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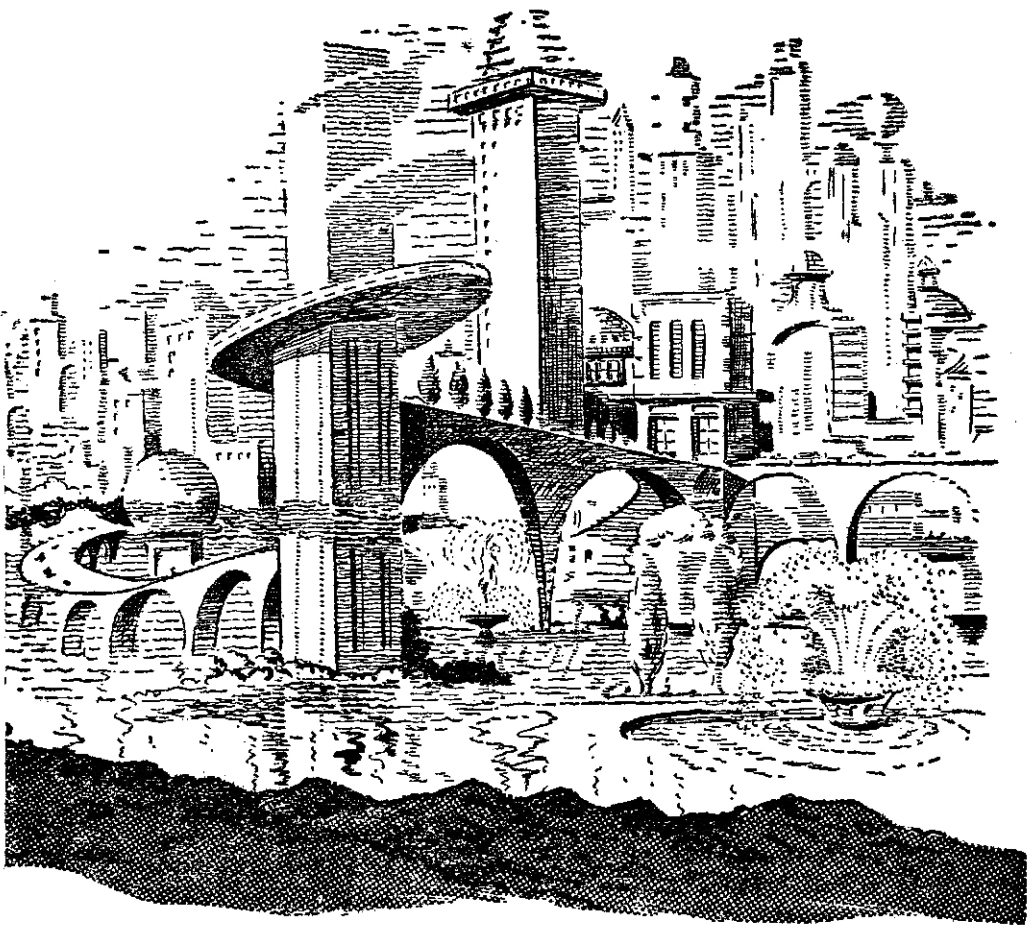
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SEVEN CAME BACK

By Clifford D. Simak

**It was easy for Adam and Eve; but on Mars
it took seven to maintain the birth rate!**



It couldn't be true: a city's fragile towers shimmered where moments before no city had been!

THEY CAME out of the Martian night, six pitiful little creatures looking for a seventh.

They stopped at the edge of the campfire's lighted circle and stood there, staring at the three Earthmen with their owlish eyes.

The Earthmen froze at whatever they were doing.

"Quiet," said Wampus Smith, talking out of the corner of his bearded lips. "They'll come in if we don't make a move."

From far away came a faint, low moaning, floating in across the wilder-

ness of sand and jagged pinnacles of rock and the great stone buttes.

The six stood just at the firelight's edge. The reflection of the flames touched their fur with highlights of red and blue and their bodies seemed to shimmer against the backdrop of the darkness on the desert.

"Venerables," Nelson said to Richard Webb across the fire.

Webb's breath caught in his throat. Here was a thing he had never hoped to see. A thing that no human being could ever hope to see.

Six of the Venerables of Mars

walking in out of the desert and the darkness, standing in the firelight. There were many men, he knew, who would claim that the race was now extinct, hunted down, trapped out, hounded to extinction by the greed of the human sand men.

The six had seemed the same at first, six beings without a difference; but now, as Webb looked at them, he saw those minor points of bodily variation which marked each one of them as a separate individual. Six of them, Webb thought, and there should be seven.

Slowly they came forward, walking deeper into the campfire's circle. One by one they sat down on the sand facing the three men. No one said a word and the tension built up in the circle of the fire while far toward the north the thing kept up its keening, like a sharp, thin knife blade cutting through the night.

"Human glad," Wampus Smith said finally, talking in the patois of the desert. "He waited long."

One of the creatures spoke, its words half English, half Martian, all of it pure gibberish to the ear that did not know.

"We die," it said. "Human hurt for long. Human help some now. Now we die, human help?"

"Human sad," said Wampus and even while he tried to make his voice sad, there was elation in it, a trembling eagerness, a quivering as a hound will quiver when the scent is hot.

"We are six," the creature said. "Six not enough. We need another one. We do not find the seven, we die. Race die forever now."

"Not forever," Smith told them.

THE VENERABLE insisted on it. "Forever. There other sixes. No other seven."

"How can human help?"

"Human know. Human have Seven somewhere?"

Wampus shook his head.

"Where we have Seven?"

"In cage. On Earth. For human to see."

Wampus shook his head again.

"No Seven on Earth."

"There was one," Webb said softly. "In a zoo."

"Zoo," said the creature, tonguing the unfamiliar word. "We mean that. In cage."

"It died," said Webb. "Many years ago."

"Human have one," the creature insisted. "Here on planet. Hid out. To trade."

"No understand," said Wampus but Webb knew from the way he said it that he understood.

"Find Seven. Do not kill it. Hide it. Knowing we come. Knowing we pay."

"Pay? What pay?"

"City," said the creature. "Old city."

"That's your city," Nelson said to Webb. "The ruins you are hunting."

"Too bad we haven't got a Seven," Wampus said. "We could hand it over and they'd lead us to the ruins."

"Human hurt for long," the creature said. "Human kill all Sevens. Have good fur. Women human wear it, High pay for Seven fur."

"Lord, yes," said Nelson. "Fifty thousand for one at the trading post. A cool half million for a four-skin cape made up in New York."

Webb sickened at the thought of it, at the casual way in which Nelson mentioned it. It was illegal now, of course, but the law had come too late to save the Venerables. Although a law, come to think of it, should not have been necessary. A human being, in all rightness...an intelligent form of life, in all rightness, should not

hunt down and kill another intelligent being to strip off its pelt and sell it for fifty thousand dollars.

"No Seven hid," Wampus was saying. "Law says friends. No dare hurt Seven. No dare hide Seven."

"Law far off," said the creature. "Human his own law."

"Not us," said Wampus. "We don't monkey with the law."

And that's a laugh, thought Webb.

"You help?" asked the creature.

"Try, maybe," Wampus told them cagily. "No good, though. You can't find. Human can't find."

"You find. We show city."

"We watch," said Wampus. "Close watch. See Seven, bring it. Where you be?"

"Canyon mouth."

"Good," said Wampus. "Deal?"

"Deal," said the creature.

Slowly the six of them got to their feet and turned back to the night again.

At the edge of the firelit circle they stopped. The spokesman turned back to the three men.

"By," he said.

"Good-by," said Wampus.

Then they were gone, back into the desert.

THE THREE men sat and listened for a long time, not knowing what they listened for, but with ears taut to hear the slightest sound, trying to read out of sound some of the movement of life that surged all around the fire.

On Mars, thought Webb, one always listens. That is the survival price. To watch and listen and be still and quiet. And ruthless, too. To strike before another thing can strike. To see or hear a danger and be ready for it, be half a second quicker than it is quick. And to recognize that danger once you see or hear it.

Finally Nelson took up again the

thing he had been doing when the six arrived, whetting his belt knife to a razor sharpness on a pocket whetstone.

The soft, sleek whirr of metal traveling over stone sounded like a heartbeat, a pulse that did not originate within the fire-light circle, but something that came out of the darkness, the pulse and beat of the wilderness itself.

Wampus said: "It's too bad, Lars, that we don't know where to pick us up a Seven."

"Yeah," said Lars.

"Might turn a good deal," Wampus said. "Likely to be treasure in that old city. All the stories say so."

Nelson grunted. "Just stories."

"Stones," said Wampus. "Stones so bright and polished they could put your eyes out. Sacks of them. Tire a man out just packing them away."

"Wouldn't need more than one load," Nelson declared. "Just one load would set you up for life."

Webb saw that both of them were looking at him, squinting their eyes against the firelight.

He said, almost angrily: "I don't know about the treasure."

"You heard the stories," Wampus said.

Webb nodded. "Let's say it this way. I'm not interested in the treasure. I don't expect to find any."

"Wouldn't mind if you did, would you?" Lars asked.

"It doesn't matter," Webb told him. "One way or the other."

"What do you know about this city?" Wampus demanded and it wasn't just conversation, it was a question asked with an answer expected, for a special purpose. "You been muttering around and dropping hints here and there but you never came cold out and told us."

For a moment, Webb stared at the man. Then he spoke slowly. "Just

this. I figured out where it might be. From a knowledge of geography and geology and some understanding of the rise of cultures. I figured where the grass and wood and water would have been when Mars was new and young. I tried to locate, theoretically, the likeliest place for a civilization to arise. That's all there's to it."

"And you never thought of treasure?"

"I thought of finding out something about the Martian culture," Webb said. "How it rose and why it fell and what it might be like."

Wampus spat. "You aren't even sure there is a city," he said disgustingly.

"Not until just now," said Webb. "Now I know there is."

"From what them little critters said?"

Webb nodded. "From what they said. That's right."

Wampus grunted and was silent.

Webb watched the two across the campfire from him.

They think I'm soft, he thought. They despise me because I'm soft. They would leave me in a minute if it served their purpose or they'd put a knife into me without a second thought if that should serve their purpose...if there was something that I had they wanted.

There had been no choice, he realized. He could not have gone alone into this wilderness, for if he'd tried he probably wouldn't have lived beyond the second day. It took special knowledge to live here and a special technique and a certain kind of mind. A man had to develop a high survival factor to walk into Mars beyond the settlements.

And the settlements now were very far away. Somewhere to the east.

"Tomorrow," Wampus said, "we change directions. We go north instead of west."

Webb said nothing. His hand slid around cautiously and touched the gun at his belt, to make sure that it was there.

IT HAD BEEN a mistake to hire these two, he knew. But probably none of the others would have been better. They were all of a breed, a toughened, vicious band of men who roamed the wilderness, hunting, trapping, mining, taking what they found. Wampus and Nelson had been the only two at the post when he had arrived. All the other sand men had gone a week before, back to their hunting grounds.

At first they had been respectful, almost fawning. But as the days went on they felt surer of their ground and had grown insolent. Now Webb knew that he'd been taken for a sucker. The two stayed at the post, he knew now, for no other reason than that they were without a grubstake. He was that grubstake. He supplied them with the trappings they needed to get back into the wilderness. Once he had been a grubstake, now he was a burden.

"I said," declared Wampus, "that tomorrow we go north."

Webb still said nothing.

"You heard me, didn't you?" asked Wampus.

"The first time," Webb said.

"We go north," said Wampus, "and we travel fast."

"You got a Seven staked out somewhere?"

Lars snickered. "Ain't that the damndest thing you ever heard of? Takes seven of them. Now with us, it just takes a man and woman."

"I asked you," said Webb to Wampus, "if you have a Seven caged up somewhere?"

"No," said Wampus. "We just go north, that's all."

"I hired you to take me west."

Wampus snarled at him. "I thought you'd say that, Webb. I just wanted to know exactly how you felt about it."

"You want to leave me stranded here," said Webb. "You took my money and agreed to guide me. Now you have something else to do. You either have a Seven or you think you know where you can find one. And if I knew and talked, you would be in danger. So there's only one of two things that you can do with me. You can kill me or you can leave me and let something else do the job for you."

Lars said: "We're giving you a choice, ain't we?"

Webb looked at Wampus and the man nodded. "You got your choice, Webb."

He could go for his gun, of course. He could get one of them, most likely, before the other one got him. But there would be nothing gained. He would be just as dead as if they shot him out of hand. As far as that went he was as good as dead anyhow, for hundreds of miles stretched between him and the settlements and even if he were able to cross those many miles there was no guarantee that he could find the settlements.

"We're moving out right now," said Wampus. "Ain't smart to travel in the dark, but ain't the first time that we had to do it. We'll be up north in a day or two."

Lars nodded. "Once we get back to the settlements, Webb, we'll h'ist a drink to you."

Wampus joined in the spirit of the moment. "Good likker, Webb. We can afford good likker then."

WEBB SAID nothing, did not move. He sat on the ground, relaxed.

And that, he told himself, was the thing that scared him. That he could

sit and know what was about to happen and be so unconcerned about it.

Perhaps it had been the miles of wilderness that made it possible, the harsh, raw land and the vicious life that moved across the land... the ever-hungering, ever-hunting life that prowled and stalked and killed. Here life was stripped to its essentials and one learned that the line between life and death was a thin line at best.

"Well," said Wampus finally, "what will it be, Webb."

"I think," said Webb, gravely, "I think I'll take my chance on living."

Lars clucked his tongue against his teeth. "Too bad," he said. "We was hoping it'd be the other way around. Then we could take all the stuff. As it is, we got to leave you some."

"You can always sneak back," said Webb, "and shoot me as I sit here. It would be an easy thing."

"That," said Wampus, "is not a bad idea."

Lars said: "Give me your gun, Webb. I'll throw it back to you when we leave. But we ain't taking a chance of you plugging us while we're getting ready."

Webb lifted his gun out of its holster and handed it over. Still sitting where he was, he watched them pack and stow the supplies into the wilderness wagon.

Finally it was done.

"We're leaving you plenty to last," Wampus told him. "More than enough."

"Probably," said Webb. "You figure I can't last very long."

"If it was me," said Wampus, "I'd take it quick and easy."

Webb sat for a long time, listening to the motor of the wagon until it was out of hearing, then waiting for the gun blast that would send him toppling face forward into the flaming campfire.

But finally he knew that it would

not come. He piled more fuel on the fire and crawled into his sleeping bag.

IN THE morning he headed east, following backward along the tracks of the wilderness wagon. They'd guide him, he knew, for a week or so, but finally they would disappear, brushed out by drifting sand and by the action of the weak and whining wind that sometimes blew across the bleakness of the wilderness.

Anyhow, while he followed them he would know at least he was going in the right direction. Although more than likely he would be dead before they faded out, for the wilderness crawled with too much sudden death to be sure of living from one moment to the next.

He walked with the gun hanging in his hand, watching every side, stopping at the top of the ridges to study the terrain in front of him before he moved down into it.

The unaccustomed pack which he had fashioned inexpertly out of his sleeping bag grew heavier as the day progressed and chafed his shoulders raw. The sun was warm...as warm as the night would be cold...and thirst mounted in his throat to choke him. Carefully he doled out sips of water from the scanty supply the two had left him.

He knew he would not get back. Somewhere between where he stood and the settlements he would die of lack of water or of an insect bite or beneath the jaws and fangs of some charging beast or from sheer exhaustion.

There was, once you thought it out, no reason why a man should try to get back...since there was utterly no chance that he would get back. But Webb didn't stop to reason it out; he set his face toward the east

and followed the wagon tracks.

For there was a *humanness* in him that said he must try at least...that he must go as far as he could go, that he must avoid death as long as he could. So on he went, going as far as he could go and avoiding death.

He spotted the ant colony in time to circle it, but he circled it too closely and the insects, catching scent of food within their grasp, streamed out after him. It took a mile of running before he outdistanced them.

He saw the crouching beast camouflaged against the sand, where it was waiting for him, and shot it where it lay. Later in the day, when another monstrosity came tearing out from behind a rock outcropping, his bullet caught it between the eyes before it had covered half the distance.

For an hour he squatted, unmoving, on the sand, while a huge insect that looked like a bumblebee, but wasn't, hunted for the thing that it had sighted only a moment before. But since it could recognize a thing through motion only, it finally gave up and went away. Webb stayed squatting for another half hour against the chance that it had not gone away, but was lurking somewhere watching for the motion it had sighted to take up again.

These times he avoided death, but he knew that the hour would come when he would not see a danger, or having seen it, would not move fast enough to stop it.

THE MIRAGES came to haunt him, to steal his eyes from the things that he should be watching. Mirages that flickered in the sky, with their feet upon the ground. Tantalizing pictures of things that could not be on Mars, of places that might have been at one time...but that very long ago.

Mirages of broad, slow rivers with the slant of sand upon them. Mirages

of green forests that stretched across the hills and so clear, so close that one could see the little clumps of wild flowers that grew among the trees. And in some of them the hint of snow-capped mountains, in a world that knew no mountains.

He kept a watch for fuel as he went along, hoping to find a cache of "embalmed" wood cropping out of the sand... wood left over from that dim age when these hills and valleys had been forest covered, wood that had escaped the ravages of time and now lay like the dried mummies of trees in the aridness of the desert.

But there was none to be found and he knew that more than likely he would have to spend a fireless night. He could not spend a night in the open without fire. If he tried it, he would be gobbled up an hour after twilight had set in.

He must somehow find shelter in one of the many caves of the weird rock formations that sprang out of the desert. Find a cave and clean out whatever might be in it, block its entrance with stones and boulders and sleep with gun in hand.

It had sounded easy when he thought of it, but while there were many caves, he was forced to reject them one by one since each of them had too large an opening to be closed against attack. A cave, he knew, with an unclosed mouth, would be no better than a trap.

The sun was less than an hour high when he finally spotted a cave that would serve the purpose, located on a ledge of stone jutting out of a steep hill.

From the bottom he stood long minutes surveying the hill. Nothing moved. There was no telltale flecks of color.

Slowly, he started up, digging his feet into the shifting talus of the slope, fighting his way up foot by foot, stop-

ping for long minutes to regain his breath and to survey the slope ahead.

Gaining the ledge, he moved cautiously toward the cave, gun leveled, for there was no telling what might come out of it.

He debated on his next move.

Flash his light inside to see what was there?

Or simply thrust his gun into the opening and spray the inside with its lethal charge?

There could be no squeamishness, he told himself. Better to kill a harmless thing than to run the chance of passing up a danger.

He heard no sound until the claws of the thing were scrabbling on the ledge behind him. He shot one quick glance over his shoulder and saw the beast almost on top of him, got the impression of gaping mouth and murderous fangs and tiny eyes that glinted with a stony cruelty.

There was no time to turn and fire. There was time for just one thing.

HIS LEGS moved like driving pistons, hurling his body at the cave. The stone lip of it caught his shoulder and ripped through his clothing, gashing his arm, but he was through, through and rolling free. Something brushed his face and he rolled over something that protested in a squeaking voice and off in one corner there was a thing that mewed quietly to itself.

On his knees, Webb swung his gun around to face the opening of the cave, saw the great bulk of the beast that had charged him trying to squeeze its way inside.

It backed away and then a great paw came in, feeling this way and that, hunting for the food that crouched inside the cave.

Mouths jabbered at Webb, a dozen voices speaking in the lingo of the

desert and he heard them say:

"Human, human, kill, kill, kill."

Webb's gun spat and the paw went limp and was pulled slowly from the cave. The great grey body toppled and they heard it strike the slope below the ledge and go slithering away down the talus slope.

"Thanks, human," said the voices. "Thanks, human."

Slowly Webb sat down, cradling the gun in his lap.

All around him he heard the stir of life.

Sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt moisture running from his armpits down his sides.

What was in the cave? What was in here with him?

That they had talked to him didn't mean a thing. Half the so-called animals of Mars could talk the desert lingo... a vocabulary of a few hundred words, part of them Earthian, part of them Martian, part of them God-knew-what.

For here on Mars many of the animals were not animals at all, but simply degenerating forms of life that at one time must have formed a complex civilization. The Venerables, who still retained some of the shape of bipeds, would have reached the highest culture, but there must have been many varying degrees of culture, living by compromise or by tolerance.

"Safe," a voice told him. "Trust. Cave law."

"Cave law?"

"Kill in cave...no. Kill outside cave...yes. Safe in cave."

"I no kill," said Webb. "Cave law good."

"Human know cave law?"

Webb said: "Human keep cave law."

"Good," the voice told him. "All safe now."

Webb relaxed. He slipped his gun

into his holster and took off his pack, laid it down alongside and rubbed his raw and blistered shoulders.

He could believe these things, he told himself. A thing so elemental and so simple as cave law was a thing that could be understood and trusted. It arose from a basic need, the need of the weaker life forms to forget their mutual differences and their mutual preying upon one another at the fall of night... the need to find a common sanctuary against the bigger and the more vicious and the lonely killers who took over with the going of the sun.

A voice said: "Come light. Human kill."

Another voice said: "Human keep cave law in dark. No cave law in light. Human kill come light."

"Human no kill come light," said Webb.

"All human kill," said one of the things. "Human kill for fur. Human kill for food. We fur. We food."

"This human never kill," said Webb. "This human friend."

"Friend?" one of them asked. "We not know friend. Explain friend."

Webb didn't try. There was no use, he knew. They could not understand the word. It was foreign to this wilderness.

At last he asked: "Rocks here?"

One of the voices answered: "Rocks in cave. Human want rocks?"

"Pile in cave mouth," said Webb. "No killer get in."

They digested that for awhile. Finally one of them spoke up: "Rock good."

They brought rocks and stones and, with Webb helping them, wedged the cave mouth tight.

IT WAS TOO dark to see the things, but they brushed against him as they worked and some of them were soft and furry and others had hides

like crocodiles, that tore his skin as he brushed against them. And there was one that was soft and pulpy and gave him the creeps.

He settled down in one corner of the cave with his sleeping bag between his body and the wall. He would have liked to crawl into it, but that would have meant unpacking and if he unpacked his supplies, he knew, there'd be none come morning.

Perhaps, he reasoned, the body heat of all the things in here will keep the cave from getting too cold. Cold, yes, but not too cold for human life. It was, he knew, a gamble at best.

Sleep at night in friendship, kill one another and flee from one another with the coming of the dawn. Law, they called it. Cave law. Here was one for the books, here was something that was not even hinted at in all the archaeological tomes that he had ever read.

And he had read them all. There was something here on Mars that fascinated him. A mystery and a loneliness, an emptiness and a retrogression that haunted him and finally sent him out to try to pierce some of that mystery, to try to hunt for the reason for that retrogression, to essay to measure the greatness of the culture that in some far dim period had come tumbling down.

There has been some great work done along that line. Axelson with his scholarly investigation of the symbolic water jugs and Mason's sometimes fumbling attempt to trace the great migrations. Then there was Smith, who had traveled the barren world for years jotting down the wind-blown stories whispered by the little degenerating things about an ancient greatness and a golden past. Myths, most of them, of course, but some place, somewhere lay the answer to the origin of the myths. Folklore does

not leap full-blown from the mind; it starts with a fact and that fact is added to and the two facts are distorted and you have a myth. But at the bottom, back of all of it, is the starting point of fact.

So it was, so it must be with the myth that told about the great and glowing city that had stood above all other things of Mars... a city that was known to the far ends of the planet.

A place of culture, Webb told himself, a place where all the achievements and all the dreams and every aspiration of the once-great planet would have come together.

And yet, in more than a hundred years of hunting and of digging, Earth's archaeologists had found no trace of any city, let alone that city of all cities. Kitchen middens and burial places and wretched huddling places where broken remnants of the great people had lived for a time... there were plenty of these. But no great city.

It must be somewhere, Webb was convinced. That myth could not lie, for it was told too often at too many different places by too many different animals that had once been people.

Mars fascinated me, he thought, and it still fascinates me, but now it will be the death of me... for there's death in its fascination. Death in the lonely stretches and death waiting on the buttes. Death in this cave, too, for they may kill me come the morning to prevent me killing them; they may keep their truce of the night just long enough to make an end of me.

The law of the cave? Some hold-over from the ancient day, some memory of a now forgotten brotherhood? Or a device necessitated by the evil days that had come when the brother-

hood had broken?

HE LAID his head back against the rock and closed his eyes and thought...if they kill me, they kill me, but I will not kill them. For there has been too much human killing on the planet Mars. I will repay part of the debt at least. I will not kill the ones who took me in.

He remembered himself creeping along the ledge outside the cave, debating whether he should have a look first or stick in the muzzle of his gun and sweep the cave as a simple way of being sure there would be nothing there to harm him.

I did not know, he said. I did not know.

A soft furry body brushed against him and a voice spoke to him.

"Friend means no hurt? Friend means no kill?"

"No hurt," said Webb. "No kill."

"You saw six?" the voice asked.

Webb jerked from the wall and sat very still.

"You saw six?" the voice was insistent.

"I saw six," said Webb.

"When?"

"One sun."

"Where six?"

"Canyon mouth," said Webb. "Wait at canyon mouth."

"You hunt Seven?"

"No," said Webb. "I go home."

"Other humans?"

"They north," said Webb. "They hunt Seven north."

"They kill Seven?"

"Catch seven," said Webb. "Take Seven to six. See city."

"Six promise?"

"Six promise," said Webb.

"You good human. You friend human. You no kill Seven."

"No kill," insisted Webb.

"All humans **kill**. Kill Seven sure. Seven good fur. Much pay. Many

Sevens die for human."

"Law says no kill," declared Webb. "Human law says Seven friend. No kill friend."

"Law? Like cave law?"

"Like cave law," said Webb.

"You good friend of Seven?"

"Good friend of all," said Webb.

"I Seven," said the voice.

Webb sat quietly and let the numbness clear out of his brain.

"Seven," he finally said. "You go canyon mouth. Find six. They wait. Human friend glad."

"Human friend want city," said the creature. "Seven friend to human. Human find Seven. Human see city. Six promise."

Webb almost laughed aloud in bitterness. Here, at last, the chance that he had hoped might come. Here, at last, the thing that he had wanted, the thing he had come to Mars to do. And he couldn't do it. He simply couldn't do it.

"Human no go," he said. "Human die. No food. No water. Human die."

"We care for human," Seven told him. "No friend human before. All kill humans. Friend human come. We care for it."

Webb was silent for a while, thinking.

Then he asked: "You give human food? You find human water?"

"Take care," said Seven.

"How Seven know I saw six?"

"Human tell. Human think. Seven know."

So that was it...telepathy. Some vestige of a former power, some attribute of a magnificent culture, not quite forgotten yet. How many of the other creatures in this cave would have it, too?

"Human go with Seven?" Seven asked.

"Human go," said Webb.

He might as well, he told himself. Going east, back toward the settle-

ments, was no solution to his problem. He knew he'd never reach the settlements. His food would run out. His water would run out. Some beast would catch him and make a meal of him. He didn't have a chance.

Going with the little creature that stood beside him in the darkness of the cave, he might have a chance. Not too good a chance, perhaps, but at least a chance. There would be food and water... or at least a chance of food and water. There would be another helping him to watch for the sudden death that roamed the wilderness. Another one to warn him, to help him recognize the danger.

"Human cold," said Seven.

"Cold," admitted Webb.

"One cold," said Seven. "Two warm."

The furry thing crawled into his arms, put its arms around his body. After a moment, he put his arms around it.

"Sleep," said Seven. "Warm. Sleep."

WEBB ATE the last of his food and the Seven Venerables told him: "We care."

"Human die," Webb insisted. "No food. Human die."

"We take care," the seven little creatures told him, standing in a row. "Later we take care."

So he took it to mean that there was no food for him now, but later there would be.

They took up the march again.

It was an interminable thing, that march. A thing to make a man cry out in his sleep. A thing to shiver over when they had been lucky enough to find wood and sat hunched around the fire. Day after endless day of sand and rock, of crawling up to a high ridge and plunging down the other side, of slogging through the heat across the level land that had been

sea bottom in the days long gone.

It became a song, a drum beat. a three-note marching cadence that rang through the human's head, an endless thing that hammered in his brain through the day and stayed with him hours after they had stopped for night. Until he was dizzy with it, until his brain was drugged with the hammer of it, so that his eyes refused to focus and the gun bead was a fuzzy globe when he had to use the weapon against the crawling things and charging things and flying things that came at them out of nowhere.

Always there were the mirages, the everlasting mirages of Mars that seemed to lie just beneath the surface of reality. Flickering pictures painted in the sky the water and the trees and the long green sweep of grass that Mars had not known for countless centuries. As if, Webb told himself, the past were very close behind them, as if the past might still exist and was trying to catch up, reluctant to be left behind in the march of time.

He lost count of the days and steeled himself against the speculation of how much longer it might be, until it seemed that it would go on forever, that they would never stop, that they would face each morning the barren wilderness they must stagger through until the fall of night.

He drank the last of the water and reminded them he could not live without it.

"Later," they told him. "Water later."

THAT WAS the day they came to the city and there, deep in a tunnel far beneath the topmost ruins there was water, water dripping, drop by slow and tantalizing drop from a broken pipe. Dripping water and that was a wondrous thing on Mars.

The seven drank sparingly since they had been steeled for century upon century to get along with little water, until they had adapted themselves to get along with little water and it was no hardship for them. But Webb lay for hours beside the broken pipe, holding cupped hands for a little to collect before he lapped it down, lying there in the coolness that was a blessed thing.

He slept and awoke and drank again and he was rested and was no longer thirsty, but his body cried for food. And there was no food nor none to get him food. For the little ones were gone.

They will come back, he said. They are gone for just a little while and will be back again. They have gone to get me food and they will bring it to me. And he thought very kindly of them.

He picked his way upward through the tunnel down which they'd come and so at last came to the ruins that lay on the hill that thrust upward from the surrounding country so that when one stood on the hill's top, there was miles of distance, dropping away on every side.

There wasn't much that one could see of the ruined city. It would have been entirely possible to have walked past the hill and not have known the city was there. During thousands of years it had crumbled and fallen in upon itself and some of it had dissolved to dust and the sand had crept in and covered it and sifted among its fragments until it simply was a part of the hill.

Here and there Webb found broken fragments of chiseled masonry and here and there a shard of pottery, but a man could have walked past these, if he had not been looking, and taken them for no more than another rock scattered among the trillions of other fragmentary rocks littered on the sur-

face of the planet.

The tunnel, he found, led down into the bowels of the fallen city, into the burial mound of the fallen greatness and the vanished glory of a proud people whose descendants now scuttled animal-like in the ancient deserts and talked in an idiom that was no more than a memory of the literacy that must have flourished once in the city on the hill.

In the tunnel Webb found evidence of solid blocks of carved stone, broken columns, paving blocks and something that seemed at one time to have been a beautifully executed statue.

At the end of the tunnel, he cupped his hands at the pipe and drank again, then went back to the surface and sat on the ground beside the tunnel mouth and stared out across the emptiness of Mars.

It would take power and tools and many men to uncover and sift the evidence of the city. It would take years of painstaking, scholarly work ... and he didn't even have a shovel. And worst of all, he had no time. For if the seven did not show up with food he would one day go down into the darkness of the tunnel and there eventually join his human dust with the ancient dust of this alien world.

There had been a shovel, he remembered, and Wampus and Lars, when they deserted him, had left it for him. A rare consideration, surely, he told himself. But of the supplies which he had carried away from the campfire that long gone morning there were just two things left, his sleeping bag and the pistol at his belt. All else he could get along without, those two were things that he had to have.

An archaeologist, he thought. An archaeologist sitting on top of the greatest find that any archaeologist had ever made and not able to do a single thing about it.

Wampus and Lars had thought that there would be treasure here. And there was no certain treasure, no treasure revealed and waiting for the hands of men to take. He had thought of glory and there was no glory. He had thought of knowledge and without a shovel and some time there simply was no knowledge. No knowledge beyond the bare knowing that he had been right, that the city did exist.

And yet there was certain other knowledge gained along the way. The knowledge that the seven types of the Venerables did still in fact exist, that from this existence the race might still continue despite the guns and snares and the greed and guile of Earthmen who had hunted Seven for its fifty thousand dollar pelt.

Seven little creatures, seven different sexes. All of them essential to the continuance of the race. Six little creatures looking for the seventh and he had found the seventh. Because he had found the seventh, because he had been the messenger, there would be at least one new generation of the Venerables to carry on the race.

What use, he thought, to carry on a race that had failed its purpose?

He shook his head.

You can't play God, he said. You can't presume to judge. There either is a purpose in all things or there's no purpose in anything, and who is there to know?

There either is purpose that I reached this city or there is no purpose. There is a purpose that I may die here or it is possible that my dying here will be no more than another random factor in the great machination of pure chance that moves the planets through their courses and brings a man homeward at the end of day.

And there was another knowledge ...the knowledge of the endless

reaches and the savage loneliness that was the Martian wilderness. The knowledge of that and the queer, almost non-human detachment that it fused into the human soul.

Lessons, he thought.

The lesson that one man is an insignificant flyspeck crawling across the face of eternity. The lesson that one life is a relatively unimportant thing when it stands face to face with the over-riding reality of the miracle of all creation.

He got up and stood at his full height and knew his insignificance and his humility in the empty sweep of land that fell away on every side and in the arching sky that vaulted overhead from horizon to horizon and the utter silence that lay upon the land and sky.

STARVING was a lonely and an awful business.

Some deaths are swift and clean.

But starving is not one of these.

The seven did not come. Webb waited for them, and because he still felt kindly toward them, he found excuses for them. They did not realize, he told himself, how short a time a man may go without nourishment. The strange mating, he told himself, involving seven personalities, probably was a complicated procedure and might take a great deal more time than one usually associated with such phenomena. Or something might have happened to them, they might be having trouble of their own. As soon as they had worked it out, they would come, and they would bring him food.

So he starved with kindly thoughts and with a great deal more patience than a man under dissimilar circumstances might be expected to.

And he found, even when he felt the lassitude of under-nourishment creeping along his muscles and his bones, even when the sharp pangs of

hunger had settled to a gnawing horror that never left him, even when he slept, that his mind was not affected by the ravages that his body was undergoing; that his brain, apparently, was sharpened by the lack of food, that it seemed to step aside from his tortured body and become a separate entity that drew in upon itself and knotted all its faculties into a hard-bound bundle that was scarcely aware of external factors.

He sat for long hours upon a polished rock, perhaps part of that once proud city, which he found just a few yards from the tunnel mouth, and stared out across the sun-washed wilderness which stretched for miles toward a horizon that it never seemed to reach. He sought for purpose with a sharp-edged mind that probed at the roots of existence and of happenstance and sought to evolve out of the random factors that moved beneath the surface of the universe's orderliness some evidence of a pattern that would be understandable to the human mind. Often he thought he had it, but it always slid away from him like quicksilver escaping from a clutching hand.

If Man ever was to find the answer, he knew, it must be in a place like this, where there was no distraction, where there was a distance and a barrenness that built up to a vast impersonality which emphasized and underscored the inconsequence of the thinker. For if the thinker introduced himself as a factor out of proportion to the fact, then the whole problem was distorted and the equation, if equation there be, never could be solved.

AT FIRST he had tried to hunt animals for food, but strangely, while the rest of the wilderness swarmed with vicious life that hunted timid life, the area around the city

was virtually deserted, as if some one had drawn a sacred chalk mark around it. On his second day of hunting he killed a small thing that on Earth could have been a mouse. He built a fire and cooked it and later hunted up the sun-dried skin and sucked and chewed at it for the small nourishment that it might contain. But after that he did not kill a thing, for there was nothing to be killed.

Finally he came to know the seven would not come, that they never had intended to come, that they had deserted him exactly as his two human companions had deserted him before. He had been made a fool, he knew, not once, but twice.

He should have kept on going east after he had started. He should not have come back with seven to find the other six who waited at the canyon's mouth.

You might have made it to the settlements, he told himself. You just might have made it. Just possibly have made it.

East. East toward the settlements.

Human history is a trying... a trying for the impossible, and attaining it. There is no logic, for if humanity had waited upon logic it still would be a cave-lining and an earth-bound race.

Try, said Webb, not knowing exactly what he said.

He walked down the hill again and started out across the wilderness, heading toward the east. For there was no hope upon the hill and there was hope toward the east.

A mile from the base of the hill, he fell. He staggered, falling and rising, for another mile. He crawled a hundred yards. It was there the seven found him.

"Food!" he cried at them and he had a feeling that although he cried it in his mind there was no sound in

his mouth. "Food! Water!"

"We take care," they said, and lifted him, holding him in a sitting position.

"Life," Seven told him, "is in many husks. Like nested boxes that fit inside each other. You live one and you peel it off and there's another life."

"Wrong," said Webb. "You do not talk like that. Your thought does not flow like that. There is something wrong."

"There is an inner man," said seven. "There are many inner men."

"The subconscious," said Webb and while he said it in his mind, he knew that no word, no sound came out of his mouth. And he knew now, too, that no words were coming out of Seven's mouth, that here were words that could not be expressed in the patois of the desert, that here were thoughts and knowledge that could not belong to a thing that scuttled, fearsome, through the Martian wilderness.

"You peel an old life off and you step forth in a new and shining life," said Seven, "but you must know the way. There is a certain technique and a certain preparation. If there is no preparation and no technique, the job is often bungled."

"Preparation," said Webb. "I have no preparation. I do not know about this."

"You are prepared," said Seven. "You were not before, but now you are."

"I thought," said Webb.

"You thought," said Seven, "and you found a partial answer. Well-fed, earth-bound, arrogant, there would have been no answer. You found humility."

"I do not know the technique," said Webb. "I do not..."

"We know the technique," Seven said. "We take care."

The hilltop where the dead city lay shimmered and there was a mirage on it. Out of the dead mound of its dust rose the pinnacles and spires, the buttresses and the flying bridges of a city that shone with color and with light; out of the sand came the blaze of garden beds of flowers and the tall avenues of trees and a music that came from the slender bell towers.

There was grass beneath his feet instead of sand blazing with the heat of the Martian noon. There was a path that led up the terraces of the hill toward the wonder city that reared upon its heights. There was the distant sound of laughter and there were flecks of color moving on the distant streets and along the walls and through the garden paths.

Webb swung around and the seven were not there. Nor was the wilderness. The land stretched away on every hand and it was not wilderness, but a breath-taking place with groves of trees and roads and flowing water courses.

He turned back to the city again and watched the movement of the flecks of color.

"People," he said.

And Seven's voice, coming to him from somewhere, from elsewhere, said:

"People from the many planets. And from beyond the planets. And some of your own people you will find among them. For you are not the first."

Filled with wonder, a wonder that was fading, that would be entirely faded before he reached the city, Webb started walking up the path.

WAMPUS SMITH and Lars Nelson came to the hill many days late. They came on foot because the wilderness wagon had broken down. They came without food except the

little food they could kill along the way and they came with no more than a few drops of water sloshing in their canteens and there was no water to be found.

There, a short distance from the foot of the hill, they found the sun-dried mummy of a man face downward on the sand and when they turned him over they saw who he was.

Wampus stared across the body at Lars.

"How did he get here?" he croaked.

"I don't know," said Lars. "He never could have made it, not knowing the country and on foot. And he wouldn't have traveled this way anyhow. He would have headed east, back to the settlements."

They pawed through his clothing and found nothing. But they took his gun, for the charges in their own were running very low.

"What's the use," said Lars. "We

can't make it, Wampus."

"We can try," said Wampus.

Above the hill a mirage flickered ... a city with shining turrets and dizzy pinnacles and rows of trees and fountains that flashed with leaping water. To their ears came the sound, or seemed to come, the sound of many bells.

Wampus spat with lips that were cracked and dried, spat with no saliva in his mouth.

"Them damn mirages," he said.

"They drive a man half crazy."

"They seem so close," said Lars.

"So close and real. As if they were someplace else and were trying to break through."

Wampus spat again. "Let's get going," he said.

The two men turned toward the east and as they moved, they left staggering, uneven tracks through the sand of Mars.

THE END
