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Pariah Planet



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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23160683

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CHAPTER 1

The little Med Ship came out of overdrive and the stars were strange and the Milky Way seemed unfamiliar. Which, of course, was because the Milky Way and the local Cepheid marker-stars were seen from an unaccustomed angle and a not-yet-commonplace pattern of varying magnitudes. But Calhoun grunted in satisfaction. There was a banded sun off to port, which was good. A breakout at no more than sixty light-hours from one's destination wasn't bad, in a strange sector of the Galaxy and after three light-years of journeying blind.

"Arise and shine, Murgatroyd," said Calhoun. "Comb your whiskers. Get set to astonish the natives!"

A sleepy, small, shrill voice said;

"*Chee!*"

Murgatroyd the *tormal* came crawling out of his small cubbyhole. He blinked at Calhoun.

"We're due to land shortly," Calhoun observed. "You'll impress the local inhabitants. I'll be unpopular. According to the records, there's been no Med Ship inspection here for twelve standard years. And that was practically no inspection, to judge

by the report."

Murgatroyd said;

"*Chee-chee!*"

He began to make his toilet, first licking his right-hand whiskers and then his left. Then he stood up and shook himself and looked interestedly at Calhoun. *Tormals* are companionable small animals. They are charmed when somebody speaks to them. They find great, deep satisfaction in imitating the actions of humans, as parrots and mynahs and parrokets imitate human speech. But *tormals* have certain useful, genetically transmitted talents which make them much more valuable than mere companions or pets.

Calhoun got a light-reading for the banded sun. It could hardly be an accurate measure of distance, but it was a guide. He said; "Hold on to something, Murgatroyd!"

Calhoun threw the overdrive switch and the Med Ship flicked back into that questionable state of being in which velocities of some hundreds of times that of light are possible. The sensation of going into overdrive was unpleasant. A moment later, the sensation of coming out was no less so. Calhoun had experienced it often enough, and still didn't like it.

The sun Weald burned huge and terrible in space. It was close, now. Its disk covered half a degree of arc.

"Very neat," observed Calhoun. "Weald Three is our port, Murgatroyd. The plane of the ecliptic would be – Hm..."

He swung the outside electron telescope, picked up a nearby

bright object, enlarged its image to show details, and checked it against the local star-pilot. He calculated a moment. The distance was too short for even the briefest of overdrive hops, but it would take time to get there on solar-system drive.

He thumbed down the communicator-button and spoke into a microphone.

"Med Ship Aesclepus Twenty reporting arrival and asking coördinates for landing. Purpose of landing, planetary health inspection. Our mass is fifty tons standard. We should arrive at a landing position in something under four hours. Repeat. Med Ship Aesclepus Twenty ..."

He finished the regular second transmission and made coffee for himself while he waited for an answer. Murgatroyd wanted a cup of coffee too. Murgatroyd adored coffee. He held a tiny cup in a furry small paw and sipped gingerly at the hot liquid.

A voice came out of the communicator;

"Aesclepus Twenty, repeat your identification!"

Calhoun went to the control-board.

"Aesclepus Twenty," he said patiently, "is a Med Ship, sent by the Interstellar Medical Service to make a planetary health inspection on Weald. Check with your public health authorities. This is the first Med Ship visit in twelve standard years, I believe, which is inexcusable. But your health authorities will know all about it. Check with them."

The voice said truculently;

"What was your last port?"

Calhoun named it. This was not his home sector, but Sector Twelve had gotten into a very bad situation. Some of its planets had gone unvisited for as long as twenty years, and twelve between inspections was almost common-place. Other sectors had been called on to help it catch up. Calhoun was one of the loaned Med Ship men, and because of the emergency he'd been given a list of half a dozen planets to be inspected one after another, instead of reporting back to sector headquarters after each visit. He'd had minor troubles before with landing-grid operators in Sector Twelve.

So he was very patient. He named the planet last inspected, the one from which he'd set out for Weald Three. The voice from the communicator said sharply;

"What port before that?"

Calhoun named the one before the last.

"Don't drive any closer," said the voice harshly, *"or you'll be destroyed!"*

Calhoun said coldly;

"Now you listen to me, friend! I'm from the Interstellar Medical Service! You get in touch with planetary health services immediately! Remind them of the Interstellar Medical Inspection Agreement, signed on Tralee two hundred and forty standard years ago. Remind them that if they do not cooperate in medical inspection that I can put your planet under quarantine and your space commerce will be cut off like that! No ship will be cleared for Weald from any other planet in the galaxy until

there has been a health inspection! Things have pretty well gone to pot so far as the Med Service in this sector is concerned, but we're trying to straighten it out. You have twenty minutes to clear this and then, I'm coming in. If I'm not landed, a quarantine goes on! Tell your health authorities that!"

Silence. Calhoun clicked off and poured himself another cup of coffee. Murgatroyd held out his cup for a refill. Calhoun gave it to him.

"I hate to put on an official hat, Murgatroyd," he said annoyedly, "but there are some people who won't have any other way."

Murgatroyd said "*Chee!*" and sipped at his cup.

Calhoun checked the course of the Med Ship. It bored on through space. There were tiny noises from the communicator. There were whisperings and rustlings and the occasional strange and sometimes beautiful musical notes whose origin is yet obscure, but which, since they are carried by electromagnetic radiation of wildly varying wave-lengths, are not likely to be the fabled music of the spheres. He waited.

In fifteen minutes a different voice came from the speaker.

"*Med Ship Aesclipus! Med Ship Aesclipus!*"

Calhoun answered and the voice said anxiously;

"*Sorry about the challenge, but we have the blueskin problem always with us. We have to be extremely careful! Will you come in, please?*"

"I'm on my way," said Calhoun.

"The planetary health authorities," said the voice, more anxiously still, *"are very anxious to be coöperative. We need Med Service help! We lose a lot of sleep over the blueskins! Could you tell us the name of the last Med Ship to land here, and its inspector, and when that inspection was made? We want to look up the record of the event to be able to assist you in every possible way."*

"He's lying," Calhoun told Murgatroyd, "but he's more scared than hostile."

He picked up the order-folio on Weald Three. He gave the information about the last Med Ship visit. He clicked off.

"What?" he asked, "is a blueskin?"

He'd read the folio on Weald, of course, but as the ship swam onward through emptiness he went through it again. The last medical inspection had been only perfunctory. Twelve years earlier – instead of three – a Med Ship had landed on Weald. There had been official conferences with health officials. There was a report on the birth-rate, the death-rate, the anomaly-rate, and a breakdown of all reported communicable diseases. But that was all. There were no special comments and no overall picture.

Presently Calhoun found the word in a Sector dictionary, where words of only local usage were to be found.

"Blueskin; Colloquial term for a person recovered from a plague which left large patches of blue pigment irregularly distributed over the body. Especially, inhabitants of Dara. The condition is said to be caused by a chronic, non-fatal form of Dara plague and has been said to be non-infectious, though

this is not certain. The etiology of Dara plague has not fully been worked out. The blueskin condition is hereditary but not a genetic modification, as markings appear in non-Mendellian distributions..."

Calhoun puzzled over it. Nobody could have read the entire Sector directory, even with unlimited leisure during travel between solar systems. Calhoun hadn't tried. But now he went laboriously through indices and cross-references while the ship continued travel onward. He found no other reference to blueskins. He looked up Dara. It was listed as an inhabited planet, some four hundred years colonized, with a landing-grid and at the time the main notice was written out, a flourishing interstellar commerce. But there was a memo, evidently added to the entry in some change of editions.

"Since plague, special license from Med Service is required for landing."

That was all. Absolutely all.

The communicator said suavely;

"Med Ship Aesclypus Twenty! Come in on vision, please!"

Calhoun went to the control-board and threw on vision.

"Well, what now?" he demanded.

His screen lighted. A bland face looked out at him.

"We have – ah – verified your statements," said the third voice from Weald. *"Just one more item. Are you alone in your ship?"*

"Of course," said Calhoun, frowning.

"Quite alone?" insisted the voice.

"Obviously!" said Calhoun.

"*No other living creature?*" insisted the voice again.

"Of – Oh!" said Calhoun annoyedly. He called over his shoulder. "Murgatroyd! Come here!"

Murgatroyd hopped to his lap and gazed interestedly at the screen. The bland face changed remarkably. The voice changed even more.

"*Very good!*" it said. "*Very, very good! Blueskins do not have tormals! You are Med Service! By all means come in. Your coördinates will be ...*"

Calhoun wrote them down. He clicked off the communicator again and growled to Murgatroyd;

"So I might have been a blueskin, eh? And you're my passport, because only Med Ships have members of your tribe aboard! What the hell's the matter, Murgatroyd? They act like they think somebody's trying to get down on their planet with a load of plague-germs!"

He grumbled to himself for minutes. The life of a Med Ship man is not exactly a sinecure, at best. It means long periods in empty space in overdrive, which is absolute and deadly tedium. Then two or three days aground, checking official documents and statistics, and asking questions to see how many of the newest medical techniques have reached this planet or that, and the supplying of information about such as have not arrived. Then lifting out to space for long periods of tedium, to repeat the process somewhere else. Med Ships carry only one man because

two could not stand the close contact without quarreling with each other. But Med Ships do carry *tormals*, like Murgatroyd, and a *tormal* and a man can get along indefinitely, like a man and a dog. It is a highly unequal friendship, but it seems to be satisfactory to both.

Calhoun was very much annoyed with the way the Med Service had been operated in Sector Twelve. He was one of many men at work to correct the results of incompetence in directing Med Service in the twelfth sector. But it is always disheartening to have to labor at making up for somebody else's blundering, when there is so much new work that needs to be done.

The condition shown by the landing-grid suspicions was a case in point. Blueskins were people who inherited a splotchy skin-pigmentation from other people who'd survived a plague. Weald plainly maintained a one-planet quarantine against them. But a quarantine is normally an emergency measure. The Med Service should have taken over, wiped out the need for a quarantine, and then lifted it. It hadn't been done.

Calhoun fumed to himself.

The world of Weald Three grew brighter and brighter and became a disk. The disk had ice-caps and a reasonable proportion of land and water surface. The Med Ship decelerated, and voices notified observation from the surface, and the little craft came to a stop some five planetary diameters out from solidity. The landing-field force-field locked on to it, and its descent began.

The business of landing was all very familiar, from the blue

rim which appeared at the limb of the planet from one diameter out, to the singular flowing-apart of the surface features as the ship sank still lower. There was the circular landing-grid, rearing skyward for nearly a mile. It could let down interstellar liners from emptiness and lift them out to emptiness again, with great convenience and economy for everyone.

It landed the Med Ship in its center, and there were officials to greet Calhoun, and he knew in advance the routine part of his visit. There would be an interview with the planet's chief executive, by whatever title he was called. There would be a banquet. Murgatroyd would be petted by everybody. There would be painful efforts to impress Calhoun with the splendid conduct of public health matters on Weald. He would be told much scandal. He might find one man, somewhere, who passionately labored to advance the welfare of his fellow humans by finding out how to keep them well, or failing that how to make them well when they got sick. And in two days, or three, Calhoun would be escorted back to the landing-grid, and lifted out to space, and he'd spend long empty days in overdrive and land somewhere else to do the whole thing all over again.

It all happened exactly as he expected, with one exception. Every human being he met on Weald wanted to talk about blueskins. Blueskins and the idea of blueskins obsessed everyone. Calhoun listened without asking questions until he had the picture of what blueskins meant to the people who talked of them. Then he knew there would be no use asking

questions at random. Nobody mentioned ever having seen a blueskin. Nobody mentioned a specific event in which a blueskin had at any named time taken part. But everybody was afraid of blueskins. It was a patterned, an inculcated, a stage-directed fixed idea. And it found expression in shocked references to the vileness, the depravity, the monstrousness of the blueskin inhabitants of Dara, from whom Weald must at all costs be protected.

It did not make sense. So Calhoun listened politely until he found an undistinguished medical man who wanted some special information about gene-selection as practised halfway across the galaxy. He invited that man to the Med Ship, where he supplied the information not hitherto available. He saw his guest's eyes shine a little with that joyous awe a man feels when he finds out something he has wanted long and badly to know.

"Now," said Calhoun, "tell me something! Why does everybody on this planet hate the inhabitants of Dara? It's light-years away. Nobody claims to have suffered in person from them. Why make a point of hating them?"

The Wealdian doctor grimaced.

"They've blue patches on their skins. They're different from us. So they can be pictured as a danger and our political parties can make an election issue out of competing for the privilege of defending us from them. They had a plague on Dara, once. They're accused of still having it ready for export."

"Hm," said Calhoun. "The story is that they want to spread

contagion here, eh? Doesn't anybody" – his tone was sardonic – "doesn't anybody urge that they be massacred as an act of piety?"

"Yes – s – s – s," admitted the doctor reluctantly. "It's mentioned in political speeches."

"But how's it rationalized?" demanded Calhoun. "What's the argument to make pigment-patches involve moral and physical degradation, as I'm assured is the case?"

"In the public schools," said the doctor, "the children are taught that blueskins are now carriers of the disease they survived three generations ago! That they hate everybody who isn't a blueskin. That they are constantly scheming to introduce their plague here so most of us will die and the rest become blueskins. That's beyond rationalizing. It can't be true, but it's not safe to doubt it."

"Bad business," said Calhoun coldly. "That sort of thing usually costs lives, in the end. It could lead to massacre!"

"Perhaps it has, in a way," said the doctor unhappily. "One doesn't like to think about it." He paused, and said; "Twenty years ago there was a famine on Dara. There were crop-failures. The situation must have been very bad. They built a space-ship. They've no use for such things normally, because no nearby planet will deal with them or let them land. But they built a space-ship and came here. They went in orbit around Weald. They asked to trade for shiploads of food. They offered any price in heavy metals, gold, platinum, iridium, and so on. They talked from orbit by vision communicators. They could be seen to be

blueskins. You can guess what happened!"

"Tell me," said Calhoun.

"We armed ships in a hurry," admitted the doctor, "We chased their space-ship back to Dara. We hung in space off the planet. We told them we'd blast their world from pole to pole if they ever dared take to space again. We made them destroy their one ship, and we watched on visionscreens as it was done."

"But you gave them food?"

"No," said the doctor ashamedly. "They were blueskins."

"How bad was the famine?"

"Who knows? Any number may have starved! And we kept a squadron of armed ships in their skies for years. To keep them from spreading the plague, we said. And some of us believed it, probably!"

The doctor's tone was purest irony.

"Lately," he said, "there's been a move for economy in our government. Simultaneously, we began to have a series of over-abundant crops. The government had to buy the excess grain to keep the price up. Retired patrol-ships – built to watch over Dara – were available for storage-space. We filled them up with grain and sent them out into orbit. They're there now, hundreds of thousands or millions of tons of grain!"

"And Dara?"

The Doctor shrugged. He stood up.

"Our hatred of Dara," he said, again ironically, "has produced one thing. Roughly halfway between here and Dara there's a two-

planet solar system, Orede. There's a usable planet there. It was proposed to build an outpost of Weald there, against blueskins. Cattle were landed to run wild and multiply and make a reason for colonists to settle there. They did, but nobody wants to move nearer to blueskins! So Orede stayed uninhabited until a hunting-party shooting wild cattle found an outcropping of heavy-metal ore. So now there's a mine there. And that's all. A few hundred men work the mine at fabulous wages. You may be asked to check on their health. But not Dara's!"

"I see," said Calhoun, frowning.

The doctor moved toward the Med Ship's exit-port.

"I answered your questions," he said grimly. "But if I talked to anyone else as I've done to you, I'd be lucky only to be driven into exile!"

"I shan't give you away," said Calhoun. He did not smile.

When the doctor had gone, Calhoun said deliberately;

"Murgatroyd, you should be grateful that you're a *tormal* and not a man. There's nothing about being a *tormal* to make you ashamed!"

Then he grimly changed his garments for the full-dress uniform of the Med Service. There was to be a banquet at which he would sit next to the planet's chief executive and hear innumerable speeches about the splendor of Weald. Calhoun had his own, strictly Med Service opinion of the planet's latest and most boasted-of achievement. It was a domed city in the polar regions, where nobody ever had to go outdoors. He was less than

professionally enthusiastic about the moving streets, and much less approving of the dream-broadcasts which supplied hypnotic, sleep-inducing rhythms to anybody who chose to listen to them. The price was that while asleep one would hear high praise of commercial products, and one might believe them when awake.

But it was not Calhoun's function to criticize when it could be avoided. Med Service had been badly managed in Sector Twelve. So at the banquet Calhoun made a brief and diplomatic address in which he temperately praised what could be praised, and did not mention anything else.

The chief executive followed him. As head of the government he paid some tribute to the Med Service. But then he reminded his hearers proudly of the high culture, splendid health, and remarkable prosperity of the planet since his political party took office. This, he said, was in spite of the need to be perpetually on guard against the greatest and most immediate danger to which any world in all the galaxy was exposed. He referred to the blueskins, of course. He did not need to tell the people of Weald what vigilance, what constant watchfulness was necessary against that race of depraved and malevolent deviants from the norm of humanity. But Weald, he said with emotion, held aloft the torch of all that humanity held most dear, and defended not alone the lives of its people against blueskin contagion, but their noble heritage of ideals against Blueskin pollution.

When he sat down, Calhoun said very politely;

"It looks like some day it should be practical politics to urge

the massacre of all blueskins. Have you thought of that?"

The chief executive said comfortably;

"The idea's been proposed. It's good politics to urge it, but it would be foolish to carry it out. People vote against blueskins. Wipe them out, and where'd you be?"

Calhoun ground his teeth, quietly.

There were more speeches. Then a messenger, white-faced, arrived with a written note for the chief executive. He read it and passed it to Calhoun. It was from the Ministry of Health. The space-port reported that a ship had just broken out from overdrive within the Wealdian solar system. Its tape-transmitter had automatically signalled its arrival from the mining-planet Orede. But, having sent off its automatic signal, the ship lay dead in space. It did not drive toward Weald. It did not respond to signals. It drifted like a derelict upon no course at all. It seemed ominous, and since it came from Orede – the planet nearest to Dara of the blueskins – the health ministry informed the planet's chief executive.

"It'll be blueskins," said that astute person, firmly. "They're next-door to Orede. That's who's done this. It wouldn't surprise me if they'd seeded Orede with their plague, and this ship came from there to give us warning!"

"There's no evidence for anything of the sort," protested Calhoun. "A ship simply came out of overdrive and didn't signal further. That's all."

"We'll see," said the chief executive ominously. "We'll go

directly to the spaceport."

Calhoun retrieved Murgatroyd who had been visiting with the wives of the higher-up officials. His small paunch distended with cakes and coffee and such delicacies as he'd been plied with. He was half comatose from over-feeding and over-petting, but he was glad to see Calhoun. At the spaceport they discovered the situation remained unchanged.

A ship from Orede had come out of overdrive and lay dead in emptiness. It did not answer calls. It did not move in space. It floated eerily in no orbit around anything, going nowhere; doing nothing. And panic was the consequence.

It seemed to Calhoun that the official handling of the matter accounted for the terror that he could feel building up. The so-far-unexplained bit of news was on the air all over the planet Weald. There was nobody awake of all the world's population who did not believe that there was a new danger in the sky. Nobody doubted that it came from blueskins. The treatment of the news was precisely calculated to keep alive the hatred of Weald for the inhabitants of the world Dara.

Calhoun put Murgatroyd into the Med Ship and went back to the spaceport office. A small space-boat, designed to inspect the circling grain-ships from time, was already aloft. The landing-grid had thrust it swiftly out most of the way. Now it droned and drove on sturdily toward the enigmatic ship.

Calhoun took no part in the agitated conferences among the officials and news reporters at the space-port. But he listened to

the talk about him. As the investigating small ship drew nearer and nearer to the deathly-still cargo vessel, the guesses about the meaning of its breakout and following silence grew more and more wild. But, singularly, there was not one suggestion that the mystery might not be the work of blueskins. Blueskins were scapegoats for all the fears and all the uneasiness a perhaps over-civilized world developed.

Presently the investigating space-boat reached the mystery ship and circled it, beaming queries. No answer. It reported the cargo-ship dark. No lights shone anywhere on or in it. There were no induction-surges from even pulsing, idling engines. Delicately, the messenger-craft maneuvered until it touched the silent vessel. It reported that microphones detected no motion whatever inside.

"Let a volunteer go aboard," commanded the chief executive. "Have him report what he finds."

A pause. Then the solemn announcement of an intrepid volunteer's name, from far, far away. Calhoun listened, frowning darkly. This pompous heroism wouldn't be noticed in the Med Service. It would be routine behavior.

Suspenseful, second-by-second reports. The volunteer had rocketed himself across the emptiness between the two again-separated ships. He had opened the airlock from outside. He'd gone in. He'd closed the outer airlock door. He'd opened the inner. He reported.

The relayed report was almost incoherent, what with horror and incredulity and the feeling of doom that came upon the

volunteer. The ship was a bulk-cargo ore-carrier, designed to run between Orede and Weald with cargoes of heavy-metal ores and a crew of no more than five men. There was no cargo in her holds now, though. Instead, there were men. They packed the ship. They filled the corridors. They had crawled into every cargo and other space where a man could find room to push himself. There were hundreds of them. It was insanity. And it had been greater insanity still for the ship to have taken off with so preposterous a load of living creatures.

But they weren't living any longer. The air apparatus had been designed for a crew of five. It could purify the air for possibly twenty or more. But there were hundreds of men in hiding as well as in plain view in the cargo-ship from Orede. There were many, many times more than her air apparatus and reserve tanks could possibly have serviced. They couldn't even have been fed during the journey from Orede to Weald!

But they hadn't starved. Air-scarcity killed them before the ship came out of overdrive.

A remarkable thing was that there was no written message in the ship's log which referred to its take-off. There was no memorandum of the taking on of such an impossible number of passengers.

"The blueskins did it," said the chief executive of Weald. He was pale. All about Calhoun men looked sick and shocked and terrified. "It was the blueskins! We'll have to teach them a lesson!" Then he turned to Calhoun. "The volunteer who went

on that ship ... He'll have to stay there, won't he? He can't be brought back to Weald without bringing contagion ..."

Calhoun raged at him.

CHAPTER 2

There was a certain coldness in the manner of those at the Weald spaceport when the Med Ship left next morning. Calhoun was not popular because Weald was scared. It had been conditioned to scare easily, where blueskins might be involved. Its children were trained to react explosively when the word "blueskin" was uttered in their hearing, and its adults tended to say "blueskin" when anything to cause uneasiness entered their minds. So a planet-wide habit of non-rational response had formed and was not seen to be irrational because almost everybody had it.

The volunteer who'd discovered the tragedy on the ship from Orede was safe, though. He'd made a completely conscientious survey of the ship he'd volunteered to enter and examine. For his courage, he'd have been doomed but for Calhoun. The reaction of his fellow-citizens was that by entering the ship he might have become contaminated by blueskin infective material if the plague still existed, and if the men in the ship had caught it – but they certainly hadn't died of it – and if there had been blueskins on Orede to communicate it – for which there was no evidence – and if blueskins were responsible for the tragedy. Which was at the moment pure supposition. But Weald feared he might bring death back to Weald if he were allowed to return.

Calhoun saved his life. He ordered that the guard-ship admit

him to its airlock, which then was to be filled with steam and chlorine. The combination would sterilize and partly even eat away his space-suit, after which the chlorine and steam should be bled out to space, and air from the ship let into the lock. If he stripped off the space-suit without touching its outer surface, and reentered the investigating ship while the suit was flung outside by a man in another space-suit, handling it with a pole he'd fling after it, there could be no possible contamination brought back.

Calhoun was quite right, but Weald in general considered that he'd persuaded the government to take an unreasonable risk.

There were other reasons for disapproving of him. Calhoun had been unpleasantly frank. The coming of the death-ship stirred to frenzy those people who believed that all blueskins should be exterminated as a pious act. They'd appeared on every visionscreen, citing not only the ship from Orede but other incidents which they interpreted as crimes against Weald. They demanded that all Wealdian atomic reactors be modified to turn out fusion-bomb materials while a space-fleet was made ready for an anti-blueskin crusade. They confidently demanded such a rain of fusion-bombs on Dara that no blueskin, no animal, no shred of vegetation, no fish in the deepest ocean, not even a living virus-particle of the blueskin plague could remain alive on the blueskin world!

One of these vehement orators even asserted that Calhoun agreed that no other course was possible, speaking for the Interstellar Medical Service. And Calhoun furiously demanded

a chance to deny it by broadcast, and he made a bitter and indiscreet speech from which a planet-wide audience inferred that he thought them fools. He did.

So he was definitely unpopular when his ship lifted from Weald. He'd curtly given his destination as Orede, from which the death-ship had come. The landing-grid locked on, raised the small space-craft until Weald was a great shining ball below it, and then somehow scornfully cast him off. The Med Ship was free, in clear space where there was not enough of a gravitational field to hinder overdrive.

He aimed for his destination, his face very grim. He said savagely;

"Get set, Murgatroyd! Overdrive coming!"

He thumbed down the overdrive button. The universe of stars went out, while everything living in the ship felt the customary sensations of dizziness, of nausea, and of a spiralling fall to nothingness. Then there was silence. The Med Ship actually moved at a rate which was a preposterous number of times the speed of light, but it felt absolutely solid, absolutely firm and fixed. A ship in overdrive feels exactly as if it were buried deep in the core of a planet. There is no vibration. There is no sign of anything but solidity and – if one looks out a port – there is only utter blackness plus an absence of sound fit to make one's eardrums crack.

But within seconds random tiny noises began. There was a reel and there were sound-speakers to keep the ship from sounding

like a grave. The reel played and the speakers gave off minute creakings, and meaningless hums, and very tiny noises of every imaginable sort, all of which were just above the threshold of the inaudible.

Calhoun fretted. Sector Twelve was in very bad shape. A conscientious Med Service man would never have let the anti-blueskin obsession go unmentioned in a report on Weald. Health is not only a physical affair. There is mental health, also. When mental health goes a civilization can be destroyed more surely and more terribly than by any imaginable war or plague-germ. A plague kills off those who are susceptible to it, leaving immunes to build up a world again. But immunes are the first to be killed when a mass neurosis sweeps a population.

Weald was definitely a Med Service problem world. Dara was another. And when hundreds of men jammed themselves into a cargo-boat which could not furnish them with air to breathe, and took off and went into overdrive before the air could fail... Orede called for no less of worry.

"I think," said Calhoun dourly, "that I'll have some coffee."

"Coffee" was one of the words that Murgatroyd recognized immediately. He would usually watch the coffee-maker with bright, interested eyes. He'd even tried to imitate Calhoun's motions with it, once, and had scorched his paws in the attempt. This time he did not move.

Calhoun turned his head. Murgatroyd sat on the floor, his long tail coiled reflectively about a chair-leg. He watched the door of

the Med Ship's sleeping-cabin.

"Murgatroyd," said Calhoun. "I mentioned coffee!"

"*Chee!*" shrilled Murgatroyd.

But he continued to look at the door. The temperature was kept lower in the other cabin, and the look of things was different from the control-compartment. The difference was part of the means by which a man was able to be alone for weeks on end – alone save for his *tormal*– without becoming ship-happy. There were other carefully thought out items in the ship with the same purpose. But none of them should cause Murgatroyd to stare fixedly and fascinatedly at the sleeping-cabin door. Not when coffee was in the making!

Calhoun considered. He became angry at the immediate suspicion that occurred to him. As a Med Service man, he was duty-bound to be impartial. To be impartial might mean not to side absolutely with Weald in its enmity to blueskins. The people of Weald had refused to help Dara in a time of famine; they'd blockaded that pariah world for years afterward; they had other reasons for hating the people they'd treated badly. It was entirely reasonable for some fanatic on Weald to consider that Calhoun must be killed lest he be of help to the blueskins Weald abhorred.

In fact, it was quite possible that somebody had stowed away on the Med Ship to murder Calhoun, so that there would be no danger of any report favorable to Dara ever being presented anywhere. If so, such a stowaway would be in the sleeping-cabin now, waiting for Calhoun to walk unsuspectingly in to be shot

dead.

So Calhoun made coffee. He slipped a blaster into a pocket where it would be handy. He filled a small cup for Murgatroyd and a large one for himself, and then a second large one.

He tapped on the sleeping-cabin door, standing aside lest a blaster-bolt came through it.

"Coffee's ready," he said sardonically. "Come out and join us."

There was a long pause. Calhoun rapped again.

"You've a seat at the captain's table," he said more sardonically still. "It's not polite to keep me waiting!"

He listened, alert for a rush which would be a fanatic's desperate attempt to do murder despite premature discovery. He was prepared to shoot quite ruthlessly.

But there was no rush. Instead, there came hesitant foot-falls. The door of the cabin slid slowly aside. A girl appeared in the opening, desperately white and desperately composed.

"H-how did you know I was there?" she asked shakily. She moistened her lips. "You didn't see me! I was in a closet, and you didn't even enter the room!"

Calhoun said grimly;

"I've sources of information." He pointed to Murgatroyd.

The girl did not move. Her eyes went from Murgatroyd to Calhoun.

"And now," said Calhoun, "do you want to tell me your story? You have one ready, I'm sure."

"There – there isn't any," said the girl unsteadily. "Just – I – I need to get to Orede, and you're going there. There's no other way to go – now."

"To the contrary," said Calhoun, "there'll undoubtedly be a fleet heading for Orede as soon as it can be assembled and armed. But I'm afraid that's not a very good story. Try another."

She shivered a little.

"I'm – running away ..."

"Ah!" said Calhoun. "In that case I'll take you back."

"No!" she said fiercely. "I'll – I'll die first! I'll wreck this ship first!"

Her hand came from behind her. There was a tiny blaster in it. But it shook visibly as she tried to aim it.

"I'll – shoot out the controls!"

Calhoun blinked. He'd had to make a drastic change in his estimate of the situation the instant he saw that the stowaway was a girl. Now he had to make another when her threat was not to kill him but to disable the ship. Women are rarely assassins, and when they are they don't use energy weapons. Daggers and poisons are more typical.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," said Calhoun drily. "Besides, you'd get deadly bored if we were stuck in a derelict waiting for our air and food to give out."

Murgatroyd, for no reason whatever, felt it necessary to enter the conversation. He said;

"Chee-chee-chee!"

"A very sensible suggestion," observed Calhoun. "We'll sit down and have a cup of coffee." To the girl he said, "I'll take you to Orede, since that's where you say you want to go."

"I – there's a boy there – "

Calhoun shook his head.

"No," he said reprovngly. "Nearly all the mining colony had packed itself into the ship that came into Weald with everybody dead. But not all. And there's been no check of what men were in the ship and what men weren't. You wouldn't go to Orede if it were likely your fellow had died on the way to you. Here's your coffee. Sugar or saccho, and do you take cream?"

She trembled a little, but she took the cup.

"I – don't understand – ."

"Murgatroyd and I," explained Calhoun – and he did not know whether he spoke out of anger or something else – "we are do-gooders. We go around trying to keep people from getting killed. It's our profession. We practise it even on our own behalf. We want to stay alive. So since you make such drastic threats, we will take you where you want to go. Especially since we're going there anyhow."

"You – don't believe anything I've said!" It was a statement.

"Not a word," admitted Calhoun. "But you'll probably tell us something more believable presently. When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday – ."

"Better have something now. We'll talk more later." Calhoun showed her how to punch the readier for such-and-such dishes,

to be extracted from storage and warmed or chilled, as the case might be, and served at dialed-for intervals.

Calhoun deliberately immersed himself in the Galactic Directory, looking up the planet Orede. He was headed there, but he'd had no reason to inform himself about it before. Now he read with every appearance of absorption.

The girl ate daintily. Murgatroyd watched with highly amiable interest. But she looked acutely uncomfortable.

Calhoun finished with the Directory. He got out the microfilm reels which contained more information. He was specifically after the Med Service history of all the planets in this sector. He went through the filmed record of every inspection ever made on Weald and on Dara. But Sector Twelve had not been well-run. There was no adequate account of a plague which had wiped out three-quarters of the population of an inhabited planet! It had happened shortly after one Med Ship visit, and was over before another Med Ship came by. But there should have been painstaking investigation, even after the fact. There should have been a collection of infective material and a reasonably complete identification and study of the infective agent. It hadn't been made. There was probably some other emergency at the time, and it slipped by. But Calhoun – whose career was not to be spent in this sector – resolved on a blistering report about this negligence and its consequences.

He kept himself casually busy, ignoring the girl. A Med Ship man has resources of study and meditation with which

to occupy himself during overdrive travel from one planet to another. Calhoun made use of those resources. He acted as if he were completely unconscious of the stowaway. But Murgatroyd watched her with charmed attention.

Hours after her discovery, she said uneasily;

"Please?"

Calhoun looked up.

"Yes?"

"I – don't know exactly how things stand."

"You are a stowaway," said Calhoun. "Legally, I have the right to put you out the airlock. It doesn't seem necessary. There's a cabin. When you're sleepy, use it. Murgatroyd and I can make out quite well here. When you're hungry, you now know how to get something to eat. When we land on Orede, you'll probably go about whatever business you have there. That's all."

She stared at him.

"But – you don't believe what I've told you!"

"No," agreed Calhoun. But he didn't add to the statement.

"But – I will tell you," she offered. "The police were after me. I had to get away from Weald! I had to! I'd stolen – "

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "If you were a thief, you'd say anything in the world except that you were a thief. You're not ready to tell the truth yet. You don't have to, so why tell me anything? I suggest that you get some sleep."

She rose slowly. Twice her lips parted as if to speak again, but

then she went into the other cabin and closed herself in.

Murgatroyd blinked at the place where she'd disappeared and then climbed up into Calhoun's lap, with complete assurance of welcome. He settled himself and was silent for moments. Then he said;

"Chee!"

"I believe you're right," said Calhoun. "She doesn't belong on Weald, or with the conditioning she'd have had, there'd be only one place she'd dread worse than Orede, and that would be Dara. But I doubt she'd be afraid to land even on Dara."

Murgatroyd liked to be talked to. He liked to pretend that he carried on a conversation, like humans.

"Chee-chee!" he said with conviction.

"Definitely," agreed Calhoun. "She's not doing this for her personal advantage. Whatever she thinks she's doing, it's more important to her than her own life. Murgatroyd – "

"Chee?" said Murgatroyd in an inquiring tone.

"There are wild cattle on Orede," said Calhoun. "Herds and herds of them. I have a suspicion that somebody's been shooting them. Lots of them. Do you agree? Don't you think that a lot of cattle have been slaughtered on Orede lately?"

Murgatroyd yawned. He settled himself still more comfortably in Calhoun's lap.

"Chee," he said drowsily.

He went to sleep, while Calhoun continued the examination of highly condensed information. Presently he looked up the

normal rate of increase, with other data, among herds of *bivis domesticus* in a wild state, on planets where they have no natural enemies. It wasn't unheard-of for a world to be stocked with useful types of Terran fauna and flora before it was attempted to be colonized. Terran life-forms could play the devil with alien ecological systems, very much to humanity's benefit. Familiar microorganisms and a standard vegetation added to the practicality of human settlements on otherwise alien worlds. But sometimes the results were strange.

They weren't often so strange, however, as to cause some hundreds of men to pack themselves frantically aboard a cargo-ship which couldn't possibly sustain them, so that every man must die while the ship was in overdrive.

Still, by the time Calhoun turned in on a spare pneumatic mattress, he had calculated that as few as a dozen head of cattle, turned loose on a suitable planet, would have increased to herds of thousands or tens or even hundreds of thousands in much less time than had probably elapsed.

The Med Ship drove on in seemingly absolute solidity, with no sound from without, with no sight to be seen outside, with no evidence at all that it was not buried deep in the heart of a planet instead of flashing through emptiness at a speed so great as to have no meaning.

Next ship-day the girl looked oddly at Calhoun when she appeared in the control-room. "Shall I – have breakfast?" she asked uncertainly.

"Why not?"

Silently, she operated the food-reader. She ate. Calhoun gave the impression that he would respond politely when spoken to, but that he was busy with activities that kept him remote from stowaways.

About noon, ship-time, she asked;

"When will we get to Orede?"

Calhoun told her absently, as if he were thinking of something else.

"What – what do you think happened there? I mean, to make that tragedy in the ship?"

"I don't know," said Calhoun. "But I disagree with the authorities on Weald. I don't think it was a planned atrocity of the blueskins."

"Wh-what are blueskins?"

Calhoun turned around and looked at her directly.

"When lying," he said mildly, "you tell as much by what you pretend isn't, as by what you pretend is. You know what blueskins are!"

"B – but what do you think they are?" she asked.

"There used to be a human disease called smallpox," said Calhoun. "When people recovered from it, they were usually marked. Their skin had little scar-pits here and there. At one time, back on Earth, it was expected that everybody would catch smallpox sooner or later, and a large percentage would die of it. And it was so much a matter of course that if they printed

a description of a criminal, they never mentioned it if he were pock-marked – scarred. It was no distinction. But if he didn't have the markings, they'd mention that!" He paused. "Those pock-marks weren't hereditary, but otherwise a blueskin is like a man who had them. He can't be anything else!"

"Then you think they're – human?"

"There's never yet been a case of reverse evolution," said Calhoun. "Maybe pithecanthropus had a monkey uncle, but no pithecanthropus ever went monkey."

She turned abruptly away. But she glanced at him often during that day. He continued to busy himself with those activities which make a Med Ship man's life consistent with retained sanity.

Next day she asked without preliminary;

"Don't you believe the blueskins planned for the ship with the dead men to arrive at Weald and spread plague there?"

"No," said Calhoun.

"Why?"

"It couldn't possibly work," Calhoun told her. "With only dead men on board, the ship wouldn't arrive at a place where the landing-grid could bring it down. So that would be no good. And plague-stricken living men wouldn't try to conceal that they had the plague. They might ask for help, but they'd know they'd instantly be killed on Weald if they were found to be plague-victims. So that would be no good, either! No, the ship wasn't intended to land plague on Weald."

"Are you – friendly to blueskins?" she asked uncertainly.

"Within reason," said Calhoun, "I am a well-wisher to all the human race. You're slipping, though. When using the word 'blueskin' you should say it uncomfortably, as if it were a word no refined person liked to pronounce. You don't. We'll land on Orede tomorrow, by the way. If you ever intend to tell me the truth, there's not much time."

She bit her lips. Twice, during the remainder of the day, she faced him and opened her mouth as if to speak, and then turned away again. Calhoun shrugged. He had fairly definite ideas about her, by now. He carefully kept them tentative, but no girl born and raised on Weald would willingly go to Orede, with all of Weald believing that a shipload of miners preferred death to remaining there. It tied in, like everything else that was unpleasant, to blueskins. Nobody from Weald would dream of landing on Orede! Not now!

A little before the Med Ship was due to break out from overdrive, the girl said very carefully;

"You've been – very kind. I'd like to thank you. I – didn't really believe I would – live to get to Orede."

Calhoun raised his eyebrows.

"I – wish I could tell you everything you want to know," she added regretfully. "I think you're – really decent. But some things..."

Calhoun said caustically;

"You've told me a great deal. You weren't born on Weald. You weren't raised there. The people of Dara – notice that I

don't say blueskins, though they are – the people of Dara have made at least one space-ship since Weald threatened them with extermination. There is probably a new food-shortage on Dara now, leading to pure desperation. Most likely it's bad enough to make them risk landing on Orede to kill cattle and freeze beef to help. They've worked out."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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