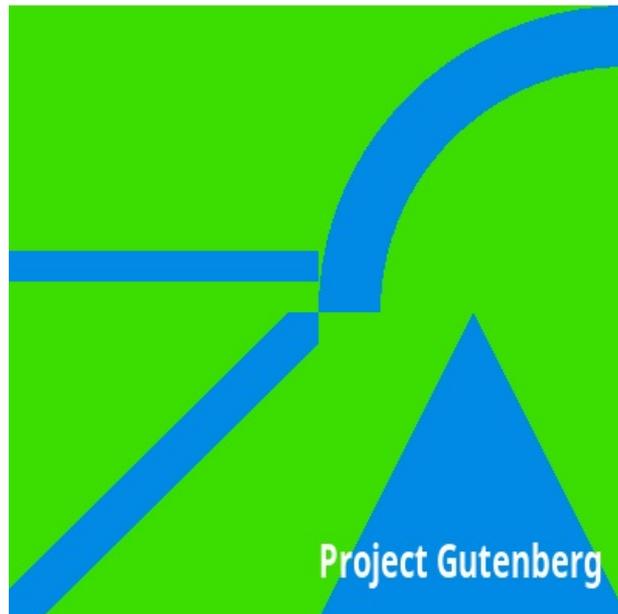

Runaway

Joseph Samachson



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Title: Runaway

Author: William Morrison

Illustrator: William Ashman

Release Date: September 3, 2009 [EBook #29897]

Language: English

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Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

runaway

By **WILLIAM MORRISON**

***Heroism is merely
daring and ingenuity
—at the age of ten—
experience can come
later!***

Illustrated by ASHMAN

A thin speck appeared in the visor plate and grew with sinister and terrifying speed. Bursts of flame began to play around the rocketing spaceship, the explosions hurtling it from side to side as it twisted and turned in a frantic effort to escape. Rogue Rogan, his vicious lips compressed, his glittering evil eyes narrowed, heart pounding, knew that this was it.

This was the day of retribution, he had so long feared....

"**P** LATO!"

Plato leaped to his feet and slid the book under the pillow. Then he seized a textbook at random, and opened it wide. His eyes fastened themselves to the print, seizing upon the meaningless words as if they would save him from a retribution that Rogue Rogan had never had to fear.

The dorm master frowned from the doorway. "Plato, didn't you hear the Assembly bell?"

"Assembly?" Plato's eyes looked up in mild astonishment. "No, sir, I didn't hear any bell. I was so absorbed in my studying, sir—" He shut the book and placed it back with the others. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm willing to accept my punishment."

The dorm master studied the little martyr's expression. "You'd better be, Plato. Now live up to your name and show some intelligence. Run along to Assembly."

Plato ran, but he also winced. How he had suffered from that miserable name of his! Even before he had known that the original Plato had been a philosopher, even before he had been capable of understanding what a philosopher was, he had been able to see the amused expression in the eyes of those who heard his name, and had hated them for it. "Show a little intelligence, Plato." Why couldn't they have given him a name like the others? There were so many ordinary, commonplace, *manly* names from which they might have chosen. Jim, Jack, George, Tom, Bill—anything would have been better than Plato. And infinitely better than what he was sometimes called by his equals—"Plato, the dopy philosopher."

HE slipped into his seat in the Assembly quietly, so as not to interrupt the droning of the principal. So they thought his name was funny, did they? Let them laugh at him. He was only ten now, but some day he would really act like a man. Some day it would be he himself, and not a fictional hero like Comets Carter, who would be adventuring on strange planets of unknown suns, tracking down the Rogans and the other criminals who sought refuge in the wide reaches of galactic space.

Some day—and then the thought burst on him like a nova exploding in his brain.

Why not now?

Why not indeed? He was smart; he could take care of himself. Even his masters admitted that, when they weren't carping at him for his daydreaming. Take that model of a spaceship they had brought to school one day, with a retired astrogator to explain to the pupils how the thing was run, and how it avoided stray meteors. He had sat down at the controls, and even the astrogator had been surprised at how confidently he took over the role of pilot, how he got the idea at once.

He could do as well in real life. He was sure of it. Give him a really worthwhile problem to work on, instead of these silly questions about square roots and who discovered the third satellite of Mars, and he'd show them.

"Thus," declaimed the principal, "you will be prepared to take up your duties—"

"Norberts to you," thought Plato. "I'm going to run away."

Where to? There were so many stars to go to, such a bewildering number of planets and asteroids.

Plato sat lost in thought. A planet whose habitation required a spacesuit was out of the question. Spacesuits his size were hard to get. The sensible thing would be to choose a place where the physical conditions, from gravity to atmospheric pressure and composition would tend to resemble those here on Venus or on Earth. But full of the most thrilling danger.

A boy's voice said, "Get up, you dopy philosopher. It's all over."

He raised his head and realized that the principal had stopped droning from the platform, that all the pupils were standing up to leave. He stood up and marched out.

When the signal for lights out came that night, Plato lay motionless for a time in the dark, his mind racing far too rapidly for him to think of sleep. He had plans to make. And after a time, when the dormitory quieted down, he went to the well of knowledge for inspiration. He slipped on his pair of goggles and threw the special switch he himself had made. The infra-red light flared on, invisible to any one in the room but himself, and he drew his book from its hiding place and resumed his reading.

The ship curvetted in space like a prancing steed. Panic-stricken by the four-dimensional space-warp in which he was trapped, Rogue Rogan stormed at his terrified followers. "By all the devils of the Coal Sack," he shouted, "the man doesn't live who can take me alive! You'll fight and die like men, you hen-hearted cowards...."

But they didn't die like men. In fact, they didn't die at all, and Plato permitted a slight sneer to play across his youthful features. Though he considered himself a passionate admirer of Comets Carter, even he felt dissatisfied with the story. When they were trapped, they were never *really* trapped. Comets Carter, sterling hero that he usually was, always showed weakness of intellect at the last moment, giving his deadly enemy an incredibly simple way out, one that Comets had, in his own incredibly simple way, overlooked.

Plato would never be guilty of such stupidity. He himself—and now *he* was Comets Carter, a quicker-thinker, smarter Carter, dealing out to Rogue Rogan a retribution many eons overdue. He was whistling through space at ten light-speeds. He was compressing light-centuries into a single second. He was—

He had just time to slip the goggles from his face before his eyes closed in sleep.

DURING the day, he continued to make his plans. There was a spaceport a hundred and forty miles away. At night, if the students poked their heads out of the window, they could see the distant ships as points of flame racing away into the darkness, like shooting stars in reverse. He would steal out of his room in the night, take a glider-train to the spaceport, and stow away. It would be as simple as that.

Of course, he needed money. He might travel at half fare, but even that would be expensive. And then there was the matter of food. He'd have to stay hidden until the spaceship took off and there was no turning back, and at the thought of crouching in some dark hold, motionless for hours,

cramped, and *with an empty stomach*—

He wasn't going to starve himself. Even Comets Carter couldn't have gone without eating and got very far in his pursuit of Rogan. Plato would have to acquire money for flight, fare and food.

The book, of course, he couldn't think of selling. It was only a decicredit novel in the first place, and somewhat worn at that. And the other students would have laughed at him for reading it. But his infra-red bedside lamp and his goggles and the space-receptor radio he had built out of spare parts—those should bring him enough to travel and live on for a few days.

He made his first sale in the free time that evening, to a young squirt in the neighboring dormitory who had a passion akin to his own. He liked to listen to tales of high adventure, of the kind the radiocasters loved and the teachers in the school frowned upon. Having arrived here from Earth only six months before, he had difficulty adjusting to the type of derring-do featured on the Venus stations, and he lacked a space-receptor that would bring him his favorites from the next planet. He snapped up, at the bargain price of ten credits, the receptor that Plato offered.

There was a little difficulty with the infra-red lamp and goggles. The customer Plato had selected turned out to be rather suspicious. He demanded, "Where did you steal them?"

Plato explained patiently, "I didn't steal them. I made them myself."

"That's a lot of hot oxo-nitrogen. You hooked them some place, and if they ever find out—"

"Okay," said Plato, "if you don't want them, you don't have to take them. I can sell them to somebody else."

He allowed the young skeptic to try the goggles on and read by the light of the lamp. He knew little of the psychology of salesmanship, but with what might be called Platonic shrewdness, he sensed that once the prospect had experienced the joys of using the magic articles, he would never give them up.

The method worked. And soon Plato was richer by fifteen credits, instead of the ten or twelve he had hoped for.

He had a few other odds and ends, which he sold for as much as they would bring. After all, once he was out in space, he wouldn't need them any more.

IN the middle of the next day, when the bell sounded the end of the class on Planetary Geography and it was time to go to the class on Animal Physiology, Plato picked himself up and walked out. One of the 'copter custodians looked at him suspiciously, but Plato didn't dignify the man by paying him direct attention.

He muttered to himself, "Always picking on me. I don't see why he can't send somebody else on his errands." It was better than the forged pass signed with the headmaster's name.

The pass itself came in handy when he bought a flight ticket. The ticket agent also stared at him suspiciously, but Plato was ready for him. He had prepared the slip of paper beforehand, tracing the headmaster's name laboriously from one of the lists of regulations attached to the wall.

To make pursuit as difficult as possible for any one who tried to trail him, Plato asked for a ticket not to Space Junction, where he was going, but to Venusberg, in the opposite direction. Both tickets cost about the same; the ticket to Venusberg, in fact, cost three decicredits more. Once on the plane-drawn glider, he could explain to the conductor that the agent had made a mistake and offer the ticket he had. Since the company would lose nothing by the transaction, there was no reason why the conductor should object.

Plato was proud of this bit of trickery, and he flattered himself that by means of it he had entirely thrown off pursuit. It must be remembered that he was only ten years old.

On the glider-flight, he found himself sitting next to a middle-aged woman who wore glasses and was surrounded by packages. She beamed at him, as she did at every one else around her, and Plato shrank back into his seat. If there was anything he didn't want on this trip, it was to be mothered.

But he couldn't escape her. She said, "My, my, you're awfully young to be traveling alone. This the first time?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Plato nervously, afraid of the embarrassing questions he could read on her face.

Hastily he stared out over the side and gasped, "Gee, how small everything is!"

Imagine anyone who had traveled vicariously through space with Comets Carter being awed by a flight in a plane-drawn glider! But the ruse worked.

She said, "Yes, it is frightening, isn't it? Even worse than space travel."

"You've been in space, ma'am?"

"Bless your heart, I've been in space more times than you could shake a stick at. The takeoff isn't so nice, I'll admit, but after that you're just sailing free. What are you going to be when you grow up?"

They had his future all planned for him, but he knew that he wasn't going to be any of the things they wanted him to be.

He said boldly, "A space explorer."

She laughed. "You youngsters are all alike inside, no matter how different you seem. My boy was the same way when he was young. But he got over it. A space explorer, no less!"

PLATO didn't answer. It was only a half hour's trip, and the conductor was walking down the aisle. Plato found it difficult to take his eyes off him. He was afraid that the man would take a look at his ticket, say, "Wrong plane, son," and turn him over to the stationmaster at Space Junction, to be shipped back.

In his nervousness, Plato had difficulty getting his ticket out of his pocket. As he had expected, the conductor said, "You're on the wrong flight."

The motherly woman exclaimed, "Oh, isn't that a shame! Are they waiting for you in Venusberg?"

Plato said tearfully, "Yes, ma'am." The tearfulness wasn't hard to manage; he'd learned the trick at school.

"That's too bad. How are you going to get there?"

"I don't know. I had just enough money to pay for this ticket."

"Doesn't the company correct mistakes, Conductor?"

"Not mistakes the passengers make," said the conductor sourly. "I'm sorry, boy, I'll have to take that ticket."

The woman's eyes flashed and, as the conductor moved on, she said, "The nasty thing. They have no consideration at all. Look, child." For a moment Plato thought she was going to offer him flight fare from Space Junction to Venusberg, but she was not, he discovered, as motherly as that. "You know what you'll do when you get off? Send a 'gram, collect, to your people in Venusberg. They'll wire you your fare. And you'll reach them in a couple of hours."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, not feeling thankful at all. So it was all right to be sympathetic, he thought indignantly, up to the point where sympathy might cost her money. Like most people, she was free-handed only with advice.

Who wanted advice?

AT Space Junction he waved her a shy farewell, and then turned and disappeared into the station crowd.

At the takeoff grounds, his heart sank. As he might have expected, the entrance to the space tarmac was well guarded. How was he going to become a stowaway on a spaceship if he couldn't even get close to it?

He wandered around outside, staring through the charged wire fence at the crowds, the spacemen, the ships inside. They were gigantic shining things, those wonderful ships, each so long that he realized for the first time how far away they must have been and how rapidly they must have traveled, for those he saw had seemed to him like shooting stars. They were pointed almost straight up. Near the stern of each ship was a vacuum-pit to absorb the radioactive exhaust gases.

His eye caught an old tub, its shininess dulled, its hull faintly scarred. Just such a ship, he thought with a thrill, as the one on which Comets Carter had been shanghaied on that momentous occasion when ...

The old freighter swung a great circle, its torsion jets blasting desperately in an effort to keep it on an even keel. This, thought Comets Carter, was it. This was the foul revenge that Rogue Rogan had planned, the evil death he had plotted with his unhuman companions. In a moment the pulsating radiations of electroid rays would set off the cargo of ghoulite, and when the interplanetary echoes of the explosion died away, Comets Carter would be no more than a series of photon packets, his body torn apart, his very atoms converted into radiation that was hurtling with the speed of light to the far corners of the universe....

It hadn't happened that way, of course. But if it *had* happened—well, it might have on just such a tub as this.

A guard saw him peering through the fence, and said, "What are you looking at, kid?"

"Those ships," said Plato, honestly enough. And then he added, to throw the man off the track, "Gee, I'd be scared to go up in one of them. No, sir, you couldn't get me into one of them for a million credits."

The man laughed. "They're not for the likes of you. A lot of those ships go to other stars."

"Other stars? Gosh! Does that little one, the *Marie T.*—"

"That tub? Just an interplanetary freighter. But even that isn't for you. Now run along and mind your own business."

Plato was happy to run along. Unfortunately, he realized, running along didn't help him to get past the fence.

And then he had a fear-inspiring thought. He couldn't tell an interplanetary ship from an interstellar. What if he did manage, somehow, to get in and stow away—and then found himself on a ship bound for no more distant port than Earth, from which he could easily be sent home in disgrace?

It sent a shiver through him. Fortunately, it also stimulated his mind. After all, there *were* such things as newspapers, and the school, nuisance in many ways though it was, had taught him to read.

HE bought a paper and turned at once to the shipping news section. As he had hoped, every ship was listed. He checked off some of the names he had glimpsed on the field, and found happily that their destinations were printed in the most routine manner.

There still remained the question of how to get past the guards. This, he suddenly realized, was a question impossible to solve on an empty stomach. It had been many hours since he had eaten lunch.

There were a dozen restaurants in the spaceport, and he selected one carefully, studying the illuminated menus and the prices before daring to enter. If that motherly old woman had been as kind-hearted as she pretended to be, he wouldn't have had to worry so much about prices. As it was, he knew that he had money enough for only two days, and after that—his stomach could complain all it wanted to, it would have to go unfed.

He chose from the menu only items that he never tasted at school—dishes made from real plant and animal life, with just enough synthetics to give them flavor. He couldn't say that he liked what he ate, but at least it gave him the feeling of being on his own, of having made the break with his tame past as complete as possible. Earth-beef tasted too strong; Venus seaweed stew had a pungency that he didn't like.

He finished his plate only because he had been taught that to leave food over was wasteful. And for the first time he began to wonder what they would feed him on the spaceship. Suppose he got on one that wasn't scheduled to make port for five years—and all he received to eat was stuff like this?

The thought made him shudder. Here was a hardship of space travel that the books he read had never mentioned.

After eating, he slumped back in his chair. He hadn't realized he was so completely exhausted until a hand shook his shoulder. Then he awoke with a start.

A waiter said, "This is no place to sleep, youngster."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was tired and I didn't realize."

"You been here for a long time. Waiting for someone?"

"Yes, sir. Something must have held him up."

"Seems to me that I noticed you walk in here about three hours ago. That's a long time to wait."

"That's what I thought, sir. I can't understand what happened."

"Well, you can't hang around here. I'll tell you what I'll do, though. I'll turn you over to the matron in our Lost and Found room, and she'll look out for you. Follow me."

IN a daze, Plato followed. But as his feet were set into motion, so was his brain. By now, of course, the search for him must be well on. They must have traced him to the station, and perhaps, despite his clever trick with the ticket, they had found the flight he had taken. For all he knew, they might be waiting for him in the Lost and Found room, ready to seize him the moment he showed his face there.

He hadn't gone so far to be recaptured so easily. As they passed an exit door, Plato darted out. He heard the waiter's surprised shout, but he didn't wait to reply. In a second, he had lost himself in the crowd.

He knew now that if he was going to get aboard an interstellar vessel, he would have to do so soon. What would Comets Carter have done in Plato's place—if Comets had been in one of his brighter moods? And then he had it. He saw a messenger coming down the street, gleaming in his uniform, and, somewhat nervously, approached him.

"May I speak to you?" asked Plato, with school-taught politeness.

"What about, bud? I'm busy."

"Well, I've been wanting to get Captain Halverson's autograph. He's on the *Space Symphony*—"

"So what?"

"Well, the thing is, they won't let me past the gate. So I thought that if I wore a messenger's uniform—"

The other boy glared at him. "Are you off your Norbert? I wouldn't let you wear this uniform for a zillion credits."

Plato swallowed nervously, and said in desperation, "I don't have a zillion credits, but I've got eight, and I'll give them to you if you let me wear it. Just half an hour, that's all it'll take. It's the last chance I'll have to ask him. He's bound for Rigel, and he won't be back for five years, and you see—"

His voice tapered to a thin, tearful squeak as the messenger looked at him.

"You're offering me eight space-lousy credits?"

"It's all I have. We'll just change clothes for a few minutes, and that'll be all. Please, I've got to see him. I know that if I do, he'll give me his autograph."

"Okay," said the messenger unexpectedly. "But hurry back. I'll be at the gate waiting for you."

AS they exchanged clothes, Plato was almost feverish with excitement. But he knew that if he expected to get past the guard, he would have to control himself. The clothes didn't fit too well, even though the messenger was small, and he must do nothing that would arouse the guard's suspicion.

He said to the messenger, "Gee, thanks. You don't know how much this means to me." And then, with a mental grip on himself so tense that it hurt physically, he approached the guard, and said casually, "Earth 'gram for Captain Halverson."

The guard hardly looked at him. He was past the gate!

He had been tricky again. Once out of sight of the guard, he made not for the *Space Symphony*, but for the *Long Ranger*, bound for Aldebaran.

"Earth 'gram for Captain Brinjar," he muttered, doing his best to look bored, as if delivering 'grams to ships was an old thing to him. And then he was aboard!

It was not quite what he expected. The smooth walls were such as he might have found in his own dormitory. The quarters, he saw, were cramped, although for someone his size they were at least adequate. And the passageways, although brilliantly lighted, were mere narrow tunnels.

From the main passageway, other tunnels branched off bewilderingly, and Plato hesitated until he realized that his very confusion gave him an excuse for poking his nose into all sorts of places. He followed one of the tunnels until he came to a door: ENGINE ROOM—KEEP OUT.

He entered. A mechanic looked up.

"Earth 'gram for Captain Brinjar. They said he was around here."

"Not here," replied the mechanic. "Try the cargo hold."

Plato backed out and set off down the corridor again, noting the direction arrows and signs. TO MAIN LOUNGE—no good. TO CAPTAIN'S CABIN—worse. He didn't want to find the captain and lose his excuse for being there.

And then he saw TO FOOD STORAGE and knew that he need look no further. This was a place both to hide and to eat, until the ship took off, and the crew found him, and had to accept him as one of themselves.

He opened the door to the food storage hold with an elaborate caution that turned out to be unnecessary. There was no one inside. He settled down between two packing cases and let out his breath. He had made it. He had stowed away successfully, and in a few hours he would be out in space, traveling between the stars, fighting, adventuring—

A yawn almost wiped the smile off his face.

HE awoke to disaster. The captain and Plato's dorm master were standing there, staring down at him, and the dorm master was saying, "All right, Plato, you've had your adventure, and now I'm afraid you'll have to pay for it. It's time to go home."

Plato couldn't move. It was impossible, after he had been so clever, so ingenious, and had thrown them off the trail in so many ways, for them to have found him!

"You shouldn't have bought a ticket to the wrong station," said the dorm master, somewhat amusedly. "When the conductor turned it in, the only one of its kind on his flight, it naturally attracted attention. We hadn't even suspected you had taken a glider-train until the flight people came to us."

Now he would never adventure on strange planets of unknown suns. He would never course through space like Comets Carter. He would never have the adventures which alone made life seem worth living.

Unable to control himself, he burst into tears. It was a completely unmanly thing to do, but he couldn't help himself. The tears flowed down over his cheeks, washing away all his shattered illusions. He would never dream such dreams again. From now on, it would be useless. They would be watching him carefully to make sure that he didn't leave the planet.

He heard the captain say in astonishment, "I didn't know these young ones could cry like that."

"Of course they cry," replied the dorm master. "They eat, sleep, cry—almost like you and me, Captain. And worst of all, they even have their dreams. That's why I sometimes wonder, Captain, if it isn't a mistake to send them to school."

"They have to learn."

"Granted," agreed the dorm master somberly. "But not to dream of being human when they're only androids."

—WILLIAM MORRISON

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