

Title: Condition of employment

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CONDITION OF EMPLOYMENT

Clifford D. Simak

HE HAD BEEN dreaming of home, and when he came awake, he held his eyes tight shut in a desperate effort not to lose the dream. He kept some of it, but it was blurred and faint and lacked the sharp distinction and the color of the dream.

He could tell it to himself, he knew just how it was, he could recall it as a lost and far-off thing and place, but it was not there as it had been in the dream.

But even so, he held his eyes tight shut, for now that he was awake, he knew what they'd open on, and he shrank from the drabness and the coldness of the room in which he lay. It was, he thought, not alone the drabness and the cold, but also the loneliness and the sense of not belonging. So long as he did not look at it, he need not accept this harsh reality, although he felt himself on the fringe of it, and it was reaching for him, reaching through the color and the warmth and friendliness of this other place he tried to keep in mind.

At last it was impossible. The fabric of the held-onto dream became too thin and fragile to ward off the moment of reality, and he let his eyes come open.

It was every bit as bad as he remembered it. It was drab and cold and harsh, and there was the maddening alienness waiting for him, crouching in the corner. He tensed himself against it, trying to work up his courage, hardening himself to arise and face it for another day.

The plaster of the ceiling was cracked and had flaked away in great ugly blotches. The paint on the wall was peeling and dark stains ran down it from the times the rain leaked in. And there was the smell,

the musty human smell that had been caged in the room too long.

Staring at the ceiling, he tried to see the sky. There had been a time when he could have seen it through this or any ceiling. For the sky had belonged to him, the sky and the wild, dark space beyond it. But now he'd lost them. They were his no longer.

A few marks in a book, he thought, an entry in the record. That was all that was needed to smash a man's career, to crush his hope forever and to keep him trapped and exiled on a planet that was not his own.

He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed, hunting for the trousers he'd left on the floor. He found and pulled them on and scuffed into his shoes and stood up in the room.

The room was small and mean - and cheap. There would come a day when he could not afford a room even as cheap as this. His cash was running out, and when the last of it was gone, he would have to get some job, any kind of job. Perhaps he should have gotten one before he began to run so short. But he had shied away from it. For settling down to work would be an admission that he was defeated, that he had given up his hope of going home again.

He had been a fool, he told himself, for ever going into space. Let him just get back to Mars and no one could ever get him off it. He'd go back to the ranch and stay there as his father had wanted him to do. He'd marry Eller and settle down, and other fools could fly the death-traps around the Solar System.

Glamor, he thought-it was the glamor that sucked in the kids when they were young and starry-eyed. The glamor of the far place, of the wilderness of space, of the white eyes of the stars watching in that wilderness - the glamor of the engine-song and of the chill white metal knifing through the blackness and the loneliness of the emptiness, and the few cubic feet of courage and defiance that thumbed its nose at that emptiness.

But there was no glamor. There was brutal work and everlasting watchfulness and awful sickness, the terrible fear that listened for the stutter in the drive, for the ping against the metal hide, for any one of the thousand things that could happen out in space.

He picked up his wallet off the bedside table and put it in his pocket and went out into the hall and down the rickety stairs to the crumbling, lopsided porch outside.

And the greenness waited for him, the unrelenting, bilious green of Earth. It was a thing to gag at, to steel oneself against, an indecent and abhorrent color for anyone to look at. The grass was green and all the plants and every single tree. There was no place outdoors and few indoors where one could escape from it, and when one looked at it too long, it seemed to pulse and tremble with a hidden life.

The greenness, and the brightness of the sun, and the sapping beat - these were things of Earth that it was hard to bear. The light one could get away from, and the heat one could somehow ride along with -

but the green was always there.

He went down the steps, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. He found a crumpled package and in it one crumpled cigarette. He put it between his lips and threw the pack away and stood at the gate, trying to make up his mind.

But it was a gesture only, this hardening of his mind, for he knew what he would do. There was nothing else to do. He'd done it day after day for more weeks than he cared to count, and he'd do it again today and tomorrow and tomorrow, until his cash ran out.

And after that, he wondered, what?

Get a job and try to strike a bargain with his situation? Try to save against the day when he could buy passage back to Mars - for they'd surely let him ride the ships even if they wouldn't let him run them. But, he told himself, he'd figured that one out. It would take twenty years to save enough, and he had no twenty years.

He lit the cigarette and went tramping down the street, and even through the cigarette, he could smell the hated green.

Ten blocks later, he reached the far edge of the spaceport. There was a ship. He stood for a moment looking at it before he went into the shabby restaurant to buy himself some breakfast.

There was a ship, he thought, and that was a hopeful sign. Some days there weren't any, some days three or four.

But there was a ship today and it might be the one.

One day, he told himself, he'd surely find the ship out there that would take him home - a ship with a captain so desperate for an engineer that he would overlook the entry in the book.

But even as he thought it, he knew it for a lie - a lie he told himself each day. Perhaps to justify his coming here each day to check at the hiring hall, to lie to keep his hope alive, to keep his courage up. A lie that made it even barely possible to face the bleak, warm room and the green of Earth.

He went into the restaurant and sat down on a stool.

The waitress came to take his order. "Cakes again?" she asked.

He nodded. Pancakes were cheap and filling and he had to make his money last.

"You'll find a ship today," said the waitress. "I have a feeling you will."

"Perhaps I will," he said, without believing it.

"I know just how you feel," the waitress told him. "I know how awful it can be. I was homesick once myself, the first time I left home. I thought I would die."

He didn't answer, for he felt it would not have been dignified to answer. Although why he should now lay claim to dignity, he could not imagine.

But this, in any case, was more than simple homesickness. It was planetsickness, culturesickness, a cutting off of all he'd known and wanted.

Sitting, waiting for the cakes to cook, he caught the dream again - the dream of red hills rolling far into the land, of the cold, dry air soft against the skin, of the splendor of the stars at twilight and the faery yellow of the distant sandstorm. And the low house crouched against the land, with the old gray-haired man sitting stiffly in a chair upon the porch that faced toward the sunset.

The waitress brought the cakes.

The day would come, he told himself, when he could afford no longer this self-pity he carried. He knew it for what it was and he should get rid of it. And yet it was a thing he lived with - even more than that, it had become a way of life. It was his comfort and his shield, the driving force that kept him trudging on each day.

He finished the cakes and paid for them.

"Good luck," said the waitress, with a smile.

"Thank you," he said.

He tramped down the road, with the gravel crunching underfoot and the sun like a blast upon his back, but he had left the greenness. The port lay bare and bald, scalped and cauterized.

He reached where he was going and went up to the desk.

"You again," said the union agent.

"Anything for Mars?"

"Not a thing. No, wait a minute. There was a man in here not too long ago."

The agent got up from the desk and went to the door. Then he stepped outside the door and began to shout at someone.

A few minutes later, he was back. Behind him came a lumbering and irate individual. He had a cap upon his head that said CAPTAIN in greasy, torn letters, but aside from that he was distinctly out of uniform.

"Here's the man," the agent told the captain. "Name of Anson Cooper. Engineer first class, but his record's not too good."

"Damn the record!" bawled the captain. He said to Cooper: "Do you know Morrisons?"

"I was raised with them," said Cooper. It was not the truth, but he knew he could get by.

"They're good engines," said the captain, "but cranky and demanding. You'll have to baby them. You'll have to sleep with them. And if you don't watch them close, they'll up and break your back."

"I know how to handle them," said Cooper.

"My engineer ran out on me." The captain spat on the floor to show his contempt for runaway engineers. "He wasn't man enough."

"I'm man enough," Cooper declared.

And he knew, standing there, what it would be like. But there was no other choice. If he wanted to get back to Mars, he had to take the Morrisons.

"O.K., then, come on with you," the captain said.

"Wait a minute," said the union agent. "You can't rush off a man like this. You have to give him time to pick up his duffle."

"I haven't any to pick up," Cooper said, thinking of the few pitiful belongings back in the boarding house. "Or none that matters."

"You understand," the agent said to the captain, "that the union cannot vouch for a man with a record such as his."

"To hell with that," said the captain. "Just so he can run the engines. That's all I ask."

The ship stood far out in the field. She had not been much to start with and she had not improved with age. Just the job of riding on a craft like that would be high torture, without the worry of nursing Morrisons.

"She'll hang together, no fear," said the captain. "She's got a lot more trips left in her than you'd think. It beats all hell what a tub like that can take."

Just one more trip, thought Cooper. Just so she gets me to Mars. Then she can fall apart, for all I care.

"She's beautiful," he said, and meant it.

He walked up to one of the great landing fins and laid a hand upon it. It was solid metal, with all the paint peeled off it, with tiny pits of corrosion speckling its surface and with a hint of cold, as if it might not as yet have shed all the touch of space.

And this was it, he thought. After all the weeks of waiting, here finally was the thing of steel and engineering that would take him home again.

He walked back to where the captain stood.

"Let's get on with it," he said. "I'll want to look the engines over."

"They're all right," said the captain.

"That may be so. I still want to run a check on them." He had expected the engines to be bad, but not as bad as they turned out to be. If the ship had not been much to look at, the Morrisons were worse.

"They'll need some work," he said. "We can't lift with them, the shape they're in."

The captain raved and swore. "We have to blast by dawn, damn it! This is a goddam emergency."

"You'll lift by dawn," snapped Cooper. "Just leave me alone."

He drove his gang to work, and he worked himself, for fourteen solid hours, without a wink of sleep, without a bite to eat.

Then he crossed his fingers and told the captain he was ready.

They got out of atmosphere with the engines holding together. Cooper uncrossed the fingers and sighed with deep relief. Now all he had to do was keep them running.

The captain called him forward and brought out a bottle. "You did better, Mr. Cooper, than I thought you would."

Cooper shook his head. "We aren't there yet, Captain. We've a long way still to go."

"Mr. Cooper," said the captain, "you know what we are carrying? You got any idea at all?"

Cooper shook his head.

"Medicines," the captain told him. "There's an epidemic out there. We were the only ship anywhere near ready for takeoff. So we were requisitioned."

"It would have been much better if we could have overhauled the engines."

"We didn't have the time. Every minute counts."

Cooper drank the liquor, stupid with a tiredness that cut clear to the bone. "Epidemic, you say. What kind?"

"Sand fever," said the captain. "You've heard of it, perhaps."

Cooper felt the chill of deadly fear creep along his body.

"I've heard of it." He finished off the whisky and stood up.

"I have to get back, sir. I have to watch those engines."

"We're counting on you, Mr. Cooper. You have to get us through."

He went back to the engine room and slumped into a chair, listening to the engine-song that beat throughout the ship.

He had to keep them going. There was no question of it now, if there'd ever been a question. For now it was not the simple matter of getting home again, but of getting needed drugs to the old home planet.

"I promise you," he said, talking to himself. "I promise you we'll get there."

He drove the engine crew and he drove himself, day after dying day, while the howling of the tubes and the thunder of the haywire Morrisons racked a man almost beyond endurance.

There was no such thing as sleep - only catnaps caught as one could catch them. There were no such things as meals, only food gulped on the run. And there was work, and worse than work were the watching and the waiting, the shoulders tensed against the stutter or the sudden screech of metal that would spell disaster.

Why, he wondered dully, did a man ever go to space? Why should one deliberately choose a job like this? Here in the engine room, with its cranky motors, it might be worse than elsewhere in the ship. But that didn't mean it wasn't bad. For throughout the ship stretched tension and discomfort and, above all, the dead, black fear of space itself, of what space could do to a ship and the men within it.

In some of the bigger, newer ships, conditions might be better, but not a great deal better. They still

tranquilized the passengers and colonists who went out to the other planets - tranquilized them to quiet the worries, to make them more insensitive to discomfort, to prevent their breaking into panic.

But a crew you could not tranquilize. A crew must be wide-awake, with all its faculties intact. A crew had to sit and take it.

Perhaps the time would come when the ships were big enough, when the engines and the drives would be perfected, when Man had lost some of his fear of the emptiness of space - then it would be easier.

But the time might be far off. It was almost two hundred years now since his family had gone out, among the first colonists, to Mars.

If it were not that he was going home, he told himself, it would be beyond all tolerance and endurance. He could almost smell the cold, dry air of home - even in this place that reeked with other smells. He could look beyond the metal skin of the ship in which he rode and across the long dark miles and see the gentle sunset on the redness of the hills.

And in this he had an advantage over all the others.

For without going home, he could not have stood it.

The days wore on and the engines held and the hope built up within him. And finally hope gave way to triumph.

And then came the day when the ship went mushing down through the thin, cold atmosphere and came in to a landing.

He reached out and pulled a switch and the engines rumbled to a halt. Silence came into the tortured steel that still was numb with noise.

He stood beside the engines, deafened by the silence, frightened by this alien thing that never made a sound.

He walked along the engines, with his hand sliding on their metal, stroking them as he would pet an animal, astonished and slightly angry at himself for finding in himself a queer, distorted quality of affection for them.

But why not? They had brought him home. He had nursed and pampered them, he had cursed them and watched over them, he had slept with them, and they had brought him home.

And that was more, he admitted to himself, than he had ever thought they would do.

He found that he was alone. The crew had gone swarming up the ladder as soon as he had pulled the

switch. And now it was time that he himself was going.

But he stood there for a moment, in that silent room, as he gave the place one final visual check. Everything was all right. There was nothing to be done.

He turned and climbed the ladder slowly, heading for the port.

He found the captain standing in the port, and out beyond the port stretched the redness of the land.

"All the rest have gone except the purser," said the captain. "I thought you'd soon be up. You did a fine job with the engines, Mr. Cooper. I'm glad you shipped with us."

"It's my last run," Cooper said, staring out at the redness of the hills. "Now I settle down."

"That's strange," said the captain. "I take it you're a Mars man."

"I am. And I never should have left."

The captain stared at him and said again: "That's strange."

"Nothing strange," said Cooper. "I -"

"It's my last run, too," the captain broke in. "There'll be a new commander to take her back to Earth."

"In that case," Cooper offered, "I'll stand you a drink as soon as we get down."

"I'll take you up on that. First we'll get our shots."

They climbed down the ladder and walked across the field toward the spaceport buildings. Trucks went whining past them, heading for the ship, to pick up the unloaded cargo.

And now it was all coming back to Cooper, the way he had dreamed it in that shabby room on Earth - the exhilarating taste of the thinner, colder air, the step that was springier because of the lesser gravity, the swift and clean elation of the uncluttered, brave red land beneath a weaker sun.

Inside, the doctor waited for them in his tiny office.

"Sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but you know the regulations."

"I don't like it," said the captain, "but I suppose it does make sense."

They sat down in the chairs and rolled up their sleeves.

"Hang on," the doctor told them. "It gives you quite a jolt."

It did.

And it had before, thought Cooper, every time before.

He should be used to it by now.

He sat weakly in the chair, waiting for the weakness and the shock to pass, and he saw the doctor, there behind his desk, watching them and waiting for them to come around to normal.

"Was it a rough trip?" the doctor finally asked.

"They all are rough," the captain replied curtly.

Cooper shook his head. "This one was the worst I've ever known. Those engines..."

The captain said: "I'm sorry, Cooper. This time it was the truth. We were really carrying medicine. There is an epidemic. Mine was the only ship. I'd planned an overhaul, but we couldn't wait."

Cooper nodded. "I remember now," he said.

He stood up weakly and stared out the window at the cold, the alien, the forbidding land of Mars.

"I never could have made it," he said flatly, "if I'd not been psychoed."

He turned back to the doctor. "Will there ever be a time?"

The doctor nodded. "Some day, certainly. When the ships are better. When the race is more conditioned to space travel."

"But this homesickness business - it gets downright brutal."

"It's the only way," the doctor declared. "We'd not have any spacemen if they weren't always going home."

"That's right," the captain said. "No man, myself included, could face that kind of beating unless it was for something more than money."

Cooper looked out the window at the Martian sandscape and shivered. Of all the God-forsaken places he had ever seen!

He was a fool to be in space, he told himself, with a wife like Doris and two kids back home. He

could hardly wait to see them.

And he knew the symptoms. He was getting homesick once again - but this time it was for Earth.

The doctor was taking a bottle out of his desk and pouring generous drinks into glasses for all three of them.

"Have a shot of this," he said, "and let's forget about it"

"As if we could remember," said Cooper, laughing suddenly.

"After all," the captain said, far too cheerfully, "we have to see it in the right perspective. It's nothing more than a condition of employment."