

# SATURN

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# THE HOUSE LORDS

*The inhabitants of that planet in Argo Navis were not only human, they were English-speaking, Earth-type humans! But instead of making it easier to get along with them, their culture was the most incomprehensible in the universe—until the explorers returned home!*

by JACK VANCE

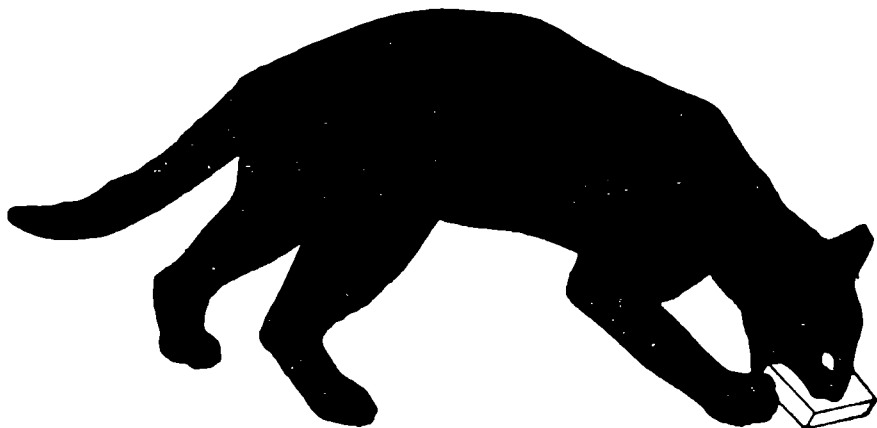
THE TWO men, with not a word spoken, had become very disturbed. Caffridge, the host, rose to his feet, took quick steps back and forth across the room. He went to the window, looked into the sky, toward the distant star BGD 1169. The guest, Richard Emerson, was affected to an even greater degree. He sat back in his chair, face white, mouth loose,

eyes wide and glistening.

Nothing had been said and there was nothing visible to explain their emotion. They sat in an ordinary suburban living room, notable only for a profusion of curios, oddities and trinkets hanging on the walls.

At a scratching sound, Caffridge turned from the window. He called sharply, "Sarvis!"

The black and white cat,



sharpening its claws on a carved column of exotic wood, laid its ears back, but continued to scratch.

"You rascal!" Caffridge picked up the cat, hustled him outside through the animal's special door. He returned to Emerson. "We seem to be thinking the same thought."

Emerson was gripping the arms of his chair. "How did I miss it before?" he muttered.

"It's a strange business," said Caffridge. "I don't know what we should do."

"It's out of my hands now, thank heaven!" said Emerson.

Caffridge picked up the small white box which contained Emerson's report. "Do you want to come along with me?"

Emerson shook his head. "I've nothing more to say. I don't want to see that again." He nodded toward the box.

"Very well," said Caffridge gloomily. "I'll show this to the Board tonight. After that..."

Emerson smiled, weary and skeptical. "After that, what?"

**T**HE ASTROGRAPHICAL SOCIETY functioned as a nonprofit organization, devoted to extraterrestrial research and exploration. The dues paid in by a million active members were augmented by revenue

from special patents and grants, licenses and counseling fees, with the result that over the years the Society had become very wealthy. A dozen space-ships carried the blue and green Astrographical chevron to remote places; the monthly publication was studied by school children and savants alike; the Astrographical Museum housed a wonderful melange of objects gathered across the universe.

In a specially equipped cupola on the roof of the museum, the Board of Directors met once a month to transact business and to watch and hear vitaliscope reports from research teams. Theodore Caffridge, Chairman of the Board, arriving at the meeting, dropped the box containing Team Commander Richard Emerson's report into the vitaliscope mechanism. He stood silently, a tall somber figure, waiting while conversation around the table died.

"Gentlemen," said Caffridge in a dull monotone, "I have already examined this report. It is the strangest matter of my experience. I am seriously disturbed, and I may remark that Commander Emerson shares my feeling."

He paused. The Directors looked at him curiously.

"Come, Caffridge, don't be mysterious!"

"Let's hear it, Theodore!"

Caffridge smiled the faintest, most remote smile possible. "The report is here; you can see for yourselves."

He touched a switch; the walls of the room dissolved into gray mist; colors swirled and cleared. The Board of Directors became a cluster of invisible eyes and ears in the cabin of the spaceship *Gaea*. Their vantage point was the recording globe at the peak of Emerson's helmet. They saw what he saw, heard what he heard.

Emerson's voice came from a speaker. "We are in orbit over Planet Two of star BGD one-one-six-nine, in Argo Navis Four. We were attracted here by a series of pulses radiating in the C-three phase. These would seem to indicate a highly organized technical civilization, so naturally we stopped to investigate."

The images around the walls of the room shifted as Emerson stepped up into the control pit. Through the observation port the Directors could see a world swinging below, in the full light of an invisible sun.

Emerson detailed the physical characteristics of the

world, which resembled those of Earth. "The atmosphere seems breathable; there is vegetation roughly comparable to our own."

Emerson approached the telescreen; again the images around the walls shifted. "The signals had led us to expect some sort of intelligent occupancy. We were not disappointed. The autochthons live, not in organized settlements, but in isolated dwellings. For lack of a better word, we've been calling them palaces." Emerson adjusted a dial on the console; the view on the telescreen expanded enormously and the Directors were looking into a forest as dense as a jungle. The view shifted across the treetops to a clearing about a mile in diameter. The "palace" occupied the center of the clearing—a dozen tall walls, steep and high as cliffs, joined apparently at random. They were constructed of some shimmering metalloïd substance, and open to the sky. No portals or apertures were visible.

"That's about all the detail I can pick up from this altitude," came Emerson's voice. "Notice the absence of roof, the apparent lack of interior furnishing. It hardly seems a dwelling. Notice also how the

clearing is landscaped—like a formal garden.”

He backed away from the telescreen; the Directors once more sat in the cabin of the *Gaea*. “We have been broadcasting international symbols in all bands,” said Emerson. “So far there has been no response. I think that we will set down in that clearing. There is an element of risk attached, but I believe that a race apparently so sophisticated will neither be surprised nor shocked by the appearance of a strange spaceship.”

**T**HE *GAEA* settled into the atmosphere of BGD 1169-2, and the hull shivered to the slur of the thin gas whipping past.

Emerson spoke into the vitaliscope pickup, noting that the ship hovered above the area previously observed and was about to land.

The bumpers struck solid ground. There was a momentary fluctuation as the automatic stabilizers took hold; then a sense of anchorage. Automatic switches cut off impulsion; the half-heard whine died down the scale into silence. The crew stood at the observation posts, staring out over the clearing.

At the center rose the palace—tall planes of glistening metalloid. Even from this close view, no openings, no windows, no doors or vents could be seen.

The grounds surrounding the palace were carefully tended. Avenues of white-trunked trees held square black leaves, large as trays, turned up to the sun. There were irregular beds of black moss, feathery maroon ferns, fluffy pink and white growths like cotton candy. In the background rose the forest; a tangle of blue-green trees and broad-leaved shrubs, red, black, gray, and yellow.

Inside the *Gaea* the crew stood by the ports, ready to depart at any sign of hostility.

The palace remained quiet.

Half an hour passed. A small shape appeared briefly outside the wall of the palace. Cope, the young third officer, saw it first and called to Emerson. “Look there!”

Emerson focused the telescopic bull’s-eye. “It’s a child—a *human* child!”

The crew came to stare. Intelligent life among the stars was a rarity; to find such life in the human mold was cause for astonishment.

Emerson increased the magnification of the telescopic

pane. "It's a boy, about seven or eight," he said. "He's looking at us, but he doesn't seem particularly interested."

The child turned back to the palace, and disappeared. Emerson uttered a soft ejaculation. "Did you see that?"

"What happened?" asked Wilhelm, the big blond second officer.

"He walked through the wall! As if it were air!"

Time passed; there was no further show of life. The crew fidgeted. "Why don't they show some interest?" complained Swett, the steward. "Even the kids walk away."

Emerson shook his head in puzzlement. "Spaceships certainly don't drop down every day."

Wilhelm suddenly called out, "There's more of them—two, three, six—a whole confounded tribe!"

**THEY** CAME from the forest, quietly, almost stealthily, singly and in pairs, men and women, until a dozen stood near the ship. They wore smocks woven of coarse fiber, crude leather shoes with flaring tops. At their belts hung daggers of several sizes and complicated little devices built of wood and twisted gut. They

were a hard-bitten lot, with heavy-boned faces and glinting eyes. They walked with a careful bend to the knee, which gave them a furtive aspect. They kept the ship between themselves and the palace at all times, as if anxious to escape observation.

Emerson said, "I can't understand it. These aren't just humanoid types; they're human in every respect!" He looked across to where Boyd, the biologist, was finishing his final tests. "What's the story?"

"Clean bill of health," said Boyd. "No dangerous pollen, no air-borne proteides, nothing remarkable in any way."

"I'm going to step outside," said Emerson.

Wilhelm protested, "They look untrustworthy and they're armed."

"I'll take a chance," said Emerson. "If they were hostile, I don't think they'd expose themselves."

Wilhelm was not convinced. "You never can tell what a strange race has in mind."

"Nevertheless," said Emerson, "I'm going out. You fellows cover me from the gun blisters. Also stand by the engines, in case we want to leave in a hurry."

"Are you going out alone?" Wilhelm asked dubiously.

"There's no point risking two lives."

Wilhelm's square raw-bones face took on a mulish set. "I'll go out with you. Two eyes see better than one."

Emerson laughed. "I've already got two eyes. Besides, you're second in command; your place is here in the ship."

Cope, the young third officer, slender and dark, hardly out of his teens, spoke. "I'd like to go out with you."

"Very well, Cope," said Emerson. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later the two men stepped out of the ship, descended the ramp, stood on the soil of BGD 1169-2. The men and women from the forest still stood behind the ship, peering from time to time toward the palace. When Emerson and Cope appeared, they drew together, ready for either attack, defense or flight. Two of them fingered the wooden contrivances at their belts, which Emerson saw to be dart catapults. But otherwise there was no motion, friendly or otherwise.

The spacemen halted twenty feet distant. Emerson raised his hand, smiled in what he

hoped to be a friendly manner. "Hello."

They stared at him, then began muttering among themselves. Emerson and Cope moved a step or two closer; the voices became audible. A lank, gray-haired man, who seemed to wield a degree of authority, spoke with peevish energy, as if refuting nonsense. "No, no—impossible for them to be Freeman!"

The gnarled, beady-eyed man to whom he spoke retorted, "Impossible? What do you take them for, then, if not Freeman?"

Emerson and Cope stared in amazement. These men spoke English!

Someone else remarked, "They're not House Lords! Who ever saw House Lords like these!"

A fourth voice was equally definite. "And it's a certainty that they're not servants."

"All of you talk in circles," snapped one of the women. "Why don't you ask them and be done with it?"

English! The accent was blurred, the intonation unusual, but the language, nonetheless, was their own! Emerson and Cope came a step closer; the forest people fell silent, and shifted their feet nervously.

Emerson spoke. "I am Robert Emerson," he said. "This is Howard Cope. Who are you people?"

The gray-haired chief surveyed them with crafty impudence. "Who are we? We're Freemen, as you must know very well. What do you here? What House are you from?"

Emerson said, "We're from Earth."

"Earth?"

Emerson looked around the blank faces. "You don't know of Earth?"

"No."

"But you speak an Earth language!"

The chief grinned. "How else can men speak?"

Emerson laughed weakly. "There are a number of other languages."

The chief shook his head skeptically. "I can't believe that."

Emerson and Cope exchanged glances of bewildered amusement. "Who lives in the palace?" Emerson asked.

The chief seemed incredulous at Emerson's ignorance. "The House Lords, naturally. Genaro, Hespior and the rest."

Emerson considered the tall walls, which seemed, on the whole, ill-adapted to human re-

quirements. "They are men, like ourselves?"

The chief laughed jeeringly. "If you would call such luxurious creatures men! We tolerate them only for their females." From the men of the group came a lascivious murmur. "The soft, sweet House Lord girls!"

The forest women hissed in anger. "They're as worthless as the men!" exclaimed one leathery old creature.

There was a sudden nervous motion at the outskirts of the group. "Here they come! The House Lords!"

Quickly, with long, bent-kneed strides, the savages retreated, and were gone into the forest.

**E**MERSON and Cope walked around the ship. Crossing the clearing in leisurely fashion were a young man, a young woman, a girl and the boy they had seen before. They were the most handsome beings the Earthmen had ever seen. The young man wore a skintight garment of emerald-green sequins, a complicated headdress of silver spines; the boy wore red trousers, a dark blue jacket and a long-billed blue cap. The young woman and the girl wore simple sheaths of white and blue, stretching with easy



elasticity as they walked. They were bareheaded and their pale hair fell flowing to their shoulders.

They halted a few yards from the ship, considered the spacemen with sober curiosity. Their expressions were identical; intent, intelligent, with a vague underlying hauteur. The young man glanced casually toward the forest, held up a small rod. A puff of darkness came forth and a black bubble wafted toward the forest, expanding enormously as it went.

From the forest came yelps of fear, the stumble of racing feet. The black bubble exploded among the trees, scattering hundreds of smaller black bubbles, which grew and exploded in their turn.

The sound of flight diminished in the distance. The four young House Lords, smiling a little, returned their attention to Emerson and Cope.

"And who may you be? Surely not Wild Men?"

"No, we're not Wild Men," said Emerson.

The boy said, "But you're not House Lords."

"And certainly you're not servants," said the girl, who was several years older than the boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen.

Emerson explained patiently, "We are astrographers, scientists, from Earth."

Like the forest people, the House Lords were puzzled. "Earth?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Emerson. "Surely you know of Earth!"

They shook their heads.

"But you're human beings—Earth people!"

"No," said the young man, "We are House Lords. 'Earth' is nothing to us."

"But you speak our language—an Earth language!"

They shrugged and smiled. "There are a hundred ways in which your people might have learned our speech."

The matter seemed to interest them very little. The young woman looked toward the forest. "Best be careful of the Wild Men; they'll do you harm if they can." She turned. "Come, let us go back."

"Wait!" cried Emerson.

They observed him with austere politeness. "Yes?"

"Aren't you curious about us, or interested in where we came from?"

The young man smilingly shook his head, and the silver spines of his headgear chimed like bells. "Why should we be interested?"

Emerson laughed in mingled astonishment and irritation. "We're strangers from space—from Earth, which you claim you never heard of."

"Exactly. If we have never heard of you, how can we be interested?"

Emerson threw up his hands. "Suit yourself. However, we're interested in you."

The young man nodded, accepting this as a matter of course. The boy and girl were already walking away; the young woman had half-turned and was waiting. "Come, Hespheor," she called softly.

"I'd like to talk to you," Emerson said. "There's a mystery here—something we should straighten out."

"No mystery. We are House Lords, and this our House."

"May we come into your house?"

The young man hesitated, glanced at the young woman. She pursed her lips, shook her head. "Lord Genarro."

The young man made a small grimace. "The servants are gone; Genarro sleeps. They may come for a short time."

The young woman shrugged. "If Genarro wakes, he will not be pleased."

"Ah, but Genarro—"

"But Genarro," the woman

interrupted quickly, "is the First Lord of the House!"

Hespheor seemed momentarily sulky. "Genarro sleeps, and the servants are gone. These wild things may enter."

He signaled to Cope and Emerson. "Come."

**T**HE HOUSE Lords strolled back through the garden, talking quietly together. Emerson and Cope followed, half angry, half sheepish. "This is fantastic," Emerson muttered. "Snubbed by the aristocracy half an hour after we arrive."

"I guess we'll have to put up with it," said Cope. "They know things we've never even thought of. That black bubble, for instance."

The boy and girl reached the wall of the palace. Without hesitation they walked through the glistening surface. The young man and woman followed. When Emerson and Cope reached the wall, it was solid, supernaturally cold. They felt along the smooth surface, pushing, groping in exasperation.

The boy came back through the wall. "Are you coming in?"

"We'd like to," said Emerson.

"That's solid there." The boy watched them in amuse-

ment. "Can't you tell where it's permeable?"

"No," said Emerson.

"Neither can the Wild Men," said the boy. He pointed. "Go through there."

Emerson and Cope passed through, and the wall felt like a thin film of cool water.

They stood on a dull blue floor, with silver filaments tracing a looped pattern. The walls rose high all around them. A hundred feet above, bars of black substance protruded from shallow ledges, and the air around the tips seemed to quiver, like the air over a hot road.

There was no furniture in the room, no trace of human habitation.

"Come," said the boy. He crossed the room, walked through the wall opposite. Emerson and Cope followed. "I hope we can find our way out," said Cope. "I wouldn't want to climb these walls."

They stood in a hall similar to the first, but with a floor of resilient white stuff. Their bodies felt light, their steps took them farther than they expected. The young man and woman were waiting for them. The boy had stepped back through the wall; the girl was nowhere in sight.

"We can stay with you a moment or two," said the young man. "Our servants are gone; the house is quiet. Perhaps you'd care to eat?" Without waiting for response he reached forward. His hands disappeared into nowhere. He drew them back, pulling forth a rack supporting trays and bowls of foodstuffs—wedges of red jelly, tall white cones, black wafers, small green globular fruits, flacons containing liquids of various colors.

"You may eat," said the young woman, motioning with her hand.

"Thank you," said Emerson. He and Cope gingerly sampled the food. It was strange and rich, and tingled in the mouth like carbonated water.

"Where does this food come from?" asked Emerson. "How can you pull it out of the air like that?"

The young House Lord looked at his hands. "The servants put it there."

"Where do the servants get it?"

The young man shrugged. "Why should we trouble ourselves, as long as it's there?"

Cope asked quizzically, "What would you do if your servants left you?"

"Such a thing could never happen."

"I'd like to see your servants," said Emerson.

"They're not here now." The young man removed his head-gear, tucked it into an invisible niche. "Tell us about this 'Earth' of yours."

"It's a planet like this one," said Emerson, "although men and women live much differently."

"Do you have servants?"

"None of us have servants now."

"Mmph," said the young woman in scorn. "Like the Wild Men."

Cope asked, "How long have you lived here?"

The question seemed to puzzle the House Lords. "How long? What do you mean?"

"How many years."

"What is a 'year'?"

"A unit of time—the interval a planet takes to make a revolution around its sun. Just as a day is the time a planet takes to rotate on its axis."

The House Lords were amused. "That's a queer thought... magnificently arbitrary. What possible use is such an idea?"

Emerson said drily. "We find time measurements useful."

The House Lords smiled at each other. "That well may be," Hespbor remarked.

"Who are the Wild Men?" asked Cope.

"Just riffraff," said the young woman with a shudder. "Outcasts from Houses where there was no room."

"They harass us; they try to steal our women," said the young man. He held up his hand. "Listen." He and the young woman looked at each other.

Emerson and Cope could hear nothing.

"Lord Genarro," said the young woman. "He comes."

Hespbor looked uneasily at the wall, glanced at Emerson and Cope, then planted himself obstinately in the middle of the hall.

**T**HERE was a slight sound. A tall man dressed in shining black strode through the wall. His hair was copper-gold, his eyes frost-blue. He saw Emerson and Cope; he took a great stride forward. "What are these wild things doing here! Are you all mad? Out, out with them!"

Hespbor interposed. "They are strangers from another world. They mean no harm."

"Out with them! Eating our

food! Ogling the Lady Faelm!" He advanced menacingly; Emerson and Cope stepped back. "Wild things, go!"

"Just as you like," said Emerson. "Show us the way out."

"One moment!" said Hespheor. "I invited them here; they are my charges."

Genarro turned his displeasure against the young House Lord. "Do you wish to join the Wild Men?"

Hespheor stared at him; their eyes locked. Hespheor wilted and turned away.

"Very well," he muttered. "They shall leave." He whistled; through the wall came the boy. "Take the strangers to their ship."

"Quickly!" roared Genarro. "The air reeks; they are covered with filth!"

"This way!" The boy scampered through the wall; Emerson and Cope followed with alacrity.

Through two walls they passed and once more stood in the open air. Cope heaved a deep sigh. "Genarro's hospitality leaves much to be desired."

The girl came out of the palace and joined the boy.

"Come," said the boy. "We'll take you to your ship. You'd

best be away before the servants return."

Emerson looked back toward the palace, shrugged. "Let's go."

They followed the boy and girl through the formal garden, past the white-trunked trees, the beds of black moss, the pink and white candy floss. The *Gaea*, at the far end of the clearing, seemed familiar and homelike; Emerson and Cope hurried their steps.

They passed a clump of gray-stalked bamboo; there was a rustle of movement, a quick rush and they were surrounded by Wild Men. Hands gripped Emerson and Cope, their weapons were snatched.

The boy and girl, struggling, kicking, screaming, were seized; nooses were dropped around their bodies and they were tugged toward the jungle.

"Loose us!" yelled the boy. "The servants will pulverize you."

"The servants are gone," cried the wild chief happily. "And I've got what I've wanted for many years—a fresh, beautiful House Lord girl."

The girl sobbed and screamed and tore at her bonds; the boy struggled and kicked. "Easy, boy," the chief warned. "We're close enough to

cutting your throat as it is."

"Why are you taking us?" panted Emerson. "We're no good to you."

"Only in what your friends will give to have you back." The chief grinned knowingly over his shoulder. "Weapons, good cloth, good shoes."

"We don't carry such things with us!"

"You'll wait till we get them!"

The forest was only fifty yards away. The boy flung himself flat on the ground, the girl did likewise. Emerson felt the grasp on his arms relax; he broke loose, swinging his fists. He struck a Wild Man, who fell to the ground. The chief snatched out his catapult, aimed it. "One move and you're dead!"

Emerson stood rigid. The Wild Men seized the boy and girl; the party moved ahead.

But now the raid had been noticed at the palace; the air pulsed to a weird high whistle. The Wild Men increased their pace.

From the palace came a fan of black, shearing down like a great black vane, striking the ground at the forest's edge.

**T**HE WILD Men stopped short. Escape was blocked at this point. They turned, ran

parallel to the edge of the clearing.

Out of the palace came Genarro and Hesper, and behind them, Faelm and another woman. Across the clearing came the sound of Genarro's voice, full of passion and threat.

Emerson and Cope ran like men in a nightmare. The *Gaea* loomed before them; they pounded up the ramp, plunged into the hull.

The crew, white-faced and anxious, had been waiting; there was not a second's delay. The door slid shut, power roared through the tubes and the *Gaea* rose from the clearing.

The *Gaea* was in space, far from any star.

Without comment he set a course for Earth.

**T**HE VITALISCOPE images vanished. The Directors of the Astrographical Society sat stiff in their seats.

Theodore Caffridge spoke. His voice sounded flat and prosaic.

"As you have seen, Commander Emerson and crew underwent a most peculiar experience."

"Peculiar!" Ben Haynault whistled. "That's an understatement if there ever was one!"

"But what does it mean?" demanded Pritchard. "Those people speaking English!"

"And knowing nothing of Earth!"

Caffridge said in his flat voice, "Emerson and I have formed a tentative hypothesis. Chronologically, what happened was this. Like you, we were mystified. Who were these House Lords? How could they speak an Earth language, but still know nothing of Earth? How did the House Lords control their servants, these tremendous creatures which could be seen only as flickers of light and shadow?"

Caffridge paused. No one spoke; he went on. "Commander Emerson had no answer to these questions. Neither did I.

"Then something very ordinary occurred, an event quite insignificant in itself. But it set off a charge in both our minds.

"What happened was that my cat Sarvis came into the house. He used his special little swinging door. My small House Lord, Sarvis. He came into his palace, he went to his dish and looked for his dinner."

There was frozen silence in the Board room, the arrestment

in time which comes of surprise and shock.

Then someone coughed; there was the hiss of breath, a bit of nervous laughter, general uneasy motion.

"Theodore," Ben Haynault asked in a husky voice, "what are you implying?"

"I've given you the facts. You must draw your own inferences."

Paul Pritchard muttered, "A hoax, surely. There's no other explanation. A society of crackpots... escapists..."

Caffridge smiled. "You might discuss that theory with Emerson."

Pritchard fell silent.

"Emerson considers himself lucky," Caffridge went on reflectively. "I'm inclined to agree. If some wild thing came into my house and killed Sarvis, I'd consider it a domestic tragedy of the highest order. I might not have been quite so forbearing."

"What can we do?" asked Haynault quietly.

Caffridge went to the window and stood looking up into the southern sky. "We can hope that they have all the House Lords they want. Otherwise—none of us are safe..."