

## Wheel in the Sky

by Richard Elam

Sue and Steve Shannon were riding with their father in a “space ferry” several thousand miles above the Earth. They could look out of the plastic windows of the little ship and see the winding curve of Central America far below.

“Look, Steve!” Sue exclaimed. “I see the Panama Canal!”

“There’s a storm over the Gulf of Mexico,” Steve said, studying a big gray patch over the water. “It makes you feel like a king being so high above everything!”

The Atlantic and Pacific were throbbing blue carpets, topped by breakers of molten silver where the sunlight hit them. It was a marvelous sight, more like a scene from a fairy-land.

“There’s the big space ship we got off,” Sue pointed out. “It’s beginning to drop back to Earth.”

“And there’s the ‘Wheel in the Sky,’” Steve said, looking ahead. “We’ll soon be there! Isn’t it great?”

Compared to the tiny ship they were in, which was shaped like a medicine capsule, the Wheel in the Sky was a gigantic thing. It looked like an automobile wheel and by its moving spokes the children saw that it was turning just like one.

“Why does the Wheel spin, Dad?” Steve asked.

“That’s in order to give the people inside of it a feeling of weight,” Mr. Shannon explained. “As I told you before, things in space have no weight because there is no gravity out here to speak of. What happens when you ride on the merry-go-round on the school playground?”

“You have to hold on tight or it’ll throw you off,” Steve answered.

“The Wheel in the Sky does the same thing. It tries to throw you off, but since you are safely inside of it, all it can do is throw your weight against the floor of the Wheel. Understand?”

The children nodded and smiled, pleased at knowing one more fact about the strange ways of space.

As the ferry neared the big space station, Steve watched the black heavens all around them. The stars were thicker than salt crystals and glittered like precious gems. Close to the Wheel, the ferry had to use its rockets in order to keep up with the spinning of the Wheel. Presently a door in the rim of the Wheel opened. Two men in space suits appeared in the doorway and threw out a line which stuck to the ferry by magnetism. Then the men pulled the little ship inside and closed the doors.

“Here we are!” the ferry pilot called to his passengers. “Everybody out!”

Since there was fresh air in the hangar, the riders did not have to use space suits. Just as his father had said, Steve found that he could walk around as easily as he did back in Arkansas.

“Ready for a tour of the Wheel, kids?” Mr. Shannon asked.

“Sure!” the twins replied together.

Mr. Shannon worked for the American Space Supply Company which carried supplies to the planets of the Solar System. This was the year 2004 and by now nearly all the planets or their moons had budding Earth colonies. Sue and Steve had earned free lifetime space passes because of a heroic act Steve had done a month before on the twins’ very first trip into space.

As Mr. Shannon took the two around the “man-made moon,” they were almost overcome by all the wonderful things they saw. They learned that the Wheel in the Sky was both a scientific laboratory and a military lookout. With their big telescopes, the Space Guard could see every mile of Earth, for the Wheel circled the globe several times a day.

While the Shannons were in the Military Lookout Room peering at the world through a telescope, Sue said, “I wish Mom could be here with us.”

“I do, too, Sis,” Steve replied. “But it would take all the soldiers in the Humpty-Dumpty story to get Mom into a rocket, wouldn’t it, Dad?”

Mr. Shannon chuckled. “I believe it would, Son.”

Their father leaned over and whispered something to the officer at the telescope, who nodded. The man slipped a high power lens on the telescope and turned it on a certain part of the United States, toward which the Wheel was slowly moving.

“Take another look, Sue,” her father said.

Sue eagerly went to the eyepiece. The telescope brought a city into very close range. It seemed as if she had only to reach out a finger to touch the tall spire of a building. Suddenly she gasped. She knew that building! It was the home office of her father’s place of work. The city was Little Rock, Arkansas, their own home!

“Steve, look!” she said excitedly to her brother and let him see for himself.

Steve was as thrilled as Sue. Together they moved the telescope lens over all the familiar spots of the great space city, which in this day had a million population. They were able to locate the wee speck that was their own home in the suburbs.

“I can almost see Mom hanging out the wash in the yard!” Steve said with a grin.

Before the children were through looking, they noticed several black hazy spots in different parts of the state.

“What are these, Dad?” Steve asked, showing them to his father.

“They’re tornadoes, Son,” Mr. Shannon replied. “There seems to be an unusually large crop of them this season. There are even some close to Little Rock. The Weather Control Bureau here has a way of dealing with them, though. They do many skillful things in Weather Control. They can make it rain in dry parts of the world and even melt snow drifts in blizzard areas.”

“What can they do about a tornado?” Steve asked.

“When one threatens a city they fire a guided missile—a bomb—that breaks up the twister before it can do any harm. We’ll visit the Weather Control Bureau as soon as we’ve been to the hub of the Wheel.”

Mr. Shannon led them out of the Military Lookout Room. Steve and Sue then found a job of climbing facing them. In order to reach the hub, they had to go through one of the spokes leading into the center of the Wheel. The children saw before them a nylon ladder stretching as far as they could see down a long corridor.

“Let’s start climbing,” their father said.

“Why can’t we just walk along the hall,” Sue asked, “instead of doing it the hard way?”

“You’re forgetting that the Wheel is always throwing you outward as it spins,” Mr. Shannon said. “If you tried to walk down the spoke it would be like trying to walk against a hurricane. For this reason, you two must be careful not to lose your grip on the ladder or you’ll be flung down the corridor against the rim.”

The three began climbing hand over hand along the ladder. They got along very well until Sue suddenly became dizzy and lost her hold. She screamed as she began flying down the corridor. Steve’s heart nearly stopped beating for a moment. He heard his father calling out loudly in a frantic voice: “Grab the ladder, Sue! Grab the ladder!”

At first Sue did not seem to hear and kept hollering in fright. Then she understood and reached out wildly with her hands for the nylon ladder as she swept along. One hand seized a piece of it and she held on for dear life, her body still hanging in mid-air as the force of the turning Wheel kept trying to throw her outward.

“Hold on, Sue!” her father called. “We’re coming!”

He and Steve swiftly crawled along the ladder to the spot where Sue was clinging with one hand.

“Hurry!” she cried. “I can’t hang on much longer!”

Just as she was about to let go, Steve reached her and held on to her with his free hand. Then his father lent his help and Sue was safe. She sobbed for a moment from the fright she had had and Mr. Shannon suggested that they go back to the rim where they would be safe again. Both children agreed, for they had suddenly lost all interest in the hub.

By the time they got to the Weather Control Bureau they found more worry awaiting them. Men were hustling about the huge room with serious looks on their faces. One of them was looking into the eyepiece of a large machine that was pointed out the window down onto Earth.

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Shannon asked one of the men.

“A tornado is headed for Little Rock, Arkansas!” was the shocking reply. “I hope our missile scores a hit, but it isn’t going to be easy because the Wheel has already moved past the United States!”

“The missile’s *got* to hit!” Steve burst out. “Our home and Mom are there!”

“Yes, it’s simply *got* to!” Sue added tearfully.

The Shannons had to stand helplessly on the side as the tornado fighters went to work. The missile gun was in another part of the Wheel, but the orders for firing it would leave this room by radio.

“Oh, why couldn’t Mom have come with us?” Sue asked. “She would have been safe here!”

Steve felt his whole body tensing like a wound spring. The perspiration was beading his forehead and his knees were weak. On his father’s face there was a dark look and Steve saw that his big hands were opening and closing.

“Twenty seconds to go before firing,” the man at the machine said slowly over the radio mike on his chest. “Steady. Eighteen—seventeen—”

“Why don’t they hurry?” Sue cried. “They’re so slow!”

“They have to do it a certain way,” Mr. Shannon answered. “They know what they’re doing, Honey. Don’t be afraid.”

But she *was* afraid. And so was Steve. And her father, too. Everyone in the room was afraid because no one could say whether the tornado could be destroyed before it hit the city or not.

“Eight—seven—six—” droned the unhurried voice of the operator.

The Shannons hardly dared breathe for fear of disturbing the man at the machine. Steve felt Sue’s body quivering next to him. It seemed as if the seconds were dragging on endlessly.

“Three—two—one—FIRE!”

Steve felt nothing but he knew the tornado bomb was on its way, speeding hundreds of miles a second Earthward.

For long, awfully long, moments after the operator had said, “Fire!” the Shannons waited for him to speak again. He kept looking calmly through the eyepiece of the machine as though just studying the stars. Then at last they saw a smile spread over his face and he said to everyone in the room, “It’s a hit! Little Rock is safe!”

Sue and Steve whooped as if it were Christmas morning. Where a minute before they had been greatly worried, now they were happy as they never believed they could be.

“Whew!” Mr. Shannon sighed. “I’m afraid I’ve had enough excitement to last me a lifetime!”

“Not me, Dad,” Steve said, as the fire of adventure began to glow again in his eyes. “I won’t be satisfied until I’ve seen what lies beyond the Wheel in the Sky!”

Source:

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