

RAMONA.

A Story.

BY HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER XVI.—(CONTINUED.)

It was Antonio—Antonio, who had been at the Morono sheep-shearing; Antonio, who knew what a marvel and miracle it seemed that the beautiful Senorita from the Moreno house should have loved Alessandro, and wedded him; and he knew that on the night she went away with him, Alessandro had lured out of the corral a beautiful horse for her to ride. Alessandro had told him all about it—Baba, fiery, splendid Baba, black as night, with a white star in his forehead. Saints! but it was a bold thing to do, to steal such a horse as that, with a star for a mark; and no wonder that even now, though near three years afterwards, Senor Felipe was in search of him. Of course it could be only the horse he wanted. Ha! much help might he get from Antonio!

"Yes, Senor, I knew him," he replied.

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No, Senor."

"Do you know where he went, from Temecula?"

"No, Senor."

"A woman told me he went to Monterey. I have been there looking for him."

"I heard, too, he had gone to Monterey."

"Where did you see him last?"

"In Temecula."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, Senor."

"Did you ever hear of his being married?"

"No, Senor."

"Where are the greater part of the Temecula people now?"

"Like this, Senor," with a bitter gesture, pointing to his wife. "Most of us are beggars. A few here a few there. Some have gone to Capitan Grande, some way down into Lower California."

Wearily Felipe continued his bootless questioning. No suspicion that the man was deceiving him crossed his mind. At last, with a sigh, he said, "I hoped to have found Alessandro by your means. I am greatly disappointed."

"I doubt not that, Senor Felipe Moreno," thought Antonio. "I am sorry, Senor," he said.

It smote his conscience when Felipe laid in his hand a generous gold piece, and said, "Here is a bit of money for you. I am sorry to see you so poorly off."

The thanks which he spoke sounded hesitating and gruff, so remorseful did he feel. Senor Felipe had always been kind to them. How well they had fared always in his house! It was a shame to lie to him; yet the first duty was to Alessandro. It could not be avoided. And thus a second time help drifted away from Ramona.

At Temecula, from a Mrs. Hartsel, Felipe got the first true intelligence of Alessandro's movements; but at first it only confirmed his worst forebodings. Alessandro had been at Mrs. Hartsel's house; he had been alone, and on foot; he was going to walk all the way to San Pasquale, where he had the promise of work.

How sure the kindly woman was that she was telling the exact truth. After long ransacking of her memory and comparing of events, she fixed the time so nearly to the true date, that it was to Felipe's mind a terrible corroboration of his fears. It was, he thought, about a week after Ramona's flight from home that Alessandro had appeared thus, alone, on foot, at Mrs. Hartsel's. In great destitution, she said; and she had lent him money on the expectation of selling his violin,

but they had never sold it; there it was yet. And that Alessandro was dead she had no more doubt than that she herself was alive; for else, he would have come back to pay her what he owed. The honestest fellow that ever lived was Alessandro. Did not the Senor Moreno think so? Had he not found him so always? There were not many such Indians as Alessandro and his father. If there had been it would have been much better for their people. "If they'd all been like Alessandro, I tell you," she said, "it would have taken more than any San Diego sheriff to have put them out of their homes here."

"But what could they do to help themselves, Mrs. Hartsel?" asked Felipe. "The law was against them. We can't any of us go against that. I myself have lost half my estate in the same way."

"Well, at any rate they wouldn't have gone without fighting!" she said. "If Alessandro had been here! they all said."

Felipe asked to see the violin. "But that is not Alessandro's," he exclaimed. "I have seen his."

"No!" she said. "Did I say it was his? It was his father's. One of the Indians brought it in here to hide it with us at the time they were driven out. It is very old, they say, and worth a great deal of money, if you could find the right man to buy it. But he has not come along yet. He will, though. I am not a bit afraid but that we'll get our money back on it. If Alessandro was alive he'd have been here long before this."

Finding Mrs. Hartsel thus friendly, Felipe suddenly decided to tell her the whole story. Surprise and incredulity almost overpowered her at first. She sat buried in thought for some minutes; then she sprang to her feet, and cried: "If he's got that girl with him he's hiding somewhere. There's nothing like an Indian to hide; and if he is hiding, every other Indian knows it, and you just waste your breath asking any questions of them. They will die before they will tell you anything. They are as secret as the grave. And they, every one of them, worshipped Alessandro. You see they thought he would be over them, after Pablo, and they were all proud of him because he could read and write and knew more than most of them. If I were in your place," she continued, "I would not give it up yet. I should go to San Pasquale. Now it might just be that she was along with him that night he stopped here, hid somewhere, while he came in to get the money. I know I urged him to stay all night, and he said he could not do it. I don't know, though, where he could possibly have left her while he came here."

Never in all her life had Mrs. Hartsel been so punished and so astonished as now. But her sympathy and her confident belief that Alessandro might yet be found gave unspeakable cheer to Felipe.

"If I find them I shall take them home with me, Mrs. Hartsel," he said as he rode away; "and we will come by this road and stop to see you." And the very speaking of the words cheered him all the way to San Pasquale.

But before he had been in San Pasquale an hour he was plunged into a perplexity and disappointment deeper than he had yet felt. He found the village in disorder, the fields neglected, many houses deserted, the remainder of the people preparing to move away. In the house of Ysidro, Alessandro's white kinsman, was living a white family—the family of a man who had pre-empted the greater part of the land on which the village stood. Ysidro, profiting by Alessandro's example, when he found that there was no help, that the American had his papers from the land-office, in all due form, certifying that the land was his, had given the man his option of paying

for the house or having it burnt down. The man had bought the house; and it was only the week before Felipe arrived that Ysidro had set off, with all his goods and chattels, for Mesa Grande. He might possibly have told the Senor more, the people said, than any one now in the village could; but even Ysidro did not know where Alessandro intended to settle. He told no one. He went to the north. That was all they knew.

To the north! That north which Felipe thought he had thoroughly searched. He sighed at the word. The Senor could, if he liked, see the house in which Alessandro had lived. There it was, on the south side of the valley, just in the edge of the foothills; some Americans lived in it now. Such a good ranch Alessandro had; the best wheat in the valley. The Americans had paid Alessandro something for it—they did not know how much; but Alessandro was very lucky to get anything. If only they had listened to him. He was always telling them this would come. Now it was too late for most of them to get anything for their farms. One man had taken the whole of the village lands, and he had bought Ysidro's house because it was the best; and so they would not get anything. They were utterly disheartened, broken-spirited.

In his sympathy for them, Felipe almost forgot his own distresses. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Who knows, Senor?" was the reply. "Where can we go? There is no place."

When in reply to his questions in regard to Alessandro's wife, Felipe heard her spoken of as "Majella," his perplexity deepened. Finally, he asked if no one had ever heard the name Ramona.

"Never."

What could it mean? Could it be possible that this was another Alessandro than the one of whom he was in search? Felipe bethought himself of a possible marriage-record. Did they know where Alessandro had married this wife of his, of whom every word they spoke seemed both like and unlike Ramona?

Yes. It was in San Diego they had been married, by Father Gaspara.

Hoping against hope, the baffled Felipe rode on to San Diego; and here, as ill-luck would have it, he found, not Father Gaspara, who would at his first word have understood all, but a young Irish priest, who had only just come to be Father Gaspara's assistant. Father Gaspara was away in the mountains, at Santa Ysabel. But the young assistant would do equally well to examine the records. He was courteous and kind; brought out the tattered old book, and looking over his shoulder, his breath coming fast with excitement and fear, there, Felipe, read, in Father Gaspara's hasty and blotted characters, the fatal entry of the names, "Alessandro Assis and Majella Fa—"

Heart-sick, Felipe went away. Most certainly Ramona would never have been married under any but her own name. Who, then, was this woman whom Alessandro Assis had married in less than ten days from the night on which Ramona had left her home? Some Indian woman for whom he felt compassion, or to whom he was bound by previous ties? And where, in what lonely, for-ever-hidden spot, was the grave of Ramona?

Now at last Felipe felt sure that she was dead. It was useless searching farther. Yet, after he reached home, his restless conjectures took one more turn, and he sat down and wrote a letter to every priest between San Diego and Monterey, asking if there were on the books a record of the marriage of one Alessandro Assis and Ramona Ortega.

It was not impossible that there might be, after all, another Alessandro

Assis. The old Fathers, in baptizing their tons of thousands of Indian converts, were sore put to it to make out names enough. There might have been another Assis besides old Pablo, and of Alessandro's there were dozens everywhere.

This last faint hope also failed. No record anywhere of an Alessandro Assis, except in Father Gaspara's book.

As Felipe was riding out of San Pasquale, he had seen an Indian man and woman walking by the side of mules heavily laden. Two little children, too young or too feeble to walk, were so packed in among the bundles that their faces were the only part of them in sight. The woman was crying bitterly. "More of these exiles. God help the poor creatures!" thought Felipe; and he pulled out his purse and gave the woman a piece of gold. She looked up in a great astonishment as if the money had fallen from the skies. "Thanks! Thanks, Senor!" she exclaimed; and the man coming up to Felipe said also, "God reward you, Senor! That is more money than I had in the world! Does the Senor know of any place where I could get work?"

Felipe longed to say, "Yes, come to my estate; there you shall have work!" In the olden time he would have done it without a second thought, for both the man and the woman had good faces—were young and strong. But the pay-roll of the Moreno estate was even now too long for its dwindled fortunes. "No, my man, I am sorry to say I do not," he answered. "I live a long way from here. Where were you thinking of going?"

"Somewhere in San Jacinto," said the man. "They say the Americans have not come in there much yet. I have a brother living there. Thanks, Senor; may the saints reward you!"

"San Jacinto!" After Felipe returned home, the name haunted his thoughts. The grand mountain-top bearing that name he had known well in many a distant horizon. "Juan Can," he said one day, "are there many Indians in San Jacinto?"

"The mountain?" said Juan Can.

"Ay, I suppose, the mountain," said Felipe. "What else is there?"

"The valley too," replied Juan. "The San Jacinto Valley is a fine broad valley, though the river is not much to be counted on. It is mostly dry sand a good part of the year. But there is good grazing. There is one village of Indians I know in the valley; some of the San Luis Rey Indians came from there; and up on the mountain is a big village; the wildest Indians in all the country live there. Oh, they are fierce, Senor!"

The next morning Felipe set out for San Jacinto. Why had no one mentioned, why had he not himself known, of these villages? Perhaps there were yet others he had not heard of. Hope sprang in Felipe's impressionable nature as easily as it died. An hour, a moment, might see him both lifted up and cast down. When he rode into the sleepy little village street of San Bernardino, and saw, in the near horizon, against the southern sky, a superb mountain-peak, changing in the sunset lights from turquoise to ruby, and from ruby to turquoise again, he said to himself, "She is there! I have found her!"

"San Jacinto?" he said to a bystander, pointing to it with his whip.

"Yes, Senor," replied the man. As he spoke, a pair of black horses, came whirling round the corner, and he sprang to one side, narrowly escaping being knocked down. "That Tennessee fellow'll run over somebody yet, with those black devils of his, if he don't look out," he muttered, as he recovered his balance.

Felipe glanced at the horses, then driving his spurs deep into his horse's side, galloped after them. "Baba!" he cried aloud in his excitement; and