

CLASSICS TO GO PARIAH PLANET



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CHAPTER I

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 wavelengths, 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 Aesclepus 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 monstrosity 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