

# fantastic

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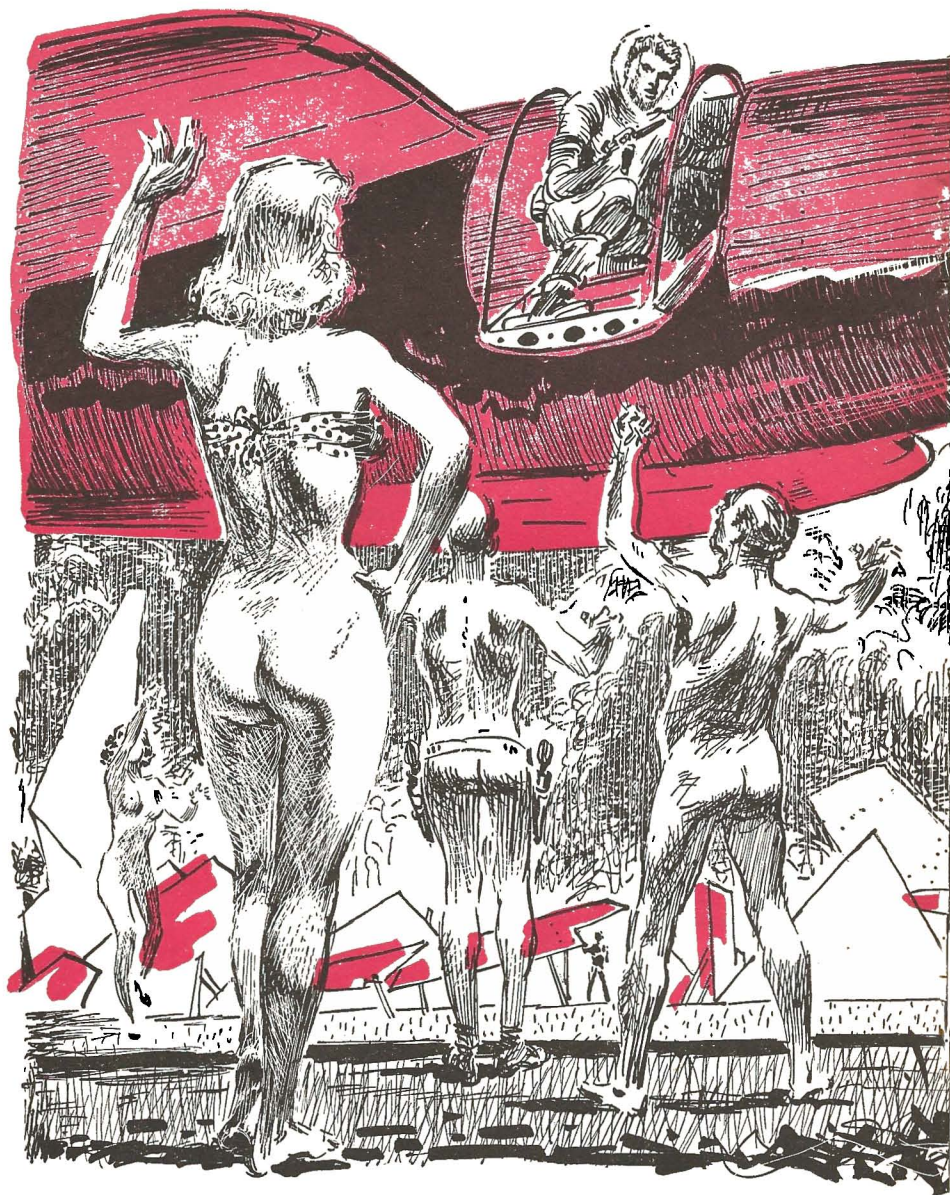
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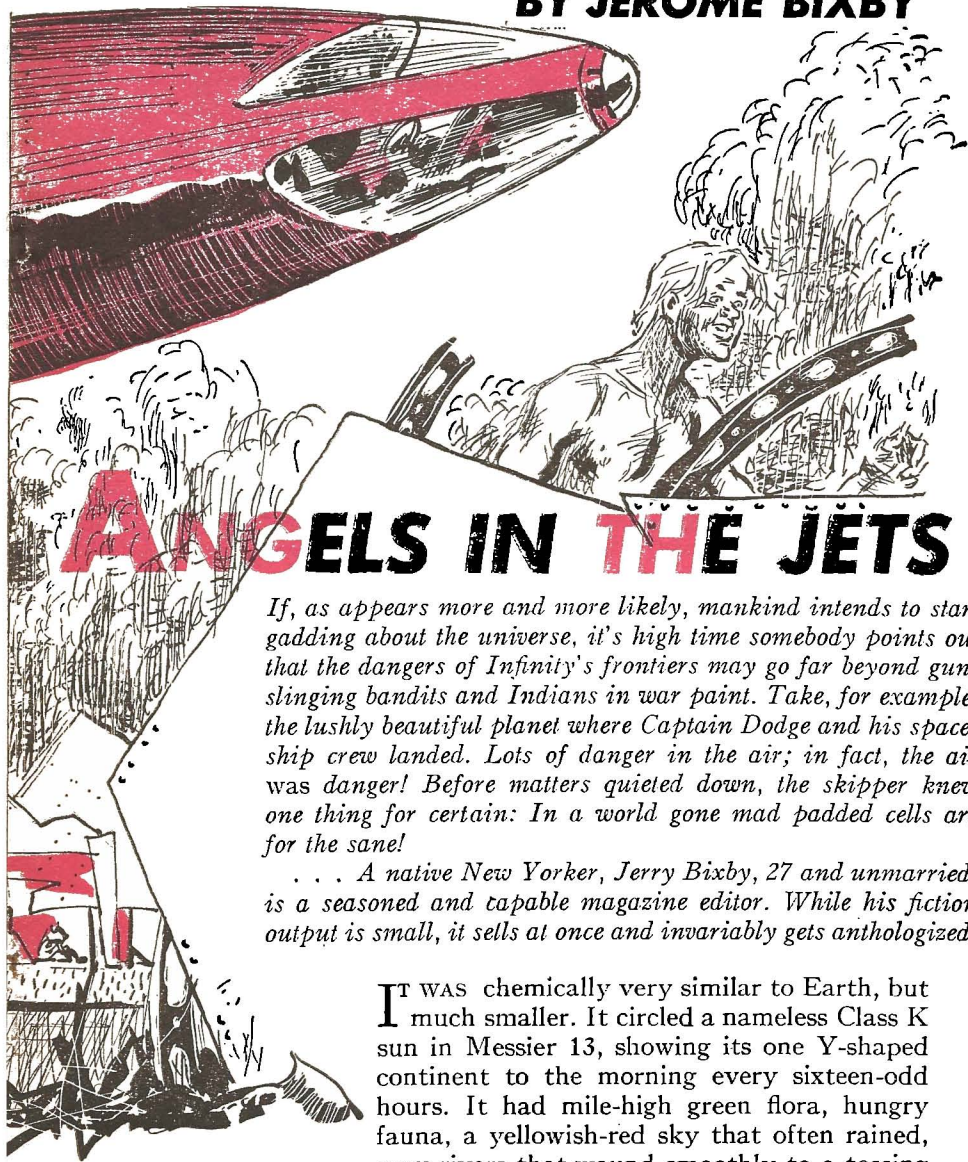
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Illustrator: Paul Lundy



BY JEROME BIXBY



*If, as appears more and more likely, mankind intends to start gadding about the universe, it's high time somebody points out that the dangers of Infinity's frontiers may go far beyond gun-slinging bandits and Indians in war paint. Take, for example, the lushly beautiful planet where Captain Dodge and his spaceship crew landed. Lots of danger in the air; in fact, the air was danger! Before matters quieted down, the skipper knew one thing for certain: In a world gone mad padded cells are for the sane!*

*. . . A native New Yorker, Jerry Bixby, 27 and unmarried, is a seasoned and capable magazine editor. While his fiction output is small, it sells at once and invariably gets anthologized.*

IT WAS chemically very similar to Earth, but much smaller. It circled a nameless Class K sun in Messier 13, showing its one Y-shaped continent to the morning every sixteen-odd hours. It had mile-high green flora, hungry fauna, a yellowish-red sky that often rained, grey rivers that wound smoothly to a tossing

grey sea. It had a perfectly breathable atmosphere — except for one thing. Because of that one thing, Captain Murchison G. Dodge had named the planet “Deadly”.

Interstellar Investigation Team 411 had been on one of the sea-coasts of Deadly for three days when Mabel Guernsey tripped over a huge, half-buried clam-like shell. In falling, she struck her head on the point of a huge conch-like shell. Her oxy-mask was torn off, and Mabel Guernsey got the madness.

They locked her up. They walked her over to the *Lance* that stood like a shining three-hundred-foot trophy on its sloping base of brown-black obsidian, created from sand by landing-blasts. They took her inside and put her in an extra storage compartment, and stacked crates in front of the door, and put a twenty-four-hour guard on duty to see that she didn't get away. For it became swiftly apparent that the one thing in the world — or, rather, on Deadly — that Mabel wanted to do, wanted most terribly to do, was to take off everybody else's mask so that they would all be like her.

Murchison Dodge, who was the *Lance's* physiologist-biologist as well as its captain, went off searching the surrounding ecology for some cure for the malady, which was in many ways similar to ergot poisoning. Like ergot, the condi-

tion was caused by the sclerotium of a fungus — airborne and inhaled, in this case, as a curious microscopic unit which Murchison Dodge thought of as a sclerotoid spore. Like ergot, it brought itching and twitching and numbness at extremities; but these were short-lived symptoms, and there was no ergot-like effect upon the involuntary muscles, so the victims didn't die. They only went mad, and stayed mad. From Mabel Guernsey's behavior, Rupert, the psychologist, judged it to be an especially manic form of insanity. Mabel seemed very happy. She wished they could all be as happy as she. She was still trying to grab off oxy-masks when they closed the door on her.

So Dodge went searching for an antidote. He was gone for two days. And while he was gone, the night guard at Mabel's storage-room prison — a spacehand named Kraus, whom nobody liked, and who found himself stimulated by the proximity of a fairly attractive and provocatively irresponsible woman — pushed aside the crates, opened the door, and went in to do some tax-free tomcatting.

When Dodge returned, in the little one-man crewboat, the *Lance* was gone.

Far below, a patch of bright color — red, blue, yellow, purple, with the tiniest glimmer of steel to one side — told Dodge that he

had at last found his wayward spaceship.

So they hadn't gone interstellar, thank God, or suicidally run the *Lance* into the local sun. That had been his first terrified thought upon finding the note they'd left and realizing what must have happened.

The note had been formed by large shells in the sand. It had been a hundred feet long. It had said: *YOU'RE CRAZY. WE'RE GOING. YOU'LL NEVER FIND US.*

And beneath, in smaller shells carefully selected for size and color, the names of the sixty-three spacehands and Team-members of the *Lance*.

Dodge sighed and cut the jets. He pulled the crewboat up into a stall. Its airfoils whined in atmosphere that was like Earth's, but almost twice as heavy. The green horizon of Deadly slid smoothly from the round nose-port, to be replaced by copper sky and yellow clouds and a hazy orange glow that was the sun, and at the moment of immotion Dodge released the chute. It whipped out, obscuring sky, clouds, sun. It billowed and boomed open. Dodge's couch and its empty companion pistoned back deeply at the jar, slowly rose. Dodge half-sat, half-lay, his weight on his shoulders, looking straight up into the stiff white underside of the chute with eyes that were feath-

ered with red and burning under dry lids. His hand went out to the button that would right the couch, but he pulled it back. The lying-down position was too comfortable after eighty foodless and sleepless hours at the controls.

The little boat drifted down, swaying on its lines, the apex of each swing allowing him a view around the edge of the chute. Copper sky. Yellow clouds. Hazy sun.

Back and forth, back and forth; and suddenly glimpses of green replaced glimpses of copper and yellow; the crewboat was among the giant trees. Each swing now revealed a wall of green and brown sliding evenly, silently, up past the port. Behind Dodge the cyclo-drive hummed *mezzo piano*, out of circuit; Dodge's hand rested on the board, ready to drop the boat on its jets should the chute tangle or be torn.

He started the gyro, and the swinging stopped.

He switched on the rear-vision screen. He blinked in astonishment at what he saw, down among the giant roots of giant trees, though he had been prepared for just about anything. He commenced to push buttons that controlled slip-strings. The boat's downward course altered, drifting left toward the clearing in the forest.

A last-moment adjustment brought it to rest on its fins in the

center of a village square.

Wearily, he heeled the pedal that would draw the chute back into its cubby, automatically re-packing it as it came. Then he turned on the side-view screens, one after another, leaving them on to get a panorama.

They were all grouped around in a wide circle, looking up at the boat. They were smiling. They were carrying guns. Even little Jansen, the bacteriologist, who had often professed a hatred of guns, had a brace of handblasts on his pudgy hips. There had been dangerous animals howling along the seacoast; Dodge supposed there must be just as many back here in Deadly's vast forests. So the guns argued that the madmen were at least able to recognize that menace, and were ready to fight it for their lives.

The glimmer of steel to one side of the colors was no longer tiny; it was huge and high — and not complete. The proud *Lance* had been partially stripped of her skin. There were ragged, gaping holes the length of her, with skeletal framework showing through, where great curving plates had been removed. Most of them cut out, Dodge saw dully, with torches. The *Lance* would never leave Deadly.

And the bright colors themselves . . .

Dodge felt a cold prickling back

of his ears. The colors were giant fifteen-by-fifteen pine crates from the *Lance's* hold, a dozen or so of them, and the tarnished plates from the *Lance's* hull along with some shining new ones from her repair stock — all broken-down, sawed-up, bent, buckled, leaned-together, bolted, welded, nailed, glued, painted and arranged in a mad travesty of a village.

Holes — windows and doors — had been sawn or battered in the crates; and judging by the array of bolts and stays visible on their outsides, some had two storeys. They sat on the thick green grass like giant children's blocks thrown helter-skelter on a lawn. All colors and crazy angles; frills and frippery; scallops and gingerbread, ju-jubes and toyland, polka-dots and peppermint stripes and bright checked patterns like gingham. Raggedy curtains in the windows, moving with the breeze, and a doormat, formerly a seat cushion in the *Lance's* main lounge, with WELCOME in drying orange. The walls of one crate-house were covered with purple and green and yellow murals whose jumbled, whirling ugliness could have meaning only to their mad creator.

The paint, Dodge thought, must be the petrolatum vehicle for the *Lance's* fuel, pigmented with vivid clays which abounded on Deadly. It was splotchy, and most of it had run badly.

A little grey stream ran through

the clearing — Dodge had found the *Lance* by following waterways methodically up and down the continent — and several slapdash garden plots were already under way. Beyond, at the edge of the clearing, was the heavy glass and metal heap of machinery that had been in the crates.

Dodge turned the gyro off, but left the slower-starting cyclodrive on as precaution; he might want to get away in a hurry. His trembling, dirty hands found another control. The couch turned slowly vertical; the straps that had held him tight demagnetized, retreated into slots. He got up, swaying a moment on the spider platform beneath the couch, took a deep breath that had acrid jet-odor in it. Then he stepped over to the shaft, found the ladder with his feet. He descended to the airlock.

Through the transparent port he could look down fifteen feet to the ground and see them staring up at him. . . .

Jansen, Goldberg, Chabot, de Silva, Mabel Guernsey, young Jones, Marian — his heart ached as he saw Marian's face in the crowd, lovely as ever and smiling rapidly — Strickland, the four wide-eyed children, all the others. Standing in a wide circle whose center was the boat, and whose radius was the sharp-nosed shadow of the boat. Some presentably clothed, others incongruously

clothed — like de Silva, who wore women's silk stockings and bathing trunks beneath the dress coat he'd affected for social gatherings aboard ship — and many not clothed at all. Dodge saw old, dignified Rupert, who had evidently not elected to come watch the crewboat; Rupert stood nude some distance off in front of a crate-house, facing away from crowd and crewboat, posing motionless with wrists crossed over his head and back arched. There was a puddle at his feet. Rupert was being a fountain.

Dodge worked the airlock mechanism, let the lock open a few inches, stopped it there; he had little assurance that they wouldn't blow his head off if they got the chance. First, of course, he put on his oxy-mask.

Looking out through the partly-open lock, his voice nasal through the mask, he said, "You poor, poor devils."

"It's Dodge, all right," said Chabot, the *Lance's* Chief Engineer. He stood on the grass with his head just out of the shadow the boat cast, his body in it.

"It's God!" cried Mabel Guernsey, and prostrated herself. Several others did likewise.

"It is not!" said Chabot scornfully over his shoulder. "It's only the captain!"

Dodge looked at Marian. She had moved to the fore of the crowd where he could see her fully.

She wore a halter affair, probably because her breasts had begun to sunburn, and nothing else except the Mercury-diamond engagement ring Dodge had given her. It glinted in the saffron sunlight as she stirred. She was looking, eyes sleepy, at his masked face in the airlock. He wondered bleakly if she even knew who he was. Her hair, unlike the matted dirty mops of several of the other women, appeared well tended; but her body was filthy, streaked with perspiration. Marian had always taken pride in her hair.

Dodge lowered his gaze to the sparkling black eyes of Chabot, who had come forward from the crowd and stood directly beneath the airlock. The man, Dodge remembered, had been a bit of a glad-hander aboard ship, always organizing and taking command of trivial activities; it was likely that this bent had led him to a kind of *pro tem* mayoralty here, for he seemed to be without dispute the spokesman. Dodge began searching for something useful to say.

Mabel Guernsey lifted her face from the grass and peeped up at Dodge. Then she got to her feet, apparently having lost her awe of God. She began to walk around the boat, within the circle of the crowd, staring up at the sleek metal sides. Several of the children followed her, singing nonsense in small piping voices.

Dodge decided that formality might be best. He put his captain's crispness into his voice. "You remember me, then, Chabot?"

"Sure, I remember you," said Chabot, smiling up. His hair was curly and as black as his eyes, with large flakes of dandruff in it. "You're crazy. You're crazy as a coot! You were going to try to make us crazy too!"

Dodge made his eyes icy, trying to frown Chabot down; then he remembered he was wearing a mask, and it didn't show. The frown remained, as he again tried to think of something to say.

"I got loose," Mabel Guernsey said, moving in her inspection of the boat. "Kraus came in, and I ran out, and he chased me. I opened the main airlock and ran outside. Kraus didn't try to close the airlock, he just stood there. Everybody else was asleep with their masks off. They all woke up happy, like Kraus and me."

"And then we went away," Chabot said, "before you came back. We hoped you wouldn't find us. We were sorry, but after all you're crazy, you know."

"Now you can't come out," he added, still smiling, "unless you take off your mask too. We'll kill you if you do!"

Every gun in the crowd came to bear on the airlock.

Dodge moved back behind the airlock door where he could watch



them through the metaglass port. The port would stop a blaster bolt long enough to permit him to throw himself back out of sight if any shooting actually started.

So they'd made plans to deal with the event of his arrival. They were on the defensive. This would have been the most frustrating moment of all, had Dodge actually been able to find the madness-remedy he had searched for. But he hadn't, of course. It might take months of research and experimentation to produce one.

He couldn't help them. He couldn't help himself.

So here he was.

And there they were.

He was hungry. He hadn't eaten since starting back for the *Lance* after hopelessly concluding his search — almost four days ago. When he'd left the *Lance* the crew-boat had had its regular stock of food for two days, no more. Now his stomach was twisting into itself with hunger. And he was tired. God, so tired.

He looked out at the upturned faces, at the tall ruined *Lance* that would never leave this world, and thought that he must be one of the loneliest men in the Universe.

"In fact," said Chabot loudly, "you'd better take off your mask and come out right away. Take off your mask and come out, or we'll push over the boat and come in and get you!"

He stood, smiling and waiting. Looking at him, Dodge thought that the madmen must be eating, at any rate; Chabot still had his waistline. He hoped, with a sudden chill, that they weren't eating each other.

Behind Chabot, Marian turned away, moving with the grace that had always stirred Dodge so. She walked over and stared at Rupert, who was still being a fountain. He stared back, his iron brows crawling up. She pushed him over. She lay down beside him. . . .

Dodge closed his eyes. Marian, and old Rupert. . . . So the woman's passion he had so often sensed in her had at last, but too soon, found its release. Slow, black moments passed. At last he forced himself to open his eyes and felt a dull, sour relief. Rupert, it appeared, was a little overage. He was back being a fountain, and Marian was sitting up, staring at the boat again.

The feeling of relief went away, as if it knew it was ridiculous, leaving only a black hole in his mind, and sick futility, and a small, feverish voice chattering that this was good tragicomedy. He leaned tiredly against the airlock door. Behind the mask his face felt hot, was suddenly running perspiration. He found himself trembling violently, tight and clotted inside, his clenched fist pressed hard against the mask,

cutting its bit into his lips, and his face was running tears too.

"We'll give you three," said Chabot. "On-n-n-ne . . ."

Dodge could taste blood in his mouth.

The others took it up like a chant, all smiling, surging forward: "Two-o-o-o . . ."

Dodge sagged against the airlock and cried like a baby.

"*Three!*" Explosive, like "*Three!*" always is.

They milled around the boat with Chabot, by furious shouting finally succeeding in getting the effort organized. They shoved and the boat rocked on its fins.

Wildly Dodge went up the ladder. He sprawled across the twin couches to slap the gyro control. The gyro whined into action and the rocking stopped abruptly. He heard laughter from outside. He went back down the ladder to the airlock, in time to stamp on dirty fingers that clutched the very rim of the lock trying for a solid grasp. The man fell back, hooting. Looking down through the transparent port, Dodge saw that it had been de Silva, boosted on the shoulders of several others.

De Silva lay on the grass and grinned up at him. "Damn you, Cap, I think you broke my hand."

A woman — Susan May Larkin, Nobel physicist — came around the corner of one of the houses. She didn't walk; she hopped. She had a bouquet of alien flowers in

one hand and her face was buried in them, and she hopped. Both feet together — crouch — hop! Both feet together — crouch — hop! A big bearlike man, one of the jetmen, came around the corner after her, grinning. He took her roughly by the arm and led her back out of sight. Still she hopped.

Sounds — a soft tinny clatter that could only be pots and pans and other kitchenware from the *Lance's* galley, beaten upon and together — came from the darkness beyond a rough-hewn, curtained window nearby. A certain periodicity of pitch-change suggested that it was music. Across the village, out of sight behind the crewboat, a female voice began to *la-la-la* tunelessly, loudly, in the very uppermost register. The singing children stopped singing to listen.

Dodge said sharply, "Chabot, come up here."

Chabot shook his head. "And have you make me crazy? Uh-uh!"

"I don't want to make you crazy," Dodge said patiently. "Remember, Chabot, I'm still captain of the *Lance*. Come on up. I just want to . . ."

And his voice trailed off, with no place to go. Just wanted to what? He had no cure for the madness. Chabot down there thought he had and was afraid — but he had none. Use Chabot as hostage, then? Why? On threat of

the man's death, he might force them to bring food to him. But even then the oxygen supply in the tank at his belt and in the boat's tank wouldn't last forever. Or even for another week. And they quite possibly might abandon Chabot or simply forget him, and Dodge's threats would not avail. And Chabot wasn't going to come up in the first place.

What *could* he do?

"All right," he said. "Stay there."

"I intend to," Chabot smiled.

So seemingly rational, thought Dodge. So well-spoken and logical within their framework of lunatic action.

Deadly's swift rotation had moved the point of the crewboat's shadow along the perimeter of the circle-standing crowd, like a giant hand on a giant clock, marking off alien minutes on smiling, mad-eyed numerals.

His mind rebelled with sudden, almost physical impact. He must do something. Not anything constructive, anything aimed at brightening his incredible position, for there was absolutely nothing of that sort to be done. Just something, something. His mind screamed for action.

"I'm going to shoot," he said in a dead voice, "your damned silly village to pieces. With this boat's proton-buster."

"Oh, no, you're not," said

Chabot. "We were talking about that." Without turning, he said curtly, "Jones —"

Ned Jones, steward and cook's apprentice, ran forward from the crowd. Lithe, slim, young, he sprang to the broad leading edge of the crewboat's right stabilizer. Poised there, he got a foothold on the radar blister a little higher up. Then, one foot braced on the blister, leaning forward a little against the sleek side of the boat, he leaped a short two feet upward, bringing his head about level with the large oval barrel of the proton-cannon. He would have fallen back, then — but he speared one arm into the cannon's muzzle. His body sagged. The muzzle moved an inch downward on its bearings, stopped. The arm broke audibly. Jones dangled, laughing with pain.

"You see," said Chabot. "You're not going to do any blasting, Dodge."

Not so rational after all, thought Dodge. No, I'm not going to do any blasting. But not because that boy's being where he is would stop the charge. He'd just vanish — or at least his arm would — if I triggered. But I'm not going to shoot, because I couldn't do that to him. And because there just isn't any reason to shoot and destroy. Nothing but a crying, tearing, clawing need to do *something*.

But what *could* he do?

So here he was.

And there they were.

Big lonely world, thought Dodge, and my oxygen won't last forever.

Marian was at the edge of the crowd again, staring up at the boat and at Dodge. Her halter had come off — he saw it back on the grass — and she was standing straight and tall and sunburned. She'd always been proud of her carriage, too.

The madness, Dodge thought, was like most others; it impaired value judgements, but not so much any logic built on the shaky basis resulting. Each person afflicted — Chabot, Marian, Rupert whose evident desire to be a fountain might signify a great deal, gun-shy Jansen whose wearing two handblasts might mean as much, de Silva, with his silk stockings — each had become a caricature of himself. The floodgates were down, Dodge thought, and they were living out their unconsciousnesses, and so they were happy.

He still felt that he had to do something. A man should be able to *act*.

"I'm taking off," he said loudly to the upturned faces. "Stand back. The jets will burn you if you don't."

Chabot didn't move. He laughed. "You're not going anywhere either. If you try to take off the boat will explode and you'll die." He stood

there, hands on his hips. "Because we put angels in the jets."

He laughed again, at the look he thought he saw on Dodge's oxy-mask. The laughter caught and ran through the crowd.

Marian spoke for the first time.

"Angels in the jets," she echoed queerly.

And Dodge remembered Marian's knack with a pencil, her certain skill in doodling.

Angels. Always angels. Little chubby, winged angels — almost cherubs.

He watched her as, with that lithe walk and an expression of intense interest, she came forward to pass Chabot and vanish under the stern of the boat. Then he heard her crooning. She sees the angels, he thought. So the madness included a powerful susceptibility to suggestion.

He looked up. Copper sky, yellow clouds. Giant trees, and a village. And he, almost cowering here in the crewboat — to the villagers, possibly, a kind of village idiot. Big lonely world.

Take off? To go where on this big lonely world? And why?

He couched by the partly-open airlock, knees bent, fingertips touching the cold steel. There was a wariness in him, like a beast's. Behind him the gyro's whine, the cyclodrive's hum, were suddenly the song of death.

What did a man live for? All  
(Continued on page 160)

# Angels in the Jets

(Continued from page 15)

Dodge's instincts jostled and shoved forward to point to one answer: that in the last analysis a man lived to live.

Maybe in ten years or so a rescue ship would come searching Messier 13 for them. But it would be an almost hopeless search. And it probably wouldn't even happen, for Investigation Teams were presumably self-sufficient, and when not heard from, presumably lost.

"Yes," he said. "I guess you're right, Chabot. If I take off, I die."

He pressed the airlock mechanism. The sliding-door whispered the rest of the way open. Dodge reached up and stripped off his oxy-mask — quickly, without giving himself time to think — and breathed deeply, once, twice, three-e-e-ee. . . .

He moved numbly to the rim of the lock, teetered there a moment on the edge of the world. His burning eyes caught the small mirror set into the wall over the first-aid cabinet; he saw his own face, looked through its eyes into the eyes of the mind he knew, and said, "Good-bye. . . ."

And even as he watched, they changed.

Soft tinkling melody from one of the houses touched his ears

pleasantly. He turned, started down the metal rungs set into the side of the boat, thinking, *But I don't feel much different!* He stopped on the way to reach over and help Jones out of the proton-cannon. Together, they jumped the short distance to the ground.

The crowd, now that the problem of the lunatic in its midst had been solved, had lost interest. They walked away, singly and in groups, chattering and smiling. Jones smiled and walked away too, clutching his broken arm. Dodge noticed with a start that Jones had two other arms — the broken arm and two others with which he clutched it. It was Jones, without doubt. But it was very strange that Dodge had never noticed those three arms before. Well, no matter . . .

Marian came out from under the stern of the crewboat, her eyes shining. Dodge wondered again if she knew him. She started to walk past him, hips swaying provocatively. He reached out and took her shoulder, bruising the flesh hard. Suddenly she was in his arms, flowing up against him.

"I like you too," she was saying hoarsely, raggedly. "I like you too."



They joined hands and began to walk. Marian, probably remembering the hopping woman, began to hop too, and soon it turned into a dance. Dodge joined in, laughing happily.

He bent over once, walking on all fours, just as they were entering the forest, so he could look back under the crewboat and see the dancing, darting figures of the angels in the jets.