

fantastic ADVENTURES

MARCH, 1952

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EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES, 368 MADISON AVE.,
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is published monthly by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company at 135 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter July 29, 1935, at the Post Office, Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada. Postmaster—please return undelivered copies under form 3573 to 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions, \$1.01 for twelve issues; in Britain Empire, \$2.00; all other foreign countries, \$5.00 for twelve issues. SINGLE COPIES: 10¢. All communications concerning subscriptions should be addressed to Circulation Dept., 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address.

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All Stories Complete

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HE FELL AMONG THIEVES (Novel—25,000) by Milton Lesser 10

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

The little green Martian meant well. But the road from Mars to Moscow—like the road from Mars to mayhem—is paved with the best of intentions

BROTHERS BEYOND THE VOID (Short—3,200) by Paul W. Fairman 56

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

To Marcusson, the thought that people are the same everywhere was comforting. Until he learned that this sameness was the very thing he was fighting against

THE TRAVELLING BRAIN (Short—8,500) by William P. McGivern 64

Illustrated by Paul Lundy

Mining was a dead man—without the rigor mortis. Until one day the old professor showed him that it was only in death that a man could really begin to enjoy living

YOUR SOUL COMES C. O. D. (Short-short—1,400) by Mack Reynolds 80

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

When you make a pact, sometimes it's better not to know who the other party is. Norman didn't when he made his contract—and he certainly got more than he bargained for...

THE MASTER KEY (Novelette) by Frances M. Deagen 86

Illustrated by Frank Navarro

All that stood between Dan Storm and a million dollars' worth of hairweed was an entire planet of red Venusian gangsters—and one beautiful Earth girl

Front cover painting by Leo Ramon Summers and Ed. Valigursky,
illustrating a scene from "He Fell Among Thieves"

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Your Soul Comes C.O.D.

By Mack Reynolds

Norman knew just what he wanted from life. Except whom to call on for help in collecting the payoff

He hadn't even gotten all his paraphernalia out before the spirit appeared

IN VIEW of the trouble to which he had gone in order to acquire such out of the way items as a piece of unicorn horn and three drops of blood from a virgin, it was rather disconcerting to have the spirit appear even before the prescribed routine. In fact, he hadn't even got his protective pentacle drawn when he looked up to find the entity materialized in his rickety easy chair.

The spirit said, "You don't really need that, you know."

Norman Wallace stared at his visitor, even after all these months of research, unbelievably. The other was far from what the young man expected. Somehow, he was reminded of Lincoln, his face almost beautiful in its infinite sadness.

The spirit nodded at the pentacle. "Mere superstition. It couldn't protect you if my purpose was to do you harm. But, more important still, I am quite incapable of such aggression. Man has freedom of choice, free will;

we of the other worlds can only help him destroy—or elevate—himself, we cannot initiate."

Norman was shaken, but not quite to the point of speechlessness. He pointed to his assembled drugs, charms, potions and incenses and said, almost indignantly, "But I haven't performed the rite, as yet."

The other nodded and shrugged. "What's the difference? You wished to summon a spirit. Very well, here I am. The desire is of more importance than the act of combining those rather silly items. But, to get to the point, just what is it you desire?"

Norman Wallace took a deep breath and got down to business. He indicated his shabby quarters. "I can bear this no longer," he said. "I want a few years of decency in living, a few years of the good things of life that others enjoy. So—"

"So in your desperation you wish to sell your soul in return for help."

"That's right."

The spirit considered momentarily. "Suppose I give you my support for forty years? Suppose I guarantee you love, wealth, power, to the degree you desire them? At the end of that time your soul is mine?"

Norman Wallace's mouth tightened, but he said, "That's agreeable."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, the pact is made."

The other frowned. "Don't we make out a contract or something? Don't I have to sign in blood?"

The faintest of smiles came to the melancholy face of the spirit. "That won't be necessary. The pact has been made, neither of us will nor can break it."

Suddenly he had disappeared.

And almost simultaneously came a knock at the door. Dazed, Norman came to his feet and opened it.

Harriet was there and immediately

in his arms. "Oh, darling, darling, I was so wrong."

He held her back, at arm's length, in amazement. "You mean that you've changed your mind, you'll marry me?"

"Oh, darling, yes. I thought going away from you, spending a few months in Florida, would let me forget. I was so wrong."

Frowning worriedly, he indicated the poverty of his room. "But Harriet, we'd still—"

She smiled now, and laughed up at him. "Remember that little farm I told you my aunt left me? The one in Louisiana?"

He nodded, uncomprehending.

"Oil, darling," she bubbled over. "Enough to give you the start you need."

AND SO it went for forty years. Wealth to the modest extent he desired it; prestige to the small degree his ambition demanded; but, most important of all, love that ripened and ever grew as the years went by. And a home rich with children, and the respect and affection of his neighbors and his associates.

Not that he had ever seen the spirit again, not in all those years. Almost, it was possible for him to look back at his life and think it was all of his own doing. Each success had seemingly been not inordinarily good luck, or a result of his own efforts. Sometimes he had even tried to convince himself that the pact he'd made was a figment of his imagination, that the demon he had thought he had summoned was a result of too much worry, too much work, too little food and recreation back in those days of his poverty-stricken youth.

But subconsciously he knew. *He knew!*

And so it was that after his forty years he sat alone in his study and waited. Harriet had gone on to bed;

the children, of course, had long since been married themselves and were living their own peaceful, happy lives.

He wondered now, as he looked back over the years, at the use to which he had put the demon's assistance. He had been promised love, wealth, and power to the extent he desired them. But, somehow, he had wanted no more than sufficient for himself and his family. He had made no attempt to accumulate the fortune of a Midas; nor, for that matter, had he attained his possessions by recourse to the racetrack or stockmarket. He had worked hard during those forty years.

He had been promised power, too. Why had he taken so little? He had been content to assume a position in society that coincided with his natural abilities. He could have been president or, for that matter, dictator of the world. Why hadn't he?

Ah, but he had taken his full measure of the other. His cup had overflowed with love. In all the years, the romance between Harriet and him had never waned. And the children? Well, for instance, the way they had returned to the old home from all over the nation this last Christmas had proven their affection.

AND NOW suddenly he thought he knew his motivation. Somewhere, beneath it all, he had been attempting to forestall the fate awaiting him. Subconsciously he had told himself that if he were moderate, if he led the good life, if he abstained from demanding the ultimate, his reckoning with the demon would be the easier.

He laughed abruptly, bitterly.

And suddenly fear washed over him. The reckoning was now.

No matter what he had done with the demonic powers awarded him. No matter how he had loved and been loved. No matter how much he re-

pented now.

His soul was the spirit's.

He clasped his hands tightly to the arms of his chair.

Run! *Hidel ESCAPE!*

But he sank back again. There was no place to run. No place to hide. No way of escape.

The spirit materialized on the couch across from him.

Norman Wallace nodded his gray head in submission. "I was expecting you."

"Your forty years are up," the spirit told him.

"Yes, I know." Hopelessness had replaced fear now.

"Is there any reason why our pact should not be fulfilled? You are satisfied that I have suitably kept my part of the bargain?"

The old man hesitated, then nodded again. "I am satisfied."

"Then you are ready to go? You have taken farewell of those you love, made what arrangements you thought necessary?"

"Yes. Yes, I am ready." His voice was firm now. "I suppose it will be hard on Harriet for a time, but then, we must all face the end sooner or later, and only recently my doctor warned me of my heart. Harriet always said she wanted me to go first, that she would hate to think of me alone in life after we have been so close."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, let us be on our way."

Norman Wallace arose too and the shock was not so great as he might have expected when he was able to look back and see himself sitting there in the easy chair, his face pale and his eyes staring unseeingly.

"Then I am dead already?"

"Yes," the spirit told him, "Your doctor's diagnosis was quite accurate. Come."

And suddenly they were in another place and Norman Wallace stared about uncomprehendingly.

He said, "It seems that in all my relations with you I have been continually surprised at the inaccuracy of the legends and myths."

"Oh?" the spirit said.

"Yes. When you first appeared you didn't look like my life-long conception of a demon. Nor in my dealings

with you have you acted the way I supposed you would. Now, this place has none of the attributes I had expected of hell."

The spirit smiled. "My dear Norman, why is it that so many suppose that souls are of less interest to us than to our adversaries? Why should not one side strive for a worthy one as well as the other? I am not a demon, nor is this hell."

THE END