

HANG HEAD, VANDAL!

By MARK
CLIFTON

*Arrogantly, they set out to destroy a planet for
the good of Man—Man who is stuffed with straw
where his heart and mind and soul should be.*

ON our abandoned Martian landing field there hangs a man's discarded spacesuit, suspended from the desensitized prongs of a Come-to-me tower. It is stuffed with straw filched, no doubt, from packing cases which brought out so many more delicate, sensitive, precision instruments than we take back.

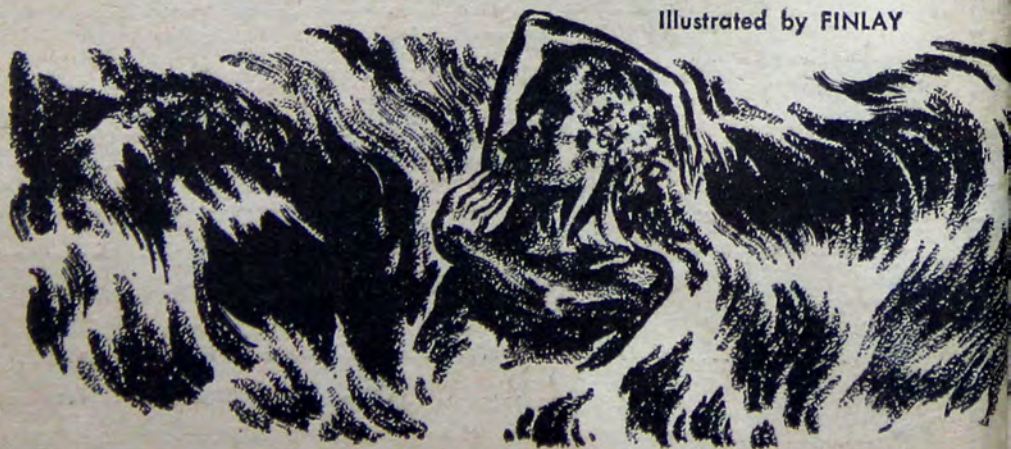
None knows which of our departing crew hanged the space-

suit there, nor exactly what he meant in the act. A scarecrow to frighten all others away?

More likely a mere Kilroy-was-here symbol; defacing initials irresistably carved in a priceless, ancient work of art, saying, "I am too shoddy a specimen to create anything of worth, but I can deface. And this proves I, too, have been."

Or was it symbolic suicide; a

Illustrated by FINLAY





sense of guilt so overpowering that man has hanged himself in effigy upon the scene of his crime?

Captain Leyton saw it there on the morning of final departure; saw it, and felt a sudden flush of his usual stern discipline surge within him; all but formed the harsh command to take that thing down at once: Find the one who hanged it there: Bring him to me!

The anger—the command. Died together. Unspoken.

Something in the pose of the stuffed effigy hanging there must have got down through to the diminishing person inside the ever thickening rind of a commander. The forlorn sadness, the dejection; and yes, he too must have felt the shame, the guilt, which overwhelmed us all.

Whether the helmet had fallen forward of its own weight because the vandal had been careless in stuffing it with too little straw to hold its head erect—vandals being characteristically futile even in their vandalism—or whether, instead of supposed vandal, this was the talent of a consummate artist moulding steel and rubber, plastic and straw into an expression of how we all felt: no matter, the result was there.

The Captain did not command the effigy be taken down. None others offered, nor asked if that

might be his wish—not even the ubiquitous Ensign perpetually bucking for approval.

So on an abandoned Martian landing field there hangs a discarded spacesuit—the image of man stuffed with straw; with straw where heart, and mind, and soul was intended to be.

AT the time it seemed a most logical solution to an almost impossible problem.

Dr. VanDam summed it up in his memorable speech before the United Nations. If he were visually conscious of the vault of face blurs in the hushed assembly, this lesser sight did not obscure his stronger vision of the greater vaulted mass of shining stars in black of space.

He may not even have been conscious of political realities which ever obscure man's dreams. First, what he said would be weighed by each delegate in terms of personal advantage to be gained for his own status. Second, his words must be weighed again in terms of national interest. Third, what advantage could be squeezed out for their racial-religious-color bloc? At the fourth level of consideration, what advantage to the small nation bloc over the large; or how would it enhance the special privileges of the large over the small? Down at the fifth level, could it preserve the status

quo, changing nothing so that those in power could remain in power, while, at the same time, giving the illusion of progress to confound the ever clamoring liberals? At the deep sixth level, if one ever got down that far, one might give a small fleeting thought to what might be good for mankind.

If Dr. VanDam even knew that such political realities must ever take precedence over the dreams of science, he gave no sign of it. It was as if all his thought was upon the glory of the stars and the dream of man reaching out to them. It was with the goal of reaching the stars in mind that he spoke.

"We must sum up the problem," he was saying. "It is simply this. There is a limit to how far we can theorize in science without testing those theories to see if they will work. Sooner or later the theorist must submit himself into the hands of the engineer whose acid test of worth is simply this: 'Does it work?'"

"We have always known that the Roman candles we are using for our timid little space flights can take us only to the nearest planets; for there is that inexorable ratio of time to initial thrust; that unless thrust continues and continues the Mayfly lifetime of man will expire many times over before we could reach the nearest star. Nor will our

limited resources fuel ion engines, and we must learn how to replenish with space dust gathered along the way.

"To have continuous velocity we must have continuous nuclear power. To have continuous nuclear power, we must have more nuclear tests. Now we believe we know how to take not special ores but ordinary matter, of any kind, and convert it into nuclear power. We believe we can control this. We have this in theory. But the engineer has not tested it with his question, 'Does it work?'"

"We cannot make these tests on Earth. For what if it does not work? We dare not use the Moon. Its lighter gravity makes it too valuable a piece of real estate in terms of future star journeys. It will be our busy landing stage; we dare not contaminate it nor risk destroying it.

"We have reached stalemate. On Earth and Moon we can go on no farther without testing. On Earth and Moon we dare not test. Some other testing area must be found.

OUR explorers have brought us conclusive proof that Mars is a dead world. A useless world in terms of life. Useless, too, as a source of minerals, for our little Roman candles can carry no commercial payload. A useless world for colonization, with air

too tenuous for human lungs and water too scarce for growing food. Humans must be housed in sealed chambers, or constantly wear spacesuits. From all practical points of view, a worthless world.

"But invaluable to science. For there, without destroying anything of value to man, we can put our theories to test. We believe we can start a nuclear reaction in ordinary rock and dirt, and keep it under control to produce a continuous flow of power. We believe we can keep it from running wild out of control.

"If the innumerable tests we must run do contaminate the planet, or even destroy it slowly, our gain in knowledge will be greater than the loss of this worthless real estate."

There was a stir in the Assembly; something between a gasp of horror and admiration at the audacity of man's sacrificing a whole planet to his knowledge. They had not known we were so far along the way.

And then, on second thought, a settling back in satisfaction. It seemed a simple solution to an impossible problem. To take not only VanDam's tests away from Earth, but all nuclear testing of every kind! To quell the fears and still the clamoring of the humanists who would rather see man stagnate in ignorance than risk the future to learn. At every

level of political reality this might turn to advantage. If there were any who still thought in such terms, it might even be good for mankind generally!

"I am not mystic minded," VanDam continued when the rustle and murmur had diminished. "But the convenience of this particular planet, located precisely where it is, far enough away that we must have made great progress in science to reach it, and close enough to be ready when we need it for further progress; this seems almost mystical in its coincidence."

(That for the ones who would have to go through the usual motions of obtaining Higher Power approval for doing what they fully intended doing all along.)

"My question: Shall the nations of Earth agree upon our use of this so convenient, and otherwise worthless, ready-at-hand stage placed right where we need it—waiting for us down through all the ages until we should be ready to make use of it?"

THEIR ultimate response was favorable.

Dr. VanDam did not mention, and being only politicians unable to see beyond the next vote or appointment they did not ask:

True, we do have a theory of how to start and continue the slow burn nuclear conversion of

ordinary rock and dirt to energy. What we do not have, as yet, is a way to stop it.

We *think* that eventually future man will probably find a way to stop the process. We *think* slow burn will not speed up and run out of control to consume an entire planet before we have found a way to stop it. We *think* that future science may even find a way to decontaminate the planet. We *hope* these things.

But we *know* that the science of nucleonics will be stillborn and stunted to grow no farther unless we go on testing. We convince ourselves that even if an entire planet is consumed, it is a worthless planet anyway, and will be worth it.

Yet there was the usual small minority who questioned our right to destroy one of the planets of the solar system. There is always such a minority, and as always, the rest of the world, intent on turning what it intended to do anyway into the Right-Thing-To-Do, was able to shout them down.

Anyway, the consequences were for future man to face. Or so we thought.

I say we, because I was one of the members of Project Slow Burn. Not that I'm the hero. There wasn't any hero. Mistaken or not, it was conceived this wasn't one of those television spectaculars cooked up to convert sci-

ence into public emotionalism. There was no country-wide search for special photogenic hero-types to front the project.

The reporters, true to their writing tradition of trying to reduce even the most profound scientific achievement to the lowest common denominator of sloppy sentimentalism or avid sensationalism, tried to heroize Dr. VanDam as head of the science side of the project. But he wasn't having any.

"Don't you think, gentlemen," he answered them with acid scorn, "It is about time the public grew up enough to support the search for knowledge because we need it, rather than because they'd like to go to bed with some handsome, brainless kook you've built up into a hero?"

This response was not likely to further the cause of journalism.

They tried to lionize Captain Leyton, as head of the transport side of it; but his remarks were even more unprintable.

They never got down far enough through the echelons of status to reach me. I was Chief of Communications, which is just another way of saying I was a television repair man with headaches. Not that it would have done them any good.

There isn't one thing about me that fits the sentimental notions of what a hero should be. I'm not

even a colorful character. If I'm expert in my job it's only because I learned early what any lazy man with an ounce of brains also learns—that life goes easier for the expert than for the ignorant. Which is not exactly the hero attitude the public likes to hear, but true all the same.

I did have an advantage which qualifies me to tell this tale.

SUPERVISION, nowadays, sits on its duff in an office surrounded by television monitors showing them every phase of their responsibilities, and punches buttons when some guy tries to goof-off or starts lousing up the operation.

Somebody has to maintain the system and check the same monitors. I saw everything of importance that happened.

That's the only way I come into the yarn at all. I didn't start out a hero type. I didn't turn into one. I just watched what happened; and I got sick at my stomach along with everybody else. And now I slink away, sick and ashamed, and not understanding even that, along with the rest. Not heroes—no—none of us.

From the first this was intended and conducted as a genuine scientific project, a group effort, with each man's ego subdued and blended in to serve the needs of the whole. No special heroes emerging to show up the rest of

the dopes. None of the usual stuff of romantic fiction was supposed to happen—those unusual dangers, horrible accidents, sudden frightful emergencies so dear to the little sadistic hearts of readers and viewers.

So far as I know, nobody beat up anybody with their fists, nor gunned them down; which is the usual, almost the only, fictional way yet found among the humanists for coping with life problems.

We assembled the mastership on the Moon base from parts which were Roman candled up, a few pieces at a time, from too heavily gravitied Earth.

The yelps of pain from taxpayers reached almost as high. It was one thing to wash the hands of the vexing problem of nuclear testing by wanting it shifted out to Mars. It was something else to pay for having it.

Against the Moon's lighter gravity we eventually were space-borne with no more than the usual fight between power thrust and inertia, both physical and psychological.

Without touching that precious reserve of fuel which we hoped would bring us back again, we were able to build up enough speed that it took us only a month to reach Mars. No point in showing, because nobody would care, how the two dozen of us were cramped in the tiny

spaces left by the equipment and instruments we had to carry.

Construction and maintenance had done their job properly, and, for once, inspection had actually done its job, too. We were able to reverse properly at the right time, and soft cushion powered our way down into a Martian plain eastward of a low range of hills.

Surely everybody has watched the documentaries long enough to have some idea about the incredibly hostile surface of Mars; the too thin air, which lets some stars shine through even in daytime; the waterless desert; the extremes of temperature; the desolation. . . .

Ah, the desolation! The terrifying desolation!

MOON surface is bad enough; but at least there is the great ball of Earth, seeming so near in that airless world that one has the illusion of being able to reach out and almost touch it, touch home, know home is still there, imagine he can almost see it.

"See that little tip of land there on the east coast of the North American continent? That's where I live!"

"Yeah," somebody answers. "And who is that guy walking through your front door without knocking while you're away?"

Sometimes it seems that close.

On Mars, Earth is just another bright spot in the black night sky; so far away that the first reaction is one of terrible despair, the overpowering conviction that in all that vast hostility a man will nevermore see home; nor know again the balmy twilight of soft, moist summer; nor feel the arms of love.

Explorers had not lied. Nothing, anywhere, could be more worthless to man than the planet Mars. Worthless, except for the unique purpose which had brought us there.

We dug in beneath the surface.

Now surely, again, everyone has seen enough of the documentaries that it is unnecessary to show us digging out our living quarters and laboratories beneath that merciless plain. We used the displaced powdered rock to form a crude cement, not long lasting but adequate for the time we would be there. With it, we surfaced over our living area. This was not so much to provide a landing field, since most of our journeying would be in individual jet powered spacesuits; but to help insure against any leakage of air if our inner seals cracked.

To help seal out the killing radiation we intended to let loose—that, too.

We erected Come-to-me towers at each elevator which would lower space-suited men to lower lev-

els where they could go through locks to reach their quarters. One Come-to-me tower for each half dozen men, tuned to the power source of their suits, to bring each man safely back, as truly as a homing pigeon, to guarantee against becoming lost on that hostile planet; and, in emergency, should one arise, to see that no panic mob ganged up at one lock and died waiting there for entrance to safety while other locks remained idle—the human way of doing things under stress.

WE had to finish all that in the first few weeks before any nuclear tests could be started. Anybody whose notions of science are derived from white-frosted actors in television commercials hasn't the vaguest idea of how much back breaking physical work at the common labor level a genuine scientist has to do.

There was some emotional relief once we had dug in and sealed out the awful desolation of an uncaring universe. (This is the hardest part of reconciling oneself to the science attitude. More comforting to believe even that the universe is hostile than to admit that it simply doesn't care about man, one way or another.) In our sealed quarters we might briefly imagine ourselves working in an air conditioned laboratory back home.

It helped. It certainly helped.

Not that I seemed to find time for more than exhausted sleeping there. To see what would be going on at the various field sites where tests were to be run meant the cameras had to be installed at those spots. In spite of the purported rigid tests for expedition personnel, my two assistants must have been somebody's nephews. Somehow each installation seemed to require I be there.

Be there, and usually without some little piece of equipment which would have helped so much, but which had been deleted from the lists we submitted by clerks who were more concerned with making a big showing on how much weight they could eliminate than in helping us.

Somehow we managed.

But I have made a little list of guys I'm going to ferret out and poke in the nose once I get back to Earth. Maybe those Hollywood producers who think the only way to solve a problem is to beat up somebody or gun him down have something, after all. Right on top of that list, in big bold letters, is the spacesuit designer who thinks a man can handle the incredibly fine parts of miniaturized electronic equipment with those crude instruments they give us to screw into the arm ends of spacesuits.

Somehow we managed. Some-

how, out of chaos, order came. Somehow tests got made. Sometimes the theories worked; sometimes, more often, there was only the human sigh, the gulp, the shrug, and back to the drawing board.

Big surprise at the end of the first three months. A supply ship landed. Mostly food and some champagne, yet! Stuff the folks back home thought they'd like to have if they were out there. Even some pin-up pictures, as if we weren't already having enough trouble without being reminded. But none of the equipment we'd radioed for in case the taxpayers could forego a drink and a cigarette apiece to raise money for sending it. The public couldn't understand our need for equipment, so they didn't send any. Miracles aren't supposed to need any equipment or effort; they just come into being because people want them.

The packages of home baked cookies were welcome enough after our diet of hydroponic algae, but I'd still rather have had a handful of miniature transistors.

Some of the guys said they'd have been willing to substitute their cookies for an equal weight of big, buxom blonde; but that's something the cookie bakers probably preferred not to think about.

The little three man crew of

the supply ship, as they were taking off for their return journey, promised they'd tell 'em what we really wanted when they got back, but I doubt the message ever got broadcast over the home and family television sets. Anyway, scientists are supposed to be cold, unfeeling, inhuman creatures who wander around looking noble, wise, and above it all.

In the beginning I'd thought that once I got the heavy work of installation completed, I could do a little wandering around looking wise and noble, myself. No such luck. I'd no more than get set up to show one experiment than it was over; and I'd have to dismantle, move, and set up for another. We'd thought the lighter gravity of Mars, thirty-eight percent, would make the labor easy. But somehow there was still lifting, tugging, pulling, hauling, cursing.

But then, nobody wants to hear how the scientist has to work to get his miracle. The whole essence is the illusion that miracles can be had without work, that all one needs is to wish.

All right. So we'll get to the miracle.

NOW we were finally ready to get down to the real test, the main reason for our coming out to Mars—Project Slow-Burn.

VanDam chose a little pocket at the center of that little cluster of hills to our West—that little cluster of hills everybody has seen in the pictures radioed back to Earth.

We didn't know it at the time, but that little cluster of hills was causing quite an uproar among archeologists back home. No archeologist had been included in the expedition, and now they were beating their breasts that from the pictures those hills looked mighty artificial to them. There was too much of a hint that the hills might once have been pyramids, they said; incredibly ancient, perhaps weathered down eons ago when the planet was younger, before it had lost so much of its atmosphere, but maybe still containing something beneath them.

We didn't hear the uproar, of course. Administration deemed it unnecessary for us to bother our pretty little heads about such nonsense. In fact the uproar never got outside the academic cloister to reach the public at all. Administration should have listened. But then, when does man listen to what might interfere with his plans to spoil something?

We got all set to go in that little pocket at the center of the hills. The spot was ideal for us because the hill elevations gave us opportunity to place our cam-

eras on their top to focus down into the crater we hoped would appear.

A whole ring of cameras was demanded; as if the physicists shared too much of the public's attitude, and all I needed to produce enough equipment was to wish for it. But by stripping the stuff from virtually every other project, I managed to balance the demands of the Slow-Burn crew against the outraged screams of the side issue scientists.

VanDam's theories worked.

At first it took the instruments to detect that here was any activity; but gradually, even crude human eyes could see there was a hole beginning to appear, deepen and spread—progressively.

It was out of my line, but the general idea seemed to be that only one molecular layer at a time was affected, and that it, in turn, activated the next beneath and to the side while its own electrons and protons gave up their final energy.

The experiment did not work perfectly. The process should have been complete. There should have been no by-product of smoke and fire, no sign to human eyes of anything happening except a slowly deepening and spreading hole in the ground.

Instead there was some waste of improperly consumed molecules, resulting in an increasing-

ly heavy, fire-laced smoke which arose sluggishly in the thin air, borne aloft only by its heat, funneling briefly while it gave up that heat; then to settle down and contaminate everything it touched.

To compound my troubles, of course.

THE physicists were griping their guts out because I didn't have the proper infra-red equipment to penetrate the smoke; and somehow I wasn't smart enough to snap my fingers and — abracadabra — produce. Those damned cookie packages instead of equipment! Those damned clerks who had decided what we wouldn't need. My little list was getting longer.

Still, I guess I was able to get a feeble little snap from my fingers. I did manage to convert some stuff, never intended for that purpose, into infra-red penetration. We managed to see down into that smoke- and fire-filled crater.

To see enough.

It was the middle of a morning (somebody who still cared claimed it would be a Tuesday back home) some three basic weeks after beginning the experiment. The hole was now some thirty feet across and equally deep, growing faster than Van-Dam's figures predicted it should, but still not running wild

and out of control. Even if it had been, we couldn't have stopped it. We didn't know how.

I was trying to work out a little cleaner fix on the South wall of the crater when that wall disappeared like the side of a soap bubble. My focus was sharp enough to see.

To see down and into that huge, vaulted room. To see the living Martians in that room shrivel, blacken, writhe and die. To see some priceless, alien works of art writhe and blacken and curl; some burst into flame; some shatter unto dust.

That was when the scientists, sitting there watching their monitors with horror-stricken eyes, felt jubilation replaced with terrible guilt.

I, too. For naturally I was watching the master monitors to see that the equipment kept working. I saw it all.

I saw those miniature people, yes people, whole and beautiful, in one brief instant blacken, writhe and die.

Out of the billions of gross people on Earth, once in a generation a tiny midget is born and matures to adult of such perfection in proportion and surpassing beauty that the huge, coarse, normal person can only stare and marvel—and remember the delicate perfection of that miniature being, with nostalgic yearning for the rest of his life.

From such, perhaps, comes the legends common to all peoples in all ages, of the fairies. Or, eons ago, was there traffic between Earth and Mars? Or even original colonization from Mars to Earth, finally mutating into giants? They were people, miniatures of ourselves.

I saw them there. Perhaps not more than a dozen in that room. But in other rooms? Perhaps in a lacework of underground rooms? A whole civilization which, like ourselves on Mars, had gone underground, sealed themselves in against the thinning atmosphere, the dying planet?

And we had begun the atomic destruction of their planet. We had begun it. We could not stop it. The corrosion keeps growing, spreading.

I saw them die. Somehow I felt their pain.

But I did not die of it.

I carry it with me. I shall always carry it with me.

THAT's all there is.

In years to come people on Earth, people who did not see what we saw, did not feel the pain and guilt we felt, will wonder at our behavior following that.

Oh there is much to wonder. If there is a civilization, where does their food come from? If they are able to convert rock to

food, why are they not able to stop the atomic destruction of their planet we have started? If they are able to so fill us with their own grief for what we have done that we can think of nothing but to slink away, like whipped curs caught in vandalism; why didn't they do this before we started the fire we cannot stop?

Oh, there is so much unanswered. People will wonder that we simply abandoned most of our equipment, the very project itself; that for a sick hour we watched, then, with one accord, without anybody making the decision, we began to withdraw and start for home.

Like small boys, thinking only to vandalize a schoolhouse in their savage glee, discovering it is a shrine.

Or, perhaps in time, we can rationalize it all away. Perhaps so soon as during that long, journey back.

It wasn't our fault, we shall begin to say. They were as much to blame as we. Sure they were!

More to blame! They were more to blame than we!

Why didn't they come out of their holes and fight us? With their fists if they didn't have any guns? *Any* red-bloodied—er, red-blooded—Amuri—well, whatever they are—ought to have enough guts to come out and fight, to

defend home, flag and mother!

We'll probably get around to that. It's the normal attitude to take after vandalism. It's the human way.

But as of now, our only thought is to slink away.

ON our abandoned Martian landing field there hangs a man's discarded spacesuit, suspended from the desensitized prongs of a Come-to-me tower. It is stuffed with straw filched,

no doubt, from packing cases which brought out so many more delicate, sensitive, precision instruments than we take back.

Although we have not been entirely irresponsible in our headlong flight back home.

We do bring back some of what we took out; the more valuable of the instruments. We have been most selective in this.

The only coarse, insensitive, unfinished instrument we bring back—is man.

THE END

1962 HUGO AWARDS NOMINATION BLANK

20th World Science Fiction Convention

AMZ-4

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