

ONE OF OUR CITIES IS MISSING

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

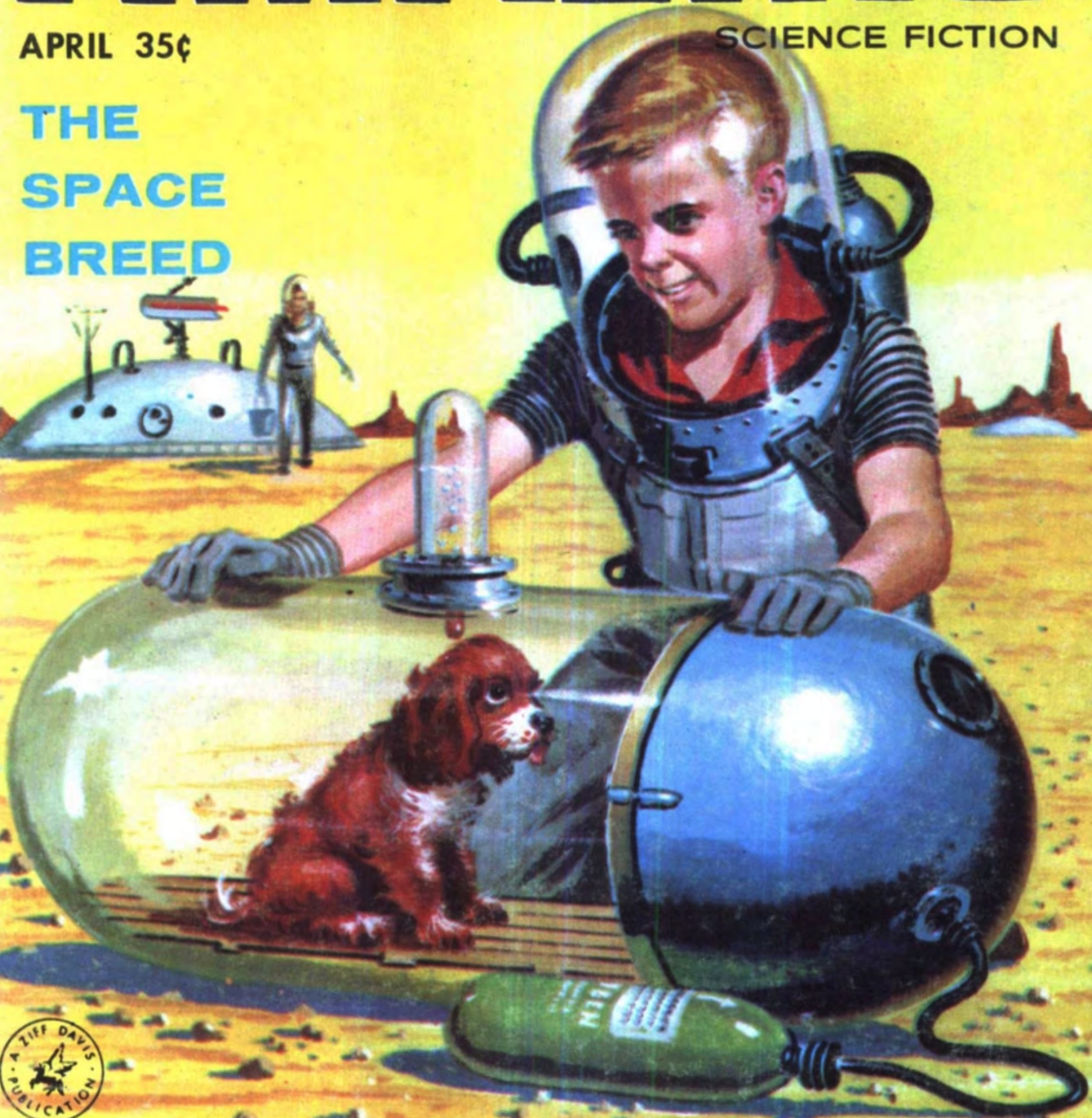
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SCIENCE FICTION

**THE
SPACE
BREED**



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THE SPACE BREED

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THE SPACE BREED

By ADAM CHASE

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On the basis of our suddenly accelerated rate of scientific progress, your children's children may well live on another planet. An actual concept of such a life is difficult to get. For instance, can you conceive living in a world where the life or death of your child hinged on the capacity of a portable oxygen tank? The strength of a plastic helmet? A world where distance is not measured in miles but in buckets of liquid air? This is a story of such a world and of tomorrow's children.

WHEN the big day arrived, Wisconsin Philips and his sister Pauline had disappeared.

Wis was ten years old, and since this was the tenth anniversary of the Sirius Four colony Wis had a certain amount of fame as the first child born eight light years from Earth. He liked to say he was conceived in space, not that he knew precisely or even approximately what that meant, but he had heard some of the grownups at the colony say that, and the mysterious term appealed to his imagination.

Pauline, two years younger than Wis, was one of the four hundred babies born so far under the big dome of Sirius IV. Their dog Orion, who disappeared with them, was four years old—which made Orion, an improbable mixture of beagle and doberman, the

only mature member of the trio.

The reason no one could find them on the big day was because they had gone outside the dome.

Pauline had been frightened, but Wis taunted her until she went along with him. They had been outside before, but only in the company of grownups. They had their own pint-sized spacesuits and, of course, even the domestic animals of the Sirius IV colony had spacesuits. For one thing, the liquid air aqueduct was still being built, which meant that going outside for buckets of air was still a necessary occupation of the colonists; and a kid, like anyone else, could tote a bucket.

But on the big day, Wis, Pauline and Orion didn't go outside to the Air River. They just went outside because Wis wanted to.



With adventure ahead, the danger was forgotten.

And on the big day, all going outside meant was that you crossed an imaginary line, for that was the day the plastite dome was lifted.

It had to be lifted because the big day on Sirius Four was the day the first new ship came from distant Earth. Wis hadn't really expected to go wandering off. His father, John Philips, was chairman of the Greeting Committee; his mother Patricia was in charge of baking. The big day was the day seventy-five new colonists from far earth arrived at Sirius Four.

Wis hadn't known what to expect. The spaceship, though, was a disappointment—just an enormous, almost featureless projectile. And the new colonists, as they filed off and trooped, wearing spacesuits, into the farm-city, were a disappointment. Why, Wis thought, they looked like anybody. Just like anybody.

While all along his father had been briefing him proudly on the meaning of the new arrivals from Earth. "It means we're here to stay, son," he had said the night before. Of course they were there to stay, Wis thought in mild exasperation. Could they be anything else? There wasn't a single spaceship in the entire colony, except the original one which had been dismantled to build the farm city.

"It means Sirius Four is a success," John Philips had also told his ten-year-old son. "It means that though we're now restricted to this little area a

few square miles in extent, some day we'll carve a home for humanity on the entire planet." Then he said, pointing through the transparent dome which, the night before the big day, was still up: "Out there, son, there's a whole new world waiting to be explored, waiting to be tamed, waiting to be conquered by man. Someday we're going to do it. Someday, maybe your children's children will do it."

It was the thought of the new world adventure that really excited Wis. It sounded like a fine idea, this exploration: Wis didn't see why he couldn't do it now.

It was then that Patricia Philips, her hands white with flaky dough, came into the room and made a mistake. The mistake was in saying: "John, he doesn't understand what you're trying to say. He's too young."

Wis didn't think he was too young. With the other children born after him Wis had seen the pictures of the early days of the colony, the dismantling of the ship, the setting up of the farm-city—which really was a gigantic hydroponics laboratory with living quarters—the erection of the plastite dome. There didn't seem to be a thing they did in the pictures that Wis himself could not do.

So on the big day, when the dome was shut off and all the grownups were busy with preparations for the new arrivals, Wis put on his spacesuit, Pauline reluctantly put on hers, they both

dressed Orion, and outside they went.

Pauline had good reason to be reluctant. In the first place, all the children at the colony had the dangers of airlessness and two hundred degrees below zero temperature drummed into them. "You couldn't survive out there a minute without protection," they were told. "There's no air to breathe, and no one can live unless he breathes. Also, the terrible cold will freeze you to ice in seconds. Why, even the oxygen of this planet is frozen."

That was one thing. The other was the Taggles.

Although the Taggles were a bogey-man sort of danger to the children of the colony, they were another reason Wis decided to go outside and do some exploring on his own. For Taggles wasn't really their name, their name was all but unpronounceable, and Wis, the oldest child in the colony, had tried to approximate the sound of it at age four with the word Taggle. The name had stuck. No one, not even adults, called the original inhabitants of Sirius Four anything but Taggles now. Didn't that give Wis a certain proprietary right to exploration?

"The Taggles," John Philips had told his children, "are a mystery. We don't know much about them, you understand, except that they've been mighty good to us. Our home planet Earth, you see, was overcrowded. So, when we started out for Sirius Four,

a thousand other expeditions started out for a thousand other unexplored places. Many of them had to go back because the native populations were hostile, a few of them were even wiped out. Why, on Fomalhaut Seven—"

"Dear—" a gentle nudge from the wife in question—"tell him about the Taggles."

"Well, yes. Sure. The Taggles lived here before we did, son. They lived here about a million years before we did. It's their planet, and they're good enough to let us share it."

"Are they afraid of us, Pop?"

"Afraid? No, of course not. There are so few of us, it would not be any trouble for them to wipe us out, like what happened on Fomalhaut Seven. That's why we have to be nice to them. In a way, though, we're lucky. Because the Taggles aren't matter-converters."

"Huh?"

"Well, that is, they don't eat food. They eat energy. So, theoretically, we could cultivate every acre of their planet—and it is their planet, make no mistake about that—and they would not mind. They're a funny lot, though. We've been here ten years and we hardly know a thing about them. They keep to themselves and—"

"Dear, you're forgetting the whole point—"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. They're big and strong and they can work magic, especially on little children. That's why it isn't safe to

go outside alone, except maybe for a bucket of air if you're told to. Because of the Taggles."

All these circumstances conspired to send ten-year-old Wis Philips outside on the first real opportunity. Not that he intended to go *far*. Gee whiz, he knew better. It had been drummed into his head that the air supply in a spacesuit was good for only ten hours. Just a little walk, that's all, especially since he had a baby like Pauline with him, who was so scared she almost puckered and broke into tears when they crested the first rise and dropped into the first little valley, thus cutting off all view of the farm-city. . . .

"John, have you seen Wis?"

"No. Isn't he with you and Pauline?"

"No." Alarmed. "I thought Pauline was with Wis and you."

"Well, they'll turn up. Why don't we send Orion to fetch them. Here, Orion! Here, boy!"

"Orion?" Frightened now. "Where's Orion?"

Orion, actually, was the trouble. Maybe Wis wouldn't have gone very far, except for Orion. Certainly Pauline would have been delighted to return at once. She practically begged Wis, but he wouldn't hear of it at first.

And then, when even he began to get a little anxious because the convoluted terrain, frozen, bleak, had long-since hidden the farm-city from view, Orion ran off.

"Hey, Orion! Hey, come back here, boy! Hey, Orion, come *on*!"

But Orion yiped playfully and scampered off.

Sure-footedly over a thrusting ridge and down the other side out of sight. Barking and yelping with delight, as if he had waited all the interminable span of his dog-life just for this moment.

"Wis, I'm scared."

"Come on." Running. "We can't just *leave* him here."

"Wis, I wanta go back."

"Sissy!"

Wis ran after the dog. Pauline choked on tears and followed him. "Wait for me. Wait, Wis, pleeeze!" In her mind's eye, Pauline was thinking of Taggles. Not that she knew what they looked like.

They chased Orion for about an hour. It's problematical what Orion was chasing or thought he was chasing, for not counting farm-city, the only life-form on Sirius Four were the energy eating Taggles, and neither Wis, Pauline nor Orion had seen any Taggles yet.

That was to come later.

Finally, Orion spent his playful energy. Tail wagging ridiculously inside the spacesuit, he waited for them. Wis wanted to scold the dog, but tongue hanging inside his helmet, flanks heaving, eyes sparkling, Orion looked so pleased with himself that Wis relented.

"All right, boy," he said, feeling very grown up. "You've had your fun. Now let's go back."

This time Wis held the space-suit leash in a tight grip.

"I'm tired, Wis. All these mountains."

"Hills, silly. If you climbed a mountain," said Wis in a superior manner, "you'd know it."

"Two more hours, back the way they had come. At least Wis thought it was the way they had come. But two hours to cover the ground they had covered before in one hour.

And no farm-city in sight anywhere.

Just the convoluted, lifeless ground, of Sirius Four. Just the black velvet of the airless sky with its incredible sprinkling of stars. Just the emptiness and the desolation all around them.

Pauline started to cry.

Wis looked at her, the tears streaming down her cheeks inside the helmet she wore. "I want to go back," she said. "I want to go *home*. I don't want to explore. Wis, take me back."

Wis wanted to say, "Ya big baby," but he didn't. He was getting a little scared himself. Straight ahead of them looked like right in back of them. The saw-toothed hills on their left looked just like the saw-toothed hills on their right. There wasn't any farm-city in sight anywhere. Of course, if the dome was up they could see it a long way off. But the dome was shut off and all the colonizers and all their animals wore spacesuits. It was the only way to let the new colonists and their equipment in,

since the dome's airlock admitted only a couple of people at a time.

Everywhere you looked, it was the same. Rock. Sharp-edged hills. Percipitous gullies.

Wis knew suddenly they were lost.

"I want to go *home*!" Pauline repeated, snuffing her tears. "You take me right home, Wis Philips."

So, holding Pauline's hand through her space-glove, with Orion now trailing obediently behind on his leash, Wis started walking.

The sensible thing to do would have been to wait in one spot until the dome went back up, because as yet they couldn't be too far away, even if they had gone outward in one direction all three hours they'd been runaways, which was certainly unlikely.

But Wis didn't do the sensible thing. Pauline was scared and crying. And Wis didn't want to admit he was almost as scared as she was. He couldn't do that, could he? He was ten years old.

He walked. Pauline, sniffing, walked with him. Orion seemed very happy.

They walked about an hour.

After an hour was when Wis realized they came back to where they started from. There was a hill that looked like three teeth biting into the black sky, Wis remembered. And there it was again.

"I think we're lost," Wis said.

He shouldn't have said it, but it just came out. Pauline began to bawl, really in earnest now.

So Wis said he was joking. His kid-sister hated him right then and freely admitted it. This made Wis ornery. He wouldn't give up. They kept walking.

Five hours after they started out, they found the city.

It didn't look like any city Wis had ever seen in pictures. It was a Taggle City, almost a million years old because the Taggles were an ancient race, but Wis didn't know that yet. It was a place, about a mile square, where the saw-toothed hills had been flattened out, where the ground had been polished utterly flat and smooth. It looked like a gigantic billiard table. Which meant, as Wis was soon to learn, that the city was underground.

Right in the middle of it, just as Wis, Pauline and Orion reached the spot, the smooth rock parted and rolled back and a trap-door opened.

Pauline screamed: "Taggle!" And she was right.

There were two Taggles there suddenly, and they were almost as scared as Pauline, probably more scared than Wis. They didn't *look* like much, really, Wis thought, even though he knew they were Taggles. How could they look like much? They were energy-eaters. They were quite insubstantial. If the ectoplasm superstitious people claim ghosts are made of is sort of fuzzy, sort of half-transparent, sort of weightless-looking and kind of glowing, then the Taggles looked like ghosts.

"It's Men!" the first one cried in silent telepathic excitement. "You want to go back and get help?"

"They seem harmless enough," the second Taggle said a little doubtfully. This second Taggle was more optimistic because ten Earth years ago he had been on the Council which allowed the Outworlders, Men, they were called, to colonize Sirius Four. There was just no reason for matter-eaters and energy-eaters to be in conflict. They could inhabit the same planet in perfect harmony. He repeated: "They seem harmless enough. They aren't armed."

"What's the one with four walking limbs?" the first Taggle wanted to know. He was uneasy.

"I don't know. I guess it's a child and the other two are adults. Why don't you ask them?"

"Who, me? Why don't *you*?"

The Taggles were a very shy people. Once granting colonization rights to the Men who had come from space, they had scrupulously ignored their guests on Sirius Four. They were a very ancient race and had had a considerable civilization at a time that saw Men still swinging through trees on Earth. They were a naturally inquisitive people and had, in fact, achieved scientific wonders. But being insubstantial energy-eaters, these wonders just weren't necessary and the Taggles had never exploited them.

"Hello!" the second Taggle,

unwilling to admit his own uneasiness, thought, projecting telepathically. "Are you the leaders of the colony?" Naturally, they would be the leaders. Only the leaders would come out personally to make contact with the Taggles.

Wis warmed to the occasion as he heard the words in his mind. And he wanted desperately to prove to Pauline she had nothing to cry about. So, while he didn't wish to lie and hence didn't answer their question directly, he did say, grandiloquently: "I am the only one ever conceived in space!"

Being insubstantial energy-eaters, the Taggles didn't have any idea, any more than did Wis, of what "conceived in space" meant. But it impressed them. Hadn't Men come through space to Sirius Four?

"Be the guest of our city," offered the second Taggle, giving the first one a look of triumph because the Men were so friendly and so obviously not hostile. Even the first Taggle felt better.

What they did not know, was that Wis, Pauline and Orion now had only five or six hours air supply left. After that they would die of asphyxiation. And Wis, in his excitement, forgot all about it.

They were taken on a tour of Taggle City, which had about a thousand inhabitants. They were told — and shown — wonders. They understood almost nothing, but Wis was enjoying himself

immensely, and occasionally a glimmering of what he saw and was told got through to him.

"This is our energizer. It draws energy directly from Sirius. We feed on it since we're energy-eaters. Of course, you have different problems. But Sirius-power — sun-power — is still a very great achievement, even for you. It could grow your crops, work your dome, build your cities, power your spaceships . . ."

An hour passed. Four hours of air—and life—left.

"These murals show you what we once were like, five million years ago. You are surprised? But you see, we too once were matter-eaters. Then our planet died. We had an option. Like you, we could go out into space. Or, we could convert ourselves to energy-eaters and stay here. We selected the latter course. You see, once we were not too unlike yourselves."

Wis and Pauline gazed in fascination at the tri-de murals. Another hour passed. Three hours left of air—and life.

"We could have told you all this before," said their Taggle guide. "But we're a shy people, and you seemed so busy in your dome, we didn't want to bother you. We don't, you see, wish to intrude. But—and I hope you won't think this is presumptuous—in our long history we've made some discoveries which could probably help you. For example . . ." The Taggle went on telepathically about something

called hyper-space which Wis didn't understand at all. "... for us, you see, it was merely a theoretical discovery. We are not wanderers, as you Men are. We have no wish to leave our native planet. But still, with the hyper-drive, it would be possible for a ship to go from here to Earth in days instead of years. Quite a savings in . . ."

That didn't interest Wis. A long space voyage sounded like fun, so why shorten it?

Two hours left of air—and life.

"Also," went on the Taggle, leading them before a tremendous machine which dwarfed the considerable cavern that housed it, "this device was developed—five million years ago—as a third alternative. We could leave our home planet, we could convert to energy-status, or we could make our world inhabitable by matter-eaters again. You see, this device taps the radioactive core of the world, bringing heat from below instead of above. Sufficient heat would melt the seas of oxygen, give this world an atmosphere, and make completely feasible once more habitation by matter-eaters, such as we once were or such as you now are. But we're a passive people, which is why we never contacted you after you came and we agreed that you could stay. Which is why, instead of heating the planet and bringing air back, we decided to become energy-eaters . . ."

One hour left of air—and life.

Then Wis suddenly blurted.

"Air? Did you say air?" He began to get very excited. "My gosh, I almost forgot. We've got to get *back*. We've got to. I have to explain, I didn't want to admit it before, but we aren't grown-ups. We're just a couple of kids and a dog and—"

"Dog? What is dog?"

So Wis had to explain it. Then he said: "We're not leaders or anything. We're just kids. We're lost. We don't know how to get back. But if we don't get back soon, we're gonna die because we won't have any air to breathe."

"That," Pauline wailed, "is what daddy said! I knew it, I knew you'd get us in trouble, Wis Philips. I hate you!"

The Taggles didn't know what to make of this. They were energy-eaters, they were almost immortal, for five million years they had had no children. They debated it for a while. And kept on debating it, not knowing if this was some kind of joke the two Men were playing. . . . After all, interstellar humor could be wide of the accepted mark, and . . .

Half an hour left of air—and life.

"Children. Perhaps . . ."

"Yes, of course. Remember, in the ancient legends . . ."

"Immature beings, not fully—but not fully what?"

"Explain, please," one of them asked Wis.

He tried to explain. He could not make himself understood,

though. And by the time he finished he was barely coherent. He knew they were in trouble. Bad trouble. If they didn't get back in a few minutes . . .

Fifteen minutes left of air—and life.

"I'm hungry," Pauline said. "I'm thirsty. I wanta go *home*."

The Taggles had to dredge racial history for the meanings of hungry and thirsty.

"We need air," Wis insisted. "We're not like you. We'll die without air."

"Very well," said the Taggle who'd been their guide, "then we'll present our machine to your people. It means nothing to us if the planet is warmed, if oxygen vaporizes again after five million years."

"No, I mean now!"

Already Wis could hear the final faint hiss which meant his emergency tank was empty. He began to feel dizzy. Pauline looked very pale. Orion had stopped nipping around their space-boots and sat forlornly on his haunches.

The Taggles knew about air only theoretically, after five million years. But one of them brightened. "Ah, you mean you wish to try out the machine?"

"No, no, no!" Wis shouted. "I mean we need oxygen, right now." His vision began to swim. With an effort of will he kept himself from crying.

Then he broke down. He admitted it. He was just a kid. He didn't know what to do. He

couldn't do anything. If they didn't get help, and fast, he and his sister and the dog were going to die.

That way, as a child admitting he was a child, Wis got through to them. One of the Taggles rushed outside for some liquid air. It was sloshed into their oxygen tanks—and only just in time. The heat of their space-suits immediately vaporized it, and Wis felt the giddy rush of air, too heavily laden with oxygen, but life-giving nonetheless.

He did a little jig. He felt great. He didn't know it, but he had an oxygen jag.

"Children," telepathized one of the Taggles. "But I don't understand. Their adults—parents?—remained aloof of us. But the children came."

"Yes," said another. "But we remained aloof of them, and our culture is far older than Man's. Perhaps it takes a child, with the guileless mentality of a child, with the sense of wonder and imagination of a child. . . . In a sense, weren't their parents who came here ten years ago, more like children, with their dreams and hope and . . . I don't know . . ." Here the telepathy grew hazy for Wis, and he lost most of its meaning; but he did understand this much: "What I mean is, we were too old. We settled back passively, accepting defeat at the hands of our environment because it was the easiest way out. But Men didn't. They were—racially—children."

They had a sense of wonder. They came here. We were too old, but they weren't. With their immaturity but their imagination, they came here, don't you understand? They were something we couldn't be. They were young enough: they were the space breed. . . ."

There was more which Wis couldn't follow. Then: "Working together, with our achievements and their unconquerable drive, what might we not accomplish? And it took these children to make us realize . . . come, let's take them home."

And they all went up and outside.

The dome over farm-city was back in place. The new colonists had all been accounted for, but there was grief in the colony—for two children, fourteen hours missing, were assumed dead. It was the first such accident in the history of the colony and it seemed an unpropitious event with which to confront the new colonists.

It was worse than that for John Philips and his wife Patricia. It was tragedy.

But John Philips wouldn't give up hope.

That was why he was outside

the dome when the Taggles appeared.

Not just a few of them. Hundreds.

Descending on the colony.

With Wis, Pauline and Orion in their van.

After that there was much celebrating and the beginning of understanding between the Taggles, who were very old, and the Men, who were still very young. The Taggles could supply wonders, and the Men would know how to use them.

A cold planet turned warm, air again, the hyper-drive to bridge the vast interstellar gulf. . . .

Meanwhile, though, John Philips and the others would still go out for their buckets of air while Wis and children like him would play with their dogs and dream. This was what John Philips thought the day after the Taggles arrived and Wis and Pauline came back, as if miraculously, from the dead. As he entered the dome he saw Wis playing with Orion in a big discarded oxygen cylinder from the new ship. Wis and the dog were having a great time; the events of yesterday were forgotten.

And tomorrow beckoned, thanks to Wis. But he didn't understand that yet.

THE END

