
Impact

Irving E. Cox



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IMPACT

By IRVING E. COX, Jr. Niaga by the waterfall

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

*They were languorous, anarchic, shameless
in their pleasures . . . were they lower
than man . . . or higher?*

Over the cabin 'phone, Ann's voice was crisp with anger. "Mr. Lord, I must see you at once."

"Of course, Ann." Lord tried not to sound uncordial. It was all part of a trade agent's job, to listen to the recommendations and complaints of the teacher. But an interview with Ann Howard was always so arduous, so stiff with unrelieved righteousness. "I should be free until—"

"Can you come down to the schoolroom, Mr. Lord?"

"If it's necessary. But I told you yesterday, there's nothing we can do to make them take the lessons."

"I understand your point of view, Mr. Lord." Her words were barely civil, brittle shafts of ice. "However, this concerns Don; he's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"Jumped ship."

"Are you sure, Ann? How long ago?"

"I rather imagined you'd be interested," she answered with smug satisfaction. "Naturally you'll want to see his note. I'll be waiting for you."

The 'phone clicked decisively as she broke the connection. Impotent fury lashed Lord's mind—anger at Don Howard, because the engineer was one of his key men; and, childishly, anger at Don's sister because she was the one who had broken the news. If it had come from almost anyone else it would, somehow, have seemed less disastrous. Don's was the fourth desertion in less than a week, and the loss of trained personnel was becoming serious aboard the *Ceres*. But what did Ann Howard expect Lord to do about it? This was a trading ship; he had no military authority over his crew.

As Lord stood up, his desk chair collapsed with a quiet hiss against the cabin wall, and, on greased tubes, the desk dropped out of sight beneath the bunk bed, giving Lord the luxury of an uncluttered floor space eight feet square. He had the only private quarters on the ship—the usual distinction reserved for a trade agent in command.

From a narrow wardrobe, curved to fit the projectile walls of the ship, Lord took a lightweight jacket, marked with the tooled shoulder insignia of command. He smiled a little as he put it on. He was Martin Lord, trade agent and heir to the fabulous industrial-trading empire of Hamilton Lord, Inc.; yet he was afraid to face Ann Howard without the visible trappings of authority.

He descended the spiral stairway to the midship airlock, a lead-walled chamber directly above the long power tubes of the *Ceres*. The lock door hung open, making an improvised landing porch fifty feet above the charred ground. Lord paused for a moment at the head of the runged landing ladder. Below him, in the clearing where the ship had come down, he saw the rows of plastic prefabs which his crew had thrown up—laboratories, sleeping quarters, a kitchen, and Ann Howard's schoolroom.

Beyond the clearing was the edge of the magnificent forest which covered so much of this planet. Far away, in the foothills of a distant mountain range, Lord saw the houses of a village, gleaming in the scarlet blaze of the setting sun. A world at peace, uncrowded, unscarred by the feverish excavation and building of man. A world at the zenith of its native culture, about to be jerked awake by the rude din of civilization. Lord felt a twinge of the same guilt that had tormented his mind since the *Ceres* had first landed, and with an effort he drove it from his mind.

He descended the ladder and crossed the clearing, still blackened from the landing blast; he pushed open the sliding door of the schoolroom. It was large and pleasantly yellow-walled, crowded with projectors, view-booths, stereo-miniatures, and picture books—all the visual aids which Ann Howard would have used to teach the natives the cultural philosophy of the Galactic Federation. But the rows of seats were empty, and the gleaming machines still stood in their cases. For no one had come to Ann's school, in spite of her extravagant offers of trade goods.

Ann sat waiting, ramrod straight, in front of a green-tinged projectoscope. She made no compromise with the heat, which had driven the men to strip to their fatigue shorts. Ann wore the full, formal uniform. A less strong-willed woman might have appeared wilted after a day's work. Ann's face was expressionless, a block of cold ivory. Only a faint mist of perspiration on her upper lip betrayed her acute discomfort.

"You came promptly, Mr. Lord." There was a faint gleam of triumph in her eyes. "That was good of you."

She unfolded her brother's note and gave it to Lord. It was a clear, straightforward statement of fact. Don Howard said he was deserting the mission, relinquishing his Federation citizenship. "I'm staying on this world; these people have something priceless, Ann. All my life I've been looking for it, dreaming of it. You wouldn't understand how I feel, but nothing else—nothing else—matters, Ann. Go home. Leave these people alone. Don't try to make them over."

The last lines rang in sympathy with Lord's own feelings, and he knew that was absurd. Changes would have to be made when the trade city was built. That was Lord's business. Expansion and progress: the lifeblood of the Federation.

"What do you want me to do?" he demanded.

"Go after Don and bring him back."

"And if he refuses—"

"I won't leave him here."

"I have no authority to force him against his will, Ann."

"I'm sure you can get help from this—" her lip curled "—this native girl of yours. What's her name?"

"Niaga."

"Oh, yes; Niaga. Quaint, isn't it?" She smiled flatly.

He felt an almost irresistible urge to smash his fist into her jaw. Straight-laced, hopelessly blind to every standard but her own—what right did Ann have to pass judgment on Niaga? It was a rhetorical question. Ann Howard represented the Federation no less than Lord did himself. By law, the teachers rode every trading ship; in the final analysis, their certification could make or break any new planetary franchise.

"Niaga has been very helpful, Ann; cooperative and—"

"Oh, I'm sure she has, Mr. Lord."

"I could threaten to cut off Don's bonus pay, I suppose, but it wouldn't do much good; money has no meaning to these people and, if Don intends to stay here, it won't mean much to him, either."

"How you do it, Mr. Lord, is not my concern. But if Don doesn't go home with us—" She favored him with another icy smile. "I'm afraid I'll have to make an adverse report when you apply for the franchise."

"You can't, Ann!" Lord was more surprised than angry. "Only in the case of a primitive and belligerent culture—"

"I've seen no evidence of technology here." She paused. "And not the slightest indication that these people have any conception of moral values."

"Not by our standards, no; but we've never abandoned a planet for that reason alone."

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Lord. Men like you—the traders and the businessmen and the builders—you've never understood a teacher's responsibility. You make the big noise in the Federation; but we hold it together for you. I'm not particularly disturbed by the superficials I've seen here. The indecent dress of these people, their indolent villages, their congenital irresponsibility—all that disgusts me, but it has not affected my analysis. There's something else here—something far more terrible and more dangerous for us. I can't put it in words. It's horrible and it's deadly; it's the reason why our men have deserted. They've had attractive women on other worlds—in the trade cities, anything money could buy—but they never jumped ship before."

"A certain percentage always will, Ann." Lord hoped he sounded reassuring, but he felt anything but reassured himself. Not because of what she said. These naive, altogether delightful people were harmless. But could the charming simplicity of their lives survive the impact of civilization? It was this world that was in danger, not by any stretch of the imagination the Federation.

As the thought occurred to him, he shrank from it with a kind of inner terror. It was heresy. The Federation represented the closest approximation of perfection mortal man would ever know: a brotherhood of countless species, a union of a thousand planets, created by the ingenuity and the energy of man. The Pax Humana; how could it be a threat to any people anywhere?

"That would be my recommendation." Suddenly Ann's self-assurance collapsed. She reached for his hand; her fingers were cold and trembling. "But, if you bring Don back, I—I won't report against a franchise."

"You're offering to make a deal? You know the penalty—"

"Collusion between a trade agent and the teacher assigned to his ship—yes, I know the law, Mr. Lord."

"You're willing to violate it for Don? Why? Your brother's a big boy now; he's old enough to look after himself."

Ann Howard turned away from him and her voice dropped to a whisper. "He isn't my brother, Mr. Lord. We had to sign on that way because your company prohibits a man and wife sailing in the same crew."

In that moment she stripped her soul bare to him. Poor, plain, conscientious Ann Howard! Fighting to hold her man; fighting the unknown odds of an alien world, the stealthy seduction of an amoral people. Lord understood Ann, then, for the first time; he saw the shadow of madness that crept across her mind; and he pitied her.

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

As he left the schoolroom she collapsed in a straight-backed chair—thin and unattractive, like Ann herself—and her shoulders shook with silent, bitter grief.

Martin Lord took the familiar path to Niaga's village. The setting sun still spread its dying fire across the evening sky, but he walked slowly through the deep, quiet shadows of the forest. He came to the stream where he had met Niaga; he paused to dip his sweat-smearred face into the cool water cascading over a five foot fall.

A pleasant flood of memory crowded his mind. When he had first met Niaga, almost a week before, she had been lying on the sandy bank of the stream, idly plaiting a garland of red and blue flowers. Niaga! A copper-skinned goddess, stark naked and unashamed in the bright spot light of sun filtered through the trees. Languorous, laughing lips; long, black hair loosely caught in a net of filmy material that hung across her shoulder.

The feeling of guilt and shame had stabbed at Lord's mind. He had come, unasked, into an Eden. He didn't belong here. His presence meant pillage, a rifling of a sacred dream. The landing had been a mistake.

Oddly enough, the *Ceres* had landed here entirely by chance, the result of a boyish fling at adventure.

Martin Lord was making a routine tour of representative trade cities before assuming his vice-presidency in the central office of Hamilton Lord, Inc. It had been a family custom for centuries, ever since the first domed ports had been built on Mars and Venus.

Lord was twenty-six and, like all the family, tall, slim, yellow-haired. As the Lords had for generations, Martin had attended the Chicago University of Commerce for four years, and the Princeton Graduate School in Interstellar Engineering four more—essential preparations for the successful Federation trader. In Chicago Martin had absorbed the basic philosophy of the Federation: the union of planets and diverse peoples, created by trade, was an economy eternally prosperous and eternally growing, because the number of undiscovered and unexploited planets was infinite. The steady expansion of the trade cities kept demand always one jump ahead of supply; every merchant was assured that this year's profits would always be larger than last. It was the financial millennium, from which depression and recession had been forever eliminated. At Princeton Lord had learned the practical physics necessary for building, servicing and piloting the standard interstellar merchant ships.

Martin Lord's tour of the trade cities completed his education. It was his first actual contact with reality. The economy of progress, which had seemed so clear-cut in the Chicago lecture halls, was translated into a brawling, vice-ridden, frontier city. In the older trade cities, the culture of man had come to dominate the occupied worlds. No trace of what alien peoples had been or had believed survived, except as museum oddities.

This, Lord admitted to himself, was conquest, by whatever innocuous name it

passed. But was it for good or evil? In the first shock of reality, Martin Lord had doubted himself and the destiny of the Federation. But only for a moment. What he saw was good—he had been taught to believe that—because the Federation was perfection.

But the doubt, like a cancer, fed and grew in the darkness of Lord's soul.

On the home trip a mechanical defect of the calibration of the time-power carried the *Ceres* off its course, light years beyond the segment of the Galaxy occupied by the Federation.

"We've burned out a relay," Don Howard reported.

"Have we replacements?" Lord asked.

"It's no problem to fix. But repairs would be easier if we could set the ship down somewhere."

Lord glanced at the unknown sun and three satellite planets which were plotted electronically on his cabin scanning screen. His pulse leaped with sudden excitement. This was his first—and last—chance for adventure, the only interstellar flight he would command in his lifetime. When he returned to earth, he would be chained for the rest of his days to a desk job, submerged in a sea of statistical tables and financial statements.

"Run an atmosphere analysis on those three worlds, Mr. Howard," he said softly.

Driven by its auxiliary nuclear power unit, the ship moved closer to the new solar system. In half an hour Don Howard brought Lord the lab report. Two of the planets were enveloped in methane, but the third had an earth-normal atmosphere. Lord gave the order for a landing, his voice pulsing with poorly concealed, boyish pleasure.

The *Ceres* settled on a hilltop, its cushioning rockets burning an improvised landing area in the lush foliage. As the airlock swung open, Lord saw half a dozen golden-skinned savages standing on the edge of the clearing. As nearly as he could judge, they were men; but that was not too surprising, because a number of planets in the Federation had evolved sentient species which resembled man. The savages were unarmed and nearly naked—tall, powerfully built men; they seemed neither awed nor frightened by the ship.

Over the circle of scorched earth Lord heard the sound of their voices. For a fleeting second the words seemed to make sense—a clear, unmistakable welcome to the new world.

But communication was inconceivable. This planet was far beyond the fringe of the Federation. Lord was letting his imagination run away with him.

He flung out his arms in a universally accepted gesture of open-handed friendship. At once the talk of the natives ceased. They stood waiting silently on the burned ground while the men unwound the landing ladder.

Lord made the initial contact himself. The techniques which he had learned in the University of Commerce proved enormously successful. Within ten minutes rapport was established; in twenty the natives had agreed to submit to the linguistic machines. Lord had read accounts of other trailblazing commercial expeditions; and he knew he was establishing a record for speed of negotiation.

The savages were quite unfrightened as the electrodes were fastened to their skulls, entirely undisturbed by the whirl of the machine. In less than an hour they were able to use the common language of the Federation. Another record; most species needed a week's indoctrination.

Every new development suggested that these half-naked primitives—with no machine civilization, no cities, no form of space flight—had an intellectual potential superior to man's. The first question asked by one of the broad-shouldered savages underscored that conclusion.

"Have you come to our world as colonists?"

No mumbo-jumbo of superstition, no awe of strangers who had suddenly descended upon them from the sky. Lord answered, "We landed in order to repair our ship, but I hope we can make a trade treaty with your government."

For a moment the six men consulted among themselves with a silent exchange of glances. Then one of them smiled and said, "You must visit our villages and explain the idea of trade to our people."

"Of course," Lord agreed. "If you could serve as interpreters—"

"Our people can learn your language as rapidly as we have, if we can borrow your language machine for a time."

Lord frowned. "It's a rather complex device, and I'm not sure—you see, if something went wrong, you might do a great deal of harm."

"We would use it just as you did; we saw everything you turned to make it run." One of the golden-skinned primitives made a demonstration, turning the console of dials with the ease and familiarity of a semantic expert. Again Lord was impressed by their intelligence—and vaguely frightened.

"You could call this the first trade exchange between your world and ours," another savage added. "Give us the machine; we'll send you fresh food from the village."

The argument was logical and eventually the natives had their way. Perhaps it was Ann Howard's intervention that decided the point. She vehemently disapproved; a gift of techniques should be withheld until she had examined their cultural traditions. But Martin Lord was a trade agent, and he had no intention of allowing his mission to be wrecked by the ephemeral doubts of a teacher. Here at the onset was the time to make it clear that he was in command. He gave the natives the machine.

As the six men trudged across the burned earth carrying the heavy apparatus easily on their shoulders, Lord wondered if either he or Ann Howard had much to do with the negotiations. He had an unpleasant feeling that, from the very beginning, the natives had been in complete control of the situation.

Less than an hour after the six men had departed, a band of natives emerged from the forest bearing gifts of food—straw baskets heaped with fruit, fresh meat wrapped in grass mats, hampers of bread, enormous pottery jars filled with a sweet, cold, milky liquid. Something very close to the miraculous had occurred. Every native had learned to use the Federation language.

A kind of fiesta began in the clearing beside the *Ceres*. The natives built fires to cook the food. The women, scantily dressed if they were clothed at all, danced sensuously in the bright sunlight to a peculiarly exotic, minor-keyed music played on reed and percussion instruments. Laughing gaily, they enticed members of Lord's crew to join them.

The milky drink proved mildly intoxicating—yet different from the stimulants used in the Federation. Lord drank a long draught from a mug brought him by one of the women. The effect was immediate. He felt no dulling of his reason, however; no loss of muscular control, but instead a stealthy relaxation of mental strain joined with a satisfying sense of physical well-being. A subtle shifting in prospective, in accepted values.

The savage feast, which grew steadily more boisterous, Lord would have called an orgy under other circumstances. The word did occur to him, but it seemed fantastically inapplicable. Normally the behavior of his men would have demanded the severest kind of disciplinary action. But here the old code of rules simply didn't apply and he didn't interfere with their enjoyment.

The afternoon sun blazed in the western sky; heat in shimmering waves hung over the clearing. Lord went into the ship and stripped off his uniform; somehow the glittering insignia, the ornamental braid, the stiff collar—designed to be impressive symbols of authority—seemed garish and out of place. Lord put on the shorts which he wore when he exercised in the capsule gym aboard ship.

Outside again, he found that most of the men had done the same thing. The

sun felt warm on his skin; the air was comfortably balmy, entirely free of the swarms of flies and other insects which made other newly contacted frontier worlds so rugged.

As he stood in the shelter of the landing ladder and sipped a second mug of the white liquor, Lord became slowly aware of something else. Divested of their distinguishing uniforms, he and his crew seemed puny and ill-fed beside the natives. If physique were any index to the sophistication of a culture—but that was a ridiculous generalization!

He saw Ann Howard coming toward him through the crowd—stern-faced, hard-jawed, stiffly dignified in her uniform. The other women among the crew had put on their lightest dress, but not Ann. Lord was in no frame of mind, just then, to endure an interview with her. He knew precisely what she would say; Ann was a kind of walking encyclopedia of the conventions.

Lord slid out of sight in the shadow of the ship, but Ann had seen him. He turned blindly into the forest, running along the path toward the village.

In a fern-banked glen beside the miniature waterfall he had met Niaga.

No woman he had ever known seemed so breathtakingly beautiful. Her skin had been caressed by a lifetime's freedom in the sun; her long, dark hair had the sheen of polished ebony; and in the firm, healthy curves of her body he saw the sensuous grace of a Venus or an Aphrodite.

In a fern-banked glen beside a miniature waterfall, Martin Lord first saw Niaga.

In a fern-banked glen beside a miniature waterfall, Martin Lord first saw Niaga.

She stood up slowly and faced him, smiling; a bright shaft of sunlight fell on the liquid bow of her lips. "I am Niaga," she said. "You must be one of the men who came on the ship."

"Martin Lord," he answered huskily. "I'm the trade agent in command."

"I am honored." Impulsively she took the garland of flowers which she had been making and put it around his neck. When she came close, the subtle perfume of her hair was unmistakable—like the smell of pine needles on a mountain trail; new grass during a spring rain; or the crisp, winter air after a fall of snow. Perfume sharply symbolic of freedom, heady and intoxicating, numbing his mind with the ghosts of half-remembered dreams.

"I was coming to your ship with the others," she said, "but I stopped here to swim, as I often do. I'm afraid I stayed too long, day-dreaming on the bank; time means so little to us." Shyly she put her hand in his. "But, perhaps, no harm is done, since you are still alone. If you have taken no one else, will I do?"

"I—I don't understand."

"You are strangers; we want you to feel welcome."

"Niaga, people don't—that is—" He floundered badly. Intellectually he knew he could not apply the code of his culture to hers; emotionally it was a difficult concept to accept. If his standards were invalid, his definitions might be, too. Perhaps this society was no more primitive than—No! A mature people would always develop more or less the same mechanical techniques, and these people had nothing remotely like a machine.

"You sent us a gift," she said. "It is only proper for us to return the kindness."

"You have made a rather miraculous use of the language machine in a remarkably short period of time."

"We applied it to everyone in the village. We knew it would help your people feel at ease, if we could talk together in a common tongue."

"You go to great pains to welcome a shipload of strangers."

"Naturally. Consideration for others is the first law of humanity." After a pause, she added very slowly, with her eyes fixed on his, "Mr. Lord, do you plan to make a colony here?"

"Eventually. After we repair the ship, I hope to negotiate a trade treaty with your government."

"But you don't intend to stay here yourself?"

"I couldn't."

"Have we failed in our welcome? Is there something more—"

"No, Niaga, nothing like that. I find your world very—very beautiful." The word very inadequately expressed what he really felt. "But I'm not free to make the choice."

She drew in her breath sharply. "Your people, then, hold you enslaved?"

He laughed—uneasily. "I'm going home to manage Hamilton Lord; it's the largest trading company in the Federation. We have exclusive franchises to develop almost five hundred planets. It's my duty, Niaga; my responsibility; I can't shirk it."

"Why not—if you wanted to?"

"Because I'm Martin Lord; because I've been trained—No, it's something I can't explain. You'll just have to take my word for it. Now tell me: how should I go about negotiating a treaty with your people?"

"You spoke of the government, Martin Lord; I suppose you used the word in a symbolic sense?"

"Your chieftain; your tribal leader—whatever name you have for them."

Her big, dark eyes widened in surprise. "Then you meant actual men? It's a rather unusual use of the word, isn't it? For us, government is a synonym for law."

"Of course, but you must have leaders to interpret it and enforce it."

"Enforce a law?" This seemed to amuse her. "How? A law is a statement of a truth in human relationship; it doesn't have to be enforced. What sane person would violate a truth? What would you do, Martin Lord, if I told you we had no government, in your sense of the word?"

"You can't be that primitive, Niaga!"

"Would it be so terribly wrong?"

"That's anarchy. There'd be no question, then, of granting us a trade franchise; we'd have to set up a trusteeship and let the teachers run your planet until you had learned the basic processes of social organization."

Niaga turned away from him, her hands twisted together. She said, in a soft whisper that was flat and emotionless, "We have a council of elders, Martin Lord. You can make your treaty with them." Then, imperceptibly, her voice brightened. "It will take a week or more to bring the council together. And that is all to the good; it will give your people time to visit in our villages and to get better acquainted with us."

Niaga left him, then; she said she would go to the village and send out the summons for the council. By a roundabout path, Lord returned to the clearing around the *Ceres*. The forest fascinated him. It was obviously cultivated like a park, and he was puzzled that a primitive society should practice such full scale conservation. Normally savages took nature for granted or warred against it.

He came upon a brown gash torn in a hillside above the stream, a place where natives were apparently working to build up the bank against erosion. In contrast to the beauty that surrounded it, the bare earth was indescribably ugly, like a livid scar in a woman's face. In his mind Lord saw this scar multiplied a thousand times—no, a million times—when the machines of the galaxy came to rip out resources for the trade cities. He envisioned the trade cities that would rise against the horizon, the clutter of suburban subdivisions choking out the forests; he saw the pall of industrial smoke that would soil the clean air, the

great machines clattering over asphalt streets.

For the first time he stated the problem honestly, to himself: this world must be saved exactly as it was. But how? How could Lord continue to represent Hamilton Lord, Inc., as a reputable trade agent, and at the same time save Niaga's people from the impact of civilization?

It was sunset when he returned to the *Ceres*. On the clearing the festivities were still going on, but at a slower pace. Ann Howard was waiting for Lord at the door of his cabin. She registered her official disapproval of the revelry, which Lord had expected, and then she added,

"We can't make a treaty with them; these people have no government with the authority to deal with us."

"You're wrong, Ann; there's a council of elders—"

"I beg to differ, Mr. Lord." Her lips made a flat, grim line against her teeth. "This afternoon I made a point of talking to every native in the clearing. Their idea of government is something they call the law of humanity. Whether it is written down or not, I have no way of knowing; but certainly they have no such thing as a central authority. This rather indicates a teacher trusteeship for the planet, I believe."

"You've made a mistake, Ann; I'll have to check for myself."

Lord and Ann Howard moved together through the clearing and he began to talk to the natives. In each case he elicited the same information that Ann had given him. The mention of a governing council seemed to amuse the savages. Lord and Ann were still conducting their puzzling inquest when Niaga returned from the village. She said that the council had been called and would meet within a week.

"There seems to be some difference of opinion," Ann told her coldly, "between you and your people."

"Yes," Lord added uncertainly, "I've been asking about the council and—"

"But you didn't phrase your question clearly," Niaga put in smoothly. "We're not quite used to using your words yet with your definitions." To make her point, she called the same natives whom Ann and Lord had questioned, and this time, without exception, they reversed their testimony. Lord was willing to believe the language had caused the difficulty. Niaga's people were entirely incapable of deception; what reason would they have had?

From that hour, the clearing was never altogether free of native guests. They deluged Lord's crew with kindness and entertainment. Lord never left the ship, day or night, without having Niaga slip up beside him and put her arm through his. Because Ann Howard had made her objections so clear, the native women, in an effort to please the teacher, had taken to wearing more clothing than they were accustomed to. But they rejected the sack-like plastics which Ann dispensed in the schoolroom and put on the mist-like, pastel-colored netting which they used normally to decorate their homes. If anything, the addition of clothing made the women more attractive than ever.

The scientists among Lord's men analyzed the planetary resources and found the planet unbelievably rich in metals; the botanists determined that the seeds for the exotic fruits and flowers were exportable. All told, Niaga's world could develop into the richest franchise in the Federation.

Niaga took Lord to visit the villages which were close to the landing site. Each town was exactly like its neighbors, a tiny cluster of small, yellow-walled, flat-roofed houses nestled among the tall trees close to a cleared farmland which was worked co-operatively by everyone in the village. No single town was large, yet judging from the number that he saw, Lord estimated the planetary population in the billions.

Continuously Niaga tried to persuade him to stay and build a colony in the new world. Lord knew that the other natives were being as persuasive with the rest of the crew. And the temptation was very real: to trade the energetic,

competitive, exhausting routine that he knew for the quiet peace and relaxation here.

As the days passed the rigid scheduling of exploratory activities, always practiced by a trade mission, began to break down. The charming savages of this new world put no monetary value on time, and something of their spirit began to infect Lord's crew. They stopped bucking for overtime; most of them applied for accumulated sick leave—so they could walk in the forest with the native women, or swim in the forest pools. Even Lord found time to relax.

One afternoon, after a swim with Niaga, they lay in the warm sun on the grassy bank of a stream. Niaga picked a blue, delicately scented water lily, and gently worked it into his hair. Slowly she bent her face close until her lips brushed his cheek.

"Must you really go away when the treaty is made?"

"I'm a Lord, Niaga."

"Does that matter? If you like it here—"

"Niaga, I wish—I wish—" He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Why is it so important for you to build your trade cities?"

As he sought for words to answer her question, the spell of her presence was broken. He saw her for what she was: an extremely beautiful woman, sensuously very lovely, yet nonetheless a primitive—a forlorn child without any conception of the meaning of civilization. "We keep our union of planets economically sound," he explained patiently, "and at peace by constantly expanding—"

"I have visited the schoolroom your teacher has put up beside the ship. I have seen her models of the many machines your people know how to build. But why do you do it, Martin Lord?"

"The machines make our lives easier and more comfortable; they—"

"More comfortable than this?" She gestured toward the stream and the cultivated forest.

"Your world moves at the pace of a walk, Niaga; with our machines, you could rise above your trees, reach your destination in minutes—when now it takes you days."

"And miss all the beauty on the way. What point is there in saving time, and losing so much that really matters? Do your machines give you anything—you as a person, Martin Lord—that you couldn't have here without them?"

The question was unanswerable. It symbolized the enormous gulf that lay between Niaga and himself. More than that, Lord saw clearly that the trade cities would destroy her world utterly. Neither Niaga nor her way of life could survive the impact of civilization. And the exotic charm, the friendly innocence was worth saving. Somehow Lord had to find a way to do it.

Lord was by no means surprised when the first three men jumped ship and went to live in one of the quiet villages. Subconsciously he envied them; subconsciously he wished he had the courage to make the same decision. Although Ann Howard demanded it, Lord couldn't seriously consider taking measures to stop further desertions.

When Don Howard jumped ship, he brought the issue to a head. Ann maneuvered Lord so that he would have to take a stand. What and how, he didn't know.

It was the first time since the landing that Niaga had not been waiting outside the ship for Lord. At his request she had gone to the village to find what progress had been made in calling the council of elders. Lord knew where to find her, but after his talk with Ann he walked slowly along the forest path. He stopped to dip his face into the stream where he had first met Niaga. Anything

to put off the showdown. Lord was trying desperately to understand and evaluate his own motivation.

He accepted the fact that he had not stopped the desertions because, if enough men jumped ship, the *Ceres* would be unable to take off again. Lord could then have embraced Niaga's temptation without having to make the decision for himself. But that was a coward's way out and no solution. There would always be people like Ann Howard who would not accept the situation. They would eventually make radio communication with the Federation, and the location of Niaga's world would no longer be a secret.

Fundamentally that was the only thing that counted: to preserve this world from the impact of civilization.

Then suddenly, as he listened to the music of the stream, Lord saw how that could be done. Ann Howard had offered him a deal; she would keep her word. Everything hinged on that.

Don Howard had to be brought back—if persuasion failed, then by force.

Martin Lord ran back to the clearing. From a supply shed he took a pair of deadly atomic pistols. Their invisible, pin-point knife of exploding energy could slice through eighteen feet of steel, transform a mountain into a cloud of radioactive dust.

He ran through the forest to the village. As usual, the children were playing games on the grass, while the adults lounged in front of their dwellings or enjoyed community singing and dancing to the pulsing rhythm of their music. The sound of gaiety suddenly died as Lord walked between the rows of houses.

Strange, he thought; they seemed to guess what was in his mind. Niaga ran from the quiet crowd and took his hand.

"No, Martin Lord; you must not interfere!"

"Where's Howard?"

"He is a free man; he has a right to choose—"

"I'm going to take him back." He drew one of his guns. She looked at him steadily, without fear, and she said,

"We made you welcome; we have given you our friendship, and now you—"

He pushed her aside brutally because her gentleness, her lack of anger, tightened the constriction of his own sense of guilt. Lord fired his weapon at the trunk of a tree. The wood flamed red for a moment and the sound of the explosion rocked the air, powdering the grass with black ash.

"This is the kind of power controlled by men," he said. His voice was harsh, shrill with shame and disgust for the role he had to play. "I shall use this weapon to destroy your homes—each of them, one by one—unless you surrender Don Howard to me."

As he turned the pistol slowly toward the closest yellow wall, Niaga whispered, "Violence is a violation of the law of humanity. We offered Don Howard sanctuary and peace—as we offer it to all of you. Stay with us, Martin Lord; make your home here."

He clenched his jaw. "I want Don and I want him now!"

"But why must you go back? Your world is powerful; your world is enormous with cities and machines. But what does it hold for you as a man, Martin Lord? Here we give you the dreams of your own soul, peace and beauty, laughter and dignity."

"Surrender, Don!" Although he was vaguely aware of it, he had no time to consider consciously the strangely sophisticated wording of her argument. When she continued to talk in the same gentle voice, the temptation caressed his mind like a narcotic; against his will, the tension began to wash from his muscles. Driven by a kind of madness to escape the sound of her voice, he pulled the trigger. The yellow wall exploded. Concussion throbbed in his ears, deafening him—but he still heard her whisper in the depths of his soul, like the

music of a forest stream.

Then, at the end of the village street, he saw Don Howard coming out of one of the houses with his hands held high.

"You win, Lord; leave them alone."

It was victory, but Lord felt no triumph—only a crushing bitterness. He motioned Howard to take the path back to the ship. To Niaga he said,

"If your council of elders ever gets around to meeting, you might tell them that, as far as I'm concerned, you've already signed the trade treaty with me. We're leaving in the morning to register the franchise."

"You'd break your own law? You said the negotiations had to be—"

"Our men will come shortly to build the first trade city. I advise you not to resist them; they'll be armed with guns more powerful than mine."

She reached for his hand, but Lord turned away from her quickly so that she could not again open the raw wound of shame in his soul. He followed Don Howard into the forest.

"You won't get away with it, Lord," Howard said grimly. "No trade agent can impose a treaty—"

"Would a trusteeship be any better?"

"Lord, no!"

"There are only two alternatives, and a Hamilton Lord trade city is by far the better."

"Yes—for Hamilton Lord."

"No, for these people. Don't forget, I'll be running Hamilton Lord. The exclusive franchise will keep out the other traders, and I can see to it that our trade city does no harm. We've a thousand planets in the Federation; who's going to know if one of the cities doesn't really function?"

"I get it. But why the hell did you have to bring me back?"

"To make a deal with—with your wife."

After a long pause, Don Howard said wearily, "If Hamilton Lord can sacrifice the richest franchise in the galaxy, I suppose I can do my bit, too."

At dawn the *Ceres* departed. Lord drove his men to work throughout the night stowing the prefabs and the trade goods aboard the ship. Just before the power tubes stabbed the launching fire into the earth, a delegation of villagers came into the clearing. Niaga led them and she spoke to Lord at the foot of the landing ladder.

"We still want you to stay among us, Martin Lord; we have come again to offer _"

"It is impossible!"

She put her arms around his neck and drew his lips against hers. The temptation washed over his mind, shattering his resolution and warping his reason. This was what he wanted: the golden dream of every man. But for Lord only one idea held fast. Niaga's primitive, naive world had to be preserved exactly as it was. If he gave in to the dream, he would destroy it. Only in the central office of Hamilton Lord could he do anything to save what he had found here. He wrenched himself free of her arms.

"It's no use, Niaga."

She knew that she had lost, and she moved away from him. One of the other golden-skinned savages pushed a small, carved box into his hands.

"A parting gift," Niaga said. "Open it when you are aboard your ship, Martin Lord."

Long after the *Ceres* had blasted off, he sat alone in his cabin looking at the box—small, delicately carved from a strange material, like a soft plastic. It seemed somehow alive, throbbing with the memory of the dream he had left behind.

With a sigh he opened the box. A billow of white dust came from it. The box fell apart and the pieces, like disintegrating gelatine, began to melt away. A printed card, made of the same unstable material, lay in Lord's hand.

"You have three minutes, Martin Lord," he read. "The drug is painless, but before it wipes memory from the minds of you and your crew, I want you to understand why we felt it necessary to do this to you.

"When you first landed, we realized that you came from a relatively immature culture because you made no response to our telepathy of welcome. We did our best after that to simplify your adjustment to our way of life, because we knew you would have to stay among us. Of course, we never really learned your language; we simply gave you the illusion that we had. Nor is there any such thing as a council of elders; we had to invent that to satisfy you. We truly wanted you to stay among us. In time you could have grown up enough—most of you—to live with us as equals. We knew it would be disastrous for you to carry back to your world your idea of how we live. We are the tomorrow of your people; you must grow up to us. There is no other way to maturity. We could not, of course, keep you here against your will. Nor could we let you go back, like a poison, into your world. We could do nothing else but use this drug. The impact of civilization upon a primitive people like yours...."

The words hazed and faded as the note disintegrated. Lord felt a moment of desperate yearning, a terrible weight of grief. With an effort he pushed himself from his chair and pulled open the door into the corridor. He had to order the ship back while he could still remember; he had to find Niaga and tell her ...

... tell her. Tell whom? Tell what? Lord stood in the corridor staring blankly at the metal wall. He was just a little puzzled as to why he was there, what he had meant to do. He saw Ann Howard coming toward him.

"Did you notice the lurch in the ship, Mr. Lord?" she asked.

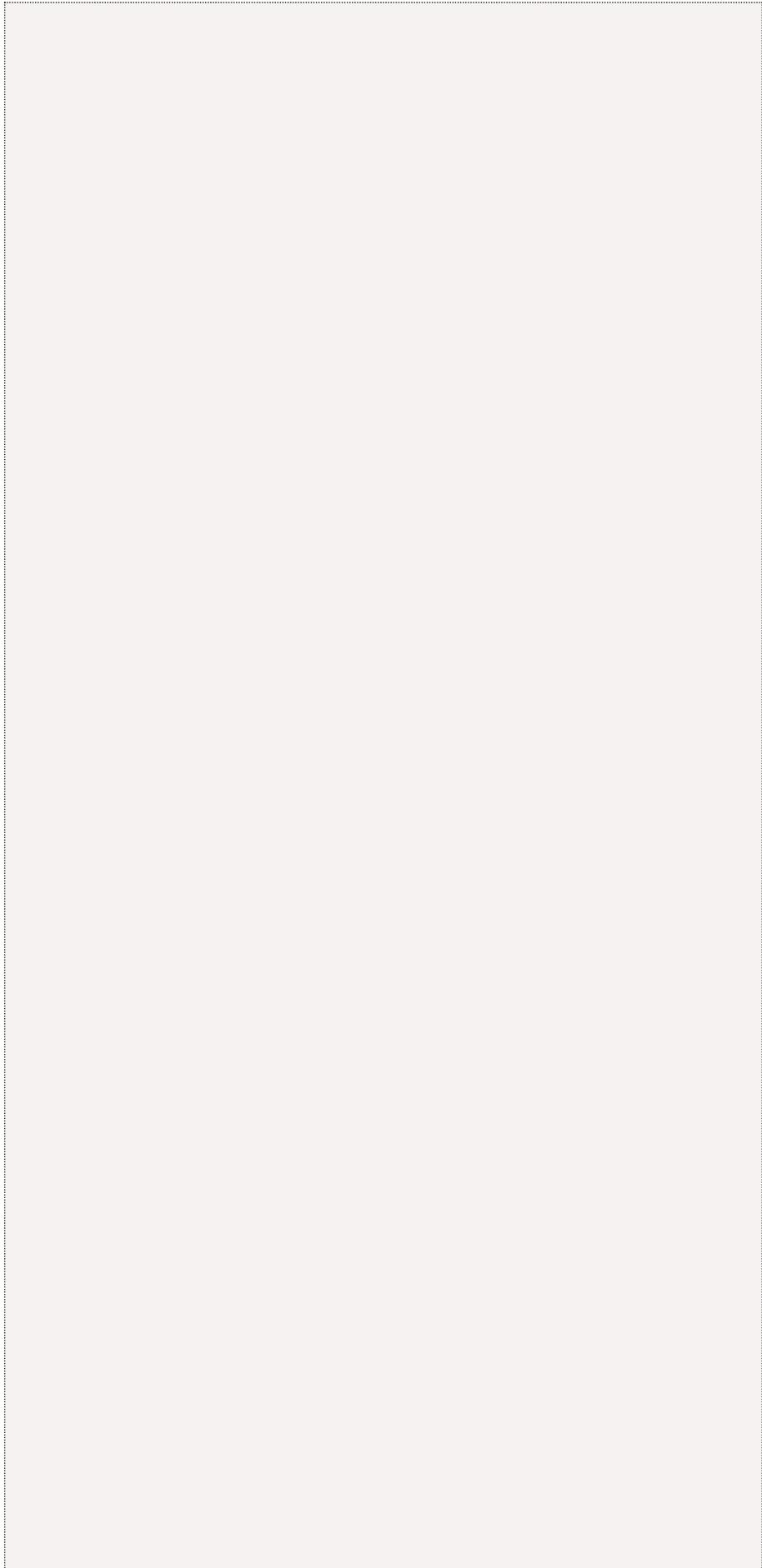
"Yes, I suppose I did." Was that why he had left his cabin?

"I thought we were having trouble with the time-power calibration, but I checked with Don and he says everything's all right." She glanced through the open door of his cabin at the electronic pattern on the scanning screen. "Well, we'll be home in another twenty hours, Mr. Lord. It's a pity we didn't contact any new planets on this mission. It would have been a good experience for you."

"Yes, I rather hoped so, too."

He went back to his desk. Strange, he couldn't remember what it was he had wanted to do. He shrugged his shoulders and laughed a little to himself. It definitely wouldn't do—not at all—for a Lord to have lapses of memory.

THE END



Transcriber's Notes

This etext was produced from Amazing Science Fiction Stories, January 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

The following corrections have been applied to the text:

Page 9: money has no meaning to these people and, if Don intends to stay here, it won't mean much to him,{superfluous quotation mark removed} either."

Page 9: "I'm sure you can get help from this--" her{original had Her} lip curled{original had a period here} "--this native girl of yours. What's her name?"

Page 13: Lord answered,{original omitted this comma} "We landed in order to repair our ship, but I hope we can make a trade treaty with your government."

Page 16: "How?{superfluous quotation mark removed} A law is a statement of a truth in human relationship;

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