



# Library podcast

## Virtual Thrilling Tales: *This World is Taboo* Chapter 7

[00:00:00] Welcome to Thrilling Tales: Seattle Public Library's Story Time for Grownups Virtual Edition. This is chapter seven, that is episode seven, of *This World is Taboo*, our eight part science-fiction pulp serial by Murray Leinster. I am your reader librarian, David Wright. Thrilling Tales typically happens twice each month at the Downtown Library, but of course we are not doing that now so we started this virtual program with this serial. When we last left our hero, the space doctor Calhoun, he had just landed on the plague planet of Dara and it appeared that he was going to be executed. And now, chapter seven of *This World is Taboo* by Murray Leinster.

[00:00:46] From the viewpoint of Darians, who were also blueskins, the decision of Calhoun's guilt and the decision to execute him were reasonable enough. Maril protested fiercely, and her testimony agreed with Calhoun's in every respect, but from a blueskin viewpoint their own statements were damning.

[00:01:05] Calhoun had taken four young astrogators to space. They were the only semiskilled space pilots Dara had. There were no fully qualified men. Calhoun had asked for them, and taken them out to emptiness, and there he had instructed them in modern guidance methods for ships of space.

[00:01:25] So far there was no disagreement. He'd proposed to make them more competent pilots; more capable of driving a ship to Orede, for example, to raid the enormous cattle herds there. And he'd had them drive the Med Ship to Weald, against which there could be no objection.

[00:01:42] But just before arrival he had tricked all four of them by giving them drugged coffee. He'd destroyed the lethal bacterial cultures they'd been ordered to dump on Weald. Then he'd sent the four student pilots off separately, so he and Maril claimed, in huge ships crammed with grain. But those ships were not to be believed in, anyhow.

[00:02:06] Nobody believed in shiploads of grain to be had for the taking. They did know that the only four partially experienced space pilots on Dara had been taken away and by Calhoun's own story sent out of the ship after they'd been drugged.

[00:02:23] Had they been trained, and had they been helped or even permitted to sow the seeds of plague on Weald, and had they come back prepared to pass on training to other men to handle other

space ships now feverishly being built in hidden places on Dara, then Dara might have a chance of survival.

[00:02:41] But a space battle with only partly trained pilots would be hazardous at best. With no trained pilots at all, it would be hopeless. So Calhoun, by his own story, appeared to have doomed every living being on Dara to massacre from the bombs of Weald.

[00:03:00] It was this last angle which destroyed any chance of anybody believing in such fairy-tale objects as ships loaded down with grain. Calhoun had shattered Dara's feeble hope of resistance. Weald had some ships and could build or buy others faster than Dara could hope to construct them.

[00:03:19] Equally important, Weald had a plenitude of experienced spacemen to man some ships fully and train the crews of others. If it had become desperately busy fighting plague, then a fleet to exterminate life on Dara would be delayed. Dara might have gained time at least to build ships which could ram their enemies and destroy them that way.

[00:03:41] But Calhoun had made it impossible. If he told the truth and Weald already had a fleet of huge ships which only needed to be emptied of grain and filled with guns and men, then Dara was doomed. But if he did not tell the truth it was equally doomed by his actions. So Calhoun would be killed.

[00:04:05] His execution was to take place in the open space of the landing-grid, with vision cameras transmitting the sight over all the blueskin planet. Half-starved men with grisly blue blotches on their skins, marched him to the center of the largest level space on the planet which was not desperately being cultivated. Their hatred showed in their expressions. Bitterness and fury surrounded Calhoun like a wall. Most of Dara would have liked to have seen him killed in a manner as atrocious as his crime, but no conceivable death would be satisfying.

[00:04:43] So the affair was coldly businesslike, with not even insults offered to him. He was left to stand alone in the very center of the landing-grid floor. There were a hundred blasters which would fire upon him at the same instant. He would not only be killed; he would be destroyed. He would be vaporized by the blue-white flames poured upon him.

[00:05:12] His death was remarkably close, nothing remaining but the order to fire, when loudspeakers from the landing-grid office froze everything. One of the grain ships from Weald had broken out of overdrive and its pilot was triumphantly calling for landing coordinates. The grid office relayed his call to loudspeaker circuits as the quickest way to get it on the communication system of the whole planet.

[00:05:40] "Calling ground," boomed the triumphant voice of the first of the student pilots Calhoun had trained. "Calling ground! Pilot Franz in captured ship requests coordinates for landing! Purpose of landing is to deliver half a million bushels of grain captured from the enemy!"

[00:05:59] At first, nobody dared believe it. But the pilot could be seen on vision. He was known. No blueskin would be left alive long enough to be used as a decoy by the men of Weald! Presently the giant ship on its second voyage to Dara—the first had been a generation ago, when it threatened death and destruction—appeared as a dark pinpoint in the sky. It came down and down, and presently it hovered over the center of the tarmac, where Calhoun composedly stood on the spot where he was to have been executed.

[00:06:35] The landing-grid crew shifted the ship to one side, and only then did Calhoun stroll in a leisurely fashion toward the Med Ship by the grid's metal-lace wall.

[00:06:48] The big ship touched ground, and its exit port revolved and opened, and the student pilot stood there grinning and heaving out handfuls of grain. There was a swarming, yelling, deliriously triumphant crowd, then, where only minutes before there'd been a mob waiting to rejoice when Calhoun's living body exploded into flame.

[00:07:10] They no longer hated Calhoun, but he had to fight his way to the Med Ship, nevertheless. He was surrounded by ecstatically admiring citizens of Dara. They shouted praise and rejoicing in his ears until he was half-deafened, and they almost tore his clothing from him in their desire to touch, to pat, to assure him of their gratitude and affection, minutes since they'd thirsted for his blood.

[00:07:36] Two hours after the first ship, a second landed. Dara went wild again. Four hours later still, the third arrived. The fourth came down to ground on the following day.

[00:07:49] When Calhoun faced the executive and cabinet of Dara for the second time his tone and manner were very dry.

[00:07:58] "Now," he said curtly, "I would like a few more astrogators to train. I think it likely that we can raid the Wealdian grain fleet one more time, and in so doing get the beginning of a fleet for defense. I insist, however, that it must not be used in combat. We might as well be sensible about this situation! After all, four shiploads of grain won't break the famine! They'll help a lot, but they're only the beginning of what's needed for a planetary population!"

[00:08:30] "How much grain can we hope for?" demanded a man with a blue mark covering all his chin.

[00:08:34] Calhoun told him.

[00:08:35] "How long before Weald can have a fleet overhead, dropping fusion bombs?" demanded another, grimly.

[00:08:43] Calhoun named a time. But then he said, "I think we can keep them from dropping bombs if we can get the grain fleet and some capable astrogators."

[00:08:54] "How?"

[00:08:55] He told them. It was not possible to tell the whole story of what he considered sensible behavior. An emotional program can be presented and accepted immediately. A plan of action which is actually intelligent, considering all elements of a situation, has to be accepted piecemeal. Even so, the military men growled.

[00:09:16] "We've plenty of heavy elements," said one. "If we'd used our brains, we'd have more bombs than Weald can hope for! We could turn that whole planet into a smoking cinder!"

[00:09:26] "Which," said Calhoun acidly, "would give you some satisfaction but not an ounce of food! And food's more important than satisfaction. Now, I'm going to take off for Weald again. I'll want somebody to build an emergency device for my ship, and I'll want the four pilots I've trained and twenty more candidates. And I'd like to have some decent rations! The last trip brought back two million bushels of grain. You can certainly spare adequate food for twenty men for a few days!"

[00:10:00] It took some time to get the special device constructed, but the Med Ship lifted in two days more. The device for which it had waited was simply a preventive of the disaster overtaking the ship from the mine on Orede. It was essentially a tank of liquid oxygen, packed in the space from which stores had been taken away. When the ship's air supply was pumped past it, first moisture and then CO<sub>2</sub> froze out.

[00:10:22] Then the air flowed over the liquefied oxygen at a rate to replace the CO<sub>2</sub> with more useful breathing material. Then the moisture was restored to the air as it warmed again. For so long as the oxygen lasted, fresh air for any number of men could be kept purified and breathable. The Med Ship's normal equipment could take care of no more than ten. But with this it could journey to Weald with almost any complement on board.

[00:10:51] Maril stayed on Dara when the Med Ship left. Murgatroyd protested shrilly when he discovered her about to be closed out by the closing airlock.

[00:11:00] "Chee!" he said indignantly. "Chee! Chee!"

[00:11:03] "No," said Calhoun. "We'll be crowded enough anyhow. We'll see her later."

[00:11:09] He nodded to one of the first four student pilots, who crisply made contact with the landing-grid office, and very efficiently supervised as the grid took the ship up. The other three of the four first-trained men explained every move to sub-classes assigned to each. Calhoun moved about, listening and making certain that the instruction was up to standard.

[00:11:32] He felt queer, acting as the supervisor of an educational institution in space. He did not like it. There were twenty-four men beside himself crowded into the Med Ship's small interior. They got in each other's way. They trampled on each other. There was always somebody eating, and always

somebody sleeping, and there was no need whatever for the background tape to keep the ship from being intolerably quiet. But the air system worked well enough, except once when the reheating unit quit and the air inside the ship went down below freezing before the trouble could be found and corrected.

[00:12:06] The journey to Weald, this time, took seven days because of the training program in effect. Calhoun bit his nails over the delay. But it was necessary for each of the students to make his own line-ups on Weald's sun, and compute distances, and for each of them to practise maneuverings that would presently be called for. Calhoun hoped desperately that preparations for active warfare did not move fast on Weald.

[00:12:34] He believed, however, that in the absence of direct news from Dara, Wealdian officials would take the normal course of politics. They had proclaimed the ship from Orede an attack from Dara. Therefore, they would specialize on defensive measures before plumping for offense. They'd get patrol ships out to spot invasion ships long before they worked on a fleet to destroy the blueskins. It would meet the public demand for defense.

[00:13:03] Calhoun was right. The Med Ship made its final approach to Weald under Calhoun's own control. He'd made brightness-measurements on his previous journey and he used them again. They would not be strictly accurate, because a sunspot could knock all meaning out of any reading beyond two decimal places. But the first breakout was just far enough from the Wealdian system for Calhoun to be able to pick out its planets with the electron telescope at maximum magnification. He could aim for Weald itself, allowing, of course, for the lag in the apparent motion of its image because of the limited speed of light. He tried the briefest of overdrive hops, and came out within the solar system and well inside any watching patrol.

[00:13:49] That was pure fortune. It continued. He'd broken through the screen of guard ships in undetectable overdrive. He was within half an hour's solar system drive of the grain fleet. There was no alarm, at first. Of course radars spotted the Med Ship as an object, but nobody paid attention. It was not headed for Weald. It was probably assumed to be a guard boat itself. Such mistakes do happen.

[00:14:15] Again from the storage space from which supplies had been removed, Calhoun produced vacuum suits. The four first students went out, each escorting a less-accustomed neophyte and all fastened firmly together with space ropes. They warmed the interiors of four ships and went on to others. Presently there were eight ships making ready for an interstellar journey, each with a scared but resolute new pilot familiarizing himself with its controls. There were sixteen ships. Twenty. Twenty-three.

[00:14:52] A guard ship came humming out from Weald. It would be armed, of course. It came droning, droning up the forty-odd thousand miles from the planet. Calhoun swore. He could not call his students and tell them what was toward. The guard ship would overhear. He could not trust

untried young men to act rationally if they were unaware and the guard ship arrived and matter-of-factly attempted to board one of them.

[00:15:24] Then he was inspired. He called Murgatroyd, placed him before the communicator, and set it at voice-only transmission. This was familiar enough, to Murgatroyd. He'd often seen Calhoun use a communicator.

[00:15:40] "Chee!" shrilled Murgatroyd. "Chee-chee!"

[00:15:45] A startled voice came out of the speaker: "What's that?"

[00:15:49] "Chee," said Murgatroyd zestfully.

[00:15:53] The communicator was talking to him. Murgatroyd adored three things, in order. One was Calhoun. The second was coffee. The third was pretending to converse like a human being. The speaker said explosively, "You there, identify yourself!"

[00:16:09] "Chee-chee-chee-chee!" observed Murgatroyd. He wriggled with pleasure and added, reasonably enough, "Chee!"

[00:16:18] The communicator bawled, "Calling ground! Calling ground! Listen to this! Something that ain't human's talking at me on a communicator! Listen in an' tell me what to do!"

[00:16:28] Murgatroyd interposed with another shrill, "Chee!"

[00:16:32] Then Calhoun pulled the Med Ship slowly away from the clump of still-lifeless grain ships. It was highly improbable that the guard boat would carry an electron telescope. Most likely it would have only an echo-radar, and so could determine only that an object of some sort moved of its own accord in space. Calhoun let the Med Ship accelerate. That would be final evidence. The grain ships were between Weald and its sun. Even electron telescopes on the ground—and electron telescopes were ultimately optical telescopes with electronic amplification—could not get a good image of the ship through sunlit atmosphere.

[00:17:11] "Chee?" asked Murgatroyd solicitously. "Chee-chee-chee?"

[00:17:16] "Is it blueskins?" shakily demanded the voice from the guard boat. "Ground! Ground! Is it blueskins?"

[00:17:24] A heavy, authoritative voice came in with much greater volume. "That's no human voice," it said harshly. "Approach its ship and send back an image. Don't fire first unless it heads for ground."

[00:17:38] The guard ship swerved and headed for the Med Ship. It was still a very long way off.

[00:17:44] "Chee-chee," said Murgatroyd encouragingly.

[00:17:47] Calhoun changed the Med Ship's course. The guard ship changed course too. Calhoun let it draw nearer, but only a little. He led it away from the fleet of grain ships.

[00:18:00] He swung his electron telescope on them. He saw a spacesuited figure outside one, safely roped, however. It was easy to guess that someone had meant to return to the Med Ship for orders or to make a report, and found the Med Ship gone. He'd go back inside and turn on a communicator.

[00:18:17] "Chee!" said Murgatroyd.

[00:18:20] The heavy voice boomed. "You there! This is a human-occupied world! If you come in peace, cut your drive and let our guard ship approach!"

[00:18:31] Murgatroyd replied in an interested but doubtful tone. The booming voice bellowed. Another voice of higher authority took over. Murgatroyd was entranced that so many people wanted to talk to him. He made what for him was practically an oration. The last voice spoke persuasively and suavely.

[00:18:52] "Chee-chee-chee-chee," said Murgatroyd.

[00:18:58] One of the grain ships flickered and ceased to be. It had gone into overdrive. Another. And another. Suddenly they began to flick out of sight by twos and threes.

[00:19:11] "Chee," said Murgatroyd with a note of finality.

[00:19:14] The last grain ship vanished.

[00:19:18] "Calling guard ship," said Calhoun dryly. "This is Med Ship Aesclipus Twenty. I called here a couple of weeks ago. You've been talking to my tormal, Murgatroyd."

[00:19:30] A pause. A blank pause. Then profanity of deep and savage intemperance.

[00:19:37] "I've been on Dara," said Calhoun.

[00:19:41] Dead silence fell.

[00:19:43] "There's a famine there," said Calhoun deliberately. "So the grain ships you've had in orbit have been taken away by men from Dara—blueskins if you like—to feed themselves and their families. They've been dying of hunger and they don't like it."

[00:20:03] There was a single burst of the unprintable. Then the formerly suave voice said waspishly, "Well? The Med Service will hear of your interference!"

[00:20:14] "Yes," said Calhoun. "I'll report it myself. I have a message for you. Dara is ready to pay for every ounce of grain and for the ships it was stored in. They'll pay in heavy metals—irridium, uranium, that sort of thing."

[00:20:28] The suave voice fairly curdled.

[00:20:31] "As if we'd allow anything that was ever on Dara to touch ground here!"

[00:20:37] "Ah! But there can be sterilization. To begin with metals, uranium melts at 1150° centigrade, and tungsten at 3370° and irridium at 2350°. You could load such things and melt them down in space and then tow them home. And you can actually sterilize a lot of other useful materials!"

[00:20:58] The suave voice was infuriated: "I'll report this! You'll suffer for this!"

[00:21:04] Calhoun said pleasantly, "I'm sure that what I say is being recorded, so that I'll add that it's perfectly practical for Wealdians to land on Dara, take whatever property they think wise—to pay for damage done by blueskins, of course—and get back to Wealdian ships with absolutely no danger of carrying contagion. If you'll make sure the recording's clear...."

[00:21:31] He described, clearly and specifically, exactly how a man could be outfitted to walk into any area of any conceivable contagion, do whatever seemed necessary in the way of looting—but Calhoun did not use the word—and then return to his fellows with no risk whatever of bringing back infection. He gave exact details.

[00:21:54] Then he said, "My radar says you've four ships converging on me to blast me out of space. I sign off."

[00:22:05] The Med Ship disappeared from normal space, and entered that improbably stressed area of extension which it formed about itself and in which physical constants were wildly strange. For one thing, the speed of light in overdrive-stressed space had not been measured yet. It was too high. For another, a ship could travel very many times 186,000 miles per second in overdrive.

[00:22:31] The Med Ship did just that. There was nobody but Calhoun and Murgatroyd on board. There was companionable silence, with only the small threshold-of-perception sounds which one did not often notice.

[00:22:44] Calhoun luxuriated in regained privacy. For seven days he'd had twenty-four other human beings crowded into the two cabins of the ship, with never so much as one yard of space between himself and someone else. One need not be snobbish to wish to be alone sometimes! Murgatroyd licked his whiskers thoughtfully.

[00:23:05] "I hope," said Calhoun, "that things work out right. But they may remember on Dara that I'm responsible for some ten million bushels of grain reaching them. Maybe, just possibly, they'll listen to me and act sensibly. After all, there's only one way to break a famine. Not with ten million bushels for a whole planet! And certainly not with bombs!"

[00:23:30] Driving direct, without pausing for practising, the Med Ship could arrive at Dara in a little more than five days. Calhoun looked forward to relaxation. As a beginning he made ready to give himself an adequate meal for the first time since first landing on Dara. Then, presently, he sat down to a double meal of Darian famine-rations, which were far from appetizing. But there wasn't anything else on board.

[00:23:55] He had some pleasure later, though, envisioning what went on in the normal, non-overdrive universe. Suns flared, and comets hurtled on their way, and clouds formed and dropped down rain, and all sorts of celestial and meteorological phenomena took place. On Weald, obviously, there would be purest panic.

[00:24:17] The vanishing of the grain fleet wouldn't be charged against twenty-four men. A Darian fleet would be suspected, and with the suspicion would come terror, and with terror a governmental crisis. Then there'd be a frantic seizure of any craft that could take to space, and the agitated improvisation of a space fleet.

[00:24:37] But besides that, biological-warfare technicians would examine Calhoun's instructions for equipment by which armed men could be landed on a plague-stricken planet and then safely taken off again. Military and governmental officials would come to the eminently sane conclusion that while Calhoun could not well take active measures against blueskins, as a sane and proper citizen of the galaxy he would be on the side of law and order and propriety and justice—in short, of Weald. So they ordered sample anticontagion suits made according to Calhoun's directions, and they had them tested. They worked admirably.

[00:25:18] On Dara, while Calhoun journeyed placidly back to it, grain was distributed lavishly, and everybody on the planet had their cereal ration almost doubled. It was still not a comfortable ration, but the relief was great. There was considerable gratitude felt for Calhoun, which as usual included a lively anticipation of further favors to come. Maril was interviewed repeatedly, as the person best able to discuss him, and she did his reputation no harm. That was all that happened on Dara....

[00:25:54] No. There was something else. A very curious thing, too. There was a spread of mild symptoms which nobody could exactly call a disease. They lasted only a few hours. A person felt slightly feverish, and ran a temperature which peaked at 30.9° centigrade, and drank more water than usual. Then his temperature went back to normal and he forgot all about it. There have always been such trivial epidemics. They are rarely recorded, because few people think to go to a doctor. That was the case here.

[00:26:31] Calhoun looked ahead a little, too. Presently the fleet of grain ships would arrive and unload and lift again for Orede, and this time they would make an infinity of slaughter among wild cattle herds, and bring back incredible quantities of fresh-slaughtered frozen beef. Almost everybody would get to taste meat again, which would be most gratifying.

[00:26:54] Then, the industries of Dara would labor at government-required tasks. An astonishing amount of fissionable material would be fashioned into bombs—a concession by Calhoun—and plastic factories would make an astonishing number of plastic sag-suits. And large shipments of heavy metals in ingots would be made to the planet's capital city and there would be some guns and minor items.

[00:27:19] Perhaps somebody could have predicted any of these items in advance, but it was unlikely that anyone did. Nobody but Calhoun, however, would ever have put them together and hoped very urgently that things would work out. He could see a promising total result. In fact, in the Med Ship hurtling through space, on the fourth day of his journey, he thought of an improvement that could be made in the sum of all those happenings when they got mixed together.

[00:27:49] He got back to Dara. Maril came to the Med Ship. Murgatroyd greeted her with enthusiasm.

[00:27:56] "Something strange has happened," said Maril, very much subdued. "I told you that sometimes blueskin markings fade out on children, and then neither they nor their children ever have markings again."

[00:28:10] "Yes," said Calhoun. "I remember that you told me."

[00:28:13] "And you were reminded of a group of viruses on Tralee. You said they only took hold of people in terribly bad physical condition, but then they could be passed on from mother to child, until sometimes they died out."

[00:28:28] Calhoun blinked.

[00:28:29] "Yes?"

[00:28:30] "Korvan," said Maril very carefully. "Has worked out an idea that that's what happens to the blueskin markings on Darians. He thinks that people almost dead of the plague could get the virus, and if they recovered from the plague pass the virus on and be blueskins."

[00:28:50] "Interesting," said Calhoun, noncommittally.

[00:28:53] "And when we went to Weald," said Maril very carefully indeed, "you were working with some culture material. You wrote quite a lot about it in the ship's log. You gave yourself an injection.

Remember? And Murgatroyd? You wrote down your temperature, and Murgatroyd's?" She moistened her lips. "You said that if infection passed between us, something would be very infectious indeed?"

[00:29:19] "This is a long discussion," said Calhoun. "Does it arrive at a point?"

[00:29:24] "It does," said Maril. "Thousands of people are having their pigment-spots fade away. Not only children but grownups. And Korvan has found out that it always seems to happen after a day when they felt feverish and very thirsty, and then felt all right again. You tried out something that made you feverish and thirsty. I had it too, in the ship. Korvan thinks there's been an epidemic of something that is obliterating the blue spots on everybody that catches it. There are always trivial epidemics that nobody notices. Korvan's found evidence of one that's making blueskin no longer a word with any meaning."

[00:30:04] "Remarkable!" said Calhoun.

[00:30:07] "Did you do it?" asked Maril. "Did you start a harmless epidemic that wipes out the virus that makes blueskins?"

[00:30:16] Calhoun said in feigned astonishment, "How can you think such a thing, Maril?"

[00:30:22] "Because I was there," said Maril. She said, somehow desperately, "I know you did it! But the question is, are you going to tell? When people find they're not blueskins any longer, when there's no such thing as a blueskin any longer, will you tell them why?"

[00:30:42] "Naturally not," said Calhoun. "Why?" Then he guessed. "Has Korvan—"

[00:30:48] "He thinks," said Maril, "that he thought it up all by himself. He's found the proof. He's very proud. I'd have to tell him how the ideas got into his head if you were going to tell. And he'd be ashamed and angry."

[00:31:03] Calhoun considered, staring at her.

[00:31:07] "How it happened doesn't matter," he said at last. "The idea of anybody doing it deliberately would be disturbing, too. It shouldn't get about. So it seems much the best thing for Korvan to discover what's happened to the blueskin pigment, and how it happened. But not why."

[00:31:26] She read his face carefully.

[00:31:28] "You aren't doing it as a favor to me," she decided. "You'd rather it was that way."

[00:31:34] She looked at him for a long time, until he squirmed. Then she nodded and went away. An hour later the Wealdian space fleet was reported massed in space and driving for Dara.



[00:31:52] This ends chapter seven of This World is Taboo by Murray Leinster. Join us next time for the eighth and final episode of this pulp science fiction classic.

