

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

APRIL, 1955

Vol. 3, No. 3

Just Around the Corner 4 <i>by William Scarff</i>
Miracle in the Moluccas 30 <i>by F. B. Bryning</i>
Who? 39 <i>by Algis Budrys</i>
The Quality of Mercy 49 <i>by Robert F. Young</i>
Life, Incorporated 59 <i>by Alice Eleanor Jones</i>
Witch Hunt 75 <i>by Len Guttridge</i>
The Visitor from Space 81 <i>by J. Harvey Haggard</i>
Bye Bye, Mindy 89 <i>by Milton Lesser</i>
A Rite for Stalek 99 <i>by Dorothy Madlé</i>
Arrival at Anxiety 109 <i>by Jerome Bishop</i>
Thunderbolt 114 <i>by John A. Sentry</i>
The Hollywood Habit 119 <i>by William Morrison</i>
Devil Play 125 <i>by Nathaniel Norsen Weinreb</i>

H. L. Herbert
President

Leo Margulies
Publisher
Editorial Director

Kelly Freas
Cover Design

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 3, No. 3. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, Inc., 471 Park Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y. Subscriptions 6 issues \$2.00, 12 issues \$3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, New York. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright 1955, by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC. APRIL 1955.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

devil play

by . . . Nathaniel
Norsen Weinreb

Proverbially speaking, the Devil can ply his trade almost anywhere. But Big League Baseball—as every one knows—has rules of its own.

"WHY, YOU DON'T even look like the devil," Otis commented sourly, watching the pink-skinned, blue-eyed, gray-moustached man of middle age who sat, with a huge briefcase gently balanced on his knees, across the desk. "When I invoked you to appear, I expected to find—"

The devil coughed gently, searched for his neat breastpocket handkerchief, found it, removed it, and started to clean his rimless glasses. Fascinated, Otis watched as the manicured and polished fingernails passed the fine linen over the square-cut shape of the spectacles.

"That is a common misconception," the devil said, his eyes lowered upon his task. "People, when they invoke me, expect to see me with hoof, horn and tail, all surrounded by an odor of brimstone. A terrible, terrible error, Mr. Otis, a medieval notion, fostered by the Faust-Mephistopheles legend and nursed through the ages by superstition. As you can see, Mr. Otis, I am quite normal and quite modern."

The blue eyes looked up and caught Otis in their brilliant, ter-

We predict you'll chuckle hugely over this utterly charming little fantasy by the distinguished author of THE BARBARIANS and THE SORCERERS, both best-selling historical novels published by Doubleday and reprinted by Perma. We predict you'll chuckle and then grow grim, for surely no tale of his Satanic Majesty could possibly be hilarious throughout. Or could we be mistaken?

rible gaze. The full mouth smiled, revealing the tiny baby-teeth, glittering white and perfectly formed. I wonder if he wears porcelain caps, Otis wondered . . .

"But how do I know that you *are* the devil?" Otis insisted stubbornly, talking as he would to one of his clients who didn't want to purchase an additional insurance policy.

"I see." The devil sighed wearily. "You want proof. A miracle. Very well—" and lazily he snapped his fingers, waved his hand, making a table, loaded with dishes and a steaming silver percolator of coffee, appear before Otis' widening eyes. The devil reached for a hot corn muffin and began buttering it carefully.

"We might as well have breakfast together," he said amiably, delicately biting into the muffin, "and talk this over like civilized people. Besides, I haven't eaten for two days. Spent most of the last two nights behind the Iron Curtain . . ." He shook his head, his cheek puffed with muffin. "I am doing a terrific business with souls there. Those Russians! What bargainers . . . Well," and he swallowed the muffin, sipped daintily at the coffee, and tapped his mouth with a napkin, "let's get on with it, shall we?"

"You are James Otis, aged forty-two years, an insurance agent, not very successful, unmarried, who wants to trade his soul for two hundred thousand dollars—tax free—

to be obtained within six months, with resulting fame and publicity and said monies to be acquired with pleasure and a minimum of effort. Is that correct, Mr. Otis?"

"Roger," said Otis, feeling silly at the old Air Force expression. But the devil reminded him of a weather officer he had known in the 15th Air Force.

"Very well," the devil said briskly. "Request has been granted. The papers are ready." He bent toward the huge briefcase, which opened automatically and from which he took out a long, pink-colored legal document. For a moment, his eyes skimmed over the paper and he hummed slightly, nodded and handed the sheet to Otis.

"You will sign where the double X's are," he informed Otis. "Here . . . use my pen . . ."

The pen, Otis thought, felt slightly hot, but he disregarded it as his experienced eyes swept over the legal wordage. It was all there . . . the sum of two hundred thousand . . . to be acquired within six months, with fame and publicity, and pleasure and a minimum of effort. In return for which one James Otis gave over his soul to the devil.

"There are no options, as you can see," the devil remarked. Otis merely grunted, unscrewed the pen and hastily applied his signature.

"Excellent penmanship," the devil observed, looking at the signature. Carefully, he inserted the document back into the briefcase

which closed itself. "Now. You have started. Within a month, you will be the star relief pitcher for the New York Giants. By the end of the baseball season, you will be the baseball sensation of the sporting world. You will be signed to an exclusive contract, earning you two hundred thousand dollars for the season."

"The Giants . . ." Otis gulped happily.

"Naturally," the devil nodded. "For years, you have been one of the Polo Grounds faithful, yearning for a World Series pennant. Anyone knows what torture it is to be a Giant fan. Why, even where I come from, we have no instruments of pain like *that*. However, relief pitcher you will be. You are too old—physically—to go a full game.

"After all, we do have to be reasonable, don't we? But you now have the power. You will try out for spring training with the Giants, paying your own expenses as any unknown does. But you won't be unknown for long."

"Power?" Otis asked. "What power?"

"The power—or supernatural ability, if you want to call it that," the devil smiled gently, "of being able to throw nothing but strikes."

Otis took a deep breath. "You mean . . . that whoever gets up to face me will strike out?"

"Exactly," said the devil and flew out of the window . . .

"Hey, Skipper," Wes Westrum called out to Durocher in the Ari-

zona sunshine, "take a peek at this old-timer who's pitching up there. Caught him myself. He hasn't missed the plate yet and has struck out fifteen in a row."

Grunting, Durocher ambled up to the first base line, watching Otis on the mound. Clad in an old sweat shirt and some faded baseball pants, Otis seemed to be lobbing them up easily. Even as Durocher watched an eager young rookie went swinging to his knees.

Durocher crooked a little finger and three coaches came panting up. "Get those red-necks out of there," the Giant manager rasped, "and send up Irvin, Lockman, Dark and Mays . . ."

And as Irvin, Lockman, Dark and Mays went down swinging on twelve perfectly pitched strikes, Durocher was wondering how much this Otis would cost the Giant management . . .

And, at World Series time, the management decided that Otis was worth every bit of the two hundred thousand he had asked for—and had been given. In addition to shattering every National and American League pitching record, with an earned run average of .000—Otis also used that gifted right-hand to pitch the Giants into the Series with the New York Yankees.

The Stadium team, although a sound one, boasted this year of only one real slugger, burly, blond Kenny Kitchner, a right-fielder, used mainly for pinch-hitting duties on the portside since his discharge

from the front in Korea. So far, Kitchner had been clipping the fences to a .467 rhythm since his return.

In the first six games of the Series, Otis and Kitchner had never met; either the reliefer came in when Kitchner had already batted or Otis wasn't used at all, as happened in the first two games that the Polo Grounders took without the aid of the devil's disciple. A slight cold kept Kitchner out of the third and fourth stanzas, which the Bombers copped. In the fifth, Stengel, masterminding his two-platoon system, sent the blond into the fray in the sixth, with Kenny clearing the bases on a long triple off Turley.

In the seventh, Otis went on to pitch the Giants to a win, striking out nine men in a row. The sixth game went to the Stengeleers, with Otis pitching one inning before Kitchner got up to bat, only to be thrown out of the game on a heated decision over a pitched ball.

Thus . . . in the last game of the series, all knotted up at three-all, the excitement arose to tremendous frenzy in the last of the ninth, with the score deadlocked at zero for both teams and with Kitchner—for the first time in the series—meeting the reliefer, Otis.

Otis was on the mound, facing Kitchner and ready to throw the first ball when his eyes caught sight of a familiar figure with rimless glasses, moustache and briefcase, hovering near the Giant dugout.

Something tugged at Otis' heart. He signalled frantically.

Durocher ran over from third base. "Tired?" he asked anxiously.

Otis shook his head. "That little man over there. I just want to see him for a second." And before the manager could protest, Otis had torn off the mound and was chasing after the little man, finally catching up to him under the stands.

"Is anything the matter? Why did you show up now?" Otis demanded.

The devil glared at him, his blue eyes flaming. "My business was with Kitchner, not you," he snapped.

"Kitchner?" Otis' heart raced.

"Yes, Kitchner." The devil smiled wickedly. "You see," he explained, "I have a contract with *him* too. Made it overseas, as a matter of fact. Not as expensive as yours, but good enough. Read it."

The briefcase flew open and the familiar pink contract fluttered in Otis' resin-coated hand. The reliefer's eyes found the vital paragraph:

"And, in return for the soul of Kenneth Wellington Kitchner, pinch-hitter for the New York Yankees, I, the Devil, do promise that said Kenneth Wellington Kitchner will—for the duration of this baseball season—always get a hit whenever he is at bat, no matter who the pitcher may be . . ."

The paper dropped from Otis' fingers.

"Now," the devil smiled gently, "go out and pitch, boy . . ."