

WHISPERING SAGE



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CHAPTER I.

BODINE BUYS A RANCH.

The scorching rays of the noonday sun beat down upon the Nevada desert.

"Across the waste two tiny specks moved. Save for them all life seemed dead. Both horses and men were gray with dust. The men's throats were brick dry; and yet the taller of the two hummed a song. Ahead of them green trees beckoned."

Abruptly they began climbing the bench lands. The country of the Little Washoe burst upon them. Paradise Valley spread out in a gigantic horseshoe. A range, the Santa Rosas, banked three sides of it, the never-falling willows marking where Rebel Creek came tumbling out of the hills at the apex of the horseshoe.

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Buck and Shorty edged to the bar and waited. One-eyed Manuel, the Mexican bartender, was busy elsewhere. The delay jarred Bodine. Catching the butt of his glowing cigarette between thumb and forefinger, he shot it straight as a bullet into Manuel's face.

Manuel's head trembled as he set out the glasses for the two strangers. He smiled craftily.

The incident had passed quite unnoticed by the crowd. Wash Taylor, a grizzled old buck-skinner, had been one of the very few to observe it. He launched immediately. When Buck told him what he had acquired with alacrity,

Bodine drew from the old skinner the complete history of the valley, "a sort of lookin' round for a place," he was saying. "If I could find a small ranch hereabouts at the right price, I might be interested."

"The only place for sale in this hill country is the old Webster ranch. No one there at all now. I used to be there in the old days."

With a deprecating sigh, he called to his favorite place then. Hawkwood, down from where Hawkwood rode into the Webster. He had all the water. A cloudburst cleared that in one night. When it was all over, Hawkwood found the mouth of the Webster dammed up like a man-made lake.

"When I got home, I went to see Hawkwood again ever since," Bodine explained to Hawkwood. "Buck doesn't know where Hawkwood is."

"Hawkwood's gone up the ship. He's running a show down in Goldena, according to last reports."

Shorty and Buck came down from the hills, and stopped at the deserted ranch. On the morning of the second day they called Shorty to his studio. "I'm going to see Webster," he said. "He's as bad as the county records. If Webster made a filing in his name, I'd go to him to buy him out. If I go to Goldena to see Webster, I mightn't come back by then, you'd think. And get away, and go over into the McCloud Lake country."

Five days later Bodine returned, behind him lumbered a freighter, flinging the tools and necessities of life. Shorty shook his head. No need to ask; Bodine had done as he had said he would.

CHAPTER II.

ACKLIN BUYS A RANCH.

In a thinly-settled country, where every man's movements are marked, news spreads quickly. People talked and wondered about Bodine.

"Of all those who watched and wondered, no one was more interested than Dick Addin, the Big Boss of the Double A. He had been quite content to see old Webster go. For ten years the Double A had taken both, his own and his share of water from Rebel Creek."

He stood it as long as he could; and then, instead of boarding Bodine, he rode to the Rancho Buena Vista to see the Senor Arascadero. Jose was the most powerful of the Basque gentry.

The quiet, half-darkened house was a relief to Acklin after the noise and glare of the Bill's Head. Jose led him to the patio, where cool zephyrs seemed eternally playing. The old man clapped his hands, and the wrinkled, leathery Mariano, his mozo, or house-boy, came on the run. Jose sent him for refreshments.

"By the way, and Acklin's big, blue eyes glowed until they seemed to shade to gray, "have you seen the fellow who bought the old Webster place?"

"Several times. He's here to-day, down at the corral. Esteban, and the vaqueros are breaking horses."

A little lot of six, unnoticed by them as they talked, had felt his way upon the verandah. He was a beautiful child. His brown, staring eyes made a mute appeal to friend and foe.

For close to five years, Jose had been both father and mother to the little blind Basilio.

From the fence at the end of the patio, a magpie scolded in raucous tones. Basilio knew that particular magpie. In a flash he slid off the steps and ran down the gravelled walk of the patio.

When he had almost reached the

those foothills. The creek flowed over for that half-mile. That's right, ain't it?"

(To be continued.)

Styles & NETS

Paris — New York

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO AND JOSEPH NOEL

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