

The Story of Griselda

Giovanni Boccaccio

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IT is a great while since, when among those that were Lord Marquesses of Saluzzo, the very greatest and worthiest man of them all was a young noble lord, named Gualtieri, who, having neither wife nor child, spent his time in nothing else but hawking and hunting. Nor had he any mind of marriage, or to enjoy the benefit of children, wherein many did repute him the wiser. But this being distasteful to his subjects, they very often solicited him to match himself with a wife, to the end that he might not decease without an heir, nor they be left destitute of a succeeding lord, offering themselves to provide him of such a one, so well descended by father and mother as not only should confirm their hope, but also yield him high contentment, whereto the Marquess thus answered:

"Worthy friends, you would constrain me to the thing wherewith I never had any intent to meddle, considering how difficult a case it is to meet with such a woman, who can agree with a man in all his conditions. And how great the number is of them who daily happen on the contrary! but most, and worst of all the rest, how wretched and miserable proves the life of that man who is bound to live with a wife not fit for him! And in saying you can learn to understand the custom and qualities of children by behavior of the fathers and mothers, and so to provide me of a wife, it is a mere argument of folly; for neither shall I comprehend, or you either, the secret inclinations of parents I mean of the father, and much less the complexion of the mother. But admit it were within compass of power to know them, yet it is a frequent sight, and observed every day, that daughters do resemble neither father nor mother, but that they are naturally governed by their own instinct.

"But because you are so desirous to have me fettered in the chains of wedlock, I am content to grant what you request. And because I would have no complaint made of any but myself, if matters should not happen answerable to expectation, I will make mine own eyes my electors, and not see by any other sight. Giving you this assurance before, that if she whom I shall make choice of be not of you honored and respected as your lady and mistress, it will ensue to your detriment, how much you have displeased me, to take a wife at your request and against mine own will."

The noblemen answered that they were well satisfied, provided that he took a wife.

Some indifferent space of time before the beauty, manners, and well-seeming virtues of a poor countryman's daughter, dwelling in no far distant village, had appeared very pleasing to the Lord Marquess, and gave him full persuasion that with her he should lead a comfortable life. And therefore without any farther search or inquisition he absolutely resolved to marry her, and having conferred with her father, agreed that his daughter should be his wife. Whereupon the Marquess made a general convocation of all his lords, barons, and other of his special friends, from all parts of his dominion, and when they were assembled together he then spake to them in manner as followeth:

"Honorable friends, it appeared pleasing to you all, and yet, I think, you are of the same mind, that I should dispose myself to take a wife, and I thereto condescended, more to yield you contentment than for any particular desire in myself. Let me now remember you of your solemn made promise, with full consent to honor and obey her whomsoever as your sovereign lady and mistress, that I shall elect to make my wife; and now the time is come for my exacting the performance of that promise, and which I look you must constantly keep. I have made choice

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of a young virgin, answerable to mine own heart and liking, dwelling not far off hence, whom I intend to make my wife, and within few days to have her brought home to my palace. Let your care and diligence then extend so far as to see that the feast may be sumptuous and her entertainment to be most honorable, to the end that I may receive as much contentment in your promise performed as you shall perceive I do in my choice."

The lords and all the rest were wonderfully joyful to hear him so well inclined, expressing no less by their shouts and jocund suffrages, protesting cordially that she should be welcomed with pomp and majesty, and honored of them all as their liege lady and sovereign. Afterward they made preparation for a princely and magnificent feast, as the Marquess did the like, for a marriage of extraordinary state and quality, inviting all his kindred, friends, and acquaintances in all parts and provinces about him. He made also ready most rich and costly garments, shaped by the body of a comely young gentlewoman, whom he knew to be equal in proportion and stature to her of whom he had made his election.

When the appointed nuptial day was come, the Lord Marquess, about nine of the clock in the morning, mounted on horseback, as all the rest did, who came to attend him honorably, and having all things in due readiness with them, he said, "Lords, it is time for us to fetch the bride." So on he rode with his train to the same poor village whereat she dwelt, and when he was come to her father's house, he saw the maiden returning very hastily from a well, where she had been to fetch a pail of water, which she set down, and stood, accompanied with other maidens, to see the passage of the Lord Marquess and his train. Gualtieri called her by her name, which was Griselda, and asked her where her father was, who bashfully answered him, and with an humble courtesy, saying, "My gracious lord, he is in the house."

Then the Marquess dismounted from his horse, commanding every one to attend him, then all alone he entered into the poor cottage, where he found the maid's father, being named Giannuculo, and said unto him: "God speed, good father, I am come to espouse thy daughter Griselda, but first I have a few demands to make, which I will utter to her in thy presence." Then he turned to the maid and said:

"Fair Griselda, if I make you my wife, will you do your best endeavor to please me in all things which I shall do or say? will you be also gentle, humble and patient?" with divers other the like questions, whereto she still answered that she would, so near as Heaven with grace should enable her.

Presently he took her by the hand, so led her forth of the poor man's homely house, and in the presence of all his company, with his own hands he took off her mean wearing garments, smock and all, and clothed her with those robes of state which he had purposely brought thither for her, and plaiting her hair over her shoulders, he placed a crown of gold on her head. Whereat every one standing as amazed, and wondering not a little, he said, "Griselda, wilt thou have me to thy husband?" Modestly blushing and kneeling on the ground, she answered, "Yes, my gracious lord, if you will accept so poor a maiden to be your wife." "Yes, Griselda," quoth he, "with this holy kiss I confirm thee for my wife;" and so espoused her before them all. Then mounting her on a milk-white palfrey, brought thither for her, she was thus honorably conducted to her palace.

Now concerning the marriage feast and triumphs, they were performed with no less pomp than if she had been daughter to the King of France. And the young bride apparently declared that, with her garments, her mind and behavior were quite changed. For indeed she was, as it were shame to speak otherwise, a rare creature, both of person and perfections, and not only was she absolute for beauty, and so sweetly amiable, gracious, and goodly, as if she were not the daughter of poor Giannuculo, and a country shepherdess, but rather of some noble lord, whereat every one wondered that formerly had known her. Besides all this, she was so obedient to her husband, so fervent in all dutiful offices, and patient, without the very least provoking, as he held himself much more than contended, and the only happy man that lived in the world.

In like manner, toward the subjects of her lord and husband she showed herself always so benign and gracious, as there was not any one but the more they looked on her the better they loved her, honoring her voluntarily and

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praying to the Heavens for her health, dignity, and welfare's long continuance, speaking now quite contrary to their former opinion of the Marquess, honorably and worthily, that he had shown himself a singular wise man in the election of his wife, which few else but he in the world would ever have done, because their judgment might fall far short of discerning those great and precious virtues, veiled under a homely habit, and obscured in a poor country cottage. To be brief, in very short time not only the Marquisate itself, but all neighboring provinces about, had no other common talk but of her rare course of life, devotion, charity, and all good actions else whatsoever, quite quailing all sinister constructions of her husband, before he had received her in matrimony.

About four or five years after the birth of her daughter she conceived with child again, and at the limited hour of deliverance had a goodly son, to the no little liking of the Marquess. Afterward a strange humor entered into his brain; namely, that by a long-continued experience, and courses of an intolerable quality, he would needs make proof of his fair wife's patience. First he began to provoke her by injurious speeches, showing fierce and frowning looks to her, intimating that his people grew displeased with him, in regard of his wife's base birth and education, and so much the rather because she was likely to bring children who, by her blood, were no better than beggars, and murmured at the daughter already born. Which words, when Griselda heard, without any alteration of countenance, or the least distemperature in any appearing action, she said:

"My honorable and gracious lord, dispose of me as you think best for your own dignity and contentment, for I shall therewith be well pleased, as she that knows herself far inferior to the meanest of your people, much less worthy of the honor whereto you liked to advance me."

This answer was very welcome to the Marquess, as apparently perceiving hereby that the dignity whereto he had exalted her, or any particular favors besides, could not infect her with any pride, coyness, or disdain. Not long after having told her in plain and open speeches that her subjects could not endure the daughter born of her, he instructed and despatched to her one of his servants, who, sorry, sad, and much perplexed in mind, said: "Madam, except I intend to lose my own life, I must accomplish what my lord hath strictly enjoined me, which is, to take this your young daughter, and then" He said no more. The lady hearing these words, and noting his frowning looks, remembering also what the Marquess himself had formerly said, imagined that he had commanded his servant to kill the child. Suddenly, therefore, she took it out of the cradle, and having sweetly kissed, and bestowed her blessing on it, albeit her heart throbbed with the inward affection of a mother, without any alteration of countenance, she tenderly laid it in the servant's arms and said: "Here, friend, take it, and do with it as thy lord and mine hath commanded thee; but leave it in no rude place where birds or savage beasts may devour it, except it be his will."

The servant departing from her with the child, and reporting to the Marquess what his lady had said, he wondered at her incomparable constancy. Then he sent it by the same servant to Bologna, to an honorable lady his kinswoman, requesting her, without revealing whose child it was, to see it both nobly and carefully educated.

At time convenient afterward, being with child again, and delivered of a princely son, than which nothing could be more joyful to the Marquess, yet all this was not sufficient for him, but with far ruder language than before, and looks expressing harsh intentions, he said unto her: "Griselda, though thou pleasest me wonderfully by the birth of this princely boy, yet my subjects are not therewith contended, but blunder abroad maliciously that the grandchild of Giannuculo, a poor country peasant, when I am dead and gone, must be their sovereign lord and master. Which makes me stand in fear of their expulsion, and to prevent that, I must be rid of this child, as well as the other, and then send thee away from hence, that I may take another wife more pleasing to them."

Griselda, with a patient, suffering soul, hearing what he had said, returned no other answer but this: "Most gracious and honorable lord, satisfy and please your own royal mind, and never use any respect of me, for nothing is precious or pleasing to me, but what may agree with your good liking." Within a while after, the noble Marquess in the like manner as he did before for his daughter, so he sent the same servant for his son, and seeming as if he had sent it to have been slain, conveyed it to be nursed at Bologna, in company of his sweet

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sister. Whereat the lady showed no other discontentment in any kind than formerly she had done for her daughter, to the no mean marvel of the Marquess, who protested in his soul that the like woman was not in all the world beside. And were it not for his heedful observation, how loving and careful she was of her children, prizing them as dearly as her own life, rash opinion might have persuaded him that she had no more in her than a carnal affection, not caring how many she had so she might thus easily be rid of them; but he knew her to be a truly virtuous mother, and wisely liable to endure his severest impositions.

His subjects believing that he had caused his children to be slain, blamed him greatly, thought him to be a most cruel man, and did highly compassionate the lady's case, who when she came in company of other gentlewomen, which mourned for their deceased children, would answer nothing else but that they could not be more pleasing to her than they were to the father that begot them.

Within certain years after the birth of these children, the Marquess purposed with himself to make his last and final proof of fair Griselda's patience, and said to some near about him that he could no longer endure to keep Griselda as his wife, confessing he had done foolishly, and according to a young, giddy brain when he was so rash in the marriage of her. Wherefore he would send to the Pope and purchase a dispensation from him to repudiate Griselda and take another wife. Wherein, although they greatly reproved him, yet he told them plainly it must needs be so.

The lady hearing this news, and thinking she must return again to her poor father's house and estate, and perhaps to her old occupation of keeping of sheep, as in her younger days she had done; understanding withal that another must enjoy him whom she dearly loved and honored, you may well think, worthy ladies, that her patience was now put to the main proof indeed. Nevertheless, as with an invincible, true, virtuous courage, she had overstood all the other injuries of fortune, so did she constantly settle her soul to bear this with an undaunted countenance and behavior.

At such time as was prefixed for the purpose, counterfeit letters came to the Marquess, as sent from Rome, which he caused to be publicly read in the hearing of his subjects, that the Pope had dispensed with him to leave Griselda, and marry with another wife; wherefore, sending for her immediately, in presence and before them all, thus he spake to her: "Woman, by concession sent me from the Pope, he hath dispensed me to make choice of another wife, and to free myself from thee. And because my predecessors have been noblemen and great lords in this country, thou being the daughter of a poor country clown, and their blood and mine notoriously imbased by my marriage with thee, I intend to have thee no longer for my wife, but will return thee home to thy father's house with all the rich dowry thou broughtest me; and then I will take another wife, with whom I am already contracted, better beseeming my birth, and far more contenting and pleasing to my people."

The lady hearing these words, not without much pain and difficulty, restrained her tears, quite contrary to the natural inclination of women, and thus answered: "Great Marquess, I never was so empty of discretion, but did always acknowledge that my base and humble condition could not in any manner suit with your high blood and nobility, and my being with you, I ever acknowledged to proceed from Heaven and you, not any merit of mine, but only as a favor lent me, which you being now pleased to recall back again, I ought to be pleased, and so am, that it be restored. Here is the ring wherewith you espoused me: here, in all humility, I deliver it to you. You command me to carry home the marriage dowry which I brought with me; there is no need of a treasurer to repay it me, neither any new purse to carry it in, much less any sumpter to be laden with it. For, noble lord, it was never out of my memory that you took me stark naked, and if it shall seem sightly to you that this body that hath borne two children, begotten by you, must again be seen naked, willingly must I depart hence naked. But I humbly beg of your excellency, in recompense of my virginity which I brought you blameless, so much as in thought, that I might have but one of my wedding smocks, only to conceal the shame of nakedness, and then I shall depart rich enough."

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The Marquess, whose heart wept bloody tears, as his eyes would likewise gladly have yielded their natural tribute, covered all with a dissembling angry countenance, and starting up, said: "Go, give her a smock only, and so send her gadding." All there present then entreated him to let her have a petticoat, because it might not be said that she who had been his wife thirteen years and more was sent away so poorly in her smock; but all their persuasions prevailed not with him. Naked in her smock, without hose or shoes, bareheaded, and not so much as a cloth or rag about her neck, to the great grief and mourning of all that saw her, she went home to her own father's house.

And he, good man, never believing that the Marquess would long keep his daughter as his wife, but rather expecting daily what now happened, had safely laid up the garments whereof the Marquess despoiled her the same morning when he espoused her. Wherefore he delivered them to her, and she fell to her father's household business, according as formerly she had done, sustaining with a great and unconquerable spirit all the cruel assaults of her enemy, Fortune.

About such time also, as suited with his own disposition, the Marquess made publicly known to his subjects that he meant to join in marriage again with the daughter to one of the Counts of Panago, and causing preparation to be made for a sumptuous wedding, he sent for Griselda, and she being come, thus he spake to her: "The wife that I have made new election of is to arrive here within very few days, and at her first coming I would have her to be most honorably entertained. Thou knowest I have no woman in my house that can deck up the chambers and set all requisite things in due order befitting so solemn a feast, and therefore I sent for thee, who, knowing better than any other all the parts, provision, and goods in the house, mayest set everything in such order as thou shalt think necessary.

"Invite such ladies and gentlewomen as thou wilt, and give them welcome as if thou wert the lady of the house, and when the marriage is ended, return then home to thy father again."

Although these words pierced like wounding daggers the heart of the poor but noble, patient Griselda, as being unable to forget the unequaled love she bare the Marquess, though the dignity of her former fortune more easily slipped out of her remembrance, yet nevertheless thus she answered:

"My gracious lord, I am glad that I can do you any service wherein you shall find me both willing and ready." In the same poor garments as she came from her father's house, although she was turned out in her smock, she began to sweep and make clean the chambers, rub the stools and benches in the hall, and ordered everything in the kitchen, as if she were the worst maid in all the house, never ceasing or giving over, till all things were in due and decent order, as best beseemed in such a case. After all which was done, the Marquess having invited all the ladies of the country to be present at so great a feast, when the marriage day was come, Griselda in her gown of country gray, gave them welcome in honorable manner, and graced them all with very cheerful countenance.

Gualtieri the Marquess, who had caused his two children to be nobly nourished at Bologna with a near kinswoman of his, who had married with one of the Counts of Panago, his daughter being now aged twelve years old and somewhat more, as also his son about six or seven, he sent a gentleman expressly to his kindred to have them come and visit him at Saluzzo, bringing his daughter and son with them, attended in very honorable manner, and publishing everywhere as they came along that the young virgin, known to none but himself and them, should be the wife to the Marquess, and that only was the cause of her coming. The gentleman was not slack in the execution of trust reposed in him, but having made convenient preparation, with the kindred, son, daughter, and a worthy company attending on them, arrived at Saluzzo about dinner time, where wanted no resort, from all neighboring parts round about, to see the coming of the Lord Marquess's new spouse.

By the lords and ladies she was joyfully entertained, and coming into the great hall, where the tables were ready covered, Griselda, in her homely country habit, humbled herself before her, saying, "Gracious welcome to the new-elected spouse of the Lord Marquess."

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All the ladies there present, who had very earnestly importuned Gualtieri, but in vain, that Griselda might better be shut up in some chamber, or else to lend her the wearing of any other garment which formerly had been her own, because she should not so poorly be seen among strangers; being seated at the tables, she waited on them very serviceably. The young virgin was observed by every one, who spared not to say that the Marquess had made an excellent change; but, above them all, Griselda did most commend her, and so did her brother likewise, as young as he was, yet not knowing her to be his sister.

Now was the Marquess sufficiently satisfied in his soul that he had seen so much as he desired concerning the patience of his wife, who in so many heart-grieving trials was never noted so much as to alter her countenance; and being absolutely persuaded that this proceeded not from any want of understanding in her, because he knew her to be singularly wise, he thought it high time now to free her from all these afflicting oppressions, and give her such assurance as she ought to have. Wherefore, commanding her into his presence, openly before all his assembled friends, smiling on her, he said: "What thinkest thou, Griselda, of our new-chosen spouse?" "My lord," quoth she, "I like her exceedingly well; and if she be so wise as she is fair, which verily I think she is, I make no doubt but you shall live with her as the only happy man of the world. But I humbly entreat your honor, if I have any power in me to prevail by, that you would not give her such cutting and unkind language as you did to your other wife, for I cannot think her armed with such patience as should indeed support them; as well in regard she is much younger, as also her more delicate breeding and education, whereas she whom you had before was brought up in continual toil and travail."

When the Marquess perceived that Griselda believed verily this young daughter of hers should be his wife, and answered him in so honest and modest manner, he commanded her to sit down by him, and said: "Griselda, it is now more than fit time that thou shouldest taste the fruit of thy long admired patience, and that they who have thought me cruel, harsh, and uncivil-natured, should at length observe that I have done nothing at all basely or unadvisedly. For this was a work premeditated before for instructing thee what it is to be a married wife, and to let them know, whosoever they be, how to take and to keep a wife; which hath begotten to me perpetual joy and happiness so long as I have a day to live with thee, a matter whereof I stood before greatly in fear, and which in marriage I thought would never happen to me.

"It is not unknown to thee, in how many kinds, for my first proof, I gave thee harsh and unpleasant speeches, which drew no discontentment from thee, either in looks, words, or behavior, but rather such comfort as my soul desired, and so in my other succeeding afterward. In one minute now I purpose to give thee that consolation which I bereft thee of in my tempestuous storms, and make a sweet restoration for all thy former sour sufferings. My fair and dear affected Griselda, she whom thou supposest for my new-elected spouse, with a glad and cheerful heart embrace for thine own daughter, and this also her brother, being both of them thy children and mine, in common opinion of the whole vulgar multitude imagined to be, by my command, long since slain. I am thy honorable lord and husband, who doth and will love thee far above all women else in the world, giving thee justly this deserved praise and commendation, that no man living hath the like wife as I have."

So, sweetly kissing her infinitely, and hugging her joyfully in his arms, the tears now streaming like new-let loose rivers down her fair face, which no disaster before could force from her, he brought her and seated her by her daughter, who was not a little amazed at so rare an alteration. She having, in zeal of affection, kissed and embraced them both, all else present being clearly resolved from the former doubt, which too long deluded them, the ladies arose jocundly from the tables, and attending on Griselda to her chamber, in sign of a more successful augury to follow, took off her poor contemptible rags, and put on such costly robes which, as Lady Marchioness, she used to wear before.

Afterward they waited on her into the hall again, being their sovereign lady and mistress, as she was no less in her poorest garments; where, all rejoicing for the new-restored mother and happy recovery of so noble a son and daughter, the festival continued many months after. Now, every one thought the Marquess to be a noble and a wise prince, though somewhat sharp and unsufferable in the severe experience made of his wife; but above all

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they reputed Griselda to be a most wise, patient, and virtuous lady. The Count of Panago, within a few days after, returned back to Bologna; and the Lord Marquess, fetching home old Giannuculo from his country drudgery, to live with him as his father-in-law in his princely palace, gave him honorable maintenance, wherein he long continued and ended his days. Afterward he matched his daughter in a noble marriage, he and Griselda living long time together in the highest honor that possibly could be.

What can now be said to the contrary, but that poor country cottages may yield as divine and excellent spirits as the most stately and royal mansions, which breed and bring up some more worthy to be hog-rubbers than hold any sovereignty over men? Where is any other besides Griselda who, not only without a wet eye, but emboldened by a valiant and invincible courage, could suffer the sharp rigors, and never the like heard-of proofs, made by the Marquess? Perhaps he might have met with another who would have quitted him in a contrary kind, and for thrusting her forth of doors in her smock, could have found better succor somewhere else, rather than walk so nakedly in the cold streets.