

Ryan? What can this mystery be? Why he looked as white and terrified as if he had seen a ghost!

### CHAPTER III.

As Christmas drew nearer and nearer Hilda's mystification daily heightened, although she refrained completely now from any endeavor to coax or persuade her sister to draw aside the veil screening this puzzling secret from sight.

Alice rarely left her own bedroom, as the short, grey December days went by. She still sternly persisted in her refusal to meet Frank and Gerald Ryan.

'But there need be no embarrassing features in the matter for you, Hilda,' she said one day to her sister. 'The two brothers have already been told that I am an invalid—practically confined to my bedroom. This is, surely, an all-sufficient excuse for my non-appearance when they are here. And I am only awaiting an expected letter—which is already overdue—to arrange as to my departure from Sunnynook.'

'Your departure from Sunnynook, Alice?' Hilda echoed, surprised and pained. 'But surely you do not intend to leave the house before my marriage?'

'I am sorry, Hilda—more sorry than I can express,' was Alice's murmured answer. 'But I cannot remain here for your marriage. The moment that expected letter reaches me I shall be compelled to go at once!'

Her voice trembled as she said these words, and then all of a sudden the girl completely broke down.

Clinging to Hilda, her tall, slender figure swaying like a reed in a storm, she broke into bitter weeping.

'I never, never should have come here—it was madness of me,' she sobbed almost distractedly. 'But the longing to see poor mother and you, Hilda, once again could not be repressed. And another longing, too, drew me here—a piece of despicable folly on my part! I only wish I could relieve my heart of its burden of secrecy this moment, Hilda,' she went on wildly; 'but I dare not—I dare not do so. For your sake—for mother's sake—for the sake of our family name and honor, there is only one course open to me—total silence as to the sorrow and shame that have ruined my life's happiness up to this—'

'Alice, Alice, you terrify me!' Hilda broke in, thoroughly alarmed and distressed at this frantic outburst. 'Do you mean me to understand, then, that your entire future is to be sacrificed to some mistaken delicacy on your part—some foolish promise of secrecy maybe—some high-flown, ridiculous scruple of conscience?'

'There is no help for it—for the present, at least, Hilda,' was Alice's evasive answer. 'I implore of you to ask me no further questions. Should the time come when I can be at liberty to speak, then you and mother shall be the first to learn the truth as to my wretched, wretched story!'

A feverish impulse prompted Hilda to put a certain question to her sister, a question she had often longed to ask Alice during the previous weeks.

'Is your secret connected in any way with Gerald Ryan, or with his brother, Frank?'

Yet Hilda still hesitated. Her true, sisterly love for Alice caused her to shrink from the possibility of being the direct cause of that loved sister's humiliation. And should she put such a question as this to Alice how could she be certain that the result would not be in accordance with her darkest fears?

A long silence fell between the two sisters. Then Hilda's decision was made.

'Be it so, Alice,' she said, as she stooped over her sister's bowed face and kissed her. 'I promise never again to touch on any such subject as this with you, dear, until you yourself think well of opening up the matter voluntarily at last.'

And Hilda kept her promise. During the ensuing weeks she took care not even indirectly to approach the matter, and she warned her mother to observe a similar reticence and tact.

When Christmas Eve came round, however, Hilda was sorely tempted to break through her self-denying

resolution; for on that day a letter reached Sunnynook for Alice, the perusal of which seemed to have an instantaneous and alarming effect upon Hilda's ill-fated sister.

In a paroxysm of grief Alice read this mysterious letter; then locked herself into her own room where she remained during the greater part of the day, refusing admission even to her mother and Hilda.

'This is terrible!' Hilda said to herself. 'The letter Alice received to-day cannot be the one she has been so long expecting. . . . What am I to do in the matter? It seems heartless and inhuman to allow her to suffer alone like this!'

Early in the short, winter afternoon, however, Alice emerged from her bedroom and joined her mother and sister in the cosy little parlor—a wan shadow of herself.

'I wonder is there a cup of tea to be got?' she said, with a sad, wistful smile, as she crept to the fire-side, like a shadow, and seated herself so that the light of the lamp did not fall upon her face.

'Certainly, dear,' Mrs. O'Carroll said, ringing the bell, as she spoke. 'Annie will get it for you directly.'

Annie Fortune appeared just then and received her orders, and almost in total silence the little group sat by the parlor fire until the girl returned with the tea-tray.

Alice sipped the tea, still in silence, while her mother and Hilda endeavored to chat carelessly and naturally as they joined her in the repast. But soon even these well-intended attempts at conversation faltered, and lapsed into frequent pauses, while the boom of the wintry wind filled the silences and the crackle of the merry flame through the high-piled logs in the grate.

It was during one of these pauses at last that a sudden interruption occurred from out-of-doors. The sound of approaching car wheels drew near; then the vehicle stopped at the outer door, and a few moments later there came a ringing double knock and an energetic peal of the door bell.

'Who in the world can it be?' Mrs O'Connell said. 'It is not Frank and Gerald. They've gone into Waterford to-day, and will not be back for some hours to come. I wonder—'

But at this instant Annie Fortune entered the parlor, ushering in a small, thin, fragile-looking woman, wrapped in furs.

'Mrs. Massy, ma'am,' Annie announced, in awe-stricken tones; and, as the name passed her lips, Alice shrank back with a startled, dismayed cry, while Mrs. O'Carroll and Hilda rose excitedly to their feet and advanced to greet the newcomer.

'Why, Jenny, my dear, can it possibly be you?' Mrs. O'Carroll cried effusively. 'This is indeed a surprise! . . . When did you return to Ireland?'

'Only yesterday, Cousin Kate,' was Mrs. Massy's somewhat grimly spoken answer. 'And I shouldn't have come to see you so soon,' she went on, with a sudden, sharp glance of her steely-grey eyes upon Alice's shrinking face, 'only that I wished to make it quite clear to you why I treated your daughter Alice as I did, and why she left my house three years ago. In common justice to myself—'

'Left your house three years ago, Jenny!' Mrs. O'Carroll interposed here. 'Do you mean to tell me that Alice has not lived with you for the past three years? I cannot believe it.'

'Ha! I see she has befooled and tricked you as she befooled and tricked me,' was Mrs. Massy's angry rejoinder. 'Listen to me, Cousin Kate, and say nothing until I've done.'

'Alice, is this true?' Mrs. O'Carroll cried, turning appealingly to her elder daughter.

'It is true that I've not lived under Mrs. Massy's roof for the past three years, mother,' Alice answered, with pale, yet resolute, lips.

'For the very good reason,' snapped Mrs. Massy, 'that I could not possibly allow such a person to remain in my house! I do not wish to prolong this unpleasant scene now by entering into long-winded de-