

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1946

Cover by Pete Kuhlhoff

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*Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# Xerxes' Hut

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

THE highway winds now through the Golden Hills, over the spot where Xerxes' hut once stood. And the mysterious well beneath the hut, filled now with rubble these past thirty years, is buried and forgotten. And whatever bizarre properties the water of that well contained are lost, too, forever.

But I'll never forget the scene I saw there, nor the grisly denouement that followed. They'll linger in my memory forever—linked with that unfathomable couple, Xerxes and Appolonia Andreapolous.

The first time I ever saw Xerxes' hut was when I was about eight years old. In the summer of 1913, that would be. Dad and I were returning, late one July night, from one of those political backslapping tours about the county that his constituents expected of a man whom they'd elected. Dark lowering clouds had been rolling up from the northeast all that afternoon, and Dad was anxious to get home before the storm broke. But Blaze, the old mare who pulled our buggy, was a privileged character, and not inclined to be hurried.

Shortly after we wheeled onto the Onarga Turnpike, we knew we were never going to make it. So Dad stopped on the sandy hump-backed road and put up the storm curtains, making of the old buggy a frail shelter against the threatening elements.

He was none too soon. The wind from the northeast lashed itself into a greater fury, and the sky was shattered with yellow-green veins of lightning. The very earth itself shook in one grand climactical

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

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*The highway was to run here—  
through property leased by  
forces beyond man's ken*



outburst of thunder as the rain came—wildly, as if angrily seeking to penetrate the isinglass windows of the flapping side-curtains.

Blaze laid her old ears back and lowered her head, and clop-clopped despondently ahead, rain streaming from her haunches, steam rising from her broad back. It was cozy in the lurching buggy, and Dad laughed in defiance of the storm.

"Not bad, eh, Danny?"

"It's swell!" I wouldn't have cared if we hadn't reached home for hours. But we had only several miles to go. I knew, because we were just rounding one of the Golden Hills, two hills that had received their name from the glory of forsythia that covered them every spring.

That was when we heard it.

There was a rough track leading from the Turnpike into the hollow at the base of the Golden Hills. Dad, whose head had been bent in a listening attitude for some time, stopped the buggy.

I strained to hear, too. And then I did hear. Fits and snatches of music torn by the storm. Someone off there to the right in the blackness was playing the piano. Eerie music, out of the night—a thing of broken chords and wailing minors that struck like small cold breezes at my spine. I can remember still how unbearably sad and lonely it sounded.

I slid over closer to Dad.

"It's Xerxes," he said. "I've heard him often when I was alone, passing here." One of the isinglass windows was torn, and Dad widened the opening until we could peer through. "He lives in a hut, there in the hollow, Danny. See?"

All I could see was faint flickering golden light, as of candles, half-observed by the slanting rain. The hut itself I couldn't see at all. Only that pale glow.

"Does he live there all alone?" I asked.

Dad slapped the reins on Blaze's back, and we started up again. "Alone," he said, "except for a half-witted servant, Clyde. But when he first came here, he had his wife with him."

"Isn't she there any more?"

"No. He said she went away. But some people wonder if maybe—" Dad coughed, and broke off.

"Maybe she went back to where they used to live?" I said.

"Maybe," Dad agreed evasively. "Though, comes to that, nobody ever heard where they did come from."

Nor has anyone ever learned, to this day. But it seems not improbable that Xerxes and his wife had fled some long-ago terror, some menace in the Levant. For they were not nomadic by nature; they were people of substance. All anyone ever knew was that they had appeared suddenly some two or three years before I was born. They exchanged no neighborly visits—indeed, successfully discouraged them. So it remained forever a mystery why they had chosen to bury themselves in the decrepit hut cupped at the base of the Golden Hills.

After the disappearance of his wife, nine years before, Xerxes had grown more and more the recluse. He came no more to town; he sent Clyde, instead, from time to time, with carefully written instructions listing his needs. And it would have been futile, of course, to attempt pumping Clyde about his employer. Idiot Clyde of the odd-shaped skull, the great hulking man's body, and the meaningless giggle of a witless child.

Clyde, who must have known so much that he was never able to tell.

IT WASN'T until the following autumn that I had closer acquaintance with the lonely occupant of Xerxes' hut. But I hadn't forgotten, in the meantime. Nights during that summer I'd sometimes awaken at the lonely hoot of a passing distant train, and it would bring back vividly the memory of that stormy July night, the dim flickering light like a goblin eye in the blackness, the mournful elegy sobbing plaintively through the rain.

Now it was October. We went butter-nut-hunting that Saturday—Dutch Meier, Stubby O'Brien, and myself. And coming back, though we were already tired and hot and sweaty, we climbed the higher one of the Golden Hills to lay prone on the summit and peer down cautiously at Xerxes' hut. There was a lazy curl of smoke from its leaning brick chimney, and someone had been burning leaves in the clearing back of the hut for we could smell the smoke.

But the hollow itself showed no sign of life.

"Careful, men!" whispered Stubby. "Don't let the enemy see you!"

We shivered delightedly. For by now we thought we knew who the "enemy" was. We'd been talking about it earlier. Xerxes was a murderer. He'd killed his wife. Dutch Meier had heard a neighbor talking to his mother about it. Of course, no one knew for sure; nothing had been proved. But we preferred to believe it was true; that here—romantically—we had a "real, live murderer," living just a few miles from town. It was scary to think of it. It was wonderful.

We stared down at the hut, enchanted. I think we almost expected to see a thin river of blood—"gore," we would have called it—flow suddenly from under the plank door of the cabin. So intent were we on our reconnaissance that we didn't hear a thing till a twig snapped frighteningly behind us. We leaped to our feet. There was nowhere to run even if our legs hadn't already gone suddenly limp as boiled spaghetti.

Clyde was standing there, watching us vacantly. In one hand he held a white envelope.

"Tee, hee, hee!" he giggled. "Tee, hee, hee!"

I don't know why it should have been so frightening, but it was. He must have been about eighteen years old at that time, and he towered over us. Dutch and Stubby were clay-colored under their tan, and I knew I must be, too. We'd never been so close to Clyde before, and he was alarming, to say the least. But when we had waited, and Clyde made no move to harm us, I found my voice.

"We weren't doing anything, honest!" I said. "We were just—just playing."

Clyde looked at us blankly. Then, "I want to play, too. Clydey wants to play, too!" He stuck out his lower lip.

I looked at Dutch and Stubby. We were embarrassed by Clydey's childishness. I wiped my forehead, and sought desperately for some answer to make. And then I saw the envelope in Clyde's hand.

"Gee, we'd like to play with you, Clydey," I said, "but look! You're going on an errand." I pointed to the envelope.

Clydey brought it up in front of his eyes wonderingly, as if he'd never seen it before. Then he brightened and smiled, showing his pointed white teeth, spaced far apart. "To the grocery store," he chanted happily, slapping his flank. "Like a galloping horse to the grocery store." He spat a little when he talked.

He turned away and started down the hill. We breathed a sigh of relief. But several yards away he stopped, and faced us again.

"The pretty lady," he said. We watched, fascinated, as great shiny tears started to roll down his cheeks. "Oh, the pretty lady, a-layin' in the water."

I swallowed. "What—what you mean, Clydey?"

He sniffed, then the tears stopped miraculously. He had forgotten. "Tee, hee, hee! Tee, hee, hee!"

He started off again, and this time he really did leave. We watched him all the way down the hill till he reached the Turnpike and headed north toward town, scuffling through the red and brown and golden fallen leaves with his strange, staggering gait.

"Boy, was I scairt!" Stubby said.

"Me, too." Dutch coughed. "I think I'm gonna be sick at my stummick."

He was.

**WE SAT** there until we felt better. "Maybe that's how Xerxes done it," Stubby said. "What Clydey said. Maybe ole Xerxes drowned his wife."

We nodded solemnly.

"If we was detectives," Dutch said, "we could find out all about the foul deed. Boy, I bet we'd get a whoppin' reward, prolly."

"Go on, you'd be scared," I said.

"Scared, yourself!" Dutch said. "You're so brave, go down there and find out all about it. I dare ya! I double dare ya! You don't dast!"

"I would if I wanted to," I said, with dignity. "I just don't happen to want to, kind of."

"N'ya, n'ya! Danny's scared!" Dutch taunted.

Stubby took it up. "Scared, scared, scared!"

"You shut up, you guys!" I howled. I

stood up recklessly. "All right, I will! I'll show you!"

I started down the side of the hill sloping into the hollow. Behind me there was a sudden, awed silence. I slid and skidded on the twigs and fallen leaves.

"You better stop tryin' to show off!" Stubby called in a hoarse whisper. "You better come back here!"

I couldn't have returned if I'd wanted to. I lost my balance and finished the last half of the journey on my corduroy-ed rear. Anyway, I didn't care. I'd show 'em who was a-scared of old Xerxes! At the bottom I stood up and brushed myself off as well as I could.

Xerxes' hut was there, a few yards before me. It was larger, seen close, than one would have supposed—fully twenty-four by thirty feet. It had never known paint, and its boards were weathered now to a silver-gray. A small window in the right end wall of the cabin had been replaced with a large one of the studio type, but this was evidently the only alteration that had ever been made in the place. And it was from this window, facing the Turnpike a quarter-mile away, that Dad and I must have seen the golden glow that rainy night last July.

I started for the plank door, my bravado beginning to ooze from me at every pore. But I knew Stubby and Dutch must be watching, and so I prodded myself forward. I went up onto the stoop, shadowed by a tangled vine from which the leaves had already fallen, and forced myself to knock. The tattoo I beat on the door was almost in rhythm with the knocking of my knees.

It opened startlingly soon. A shadow stood there against darker shadow. I couldn't see clearly. I think I must have been nearly blind with fright, anyway. But I stood my ground, though poised for flight.

"Please, mister, could I have a drink of water?"

"A drink? I don't see why not," a voice said. "Come in."

But I didn't really want to go in! I would have shrunk away. But it was too late. A hand, gentle enough, caught my arm and drew me inside.

THE voice hadn't sounded so very frightening. It wasn't harsh. It gave me courage to look up cautiously. I don't know what I'd expected. A monster, perhaps; a gnome-like little man, certainly. But Xerxes was neither of these. He was tall and well-built, though a bit on the slender side; and his thick black hair was turning shiny silver above his ears. He was handsome except for two deep grooves running from either side of his short straight nose to the corners of his mouth. The wrinkles of a man whose thoughts have been sad, bitter. He looked almost young, but he might have been any age.

He stood over me, smiling faintly, perhaps at my obvious terror. No doubt he knew of his reputation in the town. "Sit down," he said, "while I get you your drink. The pump's at the back."

I sat on the slippery seat of an elaborately carved chair, next the door by which I'd entered. Opposite me was the fireplace, and through a door alongside this leading to the well in back, Xerxes vanished.

I wasn't quite so frightened now. My eyes were growing accustomed to the dimmer light. I looked around.

I know now that it was a remarkable room for the shabby exterior of that shanty, but at the time I accepted it calmly enough. A Kirman rug, its colors gleaming like jewels against the ivory background, covered almost entirely the flat surface of the halved logs from which the floor was fashioned. Under the studio window, a great black concert grand sprawled its magnificent length, bearing five-branched silver candelabra at either side its music rack. And on the opposite wall—

I stared.

The painting hanging there must have been a good ten feet square, its size further augmented by the gilded baroque frame, a foot wide, that bordered it. I cast an apprehensive glance toward the door through which Xerxes had vanished, then slid off my slippery chair and trotted over for a closer view of the woman in the painting.

In all the years since then I've never seen a more beautiful woman. Sin was never blacker than her hair, drawn back sleekly from a central part into a great coil on her neck; slanting, secretive eyes; mouth like a

scarlet bird. In the painting she was wearing a tight satin dress that fitted her opulent figure suavely, like thick black enamel. All this against the painted background of a bright red velvet curtain, darkened now with time and varnish to a deep maroon.

"She was very beautiful, was she not, my Appolonia? She died nine years ago."

I jumped. I hadn't heard him come up behind me. He handed me the brimming glass he held. He seemed to forget me.

"Pola!" he said softly, his eyes on the painting.

I knew nothing at that age of love. Nevertheless there was something in Xerxes' eyes that awed and disturbed me. I recognized even then that he must have loved this woman terribly.

I gulped the liquid in the glass thirstily, then set it down. Anywhere. I backed away, the eyes in the painting seeming to follow me. From somewhere came the sound of water dripping. It reminded me of what Clydey had said, and the fear that had vanished began to come back in waves.

I think Xerxes must have heard the water, too. For his head jerked up, and he turned to look at me.

"You must go!" he said harshly. "You must—"

The sound of dripping water came louder now.

He broke off, muttered an imprecation. Then swiftly he went to the piano, and his hands summoned forth great crashing chords that thundered and echoed in the room.

But he had been too late. I had heard. Heard the swift rush of waters from beneath the floor, as of a surging brook rapidly filling a pool.

**A**FTER minutes during which I stood there transfixed, the music crashing about my ears, the piano fell silent and Xerxes came to put his hands on my shoulders. There was no sound of a rushing torrent any longer.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked. Intently.

"Only the music, mister," I said, because that was what he wanted to hear, I knew. And I was afraid of the way his eyes were glittering as they watched me.

He smiled then, and pressed a coin into my shrinking hand. I knew he believed me, and I was relieved.

"That's right, son, you heard nothing. Good-bye. You must go now."

I was outside. The door closed behind me. But I didn't leave. Curious, I walked as quietly as I could around the hut to where the studio window was cut in the end wall. Xerxes had pulled down a great shade covering this, but I could peek in at the side where the sash was not quite completely covered.

He was lighting all the candles hastily. Then he went to throw back the Kirman rug, lift a trap door in the floor and leave it open, standing at an angle with the floor. He came then, and stood in the curve of the grand piano, his back toward me.

He was watching the opening in the floor, his lips parted. Breathlessly, I watched too. And then I saw it! A head was coming up slowly, slowly, as if the body to which it belonged was standing on an elevator below.

The eyes were closed, the long black hair dripping wet, shedding water as it came.

It was the woman of the painting.

My heart was pounding.

Slowly she emerged, clad in dripping clinging white, from that black well in the floor. Slowly her eyes opened. She smiled. She extended her hand to Xerxes, crystal drops of water falling like fringe from her outstretched arm.

Xerxes uttered a glad cry, started toward her.

And I was running then. Away. Away from that dreadful place, where the dead came to life. Running down the dirt lane to the Turnpike where Stubby and Dutch awaited me, sobbing as I ran. I fell once, scraping my knee; but I never felt it.

I didn't tell Stubby and Dutch what I'd seen.

I never told anybody.

I was afraid.

**I**T WAS the following summer that things came to a head, brought to a climax by the proposed new highway to be cut through the Golden Hills, replacing the old winding Onarga Turnpike.

Because Xerxes' hut lay directly in the path of the new highway's route, the County Commissioners sent Dad out there to make a reasonable offer for the purchase of the property. And because Xerxes' holdings were small, and the hut itself of little or no value, no particular difficulty was anticipated.

But Xerxes flatly refused to sell.

There was an informal meeting of the exasperated commissioners in our dining room that night. I lay so quietly on the battered couch in the bay window, pretending to read a book, that Dad must have forgotten I was there. At any rate, he made no move to send me to bed where I belonged, and so I heard it all.

Oscar Newland, president of the county board, was the most vitriolic. This was nothing unusual, as he was known to grow apoplectic on the slightest provocation. He always gave the major Fourth of July speech in our town square, and we kids never missed it, expecting him to explode like a rocket.

"By Jupiter!" he was crying now. "The fellow shan't get away with it!" There followed a magnificent flow of oratory, with thunderous phrases about "obstructionists" and "standing in the path of progress" and "a town destined by Fate to become the most important in this glorious state!" the while I watched fascinated as his face purpled, and his fat jowls shook.

Dad waited till the outburst had run its course, and Mr. Newland had stopped for very lack of breath.

"I'm sorry," Dad said then. "I did my best to persuade him, but he didn't even attempt to argue with me. He just told me he didn't want to sell, and he had no more than that to say about it."

"We'll start condemnation proceedings at once!" cried Mr. Newland. And he even said resoundingly, "If we have to drag it through the highest courts in the land!" with a gesture, forefinger to the ceiling.

Dad said quietly, "Couldn't the new highway be routed another way?"

Mr. Newland recoiled as from a blow. "Are you intimating that Xerxes should be encouraged in his obstinacy?"

"I think it would be a great mistake to dispossess him."

Mr. Newland looked around at the others as if he thought his ears had deceived him. Then he turned to Dad. "May I ask why?"

"I—I can't say." There was a peculiar expression on Dad's face. "It's a feeling I have. A feeling of—oh, impending tragedy, perhaps, if we attempt to force him out."

"Tish-tosh!" snorted Mr. Newland. "Poppycock!"

I saw Dad's jaw set then in the ominous way it always did when he was sure he was right but had said his say.

A FEW mornings later, Mr. Newland made his "obstructionists in the path of progress" speech, with embellishments, at the Fourth of July celebration. By that time, the story had spread and everyone knew he was speaking of Xerxes Andrea-polous.

Standing at one corner of the bunting-striped platform, I heard him through. Two heavy-set men behind me were nodding their heads sagely as Mr. Newland drove home every point, and I heard them muttering about "goddam foreigners who come here and think they can run the country."

I drifted away when the speech ended to ride on the merry-go-round and Ferris wheel of the cheap traveling carnival that had set up business at one end of the square.

It must have been two hours later that Dutch Meier came upon me there.

"Hey!" he said breathlessly. His face was red, and streaked with excited sweat. "Hey, I been lookin' all over for ya. I got somep'n to tell ya." He drew me behind one of the pitch-tents. "There's gonna be a raid! Tonight! They're gonna go out there and tear down ole Xerxes' hut!"

"Go on!" I scoffed. "Who?"

"Some men. Honest. I heard 'em talkin' over near the bandstand. They're all goin' together. Maybe they'll let us go, too."

I remembered Xerxes' sad eyes. "No. I wouldn't want to."

"Why?" Dutch was staring at me in amazement.

I only scuffed the ground with my copper-toed shoe, and muttered, "I—I don't know."

But I did know. It wasn't fair. So many men—sneaking up on just one, tearing down his house. It wasn't right.

Dutch said helplessly, "Well; anyway. Come on over to the bandstand now, and listen."

But I shook my head. "No. I'm goin' home."

Dutch left me in disgust.

I didn't go home then, though. I trudged all the way out the sandy road, in the blazing July heat, and knocked on the door of Xerxes' hut.

"I don't know why I went, really. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to be a snitcher. I just remember thinking over and over doggedly, "It ain't fair. I don't care. It ain't fair."

Xerxes was home, as usual. And when I'd told him disjointedly, embarrassedly, of the menace that threatened him, he looked sick. His eyes went from my flushed face to the Kirman rug. I knew what he must be thinking, but I gave no sign.

He said hopelessly, "Oh, my God." And he said, "I can't hold them *all* off. What is to become of—"

He stood there in silence for long minutes, thinking. Then his hand dropped to my shoulder gently. "Thanks, son. I don't know what—" His voice broke despairingly. "But, thanks. You'd better go now."

I remember standing outside a long time, looking at the silvery boards of the door he'd shut and locked behind me. My heart was heavy. I stood there until the piano started. Softly at first. Then loudly, angrily fortissimo. The fury mounted, mounted, mounted tearingly until I gasped. It held the grief, sorrow, despair of all the world. It couldn't be borne.

I turned. And fled blindly home as if all the fiends of hell pursued me.

**I** DIDN'T learn it till long afterward, but as it transpired, the mob didn't wait until nightfall before venturing to attack Xerxes' hut. Instead, flushed with heat and alcohol, they marched out there in a roaring body in mid-afternoon.

But they were too late.

For when they arrived, it was to find the door of Xerxes' hut swinging idly open, the clearing deserted, and no sign of life about the place.

Disconcerted, they stopped, and muttered

among themselves. It was minutes before some of the bolder spirits among them nerved themselves to enter warily.

They found the body of Xerxes lying alongside the grand piano. And on the piano, where they had splattered, were the hair and the bits of gray and red matter that had been the brains of Xerxes Andreapolous. He'd blown off the back of his head by putting the muzzle of a shotgun in his mouth, and pulling the trigger with his toe.

The men, strangely sobered now, looked around. The Kirman rug was thrown back and the trap-door opened at an angle. One of the men, emboldened, went to the edge and looked down. The well was dry. And empty. But this occasioned no comment among them.

For none of them had ever seen what I had seen emerging from the well under Xerxes' hut.

**I**T WAS that afternoon, late, that Clydey came with his "gift" for me. How he escaped meeting the mob on his way, I'll never know. He must have come circuitously by back roads.

Dad was asleep on the couch in the dining room bay, a folded sheet of newspaper over his face to keep off flies. And I was out in the back yard, languidly shoving the lawn mower around. It helped me to forget about the trouble threatening Xerxes.

Clydey came in the rear gate while my back was turned, and he scared me badly. I didn't know he was there till his giggle made me jump.

"What do you want, Clydey?" I asked, watching him carefully. You always had the feeling you didn't know what he'd do next.

He looked at me vacantly, one finger exploring his nose. Then he brightened a little. "I brought you a present." He thought again, then repeated as if he'd learned it some time by rote. "Open your mouth, and shut your eyes."

I didn't open my mouth; but I shut my eyes and covered them with my hands to humor him. Minutes later I was going to peek, thinking he'd gone away and forgotten me, when I heard him giggle again. He



brought my hands down, and I opened my eyes.

He stood there beaming at me. At first I couldn't see anything else, because he was standing in the way. And then I saw he had the handle of his coaster wagon in his hand. And I saw what was on the wagon.

I couldn't scream at first. I wanted to, but I couldn't.

She was lying half-in, half-out of the wagon, and she was totally unclad. Her head was bent back at an unnatural angle, and the ends of the long black hair were stained tan where they'd dragged through the dust of the sandy road. But I knew her.

The woman of the painting in Xerxes' hut. The woman of the dripping water. Appolonia Andreapolous.

"Tee, hee, hee!" Clydey giggled. "Oh, the pretty lady!"

The giggle started me off. I'd been standing terrified, mesmerized, up till then. But I started yelling at last. I was running screaming for the back door, my eyes threatening to burst from their sockets.

Dad met me, his face white at my howls. I couldn't speak. I could only point backward toward the yard. Dad ran out, and I saw him give one horrified look. Then he was dragging a sheet from the line, throwing it over that pathetic, inert body.

And Clydey watched him stupidly, obviously mystified at our incredible reaction to his "present."

I HAVE only the haziest memory of what happened afterward. I was sick, for one thing, and not far from hysteria. Dad put me to bed, and saw to it that I stayed there the next few days, under the care of our housekeeper.

But I remember Dad called Doc Nichols, who acted as coroner on the few occasions when one was needed in our quiet town. Doc came right over, wiping the sweat from his bald head. Two sudden deaths in one afternoon almost overwhelmed him.

I heard him telling Dad about Xerxes, and I shut my eyes. I'd been too late. I'd been no help, after all.

When Doc finished, Dad took him out to the back yard. From the bedroom window

I heard him tell Doc grimly, "And this is Xerxes' wife. I know. I've seen the painting of her in his hut often enough."

Doc was dumbfounded. "Good God, but she was supposed to have disappeared nine, ten years ago!"

Dad said, "Evidently he'd held her a prisoner all these years. I can't see a mark on the body, but there can hardly be any doubt that he murdered her this afternoon, then killed himself."

This was too much for me. "He didn't, he didn't!" I hollered feebly from the window. "He loved her. He did!"

Dad looked up. "You keep still, Danny. You don't know anything about it."

I was too weak to argue. I tried, but Dad silenced me with a frown.

He told Doc. "I think Clyde must have come upon the murder and suicide, and for some strange reason of his own, he spirited the woman's body away. I've tried to question him, but it's useless. We'll never know his reason—or even what he saw."

The body of Appolonia Andreapolous was removed to the little room back of Doc's office that served as a morgue, and laid out there on a cot next the marble slab that held the sheet-covered body of her husband, Xerxes.

And I still hadn't told what I'd seen that morning last fall.

IT WAS the next morning that Doc Nichols telephoned Dad. I was still in the bedroom off the dining room, and heard Dad's end of the conversation.

"Yes? Oh, hello, Doc. Yes, yes . . . of course he must have killed her yesterday, just before he shot himself. Well, what else *can* we believe, for God's— What? All right, I'll be right over."

I wanted to tell Dad then what Xerxes had said, but he was gone, and didn't hear me calling from the bedroom. I could only wait till he returned.

But I was doomed to disappointment.

When Dad came back, he was looking white and shaken. He came into the bedroom when I called him and stood there alongside the bed, staring vacantly at nothing.

"Dad. Dad," I said. I had trouble getting his attention, but when he finally

looked at me I went on. "Dad, Xerxes didn't kill her yesterday. He told me 'way last October that his wife had been dead nine years. And Dad, I saw——"

It was the only time I ever saw Dad really angry at me. And I know now most of that anger was composed, really, of fear. Fear of the unknown, of that which cannot be explained.

"Keep still, Danny!" he said sharply. "Listen. I forbid you ever to mention the subject of Xerxes and his wife to me again. Forbid you, do you understand?"

I stared at him, open-mouthed. I knew he meant it, all right. I was afraid to say anything else but "Yes, Dad."

I could only wonder in my heart.

AND so it was that the new Turnpike was built, and the apparently dry well under Xerxes' hut was filled with rubble, once the hut itself was torn down. But I sincerely believe the well was not always dry—that once, perhaps twice, a day it filled itself. And oh, I'd give the world to know what properties that water contained! What properties it held that could give back life to the un sentient dead. For that it held this power I truly believe.

It wasn't until long, long years later that Dad told me what he had seen in the room back of Doc Nichol's office.

Doc greeted him solemnly at the door, and led him into the back room. "This woman *couldn't* have died yesterday," Doc said testily, as if angrily trying to convince himself.

Dad, puzzled at something in the doctor's manner, waited in silence.

"I've seen many a corpse in my day," Doc grumbled, "but never a twenty-four-hour-old corpse that looked like this one."

He pulled down the sheet. And he thus revealed all that was left of the woman who'd been known as Appolonia Andreapolis.

A skeleton picked clean and white and bare, as if by buzzards.

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