

Canterbury Tales

Oxford Cleric's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

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Oxford Cleric's Tale

‘Sir clerk of Oxenford,’ our hoste sayde, ‘Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde were newe spoused, sitting at the bord; this day ne herde I of your tonge a word – ‘Sir Oxford cleric,’ our host cried. ‘You sit on your horse as quietly and nervously as a young virgin at the table during her wedding feast. I haven’t heard you say a single word today. I imagine you must be pondering the truth of some aphorism, or a convoluted train of logic, perhaps. But as Solomon said: “There’s a time and a place for everything.” So for God’s sake cheer up! This isn’t the time to study. Tell us a merry tale. If a man’s to take part in a drama, he must assume the part he’s agreed to play, for goodness sake. Only for God’s sake don’t preach to us, like friars do in Lent. Don’t try to make us weep for our old sins. And don’t send us to sleep either. Tell us a tale of adventure or something, but keep all your high style, legal terms, figurative language and colours of rhetoric packed away for when you write to kings and suchlike. Speak plainly, I beg you, so that we can all understand what you’re saying.’

‘Host,’ replied the Oxford cleric, ‘I’m under your stick and so I shall do as you command. I shall tell you a tale that I learned in Padua, in Italy, from a worthy cleric there, as is proved both by his words and by all his works, for his name was Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch, the poet laureate, whose sweet words have graced all of Italian poetry as much as did Lynian’s in philosophy, law and other such things. Death, however, will not allow anybody to linger here for more than the twinkling of an eye and it has taken them both away from us, as it will us all. Francesco Petrarca is now nailed in his coffin, may God rest his soul.

‘Petrarch prefaced the story I am about to tell you with a fine introduction, before embarking upon the narrative proper; he sets the scene by describing Piedmont and the district of Saluzzo, the Cottian Alps in the very west of Italy and especially Mount Viso, where the river Po first springs from the living rock before flowing eastwards through Lombardy towards Ferrara and ultimately, Venice. This would lengthen things unnecessarily, however, to my mind, and so anyway, this is the story:

Here beginneth the Tale of the Clerk of Oxenford

Ther is, at the west syde of Itaille, doun at the rote of Vesulus the colde, a lusty playne, habundant of vitaille, wher many a tour and toun thou mayst biholde – At the foot of the chilly Mount Viso, in the north-west corner of Italy where the Apennine Hills become the foothills of the Alps, there lies a plain that is rich and fertile. Many a town and tower have stood there for generations, and other fine buildings besides. This district is called Saluzzo.

A marquis once presided over this fine region, carrying on the rule of his ancestors. The people respected him, they obeyed his wishes and his life was a comfortable and pleasant one. He was loved and feared by the nobility and by the common folk alike, for fortune had made him one of the highest-born noblemen in the whole of Lombardy. He was young, strong, full of honour and courtesy, and ruled his

Possibly one of the most intriguing of the Canterbury Tales, since to a modern ear it is difficult to decide whether to love all the characters or hate them all. Set in northern Italy, in the foothills of the Alps, this story of a sadistic husband turned father-hero and likable heroine turned collaborator was adapted by Chaucer from a tale included by the Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio in his own themed collection of short stories, the Decameron. It comes after the tale from the summoner in all three of the sequences followed here, and is another of Geoffrey's Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

district with discretion, although he did have one or two failings. His name was Walter.

One particular failing that Walter had was that he gave no thought to the future. He delighted only in the present. He liked to hunt and go hawking. Everything else took second place, including – and I take this to be his greatest failing – the choosing of a wife. His people, although otherwise very happy to be ruled over by him, gathered one day to bring this oversight to his attention. One of them – a learned man who was well-versed in law and the most able, everyone thought, to explain this grievance to the marquis, and the one considered most likely to be listened to by Walter anyway – said:

‘Oh noble marquis, your kindness has always given us the courage and assurance to be able to approach you with our concerns. Please listen, then, as I explain to you a great worry that has arisen amongst us. Although I have no more concern about this matter than the next man, yet inasmuch as you have always been gracious enough to listen to me, I ask you now for an audience so that I might explain to you what it is that is preying on all our minds.

‘My lord, we like you so much and all the things that you do, and have done so for many years, that we cannot imagine how we could spend our lives in greater happiness, except in this one respect; that if you were to find it in your heart to take a wife, our happiness would be complete. Bow your neck before this blissful yoke which men call marriage; a yoke of sovereignty, not servitude. Turn your wise thoughts towards the future and how everyone’s lives run their course; for whatever we are doing – sleeping, waking, riding or walking – time passes swiftly by. It waits for no man, my lord.



‘Although you are still young, age creeps up without us noticing. Death can strike at any moment, however rich or poor a man may be. No one can escape. And just as certainly as we all know that we shall die, we know that we can have no way of knowing when we shall die. Accept this petition, therefore, from all those of us who have never once gone against your wishes. Acknowledge our sincerity, if you are willing, my lord, and let us chose you a wife. We can do so very quickly

from amongst the fairest ladies in the land, those of the highest nobility, a wife who will bring honour to you and, may we say, even to God. Rescue us from this constant worry, my lord, and take a wife. For God’s sake, if it came about – Christ forbid! – that you were to die without leaving an heir, then an outsider will seize your lands and assume authority over us here. Woe to us then!’

Their worried looks and tearful entreaties pricked this marquis’s conscience. ‘You are asking, my own dear people,’ he told them, ‘for something that I have previously thought not to shackle myself with. I have rejoiced in a liberty that I think is seldom found in marriage. If I was free, then you are asking that I now become a slave. Nevertheless, I can see that you are sincere and I trust your wisdom, as I have always done. Therefore I am willing to marry. But regarding your offer to find me a wife, I release you from this obligation and please don’t offer it again. God knows, children may grow up to be totally unlike any of their noble forebears. Virtue comes from God alone, not from any line of esteemed ancestors a woman may be lucky or unlucky enough to have inherited anything from. I trust in God’s bounty and I shall place everything in his hands. He may do as he wishes. So leave the choosing of a wife to me. I shall take full responsibility for it. But I shall require you to accept and agree, upon pain of death, that the wife I choose will be worshipped by you like the daughter of an emperor, and respected for as long as she lives.

‘Furthermore, you must all swear to this: that none of you will grumble, take measures or complain against my choice, for since I shall be losing my liberty at your request, the least you can do is to accept the wife that I choose. Unless you agree to this, I shall be very angry to hear the matter brought up again.’

With great joy and acclaim, they all agreed to these terms and swore to abide by them. There were no dissenters. Before they left, however, they begged the marquis to appoint a day for the marriage to take place and to do this as quickly as possible, for some of them were still not entirely convinced that he would do as he promised.

The marquis agreed to name a day upon which he would be married, and said that he was doing this at their request, and in return they knelt submissively and thanked him. Then, their audience being over, they all went home. At once, the marquis gathered together all his officers and officials and commanded them to prepare a feast, and gave appropriate instructions to all his knights and squires as well. Each fell at once to the task that had been given to him. Arrangements for a wedding feast were quickly made.

2

It happened that not far from the palace where the marquis was busy making plans for his wedding, there was a little village in a very pretty location, where the inhabitants kept cows, pigs and sheep and took all their sustenance from the land, and by the sweat of their own labour. Amongst these poor folk there lived a man who was held to be the poorest of them all (it must be remembered, however, that God has been known to send his grace into the poorest ox's stall). This man was known in the village as Janicula and he had a daughter, Griselda, who was quite attractive in her way, the very model of virtue in fact, and in terms of beauty and goodness, one of the fairest under the sun. Poverty had taken away from her all thoughts of pride and lechery. She more often drank water from the well than wine from the cask, and because she was keen to be virtuous, she willingly embraced hard work and shunned idleness.

Although this maiden was very young, she concealed a mature courage within her young breast. She looked after her poor old father with great reverence and self-sacrifice and spent her days spinning wool with a spindle while she watched over a few sheep in a field, working from dawn until dusk. And as she came home she would often scour the hedgerows for herbs and other things which she would then shred and boil in order to supplement their meagre diet. Her bed was hard and all her waking hours were directed towards looking after her father, with the care and diligence of an obedient daughter.

This marquis had often seen Griselda as he rode out to hunt, or otherwise go about his business, and never with a lustful eye but always with pity, laced with a little measure of quiet admiration. He had noticed her womanly virtue and observed how she carried herself with a dignity that belied her tender years. And although people generally have no great ability to discern virtue when they see it, Walter now brought her to mind and decided at once that she was the woman he would like to marry, if marry he must.

The day of the wedding arrived, but no one could guess whom the marquis had decided to wed. Everybody marvelled at this and many grumbled in private: 'He has no intention of getting married! Is a woman suddenly going to materialise at this late hour? Alas! Why does he deceive us all like this?'

Nevertheless, Walter had jewellery made, brooches, rings, gemstones set in gold, and he found a young maiden very similar to Griselda in stature and had clothes designed and tailored using this girl as a model. Everything that pertained to a wedding was prepared and made ready. The morning of the ceremony saw every hall and every chamber of the palace decked out magnificently. The kitchens, larders and storerooms were crammed with every fine delicacy imaginable; nothing available from the whole of Italy was lacking. Then Walter, with all the lords and ladies who had been invited to the wedding feast, and all his bachelor knights, made their way towards the village where Griselda lived with her

father, to the accompaniment of lutes and citoles.

Griselda, entirely unaware of Walter's intentions, had gone to the well to fetch water, intending to return as quickly as she could – for she knows that this is the day that the marquis has chosen to be married and wants to catch a glimpse of the bride if she can. 'I will stand with the other maidens,' she thinks. 'With all my friends. We'll shelter in a doorway and watch the bride go past. I'd better make myself busy at home soon, or I'll miss it. I'll find things to do there, so if the bride does pass through the village, I'll be able to see her.'

As she reached the cottage and was about to go inside, the marquis called out to her. She set down her pot of water beside an ox's stall and fell to her knees in fear, waiting obediently to learn why she had been singled out. Walter spoke to her in a serious tone: 'Where is your father, Griselda?' he asked.

'My lord, he is here, in this cottage,'

Griselda rose to her feet, went into the cottage and brought her father out. The marquis took the old man by the hand and leading him to one side said: 'Janicula, I'm unable to hide any longer the joy that I have in my heart. If you are willing, I would like to marry your daughter. You love me as your lord, I know. You are my faithful liegeman, which gives me great pleasure and I dare say that it brings pleasure to you as well; so tell me, would you be willing for me to be your son-in-law?'



The unexpectedness of it all so stunned the old man that he stood red-faced, abashed and shaking with fright; he could hardly utter a word, except for: 'Lord, my only wish is that you should do as you desire. I will do nothing against your wishes. You are my lord.'

'But nevertheless,' replied the marquis softly, 'I think it might be best if you and I, and your daughter, were to retire to your chamber for a while, to talk. I must ask her if she is willing to be my wife and to do everything I ask her to, and I would like this conversation to be in your presence. I don't want to do anything behind your back.'

While they were speaking, the people had begun to enter the cottage and many looked on in wonder to see how honestly and attentively this maiden looked after her father. And with just as much reason for wonder, Griselda looked in astonishment at so many well-dressed people gathering inside her father's cottage; for she had never, in all her life, seen such guests as these. Her face was drained of all colour.

But to get quickly to the point, the marquis, from the privacy of Janicula's chamber said: 'Griselda, you must understand that it is both to your father's liking and to mine that we should get married. I imagine that you will have no objection to this, but first, I must make some demands of you; and since this is all rather rushed, you must tell me now whether you will agree to it or not. Do you agree to be willing to do everything that I ask of you, whatever I think is the best, whether it brings you pain or happiness, and never to complain about it? When I say yes, do you swear never to say no? Not even to frown or to sulk if there is something you don't like? Swear to this, and I will swear to our alliance in marriage.'

With her mind in a spin and shaking with fear, Griselda replied: 'Lord, I am utterly unworthy for this honour that you are bestowing upon me. But if this is what you wish, then I wish for it as well. I swear that I will never disobey you, nor ever think of doing so, and may I lose my life if I do, although my life is dear to me.'

'This is enough, my dear Griselda!' exclaimed the marquis. Then he went to the door, very soberly made his way through, followed by Griselda, and said to the people: 'The maiden whom you see before

you is to be my wife. I ask that you love her and honour her. If you love me, you will do this.’

So that none of her old rags should find their way into his palace, he instructed some women to undress her immediately, where she stood. They were none too pleased to have to handle her ragged garments, it must be said, but nonetheless, Griselda was soon regaled from head to toe in some fine, new clothes. They combed her hair, which was matted and tangled, and with their dainty fingers they placed a coronal upon her head and adorned her body with jewels and brooches. But why should I spend time describing it all? When all was done, people could hardly recognise her, she was so elegant. She was transformed. That’s all that needs to be said.

The marquis married her there and then, placed a ring on her finger which he had brought along especially, set her upon a snow-white horse and led her, accompanied by all the people, to the palace. The wedding feast began with joy and revelry and lasted until the light had faded and the day had come to a close.

This new marchioness has been sent such favour by God that soon it seems impossible to believe that she had ever been brought up in poverty and squalor. It seems more likely that she was reared in an emperor’s hall than in an ox’s stall. Griselda was loved by everybody. Those in the village, who had known her all her life, could scarcely believe what they knew to be true, and swore to Janicula that she couldn’t be his daughter after all, but must be some other creature instead. For although she had always been virtuous, her excellence increased so much, her bearing and her goodness, her discretion and her eloquence, her manners, her deportment and her charity, that she captured everybody’s heart. All who saw her, loved her. Her reputation was not confined to Saluzzo either, but quickly spread far and wide. Her goodness was celebrated everywhere and soon people, young and old, were flocking to Saluzzo simply to catch a glimpse of her.

Walter lived a harmonious and regal life, in peace and with grace, and because he could see for himself that low estate often hides great virtue beneath it, the people loved him for his prudence and his wisdom, which is not always the case with a lord. Not only was Griselda an asset to him at home, but when the situation required it, she could display fine diplomatic skills as well. There was no discord nor rancour in all the land that she was not able to suppress and quell at once with wise words and swift conciliation. If her husband was away and noblemen, or any others, were bickering, she would quickly bring them to agreement. She possessed a wisdom beyond her years and her judgements were always so fair and equitable that men thought she must have been sent from heaven, to bring such peace and harmony.

Not long after Griselda and Walter were married, she gave birth to a daughter, although she would rather have had a little boy. Walter and all the people of Saluzzo were very pleased, because although it was a little girl, they all understood the likelihood that Griselda would soon have a little boy, since she was obviously not barren.

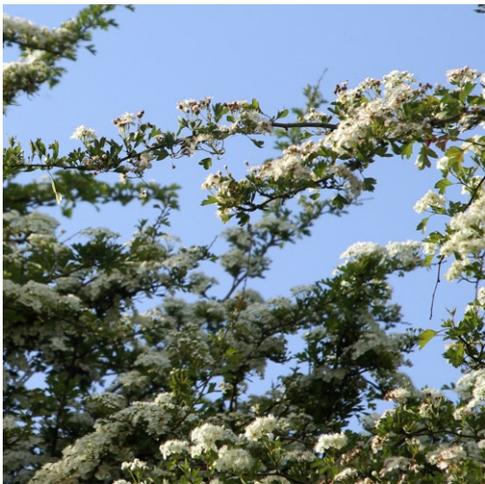
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When Walter’s daughter was still a tiny baby, however, he conceived the idea of testing his wife. He wanted to find out how devoted she was to him and how obedient – and this is not the first account of such a thing either, but he couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. He wanted to grieve her in some way, although God knows, he had always found her to be good. What need is there to test her? Some men praise this and consider that it shows intelligence, but I’m not one of those at all. I think it is evil to torment a wife unnecessarily, or to frighten and torture her when there is no need.

But anyway, this is what the marquis wanted to do, so he came one night to her bedchamber looking

dreadfully serious and upset and said: 'Griselda, I don't suppose you've forgotten that day when I took you out of your impoverished rags and dressed you in fine silk and ermine? The comfort and dignity you now enjoy hasn't, I'm sure, made you forget in any way the poverty that I raised you out of. So listen to me, for there is no one else in this room but you and I. You know full well how you came here, and although you are very dear to me, my noblemen are not so taken with you. They say that it's a disgrace for them to be under the authority of a woman who was born in a small cottage in a tiny village.

'Things have got even worse since our daughter was born. It is important that I live in harmony with my noblemen, as I have always tried to do, so I cannot disregard what they say. I must do what needs to be done concerning your daughter, not because I wish for it but because my people wish for it. Yet, God knows, this is hard for me to do. Unless I have your agreement, I shall not do it. But I want you to agree to what I am about to do. Show me now the patience and obedience that you swore to give me when we were married in your village.'



When Griselda understood what her husband was asking, she said not a word; she didn't move, she didn't smile or cry. Her expression remained impassive as she replied: 'My lord, it is entirely up to you. My child and I are yours, to do with as you wish. To kill or to save – it is your decision, for we are yours. Nothing is displeasing to me if it is what you want. I desire nothing else but you and the only fear in my heart is losing you. I shall feel this way forever and nothing can ever change that.'

The marquis was very pleased to hear this, but he pretended otherwise. He looked very sternly at Griselda and left the room with a troubled look on his face.

A short while later, he confided his intentions to a certain man and sent this fellow to his wife's bed-chamber. This man was a sergeant at arms whose loyalty the marquis felt able to trust, the sort of man who would be willing to carry out some dirty work if called upon to do so, for he both loved his lord and feared him as well. The marquis gave the man his instructions and the man went silently to the marchioness's chamber.

'Madam,' he said, 'you must forgive me if I now do a thing that I am under orders to carry out. You are intelligent enough to know that a lord's commands cannot be refused or ignored. They may be lamented or regretted but they must be done, and this duty has fallen upon me. There is nothing more to say, except that I must take your child.' Then the sergeant picked the baby out of its cradle and made a gesture as though to suggest that a violent end was in store for the poor infant.

There was nothing Griselda could do. She sat as meekly as a lamb and let this cruel sergeant do as he wished. He looked a nasty piece of work, she didn't trust his face, nor his words, and his sudden appearance had filled her with foreboding. Griselda didn't weep or sigh, but forced herself to consent to her husband's wishes. After a moment she found herself able to speak and begged the sergeant humbly if she could kiss the child before it died. She cradled the little baby on her lap and kissed it and sang to it, and it smiled and gurgled with delight as she said, full of sadness but in a gentle voice:

'Farewell, my little daughter. I shall never see you again. But since I have marked you with the sign of your Father in Heaven, who died for you on the cross, you are blessed. I commend your soul to him, because tonight you must die, because of me.'

It would have been hard for a nurse to watch this happening, but the baby's mother! Alas!

Griselda was steadfast and determined nevertheless, and controlling her grief she said to the sergeant:

‘Now take her again. This little maid is yours. Go and do what my husband has instructed you to do. I ask only one thing. Unless my lord forbids it, bury the body in some place where wolves and foxes won’t dig it up and eat it, or birds peck at it’s bones.’

The sergeant didn’t feel able to reply; he simply took the baby and left the room.

Coming once more into the presence of the marquis, the sergeant gave a true account of what had taken place between Griselda and himself, what she had said and how she had reacted, and he gave the baby to its father. Walter was not unaffected by the situation, but nonetheless, he was resolved to go through with it, as lords often are when their strength and resolution is at stake. He told the sergeant to wrap the baby up with as much care as he had in him, carry it in a small chest or a basket and unless he wanted to have his head chopped off, to tell no one where he had come from nor where he was going but to take the child at once to Bologna, where Walter’s sister was the Countess of Panaro. There, he should tell his sister the truth and ask that she foster the child with all her love but never to reveal the child’s true identity to a living soul.

The sergeant went off and did as he had been instructed.

But we must return to the marquis, for he watches intently to see whether there is any change in his wife’s demeanour, or in the things she says; but she is constant and demure, kind and considerate, good-humoured, busy and as willing to please in every way as she has always been. She doesn’t mention her daughter at all; neither in passing nor in anger, neither light-heartedly nor in complaint.

4

Four years passed, Griselda became pregnant again and in due course gave birth to a lovely little boy. When Walter was told of this birth, not only he but the entire district rejoiced at the news. They thanked God and praised him. But when the child was two years old and weaned from his nurse’s breast, Walter was seized again by a cruel desire to put his wife on trial and to try to coax her into disobeying him, to see if she would do so. Needlessly, of course. But married men often cannot see their hands before their faces, where a patient and obedient woman is concerned.

‘Wife,’ said this marquis, ‘I have told you before how upset my people are at my having married you, but now that my son has been born, it’s getting even worse. This murmuring breaks my heart and saps my courage. Their complaints are so hurtful that I can hardly bear them any more. They say: “When Walter is dead, then Janicula’s grandson shall inherit the land and be lord over us, for there is no one else.” That’s what they’re saying, and I’m afraid I have to take account of such things. They’re dangerous sentiments, although these people never express such thoughts openly in my presence. But I have to live in peace with them, if I can. So I intend to do with this little boy as I did with his sister. I warn you, don’t try to stop me or get hysterical or anything like that. Be patient and resign yourself to it, that’s all I ask.’

‘I have already said,’ replied Griselda, ‘and I shall always say it, that there is nothing I will wish for more, if you should want it, and nothing that I would rather not happen, should you wish it not to. If I knew beforehand what you wanted, it would be done without you telling me. That is to say, it doesn’t grieve me in the slightest if my son and daughter are killed, if this is what you want. These children have given me only sickness and fatigue, and then pain and sorrow. You are our lord. Do as you wish with your own things. Don’t ask me for advice. I left my old clothes behind when I came to live with you, and in the same way I left behind, as well, all my free will and all my liberty. I have clothed myself in your garments, so, as I say, you must do as you wish. I will go along with whatever you want, and if I believed that my death would bring you pleasure, I would gladly die.’

When the marquis saw such loyalty in his wife, he couldn’t look at her directly in the eye but cast his

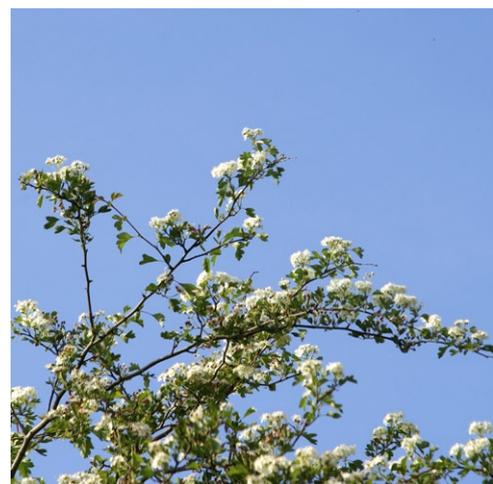
gaze to the floor and wondered how she was willing to suffer all this for his sake. He went away in sombre mood, but his heart delighted in such obedience. Then he sent the ugly sergeant to her room in the same way that he had done before, and this man seized Griselda's lovely son. She accepted this with equanimity, made no fuss, but kissed her little son tenderly, blessed him and asked the sergeant only that he might have a proper grave prepared, so that his delicate limbs might be spared from the ravages of foxes and crows.

The sergeant refused to give any such guarantee, and took the child away as though not caring what happened to it. Then he carried the little boy safely to Bologna as he had been instructed to.

This marquis reflected unceasingly upon his wife's patience, for if he didn't know the truth to be that she had loved her children dearly, he might have gained the impression that all her sad obedience was a deception and that his wife was secretly delighted that his children should be killed. But he knew for sure that, next to himself, she had loved these two children above everything else. But I would gladly ask women, haven't these tests of loyalty been enough? How much longer can a praiseworthy husband test his wife's patience and remain praiseworthy himself? But there are people who, when they have embarked upon a certain course, cannot stop. Like those bound to a stake, they are determined to see things through to the bitter end. In the same way, this marquis has determined to test his wife to the full, as he always intended.

Walter was constantly alert to any sign that his wife's attitude towards him might be changing, but such signs were never manifest. Her mood and her willing obedience never changed; in fact, as she grew older, she seemed to become more loyal still, if such a thing is possible. She seemed to love him more than ever and to be even more willing to please him. It was as though there was only a single will between the two of them. If Walter wished for a thing, Griselda wished for it as well, and God be thanked, their life together was a happy one. She was an example to others that a wife should desire nothing except what her husband desires, whatever the circumstances.

However, it was not long before disapproving voices began to be heard in the countryside round about. Rumours spread that, because Walter had married such a poor girl, he had wickedly had both his children secretly murdered because of it. Such slander was becoming common currency. To become known as a murderer is a frightful thing. Everybody who had loved him before began to question and even to hate him now, for what they thought he had done.



Nevertheless, Walter found himself unable to let it rest there. When his daughter was twelve years old, he sent word secretly to the Papal Court in Rome, commanding them to issue certain bulls that would help to expedite his cruel scheme. He wanted it to seem as though the Pope had issued a command that, in view of his people's discontent, Walter must marry again. He wanted the Papal Court to counterfeit a directive from the Pope, saying that he had permission to divorce his first wife in order to put an end to the rancour and dissention that had arisen between himself and his people. And this is exactly what the bull said, when it was published.

The common folk, unsurprisingly, took this declaration at face value, suspecting nothing. When knowledge of this bull reached Griselda, I know that her heart nearly broke because of it. But nonetheless, with great sadness, she resolved to endure the cruel adversities of Fortune with humility and without complaint. She was determined to follow her husband's wishes, to whom she had given herself in marriage, with all her heart.

And to move the story quickly on, the marquis then sent a letter secretly to Bologna in which he set out his instructions, and in particular, he asked the Earl of Panaro, who was married to his sister, to return

his two children to him with all pomp and splendour. And he asked the earl one thing more: that on no account should he tell anyone whose children these were, and if anyone asked, he should say only that the maiden was soon to be married to the Marquis of Saluzzo. And as this earl had been asked, so he quickly did. He set out himself, the very next morning with an entourage of distinguished lords and noblemen, bringing the girl along with him and with her younger brother riding beside her. This pretty young maiden was dressed for her wedding day, adorned with jewels, and her brother, who was only seven years old, was equally well-attired.

In good humour, and in noble splendour, they ride from day to day towards Saluzzo.

5

But despite all that is already in motion, this marquis, as befits his now habitual cruelty, seeks to test his wife Griselda even further. He intends to test her to the very limits of her endurance, to make sure that she is still as obedient as she has always been. In his court, openly, he calls loudly to her:

‘Griselda, I married you for your goodness, your obedience and faithfulness. Certainly, God knows, not for any wealth or honour that you might have brought to me.’

‘But in lordship there is also servitude, and in many ways. I cannot do what every ploughman, even, is at liberty to do. I am constrained by my people, and they wish me to take another wife. They go on and on about it day after day. Even the Pope has agreed to it, in order to keep the peace. You must believe this, as you must also know that my new wife is already on her way here. So be strong of heart, Griselda. Take back your dowry. I can be generous enough to say that it is yours. Go back to your father’s house. Nobody can enjoy prosperity all the time, and I advise you to suffer this stroke of ill-fortune with equanimity and good grace.’

‘My lord,’ replied Griselda, ‘I know, and have always known, that between your magnificence and my poverty there is no comparison. Nobody can deny this. I have never considered myself grand enough to be your wife, no, not even to be your maidservant. In this house, where you made me your wife – and may God bear witness to this – I have never considered myself to be lady or mistress but only to be your humble servant, a servant to you above all others, and I shall continue to consider myself so until I die. That you had the grace to keep me in such high estate for so long, I thank God as well as you, and although I was not worthy, may he reward you for it. There is nothing more I have to say. I was fostered with Janicula when I was a small child and I shall go back to him gladly, and live with him until I die. Since I gave you my maidenhead as your true wife, there is no disgrace; but may God forbid that a lord’s wife should ever marry again, or take another man.’

‘May God grant you and your new wife health and prosperity. I shall gladly yield my place to her, a place where I have found such happiness; but since it pleases you that I must go, then I shall go.’

‘You offer to return my dowry, but I well remember that all I possessed before I married you were my wretched clothes and I have no idea where those are now. Oh good God, but how gentle and kind you seemed when we were married, how, happy and considerate. Come what may, I shall never regret the time we had together, when you loved me and when I gave my heart to you completely. But it’s the truth, and it’s often proved, that love is never old until it’s new. A new love pushes away the old.’

‘My lord, you may remember that in my father’s cottage you made me take off my poor clothes and through your generosity you gave me some fine and costly ones to wear. I brought nothing to you that was my own except for nakedness, faith and virginity. But you may have your clothes back, and also my wedding ring. The rest of the jewels are in your chamber, I dare say.’

‘I came to you with nothing from my father’s house and I shall return with nothing. I will willingly do whatever you wish me to, but I hope it isn’t your intention that I should leave your palace without any

clothes at all. You could not be so heartless as to let the naked belly in which your children grew be a spectacle for all to see. Don't make me creep away like a worm! Remember that, however unworthy I was, I was once your wife. Therefore, as a reward for my virginity, which I brought to you and cannot take back, let me have a simple garment like the one you took from me, so that I may clothe myself and be decent. This is all I ask. I shall say no more, in case I start to annoy you.'

'The undergarment that you are wearing now,' replied the marquis, 'you can keep. Take it with you.' But he was so overcome that he could say no more for pity and left the hall.



Griselda undressed in front of all the people and stood in her linen undergarment. Then, with her head and feet all bare, she made her way back to her father's house. Many people followed her as she went, weeping and cursing Fortune, but Griselda did not weep and did not say anything. Her father, who had already learnt what had happened, cursed the very day that he was born. He had always harboured doubts about the marriage and suspected, from the very beginning, that when the marquis had expelled the fire of his lust he would quickly tire of Griselda, look upon her as an embarrassment and divorce her at the first opportunity.

The old man went to meet his daughter, for he could tell by the sound of the people following her that she was approaching. He covered her with her old coat, weeping for her, but of course it was too worn and threadbare to be of any use.

Griselda, this flower of wifely patience, stayed with her father, and gave no impression that she was harbouring any self-pity or vengeful thoughts. She gave no impression even that she had once lived in wealth and privilege; and this should come as no great surprise, really, since in the midst of affluence her spirit had retained its humility. No delicate pretensions nor royal pomp had ever burdened her. Her only concern had been to show patient goodness, care and honourable discretion, and to be meek and submissive to her husband.

Men speak of Job and his great humility, as clerics are well able to describe, mostly in relation to men it must be said, but regarding faithfulness, although clerics speak little of women in this regard, no man can display such humility as can a woman, nor be half as faithful.

6

The Earl of Panaro has arrived from Bologna. Word soon gets around that he has brought along with him the new marchioness. They arrive in such pomp and splendour that never before has such a thing been seen in the whole of western Lombardy.

The marquis, who was awaiting this arrival, sent a messenger to Griselda with instructions to bring her to the palace. Griselda, happily, humbly and without any inflated expectations, was pleased to comply with this summons. She knelt before the marquis and greeted him with reverence.

'Griselda,' said the marquis. 'It is my desire that this maiden, whom I am soon to marry, should be received tomorrow as royally and with as much pomp and splendour as my palace will allow. Every guest should be seated and served in as fitting a way as their status deserves, to the utmost of my resources. But I have no women I can trust enough to prepare the rooms in the way that I would like them pre-

pared, so I would like you to take charge of this; you know the kind of things I like. Although your clothes look dreadful, I'm sure you will be willing to do your best, for my sake.'

'I will be delighted to,' replied Griselda. 'I shall serve you as my lowly status requires, now and for evermore, and I shall never cease from loving you.'

Having said this, she set about organising the preparation of all the rooms, the furniture, the tables and the beds. Griselda took every trouble to see that the chambers were properly decorated and urged the chambermaids to work quickly – for God's sake! – to sweep and shake and clean, until, by her own efforts more than anybody else's, the chambers were all prepared and the hall made ready.

Next morning, the earl appeared with his two charges. Everybody ran to see the magnificence of their grand arrival and the beautiful clothes they were wearing, and quickly arrived themselves at the opinion that Walter was no fool to want to change his wife for this young lady. They all thought it was a fine idea! She was prettier than Griselda, they all agreed, and much younger, and the chances of them raising some excellent children seemed very good indeed, since she was so well-born herself. The girl's brother, also, was very splendid to look at, they thought, and seeing the pair of them together, everybody felt able to commend the marquis on his shrewd foresight and wise diplomacy.

Oh stormy people! Frivolous and unfaithful, now sailing one way, now another, always changing direction like a weathervane, delighting in new things, waxing and waning like the moon! Your opinion is worth little, you clap or jeer like fools and only fools should ever listen to you.

This is what sensible people thought. The majority, however, gazed around in wonderment at all the splendour and delighted in the novelty of having a new lady, suddenly, to rule over them. But enough of this. I will turn instead to Griselda. I will describe how busily she worked, and with such patient equanimity. She laboured hard to make everything ready for the wedding feast and cared little that her clothes were impoverished and somewhat ragged. With genuine delight, she went to the entrance of the palace to greet the new marchioness, and then quickly went about her business again. She received Walter's guests in exactly the right way, as befitted their individual status, and with such happiness that no man could fault her; although they wondered who this woman might be, who despite her torn and ragged clothes was able to display such courtesy and etiquette. But Griselda was so complementary and courteous to this young marchioness and her brother, and showed such heartfelt affection towards them, that everybody praised her for it.

At last, as all the noblemen began to take their seats at the tables in the hall, Walter called to Griselda, who was busy at a task: 'Griselda,' he cried, as though in fun. 'What do you think of my new wife? Isn't she beautiful?'

'I think she is lovely,' replied Griselda, calmly. 'I have never seen a more beautiful young lady in all my life. May God give her everything she wishes for, and may he send happiness to you both, for the rest of your lives. But let me give you one word of advice: don't torment her or poke her continually with a stick as you have done to me, for she has been brought up in comfort and privilege and I don't suppose that she will be able to endure the suffering that a poor woman can, who has spent her childhood in poverty.'

When Walter remembered the things that he had done to Griselda, and saw how she still stood as firm and unwavering as a wall, patient and innocent, his heart began to break out of pity for her.

'Enough!' he cried. 'Griselda, I have tested your faith and your constancy as far as any woman's has ever been tested, rich or poor, and now I know how steadfast you are,' and he swept her up into his arms and kissed her.

Griselda was so astonished that she just went along with it, without wondering too much about what was going on and without really listening to what he was saying, as though she had just woken out of sleep. Only slowly did his words begin to sink in.

‘Griselda, by God who died for us!’ he was saying. ‘You are my wife, I have no other and never have had, may God save my soul! This is your daughter whom I was supposed to marry, and this boy will be my heir, as I have intended all along. He is your son. They have been living secretly in Bologna. Take them into your arms, for now you cannot say that you have lost your two children. Those who have held me in low regard because of the things that they believe I have done, I say to them that it was not out of malice or cruelty but only to test your obedience. I have not killed my children, God forbid! I have only kept them out of the way until I knew your mind, that’s all.’

When Griselda heard this, she fell in a faint for joy, and when she came to again, she called her son and daughter to her, then embraced them and kissed them, weeping like a mother and bathing their faces and their hair in her tears. It was pitiful to see her faint and then to hear her humble voice saying: ‘Thank you, Lord, thank you! Thank you,’ she sobbed, ‘for saving my children. I don’t care if I die right now, in your love and in your grace. If I die now, it doesn’t matter.



‘Oh, my dear, tender children, your tearful mother quite imagined that cruel dogs, foxes or some other vermin had eaten you; but God in his mercy, and your kind father, has kept you safe,’ and with this, she fell once more to the ground, holding her son and daughter so tightly that they had difficulty getting free from her embrace as she lay there on the floor in a faint. All the people standing around her began to weep so much that they were scarcely able to remain standing themselves.

Walter comforted Griselda and she tried to get up; she was still only half aware of what was going on and everybody made a big fuss of her while she re-gathered her thoughts. Walter was so loving and so caring that it was a delight to see the joy that quickly grew between the two of them, now that they were reconciled.

When an opportunity arrived, the ladies took Griselda to a chamber, stripped her of all her ragged clothes and gave her a gown of cloth-of-gold and a coronal of precious stones to wear upon her head. Then they brought her back into the court where she received the honour she deserved.

And so this day had a happy ending after all. Everybody celebrated until the sun had set and the stars had come out, for it seemed to be a more joyous occasion even than the wedding they had been expecting.

Walter and Griselda lived for many years in prosperity and contentment. Their daughter was married to one of the wealthiest lords in all of Italy. Griselda’s father was brought to live in the palace where he remained until he died.

Walter’s son succeeded him in due course and ruled his land well; and he was happily married, although he didn’t test his wife nearly so much as his father had done. It cannot be denied that the world today is not as harsh as it used to be, so listen to what the author of this story said. This story – he said – is related not in order to urge wives to be as compliant and submissive as Griselda was, for such a thing would be insufferable, but rather that people should learn to take adversity in their stride, as Griselda did. Petrarch wrote this story for this reason, in his inimitable style. Because a woman was able to show so much patience towards a mortal man, we should all accept our lot that God has allocated to us, for it is a skilful craftsman indeed who can prove the utility of the things he makes without testing them. Saint James said in his epistle that, without doubt, Christ tests us every day of our lives and keeps us on our toes with the sharp scourge of adversity; and not in order to discover our strength, either, for he

knows how weak we are! But all is for the best, so let us suffer it with virtuous acceptance.

One word more, lords and ladies, before I finish. One would be hard-pressed to find more than two or three Griseldas in any town or city nowadays. If most women were put to such a test, their gold would be found to be so contaminated with brass that although the coin might look genuine, it would snap the moment you tried to bend it. For which reason, for the love of this wife of Bath who is riding along with us, whose life and all those like her may God maintain in high authority – great harm it would be otherwise! – I will sing, with a vibrant and youthful heart, a song which I'm sure will delight you. Let us put an end to moralising. Listen to my song.

Envoy de Chaucer

Grisilde is deed – Griselda is dead and her patience also, buried together in one grave in Italy. So GI sing, let no man be so optimistic as to test his own wife in the hope of discovering Griselda's patience. He will fail!

Oh noble and prudent wives, don't let humility staple your lips together or cause any cleric to compose a tale of you like the one I just told of Griselda. Copy echo, who has always found an answer. Don't be taken for a compliant fool but seize the initiative yourself, and print this message indelibly into your mind, for everybody's profit. You wives who are in charge of your own lives, stand firmly in your own defence, since you are wilful and stubborn like the great camel; don't be trodden on by men! And you weak and slender wives, be like the tiger in India, give your husband an earful!

Have no fear of men. don't put them on a pedestal. Even if your husband is armed in steel, the arrows of your eloquence will find their way through into his flesh. Make him jealous and you will have him eating out of your hand. If you are pretty, dress in your finest clothes and make sure that people can see your face. If you are ugly, learn to spend a little and make friends who will help you. Always be as carefree as a leaf in the wind, and let him do all the weeping, wailing and wringing of hands!