



Story of the day:

The California Missions

Mrs. Jackson sat on what used to be a part of a wall, around what used to be a garden. She had a notebook and a pen, and a keen memory. A green lizard darted out from a hole in the crumbling brick, caught a mosquito, and darted back in.

A very old Indian woman was squatting on the ground, with a clay pot between her knees. Some kernels of corn were in the pot, which she pounded and crushed with a stone. It wasn't much, but it

would do for a little corn-mush, for her dinner.

"It was better when the fathers were here," said the old woman. "It was so much better."

Mrs. Jackson looked up at the ruined bell tower, standing beside the ruined chapel. There wasn't even a bell in it anymore. The Americans who had taken over the land had no use for chapels and bells. They melted the metal down for the silver in it, and used the rest for whatever – crowbars, horseshoes, nails.

She had wandered over the mission, and many others like it. The olive trees were still alive, some of them, but untended, and choked with weeds. They still bore some fruit, and the Indians ate them, but they were bitter. Many years ago the Indians harvested the olives and squeezed them in the press to make oil. There was no olive-press now. That was smashed, and the Indians did not have the tools or the material

to repair it. But what good would it do if they had them? They did not own the land.

"Do you remember the olive oil?" asked Mrs. Jackson.

The old Indian woman took a deep breath. "I remember," she said. "The girls

used to crush wild roses and mix them with the oil, for perfume. We had oil for our lamps, and oil for our pans. And the father would use the best oil, clear as water, and make the sign of the cross on the baby's head. I remember when he did that for my daughter." Her daughter had died a long time ago. After the fathers were driven away, there was no good medicine anymore.

Mrs. Jackson had seen the foundation of the



building where the oil was made, and some of the big shards of broken pottery where they kept the oil. Why, they had made so much oil, they traded what they did not need in order to get what they could not provide for themselves, mostly iron, for tools: plows, axes, shovels, gears, cranks, levers.

It was a hard country, dry and dusty. When the fathers first came, you could hardly imagine people more miserable than an Indian tribe that had been overpowered

by its neighbor tribes. They had little to eat, and lived in constant fear, of hunger, sickness, war, slavery, and death. They prayed to their pagan gods, all in vain. At first they looked on the fathers as new enemies, and many a missionary gave up his life to bring the faith to the Indians, the Christian faith, and

a better and more human life. But eventually the wisdom and the goodness of the fathers won them over.

Mrs. Jackson knew it. She was not a Catholic. But she read the records of the missions – because the fathers kept exact count of what they had and what they produced. There was a time when the Indians at this mission held thousands and thousands of head of cattle, and sheep and goats. There was a time when the fields beyond, now scarred with cracks, like the open mouths of creatures who had died of thirst, had been fed water from the ditches the fathers made, and had borne grain, and fruit – oranges, lemons, figs.

“What do you drink now, dear?” asked Mrs. Jackson.

The old woman snorted. Some of the men

got drunk on mescal. It was a dry country. The wells that they had dug out in the time of the fathers were mostly full of mud. One well still worked, and so they got water from there. But it was a muddy water, and if you weren’t used to it, it would make you deathly ill.

“We used to have wine,” said the old woman.

That was another thing that the Indians had never known. Of course the fathers had to have oil, for anointing, and bread, for Holy

Communion. They had to have wine for the sacrament, too. And wine, which everybody drank, was good for your belly, and it was clean. The old woman glanced over toward what used to be a long alley bounded with trellises, where the fathers had first planted the grapevines. Some of the vines were still there, also mingled with

weeds, and they did bear some grapes. But the winepress had been smashed to pieces long ago, too.

What happened was simple enough. California was a part of Mexico, and the Mexican government supported the missions. That doesn’t mean that they gave them things. Mostly they took things from them, for taxes. But the fathers knew that Mexican soldiers were within a few days’ call, in case a hostile Indian tribe decided to make war on the Catholic Indians living at the missions. Things worked well for a long time. The fathers taught the Indians how to read. They taught them how to chant the prayers of the Mass. They taught them Latin, and some of the Indian boys went on to become priests themselves.

But Mexico and the United States went to

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war. I won't get into who was right and who was wrong, because that's not part of my story here. Mexico lost, and eventually California became a part of the United States. In all of the confusion, American settlers seized the land that had once belonged to the missions, and a whole way of life came to an end.

"What do you miss most of all?" asked Mrs. Jackson. She knew already what the answer would be. She had asked the same question everywhere she went, talking to the old Indians who remembered what life was like so long ago.

"I miss the happiness," said the old Indian.

She didn't have to spell it out. Mrs Jackson knew. The celebrations of Christmas and Easter, with the big bell ringing in the tower, and hundreds of Indians, men and women and children, coming to Mass in their colorful coats and shirts and hats and dresses, singing the hymns, with the altar boys, forty of them at a time, leading them with lighted candles, and the fathers . . . The fathers were *fathers*. They kept discipline, but that was because they loved the Indians. What father does not discipline his son? They were there to marry them, to baptize their children, to lead them in song whenever there was a feast – and there were so many feasts, so many good saints, and a Sunday every week.

"I can hardly remember the last Sunday," the old woman said, and tried to get up. Mrs. Jackson helped her. She too was not in good

health.

The white woman was Helen Hunt Jackson. She wasn't a Roman Catholic, but she admired what the Catholic missionaries had done, and she saw, with her own eyes, the ruins of their efforts, and she heard one old person after another tell her about how they lived in the old times. She wrote about what she saw in two books. One is a story you might read someday, called *Ramona*, about the mission fathers, the Indians they loved, and what happened after the land was taken away.



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