

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER IX.

When the Senora came back to the veranda she found Felipe asleep, Alessandro standing at the foot of the bed, with his arms crossed on his breast, watching him. As the Senora drew near, Alessandro felt again the same sense of dawning hatred which had seized him at her harsh speech to Ramona. He lowered his eyes and waited to be dismissed.

"You can go now, Alessandro," said the Senora. "I will sit here. You are quite sure that it will be safe for Senor Felipe to sleep here all night?"

"It will cure him before many nights," replied Alessandro, still without raising his eyes, and turning to go.

"Stay," said the Senora. Alessandro paused. "It will not do for him to be alone here in the night, Alessandro."

Alessandro had thought of this, and had remembered that if he lay on the veranda floor by Senor Felipe's side, he would also lie under the Senorita's window.

"No, Senora," he replied. "I will lie here by his side. That was what I had thought, if the Senora is willing."

"Thank you, Alessandro," said the Senora, in a tone which would have surprised poor Ramona, still sitting alone in her room, with sad eyes. She did not know the Senora could speak thus sweetly to any one but Felipe. "Thank you! You are kind. I will have a bed made for you."

"Oh no!" cried Alessandro; "if the Senora will excuse me, I could not lie on a bed. A raw-hide like Senor Felipe's and my blanket are all I want. I could not lie on any bed."

"To be sure," thought the Senora; "what was I thinking of! How the boy makes one forget he is an Indian! But the floor is harder than the ground, Alessandro," she said, kindly.

"No, Senora," he said, "it is all one; and to-night I will not sleep. I will watch Senor Felipe, in case there should be a wind, or he should wake and need something."

"I will watch him myself till midnight," said the Senora. "I should feel easier to see how he sleeps at first."

It was the balmyest of summer nights, and as still as if no living thing were on the earth. There was a full moon, which shone on the garden, and on the white front of the little chapel among the trees. Ramona, from her window, saw Alessandro pacing up and down the walk. She had seen him spread down the raw hide by Felipe's bed, and had seen the Senora take her place in one of the big carved chairs. She wondered if they were both going to watch; she wondered why the Senora would never let her sit up and watch with Felipe.

"I am not of any use to anybody," she thought, sadly. She dared not go out and ask any questions about the arrangements for the night. At supper the Senora had spoken to her only in the same cold and distant manner, which always made her dumb and afraid. She had not once seen Felipe alone during the day. Margarita, who, in the former times—ah, how far away those former times looked now!—had been a greater comfort to Ramona than she realized—Margarita now was sulky and silent, never came into Ramona's presence if she could help it, and looked at her sometimes with an expression which made Ramona tremble, and say to herself, "She hates me. She has always hated me since that morning."

It had been a long, sad day to Ramona; and as she sat in her window

leaning her head against the sash, and looked at Alessandro pacing up and down, she felt for the first time, and did not shrink from it nor in anywise disavow or disguise it to herself, that she was glad he loved her. More than this she did not think; beyond this she did not go. Her mind was not like Margarita's, full of fancies bred of freedom in intercourse with men. But distinctly, tenderly glad that Alessandro loved her, and distinctly, tenderly aware how well he loved her, she was, as she sat at her window this night, looking out into the moonlit garden; after she had gone to bed she could still hear his slow, regular steps on the garden walk, and the last thought she had, as she fell asleep, was that she was glad Alessandro loved her.

The moon had been set, and the garden, chapel-front, trees, vines, were all wrapped in impenetrable darkness, when Ramona awoke, sat up in her bed, and listened. All was so still that the sound of Felipe's low, regular breathing came in through her open window. After hearkening to it for a few moments, she rose noiselessly from her bed, and creeping to the window parted the curtains and looked out; noiselessly she thought; but it was not noiselessly enough to escape Alessandro's quick ear; without a sound he sprang to his feet, and stood looking at Ramona's window.

"I am here, Senorita," he whispered. Do you want anything?"

"Has he slept all night like this?" she whispered back.

"Yes, Senorita. He has not once moved."

"How good!" said Ramona. "How good!"

Then she stood still; she wanted to speak again to Alessandro, to hear him speak again, but she could think of no more to say. Because she could not, she gave a little sigh.

Alessandro took one swift step towards the window. "May the saints bless you, Senorita," he whispered fervently.

"Thank you, Alessandro," murmured Ramona, and glided back to her bed, but not to sleep. It lacked not much of dawn; as the first faint light filtered through the darkness Ramona heard the Senora's window open.

"Surely she will not strike up the hymn and wake Felipe," thought Ramona; and she sprang again to the window to listen. A few low words between the Senora and Alessandro, and then the Senora's window closed again, and all was still.

"I thought she would not have the heart to wake him, said Ramona to herself. "The Virgin would have had no pleasure in our song, I am sure; but I will say a prayer to her instead;" and she sank on her knees at the head of her bed, and began saying a whispered prayer. The footfall of a spider in Ramona's room had not been light enough to escape the ear of that watching lover outside. Again Alessandro's tall figure arose from the floor, turning towards Ramona's window; and now the darkness was so far softened to dusk that the outline of his form could be seen. Ramona felt it rather than saw it, and stopped praying. Alessandro was sure he had heard her voice.

"Did the Senorita speak?" he whispered, his face close at the curtain. Ramona, startled, dropped her rosary, which rattled as it fell on the wooden floor.

"No, no, Alessandro," she said, "I did not speak." And she trembled she knew not why. The sound of the beads on the floor explained to Alessandro what had been the whispered words he heard.

"She was at her prayers," he thought, ashamed and sorry. "Forgive me," he whispered; "I thought you called;" and he stepped back to the outer edge of the veranda, and seated himself on the railing. He would lie down no more. Ramona remained on

her knees, gazing at the window. Through the transparent muslin curtain the dawning light came slowly, steadily, till at last she could see Alessandro distinctly. Forgetful of all else, she knelt, gazing at him. The rosary lay on the floor, forgotten. Ramona would not finish that prayer that day. But her heart was full of thanksgiving and gratitude, and the Madonna had a better prayer than any in the book.

The sun was up, and the canaries, finches, and linnets had made the veranda ring with joyous racket before Felipe opened his eyes. The Senora had come and gone and come again, looking at him anxiously, but he stirred not. Ramona had stolen timidly out, glancing at Alessandro only long enough to give him one quick smile, and bent over Felipe's bed, holding her breath, he lay so still.

"Ought he to sleep so long?" she whispered.

"Till the noon it may be," answered Alessandro; "and when he wakes you will see by his eye that he is another man."

It was indeed so. When Felipe first looked about him he laughed outright with pure pleasure. Then catching sight of Alessandro at the steps, he called, in a stronger voice than had yet been heard from him, "Alessandro, you are a famous physician. Why couldn't that fool from Ventura have known as much? With all his learning, he had had me in the next world before many days except for you. Now, Alessandro, breakfast! I am hungry. I had forgotten what the thought of food was like to a hungry stomach. And plenty! plenty!" he called, as Alessandro ran toward the kitchen. "Bring all they have."

When the Senora saw Felipe bolstered up in the bed, his eye bright, his colour good, his voice clear, eating heartily like his old self, she stood like a statue in the middle of the veranda for a moment; then turning to Alessandro, she said, chokingly, "May heaven reward you!" and disappeared abruptly in her own room. When she came out her eyes were red. All day she moved and spoke with a softness unwonted, indeed inconceivable. She even spoke kindly and without constraint to Ramona. She felt like one brought back from the dead.

After this a new sort of life began for them all. Felipe's bed on the veranda was the rallying point for everything and everybody. The servants came to look up at him, and wish him well, from the garden-walk below. Juan Can, when he first hobbled out on the stout crutches Alessandro had made him of manzanita wood, dragged himself all the way round the house to have a look at Senor Felipe and a word with him. The Senora sat there, in the big carved chair, looking like a sibyl with her black silk banded head-dress severely straight across her brow, and her large dark eyes gazing out, past Felipe, into the far south sky. Ramona lived there too, with her embroidery or her book, sitting on cushions on the floor in a corner, or at the foot of Felipe's bed, always so placed, however—if anybody had noticed, but nobody did—so placed that she could look at Felipe without looking full at Senora's chair, even if the Senora were not in it.

Here also came Alessandro many times a day—sometimes sent for, sometimes of his own accord. He was freely welcome. When he played or sang, he sat on the upper step of the stairs leading down to the garden. He also had a secret, which he thought all his own, in regard to the positions he chose. He sat always, when Ramona was there, in the spot which best commanded a view of her face. The secret was not all his own. Felipe knew it. Nothing was escaping Felipe in these days. A bombshell exploding at their feet would not have more astonished the different members of this circle, the Senora, Ramona, Alessandro, than it

would to have been made suddenly aware of the thoughts which were going on in Felipe's mind now, from day to day, as he lay there placidly looking at them all.

It is probable that if Felipe had been in full health and strength when the revelation suddenly came to him that Alessandro loved Ramona, and that Ramona might love Alessandro, he would have been instantly filled with jealous antagonism. But at the time when this revelation came he was prostrate, feeble, thinking many times a day that he must soon die; it did not seem to Felipe that a man could be so weak as he was, and ever again be strong and well. Side by side with these forebodings of his own death always came the thought of Ramona. What would become of her if he were gone? Only too well he knew that the girl's heart would be broken; that she could not live on alone with her mother. Felipe adored his mother; but he understood her feelings about Ramona.

With this feebleness had also come to Felipe, as is often the case in long illnesses, a greater clearness of perception. Ramona had ceased to puzzle him. He no longer asked himself what her long steady look into his eyes meant. He knew. He saw it meant that as a sister she loved him, had always loved him, and could love him in no other way. He wondered a little at himself that this gave him no more pain; only a sort of sweet mournful tenderness towards her. It must be because he was so soon going out of the world, he thought. Presently he began to be aware that a new quality was coming into his love for her. He himself was returning to the brother love which he had had for her when they were children together, and in which he had felt no change until he became a man and Ramona a woman. It was strange what a peace fell upon Felipe when this was finally clear and settled in his mind. No doubt he had had more misgiving and fear about his mother in the matter than he had ever admitted to himself; perhaps also the consciousness of Ramona's unfortunate birth had rankled at times; but all this was past now. Ramona was his sister. He was her brother. What course should he pursue in the crisis which he saw drawing near? How could he best help Ramona? What would be best for both her and Alessandro? Long before he thought of any possible union between himself and Ramona had entered into Alessandro's mind, still longer before it had entered into Ramona's to think of Alessandro as a husband, Felipe had spent hours in forecasting, plotting, and planning for them. For the first time in his life he felt himself in the dark as to his mother's probable action. That any concern as to Ramona's personal happiness or welfare would influence her he knew better than to think for a moment. So far as that was concerned, Ramona might wander out the next hour, wife of a homeless beggar, and his mother would feel no regret. But Ramona had been the adopted daughter of the Senora Ortega, bore the Ortega name, and had lived as foster-child in the house of the Morenos. Would the Senora permit such a one to marry an Indian?

Felipe doubted. The longer he thought the more he doubted. The more he watched the more he saw that the question might soon have to be decided. Any hour might precipitate it. He made plan after plan for forestalling trouble; for preparing his mother; but Felipe was by nature indolent, and now he was, in addition, feeble. Day after day slipped by. It was exceedingly pleasant on the veranda. Ramona was usually with him; his mother was gentler, less sad, than he had ever seen her. Alessandro was always at hand, ready for any service—in the field, in the house; his music a delight, his strength and fidelity a