



This is the country that held the padre back from the edge of death. Ringed by the lofty Sierra Nevadas, the desert no longer threatens to revert to sage and sand, now blooms in the springtime.

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farmer who had grown this alfalfa was now abandoned, the glass broken out of the windows, the doors groaning on one hinge in the wind. The schoolhouse that had burned down had never been rebuilt. The roads that had led him to outlying farms had reverted to nature. The railroad tracks that had carried the cars of Owens Valley produce to Los Angeles were rusty threads in a wilderness. The Owens River, once a robust stream, deep with the snow waters of the Sierras, was but a trickle in a dry stream bed, the cottonwoods dead along its bank.

Water, mused the priest, water was one of God's greatest gifts. With it, the pioneers had turned this strip of land between two gigantic ranges into a garden. Deprived of water, the valley and its people with it were perishing.

No people less deserved such a cruel fate, Father Crowley knew, than these pioneers who had trudged their resolute way across the plains and settled the valley in the same year that the Civil War had begun in the East. During the first year, the Indians attacked with arrows; nearly everything died—the fruit trees, the grain, the livestock. But they were indomitable; they shivered and starved through the winter, and when spring came they plowed and planted again. More families came; schools were built, irrigation ditches dug; little towns sprang up along the road; board houses replaced log cabins. The cattle multiplied; the children grew up and married and multiplied; Owens Valley grew in population and riches and strength.

Then the promoters of Los Angeles had decided that the Owens Valley watershed could supply enough water to make their own sun-baked town a great world metropolis; soon the melting snows of the Sierras were being diverted from Owens Valley to the desert of San Fernando Valley and Los Angeles, two hundred and twenty miles away. Owens Valley was abandoned to

its fate by the national and state governments, by the more intractable and faint-hearted of its residents, who sold out and abandoned the farms and homes they had created with their own hands.

Father Crowley, too, had abandoned the country a decade before, believing it to be doomed. He, too, had moved on to more fertile fields, leaving his first land and people to succumb to attrition. He had simply been doing his duty when, recognized for his work in building three churches in a section that had been attended only by visiting pastors, he had answered the call to become chancellor of the new Monterey-Fresno diocese. But, lying on his back in a hospital bed ten years later, he realized that he had been interested in his own people and not all the people of Owens Valley; that he had thrown his tremendous energies into building churches, and not communities; that he had carved out of the desert a career for himself rather than a career for Owens Valley which might have rendered it indestructible. He had traveled day and night in rough stagecoaches, without sleep or food or the simple refinements of life, in a Herculean effort to administer each week to every part of his 17,000 square miles of parish. He had lived an irreproachable life of austerity and devotion. Judged in the midst of his youth, he had thought he was doing well. Seen from the vantage point of a decade and of a world collapsed, Father Crowley believed that he had done only half enough.

As chancellor of a new diocese, he had helped build, at an amazing rate of speed, churches, a cathedral, hospitals and schools. He had been enormously successful. Then had come the stock-market crash in 1929, the impoverishment of his community, the inability to meet bank loans, his stepping down from the chancellorship, his intimacy with death. He was no longer a businessman desiring to create an empire in terms of wood and stone and steel; he wanted to build in terms of the spirit, of the happiness of human souls.

When the bishop had come to him in the hospital in Bakersfield and asked, "My son, what one last favor can the Church grant you?" he had replied, "Let me go back to Owens Valley to die." But in his heart was the determination not to die until he had enjoyed a reprieve sufficiently long to enable him to expiate his sins of omission. He intended to die in Owens Valley, but not quite yet.

He determined, standing again on the parched earth of the valley, with Mount Whitney towering fourteen thousand five hundred feet above him, that the water must be returned to Owens Valley, its land must be made green again, its people called home. He did not know how, yet the resolution made him strong. By the end of the second month he felt well enough to pitch into his work; each day brought added strength, and Father Crowley had no more thought of dying.

He became a familiar sight on the streets of Lone Pine, Independence and Bishop, and on the dirt roads of Inyo and Mono counties, in his Army shirt with khaki riding pants and puttees; a medium tall, huskily built man, a little bandy-legged, with his right arm held out from the body because it had been broken at the elbow in a baseball game when he was a child, and never properly set.

First he was a man of the cloth, and his first efforts belonged to the church. He said Mass at six o'clock on Sunday morning in the majesty of Death Valley, his vestments over his khaki. At seven, he rolled up the caucok neatly, jumped into his sand-colored flivver and began the 100-mile drive out of Death Valley, where he was below sea level, over the staggeringly bare Panamint Range, on which he had to climb up to five thousand feet, down again to sea level in the Panamint sink, then up once again to four thousand feet to get over the pass of the Inyo Mountain Range, before dropping into Lone Pine to say Mass at nine o'clock. He had exactly two hours between Masses to make