

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER X.—(CONTINUED.)

"I do not understand, Senorita," he said. "What do you mean by 'afterward'?"

"I mean," replied Ramona, "that the Senora never says she wishes anything; she says she leaves everything to Felipe to decide, or to Father Salvierderra. But I think it is always decided as she wishes to have it after all. The Senora is wonderful, Alessandro; don't you think so?"

"She loves Senor Felipe very much," was Alessandro's evasive reply.

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Ramona. "You do not begin to know how much. She does not love any other human being. He takes it all. She hasn't any left. If he had died she would have died too. That is the reason she likes you so much; she thinks you saved Felipe's life. I mean, that is one reason," added Ramona, smiling, and looked up confidently at Alessandro, who smiled back, not in vanity, but honest gratitude that the Senorita was pleased to intimate that he was not unworthy of the Senora's regard.

"I do not think she likes me," he said. "I cannot tell why; but I do not think she likes any one in the world. She is not like any one I ever saw, Senorita."

"No," replied Ramona, thoughtfully. "She is not. I am, oh, so afraid of her, Alessandro! I have always been, ever since I was a little girl. I used to think she hated me; but now I think she does not care one way or the other if I keep out of her way."

While Ramona spoke these words her eyes were fixed on the running water at her feet. If she had looked up, and seen the expression in Alessandro's eyes as he listened, the thing which was drawing near would have drawn near faster, would have arrived at that moment; but she did not look up. She went on, little dreaming how hard she was making it for Alessandro.

"Many's the time I've come down here, at night, to this brook, and looked at it, and wished it was a big river, so I could throw myself in, and be carried away to the sea, dead. But it is a fearful sin, Father Salvierderra says, to take one's own life; and always the next morning, when the sun came out, and the birds sang, I've been glad enough I had not done it. Were you ever so unhappy as that, Alessandro?"

"No, Senorita, never," replied Alessandro; "and it is thought a great disgrace among us to kill one's self. I think I could never do it. But, oh, Senorita, it is a grief to think of your being unhappy. Will you always be so? Must you always stay here?"

"Oh, but I am not always unhappy!" said Ramona, with her sunny little laugh. "Indeed, I am generally very happy. Father Salvierderra says that if one does no sin one will be always happy, and that it is a sin not to rejoice every hour of the day in the sun and the sky and the work there is to do; and there is always plenty of that." Then her face clouding, she continued: "I suppose I shall always stay here. I have no other home; you know I was the Senora's sister's adopted child. She died when I was little, and the Senora kindly took me. Father Salvierderra says I must never forget to be grateful to her for all she has done for me, and I try not to."

Alessandro eyed her closely. The whole story, as Juan Can had told it to him, of the girl's birth, was burning in his thoughts. How he longed to cry out, "O my loved one, they have made you homeless in your home."

They despise you. The blood of my race is in your veins; come to me; come to me! be surrounded with love!" But he dared not. How could he dare?

Some strange spell seemed to have unloosed Ramona's tongue to-night. She had never before spoken to Alessandro of her own personal history or burdens; but she went on: "The worst thing is, Alessandro, that she will not tell me who my mother was; and I do not know if she is alive or not, or anything about her. Once I asked the Senora, but she forbade me ever to ask her again. She said she herself would tell me when it was proper for me to know. But she never has."

How the secret trembled on Alessandro's lips now. Ramona had never seemed so near, so intimate, so trusting. What would happen if he were to tell her the truth? Would the sudden knowledge draw her closer to him, to repel her?

"Have you never asked her again?" he said.

Ramona looked up astonished. "No one ever disobeyed the Senora," she said, quickly.

"I would!" exclaimed Alessandro.

"You may think so," said Ramona, "but you couldn't. I did ask Father Salvierderra once."

"What did he say?" asked Alessandro, breathless.

"The same thing. He said I must not ask; I was not old enough. When the time came I would be told," answered Ramona, sadly. "I don't see what they can mean by the time's coming. What do you suppose they meant?"

"I do not know the ways of any people but my own, Senorita, replied Alessandro. "Many things that your people do, and still more that these Americans do, are to me so strange, I know nothing what they mean. Perhaps they do not know who was your mother."

"I am sure they do," answered Ramona, in a low tone, as if the words were wrung from her. "But let us talk about something else, Alessandro; not about sad things, about pleasant things. Let us talk about your staying here."

"Would it be truly a pleasure to the Senorita Ramona, if I stayed?" said Alessandro.

"You know it would," answered Ramona, frankly, yet with a tremor in her voice, which Alessandro felt. "I do not see what we could any of us do without you. Felipe says he shall not let you go."

Alessandro's face glowed. "It must be as my father says, Senorita," he said. "A messenger came from him yesterday, and I sent him back with a letter telling him what the Senor Felipe had proposed to me, and asking him what I should do. My father is very old, Senorita, and I do not see how he can well spare me. I am his only child, and my mother died years ago. We live alone together in our house, and when I am away he is very lonely. But he would like to have me earn the wages, I know, and I hope he will think it best for me to stay. There are many things we want to do for the village; most of our people are poor, and can do little more than get what they need to eat day by day, and my father wishes to see them better off before he dies. Now that the Americans are coming in all around us he is afraid and anxious all the time. He wants to get a big fence built around our land, so as to show where it is; but the people cannot take much time to work on the fence; they need all their time to work for themselves and their families. Indians have a hard time to live now, Senorita. Were you ever in Temecula?"

"No," said Ramona. "Is it a large town?"

Alessandro sighed. "Dear Senorita, it is not a town; it is only a little village not more than twenty houses in

all, and some of those are built only of tule. There is a chapel and a graveyard. We built an adobe wall around the graveyard last year. That my father said we would do before we built the fence around the village."

"How many people are there in the village?" asked Ramona.

"Nearly two hundred, when they are all there; but many of them are away most of the time. They must go where they can get work; they are hired by the farmers, or do work on the great ditches, or to go as shepherds; and some of them take their wives and children with them. I do not believe the Senorita has ever seen any very poor people."

"Oh yes, I have, Alessandro, at Santa Barbara. There were many poor people there, and the Sisters used to give them food every week."

"Indians!" said Alessandro.

Ramona coloured. "Yes," she said, "some of them were, but not like your men, Alessandro. They were very different; miserable looking; they could not read nor write, and they seemed to have no ambition."

"That is the trouble," said Alessandro, "with so many of them; it is with my father's people too. They say, 'What is the use?' My father gets in despair with them because they will not learn better. He gives them a great deal, but they do not seem to be any better off for it. There is only one other man in our village who can read and write besides my father and me, Senorita; and yet my father is all the time begging them to come to his house and learn of him. But they say they have no time; and, indeed, there is much truth in that, Senorita. You see everybody has troubles, Senorita."

Ramona had been listening with sorrowful face. All this was new to her. Until to-night neither she nor Alessandro had spoken of private and personal matters.

"Ah, but these are real troubles," she said. "I do not think mine were real troubles at all. I wish I could do something for your people, Alessandro. If the village were only near by, I could teach them, could I not? I could teach them to read. The Sisters always said that to teach the ignorant and the poor was the noblest work one could do. I wish I could teach your people. Have you any relatives there besides your father? Is there any one in the village that you—love, Alessandro?"

Alessandro was too much absorbed in thoughts of his people to observe the hesitating emphasis with which Ramona asked this question.

"Yes, Senorita, I love them all. They are like my brothers and sisters, all of my father's people," he said: "and I am unhappy about them all the time."

During the whole of this conversation Ramona had an undercurrent of thought going on, which was making her uneasy. The more Alessandro said about his father and his people the more she realized that he was held to Temecula by bonds that would be hard to break, the more she feared his father would not let him remain away from home any length of time. At the thought of his going away her very heart sickened. Taking a sudden step towards him, he said, abruptly, "Alessandro, I am afraid your father will not give his consent to your staying here."

"So am I, Senorita," he replied, sadly.

"And you would not stay if he did not approve of it, of course," she said.

"How could I, Senorita?"

"No," she said, "it would not be right;" but as she said these words the tears filled her eyes.

Alessandro saw them. The world changed in that second. "Senorita! Senorita Ramona!" he cried, "tears have come in your eyes! O Senorita, then you will not be angry if I say

that I love you!" and Alessandro trembled with the terror and delight of having said the words.

Hardly did he trust his palpitating senses to be telling him true the words that followed, quick, firm, though only in a whisper—"I know that you love me, Alessandro, and I am glad of it!" Yes, this was what the Senorita Ramona was saying! And when he stammered, "But you, Senorita, you do not—you could not—" "Yes, Alessandro, I do—I love you!" in the same clear, firm whisper; and the next minute Alessandro's arms were around Ramona, and he had kissed her, sobbing rather than saying, "O Senorita, do you mean that you will go with me? that you are mine? Oh no, beloved Senorita, you cannot mean that!" But he was kissing her. He knew she did mean it; and Ramona, whispering, "Yes, Alessandro, I do mean it; I will go with you," clung to him with her hands, and kissed him, and repeated it, "I will go with you, I love you." And then, just then, came the Senora's step, and her sharp cry of amazement, and there she stood, no more than an arm's length away, looking at them with her indignant, terrible eyes.

What an hour this for Alessandro to be living over and over, as he crouched in the darkness, watching! But the bewilderment of his emotions did not dull his senses. As if stalking deer in a forest, he listened for sounds from the house. It seemed strangely still. As the darkness deepened, it seemed still stranger that no lamps were lit. Darkness in the Senora's room, in the Senorita's; a faint light in the dining-room, soon put out—evidently no supper going on there. Only from under Felipe's door streamed a faint radiance; and, creeping close to the veranda, Alessandro heard voices fitfully talking—the Senora's and Felipe's; no word from Ramona. Piteously he fixed his eyes on her window; it was open, but the curtains tight drawn; no stir, no sound. Where was she? What had been done to his love? Only the tireless caution and infinite patience of his Indian blood kept Alessandro from going to her window. But he would imperil nothing by acting on his own responsibility. He would wait, if it were till daylight, till his love made a sign. Certainly before long Senor Felipe would come to his veranda bed, and then he could venture to speak to him. But it was near midnight when the door of Felipe's room opened, and he and his mother came out, still speaking in low tones. Felipe lay down on his couch; his mother, bending over, kissed him, bade him good night, and went into her own room.

It had been some time now since Alessandro had left off sleeping on the veranda floor by Felipe's side. Felipe was so well it was not needful. But Felipe felt sure he would come to-night, and was not surprised when, a few minutes after the Senora's door closed, he heard a low voice through the vines, "Senor Felipe?"

"Hush, Alessandro," whispered Felipe. "Do not make a sound. Tomorrow morning early I will see you, behind the little sheepfold. It is not safe to talk here."

"Where is the Senorita?" Alessandro breathed rather than said.

"In her room," answered Felipe.

"Well?" said Alessandro.

"Yes," said Felipe, hoping he was not lying; and this was all Alessandro had to comfort himself with through his long night of watching. No, not all; one other thing comforted him—the notes of two wood-doves, that at intervals he heard, cooing to each other; just the two notes, the call and the answer, "Love?" "Here." "Love?" "Here."—and long intervals of silence between. Plain as if written on a page was the thing they told.

"That is what my Ramona is like," thought he, "the gentle wood-dove."