

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER XVI.—(CONTINUED.)

The Agent coloured. Aunt Ri was a privileged character, but her logical method of questioning was inconvenient.

"I only mean that they are under my charge," he said. "I don't mean that they belong to us in any way."

"Wall, I allow not," retorted Aunt Ri, "enny more 'n I dew. They air airin' their livin' sech 's 't is, of yer kin call it a livin'. I've ben 'mongst 'em, naow, this hyar last tow weeks, 'n I allow I've hed my eyes opened ter some things. What's that docter er yourn, him that they call the Agency docter—what's he got ter do?"

"To attend to the Indians of this Agency when they are sick," replied the Agent promptly.

"Wall, that's what I hearn; that's what's yeow sed afore, 'n that's why Alessandro, the Injun that wuz murdered—that's why he put his name down 'n yeour books, though 't went agin him orful ter do it. He wuz high-sperated, 'n 'd allers took care er hisself; but he'd ben druv out er fust one place 'n then another tell he'd goe clar down. 'n pore; 'n he jest begged that docter er yourn to go to see his little gal, 'n the docter wouldn't; 'n more 'n that, he laughed at him fur askin'. 'N' they set the little thing en the boss ter bring her here, 'n she died afore they'd come a mile with her; 'n 't wuz they, on top er all the rest, druv Alessandro crazy. He never hed none er them wandrin' spells till arter that. Naow I allow that wa'n't right er that docter. I wouldn't hev no sech docter's that raound my Agency, ef I wuz yeow. Fraps yer never heered uv that. I told Ramona I didn't bleeve yer knowed it, or ye'd hev made him go."

"No, Aunt Ri," said the Agent; "I could not have done that; he is only required to doctor such Indians as come here."

"I allow, then, thar ain't any gret use on hev'n' him at all," said Aunt Ri; "'pears like thar ain't more 'n a harndful uv Injuns raound here. I expect he gits well paid?" and she paused for an answer. None came. The Agent did not feel himself obliged to reveal to Aunt Ri what salary the Government paid the San Bernardino doctor for sending haphazard prescriptions to Indians he never saw.

After a pause Aunt Ri resumed: "Ef it ain't enny offence ter yeow, I allow I'd like ter know jest what 't is yeow air here ter dew fur these Injuns. I've got my feelin's considable stirred up, bein' among 'em, 'n knowin' this hyar one, that's ben murdered. Hev ye got enny power to give 'em ennything—food, or sech? They air powerful pore, most on 'em."

"I have had a little fund for buying supplies for them in times of special suffering" a very little; and the Department has appropriated some money for waggons and ploughs; not enough, however, to supply every village! you see these Indians are in the main self supporting."

"That's jest it," persisted Aunt Ri. "That's what I've ben seein'; 'n that's why I want so bad ter git at what 't is the Guv'munt means ter hev yeow dew fur 'em. I allow ef yeow ain't ter feed 'em, an' ef yer can't put folks inter jail fur robbin', 'n cheatin' 'em, not ter say killin' 'em—ef yer can't dew ennythin' more 'n keep 'em keep 'em from gettin' whisky, wall, I'm free ter say—" Aunt Ri paused; she did not wish to seem to reflect on the Agent's usefulness, and so concluded her sentence very differently from her first impulse—"I'm free ter say I shouldn't like ter stan' in yer shoes."

"You may well say that, Aunt Ri," laughed the Agent, complacently. "It is the most troublesome Agency in the whole list, and the least satisfactory."

"Well, I allow it mought be the least satisfyin'," rejoined the indefatigable Aunt Ri; "but I donno whar the trouble comes in, ef so be 's thar's no more kin be done than yer wuz or tellin'." And she looked honestly puzzled.

"Look there, Aunt Ri!" said he, triumphantly, pointing to a pile of books and papers. "All those to be gone through with, and a report to be made out every month, and a voucher to be sent for every lead-pencil I buy. I tell you I work harder than I ever did in my life before, and for less pay."

"I allow yer hev hed easy times afore, then," retorted Aunt Ri, good-naturedly satirical, "ef yeow air plum tired doin' that!" And she took her leave, not a whit clearer in her mind as to the real nature and function of the Indian Agency than she was in the beginning.

Through all of Ramona's journey home she seemed to herself to be in a dream. Her baby in her arms; the faithful creatures, Baba and Benito, gaily trotting along at a pace so swift that the carriage seemed gliding; Felipe by her side—the dear Felipe—his eyes wearing the same bright and loving look as of old—what strange thing was it which had happened to her to make it all seem unreal? Even the little one in her arms—she, too, seemed unreal! Ramona did not know it, but her nerves were still partially paralyzed. Nature sends merciful anaesthetics in the shocks which almost kill us. In the very sharpness of the blow sometimes lies its own first healing. It would be long before Ramona would fully realize that Alessandro was dead. Her worst anguish was yet to come.

Felipe did not know and could not understand this; and it was with a marvelling gratitude that he saw Ramona, day after day, placid, always ready with a smile when he spoke to her. Her gratitude for each thoughtfulness of his smote him like a reproach; all the more that he knew her gentle heart had never held a thought of reproach in it towards him. "Grateful to me!" he thought. "To me, who might have spared her all this woe if I had been strong!"

Never would Felipe forgive himself,—no, not to the day of his death. His whole life should be devoted to her and her child; but what a pitiful thing was that to render!

As they drew near home he saw Ramona often try to conceal from him that she had shed tears. At last he said to her: "Dearest Ramona, do not fear to weep before me. I would not be any constraint on you. It is better for you to let the tears come freely, my sister. They are healing to wounds."

"I do not think so, Felipe," replied Ramona. "Tears are only selfish and w. z. They are like a cry because we are hurt. It is not possible always to keep them back; but I am ashamed when I have wept, and think also that I have sinned, because I have given a sad sight to others. Father Salvierderra always said that it was a duty to look happy, no matter how much we might be suffering."

"That is more than human power can do!" said Felipe.

"I think not," replied Ramona. "If it were, Father Salvierderra would not have commanded it. And do you not recollect, Felipe, what a smile his face always wore! and his heart had been broken for many, many years before he died. Alone, in the night, when he prayed, he used to weep, from the great wrestling he had with God, he told me; but we never saw him except with a smile. When one thinks in the wilderness, alone, Felipe, many things become clear. I have been learning, all these years in the wilderness, as if

I had had a teacher. Sometimes I almost thought that the spirit of Father Salvierderra was by my side putting thoughts into my mind. I hope I can tell them to my child when she is old enough. She will understand them quicker than I did, for she has Alessandro's soul; you can see that by her eyes. And all these things of which I speak were in his heart from his childhood. They belong to the air and the sky and the sun, and all trees know them."

When Ramona spoke thus of Alessandro, Felipe marvelled in silence. He himself had been afraid to mention Alessandro's name; but Ramona spoke it as if he were yet by her side. Felipe could not fathom this. There were to be many things yet which Felipe could not fathom in this lovely, sorrowing, sunny sister of his.

When they reached the house, the servants, who had been on the watch for days, were all gathered in the courtyard, old Marda and Juan Can heading the group; only two absent—Margarita and Luigo. They had been married some months before, and were living at the Ortigas ranch, where Luigo, to Juan Can's scornful amusement, had been made head shepherd.

On all sides were beaming faces, smiles, and glad cries of greeting. Underneath these were affectionate hearts quaking with fear lest the homecoming be but a sad one after all. Vaguely they knew a little of what their dear Senorita had been through since she left them; it seemed that she must be sadly altered by so much sorrow, and that it would be terrible to her to come back to the place so full of painful associations. "And the Senora gone, too," said one of the outdoor hands, as they were talking it over; "it's not the same place at all that it was when the Senora was here."

"Humph!" muttered Juan Can, more consequential and overbearing than ever for this year of absolute control of the estate. "Humph! that's all you know. A good thing the Senora died when she did, I can tell you! We'd never have seen the Senorita back here else; I can tell you that, my man! And for my part, I'd much rather be under Senor Felipe and the Senorita than under the Senora, peace to her ashes! She had her day. They can have theirs now."

When these loving and excited retainers saw Ramona—pale, but with her own old smile on her face—coming towards them with her babe in her arms, they broke into wild cheering, and there was not a dry eye in the group.

Singling out old Marda by a glance, Ramona held out the baby towards her, and said in her old gentle, affectionate voice, "I am sure you will love my baby, Marda!"

Senorita! Senorita! God bless you, Senorita!" they cried; and closed up their ranks around the baby, touching her, praising her, handing her from one to another.

Ramona stood for a few seconds watching them; then she said, "Give her to me, Marda. I will myself carry her into the house;" and she moved toward the inner door.

"This way, dear; this way," cried Felipe. "It is Father Salvierderra's room I ordered to be prepared for you, because it is so sunny for the baby!"

"Thanks, kind Felipe!" cried Ramona, and her eyes said more than her words. She knew he had divined the one thing she had most dreaded in returning—the crossing again the threshold of her own room. It would be long now before she would enter that room. Perhaps she would never enter it. How tender and wise of Felipe.

Yes; Felipe was both tender and wise, now. How long would the wisdom hold the tenderness in leash, as he day after day looked upon the face of this beautiful woman—so much more beautiful now than she had been before her marriage, that Felipe some-

times, as he gazed at her, thought her changed even in feature! But in this very change lay a spell which would for a long time surround her, and set her apart from lover's thoughts as if she were guarded by a cordon of viewless spirits. There was a rapt look of holy communion on her face, which made itself felt by the dullest perception, and sometimes overawed even where it attracted. It was the same thing which Aunt Ri had felt and formulated in her own humorous fashion. But old Marda put it better, when, one day, in reply to a half-terrified, low-whispered suggestion of Juan Can, to the effect that it was "a great pity the Senor Felipe hadn't married the Senorita years ago—what if he were to do it yet?" she said, also under her breath. "It is my opinion he'd as soon think of Saint Catharine herself! Not but that it would be a great thing if it could be!"

And now the thing that the Senora had imagined to herself so often had come about—the presence of a little child in her house, on the veranda, in the garden, everywhere; the sunny, joyous, blest presence. But how differently had it come! Not Felipe's child, as she proudly had pictured, but the child of Ramona; the friendless, banished Ramona returned now into full honour and peace as the daughter of the house—Ramona, widow of Alessandro. If the child had been Felipe's own he could not have felt for it a greater love. From the first, the little thing had clung to him as only second to her mother. She slept hours in his arms, one little hand hid in his dark beard, close to his lips, and kissed again and again when no one saw. Next to Ramona herself in Felipe's heart came Ramona's child; and on the child he could lavish the fondness he felt that he could never dare to show to the mother. Month by month it grew clearer to Felipe that the main-springs of Ramona's life were no longer of this earth: that she walked as one in constant fellowship with one unseen. Her frequent and calm mention of Alessandro did not deceive him. It did not mean a lessening grief: it meant an unchanged relation.

One thing weighed heavily on Felipe's mind—the concealed treasure. A sense of humiliation withheld him, day after day, from speaking of it. But he could have no peace until Ramona knew it. Each hour that he delayed the revelation he felt him. If almost as guilty as he had held his mother to be. At last he spoke. He had not said many words before Ramona interrupted him. "Oh yes!" she said. "I knew about those things: your mother told me. When we were in such trouble I used to wish sometimes we could have had a few of the jewels. But they were all given to the Church. That was what the Senora Ortigas said must be done with them if I married against your mother's wishes."

It was with a shame-stricken voice that Felipe replied: "Dear Ramona, they were not given to the Church. You know Father Salvierderra died; and I suppose my mother did not know what to do with them. She told me about them just as she was dying."

"But why did you not give them to the Church, dear?" asked Ramona simply.

"Why?" cried Felipe. "Because I hold them to be yours, and yours only. I would never have given them to the Church until I had sure proof that you were dead and had left no children."

Ramona's eyes were fixed earnestly on Felipe's face. "You have not read the Senora Ortigas's letter?" she said.

"Yes, I have," he replied, "every word of it."

"But that said I was not to have any of the things if I married against the Senora Moreno's will."

Felipe groaned. Had his mother lied? "No, dear," he said, "that was