

FICTION

Robert Louis Stevenson

The Waif Woman

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



eBookTakeAway

FICTION

THE WAIF WOMAN

BY
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1916

First Edition, October, 1916.
Second Edition, October, 1916.

p. 2

This unpublished story, preserved among Mrs. Stevenson's papers, is mentioned by Mr. Balfour in his life of p. 3 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

p. 5

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 chaffered 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.

p. 9

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*, she would speak no more that day, but sit apart in the hall and mutter with her lips.

"This is a queer piece of goods that we have gotten," says Finnward Keelfarer, "I wish we get no harm by her! But the good wife's pleasure must be done," said he, which was his common word.

When she was at work, Thorgunna wore the rudest of plain clothes, though ever clean as a cat; but at night in the hall she was more dainty, for she loved to be admired. No doubt she made herself look well, and many thought she was a comely woman still, and to those she was always favourable and full of pleasant speech. But the more that some pleased her, it was thought by good judges that they pleased Aud the less.

When midsummer was past, a company of young men upon a journey came to the house by Frodis Water. That was always a great day for Aud, when there were gallants at table; and what made this day the greater, Alf of the Fells was in the company, and she thought Alf fancied her. So be sure Aud wore her best. But when Thorgunna came from the bed-place, she was arrayed like any queen and the broad brooch was in her bosom. All night in the hall these women strove with each other; and the little maid, Asdis, looked on, and was ashamed and knew not why. But Thorgunna pleased beyond all; she told of strange things that had befallen in the world; when she pleased she had the cue to laughter; she sang, and her voice was full and her songs new in that island; and whenever she turned, the eyes shone in her face and the brooch glittered at her bosom. So that the young men forgot the word of the merchants as to the woman's age, and their looks followed her all night.

Aud was sick with envy. Sleep fled her; her husband slept, but she sat upright beside him in the bed, and gnawed her fingers. Now she began to hate Thorgunna, and the glittering of the great brooch stood before her in the dark. "Sure," she thought, "it must be the glamour of that brooch! She is not so fair as I; she is as old as the dead in the hillside; and as for her wit and her songs, it is little I think of them!" Up she got at that, took a light from the embers, and came to her guest's bed-place. The door was locked, but Aud had a master-key and could go in. Inside, the chests were open, and in the top of one the light of her taper shone upon the glittering of the brooch. As a dog snatches food she snatched it, and turned to the bed. Thorgunna lay on her side; it was to be thought she slept, but she talked the while to herself, and her lips moved. It seemed her years returned to her in slumber, for her face was grey and her brow knotted; and the open eyes of her stared in the eyes of Aud. The heart of the foolish woman died in her bosom; but her greed was the stronger, and she fled with that which she had stolen.

When she was back in bed, the word of Thorgunna came to her mind, that these things were for no use but to be shown. Here she had the brooch and the shame of it, and might not wear it. So all night she quaked with the fear of discovery, and wept tears of rage that she should have sinned in vain. Day came, and Aud must rise; but she went about the house like a crazy woman. She saw the eyes of Asdis rest on her strangely, and at that she beat the maid. She scolded the house folk, and, by her way of it, nothing was done aright. First she was loving to her husband and made much of him, thinking to be on his good side when trouble came. Then she took a better way, picked a feud with him, and railed on the poor man till his ears rang, so that he might be in the wrong beforehand. The brooch she hid without, in the side of a hayrick. All this while Thorgunna lay in the bed-place, which was not her way, for by custom she was early astir. At last she came forth, and there was that in her face that made all the house look one at the other and the heart of Aud to be straitened. Never a word the guest spoke, not a bite she swallowed, and they saw the strong shudderings take and shake her in her place. Yet a little, and still without speech, back she went into her bad-place, and the door was shut.

"That is a sick wife," said Finnward, "Her weird has come on her."

And at that the heart of Aud was lifted up with hope.

All day Thorgunna lay on her bed, and the next day sent for Finnward.

"Finnward Keelfarer," said she, "my trouble is come upon me, and I am at the end of my days."

He made the customary talk.

"I have had my good things; now my hour is come; and let suffice," quoth she. "I did not send for you to hear your prating."

Finnward knew not what to answer, for he saw her soul was dark.

"I sent for you on needful matters," she began again. "I die here--!!--in this black house, in a bleak island, far from all decency and proper ways of man; and now my treasure must be left. Small pleasure have I had of it, and leave it with the less!" cried she.

"Good woman, as the saying is, needs must," says Finnward, for he was nettled with that speech.

"For that I called you," quoth Thorgunna. "In these two chests are much wealth and things greatly to be desired. I wish my body to be laid in Skalaholt in the new church, where I trust to hear the mass-priests singing over my head so long as time endures. To that church I will you to give what is sufficient, leaving your conscience judge of it. My scarlet cloak with the silver, I will to that poor fool your wife. She longed for it so bitterly, I may not even now deny her. Give her the brooch as well. I warn you of her; I was such as she, only wiser; I warn you, the ground she stands upon is water, and whoso trusts her leans on rottenness. I hate her and I pity her. When she comes to lie where I lie--" There she broke off. "The rest of my goods I leave to your black-eyed maid, young Asdis, for her slim body and clean mind. Only the things of my bed, you shall see burned."

"It is well," said Finnward.

"It may be well," quoth she, "if you obey. My life has been a wonder to all and a fear to many. While I lived none thwarted me and prospered. See to it that none thwart me after I am dead. It stands upon your safety."

"It stands upon my honour," quoth Finnward, "and I have the name of an honourable man."

"You have the name of a weak one," says Thorgunna. "Look to it, look to it, Finnward. Your house shall rue it else."

"The roof-tree of my house is my word," said Finnward.

"And that is a true saying," says the woman. "See to it, then. The speech of Thorgunna is ended."

With that she turned her face against the wall and Finnward left her.

The same night, in the small hours of the clock, Thorgunna passed. It was a wild night for summer, and the wind sang about the eaves and clouds covered the moon, when the dark woman wended. From that day to this no man has learned her story or her people's name; but be sure the one was stormy and the other great. She had come to that isle, a waif woman, on a ship; thence she flitted, and no more remained of her but her heavy chests and her big body.

In the morning the house women streaked and dressed the corpse. Then came Finnward, and carried the sheets and curtains from the house, and caused build a fire upon the sands. But Aud had an eye on her man's doings.

"And what is this that you are at?" said she.

So he told her.

"Burn the good sheets!" she cried. "And where would I be with my two hands? No, troth," said Aud, "not so long as your wife is above ground!"

"Good wife," said Finnward, "this is beyond your province. Here is my word pledged and the woman dead I pledged it to. So much the more am I bound. Let me be doing as I must, goodwife."

"Tilly-valley!" says she, "and a fiddlestick's end, goodman! You may know well about fishing and be good at shearing sheep for what I know; but you are little of a judge of damask sheets. And the best word I can say is just this," she says, laying hold of one end of the goods, "that if ye are made up to burn the plenishing, you must burn your wife along with it."

"I trust it will not go so hard," says Finnward, "and I beg you not to speak so loud and let the house folk hear you."

"Let them speak low that are ashamed!" cries Aud. "I speak only in reason."

"You are to consider that the woman died in my house," says Finnward, "and this was her last behest. In truth, goodwife, if I were to fail, it is a thing that would stick long in my throat, and would give us an ill name with the neighbours."

"And you are to consider," says she, "that I am your true wife and worth all the witches ever burnt, and loving her old husband"--here she put her arms about his neck. "And you are to consider that what you wish to do is to destroy fine stuff, such as we have no means of replacing; and that she bade you do it singly to spite me, for I sought to buy this bedding from her while she was alive at her own price; and that she hated me because I was young and handsome."

"That is a true word that she hated you, for she said so herself before she wended," says Finnward.

"So that here is an old faggot that hated me, and she dead as a bucket," says Aud; "and here is a young wife that loves you dear, and is alive forby"--and at that she kissed him--"and the point is, which are you to do the will of?"

The man's weakness caught him hard, and he faltered. "I fear some hurt will come of it," said he.

There she cut in, and bade the lads tread out the fire, and the lasses roll the bed-stuff up and carry it within.

"My dear," says he, "my honour--this is against my honour."

But she took his arm under hers, and caressed his hand, and kissed his knuckles, and led him down the bay. "Bubble-bubble-bubble!" says she, imitating him like a baby, though she was none so young. "Bubble-bubble, and a silly old man! We must bury the troll wife, and here is trouble enough, and a vengeance! Horses will sweat for it before she comes to Skalaholt; 'tis my belief she was a man in a woman's habit. And so now, have done, good man, and let us get her waked and buried, which is more than she deserves, or her old duds are like to pay for. And when that is ended, we can consult upon the rest."

So Finnward was but too well pleased to put it off.

The next day they set forth early for Skalaholt across the heaths. It was heavy weather, and grey overhead; the horses sweated and neighed, and the men went silent, for it was nowhere in their minds that the dead wife was canny. Only Aud talked by the way, like a silly sea-gull piping on a cliff, and the rest held their peace. The sun went down before they were across Whitewater; and the black night fell on them this side of Netherness. At Netherness they beat upon the door. The goodman was not abed nor any of his folk, but sat in the hall talking; and to them Finnward made clear his business.

"I will never deny you a roof," said the goodman of Netherness. "But I have no food ready, and if you cannot be doing without meat, you must e'en fare farther."

They laid the body in a shed, made fast their horses, and came into the house, and the door was closed again. So there they sat about the lights, and there was little said, for they were none so well pleased with their reception. Presently, in the place where the food was kept, began a clattering of dishes; and it fell to a bondman of the house to go and see what made the clatter. He was no sooner gone than he was back again; and told it was a big, buxom woman, high in flesh and naked as she was born, setting meats upon a dresser. Finnward grew pale as the dawn; he got to his feet, and the rest rose with him, and all the party of the funeral came to the buttery-door. And the dead Thorgunna took no heed of their coming, but went on setting forth meats, and seemed to talk with herself as she did so; and she was naked to the buff.

Great fear fell upon them; the marrow of their back grew cold. Not one word they spoke, neither good nor bad; but back into the hall, and down upon their bended knees, and to their prayers.

"Now, in the name of God, what ails you?" cried the goodman of Netherness.

And when they had told him, shame fell upon him for his churlishness.

"The dead wife reproves me," said the honest man.

And he blessed himself and his house, and caused spread the tables, and they all ate of the meats that the dead wife laid out.

This was the first walking of Thorgunna, and it is thought by good judges it would have been the last as well, if men had been more wise.

The next day they came to Skalaholt, and there was the body buried, and the next after they set out for home. Finnward's heart was heavy, and his mind divided. He feared the dead wife and the living; he feared dishonour and he feared dispeace; and his will was like a sea-gull in the wind. Now he cleared his throat and made as if to speak; and at that Aud cocked her eye and looked at the goodman mocking, and his voice died unborn. At the last, shame gave him courage.

"Aud," said he, "yon was a most uncanny thing at Netherness."

"No doubt," said Aud.

"I have never had it in my mind," said he, "that yon woman was the thing she should be."

"I dare say not," said Aud. "I never thought so either."

"It stands beyond question she was more than canny," says Finnward, shaking his head. "No manner of doubt but what she was ancient of mind."

"She was getting pretty old in body, too," says Aud.

"Wife," says he, "it comes in upon me strongly this is no kind of woman to disobey; above all, being dead and her walking. I think, wife, we must even do as she commanded."

"Now what is ever your word?" says she, riding up close and setting her hand upon his shoulder. "'The goodwife's pleasure must be done'; is not that my Finnward?"

"The good God knows I grudge you nothing," cried Finnward. "But my blood runs cold upon this business. Worse will come of it!" he cried, "worse will flow from it!"

"What is this todo?" cries Aud. "Here is an old brimstone hag that should have been stoned with stones, and hated me besides. Vainly she tried to frighten me when she was living; shall she frighten me now when she is dead and rotten? I trow not. Think shame to your beard, goodman! Are these a man's shoes I see you shaking in, when your wife rides by your bridle-hand, as bold as nails?"

"Ay, ay," quoth Finnward. "But there goes a byword in the country: Little wit, little fear."

At this Aud began to be concerned, for he was usually easier to lead. So now she tried the other method on the man.

"Is that your word?" cried she. "I kiss the hands of ye! If I have not wit enough, I can rid you of my company. Wit is it he seeks?" she cried. "The old broomstick that we buried yesterday had wit for you."

So she rode on ahead and looked not the road that he was on.

Poor Finnward followed on his horse, but the light of the day was gone out, for his wife was like his life to him. He went six miles and was true to his heart; but the seventh was not half through when he rode up to her.

"Is it to be the goodwife's pleasure?" she asked.

"Aud, you shall have your way," says he; "God grant there come no ill of it!"

So she made much of him, and his heart was comforted.

When they came to the house, Aud had the two chests to her own bed-place, and gloated all night on what she found. Finnward looked on, and trouble darkened his mind.

"Wife," says he at last, "you will not forget these things belong to Asdis?"

At that she barked upon him like a dog.

"Am I a thief?" she cried. "The brat shall have them in her turn when she grows up. Would you have me give her them now to turn her minx's head with?"

So the weak man went his way out of the house in sorrow and fell to his affairs. Those that wrought with him that day observed that now he would labour and toil like a man furious, and now would sit and stare like one stupid; for in truth he judged the business would end ill.

For a while there was no more done and no more said. Aud cherished her treasures by herself, and none was the wiser except Finnward. Only the cloak she sometimes wore, for that was hers by the will of the dead wife; but the others she let lie, because she knew she had them foully, and she feared Finnward somewhat and Thorgunna much.

At last husband and wife were bound to bed one night, and he was the first stripped and got in. "What sheets are these?" he screamed, as his legs touched them, for these were smooth as water, but the sheets of Iceland were like sacking.

"Clean sheets, I suppose," says Aud, but her hand quavered as she wound her hair.

"Woman!" cried Finnward, "these are the bed-sheets of Thorgunna--these are the sheets she died in! do not lie to me!"

At that Aud turned and looked at him. "Well?" says she, "they have been washed."

Finnward lay down again in the bed between Thorgunna's sheets, and groaned; never a word more he said, for now he knew he was a coward and a man dishonoured. Presently his wife came beside him, and they lay still, but neither slept.

It might be twelve in the night when Aud felt Finnward shudder so strong that the bed shook.

"What ails you?" said she.

"I know not," he said. "It is a chill like the chill of death. My soul is sick with it." His voice fell low. "It was so Thorgunna sickened," said he. And he arose and walked in the hall in the dark till it came morning.

Early in the morning he went forth to the sea-fishing with four lads. Aud was troubled at heart and watched him from the door, and even as he went down the beach she saw him shaken with Thorgunna's shudder. It was a rough day, the sea was wild, the boat laboured exceedingly, and it may be that Finnward's mind was troubled with his sickness. Certain it is that they struck, and their boat was burst, upon a skerry under Snowfellness. The four lads were spilled into the sea, and the sea broke and buried them, but Finnward was cast upon the skerry, and clambered up, and sat there all day long: God knows his thoughts. The sun was half-way down, when a shepherd went by on the cliffs about his business, and spied a man in the midst of the breach of the loud seas, upon a pinnacle of reef. He hailed him, and the man turned and hailed again. There was in that cove so great a clashing of the seas and so shrill a cry of sea-fowl that the herd might hear the voice and nor the words. But the name Thorgunna came to him, and he saw the face of Finnward Keelfarer like the face of an old man. Lively ran the herd to Finnward's house; and when his tale was told there, Eyolf the boy was lively to out a boat and hasten to his father's aid. By the strength of hands they drove the keel against the seas, and with skill and courage Eyolf won upon the skerry and climbed up, There sat his father dead; and this was the first vengeance of Thorgunna against broken faith.

It was a sore job to get the corpse on board, and a sorer yet to bring it home before the rolling seas. But the lad Eyolf was a lad of promise, and the lads that pulled for him were sturdy men. So the break-faith's body was got home, and waked, and buried on the hill. Aud was a good widow and wept much, for she liked Finnward well enough. Yet a bird sang in her ears that now she might marry a young man. Little fear that she might have her choice of them, she thought, with all Thorgunna's fine things; and her heart was cheered.

Now, when the corpse was laid in the hill, Asdis came where Aud sat solitary in hall, and stood by her awhile without speech.

"Well, child?" says Aud; and again "Well?" and then "Keep us holy, if you have anything to say, out with it!"

So the maid came so much nearer, "Mother," says she, "I wish you would not wear these things that were Thorgunna's."

"Aha," cries Aud. "This is what it is? You begin early, brat! And who has been poisoning your mind? Your fool of a father, I suppose." And then she stopped and went all scarlet. "Who told you they were yours?" she asked again, taking it all the higher for her stumble. "When you are grown, then you shall have your share and not a day before. These things are not for babies."

The child looked at her and was amazed. "I do not wish them," she said. "I wish they might be burned."

"Upon my word, what next?" cried Aud. "And why should they be burned?"

"I know my father tried to burn these things," said Asdis, "and he named Thorgunna's name upon the skerry ere he died. And, O mother, I doubt they have brought ill luck."

But the more Aud was terrified, the more she would make light of it.

Then the girl put her hand upon her mother's. "I fear they are ill come by," said she.

The blood sprang in Aud's face. "And who made you a judge upon your mother that bore you?" cried she.

"Kinswoman," said Asdis, looking down, "I saw you with the brooch."

"What do you mean? When? Where did you see me?" cried the mother.

"Here in the hall," said Asdis, looking on the floor, "the night you stole it."

At that Aud let out a cry. Then she heaved up her hand to strike the child. "You little spy!" she cried. Then she covered her face, and wept, and rocked herself. "What can you know?" she cried. "How can you understand, that are a baby, not so long weaned? He could--your father could, the dear good man, dead and gone! He could understand and pity, he was good to me. Now he has left me alone with heartless children! Asdis," she cried, "have you no nature in your blood? You do not know what I have done and suffered for them. I have done--oh, and I could have done anything! And there is your father dead. And after all, you ask me not to use them? No woman in Iceland has the like. And you wish me to destroy them? Not if the dead should rise!" she cried. "No, no," and she stopped her ears, "not if the dead should rise, and let that end it!"

So she ran into her bed-place, and clapped at the door, and left the child amazed.

But for all Aud spoke with so much passion, it was noticed that for long she left the things unused. Only she would be locked somehow daily in her bed-place, where she pored on them and secretly wore them for her pleasure.

Now winter was at hand; the days grew short and the nights long; and under the golden face of morning the isle would stand silver with frost. Word came from Holyfell to Frodis Water of a company of young men upon a journey; that night they supped at Holyfell, the next it would be at Frodis Water; and Alf of the Fells was there, and Thongbrand Ketilson, and Hall the Fair. Aud went early to her bed-place, and there she pored upon these fineries till her heart was melted with self-love. There was a kirtle of a mingled colour, and the blue shot into the green, and the green lightened from the blue, as the colours play in the ocean between deeps and shallows: she thought she could endure to live no longer and not wear it. There was a bracelet of an ell long, wrought like a serpent and with fiery jewels for the eyes; she saw it shine on her white arm and her head grew dizzy with desire. "Ah!" she thought, "never were fine lendings better met with a fair wearer." And she closed her eyelids, and she thought she saw herself among the company and the men's eyes go after her admiring. With that she considered that she must soon marry one of them and wondered which; and she thought Alf was perhaps the best, or Hall the Fair, but was not certain, and then she remembered Finnward Keelfarer in his cairn upon the hill, and was concerned. "Well, he was a good husband to me," she thought, "and I was a good wife to him. But that is an old song now." So she turned again to handling the stuffs and jewels. At last she got to bed in the smooth sheets, and lay, and fancied how she would look, and admired herself, and saw others admire her, and told herself stories, till her heart grew warm and she chuckled to herself between the sheets. So she shook awhile with laughter; and then the mirth abated but not the shaking; and a grue took hold upon her flesh, and the cold of the grave upon her belly, and the terror of death upon her soul. With that a voice was in her ear: "It was so Thorgunna sickened." Thrice in the night the chill and the terror took her, and thrice it passed away; and when she rose on the morrow, death had breathed upon her countenance.

She saw the house folk and her children gaze upon her; well she knew why! She knew her day was come, and the last of her days, and her last hour was at her back; and it was so in her soul that she scarce minded. All was lost, all was past mending, she would carry on until she fell. So she went as usual, and hurried the feast for the young men, and railed upon her house folk, but her feet stumbled, and her voice was strange in her own ears, and the eyes of the folk fled before her. At times, too, the chill took her and the fear along with it; and she must sit down, and the teeth beat together in her head, and the stool tottered on the floor. At these times, she thought she was passing, and the voice of Thorgunna sounded in her ear: "The things are for no use but to be shown," it said. "Aud, Aud, have you shown them once? No, not once!"

And at the sting of the thought her courage and strength would revive, and she would rise again and move about her business.

Now the hour drew near, and Aud went to her bed-place, and did on the bravest of her finery, and came forth to greet her guests. Was never woman in Iceland robed as she was. The words of greeting were yet between her lips, when the shuddering fell upon her strong as labour, and a horror as deep as hell. Her face was changed amidst her finery, and the faces of her guests were changed as they beheld her: fear puckered their brows, fear drew back their feet; and she took her doom from the looks of them, and fled to her bed-place. There she flung herself on the wife's coverlet, and turned her face against the wall.

That was the end of all the words of Aud; and in the small hours on the clock her spirit wended. Asdis had come to and fro, seeing if she might help, where was no help possible of man or woman. It was light in the bed-place when the maid returned, for a taper stood upon a chest. There lay Aud in her fine clothes, and there by her side on the bed the big dead wife Thorgunna squatted on her hams. No sound was heard, but it seemed by the movement of her mouth as if Thorgunna sang, and she waved her arms as if to singing.

"God be good to us!" cried Asdis, "she is dead."

"Dead," said the dead wife.

"Is the weird passed?" cried Asdis.

"When the sin is done the weird is dreed," said Thorgunna, and with that she was not.

But the next day Eyolf and Asdis caused build a fire on the shore betwixt tide-marks. There they burned the bed-clothes, and the clothes, and the jewels, and the very boards of the waif woman's chests; and when the tide returned it washed away their ashes. So the weird of Thorgunna was lifted from the house on Frodis Water.

BILLING AND SONS, LIMITED
GUILDFORD, ENGLAND.