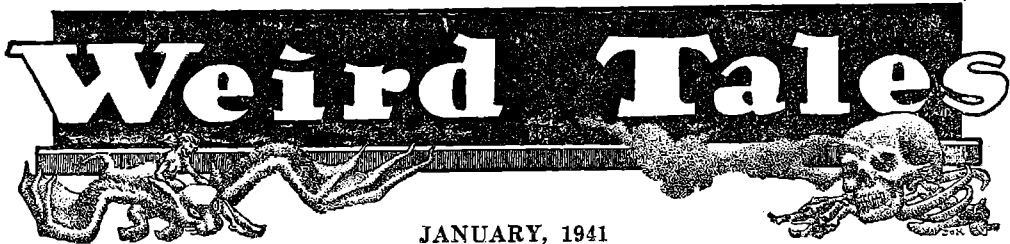


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1941

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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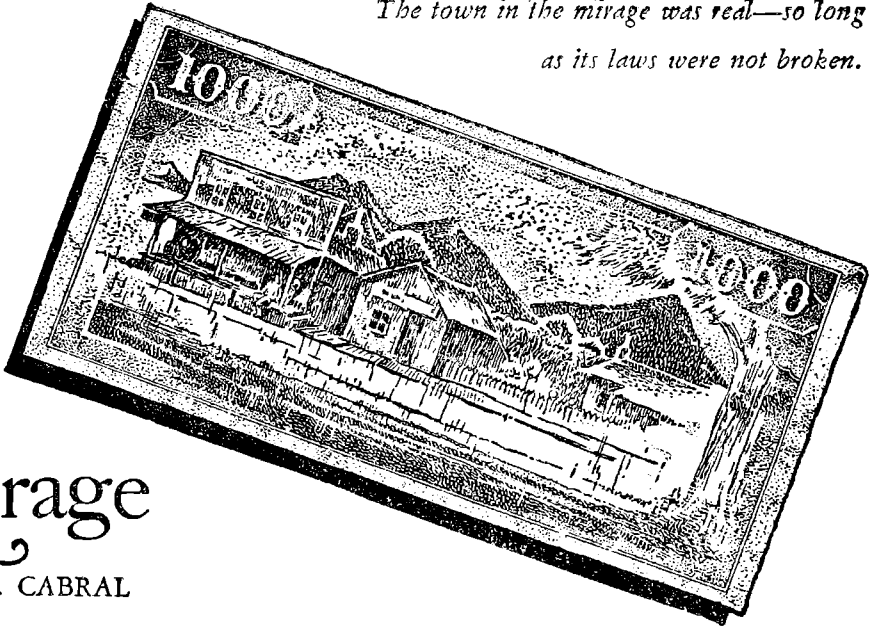
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

H. AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

*The town in the mirage was real—so long
as its laws were not broken.*



Mirage

By O. M. CABRAL

PETE SPINELLI, gasping, sprawled flat upon scorching sand. The thin shadow of a scrubby Judas-tree laced his prone body with sable bars.

"Hey!" Red Donovan urged him. "Didja hear me? I said get up!"

But Pete scarcely stirred. His puffed lips, hideously blackened and cracked, could not form words clearly.

"T'ell w' ya. I—ain't—never."

"'S only a little ways more," Red Donovan croaked.

"Same—'s yest'day. . . ."

Donovan's red-rimmed eyes narrowed. Then he kicked Pete. The spent man moaned, but made no other sign of protest.

Donovan bent over him.



"You're sticking—get it? This'll give ya ambition!"

Donovan's thumb gouged brutally at the base of Pete's skull. Pete's flaccid body jerked. A shrill whine burst from his calcined throat when a second stab of torture pierced beneath an armpit.

"Lemme 'lone! I'll—go—"

"Snap into it, then!" Donovan growled. He laughed when Pete stumbled awkwardly to his feet. "Ya yella rat, ya oughta *thank* me for this!"

Pete staggered, his feet dragging in loose, flinty sand. Maybe, Red Donovan thought disgustedly, he should have left Pete to croak back there under the bush. Only, anyone following might have found the stiff.

Vitreous sunlight spilled on the arid landscape, painful to heat-dazed eyes. All day yesterday a hot wind had covered the fugitives' tracks with blown sand and bitter alkali. Now distant mountains, minute but sharp and clear against a metallic sky, seemed to recede all through the crystal morning.

On the bare mountains there was water—had to be! Pete wouldn't make it, Red Donovan thought. He'd have to be left out of sight in some dry arroyo. Cave down the bank—hide the corpse. Because them damned buzzards would put the finger on a guy if he didn't play wise.

The heat played queer tricks. Sometimes the mountains looked nearer, bigger. They wavered tantalizingly as though painted on a bright blue curtain, or hung suspended in air, an enchanted island swimming on an ocean of glass.

Whenever Pete paused Red Donovan prodded his back with the hot barrel of a gun. Pete moaned, but he walked. A vague mistiness ahead troubled Donovan. His eyes hurt when he blinked as though dry eyeballs had been scoured with dust of glass. Was it—Jeez, was it a cloud of dust? Horses—and men?

The cloud of translucent haze did glitter with pulsating movement. In its midst, an image built up swiftly out of nothing—water and trees, glimmering white buildings of a little town. But the far-away mountains were still in sight, veiled and indistinct through the wavering illusion of the mirage.

Pete paused. Suddenly his head flung up like a pointing hound. He yelped, and began running, crazily, drunkenly, toward that false promise of bright water.

"Pete!" Red Donovan yelled hoarsely. "Wanna kill yourself, ya damned fool?"

The thirst-crazed man ahead ran clumsily, hearing nothing. Red Donovan shouted trying to tell him that there was no water, no trees, only a picture painted on the sand. Then he, too, started running after Pete Spinelli.

The mirage had all the appearance of solid reality. A thin point of madness entered Red Donovan's mind. He could not stop running. Pete fell. Donovan passed him without even glancing down. The town seemed so near! Clearly Red Donovan saw the black shadows under the green cottonwood trees, and beyond the grove the shiny mirror of cool water! As he neared the houses became more distinct. Vaguely he thought that people moved at the edge of the town.

"Help!" Red Donovan yelped, choking. "Help!"

The cottonwood grove was all about him, the blessed shade like balm to his blistered skin. Donovan panted, weak now and crawling. There was a corral where penned cattle lay munching sleepily in the shade. Beyond the corral some goats were tethered at the edge of a big water-hole. There were gardens and houses, a verdant oasis in the grim Valley of Death.

A woman in a blue sunbonnet stood at the door of one of the white-painted houses. She did not even give the sun-

blackened fugitive a passing glance of pity as he crawled, sobbing, toward the bright shield of water.

RED DONOVAN'S breath was like a death-rattle in his throat when he thrust his face down to the life-giving water. He saw his own reflection—a raw, swollen mask caked with gray alkali. Wind-ripples wrinkled the surface of the water-hole. In the bright shallows of the pond he could see colored gravel and green weeds.

Donovan dipped his scorched arm elbow deep into the crystal water. His cupped hands met nothing but empty air. When he scooped the bright drops to his fevered lips, he tasted only the desert's acrid and powdery dust!

Whimpering, he shrank in terror from the bewitched water. Surely he had felt the cool liquid trickle over his arms! His bulging eyes saw a carpet of lush green grass all about him. Yet, when he tore at the phantom blades, only hot sand filled the scoop of his palm!

Five goats in the grove, a buck and four does, peacefully nibbled green herbage. Red Donovan counted them while his frenzied mind shrieked soundlessly.

The goats munched sleepily, amber eyes voluptuously half-closed. Why—there were the cottonwood leaves—the shadows of the leaves making a splashed pattern of light and shade on grass and water!

Donovan stood up. His glazed eyes stared wildly. Then raving soundlessly, a gaunt scarecrow, he stumbled past the ghostly corral and through the tree-lined street of the phantom town.

Water gurgled in ditches on either side of the street bringing life to spaced trees. Donovan shut his eyes, unable to endure that murmuring torture. Instantly, when his eyes were closed, a breath of wind hot as from an opened oven fanned his blistered cheeks.

A woman passed soundlessly leading a tow-headed child, both real as Donovan himself. Her face was hidden in the shadow of a big poke sunbonnet. A quaint dress flowed to her heels. Red Donovan thrust out an appealing hand.

"Lady! Help—see—I gotta have—"

She heard him! Brown eyes, wide and kind, smiled at Red Donovan. His hand, clutching at the pink gingham of her sleeve, passed through colored shadow. Staring, stone-still, the stricken man saw the woman moving away slow and stately, along the silent street.

Other people, then, peered out from doorways and windows at Red Donovan as he passed. All of those faces were happy and kind and smiling. But they looked at Red Donovan with complete absence of pity. Only two children, leaving their play in a quiet garden, pointed chubby fingers at the scarecrow fugitive. And the children laughed, happy laughter without sound, watching Red Donovan with clear, innocent eyes.

Almost at the edge of the barren desert, a big two-story frame building reared a square fake front. A wide porch faced a raised plank sidewalk above the dusty street. Two chairs tilted against the wall on the porch. There was a vague impression of movement inside. A few bearded men came to the open door of the old-fashioned country store. Blurred faces stared at the newcomer through the one big window.

A little knot of men gathered outside on the porch. One old man, booted feet dangling over the edge of the boardwalk, whittled a thick staff. He glanced up casually, smiling faintly as Donovan staggered near. Red Donovan could go no further. He leaned wearily against a long hitching rack — leaned right through a wooden rail that seemed solid, and fell, sprawling, on dusty sand.

He lay on his back with his face up-

turned. Through closed lids he could see the sky, red, like a bowl of heated metal. Something touched his shoulder. Above the roaring in his ears he could hear the urgent tones of a man's voice calling to him. But he knew there was nothing. Nothing in all the world but sun, sand, and smooth glassy sky.

"Drink, friend," the voice said very faintly. "You will feel better then."

Red Donovan moaned and shuddered away from the ghostly hand. His tongue, swollen and dark, lolled from cracked lips that were stiff with his own dried blood. Glazed eyes fixed on the apparition—a frail old man with longish white hair under a wide-brimmed hat. Blue eyes glinted in a brown face netted with ageless wrinkles.

"Drink," the old man insisted.

Donovan knew that his hands could never clutch the phantom canteen. The old man's face, quaint as the shadow fixed on an old daguerrotype, wavered in the heat-haze, merely an image of tortured imagination. But no! Red Donovan's clawing fingers touched something real and solid!

WATER gurgled from the vent of the canteen, ease for his tortured throat. Donovan gulped and choked, and gulped greedily again. His lips were scarcely wet when the canteen was snatched away from his shaking hands.

"Gimme!" he tried to say, mumbling lips voicing merely an inarticulate whine. "Damn it! You gimme—!"

Frantically he clawed at the old man's retreating arms. Savage disappointment twisted Donovan's face. His hands drew back, trembling. The old man had not moved. Shrewd, friendly blue eyes did not even blink. Illusion, or real? Donovan did not know. He feared the frightful test of touch, the agony of proof that his senses lied.

"Later," the old man said gravely, "you shall have more. You will die, friend, if you are too greedy now."

It seemed to Red Donovan that the words became clearer, more distinct. He could even see the vision, man or ghost, in more exact detail. The old man wore a faded shirt of rough cloth, blue overalls and patched boots. Behind him a pack-laden burro stood patiently with drooping muzzle beside the hitching rack.

"You can get up. Lean on me."

Red Donovan grasped an extended hand, lean and hard. Real! Solid! No ghostly image of the mirage! The old man's arms seemed thin and frail, yet there was quiet power in that steady hand.

The grizzled burro lazily twitched long ears in the bright sunlight. The phantom street where Donovan had stumbled raving did seem to be real and earthly now. Faint sounds assailed his ears—quiet speech and laughter, delicate and faint. From everywhere echoed that damned thin ghostly laughter.

Red Donovan weakly leaned on the old prospector's shoulder, upborne by quiet force that, even now, did not seem quite material — some power other than the strength that resides in bone and muscle.

The old man clucked, driving the laden burro before them along the street. They stopped outside a picket gate where a path led to a cabin set in a garden of phlox and hollyhocks.

It was all real enough now—the hollow thump of their feet on the scrubbed board floor of the kitchen and the cool peace inside the cabin. The gray-haired woman in a wicker rocker peered, questioning, over the square rims of spectacles set on her button nose.

"Our friend has been lost on the sand," the old prospector told the woman. "He has suffered, mother. He needs care."

The woman smiled. Fine wrinkles crumpled the corners of kindly, faded eyes.

"Then why do you keep the poor man standing there? Get him into bed—it's all made up and ready for him. I'll see what else is needed—"

Quietly bustling she arose and threw open a door to show a wide four-poster bed draped with curtains in an adjacent room. The semi-darkness was heavenly pleasant after the torturing glare. Donovan fell on the bed. His eyes closed. He was only dimly aware that the old man cut the shoes from his swollen feet. The woman brought a cup.

"Another sip," said the old man cheerfully. "Then sleep, friend, and we'll make a new man of you!"

Red Donovan gulped. Never had plain water tasted so damned good! He shut his eyes blissfully.

"More after awhile."

That was okay. Everything was jake now. Donovan lay still. He heard, rather vaguely, the old man and the woman stirring about the kitchen.

Disconnected words — "lost -- another chance—" failed to carry any meaning to Donovan's brain.

IT MUST have been a long time before the little old woman with crinkly eyes stood beside the bed. Red Donovan, awakening, stared at her feeling helpless and confused under her steady gaze. He was still in that funny old high bed, his body covered with a patchwork counterpane. Chintz curtains were drawn back, admitting spears of sunlight that now had no terrors. Everything in the room looked neat and spotless like the old lady, and like her kind of faded too.

"So you're better, eh? That's fine. You've been a sick man, I tell you. And no wonder!"

Delicious smells from the kitchen reached Donovan's twitching nostrils—something cooking on the big, old-fashioned range.

"You said it, lady!" he gasped weakly. Vague remnants of delirium terror threatened the peace of that quiet chamber. "I—I musta been nuts! Hell! What I can remember, I musta been sick as a dog—"

"Out of your mind," the old lady told him, smiling.

"Jeez, I feel swell now." A hint of reviving mystery troubled him. "Say—what—where is this burg? I dunno."

"Salvation Wells? It's named for the big spring, the only sweet water this side of the mountains."

Red Donovan frowned, trying to think. Shreds of terrible memories fluttered in his mind like colored pennants, nightmare visions—Pete—the flaming desert—before that, the stickup in Mojave.

"You've been in trouble," said the little old lady softly. "Ah, what a pity!"

"Yeah?" Donovan's eyes narrowed with ugly suspicion. "How'd ya figger that out?"

"Fever," she told him simply. "You couldn't help talking, but never fear. You are safe with us."

She went into the kitchen. Donovan leaned back on fresh pillows, his dark thoughts running like questing rats in and out of a maze of risky possibilities. Would he have to kill her—and the old man too? Sure, even in a hick dump like this they'd have radios. They'd grab news right out of the air. Maybe the old mug in the Stetson was figuring, even now, how he could spend the reward.

Something screwy somewhere! Still, at that, the funny old dame couldn't really be sure he was a man with a price on his head. They'd have to wait to find out.

Donovan's shifty eyes glimpsed his clothes neatly folded over the back of a chair. And there, beside the bed, was his gun and—the money!

The stolen bills, neatly stacked, left in plain sight like that! Stealthily Red Donovan's hand crawled toward the gun. He

broke it open beneath the patchwork coverlet. Loaded still—four chambers—one empty shell!

They hadn't touched a thing. What did that mean? Hastily he stowed the money out of sight under the lifted edge of the husk-filled mattress.

The old woman, sunbonnet on her head, looked in at the door. She carried a wicker basket swung on one arm.

"If you feel strong enough, you might dress yourself. It'll do you good to sit on the porch awhile."

Slowly Donovan drew on his clothes freshly washed and ironed. He didn't feel so good, up on his feet. Still weak and dizzy—and he couldn't seem to remember—Aw, hell! No two ways about it, he must have been plenty goofy! Even now it was hard to believe that there wasn't something all wrong.

He could see all of Salvation Wells from the porch. Not much of a dump, at that. A tiny town of one street, a green oasis watered from the flowing well. People were at work in small gardens, or going in or out of the general store. A queer flock of nuts, Donovan thought, amused. All dressed funny. Mormons, maybe—settled down from a long time ago.

The women all wore long dresses buttoned to their necks. All the men were bearded to the eyebrows. A goofy-looking bunch of hicks, everyone with that silly grin plastered on his face! Hell, they *couldn't* know anything about that business back at Mojave, or they wouldn't be turning him loose when they'd had him down. Not this way, with a loaded rod in his pants.

Beyond the sharp limits of the green oasis, sterile plains gashed by bone-dry arroyos swept to a horizon of distant purple haze. At only two points was the infinite circle broken where craggy mountains piled low against turquoise sky.

Red Donovan, feeling stronger, walked along the one short street. Children stared and smiled with disarming friendliness. A young woman nodded in neighborly fashion from an open doorway. Red Donovan chuckled grimly thinking how different it would be if they suspected that death, chill and merciless, had stumbled in among them.

Contempt grew with assurance of temporary safety. The boobs! He had money—some of them must have seen it—enough to buy a dozen such dumps. And they hadn't pinched a nickel! They trusted him—him, Red Donovan! Just as if he was one of themselves, one of their own screwy layout, whatever that was!

Yeah, he'd sure got away with murder. Anyway, for awhile.

FAR out across the plain a horseman appeared riding in toward the little town. Shimmering head distorted the approaching image. Sometimes the horse loped with monstrous strides above the crystalline desert floor; sometimes it shrank to the size of a crawling insect.

Red Donovan, resting on the wide wooden porch of the store, intently watched the approaching rider with wary, slitted eyes. He shifted position to free the gun in his hip pocket. One of the queer townsmen—or bad news?

Then, relieved, he saw presently that the man on horseback wore the baggy homespuns that clothed the men of Salvation Wells.

The stranger's face was powdered with desert dust. Across his saddle were two small leather sacks. A short-handled prospector's pick protruded from a blanket roll lashed behind the saddle.

The horseman nodded to Donovan as he dismounted, unfastened one of the sacks and carried it inside the store. A moment later he reappeared in the doorway.

"Hi, friend!" he called. "Will you drink?"

Donovan grinned assent. Inside, the prospector led the way to a plank counter.

"Now, ain't this something?" Donovan said. "Where's your sign? How'n hell did I know a guy could get alky here?"

"We sell about everything," the bearded storekeeper said cheerfully. He wiped his hands on his blue denim apron. "Everything folks might need—from buttons to babies."

Donovan laughed. The sun-browned horseman lifted his glass.

"Here's luck!"

"Down the hatch!" Donovan answered.

He licked his lips and set down the empty glass. It had a kick—that stuff. Couldn't name it—some kinda local hooch. So they weren't so screwy, at that!

"Do any good, Jake?" the paunchy storekeeper asked the miner casually.

"Not bad." The miner patted the heavy sack on the counter. "And more outside. Weigh it up and see what it comes to."

THE storekeeper methodically set scales on the counter, untied buckskin strings, and ladled out precious yellow dust with a sugar scoop. Red Donovan's eyes fixed on the weighted balance—bulged incredulously. Gold! Precious dust in both sacks! And the bearded boob had left one outside!

"That does it fine. A hundred-eighteen, a teeny bit more or less."

From under the plank counter the storekeeper lifted a wooden box filled with fruit jars. Some were empty, others were filled to the brim. Two held only rough nuggets. Carelessly he tipped the scales. Gold—dull yellow dust—spilled into a jar. The storekeeper pushed the box back under the counter.

"Say!" Donovan, startled beyond caution, voiced his profound amazement.

"Ain'tcha gonta lock that stuff up, or something?"

The storekeeper and the bearded miner laughed together as though Donovan had said something amusing and absurd.

"That ain't funny," Donovan objected sulkily. "What I mean, ya can't tell who's got sticky fingers, see?"

They seemed to puzzle out the idea slowly. The storekeeper explained.

"He hasn't been with us long enough. He wouldn't know."

The tall miner then went out. Donovan heard him talking and laughing with someone outside. He turned, almost fiercely, and surprised a maddening smile playing about the paunchy storekeeper's lips.

"Listen!" Red Donovan demanded. "What kind of a dump is this, anyway? I wanta know—what the hell goes on here?"

"Living," the storekeeper answered gravely. "Just living."

"Yeah? That ain't what I'm askin', see? Ya can't tell me there ain't somethin' screwy about this burg. I been around. I know these mining camp's, and this ain't like none o' them! S'pose something went wrong, see? S'pose somebody burned somebody down—"

"Here? Why?"

"And I s'pose," Red Donovan sneered, "ya don't never need no cops, huh? Whadaya do if somebody busts loose wide open?"

"Breaks the law, you mean? Oh, then—why, you see, we only have one law. And those who can't keep it just leave, one way or another."

"Oh, yeah? Some law!"

"Honor your neighbor," the paunchy storekeeper said quietly smiling. "That's all. Now, friend, I think these men have come to see you."

Red Donovan whipped about. Unconsciously his hand flashed to his hip.

Instantly he felt foolish. There seemed to be no menace in the calm faces of the first old men who filed through the door. One he recognized—the old prospector who had taken a dying stranger into his house.

"Friend," the prospector said, "the time has come to try you. These good men are the Elders of this town."

"So what?" Wary, suspicious, Donovan searched the faces of the five virile old men. "What's in the bag—some kinda kangaroo court?"

One of the Elders answered. Wise eyes under a massive forehead glanced fleetingly into Donovan's tense, set face.

"It may be, friend, you mistake our intent. We give you this chance to make an honest decision. Out there"—his extended palm seemed to indicate the wide desert, and all beyond—"there is continual strife and trouble. Here is peace. Do you want to leave, or will you be one of us?"

"I see. Askin' me to take a powder. Well—what's the catch if I decide to stay?"

"You will only be asked to keep our law."

Red Donovan laughed harshly. Nuts! Yeah, they sure were a hot delegation. Wanting him to join up with their mob! Well, that was okay. Leave? Not with that gold lying loose all over the place! No—when he pulled out he'd be dragging heavy!

"You know our law?" the prospector asked.

"'Honor your neighbor'," Red Donovan quoted glibly.

"And you accept?"

"Sure! It's the berries. Ya got something there."

Hell, it wasn't even good fun to kid these loonies. It gave him the creeps somehow. Oh, well—he could stand it just a little longer. Lay low. Play wise. Watch

his chance, then lam! Who could stop him when he had the only gat in the whole damn dump?

"It will not be easy, Red Donovan," the old prospector solemnly warned. Donovan jumped—stared, wide-eyed at the smiling old man. "But if you want peace, friend, we shall help you to forget all that you are and have been."

"All what?" Red Donovan snapped with flaring terror.

"You remember what happened in Mojave?"

"I—say, what is this?" Donovan cried fiercely. "A gag? Well, if you know so much, whatdaya know? Spill it!"

His throat tightened with choking apprehension. They were so quiet — too damned quiet! Putting the finger on him! What was behind all this screwball business? Why didn't they fear him? Just let them try to start something! They'd learn tricks no gang of hayseeds ever knew—

"We do not judge you." The prospector spoke, smiling gravely. "In Mojave you held up a bank and you killed a man. You and your partner fled into the desert. You wrecked your car in an arroyo that you didn't see in time. You were pursued. You tried to walk all the way across Death Valley. Your partner died because you deserted him just before you found your way into our midst. You see, Red Donovan, there is no deed, here, to keep secrets."

"Third degree stuff, huh?" Donovan sneered. "Why don'tcha ask me to sign it?"

"Friend," the prospector said, "we mean you no harm." He laid a frail old hand on Red Donovan's quivering shoulder. And Donovan felt a vague stirring of mystery and a fear that had nothing in common with his dread of the law—fear of some unknown power that could be unleashed at a word; an unknown force with

the aspect of sympathy, therefore all the more to be distrusted. "You were lost when you found us. Confused. Here it does not matter at all what you did out there. Think of all that as though it was never real, only illusion."

"Yeah? Well, talk plain! None o' that hearts an' flowers stuff. What ya gettin' at?"

"A new beginning. A chance. Learn that it is better to live in friendship with fellow men."

"No strings? Ya won't turn me in to the bulls?"

"Forget that you were ever Red Donovan."

"I getcha—change my monicker and live here like nothin' happened."

"By your own free will, of course." The prospector smiled. "We do not compel you to keep our law. But you want to stay?"

"Oh, sure—I wanna stay, all right." Donovan grinned hypocritically, trying to match the smile in the clear eyes of the bearded townsmen. "Yeah—count me in!"

"Dwell in peace then, friend," the old prospector told him solemnly.

The Elders all shook hands with Red Donovan and, in turn, with each other. Red Donovan had never felt so goofy in his life. Him throwing the gam with these screwballs! Dopes! Next thing, maybe, they'd be asking him to give up the gat. But he'd say he chucked the rod in the lake. Give them a spiel—anyway, it wouldn't be much longer now.

Strange! There wasn't a wire running out of the place. Well, they could have a short wave set, maybe. He had a hunch no sheriff could get to the dump in less than two days. And before they could put over a fast one Red Donovan would be missing.

Baby—and how!

Just before sunrise Red Donovan stooped over the big water-hole and

carefully filled a canteen. All the rest had been easy. The big front door of the store hadn't even been locked. The whole town slept. No one had heard him or seen him. Damn near too easy! The boys in 'Frisco wouldn't believe it. It was about all he could do, even now, to believe it himself.

The first shards of sunlight splintered on the highest peaks of distant mountains lifted above purple haze. How far? Maybe two days hard going. But he'd play wise. No burning his gizzard out this time under the blazing sun of Death Valley. Get gone out of sight, hole in, and do his heavy hoofing at night. That was the ticket. And if anyone of those bearded Mormons wanted to follow, he'd feed the buzzards.

High on his back Donovan carried a pack with a blanket, food and a fortune. Gold—heavy, crude nuggets and dull yellow dust! Say twenty-five thousand. Besides, twenty grand in bills were packed in neat layers under his shirt—all the swag he had taken out of Mojave.

Tough going, but it would be even worse than death to stick in a dead burg like Salvation Wells. Way outa the world—them that liked it could have it! Another two days and he would have gone nuts himself. What a laugh the boys in 'Frisco would have when he told them about them damned billy-goat Elders!

Two days to the mountains. In maybe a week after that, he'd be burning city lights. The heat would be on about that Mojave business, but even if he took a pinch he'd beat the rap. That would be easy fixed. Red Donovan, shooting high, riding the ball!

He'd got the breaks. Maybe, at that, there wasn't so much in the rough stuff. Maybe he'd think about crashing a neat little racket. A hot night-spot, say, with plenty of dames, and the boobs rolling up asking out loud for a cleaning.

A man's shadow fell across the still surface of the pool.

Red Donovan twisted about, fury contorting his face. The old prospector stood by his grizzled burro. The animal bore a pack with a light pick and shovel strapped to the load.

"*You!*" Donovan snarled.

"Leaving us, eh?" the old man asked quietly.

Donovan saw the shrewd, faded eyes glint as they fixed on the blanket containing the stolen gold.

"So what?" Donovan challenged, his lips a thin, ugly line. "I changed my mind, see?"

"I am afraid, friend, that you will find your burden heavy." The old man's tone was not hostile, but very gentle. "Even too heavy, Red Donovan. Are you quite sure that you want to go back?"

"Try and stop me—just try!"

"You forget. Our law would not permit me to limit your free will by force, even though I could easily—"

"You could, like hell!" Murderous fury, a creeping poison, heated Donovan's brain. "I'm sayin', lug, this whole dump couldn't stop me! Yeah, and I gotta rod to say so! I'm fed up with this damned nut farm! Scram, screwball! I'm on my way, see?"

An idea—the burro would be useful! Slow, but with extra water there need not be any risk.

The prospector reached out a frail, brittle old hand to touch Red Donovan's sleeve. The pressure exerted no weight, but once again Donovan felt a creepy outflow of limitless power. Chill sweat dampened his forehead. Cursing wildly, he flung off the restraining hand.

"There can be no return."

The old man stood quietly looking at Donovan with shadowed, pitying eyes. He toppled over without a sound when Red Donovan's clenched fist crashed brutally against the bearded chin. The burro, shy-

ing, bolted away back toward the town.

"T'ell with that, then!" Donovan muttered.

Better get going before the whole damned town came yelping after him. With twenty yards start, he glanced back over his shoulder. The prospector lay still, loose as a tumbled bundle of empty clothes.

BEFORE the sun was an hour high, glistening sand crystals flung dazzling fire into the pulsing air. Donovan felt slightly dizzy.

Sweat bathed his body. The heavy pack chafed his back. Behind him the town, indistinct, warped oddly through the heat haze, growing more and more dreamlike and ghostly as the sun climbed the metallic sky.

Donovan plodded on. Now and then he glanced over his shoulder. Neither town nor oasis were there any more. Damn funny! He could see the black line of the distant arroyo where Pete Spinelli had fallen. And there was nothing between—no houses, no cottonwood trees, no water! Nothing—only colored sand glowing with heat and a few scattered greasewood bushes!

As far as he could see he was the one living thing on the face of the desert, the center of a vast circle utterly lonely.

At least the distant mountains were real! *They* had not changed! And Donovan walked toward the mountains. Yes, as long as the mountains stayed there he couldn't be lost—he'd know, anyway, where he was heading—

He didn't remember how or when he had lost his hat—before he saw the mirage, or afterwards.

Pain, like a steel clamp, tightened about his forehead. He had better rest, seek shadow, save strength for the night when pitiless sun stopped sucking moisture from his body. What a fool to keep going, like

a hunted man, when there was no one—nothing—to follow!

The pack was too heavy to lug any further. What if he buried it, marked by a pile of rocks? He could always come back to his little cache. Like that guy—yeah, Death Valley Scotty—the lug with a pal-ace—never caught in a jam like this—

Crouched in the black shadow of a little wash, Donovan unscrewed the cap of the canteen dipped full from the water-hole at Salvation Wells. He raised the canteen to his lips—coughed, and spat. In his mouth there was only the bitter taste of dry alkali dust.

He hurled the dust-filled canteen aside. Soon then he began running. Back—the town wasn't—couldn't—be far! He had to find it! It was there—he'd been in it! That morning—not long ago!

There was water—there—at the edge of the town. Only he couldn't reach it. It

was all dim and kept getting dimmer—the sleepy desert town, the calm pool, the burro, the old prospector standing there so quietly watching Red Donovan die—

"Let me in!" Donovan howled, the words stifled in his swollen, blistered throat. "Damn you—you devils—let—me—in—"

The wide plane of the desert and the deep bowl of the sky met and were sealed at the horizon. In all that empty world of shimmering crystal there was now no moving thing.

Presently, a tiny black speck began drifting lazily downward.

A hot wind from the mountains stirred the sand, set dust-devils to whirling, fantastic shapes like shifting smoke amid the crash of broken prisms of color. The sand whispered, a dry flinty sound like the scratching of dead twigs—
