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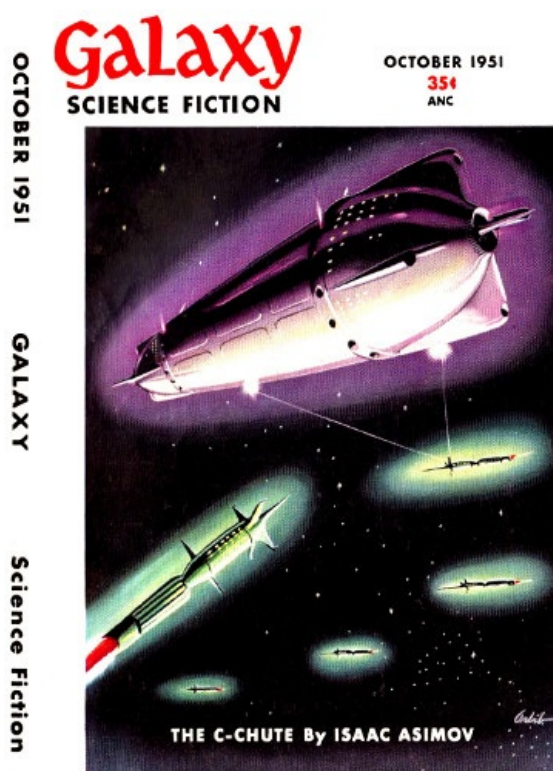
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPACEMEN DIE AT HOME ***



Spacemen Die at Home

By EDWARD W. LUDWIG

Illustrated by THORNE

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***One man's retreat is another's prison ... and
it takes a heap of flying to make a hulk a home!***

Forty days of heaven and forty nights of hell. That's the way it's been, Laura. But how can I make you understand? How can I tell you what it's like to be young and a man and to dream of reaching the stars? And yet, at the same time, to be filled with a terrible, gnawing fear—a fear locked in my mind during the day and bursting out like an evil jack-in-the-box at night. I must tell you, Laura.

Perhaps if I start at the beginning, the very beginning....

It was the Big Day. All the examinations, the physicals and psychos, were over. The Academy, with its great halls and classrooms and laboratories, lay hollow and silent, an exhausted thing at sleep after spawning its first-born.

For it was June in this year of 1995, and we were the graduating class of the U. S. Academy of Interplanetary Flight.

The *first* graduating class, Laura. That's why it was so important, because we were the *first*.

We sat on a little platform, twenty-five of us. Below us was a beach of faces, most of them strange, shining like pebbles in the warm New Mexican sunlight. They were the faces of mothers and fathers and grandparents and kid brothers and sisters—the people who a short time ago had been only scrawled names on letters from home or words spoken wistfully at Christmas. They were the memory-people who, to me, had never really existed.

But today they had become real, and they were here and looking at us with pride in their eyes.

A voice was speaking, deep, sure, resonant. "... these boys have worked hard for six years, and now they're going to do a lot of big things. They're going to bring us the metals and minerals that we desperately need. They're going to find new land for our colonists, good rich land that will bear food and be a home for our children. And perhaps most important of all, they'll make other men think of the stars and look up at them and feel humility—for mankind needs humility."

The speaker was Robert Chandler, who'd brought the first rocket down on Mars just five years ago, who'd established the first colony there, and who had just returned from his second hop to Venus.

Instead of listening to his words, I was staring at his broad shoulders and his dark, crew-cut hair and his white uniform which was silk-smooth and skin-tight. I was worshiping him and hating him at the same time, for I was thinking:

He's already reached Mars and Venus. Let him leave Jupiter and the others alone! Let us be the first to land somewhere! Let us be the first!

Mickey Cameron, sitting next to me, dug an elbow into my ribs. "I don't see 'em, Ben," he whispered. "Where do you suppose they are?"

I blinked. "Who?"

"My folks."

That was something I didn't have to worry about. My parents had died in a strato-jet crash when I was four, so I hadn't needed many of those "You are cordially invited" cards. Just one, which I'd sent to Charlie Taggart.

Stardust Charlie, we called him, although I never knew why. He was a veteran of Everson's first trip to the Moon nearly twenty-five years ago, and he was still at it. He was Chief Jetman now on the *Lunar Lady*, a commercial ore ship on a shuttle between Luna City and White Sands.

I remembered how, as a kid, I'd pestered him in the Long Island Spaceport, tagging after him like a puppy, and how he'd grown to like me until he became father, mother, and buddy all in one to me. And I remembered, too, how his recommendation had finally made me a cadet.

My gaze wandered over the faces, but I couldn't find Charlie's. It wasn't surprising. The *Lunar Lady* was in White Sands now, but liberties, as Charlie said, were as scarce as water on Mars.

It doesn't matter, I told myself.

Then Mickey stiffened. "I see 'em, Ben! There in the fifth row!"

Usually Mickey was the same whether in a furnace-hot engine room or a garden party, smiling, accepting whatever the world offered. But now a tenseness and an excitement had gripped even him. I was grateful that he was beside me; we'd been a good team during those final months at the Academy and I knew we'd be a good team in space. The Universe was mighty big, but with two of us to face it together, it would be only half as big.

And then it seemed that all the proud faces were looking at us as if we were gods. A shiver went through my body. Though it was daytime, I saw the stars in my mind's vision, the great shining balls of silver, each like a voice crying out and pleading to be explored, to be touched by the sons of Earth.

They expect a lot from us. They expect us to make a new kind of civilization and a better place out of Earth. They expect all this and a hell of a lot more. They think there's nothing we can't do.

I felt very small and very humble. I was scared. Damned scared.

At last it was over, and the proud faces descended upon us in a huge, babbling wave.

Then I saw him. Good old Stardust Charlie.

His wizened little body was shuffling down an aisle, his eyes shining like a child's. He'd been sandwiched, evidently, in one of the rear rows.

But he wasn't the Charlie I'd seen a year ago. He'd become gaunt and old, and he walked with an unnatural stiffness. He looked so old that it was hard to believe he'd once been young.

He scratched his mop of steel-gray hair and grinned.

"You made it, boy," he chortled, "and by Jupiter, we'll celebrate tonight. Yes, siree, I got twenty-four hours, and we'll celebrate as good spacemen should!"

Then Mickey strode up to us. He was his normal, boyish self again, walking lightly, his blond, curly-haired skull swaying as if in rhythm with some silent melody.

And you, Laura, were with him.

"Meet the Brat," he said. "My sister Laura."

I stared almost rudely. You were like a doll lost in the immensity of your fluffy pink dress. Your hair was long and transformed into a golden froth where sunlight touched it. But your eyes were the eyes of a woman, glowing like dark stars and reflecting a softness, a gentleness that I'd never seen in eyes before.

"I'm happy to meet you, Ben," you said. "I've heard of no one else for the past year."

A tide of heat crept up from my collar. I stuttered through an introduction of Charlie.

You and Mickey looked strangely at Charlie, and I realized that old Stardust was not a cadet's notion of the ideal spaceman. Charlie scorned the skin-tight uniforms of the government service and wore a shiny black suit that was a relic of Everson's early-day Moon Patrol. His tie was clumsily knotted, and a button on his coat was missing.

And the left side of his face was streaked with dark scar tissue, the result of an atomic blowup on one of the old Moon ships. I was so accustomed to the scars, I was seldom aware of them; but others, I knew, would find them ugly.

You were kind. You shook hands and said, softly: "It's a privilege to meet you, Charlie. Just think—one of Everson's men, one of the first to reach the Moon!"

Charlie gulped helplessly, and Mickey said: "Still going to spend the weekend with us, aren't you, Ben?"

I shook my head. "Charlie has only twenty-four hours liberty. We're planning to see the town tonight."

"Why don't you both come with us?" you asked. "Our folks have their own plane, so it would be no problem. And we've got a big guest room. Charlie, wouldn't you like a home-cooked meal before going back to the Moon?"

Charlie's answer was obscured by a sudden burst of coughing. I knew that he'd infinitely prefer to spend his liberty sampling Martian fizzes and Plutonian zombies.

But this night seemed too sacred for Charlie's kind of celebration.

"We'd really like to come," I said.

On our way to the 'copter parking field, Dean Dawson passed us. He was a tall, willowy man, spectacled, looking the way an academy professor should look.

"Ben," he called, "don't forget that offer. Remember you've got two months to decide."

"No, thanks," I answered. "Better not count on me."

A moment later Mickey said, frowning, "What was he talking about, Ben? Did he make you an offer?"

I laughed. "He offered me a job here at the Academy teaching astrogation. What a life *that* would be! Imagine standing in a classroom for forty years when I've got the chance to—"

I hesitated, and you supplied the right words: "When you've got the chance to be the first to reach a new planet. That's what most of you want, isn't it? That's what Mickey used to want."

I looked at you as if you were Everson himself, because you seemed to understand the hunger that could lie in a man's heart.

Then your last words came back and jabbed me: "That's what Mickey used to want."

"Used to want?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

You bit your lip, not answering.

"What did she mean, Mickey?"

Mickey looked down at his feet. "I didn't want to tell you yet, Ben. We've been together a long time, planning to be on a rocket. But—"

"Yes?"

"Well, what does it add up to? You become a spaceman and wear a pretty uniform. You wade through the sands of Mars and the dust of Venus. If you're lucky, you're good for five, maybe ten years. Then one thing or another gets you. They don't insure rocketmen, you know."

My stomach was full of churning, biting ice. "What are you trying to say, Mickey?"

"I've thought about it a long time. They want me for Cargo Supervisor of White Sands Port." He raised his hand to stop me. "I know. It's not so exciting. I'll just live a lot longer. I'm sorry, Ben."

I couldn't answer. It was as if someone had whacked the back of my knees with the blast of a jet.

"It doesn't change anything, Ben—right now, I mean. We can still have a good weekend."

Charlie was muttering under his breath, smoldering like a bomb about to reach critical mass. I shook my head dazedly at him as we got to the 'copter.

"Sure," I said to Mickey, "we can still have a good weekend."

I liked your folks, Laura. There was no star-hunger in them, of course. They were simple and solid and settled, like green growing things, deep-rooted, belonging to Earth. They were content with a home that was cool on this warm summer night, with a 'copter and a tri-dimensional video, and a handsome automatic home that needed no servants or housework.

Stardust Charlie was as comfortable as a Martian sand-monkey in a shower, but he tried courageously to be himself.

At the dinner table he stared glassily at nothing and grated, "Only hit Mars once, but I'll never forget the kid who called himself a medic. Skipper started coughing, kept it up for three days. Whoopin' cough, the medic says, not knowin' the air had chemicals that turned to acid in your lungs. I'd never been to Mars before, but I knew better'n that. Hell, I says, that ain't whoopin' cough, that's lung-rot."

That was when your father said he wasn't so hungry after all.

Afterward, you and I walked onto the terrace, into the moonlit night, to watch for crimson-tailed continental rockets that occasionally streaked up from White Sands.

We gazed for a few seconds up into the dark sky, and then you said: "Charlie is funny, isn't he? He's nice and I'm glad he's here, but he's sort of funny."

"He's an old-time spaceman. You didn't need much education in those days, just a lot of brawn and a quick mind. It took guts to be a spaceman then."

"But he wasn't always a spaceman. Didn't he ever have a family?"

I smiled and shook my head. "If he had, he never mentioned it. Charlie doesn't like to be sentimental, at least not on the outside. As far as I know, his life began when he took off for the Moon with Everson."

You stared at me strangely, almost in a sacred kind of way. I knew suddenly that you liked me, and my heart began to beat faster.

There was silence.

You were lovely, your soft hair like strands of gold, and there were flecks of silver in your dark eyes. Somehow I was afraid. I had the feeling that I shouldn't have come here.

You kept looking at me until I had to ask: "What are you thinking, Laura?"

You laughed, but it was a sad, fearful laugh. "No, I shouldn't be thinking it. You'd hate me if I told you, and I wouldn't want that."

"I could never hate you."

"It—it's about the stars," you said very softly. "I understand why you want to go to them. Mickey and I used to dream about them when we were kids. Of course I was a girl, so it was just a game to me. But once I dreamed of going to England. Oh, it was going to be so wonderful. I lived for months, just thinking about it."

"One summer we went. I had fun. I saw the old buildings and castles, and the spaceports and the Channel Tube. But after it was over, I realized England wasn't so different from America. Places seem exciting before you get to them, and afterward they're not really."

I frowned. "And you mean it might be the same with the stars? You think maybe I haven't grown up yet?"

Anxiety darkened your features. "No, it'd be good to be a spaceman, to see the strange places and make history. But is it worth it? Is it worth the things you'd have to give up?"

I didn't understand at first, and I wanted to ask, "Give up *what*?"

Then I looked at you and the promise in your eyes, and I knew.

All through the years I'd been walking down a single, narrow path.

Government boarding school, the Academy, my eyes always upward and on the stars.

Now I'd stumbled into a cross-roads, beholding a strange new path that I'd never noticed before.

You can go into space, I thought, and try to do as much living in ten years as normal men do in fifty. You can be like Everson, who died in a Moon crash at the age of 36, or like a thousand others who lie buried in Martian sand and Venusian dust. Or, if you're lucky, like Charlie—a kind of human meteor streaking through space, eternally alone, never finding a home.

Or there's the other path. To stay on this little prison of an Earth in cool, comfortable houses. To be one of the solid, rooted people with a wife and kids. To be one of the people who live long enough to grow old, who awake to the song of birds instead of rocket grumblings, who fill their lungs with the clean rich air of Earth instead of poisonous dust.

"I'm sorry," you said. "I didn't mean to make you sad, Ben."

"It's all right," I said, clenching my fists. "You made sense—a lot of sense."

The next morning Charlie said good-bye in our room. He rubbed his scarred face nervously as he cleared his throat with a series of thin, tight coughs.

Then he pointed to a brown, faded tin box lying on the bed. "I'm leavin' that for you. It's full of old stuff, souvenirs mostly. Thought maybe you'd like to have 'em."

I scowled, not understanding. "Why, Charlie? What for?"

He shrugged as if afraid he might be accused of sentimentality. "Oh, it's just that I've been dodgin' meteors now for twenty-five years. That's a long time, boy. Ain't one spaceman in a thousand that lucky. Some of these days, I won't be so lucky."

I tried to laugh. "You're good for another twenty-five years, Charlie."

He shook his head stiffly, staring at nothing. "Maybe. Anyway, I'm gonna get off the Shuttle this time, make one more trip to Mars. Tell you what. There's a little stone cafe on Mars, the *Space Rat*, just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal. When you get to Mars, take a look inside. I'll probably be there."

He coughed again, a deep, rasping cough that filled his eyes with tears.

"Not used to this Earth air," he muttered. "What I need's some Martian climate."

Suddenly that cough frightened me. It didn't seem normal. I wondered, too, about his stiff movements and glassy stare. It was as if he were drugged.

I shook the thought away. If Charlie was sick, he wouldn't talk about going to Mars. The medics wouldn't let him go even as far as Luna.

We watched him leave, you and Mickey and I.

"When will you be back?" you asked.

Charlie's hard face contorted itself into a gargoylish grin. "Maybe a couple of months, maybe a couple of years. You know spacemen."

Then he waved and strode away, a strange, gray, withered gnome of a man.

I wanted him to say something, to tell me the secret that would kill the doubt worming through my brain.

But he rounded a corner, still grinning and waving, and then he was gone.

That afternoon Mickey showed me his room. It was more like a boy's room than a spaceman's. In it were all the little things that kids treasure—pennants, models of Everson's two ships, a tennis trophy, books, a home-made video.

I began to realize how important a room like this could be to a boy. I could imagine, too, the happiness that parents felt as they watched their children grow to adulthood.

I'd missed something. My folks were shadow-people, my impressions of them drawn half from ancient photos, half from imagination. For me, it had been a cold, automatic kind of life, the life of dormitories and routines and rules. I'd been so blinded by the brilliancy of my dreams, I hadn't realized I was different.

My folks were killed in a rocket crash. If it weren't for rockets, I'd have lived the kind of life a kid

should live.

Mickey noticed my frown.

"What's the matter, Ben? Still sore? I feel like a heel, but I'm just not like you and Charlie, I guess. I—"

"No, I understand, Mickey. I'm not sore, really."

"Listen, then. You haven't accepted any offer yet, have you?"

"No. I got a couple of possibilities. Could get a berth on the *Odyssey*, the new ship being finished at Los Angeles. They want me, too, for the Moon Patrol, but that's old stuff, not much better than teaching. I want to be in deep space."

"Well, how about staying with us till you decide? Might as well enjoy Earth life while you can. Okay?"

I felt like running from the house, to forget that it existed. I wanted someone to tell me one of the old stories about space, a tale of courage that would put fuel on dying dreams.

But I wanted, also, to be with you, Laura, to see your smile and the flecks of silver in your eyes and the way your nose turned upward ever so slightly when you laughed. You see, I loved you already, almost as much as I loved the stars.

And I said, slowly, my voice sounding unfamiliar and far away, "Sure, I'll stay, Mickey. Sure."

Forty days of joy, forty nights of fear and indecision. We did all the little things, like watching the rockets land at White Sands and flying down to the Gulf to swim in cool waters. You tried, unsuccessfully, to teach me to dance, and we talked about Everson and Charlie and the Moon and the stars. You felt you had to give the stars all the beauty and promise of a child's dream, because you knew that was what I wanted.

One morning I thought, *Why must I make a choice? Why can't I have both you and the stars? Would that be asking too much?*

All day the thought lay in my mind like fire.

That evening I asked you to marry me. I said it very simply: "Laura, I want you to be my wife."

You looked up at Venus, and you were silent for a long while, your face flushed.

Then you murmured, "I—I want to marry you, Ben, but are you asking me to marry a spaceman or a teacher?"

"Can't a spaceman marry, too?"

"Yes, a spaceman can marry, but what would it be like? Don't you see, Ben? You'd be like Charlie. Gone for *maybe* two months, *maybe* two years. Then you'd have a twenty-four hour liberty—and I'd have what?"

Somehow I'd expected words like these, but still they hurt. "I wouldn't have to be a spaceman forever. I could try it for a couple of years, then teach."

"Would you, Ben? Would you be satisfied with just seeing Mars? Wouldn't you want to go on to Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus and on and on?"

Your voice was choked, and even in the semi-darkness I saw tears glittering in your eyes.

"Do you think I'd dare have children, Ben? Mickey told me what happened on the *Cyclops*. There was a leak in the atomic engines. The ship was flooded with radiation—just for a second. It didn't seem serious. The men had no burns. But a year later the captain had a child. And it was—"

"I know, Laura. Don't say it."

You had to finish. "It was a monster."

That night I lay awake, the fears and doubts too frantic to let me sleep.

You've got to decide now, I told myself. *You can't stay here. You've got to make a choice.*

The teaching job was still open. The spot on the *Odyssey* was still open—and the big ship, it was rumored, was equipped to make it all the way to Pluto.

You can take Dean Dawson's job and stay with Laura and have kids and a home and live to see what happens in this world sixty years from now.

Or you can see what's on the other side of the mountain. You can be a line in a history book.

I cursed. I knew what Charlie would say. He'd say, "Get the hell out of there, boy. Don't let a fool woman make a sucker out of you. Get out there on the *Odyssey* where you belong. We got a date on Mars, remember? At the *Space Rat*, just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal."

That's what he'd say.

And yet I wanted you, Laura. I wanted to be with you, always.

"Oh God," I moaned, "what shall I do?"

Next morning the door chimes pealed, and you went to the door and brought back the audiogram. It was addressed to me; I wondered who could be sending me a message.

I pressed the stud on the little gray cylinder, and a rasping, automatic voice droned: "Luna City, Luna, July 27, 1995. Regret to inform you of death of Charles Taggart, Chief Jetman...."

Then there was a Latin name which was more polite than the word "lung-rot" and the metallic phrase, "This message brought to you by courtesy of United Nations Earth-Luna Communication Corps."

I stood staring at the cylinder.

Charles Taggart was dead.

Charles Taggart was Charlie. Stardust Charlie.

My heart thudded crazily against my chest. It couldn't be! Not Charlie! The audiogram had lied!

I pressed the stud again. "... regret to inform you of death of Charles ..."

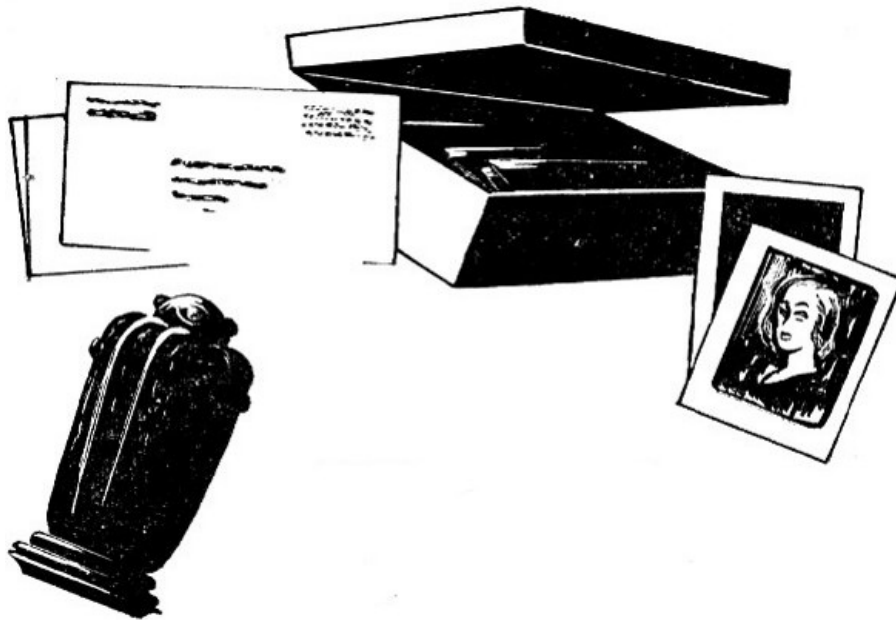
I hurled the cylinder at the wall. It thudded, fell, rolled. The broken voice droned on.

You ran to it, shut it off. "I'm sorry, Ben, so terribly—"

Without answering, I walked into my room. I knew it was true now. I remembered Charlie's coughing, his gaunt features, his drugged gaze. The metallic words had told the truth.

I sat for a long time on my bed, crying inside, but staring dry-eyed at Charlie's faded tin box.

Then, finally, I fingered his meager possessions—a few wrinkled photos, some letters, a small black statue of a forgotten Martian god, a gold service medal from the Moon Patrol.



This was what remained of Charlie after twenty-five years in space. It was a bitter bargain. A statue instead of a wife, yellowed letters instead of children, a medal instead of a home.

It'd be a great future, I thought. You'd dream of sitting in a dingy stone dive on the Grand Canal with sand-wasps buzzing around smoky, stinking candles. A bottle of luchu juice and a couple of Martian girls with dirty feet for company. And a sudden cough that would be the first sign of lung-rot.

To hell with it!

I walked into your living room and called Dean Dawson on the visiphone.

I accepted that job teaching.

And now, Laura, it's nearly midnight. You're in your room, sleeping, and the house is silent.

It's hard to tell you, to make you understand, and that is why I am writing this.

I looked through Charlie's box again, more carefully this time, reading the old letters and studying the photographs. I believe now that Charlie sensed my indecision, that he left these things so that they could tell me what he could not express in words.

And among the things, Laura, I found a ring.

A wedding ring.

In that past he never talked about, there was a woman—his wife. Charlie was young once, his eyes full of dreams, and he faced the same decision that I am facing. Two paths were before him, but he tried to travel both. He later learned what we already know—that there can be no compromise. And you know, too, which path he finally chose.

Do you know why he had to drug himself to watch me graduate? So he could look at me, knowing that I would see the worlds he could never live to see. Charlie didn't leave just a few trinkets behind him. He left himself, Laura, for he showed me that a boy's dream can also be a man's dream.

He made his last trip to Luna when he knew he was going to die. Heaven knows how he escaped a checkup. Maybe the captain understood and was kind—but that doesn't matter now.

Do you know *why* he wanted to reach Mars? Do you know why he didn't want to die in the clean, cool air of Earth?

It was because he wanted to die nearer home. His home, Laura, was the Universe, where the ship was his house, the crew his father, mother, brothers, the planets his children.

You say that the beauty of the other side of the mountain vanishes after you reach it. But how can one ever be *sure* until the journey is made? Could I or Charlie or the thousand before us bear to look upon a star and think, *I might have gone there; I could have been the first?*

We said, too, that the life of a spaceman is lonely. Yet how could one be lonely when men like Charlie roam the spaceways?

Charlie wanted me to himself that night after graduation. He wanted us to celebrate as spacemen should, for he knew that this would be his last night on Earth. It might have seemed an ugly kind of celebration to you, but he wanted it with all his heart, and we robbed him of it.

Because of these things, Laura, I will be gone in the morning. Explain the best you can to Mickey and to your parents and Dean Dawson.

Right now I've got a date that I'm going to keep—at a dingy stone cafe on Mars, the *Space Rat*, just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal.

Stardust Charlie will be there; he'll go with me in memory to whatever part of the Galaxy I may live to reach. And so will you, Laura.

I have two wedding rings with me—his wife's ring and yours.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SPACEMEN DIE AT HOME ***

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