

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER XIV.

The first day had gone, it was near night of the second, and not a word had passed between Felipe and Ramona except in the presence of the Senora. It would have been beautiful to see, if it had not been so cruel a thing, the various and devious methods by which the Senora had brought this about. Felipe, oddly enough, was more restive under it than Ramona. She had her dreams. He had nothing but his restless consciousness that he had not done for her what he hoped; that he must seem to her to be disloyal; and this, and a continual wonder what she could be planning or expecting which made her so placid, kept Felipe in a fever of unrest, of which his mother noted every sign, and redoubled her vigilance.

Felipe thought perhaps he could speak to Ramona in the night, through her window. But the August heats were fierce now; everybody slept with wide-open windows; the Senora was always wakeful; if she should chance to hear him thus holding secret converse with Ramona it would indeed make bad matters worse. Nevertheless, he decided to try it. At the first sound of his footsteps on the veranda floor, "My son, are you ill? Can I do anything?" came from the Senora's window. She had not been asleep at all. It would take more courage than Felipe possessed to try that plan again; and he lay on his veranda bed, this afternoon, tossing about with sheer impatience at his baffled purpose. Ramona sat at the foot of the bed, taking the last stitches in the nearly completed altar-cloth. The Senora sat in her usual seat, dozing, with her head thrown back. It was very hot; a sultry south wind, with dust from the desert, had been blowing all day, and every living creature was more or less prostrated by it.

As the Senora's eyes closed, a sudden thought struck Felipe. Taking out a memorandum-book in which he kept his accounts, he began rapidly writing. Looking up, and catching Ramona's eye, he made a sign to her that it was for her. She glanced apprehensively at the Senora. She was asleep. Presently Felipe, folding the note and concealing it in his hand, rose, and walked towards Ramona's window. Ramona terrifiedly watching him; the sound of Felipe's steps roused the Senora, who sat up instantly, and gazed about her with that indescribable expression peculiar to people who hope they have not been asleep, but know they have. "Have I been asleep?" she asked.

"About one minute, mother," answered Felipe, who was leaning, as he spoke, against Ramona's open window, his arms crossed behind him. Striding them out, and back and forth a few times, yawning idly, he said, "This heat is intolerable!" Then he sauntered leisurely down the veranda steps into the garden-walk, and seated himself on the bench under the trellis there.

The note had been thrown into Ramona's room. She was hot and cold with fear lest she might not be able to get it unobserved. What if the Senora were to go first into the room! She hardly dared look at her. But fortune is not always on the side of tyrants. The Senora was fast dozing off again, relieved that Felipe was out of speaking distance of Ramona. As soon as her eyes were again shut, Ramona rose to go. The Senora opened her eyes. Ramona was crossing the threshold of the door; she was going into the house. Good! Still farther away from Felipe.

"Are you going to your room, Ramona?" said the Senora.

"I was," replied Ramona, alarmed.

"Did you want me here?"

"No," said the Senora; and she closed her eyes again.

In a second more the note was safe in Ramona's hands.

"Dear Ramona," Felipe had written, "I am distracted because I cannot speak with you alone. Can you think of any way? I want to explain things to you. I am afraid you do not understand. Don't be unhappy. Alessandro will surely be back in four days. I want to help you all I can, but you saw I could not do much. Nobody will hinder your doing what you please; but, dear, I wish you would not go away from us!"

Tearing the paper into small fragments, Ramona thrust them into her bosom, to be destroyed later. Then looking out of the window, and seeing that the Senora was now in a sound sleep, she ventured to write a reply to Felipe, though when she would find a safe opportunity to give it to him there was no telling. "Thank you, dear Felipe. Don't be anxious. I am not unhappy. I understand all about it. But I must go away as soon as Alessandro comes." Hiding this also safe in her bosom, she went back to the veranda. Felipe rose, and walked toward the steps. Ramona, suddenly bold, stooped, and laid her note on the second step. Again the tired eyes of the Senora opened. They had not been shut five minutes; Ramona was at her work; Felipe was coming up the steps from the garden. He nodded laughingly to his mother and laid his finger on his lips. All was well. The Senora dozed again. Her nap had cost her more than she would ever know. This one secret interchange between Felipe and Ramona then, thus making, as it were, common cause with each other as against her, and in fear of her, was a step never to be recalled—a step whose significance could scarcely be overestimated. Tyrants, great and small, are apt to overlook such possibilities as this; to forget the momentousness which the most trivial incident may assume when forced into false proportions and relations. Tyranny can make liars and cheats out of the honestest souls. It is done oftener than any except close students of human nature realize. When kings and emperors do this, the world cries out with sympathy, and holds the plotters more innocent than the tyrant who provoked the plot. It is Russia that stands branded in men's thoughts and not Siberia.

The Senora had a Siberia of her own, and it was there that Ramona was living in these days. The Senora would have been surprised to know how little the girl felt the cold. To be sure, it was not as if she had ever felt warmth in the Senora's presence; yet between the former chill and this were many degrees, and except for her new life, and new love, and hope in the thought of Alessandro, Ramona could not have borne it for a day.

The fourth day came; it seemed strangely longer than the others had. All day Ramona watched and listened. Felipe too; for, knowing what Alessandro's impatience would be, he had, in truth, looked for him on the previous night. The horse he had rode was a fleet one, and would have made the journey with ease in half the time. But Felipe reflected that there might be many things for Alessandro to arrange at Temecula. He would doubtless return prepared to take Ramona back with him, in case that proved the only alternate left them. Felipe grew wretched as his fancy dwelt on the picture of Ramona's future. He had been in the Temecula village. He knew its poverty; the thought of Ramona there was monstrous. To the indolent, ease-loving Felipe it was incredible that a girl reared as Ramona had been could for a

moment contemplate leading the life of a poor laboring man's wife. He could not conceive of love's making one undertake any such life. Felipe had much to learn of love. Night came, no Alessandro. Till the darkness settled down, Ramona sat watching the willows. When she could no longer see she listened. The Senora, noting all, also listened. She was uneasy as to the next stage of affairs, but she would not speak. Nothing should induce her to swerve from the line of conduct on which she had determined. It was the full of the moon. When the first broad beam of its light came over the hill and flooded the garden and the white front of the little chapel just as it had done on the first night when Alessandro watched with Felipe on the veranda, Ramona pressed her face against the window-panes and gazed out into the garden. At each flickering motion of the shadows she saw the form of a man approaching. Again and again she saw it. Again and again the breeze died and the shadow ceased. It was near morning before, weary, sad, she crept to bed; but not to sleep. With wide-open anxious eyes she still watched and listened. Never had the thought once crossed her mind that Alessandro might not come at the time Felipe had said. In her childlike simplicity she had accepted this as unquestionably as she had accepted other facts in her life. Now that he did not come, unreasoning and unfounded terror took possession of her, and she asked herself continually, "Will he ever come? They sent him away; perhaps he will be too proud to come back!" Then faith would return, and saying to herself, "He would never, never forsake me; he knows I have no one in the whole world but him; he knows how I love him," she would regain composure, and remind herself of the many detentions which might have prevented his coming at the time set. Spite of all, however, she was heavy at heart; and at breakfast her anxious eyes and absent look were sad to see. They hurt Felipe. Too well he knew what it meant. He also was anxious. The Senora saw it in his face, and it vexed her. The girl might well pine and be mortified if her lover did not appear. But why should Felipe disquiet himself? The Senora disliked it. It was a bad symptom. There might be trouble ahead yet. There was indeed trouble ahead—of a sort the Senora's imaginations had not pictured.

Another day passed; another night; another, and another. One week now since Alessandro, as he leaped on his horse, had grasped Felipe's hand and said: "You will tell the Senorita; you will make sure that she understands why I go; and in four days I will back." One week, and he had not come. The three who were watching and wondering looked covertly into each other's faces, each longing to know what the others thought.

Ramona was wan and haggard. She had scarcely slept. The idea had taken possession of her that Alessandro was dead. On the sixth and seventh days she had walked each afternoon far down the river road, by which he would be sure to come; down the meadows, and by the cross-cut, out to the highway; at each step straining her fearful eyes into the distance—the cruel, blank, silent distance. She had come back after dark, whiter and more wan than she went out. As she sat at the supper-table, silent, making no faint of eating, only drinking glass after glass of milk, in thirsty haste, even Margarita pitied her. But the Senora did not. She thought the best thing which could happen would be that the Lidian should never come back. Ramona would recover from it in a little while; the mortification would be the worst thing, but even that time would heal. She wondered that the girl had not more pride than to let her wretchedness be so plainly

seen. She herself would have died before she would go about with such a woe-begone face for a whole household to see and gossip about.

On the morning of the eighth day Ramona, desperate, waylaid Felipe as he was going down the veranda steps. The Senora was in the garden and saw them, but Ramona did not care. "Felipe!" she cried, "I must, I must speak to you! Do you think Alessandro is dead? What else could keep him from coming?" His lips were dry, her cheeks scarlet, her voice husky. A few more days of this, and she would be in a brain fever, Felipe thought, as he looked compassionately at her.

"Oh no, no, dear! Do not think that!" he replied. "A thousand things might have kept him."

"Ten thousand things would not! Nothing could!" said Ramona. "I know he is dead. Can't you send a messenger, Felipe, and see?"

The Senora was walking towards them. She overheard the last words. Looking toward Felipe, no more regarding Ramona than if she had not been within sight or hearing, the Senora said, "It seems to me that would not be quite consistent with dignity. How does it strike you, Felipe? If you thought best we might spare a man as soon as the vintage is done, I suppose."

Ramona walked away. The vintage would not be over for a week. There were several vineyards yet which had not been touched; every hand on the place was hard at work, picking the grapes, treading them out in tubs, emptying the juice into stretched raw-hides swung from cross-beams in a long shed. In the willow cove the brandy-still was in full blast; it took one man to watch it; this was Juan Can's favorite work; for reasons of his own he liked best to do it alone; and now that he could no longer tread grapes in the tubs he had a better chance for uninterrupted work at the still. "No ill but has its good," he thought sometimes, as he lay comfortably stretched out in the shade, smoking his pipe day after day, and breathing the fumes of the fiery brandy.

As Ramona disappeared in the doorway, the Senora, coming close to Felipe, and laying her hand on his arm, said in a confidential tone, nodding her head in the direction in which Ramona had vanished: "She looks badly, Felipe. I don't know what we can do. We surely cannot send to summon back a lover we do not wish her to marry, can we? It is very perplexing. Most unfortunate, every way. What do you think, my son?" There was almost a diabolical art in the manner in which the Senora could, by a single phrase or question, plant in a person's mind the precise idea she wished him to think he had originated himself.

"No; of course we can't send for him," replied Felipe angrily; "unless it is to send for him to marry her; I wish he had never set foot on the place. I am sure I don't know what to do. Ramona's looks frighten me. I believe she will die."

"I cannot wish Alessandro had never set foot on the place," said the Senora gently, "for I feel that I owe your life to him, my Felipe; and he is not to blame for Ramona's conduct. You need not fear her dying. She may be ill; but people do not die of love like hers for Alessandro."

"Of what kind do they die, mother?" asked Felipe impatiently.

The Senora looked reproachfully at him. "Not often of any," she said; "but certainly not of a sudden passion for a person in every way beneath them in position, in education, in all points which are essential to congeniality of tastes or association of life."

The Senora spoke calmly, with no excitement, as if she were discussing an abstract case. Sometimes, when she spoke like this, Felipe for the moment