

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER VII.—(CONTINUED.)

On the second evening, the first after the shearers had left, Alessandro, seeing Ramona in the veranda, went to the foot of the steps, and said, "Senorita, would Senor Felipe like to have me play on the violin to him to-night?"

"Why, whose violin have you got?" exclaimed Ramona, astonished.

"My own, Senorita."

"Your own! I thought you said you did not bring it."

"Yes, Senorita, that is true; but I sent for it last night, and it is here."

"Sent to Temecula and back already!" cried Ramona.

"Yes, Senorita. Our ponies are swift and strong. They can go a hundred miles in a day, and not suffer. It was Jose brought it, and he is at the Ortega's by this time."

Ramona's eyes glistened. "I wish I could have thanked him," she said. "You should have let me know. He ought to have been paid for going."

"I paid him, Senorita; he went for me," said Alessandro, with a shade of wounded pride in the tone, which Ramona should have perceived, but did not, and went on hurting the lover's heart still more.

"But it was for us that you sent for it, Alessandro; the Senora would rather pay the messenger herself."

"It is paid, Senorita. It is nothing. If the Senor Felipe wishes to hear the violin, I will play;" and Alessandro walked slowly away.

Ramona gazed after him. For the first time she looked at him with no thought of his being an Indian—a thought there had surely been no need of her having, since his skin was not a shade darker than Felipe's; but so strong was the race feeling that never till that moment had she forgotten it.

"What a superb head, and what a walk!" she thought. Then, looking more observantly, she said: "He walks as if he were offended. He did not like my offering to pay for the messenger. He wanted to do it for dear Felipe. I will tell Felipe, and we will give him some present when he goes away."

"Isn't he splendid, Senorita?" came in a light laughing tone from Margarita's lips close to her ear, in the fond freedom of their relation. "Isn't he splendid? And, oh, Senorita, you can't think how he dances! Last year I danced with him every night; he has wings on his feet, for all he is tall and big."

There was a coquettish consciousness in the girl's tone that was suddenly, for some unexplained reason, exceedingly displeasing to Ramona. Drawing herself away, she spoke to Margarita in a tone she had never before in her life used. "It is not fitting to speak like that about young men. The Senora would be displeased if she heard you," she said, and walked swiftly away, leaving poor Margarita as astounded as if she had got a box on the ear.

She looked after Ramona's retreating figure, then after Alessandro's. She had heard them talking together just before she came up. Thoroughly bewildered and puzzled, she stood motionless for several seconds, reflecting; then, shaking her head, she ran away, trying to dismiss the harsh speech from her mind. "Alessandro must have vexed the Senorita," she thought, "to make her speak like that to me." But the incident was not so easily dismissed from Margarita's thoughts. Many times in the day it recurred to her, still a bewilderment and a puzzle, as far from solution as ever. It was as tiny seed, whose name she did not

dream of; but it was dropped in soil where it would grow some day—forcing-house soil, and a bitter seed; and when it blossomed, Ramona would have an enemy.

All unconscious, equally of Margarita's heart and her own, Ramona proceeded to Felipe's room. Felipe was sleeping, the Senora sitting by his side, as she had sat for days and nights—her dark face looking thinner and more drawn each day, her hair looking even whiter, if that could be, and her voice growing hollow from faintness and sorrow.

"Dear Senora," whispered Ramona, "do go out for a few moments while he sleeps, and let me watch—just on the walk in front of the veranda. The sun is still lying there, bright and warm. You will be ill if you do not have air."

The Senora shook her head. "My place is here," she answered, speaking in a dry, hard tone. Sympathy was hateful to the Senora Moreno: she wished neither to give it nor take it. "I shall not leave him. I do not need the air."

Ramona had a cloth-of-gold rose in her hand. The veranda eaves were now shaded with them, hanging down like a thick fringe of golden tassels. It was the rose Felipe loved best. Stooping, she laid it on the bed, near Felipe's head. "He will like to see it when he wakes," she said.

The Senora seized it, and flung it far out in the room. "Take it away! Flowers are poison when one is ill," she said, coldly. "Have I never told you that?"

"No, Senora," replied Ramona, meekly; and she glanced involuntarily at the saucer of musk which the Senora kept on the table close to Felipe's pillow.

"Musk is different," said the Senora, seeing the glance. "Musk is a medicine; it revives."

Ramona knew, but she would have never dared to say that Felipe hated musk. Many times he had said to her how he hated the odour; but his mother was so fond of it that it must always be that the veranda and the house would be full of it. Ramona hated it, too. At times it made her faint, with a deadly faintness. But neither she nor Felipe would have confessed as much to the Senora; and if they had she would have thought it all a fancy.

"Shall I stay?" asked Ramona, gently.

"As you please," replied the Senora. The simple presence of Ramona irked her now with a feeling she did not pretend to analyse, and would have been terrified at if she had. She would not have dared to say to herself, in plain words: "Why is that girl well and strong, and my Felipe lying here like to die? If Felipe dies I cannot bear the sight of her. What is she, to be preserved of the saints?"

But that, or something like it, was what she felt whenever Ramona entered the room: still more, whenever she assisted in ministering to Felipe. If it had been possible, the Senora would have had no hands but her own do aught for her boy. Even tears from Ramona sometimes irritated her. What does she know about loving Felipe! He is nothing to her! thought the Senora, strangely mistaken, strangely blind, strangely forgetting how feeble is the tie of blood in the veins by the side of love in the heart.

If into this fiery soul of the Senora's could have been dropped one second's knowledge of the relative position she and Ramona already occupied in Felipe's heart, she would, on the spot, have either died herself or have slain Ramona, one or the other. But no such knowledge was possible, no such idea could have found entrance into the Senora's mind. A revelation from heaven of it could hardly have reached even her ears—so impenetrable are

the veils which, fortunately for us all, are forever held by viewless hands between us and the nearest and closest of our daily companions.

At twilight of this day Felipe was restless and feverish again. He had dozed at intervals all day long, but had had no refreshing sleep.

"Send for Alessandro," he said. "Let him come and sing to me."

"He has his violin now; he can play, if you would like that better," said Ramona; and she related what Alessandro had told her of the messenger's having ridden to Temecula and back in a night and half a day to bring it.

"I wanted to pay the man," she said; "I know of course your mother would wish to reward him. But I fancy Alessandro was offended. He answered me shortly that it was paid, and it was nothing."

"You couldn't have offended him more," said Felipe. "What a pity! He is as proud as Lucifer himself, that Alessandro. You know his father has always been the head of their band; in fact he has authority over several bands; General, they call it now, since they got the title from the Americans; they used to call it Chief, and until Father Peyri left San Luis Rey, Pablo was in charge of all the sheep, and general steward and paymaster. Father Peyri trusted him with everything; I've heard he would leave boxes full of uncounted gold in Pablo's charge to pay off the Indians. Pablo reads and writes, and is very well off; he has as many sheep as we have, I fancy!"

"What!" exclaimed Ramona, astonished. "They all look as if they were poor."

"Oh, well, so they are," replied Felipe, "compared with us; but one reason is, they share everything with each other. Old Pablo feeds and supports half his village, they say. So long as he has anything he will never see one of his Indians hungry."

"How generous!" warmly exclaimed Ramona; "I think they are better than we are, Felipe!"

"I think so too," said Felipe. "That's what I have always said. The Indians are the most generous people in the world. Of course they have learned it partly from us; but they were very much so when the Fathers first came here. You ask Father Salvierderra some day. He has read all Father Junipero's and Father Crospi's diaries, and he says it is wonderful how the wild savages gave food to every one who came."

"Felipe! you are talking too much," said the Senora's voice, in the doorway; and as she spoke she looked reproachfully at Ramona. If she had said in words, "See how unfit you are to be trusted with Felipe. No wonder I do not leave the room except when I must!" her meaning could not have been plainer. Ramona felt it keenly, and not without some misgiving that it was deserved.

"Oh, dear Felipe, has it hurt you?" she said timidly; and to the Senora, "Indeed, Senora, he has been speaking but a very few moments, very low."

"Go call Alessandro, Ramona, will you?" said Felipe. "Tell him to bring his violin. I think I will go to sleep if he plays."

A long search Ramona had for Alessandro. Everybody had seen him a few minutes ago, but nobody knew where he was now. Kitchens, sheepfolds, vineyards, orchards, Juan Can's bedchamber—Ramona searched them all in vain. At last standing at the foot of the veranda steps, and looking down the garden, she thought she saw figures moving under the willows by the washing-stones.

"Can he be there?" she said. "What can he be doing there? Who is it with him?" And she walked down the path, calling. "Alessandro! Alessandro!"

At the first sound Alessandro sprang from the side of his companion, and

almost before the second syllables had been said was standing face to face with Ramona.

"Here I am, Senorita. Does Senor Felipe want me? I have my violin here. I thought perhaps he would like to have me play to him in the twilight."

"Yes," replied Ramona, "he wishes to hear you. I have been looking everywhere for you." As she spoke, she was half unconsciously peering beyond into the dusk, to see whose figure it was, slowly moving by the brook.

Nothing escaped Alessandro's notice where Ramona was concerned. "It is Margarita," he said instantly. "Does the Senorita want her? Shall I run and call her?"

"No," said Ramona, again displeased; "no, I was not looking for her. What is she doing there?"

"She is washing," replied Alessandro, innocently.

"Washing at this time of day!" thought Ramona, severely. "A mere pretext, I shall watch Margarita. The Senora would never allow this sort of thing." And as she walked back to the house by Alessandro's side, she meditated whether or not she would herself speak to Margarita on the subject in the morning.

Margarita, in the meantime, was also having her season of reflections, not the pleasantest. As she soused her aprons up and down in the water, she said to herself: "I may as well finish them now I am here. How provoking! I've no more than got a word with him, than she must come, calling him away. And he lies as if he was shot on an arrow at the first word. I'd like to know what's come over the man, to be so different. If I could ever get a good half hour with him alone I'd soon find out. Oh, but his eyes go through me, through and through me! I know he's an Indian, but what do I care for that. He's a million times handsomer than Senor Felipe. And Juan Jose said the other day he'd make a much better head shepherd than old Juan Can, if Senor Felipe'd only see it; and why shouldn't he get to see it, if Alessandro's here all summer?" And before the aprons were done Margarita had a fine air castle up: herself and Alessandro married, a nice little house, children playing in the sunshine below the artichoke patch, she herself still working for the Senora. "And the Senorita will perhaps marry Senor Felipe," she added, her thoughts moving more hesitatingly. "He worships the ground she walks on. Anybody with quarter of a blind eye can see that; but maybe the Senora would not let him. Anyhow, Senor Felipe is sure to have a wife, and so and so." It was an innocent, girlish castle, built of sweet and natural longings, for which no maiden, high or low, need blush; but its foundations were laid in sand, on which would presently beat such winds and floods as poor little Margarita never dreamed of.

The next day Margarita and Ramona both went about their day's business with a secret purpose in their hearts. Margarita had made up her mind that before night she would, by fair means or foul, have a good long talk with Alessandro. "He was fond enough of me last year, I know," she said to herself, recalling some of the dances and the goodnight leave-takings at that time. "It's because he is so put upon by everybody now. What with Juan Can in one bed sending for him to prate to him about the sheep, and Senor Felipe in another sending for him to fiddle him to sleep, and all the care of the sheep, it's a wonder he's not out of his mind altogether. But I'll find a chance, or make one, before this day's sun sets. If I can once get a half hour with him, I'm not afraid after that; I know the way it is with men!" said the confident Margarita, who, truth being told, it must be admitted did indeed know a great deal about the