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The Castle of Otranto

Horace Walpole



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THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO

**A
STORY**

Translated by
William Marshal, Gent.

From the Original Italian of
Onofrio Muralto*

Canon of the Church of St Nicholas
at Otranto

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The Castle of Otranto

A Gothic Story

*...vanæ
fingentur species, tamen ut pes et caput uni
reddantur formæ.*

HOR.*

MANFRED, PRINCE OF OTRANTO, had one son and one daughter: the latter, a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger – a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition; yet, he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda. Manfred had contracted a marriage for his son with the marquis of Vicenza’s daughter, Isabella, and she had already been delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred, that he might celebrate the wedding as soon as Conrad’s infirm state of health would permit. Manfred’s impatience for this ceremonial was remarked by his family and neighbours. The former, indeed, apprehending the severity of their prince’s disposition, did not dare to utter their surmises on this precipitation. Hippolita, his wife, an amiable lady, did sometimes venture to represent the danger of marrying their only son so early, considering his great youth and greater infirmities, but she never received any other answer than reflections on her own sterility, who had given him but one heir. His tenants and subjects were less cautious in their discourses: they attributed this hasty wedding to the prince’s dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced that “the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it”. It was difficult to make any

sense of this prophecy, and still less easy to conceive what it had to do with the marriage in question. Yet these mysteries, or contradictions, did not make the populace adhere the less to their opinion.

Young Conrad's birthday was fixed for his espousals. The company was assembled in the chapel of the castle, and everything ready for beginning the divine office, when Conrad himself was missing. Manfred, impatient of the least delay, and who had not observed his son retire, dispatched one of his attendants to summon the young prince. The servant, who had not staid long enough to have crossed the court to Conrad's apartment, came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing, but pointed to the court. The company were struck with terror and amazement. The princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. Manfred, less apprehensive than enraged at the procrastination of the nuptials and at the folly of his domestic, asked imperiously what was the matter. The fellow made no answer, but continued pointing towards the courtyard – and at last, after repeated questions put to him, cried out, “Oh, the helmet! The helmet!” In the mean time some of the company had run into the court, from whence was heard a confused noise of shrieks, horror and surprise. Manfred, who began to be alarmed at not seeing his son, went himself to get information of what occasioned this strange confusion. Matilda remained endeavouring to assist her mother, and Isabella stayed for the same purpose and to avoid showing any impatience for the bridegroom – for whom, in truth, she had conceived little affection.

The first thing that struck Manfred's eyes was a group of his servants endeavouring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight. “What are ye doing?” cried Manfred, wrathfully. “Where is my son?” A volley of voices replied, “Oh, my lord! The prince! The prince! The helmet! The helmet!” Shocked with these lamentable sounds and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily – but what a sight for a father's eyes! He beheld his child dashed to pieces and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers.

The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune happened and, above all, the tremendous phenomenon before him took away the prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision, and seemed less attentive to his loss than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque – nor could even the bleeding, mangled remains of the young prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him. All who had known his partial fondness for young Conrad were as much surprised at their prince's insensibility as thunderstruck themselves at the miracle of the helmet. They conveyed the disfigured corpse into the hall, without receiving the least direction from Manfred. As little was he attentive to the ladies who remained in the chapel: on the contrary, without mentioning the unhappy princesses his wife and daughter, the first

sounds that dropped from Manfred's lips were "Take care of the lady Isabella".

The domestics, without observing the singularity of this direction, were guided by their affection to their mistress to consider it as peculiarly addressed to her situation and flew to her assistance. They conveyed her to her chamber more dead than alive, and indifferent to all the strange circumstances she heard except the death of her son. Matilda, who doted on her mother, smothered her own grief and amazement, and thought of nothing but assisting and comforting her afflicted parent. Isabella, who had been treated by Hippolita like a daughter, and who returned that tenderness with equal duty and affection, was scarce less assiduous about the princess – at the same time endeavouring to partake and lessen the weight of sorrow which she saw Matilda strove to suppress, for whom she had conceived the warmest sympathy of friendship. Yet her own situation could not help finding its place in her thoughts. She felt no concern for the death of young Conrad except commiseration, and she was not sorry to be delivered from a marriage which had promised her little felicity, either from her destined bridegroom or from the severe temper of Manfred, who, though he had distinguished her by great indulgence, had imprinted her mind with terror from his causeless rigour to such amiable princesses as Hippolita and Matilda.

While the ladies were conveying the wretched mother to her bed, Manfred remained in the court, gazing on the ominous casque and regardless of the crowd which the strangeness of the event had now assembled round him. The few words

he articulated tended solely to enquiries – whether any man knew from whence it could have come. Nobody could give him the least information. However, as it seemed to be the sole object of his curiosity, it soon became so to the rest of the spectators, whose conjectures were as absurd and improbable as the catastrophe itself was unprecedented. In the midst of their senseless guesses, a young peasant, whom rumour had drawn thither from a neighbouring village, observed that the miraculous helmet was exactly like that on the figure in black marble of Alfonso the Good, one of their former princes, in the church of St Nicholas.

"Villain! What sayest thou?" cried Manfred, starting from his trance in a tempest of rage and seizing the young man by the collar. "How darest thou utter such treason? Thy life shall pay for it."

The spectators, who as little comprehended the cause of the prince's fury as all the rest they had seen, were at a loss to unravel this new circumstance. The young peasant himself was still more astonished, not conceiving how he had offended the prince; yet, recollecting himself, with a mixture of grace and humility, he disengaged himself from Manfred's gripe and then, with an obeisance which discovered more jealousy of innocence than dismay, he asked with respect of what he was guilty. Manfred, more enraged at the vigour, however decently exerted, with which the young man had shaken off his hold than appeased by his submission, ordered his attendants to seize him – and, if he had not been withheld by his friends whom he had invited to the nuptials, would have poignarded the peasant in their arms.

During this altercation some of the vulgar spectators had run to the great church which stood near the castle and came back open-mouthed, declaring the helmet was missing from Alfonso's statue. Manfred, at this news, grew perfectly frantic – and, as if he sought a subject on which to vent the tempest within him, he rushed again on the young peasant, crying, "Villain! Monster! Sorcerer! 'Tis thou hast slain my son!" The mob, who wanted some object within the scope of their capacities on whom they might discharge their bewildered reasonings, caught the words from the mouth of their lord and re-echoed "Ay, ay, 'tis he, 'tis he – he has stolen the helmet from good Alfonso's tomb and dashed out the brains of our young prince with it" – never reflecting how enormous the disproportion was between the marble helmet that had been in the church and that of steel before their eyes, nor how impossible it was for a youth seemingly not twenty to wield a piece of armour of so prodigious a weight.

The folly of these ejaculations brought Manfred to himself; yet, whether provoked at the peasant having observed the resemblance between the two helmets, and thereby led to the farther discovery of the absence of that in the church, or wishing to bury any fresh rumour under so impertinent a supposition, he gravely pronounced that the young man was certainly a necromancer, and that till the church could take cognizance of the affair he would have the magician, whom they had thus detected, kept prisoner under the helmet itself, which he ordered his attendants to raise and place the young man under it, declaring he should be kept there without food, with which his own infernal art might furnish him.

It was in vain for the youth to represent against this preposterous sentence – in vain did Manfred's friends endeavour to divert him from this savage and ill-grounded resolution. The generality were charmed with their lord's decision, which to their apprehensions carried great appearance of justice, as the magician was to be punished by the very instrument with which he had offended – nor were they struck with the least compunction at the probability of the youth being starved, for they firmly believed that by his diabolical skill he could easily supply himself with nutriment.

Manfred thus saw his commands even cheerfully obeyed – and, appointing a guard with strict orders to prevent any food being conveyed to the prisoner, he dismissed his friends and attendants and retired to his own chamber after locking the gates of the castle, in which he suffered none but his domestics to remain.

In the mean time, the care and zeal of the young ladies had brought the princess Hippolita to herself – who, amidst the transports of her own sorrow, frequently demanded news of her lord, would have dismissed her attendants to watch over him and, at last, enjoined Matilda to leave her and visit and comfort her father. Matilda, who wanted no affectionate duty to Manfred, though she trembled at his austerity, obeyed the orders of Hippolita, whom she tenderly recommended to Isabella – and, enquiring of the domestics for her father, was informed that he was retired to his chamber and had commanded that nobody should have admittance to him. Concluding that he was immersed in sorrow for the death of her brother and fearing to renew his tears by the sight of his

sole remaining child, she hesitated whether she should break in upon his affliction; yet, solicitude for him, backed by the commands of her mother, encouraged her to venture disobeying the orders he had given – a fault she had never been guilty of before. The gentle timidity of her nature made her pause for some minutes at his door. She heard him traverse his chamber backwards and forwards with disordered steps – a mood which increased her apprehensions. She was however just going to beg admittance, when Manfred suddenly opened the door – and, as it was now twilight, concurring with the disorder of his mind, he did not distinguish the person, but asked angrily who it was. Matilda replied trembling, “My dearest father, it is I, your daughter.”

Manfred, stepping back hastily, cried, “Begone, I do not want a daughter!” – and, flinging back abruptly, clapped the door against the terrified Matilda.

She was too well acquainted with her father’s impetuosity to venture a second intrusion. When she had a little recovered the shock of so bitter a reception, she wiped away her tears, to prevent the additional stab that the knowledge of it would give to Hippolita, who questioned her in the most anxious terms on the health of Manfred and how he bore his loss. Matilda assured her he was well and supported his misfortune with manly fortitude.

“But will he not let me see him?” said Hippolita mournfully. “Will he not permit me to blend my tears with his and shed a mother’s sorrows in the bosom of her lord? Or do you deceive me, Matilda? I know how Manfred doted on his son. Is not the stroke too heavy for him? Has he not

sunk under it?... You do not answer me... Alas, I dread the worst!... Raise me, my maidens – I will, I will see my lord. Bear me to him instantly – he is dearer to me even than my children.”

Matilda made signs to Isabella to prevent Hippolita’s rising – and both these lovely young women were using their gentle violence to stop and calm the princess, when a servant on the part of Manfred arrived and told Isabella that his lord demanded to speak with her.

“With me?” cried Isabella.

“Go,” said Hippolita, relieved by a message from her lord. “Manfred cannot support the sight of his own family. He thinks you less disordered than we are, and dreads the shock of my grief. Console him, dear Isabella, and tell him I will smother my own anguish rather than add to his.”

It was now evening; the servant who conducted Isabella bore a torch before her. When they came to Manfred, who was walking impatiently about the gallery, he started and said hastily, “Take away that light and begone.” Then, shutting the door impetuously, he flung himself upon a bench against the wall and bade Isabella sit by him. She obeyed trembling.

“I sent for you, lady,” said he – and then stopped under great appearance of confusion.

“My lord!”

“Yes, I sent for you on a matter of great moment,” resumed he. “Dry your tears, young lady... You have lost your bridegroom... Yes, cruel fate, and I have lost the hopes of my race! But Conrad was not worthy of your beauty.”