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# THE KING'S EYE

By James MacCreigh

The old Venusian tribal king had an immense hatred and distrust for Earthman—and two marooned explorers found the rest of his tribe even worse!



CHESTER WING shoved the cards away from him and rose with a snarl on his lips. "Damn you and your sleight-of-hand, Farrel," he lipped. "Cut it out!"

"What?" innocently asked Farrel Henderson, Wing's partner in exploration.

"Dealing from the bottom—that's what. I know we aren't playing for money, but I still don't like the idea of losing every hand."

"Oh, calm down," suggested Henderson, rising himself. "I was

only joking. We'll quit playing if you feel that way." He sauntered over to the quartz viewplate, stared at the fetid swamp that was dimly visible through the steamy fog. The scenery was pretty uninspiring, being nothing better than a stean-shrouded tangle of vegetation, mostly dull greying white. All Venusian landscapes were much alike; all revoltingly wet and unpleasantly hot. "What a place to blow a rocket-tube," he muttered, less than half to Wing.

Wing nodded vaguely, no longer angry. "Hope to Heaven we get out of here soon," he said fervently.

"How much longer do you suppose it'll actually be before the tube's ready?" inquired Henderson.

Wing cocked a thoughtful ear at the faint humming sound that told of the automatic repair-machines at work, extracting isotopic beryllium from the constant flow of swamp-water that passed through its pipes, plating it in layers on the steel core that was the mold for their new rocket-tube. "Maybe two days," he pronounced finally. "At least, the tube ought to be ready then. Whether or not our fine-feathered friends will do something to keep us here is something else again. I don't feel very happy about that—though there isn't really much that they could do, once we get the new tube in place."

**I**T HAD been a bad day for the Earthmen when they'd been forced to land in this particular section of Venus. The local tribe of natives had developed a positive allergy to Earthmen, the result of a fracas that had occurred years before, when planetary pioneering had been newer. Wing had never got all the details from the reticent tribesmen, but it had had something to do with the great *Venustone* that was now on exhibition in the Hall of the Planets, back in Washington on Earth. The Stone was really a huge red diamond, but its great size and unusual coloring had

made it highly valuable. Wing couldn't blame the chief for regretting its loss to the tribe. Probably the Earthman who had taken it had "paid" for it with trumpery beads or colored cloth—at gun's point. That sort of trade dealings was all right, of course, for the more ignorant Venusians, but the chief hereabouts—he was really a king, and "Ch'mack" was as close as Terrestrial lips could come to reproducing the verbal click and splash that was his name—was no less intelligent than the average Earthman.

"Hey!" Henderson's cry broke in on Wing's absorbed reverie. "Who's pounding on the lock?"

Certain enough, there was someone scratching on the airlock, obviously desirous of attracting attention. Wing refocused his gaze, saw, just visible at an angle through the quartz port, a hideously furred, troll-like creature, manlike in face, resembling most nearly a web-winged caricature of a kangaroo in body.

"It's one of Ch'mack's boys," said Wing. "Suppose we're in trouble again?"

"You don't mean again," Henderson shrugged expressively. "You mean yet. Ch'mack is about the touchiest living thing I've seen. I don't know why—we never did him nothing. Let's find out what he wants anyway. Go talk to the messenger."

"Me? Why me? Go yourself!"

"All right," Henderson sighed, contemplating the mucky terrain. "Let's both go. Here!" He tossed a wire-coiled sort of helmet at Wing, who caught it deftly and slipped it over his head. Henderson donned one also, and stepped into the airlock. The wire helmets were perceptors—what you might call telepathy-radios, allowing the explorers to converse mentally with the Venusians. No human could have spoken the Venusians' native tongue.

A touch on a button closed the inner door, sealing off the ship; as soon as that

was closed, the outer door of the lock opened automatically. Henderson and Wing grabbed at their nostrils, and stepped out on to Venusian soil.

Humans could breathe Venus' air indefinitely, providing they didn't overexert themselves. The CO<sub>2</sub>-rich atmosphere contained enough oxygen for life, though not as much as did Earth's. But it also contained a variety of rank, hot odors, most of which resembled decaying fish.

Wing marvelled at the fact that so disgusting a smell wasn't actually poisonous, and turned to the Venusian waiting. "What do you want?" he inquired, ungraciously but without attempting to give deliberate offense.

"Ch'mack wishes to see you," the Venusian thought back, hostility in his tones. "Come with us." The Earthmen might have refused, but they suddenly discovered that there were more Venusians than one present. And all of them were armed.

They went.

"WHY will you not admit your purpose here?" bellowed Ch'mack suspiciously. The Earthmen shrugged and didn't answer. They had been asked that question, or a variant, a dozen times since that quiz began. And Ch'mack had refused to tell them just of what they were suspected. Nor had their perceptors been able to penetrate his will-shielded mind. "I know what you want," he went on vindictively. "Don't think that I do not. I know almost everything. But admit it to me!"

"Modest cuss," thought Wing "below the threshold"—i. e., without sufficient intensity for the thought to be telepathed. Aloud he said, "I don't know what you mean."

"Fool! Do you think you can hide things from me? I know what you are after," repeated the king. "And you won't

get it!" With a furtive movement he stuck his hand into his pouch, the only article of clothing he wore. He seemed reassured at what he found. "No, you won't steal it," he continued. "I won't let you! But you must be punished for wanting to steal it. I will see that you are punished."

"Steal what?" inquired Wing, annoyed.

"Steal what! As if you didn't know. My Eye, of course!"

Wing and Henderson exchanged puzzled glances. The king had two perfectly good eyes, that was true enough, but certainly neither of them had any intention of stealing one. The king glared at them heatedly. For a second it seemed he would actually walk over to them, violating the tribe's eon-old custom and actually setting his feet to the ground, to strike them. Then he looked away, a cunning smile spreading over his face, seemingly plunged into deep thought.

"Ah," he said finally. "I have been trying to think of a punishment for them, but I cannot. My mind is too subtle, too delicate, to think of a fitting doom. Besides, we must make absolutely sure that they are guilty, must make them confess. I shall refer the matter to the Tribune!"

The Tribune! The hapless two knew what that meant. The Tribune was an old institution in all Venusian tribes, apparently a relic of the laws that had governed Venus when it was a unified, planet-wide democracy. It was a group of a dozen or so of the leaders of each tribe, the most powerful men in them and generally the oldest and bitterest as well. To appear before a Tribune was akin to appearing before a highly refined and super-deadly Spanish Inquisition. It was a rule of the Tribune that confession must precede punishment. But any kind of a confession would do, and the Tribune was perfectly willing to use torture to obtain it. Often the "questioning" was worse



and more to be feared than the punishment itself—for the worst punishment was merely death, and death is always too abstract a concept to be feared with the heart, only with the mind.

Henderson felt his companion nudging him. He looked—Wing had flicked the switch that turned off his perceptor, was motioning to him to do likewise. "Listen," spoke Wing tensely as soon as Henderson had prevented the transmission of the words, "we'd better give in to them. Time works for us; it'll be a while before they can summon the Tribune. Maybe we can stall them off until the tube's ready. If we make a break for it now we can probably get away all right—but what'll we do then?"

Henderson comprehended. "Okay," he said. "But we better hang onto our guns—Hey!" His surprise was justified; before his very eyes, Wing stiffened and fell heavily to the ground. Then he felt a sharp sting in his own thigh and realized, as he collapsed in his turn, that they had both been shot with paralysis darts.

And as he lay there rigid, he cursed himself. For a smirking Venusian face bent over him and took away the gun he'd just determined to retain at all costs.

**W**ING had no clear idea of how long it was before he felt the first muscle-twinges that indicated that the effect of the dart had begun to work off.

The first thing he did was to move his eyes. The particular sector of the wall on which they had been permanently focused had become boring.

He discovered that he and his companion were in a sort of cage; bars of Venus fern-wood, floor of some rocky, cement-like material. It had a door, and the door was standing invitingly open. But Wing could only look longingly at the door, and not pass through it, for he and his partner were very securely tied with rope twisted from the "veins" of the fern-wood

leaves, as strong as cobalt-steel, and tougher.

They were alone in a large room, their cage only one of a dozen or more, but all the others empty. Beside the cages the room held a good many seats and benches, and a lot of equipment at which Wing looked only briefly. Its purpose was too plain for his nerves. It was torture tools, and all ready for use.

Wing kicked and rolled over, touching his companion, who was also back to normal. "What do we do now?" asked Henderson, carefully keeping fear from his voice.

"Wait. That's all we can do."

That was true enough. Wing knew their bonds were amply secure; there was no chance of immediate escape. To make plans now would be stupid, for they had no idea of what chances the future might offer.

So they waited, passing the time in desultory conversation. In twenty minutes or so one of the Venusians peered in the door at them, widened his eyes when he saw they'd regained the power of movement, and went away again. "This is it," said Wing, and Henderson nodded in agreement.

It was it. In a moment the door was flung open wide and in solemn procession, entered the Tribune.

Wing thought they were the toughest-looking representatives of their kind he'd ever seen. They were every one members of the nebulously defined aristocracy of their tribe.

The two Earthmen were unceremoniously unbound and yanked from their cage. Dragged to a brace of high-backed fern-wood chairs, they were bound again, to the chairs. That was no pleasure, for these chairs had been designed for the different Venusian anatomy—and, being for the exclusive use of the Tribune's prisoners, hadn't been intended for comfort anyhow.

The Tribune took seats, all but one. This one, apparently the Chairman, advanced threateningly toward the Terrestrials. He reached out to touch Wing's head. Wing feared the beginning of the torture and strained desperately against the ropes, but the Venusian merely wanted to turn on Wing's perceptor. When he had done the same to Henderson, he lanced a thought at them, menace implicit in his manner.

"Earthmen," he thought, even his mind-vibrations coming ponderous and slow, "confess to us and save yourselves pain!"

"Confess what?" Henderson flashed. "We told you—we came here only because our ship was wrecked. We had no intention of harming you, or of stealing your king's 'Eye', whatever that may be. As soon as our ship is repaired, we will go away."

The Venusian's next thought conveyed an impression of sardonic laughter. "Go away! Earthmen, you will never go away from here. Not alive." His demeanor had been hostile; now it became aggressively menacing. Like a scourge the thought came: "*Confess!* We know that you came here to steal the Eye. We know that your pretended ignorance of the nature of the Eye is a bluff. Let us end all bluffs and lies. The Eye—I shall say it to keep you from using this line of evasion any more—is a great, red, sacred gem, the twin of the one that was foully stolen from us forty years ago. Now that I have broken down that veil of lying—*confess!*"

The Venusian stepped back, panting with the vigor of his thoughts. He eyed his two prisoners intently. Seeing that they had resolved not to answer, he angrily motioned toward a pair of guards stationed near the door. Together they lugged up a heavy, squat metal basin, in which burned a fiercely hot flame.

The two Terrestrials realized that the torture had come, and braced themselves, for it.

But they weren't to be tortured just then anyhow, it seemed, for, before the torture could commence, there was a disturbance at the door and a new Venusian burst in. "The King is dead!" he screamed, the thought beating on the brains of the Earthmen while the gibberish of his voice resounded in their ears. "His body has been found on the throne. He was murdered!"

WING and Henderson had suddenly become secondary matters. The Tribune left the room in a flurry—though not so fast but what the guards returned the pair of Earthmen to their cages, retying them. In a moment the hall was empty again.

"This is not going to help us at all, Farrel," Wing said with dark foreboding. "Of all the things I didn't want to happen. I don't care who killed the king. I know who's going to pay for it. Us."

"Shut up," growled Henderson, who knew that. His eyes were fastened on his own wrist, where he was fighting the ropes with his fingers. "Let's think about getting out of this place. The monkey that tied me up was in a hurry, and I know a couple of things about ropes, anyhow. He didn't notice the way I kept my arm poked a little away from my side. I've got a little slack here. If I can find something long and narrow, I think I can pry that knot open."

Wing flopped painfully to his side. "In my pocket," he grunted, contorting himself so that Henderson could get at it. "It's a fountain pen. Will it do?"

"No," said Henderson, extracting it. "But I'll make it do!" Holding it in his teeth, he slipped it into the precious inch of slackness he'd created, pried, and stretched the inch to two. A moment later his arm was free; he shed his own bonds and quickly got to those of his companion.

"Let's get from here," muttered Wing when they were both standing, trying to

massage the pain from their hurt limbs. "If we use our perceptors occasionally, just flip them on and off, we'll be able to catch thoughts and see if anyone is looking for us."

They moved quietly to the door and stood in attitudes of intense concentration as they "listened" for sentries. Their questing minds could find no trace of anyone watching, so they slipped out the door and broke for the surrounding jungle at a quick, space-consuming walk. Their perceptors they continued to use at intervals. For their purposes, the things had a great defect; they broadcast thoughts quite as well and as far as they received them. . . .

The uniformly grey Venusian jungles, with its toadstool plants and fern-like trees, offered no pleasing prospect to the two explorers as they slogged their way along as quietly as possible. They had to take immense care that the apparently dry spots they stepped on were really what they seemed. Bogs and swampholes freckled the Venusian terrain.

**W**ING shoved an overhanging creeper out of his way and stood straight, panting. Suddenly he stiffened. "Look!" he whispered, piercingly. "Just ahead."

There was a glint of metal through the trees. Wing and Henderson stared at it intently. It was a metal building, as unlike those of the town behind them as the Coliseum is unlike a Twentieth-Century baseball grandstand. The degenerate Venusian architecture with which the two were familiar, stacked up against this new building, would have seemed unbearably shoddy.

The building was metal, some sort of steel, apparently, but obviously rust-proof. The corners of it were weathered to soft curves, they saw as they slipped closer. It was *old*.

Octagonal, it had no windows at all, as far as the two explorers could see. The

structure was thirty feet or more in diameter, about the same in height.

"This is no place for us, Chet," whispered Henderson. "That place is probably crawling with Venusians. Let's go!"

Wing nodded agreement and turned.

But didn't go far. He spied a flicker of motion in the underbrush not far away. He tugged at Henderson's sleeve, pointing silently.

Henderson looked first at Wing's face, then at the indicated spot. Fern-trees, he saw, and the toad-stool growths, and the vines and sinkholes.

And something else. He couldn't quite . . . yes! He saw it clearly and grabbed Wing's shoulder. "It's a *snake!*" he whispered hoarsely, panic in his voice.

Wing nodded, silently pointed toward the tower. A "snake"—really a lizard, fast and deadly poisonous—was nothing to play around with. Their only hope of life was to get away before it spied them.

The snake, it seemed, wasn't especially hungry, though there was never a time at all when a Venusian snake wasn't willing to take just a little bit more food. But it wasn't actively *looking* for a meal. Consequently, it didn't see them right away.

But eventually it had to—and did. When they were less than fifty feet from the tower, having progressed a hundred away from the snake, there was a sudden commotion in the undergrowth and it came slithering with immense speed toward them, its great, cone-shaped head waving from side to side, the horizontal jaws opening and closing as the rudimentary, clawed hands flailed the air.

The two adventurers caught sight of the monster coming at them and rapidly decided what to do. Together they broke for the building, then dashed around it, searching for a door. Luckily, there was one, and it was unlocked. They flung themselves inside, slammed the door and braced their backs against it just as the snake rammed it.

A glance around made them wonder if they had done right. The Tribune tortured, agonizingly, before it killed; the snake, at the worst, would eat them alive, a matter over with in a few minutes. For, though no living thing was visible, there was no dust or rust—and the place was lighted with several burning torches.

Wing headed silently for the only visible doorway, Henderson following.

They emerged into a huge room. What they had been in before, they realized, had been only an anteroom. This new auditorium comprised almost the entire structure. They had entered at the very front: just before them, on a dais, was a sheeted recumbent figure. The dead king, Wing thought swiftly, but thought no more about it.

For occupying the room with them, their heads bowed in mourning, were half a hundred armed Venusian natives!

**T**HE confusion that followed was terrific. They were seen immediately, and a babel of voices arose.

Wing thought with frantic speed, and

evolved a plan. Before the Venusians could recover from their shock, he stepped quickly to the side of the dais, and screamed at Henderson:

"Snap on your perceptor! Tell them to stay back! If they take one step forward, I'll turn the table over and dump his immortal majesty on the ground!"

Henderson shouted joyously as he comprehended the plan; and immediately did as he was bid. There was sudden consternation among the Venusians as his sacrilegious words smote them to a standstill. The person of the King was inviolate! Never was he allowed even to walk on the bare ground or floor, was carried from place to place in a palanquin, could stand or sit only on a specially consecrated throne or dais. To have his corpse desecrated horrified them beyond words.

One of the Venusians, the leader of the Tribune, stepped forward.

"What do you wish of us?" he asked.

Henderson spoke for both of them. "A guarantee of unhindered passage to our ship; and freedom to leave in it as soon as we can."

"That is impossible," said the Venusian flatly. "You killed Ch'mack. We cannot permit the king's murderers to live."

Henderson swore, gazed vainly at Wing. Wing took part in the discussion. "We didn't kill Ch'mack," he said. "How was he murdered?"

"As you know, he was stabbed."

"We were in a cage when that happened. How could we have killed him?"

The Venusian laughed sardonically. "Fools!" he cried. "Do you think to deceive us as simply as that? Ch'mack was killed while you were supposed to be paralyzed. You escaped from your bonds—do not deny it; we know you were able to do it, for you did so a second time to make your escape—killed him and returned to the cage, knowing that you would have a better chance of escaping for good in the confusion after his body was found."

Wing cursed without hope. "What can you do with people like that?" he murmured to himself.

Henderson said, "Why not let us go? We swear, by any oath you ask us to take, that we had nothing to do with the death of Ch'mack. You cannot harm us, for if any one of you makes a suspicious move, we'll dump his corpse on the floor. Better that his murderers—even if we were his murderers—go free, than that the soul of Ch'mack be refused admission to the special heaven of royalty because its body has touched the unhallowed ground."

"You are still a fool, Earthman," thought the Venusian heavily. "You cannot remain on guard forever. Sooner or later you may fall asleep, or even look away for a second. If not, then you will starve to death in a few weeks, or die of thirst, agonizingly. We can afford to wait. . . . Earthmen, we will make you an offer. Step back from the body of Ch'mack, and we will kill you where you stand, for you must die. If you do not do this, you will die soon anyhow . . . but

slowly. If not of thirst, it will mean that you have fallen into our hands. And *that* death will not be pleasant."

WING'S stomach wrapped itself into a tight hard knot. There was one hundred per cent of truth in what the Venusian was saying. Death he really did not fear—but the slow wait for death, or the absolute certainty of its coming if he accepted their offer, was infinitely horrible to him.

"Chet!" Henderson's urgent cry brought the faint flicker of new hope to Wing.

"What is it?" he asked, looking up to see Henderson removing his mind-reader, which he had already switched off.

"I have an idea. While they were talk—wait a minute," he interrupted himself sharply. "Forget that. I—um—I think if I go down and mingle with them, maybe I can grab a gun and we can get away. You stay by the body, and dump it if anything happens."

That was why Henderson had removed his mind-reader, thought Wing; he didn't want the Venusians to know what he was doing. Henderson was already moving toward them as Wing assented, "Okay," cheerfulness in his voice for the first time. He prepared to transmit to the Venusians the order not to move; then realized that they'd know it already because it had been in his mind, and—

His heart dropped again, and his stomach screwed up even tighter than before. Oh, what a fool Henderson was, he thought agonizedly. Henderson had told him the plan; therefore, it had been in Wing's mind; therefore, by courtesy of the efficient perceptor, the Venusians knew all about it. He swore, dully.

BUT what was Henderson doing? He was gesturing to one of the Venusians—the one who had spoken, the head of the Tribune.

"Chet," Henderson called. "Tell this guy to stop running away. I won't hurt him. I just want to talk to him. Tell him to let me put the perceptor on him. And *don't argue!*"

Though puzzled, Wing complied.

"And you are still fools," the Venusian sneered. "This one thinks he can surprise me, take my rifle. But look!" and he loosed his weapon-belt, handed it to another Venusian. Now openly contemptuous, he said, "Tell him he can put that thing on me!"

Wing relayed the statement in English. Very carefully, Henderson slipped the mind-reader on the Venusian's forehead, and snapped the switch on. Then he shouted to Wing, "Chet, for God's sake, *repeat what I say!*"

With blinding speed, he grabbed the Venusian's pouch away from him, ripped it open, and held on high—the Eye!

"Tell them that here is the murderer of their king!" he screamed to Wing. "Tell them!"

But Wing didn't have to. For the Venusian was wearing a perceptor; surprised by the lightning attack, for a moment his defenses were down, and every person, human or Venusian, in that chamber felt the cold impact of the thought,

*"Of course I killed him. But YOU will die for it!"*

He was wrong, and comprehended his error immediately, as he saw the staring faces of his compatriots around him. He saw how he had been tricked—but too late. He ripped the mind-helmet from his head, dashed it full in Henderson's face, leaped for the door.

Henderson fell, hurt and unconscious, to the floor. So great was the turmoil caused by surprise that the criminal made good his escape from the building. But the others followed him, drawing their weapons, shouting and screaming as they ran.

Wing leaped to the side of his comrade.

Henderson wasn't severely injured, he found; merely unconscious, and cut about the forehead. As Wing was chafing his wrists to revive him, he heard a great babble of shouts and a volley of rifle fire from outside. In a few moments the Venusians began to trickle back, very grave in appearance.

"Earthman," thought one of them, "you are free. Please leave as soon as you can. You have brought us enough sorrow."

More cheerful instructions than that Wing never hoped to hear. "Did you kill him when you shot at him?" he asked.

The Venusian stared at him. Ponderously he replied, "We were not shooting at him. We killed a snake. It had been lurking just outside, and *it* killed him. Now go." And he turned away.

HENDERSON had lost a lot of blood, and was pretty weak. Still, he had regained consciousness in time to help Wing replace the rocket tube, now all repaired. They were all set to leave now; without formalities, Wing touched the firing keys, timing the rockets to thunder in sharp, staccato jerks, "rocking" the ship free of the hole it had dug for itself in the mud.

In a moment the powerful suction of the mud was broken. Wing slammed down an entire row of keys; the ship creaked and groaned; the mighty rockets shoved them forward with immense acceleration, and in a moment they were roaring through the atmosphere, their ship ripping the air to shreds as they sped for the high vacuums where they could really make speed for the nearest Earth colony.

Wing cut half the rockets, and touched the lever that brought out the tiny, retractable stubby wings. Even in the stratosphere, where they were, their immense speed made wings useful. It saved fuel, for one thing, and, more important to Wing, it made conversation possible by cutting down the noise. Wing had been too anx

ious to get away from the Venusian town to bother with questions; now he succumbed to his curiosity, turned to Henderson, and said:

"Now spill it. How did you work that little trick?"

Henderson smiled weakly, but with triumph.

"Well, I knew that neither you nor I had killed Ch'mack. It had to be one of the Venusians. Which one? That I had to find out.

"But there was a logical suspect, if you followed the detective-story pattern, and looked for the motive. Someone stood to become King after Ch'mack died. I thought that might be a powerful inducement to killing.

"And while you were talking to them, I was trying to read their minds with my perceptor. I couldn't make a great deal of progress with any of them,—but one of them had me stopped cold. He was very intently *not* thinking about the murder. I figured that was sort of suspicious, and I saw that he was the guy who'd inherit the king-ship, so I took a chance. It worked."

"Good for you," applauded Wing. "You got us out of a pretty damned tight mess." He sat complacently at the controls, smiling into the black sky ahead as the ship sped along. Suddenly his smile clouded. "If you couldn't read his mind, how did you know that he had the Eye?" he asked.

"Oh, that," said Henderson proudly. "I didn't. I mean, he didn't. I knew that he *didn't* have the Eye, because I did. I found it on Ch'mack's body, and planted it on the other guy for effect. I knew that it would take a real shock to make him think 'out loud' about the killing, so I provided one. And that," he said, hastily pursuing his advantage, "is all due to my 'sleight-of-hand' that you're so fond of criticizing. I hope you'll be a little more respectful about it in the future."

"I will," agreed Wing happily. "In fact, soon as we land I'll let you play cards with me again."

"For money?" particularized Henderson.

"Well—" Wing hesitated, then grimly agreed. "Yes, for money. I guess I owe you something." He resumed his sunny smile at the sky. "Well, it's too late to do anything about it now, but I wish I could have got a closer look at that Eye," he said a moment later. "Seemed to me that Ch'mack was a lot more worried about keeping it than even its value warranted. I wish I had it to find out why."

"Do you really wish you had it?" grinned Henderson.

"Uh-huh. It ought to be. . . . Say! Did you—?"

"You bet I did!" Henderson cried. He took the object in question from a pocket and tossed it at his colleague. "Here—catch!"

THE END