

The Trouble with

In the Earth's distant future Man had seemingly vanished. There were dogs and robots in his place—and the ants . . .



The robot, the dog, and the raccoon gazed fearfully up the slope of the hill as the ants marched downward . . .

ANTS



By Clifford D. Simak

ARCHIE, the little renegade raccoon, crouched on the hillside, trying to catch one of the tiny, scurrying things running in the grass. Rufus, Archie's robot, tried to talk to Archie, but the raccoon was too busy and he did not answer.

Homer did a thing no Dog had ever done before. He crossed the river and trotted into the wild robots' camp and he was scared, for there was no telling what the wild robots might do to him when they turned around and saw him. But he was worried worse than he was scared, so he trotted on.

Deep in a secret nest, ants dreamed and planned for a world they could not understand. And pushed into that world, hoping for the best, aiming at a thing no Dog, or robot, or man could understand.

In Geneva, Jon Webster rounded out his ten-thousandth year of suspended animation and slept on, not stirring. In the street outside, a wan-

dering breeze rustled the leaves along the boulevard, but no one heard and no one saw.

Jenkins strode across the hill and did not look to either left or right, for there were things he did not wish to see. There was a tree that stood where another tree had stood in another world. There was the lay of ground that had been imprinted on his brain with a billion footsteps across ten thousand years.

And, if one listened closely, one might have heard laughter echoing down the ages...the sardonic laughter of a man named Joe.

ARCHIE caught one of the scurrying things and held it clutched within his tight-shut paw. Carefully he lifted the paw and opened it and the things was there, running madly, trying to escape.

"Archie," said Rufus, "you aren't listening to me."

The scurrying thing dived into

Archie's fur, streaked swiftly up his forearm.

"Might have been a flea," said Archie. He sat up and scratched his belly.

"New kind of flea," he said. "Although I hope it wasn't. Just the ordinary kind are bad enough."

"You aren't listening," said Rufus.

"I'm busy," said Archie. "The grass is full of them things. Got to find out what they are."

"I'm leaving you, Archie."

"You're what!"

"Leaving you," said Rufus. "I'm going to the Building."

"You're crazy," fumed Archie. "You can't do a thing like that to me. You've been tetchd ever since you fell into that ant hill..."

"I've had the Call," said Rufus. "I just got to go."

"I've been good to you," the raccoon pleaded. "I've never overworked you. You've been like a pal of mine instead of like a robot. I've always treated you just like an animal."

Rufus shook his head stubbornly. "You can't make me stay," he said. "I couldn't stay, no matter what you did. I got the Call and I got to go."

"It isn't like I could get another robot," Archie argued. "They drew my number and I ran away. I'm a deserter and you know I am. You know I can't get another robot with the wardens watching for me."

Rufus just stood there.

"I need you," Archie told him. "You got to stay and help me rustle grub. I can't go near none of the feeding places or the wardens will nab me and drag me up to Webster Hill. You got to help me dig a den. Winter's coming on and I will need a den. It won't have heat or light, but I got to have one. And you've got to..."

Rufus had turned around and was

walking down the hill, heading for the river trail. Down the river trail... traveling toward the dark smudge above the far horizon.

Archie sat hunched against the wind that ruffled through his fur, tucked his tail around his feet. The wind had a chill about it, a chill it had not held an hour or so before. And it was not the chill of the weather, but the chill of other things.

His bright, beady eyes searched the hillside and there was no sign of Rufus.

No food, no den, no robot. Hunted by the wardens. Eaten up by fleas.

And the Building, a smudge against the farther hills across the river valley.

A hundred years ago, so the records said, the Building had been no bigger than the Webster House.

But it had grown since... a place that never was completed. First it had covered an acre. And then a square mile. Now finally a township. And still it grew, sprawling out and towering up.

A smudge above the hills and a cloudy terror for the little, superstitious forest folks who watched it. A word to frighten kit and whelp and cub into sudden quiet.

FOR THERE was evil in it... the evil of the unknown, an understood evil, an evil sensed and attributed rather than seen or heard or smelled. A sensed evil, especially in the dark of night, when the lights were out and the wind keened in the den's mouth and the other animals were sleeping, while one lay awake and listened to the pulsing *otherness* that sang between the worlds.

Archie blinked in the autumn sunlight, scratched furtively at his side.

Maybe someday, he told himself, someone will find a way to handle

fleas. Something to rub on one's fur so they will stay away. Or a way to reason with them, to reach them and talk things over with them. Maybe set up a reservation for them, a place where they could stay and be fed and not bother animals. Or something of the sort.

As it was, there wasn't much that could be done. You scratched yourself. You had your robot pick them off, although the robot usually got more fur than fleas. You rolled in the sand or dust. You went for a swim and drowned some of them... well, you really didn't drown them; you just washed them off and if some of them drowned that was their own tough luck.

You had your robot pick them off...but now there was no robot.

No robot to pick off fleas.

No robot to help him hunt for food.

But, Archie remembered, there was a black haw tree down in the river bottom and last night's frost would have touched the fruit. He smacked his lips, thinking of the haws. And there was a cornfield just over the ridge. If one was fast enough and bided his time and was sneaky about it, it was no trouble at all to get an ear of corn. And if worse came to worse there always would be roots and wild acorns and that patch of wild grapes over on the sand bar.

Let Rufus go, said Archie, mumbling to himself. Let the Dogs keep their feeding stations. Let the wardens go on watching.

He would live his own life. He would eat fruit and grub for roots and raid the cornfields, even as his remote ancestors had eaten fruit and grubbed for roots and raided fields.

He would live as the other raccoons had lived before the Dogs had come along with their ideas about the Brotherhood of Beasts. Like ani-

mals had lived before they could talk with words, before they could read the printed books that the Dogs provided, before they had robots that served in lieu of hands, before there was warmth and light for dens.

Yes, and before there was a drawing that told you if you stayed on Earth or went to another world.

The Dogs, Archie remembered, had been quite persuasive about it, very reasonable and suave. Some animals, they said, had to go to the other worlds or there would be too many animals on Earth. Earth wasn't big enough, they said, to hold everyone. And a drawing, they pointed out, was the fair way to decide which of them would go to the other worlds.

And, after all, they said, the other worlds would be almost like the Earth. For they were just extensions of the Earth. Just other worlds following in the track of Earth. Not quite like it, perhaps, but very close. Just a minor difference here and there. Maybe no tree where there was a tree on Earth. Maybe an oak tree where Earth had a walnut tree. Maybe a spring of fresh, cold water where there was no such spring on Earth.

Maybe, Homer had told him, growing very enthusiastic...maybe the world he would be assigned to would be a better world than Earth.

Archie hunched against the hillside, felt the warmish sun of autumn cutting through the cold chill of autumn's wind. He thought about the black haws. They would be soft and mushy and there would be some of them lying on the ground. He would eat those that were on the ground, then he'd climb the tree and pick some more and then he'd climb down again and finish off the ones he had shaken loose with his climbing of the tree.

He'd eat them and take them in

his paws and smear them on his face. He might even roll in them.

Out of the corner of one eye, he saw the scurrying things running in the grass. Like ants, he thought, only they weren't ants. At least, not like any ants he'd ever seen before.

Fleas, maybe. A new kind of flea.

His paw darted out and snatched one up. He felt it running in his palm. He opened the paw and saw it running there and closed the paw again.

He raised his paw to his ear and listened.

The thing he'd caught was ticking!

THE WILD robot camp was not at all the way Homer had imagined it would be. It was not a camp and it was not a city. It was scarcely anything. There were no buildings and there were no streets. Just launching ramps and three spaceships and half a dozen robots working on one of the ships.

Although, come to think of it, Homer told himself, one should have known there would be no buildings in a robot camp. For the robots would have no use of shelter and that was all a building was.

Homer was scared, but he tried hard not to show it. He curled his tail over his back and carried his head high and his ears well forward and trotted toward the little group of robots, never hesitating. When he reached them, he sat down and lolled out his tongue and waited for one of them to speak.

But when none of them did, he screwed up his courage and spoke to them, himself.

"My name is Homer," he said, "and I represent the Dogs. If you have a head robot, I would like to talk to him."

The robots kept on working for a minute, but finally one of them

turned around and came over and squatted down beside Homer so that his head was level with the dog's head. All the other robots kept on working as if nothing had happened.

"I am a robot called Andrew," said the robot squatting next to Homer, "and I am not what you would call the head robot, for we have no such thing among us. But I can speak with you."

"I came to you about the Building" Homer told him.

"I take it," said the robot called Andrew, "that you are speaking of the structure to the northeast of us. The one you can see from here if you just turn around."

"That's the one," said Homer. "I came to ask why you are building it."

"But we aren't building it," said Andrew.

"We have seen robots working on it."

"Yes, there are robots working there. But we are not building it."

"You are helping someone else?"

Andrew shook his head. "Some of us get a call. A call to go and work there. The rest of us do not try to stop them, for we are all free agents."

"But who is building it?" asked Homer.

"The ants," said Andrew.

Homer's jaw dropped slack.

"Ants? You mean the insects. The little things that live in ant hills?"

"Precisely," said Andrew. He made the fingers of one hand run across the sand like a harried ant.

"But they couldn't build a place like that," protested Homer. "They are stupid."

"Not any more," said Andrew.

Homer sat stock still, frozen to the sand, felt chilly feet of terror run along his nerves.

"Not any more," said Andrew, talking to himself. "Not stupid any

more. You see once upon a time, there was a man named Joe..."

"A man? What's that?" asked Homer.

The robot made a clucking noise, as if gently chiding Homer.

"Men were animals," he said. "Animals that went on two legs. They looked very much like us except they were flesh and we are metal."

"You must mean the websters," said Homer. "We know about things like that, but we call them websters."

The robot nodded slowly. "Yes, the websters could be men. There was a family of them by that name. Lived just across the river."

"There's a place called Webster House," said Homer. "It stands on Webster Hill."

"That's the place," said Andrew.

"We keep it up," said Homer. "It's a shrine to us, but we don't understand just why. It is the word that has been passed down to us...we must keep Webster House."

"The Websters," Andrew told him, "were the ones that taught you Dogs to speak."

Homer stiffened. "No one taught us to speak. We taught ourselves. We developed in the course of many years. And we taught the other animals."

ANDREW, the robot sat hunched in the sun, nodding his head as if he might be thinking to himself.

"Ten thousand years," he said. "No, I guess it's nearer twelve. Around eleven, maybe."

Homer waited and as he waited he sensed the weight of years that pressed against the hills...the years of river and of sun, of sand and wind and sky.

And the years of Andrew.

"You are old," he said. "You can remember that far back?"

"Yes," said Andrew. "Although I am one of the last of the man-made robots. I was made just a few years before they went to Jupiter."

Homer sat silently, tumult stirring in his brain.

Man... a new word.

An animal that went on two legs.

An animal that made the robots, that taught the Dogs to talk.

And, as if he might be reading Homer's mind, Andrew spoke to him.

"You should not have stayed away from us," he said. "We should have worked together. We worked together once. We both would have gained if we had worked together."

"We were afraid of you," said Homer. "I am still afraid of you."

"Yes," said Andrew. "Yes, I suppose you would be. I suppose Jenkins kept you afraid of us. For Jenkins was a smart one. He knew that you must start afresh. He knew that you must not carry the memory of Man as a dead weight on your necks."

Homer sat silently.

"And we," the robot said, "nothing more than the memory of Man. We do the things he did, although more scientifically, for, since we are machines, we must be scientific. More patiently than Man, because we have forever and he had a few short years."

Andrew drew two lines in the sand, crossed them with two other lines. He made an X in the open square in the upper left hand corner.

"You think I'm crazy," he said. "You think I'm talking through my hat."

Homer wriggled his haunches deeper into the sand.

"I don't know what to think," he said. "All these years..."

Andrew drew an O with his finger in the center square of the cross-hatch he had drawn in the sand.

"I know," he said. "All these years you have lived with a dream. The idea that the Dogs were the prime movers. And the facts are hard to understand, hard to reconcile. Maybe it would be just as well if you forgot what I said. Facts are painful things at times. A robot has to work with them, for they are the only things he has to work with. We can't dream, you know. Facts are all we have."

"We passed fact long ago," Homer told him. "Not that we don't use it, for there are times we do. But we work in other ways. Intuition and cobbling and listening."

"You aren't mechanical," said Andrew. "For you, two and two are not always four, but for us it must be four. And sometimes I wonder if tradition doesn't blind us. I wonder sometimes if two and two may not be something more or less than four."

They squatted in silence, watching the river, a flood of molten silver tumbling down a colored land.

Andrew made an X in the upper right hand corner of the cross-hatch, an O in the center upper space, and X in the center lower space. With the flat of his hand, he rubbed the sand smooth.

"I never win," he said. "I'm too smart for myself."

"You were telling me about the ants," said Homer. "About them not being stupid any more."

"Oh, yes," said Andrew. "I was telling you about a man named Joe. . ."

JENKINS strode across the hill and did not look to either left or right, for there were things he did not wish to see, things that struck too deeply into memory. There was a tree that stood where another tree had stood in another world. There was the lay of ground that had been

imprinted on his brain with a billion footsteps across ten thousand years.

The weak winter sun of afternoon flickered in the sky, flickered like a candle guttering in the wind, and when it steadied and there was no flicker it was moonlight and not sunlight at all.

Jenkins checked his stride and swung around and the house was there. . . low-set against the ground, sprawled across the hill, like a sleepy young thing that clung close to mother earth.

Jenkins took a hesitant step and as he moved his metal body glowed and sparkled in the moonlight that had been sunlight a short heartbeat ago.

From the river valley came the sound of a night bird crying and a raccoon was whimpering in a cornfield just below the ridge.

Jenkins took another step and prayed the house would stay. Although he knew it couldn't because it wasn't there. For this was an empty hilltop that had never known a house. This was another world in which no house existed.

The house remained, dark and silent, no smoke from the chimneys, no light from the windows, but with remembered lines that one could not mistake.

Jenkins moved slowly, carefully, afraid the house would leave, afraid that he would startle it and it would disappear.

But the house stayed put. And there were other things. The tree at the corner had been an elm and now it was an oak, as it had been before. And it was autumn moon instead of winter sun. The breeze was blowing from the west and not out of the north.

Something happened, thought Jenkins. The thing that has been growing on me. The thing I felt and could

not understand. An ability developing? Or a new sense finally reaching light? Or a power I never dreamed I had.

A power to walk between the worlds at will. A power to go anywhere I choose by the shortest route that the twisting lines of force and happenstance can conjure up for me.

He walked less carefully and the house still stayed, unfrightened, solid and substantial.

He crossed the grass-grown patio and stood before the door.

Hesitantly, he put out a hand and laid it on the latch. And the latch was there. No phantom thing, but substantial metal.

Slowly he lifted it and the door swung in and he stepped across the threshold.

After five thousand years, Jenkins had come home...back to Webster House.

SO THERE was a man named Joe.

Not a webster, but a man. For a webster was a man. And the Dogs had not been first.

Homer lay before the fire, a limp pile of fur and bone and muscle, with his paws stretched out in front of him and his head resting on his paws. Through half closed eyes he saw the fire and shadow, felt the heat of the blazing logs reach out and fluff his fur.

But inside his brain he saw the sand and the squatting robot and the hills with the years upon them.

Andrew had squatted in the sand and talked, with the autumn sun shining on his shoulders. Had talked of men and dogs and ants. Of a thing that had happened when Nathaniel was alive, and that was a time long gone, for Nathaniel was the first Dog.

There had been a man named Joe...a mutant-man, a more-than-man

...who had wondered about ants twelve thousand years ago. Wondered why they had progressed so far and then no farther, why they had reached the dead end of destiny.

Hunger, perhaps, Joe had reasoned. The ever pressing need to garner food so that they might live. Hibernation, perhaps, the stagnation of the winter sleep, the broken memory chain, the starting over once again, each year a genesis for ants.

So, Andrew said, his bald pate gleaming in the sun, Joe had picked one hill, had set himself up as a god to change the destiny of ants. He had fed them, so that they need not strive with hunger. He had enclosed their hill in a dome of glassite and had heated it so they need not hibernate.

And the thing had worked. The ants advanced. They fashioned carts and they smelted ore. This much one could know, for the carts were on the surface and acrid smelting smoke came from the chimneys that thrust up from the hill. What other things they did, what other things they learned, deep down in their tunnels, there was no way of knowing.

Joe was crazy, Andrew said. Crazy. And yet, maybe not so crazy either.

For one day he broke the dome of glassite and tore the hill asunder with his foot, then turned and walked away, not caring any more what happened to the ants.

But the ants had cared.

The hand that broke the dome, the foot that ripped the hill had put the ants on the road to greatness. It had made them fight...fight to keep the things they had, fight to keep the bottleneck of destiny from closing once again.

A kick in the pants, said Andrew. A kick in the pants for ants. A kick in the right direction.

Twelve thousand years ago a brok-

en, trampled hill. Today a mighty building that grew with each passing year. A building that had covered a township in one short century, that would cover a hundred townships in the next. A building that would push out and take the land. Land that belonged, not to ants, but animals.

A building... and that was not quite right, although it had been called the Building from the very start. For a building was a shelter, a place to hide from storm and cold. The ants would have no need of that, for they had their tunnels and their hills.

Why would an ant build a place that sprawled across a township in a hundred years and yet that kept on growing? What possible use could an ant have for a place like that?

Homer nuzzled his chin deep into his paws, growled inside his throat.

There was no way of knowing. For first you had to know how an ant would think. You would have to know her ambition and her goal. You would have to probe her knowledge.

Twelve thousand years of knowledge. Twelve thousand years from a starting point that itself was unknowable.

But one had to know. There must be a way to know.

FOR YEAR after year, the Building would push out. A mile across, and then six miles and after that a hundred. A hundred miles and then another hundred and after that the world.

Retreat, thought Homer. Yes, we could retreat. We could migrate to those other worlds, the worlds that follow us in the stream of time, the worlds that tread on one another's heels. We could give the Earth to ants and there still would be space for us.

But this is home. This is where the

Dogs arose. This is where we taught the animals to talk and think and act together. This is the place where we created the Brotherhood of Beasts.

For it does not matter who came first... the webster or the dog. This place is home. Our home as well as webster's home. Our home as well as ants'.

And we must stop the ants.

There must be a way to stop them. A way to talk to them, find out what they want. A way to reason with them. Some basis for negotiation. Some agreement to be reached.

Homer lay motionless on the hearth and listened to the whisperings that ran through the house, the soft, far-off padding of robots on their rounds of duties, the muted talk of Dogs in a room upstairs, the crackling of the flames as they ate along the log.

A good life, said Homer, muttering to himself. A good life and we thought we were the ones who made it. Although Andrew says it wasn't us. Andrew says we have not added one iota to the mechanical skill and mechanical logic that was our heritage... and that we have lost a lot. He spoke of chemistry and he tried to explain, but I couldn't understand. The study of elements, he said, and things like molecules and atoms. And electronics... although he said we did certain things without the benefit of electronics more wonderfully than man could have done with all his knowledge. You might study electronics for a million years, he said, and not reach those other worlds, not even know they're there... and we did it, we did a thing a webster could not do.

Because we think differently than a webster does. No, it's man, not webster.

And the robots. The robots are no better than the ones that were left to

us by man. A minor modification here and there... an obvious modification, but no real improvement.

Who ever would have dreamed there could be a better robot?

A better ear of corn, yes. Or a better walnut tree. Or a wild rice that would grow a fuller head. A better way to make the yeast that substitutes for meat.

But a better robot... why, a robot does everything we might wish that it could do. Why should it be better?

And yet... the robots receive a call and go off to work on the Building, to build a thing that will push us off the Earth.

We do not understand. Of course, we cannot understand. If we knew our robots better, we might understand. Understanding, we might fix it so that the robots would not receive the call, or, receiving it, would pay it no attention.

And that, of course, would be the answer. If the robots did not work, there would be no building. For the ants, without the aid of robots, could not go on with their building.

A flea ran along Homer's scalp and he twitched his ear.

Although Andrew might be wrong, he told himself. We have our legend of the rise of the Brotherhood of Beasts and the wild robots have their legend of the fall of man. At this date, who is there to tell which of the two is right?

But Andrew's story does tie in. There were Dogs and there were robots and when man fell they went their separate ways. Although we kept some of the robots to serve as hands for us. Some robots stayed with us, but no dogs stayed with the robots.

A LATE autumn fly buzzed out of a corner, bewildered in the fire-

light. It buzzed around Homer's head and settled on his nose. Homer glared at it and it lifted its legs and insolently brushed its wings. Homer dabbed at it with a paw and it flew away.

A knock came at the door.

Homer lifted his head and blinked at the knocking sound.

"Come in," he finally said.

It was the robot, Hezekiah.

"They caught Archie," Hezekiah said.

"Archie?"

"Archie, the raccoon."

"Oh, yes," said Homer. "He was the one that ran away."

"They have him out here now," said Hezekiah. "Do you want to see him?"

"Send them in," said Homer.

Hezekiah beckoned with his finger and Archie ambled through the door. His fur was matted with burs and his tail was dragging. Behind him stalked two robot wardens.

"He tried to steal some corn," one of the wardens said, "and we spotted him, but he led us quite a chase."

Homer sat up ponderously and stared at Archie. Archie stared straight back.

"They never would have caught me," Archie said, "if I'd still had Rufus. Rufus was my robot and he would have warned me."

"And where is Rufus now?"

"He got the call today," said Archie, "and left me for the Building."

"Tell me," said Homer. "Did anything happen to Rufus before he left? Anything unusual? Out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing," Archie told him, "Except that he fell into an ant hill. He was a clumsy robot. A regular stuffable bum... always tripping himself, getting tangled up. He wasn't co-or-

minated just the way he should be. He had a screw loose someplace."

Something black and tiny jumped off of Archie's nose, raced along the floor. Archie's paw went out in a lightning stroke and scooped it up.

"You better move back a ways," Hezekiah warned Homer. "He's simply dripping fleas."

"It's not a flea," said Archie, puffing up in anger. "It is something else. I caught it this afternoon. It ticks and it looks like an ant, but it isn't one."

The thing that ticked oozed between Archie's claws and tumbled to the floor. It landed right side up and was off again. Archie made a stab at it, but it zig-zagged out of reach. Like a flash it reached Hezekiah and streaked up his leg.

Homer came to his feet in a sudden flash of knowledge.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Get it! Catch it! Don't let it . . ."

But the thing was gone.

Slowly Homer sat down again. His voice was quiet now, quiet and almost deadly.

"Wardens," he said, "take Hezekiah into custody. Don't leave his side, don't let him get away. Report to me everything he does."

Hezekiah backed away.

"But I haven't done a thing."

"No," said Homer, softly. "No, you haven't yet. But you will. You'll get the Call and you'll try to desert us for the Building. And before we let you go, we'll find out what it is that made you do it. What it is and how it works."

Homer turned around, a doggy grin wrinkling up his face.

"And, now, Archie. . ."

But there was no Archie.

There was an open window. And there was no Archie.

HOMER stirred on his bed of hay, unwilling to awake, a growl gurgling in his throat.

Getting old, he thought. Too many years upon me, like the years upon the hills. There was a time when I'd be out of bed at the first sound of something at the door, on my feet, with hay sticking in my fur, barking my head off to let the robots know.

The knock came again and Homer staggered to his feet.

"Come in," he yelled. "Cut out the racket and come in."

The door opened and it was a robot, but a bigger robot than Homer had ever seen before. A gleaming robot, huge and massive, with a polished body that shone like slow fire even in the dark. And riding on the robot's shoulder was Archie, the raccoon.

"I am Jenkins," said the robot. "I came back tonight."

Homer gulped and sat down very slowly.

"Jenkins," he said. "There are stories . . . legends . . . from the long ago."

"No more than a legend?" Jenkins asked.

"That's all," said Homer. "A legend of a robot that looked after us. Although Andrew spoke of Jenkins this afternoon as if he might have known him. And there is a story of how the Dogs gave you a body on your seven thousandth birthday and it was a marvelous body that . . ."

His voice ran down . . . for the body of the robot that stood before him with the raccoon perched on his shoulder . . . that body could be none other than the birthday gift.

"And Webster House?" asked Jenkins. "You still keep Webster House?"

"We still keep Webster House," said Homer. "We keep it as it is. It's a thing we have to do."

"The websters?"

"There aren't any websters."

Jenkins nodded at that. His body's hair-trigger sense had told him there were no websters. There were no webster vibrations. There was no thought of websters in the minds of things he'd touched.

And that was as it should be:

He came slowly across the room, soft-footed as a cat despite his mighty weight, and Homer felt him moving, felt the friendliness and kindness of the metal creature, the protectiveness of the ponderous strength within him.

Jenkins squatted down beside him.

"You are in trouble," Jenkins said.

Homer stared at him.

"The ants," said Jenkins. "Archie told me. Said you were troubled by the ants."

"I went to Webster House to hide," said Archie. "I was scared you would hunt me down again and I thought that Webster House..."

"Hush, Archie," Jenkins told him. "You don't know a thing about it. You told me that you didn't. You just said the Dogs were having trouble with the ants."

He looked at Homer.

"I suppose they are Joe's ants," he said.

"So you know about Joe," said Homer. "So there was a man called Joe."

Jenkins chuckled. "Yes, a trouble-maker. But likeable at times. He had the devil in him."

Homer said: "They're building. They get the robots to work for them and they are putting up a building."

"Surely," said Jenkins, "even ants have the right to build."

"But they're building too fast. They'll push us off the Earth. Another thousand years or so and they'll cover the whole Earth if they keep on building at the rate they've been."

"And you have no place to go? That's what worries you."

"Yes, we have a place to go. Many places. All the other worlds. The cobbly worlds."

JENKINS nodded gravely. "I was in a cobbly world. The first world after this. I took some websters there five thousand years ago. I just came back tonight. And I know the way you feel. No other world is home. I've hungered for the Earth for almost every one of those five thousand years. I came back to Webster House and I found Archie there. He told me about the ants and so I came up here. I hope you do not mind."

"We are glad you came," said Homer, softly.

"These ants," said Jenkins. "I suppose you want to stop them."

Homer nodded his head.

"There is a way," said Jenkins. "I know there is a way. The websters had a way if I could just remember. But it's so long ago. And it's a simple way, I know. A very simple way."

His hand came up and scraped back and forth across his chin.

"What are you doing that for?" Archie asked.

"Eh?"

"Rubbing your face that way. What do you do it for?"

Jenkins dropped his hand. "Just a habit, Archie. A webster gesture. A way they had of thinking. I picked it up from them."

"Does it help you think?"

"Well, maybe. Maybe not. It seemed to help the websters. Now what would a webster do in a case like this? The websters could help us. I know they could..."

"The websters in the cobbly world," said Homer.

Jenkins shook his head. "There

aren't any websters there."

"But you said you took some back."

"I know. But they aren't there now. I've been alone in the cobbly world for almost four thousand years."

"Then there aren't websters anywhere. The rest went to Jupiter. Andrew told me that. Jenkins, where is Jupiter?"

"Yes, there are," said Jenkins. "There are some websters left, I mean. Or there used to be. A few left at Geneva."

"It won't be easy," Homer said. "Not even for a webster. Those ants are smart. Archie told you about the flea he found."

"It wasn't any flea," said Archie.

"Yes, he told me," Jenkins said.

"Said it got onto Hezekiah."

"Not onto," Homer told them. "Into is the word. It wasn't a flea... it was a robot, a tiny robot. It drilled a hole in Hezekiah's skull and got into his brain. It sealed the hole behind it."

"And what is Hezekiah doing now?"

"Nothing," said Homer. "But we are pretty sure what he will do as soon as the ant robot gets the setup fixed. He'll get the Call. He'll get the call to go and work on the Building."

Jenkins nodded. "Taking over," he said. "They can't do a job like that themselves, so they take control of things that can."

He lifted his hand again and scraped it across his chin.

"I wonder if Joe knew," he mumbled. "When he played god to the ants I wonder if he knew."

But that was ridiculous. Joe never could have known. Even a mutation like Joe could not have looked twelve thousand years ahead.

SO LONG ago, thought Jenkins. So many things have happened.

Bruce Webster was just starting to experiment with dogs, had no more than dreamed his dream of talking, thinking dogs that would go down the path of destiny paw in hand with Man...not knowing then that Man within a few short centuries would scatter to the four winds of eternity and leave the Earth to robot and to dog. Not knowing then that even the name of Man would be forgotten in the dust of years, that the race would come to be known by the name of a single family.

And yet, thought Jenkins, if it was to be any family, the Websters were the ones. I can remember them as if it were yesterday. Those were the days when I thought of myself as a Webster, too.

Lord knows, I tried to be. I did the best I could. I stood by the Webster dogs when the race of men had gone and finally I took the last bothersome survivors of that madcap race into another world to clear the way for Dogs...so that the Dogs could fashion the Earth in the way they planned.

And now even those last bothersome survivors have gone...someplace, somewhere...I wish that I could know. Escaped into some fantasy of the human mind. And the men on Jupiter are not even men, but something else. And Geneva is shut off. blocked off from the world.

Although it can't be farther away or blocked more tightly than the world from which I came. If only I could learn how it was I traveled from the exile cobbly world back to Webster House...then, maybe, perhaps, somehow or other, I could reach Geneva.

A new power, he told himself. A new ability. A thing that grew upon me without my knowing that it grew. A thing that every man and every robot...and perhaps every dog...

could have if he but knew the way.

Although it may be my body that made it possible. . . this body that the Dogs gave me on my seven thousandth birthday. A body that has more than any body of flesh and blood has ever quite attained. A body that can know what a bear is thinking or a fox is dreaming, that can feel the happy little mouse thoughts running in the grass.

Wish fulfillment. That might be it. The answer to the strange, illogical yearnings for things that seldom are and often cannot be. But all of which are possible if one knows the way, if one can grow or develop or graft onto oneself the new ability that directs the mind and body to the fulfillment of the wish.

I walked the hill each day, he remembered. Walked there because I could not stay away, because the longing was so strong, steeling myself against looking too closely, for there were differences I did not wish to see.

I walked there a million times and it took that many times before the power within me was strong enough to take me back.

For I was trapped. The word, the thought, the concept that took me into the cobbly world was a one way ticket and while it took me there it could not take me back. But there was another way, a way I did not know. That even now I do not know.

"You said there was a way," urged Homer.

"A way?"

"Yes, a way to stop the ants."

Jenkins nodded. "I am going to find out. I'm going to Geneva."

JON WEBSTER awoke.

And this is strange, he thought, for I said eternity.

I was to sleep forever and forever

has no end.

All else was mist and the greyness of sleep forgetfulness, but this much stood out with mind-sharp clarity. Eternity, and this was not eternity.

A word ticked at his mind, like feeble tapping on a door that was far away.

He lay and listened to the tapping and the word became two words. . . words that spoke his name:

"Jon Webster. Jon Webster." On and on, on and on. Two words tapping at his brain.

"Jon Webster."

"Jon Webster."

"Yes," said Webster's brain and the words stopped and did not come again.

Silence and the thinning of the mists of forgetfulness. And the trickling back of memory. One thing at a time.

There was a city and the name of the city was Geneva.

Men lived in the city, but men without a purpose.

The Dogs lived outside the city. . . in the whole world outside the city. The Dogs had purpose and a dream.

Sara climbed the hill to take a century of dreams.

And I. . . I, thought Jon Webster, climbed the hill and asked for eternity. This is not eternity.

"This is Jenkins, Jon Webster."

"Yes, Jenkins," said Jon Webster, and yet he did not say it, not with lip and tongue and throat, for he felt the fluid that pressed around his body inside its cylinder, fluid that fed him and kept him from dehydrating. Fluid that sealed his lips and eyes and ears.

"Yes, Jenkins," said Webster, speaking with his mind. "I remember you. I remember you now. You were with the family from the very first. You helped us teach the Dogs. You stayed with them when the family

was no more."

"I am still with them," said Jenkins.

"I sought eternity," said Webster. "I closed the city and sought eternity."

"We often wondered," Jenkins told him. "Why did you close the city?"

"The Dogs," said Webster's mind. "The Dogs had to have their chance. Man would have spoiled their chance."

"The dogs are doing well," said Jenkins.

"But the city is open now?"

"No, the city still is closed."

"But you are here."

"Yes, but I'm the only one who knows the way. And there will be no others. Not for a long time, anyway."

"Time," said Webster. "I had forgotten time. How long is it, Jenkins?"

"Since you closed the city? Ten thousand years or so."

"And there are others?"

"Yes, but they are sleeping."

"And the robots? The robots still keep watch?"

"The robots still keep watch."

Webster lay quietly and a peace came upon his mind. The city still was closed and the last of men were sleeping. The Dogs were doing well and the robots stayed on watch.

"You should not have wakened me," he said. "You should have let me sleep."

"There was a thing I had to know. I knew it once, but I have forgotten and it is very simple. Simple and yet terribly important."

Webster chuckled in his brain. "What is it, Jenkins?"

"It's about ants," said Jenkins. "Ants used to trouble men. What did you do about it?"

"Why, we poisoned them," said Webster.

Jenkins gasped. "Poisoned them!"

"Yes," said Webster. "A very sim-

ple thing. We used a base of syrup, sweet, to attract the ants. And we put poison in it, a poison that was deadly to ants. But we did not put in enough of it to kill them right away. A slow poison, you see, so they would have time to carry it to the nest. That way we killed many instead of just two or three."

Silence hummed in Webster's head . . . the silence of no thought, no word.

"Jenkins," he said. "Jenkins, are you."

"Yes, Jon Webster, I am here."

"That is all you want?"

"That is all I want."

"I can go to sleep again."

"Yes, Jon Webster. Go to sleep again."

JENKINS stood upon the hilltop and felt the first-rough forerunning wind of winter whine across the land. Below him the slope that ran down to the river was etched in black and grey with the leafless skeletons of trees.

To the northeast rose the shadow-shape, the cloud of evil omen that was called the Building. A growing thing spawned in the mind of ants, built for what purpose and to what end no thing but an ant could even closely guess.

But there was a way to deal with ants.

The human way.

The way Jon Webster had told him after ten thousand years of sleep. A simple way and a fundamental way, a brutal, but efficient way. You took some syrup, sweet, so the ants would like it, and you put some poison in it . . . slow poison so it wouldn't work too fast.

The simple way of poison, Jenkins said. The very simple way.

Except it called for chemistry and the Dogs knew no chemistry.

Except it called for killing and there was no killing.

Not even fleas, and the Dogs were pestered plenty by the fleas. Not even ants, and the ants threatened to dispossess the animals of the world they called their birthplace.

There had been no killing for five thousand years, or more. The idea of killing had been swept from the minds of things.

And it is better that way, Jenkins told himself. Better that one should lose a world than go back to killing.

He turned slowly and went down the hill.

Homer would be disappointed, he told himself.

Terribly disappointed when he found the websters had no way of dealing with the ants.

THE END