



Ankerita

Echoes of the Lady

A Prelude to the Gothic Trilogy
by
Robert Wingfield

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A blood moon cast its eerie lustre across the darkened landscape as I plodded onwards through undulating back roads. The journey had been long. After my last B&B had overbooked and turned me away, I was seeking a place of refuge. No chance of rain, but the nights were cold, even after the warm day.

I felt a strange fascination with a shadowy lane to my left, and as I stepped into the gloom, it was like entering another realm, charged with expectation and longing. It seemed only a few steps before I stood in the carpark of a ruined abbey, moonlight casting the broken stonework into sharp relief. The heat of the day still lingered in the ruins, but an air of sadness pervaded its once proud structure, more perhaps than could be attributed to its age. The crumbling masonry still echoed the violent deaths of devout monks when the commissioners came in the name of the king many years ago. Tonight, all was silent.

I found a way around the ever-watchful eye of the single security camera and scuffled over a low part of the wall, dropping quietly onto the neatly tended grass beyond. Above me a huge glassless window overlooked what was originally the refectory. Images of wooden tables groaning with food flitted through my mind. Was there something in the window? The lambency of the starlit sky cast only a vague shadow of the masonry on the broken tiled floor and when I looked again, there was nothing there. Even so, I felt an uneasiness, as though I was being watched. I told myself I was being stupid, and pressed on.

Beyond the remains of a doorway, I found the cloister, a tracing of wall footings. The roofed chapterhouse appeared in front of me, up a short flight of stone steps. I saw a patch of mist drift across the open doorway, and heard a low sigh. It could have been the wind in the trees but sounded more like a suggestion of tired greeting. I put my foot on the lower step. A vision of a slaughtered monk lying there filled my imagination. I was getting very jumpy. I took a breath and scooted up into the ancient building.

A round opening at the end of the structure showed the full moon, leaving the room a mixture of dense shadow, and light bathing stone coffin lids on the floor with a ruddy glow. I shuddered involuntarily as one in particular caught my attention. It was flat, depicting a lady with a gable hood and a long, elegant dress. I flashed my torch on, curious to see who had been gravled underneath, but the face was blank.

Before I had time to decipher the writing around the edge, the doorway darkened. A figure stepped inside. I gaped at a lady in a rich, flowing robe with a low-slung belt sporting a fancy buckle. Her hood tightly framed her face, and luxuriant chestnut hair escaped onto her shoulders. My torch picked out her features. Her flesh looked drawn and thin, showing the outlines of the bones beneath. Her eyes were sunken and haunted, but her voice filled the room like silk.

“God ye good-den, my lord.” My torch died.

“Who are you?” I tried unsuccessfully to switch the light back on.

“Thou should’st know me.” She paused, and then continued when I did not reply, “I am Ankerita, lady of the abbey.” The name came with authority as though I should recognise it. “Why art thou here?”

I tried to justify myself. “I—I’m sorry. I was looking for somewhere to spend the night. I’ll be gone by morning.” I wondered if there were other members of her coven, or whatever it was, nearby. “You need not worry if I’m disturbing something...”

The ruined building shimmered. The words died on my lips as the abbey outside changed. Beyond the doorway was now a transparent cloister. Complete walls, columns and doorways had appeared, but the outline of the ruins and the distant lights of a village could still be seen, as though the new structure was painted on lace. “What sort of trick...?” I challenged her.

She regarded the consolidating structure and nodded. “No patchery meant, good sir. I have been staying for someone like you to release me from nonexistence. Pray tell, what year is this?”

“Seriously?”

“What year?” the voice commanded.

It felt like there were spiders crawling inside my head. My mouth moved involuntarily as I gave her the information. I shook myself out of the spell. “What did you do to me?”

Ankerita’s face puckered. “Ah, so I have been in my cage toward five centuries. Long enough for any penance, I trow. Peradventure, I should explain?”

The abbey outside was becoming more and more solid. Inside, the chapterhouse now had benches and wall hangings, and began to glow with candlelight. “Please tell me. Really, what is going on?” I tried to take hold of her arm. My hand passed straight through. It felt cold and clammy as through a spray of mist. “So, you *are* some sort of trick. More fool me for being shaken.”

The lady continued as if on a pre-set tape. “I have a serious history, but do not misthink me. Be calm.” She smiled. An ethereal hand rested on my shoulder. I felt myself relaxing despite the coldness of her touch. “Do you feel better? Come.” She towed me unresisting outside.

I stared around the abbey. The stonework now looked solid. The lights of the village had completely vanished. I leaned on a wall which hadn’t been there moments before. “What have you done to the place? What are you doing here?”

“I was a bad person.” The lady gazed at the floor, and my mind was freed from her thrall. “I was condemned for sticking my feere... er, what you would now call, ‘husband’... After he died of the wound I gave him, I was forced to spend the rest of my life in this lodging.” Her gloved hands swept scornfully round. “The time I was locked in that chapel only helped to strengthen me. But I should have been freed, instead of condemned as an anchoress—” she noticed my blank expression, “—a religious hermit, if you like. My family was too powerful to permit the sheriff to apply the rope for my crime, so I was sealed in the abbey. I should pass the rest of my days in penitence, listening to the crack of the peasants and their petty woes, in exchange for alms.”

“Go on. You interest me.” The illusion was a good one, and I was determined to play along. I felt deliciously calm now.

Ankerita smiled benevolently. “You seem to understand my conject. You could well be the crossbiter I seek. Come, as you wish to know more.”

I caught her arm, now as solid as my own. “Hang on; your name is Ankerita and you became an anchoress? Bit of a coincidence?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “That was the name those gents gave me. My real name was... I’ve forgotten, it was so long ago. Ten years they caged me. I endured. But then they became impatient and helped me over to the other side with a noxious potage. Can you imagine that?”

“Sounds awful.”

“Come then, through here.”

Ankerita opened a door in the stonework behind her, and we stepped into a small antechamber. She held her palms out. “This room is where I killed my lord and husband. He was beating me unfairly for some imagined impropriety. He would not believe my innocence. *Nobody* accuses me falsely. I stuck him, in mood, happily...”

“In mood, happily? Surely you didn’t enjoy it?”

The lady smiled and my brain crawled again. “Alas, no. In your language, I mean I was very angry, and defended myself. The Law did not see it like that. I did not mean to kill him, merely to protect myself. It is important for you to know.”

“I believe you.” I could do nothing else. She had me bewitched.

“Come in and see the minster.”

She went to a pair of solid wooden doors opposite and pushed through.

I followed her and stopped dead. Rich furnishings decked the church. Garish stone carvings frowned down at me, and the glint of gold reflected in many burning candles. I reached out to touch a cross fixed to one of the massive support columns.

Ankerita shook her head. “I can show you better.”

“Lead on, my lady.” I followed her obediently.

“Here is where I was gravied.” She pointed at a slab laid flat on the floor of the church. “They were afraid of me. They said they had seen my husband’s spectre ordering them to punish me. One night, his family drugged me to appear dead, and they buried me apace, here in sanctified ground.”

I looked down at the tombstone of Ankerita, the lady now at my side. It was that I’d seen in the chapterhouse, now restored and new. “There’s no face in the image.” I took the opportunity to ask. “It’s just blank.”

“They dared not record my aspect.” She gazed at the gravestone. “It was part of the enchantment to bind me to the earth. The substance of the coffin kept me confined. They hated me, but feared me as well, and put the hex in place. They could not simply let me die for what I had done...” She sighed. “Let us continue.”

I followed her as she glided through the deserted church, past tables covered with rich cloth, and under iron chandeliers ablaze with candles. The perfumes of rich spices and wax on the wood assailed my nostrils.

“And now you must see my prison.” I jumped as she gently took my arm. Her hand was still deathly cold and seemed to drag the warmth out of me.

She noticed my tremor. “It is difficult for me to take form. I need your energy. You are strong in that.”

She steered me into the side of the building and paused at a barred door. “Look inside. See what I endured.”

The room had a single candle burning, flickering reflected in an ornate cross on a small altar. The furnishings were sparse: a simple bed and a heavy chest. I gagged at the smell of human filth and looked again. By the altar appeared the kneeling figure of a hooded woman.

“You see it as it was, when I was in there.” Ankerita’s voice lightened. The sound danced around the walls.

I stared at her, and wondered at the lady beside me. Ankerita was no longer thin and haggard as when we first met. The face that regarded me, with a twinkle of amusement pursing her lips, was now that of a hauntingly beautiful young woman.

“You are lovely!” I couldn’t stop myself.

Her smile faded. “And you see me now, as before I was imprisoned this half millennium. Death should have been a relief, but I could not rest. You see, the bewitched stone covering my grave held me...”

“Then how are you here?” I could not take my eyes off her.

She exhaled, her breath creating clouds of vapour. “The stone was removed to preserve it. I was joyous. I thought I would be able to die at last. Instead, I was released into this state of purgatory, free, but only when the moon gives me the strength. I have been awaiting the right time, and the right person.”

“Me?”

“Look back into the cell.”

I was alone in the church. The walls started to fade. I stared through the vanishing buildings. Ankerita had disappeared, but the figure in the anchorhold was still visible through the barred door. It shifted round on its knees. The cowl dropped away. The face that stared at me was my own. *I* was the creature in the prison. The world around me went black. I was trapped in Ankerita’s tomb, gasping for air. And then I heard her voice.

“You are not the one.”

I breathed again, back in the ruin, bathed now in the radiance from a cold white moon. The lady of the abbey was gone, leaving me a desperate ache of longing... but I know she will reawaken. I will be waiting for her.

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Ankerita does return. Her story is told in the full length novels of the Seventh House trilogy, available from this outlet and most others.

Ankerita – Seasons out of Time

Ankerita – The Summoning (Requiem for the Forgotten Path)

Ankerita – Strangers with the Eyes of Men

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