

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Senora Moreno had never before been so discomfited as in this matter of Ramona and Alessandro. It chafed her to think over her conversation with Felipe; to recall how far the thing she finally attained was from the thing she had in view when she began. To have Ramona sent to the convent, Alessandro kept as overseer of the place, and the Ortega jewels turned into the treasury of the Church—this was the plan she had determined on in her mind. Instead of this Alessandro was not to be overseer on the place; Ramona would not go to the convent; she would be married to Alessandro, and they would go away together; and the Ortega jewels—well, that was a thing to be decided in the future; that should be left to Father Salvierderra to decide. Bold as the Senora was, she had not quite the courage requisite to take that question wholly into her own hands.

One thing was clear, Felipe must not be consulted in regard to them. He had never known of them, and need not now. Felipe was far too much in sympathy with Ramona to take a just view of the situation. He would be sure to have a quixotic idea of Ramona's right of ownership. It was not impossible that Father Salvierderra might have the same feeling. If so, she must yield; but that would go harder with her than all the rest. Almost the Senora would have been ready to keep the whole thing a secret from the Father, if he had not been at the time of the Senora Ortega's death fully informed of all the particulars of her bequest to her adopted child. At any rate, it would be nearly a year before the Father came again, and in the meantime she would not risk writing about it. The treasure was as safe in Saint Catharine's keeping as it had been all these fourteen years; it should still lie hidden there. When Ramona went away with Alessandro she would write to Father Salvierderra, simply stating the facts in her own way, and telling him that all further questions must wait for decision until they met.

And so she plotted and planned, and mapped out the future in her tireless weaving brain, till she was somewhat soothed for the partial failure of her plans.

There is nothing so skilful in its own defence as imperious pride. It has an ingenious system of its own, of reprisals—a system so ingenious that the defeat must be sore indeed, after which it cannot still find some booty to bring off! And even greater than this ingenuity at reprisals is its capacity for self-deception. In this regard it outdoes vanity a thousandfold. Wounded vanity knows when it is mortally hurt, and limps off the field, piteous, all disguises thrown away. But pride carries its banner to the last, and fast as it is driven from one held unfurls it in another, never admitting that there is a shade less honour in the second field than in the first, or in the third than in the second; and so on till death. It is impossible not to have a certain sort of admiration for this kind of pride. Cruel, those who have it, are to all who come in their way; but they are equally cruel to themselves when pride demands the sacrifice. Such pride as this has led many a forlorn hope on the earth, when all other motives have died out of men's breasts; has won many a crown, which has not been called by its true name.

Before the afternoon was over the Senora had her plan, her chart of the future, as it were, all reconstructed;

the sting of her discomfiture soothed; the placid quiet of her manner restored; her habitual occupations also, and little ways, all resumed. She was going to do "nothing" in regard to Ramona. Only she herself knew how much that meant; how bitterly much! She wished she were sure that Felipe also would do "nothing;" but her mind still misgave her about Felipe. Unpitifully she had led him on, and entangled him in his own words, step by step, till she had brought him to the position she wished him to take. Ostensibly, his position and hers were one, their action a unit; all the same, she did not deceive herself as to his real feeling about the affair. He loved Ramona. He liked Alessandro. Barring the question of family pride, which he had hardly thought of till she suggested it, and which he would not dwell on apart from her continuing to press it—barring this, he would have liked to have Alessandro marry Ramona and remain on the place. All this would come uppermost in Felipe's mind again when he was removed from the pressure of her influence. Nevertheless she did not intend so speak with him on the subject again, or to permit him to speak to her. Her ends would be best attained by taking and keeping the ground that the question of their non-interference having been settled once for all, the painful topic should never be renewed between them. In patient silence they must await Ramona's action; must bear whatever of disgrace and pain she chose to inflict on the family which had sheltered her from her infancy till now.

The details of the "nothing" she proposed to do, slowly arranged themselves in her mind. There should be no apparent change in Ramona's position in the house. She should come and go as freely as ever; no watch on her movements; she should eat, sleep, rise up and sit down with them, as before; there should be not a word, or act, that Felipe's sympathetic sensitiveness could construe into any provocation to Ramona to run away. Nevertheless, Ramona should be made to feel every moment of every hour, that she was in disgrace; that she was with them, but not of them; that she had chosen an alien's position, and must abide by it. How this was to be done the Senora did not put in words to herself, but she knew very well. If anything would bring the girl to her senses this would. There might still be a hope, the Senora believed, so little did she know Ramona's nature, or the depth of her affection, for Alessandro, that she might be in this manner brought to see the enormity of the offence she would commit if she persisted in her purpose. And if she did perceive this, confess her wrong, and give up the marriage—the Senora grew almost generous and tolerant in her thoughts as she contemplated this contingency—if she did thus humble herself, and return to her rightful allegiance in the Moreno house, the Senora would forgive her, and would do more for her than she had ever hitherto done. She would take her to Los Angeles and to Monterey; would show her a little more of the world; and it was by no means unlikely that there might thus come about for her a satisfactory and honorable marriage. Felipe should see that she was not disposed to deal unfairly by Ramona in any way, if Ramona herself would behave properly.

Ramona's surprise, when the Senora entered her room just before supper, and, in her ordinary tone, asked a question about the chili which was drying on the veranda, was so great, that she could not avoid showing it both in her voice and look.

The Senora recognised this immediately, but gave no sign of having done so, continuing what she had to say about the chili, the hot sun, the turning of the grapes, etc., precisely

as she would have spoken to Ramona a week previous. At least this was what Ramona at first thought; but before the sentences were finished she had detected in the Senora's eye and tone the weapons which were to be employed against her. The emotion of half-grateful wonder with which she had heard the first words changed quickly to heart-sick misery before they were concluded; and she said to herself: "That's the way she is going to break me down, she thinks! But she can't do it. I can bear anything for four days; and the minute Alessandro comes I will go away with him." This train of thought in Ramona's mind was reflected in her face. The Senora saw it, and hardened herself still more. It was to be war then. No hope of surrender. Very well. The girl had made her choice.

Margarita was now the most puzzled person in the household. She had overheard snatches of the conversation between Felipe and his mother and Ramona, having let her curiosity get so far the better of her discretion as to creep to the door and listen. In fact, she narrowly escaped being caught, having had barely time to begin her feint of sweeping the passage-way, when Ramona, flinging the door wide open, came out, after her final reply to the Senora, the words of which Margarita had distinctly heard: "God will punish you."

"Holy Virgin! how dare she say that to the Senora!" ejaculated Margarita, under her breath; and the next second Ramona rushed by, not even seeing her. But the Senora's vigilant eyes, following Ramona, saw her; and the Senora's voice had a ring of suspicion in it, as she called, "How comes it you are sweeping the passage-way at this hour of the day, Margarita?"

It was surely the devil himself that put into Margarita's head the quick lie which she instantaneously told. "There was early breakfast, Senora, to be cooked for Alessandro, who was setting off in haste, and my mother was not up, so I had it to cook."

As Margarita said this, Felipe fixed his eyes steadily upon her. She changed colour. Felipe knew this was a lie. He had seen Margarita peering about among the willows while he was talking with Alessandro at the sheepfold; he had seen Alessandro halt for a moment and speak to her as he rode past,—only for a moment; then, pricking his horse sharply, he had galloped off down the valley road. No breakfast had Alessandro had at Margarita's hands, or any other's, that morning. What could have been Margarita's motive for telling this lie?

But Felipe had too many serious cares on his mind to busy himself long with any thought of Margarita or her fibs. She had said the first thing which came into her head, most likely, to shelter herself from the Senora's displeasure: which was indeed very near the truth, only there was added a spice of malice against Alessandro. A slight undercurrent of jealous antagonism towards him had begun to grow up among the servants of late; fostered, if not originated, by Margarita's sharp sayings as to his being admitted to such strange intimacy with the family.

While Felipe continued ill, and was so soothed to rest by his music, there was no room for cavil. It was natural that Alessandro came and went as a physician might. But after Felipe had recovered, why should this freedom and intimacy continue? More than once there had been sullen mutterings of this kind on the north veranda, when all the labourers and servants were gathered there of an evening. Alessandro alone being absent from the group, and the sounds of his voice or his violin coming from the south veranda, where the family sat.

"It would be a good thing if we too had a bit of music now and then," Juan Canito would grumble; "but the

lad's chary enough of his bow on this side the house."

"Ho! we're not good enough for him to play to!" Margarita would reply; "'Like master, like servant,' is a good proverb sometimes, but not always. But there's a deal going on, on the veranda yonder, besides fiddling!" and Margarita's lips would purse themselves up in an expression of concentrated mystery and secret knowledge, well fitted to draw from everybody a fire of questions, none of which, however, would she answer. She knew better than to slander the Senora Ramona, or to say a word even reflecting upon her unfavourably. Not a man or a woman there would have borne it. They all had loved Ramona ever since she came among them as a toddling baby. They petted her then, and idolised her now. Not one of them whom she had not done good offices for—nursed them, cheered them, remembered their birthdays and their saints'-days. To no one but her mother had Margarita unbosomed what she knew and what suspected; and old Marda, frightened at the bare pronouncing of such words, had terrified Margarita into the solemnest of promises, never, under any circumstances whatever, to say such things to any other member of the family. Marda did not believe them. She could not. She believed that Margarita's jealousy had imagined all.

"And the Senora; she'd send you packing off this place in an hour, and me too, long's I've lived here, if ever she was to know of your blackening the Senora. An Indian, too! You must be mad, Margarita!"

When Margarita, in triumph, had flown to tell her that the Senora had just dragged the Senora Ramona up the garden-walk, and shoved her into her room and locked the door, and that it was because she had caught her with Alessandro at the washing-stones, Marda first crossed herself in sheer mechanical fashion at the shock of the story, and then cuffed Margarita's ears for telling her.

"I'll take the head off your neck, if you say that aloud again! Whatever's come to the Senora! Forty years I've lived under this roof, and I never saw her lift a hand to a living creature yet. You're out of your senses, child!" she said, all the time gazing fearfully towards the room.

"You'll see whether I am out of my senses or not," retorted Margarita, and ran back to the dining room. And after the dining-room door was shut, and the unhappy pretence of a supper had begun, old Marda had herself crept softly to the Senora's door and listened, and heard Ramona sobbing as if her heart would break. Then she knew that what Margarita had said must be true, and her faithful soul was in sore straits what to think. The Senora's misdemeanor herself! Never! Whatever happened, it was not that! There was some terrible mistake somewhere. Kneeling at the keyhole, she had called cautiously to Ramona, "Oh, my lamb, what is it?" But Ramona had not heard her, and the danger was too great of remaining; so, scrambling up with difficulty from her rheumatic knees, the old woman had hobbled back to the kitchen as much in the dark as before, and, by a curiously illogical consequence, crosser than ever to her daughter. All the next day she watched for herself, and could not but see that all appearances bore out Margarita's statements. Alessandro's sudden departure had been a tremendous corroboration of the story. Not one of the men had had an inkling of it; Juan Canito, Luigo, both alike astonished; no word left, no message sent; only Senor Felipe had said carelessly to Juan Can, after breakfast: "You'll have to look after things yourself for a few days, Juan. Alessandro has gone to Temecula."

"For a few days!" exclaimed Margarita, sarcastically, when this was