

“Alone in so dismal a place”

Manfred, prince of Otranto, is desperate to get an heir to his estate after his only son, Conrad, is mysteriously killed on the day of his wedding to the beautiful Isabella. Rejecting his own wife, Manfred determines to marry Isabella himself.

“Heaven nor hell shall impede¹ my designs²,” said Manfred, advancing again to seize the princess. At that instant the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench

where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast³. Isabella, whose

back was turned to the picture, saw not the motion, nor knew whence⁴ the sound came, but started⁵, and said, “Hark⁶, my lord! What

sound was that?” and at the same time made towards the door. Manfred, distracted between the flight of Isabella, who had now reached the stairs, and yet unable to keep his eyes from the picture, which began to move, had however

advanced some steps after her, still looking backwards on the portrait, when he saw it quit its panel, and descend on the floor with a grave and melancholy air. [...] The spectre marched

sedately, but dejected⁷, to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand. Manfred accompanied him at a little distance, full of anxiety and horror, but resolved. As he would have entered the chamber, the door was

clapped to with violence by an invisible hand. [...] “Since hell will not satisfy my curiosity,” said Manfred, “I will use the human means in my power for preserving my race; Isabella shall not escape me.”

That lady, whose resolution had given way to terror the moment she had quitted Manfred, continued her flight to the bottom of the principal staircase. There she stopped, not knowing whither⁸ to direct her steps, nor how to escape from the impetuosity of the prince. The gates of the castle she knew were locked, and guards placed in the court. [...] Yet where conceal herself? How avoid the pursuit he would infallibly make throughout the castle? As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the church of St. Nicholas. Could she reach the altar before she was overtaken, she knew even Manfred’s violence would not dare to profane the sacredness of the place; and she determined, if no other means of deliverance offered, to shut herself up for ever among the holy virgins, whose convent was contiguous to the cathedral. In this resolution, she seized a lamp that burned at the foot of the staircase, and hurried towards the secret passage.

The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges⁹, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror; —yet more she



↑ *The Red Cross Knight* by John Singleton Copley, circa 1793

1. stop
2. plans, intentions
3. sighed, breathed heavily
4. from where
5. jump out of surprise
6. listen
7. discouraged
8. where
9. gong

dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics to pursue her. She trod as softly as impatience would give her leave, — yet frequently stopped and listened to hear if she was followed. In one of those moments she thought she heard a sigh. She shuddered, and recoiled a few paces. In a moment
50_ she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled; she concluded it was Manfred. Every suggestion that horror could inspire rushed into her mind. [...] She was going to advance, when a door that stood ajar, at some distance to the left, was opened gently: but ere¹⁰ her lamp, which she held up, could discover who opened it, the person retreated precipitately on seeing the light.

55_ Isabella, whom every incident was sufficient to dismay¹¹, hesitated whether she should proceed. Her dread of Manfred soon outweighed every other terror. It could only be, she thought, some domestic belonging to the castle. Her gentleness had never raised her an enemy, and conscious innocence bade her hope that, unless sent by the prince's order to seek her, his servants would rather assist
60_ than prevent her flight. Fortifying herself with these reflections, and believing, by what she could observe, that she was near the mouth of the subterraneous cavern, she approached the door that had been opened; but a sudden gust of wind that met her at the door extinguished her lamp, and left her in total darkness.

Words cannot paint the horror of the princess's situation. Alone in so dismal
65_ a place, [...] hopeless of escaping, expecting every moment the arrival of Manfred, [...] she was ready to sink under her apprehensions. She addressed herself to every saint in heaven, and inwardly implored their assistance. For a considerable time she remained in an agony of despair. At last, as softly as was possible, she felt for the door, and, having found it, entered trembling into the
70_ vault from whence she had heard the sigh and steps. It gave her a kind of momentary joy to perceive an imperfect ray of clouded moonshine gleam from the roof of the vault, which seemed to be fallen in, and from whence hung a fragment of earth or building, she could not distinguish which, that appeared to have been crushed inwards. She advanced
75_ eagerly towards this chasm, when she discerned a human form standing close against the wall.

She shrieked, believing it the ghost of her betrothed Conrad.

Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)

10. before
11. horrify

Horace Walpole (1717 - 1797)

an English art historian, man of letters and politician. He is now largely remembered for designing Strawberry Hill, a neo-Gothic mansion set in South-West London where he revived the Gothic style (see p. 136), and for his Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto.

