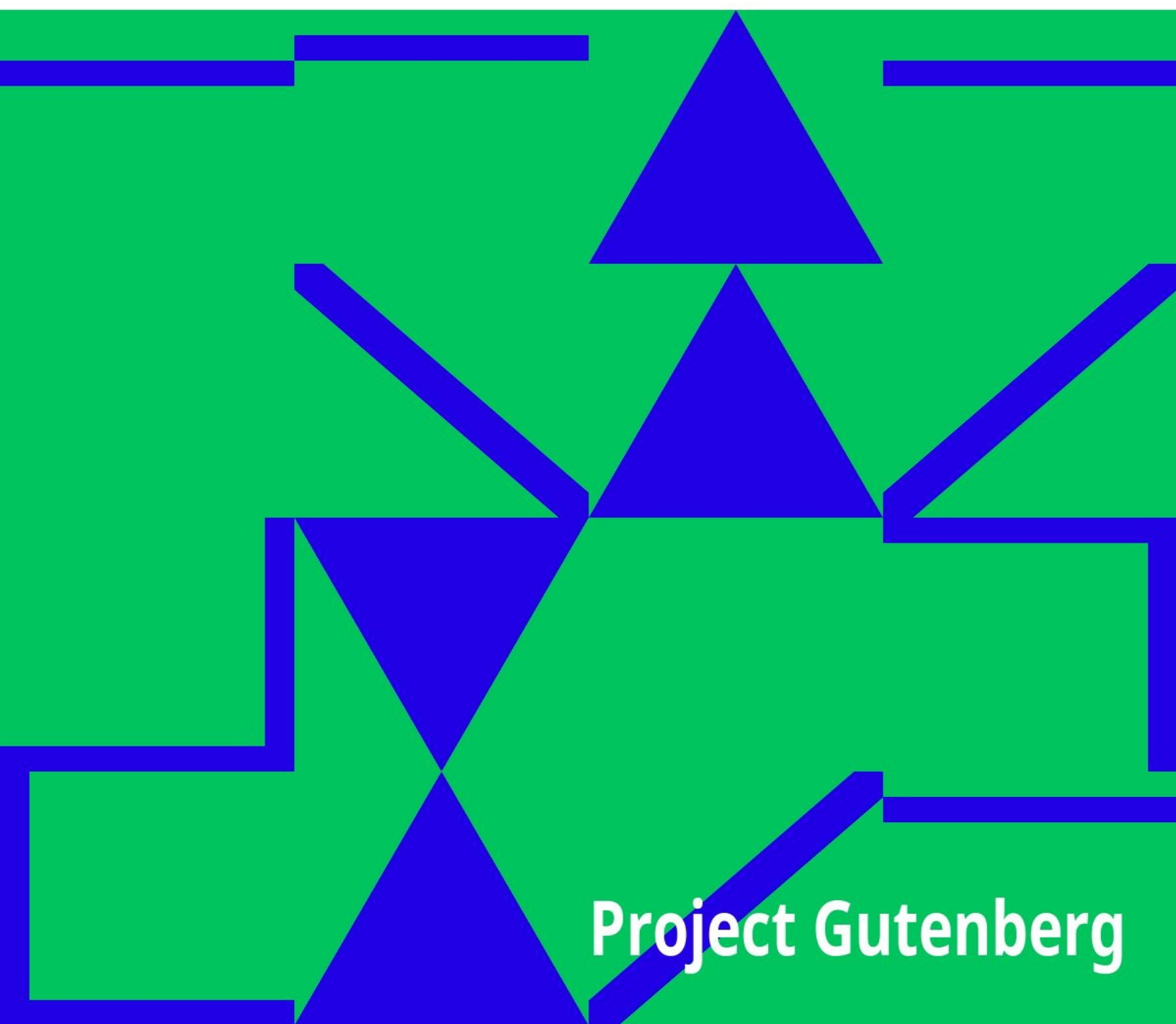


Dead Man's Planet

Joseph Samachson



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**DEAD
MAN'S
PLANET**

By **WILLIAM MORRISON**

Illustrated by **EMSH**

*When a driven man arrives at a cemetery world,
what else can it be but journey's end—and the start
of a new one?*

OUTSIDE the ship, it was the sun that blazed angrily. Inside, it was Sam Wilson's temper. "Study your lessons," he snarled, with a savageness that surprised himself, "or I'll never let you set foot on this planet at all."

"Okay, Pop," said Mark, a little white around the nostrils. He looked old for so young a kid. "I didn't mean anything wrong."

"I don't care what you meant. You do as you're told."

In the quiet that followed, broken only by the hum of the arithmetic-tape, Sam wondered at himself. As kids went, Mark had never been a nuisance. Certainly Rhoda had never had any trouble with him. But Rhoda had been altogether different. Sam was tough and he had always got a sense of satisfaction out of knowing that he was hard-boiled. Or at least that was once true. Rhoda had been sweet, gentle....

He aroused himself from thoughts of her by calling, "Mark!"

"Yes, Pop?"

His voice had been harsher than he had intended. Over the past few weeks he seemed gradually to have been losing control of it. Now, although he was going to do his son a favor, he sounded like a slavemaster threatening a beating. "You can shut off your arithmetic lesson. We're going out."

"But didn't you want me—"

"I changed my mind."

Mark seemed more troubled than pleased, as if a father who changed his mind so readily was a man to be wary of.

I'm on edge all the time, thought Sam, and I'm getting him that way, too. I'll have to regain control of myself.

HE had long ago made all the necessary tests for such possible dangers as lack of oxygen and the presence of infectious organisms. On all counts, the planet had passed muster. The sun, whiter than Sol, was almost hot enough to make him forget the chill he carried deep inside him. Almost, but not quite, especially as the air, though breathable, was thin and deficient in nitrogen. The countryside was bleak, inspiring in him the thought that there are two kinds of desolation; the one that precedes the coming of Man, and the one which he knows only too well how to create wherever he goes. The desolation here was non-human.

"It—it's like a cemetery, ain't it, Pop?"

Sam looked at his son sharply. Kids of ten were not supposed to know much about cemeteries. Nor, for that matter, were kids of six, Mark's age when the funeral had taken place. Sam hadn't let him attend, but evidently the incident had made a deeper impression on his mind than Sam had realized. He would always remember a cemetery as the place where his mother lived. Perhaps he missed Rhoda almost as much as his father did.

"It's different from a cemetery," said Sam. "There's nobody buried here. Looks like we're the first human beings ever to set foot on this place."

"Do you think we'll find animals to catch, Pop?"

"I don't see signs of any animals."

That was part of Sam's private fiction, that he was looking for strange animals to be sold to zoos or circuses. Actually he was seeking less to find anything new than to lose something he carried with him, and succeeding in neither attempt.

Mark shivered in the sun. "It's kind of lonely," he said.

"More lonely than the ship?"

"It's different. It's bigger, so it's more lonely."

I'm not so sure, argued Sam mentally. In the ship, we have all of space around us, and nothing's bigger than that. Still, your opinion has to be respected. You're almost as great an expert on the various kinds of loneliness as I am. The difference is that you're loneliest when you're away from people. I'm loneliest in a crowd. That's why I don't mind this planet so much.

He walked ahead, Mark following almost reluctantly. The ground was rocky and the shrub-like vegetation sparse and stunted, ranging in color from greenish gray to brown. It seemed hardly capable of supporting a large animal population. If there were any animals here at all, they were probably too small to be impressive, and would be of little interest to exhibitors.

They walked in silence for a few moments, and then Sam asked, "Want to go on?"

"I want to finish my studying."

That was something new. "Okay," said Sam, and turned back.

THEY were approaching the ship when the sound of a pebble falling came to Sam's ears. Automatically, his hand reached for his gun, and he swung around to face what might be danger. As he did so, something snarled and fled. He could see no sign of motion, but he could hear the scattering of other pebbles along a gully as the creature retreated.

"Looks like we're not alone here, after all," he said. "Wonder what that was."

"It couldn't have been very big," said Mark. "Big animals don't run away."

"Not usually, unless they're smart, or they've met people before. I'll have to set traps."

"Do you think maybe if you caught him you could sell him to a circus, Pop?"

"I'll have to see what he's like, first," said Sam. He looked around. "If there's one

animal, there are likely to be others. It's strange that I didn't detect any sign of them."

He put his arm absently over Mark's shoulder. He didn't notice the expression on the kid's face at this unexpected gesture.

When they were inside the ship again, Mark said, "Guess I'd better get back to my arithmetic."

"In a minute," said Sam. "I want to talk to you first." He dropped wearily into a seat, although he had done nothing that should have tired him out. His son looked at him expectantly. "Mark, do you like traveling around with me?"

"Sure, Pop, I like to be with you."

"Not seeing anybody else? No other kids, no people of any kind? Just being with me, learning your lessons from tapes, and having your test papers corrected automatically? You don't get tired of it?"

Mark hesitated despite himself. Then he said loyally, "I'd rather be with you than anybody else. When Mom—when Mom died—I didn't want to see anybody."

"I know how you felt. But that was four years ago. You can't grow up alone. Now what you need to do is meet people, learn how they talk and think and feel. You can't learn those things from tapes, and you can't learn them from me."

Mark said stubbornly, "I like to be with you."

"I'm not much of a person to be with. Don't think I don't know it. I'm mean and surly, and my temper's getting worse by the day. I can't associate with people any more. But *you* can. I was thinking maybe I'd leave you—"

"No!" cried Mark.

"Not in an orphanage or anything like that. But I have some friends whose kids are growing up—"

"No. I won't go. If you send me, I'll run away. I want to be with you."

"Okay," said Sam. "That's that."

But it wasn't, and he knew it. Even as he went about preparing his traps, he knew it.

AS it turned out, the only animals he caught in his traps were small ones which tore themselves in two and then scampered off, each half running in a different direction. For the animal which had made those noises, no traps were necessary. Later on he heard a noise outside again, and he went out cautiously, gun in hand. The animal backed away, but he saw it, then he heard it bark. So did Mark, who had followed him.

Mark's eyes almost popped. It was four years since he had heard the sound, but he knew at once what it was. "Gosh! A dog! How do you s'pose he got here?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"But if we're the first human beings to land here—it ain't possible!"

"I know that. But there he is."

At the sound of their voices, the dog broke into a series of furious barks, backing away as it did so.

"What kind is he, Pop?"

"He looks like a mongrel to me. A bad-tempered, medium-sized mongrel with an ugly look about him. Maybe I ought to shoot him and get it over with."

"Shoot him? Don't do that! I want him as a pet."

"He looks too wild to make much of a pet."

The dog gave one last bark of defiance, turned, and fled in the same general direction, Sam noticed, as he had run last time.

"Maybe dogs *do* grow on other planets, Pop."

"Only if men have brought them there."

"Then that means there was a ship here?"

"At some time or other there was a ship. I don't think it was smashed up, or I'd have seen wreckage when I cruised around before landing. That dog was either left here by mistake, or deliberately marooned."

"Maybe—maybe he's with somebody who's still here."

"Not likely," said Sam thoughtfully. "He wanders around too freely, and he seems unused to the presence of human beings. Besides, no men would be likely to live here long without shelter. And I've seen no sign of any house or hut."

"Could he belong to a being that wasn't human?"

"No," replied Sam with certainty. "Only human beings have been able to domesticate dogs. If a dog is here, a human being was once here. That's definite."

"He *would* make a good pet," said Mark longingly.

"Not that one. Maybe I should have got you a dog long ago. It might have been just the kind of companionship you needed. But you can't make a pet of this animal. He's been away from people too long, and he's developed some mean habits." And he added mentally, "*Like me.*"

"I could train him," said Mark. "He wouldn't be any trouble at all, Pop. I'd train him and feed him, and he'd be just like one of us. And—and like you say, Pop, it wouldn't be so lonely for me."

Kids don't give up easily, thought Sam. All the same, he had an idea that with this dog all the persistence in the world would be useless. He shrugged, and said simply, "We'll see." And then they went into the ship to eat.

ALL through the meal he could tell that Mark was thinking about the dog. The boy's thoughts seemed to affect his appetite. For the first time, he left some of his proteinex on the plate.

"I'm not very hungry today," he said apologetically. "Maybe—" He looked inquiringly at his father.

"Go ahead and finish it," said Sam. "We've got plenty of food. I'll fix up something else for the dog."

"But I want to feed him myself, Pop. I want him to get used to me feeding him."

"I'll give you your chance later."

Afterwards, Sam thriftily opened an old can of a less expensive variety of proteinex and put half of it on a platter, which Mark carried outside the ship. He moved off about a hundred yards in the direction the dog had taken, and set the platter down on a rock.

"The wind is blowing the wrong way," said Sam. "Let's wait a while."

IN ten minutes the wind shifted, and if the dog was near, Sam felt certain that he had picked up both their scent and that of the food. That his feeling was correct was shown by the sudden appearance of the animal, who barked again, but this time not so fiercely. And he stopped barking to sniff hungrily, at the same time keeping his distance.

"Here, mutt," called Mark.

"I'm afraid he won't come any closer while we're around," said Sam. "If you want him to have that food, you'd better go away from it."

Mark reluctantly backed away with his father. The dog approached the food, finally rushing down upon it as if he feared it would escape, and gobbled it.

In the days that followed, they continued to feed him, and the animal became relatively tame. He stopped barking at them, and at times let Mark come within a few feet of him. But he never allowed Mark to come close enough to touch him, and he was especially wary of Sam. The latter could see, however, that there was nothing around the smooth-furred neck. The collar, if it had ever existed, had evidently been worn away.

"So we can't find out what his name is," said Mark in disappointment. "Here, Prince, here, Spot, here, Rover—"

The animal answered to none of the traditional dog names, nor to several of the newer ones that Mark recalled.

After the dog had been with them for a half hour or so he usually trotted off in the direction of what they had come to consider his lair.

"He doesn't seem to be getting tame enough for a pet," said Sam. "That's one idea I'm afraid you'll have to give up."

"All he needs is a little more time," said Mark. "He's getting used to me." Then a sudden fear struck him, and he added, "You're not going to leave here yet, are you, Pop? I thought you wanted to catch some big animals."

"There aren't any other big animals," replied Sam. "Just those small ones who came apart in the traps, and they're not worth catching. But I'll stay. This place is as good as any other. I won't leave it yet."

IN fact, the stay on the planet, bleak as the place was, seemed to be less unpleasant than cruising aimlessly through space. Mark had been starved for companionship of someone besides his father, and in a way, without making too many demands, the dog was a companion. Wondering about the beast and trying to tame him gave them something with which to occupy their minds. It had been several days, realized Sam, since he had last snapped at Mark.

It had become quite certain now that there was no other human being around. The dog's eagerness for the food showed that no one else had taken care of him for a long time. Evidently he had been forced to feed himself on the small and elusive native animals which he could run down.

One of the things that puzzled Sam was the dog's obvious anxiety to leave the neighborhood of the ship after a short period and return to his lair. And one day, driven by curiosity, Sam followed him, with Mark coming along, too.

The dog had become sufficiently accustomed to them by now not to resent their presence, and it was easy to keep him in sight. He led the way for at least two miles, over rocky ground and past a small stream. Quite unexpectedly he stopped and began to whine and sniff the ground. As Sam and Mark approached, he turned on them, barking furiously.

The man and boy exchanged glances. "He's acting just like he did in the beginning," said Mark.

"There's something in the ground," said Sam. "I'm going to find out what it is."

And he drew his gun.

"You're not going to kill him, Pop!"

"I'll just put him to sleep. An anaesthetic pellet of the kind I use for trapping ought to do the trick."

But one pellet turned out to be not enough. It required the bursting of three pellets before the animal finally trembled, came to a halt, and with eyes glazed, fell over on the ground.

When they approached closer, Sam caught sight of half a dozen stones, roughly piled together. He said, "Better get back, Mark. This may not be pleasant."

"You think—you think somebody's buried here?"

"Very likely. I'm going to see."

USING a flat rock with a sharp edge as an improvised spade, he began to dig. The ground was hard, and the rock was not the best of tools. It took him half an hour to reach the first bone, and another half-hour to uncover the rest.

Mark had come up behind him and was watching with no sign of revulsion. He said, "I—I was afraid there might be a body, Pop."

"So was I. It looks as if the man died so long ago that everything else has rotted away, except for a few metal clasps. No other sign of shoes or clothes. And no indication of how this happened."

"You think he was the dog's master?"

"Evidently."

They both stared at the sleeping animal. Then Sam shrugged, and began to fill the shallow grave again. Mark helped him push in the dirt and stamp it down into place. Finally they moved the stones back.

They were about to leave when Mark cried out, "Look at that rock!"

Staring where his son pointed, Sam saw a gray column about four feet high, with four smooth lateral sides. Rectangular prisms of this size were rare in nature. This was obviously the work of human hands, and of a blasting rod as well, to judge by the sides, which showed evidence of having been fused before weathering had cut into them. At first he had thought the column was a gravestone. But there was no inscription upon it. There was nothing but a thin deep groove that ran horizontally around the four sides, several inches from the top.

"What does it mean, Pop?"

"Let's find out. It's obviously been put here as some sort of memorial. As for this groove—"

He put his hands on the top of the stone and lifted. As he had half expected, it separated at the horizontal groove. The top of the stone was the lid of a box. Inside lay a plastic container.

"Some kind of plastic we don't make any more," muttered Sam.

"Aren't you going to open it?" asked Mark eagerly. "Maybe it tells about the grave and the dog's name."

The plastic came open at a slight tug. Inside were several strong sheets of paper. Sam stared at them and said, "It's writing, sure enough. But in some language I don't understand."

"We can put it in our mechanical translator," said Mark. "That can tell us what it means."

"That's what we'll do."

"Aren't we going to take the dog with us, Pop?"

"No, we'll leave him here. He'll come to in a little while."

WALKING back to their ship, Mark continued to show an excitement that was unusual for him. "You know what?" he said. "I'll bet we're going to learn

what the dog's name is."

"I doubt if whoever wrote this thing would bother about a trifle like that."

"But that's important. You'll see, Pop, you'll see!"

At the ship, Sam inserted the sheets into the reader section of his translator and started the motor. The selector swung into action.

"Before it can translate, it has to decide what language this is," he explained.

"Will that take long?"

"A few minutes if we're lucky, a couple of hours if we're not. After that, I think the translation itself shouldn't take more than a few minutes. While we're waiting, we might as well eat."

"I'm not hungry," said Mark.

"You'd better eat anyway."

"Just a little bit, maybe. You know what I think, Pop? When I call the dog by his name, he'll know I'm his friend and he'll come to me. Then he'll really be my pet."

"Don't count too much on it," said Sam. And thought once more how lonely his son must be, to center so much hope in a half-wild beast.

A light glowed suddenly in the translator. The selector had found the proper language. Now it began to translate.

Twenty minutes later, its work had been completed. As Sam silently began to read, Mark bumped against him, knocking the translation from his hand. Sam's first reaction was anger at the boy's clumsiness. Then he became aware of the hope and the fear that lay behind Mark's excitement, and bit back the angry words which had almost reached his lips.

"Easy, Mark, easy," he said. He picked up the translation again and sat down. "You can read it over my shoulder, if you want to."

"I just want to find out the dog's name."

"The important thing is his master's name. Julian Hagstrom, it says. And he was on a spaceship with his brother, Raoul."

Mark's eyes had skipped ahead. "Look, Pop, here's the dog's name—Arkem! I never heard of a dog having a name like that! What does it mean?"

"I wouldn't know," muttered Sam absently, still reading.

But Mark wasn't actually interested in his answer. He ran outside. "Arkem!" he called. "Arkem!"

There was nothing he could interpret as an answer. After a moment or two he came into the ship again, his face betraying his disappointment. "I guess he doesn't hear me. He's too far away."

Sam nodded. He had put the translation down and was staring straight ahead of him, as if looking through the ship's side.

"Is anything the matter, Pop?"

"What? Oh, no, nothing's the matter. I was just thinking about what I read here."

"They had an accident, didn't they? How did it happen?"

"**I**T happened because their ship wasn't as good as ours. Julian Hagstrom, the man who was killed, was buried here by his brother. Raoul put this record in the stone to mark his grave. I think he also engraved something on the stone itself. But that's been worn away."

"It must have been a long time ago. Maybe years."

"Yes, it was years ago. After he buried Julian, Raoul tried to make repairs, and headed in a direction where he hoped he'd find a civilized planet. He never made it."

"How can you know that? He wrote the paper *before* he started out."

"If he had made it, we'd have heard of him. We'd certainly have heard of him." Sam's face was bleak. "And Rhoda—your mother—would still be alive."

Mark looked puzzled, and stared at the translation once more. "It says here he tried to re-reverse the aging process. What does that mean? And what's

immortality, Pop?"

"Something he and his brother were looking for. Something to keep people from ever dying. They had a ship full of dogs and other animals. All died in their experiments—all but Arkem. They had high hopes of Arkem. He lived through a number of different treatments and became quite a pet of Julian's. Then came the crash. Their method wasn't proof against accidental death, and at any rate they hadn't applied it yet to themselves.

"After Raoul buried his brother, the dog was miserable, and howled so much that Raoul decided to leave him behind. He was helped to reach this decision by the fact that the ship had lost much of its air in the accident, and he knew that the air-purifying mechanism wasn't working too well. He figured he'd have a better chance of surviving if he stayed in the ship alone. But it didn't do him any good. He was lost in space, or we'd certainly have heard of him."

From outside there came the sound of a low growl. "It's Arkem!" cried Mark. "Now you'll see. Wait till he hears me call his name."

He ran out, and Sam followed slowly. "Don't expect too much, Mark," he said, almost with pity.

Mark didn't hear him. "Arkem!" he called. "Arkem! Arkem!"

The dog was watchful, keeping his distance and giving no sign of recognition. Sam put his arm around his son's shoulder.

"Arkem, Arkem! Here, Arkem!"

The dog snarled.

THERE were tears in the boy's eyes. "He doesn't know his own name! He doesn't even know his own name! Arkem!"

"It's no use, Mark, he's forgotten he ever had a name. I'm afraid you'd better give up the idea of having him as a pet."

"But you *can't* forget your own name!"

"You can in eight hundred years. Yes, Mark, that's when all this happened, eight hundred years ago. That's why the language had to be translated. Arkem is immortal. And during his long life he's forgotten not only his name, but the master for whose sake he was marooned here. If Julian Hagstrom were, by some miracle, to come back to life, I'm sure the dog wouldn't remember him. All he has is a vague but strong tie to that heap of stones. He no longer knows why he's protecting it. He's been away from live human beings so long that his brain is little more than a bundle of reflexes and instincts."

"I'll train him," said Mark. "Sometimes you forget a thing at first, but it comes back to you later. He'll remember his name—here, Arkem!"

"It's no use," said Sam. "For eight hundred years he's been tied to that heap of stones. He'll never remember anything except that fact. I'll get you another dog for a pet."

"You mean we're going back to Mars or Earth?"

"Some place like that. Some place where there are people. Being alone in space is no good for you."

"Oh, no, Pop, you can't get rid of me like that."

"I'm not trying to get rid of you," said Sam. "Being alone in space is no good for me either. I'm going with you."

"Gee, are you sure? You won't change your mind?"

The delighted but uncertain look on his son's face shook Sam. He said carefully, "I won't change my mind. I've decided that it's possible to have too much of a good thing. If grief is a good thing."

Suddenly, for no reason that they could detect, the dog barked at them and backed away, the fur rising in an angry ridge along his back.

"Couldn't we take him along anyway?" asked Mark. "I don't like to think of him all alone here, year after year."

"He'll be miserable here, but he'd be more miserable away from his heap of dirt and stones. Perhaps—" Mark didn't see as Sam pulled his gun, then let it slip back into place. "No. That's none of my business. Maybe he'll be fortunate and have an accident."

"What did you say, Pop?"

"Nothing much. Come along, Mark. We're heading for civilization."

An hour later, the ship rose into the air. Through the blasting of the rockets, Sam thought—imagined, he decided, was a better word—that he heard the long doleful whine of a creature whose mindless grief was doomed to last for all eternity.

—WILLIAM MORRISON

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