

THE IDOL

Nobody is so well paid that he'd turn down the chance of making a few extra dollars—and if such dollars are free of tax, so much the better. George Manning was no exception to the general rule. He had a racket, and a highly remunerative one, and the additional income derived from it was never shown on his tax returns. He was lucky inasmuch as he had made, through his wife, some excellent contacts. Vera Manning, before her marriage, had been Vera Lowenstein — and everybody has heard of the firm of Lowenstein and Levine, dealers in objects d'art from all over the galaxy. Manning had met her when she was travelling in the old Beta Leonis, of which vessel he was second officer. Old Lowenstein had been pleased rather than otherwise to acquire a spaceman as a son-in-law, and it had not been long before a mutually advantageous arrangement had been worked out.

Manning told me all about it one evening, ship's time, when we were both of us off watch. I had expressed amazement that second mate's pay—and a married second mate at that—could run to such luxuries as the expensive microfilm projector, the private library of all the latest films and the liquor cabinet stocked with exotic wines and spirits that, even duty free, were well beyond the financial reach of the average ship's officer. Manning was ready to talk, having partaken freely of his own Vegan Dragon's Blood, which looks like a red wine but tastes like a superlatively smooth and potent Scotch whiskey with a hint of very dry Curacao. He was in a mood in which he just had to tell somebody how clever he was. We were old shipmates and he knew that he could trust me.

He said, "I like all this, Bill. I like to do my spacefaring in comfort, like a civilized man — but there's one thing that I like even more."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"Doing the Income Tax sharks in the eye," he replied. "The way I'm making money now I should be working six months of the year for nothing."

"The Commission doesn't pay that well," I said. "In fact, the Commission doesn't pay well. Period."

"Who was talking about pay? But if I paid full tax on my makings I could never afford to live the way I do. Moral: If you make money, make it in such a way that the tax collector can't get his filthy paws on it."

"Risky," I told him. "Damned risky. If they get you — when they get you — they'll put the boot in."

He laughed. He has one of those lean, long, dark faces to which laughter comes seldom, on which laughter is all the more striking. He said, "If, not when, Bill. And it's a big if. I behave with scrupulous legality." He opened his liquor cabinet, took out two more bulbs of the fabulously expensive Dragon's Blood, tossed one to me. He waited until we both moistened our throats, then went on. "This is the way of it. I love my wife. Every voyage I bring her home things that I've picked up on the various planets we call at. I declare them as gifts, pay duty accordingly to the Terran Customs. I take them home to Vera. Sooner or later Vera gets tired of the way in which they

clutter up the apartment ..."

"I'm not surprised," I interrupted. "I'm still wondering what any sane woman could have done with that Altairian wyzzoth goad you brought home last trip."

"She did with it what she does with everything else," said Manning. "I love her; she loves her dear old father. She likes giving him presents. He likes giving her presents — especially after he's made a good sale. His presents to her are in the form of good, thick hunks of folding money. Then it's not only my wife whom I love dearly. There are all sorts of aunts and uncles and cousins by marriage all over the galaxy. I bring them presents; they give me presents."

"It's risky," I said again.

"It's not," he averred.

"It's almost time that I was on watch," I told him, looking at his bulkhead clock that, like everything else in his cabin, was of a design and workmanship far superior to anything deemed suitable for the use of its junior officers — or, come to that, its senior officers — by the Interstellar Transport Commission.

"Another Dragon's Blood?"

"No thanks," I said regretfully. "'thanks for the party. See you at midnight.'

I unstrapped myself from my chair, pulled myself out into the alleyway and then along to my own cabin, where I got ready for my four-hour spell of duty.

There may be more boring ways of passing the time than standing a watch in the control room of an interstellar ship, but I have yet to hear about them. The trouble is this: Everything is automatic, yet, in the final analysis, the automatic controls cannot be trusted. Nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand you could make a voyage clear across the Galaxy with the control and drive rooms unmanned; the thousandth time the blowing of a single fuse could cause catastrophe. Catastrophe in Space means more than the destruction of property; it means loss of life. Control rooms, therefore, are manned at all times with officers trained and qualified to cope with the sudden emergency that, in all probability, will never arise.

The fourth officer, as he always did, hurried over his handing over. I, as I always did, refused to accept responsibility until I had checked everything, thereby selfishly extending the period in which I should have somebody to talk to.

The fourth fumed and fretted while I read through the previous entries in the Log, starting at the very top of the page, even the heading, Starship Delta Orionis, Port Woomera, Terra, to Port Southern, Lorraine (Beta Cruets IV). I examined the entries concerning Temporal Precession Rates, the Relative Humidity of the ship's atmosphere, pressures and temperatures. I switched on the Tri-Di Chart and expressed disapproval of the game of three dimensional noughts and crosses that the fourth had been playing

with somebody — perhaps the Electronic Radio Officer, perhaps himself—and made him clear the lattice from the tank.

At last I expressed my readiness, albeit reluctantly, to take over. The fourth bade me a surly goodnight and was out of the control room before I had strapped myself into the pilot's chair. I lit a cigarette, looked out the ports at the rather frightening whorls and spirals of light that are all that one sees from a ship with the Interstellar Drive in operation. I looked away from the port to the faces of the gauges and meters. I looked at nothing at all and listened to the throb of pumps, the whirring of generators, the high whine of the precessing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive.

I thought, inevitably, of what George Manning had told me. It all added up. I had wondered why he, a fairly senior second mate who had succeeded in keeping his nose clean, had asked for a transfer from the Betty Lion, with her regular run, to the Delia O' Ryan, far smaller (and with her personnel paid accordingly) and little better than a tramp. Now I knew. It all added up nicely. In a Beta Class ship, running only to the major ports, there would be small opportunity for picking up alien art treasures at bargain prices. In a Delta Class ship, running mainly to small ports on unimportant, little known planets, a bottle of whiskey or a carton of cigarettes might well purchase something worth thousands of dollars.

I sighed. It was a good racket that George Manning had got himself into. It was a racket in which it was essential to have shoreside contacts, essential to have somebody who could teach one what was good and what wasn't. It was a good racket, and it was safe. The Terran Customs, although vicious in their treatment of smugglers, never charged high duties on declared gifts, and it was highly improbable that they would ever discover Manning's connection with the firm of Lowenstein and Levine. Too, they were on the lookout for such obvious things as drugs and liquor and precious stones and would be inclined to regard works of art as mere curios.

To pass the time, I began to speculate. There would be nothing worth picking up on Lorraine. It was an Earth-type planet, Earth colonized. There had been no intelligent native life at the time of the colonization and the colonists had developed a drably industrial culture. Our next port of call was Port Broonaara, on Broonaara, one of the outposts of the Shaara Empire. The Shaara, those communistic bumble bees, are not artists. There would be nothing for Manning there. After Broonaara we should call at Cleg, and after Cleg we should make the rounds of Willoughby, New Cheshire, Wittenfels and Dorado. From Dorado we were to proceed to Port Southern, and thence back to Woomera.

Even I, a peasant in such matters, knew that there would be nothing worth picking up on any of those planets.

Even I was wrong.

Having obtained the permission of the Queen-Mother of the local hive we dropped down to Port Broonaara. Broonaara is a pleasant enough world, not too hot, with all of its considerable land surface covered with luxuriously flowering trees and shrubs. It is an ideal world for the Shaara, who find it easy to maintain a colony there and to produce enough honey in excess of

their own needs to maintain a flourishing export trade, both to their own home planets and to those colonized by Man.

It was morning, local time, when we made our landing. Normally we should have begun discharge at once, have completed discharge by noon and commenced loading, blasting off in the evening. But this, we discovered, was not a normal day. The hive, a couple of miles to the west of the spaceport, looked like an active volcano. From the entrance at its top poured a stream of drones and workers, like dense, dark smoke, spiralling up into the clear, yellow sky. The Shaara drone who acted as the Commission's agent told us what was afoot. A new hive was to be established, he said, his voice droning from the diaphragm strapped to his thorax. A new hive was to be established, and what we were privileged to see was the nuptial flight of the new Queen-Mother and her entourage.

It was all very interesting, said the Old Man, but it wasn't getting his ship discharged and loaded.

The Shaara drone replied that he, in his younger days, had been an astronaut and that more than once his ship had been delayed by public holidays on Earth and on various Man-colonized planets. As a drone he saw nothing wrong with holidays, but Shaara holidays were in honour of something happening now, not something that happened centuries ago. Even so, a holiday was a holiday ...

The Old Man took the hint and asked him up to his cabin to partake of something in honour of the occasion. When they had left the officers' lounge Manning approached the chief officer.

"After all, sir," he said. "a holiday is a holiday, and the Guild ruling is that, whenever possible, local holidays shall be observed by the personnel of starships ..."

"Oh, all right," said the mate. "Anybody who wants to go ashore can go ' ashore. A few drones extra cavorting over the surface of this glorified hothouse won't be noticed."

"Care to stretch your legs?" Manning asked me.

"Might as well," I told him.

We went to our rooms to get changed into our lightest clothing. We met in the alleyway, were joined there by Peter Carson, our Psionic Radio Officer. This did not please George. He disliked telepaths in general and Carson in particular. I didn't mind Carson myself. He was a harmless little man—rotund, almost bald, looking as though he should have been sucking the nipple of a feeding bottle instead of the cigar that was always in his mouth.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked. "I could do with some exercise, and all that the others want to do is to get their heads down ..."

"By all means," I said, before George Manning could make a rude, negative reply, as he was about to do.

George grunted. He led the way down to the airlock and the ramp at a speed that was indicative of his bad temper. Once out of the ship he strode over the scarred concrete of the apron as though he were in a hurry to keep an important appointment. By the time we reached the blue turf at the spaceport limits Carson was perspiring profusely.

"What's the big hurry, George?" I demanded.

"None," he snapped.

"What do you hope to find?" I asked.

"Don't you people ever read the Pilot Books?" he countered.

"Of course," I replied. "Broonaara, Fourth Planet of Delta Eridana. Mass 0.9. Atmospheric pressure at sea level 1010 millibars. Mean temperature at Equator fifty deg Centigrade ..."

"What about the history of the place? he pressed.

"It's one of the worlds of the Shaara Empire," I said,

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Then you didn't read the book properly. There's supposed to have been a humanoid race here once. Probably the Shaara bumped 'em off — although they swear they didn't. Not that it much matters—our record insofar as the treatment of non-humanoid aborigines is concerned has some black patches..."

"So?"

"So they may have left artifacts." He turned to Carson. "Now you're here you might as well make yourself useful. Broadcast the thought of whiskey, bottles and bottles of whiskey, as strongly as you can."

"I'll try," said Carson.

His baby face puckered with the effort. George and I looked away from him to the yellow sky, to the swarms of spiralling black dots. We saw, at last, two of them detach themselves from the complicated aerial dance, fly in a dead straight line to where we were standing.

It was two of the drones. They came in gracefully, marred the beauty of their performance by a clumsy landing. They stood there looking at us with their big, faceted eyes, rather handsome creatures with their black and scarlet striped bodies, their shimmering wings.

"Earthmen," said one in his buzzing, artificial voice. "Whiskey?"

"Yes," replied George. "Whiskey. Lots of whiskey. But you must pay for it."

"What do you want?" asked the drone.

"The people who were on this world before you. The people like us. Did

they leave any ruins?"

He had some trouble getting the idea across, finally had to enlist the aid of Carson. The Shaara arc telepathic, although not spectacularly so. We learned eventually that there were ruins, and that they were two hours' flight from the spaceport. Manning's face fell. To walk that distance, and most of it through thick jungle, would be impossible in the limited time that we had at our disposal.

The Shaara drones, however, are inclined to let their fondness for human intoxicants outweigh their dislike for work — and, in this case, the real labor was being done by workers. One of them flew off and up, back to the hive. After a short delay he was back, and with him were a dozen of the big, drab workers. Each quartet of the workers was harnessed to a light but quite commodious cage, woven from the stems of some plant not unlike the Terran bamboo.

Not too happily we clambered into the cages. The ride itself was not too uncomfortable, however, once we had got used to the slight swaying motion. We went swinging low over the forest, over the blue trees with their gaudy yellow and scarlet blossoms, breathing deeply of the heady scents that drifted up through the warm air. We could shout to each other above the hum of the wings of the Shaara workers, and at first we did so. For most of the journey, though, we were silent—and I, for one, was almost asleep when my basket grounded gently on the springy turf in the center of a clearing.

Dazedly, I tumbled out to the ground, saw that Manning and Carson were doing likewise. I looked around me, did not see at first the ruins, moss covered as they were, overgrown with flowering creepers, their stones split by upthrusting trees.

How old they were I cannot say. A thousand years might well be a conservative estimate. Two thousand? Ten thousand? But that elder race had built well. The huge, truncated pyramid still retained its shape in spite of the ravages of time, of Nature.

There was a door in the sloping side, overgrown, impassable. This the Shaara workers, unharnessed from the baskets, attacked with claws and Mandibles, cleared in a surprisingly short time. We peered at the dark entrance dubiously.

"This was, I think, a temple," whispered Carson. "There are forces there still, dormant, needing only a worshipper to reawaken them . . ."

"Shut up!" snapped Manning. Then, "Damn it! I should have brought a torch!"

One of the two drones went to a nearby flowering bush, snapped off three huge, fleshy, yellow blossoms, handed one to each of us. George and I took ours automatically, then looked at them dubiously.

"Very touching," said George at last. "But we didn't come here to pick daisies."

"Light," said the drone. "Light."

We did not doubt him. We had come across far stranger things on other worlds. We advanced cautiously through the gloomy doorway and found that the blooms, once in the darkness, shed a pale, sickly illumination, enough for us to pick our way over the cracked flags of the floor.

The air was dry and musty and smelled of age and decay. Things rustled away from our advancing feet. Something large, seen only vaguely, flapped noisily around us, uttering shrill, almost supersonic cries. Something whined softly and something else hissed.

I don't know which of us saw the statue first; it seemed that the three of us cried out simultaneously. It shimmered wanly in the feeble light, a shape as tall as a man, man-like in form. We approached it carefully, saw dimly that its body was almost formless, suggested a human shape rather than stated it. Only the hands, the outstretched hands, the eloquent hands had been fashioned in detail. Six fingered they were, but this was not obvious. They were hands, and they were the work of an artist who had spent his life striving to achieve perfection in their portrayal.

I heard Manning draw a sharp breath. I knew what he was thinking. I knew that those hands represented to him a small, or even a large fortune. "If we can get this thing out of here . . ." he whispered.

We could, and we did. The base of the statue was not anchored, and the statue itself — we later discovered that it was made of aluminium — was not heavy, was no heavier than a man would have been. Slowly, carefully, George and I carried it out into the ruddy sunlight while Carson lit our way with the luminous flowers.

When we could see it better we were not disappointed. Featureless though the body and head were, they had a certain strength. But nobody was going to look for long, if at all, at head and body when those hands were there to be stared at.

"I don't know who they were, or what they were," I said at last. "But they showed rather more sense in their depiction of their God than some of our religious artists . . . Sure, they made God in their own image — but don't we all? Those hands ... The way I see it, they deified Man the artist, Man the builder, Man the craftsman

"No," said Carson earnestly. "No, Bill. The way I feel it, it wasn't that at all. They ..."

"Shut up!" Manning told him rudely. "The main thing to worry about is getting this idol, if that's what it was, back to the ship ... The trouble is that it weighs as much as any one of us. How much can these workers carry?"

The Shaara drones, who obviously thought that we were quite mad, were drawn into the discussion. They told us that one Earthman, or the equivalent, was the limit of the carrying capacity of four workers. The workers, who obviously couldn't think at all, stood patiently by whilst the matter was threshed out.

Manning decided that he, I and the idol should be flown back to the ship at once and that Peter Carson — who, after all, had come along uninvited — should wait by the temple until four of the workers returned for him. I said that it would be better if all three of us returned to the spaceport together, sending one of the drones and a carrying party back for the idol. It was Carson who settled the argument, saying that he would be quite happy to wait and that he found the atmosphere of the temple intensely interesting. Manning said that this suited him, adding spitefully that Carson would have to pay his own fare — a bottle of whiskey each way — there and back. The little telepath flushed, but said nothing. When we lifted from the clearing he was sitting on the turf, his back to one of the weathered stones, his eyes shut and what we called his receptive expression on his chubby face.

The captain and the mate were not at all pleased when we returned without Carson; after all, to leave a shipmate alone on an alien planet is one of the crimes. Manning tried to make a joke of it, pointing out that it was like one of those brain twisting puzzles in which a man, with only one boat at his disposal and with a goose and a fox in his charge has to cross a river and is hampered by the fact that his waterborne transport has not the lift to carry all three beings without sinking. The Old Man did not think that it was at all funny, neither did the chief officer. They made George promise to pay the Shaara drones and workers a handsome bonus in whiskey if they returned with Carson within three hours, then punished him further by making savage fun of his acquisition.

"At least it's useful," said the mate. "It will make a fine hall stand. It will hold three hats — one on its ugly head and two on each hand ... "Satan soon finds mischief for idol hands to do," said the Old Man gravely.

"They're beautiful hands," protested Manning.

"They're ugly," said the mate. "The whole damned thing is ugly. I wouldn't give it house room, not even as a hall stand."

Manning lost his temper then, and said nastily that gold-braided epaulettes do not make one an authority on art. The mate lost his temper and said that an alleged knowledge of art does not make one an efficient spaceman. The Old Man said that Mr Manning would have ample opportunity to learn to become such during the vessel's stay on Cleg, Willoughby, New Cheshire, Wittenfels and Dorado, because there would be no shore leave for him on any of those planets. Neither would there be any shore leave, he added, for Mr Templeton. Mr Templeton — myself — was rather peeved on learning this but had enough sense to say nothing.

They let us go then and we carried the idol into the ship and up to Manning's cabin, lashing it securely in a corner. We had a few drinks then, and Manning unburdened his soul on the subject of brassbound peasants and snooping teacup readers who tagged along uninvited and got their betters into trouble.

By the time that Carson did return to the ship George had worked up a fine hate against him, and for all the rest of the voyage refused to talk to him. Carson in his turn sulked, and refused to talk to either of us. It was very

childish, especially since he made it quite obvious that he had something to tell us.

At last came the day when we dropped down from the blue sky of Earth, down to the familiar drabness of the South Australian desert, to Port Woomera. On flaring jets we fell slowly to our berth, touched gently. The airlock doors sighed open, the ramp extended itself to the apron. The usual horde of officials climbed up it into the ship.

The Customs were there, of course. (They always are.) They did a busy trade, handing out receipts for duty and purchase tax on the various curios, most of them cheap and trashy, brought in by crew members. Carson and I were standing in the alleyway when one of the Customs officers went into Manning's room. The door was open, and we could see the second mate showing the idol to him for inspection.

"And how much did you pay for that, Mr Manning?" the official asked.

"All in all," said George truthfully, "a dozen bottles of whiskey —but they were actually for transportation to the ruined temple where we found it."

"Yes," whispered Carson to me. "The temple ..." (We were on speaking terms again; the conclusion of a voyage usually brings about an end to enmities.) "I learnt a lot when you left me there. After all the millennia the thoughts of the worshippers were verily still quite strong ..."

"What were they?" I asked.

"They could," he said, "be roughly translated as 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's ...' "

"But that's from our Bible,"

"But it's not the basis of any of our religions . . ."

"Those hands," the Customs officer was saying. "They have something. They mean something ..."

He put out one of his own to one of the hands of the idol.

"Oh," whispered Carson. "Oh. The touch of a worshipper, a true worshipper ..."

"But what ...?" I began.

"Can't you see? The power is still there, but dormant, waiting for this ..."

The Customs officer grasped the idol's hand in his own. Before our eyes the belly of the thing split open, and from it there rained to the deck a scintillating stream of diamonds and rubies and emeralds, of stones that were strange to us and that shone with rainbow splendour.

Manning paled.

He knew, as we knew, that he would pay and pay for his crime of smuggling, that the authorities would never believe the story that he was

ignorant of what the idol had contained. He knew that investigations would be made into the state of his personal finances.

He knew then what Carson, given the chance, would have told him—that the hands of the idol did not represent the hands of Man, the Builder, Man, the Artist, Man, the Craftsman.

They were the hands of the Taxgatherer.