

RAMONA.

A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

CHAPTER V. (CONTINUED.)

On one of the posts of the shed short projecting slats were nailed, like half-ropes of a ladder. Lightly as a rope-walker Felipe ran up these, to the roof, and took his stand there, ready to take the fleeces and pack them in the bag as fast as they should be tossed up from below. Luigo, with a big leathern wallet fastened in front of him, filled with five-cent pieces, took his stand in the centre of the shed. The thirty shearers, running into the nearest pen, dragged each his sheep into the shed, in the twinkling of an eye had the creature between his knees, helpless, immovable, and the sharp sound of the shears set in. The sheep-shearing had begun. No rest now. Not a second's silence from the bleating, baaing, opening and shutting, clicking, sharpening of shears, flying of fleeces through the air to the roof, pressing and stamping them down in the bales; not a second's intermission, except the hour of rest at noon, from sunrise till sunset, till the whole eight thousand of the Senora Moreno's sheep were shorn. It was a dramatic spectacle. As soon as a sheep was shorn the shearer ran with the fleece in his hand to Luigo, throw it down on a table, received his five-cent piece, dropped it in his pocket, ran to the pen, dragged out another sheep, and in less than five minutes was back again with a second fleece. The shorn sheep, released, bounded off into another pen, where, light in the head no doubt from being three to five pounds lighter on their legs, they trotted round bewilderedly for a moment, then flung up their heels and capered for joy.

It was warm work. The dust from the fleeces and the trampling feet filled the air. As the sun rose higher in the sky the sweat poured off the men's faces; and Felipe, standing without shelter on the roof, found out very soon that he had by no means yet got back his full strength since the fever. Long before noon, except for sheer pride, and for the recollection of Juan Canito's speech, he would have come down and yielded his place to the old man. But he was resolved not to give up, and he worked on, though his face was purple and his head throbbing. After the bag of fleeces was half full, the packer stands in it jumping with his full weight on the wool, as he throws in the fleeces, to compress them as much as possible. When Felipe began to do this, he found that he had indeed overrated his strength. As the first cloud of the sickening dust came up, enveloping his head, choking his breath, he turned suddenly ill, and, calling faintly, "Juan, I am ill," sank helpless down in the wool. He had fainted. At Juan Canito's scream of dismay, a great hubbub and outcry arose; all saw instantly what had happened. Felipe's head was hanging limp over the edge of the bag Juan in vain endeavouring to get sufficient foothold by the side to lift him. One after another the men rushed up the ladder, until they were all standing, a helpless excited crowd, on the roof, one proposing one thing, one another. Only Luigo had had the presence of mind to run to the house for help. The Senora was away from home. She had gone with Father Salvierderra to a friend's house, a half day's journey off. But Ramona was there. Snatching all she could think of in way of restoratives she came flying back with Luigo, followed by every servant of the establishment, all talking, groaning, gesticulating, suggesting, wringing their hands—as disheartening a Babel as ever made bad matters worse.

Reaching the shed, Ramona looked up to the roof bewildered. "Where is he?" she cried. The next instant she saw his head, held in Juan Canito's arms, just above the edge of the wool-bag. She groaned, "Oh, how will he ever be lifted out!"

"I will lift him, Senora, cried Alessandro, coming to the front. "I am very strong. Do not be afraid; I will bring him safe down." And swinging himself down the ladder, he ran swiftly to the camp, and returned, bringing in his hands blankets. Springing quickly to the roof again, he knotted the blankets firmly together, and tying them at the middle around his waist, threw the ends to his men, telling them to hold him firm. He spoke in the Indian tongue as he was hurriedly doing this, and Ramona did not at first understand his plan. But when she saw the Indians move a little back from the edge of the roof, holding the blankets firm grasped, while Alessandro stepped out on one of the narrow cross-beams from which the bag swung, she saw what he meant to do. She held her breath. Felipe was a slender man; Alessandro was much heavier, and many inches taller. Still, could any man carry such a burden safely on that narrow beam! Ramona looked away, and shut her eyes, through the silence which followed. It was only a few moments; but it seemed an eternity before a glad murmur of voices told her that it was done, and, looking up, she saw Felipe lying on the roof, unconscious, his face white, his eyes shut. At this sight, all the servants broke out afresh, weeping and wailing, "He is dead! He is dead!"

Ramona stood motionless, her eyes fixed on Felipe's face. She, too, believed him dead; but her thought was of the Senora.

"He is not dead," cried Juan Canito, who had thrust his hand under Felipe's shirt. "He is not dead. It is only a faint."

At this the first tears rolled down Ramona's face. She looked piteously at the ladder up and down which she had seen Alessandro run as if it were an easy indoor staircase. "If I could only get up there!" she said, looking from one to another. "I think I can;" and she put one foot on the lower round.

"Holy Virgin!" cried Juan Can, seeing her movement. "Senorita! Senorita! do not attempt it. It is not too easy for a man. You will break your neck. He is fast coming to his senses."

Alessandro caught the words. Spite of all the confusion and terror of the scene his heart heard the word, "Senorita." Ramona was not the wife of Felipe, or of any man. Yet Alessandro recollected that he had addressed her as Senora, and she did not seem surprised. Coming to the front of the group, he said, bending forward, "Senorita!" There must have been something in the tone which made Ramona start. The simple word could not have done it. "Senorita," said Alessandro "it will be nothing to bring Senor Felipe down the ladder. He is, in my arms, no more than one of the lambs yonder. I will bring him down as soon as he is recovered. He is better here till then. He will very soon be himself again. It was only the heat." Seeing that the expression of anxious distress did not grow less on Ramona's face, he continued, in a tone still more earnest, "Will not the Senorita trust me to bring him safe down?"

Ramona smiled faintly through her tears. "Yes," she said, "I will trust you. You are Alessandro, are you not?"

"Yes, Senorita," he answered, greatly surprised, "I am Alessandro."

CHAPTER VI.

A bad beginning did not make a good ending of the Senora Moreno's sheep-shearing this year. One as superstitiously prejudiced against Roman

Catholic rule as she was in favour of it, would have found, in the way things fell out, ample reason for a belief that the Senora was being punished for having let all the affairs of her place come to a standstill to await the coming of an old monk. But the pious Senora, looking at the other side of the shield, was filled with gratitude that, since all this ill luck was to befall her, she had the good Father Salvierderra at her side to give her comfort and counsel.

It was not yet quite noon of the first day, when Felipe fainted and fell in the wool; and it was only a little past noon of the third, when Juan Canito, who, not without some secret exultation, had taken Senor Felipe's place at the packing, fell from the cross-beam to the ground, and broke his right leg—a bad break near the knee; and Juan Canito's bones were much too old for fresh knitting. He would never again be able to do more than hobble about on crutches, dragging along the useless leg. It was a cruel blow to the old man. He could not be resigned to it. He lost faith in his saints, and privately indulged in blasphemous beratings and reproaches of them, which would have filled the Senora with terror had she known that such blasphemies were being committed under her roof.

"So many times as I have crossed that plank in my day!" cried Juan; "only the fiends themselves could have made me trip; and there was that whole box of candles I paid for with my own money last month, and burned to St Francis in the chapel for this very sheep-shearing! He may sit in the dark, for all me, to the end of time! He is no saint at all! What are they for, if not to keep us from harm when we pray to them? I'll pray no more. I believe the Americans are right who laugh at us." From morning till night, and nearly from night till morning, for the leg ached so he slept little, poor Juan groaned and grumbled and swore, and swore and grumbled and groaned. Taking care of him was enough, Margarita said, to wear out the patience of the Madonna herself. There was no pleasing him whatever you did, and his tongue was never still a minute. For her part she believed that it must be as he said, that the fiends had pushed him off the plank, and that the saints had had their reasons for leaving him to his fate. A coldness and suspicion gradually grew up in the minds of all the servants towards him. His own reckless language, combined with Margarita's reports, gave the superstitious fair ground for believing that something had gone mysteriously wrong, and that the Devil was in a fair way to get his soul, which was very hard for the old man, in addition to all the rest he had to bear. The only alleviation he had for his torments, was in having his fellow-servants, men and women, drop in, sit by his pallet, and chat with him, telling him all that was going on; and when by degrees they dropped off, coming more and more seldom, and one by one leaving off coming altogether, it was the one drop that overflowed his cup of misery; and he turned his face to the wall, left off grumbling, and spoke only when he must.

This phase frightened Margarita even more than the first. Now, she thought; surely the dumb terror and remorse of one who belongs to the Devil had seized him, and her hands trembled as she went through the needful ministrations for him each day. Three months, at least, the doctor, who had come from Ventura to set the leg, had said he must lie still in bed and be thus tended. "Three months!" sighed Margarita. "If I be not dead or gone crazy myself before the end of that be come!"

The Senora was too busy with Felipe to pay any attention or to give thought to Juan. Felipe's fainting had been the symptom and beginning of a fierce relapse of the fever, and he was lying in

his bed, tossing and raving in delirium always about the wool.

"Throw them faster, faster! That's a good fleece; five pounds more; a round ton in those bales. Juan! Alessandro! Captain!—Jesus, how this sun burns my head!"

Several times he had called "Alessandro" so earnestly, that Father Salvierderra advised bringing Alessandro into the room, to see if by any chance there might have been something in his mind that he wished to say to him. But when Alessandro stood by the bedside, Felipe gazed at him vacantly, as he did at all the others, still repeating, however, "Alessandro! Alessandro!"

"I think perhaps he wants Alessandro to play on his violin," sobbed out Ramona. "He was telling me how beautifully Alessandro played, and said he would have him up on the veranda in the evening to play to us."

"We might try it," said Father Salvierderra. "Have you your violin here, Alessandro?"

"Alas, no, Father," replied Alessandro, "I did not bring it."

"Perhaps it would do him good if you were to sing, then," said Ramona. "He was speaking of your voice also."

"Oh try, try!" said the Senora, turning to Alessandro. "Sing something low and soft."

Alessandro walked from the bed to the open window, and after thinking for a moment, began a slow strain from one end of the masses.

At the first note, Felipe became suddenly quiet, evidently listening. An expression of pleasure, spread over his feverish face. He turned his head to one side, put his hand under his cheek and closed his eyes. The three watching him looked at each other in astonishment.

"It is a miracle," said Father Salvierderra. "He will sleep."

"It was what he wanted!" whispered Ramona.

The Senora spoke not, but buried her face in the bedclothes for a second; then lifting it, she gazed at Alessandro as if she were praying to a saint. He, too, saw the change in Felipe, and sang lower, till the notes sounded as if they came from afar; lower and lower, slower; finally they ceased, as if they died away lost in distance. As they ceased, Felipe opened his eyes.

"Oh, go on, go on!" the Senora implored in a whisper shrill with anxiety. "Do not stop!"

Alessandro repeated the strain, slow, solemn; his voice trembled; the air in the room seemed stifling, spite of the open windows; he felt something like terror as he saw Felipe evidently sinking to sleep by reason of the notes of his voice. There had been nothing in Alessandro's healthy outdoor experience to enable him to understand such phenomenon. Felipe breathed more and more slowly, softly, regularly; soon he was in a deep sleep. The singing stopped; Felipe did not stir.

"Oan I go?" whispered Alessandra.

"No, no!" replied the Senora impatiently. "He may wake any minute."

Alessandro looked troubled, but bowed his head submissively, and remained standing by the window. Father Salvierderra was kneeling on one side of the bed, the Senora at the other, Ramona at the foot—all praying; the silence was so great that the slight sounds of the rosary beads slipping against each other seemed loud. In a niche in the wall, at the head of the bed, stood a statue of the Madonna, on the other side a picture of Santa Barbara. Candles were burning before each. The long wicks smouldered and died down, sputtering, then flared up again as the ends fell into the melted wax. The Senora's eyes were fixed on the Madonna. The Father's were closed. Ramona gazed at Felipe with tears streaming down her face as she mechanically told her beads.

"She is his betrothed, no doubt," thought Alessandro. "The saints will