

Story of the Birth of "Sage and Tumbleweed"

Sage and Tumbleweed

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by *Inyokel

The Padre came up the trail today having parked his Ford in the sagebrush near Lone Pine Canyon road. Few find their way to this old desert rat's nest in the red rocks of the Alabamas, so I speculated on the somehow familiar figure in khaki breeches and puttees swinging easily along my private labyrinth. When he spoke, I knew him. Ten years had slipped by since last he climbed to my eyrie and we had smoked a pipe together as we watched the alpenglow on the tip of Cerro Gordo. There had been many priests here before, good men all, sent by those who govern such things to preach to us weatherbeaten sinners, baptize the little dusky Mejicanos, and pray and suffer in this cruel land. That this Padre was the first to return for more than a visit, "I asked to be allowed to come back, Inyokel," he began, using the sobriquet he had coined for me a decade ago, "and my Bishop was good enough to let me come. I know now how truly Mary Austin wrote of Inyo in her *Land of Little Rain*: 'if one is inclined to wonder at first how so many dwellers came to be in the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands, what they do there, and why they stay, one does not wonder so much after living there. None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections. The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the



luminous radiance of the spring have the lotus charm. They trick the sense of time, so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have not done it. Men who have lived there, miners and cattlemen, will tell you this, not so fluently, but emphatically, cursing the land and going back to it.' I stayed too long when first I came, Inyokel, and so I'm back." My hand went out and clasped his again in the grip of fellowship. I understood.

And so we came to sit once more on the natural armchairs of ruddy granite, upholstered with saddle blankets, that grace my portico. There were long stretches of conversation, mostly prompted by his questions, and longer silences, during which we both meditated upon the ways of God and men. At least I hope he thought about the ways of God. I know he ejaculated, "God rest them," again and again as we called the roll of those who had been laid in the little graveyard beyond the town. It seemed to me that a wistful look crept into his eyes as he murmured, 'And old Mrs. Olivas and Angel Duarte too.'

We deplored the passing of the Lone Pine we used to know, where every shack of weathered siding and tar-paper was hidden in a bower of hollyhock and honeysuckle and purpling grapes, but where now the gaudy neon signs, and the stench of auto exhausts proclaim that the years and the pavement have brought the city to the *Pueblo de las Uvas*. But we invariably reverted to silence when we chanced to mention one who had sold his ranch or home to "The City," or when I pointed out a vanished "farm" still limned by skeletons of trees, "Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." 'Tis just another chapter in the history of Inyo, Inyokel," he concluded. "God only knows what her future will be, but for us there is nothing to do but to carry on. St. Charles Borromeo used to say that 'one soul is enough for a diocese,' and as long as there are souls in Inyo a priest must be in their midst to offer sacrifice, to christen and shrive, to marry and to bury. What you and I may feel matters naught-the soul of the tourist, the packer, the service station attendant, and the hotel clerk are as precious to Almighty God as if the bodies in which they dwell were swinging a single-jack, curling a riata, or following a plow." Then he suddenly added, "I wish you would do it." "Do what?" I asked, removing my pipe and preparing to refill it. "Write a little bit every week about Inyo, her story, her"-I dropped my tobacco can. He chuckled. "But I mean it. You know Inyo, and you can tell a tale well. Why do you think I called you Inyokel so long ago? Because, bumpkin that you are, you personify Inyo to me. Under your sometimes outlandish but unquenchable humor you hide a wealth of those riches that all men seek, the nuggets of wisdom. Such to me is Inyo. Beneath the harsh laughter of her desertness, the unending necromancy of her contrasts, there lies much that men have loved and fought and died for. And by that I do not mean mere gold. The world knows all about Death Valley Scotty. Tell it about the heroism of Manly, who named that sink of dread, and of Mrs. Brier of the forty-niners and Mrs. McGuire of Haiwee. Write, as you can, of the inferno of our wastelands, but add that you have lain in our mountain meadows in beds of columbine and scarlet gentian and Queen Anne's lace. Tell them-" I got up courage enough to stop him. "But what business have I writing? Look at these calloused paws. A pencil-" "Exactly," he broke in, "that's it. Tell the world how your paws became calloused. Tell them of Ballarat and Greenwater and Skidoo. Lift the curtain on Cerro Gordo, where they 'had a dead man for breakfast every morning.' Don't worry about your spelling. I'll help you with that, and cross your t's and dot your i's."



'And what would your Riverince call the mulligan that you expect this hard-rock man to turn out week after week for your good pleasure?" It was a stall, as I was sparring for time. But I had the wrong man. He knew all the answers. "Sage and Tumbleweed", he countered quick as a flash. "Sage, because it covers most of Inyo; sage, because it seems to this poor listener that there is a touch of the sage about you, Inyokel. In your apparently aimless knocking on the outcroppings you occasionally hit a paystreak. And to allow for the other and larger part of your nature, add the tumbleweed, that species of amaranthus that, when dry, is uprooted by the wind and dances about the countryside, pausing at someone's line fence till the next breeze sends it tumbling and pirouetting o'er the waste, a clown of the desert. That's you, Inyokel, sage and tumbleweed, savant and mountebank!" "I'll think it over," I murmured. There was nothing else I could say.

'And if you want a story that breathes of Inyo," he ended, pointing to the silvered shafts of sunlight from behind Williamson as the signal for his departure, relate what happened to me at one of my missions on the first visit. I found a likely looking lad ready to serve my Mass. "Do you know the Latin?" I asked. 'Naw,' came the prompt rejoinder. 'I just pack the book around and feed you the wine and water and stuff.'"

*Inyokel – Fr. Crowley's pen name.