I hadn't wanted to wear my uniform when I left the hospital, but I didn't have any other clothes there and I was too glad to get out to argue about it. But as soon as I got on the local plane I was taking to Los Angeles, I was sorry I had it on.

People gawked at me and began to whisper. "The stewardess gave me a special big smile. She must have spoken to the pilot, for he came back and shook hands, and said, "Well, I guess a trip like this is sort of a comedown for you."

A little man came in, looked around for a seat, and took the one beside me. He was a fussy, spectacled guy of fifty or sixty, and he took a few minutes to get settled. Then he looked at me, and stared at my uniform and at the little brass button on it that said "TWO."

"Why," he said, "you're one of those Expedition Two men!" And then, as though he'd only just figured it out, "Why, you've been to Mars I"

"Yeah," I said. "I was there."

He beamed at me in a kind of wonder. I didn't like it, but his curiosity was so friendly that I couldn't quite resent it.

"Tell me," he said, "what's it like out there?"

The plane was lifting* and I looked out at the Arizona desert sliding by close underneath.

"Different," I said. "It's different."

The answer seemed to satisfy him completely. "I'll )ust bet it is," he said. "Are you going home, Mr. . . ."

"Haddon. Sergeant Frank Haddon."

"You going home, Sergeant?"

"My home's back in Ohio," I told him. "I'm going in to L.A. to look up some people before I go home."

"Well, that's fine. I hope you have a good time, Sergeant. You deserve it. You boys did a great job out there. Why, I read in the newspapers that after the U.N, sends out a couple more expeditions, we'll have cities out there, and regular passenger lines, and all that."

"Look," I said, "that stuff is for the birds. You might as well build cities down there in Mojave, and have them a lot closer. There's only one reason for going to Mars now, and that's uranium."

I could see he didn't quite believe me. "Oh, sure," he said, "I know that's important too, the uranium we're all using now for our power stationsbut that isn't all, is it?"

"It'll be all, for a long, long time," I said.

"But look, Sergeant, this newspaper article said . . ."

I didn't say anything more. By the time he'd finished telling about the newspaper article, we were coming down into L.A. He pumped my hand when we got out of the plane.

"Have yourself a time. Sergeant! You sure rate it. I hear a lot of chaps on Two didn't come back."

"Yeah," I said. "I heard that."

I was feeling shaky again by the time I got to downtown L.A. I went in a bar and had a double bourbon and it make me feel a little better.

I went out and found a cabby and asked him to drive me out to San Gabriel. He was a fat man with a broad red face.

"Hop right in, buddy," he said. "Say, you're one of those Mars guys, aren't you?"

I said, "That's right."

"Well, well," he said. "Tell me, how was it out there?"

"It was a pretty dull grind, in a way," I told him.
"I'll bet it was!" he said, as we started through traffic.
"Me, I was in the Army in World War Two, twenty years ago. That's just what it was, a dull grind nine tenths of the time. I guess it hasn't changed any."
"This wasn't any Army expedition," I explained. "It was a United Nations one, not an Army onebut we had officers and rules of discipline like the Army."
"Sure, it's the same thing," said the cabby. "You don't need to tell me what it's like, buddy. Why, back there in 'forty-two, or was it 'forty-three?anyway, back there I re- member that. . ."
I leaned back and watched Huntington Boulevard slide past. The sun poured in on me and seemed very hot, and the air seemed very thick and soupy. It hadn't been so bad up on the Arizona plateau, but it was a little hard to breathe down here.
The cabby wanted to know what address in San Gabriel.
I got the little packet of letters out of my pocket and found the one that had "Martin Valinez" and a street address on the back. I told the cabby and put the letters back into my pocket.
I wished now that I'd never answered them.
But how could I keep from answering when Joe Valinez' parents wrote to me at the hospital? And it was the same with Jim's girl, and Walter's family. I'd had to write back, and the first thing I knew I'd promised to come and see them, and now if I went back to Ohio without doing it I'd feel like a heel. Right now, I wished I'd decided to be a heel.
The address was on the south side of San Gabriel, in a section that still had a faintly Mexican tinge to it. There was a little frame grocery store with a small house beside it, and a picket fence around the yard of the house; very neat, but a queerly homely place after all the slick California stucco.
I went into the little grocery, and a tall, dark man with quiet eyes took a look at me and called a woman's name in a low voice and then came around the counter and took my hand.
"You're Sergeant Haddon," he said. "Yes. Of course. We've been hoping you'd come."
His wife came in a hurry from the back. She looked a little too old to be Joe's mother, for Joe had been just a kid; but then she didn't look so old either, but just sort of worn.
She said to Valinez, "Please, a chair. Can't you see he's tired? And just from the hospital."
I sat down and looked between them at a case of canned peppers, and they asked me how I felt, and wouldn't I be glad to get home, and they hoped all my family were well.
They were gentlefolk. They hadn't said a word about Joe, just waited for me to say something. And I felt in a spot, for I hadn't known Joe well, not jreally. He'd been moved into our squad only a couple of weeks before take-off, and since he'd been our first casualty, I'd never got to know him much.
I finally had to get it over with, and all I could think to say was, "They wrote you in detail about Joe, didn't they?"
Valinez nodded gravely. "Yesthat he died from shock within twenty-four hours after take-off. The letter was very nice."
His wife nodded too. "Very nice," she murmured. She

looked at me, and I guess she saw that I didn't know quite
what to say, for she said, "You can tell us more about it. Yet
you must not if it pains you."
I could tell them more. Oh, yes, I could tell them a lot
more, if I wanted to. It was all clear in my mind, like a movie
film you run over and over till you know it by heart.
I could tell them all about the take-off that had killed
their son. The long lines of us, uniformed backs going up into
Rocket Four and all the other nineteen rocketsthe lights
flaring up there on the plateau, the grind of machinery and
blast of whistles and the inside of the big rocket as we
climbed up the ladders of its center well.
The movie was ruiming again in my mind, clear as crystal,
and I was back in Cell Fourteen of Rocket Four, with the
minutes ticking away and the walls quivering every time
one of the other rockets blasted off, and us ten men in our
hammocks, prisoned inside that odd-shaped windowless
metal room, waiting. Waiting, till that big, giant hand came
and smacked us down deep into our recoil springs, crush-
ing the breath out of us, so that you fought to breathe, and
the blood roared into your head, and your stomach heaved
in spite of all the pills they'd given you, and you heard the
giant laughing, b-r-room! b-r-r-roomi b-r-r-oomi
Smash, smash, again and again, hitting us in the guts and
cutting our breath, and someone being sick, and someone
else sobbing, and the b-r-r-oom! b-r-r-oomi laughing as it
killed us; and then the giant quit laughing, and quit slap-
ping us down, and you could feel your sore and shaky body
and wonder if it was still all there.
Walter Millis cursing a blue streak in the hammock under-
neath me, and Breck Jergen, our sergeant then, clambering
painfully out of his straps to look us over, and then through
the voices a thin, ragged voice saying uncertainly, "Breck,
I think I'm hurt . . ."
Sure, that was their boy Joe, and there was blood on his
lips, and he'd had itwe knew when we first looked at him
that he'd had it. A handsome kid, turned waxy now as he
held his hand on his middle and looked up at us. Expedition
One had proved that take-off would hit a certain percentage
with internal injuries every time, and in our squad, in our
little windowless cell, it was Joe that had been hit.
If only he'd died right off. But he couldn't die right off, he
had to lie in the hammock all those hours and hours. The
medics came and put a strait-jacket around his body and
doped him up, and that was that, and the hours went by.
And we were so shaken agd deathly sick ourselves that we
didn't have the sympathy for him we should have hadnot
till he started moaning and begging us to take the jacket off.
Finally Walter Millis wanted to do it, and Breck wouldn't
allow it, and they were arguing and we were listening when
the moaning stopped, and there was no need to do anything
about Joe Valinez any more. Nothing but to call the medics,
who came into our little iron prison and took him away.
Sure, I could tell the Valinezes all about how their Joe
died, couldn't I?
"Please," whispered Mrs. Valinez, and her husband
looked at me and nodded silently.
So I told them.
I said, "You know Joe died in space. He'd been knocked
out by the shock of take-off, and he was unconscious, not

feeling a thing. And then he woke up, before he died. He didn't seem to be feeling any pain, not a bit. He lay there, looking out the window at the stars. They're beautiful, the stars out there in space, like angels. He looked, and then he whispered something and lay back and was gone."

Mrs. Valinez began to cry softly. "To die out there, looking at stars like angels . . ."

I got up to go, and she didn't look up. I went out the door of the little grocery store, and Valinez came with me.

He shook my hand. "Thank you, Sergeant Haddon. Thank you very much."

"Sure," I said.

I got into the cab. I took out my letters and tore that one into bits. I wished to God I'd never got it. I wished I didn't have any of the other letters I still had.

a.

I took the early plane for Omaha. Before we got there I fell asleep in my seat, and then I began to dream, and that wasn't good.

A voice said, "We're coming down."

And we were coming down, Rocket Four was coming down, and there we were in our squad cell, all of us strapped into our hammocks, waiting and scared, wishing there was a window so we could see out, hoping our rocket wouldn't be the one to crack up, hoping none of the rockets cracked up, but if one does, don't let it be ours. . . .

"We're coming down. . . ."

Coming down, with the blasts starting to boom again underneath us, hitting us hard, not steady like at take-olf, but blast-blast-blast, and then again, blast-blast.

Breck's voice, calling to us from across the cell, but I couldn't hear for the roaring that was in my ears between blasts. No, it was not in my ears, that roaring came from the wall beside me: we had hit atmosphere, we were coming in.

The blasts in lightning succession without stopping, crash-crash-crash-crash-crashi Mountains fell on me, and this was it, and don't let it be ours, please, God, don't let it be ours....

Then the bump and the blackness, and finally somebody yelling hoarsely in my ears, and Breck Jergen, his face deathly white, leaning over me.

"Unstrap and get out, Frank! All men out of hammocks . all men out!"

We'd landed, and we hadn't cracked up, but we were half dead and they wanted us to turn out, right this minute, and we couldn't.

Breck yelling to us, "Breathing masks on! Masks on! We've got to go out!"

"My God, we've just landed, we're torn to bits, we can't!"

"We've got to I Some of the other rockets cracked up in landing and we've got to save whoever's still living in them! Masks on! Hurry!"

We couldn't, but we did. They hadn't given us all those months of discipline for nothing. Jim Clymer was already on his feet, Walter was trying to unstrap underneath me, whistles were blowing like mafl somewhere and voices shouted hoarsely.

My knees wobbled under me as I hit the floor. Young Lassen, beside me, tried to say something and then crumpled

up. Jim bent over him, but Breck was at the door yelling, "Let him go I Come on I"

The whistles screeching at us all the way down the ladders of the well, and the mask clip hurting my nose, and down at the bottom a disheveled officer yelling at us to get out and join Squad Five, and the gangway reeling under us.

Cold. Freezing cold, and a wan sunshine from the shrunken little sun up there in the brassy sky, and a rolling plain of ocherous red sand stretching around us, sand that slid away under our feet as our squads followed Captain Wall toward the distant metal bulk that lay oddly canted and broken in a little shallow valley.

"Come on, menhurryl Hurryl"

Sure, all of it a dream, the dreamlike way we walked with our lead-soled shoes dragging our feet back after each step, and the voices coming through the mask resonators muffled and distant.

Only not a dream, but a nightmare, when we got up to the canted metal bulk and saw what had happened to Rocket Seventhe metal hull ripped like paper, and a few men crawling out of the wreck with blood on them, and a gurgling sound where shattered tanks were emptying, and voices whimpering, "First aid! First aidi"

Only it hadn't happened, it hadn't happened yet at all, for we were still back in Rocket Four coming in, we hadn't landed yet at all but we were going to any minute.

"We're coming down. . . ."

I couldn't go through it all again. I yelled and fought my hammock straps and woke up, and I was in my plane seat and a scared hostess was a foot away from me, saying, "This is Omaha, Sergeant. We're coming down."

They were all looking at me, all the other passengers, and I guessed I'd been talking in the dream1 still had the sweat down my back like all those nights in the hospital when I'd keep waking up.

I sat up, and they all looked away from me quick and pretended they hadn't been staring.

We came down to the airport. It was midday, and the hot Nebraska sun felt good on my back when I got out. I was lucky, for when I asked at the bus depot about going to Cuffington, there was a bus all ready to roll.

A farmer sat down beside me, a big young fellow who offered me cigarettes and told me it was only a few hours' ride to Cuffington.

"Your home there?" he asked.

"No, my home's back in Ohio," I said. "A friend of mine came from there. Name of Clymer."

He didn't know him, but he remembered that one of the town boys had gone on that second expedition to Mars.

"Yeah," I said. "That was Jim."

He couldn't keep it in any longer. "What's it like out there, anyway?"

I said, "Dry. Terrible dry."

"Ill bet it is," he said. "To tell the truth, it's too dry here, this year, for good wheat weather. Last year it was fine. Last year.. ."

Cuffington, Nebraska, was a wide street of stores, and other streets with trees and old houses, and yellow wheat fields all around as far as you could see. It was pretty hot,

and I was glad to sit down iu the bus depot while I went
through the thin little phone book.
There were three Graham families in the book, but the
first one I called was the right oneMiss lla Graham. She
talked fast and excited, and said she'd come right over, and
I said I'd wait in front of thi-' bus depot.
I stood underneath the awning, looking down the quiet
street and thinking that it sort of explained why Jim Cly-
mer had always been such ~ quiet, slow-moving sort of guy.
The place was sort of relaxed, like he'd been.
A coupe pulled up, and Miss Graham opened the door.
She was a brown-haired girl, not especially good-looking,
but the kind you think of as a nice girl, a very nice girl.
She said, "You look so tired that I feel guilty now about
asking you to stop."
"1m all right," I said. "And it's no trouble stopping over a
couple of places on my way back to Ohio."
As we drove across the little town, I asked her if Jim
hadn't had any family of his own here.
"His parents were killed in a car crash years ago," Miss
Graham said. "He lived with an uncle on a farm outside
Grandview, but they didn't get along, and Jim came into
town and got a job at the power station."
She added, as we turned a comer, "My mother rented
him a room. That's how we got to know each other. That's
how wehow we got engaged."
"Yeah, sure," I said.
It was a big square house with a deep front porch, and
some trees around it. I sat down in a wicker chair, and Miss
Graham brought her mother out. Her mother talked a little
about Jim, how they missed him, and how she declared he'd
been just like a son.
When her mother went back in, Miss Graham showed me
a little bunch of blue envelopes, "These were the letters I
got from Jim. There weren't very many of them, and they
weren't very long."
"We were only allowed to send one thirty-word message
every two weeks," I told her. "There were a couple of thou-
sand of us out there, and they couldn't let us jam up the
message transmitter all the time."
"It was wonderful how much Jim could put into just a
few words," she said, and handed me some of them.
I read a couple. One said, "I have to pinch myself to
realize that I'm one of the first Earthmen to stand on an
alien world. At night, in the cold, I look up at the green star
that's Earth and can't quite realize I've helped an age-old
dream come true."
Another one said, "This world's grim and lonely, and mys-
terious. We don't know much about it yet. So far, nobody's
seen anything living but the lichens that Expedition One
reported, but there might be anything here."
Miss Graham asked me, "Was that all there was, just
lichens?"
"That, and two or three kinds of queer cactus things," I
said. "And rock and sand. That's all."
As I read more of those little blue letters, I found that
now that Jim was gone I knew him better than I ever had.
There was something about him I'd never suspected. He
was romantic inside. We hadn't suspected it, he was always
so quiet and slow, but now I saw that all the time he was

more romantic about the thing we were doing than any of us.
He hadn't let on. We'd have kidded him, if he had. Our name for Mars, after we got sick of it, was the Hole. We always talked about it as the Hole. I could see now that Jim had been too shy of our kidding to ever let us know that he glamorized the thing in his mind.
"This was the last one I got from him before his sickness," Miss Graham said.
That one said, "I'm starting north tomorrow with one of the mapping expeditions. We'll travel over country no human has ever seen before."
I nodded. "I was on that party myself. Jim and I were on the same half-track,"
"He was thrilled by it, wasn't he, Sergeant?"
I wondered. I remembered that trip, and it was hell. Our job was simply to run a preliminary topographical survey, checking with Geigers for possible uranium deposits.
It wouldn't have been so bad, if the sand hadn't started to blow.
It wasn't sand like Earth sand. It was ground to dust by billions of years of blowing around that dry world. It got inside your breathing mask, and your goggles, and the engines of the half-tracks, in your food and water and clothes. There was nothing for three days but cold, and wind, and sand.
Thrilled? I'd have laughed at that before. But now I didn't know. Maybe Jim had been, at that. He had lots of patience, a lot more than I ever had. Maybe he glamorized that hellish trip into wonderful adventure on a foreign world.
"Sure, he was thrilled," I said. "We all were. Anybody would be."
Miss Graham took the letters back, and then said, "You had Martian sickness too, didn't you?"
I said, yes, I had, just a touch, and that was why I'd had to spend a stretch in reconditioning hospital when I got back.
She waited for me to go on, and I knew I had to. "They don't know yet if it's some sort of virus or just the effect of Martian conditions on Earthmen's bodies. It hit forty per cent of us. It wasn't really so badfever and dopiness, mostly."
"When Jim got it, was he well cared for?" she asked. Her lips were quivering a little.
"Sure, he was well cared for. He got the best care there was," I lied.
The best care there was? That was a laugh. The Brst cases got decent care, maybe. But they'd never figured on so many coming down. There wasn't any room in our little hospitalthey just had to stay in their bunks in the aluminum Quonsets when it hit them. All our doctors but one were down, and two of them died.
We'd been on Mars six months when it hit us, and the loneliness had already got us down. All but four of our rockets had gone back to Earth, and we were alone on a dead world, our little town of Quonsets huddled together under that hateful, brassy sky, and beyond it the sand and rocks that went on forever.
You go up to the North Pole and camp there, and find out

how lonely that is. It was worse out there, a lot worse. The first excitement was gone long ago, and we were tired, and homesick in a way nobody was ever homesick beforewe wanted to see green grass, and real sunshine, and women's faces, and hear running water; and we wouldn't until Expedition Three came to relieve us. No wonder guys blew their tops out there. And then came Martian sickness, on top of it.

"We did everything for him that we could," I said.

Sure we had. I could still remember Walter and me tramping through the cold night to the hospital to try to get a medic, while Breck stayed with him, and how we couldn't get one.

I remember how Walter had looked up at the blazing sky as we tramped back, and shaken his fist at the big green star of Earth.

"People up there are going to dances tonight, watching shows, sitting around in warm rooms laughing! Why should good men have to die out here to get them uranium for cheap power?"

"Can it," I told him tiredly. "Jim's not going to die. A lot of guys got over it."

The best care there was? That was real funny. All we could do was wash his face, and give him the pills the medic left, and watch him get weaker every day till he died.

"Nobody could have done more for him than was done," I told Miss Graham.

"I'm glad," she said. "I guessit's just one of those things."

When I got up to go she asked me if I didn't want to see Jim's room. They'd kept it for him just the same, she said.

I didn't want to, but how are you going to say so? I went up with her and looked and said it was nice. She opened a big cupboard. It was full of neat rows of old magazines.

"They're all the old science fiction magazines he read when he was a boy," she said. "He always saved them."

I took one out. It had a bright cover, with a space ship on it, not like our rockets but a streamlined thing, and the rings of Saturn in the background.

When I laid it down, Miss Graham took it up and put it back carefully into its place in the row, as though somebody was coming back who wouldn't like to find things out of order.

She insisted on driving me back to Omaha, and out to the airport. She seemed sorry to let me go, and I suppose it was because I was the last real tie to Jim, and when I was gone it was all over then for good.

I wondered if she'd get over it in time, and I guessed she would. People do get over things. I supposed she'd marry some other nice guy, and I wondered what they'd do with Jim's things-with all those old magazines nobody was ever coming back to read.

3-

I would never have stopped at Chicago at all if I could have got out of it, for the last person I wanted to talk to anybody about was Walter Millis. It would be too easy for me to make a slip and let out stuff nobody was supposed to know.

But Walters father had called me at the hospital, a couple of times. The last time he called, he said he was having Brock's parents come down from Wisconsin so they could

see me, too, so what could I do then but say, yes, I'd stop. But I didn't like it at all, and I knew I'd have to be careful.
Mr. Millis was waiting at the airport and shook hands with me and said what a big favor I was doing them all, and how he appreciated my stopping when I must be anxious to get back to my own home and parents.
"That's all right," I said. "My dad and mother came out to the hospital to see me when I first got back."
He was a big, fine-looking important sort of man, with a little bit of the stuffed shirt about him, I thought. He seemed friendly enough, but I got the feeling he was looking at me and wondering why I'd come back and his son Walter hadn't. Well, I couldn't blame him for that.
His car was waiting, a big car with a driver, and we started north through the city. Mr, Millis pointed out a few things to me to make conversation, especially a big atomic-power station we passed.
"It's only one of thousands, strung all over the world," he said. "They're going to transform our whole economy. This Martian uranium will be a big thing, Sergeant."
I said, yes, I guessed it would.
I was sweating blood, waiting for him to start asking about Walter, and I didn't know yet just what I could tell him. I could get myself in Dutch plenty if I opened my big mouth too wide, for that one thing that had happened to Expedition Two was supposed to be strictly secret, and we'd all been briefed on why we had to keep our mouths shut.
But he let it go for the time being, and just talked other stuff. I gathered that his wife wasn't too well, and that Walter had been their only child. I also gathered that he was a very big shot in business, and dough-heavy.
I didn't like him, Walter I'd liked plenty, but his old man seemed a pretty pompous person, with his heavy business talk.
He wanted to know how soon I thought Martian uranium would come through in quantity, and I said I didn't think it'd be very soon.
"Expedition One only located the deposits," I said, "and Two just did mapping and setting up a preliminary base. Of course, the thing keeps ex~nding, and I hear Four will have a hundred rockets. But Mars is a tough setup."
Mr. Millis said decisively that I was wrong, that the world was power-hungry, that it would be pushed a lot faster than I expected.
He suddenly quit talking business and looked at me and asked, "Who was Walter's best friend out there?"
He asked it sort of apologetically. He was a stuffed shirt; but all my dislike of him went away then.
"Breck Jergen," I told him. "Breck was our sergeant. He sort of held our squad together, and he and Walter cottoned to each other from the first."
Mr. Millis nodded, but didn't say anything more about it. He pointed out the window at the distant lake and said we were almost to his home.
It wasn't a home, it was a big mansion. We went in and he introduced me to Mrs. Millis. She was a limp, pale-looking woman, who said she was glad to meet one of Walter's friends. Somehow I got the feeling that even though he was a stuffed shirt, he felt it about Walter a lot

more than she did.
He took me up to a bedroom and said that Brock's parents would arrive before dinner, and that I could get a little rest before then.
I sat looking around the room. It was the plushiest one I'd ever been in, and, seeing this house and the way these people lived, I began to understand why Walter had blown his top more than the rest of us.
He'd been a good guy, Walter, but high-tempered, and I could see now he'd been a little spoiled. The discipline at training base had been tougher on him than on most of us, and this was why.
I sat and dreaded this dinner that was coming up, and looked out the window at a swimming pool and tennis court, and wondered if anybody ever used them now that Walter was gone. It seemed a queer thing for a fellow with a setup like this to go out to Mars and get himself killed.
I took the satin cover off the bed so my shoes wouldn't dirty it, and lay down and closed my eyes, and wondered what I was going to tell them. The trouble was, I didn't know what story the officials had given them.
"The Commanding Officer regrets to inform you that your son was shot down like a dog . . ."
They'd never got any telegram like that. But just what line had been handed them? I wished I'd had a chance to check on that.
Damn it, why didn't all these people let me alone? They started it all going through my mind again, and the psychos had told me I ought to forget it for a while, but how could I?
It might be better just to tell them the truth. After all, Walter wasn't the only one who'd blown his top out there. In that grim last couple of months, plenty of guys had gone around sounding off.
Expedition Three isn't coming!
We're stuck, and they don't care enough about us to send help!
That was the line of talk. You heard it plenty, in those days. You couldn't blame the guys for it, either. A fourth of us down with Martian sickness, the little grave markers clotting up the valley beyond the ridge, rations getting thin, medicine running low, everything running low, all of us watching the sky for rockets that never came.
There'd been a little hitch back on Earth, Colonel Nichols explained. (He was our C.O. now (BSPGeneral Rayen had died. ) There was a little delay, but the rockets would be on their way soon, we'd get relief, we just had to hold on.
Holding onthat's what we were doing. Nights we'd sit in the Quonset and listen to Lassen coughing in his bunk, and it seemed like wind-giants, cold-giants, were bawling and laughing around our little huddle of shelters.
"Damn it, if they're not coming, why don't we go home?" Walter said. "We've still got the four rocketsthey could take us all back."
Breck's serious face got graver. "Look, Walter, there's too much of that stuff being talked around. Lay off."
"Can you blame the men for talking it? We're not story-book heroes. If they've forgotten about us back on Earth, why do we just sit and take it?"
"We have to," Breck said. "Three will-come."
I've always thought that it wouldn't have happened, what

did happen, if we hadn't had that falSe alarm. The one that set the whole camp wild that night, with guys shouting, "Three's here! The rockets landed over west of Rock Ridgel" Only when they charged out there, they found they hadn't seen rockets landing at all, but a little shower of tiny meteors burning themselves up as they fell.

It was the disappointment that did it, I think. I can't say for sure, because that same day was the day I conked out with Martian sickness, and the ffoor came up and hit me and I woke up in the bunk, with somebody giving me a hypo, and my head big as a balloon. I wasn't clear out, it was only a touch of it, but it was enough to make everything foggy, and I didn't know about the mutiny that was boiling up until I woke up once with Breck leaning over me and saw he wore a gun and an M.P. brassard now.

When I asked him how come, he said there'd been so much wild talk about grabbing the four rockets and going home that the M;P. force had been doubled and Nichols had issued stern warnings.

"Walter?" I said, and Breck nodded. "He's a leader and he'll get hit with a court-martial when this is over. The blasted idiot!"

"I don't get ithe's got plenty of guts, you know that," I said.

"Yes, but he can't take discipline, he never did take it very well, and now that the squeeze is on he's blowing up. Well, see you later, Frank."

I saw him later, but not the way I expected. For that was the day we heard the faint echo of shots, and then the alarm siren screaming, and men running, and half-tracks starting up in a hurry. And when I managed to get out of my bunk and out of the hut, they were all going toward the big rockets, and a corporal yelled to me from a jeep, "That's blown it! The damn fools swiped guns and tried to take over the rockets and make the crews fly 'em homel"

I could still remember the sickening slidings and bouncings of the jeep as it took us out there, the milling little crowd under the looming rockets, milling around and hiding something on the ground, and Major Weiler yelling himself hoarse giving orders.

When I got to see what was on the ground, it was seven or eight men and most of them dead. Walter had been shot right through the heart. They told me later it was because he'd been the leader, out in front, that he got it first of the mutineers.

One M.P. was dead, and one was sitting with red all over the middle of his uniform, and that one was Breck, and they were bringing a stretcher for him now.

The corporal said, "Hey, that's Jergen, your squad leader!"

And I said, "Yes, that's him." Funny how you can't talk when something hits youhow you just say words, like "Yes, that's him."

Breck died that night without ever regaining consciousness, and there I was, still half sick myself, and with Lassen dying in his bunk, and five of us were all that was left of Squad Fourteen, and that was that.

How could H.Q. let a thing like that get known? A fine advertisement it would be for recruiting more Mars expeditions, if they told how guys on Two cracked up and did a

crazy thing like that. I didn't blame them for telling us to keep it top secret. Anyway, it wasn't something we'd want to talk about.

But it sure left me in afine spot now, a sweet spot. I was going down to talk to Brock's parents and Walter's parents, and they'd want to know how their sons died, and I could tell them, "Your sons probably killed each other, out there." Sure, I could tell them that, couldn't I? But what was I going to tell them? I knew H.Q. had reported those casualties as "accidental deaths," but what kind of accident?

Well, it got late, and I had to go down, and when I did, Breck's parents were there. Mr. Jergen was a carpenter, a tall, bony man with level blue eyes like Breck's. He didn't say much, but his wife was a little woman who talked enough for both of them.

She told me I looked just like I did in the pictures of us Breck had sent home from training base. She said she had three daughters tootwo of them married, and one of the married ones living in Milwaukee and one out on the Coast. She said that she'd named Breck after a character in a book by Robert Louis Stevenson, and I said I'd read the book in high school.

"It's a nice name," I said.

She looked at me with bright eyes and said, "Yes. It was a nice name."

That was a fine dinner. They'd got everything they thought I might like, and all the best, and a maid served it, and I couldn't taste a thing I ate.

Then afterward, in the big living room, they all just sort of sat and waited, and I knew it was up to me.

I asked them if they'd had any details about the accident, and Mr. Millis said. No, just "accidental death" was all they'd been told.

Well, that made it easier. I sat there, with all four of them watching my face, and dreamed it up.

I said, "It was one of those one-in-a-million things. You see, more little meteorites hit the ground on Mars than here, because the air's so much thinner it doesn't burn them up so fast. And one hit the edge of the fuel dump and a biinch of little tanks started to blow. I was down with the sickness, so I didn't see it, but I heard all about it."



You could hear everybody breathing, it was so quiet as I went on with my yarn.

"A couple of guys were knocked out by the concussion and would have been burned up if a few fellows hadn't got in there fast with foamite extinguishers. "They kept it away from the big tanks, but another little tank let go, and Breck and Walter were two of the fellows who'd gone in, and they were killed instantly."

When I'd got it told, it sounded corny to me and I was afraid they'd never believe it. But nobody said anything, until Mr. Millis let out a sigh and said, "So that was it. Well . >. well, if it had to be, it was mercifully quick, wasn't it?"

I said, yes, it was quick.

"Only, I can't see why they couldn't have let us know. It doesn't seem fair."

I had an answer for that. "It's hush-hush because they don't want people to know about the meteor danger. That's why."

Mrs. Millis got up and said she wasn't feeling so well, and would I excuse her and she'd see me in the morning. The rest of us didn't seem to have much to say to each other, and nobody objected when I went up to my bedroom a little later.

I was getting ready to turn in when there was a knock on the door. It was Breck's father, and he came in and looked at me steadily.

"It was just a story, wasn't it?" he said.

I said, "Yes. It was just a story."

His eyes bored into me and he said, "I guess you've got your reasons. Just tell me one thing. Whatever it was, did Breck behave right?"

"He behaved like a man, all the way," I said. "He was the best man of us, first to last."

He looked at me, anc~l guess something made him believe me. He shook hands and said, "All right, son. We'll let it go."

I'd had enough. I wasn't going to face them again in the morning. I wrote a note, thanking them all and making ex-cuses, and then went down and slipped quietly out of the house.

It was late, but a truck coming along picked me up, and the driver said he was going near the airport. He asked me what it was like on Mars and I told him it was lonesome. I slept in a chair at the airport, and I felt better, for next day I'd be home, and it would be over.

That's what I thought.

4-

It was getting toward evening when we reached the vil-lage, for my father and mother hadn't knovyn I was coming on an earlier plane, and I'd had to wait for them up at Cleve-land Airport. When we drove into Market Street, I saw there was a big painted banner stretching across: "HABMONVILLE WELCOMES HOME ITS SPACEMAN)"

Spacemanthat was me. The newspapers had started calling us that, I guess, because it was a short word good for headlines. Everybody called us that now. We'd sat cooped up in a prison cell that flew, that was allbut now we were "spacemen."

There were bright uniforms clustered under the banner, and I saw that it was the high-school band. I didn't say any-thing, but my father saw my face.

"Now, Frank, I know you're tired, but these people are your friends and they want to show you a real welcome."

That was fine. Only it was all gone again, the relaxed feel-ing I'd been beginning to get as we drove down from Cleve-land.

This was my home country, this old Ohio country with its neat little white villages and fat, rolling farms. It looked good, in June. It looked very good, and I'd been feeling better all the time. And now I didn't feel so good, for I saw that I was going to have to talk some more about Mars.

Dad stopped the car under the banner, and the high-school band started to play, and Mr. Robinson, who was the Chevrolet dealer and also the mayor of Harmonville, got into the car with us.

He shook hands with me and said, "Welcome home, Frank! What was it like out on Mars?"

I said, "It was cold, Mr. Robinson. Awful cold."

"You should have been here last February!" he said.

"Eighteen belownearly a record."
He leaned out and gave a signal, and Dad started driving again, with the band marching along in front of us and playing. We didn't have far to go, just down Market Street under the big old maples, past the churches and the old white houses to the square white Grange Hall.
There was a little crowd in front of it, and they made a sound like a cheernot a real loud one, you know how people can be self-conscious about really cheeringwhen we drove up. I got out and shook hands with people I didn't really see, and then Mr. Robinson took my elbow and took me on inside.
The seats were all filled and people standing up, and over the little stage at the far end they'd fixed up a big floral decorationthere was a globe all of red roses with a sign above it that said "Mars," and beside it a globe all of white roses that said "Earth," and a little rocket ship made out of flowers was hung between them.
"The Garden Club fixed it up," said Mr. Robinson.
"Nearly everybody in Harmonville contributed flowers."
"It sure is pretty," I said.
Mr. Robinson took me by the arm, up onto the little stage, and everyone clapped. They were all people I knewpeople from the farms near ours, my high-school teachers, and all that.
I sat down in a chaif and Mr. Robinson made a little speech, about how Harmonville boys had always gone out when anything big was doing, how they'd gone to the War of 1812 and the Civil War and the two World Wars, and how now one of them had gone to Mars.
He said, "Folks have always wondered what it's like out there on Mars, and now here's one of our own Hannonville boys come back to tell us all about it."
And he motioned me to get up, and I did, and they clapped some more, and I stood wondering what I could tell them.
And all of a sudden, as I stood there wondering, I got the answer to something that had always puzzled us out there. We'd never been able to understand why the fellows who had come back from Expedition One hadn't tipped us off how tough it was going to be. And now I knew why. They hadn't because it would have sounded as if they were whining about all they'd been through. And now I couldn't, for the same reason.
I looked down at the bright, interested faces, the faces I'd known almost all my life, and I knew that what I could tell them was no good anyway. For they'd all read those newspaper stories, about "the exotic red planet" and "heroic spacemen," and if anyone tried to give them a different picture now, it would just upset them.
I said, "It was a long way out there. But flying space is a wonderful thingflying right off the Earth, into the stars there's nothing quite like it."
Flying space, I called it. It sounded good, and thrilling. How could they know that flying space meant lying strapped in that blind stokehold listening to Joe Valinez dying, and praying and praying that it wouldn't be our rocket that cracked up?
"And it's a wonderful thrill to come out of a rocket and step on a brand-new world, to look up at a different-looking

sun, to look around at a whole new horizon . . ."
Yes, it was wonderful. Especially for the guys in Rockets Seven and Nine who got squashed like flies and lay around there on the sand, moaning "First aidi" Sure, it was a big thrill, for them and for us who had to try to help them.
"There were hardships out there, but we all knew that a big job had to be done . . ."
That's a nice word, too, "hardships." It's not coarse and ugly like fellows coughing their hearts out from too much dust; it's not like having your best friend die of Martian sick-ness right in the room you sleep in. It's a nice, cheerful word, "hardships."
. . . and the only way we could get the job done, away out there so far from Earth, was by teamwork."
Well, that was true enough in its way, and what was the use of spoiling it by telling them how Walter and Breck had died?
"The job's going on, and Expedition Three is building a bigger base out there right now, and Four will start soon. And itil mean plenty of uranium, plenty of cheap atomic power, for all Earth."
That's what I said, and I stopped there. But I wanted to go on and add, "And it wasn't worth iti It wasn't worth all those guys, all the hell we went through, just to get cheap atomic power so you people can run more electric washers and television sets and toasters!"
But how are you going to stand up and say things like that to people you know, people who like you? And who was I to decide? Maybe I was wrong, anyway. Maybe lots of things I'd had and never thought about had been squeezed out of other good guys, back in the past.
I wouldn't know.
Anyway, that was all I could tell them, and I sat down, and there was a big lot of applause, and I realized then that I'd done right. I'd told them just what they wanted to hear, and everyone was all happy about it.
Then things broke up, and people came up to me, and I shook a lot more hands. And finally, when I got outside, it was darksoft, summery dark, the way I hadn't seen it for a long time. And my father said we ought to be getting on home, so I could rest.
I told him, "You folks drive on ahead, and I'll walk. Ill take the short cut. I'd sort of like to walk through town."
Our farm was only a couple of miles out of the village, and the short cut across Heller's farm I'd always taken when I was a kid was only a mile. Dad didn't think maybe I ought to walk so far, but I guess he saw I wanted to, so they went on ahead.
I walked on down Market Street, and around the little square, and the maples and elms were dark over my head, and the flowers on the lawns smelled the way they used to, but it wasn't the same eitherI'd thought it would be, but it wasn't.
When I cut off past the Odd Fellows' Hall, beyond it I met Hobe Evans, the garage hand at the Ford place, who was humming along half tight, the same as always on a Saturday night,
"Hello, Frank, heard you were back," he said. I waited for him to ask the question they all asked, but he didn't. He said, "Boy, you don't look so good! Want a drink?"

He brought out a bottle, and I had one out of it, and he had one, and he said he'd see me around, and went humming on his way. He was feeling too good to care much where I'd been.

I went on, in the dark, across Heller's pasture and then along the creek under the big old willows. I stopped there like I'd always stopped when I was a kid, to hear the frog noises, and there they were, and all the June noises, the night noises, and the night smells.

I did something I hadn't done for a long time. I looked up at the starry sky, and there it was, the same little red dot I'd peered at when I was a kid and read those old stories, the same red dot that Breck and Jim and Walter and I had stared away at on nights at training base, wondering if we'd ever really get there.

Well, they'd got there, and weren't ever going to leave it now, and there'd be others to stay with them, more and more of them as time went by.

But it was the ones I knew that made the difference, as I looked up at the red dot.

I wished I could explain to them somehow why I hadn't told the truth, not the whole truth. I tried, sort of, to explain.

"I didn't want to lie," I said. "But I had to-at least, it seemed like I had to"

I quit it. It was crazy, talking to guys who were dead and forty million miles away. They were dead, and it was over, and that was that. I quit looking up at the red dot in the sky and started on home again.

But I felt as though something was over for me too. It was being young. I didn't feel old. But I didn't feel young either, and I didn't think I ever would, not ever again.