

WILFRID BLUNT

GRISELDA: A SOCIETY
NOVEL IN RHYMED
VERSE

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novel in rhymed verse

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Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

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CHAPTER I

An idle story with an idle moral!
Why do I tell it, at the risk of quarrel
With nobler themes? The world, alas! is so,
And who would gather truth must bend him low,
Nor fear to soil his knees with graveyard ground,
If haply there some flower of truth be found.
For human nature is an earthy fruit,
Mired at the stem and fleshy at the root,
And thrives with folly's mixon best o'erlaid,
Nor less divinely so, when all is said.
Brave lives are lived, and worthy deeds are done
Each virtuous day, 'neath the all-pitying sun;
But these are not the most, perhaps not even
The surest road to our soul's modern heaven.
The best of us are creatures of God's chance
(Call it His grace), which works deliverance;
The rest mere pendulums 'twixt good and ill,
Like soldiers marking time while standing still.

'Tis all their strategy, who have lost faith
In things Divine beyond man's life and death,
Pleasure and pain. Of heaven what know we,
Save as unfit for angels' company,
Say rather hell's? We cling to sins confessed,
And say our prayers still hoping for the best.
We fear old age and ugliness and pain,
And love our lives, nor look to live again.

I do but parable the crowd I know,
The human cattle grazing as they go,
Unheedful of the heavens. Here and there
Some prouder, may be, or less hungry steer
Lifting his face an instant to the sky,
And left behind as the bent herd goes by,
Or stung to a short madness, tossing wild
His horns aloft, and charging the gay field,
Till the fence stops him, and he vanquished too,
Turns to his browsing – lost his Waterloo.

The moral of my tale I leave to others
More bold, who point the finger at their brothers,
And surer know than I which way is best
To virtue's goal, where all of us find rest,
Whether in stern denial of things sweet,
Or yielding timely, lest life lose its feet
And fall the further.

A plain tale is mine

Of naked fact, unconscious of design,
Told of the world in this last century
Of man's (not God's) disgrace, the XIXth. We
Have made it all a little as it is
In our own images and likenesses,
And need the more forgiveness for our sin.

Therefore, my Muse, impatient to begin,
I bid thee fearless forward on thy road:
Steer thou thy honest course 'twixt bad and good.
Know this, in art that thing alone is evil
Which shuns the one plain word that shames the devil.
Tell truth without preamble or excuse,
And all shall be forgiven thee – all, my Muse!

In London then not many years ago
There lived a lady of high fashion, who
For her friends' sake, if any still there be
Who hold her virtues green in memory,
Shall not be further named in this true tale
Than as Griselda or the Lady L.,
Such, if I err not, was the second name
Her parents gave when to the font she came,
And such the initial letter bravely set

On her coach door, beneath the coronet,
Which bore her and her fortunes – bore, alas!
For, as in this sad world all things must pass,
However great and nobly framed and fair:
Griselda, too, is of the things that were.

But while she lived Griselda had no need
Of the world's pity. She was proudly bred
And proudly nurtured. Plenty her full horn
Had fairly emptied out when she was born,
And dowered her with all bounties. She was fair
As only children of the noblest are,
And brave and strong and opulent of health,
Which made her take full pleasure of her wealth.
She had a pitying scorn of little souls
And little bodies, levying heavy tolls
On all the world which was less strong than she.
She used her natural strength most naturally,
And yet with due discretion, so that all
Stood equally in bondage to her thrall.
She was of that high godlike shape and size
Which has authority in all men's eyes:
Her hair was brown, her colour white and red,
Nor idly moved to blush. She held her head
Straight with her back. Her body, from the knee
Tall and clean shaped, like some well-nurtured tree,
Rose finely finished to the finger tips;
She had a noble carriage of the hips,
And that proportionate waist which only art

Dares to divine, harmonious part with part.
But of this more anon, or rather never.
All that the world could vaunt for its endeavour
Was the fair promise of her ankles set
Upon a pair of small high-instepped feet,
In whose behalf, though modestly, God wot,
As any nun, she raised her petticoat
One little inch more high than reason meet
Was for one crossing a well-besomed street.
This was the only tribute she allowed
To human folly and the envious crowd;
Nor for my part would I be found her judge
For her one weakness, nor appear to grudge
What in myself, as surely in the rest,
Bred strange sweet fancies such as feet suggest.
We owe her all too much. This point apart,
Griselda, modesty's own counterpart,
Moved in the sphere of folly like a star,
Aloof and bright and most particular.

By girlish choice and whim of her first will
She had espoused the amiable Lord L.,
A worthy nobleman, in high repute
For wealth and virtue, and her kin to boot;
A silent man, well mannered and well dressed,
Courteous, deliberate, kind, sublimely blessed
With fortune's favours, but without pretence,
Whom manners almost made a man of sense.
In early life he had aspired to fame

In the world of letters by the stratagem
Of a new issue, from his private press,
Of classic bards in senatorial dress,
"*In usum Marchionis.*" He had spent
Much of his youth upon the Continent,
Purchasing marbles, bronzes, pictures, gems,
In every town from Tiber unto Thames,
And gaining store of curious knowledge too
On divers subjects that the world least knew:
Knowledge uncatalogued, and overlaid
With dust and lumber somewhere in his head.
A slumberous man, in whom the lamp of life
Had never quite been lighted for the strife
And turmoil of the world, but flickered down
In an uncertain twilight of its own,
With an occasional flash, that only made
A deeper shadow for its world of shade.
When he returned to England, all admired
The taste of his collections, and inquired
To whose fair fortunate head the lot should fall
To wear these gems and jewels after all.
But years went by, and still unclaimed they shone,
A snare and stumbling-block to more than one,
Till in his fiftieth year 'twas vaguely said,
Lord L. already had too long delayed.
Be it as it may, he abdicated life
The day he took Griselda to his wife.

And then Griselda loved him. All agreed,

The world's chief sponsors for its social creed,
That, whether poor Lord L. was or was not
The very fool some said and idiot,
Or whether under cloak of dulness crass,
He veiled that sense best suited to his case,
Sparing his wit, as housewives spare their light,
For curtain eloquence and dead of night;
And spite of whispered tales obscurely spread,
Doubting the fortunes of her nuptial bed,
Here at this word all sides agreed to rest:
Griselda did her duty with the best.

Yet, poor Griselda! When in lusty youth
A love-sick boy I stood unformed, uncouth,
And watched with sad and ever jealous eye
The vision of your beauty passing by,
Why was it that that brow inviolate,
That virginal courage yet unscared by fate,
That look the immortal queen and huntress wore
To frightened shepherds' eyes in days of yore
Consoled me thus, and soothed unconsciously,
And stilled my jealous fears I knew not why?
How shall I tell the secret of your soul
Which then I blindly guessed, or how cajole
My boyhood's ancient folly to declare
Now in my wisdom the dear maid you were,
Though such the truth?

Griselda's early days

Of married life were not that fitful maze
Of tears and laughter which betoken aught,
Changed or exchanged, of pain with pleasure bought,
Of maiden freedom conquered and subdued,
Of hopes new born and fears of womanhood.
Those who then saw Griselda saw a child
Well pleased and happy, thoughtlessly beguiled
By every simplest pleasure of her age,
Gay as a bird just issued from its cage,
When every flower is sweet. No eye could trace
Doubt or disquiet written on her face,
Where none there was. And, if the truth be told,
Griselda grieved not that Lord L. was old.
She found it well that her sweet seventeen
Should live at peace with fifty, and was seen
Just as she felt, contented with her lot,
Pleased with what was and pleased with what was not.
She held her husband the more dear that he
Was kind within the bounds of courtesy,
And love was not as yet within her plan,
And life was fair, and wisdom led the van.

For she was wise – oh, wise! She rose at eight
And played her scales till breakfast, and then sat
The morning through with staid and serious looks,
Counting the columns of her household books,
Her daily labour, or with puzzled head
Bent over languages alive and dead,
Wise as, alas! in life those only are

Who have not yet beheld a twentieth year.
Wealth had its duties, time its proper use,
Youth and her marriage should be no excuse;
Her education must be made complete!
Lord L. looked on and quite approved of it.
The afternoons, in sense of duty done,
Went by more idly than the rest had gone.
If in the country, which Lord L. preferred,
She had her horse, her dogs, her favourite bird,
Her own rose-garden, which she loved to rake,
Her fish to feed with bread crumbs in the lake,
Her schools, old women, poor and almshouses,
Her sick to visit, or her church to dress.
Lord L. was pleased to see her bountiful:
They hardly found the time to find it dull.

In London, where they spent their second year,
Came occupations suited to the sphere
In which they lived; and to the just pretence
Of our Griselda's high-born consequence,
New duties to the world which no excuse
Admitted. She was mistress of L. House
And heir to its traditions. These must be
Observed by her in due solemnity.
Her natural taste, I think, repelled the noise,
The rush, and dust, and crush of London joys;
But habit, which becomes a second sense,
Had reconciled her to its influence
Even in girlhood, and she long had known

That life in crowds may still be life alone,
While mere timidity and want of ease
She never ranked among youth's miseries.
She had her parents too, who made demand
Upon her thoughts and time, and close at hand
Sisters and friends. With these her days were spent
In simple joys and girlish merriment.
She would not own that being called a wife
Should make a difference in her daily life.

Then London lacks not of attractions fit
For serious minds, and treasures infinite
Of art and science for ingenious eyes,
And learning for such wits as would be wise,
Lectures in classes, galleries, schools of art:
In each Griselda played conspicuous part —
Pupil and patron, ay, and patron-saint
To no few poor who live by pens and paint.
The world admired and flattered as a friend,
And only wondered what would be the end.

And so the days went by. Griselda's face,
Calm in its outline of romantic grace,
Became a type even to the vulgar mind
Of all that beauty means when most refined,
The visible symbol of a soul within,
Conceived immaculate of human sin,
And only clothed in our humanity
That we may learn to praise and better be.

Where'er she went, instinctively the crowd
Made way before her, and ungrudging bowed
To one so fair as to a queen of earth,
Ruling by right of conquest and of birth.

And thus I first beheld her, standing calm
In the swayed crowd upon her husband's arm,
One opera night, the centre of all eyes,
So proud she seemed, so fair, so sweet, so wise.
Some one behind me whispered "Lady L.
His Lordship too! and thereby hangs a tale."

His Lordship! I beheld a placid man,
With gentle deep-set eyes, and rather wan,
And rather withered, yet on whose smooth face
Time seemed to have been in doubt what lines to trace
Of youth or age, and so had left it bare,
As it had left its colour to his hair.
An old young man perhaps, or really old,
Which of the two could never quite be told.
I judged him younger than his years gave right:
His looks betrayed him least by candlelight.
Yet, young or old, that night he seemed to me
Sublime, the priest of her divinity
At whose new shrine I worshipped. But enough
Of me and my concerns! More pertinent stuff
My tale requires than this first boyish love,
Which never found the hour its fate to prove.
My Lady smiling motions with her hand;

The crowd falls back; his Lordship, gravely bland,
Leads down the steps to where his footmen stay
In state. Griselda's carriage stops the way!

And was Griselda happy? Happy? – Yes,
In her first year of marriage, and no less
Perhaps, too, in her second and her third.
For youth is proud, nor cares its last sad word
To ask of fate, and not unwilling clings
To what the present hour in triumph brings.
It was enough, as I have said, for her
That she was young and fortunate and fair.
The world that loved her was a lovely world,
The rest she knew not of. Fate had not hurled
A single spear as yet against her life.
She would not argue as 'twixt maid and wife,
Where both were woman, human nature, man,
Which held the nobler place in the world's plan.
Her soul at least was single, and must be
Unmated still through its eternity.
And, even here in life, what reason yet
To doubt or question or despair of Fate?
Her youth, an ample web, before her shone
For hope to weave its subtlest fancies on,
If she had cared to dream. Her lot was good
Beyond the common lot of womanhood,
And she would prove her fortune best in this,
That she would not repine at happiness.
Thus to her soul she argued as the Spring

Brought back its joy to each begotten thing —
Begotten and begetting. Who shall say
Which had the better reason, she or they?

In the fourth year a half acknowledged grief
Made its appearance in Griselda's life.
Her sisters married, younger both than she,
Mere children she had thought, and happily.
Each went her way engrossed by her new bliss,
Too gay to guess Griselda's dumb distress.
Her home was broken. In their pride they wrote
Things that like swords against her bosom smote,
The detail of their hopes, and loves, and fears.
Griselda read, and scarce restrained her tears.
Her mother too, the latest fledgling flown,
Had vanished from the world. She was alone.

When she returned to London, earlier
Than was her custom, in the following year,
She found her home a desert, dark and gaunt;
L. House looked emptier, gloomier than its wont.
Griselda sighed, for on the table lay
Two letters, which announced each in its way
The expected tidings of her sisters' joy.
Either was brought to bed – and with a boy.
Her generous heart leaped forth to these in vain,
It could not cheat a first sharp touch of pain,
But yielded to its sorrow.

That same night,
Lord L., whose sleep was neither vexed nor light,
And who for many years had ceased to dream,
Beheld a vision. Slowly he became
Aware of a strange light which in his eyes
Shone to his vast discomfort and surprise;
And, while perplexed with vague mistrusts and fears,
He saw a face, Griselda's face, in tears
Before him. She was standing by his bed
Holding a candle. It was cold, she said,
And shivered. And he saw her wrap her shawl
About her shoulders closely like a pall.
Why was she there? Why weeping? Why this light,
Burning so brightly in the dead of night?
These riddles poor Lord L.'s half-wakened brain
Tried dimly to resolve, but tried in vain.

"I cannot sleep to-night," went on the voice,
"The streets disturb me strangely with their noise,
The cabs, the striking clocks." Lord L.'s distress
Struggled with sleep. He thought he answered "Yes."
"What can I do to make me sleep? I am ill,
Unnerv'd to-night. This house is like a well.
Do I disturb you here, and shall I go?"
Lord L. was moved. He thought he answered "No."
"If you would speak, perhaps my tears would stop.
Speak! only speak!"

Lord L. here felt a drop

Upon his hand. She had put down the light,
And sat upon his bed forlornly white
And pale and trembling. Her dark hair unbound
Lay on her knees. Her lips moved, but their sound
Came strangely to his ears and half-unheard.
He only could remember the last word:
"I am unhappy – listen L.! – alone."
She touched his shoulder and he gave a groan.
"This is too much. You do not hear me. See,
I cannot stop these tears. Too much!"

And he
Now well awake, looked round him. He could catch
A gleam of light just vanished, and the latch
Seemed hardly silent. This was all he knew.
He sat some moments doubting what to do,
Rose, went out, shivered, hearing nothing, crept
Back to his pillow, where the vision wept
Or seemed to weep awhile ago, and then
With some disquiet went to sleep again.

Next morning, thinking of his dream, Lord L.
Went down to breakfast in intent to tell
The story of his vision. But he met
With little sympathy. His wife was late,
And in a hurry for her school of art.
His lordship needed time to make a start
On any topic, and no time she gave.
Griselda had appointments she must save,

And could not stop to hear of rhyme or reason —
The dream must wait a more convenient season.
And so it was not told.

Alas, alas!

Who shall foretell what wars shall come to pass,
What woes be wrought, what fates accomplished,
What new dreams dreamt, what new tears vainly shed,
What doubts, what anguish, what remorse, what fears
Begotten in the womb of what new years! —
And all because of this, that poor Lord L.
Was slow of speech, or that he slept too well!

CHAPTER II

Thus then it was. Griselda's childhood ends
With this untoward night; and what portends
May only now be guessed by those who read
Signs on the earth and wonders overhead.
I dare not prophesy.

What next appears
In the vain record of Griselda's years
Is hardly yet a token, for her life
Showed little outward sign of change or strife,
Though she was changed and though perhaps at war.
Her face still shone untroubled as a star
In the world's firmament, and still she moved,
A creature to be wondered at and loved.
Her zeal, her wit, her talents, her good sense
Were all unchanged, though each seemed more intense
And lit up with new passion and inspired
To active purpose, valiant and untired.
She faced the world, talked much and well, made friends,
Promoted divers schemes for divers ends,
Artistic, social, philanthropical:
She had a store of zeal for each and all.
She pensioned poets, nobly took in hand
An emigration plan to Newfoundland,

Which ended in disaster and a ball.
She visited St. George's hospital,
The Home for Fallen Women, founded schools
Of music taught on transcendental rules.
L. House was dull though splendid. She had schemes
Of a vast London palace on the Thames,
Which should combine all orders new and old
Of architectural taste a house could hold,
And educate the masses. Then one day,
She fairly wearied and her soul gave way.

Again she sought Lord L., but not to ask
This time his counsel in the thankless task
She could no more make good, the task of living.
He was too mere a stranger to her grieving,
Her needs, her weakness. All her woman's heart
Was in rebellion at the idle part
He played in her sad life, and needed not
Mere pity for a pain to madness wrought.
She did not ask his sympathy. She said
Only that she was weary as the dead,
And needed change of air, and life, and scene:
She wished to go where all the world had been —
To Paris, Florence, Rome. She could not die
And not have seen the Alps and Italy.
Lord L. had tried all Europe, and knew best
Where she could flee her troubles and find rest.
Such was her will. Lord L., without more goad,
Prepared for travel – and they went abroad.

I will not follow here from day to day
Griselda's steps. Suffice it if I say
She found her wished-for Paris wearisome,
Another London and without her home,
And so went on, as still the fashion was,
Some years ago, e'er Pulman cars with gas
And quick night flittings had submerged mankind
In one mad dream of luggage left behind,
By the Rhone boat to Provence. This to her
Seemed a delicious land, strange, barren, fair,
An old-world wilderness of greys and browns,
Rocks, olive-gardens, grim dismantled towns,
Deep-streeted, desolate, yet dear to see,
Smelling of oil and of the Papacy.
Griselda first gave reins to her romance
In this forgotten corner of old France,
Feeding her soul on that ethereal food,
The manna of days spent in solitude.
Lord L. was silent. She, as far away
Saw other worlds which were not of to-day,
With cardinals, popes, Petrarch and the Muse.
She stopped to weep with Laura at Vacluse,
Where waiting in the Mistral poor Lord L.,
Who did not weep, sat, slept and caught a chill;
This sent them southwards on through Christendom,
To Genoa, Florence, and at last to Rome,
Where they remained the winter.

Change had wrought
A cure already in Griselda's thought,
Or half a cure. The world in truth is wide,
If we but pace it out from side to side,
And our worst miseries thus the smaller come.
Griselda was ashamed to grieve in Rome,
Among the buried griefs of centuries,
Her own sweet soul's too pitiful disease.
She found amid that dust of human hopes
An incantation for all horoscopes,
A better patience in that wreck of Time:
Her secret woes seemed chastened and sublime
There in the amphitheatre of woe.
She suffered with the martyrs. These would know,
Who offered their chaste lives and virgin blood,
How mortal frailty best might be subdued.
She saw the incense of her sorrow rise
With theirs as an accepted sacrifice
Before the face of the Eternal God
Of that Eternal City, and she trod
The very stones which seemed their griefs to sound
Beneath her steps, as consecrated ground.
In face of such a suffering hers must be
A drop, a tear in the unbounded sea
Which girds our lives. Rome was the home of grief,
Where all might bring their pain and find relief,
The temple of all sorrows: surely yet,
Sorrow's self here seemed swallowed up in it.

'Twas thus she comforted her soul. And then,
She had found a friend, a phoenix among men,
Which made it easier to compound with life,
Easier to be a woman and a wife.

This was Prince Belgirate. He of all
The noble band to whose high fortune fall
The name and title proudest upon earth
While pride shall live by privilege of birth,
The name of Roman, shone conspicuous
The head and front of his illustrious house,
Which had produced two pontiffs and a saint
Before the world had heard of Charles le Quint;
A most accomplished nobleman in truth,
And wise beyond the manner of his youth,
With wit and art and learning, and that sense
Of policy which still is most intense
Among the fertile brains of Italy,
A craft inherited from days gone by.
As scholar he was known the pupil apt
Of Mezzofanti, in whose learning lapped
And prized and tutored as a wondrous child,
He had sucked the milk of knowledge undefiled
While yet a boy, and brilliantly anon
Had pushed his reputation thus begun
Through half a score of tongues. In art his place
Was as chief patron of the rising race,
Which dreamed new conquests on the glorious womb
Of ancient beauty laid asleep in Rome.

The glories of the past he fain would see
Wrought to new life in this new century,
By that continuous instinct of her sons,
Which had survived Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Huns,
To burst upon a wondering world again
With full effulgence in the Julian reign.

In politics, though prudently withdrawn
From the public service, which he held in scorn,
As being unworthy the deliberate zeal
Of one with head to think or heart to feel;
And being neither priest, nor soldier, nor
Versed in the practice of Canonic lore,
He made his counsels felt and privately
Lent his best influence to "the Powers that be," —
Counsels the better valued that he stood
Alone among the youth of stirring blood,
And bowed not to that Baal his proud knee,
The national false goddess, Italy.
He was too stubborn in his Roman pride
To trick out this young strumpet as a bride,
And held in classic scorn who would become
Less than a Roman citizen in Rome.
A man of heart besides and that light wit
Which leavens all, even pedantry's conceit.
None better knew than he the art to shew
A little less in talk than all he knew.
His manner too, and voice, and countenance,
Imposed on all, and these he knew to enhance

By certain freedoms and simplicities
Of language, which set all his world at ease.
A very peer and prince and paragon,
Griselda thought, Rome's latest, worthiest son,
An intellectual phoenix.

On her night
A sudden dawn had broke, portentous, bright.
Her soul had found its fellow. From the day

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