

THE AMBER DEMON.

(Continued.)

"Not half beautiful enough for you, my darling," he said fondly. "If I were a king I would make you my queen."

"You love me so much?" coquettishly.

"I love you, Else, better than anything on earth, nay, better than life itself. For you there is nothing I would not do. Tell me, my own, that you return my love. I should never weary of hearing your sweet lips say 'I love you,'" and he bent upon her an impassioned glance, "Say, I love you, Ole."

"I love you, Ole," she repeated, returning his gaze with one that sent the blood madly coursing and pulsing through his veins as he met the look from those liquid eyes that seemed the fountain of purity and truth.

"Mine, mine only, nothing, not even death, can part us now!" he cried exultingly, straining her to him with a convulsive pressure that was almost painful in its intensity.

"Not even death, ha! ha!" screamed frantically a voice so hoarse and strained, it sounded like nothing human as it seemed to come out of the ground at their feet.

"What is that?" cried Else starting out of Bertel's clasp, and looking fearfully around, "I thought I heard a cry."

"It must have been some sea-bird, there is nothing here," said Ole soothingly, though he had been somewhat startled at the sudden sound which had seemed like a repetition of his own words; "or it may have been the wind, I hear it rising."

Else shivered, and looked apprehensively over her shoulder. "Let us go home," she said, "it is getting dark, and hark how the sea is roaring."

Something told her whose voice it was that she had heard, though nothing was to be seen around but the hillocks of sand covered with the dune-grass, and a strange premonition of evil came over her as she listened to the melancholy sound of the distant sea. Little as she was apt to be touched by any external thing, that dismal cry as of a soul in despair, had an effect upon her shallow nature, though unfortunately for herself, it was an evanescent one.

CHAPTER IV.

For a time Else adhered to her resolution of not allowing Karl to see so much of her.

She was so dazzled at the prospect opening before her when she would be Ole Bertel's bride, the mistress of the pretty cottage, and able to look down scornfully upon all her former companions, the village maidens, who would still be obliged to work hard disentangling the pieces of amber from the sea-tang, wetted through and through by the icy spray, as they are obliged to stand as close as possible to the water's edge; while she, Else, could pass her time in luxurious idleness, dressed in finer clothes than any of them possessed or were ever likely to possess.

Karl haunted the spots where he had been used to meet her, but without avail; she studiously kept out of his way, and she could the more easily do this as she knew the time the boats usually returned from the reef, and used to make a point of ostentatiously greeting her betrothed and walking away with him.

Karl writhed in secret under her treatment of him; and once or twice Else felt herself shuddering when she met the gleam of his fierce eyes.

She remembered her grandmother's story. Karl was quite capable of treating the village to another tragedy, though on slightly different lines.

There were times when on passing him by Bertel's side, she had felt that she and her betrothed had been very near their deaths. Yet her coquetry was such that she could not resist trying the extent of her power over the unfortunate young man, and she would send him languishing glances that seemed to set his soul on fire, and made the blood course through his veins like a raging lava flood.

And still Ole Bertel's luck increased.

Whether it was that the thought of his approaching happiness made him work harder, or he really had exceptional luck, certain it is that not one of the amber-fishers, even those working with him at the celebrated reef, could boast of such splendid blocks of amber as had fallen to his lot.

It was hard work poking about with a stout crowbar and pronged iron among the masses of weed, sand and stone, that formed the sea-bottom; or crawling on hands and knees loosening from the sea-floor any blocks recent storms might have dislodged; and often though the sea was icy cold, so severe was the strain of working under water, that, when he rose to the surface for a few minutes' rest, and to bring up the treasure he had accumulated in the receptacle round his waist, he was bathed in perspiration. But he never thought of the hardship of his occupation. Love smoothed away all difficulties. It was for Else he worked, his peerless darling who loved him alone.

Karl Malen was by no means so successful, but then this was scarcely to be wondered at. His mind, too, was full of the image of but one person, the woman who had made a plaything of his heart, little dreaming of the dangerous nature of the toy she was amusing herself with. He thought of her to the exclusion of everything else. Her face floated before him in the depths of the ocean, with its alluring smile and maddening eyes. He saw it when he came up to take breath. The remembrance of her kisses burned like fire upon his lips even amid the icy coldness of the water, trails of seaweed reminded him of her golden hair, as it had floated over his breast when he had clasped her unrebuked in his arms. Her voice, with its dulcet tones, sounded ever in his ears mingling with the roar of the waters. Was it any

wonder, that with his mind preoccupied thus he should pass over pieces of amber and fill the receptacle at his waist with rocks, stones, and other unprofitable things which he absently gathered.

When, as was sometimes the case, Malen took his turn at working the air-pumps, dreadful thoughts would keep constantly passing through his mind.

Was there any truth in that story of the Demon of the Amber Reef who lived down below and yearly claimed his toll for the right of fishing there?

That toll—a human life.

True it was, that never during the memory of man had the amber harvest been gathered year by year without someone falling a victim to wind and wave. Now it had been one in the prime of life, a husband and father, and the mainstay, perhaps, of a numerous family all dependent upon him, and too young to support themselves when suddenly bereft of the breadwinner.

The next year it might be an old man, hale and hearty, but yet who could not, in the course of nature, hope to have many more years to live; or it might be a youth in the first flush of early manhood, with all his wonderful hope and aspirations unfulfilled, who was called upon by the inexorable demon to pay the tax. It mattered not what they wore or whether their loss was irreplaceable, if the summons came, go they must—there was no hope of escape for them.

Karl thought of this as he worked away at the pumps. Up to the present no one had fallen a victim during this season's fishing. Who would be the next one to pay the tax of his life to the Amber Demon?

If only the choice were to fall upon his rival. Else had owned that she loved him, Karl, the best.

It was only for the sake of Bertel's wealth that she had accepted him. Out of the way—if only he could be removed out of the way—she would then be his, his alone.

He could never rest day or night, at sea or on land, he was still tormented by these thoughts. At night, after the day's work was done, instead of trying to get the repose he so needed after the labor of so many hours, he wandered about the sand-dunes, like an evil spirit, fighting with his misery and revolving various schemes in his mind, by which he might get rid of his rival.

Outwardly friends with Bertel, inwardly he regarded him with the bitterest feelings.

He believed Else's statement that she loved him and looked upon Bertel in the light of a spoiler.

What right had he to buy the woman he himself loved so madly?

He knew enough of Bertel's false love to be aware that she would never content herself in his tumble down cottage, which was even more dilapidated than the one in which she lived with her grandmother, but love is blind, and he imagined that his passion would make up to her for anything she might lose in a worldly point of view, if she became his bride instead of Bertel's.

He did not know, any more than her betrothed, that Else was incapable of feeling deep or true love for anyone save herself. Her shallow nature could not understand the force that passion could have over some minds, and she did not recognize the power she held over both young men, and which the least thing might turn to evil, at all events, in Karl Malen's strong, but undisciplined organization.

She could not see the harm her selfish vanity and love of admiration was causing, and even now half regretted that, for the time being, she had given up her pastime with Karl.

It was so lonely in the cottage with her grandmother, she missed those walks and meetings with him. His fiery love-making satisfied her vanity even more than Ole's quieter, but none the less sincere, protestations of affection.

She began to think she was foolishly nervous; there was nothing to be afraid of in Karl. He loved her, he would do her no harm; it was not likely he would murder her as at one time she had half begun to fear, might be the case.

She did not work now; since her engagement with Ole, she had given it up. No need for the wife of the richest man in the village to soil her hands with labor.

So she thought and spent a great deal of her time wandering about the sand-dunes, half hoping that she would meet Karl, and listen once more to his fiery love-speeches.

One day she was wandering disconsolately over the brown heath. She was aware that both her lovers were out with the fleet of fishing-boats that lay just off the lighthouse that had been erected on the reef, and that there was no chance of her meeting either of them until the return of the flotilla in the evening, but a restless spirit had seized her, and she felt she could not stay and listen to her grandmother's homilies.

Her steps strayed into the little churchyard which overlooked the bay within the barrier.

It was not often Else came here, for it was a melancholy place, little suited to one of her gay and frivolous temperament.

There was a small church erected almost entirely of hewn boulder stones. It had no steeple, and the bells were hung between two beams in the open air.

In the churchyard not a tree nor a bush was to be seen; not a single flower had been planted there, nor had a wreath been laid upon the graves. Rough mounds showed where the dead had been buried, and rank grass, tossed by the wind, grew thickly over the whole churchyard. Here and there a grave had a monument to show, in the shape of a half-decayed block of wood, rudely shaped into the form of a coffin, the block having been brought from the wild sea itself, where the inhabitants of the Samland find the hewn beams and planks, and fragments which the breakers cast ashore.

However, these rude monuments do not last long. The wind and the