

THE AMBER DEMON.

(Continued.)

Joanna had been on an errand to Else's grandmother's house which stood among the sand-hills, little more than a hut with strings of fish hung up to dry, that flapped and beat against the wall in the wind that blew the particles of sand that were not held down by the twining roots of the sand-grass high in the air, and was returning in a somewhat melancholy mood; Bertel's betrothal to Else having crushed any faint hopes she might have entertained that at last her silent love might be rewarded. She was walking over the dunes which looked like huge waves of sand suddenly arrested in their course. The sandweeds and dunegrass with its bluish stalks spreading a changing color over them; the wind was blowing rather sharply, and the sea was moaning in the distance with a melancholy wail, but she heeded neither, being so pre-occupied with her own sad thoughts.

As she rounded one of the great waves of sand, she stopped and stood as though turned to stone, gazing at the sight suddenly revealed to her. In the hollow caused by one of the undulations just in front of her were Karl Malen, and in his arms was Ole's betrothed bride allowing him to rain kisses on her upturned face.

Joanna, simple maiden as she was, had no wish or intention of spying upon her successful rival, but she seemed rooted to the spot, with no power to move away. The words were wafted to her ears that told her Else did not care for the man to whom she was betrothed, that she was only marrying him for the sake of the luxuries he could give her.

Even when Else had disappeared, and Karl had passed not far from where she stood, but without looking in her direction or perceiving her, she still remained there.

Much as Joanna secretly loved Ole, her one thought now was pity for him in his blindness.

The girl that he worshipped, deeming her pure and true, was false to the core, encouraging this other man in his absence.

What ought she to do? Should she tell Ole of what she had witnessed?

But she shrank from this. Might he not think her unmaidenly and forward? She knew how Else would twist and distort her words, and well, too, she knew her fatal power of fascination. Ole would be made to believe that it was jealousy on her part. No; perhaps had she not loved him herself she might have found courage to tell him of what she had witnessed on the sand dunes, but now— "God help thee, Ole, in the trouble that is surely before thee," she sighed, as at length she wended her way homeward, oppressed with a feeling of coming woe.

CHAPTER III.

In the poor little cottage that up to the present had been Else Preben's home, and which she now looked upon with contempt, it was so bare and comfortless, so different from the pretty little house Ole had built for his intended bride in the shelter of the sandhills, she stood admiring herself in the tiny cracked looking-glass.

Round her neck was the coral ornament her betrothed had given her.

It consisted of coral beads strung on a stout silken cord, the smallest coming first, larger next, then still larger ones, till the largest of all were reached.

It was worn in such a way that the smallest beads were round her neck, the next in size round her shoulders, while the largest covered her shapely bust and depended down her back.

She twisted this way and that, she craned her neck, trying to look round at the back view she presented, while a smile of gratified vanity hovered about her well-cut lips.

"It is mine," she murmured in ecstasy; "there is not another like it in the village. When Lisbeth married she thought hers wonderful that her parents gave her, but it is nothing to mine."

"Aye, child," returned her old granddame, the only other occupant of the cottage, and the sole relative Else possessed, "it's mighty fine; but to my thinking 'twould have been better to have kept the money to set up housekeeping."

"Ole has plenty of money now," Else said, with a toss of her head.

"He will not have it long if he indulges you with such expensive fancies as that," said the old woman pointed to the coral ornament her granddaughter was admiring with such pride.

"Indeed."

"Yes, child; you need not look so scornful. Do you know what such a perfect string of coral as that cost?"

"A few thalers, I daresay."

"Fifty pounds, at the very least."

"And if it did?"

"That is a large sum to spend on a gewgaw."

"Ole will have to spend a good deal more on me when I am his wife," Else said coolly. "It is not likely that I am going to work once I am married."

"You may have to."

"Ha! ha! I should like to see myself," laughed Else in derision.

"What do you think I am marrying Ole Bertel for?"

"In my young days when a girl married it was for love," returned the old woman, seriously.

"Love, indeed; that may have suited you," her granddaughter said insolently; "he was neither loving nor dutiful to her one remaining relative; but I marry for fine clothes and idleness."

"Have you told Bertel so?"

"Have I, indeed? not likely. I have no wish to remain in this hovel," looking round with disgust at the smoke-begrimed rafters and the strings of dried fish that flapped in the breeze that found its way through numerous cracks and crevices. "I tell him everything he wishes."

"And he believes you?"

"Of course; is he not in love with me?"

"Alas!"

"Why should you say that?" demanded Else angrily. "Am I not beautiful enough for any man?"

"More than beautiful enough."

"Then why do you say 'Alas!' as though you pitied Ole? All the young men are envying him his good luck."

"The most beautiful things are not always the best in the wear and tear of life."

"I think beauty the best," still admiring the necklace, and twisting the beads over her slim, sun-burned fingers. "Who would be plain as Lisbeth is?"

"Yet what a good wife she makes, there is not a happier home than hers from the Frisches Haff to the Kurisches Haff."

"Bah! she is always plodding and working; never goes out to enjoy herself. I intend my married life to be something very different."

"Well for you, child, and Ole, too, if your home be anyway as happy a one as Lisbeth's. Your truest happiness will be found at your own fireside."

"I am not going to stick at home to please anybody. I shall amuse myself just the same after marriage, or rather I expect to have a great deal more fun."

"Else," and the old woman's voice took a solemn tone, "there is one thing I must warn you of."

"What is it?" ungraciously. "I do not want any of your warnings."

"Else, child, I have no wish to grieve you. You are all that is left to me now; husband, son, daughter, all gone; you only remain to tell me of past joys and sorrows. I would not that your life should be wrecked," and the grandmother laid a wrinkled hand on the rounded, shapely arm of her beautiful granddaughter with a gesture of entreaty.

But Else shook it off impatiently.

"What do you mean?" she cried harshly.

"Ah! you must know what I mean."

"I do not," shortly.

"Else, you have won the love of a good man. Are you treating him as he deserves?"

"I do not understand you," but the hot flush that rose to her brow convinced her grandmother that she understood her meaning only too well.

"You are wilful, child, but you cannot deceive me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why do you still encourage Karl Malen?"

If a bombshell had fallen at her feet it could not have surprised Else more than this plain question. She had always regarded her grandmother as being in her dotage; it was doubly surprising, therefore, to find herself arraigned by the old woman she had looked upon as conveniently blind and deaf to all her proceedings.

"Karl Malen," was all she could repeat.

"Yes."

"He is nothing to me," she cried at length, defiantly.

"Nothing, Else?"

"I have said so."

"Then why go to meet him?"

"I do not," she told the lie without a quiver in her voice.

But the old woman shook her head sorrowfully.

"My eyes may be dim, but I could not mistake your companion last evening. It was not your betrothed who came with you to the door," she said slowly.

"I tell you what, grandmother," Else cried, with a shrill laugh, "you see double through your glasses. Who should be with me but Ole?"

"Child, you are laying up sorrow for yourself and for others. Be warned in time. There is nothing so cruel as jealousy."

"I am not jealous."

"But you will raise the demon of jealousy in the heart of one or both young men if you go on in your present course, and then I say to you beware!"

"I am quite capable of taking care of my own affairs," Else said, "I do not want your interference."

"Ah! well, perhaps when it is too late you may repent the evil you have wrought. Child, I tell you I have seen terrible consequences ensue from jealousy. Eighty years have passed over my head, but well do I remember when I was a girl the tragedy that occurred in this very village."

"How was that?" Else asked with some show of curiosity.

"It was very much what you are doing now," her grandmother answered. "The girl, I mind her well, she was pretty, as pretty as you are now. She was a coquette, too, and she played one lover off against the other, much as I fear you are doing, Else."

"And the result?" eagerly.

"The result was—the death of all three."

"Oh!"

"Yes, maddened at finding the falseness of the girl he believed to be everything that was good and true, her lover, finding her one day in his rival's arms taking and returning his kisses, slew them both and then himself. It was on the sand-dunes that the tragedy took place, and it was two days before the corpses were discovered."

"What a horrifying tale," Else exclaimed with a seer, but in spite of the sinner her rich color faded somewhat.

"It is a true one."