see the gleam of triumph that shone in her eyes, but he knew it was there. He let his stupid mind fumble over the idea of being boiled in oil and over the idea of going back to live with Marie after what had happened—going back to live with a Marie deprived of a copper kettle. Of course, he was only a stupid peasant. He leaned forward and muttered to the Captain. Marie uttered a loud cry.

Last year, when I was in Champrond they showed me the old cemetery where Jean Beurre lies buried, and told me this story, but when he reached this point in it my guide slugged his shoulders.

"They say it is not known of a positiveness whether Jean Beurre died in his bed or in the kettle of oil," he said; "but Monsieur will know better. There would be but one thing poor Jean Beurre could say—flesh is weak, Monsieur."

"Of course," I said thoughtfully, "he could only say one thing."

"Of a truth!" agreed my guide. "One thing—or the other."