

**РОБЕРТ
СТИВЕНСОН**

THE WAIF
WOMAN

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The Waif Woman

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The Waif Woman:

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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Robert Louis Stevenson

The Waif Woman

This unpublished story, preserved among Mrs. Stevenson's papers, is mentioned by Mr. Balfour in his life of Stevenson. Writing of the fables which Stevenson began before he had left England and "attacked again, and from time to time added to their number" in 1893, Mr. Balfour says: "The reference to Odin [Fable XVII] perhaps is due to his reading of the Sagas, which led him to attempt a tale in the same style, called 'The Waif Woman.'"

THE WAIF WOMAN

A CUE – FROM A SAGA

This is a tale of Iceland, the isle of stories, and of a thing that befell in the year of the coming there of Christianity.

In the spring of that year a ship sailed from the South Isles to traffic, and fell becalmed inside Snowfellness. The winds had speeded her; she was the first comer of the year; and the fishers drew alongside to hear the news of the south, and eager folk put out in boats to see the merchandise and make prices. From the doors of the hall on Frodis Water, the house folk saw the ship becalmed and the boats about her, coming and going; and the merchants from the ship could see the smoke go up and the men and women trooping to their meals in the hall.

The goodman of that house was called Finnward Keelfarer, and his wife Aud the Light-Minded; and they had a son Eyolf, a likely boy, and a daughter Asdis, a slip of a maid. Finnward was well-to-do in his affairs, he kept open house and had good friends. But Aud his wife was not so much considered: her mind was set on trifles, on bright clothing, and the admiration of men, and the envy of women; and it was thought she was not always so circumspect in her bearing as she might have been, but nothing to hurt.

On the evening of the second day men came to the house from

sea. They told of the merchandise in the ship, which was well enough and to be had at easy rates, and of a waif woman that sailed in her, no one could tell why, and had chests of clothes beyond comparison, fine coloured stuffs, finely woven, the best that ever came into that island, and gewgaws for a queen. At the hearing of that Aud's eyes began to glisten. She went early to bed; and the day was not yet red before she was on the beach, had a boat launched, and was pulling to the ship. By the way she looked closely at all boats, but there was no woman in any; and at that she was better pleased, for she had no fear of the men.

When they came to the ship, boats were there already, and the merchants and the shore folk sat and jested and chattered in the stern. But in the fore part of the ship, the woman sat alone, and looked before her sourly at the sea. They called her Thorgunna. She was as tall as a man and high in flesh, a buxom wife to look at. Her hair was of the dark red, time had not changed it. Her face was dark, the cheeks full, and the brow smooth. Some of the merchants told that she was sixty years of age and others laughed and said she was but forty; but they spoke of her in whispers, for they seemed to think that she was ill to deal with and not more than ordinary canny.

Aud went to where she sat and made her welcome to Iceland. Thorgunna did the honours of the ship. So for a while they carried it on, praising and watching each other, in the way of women. But Aud was a little vessel to contain a great longing, and presently the cry of her heart came out of her.

“The folk say,” says she, “you have the finest women’s things that ever came to Iceland?” and as she spoke her eyes grew big.

“It would be strange if I had not,” quoth Thorgunna. “Queens have no finer.”

So Aud begged that she might see them.

Thorgunna looked on her askance. “Truly,” said she, “the things are for no use but to be shown.” So she fetched a chest and opened it. Here was a cloak of the rare scarlet laid upon with silver, beautiful beyond belief; hard by was a silver brooch of basket work that was wrought as fine as any shell and was as broad as the face of the full moon; and Aud saw the clothes lying folded in the chest, of all the colours of the day, and fire, and precious gems; and her heart burned with envy. So, because she had so huge a mind to buy, she began to make light of the merchandise.

“They are good enough things,” says she, “though I have better in my chest at home. It is a good enough cloak, and I am in need of a new cloak.” At that she fingered the scarlet, and the touch of the fine stuff went to her mind like singing. “Come,” says she, “if it were only for your civility in showing it, what will you have for your cloak?”

“Woman,” said Thorgunna, “I am no merchant.” And she closed the chest and locked it, like one angry.

Then Aud fell to protesting and caressing her. That was Aud’s practice; for she thought if she hugged and kissed a person none could say her nay. Next she went to flattery, said she knew the

things were too noble for the like of her – they were made for a stately, beautiful woman like Thorgunna; and at that she kissed her again, and Thorgunna seemed a little pleased. And now Aud pled poverty and begged for the cloak in a gift; and now she vaunted the wealth of her goodman and offered ounces and ounces of fine silver, the price of three men's lives. Thorgunna smiled, but it was a grim smile, and still she shook her head. At last Aud wrought herself into extremity and wept.

"I would give my soul for it," she cried.

"Fool!" said Thorgunna. "But there have been fools before you!" And a little after, she said this: "Let us be done with beseeching. The things are mine. I was a fool to show you them; but where is their use, unless we show them? Mine they are and mine they shall be till I die. I have paid for them dear enough," said she.

Aud saw it was of no avail; so she dried her tears, and asked Thorgunna about her voyage, and made believe to listen while she plotted in her little mind. "Thorgunna," she asked presently, "do you count kin with any folk in Iceland?"

"I count kin with none," replied Thorgunna. "My kin is of the greatest, but I have not been always lucky, so I say the less."

"So that you have no house to pass the time in till the ship return?" cries Aud. "Dear Thorgunna, you must come and live with us. My goodman is rich, his hand and his house are open, and I will cherish you like a daughter."

At that Thorgunna smiled on the one side; but her soul laughed

within her at the woman's shallowness. "I will pay her for that word *daughter*," she thought, and she smiled again.

"I will live with you gladly," says she, "for your house has a good name, and I have seen the smoke of your kitchen from the ship. But one thing you shall understand. I make no presents, I give nothing where I go – not a rag and not an ounce. Where I stay, I work for my upkeep; and as I am strong as a man and hardy as an ox, they that have had the keeping of me were the better pleased."

It was a hard job for Aud to keep her countenance, for she was like to have wept. And yet she felt it would be unseemly to eat her invitation; and like a shallow woman and one that had always led her husband by the nose, she told herself she would find some means to cajole Thorgunna and come by her purpose after all. So she put a good face on the thing, had Thorgunna into the boat, her and her two great chests, and brought her home with her to the hall by the beach.

All the way in she made much of the wife; and when they were arrived gave her a locked bed-place in the hall, where was a bed, a table, and a stool, and space for the two chests.

"This shall be yours while you stay here," said Aud. And she attended on her guest.

Now Thorgunna opened the second chest and took out her bedding – sheets of English linen, the like of it never seen, a cover of quilted silk, and curtains of purple wrought with silver. At the sight of these Aud was like one distracted, greed blinded

her mind; the cry rose strong in her throat, it must out.

“What will you sell your bedding for?” she cried, and her cheeks were hot.

Thorgunna looked upon her with a dusky countenance. “Truly you are a courteous hostess,” said she, “but I will not sleep on straw for your amusement.”

At that Aud’s two ears grew hot as her cheeks; and she took Thorgunna at her word; and left her from that time in peace.

The woman was as good as her spoken word. Inside the house and out she wrought like three, and all that she put her hand to was well done. When she milked, the cows yielded beyond custom; when she made hay, it was always dry weather; when she took her turn at the cooking, the folk licked their spoons. Her manners when she pleased were outside imitation, like one that had sat with kings in their high buildings. It seemed she was pious too, and the day never passed but she was in the church there praying. The rest was not so well. She was of few words, and never one about her kin and fortunes. Gloom sat on her brow, and she was ill to cross. Behind her back they gave her the name of the Waif Woman or the Wind Wife; to her face it must always be Thorgunna. And if any of the young men called her *mother*

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