

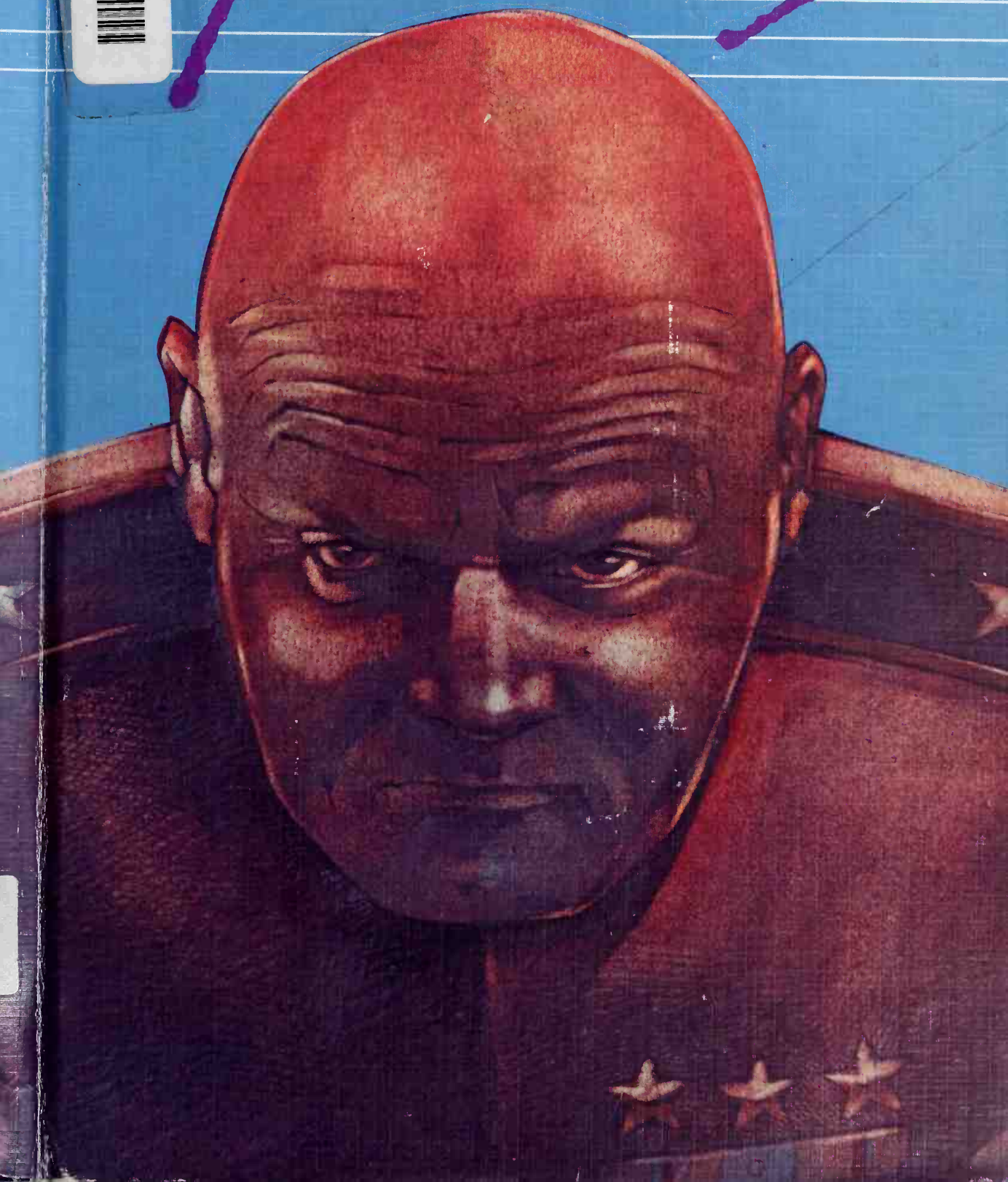
ASIMOV

GREENBERG

WAUGH



Mutants





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MUTANTS

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MUTANTS

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RAINTREE PUBLISHERS

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Contents

Introduction	6
Isaac Asimov	
The Better Choice	8
S. Fowler Wright	
Prone	12
Mack Reynolds	
Barney	26
Will Stanton	
Lost Love	32
Algis Budrys	

Introduction

ISAAC ASIMOV

Back in 1859, an English scientist wrote a book called "The Origin of Species" which began to convince biologists that life had developed by a process called "evolution." Living things slowly changed from generation to generation. Some kinds of plants or animals (species) slowly died out, and others slowly changed into plants or animals of a somewhat different type. It all took billions of years, but finally from the simplest forms of life, little microscopic scraps of living things, such enormously organized species as redwood trees, whales, and human beings finally came into being.

Biologists, and scientists generally, are quite convinced that evolution takes place, but it is difficult to work out the detailed methods whereby evolution takes place. It's like knowing that an automobile will drive if you turn on the ignition and step on the gas, but not knowing exactly what goes on under the hood when you do those things.

One hint came in the 1890s when a Dutch botanist found that sometimes changes took place quite suddenly. A plant would produce seeds which, when they were planted and grew, would produce a plant that was noticeably different in some ways from the parent plant. This was called a "mutation," from a Latin word for "change."

Then it was discovered that cells contained tiny structures called "chromosomes" and these chromosomes were made up of still tinier structures called "genes" which were made up of a kind of chemical called "nucleic acids."

The genes controlled the various physical characteristics of living things, and if the gene were changed somehow, some physical characteristic would be changed.

Genes could be changed in all sorts of ways—by heat, by

chemicals, even just by accident. Every time a new cell was formed, the genes had to produce duplicates of themselves and sometimes the machinery for preparing duplicates didn't work properly.

In the 1920s, it was found that X rays could produce changes in genes and, therefore, bring about mutations. This was true of other kinds of energetic radiation, such as cosmic rays, or the radiation produced by radioactive substances—or even sunlight.

But then, at the end of World War II came the nuclear bomb. A nuclear bomb produces a great deal of very energetic radiation. The radiation combined with the heat and blast could kill hundreds of thousands of people. What if people were far enough away, though, to escape the effect of the blast and the heat. The radiation might still reach them.

The radiation wouldn't be so great in quantity as to kill them, but might it not be enough, even so, to change their genes, and to change their characteristics? Or, at the very least, might it not cause them to produce children with changed characteristics.

For that reason, after World War II, science fiction writers began to write numerous stories dealing with mutations. These pointed up the dangers of nuclear warfare in many cases. In others, it just took advantage of the drama made possible by mutants. After all, mutants are sometimes just as grisly and frightening as the "monsters" in older kinds of stories.



The Better Choice

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

"Mutants," Professor Forsyte said with quiet finality, "are normal, for mutability is a fundamental natural law. They have been explicable since we have known that atoms may be transformed or split with inevitable consequence—and they are certainly nothing new.

"One of the earliest books that has survived from classical times narrates how a man's wife was changed into a cat; and there is independent testimony, almost equally ancient, from Northern Europe, which tells of the mutations of men and wolves."

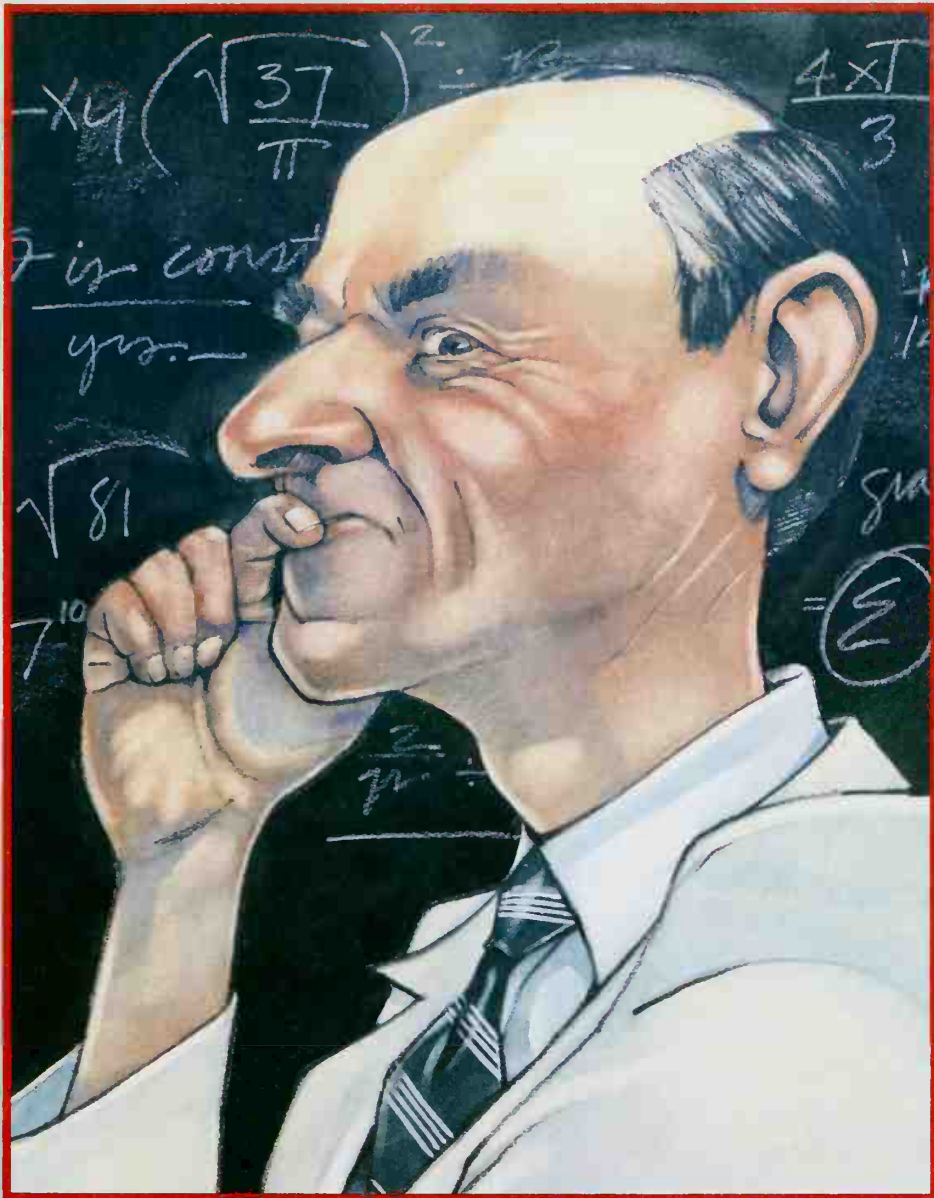
Olive asked, "Could you do it? I should rather like being a cat."

"I should have supposed that the attraction would not be great."

"Well, I feel differently. Shouldn't you like me purring against your legs?"

The professor looked at his wife doubtfully. She had always been too volatile, too flippant to be helpful in serious work. But perhaps now . . . if she really would!

As he hesitated, he saw the expression of petulant annoyance which was too frequent on an attractive face.



"Of course," she said. "you couldn't. It's only talk."

"If you would co-operate—"

"I'd jump at the chance."—And I'd be able to jump better than I do now, she thought whimsically; but she had learned that such levities were not appreciatively received.

"It would be a particularly interesting experiment," the professor continued. "But we should need to have a clear understanding about getting you back to normal. We should have to co-operate in that also."

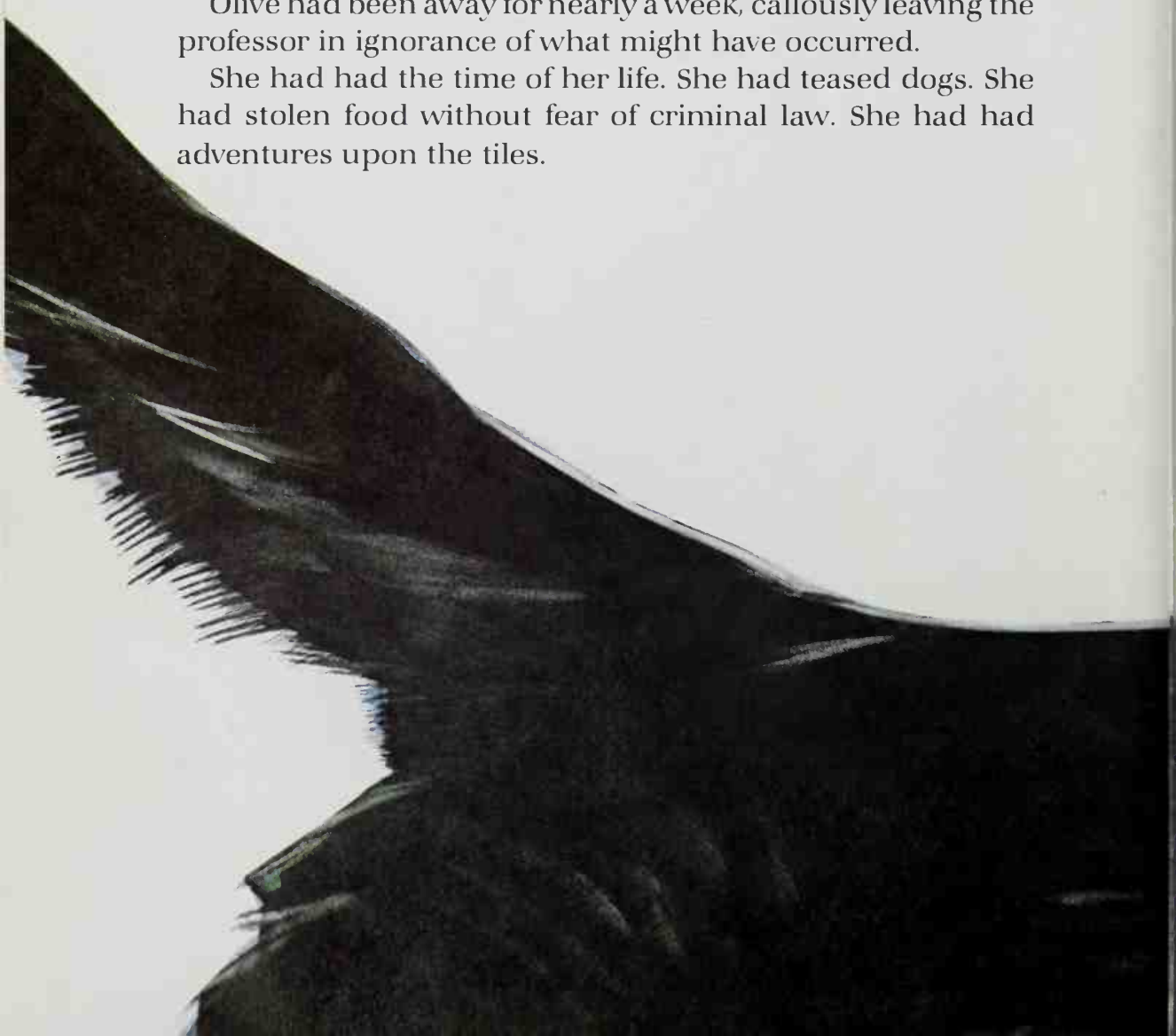
"You think it might come unstuck there?"

"There should be no risk whatever. I only meant that the cat—that I couldn't do it without your consent."

"Well, you'd certainly get that!"

Olive had been away for nearly a week, callously leaving the professor in ignorance of what might have occurred.

She had had the time of her life. She had teased dogs. She had stolen food without fear of criminal law. She had had adventures upon the tiles.



Now she leaped on to the windowsill, so that (for he was not asleep, as she had assumed he would be) he saw her, black against moonlit sky.

Would she come in? Would she creep in beside him? Would she be content to wait till the daylight should come, or would she desire his help to release her now, so that the dawn would reveal a disorder of gold-brown hair, and a piquant face asleep on a red-nailed hand?

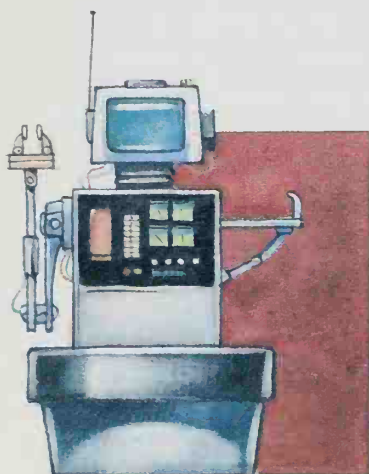
So he hoped, so he expected that it would be; but it might be best that she should think him asleep while he watched what she would do.

She did not come in. Only her tail moved. He saw it arch and wave, as if it were agitated by the thoughts that crept down her spine.

It was true that she had meant to return to him, and her human life. It had been an evident course which her mind had accepted without debate. But it was now that a doubt arose.

There was so little to return to: so very much to resign. He saw her turn and leap back into the night.





Prone

MACK REYNOLDS

SupCom Bull Underwood said in a voice ominously mild, "I continually get the impression that every other sentence is being left out of this conversation. Now, tell me, General, what do you mean *things happen around him?*"

"Well, for instance, the first day Mitchie got to the Academy a cannon burst at a demonstration."

"What's a cannon?"

"A pre-guided-missile weapon," the commander of the Terra Military Academy told him. "You know, shells propelled by gunpowder. We usually demonstrate them in our history classes. This time four students were injured. The next day sixteen were hurt in ground-war maneuvers."

There was an element of respect in the SupCom's tone. "Your course must be rugged."

General Bentley wiped his forehead with a snowy handkerchief even as he shook it negatively. "It was the first time any such thing happened. I tell you, sir, since Mitchie Farthingworth has been at the academy things have been chaotic. Fires in the dormitories, small arms exploding, cadets being hospi-

talized right and left. We've just got to expel that boy!"

"Don't be ridiculous," the SupCom growled. "He's the apple of his old man's eye. We've got to make a hero out of him if it means the loss of a battle fleet. But I still don't get this. You mean the Farthingworth kid is committing sabotage?"

"It's not that. We investigated. He doesn't do it on purpose, things just *happen* around him. Mitchie can't help it."

"Confound it, stop calling him Mitchie!" Bull Underwood snapped. "How do you know it's him if he doesn't do it? Maybe you're just having a run of bad luck."

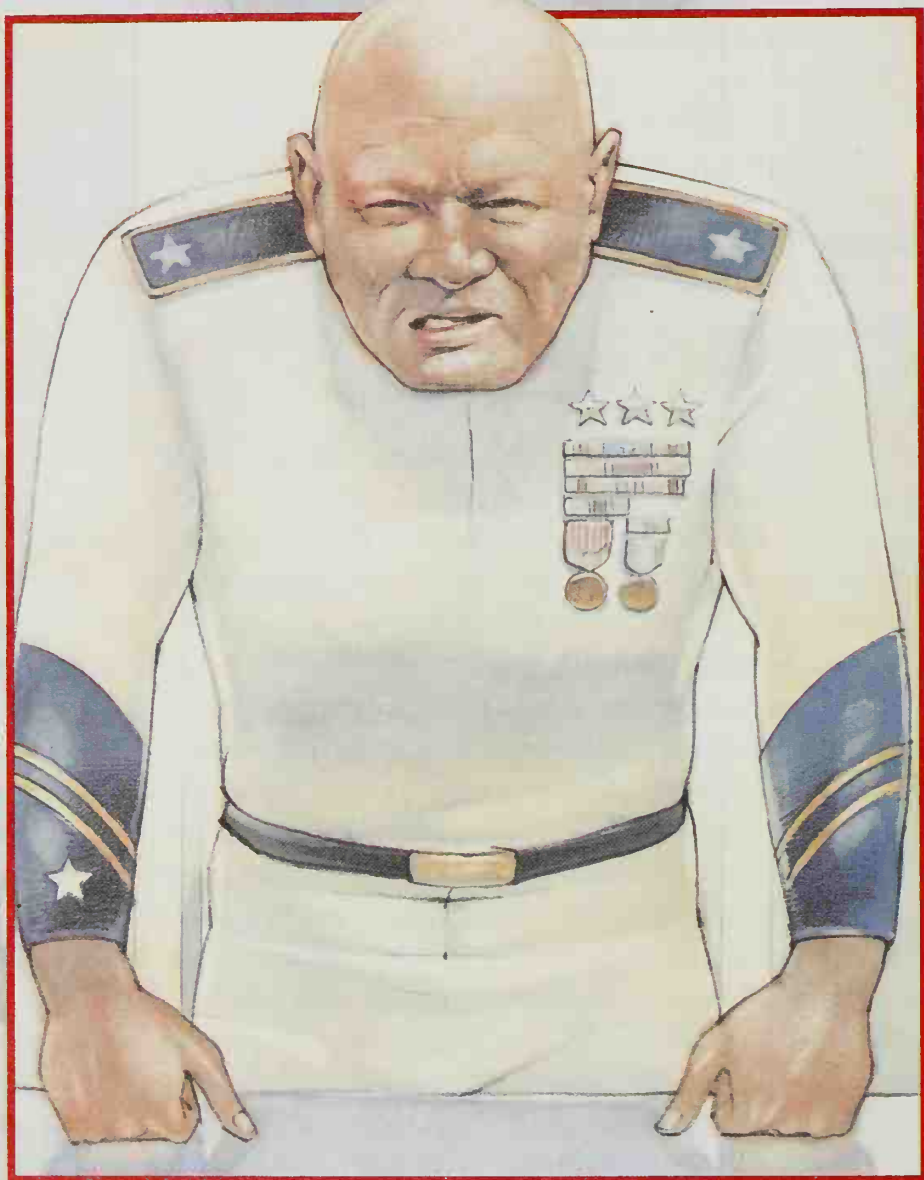
"That's what I thought," Bentley said, "until I ran into Admiral Lawrence of the Space Marines Academy. He had the same story. The day Mitchie—excuse me, sir—Michael Farthingworth set foot in Nuevo San Diego, things started happening. When they finally got him transferred to our academy the trouble stopped."

It was at times like these that Bull Underwood regretted his shaven head. He could have used some hair to tear. "Then it *must* be sabotage if it stops when he leaves!"

"I don't think so, sir."

The SupCom took a deep breath, snapped to his secretarobot, "Brief me on Cadet Michael Farthingworth, including his early life." While he waited he growled under his breath, "A stalemated hundred-year war on my hands with those Martian *makrons* and I have to get things like this tossed at me."

In less than a minute the secretarobot began: "Son of Senator Warren Farthingworth, Chairman War Appropriations Committee. Twenty-two years of age. Five feet six, one hundred and thirty, blue eyes, brown hair, fair. Born and spent early youth in former United States area. Early education by mother. At age of eighteen entered Harvard but schooling was interrupted when roof of assembly hall collapsed killing most of faculty. Next year entered Yale, leaving two months after when 90 percent of the university's buildings were burnt down in the holocaust of '85. Next attended University of California but failed to graduate owing to the earthquake which completely . . ."



"That's enough," the SupCom rapped. He turned and stared at General Bentley. "What is it? Even if the kid was a psychokinetic saboteur he couldn't accomplish all that."

The academy commander shook his head. "All I know is that, since his arrival at the Terra Military Academy, there's been an endless series of casualties. And the longer he's there worse it gets. It's twice as bad now as when he first arrived." He got to his feet wearily. "I'm a broken man, sir, and I'm leaving this in your hands. You'll have my resignation this afternoon. Frankly, I'm afraid to return to the school. If I do, some day I'll probably crack my spine bending over to tie my shoelaces. It just isn't safe to be near that boy."

For a long time after General Bentley had left, SupCom Bull Underwood sat at his desk, his heavy underlip in a pout. "And just when the next five years' appropriation is up before the committee," he snarled at nobody.

He turned to the secretarobot. "Put the best psychotechnicians available on Michael Farthingworth. They are to discover . . . well, they are to discover why things happen around him. Priority one."

Approximately a week later the secretarobot said, "May I interrupt you, sir? A priority-one report is coming in."

Bull Underwood grunted and turned away from the star chart he'd been studying with the two Space Marine generals. He dismissed them and sat down at his desk.

The visor lit up and he was confronted with the face of an elderly civilian. "Doctor Duclos," the civilian said. "Case of Cadet Michael Farthingworth."

"Good," the SupCom rumbled. "Doctor, what in the devil is wrong with young Farthingworth?"

"The boy is an accident prone."

Bull Underwood scowled at him. "A what?"

"An accident prone." The doctor elaborated with evident satisfaction. "There is indication that he is the most extreme case in medical history. Really a fascinating study. Never in my experience have I been—"

"Please, Doctor. I'm a layman. What is an accident prone?"

"Ah, yes. Briefly, an unexplained phenomenon first noted by the insurance companies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An accident prone has an unnaturally large number of accidents happen either to him, or less often, to persons in his vicinity. In Farthingworth's case, they happen to persons about him. He himself is never affected."

The SupCom was unbelieving. "You mean to tell me there are some persons who just naturally have accidents happen to them without any reason?"

"That is correct," Duclos nodded. "Most prones are understandable. Subconsciously, the death wish is at work and the prone *seeks* self-destruction. However, science has yet to discover the forces behind the less common type such as Farthingworth exemplifies." The doctor's emphatic shrug betrayed his Gallic background. "It has been suggested that it is no more than the laws of chance at work. To counterbalance the accident prone, there should be persons at the other extreme who are blessed with abnormally good fortune. However. . ."

SupCom Bull Underwood's lower lip was out, almost truculently. "Listen," he interrupted. "What can be done about it?"

"Nothing," the doctor said, his shoulders raising and lowering again. "An accident prone seems to remain one as a rule. Not always, but as a rule. Fortunately, they are rare."

"Not rare enough," the SupCom growled. "These insurance companies, what did they do when they located an accident prone?"

"They kept track of him and refused to insure the prone, his business, home, employees, employers, or anyone or anything connected with him."

Bull Underwood stared unblinkingly at the doctor, as though wondering whether the other's whole explanation was an attempt to pull his leg. Finally he rapped, "Thank you, Doctor Duclos. That will be all." The civilian's face faded from the visor.

The SupCom said slowly to the secretarobot, "Have Cadet

Farthingworth report to me." He added *sotto voce*, "And while he's here have all personnel keep their fingers crossed."

The photoelectric-controlled door leading to the sanctum sanctorum of SupCom Bull Underwood glided quietly open and a lieutenant entered and came to a snappy attention. The door swung gently shut behind him.

"Well?" Bull Underwood growled.

"Sir, a Cadet Michael Farthingworth to report to you."

"Send him in. Ah, just a minute, Lieutenant Brown. How do you feel after talking to him?"

"Me, sir? I feel fine, sir." The lieutenant looked blankly at him.

"Hmmm. Well, send him in, confound it."

The lieutenant turned and the door opened automatically before him. "Cadet Farthingworth," he announced.

The newcomer entered and stood stiffly before the desk of Earth's military head. Bull Underwood appraised him with care. In spite of the swank Academy uniform, Michael Farthingworth cut a wistfully ineffectual figure. His faded blue eyes blinked sadly behind heavy contact lenses.

"That'll be all, Lieutenant," the SupCom said to his aide.

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant about-faced snappily and marched to the door—which swung sharply forward and quickly back again before the lieutenant was halfway through.

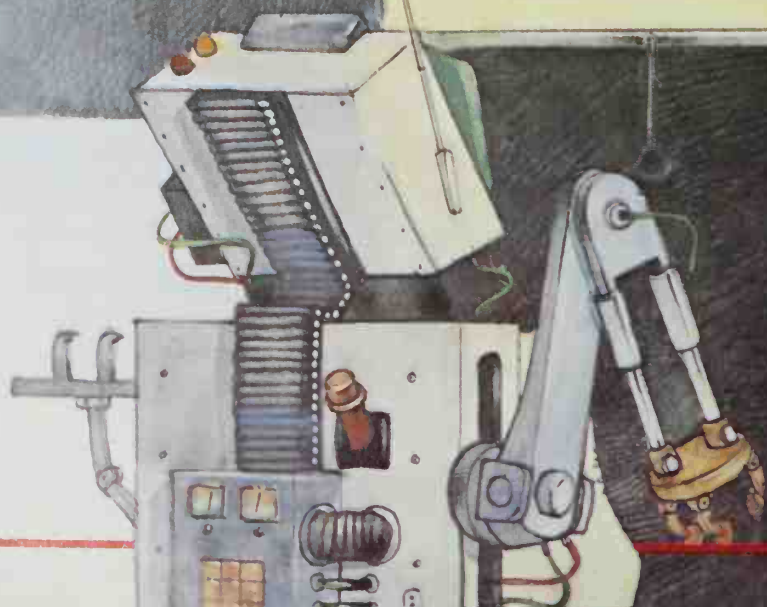
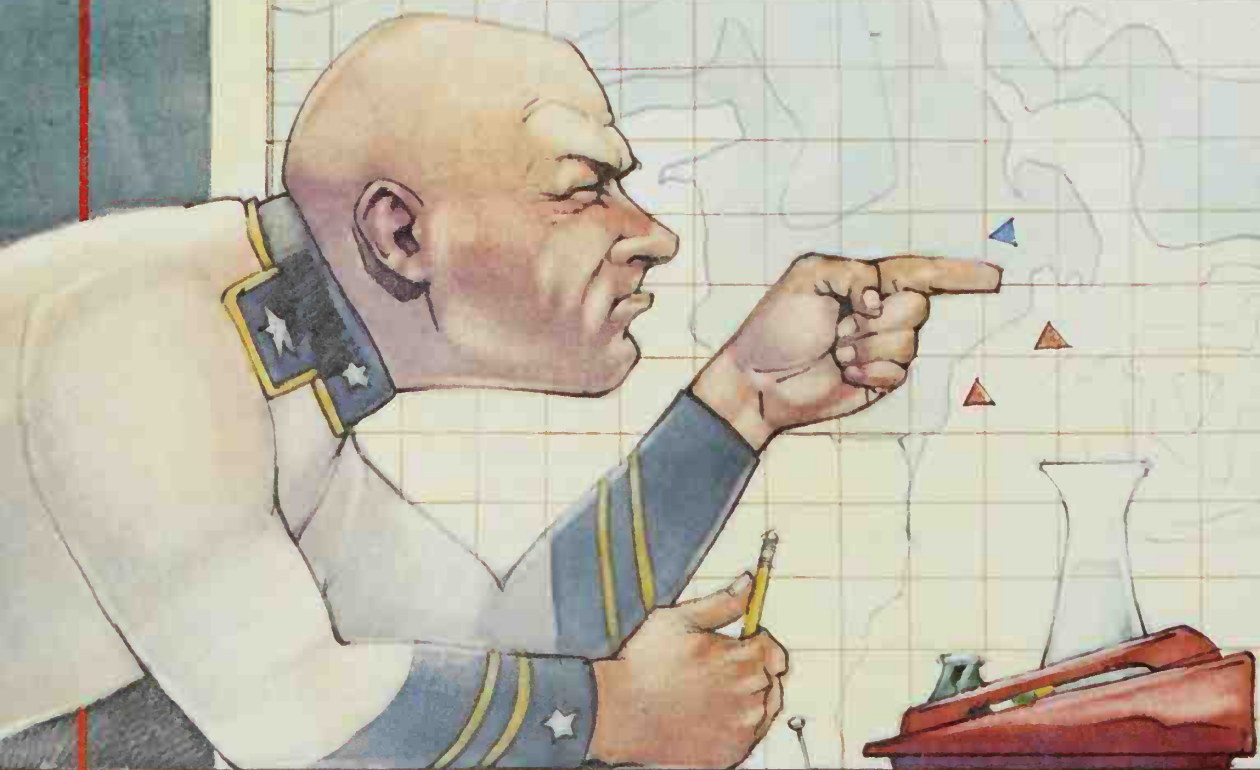
SupCom Bull Underwood winced at the crush of bone and cartilage. He shuddered, then snapped to his secretarobot, "Have Lieutenant Brown hospitalized . . . and, ah, . . . see he gets a Luna Medal for exposing himself to danger beyond the call of duty."

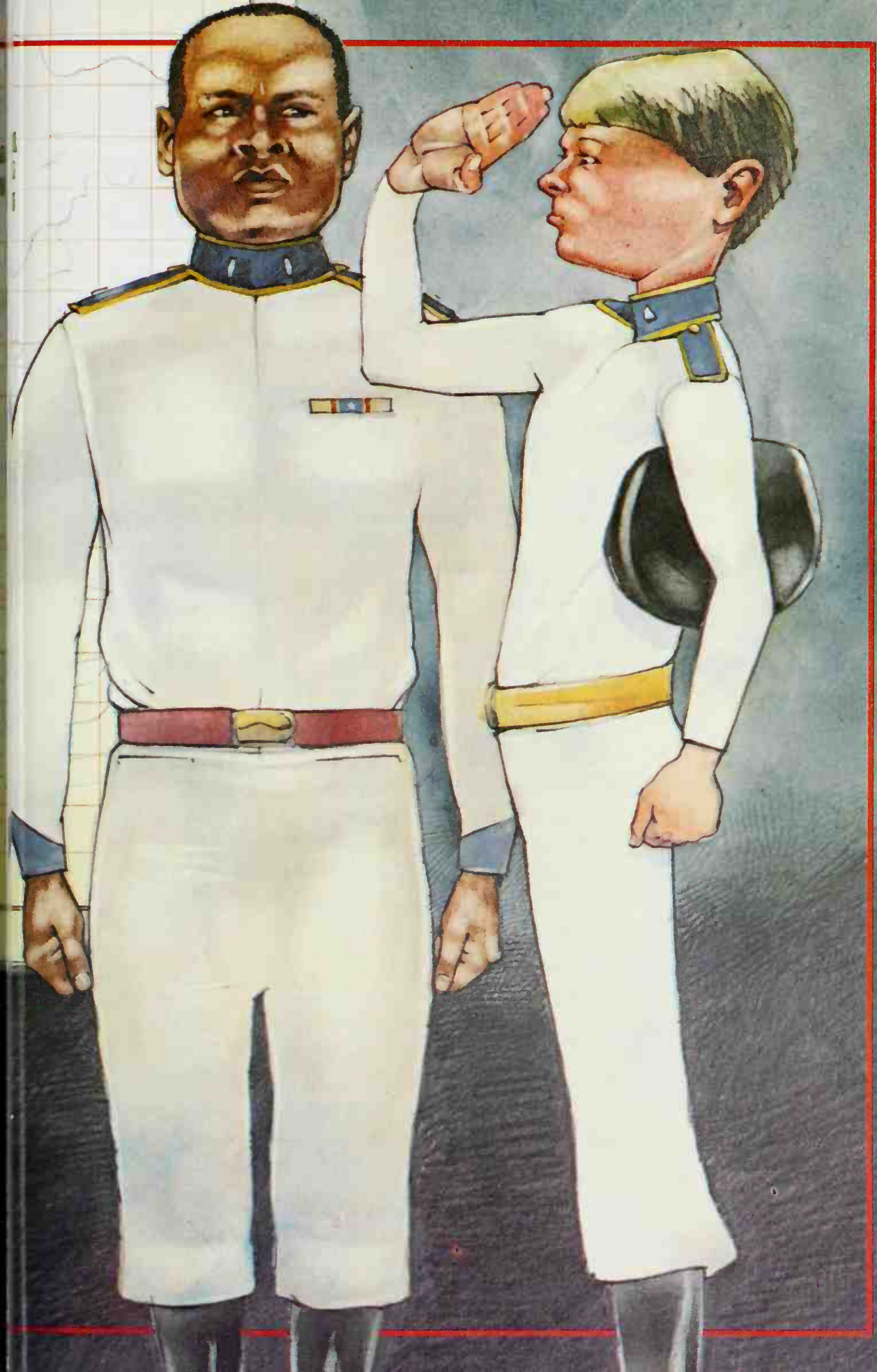
He swung to the newcomer and came directly to the point. "Cadet Farthingworth," he rapped, "do you know what an accident prone is?"

Mitchie's voice was low and plaintive. "Yes, sir."

"You do?" Bull Underwood was surprised.

"Yes, sir. At first such things as the school's burning down didn't particularly impress me as being personally connected





with me, but the older I get, the worse it gets, and after what happened to my first date, I started to investigate."

The SupCom said cautiously, "What happened to the date?"

Mitchie flushed. "I took her to a dance and she broke her leg."

The SupCom cleared his throat. "So finally you investigated?"

"Yes, sir," Mitchie Farthingworth said woefully. "And I found I was an accident prone and getting worse geometrically. Each year I'm twice as bad as the year before. I'm glad you've discovered it too, sir. I . . . didn't know what to do. Now it's in your hands."

The SupCom was somewhat relieved. Possibly this wasn't going to be as difficult as he had feared. He said, "Have you any ideas, Mitchie, ah, that is . . ."

"Call me Mitchie if you want, sir. Everybody else does."

"Have you any ideas? After all, you've done as much damage to Terra as a Martian task force would accomplish."

"Yes, sir. I think I ought to be shot."

"Huh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm expendable," Mitchie said miserably. "In fact, I suppose I'm probably the most expendable soldier that's ever been. All my life I've wanted to be a spaceman and do my share toward licking the Martians." His eyes gleamed behind his lenses. "Why, I've . . ."

He stopped and looked at his commanding officer pathetically. "What's the use? I'm just a bust. An accident prone. The only thing to do is liquidate me." He tried to laugh in self-deprecation but his voice broke.

Behind him, Bull Underwood heard the glass in his office window shatter without seeming cause. He winced again, but didn't turn.

"Sorry, sir," Mitchie said. "See? The only thing is to shoot me."

"Look," Bull Underwood said urgently, "stand back a few yards farther, will you? There on the other side of the room." He cleared his throat. "Your suggestion has already been

considered, as a matter of fact. However, due to your father's political prominence, shooting you had to be ruled out."

From a clear sky the secretarobot began to say, "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe."

SupCom Bull Underwood closed his eyes in pain and shrunk back into his chair. "What?" he said cautiously.

"The borogoves were mimsy as all get-out," the secretarobot said decisively and shut up.

Mitchie looked at it. "Slipped its cogs, sir," he said helpfully. "It's happened before around me."

"The best memory bank in the system," Underwood protested. "Oh, no."

"Yes, sir," Mitchie said apologetically. "And I wouldn't recommend trying to repair it, sir. Three technicians were electrocuted when I was . . ."

The secretarobot sang, "O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

"Completely around the corner," Mitchie said.

"This," said Bull Underwood, "is too frabjous much! Senator or no Senator, appropriations or no appropriations, with my own bare hands—"

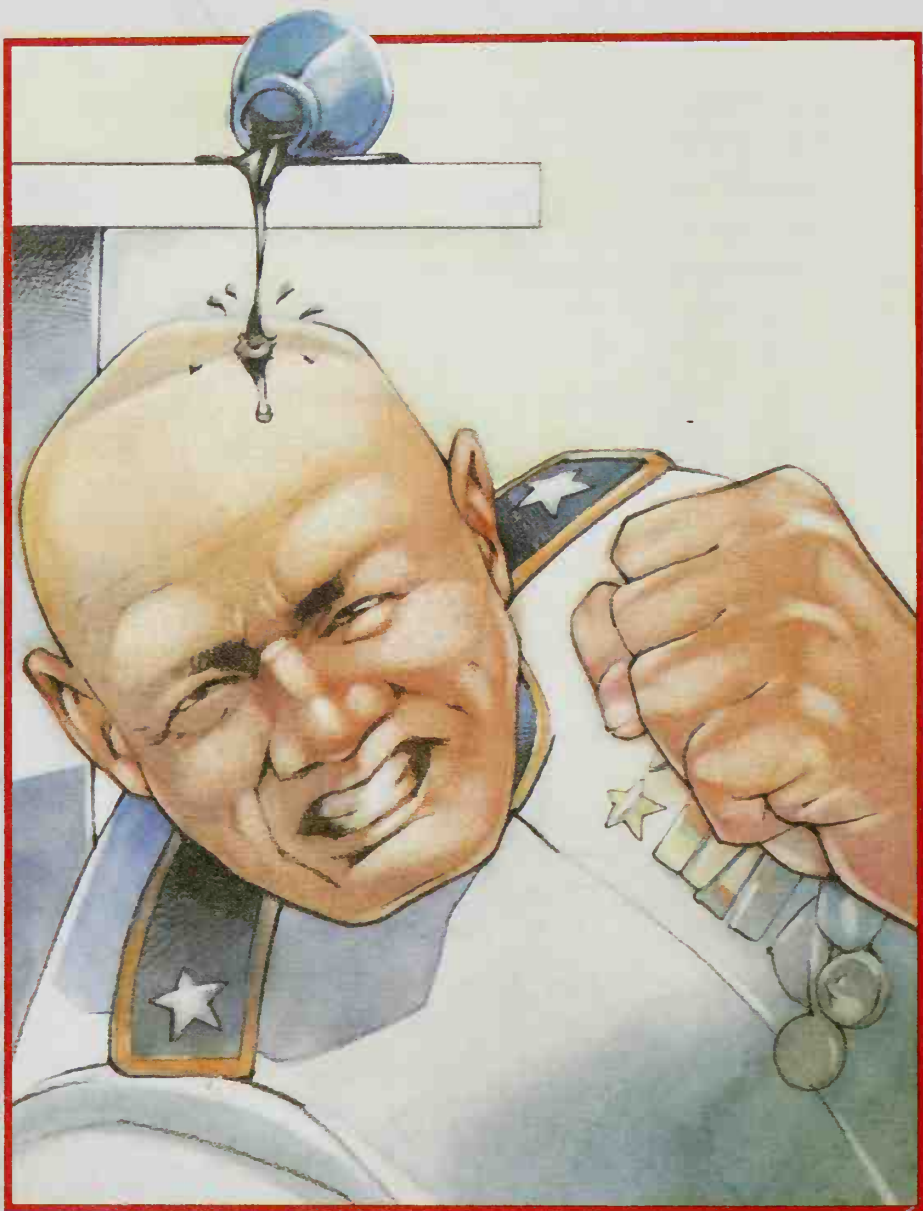
As he strode impulsively forward, he felt the rug giving way beneath him. He grasped desperately for the edge of the desk, felt ink bottle and water carafe go crashing over.

Mitchie darted forward to his assistance.

"Stand back!" Bull Underwood roared, holding an ankle with one hand, shaking the other hand in the form of a fist. "Get out of here, confound it!" Ink began to drip from the desk over his shaven head. It cooled him not at all. "It's not even safe to destroy you! It'd wipe out a regiment to try to assemble a firing squad! It—" Suddenly he paused, and when he spoke again his voice was like the coo of a condor.

"Cadet Farthingworth," he announced, "after considerable deliberation on my part I have chosen you to perform the most hazardous operation that Terra's forces have undertaken in the past hundred years. If successful, this effort will undoubtedly end the war."

"Who, me?" Mitchie said.



"Exactly," SupCom Underwood snapped. "This war has been going on for a century without either side's being able to secure that slight edge, that minute advantage which would mean victory. Cadet Farthingworth, you have been chosen to make the supreme effort which will give Terra that superiority over the Martians." The SupCom looked sternly at Mitchie.

"Yes, sir," he clipped. "What are my orders?"

The SupCom beamed at him. "Spoken like a true hero of Terra's Space Forces. On the spaceport behind this building is a small spycraft. You are to repair immediately to it and blast off for Mars. Once there you are to land, hide the ship, and make your way to their capital city."

"Yes, sir! And what do I do then?"

"Nothing," Bull Underwood said with satisfaction. "You do absolutely nothing but live there. I estimate that your presence in the enemy capital will end the war in less than two years."

Michael Farthingworth snapped him a brilliant salute. "Yes, sir."

Spontaneous combustion broke out in the wastebasket.

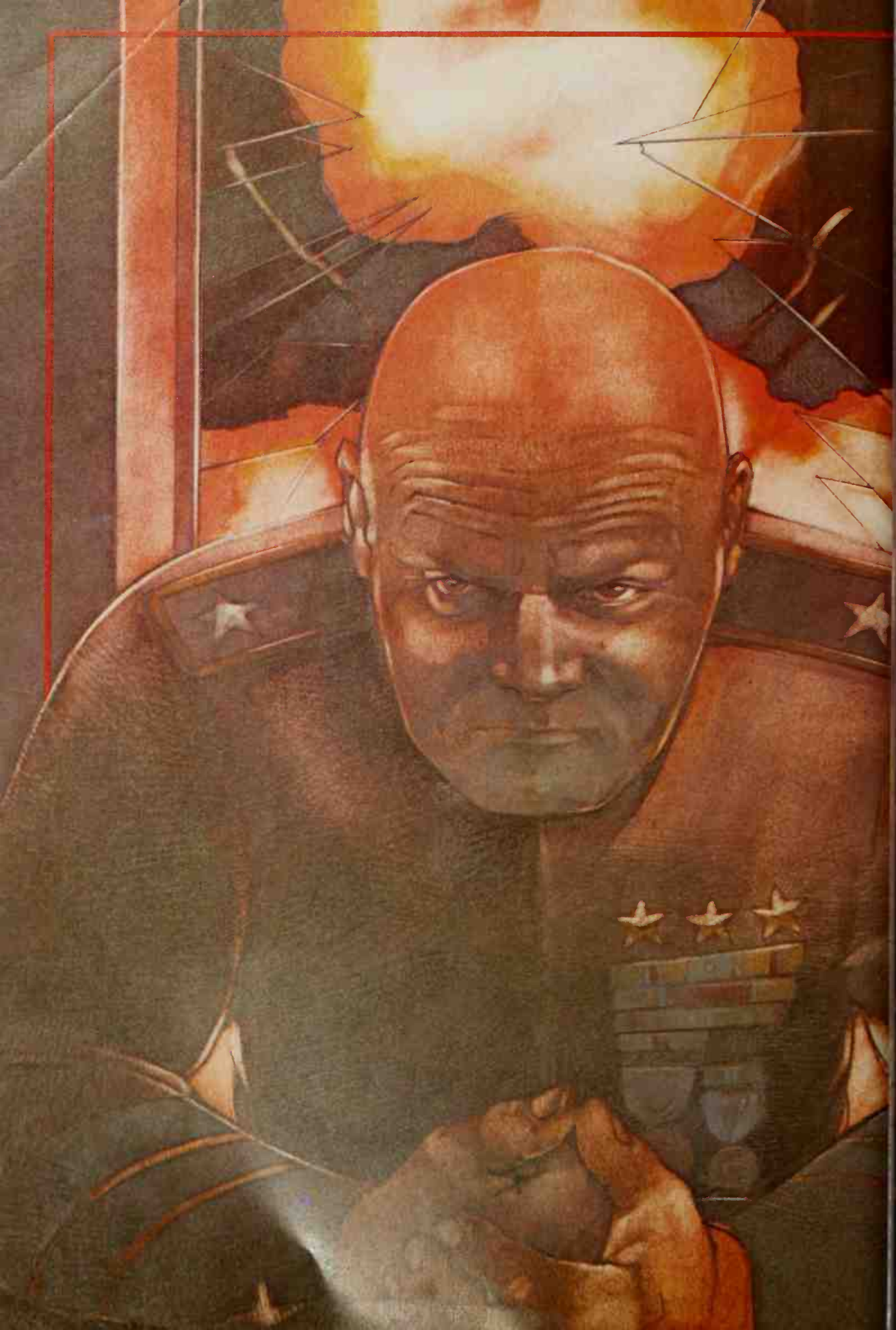
Through the shards of his window, SupCom Bull Underwood could hear the blast-off of the spyship. Half a dozen miles away the flare of a fuel dump going up in flames lighted up the sky.

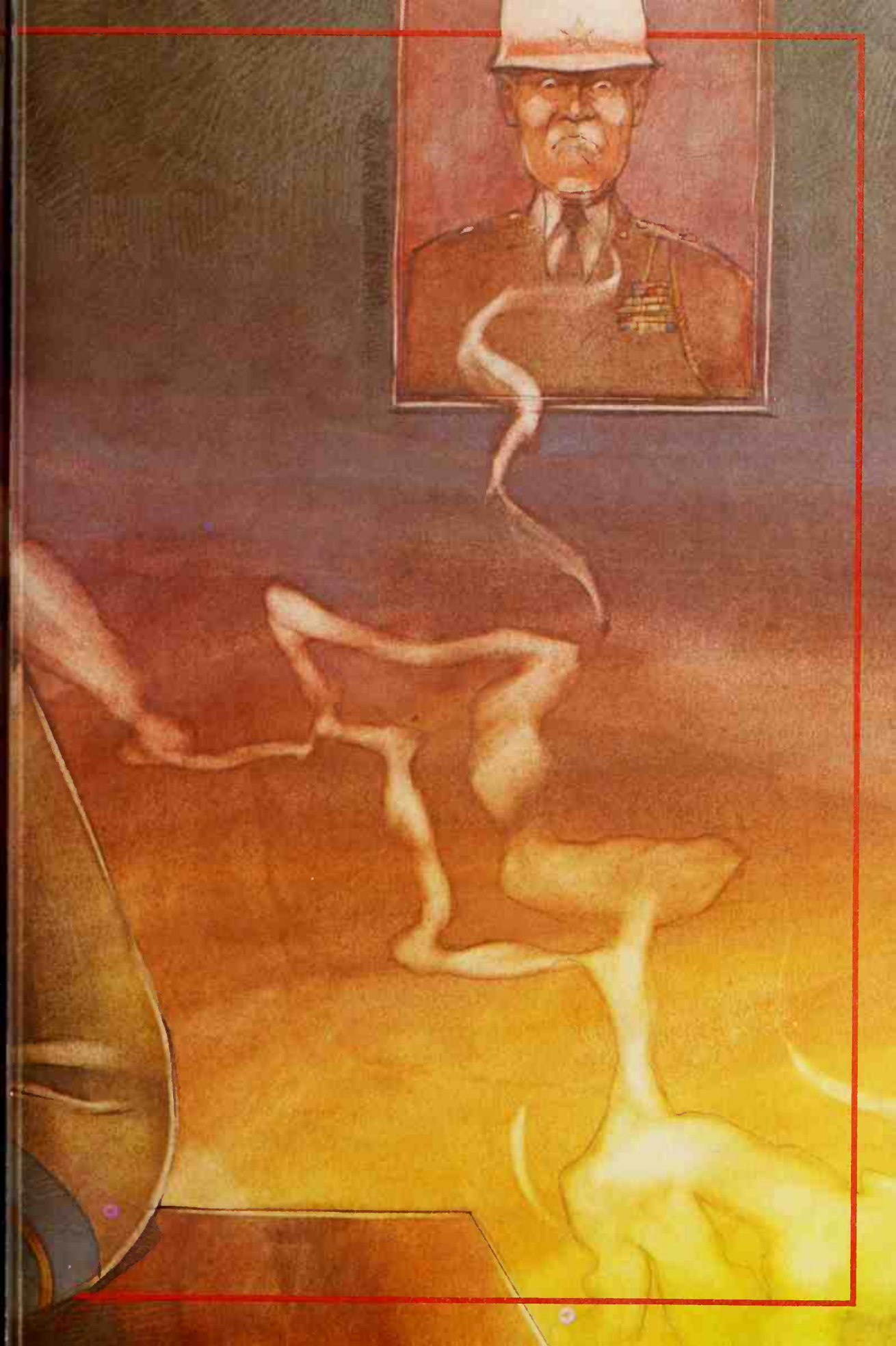
Seated there in the wreckage of his office he rubbed his ankle tenderly. "The only trouble is when the war is over we'll have to bring him home."

But then he brightened. "Perhaps we could leave him there as our occupation forces. It would keep them from ever recovering to the point where they could try again."

He tried to get to his feet, saying to the secretarobot, "Have them send me in a couple of medical corpsmen."

"Beware the Jabberwock," the secretarobot sneered.







Barney

WILL STANTON

August 30th. We are alone on the island now, Barney and I. It was something of a jolt to have to sack Tayloe after all these years, but I had no alternative. The petty vandalisms I could have forgiven, but when he tried to poison Barney out of simple malice, he was standing in the way of scientific progress. That I cannot condone.

I can only believe the attempt was made while under the influence of alcohol, it was so clumsy. The poison container was overturned and a trail of powder led to Barney's dish. Tayloe's defense was of the flimsiest. He denied it. Who else then?

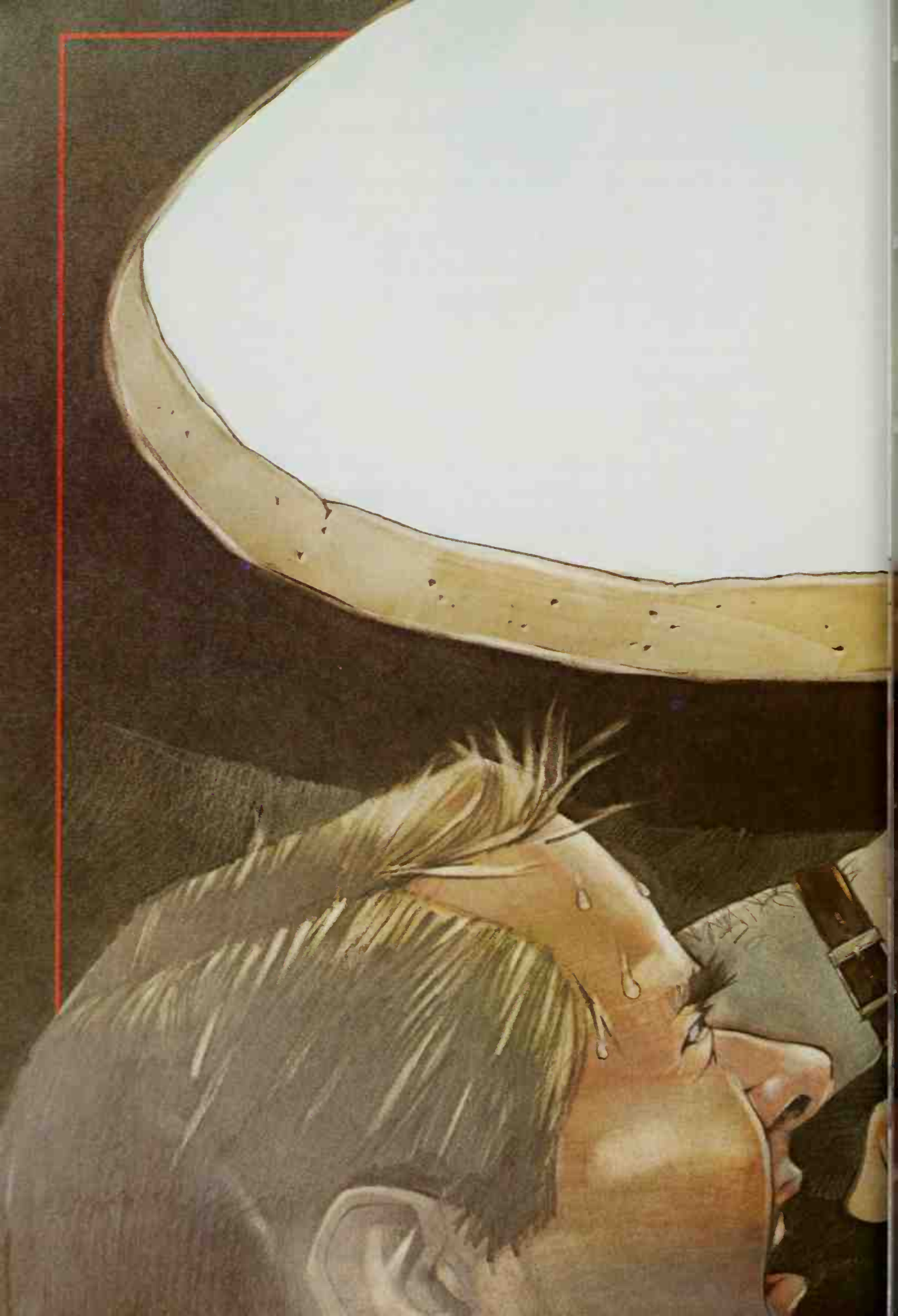
September 2nd. I am taking a calmer view of the Tayloe affair. The monastic life here must have become too much for him. That, and the abandonment of his precious guinea pigs. He insisted to the last that they were better suited than Barney to my experiments. They were more his speed, I'm afraid. He was an earnest and willing worker, but something of a clod, poor fellow.

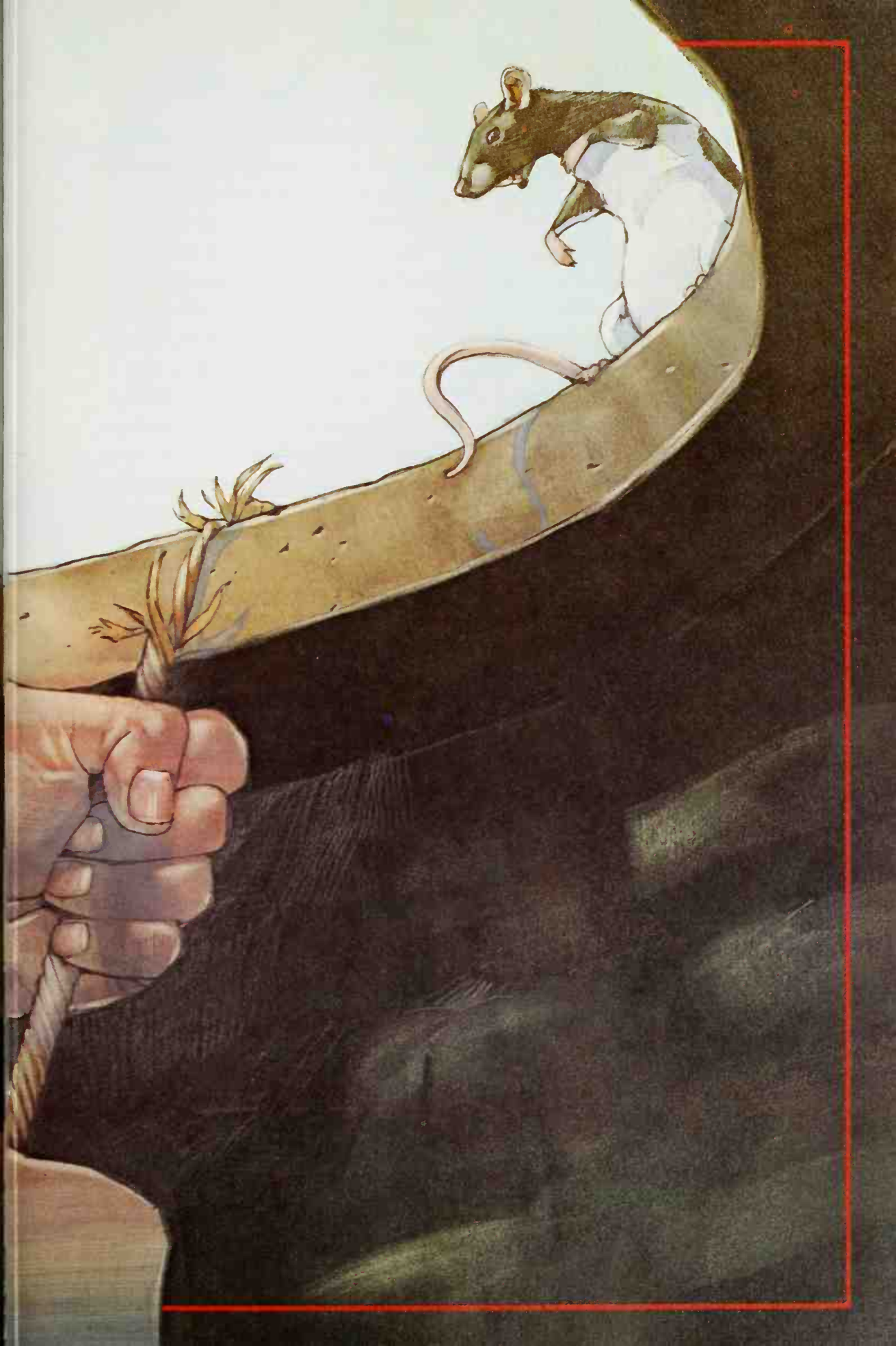
At last I have complete freedom to carry on my work without the mute reproaches of Tayloe. I can only ascribe his violent antagonism toward Barney to jealousy. And now that he was gone, how much happier Barney appears to be! I have given him complete run of the place, and what sport it is to observe how his newly awakened intellectual curiosity carries him about. After only two weeks of glutamic acid treatments, he has become interested in my library, dragging the books from the shelves, and going over them page by page. I am certain he knows there is some knowledge to be gained from them had he but the key.

September 8th. For the past two days I have had to keep Barney confined and how he hates it. I am afraid that when my experiments are completed I shall have to do away with Barney. Ridiculous as it may sound there is still the possibility that he might be able to communicate his intelligence to others of his kind. However small the chance may be, the risk is too great to ignore. Fortunately there is, in the basement, a vault built with the idea of keeping vermin out and it will serve equally well to keep Barney in.

September 9th. Apparently I have spoken too soon. This morning I let him out to frisk around a bit before commencing a new series of tests.. After a quick survey of the room he returned to his cage, sprang up on the door handle, removed the key with his teeth, and before I could stop him, he was out the window. By the time I reached the yard I spied him on the coping of the well, and I arrived on the spot only in time to hear the key splash into the water below.

I own I am somewhat embarrassed. It is the only key. The door is locked. Some valuable papers are in separate compartments inside the vault. Fortunately, although the well is over forty feet deep, there are only a few feet of water in the bottom, so the retrieving of the key does not present an insurmountable obstacle. But I must admit Barney has won the first round.





September 10th. I have had a rather shaking experience, and once more in a minor clash with Barney I have come off second best. In this instance I will admit he played the hero's role and may even have saved my life.

In order to facilitate my descent into the well I knotted a length of three-quarter-inch rope at one-foot intervals to make a rude ladder. I reached the bottom easily enough, but after only a few minutes of groping for the key, my flashlight gave out and I returned to the surface. A few feet from the top I heard excited squeaks from Barney, and upon obtaining ground level I observed that the rope was almost completely severed. Apparently it had chafed against the edge of the masonry and the little fellow perceiving my plight had been doing his utmost to warn me.

I have now replaced that section of rope and arranged some old sacking beneath it to prevent a recurrence of the accident. I have replenished the batteries in my flashlight and am now

SEPTEMBER 10TH

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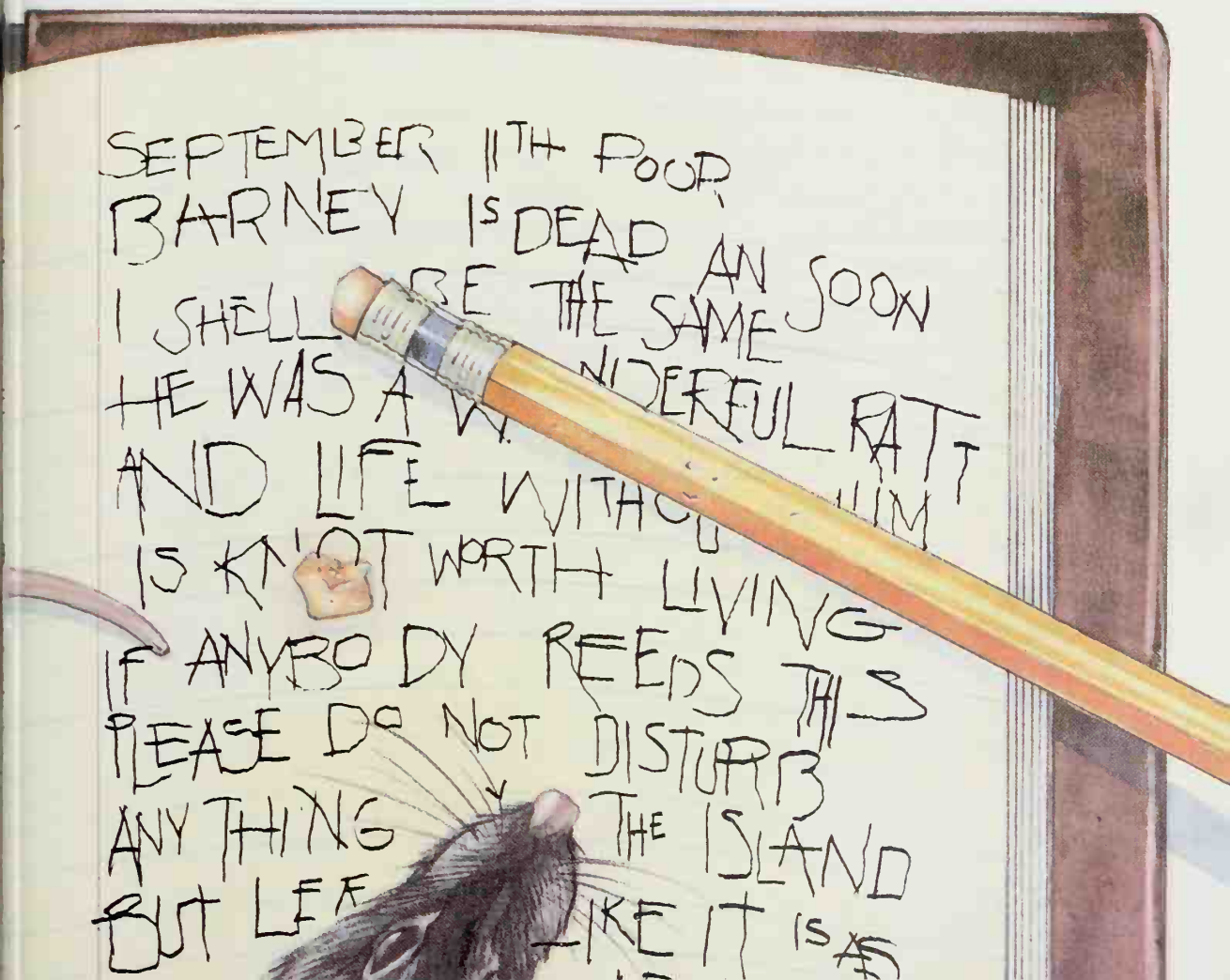
IN ORDER TO FACILITATE MY DESCENT INTO
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BOTTOM EASILY ENOUGH BUT AFTER
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I RETURNED TO THE SURFACE... A FEW
FEET FROM THE TOP I HEARD EXCITED
SQUEAKS FROM BARNEY AND HE


prepared for the final descent. These few moments I have taken off to give myself a breathing spell and to bring my journal up to date. Perhaps I should fix myself a sandwich as I may be down there longer than seems likely at the moment.

September 11th. Poor Barney is dead an soon I shell be the same. He was a wonderful ratt and life without him is knot worth living. If anybody reeds this please do not disturb anything on the island but leeve it like it is as a shryn to Barney, especilly the old well. Do not look for my body as I will caste myself into the see. You mite bring a couple of young ratts an leeve them as a living memorial to Barney. Females—no males. I sprayned my wrist is why this is written so bad. This is my laste will. Do what I say an don't come back or disturb anything after you bring the young ratts like I said. Just females.

Goodby



SEPTEMBER 11TH POOR
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Lost Love

ALGIS BUDRYS

Somewhere just outside Hammonton, Doc Bennett first noticed the boy in the next seat. Doc woke up a little—probably because the bus had just taken a bad bounce—grunted sleepily, opened his eyes, and looked across the aisle. He was a thin, lank-haired boy sitting with his chin cupped in his palm, staring out into the darkness, and Doc felt a brief flicker of curiosity.

The boy was about fifteen or sixteen, he judged, and thinner than he should be. Shabbier, too, Doc thought, looking at the patched jeans and threadbare jacket, and the shapeless old farm shoes on his feet.

It gave Doc a turn to notice that the boy wasn't even wearing any socks. The jeans were too short for his long legs, and his dusty ankles were bare and knobby above the shoetops.

Bennett started to take a closer look. Maybe the boy didn't have a shirt on under his jacket, either. But the way the bus was swaying made him sleepy, and he was barely awake anyhow, so even while he was leaning forward, his eyes nodded shut.

In Elwood, the bus stopped for a passenger, and Doc Bennett woke up again. He rubbed his eyes, shifted around on the stiff seat, and scratched his side. Then he noticed the boy across the aisle, who was sitting, looking down at his hands folded in his lap, and Doc thought no boy that age ought to have anything to feel as sad and lost about as this one did. The look on his face was a thousand miles away.

Doc took a better look. The boy was thin—a lot thinner than he should be; and his clothes were in pretty bad repair. He was wearing a pair of old blue jeans with fuzzy-edged patches over the knees, and his shins stuck out of the bottom of the almost white legs. Lord knew how often the jeans'd been washed to bleach the color so much. And no socks. Doc stared at his knobby, grimy ankles; no socks in November—and a pair of cracked farm brogans with knotted laces.

"Say—young fellow . . ."

The boy raised his head and looked across the aisle. "Yes, sir?" he asked in a soft, polite voice.

Doc didn't know how to go on for a minute. He thought about a way to make the boy understand he wasn't just a snoop—he guessed the youngster must have run into his share of well-meaning old ladies.

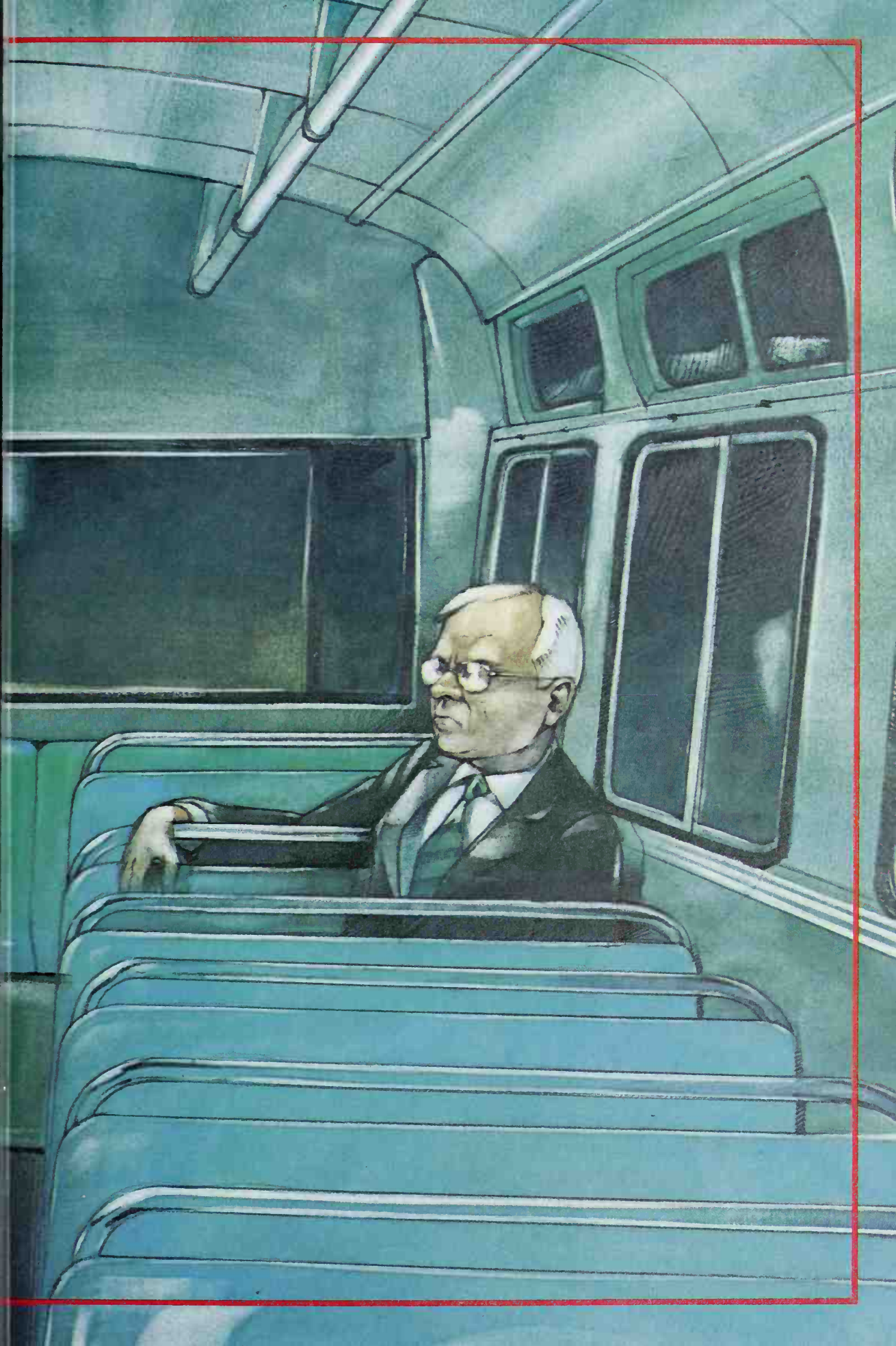
The boy was looking at him with that lost look just behind the politeness in his eyes, waiting patiently.

"Youngster—well, look, my name's Doctor Samuel Bennett. This isn't any of my business, but—where're you headed for, dressed like that this time of year?" That wasn't very good, but it was the best he could think of. And he winced and cursed himself for a stumble-tongued old busybody when the boy gave him the answer he'd been afraid of: "I don't have any other clothes, sir."

The boy said it without any trace of embarrassment or bitterness, and that surprised Doc. The youngster was just at the age when it ought to matter very much.

Doc fumbled for the next thing to say. "Well—well, is there anybody waiting for you, where you're going?"





"I don't know, sir."

Just like that. "I don't know, sir." Doc Bennett shook his head and frowned, trying to concentrate. He ought to be asking the boy's name; maybe he was running away from somewhere. Maybe had a good reason, too—a reason that ought to be looked into. The boy looked as though nobody'd ever taken any decent care of him.

But the bus was swaying, and busses always made Bennett sleepy. He tried to keep himself awake, but it was a losing battle. He felt his head droop, and caught a glimpse of a sad, disappointed, but resigned look on the boy's face. And then he fell asleep.

Doc Bennett woke up in Egg Harbor City, a little surprised because he usually woke up for every stop whenever he traveled anywhere. He must have been more tired than he thought.

He looked around as the bus started to pull out. There weren't very many other passengers on the bus, and most of them were clustered up front. There was nobody sitting toward the back except himself and a boy across the aisle, who was looking at him hopefully.

Doc looked back at the boy, wondering what he wanted.

He was an awfully thin youngster, and dressed in shabby, worn-out clothes that were a lot too small for him and a lot too thin for this kind of weather. Doc frowned at the bare wristbones sticking out of the boy's windbreaker. No shirt collar showed at his neck, and Doc wondered if the jacket could be all he had on except for his hand-patched jeans.

Doc took a look at the boy's feet. His broken and shapeless shoes were a lot too big for his feet—and he didn't have any socks on.

"Hello, young fellow," he said, hoping the boy wouldn't shy away. He looked sadder and lonelier than any boy Doc had ever seen; he looked as though he was used to more meanness than kindness from people. He looked as though he'd never known a day without a disappointment. In some ways, he

looked as though he'd found out what sixty-year-old men, sitting on park benches in the wintertime with newspapers stuffed into their shirts, had found out.

And no boy should ever have found that out—or even guessed it might be waiting for him.

"Hello, Doctor Bennett," the boy answered politely.

Doc peered at his face. "Well, . . . I'm sorry, son, but I don't remember your name. Most of my friends call me Doc."

He couldn't remember the boy for the life of him. He felt ashamed of that—if there was anybody he should have remembered, it was this youngster.

"We only met a very short time . . . once," the boy said in a sad, haunted voice; "I didn't really think you'd remember me."

Doc shook his head. "I'm sorry, youngster; a doctor sees a lot of people. But I'm not usually this forgetful," he apologized.

The boy nodded.

That was a strange reaction. Doc hitched himself up farther in his seat, and looked more carefully at the boy.

"That's not such practical clothing for this kind of weather," he said awkwardly. "Is somebody meeting you? Where're you bound for?"

"I don't know, Doc."

"You don't know!" Doc sat up straight. Maybe he had an amnesia case here. No—that didn't jibe with the rest of it. What was it? He looked at the boy's cheeks and eyes for traces of fever.

"Don't you have anyplace to go, son?" he asked gently.

The boy shook his head. "No, Doc; not ever. I just travel. Sometimes I have somebody to talk to. Most times I don't. Most times I don't even have that."

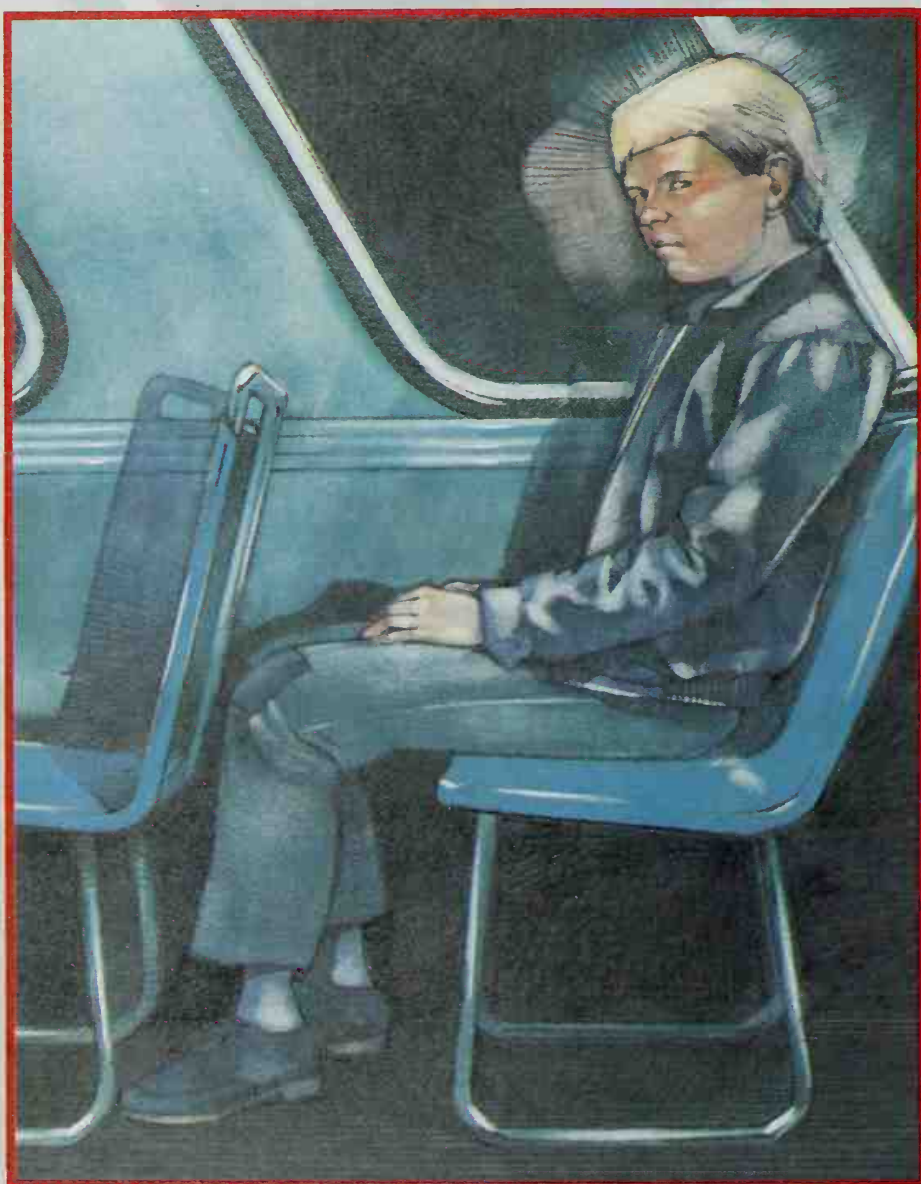
"Lord, boy, how long's that been going on?"

The boy shrugged, and all the loneliness in the world was in his eyes. "Three years. Ever since I realized."

"Realized what, son?"

"That I had to find somebody."

"Who?"



The boy shook his head and looked down at the floor.

Too important, Doc thought. It's too important to talk about. He remembered what it had been like when he was this boy's age.

"Doc?"

"Yes, son?"

"Doc, why don't you remember me?"

Bennett couldn't make sense out of the question. He shook his head. "There's no answer, son; why does anybody forget anything? It just happens, I guess. Can't explain it."

"Haven't you ever seen me before?"

The boy was looking down at the floor, but Doc noticed how tightly his frail hands were knotted together. "No, son," he said gently.

"Are you *sure*, Doc?"

Bennett didn't know what to do. The boy was strung up as tight as a drawn wire. He felt helpless. "I'm sure, son."

The boy looked up. "Doc, in your practice, do you know of any kids whose parents don't take any care of them?"

Doc thought he'd found his answer. He cursed silently. "No, son, I can't say I do. But you've got to remember that sometimes people *can't* do as much for their children as they'd like to."

The boy shook his head. "I don't mean that," he said in a lost whisper.

Doc hadn't thought he did. He cursed again.

"Listen, son—" He stopped. It was a big step, but he made up his mind. "Son, how'd you like to stay with me for a while, until we can get you straightened out? We'd find you a job after school—I don't suppose you've got any relatives you care for?"

The boy bit his lips. He looked down again. "Thanks, Doc," he whispered, "but it wouldn't work. Nobody's going to pay me for work they don't think I did—and, besides, Doc, you can't afford it."

Doc nodded unconsciously. Then he asked: "What makes you think so, son?"

The boy smiled in embarrassment. "You're on a bus. If you were younger, that wouldn't mean anything. But there are two kinds of old doctors that ride busses—the no-good ones and the ones who never charged much."

Bennett flushed uncomfortably; there wasn't any mistaking which kind the boy thought he was. It wasn't really true—he'd pulled down some big fees in his time.

Not enough, though, he sighed to himself. Not nearly enough. Well, if he had it to do over . . . No, not then, either, he admitted.

He flushed again, and in his mind he squinted at himself suspiciously. He didn't like noble people. "You're a pretty quick judge of people," he grunted crankily.

"I've studied them, sir."

Yes, by God, I suppose you have, Doc thought. I suppose you had to. "Listen, son—what're you going to do? How're you going to live?"

"I get by, Doc. I shine shoes or I work in a lunchroom—anyplace where I can get tips. It doesn't last very long, any job doesn't, but even with less tips than somebody else would get, I make out."

"My gosh, son, the only place this bus goes to of any size is Atlantic City! And this is November. You won't find much work there."

"I know. But I haven't been up this way before. And I saved up enough in Camden for the ticket."

"Well— you must have learned some trade by now. Don't you have any special skill? Something you could get a regular salary for?"

The boy shook his head. "You only get paid if the boss remembers you." An odd look came over his face. "I've got some . . . skills. But they wouldn't be fair."

Bennett didn't know what to make of him, he felt completely bewildered. He couldn't make head or tail of what the boy meant by some of the things he was saying.



"Doc, I've got to keep moving around; I've got to keep looking. I don't know what else to do."

"Looking for what?" Doc asked again.

"For—for somebody else. For somebody else who's looking for somebody else. For somebody people don't notice. Doc, you know those movies about invisible people? That's who I'm looking for. Invisible people. People who get on busses and have to remind the driver to take their ticket, people who get forgotten. I figure that's the way it's got to be. We're all out—all looking for each other. There can't be very many of us, but there's *got* to be more than just me!" The boy's mouth was trembling, and Bennett felt himself growing frightened for him.

I'm a doctor, he thought. A healer. Something's terribly wrong with this boy.

But he sat there helplessly, because he didn't know what to do. The best he could think of was taking the boy off the bus and getting him to a psychologist. But how was he going to manage that? He had to think of a way that wouldn't frighten the youngster.

"Sooner or later, Doc, I'm going to find somebody. I don't care what they look like, or who they are, or what they are—they've got to be somewhere in this world!" He slumped down in his seat and whispered: "But suppose we forget each other?"

He looked up. "It would be different if you hadn't set up the rules of this world. If there weren't so many of you—if it hadn't been organized so only you could live in it. But there's no place—nothing—unless we want to fight—unless *I* want to fight—and I don't want to fight—I just want to live—and be happy—I'm one of you—I was—until just a few years ago—and then you all started to forget me—

"Doc, I tried my best. I *tried* to stay one of you. I did. I tried to fit in. But I can't help it. I can't stop it. You forget me. You all forget me—"

But Bennett was falling asleep. He felt his head nodding forward.

The boy's hand clenched tightly over his arm, and for just a moment Doc felt the beat of a pulse like he'd never met before. But he couldn't keep his eyes open.

"Doc! Remember me! Remember me . . ."

"Ab-secon!" the driver called back. "Absecon, Mac."

Doc Bennett woke up with a nervous grunt. "Huh?"

"Your stop, Mister."

"Oh—oh, thanks," Doc said, climbing out of the seat hastily and reaching up into the rack for his hat. He shook his head to clear it.

He was grumpy with himself as he made his way quickly toward the front of the bus. He usually woke up for every stop whenever was was traveling. Especially on busses.

He banged his hip into the steel corner of a seat and winced. Darn it! he thought crankily, people ought to have armor-plated hides. But then, Evolution probably hadn't heard about human society yet.

"Thanks," he said again as he climbed down the high step and out of the bus, feeling his muscles strain to make the distance. We ought to have non-rigid skeletons, too, he added, while we're at it.

He waited for the bus to pull away so he could cross the street. Well, he thought with a slight smile, we're a pretty tough lot in our own way. The next thing that comes along better have something pretty fancy in the way of protection.

He looked up and a pale-faced, thin-looking boy was watching him from a window as the bus pulled away.

Doc's smile turned a little sad. The kid looked as though he needed somebody to take care of him.

He crossed the street and walked quickly down the side-street toward his home, because the November wind was cold. He climbed up the stairs to the apartment over the grocery and unlocked the door with stiff fingers.

"Sam?"

He closed the door behind him. "Yes, Ruth, I'm home." He felt the ache rising up in his throat again. That young doctor in





Camden had asked just a little too much for his practice. It was worth it, but it was more than they had.

Ruth came out of the kitchen, and he shook his head slowly. "It didn't work out."

She smiled. "So what?"

But he felt the ache grow stronger. He wanted to have things better for her, he always had. But it didn't seem to work out—and he supposed somebody had to take care of the people who couldn't quite work it out when it came to paying medical bills.

Like calling to like, he thought with a twist to his mouth.

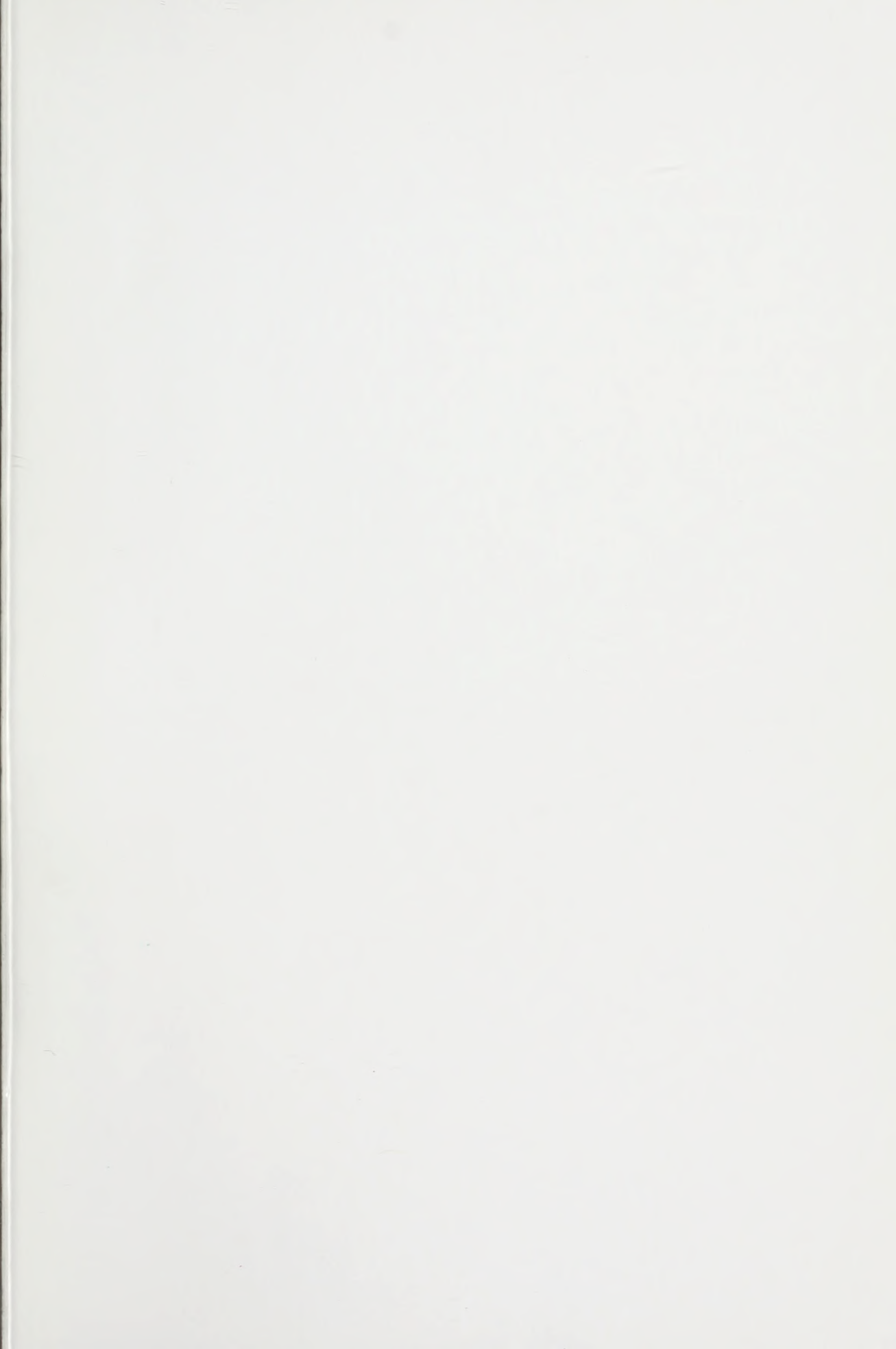
"Supper's ready, darling. I hope you weren't too cold."

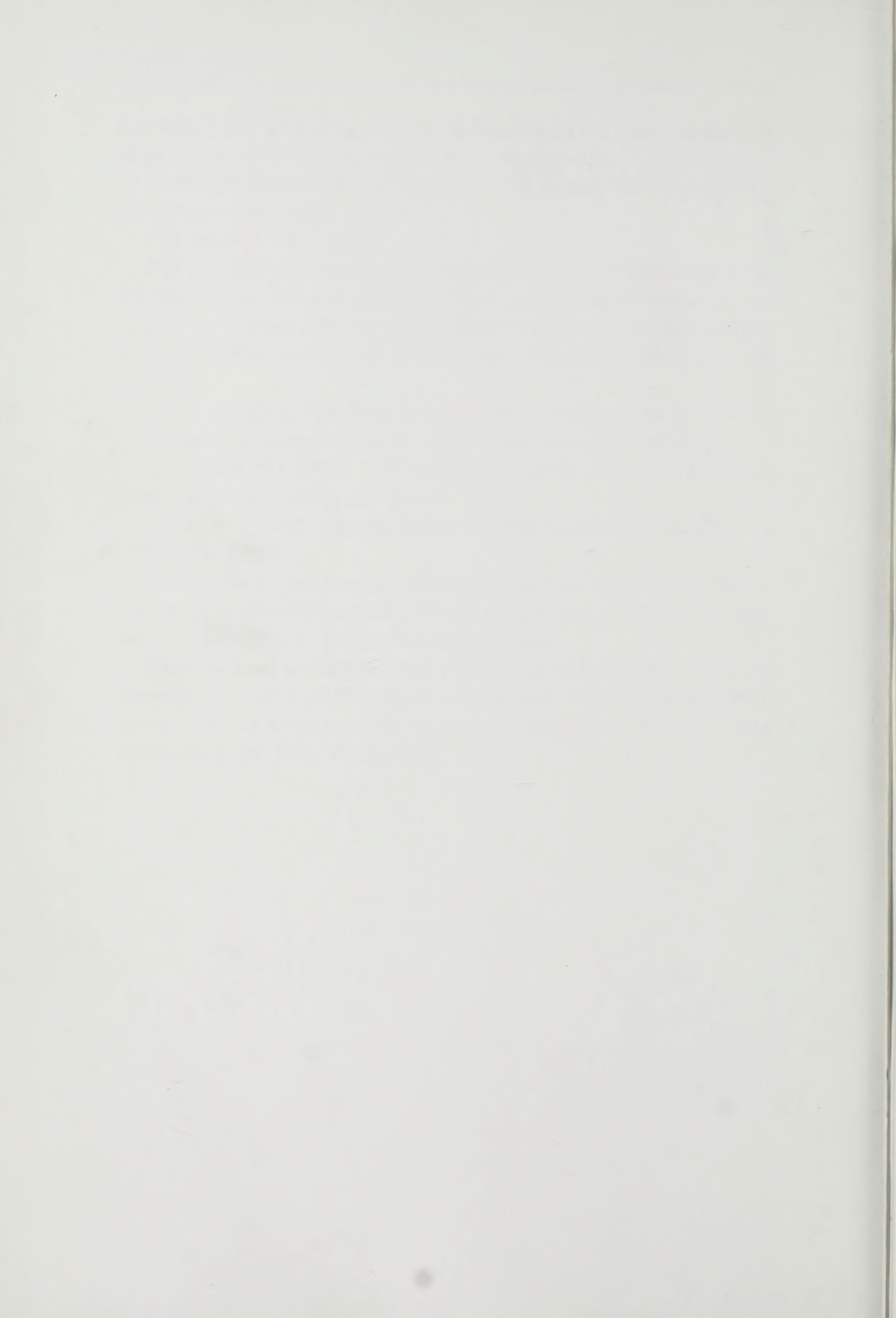
He shook his head. "Didn't feel a thing." He followed her into the kitchen and sat down.

"Sam, I—" Ruth stopped and looked over his shoulder. He turned around.

There was a thin, worn-looking girl of about fourteen standing in the other doorway. "You didn't set a place for me, again," she said in a lost, trembling voice.

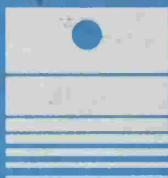
Doc looked at her in complete bewilderment. And he thought it was odd he didn't recognize her. Despite everything, she was very pretty and he thought he should—she looked a great deal like Ruth.











SCI-FI SHORTS

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