



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: This World is Taboo Chapter 2

[00:00:03] Hello and welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library's Story Time for Grownups. I am your librarian reader, David Wright. And, you're joining us for chapter two, that's episode two, of the science fiction pulp classic – *This World is Taboo* by Murray Leinster.

[00:00:26] 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 it when anything causing uneasiness entered their minds. So a planet-wide habit of irrational response had formed and was not seen to be irrational because almost everybody had it.

[00:01:04] 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.

[00:01:20] The reaction of his fellow citizens was that by entering the ship he might have become contaminated by blueskin infectious material of 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.

[00:01:56] Calhoun saved his life. He ordered that the guardship admit him to its airlock, which then was to be filled with steam and chlorine. The combination would sterilize and even partly eat away his spacesuit, after which the chlorine and steam should be bled out to space, and air from the ship let into the lock.

[00:02:15] If he stripped off the spacesuit without touching its outer surface, and reentered the investigating ship while the suit was flung outside by a man in another spacesuit, handling it with a pole he'd fling after it, there could be no possible contamination brought back.

[00:02:33] Calhoun was quite right, but Weald in general considered that he'd persuaded the government to take an unreasonable risk.

[00:02:41] 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 vision screen, citing not only the ship from Orede but other incidents which they interpreted as crimes against Weald.

[00:03:05] 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.

[00:03:35] 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.

[00:04:00] He did.

[00:04:02] 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 spacecraft 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.

[00:04:32] He aimed for his destination, his face very grim. He said savagely, "Get set, Murgatroyd! Overdrive coming!"

[00:04:41] 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 spiraling fall to nothingness. Then there was silence.

[00:04:59] 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.

[00:05:28] 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.

[00:05:54] 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 germs. 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.

[00:06:35] Weald was definitely a Med Service problem world. Dara was another. And when hundreds of men jammed themselves into a cargo spaceship 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."

[00:07:03] Coffee was one of the words that Murgatroyd recognized. Ordinarily he stirred immediately on hearing it, and watched the coffeemaker with bright, interested eyes. He'd even tried to imitate Calhoun's motions with it, once, and had scorched his paws in the attempt. But this time he did not move.

[00:07:23] 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.

[00:07:36] "Murgatroyd," said Calhoun. "I mentioned coffee!"

[00:07:40] "Chee!" shrilled Murgatroyd.

[00:07:44] But he continued to look at the door. The temperature was kept lower in the other cabin, and the look of things was different than 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.

[00:08:01] 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!

[00:08:17] 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.

[00:08:35] And the people of Weald had refused to help Dara in a time of famine, and had blockaded that pariah world for years afterward. And 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.

[00:09:00] 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 in unsuspectingly, only to be shot dead.

[00:09:26] 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 come through it.

[00:09:46] "Coffee's ready," he said sardonically. "Come out and join us."

[00:09:52] There was a long pause. Calhoun rapped again.

[00:09:56] "You've a seat at the captain's table," he said more sardonically still. "It's not polite to keep me waiting!"

[00:10:04] 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, because he was on duty and the Med Service did not approve of the extermination of populations, however justified another population might consider it.

[00:10:23] But there was no rush. Instead, there came hesitant foot-falls whose sound made Calhoun start. The door of the cabin slid slowly aside. A girl appeared in the opening, desperately white and desperately composed.

[00:10:42] "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!"

[00:10:54] Calhoun said grimly, "I've sources of information. Murgatroyd told me this time. May I present him? Murgatroyd, our passenger. Shake hands."

[00:11:06] Murgatroyd moved forward, stood on his hind legs and offered a skinny, furry paw. She did not move. She stared at Calhoun.

[00:11:16] "Better shake hands," said Calhoun, as grimly as before. "It might relax the tension a little. And do you want to tell me your story? You have one ready, I'm sure."

[00:11:27] The girl swallowed. Murgatroyd shook hands gravely. He said, "Chee-chee!" in the shrillest of trebles and went back to his former position.

[00:11:38] "The story?" said Calhoun insistently.

[00:11:42] "There—there isn't any," said the girl unsteadily. "Just that I—I need to get to Orede, and you're going there. There's no other way to go, now."

[00:11:55] "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 as a story yours isn't good enough. Try another."

[00:12:07] She shivered a little.

[00:12:09] "I'm running away...."

[00:12:11] "Ah!" said Calhoun. "In that case I'll take you back."

[00:12:15] "No!" she said fiercely. "I'll—I'll die first! I'll wreck this ship first!"

[00:12:20] Her hand came from behind her. There was a tiny blaster in it. But it shook visibly as she tried to aim it.

[00:12:28] "I'll shoot out the controls!"

[00:12:30] 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. But this girl threatened to destroy the ship rather than its owner, so she was not actually an assassin at all.

[00:12:55] "I'd rather you didn't do that," said Calhoun dryly. "Besides, you'd get deadly bored if we were stuck in a derelict waiting for our air and food to give out."

[00:13:08] Murgatroyd, for no reason whatever, felt it necessary to enter the conversation:

[00:13:14] "Chee-chee-chee!"

[00:13:16] "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."

[00:13:30] "I have a sweetheart there...."

[00:13:32] Calhoun shook his head.

[00:13:35] "No," he said reprovingly. "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 sweetheart had died on the way to you. Here's your coffee. Sugar or saccho, and do you take cream?"

[00:14:01] She trembled a little, but she took the cup.

[00:14:05] "I don't understand."

[00:14:07] "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 sick or dying. Sometimes we even try to keep them 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."

[00:14:42] "You don't believe anything I've said!" It was a statement.

[00:14:47] "Not a word," admitted Calhoun. "But you'll probably tell us something more believable presently. When did you eat last?"

[00:14:54] "Yesterday."

[00:14:56] "Would you rather do your own cooking?" asked Calhoun politely. "Or would you permit me to ready a snack?"

[00:15:03] "I—I'll do it," she said.

[00:15:06] She drank her coffee first, however, and then 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. There was also equipment for preparing food for oneself, in one's own chosen manner—again an item to help make solitude not unendurable.

[00:15:30] 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.

[00:15:46] The girl ate daintily. Murgatroyd watched with highly amiable interest. But she looked acutely uncomfortable.

[00:15:56] Calhoun finished with the Directory. He got out the micro-film 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.

[00:16:12] But Sector Twelve had not been run well. 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.

[00:16:30] There should have been a painstaking investigation, even after the fact. There should have been a collection of infectious material and a reasonably complete identification and study of the agent. It hadn't been made. There was probably some other emergency at the time, and it slipped by. Calhoun, whose career was not to be spent in this sector, resolved on a blistering report about this negligence and its consequences.

[00:16:58] 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.

[00:17:25] Hours after her discovery, she said uneasily, "Please?"

[00:17:33] Calhoun looked up.

[00:17:35] "Yes?"

[00:17:36] "I don't know exactly how things stand."

[00:17:41] "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 out 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."

[00:18:04] She stared at him.

[00:18:07] "But you don't believe what I've told you!"

[00:18:09] "No," agreed Calhoun, but didn't add to the statement.

[00:18:14] "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—"

[00:18:22] He shook his head.

[00:18:23] "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. Incidentally, there's no lock on the cabin door because there's only supposed to

be one person on this ship at a time. But you can brace a chair to fasten it somehow or other. Good night."

[00:18:48] She rose slowly. Twice her lips parted as if to speak again, but then she went into the other cabin and closed herself in. There was the sound of a chair being wedged against the door. 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!"

[00:19:15] "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, which would be Dara. But I doubt she'd be afraid to land even on Dara."

[00:19:30] Murgatroyd liked to be talked to. He liked to pretend that he carried on a conversation, like humans.

[00:19:35] "Chee-chee!" he said with conviction.

[00:19:39] "Definitely," agreed Calhoun. "She's not doing this for her personal advantage. Whatever she thinks she'd doing, it's more important to her than her own life. Murgatroyd...."

[00:19:50] "Chee?" said Murgatroyd in an inquiring tone.

[00:19:54] "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?"

[00:20:13] Murgatroyd yawned. He settled himself still more comfortably in Calhoun's lap.

[00:20:19] "Chee," he said drowsily.

[00:20:23] 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 *bovis domesticus* in a wild state, on planets where there are no natural enemies.

[00:20:40] 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.

[00:21:08] 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.

[00:21:23] 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.

[00:21:44] 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 in the heart of a planet instead of flashing through emptiness at a speed so great as to have no meaning.

[00:22:03] Next ship-day the girl looked oddly at Calhoun when she appeared in the control room. Murgatroyd regarded her with great interest. Calhoun nodded politely and went back to what he'd been doing before she appeared.

[00:22:18] "Shall I have breakfast?" she asked uncertainly.

[00:22:22] "Murgatroyd and I have," he told her. "Why not?"

[00:22:25] Silently, she operated the food-readier. She ate. Calhoun gave a very good portrayal of a man who will respond politely when spoken to, but who was busy with activities remote from stowaways.

[00:22:39] About noon, ship-time, she asked, "When will we get to Orede?"

[00:22:44] Calhoun told her absently, as if he were thinking of something else.

[00:22:51] "What—what do you think happened there? I mean, to make that tragedy in the ship."

[00:22:55] "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."

[00:23:04] "Wh-what are blueskins?" asked the girl.

[00:23:08] Calhoun turned around and looked at her directly.

[00:23:12] "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!"

[00:23:22] "But what do you think they are?" she asked.

[00:23:26] "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.

[00:23:44] "And it was so much a matter of course that if they printed a picture of a criminal they never mentioned it if he were pock-marked. 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!"

[00:23:10] "Then you think they're human?"

[00:23:13] "There's never yet been a case of reverse evolution," said Calhoun. "Maybe Pithecanthropus had a monkey uncle, but no Pithecanthropus ever went monkey."

[00:23:24] She turned abruptly away. But she glanced at him often during that day. He continued to busy himself with those activities which make Med Ship life consistent with retained sanity.

[00:23:37] 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?"

[00:23:50] "No," said Calhoun.

[00:23:53] "Why?"

[00:23:54] "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."

[00:024:24] "Are you friendly to blueskins?" she asked uncertainly.

[00:24:28] "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 left."

[00:24:53] 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!

[00:25:32] 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—I didn't really believe I would live to get to Orede."

[00:25:48] Calhoun raised his eyebrows.

[00:25:51] "I wish I could tell you everything you want to know," she added regretfully. "I think you're ... really decent. But some thing..."

[00:26:01] 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—"

[00:26:36] She gasped and sprang to her feet. She snatched out the tiny blaster in her pocket. She pointed it waveringly at him.

[00:26:45] "I have to kill you!" she cried desperately. "I—I have to!"

[00:26:49] Calhoun reached out. She tugged despairingly at the blaster's trigger. Nothing happened. Before she could realize that she hadn't turned off the safety, Calhoun twisted the weapon from her fingers. He stepped back.

[00:27:04] "Good!" he said approvingly. "I'll give this back to you when we land. And thanks. Thanks very much!"

[00:27:12] She wrung her hands. Then she stared at him.

[00:27:16] "Thanks? When I tried to kill you?"

[00:27:20] "Of course!" said Calhoun. "I'd made guesses. I couldn't know that they were right. When you tried to kill me, you confirmed every one. Now, when we land on Orede I'm going to get you to try to put me in touch with your friends. It's going to be tricky, because they must be pretty well scared about that ship. But it's a highly desirable thing to get done!"

[00:27:46] He went to the ships' control board and sat down before it.

[00:27:51] "Twenty minutes to breakhour," he observed.



[00:27:53] Murgatroyd peered out of his little cubbyhole. His eyes were anxious. Tormals are amiable little creatures. During the days in overdrive, Calhoun had paid less than the usual amount of attention to Murgatroyd, while the girl was fascinating.

[00:28:08] They'd made friends, awkwardly on the girl's part, very pleasantly on Murgatroyd's. But only moments ago there had been bitter emotion in the air. Murgatroyd had fled to his cubbyhole to escape it. He was distressed. Now that there was silence again, he peered out unhappily.

[00:28:26] "Chee?" he queried plaintively. "Chee-chee-chee?"

[00:28:31] Calhoun said matter-of-factly, "It's all right, Murgatroyd. If we aren't blasted as we try to land, we should be able to make friends with everybody and get something accomplished."

[00:28:45] The statement was hopelessly inaccurate.

[00:28:51] This ends chapter two, episode two of *This World is Taboo* by Murray Leinster. Join us next time for the next exciting installment.

