

Danger on the Ice Canal

by Richard Elam

Steve and Sue Shannon were at Mars Port No. 13. This was one of the many colonies on the planet Mars where Earth scientists were carrying on work. It was a town of plastic tops, called domes, that were clear as glass. The town was at the center of three canals that led outward into the red desert.

The Shannon twins were now touring the largest dome with Biff Warren, who worked for their father's space cargo company. Suddenly their tour brought them to a large cafeteria where many of the workers were eating.

"Umm!" Sue exclaimed. "Smell that turkey!"

"Yeah!" Steve said. "It sure makes your mouth water, doesn't it?"

"Which reminds me," Biff said, looking at his watch. "We'll have to finish up our sightseeing pretty soon. The quicker we get back to your father's ship, the quicker we can have our own turkey feast!"

"I can hardly wait for that!" Sue sighed, as the wonderful smell of the holiday meal kept tickling her nose.

When Thanksgiving dinner was finished aboard the big space freighter that had brought the children to Mars, the ship would take off into space. But before that, Biff, Sue and Steve would have to go twenty miles back down the ice canal to reach the ship.

Biff had become a close friend of the young Shannons, having made trips with them to other ports in space. Sue liked Biff because of his quick smile and gentle patience. Steve liked him because he was all that Steve would like to be some day himself—a fearless, bold spaceman.

They finished up their tour of the dome. They saw the room where giant machines made oxygen out of chemicals and blew it through the building so that there was fresh air to breathe all the time. And they saw the astronomy hall far up on top of the dome where scientists could see the heavens through the thin atmosphere much clearer than they could from Earth.

"Isn't it about time for the fuel rocket to be shot off, Biff?" Steve asked.

Biff nodded. "I think it's just about time," he said. "We'll suit up and go outside to see."

In the dressing room they put on their space suits. As though they were his own children, Biff carefully checked the young Shannons' air tanks, built-in heaters, and their helmet radios for talking to one another. Finally Biff rubbed gelatin on their helmets so that they would not frost over in the cold that was a hundred degrees below zero.

Outside they found space-suited figures gathered around the fuel rocket cannon. The cannon was pointed toward a shiny ball high up in the purple-black sky.

“Look, Sis, there’s the space ship toward which they’re going to shoot the fuel rocket,” Steve said.

“I see it!” Sue cried, her eyes dancing excitedly.

“They have to line up the cannon with the ship just right or the rocket won’t reach it,” Biff said.

“Won’t the rocket hit the ship?” Steve asked.

“No, it’ll lose all its speed by the time it reaches the ship,” Biff told him. “Then they’ll take on fuel from the rocket by means of a long hose.”

Suddenly the three of them heard a loud roar and saw a burst of flame. Like a bullet, the rocket left the muzzle of the giant gun and rose into the sky.

“They’ll be shooting off more rockets before they have enough fuel for the space ship,” Biff said. “There’ll be a little wait in between each firing.”

“Look, Biff, isn’t the space ship right over the canal where we’ll be heading back?” Steve asked.

“That’s right, Steve,” Biff answered. “You’ll remember, our ship is at the end of the canal. We’ll be able to see the rockets go off as we head back—which we’d better do right now, if we’re going to have any turkey and pumpkin pie!”

The canals of Mars had been carved out of a great desert by water and fierce winds. Because of the ice that filled them, they made good highways. The three went to the canal bank to see if their sled was ready to go, and it was. The sled looked like a big bombing plane with the wings off. Instead of wheels, there were long runners beneath it. In this sled Biff and his young helpers had brought supplies to the colony several hours before.

Steve, Sue and Biff climbed into the front seat. Then Biff shut the door. He pushed buttons in front of them. Steve and Sue felt the sled’s engines throbbing. The next moment the sled shot off over the smooth sheet of ice, Biff holding tightly to the steering wheel.

“Wheeeeeee!” Sue screamed in delight. “Offfffffff weeeeeeee gooooooooooooo!”

“Like a rooooller cooooster!” Steve shouted.

They sped along at a hundred miles an hour. This was as much fun as they had had on their last space journey.

Each of their trips into space seemed to be more exciting than the last. They had won a lifetime free pass into space and by now they were sure they would need a lifetime in which to see all of its many wonders. A brave act by Steve on their first space trip had earned them their pass. Right now, Steve thought that their mother and home, back in Arkansas, seemed as far away as Deneb, the North Star of Mars.

“We’ll be there in about ten minutes,” Biff said. “The ship leaves in thirty, which gives us some

spare time.”

“Look,” Sue said, “there comes the first fuel rocket back down in a parachute.”

“That’s right, Sue,” Biff replied.

Steve studied the bank of the canal. Along it he saw scrubby cactus, which was forever fighting for life in the cold, dry atmosphere. Beyond the bank stretched acres of red wasteland, and sand drifts piled up by strong winds that never stopped blowing.

A few minutes later, Sue noticed a bright streak against the purple sky. It was nearly as bright as the tiny sun, which was so far away that it could not keep Mars warm.

“There goes another fuel rocket!” Sue called out, pointing through the windshield.

As Biff caught sight of it, he jerked up sharply in his seat, bumping the shoulders of Sue and Steve on both sides of him.

“That rocket’s too low!” he exclaimed. “It’s not lifting! Something’s gone wrong!”

Steve felt chills run up his spine. He was seeing the danger too, now. The rocket was dropping ahead of them, a screaming bomb filled with explosive fuel. It was still quite a distance away, but even Steve knew that it would make a terrible blast when it struck the ice.

Biff’s feet hit the brakes of the sled and the runners chewed into the hard ice pack, shrieking, and bringing the sled to a skidding stop. The riders were slammed forward. Sue and Steve were dazed, but not hurt. When Steve’s mind cleared, he saw that Biff had thrown himself over in front of Sue and him to protect them. But in doing this, his helmet had thumped against the windshield. He was now slumped over and not moving.

“Sue!” Steve cried. “Biff is hurt!”

Just then they felt the shock of the explosion. It tilted the sled at an angle and dropped it down again with a hard jolt. The air was filled with flying chunks of ice. It looked like a hailstorm outside. The ice clattered against the windshield like stones. Sue and Steve were relieved when it finally stopped. But the explosion had left the ice sheet in front of them broken and choked with lumps of ice.

“Steve,” Sue moaned, “what are we going to do?”

Steve looked at Biff who was still not moving. He could see a big lump on Biff’s forehead where his head had struck the helmet, knocking him out. The children tried to revive their friend, but could not.

“We’ve got to get the sled to the ship ourselves, Sue!” her brother said. “Biff may need a doctor! Besides, I bet we’ve all missed our Thanksgiving dinner!”

“I won’t want any dinner if Biff is hurt badly!” Sue said tearfully.

At first it seemed like an impossible thing for a pair of twelve-year-olds to run the big sled. But

Steve remembered how Biff had worked the controls and he believed he, too, could do it. He changed seats with the unconscious spaceman and tried the levers and buttons.

Presently the sled's rockets began to pour fire out of the rear. But Steve couldn't get the sled to move. He was afraid it had been damaged. Then Sue showed him a lever to push which she had remembered seeing Biff shove. As Steve worked it gently, the sled started off slowly.

"We'll go slow," Steve said, "and take it very easy."

The explosion had hit at the far edge of the canal so that there was a narrow place on the other side where the ice was still smooth. Steve carefully guided the sled across the canal and through the unbroken part. When there was smooth ice before them, Steve picked up speed a little. As he drove, Sue tried to awaken Biff.

Steve would have found their adventure a lot of fun if things weren't so serious at the moment. It wasn't every day that a boy had the chance to drive a giant rocket sled on a distant planet!

At last Steve saw the round top of the space ship just over the horizon. It was at that moment that Sue called out the good news:

"Biff's awakening, Steve!"

The boy saw their friend slowly rise up, then shake his head to clear it. When he smiled at them in his pleasant way, they were sure that he was going to be all right. By the time they had told him what had happened, he was his old self again. He took the controls and looked at his watch.

"Time's running out," he said. "We've got to hit top speed again. Hold onto your helmets! Here we go!"

And off they went at lightning speed once more. It seemed to Steve as if they covered the distance between them and the space ship in seconds.

As the sled came to a gentle stop beneath the giant freighter, Biff said, "It looks like we'll make our Thanksgiving dinner on time after all, doesn't it, kids?"

"Yeah," Steve answered, "and this is certainly one Thanksgiving that I'm really thankful!"

"I know what you mean, Steve," Sue said thoughtfully. "We're thankful that we're alive!"

Biff and Steve both nodded. It was a holiday none of them would ever forget.

Source:

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