

The Curious Boy

by Richard Elam

Just as Ted was expecting the worst, he felt a gentle bump beneath him. He looked around and saw that the rest of his family were no longer deep in their couches. That meant the heavy pressure of their descent was off them. They must have already landed!

But he could not get up yet, for he was in a vertical position and hanging by his straps. This was because the rocket had landed upright on its tail fins.

Ted heard a rumbling sound. He felt the side of the room to which the couches were fastened slide down into normal position. Ted unbuckled his straps and rose to his feet.

“Hey, it’s time to get up!” he said to the others.

Dr. Kenton unstrapped himself and then assisted Mrs. Kenton. Ted helped get Jill loose.

“Whew! That was awful!” Mrs. Kenton complained.

“I—I think I left my stomach up in the sky!” Jill said.

Ted started toward the side window. “I feel so heavy!” he said. “I can hardly lift my feet!”

His father plodded with him to the window. “That’s because the gravity of Luna is added to the ship’s artificial gravity. They’ll cut off the rocket gravity any moment.”

Looking out the window, Ted thought that this was like a scene from a fairy tale. Any moment he expected to see a group of gnomes come frolicking past! But nothing appeared to be alive in that craggy, lonely wilderness, except within the man-made structure of lunar rock.

Jill and her mother, having taken longer to get their bearings, finally joined the other two at the window.

“What makes it so awfully bright out there?” asked Jill, squinting her eyes.

“Don’t forget that we have a blanket of atmosphere to protect us from the sun on earth, but here on Luna the sun strikes with full force,” her father explained.

“Talk about a sunburn!” Ted said, with a whistle.

“You couldn’t stand it long,” Dr. Kenton said, chuckling grimly. “It’s hot enough to boil water out there right now!”

“Then when the sun is down, it must be nice,” put in Mrs. Kenton innocently.

Her husband grinned. “If you call over two hundred degrees below zero centigrade nice!”

A crisp voice came over the speaker: "All passengers to the dressing room to don space gear!"

"You mean we have to go out in that?" Mrs. Kenton asked, shocked.

"I don't know any other way of getting to the settlement across the way," was Dr. Kenton's gentle reply.

As the Kentons were walking along the corridor to the dressing room, they suddenly felt light on their feet. The unexpectedness of it sent them colliding with one another. A voice from a wall speaker said: "Watch your step. The artificial gravity of the ship has been cut off."

"I feel like a feather!" Jill said, dancing along.

"You should—you weigh only one sixth of your Earth weight," her father said. "But you be careful or you'll have another accident like you did earlier!"

The passengers lined up to receive their space gear. It was bulky equipment, but not very heavy in the light gravity. In the dressing room, several crewmen demonstrated how to put on the space suits.

Dr. Kenton, who had put on much space gear in his time, helped his family into theirs.

"Climb into the flexible suit first," he said, as he demonstrated. "Then all you have to do is to zip it up—so!"

"What are these tubes on our backs?" Jill asked, after the asbestos-covered suits were donned.

"That's your oxygen source," her father said. "Those smaller boxes are refrigerator units that cool the air so that you won't burn up in the terrible heat out there."

Weighted shoes were pulled on next. These were heavy, in order to bring the wearer more nearly to his Earth weight. Dr. Kenton helped them on next with their plastic fish-bowl helmets, fastening them in place with catches.

They found that they could talk to one another, even from the air-tight helmets, because of a compact radio attachment on the top. Last to be put on were protective gloves.

When everyone in the dressing room was fully attired, the strange company left the ship through an air lock—a pair of doors which kept the air pressure from escaping. The *Shooting Star's* gangplank, which was actually a long escalator, slid out of the side of the ship on gears until the bottom touched ground. Then the passengers stepped out of the air lock onto it and were carried slowly downward. The rocket, in landing on her tail fins, was now in position for the fire-off later into space.

"What a strange feeling it is," thought Ted, setting foot on a world outside of his own beloved Earth! The ground they walked on was soft and powdery, and his father said it was called pumice.

The party was heading for a ring of stone buildings ahead, which were connected to one another by long tunnels. It reminded Ted of a giant wheel turned over on the ground. At the center was the largest building of all. Ted asked his father what it was.

“That’s the headquarters building,” the scientist answered. “It’s called the Hub, and it acts as a central control for all the other buildings around the circle.”

“Why are the buildings connected with one another?” Jill wanted to know.

“That’s so the people inside can go from one to the other without having to put on space suits. You see, all the buildings and connecting corridors are filled with compressed air. The Moon has no air of its own, so it has to be manufactured just as it is on the *Shooting Star*.”

Ted thought his father’s voice sounded queer coming over his helmet receiver, but he guessed he would get used to it in time.

The party from the *Shooting Star* entered a building where they removed their space suits. They were told that they were free to do whatever they liked until the ship was repaired for the journey to Mars.

Some of the passengers said that they would like to make a tour of the Wheel, and when others also expressed a wish to do so, a guide took the entire party around. The Kenton children found that most of the departments had to do with scientific research, while the rest were devoted to the running of the colony.

“Did they haul all these stones from Earth to build this place?” Ted asked, as they went down one of the long rock passageways.

“Goodness no!” his father replied with a laugh. “The whole colony is built of lunar rock, quarried near by.”

When the Wheel had been circled by the sightseers and it was learned that the *Shooting Star* would not be ready for hours for the fire-off, Dr. Kenton made a suggestion to his family as they sat idly with the other passengers in the lounge.

“I have an astronomer friend who runs an observatory not far from here,” he said. “Would you kids like to visit it?”

Their eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, and they both nodded as one. Mrs. Kenton, however, was not so ambitious.

“Not I,” she sighed. “That long walk around this building will last me for a good while.”

Ted noticed a sandy-haired boy of his own age watching them closely. Even as they made the tour around the Wheel, the boy had listened intently to everything Dr. Kenton had said. And when the scientist had mentioned going to Mars, Ted saw that his eyes had lighted up as though with longing.

“We won’t be able to take the other passengers with us,” Dr. Kenton told his son and daughter, “because there aren’t enough cars available.”

After Dr. Kenton had chartered a car from the motor pool, he and his son and daughter went to the dressing room to climb into their space gear. As they were zipping up their suits, Ted looked toward the open doorway and saw the same curious boy watching them again! What could be his interest in

them?

Source:

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