

## RAMONA.

## A Story.

By HELEN JACKSON.

## CHAPTER XIV.—(CONTINUED.)

"Ay," said old Marda, who had seen all this for days back, "ay, she has wasted away this last week like one in a fever, sure enough; I have seen it. It must be she is starving herself to death."

"Indeed, she has not eaten for ten days—hardly since that day," and Margarita and her mother exchanged looks. It was not necessary to further define the day.

"Juan Can says he thinks he will never be seen here again," continued Margarita.

"The saints grant it, then," said Marda hotly, "if it is he has cost the Senorita all this! I am that turned about in my head with it all that I've no thoughts to think; but plain enough it is he is mixed up with whatever 't is has gone wrong."

"I could tell what it is," said Margarita, her old pertness coming uppermost for a moment; "but I've got no more to say, now the Senorita's lying on her bed, with the face she's got. It's enough to break your heart to look at her. I could just go down on my knees to her for all I've said; and I will, and to Saint Francis too! She's going to be with him before long; I know she is."

"No," said the wiser, older Marda. "She is not so ill as you think. She is young. It's the heart's gone out of her, that's all. I've been that way myself. People are, when they're young."

"I'm young," retorted Margarita. "I've never been that way."

"There's many a mile to the end of the road, my girl," said Marda, significantly; "and 'It's ill boasting the first day out,' was a proverb when I was your age!"

Marda had never been much more than half-way fond of this own child of hers. Their natures were antagonistic. Traits which, in Margarita's father, had embittered many a day of Marda's early life, were perpetually cropping out in Margarita, making between the mother and daughter a barrier which even parental love was not always strong enough to surmount. And, as was inevitable, this antagonism was constantly leading to things which seemed to Margarita, and in fact were, unjust and unfounded.

"She's always flinging out at me whatever I do," thought Margarita. "I know one thing; I'll never tell her what the Senorita's told me; never—not till after she's gone."

A sudden suspicion flashed into Margarita's mind. She seated herself on the bench outside the kitchen door, to wrestle with it. What if it were not to a convent at all, but to Alessandro, that the Senorita meant to go! No; that was preposterous. If it had been that, she would have gone with him in the outset. Nobody who was plotting to run away with a lover ever wore such a look as the Senorita wore now. Margarita dismissed the thought; yet it left its trace. She would be more observant for having had it: her resuscitated affection for her young mistress was not yet so strong that it would resist the assaults of jealousy, if that passion were to be again aroused in her fiery soul. Though she had never been deeply in love with Alessandro herself, she had been enough so, and she remembered him vividly enough, to feel yet a sharp emotion of displeasure at the recollection of his devotion to the Senorita. Now that the Senorita seemed to be deserted, unhappy, prostrated, she had no room for anything but pity for her; but let Alessandro come on the stage again, and all would be changed. The old

hostility would return. It was but a dubious sort of ally, after all, that Ramona had so unexpectedly scoured in Margarita. She might prove the sharpest of broken reeds.

It was sunset of the eighteenth day since Alessandro's departure. Ramona had lain for four days well nigh motionless on the bed. She herself began to think she must be going to die. Her mind seemed to be vacant of all thought. She did not even sorrow for Alessandro's death; she seemed torpid, body and soul. Such prostrations as these are Nature's enforced rests. It is often only by help of them that our bodies tide over crises, strains, in which, if we continued to battle, we should be slain.

As Ramona lay half unconscious—neither awake nor yet asleep—on this evening, she was suddenly aware of a vivid impression produced upon her; it was not sound, it was not sight. She was alone; the house was still as death; the warm September twilight silence reigned outside. She sat up in her bed, intent—half alarmed—half glad—bewildered—alive. What had happened? Still there was no sound, no stir. The twilight was fast deepening; not a breath of air moving. Gradually her bewildered senses and faculties awoke from their long-dormant condition; she looked around the room; even the walls seemed revived; she clasped her hands, and leaped from the bed. "Alessandro is not dead!" she said aloud; and she laughed hysterically. "He is not dead!" she repeated. "He is not dead! He is somewhere near!"

With quivering hands she dressed and stole out of the house. After the first few seconds she found herself strangely strong; she did not tremble; her feet trod firm on the ground. "Oh, miracle!" she thought, as she hastened down the garden walk; "I am well again! Alessandro is near!" So vivid was the impression that when she reached the willows and found the spot silent, vacant, as when she had last sat there, hopeless, broken-hearted, she experienced a revulsion of disappointment. "Not here!" she cried; "not here!" and a swift fear shook her. "Am I mad? Is it this way, perhaps, people lose their senses, when they are as I have been?"

But the young strong blood was running swift in her veins. No! this was no madness; rather a newly discovered power; a fulness of sense, a revelation. Alessandro was near.

Swiftly she walked down the river road. The farther she went the keener grew her expectation, her sense of Alessandro's nearness. In her present mood she would have walked on and on, even to Temecula itself, sure that she was at each step drawing nearer to Alessandro. As she approached the second willow copse, which lay perhaps a quarter of a mile west of the first, she saw the figure of a man, standing, leaning against one of the trees. She halted. It could not be Alessandro. He would not pause for a moment so near the house where he was to find her. She was afraid to go on. It was late to meet a stranger in this lonely spot. The figure was strangely still; so still that, as she peered through the dusk, she half fancied it might be an optical illusion. She advanced a few steps, hesitatingly, then stopped. As he came out from the shadows of the trees she saw that he was of Alessandro's height. She quickened her steps, then suddenly stopped again. What did this mean? It could not be Alessandro. Ramona wrung her hands in agony of suspense. An almost unconquerable instinct urged her forward; but terror held her back. After standing irresolute for some minutes she turned to walk back to the house, saying, "I must not run the risk of its being a stranger. If it is Alessandro he will come."

But her feet seemed to refuse to move in the opposite direction. Slower

and slower she walked for a few paces, then turned again. The man returned to his former place, and stood as at first, leaning against the tree.

"It may be a messenger from him," she said; "a messenger who has been told not to come to the house until after dark."

Her mind was made up. She quickened her pace to a run. A few moments more brought her so near that she could see distinctly. It was—yes, it was Alessandro. He did not see her. His face was turned partially away, his head resting against the tree; he must be ill. Ramona flew, rather than ran. In a moment more Alessandro had heard the light steps, turned, saw Ramona, and, with a cry, bounded forward, and they were clasped in each other's arms before they had looked in each other's faces. Ramona spoke first. Disengaging herself gently, and looking up, she began: "Alessandro—" But at the first sight of his face she shrieked. Was this Alessandro, this haggard, emaciated, speechless man, who gazed at her with hollow eyes, full of misery, and no joy! "O God," cried Ramona, "you have been ill! You are ill! My God, Alessandro, what is it?"

Alessandro passed his hand slowly over his forehead, as if trying to collect his thoughts before speaking, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on Ramona, with the same anguished look, conclusively holding both her hands in his.

"Senorita," he said, "my Senorita!" Then he stopped. His tongue seemed to refuse him utterance; and his voice,—this strange, hard, unresonant voice,—whose voice was it? Not Alessandro's.

"My Senorita," he began again. "I could not go without one sight of your face; but when I was here I had not courage to go near the house. If you had not come I should have gone back without seeing you."

Ramona heard these words in fast-deepening terror. What did they mean? Her look seemed to suggest a new thought to Alessandro.

"Heavens, Senorita!" he cried, "have you not heard? Do you not know what has happened?"

"I know nothing, love," answered Ramona. "I have heard nothing since you went away. For ten days I have been sure you were dead; but to-night something told me that you were near and I came to meet you."

At the first words of Ramona's sentence, Alessandro threw his arms around her again. As she said "love," his whole frame shook with emotion.

"My Senorita!" he whispered, "my Senorita! how shall I tell you! How shall I tell you!"

"What is there to tell, Alessandro?" she said. "I am afraid of nothing, now that you are here, and not dead, as I thought."

But Alessandro did not speak. It seemed impossible. At last, straining her closer to his breast, he cried: "Dearest Senorita! I feel as if I should die when I tell you—I have no home; my father is dead; my people are driven out of their village. I am only a beggar now, Senorita; like those you used to feed and pity in Los Angeles convent!" As he spoke the last words he reeled, and, supporting himself against the tree, added, "I am not strong, Senorita, we have been starving."

Ramona's face did not reassure him. Even in the dusk he could see its look of incredulous horror. He misread it.

"I only came to look at you once more," he continued. "I will go now. May the saints bless you, my Senorita, always. I think the Virgin sent you to me to-night. I should never have seen your face if you had not come."

While he was speaking, Ramona had buried her face in his bosom. Lifting it now, she said, "Did you

mean to leave me to think you were dead, Alessandro?"

"I thought that the news about our village must have reached you," he said, "and that you would know I had no home, and could not come to seem to remind you of what you had said. O, Senorita, it was little enough I had before to give you! I don't know how I dared to believe that you could come to be with me; but I loved you so much, I had thought of many things I could do; and"—lowering his voice and speaking almost sullenly—"it is the saints, I believe, who have punished me thus for having resolved to leave my people, and take all I had for myself and you. Now they have left me nothing," and he groaned.

"Who?" cried Ramona. "Was there a battle? Was your father killed?" She was trembling with horror.

"No," answered Alessandro. "There was no battle. There would have been, if I had had my way; but my father implored me not to resist. He said it would only make it worse for us in the end. The sheriff, too, he begged of me to let it all go on peaceably, and help him keep the people quiet. He felt terribly to have to do it. It was Mr. Rothsaker, from San Diego. We had often worked for him on his ranch. He knew all about us. Don't you recollect, Senorita, I told you about him, how fair he always was, and kind too? He has the biggest wheat ranch in Cajon; we've harvested miles and miles of wheat for him. He said he would have rather died, almost, than have had it to do; but if we resisted he would have to order his men to shoot. He had twenty men with him. They thought there would be trouble; and well they might—turning a whole village full of men and women and children out of their houses, and driving them off like foxes. If it had been any man but Mr. Rothsaker, I would have shot him dead, if I had hung for it; but I knew if he thought we must go, there was no help for us."

"But, Alessandro," interrupted Ramona, "I can't understand. Who was it made Mr. Rothsaker do it? Who has the land now?"

"I don't know who they are," Alessandro replied, his voice full of anger and scorn. "They're Americans—eight or ten of them. They all got together and brought a suit, they call it, up in San Francisco; and it was decided in the court that they own all our land. That was all Mr. Rothsaker could tell about it. It was the law, he said, and nobody could go against the law."

"Oh," said Ramona, "that's the way the Americans took so much of the Senorita's land away from her. It was in the court up in San Francisco; and they decided that miles and miles of her land, which the General had always had, was not hers at all. They said it belonged to the United States Government."

"They are a pack of thieves and liars, every one of them!" cried Alessandro. "They are going to steal all the land in this country; we might all just as well throw ourselves into the sea and let them have it. My father has been telling me this for years. He saw it coming; but I did not believe him. I did not think men could be so wicked; but he was right. I am glad he is dead. That is the only thing I have to be thankful for now. One day I thought he was going to get well, and I prayed to the Virgin not to let him. I did not want him to live. He never knew anything clear after they took him out of his house. That was before I got there. I found him sitting on the ground outside. They said it was the sun that had turned him crazy; but it was not. It was his heart breaking in his bosom. He would not come out of his house, and the men lifted him up and carried him out by force, and threw him on the ground; and then they threw out all