

Adventure on the Sun's Doorstep

by Richard Elam

Sue and Steve Shannon watched the magic world of stardust through a port of the rocket freighter. The ship was moving under power of its atomic engines, headed toward the sun.

They had one more cargo stop to make before returning to their beloved soil on the Earth.

The twins heard the clack of magnetic soles behind them. Without such shoes holding them to the floor, space travelers would float about helplessly like wingless birds.

“Hi, kids,” greeted their father. “Growing tired of the view?”

“I guess I am, Dad,” Steve admitted. His blue eyes were tired.

“How far away is Apollo’s Chariot now?” Sue asked.

Mr. Shannon grinned. “That’s the umpteenth time you two have asked that. But I suppose I’m as restless as you are to get back to Mom in Arkansas.”

Hearing this made Steve suddenly homesick. There was really no place like home, just like the poet had said. Steve knew Sue felt the same way. He had seen a wistful look in her hazel eyes every time they had talked of Little Rock.

The seemingly endless days finally did end. The three Shannons went up into the lookout dome with the crewmen. The dome was covered by a darkened plastic screen to cut down the blinding glare of the sun, which was very close.

It was a heart-stopping sight for Sue and Steve. The planet Mercury covered the face of the sun like a black plate. Streaming out from the edges were mountainous tongues of living fire. Mr. Shannon called this flaming halo the sun’s *chromosphere*.

“Gee, what a thing to see!” Steve gasped.

“It’s—it’s unbelievable!” Sue added, breathless.

“Indeed, it is,” Mr. Shannon agreed. “See that thing like a lighted wheel just ahead of us? That’s Apollo’s Chariot. It was named after the famous Greek sun god, you know.”

Sue and Steve knew that Apollo’s Chariot was really a space laboratory that was a home for scientists who were studying the sun. They had been the ones who had given their tiny world its colorful nickname. It was protected with asbestos and other special material to shield it from the heat as it circled the great star, month after month, year after year.

“We had to contact Apollo’s Chariot while Mercury was shading our ship from the sun’s rays,” Mr. Shannon said. “We aren’t protected like Apollo’s Chariot is.”

“Mercury seems as big as the sun, the way it covers it completely,” Steve remarked.

“That’s because we’re so close to Mercury,” his father explained. “Actually, the sun is so much bigger it’s like comparing a pinpoint to a grapefruit!”

In the midnight darkness between the ships, giant searchlights had to be turned on. Then the scientists on the other ship came out onto their loading platform to receive their cargo. Conversation was carried on by means of space suit radios with those aboard the freighter, who stood on their own outside platform.

“Why can’t we get closer to Apollo’s Chariot?” Steve asked Biff Warren, who was the twins’ favorite among the crewmen. Biff was piling boxes and crates at the edge of the platform.

“Space regulations,” answered Biff. “If a meteor should hit one of us, the other ship would explode too if we were close. Also, rocket tubes are so tricky that you never know when one is going to misfire and send your ship scooting off suddenly in the wrong direction.”

One end of a double cable was fastened to rings on the freighter’s platform. Then the other end was tossed across the space between the two ships and attached by the scientists to their own side.

Steve saw the crewmen around him pick up cords from out of the cable equipment box. They fastened one end to buckles on their suits and the other to the cable. Steve guessed that the lines were a safety measure to keep the men from drifting off into space as they carried the cargo across.

The first crewman picked up a crate as lightly as if it were a pile of feathers. Then with his foot he shoved off from the platform.

He guided the crate through the emptiness with his gloved hands and the men on the opposite platform helped him aboard. Another crewman stepped off the freighter with another crate. Then another crewman with another piece of cargo. The carriers returned by the other cable line.

Steve went over to his dad who, as an official of the American Space Supply Company, was supervising the work as always. “Dad, may Sue and I carry a box across? We’ll be careful.” Mr. Shannon thought a moment. “I suppose it will be all right. There’s no way you can go adrift if you fasten on to the cable. But you have to be careful you’re snapped on securely.”

Mr. Shannon made a place for them in line. Sue in front. There was a wait before Sue’s turn so that more crates could be placed on the platform’s edge. The children looked beyond Apollo’s Chariot at the huge black circle of Mercury as it masked the mighty sun.

“Biff,” Steve asked his friend as he was stacking the crates, “why couldn’t the Apollo scientists study the sun from Mercury?”

Biff chuckled and it made a funny crackling sound over the young Shannons’ radios. “Men will land on Mercury when they grow hides of asbestos, Steve. It’s so hot on the sunward side that there are supposed to be lakes and pools of lead there! The other side never sees the sun, so you can imagine how cold it is! Think you two would like to go there?”

“I should say not!” Sue answered for both of them.

When the next piece of cargo was ready to go over, Biff checked the children's safety cords. Then he let Sue push off from the platform with a box in front of her. A few moments later, Steve followed. The boy heard his sister giggle excitedly as they floated across. Searchlight beams were in their eyes but they didn't mind. Steve, too, thought this great fun after being cramped for so long on the freighter. He looked down at the empty space below, but he knew he could not fall and so was not afraid. Reaching the other platform, he and his sister were helped aboard.

"They sure are using young crewmen these days!" joked one of the scientists, a tall man who seemed to be working harder than the others. "Nice work, young folks!"

The scientist was in the act of changing the children's cords over to the returning cable when a slight mishap occurred. One of the crates coming over bumped into him. He laughed as he again got to his feet but his laughter quickly changed to alarm when Sue suddenly pushed off from the platform. She had thought her cable line was secure and that she was ready to make the exciting trip back across the gulf.

"Wait, miss!" the scientist called. "I didn't finish fastening your cable cord!" He reached for Sue but her suit slipped out of the fingers of his bulky space gloves.

Steve froze for an instant in terror at what he had seen. Then without thought of anything else except his sister's danger, he dove right off the platform after Sue, not realizing or caring that his own cable cord was not fastened.

If the scientist had not grabbed for Sue she might have floated safely across to the freighter. But by touching her he had sent her off in a direction beneath it.

Over his radio, Steve heard her screaming for help and saw her flinging her arms and legs about like a drowning swimmer. Steve was moving faster than she and presently caught up with her.

"What are we going to do, Steve?" she cried, holding tightly to him. "We can't stop! And it's so dark out here!"

Steve knew that unless someone came to their aid they would drift on and on since there was no air to slow them down. But he didn't tell Sue this.

He remembered, as he had at times before, that a spaceman must keep his head in an emergency. He spoke comforting words to Sue, telling her to try to be calm, that help would be coming.

Even as he told her this a spear of light hit them and a voice broke in on their radio: "Steve! Sue! Stop struggling! I'm on my way to you!"

"Biff!" Steve exclaimed, and the dread in his heart suddenly lifted. He looked over his shoulder and saw their big friend approaching, guided by the light that had been flashed on them from the freighter.

There was a little plume of flame trailing behind him. In a few minutes he had caught up with them. Sue was so glad to see him she grabbed the big spaceman and her helmet bumped against his in an attempted kiss.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you, Biff!” she sobbed. “I was so *awfully* scared!”

“You’re all right now,” Biff said gently. “Both of you hold on to me and we’ll go back.”

Steve took Biff’s left arm and Sue firmly grasped one of Steve’s. Biff carried a type of hand rocket, called a “pusher,” that he had used to shoot himself along toward them. By pointing the rocket in the opposite direction from which he wanted to go, the “pusher” pushed him in the manner of the rocket tubes on the freighter.

Biff pointed the pusher away from the freighter. Steve saw a burst of fire beside them and the three of them sped off toward the big ship. As Sue reached the platform, her father was there to help her aboard. She could see in his eyes the fear he had felt for them.

Steve was surprised to have the crew greet him warmly with pats on the back. The boy turned to his father. “Why are they calling me a hero?” he asked. “It was Biff who saved us!”

“Not taking credit away from Biff, any good spaceman would have done what he did,” said Mr. Shannon. “But few would have attempted your trick of jumping into space after your sister with no way of getting back. Right, Biff?”

Biff nodded his plastic helmet. “It wasn’t the smartest thing you could have done, Steve, but it showed your bravery. Courage counts just as much as ability in a spaceman. Don’t ever forget that, son.”

Steve, who wanted to be a spaceman some day, would not forget it.

Source:

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