

**The Clerk's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer**



**Here follows the Prologue
of the Clerk of Oxford's Tale.**

"Sir Clerk of Oxford," said our Host, "you ride as quiet and demure as a newly married maiden, sitting at the wedding feast. This day I have not heard one word from your tongue, I believe you are pondering some complex argument; but "everything has its time¹," just as Solomon says. 6

For God's sake, be of merrier countenance; it is not the time to study now. Tell us some merry tale, by your faith. For everyone who has entered into a game must agree to the rules of the game. But preach not, like friars in Lent, to make us bewail our old sins, and do not let your tale put us to sleep. 14

Tell us some merry happening. Put away your learned terms and colors² of rhetoric and figures; keep them in reserve until a time when you may be composing in high style, such as when men write to kings. I pray you to speak so plainly now that we may understand what you say. 20

This worthy clerk answered gently, "Host, I am under your authority. You have now the governance over us, and therefore I bind myself by obedience to you, as far as reason asks. I will tell you a tale that I learned at Padua from a scholar, and a very worthy one, as is shown by his words and deeds. He is now dead and nailed in his coffin. I pray God rest his soul. 30

Francis Petrarch³, the laureate poet, is the name of this scholar, whose sweet rhetoric illumined all Italy with poetry, as John of Lignano⁴ did with philosophy and law and other learned arts. 35

¹ Everything has its time. "To everything there is a season." Ecclesiastes. 3.1.

² Colors. Figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, and hyperbole.

³ Petrarch. Chaucer may have met Petrarch on his first trip to Italy in 1372-73.

⁴ Giovanni da Lignano. Professor of canon law at Padua (and Bologna), who once visited England. (D. 1383)

But death, which will not allow us to dwell here but as it were a twinkling of an eye, has slain them both, and will yet slay all of us. 38

But to continue as I began of this worthy poet who taught me this tale I say that first, before he comes to the body of his tale, he composes a prologue in a high style⁵, in which he describes Piedmont and the country of Saluzzo, and speaks of the Apennines, the high hills that are the bounds of West Lombardy, and especially he speaks of Mount Viso⁶, where the Po out of a small spring takes its first source and rising, and ever grows in its course eastward toward the Emilia⁷, Ferrara and Venice⁸, which would take a long time to describe. And truly to my judgment it seems an irrelevant thing, except that he wished to convey this information. But this is his tale, which you may hear now. 56

Here begins the Tale of the Clerk of Oxford

On the western side of Italy, down at the root of the cold Viso, there is a lively plain, abundant in its harvest, where you may behold many towers and towns founded in the time of the old fathers, and many other delightful sights. This noble country is called Saluzzo, where long ago a marquis was lord, as were his worthy ancestors before him, and his lieges great and small were all obedient and ready to serve him. Thus he lived in delights, and had done for a long time, through the favor of Fortune, beloved and feared both by his lords and the common people. And to speak of lineage as well, he was of the gentlest birth of Lombardy, a fair person and strong and young, and full of honor and courtesy, discreet enough to guide his country, except that he was to be blamed in certain things. And this young lord's name was Walter. 77

I blame him in this: that he considered not what might happen to him in the time to come, but put all his thought on present delight, such as hawking and hunting all the time. Very nearly all other cares he let slip, and, what was worst of all, he would not wed a wife, for anything that might happen. This point only his people bore so sorely that one day they flocked to him in groups, and one of them, who was the wisest in learning, or else from whom the lord would take it

⁵ High style. Perhaps in contrast to the low style (in prose and simple language) of Giovanni Boccaccio who told the tale of Griselda (the topic of the tale that the Clerk is about to tell) as the tenth tale of the tenth day of his *Decameron*.

⁶ Mount Viso. Also called Monviso, the highest of the Italian Alps.

⁷ Emilia. Eastern Italy.

⁸ Venice. Where the Po empties into the Adriatic Sea.

least badly when he told him what his people thought, or else who could best expound such a matter, said this to the marquis: 91

“O noble marquis, your humanity gives us confidence and fortitude, as is often needed, to tell you our heaviness, so much so that we can now tell you of the heaviness of our hearts. Please accept now, lord, through your nobility, accept the complaint that we lay before you with piteous heart, and do not let your ears disdain my voice. Although I have nothing more to do in this matter than any other person here, yet, my beloved lord, in as much as you have always showed me favor and grace, I dare even more so to ask of you a little time to listen, so that we may show our request, but only to the extent that you, my lord, shall do fully as you wish. For surely, lord, we so delight in you and in all your work, and have always done so, that we could not devise for ourselves how we might live in greater felicity, except for one thing, lord, if it should be your will, that you desire to be a wedded man; then your people would rest in their most excellent hearts. Bow your neck under that blissful yoke of sovereignty, not of servitude, which men call espousal or wedlock. 115

“And think, lord, among all your prudent thoughts, how our days pass away from us in various ways; for though we sleep or wake, or roam, or ride, time forever flees away; it will tarry for no person. And though your fresh youth may still be in flower, age always creeps in, as still as a stone, and death menaces all ages and strikes each estate, and nobody escapes. And just as certainly as each one of us knows that we shall die, so uncertain are we of that day when death shall fall on us. Accept, then, this loyal intention from us, who never yet refused your command. And, lord, if you will agree, we will in short time choose you a wife born of the noblest and greatest of all this land, at the least, so that it ought to seem for God's honor and yours, as well as we can judge. Deliver us out of this anxious fear, and for the sake of the high God take a wife. For if it should so happen, God forbid, that through your death your line should fail, and that a strange successor should take your heritage, ah, may woe be to us living. For these reasons we beseech you to wed quickly.” 140

Their meek prayer and piteous countenance struck pity into the marquis' heart. He said, “My own dear people, you would constrain me to that which I never once thought of. I have rejoiced in my liberty, which is seldom found in marriage where I was free, I must now be in servitude. 147

“But I see your loyal meaning, nevertheless, and trust your wisdom, and have always trusted it. For this reason, by my free will I will agree to wed, as soon as I am able. But as to the offer which you have made today to choose me a wife, I release you from that choice, and ask you to offer it no more. For, God knows, children are often unlike their worthy elders before them. Goodness comes all from God, not from the strain of which they were begotten and born. I trust in God's goodness, and therefore my marriage and well-being and peace I commit to Him; He may do as pleases Him. 161

“Let me alone to choose my wife: I will bear that responsibility upon my own back. But I pray you and charge you upon your lives that whatever wife I take, you will give me assurance to honor her, as long as she lives, in word and deed here and everywhere, as if she were an emperor's daughter. And furthermore you shall swear this: that you will neither grumble nor strive against my choice. For since I am to forgo my liberty at your request, upon my soul I will take a wife where my heart is set. And except you will agree to this, speak no more of this matter, I ask you.” 175

With hearty will they swore and agreed to this whole thing, and no creature said no, beseeching him before they went that through his grace he would set for their sake a certain day for his wedding, as soon as he could. For still the people somewhat feared ever lest this marquis would not after all wed a wife. Such a day as pleased him, on which he would truly be wedded, he granted them, and said that he did all this only at their request. 185

And with humble and submissive minds and reverently kneeling upon their knees they all thanked him; and thus they had achieved their desire, and all went their way home. And upon this he commanded his officers to purvey the feast; and gave to his personal knights and squires such orders as he wished; and they obeyed his commandments, and each did his full duty to give honor to the feast. 196

Here ends the first part.

Here begins the second part.

Not far from that honorable palace where this marquis prepared for his marriage, stood a village in a pleasant site, where poor people of that place had their huts and beasts, and drew their sustenance from their own labor, as the earth yielded them its plenty. Among these poor people dwelt a man thought to be the poorest of the whole village; but God almighty

can sometimes send his grace into a little ox's stall⁹. This man was called Janicula by the men of that village. 208

He had a daughter named Griselda. This young maiden to the eye was plenty beautiful; but to speak of virtuous beauty, she was in this respect one of the most beautiful under the sun. She was bred in poverty, and no lecherous desire ran through her heart; she drank more often from the spring than of the cask, and because she wished to satisfy the demands of virtue, she knew labor well, but no idle ease. 217

And though she was tender of age, yet in the breast of her virginity was enclosed a mature and steadfast temper, and she cherished her old poor father in great reverence and love. Spinning in the field, she watched a few sheep, and would never be idle until she slept. And when she came home, she would often bring cabbages or other vegetables, which she shredded and boiled for their sustenance, and made her bed, which was hard and not a bit soft. She always sustained her father's life with all the diligence and obedience that a child could show to a father's honor. 231

Upon Griselda, this poor maiden, the marquis often set his eye, by chance as he rode at his hunting; and when it so happened that he could see her, he cast his look upon her not with wanton glances of folly, but would often consider her countenance in a serious fashion, commending her womanhood in his heart, and her virtue, surpassing any creature of so young age as well in look as in deed. For though the common people have no great insight into virtue, he considered very well her goodness and intended to wed her only, if ever he should wed. 245

The day of the wedding came, but no creature could tell who the woman was to be; for this marvel many wondered and said when they were in private, "Will our lord still not leave his vanities? Will he not wed? Alas the day! Why will he so deceive us and himself?" 252

But nevertheless for Griselda's sake this marquis had had brooches and rings made of gems set in gold and azure; and for her clothing, and for all the other adornments that pertain to such a wedding, he had had the measurement taken of a maiden similar to her in stature. The morning drew toward nine o'clock on the day when this wedding should be, and the palace was put all in order, the hall and chambers, each

according to its use. There you could see the store-rooms stuffed with plenty of the choicest food to be found as far as Italy stretches. 266

This richly arrayed royal marquis, the lords and ladies in his company who had been bidden to the feast, and the young knights of his retinue with the sound of mingled melody proceeded directly to the village of which I have spoken. Griselda, completely unaware, God knows, that all this pageantry was made for her, went to fetch water at a spring, and came home as gone to soon as she could; for indeed she had heard that the marquis was to wed that same day, and if she could she would gladly have seen some of that sight. She thought, "I will stand in our door with other maidens, my friends, and see the marchioness; and therefore I will attempt to do as soon as possible the labor that I must do at home. And then at leisure I may see her, if she should take this way to the castle." 287

And as she was about to cross over her threshold, the marquis came and began to call her. And without delay she set down her water-vessel in an ox's stall beside the threshold, and fell down upon her knees, and remained kneeling with a serious countenance until she heard the lord's will. 294

This thoughtful marquis spoke to this maiden in a serious tone and said, "Where is your father, Griselda?" And she answered with reverence and humble expression, "Lord, he is close at hand." And she went in without staying longer and fetched her father to the marquis. He then took this old man by the hand, and when he had taken him aside, said this: "Janicula, I can no longer hide the pleasure of my heart. If you promise it, whatever happens, before I depart I will take your daughter as my wife as long as she lives. You love me, and are born my faithful follower, I know well, truly; and I dare well say, all that pleases me pleases you. And especially, therefore, tell me what you think about that point I have spoken of just now; if you will agree to my proposal that you will take me as your son-in-law?" 315

These sudden words so astonished the old man that he grew red and abashed and stood all quaking. He could scarcely say a word except only this: "Lord," he said, "my will is your will; and I wish nothing against your pleasure. You are my very dear lord. Govern this matter just as you wish." 322

"Yet I would like," said this marquis softly, "that in your chamber I and you and she might have a conference; and do you know why? Because I wish to

⁹ Ox's stall. As was the Christ child.

ask if it would be her will to be my wife, and to conduct herself according to my wishes. And all this shall be done in your presence; I will not speak outside of your hearing. 329

And while they were in the room carrying out their treaty, of which you shall after this, the people drew near the house and marveled how kindly and attentively she looked after her dear father. 334

But Griselda herself might well be marveling most of all, for never before had she seen such a sight; it is no wonder if she were astonished to see so great a guest come there, such as she not was accustomed to; she gazed at him with a pale face. 340

But briefly to hurry this tale forth, these are the words which the marquis spoke to this true gentle faithful maiden: "Griselda," he said, "you shall understand well that it pleases your father and me that I should wed you; and it is also possible, as I suppose, that you will grant it. But these questions I will ask first. Since it is to be done in so hasty a fashion, will you now assent, or consider further? I ask this: are you ready with good heart to do all I wish, that I may freely cause you to laugh or to grieve as seems best to me, and that you never shall complain about it day or night, and that when I say 'yes,' you will never say 'no,' neither by word nor frowning expression? Swear this, and here I swear our alliance." 357

Wondering at these words and trembling for fear, she said: "Lord, undeserving and unworthy am I of that which honor that you offer me. But as you wish, so too do I wish. And here I swear that willingly I shall never disobey you in deed or thought, even if I were to die for it and yet were loath to die." 364

"This is enough, my Griselda," he said. And he went forth with a serious countenance through the door, and she came after him. And to the people he said, "This is my wife who stands here. Whoever loves me, honor and love her, I beg. There is no more to say." 371

And because she should bring into his house nothing of her old clothing, he ordered that women should uncliothe her right there. These ladies were not very joyous to handle the clothes in which she was clad; but nevertheless from foot to head they clothed afresh this maiden bright of hue. Then they combed her hair which lay unarranged and uncared for, and with their slender fingers placed a crown on her head, and covered her with gemmed ornaments, great and small. Why should I make a long tale of her array?

When she was translated into such richness, the people hardly knew her for her beauty. 385

This marquis married her with a ring brought for that purpose, and then set her upon a snow-white and gently-pacing horse, and conveyed her to his palace amid joyful people who led her and met her. And thus they spent the day in revelry until the sun went down. 392

And to move this tale forth quickly, I say that God by His grace sent such favor to this new marchioness that none would have believed she had been rudely born and fostered, as in a cot or ox-stall, but rather in an emperor's palace. In the eyes of every creature she grew so beloved and deserving of honor that people where she was born, who had known her year by year from her birth, scarce believed that she was daughter to Janicula, of whom I have spoken; but dared have sworn she was quite another creature. 406

For though she had always been full of worth, she increased in excellence of precious virtues rooted deep in goodness of nature. She was so discreet and fair of speech, so benign and so worthy of reverence, and had such power over the people's hearts, that every person who looked upon her face loved her. The nobility of her fame was published not only in the town of Saluzzo, but in many surrounding regions. If one spoke well of her, another said the same. So spread the report of her high goodness that men and women, young and old, went to Saluzzo to look upon her. 420

Thus Walter, wedded lowly--no, royally actually--with good fortune and honor, lived at home well at ease and in God's peace, and outside the home he had plenty of favor. And because he had seen that under lowly social rank virtue is often hidden, the people believed him to be a prudent man, and that is seldom seen. This Griselda through her natural wit not only knew all the acts of wifely domesticity, but also, when the case required it, she could promote common profit¹⁰. There was no discord, rancor nor heaviness in all that land which she knew not how to appease, and wisely to bring all those in trouble into rest and satisfaction. Even if her husband were absent, if men of gentle birth or others of her country were angered, she would quickly reconcile them. She had such wise and mature words, and judgments of such equity that people thought she had been sent from heaven to save people and to redress every wrong. 441

¹⁰ Common profit. Public or common good.

Not long after this Griselda was wedded, she bore a daughter, though she had rather have borne a baby boy. The marquis and the people were glad about this. For if a daughter came first, she might by likelihood succeed in bearing a son, since she was not barren. 448

Here ends the second part.

Here begins the third part.

It happened, as happens more times than one, that when this child had nursed only a little while, this marquis so longed in his heart to test his wife, and to know her steadfastness, that he could not cast out of his heart this marvelous desire to test his wife. 454

Needlessly, God knows, he intended to frighten her. He had tested her enough already, and found her good at all times. What need was there to test her more and more? Though some men praise it for a subtle mark of wit, as for me I say that it is not fitting to test a wife when there is no need, and to put her in anguish and fear. 462

To this end the marquis plotted in this manner. He came alone by night to the place where she lay, and, with stern face and troubled countenance, said this: "Griselda, that day when I took you out of your poor condition and put you in the estate of high nobility: you have not forgotten that, I believe. I say, Griselda, I trust that this present dignity in which I have placed you does not makes you forgetful that I took you in poor, lowly estate, despite of any present happiness you might experience. Take heed of every word I say, for there is no creature who can hear it but the two of us. 476

You know well yourself how you came here into this house; it has not been a long time. And though you are cherished and dear to me, you are in no way so to my gentle people. They say it is a great shame and woe to them to be subjects and to be in servitude to you, who were born in a little village. And, in truth, especially since your daughter was born, they have spoken these words. But I desire to live my life in quiet and peace with them as before. I cannot be careless in this matter. I must act for the best with your daughter; not as I wish, but only as my people desire. And yet I am loath to do this thing, God knows. And without your knowledge I will not act; but I desire that you give me your consent in this thing. Show now in your action the patience you promised me and swore in your village, that day when your marriage was made. 497

When she had heard all this, she changed neither in word nor face nor bearing; it seemed as if she were not grieved. She said, "Lord, all lies in your pleasure. My child and I with hearty obedience are all yours, and you may save or destroy your own possession; act according to your own will. May God so save my soul, nothing can please you that can displease me; I desire to have nothing, and fear to lose nothing, except only you. This will now is in me, and shall always be. No length of time or death can destroy it, or change my heart to another place." 511

This marquis was glad about her answer, yet he pretended as if he were not. His expression and his look were dreary when he went from the chamber. Soon after this he secretly told his full purpose unto a trusty man, and sent him to his wife. 518

This man was a kind of officer, whom he had often found faithful in weighty matters; such people can discreetly execute things, bad as well as good. The lord well knew he loved and feared him. And when this officer knew his lord's will, he entered the chamber. 525

"Madame," he said, "though I may be doing a thing to which I am constrained, you must forgive me of it. You are so wise that you know well that lords' behests must not be avoided. These commands may well be bewailed or lamented; but one must obey the lord's pleasure, and so I shall. There is nothing more to say. I am commanded to take this child." And he said no more, but caught up the child pitilessly and made motions as though he would have slain it before he departed. 536

Griselda must endure all and comply in all things, and sat meek and quiet as a lamb and let him do his will. This man had a bad reputation; his face was suspect, as were his words; suspect also was the time in which he carried this out. Alas, she thought he would have slain her daughter, whom she loved so, right then. But still she neither wept nor sighed, consenting to what the marquis willed. But at last she began to speak, and meekly prayed the officer that, as he was a worthy man and of gentle stock, she might kiss her child before it died. 550

And with a calm face she laid this little child in her bosom, and she then blessed it, lulled it, and afterwards kissed it. And then she said in her gentle voice, "Farewell, my child, I shall never see you again. But since I have marked you with the cross of that Father—blessed may he be—Who died for us on a cross of wood. Your soul, little child, I commit to Him, for this night you shall die for my sake." 560

I believe that to a nurse it would have been hard to see this pitiful act; well might a mother have cried, "Alas!" Yet she was so calm and steadfast that she endured all adversity, and meekly said to the officer, "Take here your little young maiden again. Go now, do my lord's command," she said. "But by your grace I will pray you one thing, that, unless my lord forbade you, at least you bury this little body in some spot where no beasts or birds may tear it to pieces." But to that he would speak no word, and took the child and went his way. 574

This officer came back to his lord and told him Griselda's words and demeanor, point for point, in short and plain, and presented him with his sweet daughter. This lord felt some pity, after his fashion, but nevertheless, as lords do when they will have their way, held still to his purpose, and told this officer that he should secretly wind and wrap this child softly and tenderly with all his care, and carry it in a crib or cloth; but, upon pain of having his head struck off; he should let no man know his purpose, nor from where he came or where he went. And he should take it to the lord's dear sister at Bologna, who at that time was countess of Panico¹¹, and should explain this matter to her, beseeching her to do her best to foster this child in all matters of gentle breeding. And he bade her to hide whose child it was from every creature, no matter what might happen. And the sergeant went, and carried this thing out. 596

But now we return to this marquis. For now he went intently examining whether he could see by his wife's bearing, or perceive by her speech, that she was changed. But he never could find her as anything but steadfast and gentle at all times. In every way she was as glad, as humble, and as busy in service and in love to him as she was accustomed to be, and she spoke not a word of her daughter. 606

No accidental evidence of any affliction she felt was seen in her, nor did she ever mention her daughter's name, in earnest or in game¹². 609

Here ends the third part.

Here follows the fourth part.

Four years in this manner passed, before she was with child again; but now, as God willed, she bore by this Walter a baby boy, gracious and fair to see. And when people told it to his father, not only he but all

¹¹ Panico. Near Bologna.

¹² In earnest or in game. I.e., on any account.

his land was merry for this child, and thanked and praised God. When it was two years old and parted from the breast of its nurse, one day the desire seized the marquis to test his wife yet again, if he could. Ah, needless was the test! But wedded men know no moderation, when they find a patient creature. 624

"Wife," said this marquis, "before this, you have heard that my people dislike our marriage, and especially is it worse than ever in our lives now since my son is born. The murmuring slays my heart! For the voice comes to my ears so bitterly that it nearly destroys my spirit. They say this now: "When Walter is gone, then shall the blood of Janicula succeed and be our lord, for we have no other." Such words my people surely say. Well ought I to take heed of such murmuring, for in truth I fear it, though they speak not openly in my presence; I wish to live in peace, if I could. For this reason I am fully resolved to serve him secretly by night as I served his sister. I warn you of this, lest you suddenly act distractedly in your grief; be patient, I pray you. 644

She said, "I have said, and ever shall, that I wish nothing and refuse nothing, in truth, except as you wish. I grieve not at all though my daughter and son have been slain, as it was at your command. I have had no part in my two children except sickness first, and then woe and pain. You are our lord: do with your own just as you wish. Ask no advice from me, for just as I left at home all of my clothing when I first came to you, so I left my will and all my freedom, and took your clothing. Therefore, I pray you, do your pleasure; I will obey your will. 658

And surely, if I had foreknowledge to understand your desire before you told it to me, I would do it without neglect. But now that I know your desire and what you wish, I hold firmly to all your pleasure. For if I knew that my death would do you pleasure, I would die very gladly to please you. Death can hold no comparison to your love." 667

And when this marquis saw the constancy of his wife, he cast down his two eyes, and marveled that she could suffer all this treatment in patience. And he went forth with dreary countenance, but in his heart was great gladness. This ill-favored officer, just as he seized her daughter, in the same way or worse (if a man could contrive worse) caught up her son, who was so full of beauty. And likewise she was so patient that she made no heavy expression, but kissed her son and crossed him. The only exception was this: she prayed the man that, if he could, he should bury her little son in the earth, to save his tender limbs from fowls and beasts. 683

But she could get no answer from him; he went his way as if he did not care. But he brought the child right tenderly to Bologna. This marquis more and more wondered at her patience; and if he had not truly known before this that she loved her children perfectly, he would have thought that she had endured this with such a calm expression out of some deception, and from cruelty or malice. But in truth he knew that next to him she loved her children best of the whole world. 695

But now I would gladly ask of women if these tests should not have sufficed. What more could a harsh husband contrive to test her wifhood and steadfastness, while he continued at all times in his harshness? But there are people of such disposition that, when they have taken a certain course, they cannot stop, but just as if they were bound to a stake, they will not slacken from that first purpose. Just so, this marquis intended fully to test his wife, as he was first inclined. 707

He watched to see by word or bearing if she were changed toward him, but never could find variance; she was always the same in heart and expression. And the older she grew, the truer in love she was to him, if that were possible, and the more painstaking. It seemed that in the two of them there was but one will, for as Walter wished, the same was her pleasure as well. And, God be thanked, all happened for the best. She well showed that for no earthly discomfort should a wife wish anything, except as her husband may wish. 721

The evil reputation of Walter spread often and widely, that by a cruel heart he had wickedly murdered both his children in secret, because he had wedded a poor woman. Such murmur was commonly among them; it is no wonder, for no word came to the people's ears except that they were murdered. Therefore though his people before had loved him well, the scandal made them hate him. To be a murderer is a hateful report! But nevertheless he would not stop from his cruel purpose in earnest or in game¹³; his mind was fully set upon testing his wife. 735

When his daughter was twelve years of age, he sent his messenger to the court of Rome, which had been informed of his will already in secret fashion, commanding them to contrive such bulls as should answer his cruel purpose: how the pope, as if for the quiet of his people, ordered him wed another if he

¹³ In earnest or in game. I.e., on any account.

would. I say he commanded that they should counterfeit the papal bulls, making mention that he had leave to abandon his first wife, as if by the pope's dispensation, to stop the rancor and strife between his people and him; thus said the bull, which they made public to all. The common people, and no wonder, knew full well that it would be so. When these tidings came to Griselda, I believe her heart was sad; but she, this humble creature, always just as constant, was entirely ready to endure the adversity of Fortune, awaiting always his desire and pleasure, to whom, heart and all, she was given as to her true earthly sufficiency. 759

But, to tell this story shortly, the marquis wrote a special letter in which he showed all full intention, and dispatched it secretly to Bologna. He especially prayed the earl of Panigo, who had wedded his sister, to bring his two children home again openly in honorable state. But he asked him one thing above all, that though men should ask, he should tell no creature whose children they were, but say that the maiden was to be wedded soon to the Marquis of Saluzzo. And this earl did just as he was asked. 773

For on the day set he went on his way toward Saluzzo, along with many lords in a rich company, to escort this maiden; her young brother riding beside her. This blooming maiden was arrayed in preparation for her marriage with many clear gems; her brother, seven years old, was also arrayed freshly, as befitted him. And thus with great magnificence and joyful mood they rode from day to day on their journey, shaping their course toward Saluzzo. 784

Here ends the fourth part.

Here follows the fifth part.

Meanwhile, and after all his wicked behavior, to test his wife still more, to prove her disposition to the utmost, and to learn fully whether she were as steadfast as formerly, one day in front of others this marquis spoke these words roughly to her: "Surely, Griselda, I have had pleasure enough in having you as a wife, for your goodness, loyalty and obedience, not for any lineage or wealth of yours. But now, when I well reflect, I know in very truth that in greatness of rank there is great servitude in various ways; I have not the freedom of every ploughman. My people cry day after day and force me to take another wife. And the pope also, to allay rancor, consents to this. And in truth I must tell you this: that my new wife is on her way. Be strong of heart, and leave her place. And the dowry that you brought me, take it again; I grant you that grace. Return to your

father's house. No person may have prosperity always. I counsel you to endure the stroke of Fortune or of chance with a steady heart." 812

And she answered again patiently, "My lord, I know, and knew always, that no man may make comparison between your magnificence and my poverty; no man can say that nay. I never held myself worthy in any way to be your wife; no, nor your chamber-maid. And I take almighty God as my witness, and--may He so surely gladden my soul--in this house where you made me a lady I never held myself to be the lady or mistress, but humble servant to your honor, above every earthly creature; and so I shall ever be as long as I shall live. 833

"Through your kindness you have so long held me in honor and dignity of which I was not worthy; for that I thank God and you, and I pray Him to reward you. There is no more to say. Gladly will I return to my father, and dwell with him to the end of my life. Where I was fostered from childhood, I will lead my life until I die, a widow pure in body, heart and all. For since I gave you my maidenhead and am your undoubted loyal wife, God forbids that such a lord's wife take another man as husband or mate. And with your new wife may God through His grace grant you happiness and prosperity; I will gladly yield her my room where I was accustomed to be happy, for since it pleases you that I shall go, my lord, who were once all my heart's repose, I will go when you desire. 847

"But as for your offer such dowry as I first brought, it is well in my mind that it was only my wretched unsightly clothing, which now would be hard to recover. O good God! How noble and kind you seemed by your speech and expression that day when our marriage was made! But to tell the truth--at least I find it to be truth, for it is proved in me--love old is not as it was new. 857

"But certainly, lord, even if I were to die for it, for no adversity shall it ever be that I shall repent in word or deed of giving you my heart with full purpose. My lord, you know that you had me stripped of my poor clothes in my father's home, and by your grace clad me richly. Truly I brought nothing else to you, except faithfulness and nakedness and maidenhead. And here I return my clothing forevermore, and my wedding-ring as well. The remnant of your jewels, I dare assure you, are ready within your chamber. 870

"Naked I came out of my father's house, and naked must I return¹⁴. All your pleasure I gladly would follow, yet I hope it would not be your will that I go out of your palace smockless. You could not do so unseemly a thing as permit that body in which your children once lay to be seen entirely bare before the people as I walk. For this reason, I pray you, let me not go like a worm by the road. Recall, my own lord so dear, I was your wife, though unworthy. As reward for my maidenhead, therefore, which I brought and do not bear away again, promise to give me as payment only such a smock as I was accustomed to wear, so that I may cover the body of her who was your wife. And here, lest I offend you, I take my leave of you, my own lord." 889

He replied, "The smock which you have on your back, let it remain there and bear it forth with you." But for the compassion and pity he felt he could scarcely speak these words, and needed to go out. Before the people she strips herself, and goes forth toward her father's house in her smock, with her head and feet entirely bare. 896

The people follow her, weeping in their way, and as they go they curse Fortune at all points. But she kept her eyes dry of tears, and in this entire time spoke no word. Her father, who soon heard these tidings, cursed the day and hour that nature formed him to be a living being; for in truth this old poor man was always suspicious of her marriage, and ever since the beginning he judged that when this lord had accomplished his desires, he would think it a disgrace to his estate to descend so low, and would discard her as soon as he could. 910

He went quickly to meet his daughter, for by the noise of the people he knew she was coming, and weeping sorely he covered her with her old coat, as well as he could. But he could not cover her entire body, for the cloth was coarse and much older than it was on the day of her marriage. 917

Thus for a certain time this flower of wifely patience dwelt with her father, in such a way that neither by her words nor by her expression, before the people or in their absence, did she show that injury had been done her; nor did she seem to have any remembrance of her high estate. And it was no wonder; for in her great estate her spirit had always been in complete humility; hers had been no delicate palate or pleasure-loving heart, no pomp or semblance of

¹⁴ Naked I . . . return. This line echoes Job 1.21. "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again."

royalty, but she was always full of patience kindness, discreet, humble, always honorable, as well as meek and constant to her husband at all times. Men speak of Job¹⁵, and most of all of his humility, as scholars can well explain when they wish to speak concerning holy men. But in truth, though clerks praise women rather little, no man can behave as humbly as a woman can, nor can be half so loyal as a woman can be, unless it has happened very recently. 938

[Part Six¹⁶]

This earl of Panigo had come from Bologna, from which the report spread among great and small. And it was known in the ears of all the people that he brought with him a new marchioness in such magnificence and splendor that never had the eye of man seen so noble an array in all of West Lombardy. The marquis, who planned and knew all this, before the earl came, sent his messenger to this same simple poor Griselda. And she came at his command with humble heart and glad expression and with no swelling thoughts in her mind, and set down on her knees, and greeted him reverently and discreetly. 952

“Griselda,” he said, “it is fully my intention that this maiden, who shall be wedded to me, be received tomorrow in my house as royally as it is possible; and that every creature according to his degree shall be seated, served, and entertained as best as I can arrange it. In truth I have no women able to put the rooms in order according to my preferences; and therefore I gladly would like it if all the oversight of it were yours. You know also from before all my pleasure. Though your clothes may be poor and wretched-looking, do you your duty, at the least.” 966

She said, “Not only, lord, am I glad to do your pleasure now, but in all things I desire also to serve you and to please you in my degree without fainting, and shall evermore. Never, for joy or woe, shall the spirit in my heart cease to love you best with all my loyal purpose. 973

¹⁵ Job. Biblical figure who had all the worldly gifts one could ever want and head them all stripped away from him as a test of his virtue. Like Griselda, he is known for his patience; thus the phrase, “the patience of Job.”

¹⁶ Part Six. Though there is little evidence in the manuscripts that Chaucer intended another section division to be included here, most editors, perhaps because a section break at this point will keep the length of the sections consistent and perhaps because there is a distinctly different scene beginning here, conjecture that a new section is warranted.

And with that word she began to prepare the house and to set tables and make beds, and took pains to do all she could, asking the chambermaids for God's sake to hurry and shake and sweep fast. And she, the hardest-working of all, arranged the hall and every chamber. 980

About mid-morning this earl alighted, and with him these two noble children, whose array, so richly furnished, the people ran to gaze upon. And then first they said among themselves that Walter was no fool though he desired to change his wife, for it was for the best. For, as they all judged, she was fairer than Griselda, and of more tender years; and fairer fruit and more pleasing should spring from them, because of her high lineage. Her brother also was so fair of face that the people were pleased to see them, commending now the choice of the marquis. 994

“O stormy people! Changeable as a weather vane, unstable, ever faithless, indiscreet, delighting always in new rumor! Forever you wax and wane like the moon. Ever full of gabbing that is not worth a farthing! Your judgment is false, and your constancy turns out badly; anyone who trusts in you is a great fool.” So said the serious people in that city, when the people were gazing this way and that, because they were glad, only for the novelty of it, to have a new lady of their town. I make no more mention of this; but I will address myself again to Griselda, and tell of her constancy and zeal. 1008

Griselda was very busy in all that pertained to the feast. Not at all was she ashamed of her clothing, though it was rude and somewhat torn. But with glad countenance she took herself to the gate with the other people, to greet the marchioness, and after that continued her tasks. And she received the guests with such glad appearance and discernment, each according to his degree, that none perceived any fault; but they always wondered who she might be, who was in such poor attire, and yet so well understood stately ceremony, and they praised the worthiness of her prudence. 1022

Meanwhile she did not cease to commend so well this maiden, and her brother, with all her heart and gracious temper, so that none could have praised them better. 1026

At last, when these lords went to sit down to their meal, the marquis called Griselda while she was busy in his hall. 1029

“Griselda,” he said, as if it were in jest, “how do you like my wife, and her beauty? 1031

"Very well, my lord," she answered; "for in good faith I never saw a more beautiful one. I pray God to give her prosperity, and much pleasure to you both until your life's end. One thing I ask you and warn you also: that you do not prick this tender maiden with any tormenting, as you have others. For she has been fostered more tenderly, and, to my thinking, she could not bear adversity as could a creature fostered in poverty." 1043

And when this Walter saw her patience, and glad expression without any malice, though he had so often afflicted her, and how she was ever steady and constant as a wall, continuing at all times her innocence, this stern marquis began to incline his heart to take pity upon her wifely steadfastness. 1050

"This is enough, my Griselda. Be no more aghast," said he, "nor displeased. I have tested your loyalty and your kindness both in a great rank and in poverty, as well as ever woman was tested. Now I know, dear wife, your steadfastness." And he took her in his arms and began to kiss her. And she in her wonder paid no attention to it; she did not hear what he said to her. She acted as if she had just started out of a sleep, until she came to her senses out of her dazedness. 1061

"Griselda," he said, "by God Who died for us, you are my wife, nor have I another, nor ever had, so God save my soul! This is your daughter whom you supposed to be my wife; the other, in faith, shall be my heir, as I have always intended. You bare him truly in your body. I have kept them secretly at Bologna; but take them back, for now you cannot say that you have lost either of your two children. And people that have said otherwise of me, I warn them well that I have done this deed out of neither malice nor cruelty, but to test your womanhood; not to slay my children--God forbid--but to keep them secretly until I knew all your mind and will." 1078

When she heard this, she fell down in a swoon for piteous joy, and after her swooning she called both her young children to her; and, piteously weeping, embraced them in her arms and tenderly kissed them, just as a mother, with her salt tears bedewing their hair and their faces. Ah, what a pitiful thing it was to see her swooning and to hear her humble voice! 1087

"Lord have mercy," she said, "I thank you that you have saved me my dear children. Now I do not care even if I should die right here; since I stand in your love and grace, no matter when my spirit departs. O, my tender, dear young children! Your sorrowful

mother believed very well that cruel hounds or some foul vermin had eaten you; but God in his mercy, and your benign father, have caused you to be tenderly guarded." And in that same moment suddenly she fell to the ground. And in her swoon she held her two children so firmly in her embrace that only with much skill and difficulty they removed the children from her arms. Ah, many tears trickled down many pitying faces among them that stood nearby; scarcely could they remain about her. 1106

Walter cheered her and soothed her sorrow; she rose up from her trance embarrassed, and every creature expressed joy and congratulations to her, until she regained her senses once more. Walter so earnestly strove to please her that it was rare to see the gladness between the two, now that they were joined again. These ladies, when they saw their time, took her and went into a chamber and stripped off her poor garments, and in cloth of gold that shone bright, with a crown of many rich stones upon her head, they led her into the hall, where she was honored as was her due. Thus came this piteous day to a joyous end, for every creature strove to spend the day in mirth and revel, until the stars' light shone in the sky. Far more splendid in every man's sight was this feast, and of greater cost, than was the revel at their wedding. 1127

These two lived many years in great prosperity, harmony, and peace. The marquis married his daughter richly to a lord, one of the worthiest of all Italy. And he kept his wife's father in rest and peace at his court, until the soul crept out of his body. Griselda's son, after his father's day, succeeded to his inheritance in quiet and peace, and was fortunate also in marriage, though he did not put his wife to a great test. 1138

The world is not so strong, there is no denying it, as it was in olden times; listen, therefore to what my author¹⁷ says: This story was not told so that wives will follow Griselda's example in humility, for that would be intolerable even if they wanted to, but so that everyone, according to his station, will be steadfast in adversity as Griselda was. It was with this purpose that Petrarch wrote this story, which is set down in high style. 1148

Since one woman was so patient towards a mortal man, the more we should receive with patience all that God sends us, for it is reasonable that He should test those whom He created. However, He will not

¹⁷ My author. My source (or sources) for this tale, i.e., Boccaccio and Petrarch.

tempt anyone whom he had redeemed, as St. James will tell you if you read his epistle¹⁸. Undoubtedly God tests people every day and permits us often to be beaten in various ways, for our own good, with the sharp lashes of adversity--not so that He may know our qualities, for surely He knew all our weaknesses before we were ever born. His arrangements are all for our profit; let us live then in virtuous patience. 1162

Hear but one more word, ladies and gentlemen, before I stop. Nowadays it would be very hard to find two or three like Griselda in a whole town. For if they were put to such tests, their gold is so badly alloyed with brass¹⁹ that, though the coin appears to be good, it is more likely to break in two than bend. And so, for the love of the Wife of Bath--may God keep her and all her sex in supremacy: it would be a pity otherwise--with all lusty spirit, fresh and vigorous, I shall sing you a song which I think will please you. So let us stop this serious talk; listen to my song which goes like this²⁰: 1176

Chaucer's Envoy²¹

Griselda is dead, and her patience, too, and both are buried together in Italy. Therefore, I openly declare that no married man should be so harsh as to try his wife's patience in hope of finding another Griselda, for he shall certainly fail. 1182

Oh, noble wives, full of high wisdom, let no humility nail down your tongue, and let no scholar have cause or reason to write so marvelous a story about you as the tale of patient Griselda, lest Chichevache²², the cow, swallow you into her belly. Follow the example of Echo²³, who never keeps quiet but always answers

¹⁸ St. James . . . epistle. See James 1.13.

¹⁹ Gold is so badly alloyed with brass. In other words, they are not pure or made entirely of the best elements.

²⁰ Like this. The next section, usually titled in modern editions as "Chaucer's Envoy" (though it is given various headings in the manuscripts), adopts a completely different tone. One might imagine the clerk speaking in a woman's voice, in imitation of the Wife of Bath. It should be apparent that the words the clerk sings here are not his voice, since it refutes what he has just said and tells the audience not to listen to clerks (scholars). The advice offered in these lines also closely aligns with that which the Wife of Bath has offered in her prologue.

²¹ Envoy: usually a short song of parting in which the poet tells his poem to fly off to his intended audience.

²² Chichevache the cow: a lean cow fabled to have fed on patient wives, so it consequently (so the story goes) had little to eat.

²³ Echo: mythological figure whose voice repeated the last syllable of each of her utterances.

back. Don't be tricked in your innocence; take the control into your own hands. Engrave this lesson deeply in your memories, for it will work to the common profit of all. 1194

You wives, strong as big camels, stand up for your own rights; don't allow men to do injustices to you. And weak wives, feeble in battle, be fierce as a tiger, yonder in India; always chatter like a windmill, I advise you. Don't fear men or pay them respect, for though your husband may be dressed in armor, the arrows of your crabbed eloquence will pierce his breast and his helmet. I advise you to bind him with jealousy and you will make him cower like a quail. If you are pretty, show your face and your dress where people are present; if you are ugly, be generous in your spending; always work hard to make friends. Be as gay in spirit as a linden leaf, and let him worry and weep, wring his hands and wail! 1212

Behold the merry words of the host²⁴.

When the clerk had finished his story, our host swore and said: "By God's bones, I'd rather my wife at home had heard this story just once than have a barrel of ale! That's a good story for that purpose. You people know what I'd like, but leave behind what can not be." 1212a-g.

Here ends the Tale of the Clerk of Oxford.

Translated and Edited by Gerard NeCastro
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²⁴ Merry words of the host. This part does not appear in all manuscripts, but is considered by most editors to be worthy of inclusion.