

Pelting Stones

by Richard Elam

Ted decided he would find out just why the boy was watching them. “Hello,” Ted greeted.

“Hi,” the boy answered.

“What’s your name?” Ted asked.

“Randy Matthews,” the boy returned.

Before Ted could go on with his questioning, Dr. Kenton spoke up. “Randy, would you like to go with us to visit the observatory?”

“Yes, sir, I would,” was the ready reply.

“You’d better check with your folks first,” Dr. Kenton advised.

“I don’t have any folks here,” Randy said. “Mr. Collins is taking care of me. He’s an engineer.”

“Then check with him and come on back if you can,” Dr. Kenton said.

When Randy had left, Ted said, “He’s been watching us a long time, Dad, just as if he couldn’t wait to make friends with us.”

“I’ve noticed it, too,” his father said. “I wonder what he meant when he said he has no folks *here*?”

Randy got back shortly and said he could go with them. The Kentons had to wait for him to dress, but they were surprised at his speed. He seemed to know all the fasteners and fittings perfectly.

The four of them left the building and went outside where an odd vehicle awaited them.

“What a funny-looking car!” Jill exclaimed, and Ted could hear her merry laugh ring in his helmet receiver.

“A fresh-air taxi!” Ted put in.

The car had enormous tires and an open top. It looked more like a tractor than anything else.

“Let’s climb in,” Dr. Kenton said. He helped the children in, then took the driver’s seat. He turned a switch, and they were off.

When they had gotten up speed, Ted thought this the most exciting ride he had ever taken! They bounced along over the rough ground without feeling any of the bumps. Dr. Kenton explained that the tires were low-pressured and shock-absorbent.

The young folks were so impressed by their ride that it was much later before they took time to notice the breath-taking beauty of the sky. The stars were so numerous, they looked like swaths of white dust against the absolute blackness. Randy was the first to notice the big green globe of Earth behind them, and pointed it out.

“It makes me homesick seeing it,” Jill said, and Ted detected a tremor in her voice.

Ted couldn't help admiring Jill for her courage in agreeing to come along against her wishes, just to keep the family together.

When the Moon car reached the observatory, Ted did not find exactly what he had expected. Instead of a white tower, like the observatories at home, what he saw was a natural, tall column of jagged rock, on the top of which was a man-made shiny dome with a slit in it where the telescope eye peeped out.

The four got out of the car and walked through a doorway that had been blasted through the rock in some time past. Beyond this was an air lock that kept the compressed air of the observatory from escaping.

When they had gone through the door, the four found facing them a crude elevator. Dr. Kenton motioned the young people inside and then followed. He threw a switch, and the elevator cage began rising slowly.

“This column of rock has always been hollow,” he explained, “so it was easy to run an elevator up through it.”

He unfastened his helmet and took it off. “You can take off your hats now,” he told the children. “There's air in here.”

The elevator stopped at the top of the shaft. The four got out and entered a big room with a rounded ceiling. Ted knew this to be the dome that housed the telescope. The reflector was like a huge cylinder resting in its horseshoe yoke across the room.

“Hello!” Dr. Kenton called. “Is anyone home?”

Suddenly a round face appeared at the side of the telescope. The face reminded Ted of a circus clown's, with its wild, wispy hair and broad grin.

“John Kenton!” cried the little man, as he ran out and embraced Ted's dad. The elderly scientist asked, “What in the world are you doing on Luna? And who are these young folks with you?”

Dr. Kenton explained that he was on a stop-over to Mars, and he introduced the children to the funny little scientist, whose name was Dr. Beeler.

“We had some time to kill so we decided to visit the observatory,” Dr. Kenton finished. “Will you show the children some of the sights?”

Dr. Beeler's eyes brightened with pleasure. Ted was sure that the little man was truly enjoying their visit. Ted thought he must get awfully lonesome up here by himself.

Dr. Beeler set the position of the telescope by turning two cranks. Then he conducted the children up a catwalk to a platform about twelve feet from the floor. Jill took the first peek through the eyepiece at the top of the tube.

“Oooh—it’s beautiful!” Jill cried with a gasp.

Ted let Randy have the next turn, and then he himself looked. The view was breath-taking. What he saw was the flattened, white globe of Saturn with its graceful rings and many satellites.

“The Moon is much better than the Earth for using a telescope,” Dr. Beeler said, “because here there is no atmosphere or haze to get in the way.”

The children saw other captivating sights. There was the shimmering pearl of Venus, Earth’s twin, then Jupiter, the king of planets, with its four orderly larger moons. The children also saw smoky-looking nebulae and star clusters that resembled bees in a hive. Then Dr. Beeler showed them what he seemed to think was the greatest treat of all—the Earth under high magnification. When Jill placed her eye to the eyepiece, she suddenly turned away, sobbing.

Dr. Beeler and her father came running to her.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Dr. Kenton asked.

“I—I guess I’m homesick!” Jill said. “I miss the green grass and the blue sky terribly! Oh, why did we ever have to leave home?”

Ted saw his father’s face grow grave. Now his dad knew that Jill had never wanted to come along. Her father placed his arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t know you felt this way,” he said softly.

Dr. Beeler stood by, fidgeting as though he wanted to say something but didn’t know just what.

Presently Dr. Kenton looked at his wrist watch which he could read through the plastic cuff of his space suit. “We’d better get back to the colony,” he said. “The *Shooting Star* may be nearly ready to take off.”

They came down off the catwalk to the floor level where they took their leave of Dr. Beeler. Ted saw a sad look in the old astronomer’s eyes as though he would have liked them to stay longer.

“Good luck to all of you,” Dr. Beeler said. Then to Jill he added, “Don’t worry, young lady. You won’t find Mars such a bad place. And you’ll be seeing the good old Earth again, some day, too.”

As the four went down in the elevator, Jill said, “I’m sorry I was such a baby.”

“Nonsense,” her father returned. “I must confess I’ve been a little homesick myself since leaving Earth. How about you, Ted, and you, Randy?”

Ted had to admit to a certain amount himself, but the Kentons were surprised to hear Randy’s opinion.

“No sir,” Randy said, “I’m not homesick for Earth.”

Ted could not understand why a person should prefer the other planets to their own home world. Ted could see that his father felt the same, for he gave their new young friend an odd look.

Ted thought it would be a good time to learn something more about the mysterious Randy, and he was about to ask some questions when the cage touched the ground floor.

“Everybody out,” Dr. Kenton said. “Put on your helmets and turn on your air valves.”

There was no time for questioning now. The three younger folks did as instructed. Ted liked the caressing feeling he got as the air pumped up his suit. It was like a soft summer breeze against his skin. It made him want to giggle.

The explorers climbed into their car outside, and Dr. Kenton started it. Then they went flying across the bleak gray moonscape, back toward the Wheel. Jill had gotten over her gloom, and the excitement of the carefree ride prompted her to start singing. It was a well-known song that all the school children at home knew, and Ted and her father both joined in. Dr. Kenton invited Randy to chime in, but the boy surprised them once more when he said that he did not even know the song! This only added to the mystery of Randy.

Suddenly the scientist jammed the brakes on so suddenly that the children were pitched forward.

“What’s wrong?” Ted asked, when he had regained his wits.

He was surprised to see his father leap from his seat and vault to the ground. “Out of here—all of you—quickly!” he urged.

His insistent voice brought them tumbling out of the car to the ground.

“What is it?” Jill cried frantically.

“See those spurts of dust just up ahead?” her father said, pointing. “They’re meteorites striking the ground. We almost blundered right into a meteor shower!”

He looked around. “We’ve got to find some shelter,” he told them. “A cave—a clump of rocks—anything.”

“There’s a bunch of rocks!” Randy said, indicating a clump off to their left.

“That seems to be the closest place!” Dr. Kenton said. “Let’s go!”

They broke into a run across the ground, slipping and sliding in the powdery pumice. Ted saw bursts of Moon dust closer now, and they were coming with greater frequency. One huge geyser several feet away threw a shower of sand over all of them, blinding them momentarily. When the “air” cleared, Ted was shocked to find Randy missing.

“Where’s Randy?” he cried.

“There he is—on the ground,” Jill shrieked, pointing behind them.

Ted turned, and his heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. Randy was stretched out flat. He was unmoving, still as death!

Source:

Elam, Richard. “Pelting Stones.” *Young Visitor to Mars*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1953. 47 – 58. Electronic.