

# OLE MOTHER METHUSELAH



**René Lafayette**



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ILLUSTRATED BY CARTIER

*Old Doc had his hands full. The attendant had made a mistake, it seemed—raising human embryos in lion-embryo serums produced the most inhuman bratlings!*

BUCKETING along at a hundred and fifty light-years, just entering the Earth Galaxy, the *Morgue*, decrepit pride of the Universal Medical Society, was targeted with a strange appeal.

ANY UMS SHIP ANY UMS SHIP ANY DOCTOR ANYONE EMERG EMERG EMERG PLEASE CONTACT PLEASE CONTACT UNITED STATES EXPERIMENTAL STATION THREE THOUSAND AND TWO PLANET GORGON BETA URSUS MAJOR. RELAY RELAY EMERG.

Ole Doc was in his salon, boots on a gold-embroidered chair, head reclined against a panel depicting the Muses crowning a satyr, musing upon the sad and depleted state of his wine "cellar" which jingled and rattled, all two bottles of it, on a shelf above the coffeemaker. He heard the tape clicking but he had heard tapes click before. He heard it clicking the distinctive three dots of an emergency call but he had heard that before also.

"Hippocrates!" he bellowed. And after a silence of two days the loudness and suddenness of this yell brought the little slave out of his galley as though shot from a gun. Four-armed, antennaed and indestructible, little Hippocrates was not easily dismayed. But now he was certain that they were hard upon a dead star—nay, already struck.



"Master?"

"Hippocrates," said Ole Doc, "we've only got two bottles of wine left!"

Hippocrates saw that the ship was running along on all drives, that the instrument panel, which he could see from where he stood in the passage, half a ship length forward from the salon, was burning green on all registers, that they were on standard speed and that, in short, all was well. He wiped a slight smear of mustard and gypsum from his mouth with a guilty hand—for his own supplies of delicacy were so low that he had stolen some of Ole Doc's plaster for casts.

"The formula for making wine," began Hippocrates with his phonograph record-wise mind, "consists of procuring grapes. The grapes are then smashed to relieve them of juice and the juice is strained and set aside to ferment. At the end of—"

"We don't have any grapes," said Ole Doc. "We don't have any fuel. We have no food beyond ham and powdered eggs. All my shirts are in ribbons—"

"If you would stop writing on the cuffs," said Hippocrates, "I might—"

"—and I have not been fishing for a year. See what's on that tape. If it's good fishing and if they grow grapes, we'll land."

Hippocrates knew something had been bothering him. It was the triple click of the recording receiver. Paper was coming out of it in a steady stream. *Click, click, click.* Emerg. Emerg. Emerg!

Ole Doc looked musingly at the Muses and slowly began to relax. That was a good satyr Joccini had done, even if it was uncomfortably like—

"United States Experimental Station on Gorgon Beta Ursus Major," said Hippocrates. "Direct call to UMS, master." He looked abstractedly at the dark port beyond which the stars flew by. Through his mind was running the "Star Pilot for Ursus Major." Pie never forgot anything, Hippocrates, and the eighteen thousand close-packed pages whirred by, stopped, turned back a leaf and then appeared in his mind. "It's jungle and rivers.. Wild game. Swamps." And he brightened. "No women."

"What?" said Ole Doc incuriously.

"Gorgon of Beta Ursus Major. Lots of fish. Lots of them. And wine. Lots of fish and wine."

Ole Doc got up, stretched and went forward. He punched a pneumatic navigator and after divers whirs and hisses a light flashed on a screen giving him a new course departing from a point two light-years in advance of the reading. He could not turn any sooner. He settled himself under the familiar controls, disconnected the robot and yawned.

Two days later they were landing on Field 1,987,806 United States Army Engineers, Unmanned, half an hour's jaunt from United States Experimental Station 3,002.

Ole Doc let Hippocrates slide the ladder out and stood for a moment in the air lock, black kit in hand. The jungle was about three hundred feet above the edges of the field, a wild and virulent jungle, dark green with avid growing and yellow with its rotting dead. For a little space there was complete silence while the chattering gusts of the landing jets echoed out and left utter stillness. And then the jungle came awake once more with screams and catcalls and a ground-shaking *aa-um*.

Hippocrates skittered back up the ladder. Pie stopped at the top. Again sounded the *aa-um* and the very plates of the old ship shook with it. Hippocrates went inside and came back with a hundred and ten millimeter turret cannon cradled comfortably over his two right arms.

Ole Doc threw a switch which put an alpha force field around the ship to keep wild animals off and, with a final glance at the tumbled wrecks of buildings which had once housed a military post, descended the ladder and strolled after Plippocrates into the thick growth.

Now and then Hippocrates cocked an antenna at the towering branches overhead and stopped suspiciously. But he could see nothing threatening and he relieved his feelings occasionally by sending a big gout of fire from the 110 to sizzle them out a straight trail and calcine the mud to brick hardness.

*Aa-um* shook the jungle. And each time it sounded the myriad of animal and bird noises fell still for a moment.

Hippocrates was about to send another shot ahead when Ole Doc stopped

him. An instant later a gray-faced Irishman with wild welcome in his eyes broke through the sawtrees to clasp Ole Doc in emotional arms.

"I'm O'Hara. Thank God I got through. Receiver's been out for six months. Didn't know if I was getting a signal out. Thank God you've come!" And he closed for another embrace but Ole Doc forestalled him by calling attention to the *aa-um* which had just sounded once more.

"Oh that!" said O'Hara. "That's a catbeast. Big and worry enough when I've got time to worry about them. Oh, for the good old days when all I had to worry about was catbeast getting my cattle and mesohawks my sheep. But now—" And he started off ahead of them at a dead run, beckoning them to hasten after him.

They had two close calls from swooping birds as big as ancient bombers and almost took a header over a tree trunk ten feet through which turned out to be a snake rising from the ooze with big, hungry teeth. But they arrived in a moment at the station all in one piece.

"You've got to understand," panted O'Hara when he found Ole Doc wouldn't run any faster, "that I'm the only man here. I have some Achnoids, of course, but you would not call those octopi company even if they can talk and do manual labor. But I've been here on Gorgon for fifteen years and I never had anything like this happen before. I am supposed to make this planet habitable in case Earth ever wants a colony planted. This is an agricultural and animal husbandry station. I'm supposed to make things easy for any future colonist. But no colonists have come so far and I don't blame them. This Savannah here is the coolest place on the planet and yet it's hot enough. But I haven't got an assistant or anyone and so when this happened—"

"Well, come on, man," said Ole Doc. "What *has* happened."

"You'll see!" cried O'Hara, getting wild-eyed with excitement and concern once more. "Come along."

They entered a compound which looked like a fortress. It sat squarely in the center of a huge grassy field, the better to have its animal targets in the open when they attacked and the better to graze its livestock. As they passed through the gate, O'Hara carefully closed it behind him.

Ole Doc looked incuriously at the long lines of sheds, at the helio motors above each and the corrals where fat cattle grazed. A greenhouse caught his interest because he saw that an Achmoid, who more closely resembled a blue pinwheel than a man, was weeding valuable medicinal herbs from out of, as Ole Doc saw it, worthless carrots. But O'Hara dragged him on through the noisy heat and dust of the place until they stood at Shed Thirteen.

"This is the lion shed," said O'Hara.

"Interesting," said Ole Doc disinterestedly.

O'Hara opened the door. A long row of vats lined each side of the passage and the sound of trickling fluid was soothing as it ran from one to the next. A maze of intricate glass tubing interconnected one vat to the next and a blank-beaked Achmoid was going around twiddling valves and reading temperatures.

"Hm-m-m," said Ole Doc. "Artificial birthing vats."

"Yes, yes. To be sure!" cried O'Hara in wild agreement, happy that he was getting some understanding. "That's the way we get our stock. Earth sends me sperm and ovums in static ray preservation and I put them into the vats and bring them to maturity. Then we take them out of the vats and put them on artificial udders and we have calves and lambs and such. But this is the lion shed."

"The what?" said Ole Doc.

"For the lions," said O'Hara. "We find that carefully selected and properly evolved Earth lions kill catbeasts and several other kinds of vermin. I've got the deserts to the south of here crawling with lions and some day we'll be rid of catbeasts."

"And then you'll have lions," said Ole Doc.

"Oh no," said O'Hara impatiently. "Then we'll bacteriacide the lions with a plague. Which is to say I will. There isn't any we. I've been here for fifteen years—"

"Well, maybe you've been here for fifteen years," said Ole Doc without much sympathy, "but why am I here?"

"Oh. It's the last cargo. They send my stuff up here in tramps. Unreliable