

The Flying Mountain

by Richard Elam

Steve and Sue were playing a game as the freighter headed through space toward Earth. It was fun trying to see who could build the higher tower of sticks. The young Shannons were in extra good spirits. Before long they would be seeing Mom and their home in Arkansas, after being in space for so many months.

Steve carefully placed the last stick on his tower which was almost as high as he could reach.

"I won, Sis!" he exclaimed. But as he drew his hand away, it brushed against the tower, causing the sticks to drift off in all directions.

"I won!" Sue cried gleefully, "Yours broke up!"

Steve made a face and began picking the sticks out of the air before they floated too far. It was lack of weight in space that made it possible to play such a game. The twins would have hung in the air like the sticks if their shoe soles were not held to the floor by magnetism.

"I'll beat you next time," Steve boasted.

Before they could start again, their father came into the room. "It looks as though we may not be getting home as quickly as we had expected, kids. Captain Furman has received an S. O. S. from a passenger rocket that's down on the asteroid, Sierra." The twins knew an asteroid to be one of the thousands of tiny planets in the Solar System.

"Are we going to her aid?" Steve asked.

"It depends on whether we have enough fuel or not," his father replied. "Even atomic fuel runs out sometime, you know. Captain Furman is talking with his officers now. It'll be a shame if we can't help the *Pole Star*—as much as I want to see Mom."

It was just like his unselfish dad to say that, Steve thought. He felt the same way about it. And he didn't doubt that tender-hearted Sue was of the same mind.

Mr. Shannon started out of the room again. "I'm going to see what they are going to do."

Steve and Sue went back to their game. But somehow it wasn't as much fun now. People were in trouble and trouble in space was often a frightening thing.

It seemed like a long time before their father came back. He walked in so fast that his magnetic shoes sounded like tiny hammers. "Kids," he said, "the captain wants to see you."

"Us?" Steve asked.

"That's right. Come quickly."

They went out, leaving some sticks in mid-air and others drifting off. The young Shannons walked shyly into the captain's room where all the officers stood. Steve felt out of place among the neatly uniformed spacemen.

Mr. Shannon was in charge of cargo which the freighter dropped off at different ports in space, for he was an official of the American Space Supply Company. But he had nothing to do with the running of the ship.

"Young folks," said the tall captain, who had a blond mustache, "we want you to help us solve a problem."

"Sir?" Steve asked, puzzled.

"Here it is," went on the chief, in his booming voice. "If we go on past Earth to Sierra to help the *Pole Star*, it'll leave us with only a fifty-fifty chance of having enough fuel to reach Earth. But the *Pole Star* is running short of supplies and their radio just went dead a while ago. It's too late to get help from Earth. The crew is divided on what we should do, so I decided to call you two in to see what you think."

A husky crewman spoke out boldly, "What do these kids know about space, Captain? They're not even old enough to be out here! I say stick to our course and get this crew and ship back safely to Earth!"

The remark angered Steve, but the spaceman looked too big to talk back to. Sue wasn't so timid.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she exclaimed. "Thinking of yourself when other people are in trouble!"

Steve and his father were surprised at Sue's outburst. Captain Furman and the other crewmen smiled.

"I think that solves our problem," the captain spoke firmly. "If the young lady has courage enough to overlook the risk, the rest of us should have it, too. Thank you, Sue. We move at full rocket thrust to aid the *Pole Star*."

As the Shannons went out into the corridor, Steve asked his sister, "Wow, Sue, what made you talk back to that big fellow like that?"

"He was so selfish!" Sue answered. "Besides, it made me mad to hear him say we didn't know anything about space! Why, we've been over almost all of the Solar System, haven't we, Dad?"

Her father pressed her shoulder. "Of course, honey. I'm proud of you, because I felt the same way."

It took a few days for the freighter to reach the asteroid. The space ship, in going past the Earth, had come close enough for the Earth to be seen as a misty, green light. It made the twins long for home as they saw it.

"Sierra is like a big meteor, isn't it, Dad?" Steve asked, as the three of them looked downward

on the flat, egg-shaped rock.

His father nodded. "It's often called, 'The Flying Mountain,' because of the low peaks on it. Sierra is only a mile long and less than that wide."

"I remember from school that it wasn't discovered until 1965," Sue said.

"That's because it's so small and isn't very bright in the sky," her father spoke. "Most of the asteroids are much farther out, between Mars and Jupiter, but a few come in close to Earth like Sierra, Hermes, Eros and some others."

The freighter landed safely in a flat area about two hundred feet from the *Pole Star*. The Shannons could see the damaged space ship jammed against a cliff. Brilliant sunshine reflected upward from bare dark rock, dazzling their eyes. It was over a hundred degrees on Sierra, for there was no atmosphere to check the sun's heat.

"Boy, what a place for a sunburn!" Steve said.

"It's certainly summertime on Sierra!" Sue added.

They watched crewmen in space suits come out of the freighter and begin uncoiling a spool of rope that would stretch between the two ships. Safety lines led from all the men back to the cargo ship.

"There's almost no gravity at all here," Mr. Shannon told his son and daughter, "because the asteroid is so small. If the people from the *Pole Star*—providing there are any alive—didn't have the rope to hang on to, they might float right off Sierra."

The children asked to go outside. The three suited up and went out, using safety lines, just in case.

The glare was so strong that they had to lower their darkening glasses over the face part of their helmets. The heat was such that they had to switch on the cooling outfits in their suits. It was strange to see the edge of the asteroid so close, just beyond a fringe of dagger-like peaks. It was like being on a big space raft.

The twins tried walking. They were less than feather-light and it was quite a job for them even to keep upright. Sue decided this wouldn't be a very good place to spend a summer vacation.

Sue's cooling outfit made her sneeze. She was lifted right off the ground and her father had to pull her down quickly. She and Steve laughed but they had been scared.

"See, it doesn't take much to send you sky high!" Mr. Shannon joked, speaking over the radio set which all three of them carried in their space suits.

At last the crewmen, who had been moving so carefully over the ground toward the *Pole Star*, reached the ship and fastened the rope to it. The outer door of the *Pole Star* was then opened by someone inside.

"Thank goodness somebody's alive in there!" Mr. Shannon said thankfully. "I guess the ship

just coasted into the rock wall without too much force.”

The freighter crew began helping people out of the passenger rocket. If things weren’t so serious, it would have been funny for Sue and Steve to see them in their balloon-like space suits, bouncing one careful step at a time and holding on for dear life to the rope.

As the party neared the freighter, the twins suddenly saw their father dash toward the ship. In his haste, Mr. Shannon seemed to have forgotten where he was and went scooting upward like a high-jumper.

“Dad!” Sue and Steve cried out together.

Mr. Shannon had to put out his hands and feet at the last minute to keep from crashing into the wall of the freighter. Then he pulled himself down to the ground with his safety line. When they saw that their father was unhurt, Sue and Steve began walking toward the ship with careful steps.

They heard their dad exclaim, “Mr. Ballinger!” as he walked over to one of the men from the *Pole Star*.

“John Shannon!” the man said.

It turned out that Mr. Ballinger was the president of the American Space Supply Company and was Mr. Shannon’s boss. Mr. Ballinger explained that the *Pole Star* was heading for Mars when there was an explosion in the rocket tubes. By landing on Sierra the captain thought there was a better chance of their being found than if they had just kept drifting in space, because all ships knew the path of “The Flying Mountain.” No one had been hurt in the landing and the *Pole Star* had enough fuel to get the freighter back to Earth.

“I don’t know whether I should fire you people or not for risking my good freighter just to save an old codger like me!” the friendly Mr. Ballinger joked.

“We almost didn’t,” Steve’s dad reminded him and explained how Sue’s outburst had decided the problem.

“You’ve certainly got some smart ones there, John,” Mr. Ballinger said, smiling at Sue and Steve. “Your son has already proved himself a hero before and now it’s Sue. Yes, sir, I sure wish I had a pair like them!”

But the twins scarcely heard him. They were thinking that, in spite of the great fun they had had on all their space adventures, how wonderful it was going to be to see Mom again and set foot on the grandest planet in all the Solar System—Earth!

Source:

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