

THE ANTIC NOTION

by

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INTERIOR HOUSE, ANTIC AND ELDRITCH.

DIMPSEY LIGHT THROUGH FRENCH WINDOWS.

OUTSIDE DREICH DINGE AND DRIZZLE.

EDGAR: I'd lost the path completely. The brim'skud had enveloped the trees and I couldn't make out my hands in front of me or my boots as I trudged through the claggy tread. The trasts and coshes of dead trees seemed to bite at my ankles. Fox-fire glowed in the jaw-hole. The light was thinning and getting benighted. A burr around the moon had doomfire about it. The last week of winter or the first of spring, the failleach. I can't remember.

ANNABEL: I remember. The hag was on the horse's mane when it fell in the mire. As we proceeded, the rime coming in from the sea and the hoar frost in the bar'ber chilling the woor. A blinter of ice-splinters catching the low light and winter stars. The bright borough of blackthorn winter. The blae would cut the nose off you. I thought I heard a nightingale singing among the brambles, its throat bobbing like a pea in a whistle.

EDGAR: We'll have to start without her. We can't wait for her if she's not coming.

ANNABEL: She might have become lost in the combe. Or sunk in the grassy green breunloch.

EDGAR: I remember her as her silhouette came across the morbbach on the flooded seaplain. She's there now on the fen.

ANNABEL: She waded through the fideach and was shivering, clutching at her grubbied brocade. Her teeth chattering and her eyes dewed with tears, hope drained from her mien.

EDGAR: Words cleave to the detail, anchoring the vastness of the vista. Strands of staghorn lichen, the chitinous shell of an insect. In the strand of a ditch the broken bones of a fallen creature.

ANNABEL: And so it was to pass.

EDGAR: We had settled down for victuals, a light evening repast with warming broth.

ANNABEL: A fresh heft of peat and the turf blinked with fronds of smoke that caught in the throat, bitter and drouthy.

ANNABEL: A rider came down the drive, his breast surging as his nag hoofed the stony pass.

EDGAR: "What-ho!" he cried. "Halloa! Anyone within? Anyone within?"

ANNABEL: "Hulloa sir, who are you that have skeloped out this far out past the lamma growths and the cramble?"

EDGAR: "Many a mile have I ridden and swift, from the warths of Hereford here to this nook in the ynys. I glimpsed the premises before the darkness overtook the day. I prayed it was not a malign vision to dispirit me from my senses."

ANNABEL: "It is no vision, sir. Pray you come in, you've taken some buffling there. If you don't fetch up to the heat of the crackling moine you'll be fit for a creeg before the night pays its debt to the day in morning."

EDGAR: "I thank you madam. I am exceedingly tired, and would fain crave the golden dew of sleep that knits the ravelled sleeve of care."

ANNABEL: As he entered the hall-way the door slammed shut with a howling gust, blowing out the candles and plunging us into darkness without shadow. At that moment a fireflacht burst on the horizon, bright and without thunder, silent. Following the sparks at the fireplace we took ourselves within. As the stranger warmed himself I asked the man what had brought him hither that night.

EDGAR: "Would you agree," he said, "it is folly to fear the dead?"

ANNABEL: "I do not know aught of that world, whether it be our business to delve into the spirit realm, but I see it is natural to fear that which one cannot know, and that what can never be known to our mortal senses, which is what it is to die. That is a book whose pages are sealed shut. To

see what is printed within, is to never speak of it after."

EDGAR: "What if I told you, madam, that I have seen the unruly face of the dead? I have seen the apparition manifest and unfold itself before me, like ancestral presences in a dream, but corporeal, of flesh and substance such as you and I in the material realm possess?"

ANNABEL: "Why, I should say that you might have been overtired and mistaking one that was not a man for one that was a man."

EDGAR: "And so should anyone. Yet the rational mind upholds the antic notion. The empirical proof has been presented, there before my very eyes. I have seen the dead walk."

ANNABEL: "You are tired, sir, and your fancy stirs you into mismarking the good parts of nature for fearful elements. Your mind is dark with cares."

EDGAR: "I have seen them. I see them still, as clear as I see you now. Look at this."

HE PRESENTS A POCKET WATCH

ANNABEL: "It is an ordinary pocket watch. Scratched upon the face but its hands still turn, though they seem somewhat too fast."

EDGAR: "I obtained this watch from a drowned man in Donegal. As his body bobbed and lopped in the billowing waters of the main I plucked him out and stretched him upon the shore. His heart had stopped and he would respond to no method of resuscitation. His skin was deathly white and pallid with soak. I sat by him a time, and watched the roost where the tides meet. The whirlpool must have dragged him under among the lippers of the marshum, and extinguished that vital spark his life with its choppy japs."

ANNABEL: "A dismal scene. There's many who have been brought to their peace by the violent broils of the undertow."

EDGAR: "Dismal indeed. As I recovered my breath my spirits plunged. I looked again at the drowned man. His eyes sprang open with terror. His body

coiled up at me and he grasped me with both hands about my shoulders and looked fearfully into my eyes. I shall never forget that uncanny gaze that pierced my very soul."

ANNABEL: "Why then, he was not dead after all."

EDGAR: "A cold radiated from him to me, chilling my bones. I shivered and recoiled but he grasped me firmly and would not let me off. I struggled to liberate myself from his freezing grasp but could none. I cried out in abject fright and mortal terror. His mouth hung open, as if he had words to share that would not spring from that ghastly mouth. He released my shoulders and clasped my wrist with both of his deathly hands, forcing them to his breast. He pushed my fingers into his waistcoat and retrieved withal this watch. That scratched pocket watch you hold in your hand. He closed my hands about it and pushed me away. In my confusion and fear I stumbled and fell back. Upon recovering myself, the dead man was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had simply passed, spirit and body both, into an invisible realm as suddenly as a storm breaks upon the spray."

ANNABEL: "Well, sir, it is a very fantastic story and I know not if it be true..."

EDGAR: "It is true! You hold the very dead man's watch!"

ANNABEL: "I know that this watch is a very real thing, even if it be broken and the hands do seem to move rather too fast. It is cold, I grant you, but not so cold as death. But sir, your fatigue is overcoming you. These exertions can do you no good. We have a bedroom made up -"

EDGAR: "I'll not stay. I'll warm myself some more, and I must press on my way if I can find the trail again."

ANNABEL: "Not this night, sir. The gurl is threatening and the roaries gallop from the south east. It is cold and you would be advised to remain until it breaks and the morning makes its koop."

EDGAR: "I would be gone..."

HE STUMBLES, AND SINKS BACK INTO THE  
CHAIR BY THE FIRE

- ANNABEL: I started, and went to help him but he had already fallen into a deep slumber. I was glad on it and fetched him blankets to keep him warm and stoked the turf on the fire to maintain it for him. Then I left him.
- EDGAR: What happened then? When you returned in the morning?
- ANNABEL: I entered the parlour and the stranger had gone. I looked about for him. He had left the pocket watch. The glass of brandy I had poured him in the night was full, even though I had with mine own eyes seen him drink it. I went outside, and his horse was gone too. There was no sign of his having ever been there. No footprints or traces of his tobacco. It was as if he had never existed, or I had dreamed it.
- EDGAR: Each day makes of its antecedents these ruptures, bringing anew a world without continuance from that which went before. It is nothing strange.
- ANNABEL: I thought nothing of it. He had gone, it was so. But thereafter I noticed myself becoming more short of breath with each morning. The days seemed to clamor upon each other as if the day and night were locked in a deadly battle. I found grayed hairs appearing on my head, and a certain slowness of gait and dimness of vision.
- EDGAR: Why, you had sprung a fever. The fellow had divested himself of some choler and spread the infection to you.
- ANNABEL: I looked at the watch, whose hands were still spinning. The hands had picked up speed, they were moving vigorously, ticking faster than could offer discrete measure from tick to tick. It was buzzing, buzzing, and all the while I felt myself weaken, especially when in proximity to that strange artefact.
- EDGAR: It is as if the watch were drawing the vital force from your frame, leaching your own elemental force.

ANNABEL: I cast it into the fire. Yet it did not stop ticking. I bent with the tongs but could not retrieve it from the blaze, yet still it ticked, and ever faster. The more vigour I spent on the task the weaker I became and the faster the ticking, and louder. The buzz became deafening as the flames licked around it and my life force ebbed away.

EDGAR: It was then that I found you. Slumped across the stone before the fire, motionless and barely breathing.

ANNABEL: I dimly perceived being borne aloft, and remember the galloping of the hooves.

EDGAR: I took you away from the house, riding at pell-mell, fearful that I had come too late and would not be able to lead us to such assistance as I myself could not afford you in your calamitous condition.

ANNABEL: I thought myself dreaming. The ravine seemed to dive into a tenebrous bealach that no hope could penetrate. I wearied, and lost all trace of care.

EDGAR: Then as we dove into the clint of the glaab I felt a surge in my spirits as I marked the way through the desperate landscape.

ANNABEL: Alas, it was not to be.

EDGAR: The nag fell.

ANNABEL: Such falling in the dream, gliding through a dintless lythe without time, without sensation or sense. Then I woke.

EDGAR: The way was barren. The nag was fordone; its ankles shattered, its bones caught and snapped by the tugging corrach. The more it struggled, the more it sank.

ANNABEL: The poor creature cried with fear, as I did too. Its exertions drew it further down into the gouty moss.

EDGAR: I grasped your arm, and dragged you from the leacon. We lay exhausted upon a copse, and you become deathly still.

ANNABEL: I looked up and saw shrivelights glimmering through the enfolding shreep. I felt the cold dread hand of night drawing me on, and I looked down at myself darkly.

EDGAR: I bore you up upon my shoulders, slogging the burden through the neap. For some time we passed through the gloom. My body craved for flight. I saw a poisoned crow, gaping and helplessly floundering, yellow foam bubbling in its maw. A rabbit, inflated and foul. I could not tear my eyes away from the prevailing murderousness of nature. I thought to go on and on over the earth and flee the pestilential visions of the torrid veil.

ANNABEL: I felt the desire to settle forever in one place, and be still forever. I saw a dandelion in full flower, a little sun bristling with sun-rays on the green earth, incomparable and unique. I held out my hand, and I was lost.

CURTAIN