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SCIENCE-FICTION  
A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

**"SLAN!"**

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By A. E. VAN VOGT

OCTOBER - 1940



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*Title:* Runaway Cargo

*Author:* Schachner, Nat [Nathan] (1895-1955)

*Date of first publication:* October 1940

*Edition used as base for this ebook:* Astounding Science-Fiction, October 1940 [New York: Street & Smith] [first edition]

*Date first posted:* 26 October 2016

*Date last updated:* April 18, 2017

Faded Page ebook#20170468

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

**Publisher's Note:** As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

# RUNAWAY CARGO

By Nat Schachner

**The cargo was harmless enough—so long as no air hit it! And it was automatically controlled from the Moon to Earth—till the control stations were blown up!**

Moon Station 2X hummed with activity. The great lucent dome was alive with lights and the bustle that presaged the departure of a great cargo craft. The pitted surface of Tycho cast eerie shadows, and the fierce Sun filtered through the artificial air within the huge, overarching span. Mighty derricks lifted giant fingers and scooped the precious Tycho dust into the hold of the waiting cargo ship. Orders crackled and men scurried like gnomes delving deep in the bowels of a planet. Every second counted; every extra moment's exposure of the dust to the disintegrating influence of the atmosphere increased the chances of blowing the Moon to kingdom come a hundredfold.

Shep Low tried to keep his eyes on the screen that registered incoming calls from New York, but they insisted on straying nervously to the ovoid ship that thrust its blunt nose, like an upended egg, through the sheathing dome and into the airlessness of the Moon. His short, chunky body was rigid, and his wide, generous mouth was clamped tight. Finally he could stand it no longer. He jumped up from his post, glared openly through the control-room window.

"Damn it, Neal!" he exploded. "Won't they *ever* get through loading that blasted, triple-blank stuff? I never saw such a bunch of slow-moving guys in my life!"

Neal Cass did not immediately answer. Carefully, and with exasperating calm, he kept on checking the readings of the cylindrical beam of force that surged through space between Moon Station 2X and Port New York. Amperage, voltage, magnetic sidesway, countervailing fields, hysteresis. Everything was right, and tight to the hairline. Everything was set for the quick, hurtling flight across the void.

Shep whirled on him. "How the blazes can you sit there like a mummified fish?" he said violently, "Those fellows out there are way behind schedule. That Tycho dust's liable to go popping on us any second."

"Keep your shirt on," Neal advised. "It disintegrates pretty fast; but not that fast. The rate follows a definite curve, and we know exactly how long it takes to reach the limiting point. Once it slides into the vacuum hold of the ship it's safe enough. As for the loading crew being behind schedule"—he looked at the moving time signal—"they're exactly five minutes ahead of it, my jittery friend."

Shep groaned and wiped his forehead with an old-fashioned handkerchief. "I'd have sworn it was noon of next month. I can take almost anything, but just sitting on my hands, waiting for some highly unstable dust to blast us out of the Galaxy, is more than should be expected of a reasonable man."

"Meaning *you*?"

"Yes, me!" Shep retorted inelegantly. "I wish to Hannah that first Moon expedition never discovered the dust in the old slag vents of Tycho."

"I'm with you there, Shep. But it *was* discovered, and by some miracle of chance a sample was brought back to Earth without exploding. Packed in vacuum shells, it makes the most terrible weapon civilized man has ever had. Doesn't even have to be detonated. As the shell strikes, contact releases a spring. The shell opens, the dust flies in all directions. The oxygen in the air does the rest." Neal's face grew grim. "I've heard of the tests. One shell wiped out an area five miles square and dug a hole a hundred feet deep."

"Yeah, I've heard, too." Shep glanced apprehensively out at the feverish workers. "I *still* say they should have left the dust here in Tycho where it belongs."

Neal nodded. "That was the original intention when our chemists laid the results before the North American Union. But the other unions got wind of it. They sent over their own expeditions. We claimed Tycho by right of discovery; they searched the other craters and set up their own Moon stations. Unfortunately they found the dust, too. So in self-defense, we've got to keep on mining and shipping."

Shep wiped his face again. "That's the hell of it! Everyone afraid to stop because of the others. Now if I had my way—"

The warning signal flashed red and buzzed sharply. Neal turned the screen switch. The round, serious face of Bruce Hopper blinked owlishly at him from the silver surface. He was the New York operator.

"Hello, Neal!" he greeted, "Everything's set at this end. Landing beam's tight and ready. When does the *Thunderbolt* blast off?"

Neal glanced up at the time signal. "In about five minutes, Bruce, The loading's a bit ahead of schedule. I'll transmit the starting units as soon as she lifts."

"Good enough!" Bruce approved. Then his round, businesslike face took on a worried look. He glanced furtively around the deserted control chamber as though he were afraid of eavesdroppers. He lowered his voice. "You can't hurry the stuff over fast enough to suit Their Nibs."

"What's up?"

"Plenty! That is, nothing definite; nothing you could put a handle to. But Their Nibs are nervous. Been holding a lot of secret meetings. In fact, the great William Pruyn just contacted me to find out when that load of Tycho dust was coming through. Himself in person, too; not a stereo."

Neal whistled. "Their Nibs"—irreverently so-called by the control men—was the august Council of Experts who governed the North American Union; and Pruyn was its president. "That sounds bad," he agreed. "But hell, we've already delivered two cargoes. That dust's pretty deep down the vents. Takes at least a month to load up a ship. Besides, what are Their Nibs nervous about? The World Treaty's got another six months to run."

Bruce laughed mirthlessly. "You fellows have been on the Moon too long. Earth's become a vast whispering gallery of rumors. The way things are now, no union's going to pay much attention to a treaty. And the first two shipments are already past history. The detonating plants are clamoring for more."

"We've sent as much as any other Moon station," Neal protested. "And now that we've installed the new Shipman process we'll double the output."

"That's the trouble. The other unions got wind of it. That's why they're liable to strike before we get the edge on them." He stopped suddenly, flung his head around toward the rear of his chamber. "Signing off, Neal. Someone's coming. Send me the elements when the *Thunderbolt* blasts."

Then the screen wiped clean into a featureless blank.

"Holy cats!" breathed Shep, his dark face screwed up into little knots. "So *that's* the way it is! Maybe we'd better tell Gautry to put some guards around the station. No telling what might happen."

Neal grinned. "The only thing that'll happen will be a swell case of lunar madness for you if you don't take hold of yourself. They say the lesser gravity has a lot to do with it. Makes lesions in the brain cells, and the victim sees wimpuses and thinks he's a floating moonbeam."

"Shut up!" Shep yelled indignantly. "I'm serious."

"So am I. What do you want to guard against? Any flight from Earth would be seen by us in ample time."

"I'm not talking about Earth. How about the half dozen Moon stations? There's Gassendi, worked by the East Europe Union; Proclus with a heavy staff of Central Asians; Eratosthenes and so on. Any one of them could launch a swift attack against us without our having a chance."

Neal frowned and looked thoughtful. "There's something in that," he admitted. "Perhaps you're right. At any rate it wouldn't hurt. I'll talk it over with Gautry after the *Thunderbolt* clears." Everett Gautry was supervising chief of the station. "Ah! She's ready now. They've battened down the hatches; they're waving everyone out of range."

The huge orange light beam swung frantically outside. The annunciators blared warning. "Back, everyone! The ship's blasting off."

The men scurried for their lives, dropping into specially prepared shelter chambers, bounding with fantastic jumps for the rock-hewn central quarters. Ev Gautry, feet straddled, powerful frame leaning slightly forward, flashed a hand signal across the pumicelike ground toward the control chamber.

Neal stared tensely at the time signal, ready for readings.

There was a sudden blast of sound. The deep cavity underneath the ship was filled with belching flame. A lurid blaze flicked over the station. The *Thunderbolt* *whooshed* out through the skin-tight vent, streaked upward so fast the human eye could barely follow its flight. Already it was a tiny speck of shimmering metal against a cold, black sky, heading at a slight angle to the half Earth that glowed palely green overhead.

"Boy! She travels fast!" Shep said admiringly. Then he took a deep breath of relief. "Can't say I'm sorry she left. It's Earth's headache now. I'll sleep easy for another month now."

Neal flung figures into the calculator, watched the shining mechanism spin and gyrate. Within seconds the plotted elements of the ship's course spewed out on flexible steel tape. He glanced at them with expert eye. "Everything's right and tight. The beam's holding it like a vise. A

neat job, if I do pat myself on the back."

"You ought to," said Shop. "It's your idea—I mean the crewless cargo ship and the force beam to guide it. Come to think of it, why isn't it applied to other types as well?"

"Not enough flexibility of motion," explained Neal. "Can't swerve off the beam in case of necessity. The occasion might arise in one out of a billion cases—not enough to bother about with cargoes, but with passengers on board it's another matter. Besides, passengers need attention. Got to wipe their noses, furnish an audience for their 'ohs' and 'ahs' when they hit space for the first time, and answer a lot of fool questions."

"You've left out the real reason you got busy and worked out the beam, Neal. They couldn't get a crew for a dust boat since the first one went out like a nova halfway to Earth."

"Can't say as I blame them. The slightest amount of residual air in the hold—a leak from crew quarters—and the dust explodes. But I'd better send Bruce the flight elements. She's due to come sliding down the beam at Port New York in three hours and thirty-five minutes."

He tripped the visor into action; set it on the New York length.

The screen remained blank.

"That's funny! Bruce must've stepped out a moment. But the automatic reflex should have buzzed back."

He waited a minute; tried it again.

Still the screen showed no signs of life.

Neal said "Damn!" Little puckers appeared in his forehead.

"Maybe his screen's blown," suggested Shep.

"He's got an auxiliary, on an independent circuit. And he knows I was due to transmit."

Shep's dark face began to look white. "Gosh, Neal! Suppose they've started."

Neal swung on him fast. "*Who's* started?" There was an edge to his voice.

Shep gulped. "One of the other unions."

"You're crazy!" Neal made it harsh, explosive, to hide his own unease.

"Maybe, but it makes sense. This is a swell time to start what back in the Second World War they called a 'blitzkrieg.' In another month we go into double production, thanks to the Shipman process. Then it would be too late. Now they've got the jump on us. Their own cargo comes through, and ours gets bypassed in space. The opportunity would never come up again."

Neal got up. His tall, lean body, flat-muscled, lithe like that of a dancer, overtopped Shep by a head. "If it isn't the Moon madness that's got you, you don't know the half of it."

He stopped abruptly, tried New York feverishly again and again.

The screen did not even flicker.

Then he set the length for Washington, where the Council of Experts sat. His mouth, was a hard, tight gash, and his eyes burned like neon bulbs.

So intent was he on the controls, so intent was Shep Low on Neal, that neither one heard the stealthy opening of the exit slide behind them. Five men moved soundlessly into the room, their feet padded with noiseless arbo sheaths.

Neal half turned from the still-blank screen. "Look, Shep!" he started. "While I'm raising Washington, you go get Gautry and tell him—" Then he saw the men, and he jerked upward with a cry of warning, his right hand streaking to the belt where his thermo unit hung.

Fast as he was, the men were faster. Two sprang for him, short dural clubs upraised. Two others sprang for the startled assistant, The fifth flung for the screen control, sent his club crashing over the tangle of cables and thin-walled tubes. The face of the Washington operator was humming into life when a blast of shorted wires and tubes sent crisping flares over the entire outfit.

Neal tugged desperately at his thermo unit and started a second shout for help. Then two clubs slammed simultaneously down on his skull. Moon and stars and galaxies whirled dizzily around. As he went toppling he heard as from a great distance the smothered outcry of Shep

Low: then everything slid away from him.

The five men paid no further attention to the slumped victims. They worked efficiently and fast. No words were uttered. Their alien eyes and olive-stained faces were impassive. Their lank, black hair was plastered greasily over sloping foreheads. Silently on their arbo sheaths they padded around the chamber, methodically smashing every instrument, every panel, every auxiliary set that might take over in an emergency. The dural clubs, specially alloyed, made small, squishing sounds as they thudded into the apparatus.

The whole thing took but a few seconds. The leader's pale eyes flicked over the holocaust; then he lifted his hand and twisted his wrist in a peculiar gesture. It was a salute!

As silent as they had come, the five men slid out of the place they had wrecked. Like shadows, they hugged the tumbled rocks to one of the emergency locks. Still without a word, they slipped inside, where a small, dull-gray scooter waited. They tumbled in, slid the port into place, and went out of the automatic lock like a gray ghost. Quietly the electro-powered scooter vanished toward the east, its gray sheath merging with the pumice-gray surface of the Moon.

Behind them lay the unwitting Moon station, cut off from all outside communication or warning for at least a day of intensive repairs. The leader's olive-tinted face permitted itself a flitting grin. A day? All that was required was a mere three hours and a half of silence!

Everett Gautry splashed the sweat off his broad-beamed forehead with a weary gesture. The lean, pumice-smudged man leaning against the wall of central quarters looked down at his gnarled hands and spat thoughtfully. He was Joe Banks, the mining foreman.

"Another load gone, Mr. Gautry," he said, "and I wish to Saturn it'd be the last. My men are getting pretty leery 'bout that there dust. Ever' time they shove a dipper into that old vent they jump like it's already exploded."

"She's a hell hole, all right," Gautry agreed, "but we got our orders. 'Get it out,' they tell me, and I get it out according. Ain't much chance o' trouble down there in the vents, though. Been lying there for millions of years, vacuum-sealed, so to speak."

Joe Banks spat again. "Lucky there ain't any atmosphere on the Moon, or else—"

"The scientists back home worried around with that for a while. Claim the discovery of the Tycho dust solved what was puzzling them ever since they turned an eye on the Moon."

"How do you mean?"

"About, the Moon's surface looking like an old-fashioned battlefield," Gautry explained, "and the total absence of air an' water. They figure long ago there must've been both. But the dust was gradually forming underground, under pressure, from some chemicals that we been fortunate back on Earth in not having. Some pockets close to the surface got exposed. A moonquake, mebbe; a big meteor; or mebbe just plain erosion. The contact with oxygen set off the dust. The whole surface of the Moon went off in one grand smack. Everything went—atmosphere, seas, soil, mebbe a whole race o' people. Where the pockets were there was extra-deep explosions—that's your craters now, like Tycho here."

Joe shivered, looked apprehensively down the deep vent almost at their feet. It ran for miles into the bowels of the dead Moon, and was capped with vacuum locks to keep the artificial air within the dome from seeping down into the workings. "I suppose the stuff we're mining lay too deep for the big blow tuh get at it."

"That's the way they figure it," nodded Gantry. He yawned, flexed his powerful arms. "Might's well go in an' chin with Cass an' Low for a while. We all deserve a rest."

"Me, too," agreed Joe. "'Sides, I wanna hear what's goin' on back on Earth." He grinned shamefacedly. "There oughta be a message for me."

Gautry chuckled and poked him in the ribs. "Nancy, eh?"

"Yeah! I tol' her the company don't like so many personal messages, but she says either she talks tuh me ever' other day or she's a-comin' out here tuh see what's what. Claims she got a sneakin' suspicion there's some yaller-haired gals up here on th' Moon."

The boss grinned. "I wish tuh Mike there was, Joe. Me, I'm a single man, and this here life gets kinda hard. You're lucky, fella. But come on."

They threaded their way over the porous surface toward the control chamber.

"'S funny!" Gautry remarked. "Everything's quiet's the Moon itself in there. Usually those two babies come boilin' out when the cargo ship blasts off. Like tuh raise hell when there's a chance."

Joe Banks nodded. "'Specially Neal Cass. Bet he could fight his weight in meteors. Good guy, though."

"They don't come any better." Gautry stepped in through the open slide door. Banks was right on his tail.

"Hello, you two space eaters!" greeted Gautry; then went suddenly quiet. Banks made a little choking sound.

The control room was a shambles of twisted wires and smoldering tubes. It looked as though some Moon giant had torn through it in a murderous rage. And on the floor, limp, unstimulating, lay the two control men!

Ev Gautry was a big man, but he moved now with the celerity of a cat. He shoved clear across the chamber in a single move, ripped open the emergency medical kit, tumbled out supplies—water, bandages, hypos already filled with powerful stimulants.

"See if they're alive, Joe," he said hoarsely. He did not recognize his own voice.

Banks knelt swiftly. There was a huge lump in his throat that almost suffocated him. He put his ear to Neal's chest; then he did the same with Shep Low.

"They're alive!" he yelled joyfully. "Gawd, Mr. Gautry, they must be made o' dural! Lookit them there lumps on their skulls."

But the boss shoved him aside and began to swab and paint the wounds. He injected the hypos expertly into the big arteries of the arm. There was an almost instantaneous reaction. Color flowed into their faces, breathing grew stertorous, then subsided into regularity. Neal opened his eyes first.

"Wh-what—" he gasped.

"Take it easy, old chap," Gautry advised. "Look, Shep's comin' around."

But Neal's bleary eyes took in the wreckage of his pet instruments, and he jerked off the restraining hand and came wabbling to his feet.

"Those men," he gasped. "Did you get them?"

"Whoa!" said Gautry. "What men?"

"The five who attacked us and wrecked the works."

Joe Banks shook his head. "Never seen hide nor hair o' anyone."

Shep painfully struggled up. His face was pale and the blood streamed still from the cut on his forehead. "They got away clean," he groaned.

Gautry's eyes narrowed. "What's this all about?"

Neal explained swiftly. "They looked like one of the tribes of the Northeast Asiatic Union," he ended. "You know the type—dark-olive faces; curious, slitted eyes, and damp black hair plastered down."

Gautry swore. "Their station's the other side o' the Moon. Damn their filthy hides! I'll break out every gun and scooter we have and blast them to hell and gone off the Moon!"

"But why should they 'a' done it?" asked Joe.

Neal started to shake his head, then suddenly galvanized into life. Alarm flooded his bruised face. "Migosh!" he exploded. "Shep was right."

Shep held his head. "I wish to hell I wasn't," he moaned.

The boss felt a quivering premonition. "Stop talking riddles, you two!" he snapped.

But Neal disregarded him. Frantically his eyes sought the time signal. It was broken.

"Quick!" he shouted. "What time is it?"

Joe stared down at his wrist. "Eleven—fifty-six."

"We were out then about fifteen minutes." Neal's voice was flat, emotionless. "In three hours and twenty minutes the *Thunderbolt* will crash headlong into Port New York."

"You're crazy!" yelled Gautry. "That slap on the head knocked you dizzy. Just because our plant is wrecked don't mean New York can't hold her on the beam and set 'er down easy."

"He's not crazy!" Shep shouted almost, hysterically. "He's talking God's truth. Just before they jumped us we were trying to raise Bruce

Hopper at New York. He's out; and his station's out, same as us. It was a deliberate set-up, I tell you. Both ends of the beam were smashed."

Shep's voice stopped abruptly, and for a long moment only the deep breathing of the four men could be heard. In each man's mind flashed the same panoramic vision. Of a great cargo boat hurtling crewless through space. Of a control beam that was haywire. Of frantic ground crews at Port New York trying desperately to rig up emergency controls and knowing that it could not possibly be done in time. Of twenty million people cramming all roads, all available crafts in panic terror to evacuate a hundred miles square and knowing that millions of them would not make it. Of hope against hope that somehow the ship would swerve and go careening safely out into space. Of blasphemy and imprecations and prayers all intermingled as every telescope trained on the approaching disaster. Of the moment of contact!

Here, every one of the four in that smashed control room felt his heart held in a vise and all blood squeezed from his veins. They knew what would happen. They knew exactly the terrific energies imprisoned in the Tycho dust that required only contact with air for a short space of time to explode.

Cautious experimentation had blasted miles of desert sky-high with a single shell load. Here there was a thousand tons! The imagination reeled and rocked. Half the eastern coast would detonate out of existence. No similar holocaust had taken place in all Earth's history since the time when the glaciers marched inexorably down from the pole.

"We've got to stop it!" Neal's voice was hard, brittle as he broke the terrible silence.

"But how?" Gautry spread his hands helplessly. For the first time in his hard-bitten career he did not know what to do.

"There isn't a chance," wailed Shep. "The Northeast Union knew what was what. Damn their hides! They must have thousands of fighting detonators crammed to the brim with their own Moon dust waiting for the *Thunderbolt* to crash." He shook his fist up at the pale-green disk of the Earth. "They'll come in slamming and blasting to mop up our union, to bring the terrified remnants under the tyranny. Damn 'em!"

Joe Banks swayed. The gray pumice smudges made black streaks on the sudden pallor beneath. "Nancy!" he whispered. "Nancy! She's in New York!"

"Shut up, all of you!" snapped Neal. "Let me think."

They fell silent. Only their feverish eyes followed his jerky, abrupt pacings around the control chamber. He seemed like a caged lion. His eyes blazed, his brow was a corrugated board, and his mouth was tight with furious thought.

"If anyone can think of a way, it's Neal," Shep said huskily.

Gautry shook his head despairingly. "Correct. But there ain't any way."

Neal came to a swift halt. "It's a million-to-one shot, but it's the only chance."

Joe Banks looked up like a man reprieved from death, "Wh-what is?"

"No time for details, Joe," said Neal. His voice crackled. "Every second counts. Get the *Flying Meteor* fueled at once. She's the fastest boat we've got. And put the following equipment on board. Hurry, Gantry, if you've ever hurried in your life."

Gautry was the boss of Moon Station 2X, but like all good men he knew when to take orders as well as when to issue them. This was an occasion for taking orders. He didn't have the slightest idea what Neal Cass had in mind; but he knew Neal, and that was enough for him.

"Right, Neal. You'll have 'er r'aring to go in five minutes flat. C'mon, Joe, we got lots to do, an' pronto."

Moon Station 2X within five seconds was a seething, ordered inferno of shouted orders and toiling, sweating men. The little speedster was trundled into its lock, rocket fuel jetting into its tanks from flexible hoses even as it moved. Grim mechanics swarmed over its surface, spied through its innards, tightening, tuning, making sure every rocket valve, every jet was functioning like a precision watch. Equipment poured into it in endless stream.

In four minutes and ten seconds Gautry shouted: "She's ready to blast, Neal. I don't know what you're up to, but we're all praying."

Neal lay in his cushioned rebound straps at the controls. Shep, darkly haggard, lay in his own supports. The ports slid noiselessly into place.

"Hold tight, Shep! I'm giving her maximum acceleration."

Neal shifted the lever all the way over. There was a rushing, roaring sound; a huge jerk out into space that thrust them back against the



straps like bouncing marionettes. A crushing weight slammed against their limbs. A wall of blackness overcame them.

It was only seconds, but it seemed like eternities. Then they fought out of their daze. The crushing load lifted.

Shep said: "Whah ... hah! That's the fastest take-off I've ever been in."

Neal's eyes focused on his sights. "Had to, Shep. Every split second counts. We've got to catch up with the *Thunderbolt* before she gets too close to Earth."

"Hm-m-m! The *Thunderbolt's* bowling along pretty fast. About thirty miles a second."

"Thirty-two and a half, to be exact. And she's got a head start on us of a whole hour."

Shep groaned. "Sounds pretty hopeless. We're geared to about forty, and you know what they say about stern chases."

Neal's jaw hardened. "I'm not going to run the usual way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, building up acceleration to maximum speed for which the ship is planned, and then letting her coast. I'm going to keep on accelerating."

Shep sat up quickly, "Wh-what?" he gasped.

"Only chance to catch up," Neal explained. "If I can push her up to sixty and keep accelerating her against the Moon's gravity to keep her at that, we may overhaul the *Thunderbolt* in about an hour and three quarters. Don't forget, the *Thunderbolt's* practically hit the Earth's sphere of gravity by now. Instead of fighting the Moon pull, as we are now, she's accelerating without rockets."

Shep cleared his head with a vigorous shake. "We'll start every strut and every seam," he protested. "You know these speedsters can't stand constant acceleration like that."

"She'll have to," Neal declared grimly. "Otherwise we might as well write 'finis' to home and country and two hundred million swell human beings."

Shep digested that. "O.K.!" he said finally. "Give her the gun. *We* don't matter in this worth a cent. Only—"

"Only what?"

"If I only knew what you had up your sleeve to stop the *Thunderbolt*, Neal."

Neal turned around to his assistant. "I've only a glimmering yet," he said. "I'm trying to work it out while we're traveling. That's why I had Gantry shove in every type of apparatus I could think of."

The Moon was already only a huge silver disk beneath them, and shrinking visibly with the passing minutes. Neal held the *Flying Meteor* grimly at constant acceleration. Their limbs were heavy and their blood pumped sluggishly. Their bodies seemed to weigh tons. The gravity pull within the ship was of the order of two Earth gravities.

Behind them blazed the steady trail of rocket flame, spreading fanwise into space. The stout metal struts shook and vibrated and complained at the punishment they were taking.

But Neal kept his eye glued to the scanner for sight of the runaway *Thunderbolt*. They flung past the sphere of Moon attraction and Earth swung slowly underneath, and the Moon described a tedious arc to the zenith, but still the *Thunderbolt* was too far ahead for sight.

"Look," Shep said hopefully. "I just thought of it. If both control stations were wrecked, wouldn't the force beam that holds the *Thunderbolt* to her destination disappear with it? That would mean that the slightest deviation would send the runaway smacking into some other part of Earth." A small grin illuminated his wan face. "Maybe she might act like a museum boomerang and let the Northeast Union have it kerplunk."

"Sorry, Shep, it won't happen. She'll crash at Port New York just the same. You forget a very simple principle. Though the power's cut off, there remains a tremendous magnetic lag. A thing by the name of hysteresis, in case you've forgotten. On the power we were using, the beam can last for days. The only thing that happened with the destruction of the controls is that there's no way of cushioning its fall with directive nose rockets."

"Damn!" muttered Shep, and fell silent again.

But a moment later he broke out once more. "Maybe you expect to do it, Neal; but couldn't we send a shell crashing into her when we overhaul her, and explode her in space?"

Neal looked at his assistant queerly. "You know what that would mean, don't you?"

Shep reddened with embarrassment. "Yes," he admitted. Then, almost belligerently: "After all, it's two lives against the whole union. I know I shouldn't have talked. I'd have felt a whole lot better if you had stayed back on the Moon."

"You old son!" Neal told him affectionately. "I knew I could count on you. Sure, I was thinking of that. But it's too late now. By the time we overtake the *Thunderbolt* she'll be so close to Earth that the explosion of the dust would sear the face of the union as though the Sun had plopped right down on it."

"Oh-h-h!" Again Shep subsided into glum silence.

They roared on, jets blasting, combining gravity fall with maximum acceleration. The pressure on them grew almost unbearable. The lifting of an arm was a torture. Neal grew cold with fear. Even if the *Flying Meteor* didn't shake herself apart, they'd catch up with the cargo boat too late. Already Earth was a vast panorama beneath and spreading out with frightening rapidity.

"There she is!" yelled Shep suddenly. Neal tried to turn his head fast toward the scanner and almost wrenched it off.

There she was, certainly.

A distant, ovoid body, glittering with reflected Sun, falling fast toward the looming Earth.

"Can we make it?" husked Shep.

Neal forced his lead-heavy fingers to the calculators. Slowly the integrations moved. He fetched a deep, painful breath. "She's 4,500 miles ahead of us and about 60,000 miles from Earth. At her present rate of speed she's due to smack in about half an hour." His fingers held the acceleration lever over to the extreme right. "We'll catch up in eight minutes."

"And then?"

Neal shook his head wearily. "I don't know," he confessed with tragic despair. "My brains loby with the double gravity. I haven't been able to think of a single thing yet."

Shep groaned. "Look!" he exclaimed. "There are battle liners rising out of Port New York. A dozen of them! By the ten moons of Neptune, I think they're going to blast the *Thunderbolt*."

Neal's face grew gray. "Quick, Shep, get them on the visor! Tell them for God's sake not to try it. They'll rip the whole face of the Earth to pieces."

Shep's hand moved like a slow-motion stereo to the switch, stopped halfway. Excitement blazed suddenly in his eyes. "Neal! Neal!" he almost screamed. "We've been fools! They're right and we're wrong. We forgot completely."

"What?"

"That the dust won't explode unless there's oxygen. There's no air in space, and the *Thunderbolt* is a practical vacuum. When they smash her up, all that'll happen is that the dust spatters out into space, harmless."

"Yeah! And then drift down to Earth, contact with Earth's stratosphere—and then what?"

Shep collapsed. The luster died in his eyes. "I might have known you'd have thought of it already. Hereafter I'll keep my brilliant ideas to myself."

The grim, gray warships were coming up fast as Shep spat out his warning over the screen. "But, damn it, man!" exploded Squadron Commander Dakin of the flagship, *Abraham Lincoln*. "We can't just stand back and watch everything go up in smoke."

"Nothing else to do, sir," Shep reported heavily. "Unless Neal here can—"

Neal was pacing feverishly up and down the narrow limits of the chamber, picking up pieces of apparatus, studying them with fiercely narrowed eyes, setting them down again with an impatient groan.

"There *must* be a way!" he kept on repeating. "There must—"

He stopped short, stared at a small, shining tube of magneton, mounted on a swinging pivot and looking for all the world like an old-fashioned machine gun. The difference was that its slender arm and solid base were wound with fine strands of spider-thin wires that made a sheath of open mesh about two inches equidistant around the magneton and capable of whirling revolution at the turn of a switch.

Shep turned anxiously, and Dakin was fixed on the screen. "Got anything?" asked Shep.

Neal furrowed his scalp with a swift movement of his hand. "Something's beginning to glimmer. Let me think." He was talking half incoherently to himself. "The beam of force ... pure magnetism ... tremendous lag ... hysteresis ... but it's cut off from both bases ... floating in space, so to speak."

"What about it?" demanded Dakin from his uprushing flagship.

Neal looked vacantly at the pale, drawn features of the space fighter. His brain was moving furiously.

"Means it shouldn't take much power to move it. If the beam moves, the *Thunderbolt* goes with it."

Shep whooped. "You mean you can do it?"

"I can try. But not what you think. I couldn't possibly shunt it out into space."

"Oh!" groaned Dakin. "You mean you might be able to shunt it onto some other land." His voice hardened. "Sorry, Cass. As commander of the space fleet of the North American Union, I'll have to forbid that. The Council of Experts will never permit the sacrifice of millions of innocent lives to save our own."

"Wasn't thinking of that," snapped Neal. "Shut up a moment; I'm groping around."

Dakin shut up. Neal Cass had a certain reputation.

"Let's see now. The floating force beam's at right angles to the magnetic lines of force of the Earth, The lines run north and south through the magnetic poles. A regular mesh work. The dangling end of the beam is in contact. Suppose ... suppose—"

Shep kept his eyes glued straight ahead on the falling *Thunderbolt*. They were overhauling it fast, but Earth was barely 40,000 miles below. Soon it would be too late to do any thing.

Neal's eyes cleared. He pounded balled fist into open palm. "I've got it!" he shouted.

"Thank God!" breathed Shep. "I knew you would."

A hopeful yet half-skeptical flicker played over Dakin's tight-drawn countenance. "Then hurry, man! You've barely got twenty minutes to do your stuff."

Neal was already at the magneton tube, his hands like blurred lightning. He hooked up tubes in series, he attached wires, he plugged the whole thing into the power circuit of their generators, and spun the magneton on its pivots until it pointed at right angles to their line of flight and tangential to the outspread Earth beneath.

As he worked he spoke rapidly. "It's a gigantic gamble. I haven't time to work the thing out mathematically on the integrator. But this magneton instrument is a refinement on the usual thing. When the power goes on it develops a negative magnetic beam. A sort of hole in space. Along its cylindrical stream of action it clears out of its path every type of electro-magnetic wave, every light wave, even the gravitational warp itself."

He spun sharply. "What are you dawdling for, Shep? Get going! Blast on every rocket. Pull in front of the *Thunderbolt*, turn the nose of the *Flying Meteor* directly down along the force beam. Hurry!"

Shep gulped, obeyed. He wasn't resentful, though Neal should have known he wasn't a mind reader. Neal's nerves were on the ragged edge, that was all.

"Hold on to your hat!" he yelled back. "Here we go."

The ship was no longer a flying meteor; it was a blazing, portentous comet. All space behind was a flame of dazzling spray. The *Thunderbolt* seemed to reverse its gait, to rush back upon them at an alarming speed.

They fled past, swerved, barely missing the frantically maneuvering battle liners. Into the stream of the force beam they swung, held. Not more than fifty miles behind, along the same magnetic flow, shot the *Thunderbolt*.

Shep drew a deep breath. In fifteen minutes more they'd hit the stratosphere. "Here you are, Neal," he said. "Now what are you going to do?"

Neal worked on furiously, talking fast. "At the ten-thousand-mile level above Earth, start swinging obliquely, Shep. At one thousand fall into a closed-orbit parallel to the equator, and directly along the line of the sixtieth parallel of latitude. Do you understand?"

Shep looked blank. "I can follow orders," he grumbled, "but that doesn't mean I understand what you're driving at."

Neal readjusted the angle of sight of the magneton cylinder, threw the first of the step-up power switches. The tubes began to glow, and the hurtling craft was filled with the humming of innumerable bees.

"It's simple enough—if it works!" he declared. "I'm starting to cut a negative cylinder of force through space. As the ship swings into an orbit around the Earth, the anti-magnetic stream will follow and form a closed path. It will shear straight through the longitudinal magnetic lines of Earth, so that all around it, completely enveloping the sheath, there will be, practically, a solid wall of incasing magnetic waves.

"We're now on the Earth-Moon force beam. The dangling end, which stops at ten thousand miles above Port New York, will contact our negative, or antimagnetic hole. Instead of continuing to buck the strong resistance of the Earth's magnetic lines, it will slip easily into the magnetic vacuum."

"And follow us into a closed orbit around Earth," Shep broke in excitedly. "Which means that the *Thunderbolt* will follow, too, like a flying chip in the wake of a cyclone."

"Exactly."

"By the shining rings of Saturn!" crowed Shep. "I knew you'd get it. But why must I place her along the sixtieth parallel?"

Neal grinned, said quickly: "Start angling, Shep. We're hitting the ten-thousand-mile level."

Shep's stubby fingers raced over the controls. Neal caught hold of a strap, clung grimly against the side sway. Earth reeled beneath them. The magneton glowed with a curious luster. The tubes whined with bluish fires.

Neal's eyes were riveted on the rear screen, where the *Thunderbolt* made a shining, hurtling ovoid.

It had not swerved from its original path!

Shep froze at the controls, his face a tragic mask.

"Your scheme didn't work," he said.

But even as he spoke, the *Thunderbolt* began to turn. Slowly at first; then with increasing speed. Following the angling path of the *Flying Meteor*, following like an obedient duckling in the wake of its watchful mother.

Neal expelled his bursting lungs with a gusty *whoosh*. He had not even known that the taut muscles of his throat had withheld all breathing.

"You spoke too soon, Shep." Strange how calm his voice was, now that victory perched in the offing. "Don't forget—at one thousand miles, swing into a closed orbit on the sixtieth parallel."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Shep grinned delightedly.

On the visor screen were crowding faces. A dozen bewildered countenances of the captains of the battle fleet, crowding each other, masking, obliterating, clamoring, all discipline or ordered precedence forgotten.

Space Commander Dakin's sharp-visaged face ducked from side to side to gain clear vision. "By God, Cass!" he swore. "You've done it! You've saved the union! But why the sixtieth parallel?"

"You'll see," Neal retorted with a cryptic smile.. To Shep he said: "Got her set properly?"

"Right!"

Shep was a skillful pilot. Earth was perilously near, a great, panoramic, swift-rushing ball beneath. Continents fled past like blurs, oceans tumbled green and blue. And still they dived in a long, straightening slant. Behind them rushed the *Thunderbolt*, and after it, in disciplined array, flung the battle fleet of the union.

"Now!" said Neal sharply.

Shep pointed slightly toward the north pole, made a wide arc, and pushed the *Flying Meteor* into an orbit. Around and around the Earth they swung, once, twice, three times, turning from west to east with the turning globe underneath. North Europe, North Asia, Atlantic, Canada.

"I want you," said Neal slowly, "to slacken speed so that we revolve in the same period of revolution as Earth. Come to a relative position directly over Bering Strait."

Shep looked startled. "Oh!" he gasped, and obeyed.

Meanwhile Neal swung a parabolic repeller ray on the oncoming *Thunderbolt*. As the *Flying Meteor* slowed, the cargo boat with its load of Tycho dust slowed also under the impact of the ray.

Fifty miles behind, motionless with respect to them, motionless with respect to the capital city of the Northeast Asiatic Union. The Bering Straits was a thin, shining hairline beneath, the vast stretch of land on either side blinked back at them.

The *Thunderbolt's* channel of force, ruptured at both ends by the destruction of the two plants on Earth and Moon, had reknit in the tunnel Neal had carved out of Earth's magnetic field for it. Firmly held in that channel, revolving about Earth at such a speed and at such a distance as to be in a stable, twenty-four-hour orbit, the *Thunderbolt* would seemingly hang permanently motionless just where it was.

Magically the visor screen cleared of its crowding faces. Only Dakin's remained.

"I know now what you have in mind, Cass," he said harshly. "There's no doubt they deserve it. They wanted to wipe us out with the detonation of that load of dust. It's poetic justice. But I can't permit you to do it. Not until I communicate with Washington."

"I had no such intention, Commander Dakin," Neal quietly replied. "Trust me just this little further. Put one of your scout ships in position at a safe distance, but within firing range. Have her train all her armament on the *Thunderbolt* and keep it fixed. Meanwhile, I'll call Washington."

Dakin hesitated, then saluted briefly. "All right, Cass. I'll take your word for it."

He rapped out orders and a ship dissociated itself from the main fleet, raced upward and took its position.

Neal put in his call.

William Pruyn, hawk-faced, gaunt, with imperious air tempered now by grave anxiety, flashed on the screen.

"Great heavens, Cass!" he greeted abruptly. "We don't know what it's all about, but you seem to have saved us all from a horrible disaster. Explain, man; explain!"

Neal saluted. "The Northeast Asiatic Union plotted to destroy our union, sir," he said. "The smash of the *Thunderbolt* would have been their opening gun."

Pruyn said "Ah-h-h!" His face grew hard as granite. "No wonder their ambassador has been clamoring for an audience."

"Is he with you now?"

"In the anteroom. I was just admitting him when you called."

"Please ask him in, sir. And ... uh ... may I be permitted to speak for you to him?"

Pruyn permitted himself a rare smile. "You seem to have done pretty well so far, young man. You might as well continue."

"Thank you, sir."

The olive-tinted ambassador hurried into the room, stared impassively at the screen. All his race were well schooled against betraying emotions.

Neal wasted no verbiage. "You know," he started abruptly, "that your plans have miscarried."

The ambassador's face did not change. "I do not know," he said politely.

"Then look." Neal switched the rear screen in to contact with the main visor.

The ambassador's eyes took in the picture but betrayed nothing.

"Yes?" he said.

"The *Thunderbolt* that you expected to explode with its cargo on Port New York is now motionless over Ir-tuan, the capital city of your country. It stays there, Mr. Ambassador. I've placed it into a closed orbit that will occupy that position forever. Forever, do you understand?"

The Northeasterner looked contemptuous. "We have a powerful fleet," he said softly. "At a word from our Great Lord it will rise up and wipe out your puny squadron. Then it will take in tow your *Thunderbolt*—straight for your country."

Neal laughed. "You sure give us little credit for intelligence. At this moment a scout cruiser lies overhead, all guns trained on the cargo

boat. At the slightest sign of hostility on your part, she blasts her with shells. The *Thunderbolt* explodes, the dust falls into the stratosphere, and—well, you know the rest. You thought of it before I did."

The envoy did not change his smile. "How many years can your guardian cruiser stay in position?"

"Not long," Neal retorted. "But long enough for me to board the *Thunderbolt* and place a certain little mechanism of my invention into its hold. It is so delicate that the slightest tampering with the ship, the slightest shift from its present orbit, and it detonates the works. Laugh that off."

The ambassador began to sweat. "What do you want?"

"Nothing! I'm keeping the dust over your heads as a sort of peace insurance. As long as you fellows watch your steps and mind your own business, the *Thunderbolt* is harmless. If you make the slightest wrong move, though, I'm having a long-range finder set up in our own country, tuned to the wave length of the detonator within the ship. *You* act out of turn and, strangely enough, the ship explodes. What's your answer?"

The ambassador bowed. He was dignified in defeat. "I shall communicate with the Great Lord and explain the situation. I am certain he will follow my advice. Our union has no intention of troubling the peaceful waters of Earth."

"I thought as much," grinned Neal. He stared affectionately at the shining, ovoid surface of the *Thunderbolt*. "A little dust sure goes a long way."

THE END.

[End of *Runaway Cargo*, by Nat Schachner]