

All
Stories
New

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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.
DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.

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time bomb

by
Joseph Farrell

Under the psychophone, Randall couldn't lie, and he couldn't stop talking. But even so, there was still a chance that they might not learn enough, because...

HANK RANDALL slugged the big man with a big wrench. Then he stared in surprise at what had come of his sudden anger. He watched Brognor fall, a limp sack of fat, to the floor.

But the surprise passed swiftly. He looked around, saw that there were no witnesses to the act. The Syrtians seldom came around here; they kept their workers in line with the occasional psychophone tests and paid little attention to what mere humans were doing most of the time.

Brognor had asked for it. There had been no need for him to lead on the eight saboteurs, entice them into the Syrtian dome, and then report them. He could have ignored them, laughed at their fantastic plan as Randall had done. When the fat man came into the gold room and reported gleefully that the eight humans had been captured and killed, Randall saw red. If the wrench hadn't been in his hand at the time, he would have torn Brognor apart with his fingers.

Joan Correy was one of the eight—Brognor had named her

specifically. He and Randall had met her and the others on their last off-shift, and Brognor had it in for her because she was more interested in Randall. The conspirators somehow knew that they were gold men, working for the Syrtians, and tried to enlist their help in a plan to smash the force dome from which they believed the Syrtians were preparing to take over the Earth.

RANDALL hefted the wrench and reflected bitterly. He realized now that the conspirators had convinced him. He no longer thought of the two Syrtians as benevolent alien scientists.

Too bad he hadn't joined in the project. He'd probably be dead now—but as it was he was done for, when the Syrtians found Brognor's body.

It was a crazy scheme that Joan had outlined to him, smuggling in a critical mass of U-235 and the equipment for exploding it. Inside the hundred yard dome, that would vaporize everything, including Randall himself, if he couldn't get out in time.

But now he'd die anyway.

with nothing to show for it. He glared at the limp figure on the floor. Brognor needn't have crowed about it. There had been a sadistic satisfaction in the fat man's voice when he told about the trap he had set.

Randall resisted an urge to kick the twisted corpse. There was more important work to be done. If this was the end for him, he was going to take the two Syrtians along with him. Joan had wanted a fission bomb exploded here inside the dome.

She'd have her wish.

HE WAS IN the gold room, where he and Brognor had worked, and the big atom converter loomed over him. To the Syrtians it was just a gadget, but one that was of some use to them on Earth. A black cubic box ten feet in each dimension, it tore up dirt into elementary particles and rearranged them into any desired atom—in this case, gold. From its mouth a grayish yellow shower sifted steadily into a crucible. The shower was actually fine gold dust—atomically fine. He and Brognor would change the crucible

once in a while and melt the dust down into bars. The men who worked for the Syrtians were paid off in gold.

It was a matter of logistics. The Syrtians couldn't bring in enough power to overrun the Earth by brute force—yet. They were able to set up this force-dome to protect them while they studied the situation. And when they found that gold was considered a precious metal, and that men could be hired for gold, they promptly brought in the atom converter and started buying men.

That was easy, because many people didn't believe the Syrtians were too bad. Randall had been one—he'd thought the popular hatred of the aliens was baseless.

CLEANING out the atom converter occasionally was one of his jobs and he had studied the interior. The principle on which it worked was a mystery to him, but that didn't mean he couldn't manipulate it. People can adjust television sets without having the faintest idea of what makes the picture.

He turned off the power

and ripped off the cover, as he did when cleaning. He climbed into the interior and looked it over.

The Syrtians had instructed him carefully. He was to clean here and here and here—but never there. "*There*" was the part of the machine which evidently determined what element was created. It was set to produce gold, and if he tampered with the wheels, some other element would come out. The symbols engraved on the wheel meant nothing to him, but he could count. There were one hundred and four symbols there, and the marker was against number 79. Since gold was the 79th element, it was safe to assume that the one hundred and four symbols represented the numbers of the elements.

He counted up to symbol 94 and turned the wheel carefully until that number was against the marker. To be sure, he checked back from the end. Then he climbed out of the machine, replaced the cover and put an empty crucible under the mouth of the machine. He turned on the power.

A gray mist began falling

from the opening. The crucible started to fill with plutonium.

RANDALL did some figuring. What had Joan said about the critical mass of U-235? And would plutonium work the same?

He seemed to remember something about ten kilograms—since this accumulation wouldn't be spherical, say twelve. If plutonium worked the same. Since the bowl filled with thirty kilos of gold in about three hours, and since plutonium was somewhat heavier, this should build up to critical mass in about one hour.

His watch read 1100. At noon then, this dome should cease to exist. And there was a long chance that he might be able to get out before then.

He started out, just as a Syrtian came through the door toward him.

The Syrtian towered two feet over Randall and outweighed him three to one. His grayish humanoid body bulged with power, and he held Randall's shoulder gently while he looked at the body on the floor.

The gentle grip almost made Randall cry out. The stubby alien fingers remained steady as the Syrtian spoke.

"I suppose it does not matter why you killed your fellow creature. We can find out under the psychophone, but it is unimportant. It means only that today we lose two of our workers instead of one."

HE RELEASED the shoulder and waved Randall ahead of him down the corridor. Randall stumbled along, fingering his bruised bones and wondered if there was a chance to talk himself out of it. He had about fifty-eight minutes to get out of the dome, and he was developing a great desire to live. It wouldn't do Joan any good if he died with the Syrtians.

"What will you do with me?" he asked. Brognor asked for it. It was self-defense."

"You will be psychophoned and then most likely disposed of," the Syrtian told him. "Not on account of Brognor—his test showed a paranoic tendency and we weren't going to keep him long anyway, though he helped us by informing. We

are more interested in your relations with the humans who tried to bring a fission bomb into this dome. We were forced to kill seven of them, but captured one female. Under psychophone testing of her, we learned that this group had been in contact with you, and also that this female feels that you have a great affection for her."

Randall stumbled. Joan was alive, then! But not for long. If the Syrtians didn't dispose of them both, they'd die in fifty-six minutes in a blazing atomic blast. And the Syrtians would find out about the plutonium bomb when they psychophoned him, unless he could find a way to stall the test, and he wouldn't even have the satisfaction of knowing the aliens were going out at the same time.

The Syrtian pushed him along.

"If we find that you indeed have an affection for this female, as her thoughts indicate, we can no longer use you."

Randall stumbled again. Great affection? He realized something he hadn't even admitted to himself before. He

had been with her only a few hours and—it was true. He felt the irony—if he hadn't fallen in love with her, he could pass the test and be clear. But then he wouldn't have felt the urge to slug Brognor and to tamper with the atom converter, and wouldn't be in this mess at all.

He was halted by another crushing grip on his shoulder. The alien fingered a device on a door and pushed it open. He shoved Randall through and the door slammed behind him.

THE GIRL stared miserably at him. Her clothes were torn and her skin bruised. On the shoulder that showed through the ripped dress were welts showing where Syrtian fingers had clutched her. Her eyes filled quickly as she saw Randall.

"I didn't want to tell, Hank." She fell into his arms. "I didn't want to drag you into it. But that instrument they use—it makes you talk and talk and want to tell everything you know, even though you hate yourself while you're saying it. It makes you feel that your mind is naked..."

Randall stroked her dark hair, piled it on the bruised shoulder to hide the red marks.

"It's all right—you can't fight the psychophone. They'll be bringing one in for me, I expect." He looked at his watch. "Joan, if there's any way we can delay their using it on me—for about fifty three minutes..."

But his hopes of a delay faded. The door opened and two Syrtians came in, wheeling the psychophone. One of them motioned to Randall.

"Into the chair."

THERE WAS no point in resisting. Randall took the indicated seat and let the clamps be applied to his head. He gazed dully at the equipment. The wires from the clamps led to a glass bowl on the wheeled table in which a milky fluid began to churn. The Syrtians made some adjustments and suddenly Randall felt an urge to tell everything he knew. He started talking, unordered strands of thought in loose words, but one of the Syrtians directed him into the desired channel with a command.

"This female—tell me, do you feel affection for her?"

"Yes—I love Joan—although I only met her Tuesday night when Brognor and I were out on leave—I think she's the most wonderful..."

A sharp Syrtian voice: "And you wish to participate with her in the mating ceremonies of your people?"

"Yes—oh, yes—I do..."

Again the demanding voice forced his rambling speech onto the desired subject. "She was one of a group that attempted to smuggle a fission bomb into this dome. Were you a party to that act?"

"No, I didn't realize their plan was so far advanced. I thought it was just an idea they were working up for the future. When she mentioned the project to me, I advised her against it, told her it wouldn't work. It was Brognor who turned them in, had you activate the portals and take them as they came through. And when Brognor told me about it..."

ONE OF THE Syrtians reached to turn off the machine. The part of Randall's

mind that wasn't busy spilling its secrets felt a great surge of relief. Just in time! Another few seconds, and they'd know about the growing pile of plutonium. Randall felt content as he watched the Syrtian finger start to yank out the wire that would stop the psychophone.

His hopes were smashed when the other Syrtian waved the finger away from the wire. "Let him talk a little more—he just might have something interesting to say."

Randall chatted on, with no control over what he was saying.

"And after I slugged Brognor I decided you people would have to go. So I set up my own fission bomb, which will explode at approximately twelve o'clock..."

Syrtians never show emotion, but both of them bent forward swiftly. "Where—where is it!"

"You'll find it in the..."

Something flew before him. It was Joan diving into the psychophone, tearing the clamps from his head and knocking the wheeled table over. The glass bowl smashed

on the floor. The murky fluid oozed in a spreading circle.

Randall grinned happily, not minding his lacerated scalp where the clamps had been torn off. He no longer had any desire to talk, and he knew they had only the one psychophone. Logistics again—no space for unnecessary duplicates.

He reached to help the girl up.

"Thanks, Joan. You were wonderful."

ONE OF THE Syrtians didn't think so. He picked the girl up and tossed her into a corner. She groaned and tried to get up. Randall climbed out of his chair, pushed aside the Syrtian hand that reached for him. The two aliens surrounded him.

"You will tell us where the bomb is hidden."

"I will tell you nothing. In forty minutes you will no longer worry about the bomb, because you will be dead."

One Syrtian spoke to the other: "Can we repair it in time?"

The other looked at the wrecked psychophone.

"No." To Randall: "But we can torture you. You will tell us."

"Not in forty minutes." Randall pointed to Joan, sitting dazed in the corner wiping blood from her mouth. "Not after that. I'll withstand any torture for forty hours."

The Syrtians remained expressionless. "It's probably in the gold room," said one. "Where I found him. I'll find out easily enough. The crude fission bombs these people make are not easily hidden."

He left. The other alien let Randall walk over to Joan and put his arm around her. She smiled up at him.

"I don't know how you did it, Hank, but I hope he doesn't find it. Some of the others warned me against you, but I knew they were wrong. A lot of men work for the Syrtians without being bad. Many people have been fooled into believing they were here to help us..."

THE SYRTIAN returned. "Not there. No room for anything to be hidden in that room. The machine is running

normally— I didn't bother to turn it off."

"We could search with radiation detectors," said the other. "But it would take too long."

They spoke together softly, then turned to Randall.

"We are prepared to make you an offer. If you tell us where the bomb is hidden, we will permit you to go free."

Randall didn't feel too triumphant yet. The aliens were on a spot and had to make a deal; but it was a question of how good a deal he could get out of them.

"We'll go through a portal," he suggested. "Joan, myself and one of you. Then I'll tell you the location of the bomb and you can come back and dispose of it."

"It will be necessary for you to tell us first. Then, after we have checked that your information is true, you will be freed."

Randall looked pointedly at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes. And when I said twelve o'clock, I meant approximately. Give or take ten minutes."

The Syrtians conferred again. Then:

"This is our best offer—we shall permit the female to leave. Then after you tell us, you will be permitted to go."

That was the best Randall had hoped for. He agreed.

"A few minutes to say good-bye," he requested.

AT 11:45, Joan went through a portal created by the Syrtians. Those portals were one of the puzzling features of the force dome; they opened up to several miles away. She stepped through, and Randall knew she would come out the other side a good distance from the dome.

She had protested bitterly, wanted both to go or neither. But he was happy to have made that much of a deal. The Syrtians felt an enormous contempt for humans and they must hate him fervently for having forced the concession out of them. They'd hate him still more when they found out he was double crossing them.

He laughed. "I know very well that if I told you, you'd kill me. You've lost too much face already. So why should I talk?"

The iron grip seized his hair,

bent his head back. Pain streamed down his spine as the Syrtian bent him backward, twisting, twisting. "Where is it! Where is it!" The pressure relaxed a little to let him answer. He tried to spit, but his lips only slobbered.

"It's too late," said one Syrtian. "We must leave if we are to escape annihilation. Leave him here to die in his own explosion and come to the ship."

Randall felt the grip release and he hit the floor, new centers of pain flaring out where he landed. He choked for breath, heard a Syrtian voice dimly through the ringing in his ears.

"Ironic that such a clod should be the downfall of our plans. We must abandon all our equipment—it will be the end of the project on this planet for a long long time."

THEY LEFT. Randall found, after much struggling, that he could stand up. His back ached, but it would be all right in a few days.

A few days? But in a few minutes he'd be vaporized along with the Syrtian dome.

He tried the door, but it was locked tight, as he had expected. It worked electrically, he knew, but no human had ever figured the trick of opening them that the aliens found so simple.

The lights dimmed momentarily. That would be the Syrtian spaceship breaking out of a big portal. They wouldn't be back—at least not for a good many years. Supermen they might be, but next time they wouldn't be given time to set up a force to work from. He kicked the broken psycho-phone aside and sat painfully in the chair to rest his aching back. It was 11:55. At least Joan was out of it. He hoped the force field would hold long enough to absorb the worst of the blast so Joan and anybody else near the dome wouldn't be hurt.

He suddenly realized that this was he, Hank Randall, who was going to be vaporized in a few minutes. He couldn't think of himself in the third person. He closed his eyes and began remembering prayers he hadn't said in some time.

There was a dull, barely

audible noise and the lights suddenly went out.

The darkness was worse. He didn't want to die in the dark. He stumbled to the door and pushed at it, knowing it wouldn't open. Surprisingly, it did open. Of course—the power was off. He was in the corridor and there was light at one end.

He ran frantically, stumbling, toward the light, kept running when he was out of the dark corridor and in the daylight. After a while he stopped and looked back.

The force field of the Syrtians had ceased to exist.

MILITARY vehicles closed in, and some privileged civilians. Joan was in one of them. Men with scintillation counters scouted the area, finally established zones to be entered only by personnel of the proper expendability. Randall found Joan with a loose-faced man who permitted them only a brief greeting, then separated them.

"Now," said the loose-faced man, "suppose you tell me what happened. My name is Ivan Stafford."

"Dr. Stafford?" Randall stared respectfully at the renowned theoretical physicist. "Well, it was like this. . ."

He explained what he had done. "And now maybe you can tell me what happened? Evidently the bomb was just powerful to knock out their power system, destroying the force field. Why didn't it destroy everything?"

Stafford gazed thoughtfully at him.

"You can't make a fission bomb that way. The Syrtians knew you weren't lying, but they never thought that you might be mistaken! The plutonium you were producing was finely divided—atomically fine. An approach to critical mass would melt some of that powder into solid metal and blow the rest out as a powder. But the fact remains that you

did produce a small explosion. The only answer is that the powder must have piled unevenly and one or more piles toppled together in such a way that critical mass was achieved for a millionth of a millisecond. The resultant explosion was enough to knock out the power plant without causing extensive damage. If we can decontaminate the place, we may be able to pick up some of the Syrtian secrets."

Randall nodded, satisfied.

"That's your job, Doc. And if you find a way to communicate with the Syrtians, there's a piece of news they'll be interested in. One of their employees is going to be involved in a mating ceremony with a certain female. . ."

