

PLANET STORIES



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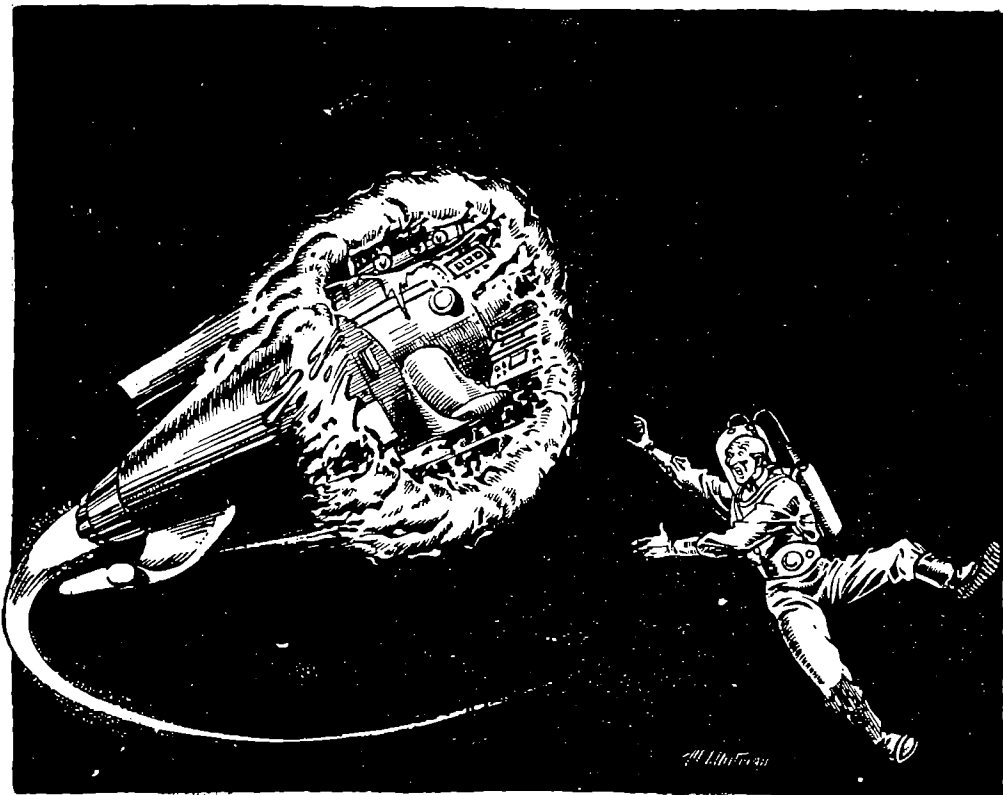
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He began kicking and squirming like a mad dancer.

Escape From Pluto

By WILLIAM OBERFIELD

Exiled to Pluto's harsh wastes, Marcius Kemble listened eagerly to the evil voices planning his triumphant return. But even the Plutonians underestimated the flaming glory to which they sent him.

MARCIOUS KEMBLE STOOD UP-
ON the frozen surface of Pluto and swore aloud. He knew there were none to hear him but, just the same, he shouted into his plastic space helmet until his ears were ringing, cursing all the planets and their diverse inhabitants in order, most of all Earth.

You see, Marcius Kemble was an example. He was an example to any others, in the year of twenty-two hundred A.D., who would strive to rule the solar system. The planets were independent states and they were to remain that way. For trying to change this, Kemble had been exiled to unexplored Pluto.

Marcius raised his mailed fist toward the mighty stars and ground out curses against Earth and all those upon it, wishing that he could call upon it the wrath of Heaven and Hell, for it had been the men of Earth who had brought about his ultimate downfall.

It had been the age-old story of a power-mad tyrant finding out the secret grudges of his subjects and working on them to inspire a frenzy of hate, to maneuver them into a war against unsuspecting neighboring nations. He had gained control of the whole of Mars in this way and had been reaching out for the moon-system of Saturn, when the full force of the Planetary,

Combine had come against him, scattering his forces.

The counter offensive had been led by Earth, and it had been an Earth ship which, after his short-lived escape, had parachuted him to the cold surface of Pluto. Is it any wonder that he should hate them?

Marcus Kemble looked fearfully around at the bleak, frozen landscape of Pluto, a cold Hell, hardly reached by the light of the sun. Then he began to laugh.

Marcus laughed into the little plastic world of his helmet and the sound roared back into his own ears, and he laughed louder. Tears streamed down over the contact lenses in his eyes and caused the white mountains to gesticulate and beckon to him.

He was beginning to see it all very clearly now. It wasn't his own laughter in his helmet. The white mountains were laughing at him, the stars and sun were laughing, and all the people of all the planets. It was all concentrated into his ears by the curve of his helmet.

They were spying on him to see what he would do, laughing because he could do nothing, their voices filling his head, asking who he was, what he was going to do now, mocking him. He would show them! Run to the laughing white mountains, cast them into an ocean, crush them beneath his feet! That would put them in their places! Do it now!

Marcus pulled himself to his feet. He knew that he had been running and had fallen, striking his helmet upon something hard, and that he had been laughing, crying and cursing at the same time. The reverberating blow had shocked him into silence. And he was remembering the words of the doctor who had cared for him, back on Mars.

The doctor had said, "You have a great mind, Sifre, and a very strong will, but there are some flaws, as in all men. If you should know defeat, your only hope will be death. Living, your mind would refuse to give up, beating itself into insanity against a blank wall."

Now, Marcus knew what the doctor had meant. There were still the voices in his mind repeating over and over, "Who are you?—Who are you?" almost as if they were mocking the beating of his heart.

There was something strange about the

voices, Marcus thought. It was as if there were some alien intelligence behind them. There were two of them, and they seemed to require an answer from him. It was with no great hope that he answered the voices by concentrating upon his name and present predicament.

THE thoughts of Marcus Kemble did not go unheard. Unknown to the rest of the solar system, Pluto had its inhabitants. To Earth men, these would be very strange beings, not alone in appearance but in composition. Their heads were roughly triangular, widening upward from a pointed chin and resting on thin, yet strong, necks above equally strong and spindly man-like bodies. They were mainly composed of elements which became solid only at very low temperatures.

Thus it was that one of these beings sat before a radio-like device and perspired in the extreme cold of the room. His long pointed ears were depressed by the weight of a shiny metal cap and his too-large eyes held a look of worried consternation. The reason for his consternation was the thoughts of the ex-dictator of Mars.

The wearer of the cap shot a series of rapid sounds at the other occupant of the room.

He said, in effect, "I have received thought emanations from the direction of the great plain, rather garbled. The being is probably a giant from some other world, for his thoughts are alien and he evidently considers it within his power to crush the mountains which house us!"

The other made a negative gesture with a slender hand. "Don't you think it is more likely that it is a trick of the enemy to frighten us, Gor? They have tried such things before, you know."

Gor was quiet while he peered into the eyepiece of an instrument; then he replied, "We will soon know. Tower Three has made contact, giving us the exact location, and the inquisitors have now gone to work on him."

For a while, the two Plutonians busied themselves with their various machines, then Gor spoke again. "You are radiating sorrow, Bakar. What troubles you?"

Bakar sighed. "I was thinking of the ancient pictures of Ahndee in the days when its orbit was much nearer the sun,

and we, the inhabitants of Ahndee, were happy in our beautiful cities.

"Now, the two remaining great nations hide, one from the other, beneath the mountains, and neither can break the defenses of the other, but still we try. What is the use of it?"

"Careful, Bakar," Gor looked sternly at the other. "The Four may have you in the thought beam. You know that The Four lead us along this path because it is the only choice, the path shown in the future machine.

"In the time you speak of," Gor went on, "the people were no better off than we of today. Because they did not have the future machine, they had failures. They wandered from the way and their failures turned them back to the course provided by the natural law. Now we know for what we are bound and, if we work toward that end, can know no failures."

A strange light came into Bakar's eyes, but he said nothing.

Shortly thereafter, a voice drifted into the room. It was a mild voice, but it was also old and wise.

The voice said, "This is Nel, one of The Four. The being on the plain has been probed and analyzed and has been found to be a creature of the carbon class from the inner worlds. He has sought to deceive us in the manner in which he has deceived his own, but we have seen all.

"The being is of a race called man and is named Mah Shuss Kem Bil. He is clothed in a type of space armour which embodies an air purifier, good for a period of time long enough to transport him to the fourth planet at half the speed of light, and is protected against cold by electric and tonic stimulants which do not produce heat, but only suspend the sensation of cold. Therefore we may come in contact with him without fear of burns.

"Since the future machine indicates that he must be sent back into space, and since there is no place for him in our world, he will be disposed of at once. Tower Two will dispatch two ships. The man will be instructed in the operation of one of the ships and sent on his way. The pilots will return in the other ship. That is all."

For a long moment, quiet filled the room.

Gor was uneasy as he said, "Well, Bakar, have you not heard? It is your duty to

dispatch the ships. Why do you hesitate?"

Bakar sprung to his feet, a small weapon clutched in his claw-like hand. "No!" he hissed, "I will not obey the machine. I am going to prove to you, and to all, that it can be wrong. You know of the soft places in the plain, Gor. It is a wonder that the man did not land in one of these, considering that there are more of these than solid ground. But he will weary of waiting for the ships, which he has been informed of, and begin to wander. He cannot go far before he is swallowed up, sinking deeper and deeper. Then we shall see if the future machine is always right!"

Gor said nothing, but a slight smile came to his lips, a rather ironic one.

It was much later when Gor again spoke. He turned from his position at the thought receiver and said, "News for you, Bakar. I have just received thought that the man is on his way."

Bakar visibly started, and Gor continued, "How many times have you complied with an order from The Four and pressed the button that informs second in command that you had done so? Force of habit caused you to perform it this time, Bakar. The order went on, through second in command."

He added softly, "The future machine never lies!"

MARCIUS KEMBLE stood upon the frozen plain and waited. A satanic smile lighted his face and the cry for revenge was in his heart. He somehow felt that the thoughts had not lied, that they would send the promised ship. Then he would be free again, blasting back to quench his thirst for revenge against the Combine. His face became flushed and the temperature within his suit became perceptibly greater, as he formed his fanatical plans. While he waited, the leaders of the Combine, in his mind, suffered and died a thousand times.

The coming of the ships was swift. One moment there was nothing; the next, they rested upon the plain before him. Marcius was surprised to note that they were very small, as compared to others he had seen. So much the better, he thought, to elude the space patrol.

He also marveled at the fact that the creatures coming toward him from the

ships were lightly clothed, and that they could speak to him through his mind.

"Do not fear us," came the thought. "You must come with us into one of the craft, to learn of the controls."

Inside the ship, Marcius found that "learning of the controls" was much simpler than he had thought it would be.

He sat in the pilot's seat, hands on the controls and eyes closed. A thousand times more effective than words, thoughts came to him, and he flew the Plutonian ship through every condition and position that could ever be encountered, even though he never left the place at which the ship had come to rest on the plain. Mental instruction.

It all ended with Marcius Kemble, condemned dictator of Mars, soaring away from Pluto forever, still enclosed in his space suit because the air within the ship was never meant for the lungs of men, and heading toward earth, toward the fulfillment of his evil plans.

As the atmosphere of Pluto fell away behind him, Marcius wondered that he felt no acceleration. Then he remembered a faint something which he had detected in the thoughts of his instructor, something about increased momentum being induced into each individual atom, so that each retained its normal position to that of every other.

But Marcius was not the kind to spend much time on thinking of such complicated matters. Instead, he lapsed into an ecstasy of evil dreams, dreams in which he was again the mighty monarch, this time of Earth.

AS THE little ship drove on through space, Marcius pictured himself walking in on the members of the Council—he would have gained his rightful place as ruler by then, of course—and chuckled at the expressions he imagined on their faces, mouths hanging open, eyes many times too large, and their heads hanging nearly to their belts.

Someone was kneeling before him. It was the Martian member and his eyes were tightly closed against the stinging tears while his thin hands were clasped before him, praying to Marcius to have mercy.

Marcius was about to order them strung end to end and dangled, for the rest of

their lives from an over-hanging cliff, when he became aware of his present surroundings with a start. Time to start decelerating.

Sighing, he reached for the proper lever and pulled it back.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the ship seemed to shake itself and Marcius was half lifted from his seat. It couldn't be! The decelerating force should act equally on his body and the ship. How, then, could he be thrown forward?

Something bumped lightly against his helmet and drifted on by. Only for a moment did he stare blankly at the little silvery sphere, then the nose of the ship came away with a weird plopping hiss, and he was jerked through the opening by the force of the escaping air.

In confusion, he tried to swing his body around so that he could see what had happened. He twisted his shoulders around, but his hips turned equally in an opposite direction. To halt one meant to halt the other. He tried kicking his legs back hard, but only succeeded in arching his body and wrenching his back. Desperately, he began kicking and squirming like a mad dancer. Each motion depended upon an equal and opposite motion of his body.

In the midst of his struggles, his heel struck on something and started him spinning, head over heels. It was the ship. The combined gravities of the ship and his own body had brought them together again, and he was revolving about the heavier object in a close orbit, and he was turning end for end, now.

Marcius could not feel the motion. It seemed as if the universe were turning about his stationary body, rising at his head and setting at his feet.

He saw the ship then, but it was no longer a ship. It dawned on him why the Plutonians had never ventured much nearer the sun, and why, after they had known all about him, they had let him go.

Receding from him, was a perfect sphere of liquid mercury, once the hard hull of a space ship, covered with a thin layer of water that had once been windows, with small pieces of solid material floating on the surface. It was only a natural law that it should revert to this form when deprived of the sub-temperatures of Pluto.

Yes, Marcius Kemble saw it all now, but too late. He remembered a demonstration

he had seen when a child. A man had poured mercury into a mold and cooled it to near absolute zero. When withdrawn from the mold, it had been a little bell that gave a clear tone.

Why hadn't he thought of it before? The cold bodies of the Plutonians enabled them to handle such metals as he would handle steel! They made their ships and machines of such things as mercury and ice, and perhaps a few materials unknown to man, but all of a low melting point. Why should they do otherwise, when the extreme cold of Pluto made those things as hard as steel? It was even doubtful if they could produce enough heat to melt steel or even glass, or if they could produce a substance able to retain such fires.

A hot rage began to boil within him. The Plutonians had known it all along! With their science they could have kept him alive until they had learned how to build a ship that would not melt from the heat of the sun.

Now, Marcius Kemble's unretarded speed carried him through the orbit of the earth while it was still many thousands of miles distant. He began to feel the boiling heat of the sun and realized what it would be like when the insulation of his space suit gave way to that awful heat, but he decided that he would never live to suffer it. Better to let the vacuum of space draw his life from him quickly and painlessly.

Slowly, he reached up to unscrew his helmet. He gave it a slight tug, then twisted with all his might. The helmet did not budge. For a moment he could not think clearly. Then it came to him. The air pressure within the suit was so great, in relation to the vacuum of space, that it bound the threads together with a friction that he could never hope to overcome!

With fear-filled eyes, he watched the hot disk of the sun expand around him as he fell toward it.

The system would soon be rid of Marcius Kemble.
