

# Cargo for Callisto

by Richard Elam

The big rocket freighter was speeding through the star dust of outer space. It was carrying supplies to Callisto (one of the twelve moons of Jupiter) and the Shannons, on another space adventure.

Steve and Sue looked out a window of the freighter at the airless world growing in size. Callisto was a gigantic roughened rock, but it was a globe larger than the planet Mercury. It reminded Steve of a giant cockle-burr hanging in the sky.

Suddenly the children heard a tiny voice behind them say, "Rocket away!"

They turned and Sue exclaimed, "It's Bud!"

The blue parakeet, a budgy, blinked lazily at them. The twins had met Mr. Whittle's pet a week ago. He had taken a liking to them from the very start. They didn't know that a few hours from now their very lives would depend on this little fellow.

"We'd better take him back to Mr. Whittle," Steve said.

The budgy kept studying them with his flat face and blinking his tiny button eyes. Then he squawked again, "Rocket away!"

"It'll be 'rocket away' for you, young fellow!" Steve said sternly. "Up on my finger, Bud!"

The bird did as he was ordered. They took him down the hall to Mr. Whittle's room. Bud's owner, off duty now, was a tall, spidery crewman with a big Adam's apple. He always gave his pet full run of the ship.

Mr. Whittle whistled to the parakeet, but the bird stayed on Steve's finger.

Mr. Whittle chuckled. "Hey, I believe he likes you two better than his master!"

"We like him, too," Sue told the crewman.

"You can keep him for a few days if you want to," Mr. Whittle said. "I'm going to be pretty busy after we land."

"Gee, we'd like to look after him!" Steve answered.

"If you take him outside on Callisto, you'll have to put him in that air-tight cage over there I had made. It's sort of like a space suit for him."

Sue and Steve played with Bud in the room they used for games until it was time to "strap down" for landing. Then they went to the couch hall and lay down on cots like the other space travelers were doing. They buckled straps across their bodies to keep them in place.

For a long time, Steve and Sue lay there as the big freighter began cutting its rushing speed. It felt to Steve as if a giant anvil were crushing downward on his chest. Take-off and landing were always the roughest moments in space travel, as the twins had already found out on other space trips.

At last the ship set down on Callisto. The young Shannons went back to the game room. Then with the bird on Steve's shoulder, the twins looked out the window at the strange new world.

They saw a land bathed in ghostly twilight. Very little light was coming from the sun. It was so far away that it was only a small circle. Most of the light came from a huge shape that looked like somebody's lost beach ball resting on the ground. Its bottom edge just touched the horizon.

Sue and Steve were joined by their father, who worked for the space freight company.

"That's His Majesty, Jupiter—the king of planets," Mr. Shannon told them. "He's over a million miles away and yet he looks close enough to touch, doesn't he?"

"Let's go outdoors, Dad!" Steve begged.

"No reason why we can't," Mr. Shannon replied.

After they had put on their space clothes, Steve popped Bud into his warm, air-tight cage.

As they all went outside, they saw the crewmen unloading the cargo.

"There's the colony over there," Mr. Shannon said, pointing to a high framework that looked something like an oil derrick.

"They mine here for a mineral called magna. It's very valuable, because without it we couldn't have atomic engines. Magna is what keeps our rocket tubes from melting under the terrific heat that goes through them."

"May we go down into the mines, Dad?" Steve asked.

"We'll see if we can," said his father.

As they walked toward the mining place, Mr. Shannon said, "Underneath us are pockets of poisonous gas like that found in Jupiter's atmosphere. Sometimes it leaks into the mining tunnels causing danger from suffocation."

"I sure hope the gas stays where it belongs while we're down there!" Steve said and swallowed the lump of fear in his throat.

They turned their attention to Jupiter. It looked even more like a beach ball now with its stripes of beautiful colors. Mr. Shannon said the bands were floating ice bergs of the poisonous gases he was talking about.

"No ship can land on Jupiter," he said. "Its gravity would crush a spaceman flat. Gravity pull is much stronger on the larger planets, you know. Jupiter's atmosphere is many thousands of miles deep. Raging storms are going on beneath it all the time."

“Ooo!” Sue gasped. “I guess we’re close enough to it then!”

Other wonders of the sky were the round beacons of Jupiter’s other moons, three of which were about the same size as Callisto. They hung like bright searchlights in the starry heavens.

The men at the mining place greeted the Shannons warmly. They had not seen anyone from Earth for so long that they had grown very lonely.

The chief mining engineer said he would be glad to take the visitors on an underground tour. His name was Dr. Harding. He was plump and short and wore black-rimmed glasses inside his space helmet.

He led them into an elevator and it sank into the darkness. Steve remembered about the poisonous gases that crept about underground and it made him shiver to think about it.

Dr. Harding watched Bud hopping around uncomfortably inside his small space cage. “Do you remember, Mr. Shannon,” he asked over his suit radio, “when they used to use canary birds in mines to warn about leaking gas? The birds would notice it first and give the miners time to get out.”

“I’ve read about that, Dr. Harding,” said Mr. Shannon.

“Now we have automatic warning machines in the tunnels to do that,” the chief engineer told Sue and Steve.

Deeper and deeper below the soil of Callisto the elevator sank. At last the cage reached the bottom, and the riders found themselves in a large cavern. There were machines and men all about, working busily. Tracks led off into tunnels and ore cars were running on them. Some were going empty into the tunnels while others were coming out full of rock and gravel.

“The magna is separated from the rock in that big machine over there,” Dr. Harding explained. “Want to ride an ore car into one of the tunnels?”

“Sure!” Steve spoke up.

“The mine is air-conditioned,” the chief engineer said, “so we can take off our helmets.”

This done, Steve let Bud out of his cage. The little bird hopped up on his gloved finger, saying, “Rocket away!” several times. His two-word language seemed to do for everything.

One worker controlled all the cars at a main switch in the middle of the cavern. The Shannons and their guide climbed into an empty ore car and it rolled into a tunnel.

Glistening dark rock crowded in on Sue and Steve from all sides. Steve hoped the walls were strong enough so they would not come crashing down on their heads! There were lights along the way to help brighten the gloom.

After clicking along like a trolley for awhile, the car came to the end of the line. It was a large room with more machines and workmen. The men were digging magna ore out of the wall with drills.

As Dr. Harding explained about the work, Bud began flitting about as though sight-seeing on his own. He was shy of the workers at first, but then made friends with them. He spoke to them with his favorite two words and the men laughed in great fun to hear him.

Then a few minutes later, Bud began acting queerly. He flew back to Steve's finger and started wobbling as though dizzy.

"What's the matter with him?" Steve asked.

"He's sick or something!" Sue cried out. She took the budgy from Steve and cuddled him in her own gloves. But the little blue bird seemed to be no better.

Dr. Harding walked over to look at the bird. Then he ordered, "Everybody into the ore car! We have to get out of here fast! Sue, hold the bird up close to your suit!"

The workers dropped their tools as if they were red hot and climbed into the car. Mr. Shannon helped Sue and Steve on, then jumped on himself.

Dr. Harding pressed the electric button that was the signal to the operator in the main cavern to move the car. The car began to roll down the track. It picked up speed as Dr. Harding kept pressing the button.

"Leaking gas, Dr. Harding?" Mr. Shannon asked worriedly.

The chief engineer nodded. He sniffed the air like a hunting dog after a scent. "Take a deep breath, everyone, then hold it!"

Steve thought his lungs would burst, but finally Dr. Harding let them take another deep breath. By the time they had taken one more, the car had reached the main cavern. As it rolled to a stop, Dr. Harding jumped down and ran over to the car operator.

Steve saw a door slide down and close off the tunnel where they had come out. Then the little man gave a deep sigh and took off his black-rimmed glasses to wipe them.

Sue and Steve watched Bud hopefully. He was standing more steadily on Sue's finger now.

"I think he'll be all right," the chief engineer said. "We sure owe Bud a lot for warning us the way he did. Something must have happened to the warning machine. It was supposed to set off a siren."

"If it weren't for Bud we might have been overcome before we could have gotten out of there!" Mr. Shannon added.

"You're so right!" Dr. Harding said. "The men will go back in there in gas masks to find the leak and see what's wrong with the warning machine."

"We're plenty lucky!" Steve sighed, his spine still prickly from their narrow escape.

Sue kissed the budgy. “You’re a hero, Bud,” she told him, “and we love you!”

Bud blinked lazily. Then as if to show that he was all right again, he squawked, “Rocket away!”

Source:

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