

YOLANDE.

By WILLIAM BLACK,

Author of "SHANON BELLA," "MADRID OF DARE," "WHITE WINGS," "SUSAN," ETC.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CONFIDANT.

One evening John Shortlands and Jack Melville were together standing at the door of the lodge, looking down at the glen at the very edge of which they were seated. The day had been dull and overclouded, and seemed about to sink into an equally gloomy evening, when suddenly, at sunset, the western heavens broke into a flame of red, and all at once the stream flowing down through the long valley became one sheet of vivid pink fire, only broken here and there by the big blocks of granite in its channel, which remained a pale and ghostly gray.

"No; it's about her I want to speak to you. Come along."

"About her?" she repeated, with the large clear gray eyes showing some astonishment.

"Or, rather," said his companion, when they had got as far as the bridge, "about her father. Winterbourne is an old friend of mine, and I won't just call him an ass; but by the way he is going on at present, shilly-shallying, frightened to say the least. Of course that, is enough to worry a far stronger man than he is into his grave. Well, if he won't speak, I will. Dang it, I hate mystery! My motto is—Out with it! And he will never have got into this precious mess if he had taken my advice all through."

"Melville was surprised, but he did not interrupt. John Shortlands seemed a trifle angry."

"The immediate trouble with him is this: he ought or he ought not to be so confident certain matters to you as a friend of your father? Well, I am going to take that into my own hands. I am going to tell you the whole story and a miserable business it is."

"Do you think that is a question?"

"Yes; but we should fetch Miss Winterbourne to show her the skies on fire."

She did that. I firmly believe she did keep her restraint to the letter. But then the poor wretch had worse and worse agony to bear, and then it was that somebody or other—it wasn't Winterbourne, and he knew nothing about it—recommended her to try small doses of opium as a sort of medicine, don't ye see. I think it was opium, for I am not sure whether chlorodyne was in use just then; but at all events it was chlorodyne soon afterward; and it seems miraculous how women can go on destroying themselves with those medicinal drugs without being found out. I don't know whether Winterbourne would ever have found it out; for he is an indulgent sort of chap, and he was very fond of her, and then suddenly there was a scene at dinner. Then he discovered the whole thing. The child was sent away for fear of further scenes, and this so terrified the mother that she made the most solemn promise never to touch the poison again. But by this time—here is the mischief of these infernal things—her power of self-control had been effected. Man alive! I can't tell you what Winterbourne had to go through. His patients with her was superhuman; and always the promise held out to her that Yolande was to be restored to her, and sometimes she succeeded so well that every one was hopeful, and she seemed to have quite recovered.

"But if you are afraid of accepting the responsibility, there's an easy way out of it. I will go and tell my mother, and have it over. I have already broken away from Winterbourne's shilly-shallying by speaking to you; he would never have done it, and he's worrying himself into his grave about it. He's a timid and sensitive fellow. He now thinks he should have told the Master, as he calls him, when he first proposed for Yolande, and perhaps it might have been better to do so; but I can see how he was probably well inclined to do so for various reasons, and anxious not to put any stumbling-block in the way. But now if you were to go to him and say, 'Well, I have heard the whole story, and I can't consent either. Yolande and her future husband. Forget the whole thing, and don't worry any more about it, I do believe he would recover his peace of mind, for he has confidence in your judgment.'

"I would be rather a serious thing."

"I must take time to turn the matter over."

"Oh, certainly."

"They had now reached the bridge, and happening to look up, they saw that Yolande had come to the door of the lodge, and was standing there, and waving a handkerchief to them as a sign to make haste. And what a pretty picture she made as she stood there!—the warm light from the window upon the tall English-looking figure clad in a light-blue costume, and giving color to the fair, freckled face, and the ruddy-gold aureole of her hair. Melville's eyes lighted up with pleasure at the very sight of her; it was but natural—she was like a vision."

"Ah," said she, shaking her finger at them as they went up the path, "you are wicked men. Seven minutes late already; and if the two-pounder that Mr. Melville shot, he would have fallen all to pieces to meet with yourselves to blame—that is true."

"I wish, Miss Winterbourne," said Jack Melville, "that some noble creature to separate Yolande from her father, and let her live in peace and quiet in this neighborhood here, and he left in London to take his chance of a stone being thrown through his window at any hour of the day or night."

"But that terrorism is perfectly frightful!"

lands, bluntly. "Is he a worrying sort of creature?"

"Oh, not at all. He is remarkably sensible. He will take a perfectly calm view of the situation; you may depend on that."

"Other things being equal, I am for his being laid—most distinctly. If he has common-sense, there need be no trouble. On the other hand, you know, if you should think we are making a fuss where none is necessary, I have a notion that Winterbourne would be satisfied by your judgment, as an intimate friend of Leslie's."

"But that is putting rather a serious responsibility on me. Supposing it is decided to say nothing about the matter, then I should be in the awkward position of knowing something affecting Leslie's domestic affairs of which he would be ignorant."

"Undoubtedly. I quite see that. But if you are afraid of accepting the responsibility, there's an easy way out of it. I will go and tell my mother, and have it over. I have already broken away from Winterbourne's shilly-shallying by speaking to you; he would never have done it, and he's worrying himself into his grave about it. He's a timid and sensitive fellow. He now thinks he should have told the Master, as he calls him, when he first proposed for Yolande, and perhaps it might have been better to do so; but I can see how he was probably well inclined to do so for various reasons, and anxious not to put any stumbling-block in the way. But now if you were to go to him and say, 'Well, I have heard the whole story, and I can't consent either. Yolande and her future husband. Forget the whole thing, and don't worry any more about it, I do believe he would recover his peace of mind, for he has confidence in your judgment.'

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