

# Weird Tales



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*FICTION*

THE PULSE OF THE MACHINE . . . . . Nina Kiriki Hoffman 10

FOUR BY LORD DUNSANY:  
THE RATIONS OF MURDOCH FINUCAN, A MODERN PORTRAIT,  
ECHOING DREAM, & HELPING THE FAIRIES . . . Lord Dunsany 21

A SÉANCE . . . . . Nina Kiriki Hoffman 29

RIDI BOBO . . . . . Robert Deveraux 32

ROGUE WAVE . . . . . Gary David Johnson 38

WHERE THE SUN STAYS FOR WINTER . . . . . Nina Kiriki Hoffman 41

VALENTINES . . . . . Nina Kiriki Hoffman 43

CECILEY AT THE SUPERMARKET . . . . . Nina Kiriki Hoffman 44

SKINNED . . . . . Jimm Gordon 46

BUCK, GLORY RAE,  
& THE THREE LITTLE PIGS . . . . . John Gregory Betancourt 52

ANTONIUS BEQUEATHED . . . . . Tanith Lee 54

THE SWITCH-BACK . . . . . R. Chetwynd-Hayes 65

*VERSE*

THE SPIRIT'S LAMENT by John S. Davis: 20. THE DEVIL AND THE MODERN MAN by Darrell Schweitzer: 28. THE DANCE OF THE CORPSES by Jason J. Marchi: 37. THE SHARK by Margo Skinner: 43. WHATEVER IT IS by Stanley McNail: 51. PRISONERS OF THE ROYAL WEATHER by Bruce Boston: 82.

*FEATURES*

THE EYRIE . . . . . 4

THE DEN . . . . . Gahan Wilson 8

WEIRDISM: NECROMANCY . . . . . Jason Van Hollander 27

WEIRD TALES TALKS WITH  
NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN . . . . . Darrell Schweitzer 60

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## A MODERN PORTRAIT

Going to see an exhibition of pictures the other day, I went straight up to one of them, ignoring a hundred and forty-two, for the rather inadequate reason that I had heard several people talking about it. Well, it would not have been an inadequate reason if they had greatly praised it; but, as it was, they had all been doing the opposite. And I am glad I went, for I might otherwise have accepted their hasty opinions. I must say that, at first sight, I agreed with them, and the picture seemed to me to be all they had said of it. It was a picture of a woman, if you could call her such, standing in a very smooth fawn-colored landscape, that went right to a pale-green sky, beside a thin ruined tower full of odd angles. Looking at it close, the picture seemed quite impossible, so I stepped back four or five paces and sat on a bench to look at it, so as to give it every chance, and I was just about to decide that it could be no likeness of anybody on earth when I glanced at a lady who was sitting on the same bench. Then I saw how wrong I had been. The likeness was astonishing, and she was obviously sitting in front of her own portrait. So perfectly had the artist got her likeness that I could not help turning away from her portrait to gaze at her. This of course she saw, but did not resent, as she showed by saying at once, "Do you think it is like me?"

"It is marvellous," I said. "A speaking likeness. How did you come to be like that?"

My last remark sounds so rude that I should like to take up a little space in explaining it. To begin with, it was wrung from me by surprise — the surprise of finding myself so completely wrong, and all my friends wrong who had told me about this picture, believing it to be unnatural; and there she was beside me, with the same long Victorian dress right to the ground that there was in the picture, the same forehead of steel, or bright metal, with a wisp of rusted iron above it in the form of a query mark, and one of those small horns sometimes carried on bicycles, in place of a nose, with one eye just below it. And I noticed that one of her hands was a lobster's pair of claws, while the other one was a spanner, with a gold wedding-ring on one of the

horns of the implement, neat and well-fitting as it was in the picture. Her only other ornament was an oval brooch in gold, framing a miniature of a gentleman wearing whiskers, and a few jet buttons down the front of the black dress. As I have said, my words were wrung from me. But she took no exception to them, and answered at once. "My mother was a late-Victorian lady," she said, "and my father was a bicycle; a lady's bicycle, you know."

I glanced at her again and saw it all in a flash, the long dress, the cameo, and then the bright drops of rain on her metal forehead, and a few faint stains of rust, marking some earlier drops.

"Yes, yes, of course," I said. And I could not at first think of anything more to say to her, till I remembered something that had puzzled me, at first sight, over the tower. "That tower," I said, "the one you were standing by. Was it quite safe? I was wondering if it might not have fallen."

"But why?" she asked.

And all I could find to say was "The force of gravity."

"Oh, that's quite superseded now," she said.

"And again I said, "Yes, of course."

And with her next remark we luckily got away from modern science, of which I really know nothing; for she looked up at her portrait again, and said to me: "Do you think I take more after my mother?"

But, as I was beginning to get a little bit bewildered, I hurriedly spoke of the artist, instead of answering her question, and said what a wonderful likeness he had got. And this could not be denied, and somehow left little to talk about; so little that she soon got up from the bench and hurried away. And it was not till I saw the swift gliding movement with which she went down the gallery, that I noticed, what her long skirts had prevented my seeing before, that she had wheels instead of feet. One snort through the bicycle-horn may have been some sort of farewell.

It only shows that one should not say of any portrait that it is like nothing on earth, as a good many people are too ready to do, until one is quite sure.

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