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# INVENT OR DIE!

Lawrence's inventiveness was not what the Venusians thought it was—but it served him well in the end!

By  
**R. R. Winterbotham**

**A**LL day long Hal Lawrence, the earthman, had been nervous about Heeto, and the long, flat-bladed knife the Venusian fondled so sadly as he sat in the cave. Nominally Heeto was Hal's nurse and every three or four hours he dressed the wounds the terrestrial had received when his space ship cracked up in the valley.

Some days previously Hal had taught Heeto how to play chess and now Heeto was teaching Hal. There was no accounting for the brilliance of these Venusian minds, yet in all of the works Hal had seen in the valley of the caves, there was nothing that might be called a product of civilization. The Venusians lived in a stone age culture, yet they had intelligence far beyond that which the most advanced minds of earth could offer.

"Check—and mate," Heeto said. His small, red eyes gleamed from the center of his bulbous head.

"Doggone it, you've beaten me again," Hal said, grinning. "Isn't there anything you can't do? You learn English in about ten terrestrial hours, you master chess in a day or two, you work differential calculus in your head—"

Heeto didn't appear to be listening. He picked up the sword from a ledge and felt its keen edge. He rose, towering ten



feet above the earthman. Most of the height was due to his stilt-like legs, for his body was small and round, only slightly larger than his head.

"It is treason to tell you, earthman," Heeto said, "but in a few more *nid* I shall take you before the dojo, who will order me to cut off your head."

An electric shock seemed to freeze Hal Lawrence.

"Surely you're joking, Heeto!" he exclaimed. "What have I done? Why should I be decapitated?"

"It is the law," Heeto replied solemnly. "It is too bad, for I shall miss our chess games."

"If that's the law, it's not justice! Why should innocent strangers be executed? I'm a harmless man of science. I'll respect your institutions and customs, I will not rob you. I simply came here to further the interests of science for my people."

"Let's not discuss it," Heeto said. "The subject is painful to me."

"Not half as painful as it is to me," Hal assured him. "If you intended to execute me, why did you bother to patch me up after the ship crashed?"

"We do not consider you an inventor then," Heeto explained. "We thought you were part of a meteor. Now we find that it was a ship, not a meteor and that it contained many inventions. It is our custom to award inventors reprieves from execution as long as they continue to invent things. For the things you brought us in your space ship, you were rewarded generously—two hundred *nid*, all told. When you taught me chess, you were given an extra ten *nid*. All of the time is gone now. There are only three *nid* remaining on your reprieve."

A *nid* is the Venusian equivalent of a day. It is about forty hours long. The Venusian nights are fairly comfortable, but the days are unbearably hot and for this reason, Venusians spent all of their daylight hours deep in mountain caves.

"You mean invention is a capital offense but that inventions are capable of staying the execution?"

"It is the law," Heeto said. "Everyone must work to live. If men spent all of their time in invention, no one would work. When invention is punished, everyone works."

The earthman could hardly keep his eyes off the sharp blade Heeto held in his hands. "If I should invent something else, would I get another . . . er . . . reprieve?"

"If you do not invent something, you will die."

"What if I'd rather work. A little honest work never hurt anyone. Besides, I'm not much of an inventor. I had a lot of help on the space ship. I'll take a job."

"No," Heeto said, shaking his head sadly. "You are an inventor."

"Now listen, Heeto, be sensible. As a matter of fact I didn't invent chess or the cigar lighter, or any of these things on my ship. I didn't even invent the ship. I just risked my neck in someone else's idea."

"Circumstantial evidence is against you, my friend. Who on Venus has ever made such things before?"

"I tell you that I came from another planet! I'm an earthman!"

"You came from above the clouds. That must be Venus too—an unexplored land. If you can prove someone else invented these things—"

Hal groaned. The earth was millions of miles away. To prove to the Venusians, who knew nothing of astronomy because their world was cloaked in clouds, that another world existed in the universe was next to impossible.

Heeto glanced nervously about the cavern, as if in fear of being overheard.

"The dojo doesn't like you very much, earthman."

"So that's it!" Hal had never seen the dojo, but he had heard a great deal about

him. The dojo was the high lord and master, king and czar of Venus. "He's afraid of me."

"Inventions are dangerous. They throw men out of work and when men have no work they talk revolution. That is why invention is not encouraged here on Venus."

Hal smiled. "By threatening to kill me if I don't invent is no way to discourage me. Have you ever played checkers, Heeto?"

"Checkers? Is it like chess?"

"It's played on the same kind of a board."

"If it is a good game you will have ten more *nids* of life."

"Good. I can invent something in thirteen *nids*."

THE clouds of Venus took on the characteristic, blood-red hue of the Venusian sunrise. Hal Lawrence wondered if he would ever see a real honest-to-God sunrise again.

Back home sunrise meant a new day; people of the earth faced new days eagerly. But here on Venus sunrise meant the dawn of terrible heat. Sweat already was beginning to trickle down Hal's shoulders and the humidity was suffocating.

Besides today was the last day of reprieve since his last invention. Today he would appear in court before the dojo, show a new product of his creative ability or get his head chopped off. Hal had a neat little invention for today and he hoped to win a twenty-*nid* reprieve in which to work on something else.

That was why Hal had visited the works of the Venusians. He wanted to see the industries of Venus and invent some labor saving devices. If he could throw enough men out of work, he could cause a revolution and this silly law that required an inventor to invent or die could be changed.

He saw that the chief, and perhaps

the only industry of Venus was digging. Venusians were digging up a mountain range to the south of the valley and transporting the dirt and rocks to the plain east of the line of cliffs in which the Venusians dug their caves.

"It is to protect us from the heat," Heeto explained. "A range of high mountains in the east will shield our caves from the morning sun. Our nights will be longer."

Hal laughed. "After the dojo sees my new invention he won't need a mountain range."

It had been partly luck and partly the logical result of Venusian heat that Hal's new invention should be an air conditioner for the dojo's cave.

"It is not something that will displace labor?" Heeto asked horrified.

"What if it is?"

Heeto cast his round, weepy eyes to the ground and shook his head.

"Alas, there is much you do not know about the customs of my people. I like you my friend. I should hate to see your head chopped off."

The light, growing brighter each moment, was a dazzling brilliance when they reached the large royal cavern in the center of the line of cliffs along the edge of the plain.

Toward this entrance trudged Heeto and Hal and as they approached a clanging noise sounded from within. A guard, carrying a stone tipped spear, appeared in the opening.

HEETO flashed his medallion, which he wore on a string around his neck, and the guard saluted and allowed the two to enter. They passed another guard, beating lustily on an iron gong, giving the daily warning that the outside heat would no longer permit Venusians to leave their caves.

Hal Lawrence, in contrast with his Venusian companion, was short and sturdily

built. He was stripped of all excess clothing, except a pair of shorts and riding boots. Dangling from his waist was a stone-headed club, as protection from wild *ppits* and other dangerous beasts of the Venusian hills.

The passage, lighted by torches, widened into a huge chamber with painted walls. From the ceiling hung a large phosphorescent stone which made the room as light as day.

A guard, holding a long spear, stood beside a flat-topped stone at the far end of the chamber. Behind the guard, utterly incongruous with the stone-age surroundings was a large metal cabinet—Hal's air conditioning machine.

"There it is," Hal said to Heeto. "I built it with my own little hands. Dojo Ermos ought to give me twenty or thirty *nid*—"

"Or chop off your head," Heeto said ominously.

The guard suddenly snapped to attention. He swung his spear high over his head and shouted:

*"Elixirar! Dojo! Ug!"*

Hal often had heard the cry on the appearance of the dojo. The cry was simply a hail to the dojo, like "Long Live the King!" "Ave, Caesar!" or other terrestrial greetings to majesties.

There was the shuffle of sandals, the unison tramp of soldiers' feet and the dojo, followed by the cavern guard, entered the room from a side passage. In appearance, the dojo looked like any other Venusian—long legs, melon-like body, bulbous head and weepy eyes—but Ermos was older than most of his people. The few straggly hairs on his head were white. He moved slowly. Yet his eyes were bright and keen. They seemed to pierce Hal and to read his thoughts. They bored into Hal's soul with hatred.

Dojo Ermos seated himself on the flat-topped throne. He nodded to the body-

guard, who snapped spears to the floor and stood rigidly at attention.

The scene possessed an essence of unreality to Hal. The mixture of savagery and civilization, the queerly shaped beings, the unbearable heat combined to give the atmosphere. The half-naked monarch, wearing a medal around his neck to denote his authority, might have been a south sea island monarch, save that his people solved complex mathematical problems in their heads and could master the English language in a few hours.

"Is your invention ready, Hal Lawrence?" the dojo asked.

"It is, sir," came the reply.

"Then let me warn you: if it succeeds, your execution will be delayed a suitable time, depending on the merits of the invention. If it fails, you will die immediately."

"And who is to judge?"

"I am, Hal Lawrence, and I shall judge rightly, for the law states that if the invention does what the inventor claims and I judge it wrongly, I must die." The dojo clapped his hands.

Hal stepped to the side of the conditioner and started the motor, one of the simple combustion type machines Hal had salvaged from his wrecked space ship.

The motor hummed. Fans whirred. From the vent of the conditioner came a cool breeze to fan the dojo. The hot, suffocating air of the Venusian cave grew cool and pleasant. Dojo Ermos closed his eyes and sighed with evident pleasure.

"It works on an evaporation principle, sir," Hal explained. "Water absorbs heat to turn into vapor—"

"Yes, yes. We know the principle," the dojo said.

"You know the principle and yet no one has invented this machine?" Hal asked incredulously. "Why do you prefer to suffocate in this unbearable heat, rather than make yourself comfortable?"

"Because if it were cool there would be no reason to move the mountain range in the south part of the valley. If the mountains were not moved, there would be no work for my people. I would have to execute idlers."

"You might find other work for them to do," Hal suggested. "Those who lose their jobs digging up mountains might be set to work building and repairing these machines."

"This is a machine," the dojo said, savagely, "it does a man's work. When my people learn too much about machines, they will invent other machines to do their work. The whole world will soon be peopled by idlers."

Hal opened his mouth to remonstrate, but Heeto nudged him in the ribs.

"As a matter of fact, Hal Larwence, I hardly approve of this invention," the dojo went on, throwing his head back and drinking in the cool breeze. "It deserves only one *nid* of time extension. May you invent something more worthy before your time is up."

The dojo waved his hand, indicating that the interview was over. He rose and strode back into the side passage, followed by his marching bodyguard.

**H**AL and Heeto followed a passage through the cliffs to their own quarters.

"One *nid*!" Hal repeated. "What can I invent in that length of time? In my world, Heeto, inventions have taken years to perfect!"

"If I were you, my friend, I would invent something that the dojo will appreciate."

Hal laughed. "And what would he appreciate? Something that would end my life quickly, no doubt. Perhaps a new way to cut off my head—"

Hal stopped suddenly. His eyes were fastened on the broad bladed sword that Heeto carried at his side.

"Who invented *that*, Heeto?"

"The sword, Hal? I do not know. It was invented many years ago—"

"Lord! Why didn't I think of it! A guillotine!"

"A what?"

Hal described the invention made famous in the French revolution. It would be easy to invent. Steel from the wrecked space ship could be sharpened into a blade and plastics from the interior could be fashioned into a frame.

"You can do it with time to spare!" Heeto said joyfully.

"We will use that time," Hal said grimly.

**B**EFORE night fell Hal and Heeto visited the caverns of Venus. Hal spoke to the workers, resting from their labors in the mountain range. He talked to soldiers, palace officials and the serfs who grew food in underground farms.

He told them how they could win a life of ease.

He spoke of liberty, justice and relief from tyranny.

Heeto shuddered as he listened.

"You preach revolution," he whispered. "It is treason!"

"I am sorry you are not with me, Heeto," said Hal.

"With you! I am ahead of you! Look!" Heeto held up a small triangle of rock. "I made it with my own hands!"

Hal Lawrence laughed.

As soon as the sun set, Hal made a trip to the space ship. He found a plate of steel suitable for his needs and he brought enough materials from the interior of the ship to fashion a rude guillotine, which now for the second time in history was to play a part in the founding of a republic.

At dawn the guillotine was taken into the royal palace.

"It won't work," Heeto whispered.

"It has to work," said Hal.

In the cavern came the sound of shuffling feet. A few workmen, just returned from the mountain range, appeared cautiously in the court of Dojo Ermos. Soon others appeared.

The crowd swelled until it packed every available inch about the flat-topped throne.

At the entrance of the cave the gong announced the rising of the sun. Once more there came the rhythmic tread of the palace bodyguard and again the dojo shuffled into the room.

His eyes quickly swept the throng, but they exhibited no surprise.

"I hear, Hal Lawrence, that you have been preaching revolution among my people," the dojo said. "You know, perhaps, that the penalty for treason is death?"

"I have not advocated the overthrow of your government, sir," Hal replied. "You did not urge a revolution de facto, but you planted the seed," said the dojo. "But I need not worry. Today is your last day of life."

"No," Hal said. "Revolutions are not built in a day. It takes hundreds of years of oppression, such as the people of Venus have endured, to make people ripe for revolution."

"You insinuate—" The monarch checked himself. "Never mind. Hal Lawrence, have you an invention to offer?"

"I have, your majesty," Hal said, pointing to the guillotine. "It is a new machine for decapitation."

The dojo raised his eyebrows and stared at the frame and knife.

"I daresay it will not work. Are you willing to test it?"

"I am, sir," Hal replied, "but let me call attention to a matter of Venusian law. If a king has a man executed illegally, he himself must die. These people here—" Hal pointed to the crowd in the room—"have come to make sure justice is done today. If my machine works, I will have been executed illegally."

"But if it does not work you lose your head. I do not think it will work. You must prove it or you will be decapitated."

"If you order me executed, then the machine has caused my execution and it is a successful invention. Therefore I will have been illegally executed," Hal said. "In which case you also must die."

"**A**H!" THE dojo's eyes shifted uneasily toward the crowd of grinning Venusians. "I will not quibble. It is a clever trick, earthman. You have created a successful invention. For this you may have fifteen *nid* in which to be more clever—but next time you must not expect me to be so easily beaten."

"Thank you, sir," Hal said bowing. "And now all of my friends here have inventions. It is a coincidence, sir, that each of them have new machines for decapitation. I trust that each of them will receive fifteen *nid* in which to invent something else."

"I have been tricked!" roared the dojo.

"In my world it is called a strike," Hal explained. "It might even lead to violence—"

"Soldiers of the guard!" the dojo shouted. "Protect me."

"Sir," began the captain, "I beg to inform you that all of us have turned inventor, too. We have, coincidentally, invented new machines to decapitate—"

The king, trembling in anger, sank back on the throne. He turned his red eyes toward Hal Lawrence.

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

"The first step is the repeal of the laws that hinder invention and the advancement of civilization," Hal began.

Throughout the night Hal outlined his plan to make Venus a world where happiness and comfort could be sought by all living creatures.

THE END