

the job of supervising the armor cleaning to the Hweetorals of the squads and then I went home to my native woman. Yes, this guard's outfit life was like Fighter Basic Course.

But only for the lower ranks.

III

LIFE wasn't too unendurable in those days. The duties were incredibly dull, of course, but the danger of sudden death had receded, since only a few fanatics still tried to pick off us occupation troops. And this new world of Haldoria's was rich in the things a sensitive and artistic man appreciates: painting, sculpture, music. Then there was this new and pleasing thing of living with a woman...

But it wouldn't last long.

Soon there'd be another planet to invade and maybe a space battle with the great enemy. More years of cramped living and lurking danger, for in the Empire one was drafted for the duration, and this duration was now some four hundred years old. The most Trontar Ruxt could expect, the very most, was to somehow keep alive for another fifty years and then to retire on a small pension to one of the lesser worlds of the Empire.

"Trontar Ruxt! Your records show that you're a statistician."

My commanding officer stared at me suspiciously, for a fighting man, even one on guard duty, distrusts office personnel. And as everyone knows, "Once a fighting man, always a fighting man." I think my C.O.'s last action had been thirty years ago.

"I was a statistician before I got in the service, Sir."

"Well, they're screaming over at headquarters for qualified office personnel, and we have to send them any trained men we have — of any rank."

"It's for Haldor, Sir," I said. By now I knew the correct answer was most often the noncommittal one.

I reported to the Headquarters, 27th Invasion Force. The rumor was that Phase II, Reduction of Inhabitants to Slavery with Shipment to Haldorian Colonies, was about to start. And also, our Planners were supposed to be well into Phase III, Terraforming, already. Terraforming was necessary, of course, to bring the average temperature of earth down to something like the sub-arctic so that we Haldorians could live here in comfort. We lost quite a few fighters during invasion when their cooling systems broke down. Rumor, as always, was dead right; and the Headquarters was a mad rat-race.

The Senior Trontar of the office was delighted to get another body.

"Took your time getting here,

Ruxt! You guard louts don't know the meaning of time, do you?"

I remained at attention.

"So you're a statistician, are you? Well, we don't need any statisticians now. We just got in a whole squad of them. Can you use a writer, maybe?"

"YES, Sir," I did not remind the Senior Trontar that using a writer was a clerk's job, not a Trontar's, not a combat three-striper's, because the chances were that he knew it, for one thing. And he could easily make me a clerk, for another thing.

"Okay. Now that we understand each other," the Senior Trontar grinned, "or that you understand me, which is all that matters, here's your job." He handed me a stack of scribbled notes, some rolls of speech tape and a couple of cans of visual stuff. "Make up a report in standard format like this example. Consolidate all this stuff into it. This report has to be ready in two days, and it has to be perfect. No misspellings, no erasures, no nothing. Got that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Yes, Sir," he mimicked. "Haldor only knows why they couldn't send me a few clerks instead of a squad of statisticians and one guard trontar. Do you know what this stuff is that you're going to work up? It's the final report on our invasion here!"

I looked impressed. Strange how you learn, after a while, even the facial expression you are supposed to wear.

"Do you know why this report has to be perfect in format and appearance?" I wouldn't say the Senior Trontar's manner was bullying, quite. Perhaps one could call it hectoring. "Because the Accountant is out in this sector somewhere and we have to be ready for him if he drops in."

This time I didn't have to try to look impressed. The Accountant is the man who passes judgment on the conduct of all military matters — though of course he's not one man, but maybe a dozen of them. Armed with the invaluable weapon of hindsight, he drops in after an invasion is completed. He determines whether the affair has gone according to regulations, or whether there has been carelessness, slackness or wasting of Haldorian resources of men or material. Additionally he monitors civil administration of colonies and federated worlds. There are stories of Generals becoming Fighter Basics and Chief Administrators becoming sub-clerks after an Accountant's visit.

I GOT the report done, but it took the full two days—mainly because fighting men make such incomplete and erroneous reports while action is going on. I got to

understand the exasperated concern of office personnel who have to consolidate varied fragments into a coherent whole. And adding to the natural difficulties of the task was the continual presence of the Senior Trontar, and his barbed comments and lurid promises as to what would follow my failure at the work.

But the report was done and sent in to the Adjutant.

It came back covered with scribbled changes, additions, and deletions — and it came back carried by a much disturbed Senior Trontar.

"Who in Haldor do they think I am?" he moaned. "I just handed on to you the figures that they gave me. Me! And threatening me with duty on a space freighter . . . and one into the Slug area at that!"

I thought, as I looked at my ruined script, that guard duty wasn't so bad, and that even combat wasn't rough *all* the time.

"See, Trontar," the four-striper said, calling me by my proper rank for the first time, "you did a good job, the Adjutant himself said so. But these figures . . ." he shuddered. "If the Accountant should see these we'd all be for it. Space-freighter duty would be getting off light." The Senior Trontar seemed almost human to me right then.

"I just put down what you gave me," I said.

22

"Yeah, sure, Ruxt. But I didn't realize, nobody realized, how bad the figures were till they were all together and written up. Look, this report shows that we shouldn't Terraform this planet — that we can't make a nudnick on the slavery proposition — and that maybe we shouldn't have even invaded this inferno at all."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I'll tell you what you're going to do . . ." The Senior Trontar had regained his normal nasty disposition. "You're going to re-do this report. You're going to re-do it starting now, you're going to work on it all night, and you're going to have it on my desk and in perfect shape when I come in the morning, or, by Haldor, the next thing you write will be your transfer to the space freighter run nearest the Slug Galaxy." The Senior Trontar ran momentarily out of breath. "And," he came back strongly, "you won't be going as no Trontar, neither!"

"It'll be on your desk in the morning, Sir," I said.

Deck hands on the space freighter run were, I'd heard, particularly expendable.

BY the middle of the third watch I had completed a perfect copy of the report complete with attachments, appendices, and supplements. And also by this time I knew from the dif-

GALAXY

ferences between the original report and this jawboned version that someone had goofed badly in undertaking this invasion, and then had goofed worse in not calling the thing off. Now there was to be considerable covering-up of tracks. The thought suddenly came to me that a guard's trontar named Ruxt knew rather a lot of what had gone on. Following that mildly worrying thought came a notion that perhaps a guard's trontar named Ruxt might be considered by some as just another set of tracks to be covered up. That far-off retirement on a small but steady income became even more unlikely, and the possibilities began to appear of a quick end in the Slug-shattered hulk of a space freighter.

Had the Senior Trontar changed in his attitude towards me, towards the end of the day, perhaps acted as though I were a condemned man? Possibly. And had some of the officers been whispering about me late in the afternoon? Could have been.

Shaken, I wandered down to the mess hall and joined a group of third-watch guards, who were goofing off while their Trontar was checking more distant guard posts.

"It's easy," one of them was telling the others. "All you got to do is to slip some surgeon/replacer a few big notes and he

gives you this operation which makes you look like a native. And then you just settle down on Astarte for the rest of your life with the women just begging you to let them support you."

"You mean you'd rather live on some lousy federated world than be a Haldorian in the Invasion Forces?" There was a strong sardonic note in the questioner's voice.

"Man, you ever been on Astarte?" the first man asked incredulously.

"Yeah, but how are you going to be sure that the surgeon/replacer doesn't turn you in?" objected one of the others. "He could take your money, do the operation, and have you picked up. That way he'd have the money and get a medal too."

"I'd get around that," the talky guy said, "I'd just . . ."

At this point he was jabbed in the arm by one of his buddies who had noticed my eavesdropping. The man shut up. All four of them drifted off to their posts.

I WENT reluctantly back to the office. From then till dawn I dreamed up and rehearsed all manner of wild schemes to take me out of this dangerous situation. Or was it all perhaps just imagination? A Haldorian Trontar should never be guilty of an excess of that quality. But I made

SUCCESS STORY

23

sure when the Senior Trontar sneaked in a bit before the regular opening time, that I was just, apparently, completing the last page of the report. The impression I hoped to convey was that I had spent the entire night in working and worrying.

"It's okay," the Senior Trontar growled after he had studied the completed report. "Guess you can take a couple of days off, Ruxt. I believe in taking care of my men. Say," he asked casually, "I suppose you didn't understand those figures you were working up, did you?"

"No," I said, "I didn't pay any attention to them, they were just something to copy, that's all." I felt confident that I could out-fence the Senior Trontar any time at this little game, but what had he and the Adjutant been whispering about before they had come in?

"But you used to be a statistician, didn't you?" He looked at the far corner of the room and smiled slightly. "But you take a couple days off, Ruxt. Maybe we'll find something good for you when you come back." He smiled again. "Don't forget to check out with the Locator before you go, though. We don't want to lose you."

I stumbled home, not even noticing the hate-filled glances my armor and blue skin drew from

the natives along the streets. The glances were standard, but this feeling of being doomed was new.

They were going to get me. I felt sure of that, even though my Sike Test Scores had always been as low as any normal's. But how could a Haldorian disappear on this planet? Aside from skin color, there was the need to keep body temperatures at a livable level. The body armor unit was good only for about a week. Find a surgeon/replacer and bribe him to change me to an Earthman? I saw now how ridiculous such an idea was. But was there nothing but to wait passively while the Senior Trontar and the Adjutant, and whoever else did the dirty work, all got together and railroaded me off?

Haldorians, though, never surrender — or so the Mil Prop lad would have us believe. Right from the time you are four years old and you start seeing the legendary founders of Haldoria — Bordt and Smordt — fighting off the fierce six-legged carnivores, you are told never to give up. "Where there's Haldor, there's Hope!" "There's always another stone for the wolves, if you but look." I must confess I'd snickered (way deep inside, naturally) at these exhortations ever since I'd reached the age of thinking, but now all these childhood admonitions came rushing back to give me strength,

quite as they were intended to do. I found that I could but go down like any Haldorian, fighting to the last.

IV

SO I put on my dress uniform the next day, and made sure that nothing could be deader than the dulled bits, or brighter than the polished ones. A bit of this effort was wasted since I arrived at Headquarters looking something less than sharp. The cooling unit in my armor was acting up a bit; and, also, three Terran city guerillas had tried to ambush me on the way. You take quite a jolt from a land mine, even with armor set on maximum. Some of those people never knew when they were licked. No wonder their Spanglt Resistance Quotient was close to the highest on record.

I got through the three lines of guards and protective force fields all right, checking my rayer here, my armor there — the usual dull procedure. By the time I reached the Admissions Officer I was down to uniform and medals.

"You want to see the Accountant?" the Admissions Officer asked incredulously. "You mean one of his staff! Well, where's your request slip, Trontar?"

"I've come on my own, Sir," I

said, "not from my office, so I haven't a request slip."

"Come on your own? What's your unit? Give me your ID card!"

Let's see, I thought, I've abstracted classified material from the files and carried it outside the office, I've broken the chain of command and communication, and, worst of all, I'd tried to see a senior officer without a request slip. Yeah, maybe I'd be lucky to end up as a *live* deckhand on a space freighter.

A bored young Zankor with the rarely-seen balance insignia of the Accountant's Office rose from behind the Admissions Officer.

"I'll take responsibility for this man," he said casually to the A.O. "Follow me, Trontar. I was wondering when you'd turn up."

"Me?"

"Well, someone like you. Though usually it's scared sub-clerks that we drag up. And that reminds me." He turned to another young and equally bored Zankor standing nearby. "Take over, Smit, will you? They're bringing in that sub-clerk who's been writing those anonymous letters. I've reserved the Inquisition Room for a couple of hours for him."

I followed the Zankor as he strode away, wondering as I did if they had more than one Inquisition Room.

He led me into a small room just off the corridor and motioned me to a chair. "Before you see the Accountant, Trontar," he said, "I'll have to screen what you have. It may be that we won't have to bother the Accountant at all."

THE smooth way the Zankor talked and his friendly manner almost convinced me that we should both put the interests of the Accountant first. But then it occurred to me that a man with the gold knot of a Zankor on his collar wasn't often friendly with a mere Trontar. That thought snapped me out of it and I knew I should only give the minimums.

"I've got documents," I said — "document" is such a lovely strong word, "which prove that the official report on the invasion and occupation of this planet is false." That, I thought, was as minimum as one could get.

"Ah, and have you?" The Zankor still looked bored. "Well, let's see them, Trontar," he said briskly.

The Zankor had that sincere look the upper class always uses when they are about to do you dirt. They blush that heavy shade of blue, almost purple, and they look you straight in the eye, and they quiver a bit as to voice . . . and the next thing you know, you're shafted.

"I'm sorry, Sir," I said, "but what I have is so important that I can give it to the Accountant only."

He stared at me for rather a long moment, pondering, no doubt, the pleasures of witnessing a full-dress military flogging. Then he shrugged and picked up the speaker beside him. He didn't call the Trontar of the Guard to come and take my documents by force. I could tell that even though he spoke in High Haldorian, that harsh language the upper class are so proud of preserving as a relic from the days of the early conquerors. No, he was speaking to a superior — there's never any doubt as to who is on top when people are speaking High Haldorian — and then I caught the emphatic negative connected with the present-day Haldorian phrases meaning Phase II and Phase III, Terraforming. So even though I don't know High Haldorian, and would never be so incautious as to admit it if I did, I knew roughly what had been said.

And I was frantically revising my plans.

"Follow me," the Zankor said, after completing the call. "We'll see the Accountant now, and —" he looked at me sincerely — "you'd better have something very good indeed. You really had, Trontar."

THE Accountant turned out to be a tall and thin Full Marshal, the first I'd seen. He was dressed in a uniform subtly different from the regulation, and he wore only one tiny ribbon, which I didn't recognize. He had the slightly deeper-blue skin you often see on the upper classes, though this impression may have been due to the green furnishings of the room. It was, in fact, called the Green Room, when the Terrans had used it as one of their regional capitals.

I saluted the Accountant with my best salute, the kind you lift like it was sugar and drop as if it were the other. The Accountant responded with one of those negligent waves that tell you the saluter was a survivor of the best and bloodiest private military school in existence.

"Proceed, Trontar," the Accountant said, leaning back and relaxing as if he didn't have a care in the universe.

I launched into my speech, the one I'd been mentally rehearsing. I told him I knew I was breaking the chain of communication, but that I was doing it for the service and for Haldoria, etc. Any old serviceman knows the routine. I was, as I ran through this speech, just as sincere and just as earnestly interested in the good of Haldoria as any Haldorian combat Trontar could be. But, deep in-

side me, the old Ameet Ruxt was both marveling at the change in himself and cynically appreciating the performance.

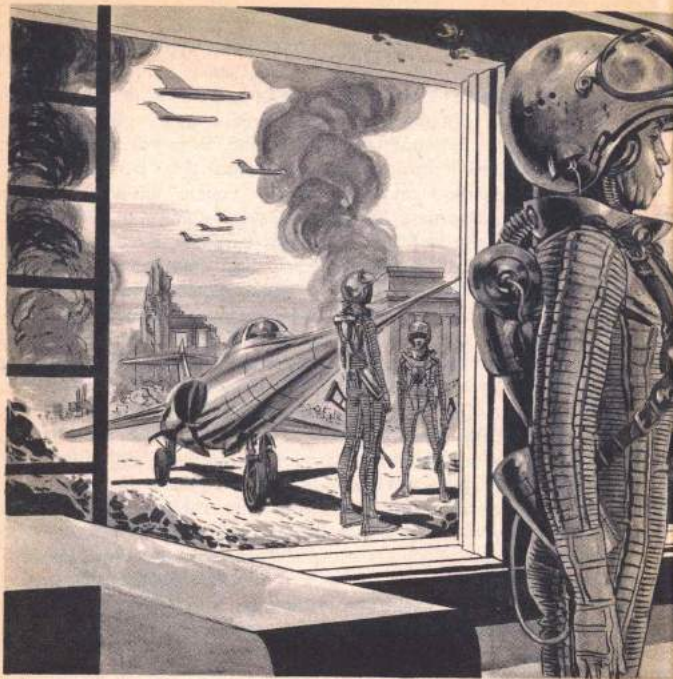
The Accountant interrupted the performance about halfway through. "Yes, yes, Trontar," he said brusquely, "I think we can assume your action is for the good of Haldoria, may the Empire increase and the Emperor live forever. Yes. But you say you have material dealing with the overall report on our invasion and occupation of this planet. You further say this material shows discrepancies in the official report — which you imply you have seen."

"Yes, Sir," I said, and I handed over the several sheets of paper which comprised the old report and the changes of the new. Meanwhile, behind me, the Zankor was invisible but I had not a doubt but that he was there, keeping the regulation distance from me.

These people knew their business.

The Accountant took the collection of papers and compared them with some others he had on his desk. I continued to stand at Full Brace. Once you've been chewed out for slipping into an Ease position without being so ordered, you never forget.

The Accountant laid down the papers, scanned my face, got up and walked to the far end of the



room. In front of a mirror he stopped and fingered that one small ribbon, quite, I thought, as if he were matching it with another one.

He came back quickly and sat down again. "Zankor," he said, "set up a meeting with the top brass for this afternoon. I'll talk with the Trontar privately."

The Zankor saluted and was on his way out the door when the Accountant spoke again. "And Zankor . . ."

"Yes, Sir?"

"I should be very unhappy if the top brass here — the *present* top brass — found out about this material the Trontar brought."

The Zankor swallowed hard

and assured the Accountant that he understood . . . "Sir."

THEN we were alone and the Accountant was suddenly a kindly old man who invited me to sit down and relax. I did. I really let go and stretched out, I forgot everything I'd ever been taught as a child or had learned on my

climb to the status of Trontar. I relaxed and he had me.

I had been caught on the standard Haldorian Soft/Hard Tactic.

"Disabuse your mind, Trontar," the Accountant snapped, and he was no longer a kindly old man but a thin-lipped Haldorian snapper, "of any idea that you have

saved the Empire — or any such nonsense!" Having cracked his verbal whip about my shoulders he just crouched there, glaring at me, his mouth entirely vanished and his eyes — well, I'd just as soon not think about some things.

Yes, and then he gave me the Shout/Silence treatment, the whole thing so masterfully timed that at the end he could have signed me on as a permanent latrine keeper on a spy satellite in the Slug Galaxy. A genius, that man was. The sort of man who could — and probably did — control forty wives without a weapon.

"Your information, as it happens," he said after I had regained my senses, "checks with other data I've received. It might be, of course, that the whole thing is a fabrication of my enemies. In that case, Trontar —" he looked at me earnestly — "you can be assured you'll not be around to rejoice at or to profit from my downfall."

"Of course, Sir," I said, quite as earnestly as he.

"But we both know that you are only a genuine patriot," he said with a hearty chuckle, a chuckle exactly like that of a Father Goodness — that kindly old godfather who brings such nice presents to every Haldorian child until they are six, and who on that last exciting visit brings, and enthusiastically uses, a bundle of

large and heavy whips to demonstrate that no one can be trusted. Efficient teachers, the Haldorians.

"Just a genuine patriot," the Accountant repeated, "who has rendered a considerable service to the Empire. Trontar," he said, all friendly and intimate, "the Empire likes to reward well its faithful sons. What would you most like to have or to do?"

"To serve Haldoria, Sir!" I was back on my mental feet at last.

He dropped his act then. He was, I think, just practicing anyway. We had a short talk then, the kind in which one person is quickly and efficiently pumped of everything he knows. After about ten minutes of question and answers, the Accountant leaned back and studied my face carefully.

"Have you considered Officers' Selection Course, Trontar? I might be able to help you a little in getting in."

Officers' Selection Course was, I knew, Fighter Basic Course multiplied in length and casualties. Less than 20 per cent graduate ... or escape.

"NO, Sir," I said. "I wondered if I mightn't be of more value to Haldoria in some way other than being in the combat services." So now I'd said, it and there was nothing to do but to go on. "Perhaps," I ventured, "I might

be of some help in the administrative services."

The Accountant said nothing, his face was immobile, his hands still. He'd learned his lessons well, once.

"In fact," I said, deciding to go for broke, "with my knowledge of the language and the customs here, I might be of most service to Haldoria right here on this planet."

"Had you guessed, by any chance, Trontar," the Accountant's voice was neutrally soft, "that we won't be terraforming this world? And that we may not even exploit the slavery proposition?"

"I thought both those possibilities likely," I admitted.

"But you know that in such a case we would have no administrative services on this world? Thus you are, in fact, asking for a position that wouldn't exist." The Accountant, without a change of position of expression, somehow gave the impression of looming over me.

"I thought," I said, trying to pick exactly the right words, and at the same time all too conscious of a twitching muscle in my left eyelid, "that there might be an analogous position, even so."

The Accountant loomed higher.

"If only," he said, "you hadn't come to us, Trontar. I mean that you, in effect, sold your associ-

ates out to me. And I hold that once a seller, always a seller. If I could be certain that you are and will be perfectly loyal to the Haldorian Way ..."

I managed to quiet the twitching eyelid and to look perfectly loyal to the Haldorian Way.

"Yes, Trontar," the Accountant said decisively, "I'll buy it."

THE results of my conference with the Accountant were not long in appearing.

The Haldorian troops were called in, along with the military governors and the whole administrative body, and they all shipped out, somewhere into the Big Out-There they all love so much. A surprised Earth was informed that she was now a full-fledged and self-governing member of the Haldorian Empire. The Terrans were not informed of the economic factors behind this decision, though it might have been cheering for them to know that their Spanglt Resistance Quotient indicated they would make unsatisfactory slaves. Nor did the high cost of terraforming the planet get mentioned. We Haldorians prefer the gratitude of others towards us to be unalloyed with baser, or calculating, emotions.

Not all the Haldorian personnel went out to fight or to administer. I understand the space-freighter run to the battle fleet in the Slug

Galaxy gained many new deckhands, among them one whose uniform showed the marks where Trontar's stripes had perched.

As for myself?

Well, a relatively minor operation changed me into a black-skinned Terran, though the surgeon/replacers could do nothing, ironically enough in view of my new color, to increase my resistance to heat. I remember those stirring days of combat sometimes, usually when I am making my semi-annual flight between Churchill, Manitoba, and Tierra Del Fuego. In fact, during those flights when I am practically alone is the only time I have to reflect or remember, because on both of my estates there is nothing but noise, children, and wives.

But it's a good life when the snow is driving down out of a low

gray overcast, just like it does back on Haldor. It's a good life being Resident Trader on Terra, especially when one is, on the side, a trusted agent of the Accountant. It would be a perfect life — if the Accountant hadn't been right about people being unable to stop selling out.

Right now I'm up to my neck in this Terran conspiracy to revolt against the very light bonds Haldoria left on this planet. But how could I resist the tempting offer the Terrans made me? The long sought-for good life, it now occurs to me, isn't so much in escaping from something, but in knowing when to stop. But that I know. I'm drawing the line right now. I'll just tell that agent of the Slug Galaxy that I have no intention of selling out both this solar system *and* Haldoria!

— EARL GOODALE



Condition of Employment

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

*This was one time when there
had to be — just had to be — a
way to keep a good man down!*

Illustrated by MACK

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 Ellen 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 heat — 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, a 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.

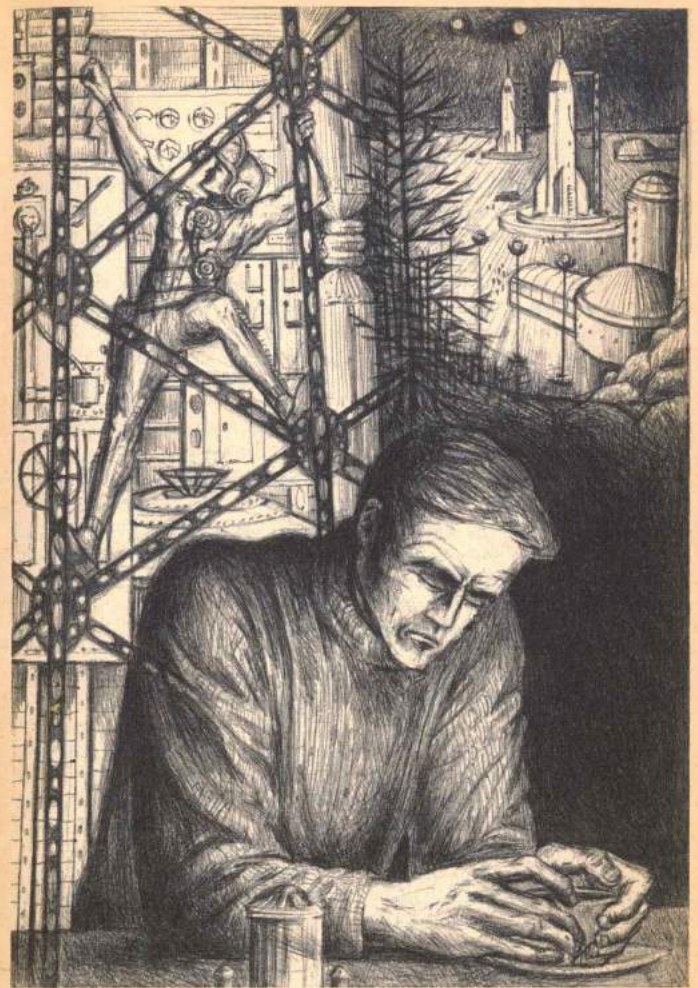
The day would come, he told himself, when he could afford no longer this self-pity he carried. He knew it for what it was and he should get rid of it. And yet it was a thing he lived with — even more than that, it had become a way of life. It was his comfort and his shield, the driving force that kept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



CONDITION OF EMPLOYMENT

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 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