Ramona
Helen Hunt Jackson (1884)

Helen Hunt Jackson was a white American author who became an activist for the rights of indigenous Americans. In 1881, she published a nonfiction book, A Century of Dishonor*, which documented the US government's repeated breaking of treaties with indigenous nations. She followed up with a romantic novel,* Ramona*, which dramatized injustices suffered by indigenous people of California under US rule. Jackson hoped that* Ramona *would galvanize public support for indigenous rights, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel* Uncle Tom's Cabin *had done for the anti-slavery cause.* Ramona *was indeed popular, but its primary cultural impact was arousing fascination for California's Spanish colonial legacy.*

The novel is set in southern California sometime after the Mexican-American War. The titular character, Ramona Ortegna, is mestiza*, the daughter of an unnamed Gabrieleño woman and a Scottish merchant surnamed Phail; Ramona gets the surname Ortegna (=Orteña) from a wealthy Californio woman who rears Ramona in infancy. Though she grows up in the Californio elite, Ramona falls in love and elopes with a Luiseño sheepshearer named Alessandro. Alessandro's Luiseño band live in the Temecula valley, on land to which the Mexican government had given them informal title, without legal documentation. Consequently, a lawsuit in the US courts awards the land to white American settlers, and Alessandro's band are expelled.*

In the following selection, Ramona and Alessandro, now homeless, have traveled to San Diego to be married. To mark the end of her life as a wealthy Californio, Ramona reclaims her father's Scottish surname, Phail, and she uses as her first name Majella, a Hispanicization of the Luiseño word mahel*, which means "dove" (a pet name given her by Alessandro). The Spanish Catholic priest who marries Ramona/Majella and Alessandro becomes Jackson's morally authoritative mouthpiece as he denounces California's new American rulers.*

[T]heir fleet horses bore them so well that it was not late when they reached the town. Father Gaspara's house was at the end of a long, low adobe building, which had served no mean purpose in the old presidio days but was now fallen into decay; and all its rooms, except those occupied by the Father, had been long uninhabited. On the opposite side of the way, in a neglected, weedy open, stood his chapel—a poverty-stricken little place, its walls imperfectly whitewashed, decorated by a few coarse pictures and by broken sconces of looking-glass, rescued in their dilapidated condition from the mission buildings, now gone utterly to ruin. In these had been put candleholders of common tin, in which a few cheap candles dimly lighted the room. Everything about it was in unison with the atmosphere of the place—the most profoundly melancholy in all southern California. Here was the spot where that grand old Franciscan, Padre Junipero Serra, began his work, full of the devout and ardent purpose to reclaim the wilderness and its peoples to his country and his Church [...] Here he baptized his first Indian converts and founded his first mission. And the only traces now remaining of his heroic labors and hard-won successes were a pile of crumbling ruins, a few old olive trees and palms; in less than another century, even these would be gone, returned into the keeping of that mother, the earth, who puts no headstones at the sacredest of her graves.

Father Gaspara had been for many years at San Diego. [...] He had a nature at once fiery and

poetic; there were but three things he could have been—a soldier, a poet, or a priest. Circumstances had made him a priest; and the fire and the poetry which would have wielded the sword or kindled the verse, had he found himself set either to fight or to sing, had all gathered into added force in his priestly vocation. The look of a soldier he had never quite lost—neither the look nor the tread—and his flashing dark eyes, heavy black hair and beard, and quick elastic step seemed sometimes strangely out of harmony with his priest's gown. And it was the sensitive soul of the poet in him which had made him withdraw within himself more and more, year after year, as he found himself comparatively powerless to do anything for the hundreds of Indians that he would fain have seen gathered once more, as of old, into the keeping of the Church. He had made frequent visits to them in their shifting refuges, following up family after family, band after band, that he knew; he had written bootless letter after letter to the government officials, of one sort and another, at Washington. He had made equally bootless efforts to win some justice, some protection, for them from officials nearer home; he had endeavored to stir the Church itself to greater efficiency in their behalf. Finally, weary, disheartened, and indignant with that intense, suppressed indignation which the poetic temperament alone can feel, he had ceased—had said, "It is of no use; I will speak no word; I am done; I can bear no more!"—and settling down into the routine of his parochial duties to the little Mexican and Irish congregation of his charge in San Diego, he had abandoned all effort to do more for the Indians than visit their chief settlements once or twice a year to administer the sacraments. When fresh outrages were brought to his notice, he paced his room, plucked fiercely at his black beard, with ejaculations, it is to be feared, savoring more of the camp than the altar; but he made no effort to do anything. Lighting his pipe, he would sit down on the old bench in his tile-paved veranda and smoke by the hour, gazing out on the placid water of the deserted harbor, brooding, ever brooding, over the wrongs he could not redress. [...]

"Majella, the chapel is lighted; but that is good!" exclaimed Alessandro as they rode into the silent plaza. "Father Gaspara must be there"; and jumping off his horse, he peered in at the uncurtained window. "A marriage, Majella—a marriage!" he cried, hastily returning. "This, too, is good fortune. We need not wait long."

When the sacristan whispered to Father Gaspara that an Indian couple had just come in, wishing to be married, the Father frowned. His supper was waiting; he had been out all day, over at the old mission olive orchard, where he had not found things to his mind; the Indian man and wife whom he hired to take care of the few acres the Church yet owned there had been neglecting the Church lands and trees to look after their own. The Father was vexed, tired, and hungry, and the expression with which he regarded Alessandro and Ramona, as they came towards him, was one of the least prepossessing of which his dark face was capable. [...] But as his first glance fell on Ramona, Father Gaspara's expression changed.

"What is all this!" he thought; and as quick as he thought it, he exclaimed, in a severe tone, looking at Ramona, "Woman, are you an Indian?"

"Yes, Father," answered Ramona gently. "My mother was an Indian."

"Ah, half-breed!" thought Father Gaspara. "It is strange how sometimes one of the types will conquer, and sometimes another! But this is no common creature." And it was with a look of

new interest and sympathy on his face that he proceeded with the ceremony—the other couple, a middle-aged Irishman with his more than middle-aged bride, standing quietly by and looking on with a vague sort of wonder in their ugly, impassive faces, as if it struck them oddly that Indians should marry.

The book of the marriage records was kept in Father Gaspara's own rooms, locked up and hidden even from his old housekeeper. He had had bitter reason to take this precaution. It had been for more than one man's interest to cut leaves out of this old record, which dated back to 1769 and had many pages written full in the hand of Father Junipero himself.

As they came out of the chapel, Father Gaspara leading the way, the Irish couple shambling along shamefacedly apart from each other, Alessandro, still holding Ramona's hand in his, said, "Will you ride, dear? It is but a step."

"No, thanks, dear Alessandro, I would rather walk," she replied; and Alessandro slipping the bridles of the two horses over his left arm, they walked on.

Father Gaspara heard the question and answer and was still more puzzled. [...] Father Gaspara was a well-born man and, in his home in Spain, had been used to associations far superior to any which he had known in his Californian life, A gentle courtesy of tone and speech, such as that with which Alessandro had addressed Ramona, was not often heard in his parish. When they entered his house, he again regarded them both attentively. Ramona wore on her head the usual black shawl of the Mexican women. There was nothing distinctive, to the Father's eye, in her figure or face. In the dim light of the one candle—Father Gaspara allowed himself no luxuries—the exquisite coloring of her skin and the deep blue of her eyes were not to be seen. Alessandro's tall figure and dignified bearing were not uncommon. The Father had seen as many fine-looking Indian men. But his voice was remarkable, and he spoke better Spanish than was wont to be heard from Indians.

"Where are you from?" said the Father as he held his pen poised in hand, ready to write their names in the old rawhide-bound book.

"Temecula, Father," replied Alessandro.

Father Gaspara dropped his pen. "The village the Americans drove out the other day?" he cried.

"Yes, Father."

Father Gaspara sprang from his chair, took refuge from his excitement, as usual, in pacing the floor. "Go! Go! I'm done with you! It's all over," he said fiercely to the Irish bride and groom, who had given him their names and their fee but were still hanging about irresolute, not knowing if all were ended or not. "A burning shame! The most dastardly thing I have seen yet in this land forsaken of God!" cried the Father. "I saw the particulars of it in the San Diego paper yesterday." Then, coming to a halt in front of Alessandro, he exclaimed: "The paper said that the Indians were compelled to pay all the costs of the suit; that the sheriff took their cattle to do it. Was that true?"

"Yes, Father," replied Alessandro.

The Father strode up and down again, plucking at his beard. "What are you going to do?" he said. "Where have you all gone? There were two hundred in your village the last time I was there."

"Some have gone over into Pachanga," replied Alessandro, "some to San Pasquale, and the rest to San Bernardino."

"Body of Jesus, man! But you take it with philosophy!" stormed Father Gaspara.

Alessandro did not understand the word "philosophy," but he knew what the Father meant. "Yes, Father," he said doggedly. "It is now twenty-one days ago. I was not so at first. There is nothing to be done."

Ramona held tight to Alessandro's hand. She was afraid of this fierce, black-bearded priest who dashed back and forth, pouring out angry invectives.

"The United States government will suffer for it!" he continued. "It is a government of thieves and robbers! God will punish them. You will see, they will be visited with a curse—a curse in their borders; their sons and their daughters shall be desolate! But why do I prate in these vain words? My son, tell me your names again"; and he seated himself once more at the table where the ancient marriage record lay open.

After writing Alessandro's name, he turned to Ramona. "And the woman's?" he said.

Alessandro looked at Ramona. In the chapel, he had said simply, "Majella." What name should he give more?

Without a second's hesitation, Ramona answered, "Majella. Majella Phail is my name."

She pronounced the word "Phail" slowly. It was new to her. She had never seen it written; as it lingered on her lips, the Father, to whom also it was a new word, misunderstood it, took it be in two syllables, and so wrote it. The last step was taken in the disappearance of Ramona. How should anyone, searching in after years, find any trace of Ramona Ortegna in the woman married under the name of "Majella Fayeel"?

"No, no! Put up your money, son," said Father Gaspara as Alessandro began to undo the knots of the handkerchief in which his gold was tied. "Put up your money. I'll take no money from a Temecula Indian. I would the Church had money to give you. Where are you going now?"

"To San Pasquale, Father."

"Ah, San Pasquale! The headman there has the old pueblo paper," said Father Gaspara. "He was showing it to me the other day. That will, it may be, save you there. But do not trust to it, son. Buy yourself a piece of land as the white man buys his. Trust to nothing."

Alessandro looked anxiously in the Father's face. "How is that, Father?" he said. "I do not know."

"Well, their rules be thick as the crabs here on the beach," replied Father Gaspara, "and, faith, they appear to me to be backwards of motion also, like the crabs; but the lawyers understand. When you have picked out your land and have the money, come to me, and I will go with you and see that you are not cheated in the buying, so far as I can tell; but I myself am at my wit's ends with their devices. Farewell, son! Farewell, daughter!" he said, rising from his chair.

Hunger was again getting the better of sympathy in Father Gaspara, and as he sat down to his long-deferred supper, the Indian couple faded from his mind; but after supper was over, as he sat smoking his pipe on the veranda, they returned again and lingered in his thoughts [...]

Source: Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona: A Story* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), 311-318 (chap. 18), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwkn6l. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Some paragraph breaks adjusted. A run-on sentence broken up. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. The priestly title *Father* is consistently capitalized here though inconsistently so in the source publication. The words *presidio, mission, government,* and *southern* (in *southern California*), all capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase.

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