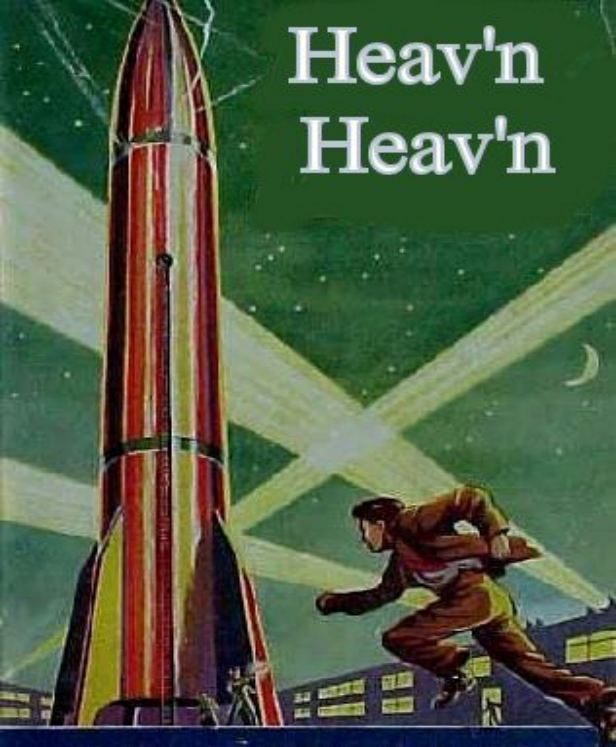


Heav'n Heav'n



ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

"Author of Sinister Barrier"



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Eric Frank Russel

He swungwide the cast-iron doors, peered into the fire-clay tunnel,

and drew a deep breath. It was like looking into the business end of a spaceship. The doors should have opened upon heat and thunder and beyond the tunnel the stars. A shuddering in the floor. Silver buttons upon his jacket, little silver comets on his collar and shoulder straps.

"So!" rasped a voice. "Always you open the doors then pose like one paralyzed. What is dumfounding about a oven?"

The uniform with its buttons and comets faded away, leaving him dressed in soiled white overalls. The floor was creaky but firm. The stars had gone as if they had never been.

"Nothing, Monsieur Trabaud."

"Attention then! Prepare the heat as you have been shown."

"Yes, Monsieur Trabaud."

Taking an armful of fragrant pine branches from the nearby stack, he shoved them between the doors, used a long iron rake to poke them to the back of the tunnel. Then another bundle and another. He picked from the floor a dozen small, sticky pinecones, tossed them one by one in among the packed branches. Then he contemplated the result. A rocket primed with cones and needles. But how absurd.

"Jules!"

"Yes, Monsieur Trabaud."

Snatching hurriedly at pine-branches, twigs and tiny logs, he stuffed them between the doors until the tunnel was full. That was done.

Everything was ready.

The ship required only the starting spark. Eagle eyes high in the bow

must watch for the ground staff to scurry clear of the coming blast.

Then the touch of askil ed, experienced finger upon a crimson button.

After that a howl from below, a gigantic trembling, a slow up-ward climb becoming faster, faster, faster.

"Name of a dog! Now he is transfixed yet again. That I should be afflicted with such a dreamer."

Brushing past him, Trabaud thrust a flambeau of blazing paper into the fire oven, slammed shut the doors. He turned upon the other, his heavy black eyebrows frowning. "Jules Rioux, you are of the age sixteen. Yes?"

"Yes, Monsieur Trabaud."

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"Therefore you are old enough to know that to bake bread there must be hotness within this sacred oven. And for that we must have fire; and to have fire we must apply a flame. Is that not so?"

"Yes, Monsieur Trabaud," he agreed shamefacedly.

"Then why should I have to tell you these things again and again and again?"

"I am an imbecile, Monsieur."

"If that were so, I could understand; I could forgive you. The good God makes fools in order to create pity." Seating himself on a dusty and bulging sack, Trabaud put forth a hairy arm, drew the other to him,

went on in confidential tones. "Your brain wanders like a rejected lover in a strange country. Tell me, my little, who is this girl?"

"Girl?"

"This woman, this divine creature who fills your mind."

"There is no woman, Monsieur."

"No woman?" Trabaud was frankly astonished. "You sicken with desire and yet there is no woman?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Then of what do you dream?"

"Of the stars, Monsieur."

"A thousand thunders!" Trabaud spread hands in mute appeal and gazed prayerfully at the ceiling. "An apprentice baker. Of what does he dream? Of the stars!"

"I cannot help myself, Monsieur."

"Of course you cannot; you are but sixteen." He gave an expressive shrug. "I will ask you two things.

How can there be people if no man makes bread? And how can anyone go among the stars if there are no people?"

"I do not know, Monsieur."

"There are ships flying between the stars," continued Trabaud, "for one reason only - because here we have life." Leaning to one side he picked up a yard-long loaf, yeasty and golden-crust. "And this

sustains life."

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Do you think that I would not like to adventure among the stars?"

asked Trabaud.

"You, Monsieur?" Jules stared at him wide-eyed.

"Of a certainty. But I am old and gray-haired and I have risen to different eminence. There are many things I cannot do, shall never do.

But I have become a great artist; I make beautiful bread."

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"Yes, Monsieur."

"Not," emphasized Trabaud, wagging an admonitory finger, "*not* the machine-excreted pap of the electric bakery at Besancon, but real hand-made bread prepared to perfection. I make it with care, and with love; that is the secret. Upon each batch I bestow a little of my soul. It is the artist in me. You understand?"

"I understand, Monsieur."

"So, Jules, the citizens do not attend merely to buy bread. True, it reads above my window: *Pierre Trabaud* -Roulangier, but that is no more than becoming modesty. The characteristic of the great artist is that he is modest."

"Yes, Monsieur Trabaud."

"I will tell you, Jules, why the citizens bring their baskets the moment the scent of my opened oven goes down the road. It is because they are of the taste discerning; they are revolted by the crudities of the electric bakery. They come here to purchase my masterpieces. Is that not so, Jules?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Then be content. In due time you, too, will be an artist. Meanwhile let us forget the stars; they are for others."

With that, Trabaud left his sack and commenced spreading a thin layer of flour over a zinc-topped table.

Jules stood silently watching the oven doors from behind which came cracks and splits and hissing sounds. An odor of burning pine filled the bakery and invaded the street. After a while he opened the doors and a great blast of heat came out, full and fierce like the flame trail of a rocket.

Heav'n, heav'n, gonna walk all over God's heav'n.

Colonel Pinet's monocle glittered as he leaned over the counter, pointed to the supposedly hidden tray and said, "One of those also, if you please."

"They are not for sale, M. le Colonel," declared Trabaud.

"Why are they not?"

"They are the errors of Jules; one more minute and they would have been charcoal. I do not sell blunders. Who wishes to eat charcoal?"

"I do," Pinet informed. "That is the unresolved difference between

myself and my wife. She cooks lightly. I am never served with a well-scorched tidbit. Permit me to enjoy one of Jules' mistakes."

"Monsieur--"

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"Madame would never accept such a miserable loaf."

"Madame has an appointment with her hairdresser, and has commissioned me to do the shopping,"

Colonel Pinet told him. "I propose to do it in my own way. You will perceive, my dear Trabaud, that I am an opportunist. Will you be good enough to serve me with an appetizing cinder, or must I seek one from the electric bakery?"

Trabaud flinched, glowered, selected the least scorched loaf from the tray, wrapped it to hide it from other eyes, handed it over with bad grace. "The good God preserve me. This Jules gains me one customer but then he will lose me a hundred."

"He causes you to suffer?" inquired Pinet.

"It is perpetual agony, M. le Colonel. I am compelled to watch him all the time. I have but to turn my back ---so," ---he turned his back to demonstrate---and, *pouf!* his mind is off his work and floating among the stars like a runaway balloon."

"The stars, you say?"

"Yes, M. le Colonel. He is a space conqueror chained to earth by unfortunate circumstances. Of that material I must make a baker."

"And what are these circumstances of which you speak?"

"His mother said to him, Trabaud requires an apprentice; this is your chance. You will leave school and become a baker.' So he came to me. He is obedient, you understand-so long as he happens to be with us upon this world."

"Mothers," said Pinet. He polished his monocle, screwed it back into his eye. "My mother wished me to be a beautifier of poodles. She said it was a genteel occupation; there was money in it. Her society friends would rush to me with their pet lapdogs." His long, slender fingers made clipping and curling motions while his face registered acute disdain. "I asked myself: what am I that I should manicure a dog? I enlisted in the Terraforce and was drafted to Mars."

"My mother was prostrated by the news."

"Alas," said Trabaud, with sympathy.

"Today she brags that her son is an officer of the four-comet rank."

"Such are mothers. They have no logic."

"It is perhaps as well," Trabaud suggested. "Else some of us might never have been born."

"You will show me this star-gazer," ordered Pinet.

"Jules!" bawled Trabaud, cupping hands around mouth and aiming toward the bakery at back. "Jules, come here."

No reply.

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"You see?" Trabaud made a gesture of defeat. "The problem is formidable." He went into the bakery.

His voice rang out, loud, impatient. "I cal ed you; why did you not answer? M. le Colonel wishes to see you at once. Brush back your hair and make haste."

Jules appeared, his manner reluctant, his hands and hair white with flour. His gray eyes were clear and steady as he looked at the inquisitive Colonel Pinet.

"So!" commented Pinet, examining him with interest. "You hunger for the stars. *Why?*"

"Why does one desire anything?" said Jules. He gave a deep shrug.

"It is my nature."

"An excel ent answer," approved Pinet. "It is of one's nature. A thousand people entrust themselves hourly to a single pilot's hands.

They are safe. Why? Because what he does is of his nature." He studied Jules slowly from head to feet. "Yet you bake bread."

"Someone must bake it," put in Trabaud. "We can-not al be star-roamers."

"Silence!" commanded Pinet. "You conspire with a woman to slaughter a soul; therefore you are an assas-sin. That is to be

expected. You come from the Cotes du Rhone where assassins swarm like flies."

"M. le Colonel, I resent-"

"You are willing to continue to serve this murderer?" Pinet demanded of Jules.

"Monsieur Trabaud has been kind. You will pardon me-"

"Of course he has been kind," interjected Pinet. "He is a sly one. All the Trabauds are sly ones." He threw a broad wink at Trabaud but Jules caught it and felt vastly relieved. "One thing is demanded of all recruits," continued Pinet, more seriously. "Do you have any idea what that may be?"

"Intelligence, M. le Colonel," suggested Jules.

"Yes, of course; but it is not sufficient. It is required that a recruit should hunger and thirst for the Space Service."

"Which is as it should be," offered Trabaud. "One works hardest and best at the things for which one has some enthusiasm. If I were to care nothing about bread, I would now be a dirty-handed tobacco-spitter at the electric bakery."

"Every year ten thousand aspirants arrive at the Space College," Pinet informed Jules. "Of these, more than eight thousand fail to pass through. Their enthusiasm is not enough to support four years of intensive study and single-minded concentration. So they fail. It is disgusting, do you agree?"

"Yes, M. le Colonel, it is disgusting," confirmed Jules, frowning.

"Hah!" said Pinet, showing satisfaction. "Then let us deprive this

vulture Trabaud of his prey. We shal find for him another one who is of the nature to bake."

"Monsieur-?"

"I wil recommend you to the col ege; I ask of youonly one thing in return."

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<http://www.processtext.com/abclit.html> Jules went momentarily breathless. "Oh, M. le Colo-nel! What do you wish?"

"I ask you, Jules, not to disgust me."

He sat in the cabin, his eyes sunken and red-rimmed, while the *Fantome* whistled through space. In twentytough, hectic years he had builded* a ladder and climbedit to a captaincy. His present reputation was that of beingone of the most conscientious commanders in the service. It was firmly founded upon a motto that had sustainedhim through al his most trying times.

"I ask you, Jules, not to disgust me."

His mother and Colonel Pinet had both died proud;and he was a captain.

As navigator, copilot and pilot he had served in thebow, where he'd always wanted to be, visibly plunginginto the vast starfield that he loved so much. There had been regular hours of sleep, rest and work, the latterfil ed with the constant, never-ending thril of things that could be seen, watched, studied.

(* Author's word – not an error in scanning) Now he'd exchanged al that for imprisonment amid-ships, nothing around him but dul titanium

al oy wal s, little before him save a desk smothered with papers.

Al his waking hours, al his resting hours and part of his sleeping time, he answered questions, made decisions, wrote entries in official books, filled a thousand and one official forms. *Beaucomp de papierasserie* in the idiom of France-Sud.

One hour after supper, "Your pardon, Captain. The fat man from Dusseldorf is mad drunk again. He has injured a steward who tried to restrain him. Permission requested to lock him in the brig." "

"Granted."

Or *in* the middle of a nervy, restless sleep an imperative shake of his shoulder followed by, "You pardon, Captain. Tubes ten and eleven have cracked their linings. Permission requested to cut off power for two hours while repairs are carried out."

"Granted. Have the duty navigator bring me the current coordinates immediately you're ready to resume progress."

Two hours later another shoulder shake. "Apologies for disturbing you, Captain. Repairs have been completed. Here are our present coordinates."

Questions.

Form-filing.

Requests, reports, demands, crises, decisions, answers, orders, commands. Continual harassment **Generated by ABC Amber LIT**

Converter, <http://www.processtext.com/abclit.html> More paperwork.

"Your pardon, Captain. Two passengers, William Archer and Marion White, wish to be married. When would it be convenient for you to conduct the service?"

"Have they passed the medical examiner?"

"Yes Captain."

"Has the groom a ring?"

"No, Captain."

"Ascertain the correct size and supply him from the ship's store at the standard charge of twenty dollars."

"And the service, Captain?"

"At four bells. Let me know whether that time suits them."

Paper work again. Duplicated copies of two birth certificates, two emigration certificates, two health certificates, two entry warrants.

Copies in triplicate of marriage certificates for Earth Government, Sinus Government and Space Service Record Office. One original copy for the bride.

And so it went on, every conceivable problem greater or petty, at all hours without let-up. Upon landing after a long run, it was considered normal for the captain to be the only one to stagger down the ramp, whirly-minded with constant nerve-testing and serious lack of sleep.

Sometimes he was tempted to take action to demote himself, except that-

"I ask you, Jules, not to disgust me."

The *Fantome* came down at Bathalbar, on the planet Dacedes, system of Sinus. The run had numbered twohundred eighty-five Earth-days.

Landing formalities over, Captain Jules Rioux left the ship, wandered hazily to Mama Kretschmer's. That was routine and in accordance with best psychological advice.

A ship's commander needs deep, potent sleep and plenty of it. But first he must expunge from his mind all thoughts of the vessel, the journey, and everything pertaining thereto. He must so condition himself mentally that he will slumber like a child, deeply, happily, right around the clock. The preliminary technique was to discard past problems and walk into one's own heaven.

Mama Kertschmer, a big-bosomed hausfrau from Bavaria, nodded familiarly, said, "Der Kapitan Roo. I am pliss. You want der sem as effer?"

"If you please, Madame Kretschmer."

He went into the back room. The front one, big, crowded and noisy, held commanders who'd got in several days ahead and already were feeling their oats. The backroom, soundproofed, with heavily cushioned reclining chairs, contained three semicomatose officers of his own rank. He did not speak to these. They offered no greeting, seemed unaware of his entry. They were knocking at the doors of paradise.

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<http://www.processtext.com/abclit.html> In short time Mama brought him a glass of navy rum, neat, warmed to blood heat, spiked with a few drops of oil of cinnamon. He lay back, settled himself

comfortably and sought for the land of peace.

The spiced rum glowed within his bowels, fumed in-to his head. The silence bore down upon his eyelids.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he moved away from this time of exhaustion and walked into that other world.

Women with broad, rosy-cheeked peasant faces, little lacework caps on their hair, baskets on their arms. Long iron trays sliding over pine ash and coming out loaded with loaves, long ones, flat ones, curly ones, plaited ones.

A chatter of feminine voices reciting village gossip amid an ineffable fragrance of pine-smoke and fresh-baked bread.

END.

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