

Knitting the Herring 3/3 'Heart in the Home'

A story inspired by an old Largo folktale and the gansey collection at the Scottish Fisheries Museum.

It is May 1883 and the women of the town were waiting on the pier, a long line of them sit with their backs against the wall out of the wind, knitting.

A young woman stands up and arches her back, turns and looks out to sea, her hair whips her across face and into her eyes, she twists an auburn lock back behind her ear and pulls her shawl tighter, tucking it into her knitting belt, its buckle on its last notch because she is heavily pregnant.

Ina's baby has been moving a lot today, she presses her wires firmly into the padded busk and returns to sit on the cold stone step and paying attention once more to the gansey on her wires. Pulled into the shape of a diamond, the garment forms a neat ring through which she can just make out the proud lump of her belly button under her skirts. Her stomach is full and round now she smiles as she remembers her man teasing her earlier that morning as he placed his hand on her belly to feel the bairn kicking:

"Your belly is as big as Largo Law and there's the wee Devil himself kicking to get out!"

Ina feels a nudge on her arm and returns from her daydream to the windy pier, it's her neighbour 'Chatty' she nods at Ina's belly and winks.

"You'll no be sad if your man is-nae' chosen eh? What with it being so near the birth an' all an' it being your first?"

Ina shrugs her shoulders and looks back along the line of knitters, their faces animated, gossiping, their nimble fingers a blur as each fashions their own unique patterned gansey. Eight moons had passed and when her time came, whether her man was in London or out at sea, she took comfort that a neighbour like Chatty would be at hand.

Chatty nudges her again and points at a woman several yards away.

"Will you look at her from number six" she's already on the last sleeve – maybe she knows something already - it's her man counting the ballots I hear."

Ina wondered that Chatty couldn't call her own sister in law by name but her neighbour wasn't finished with her observations:

"An' her mither, she must be long finished if she's knitting her man fresh boot stockings now."

Ina sighs, no wonder her neighbour's by-name is Chatty she never stopped talking! This was a close-knit community, Chatty knew every man, woman

and bairn from the East to the West, but Ina had only moved here to marry her handsome fisher-lad nine months ago. All the lassies back in Largo thought he was a real catch and with her parents both gone Ina had left Largo last summer with only her creel and her cat.

“Maybe those stockings are a red herring and she’s knitting her man’s gansey’s indoors, he’s eaten so many of her pies she can only be half way up his belly by now...” Chatty continued.

They were certainly knitting up a storm; each woman on the pier wanted their man or their sons to be chosen to travel up to the exhibition in London. When the big announcement made in the papers all the women had sharpened their wires on their hearthstones or doorsteps in readiness but then there’d been such a ‘stooshie’ that it was agreed that a ballot was really the fairest way to decide which four men would represent their fishing community. So all the women simply started knitting a new gansey so whichever men were chosen they would look smart when they waved them off at the station. However Ina had noticed how the women narrowed their eyes and cast canny glances at their neighbours knitting.

“Whit were they thinking? Fancy holding the ballot just days before they leave for London the men don’t appreciate how long it takes to knit a gansey!” Chatty muttered.

Ina had pins and needles now in her toes. Perhaps she should admit defeat, she’d struggled to find time to knit between baiting the lines, cleaning the house and keeping her man fed. She’d cast on her ten score stitches months ago but she’d been so tired lately that when she did manage to knit she could barely keep her eyes open, even when she’d pushed the sharp point of the wires into her fingers to stay awake. She regretted having chosen the cream-coloured worsted wool now, keeping her knitting clean was difficult.

No, she wouldn’t give up now! What if her man was chosen? She caught her breath as the baby kicked again, how much longer would they be at the ballot box? At this rate the baby would be here before her gansey was finished. Well he’d just have to go to London in his Sunday best, if he was chosen and the wedding gansey she’d so lovingly knitted back in Largo.

The hum of the women grew louder, like a hive of bees before a swarm, a bead of sweat ran down Ina’s face and she felt dizzy, she wanted to get home soon, it was getting late and the cat would be waiting to be fed. The town clock struck and as a door on the waterfront opened, a beam of light spilled across the harbour, the click of knitting wires stopped and the women fell silent. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath as a group of men walked briskly down the pier led by a red-faced man who wore a brown bowler hat. Ina could see the brass buttons of his coat straining at their stitches. He reached into a pocket of his jacket and pulled out a leather bound notebook, he paused for effect taking time to find the right page. The older

fishermen stood behind him they looked at their boots so as not to catch the eyes of their wives or daughters.

The man cleared his throat and spoke:

“The ballot has been counted and the four representatives have been chosen...”

Ina gasped as the baby turns a somersault in her belly. The man is still talking but she can no longer hear what he’s saying, she fixes her eyes on his notebook but her eyes are starting to swim. With the next stab of pain Ina fell to her knees, her half finished knitting falls from her fingers onto the pier and her white ball of wool skips over the edge and falls into the harbour with a plop.

As Chatty helps Ina up another neighbour takes her arm and pulls her to her feet.

“My knitting, where’s my knitting?” Ina gasps and then another wave of pain washes over her.

The man pays no attention to the young woman on her hands and knees further up the pier as he starts to read out the names:

“Willie....

“Hauld your wisht man – there’s a bairn coming!” Chatty roars.

She bends down to pick up Ina’s gansey, deftly breaking the pale worsted thread that connects Ina’s knitted stitches to the lost ball of wool. Realising that her waters have broken the two women bustle Ina down the pier but they have to stop and wait for the speaker to move. Chatty stabs her spare wire into the sleeve of his tweed jacket just below the leather elbow patch and Ina sees his face wince as he steps back and then she hears a splash and the women roar with laughter.

The rest of the night was a blur as the baby made her way into the world. Chatty was there throughout, all through the breech birth and by the time Ina’s husband returned home from sea the baby was bathed and fast asleep in the wooden drawer next to the bed.

The cat got up from the fire and went over to the man and started to weave around his legs as he stepped into the cottage, and then skittered across the floor playing with another white ball, it rolled into the soot on the hearth and bounces into the fire - it is Ina’s last ball of wool.

“Stop Kipper!” Ina shouts

“Sssh! You’ll wake the bairn!” Her man whispers as Ina starts looking wildly around for her knitting...perhaps she’d left it on the pier? She starts to panic – all that work – all that wool lost! Her husband bends down and looks under

the bed and there, carefully placed in a pillowslip to keep it clean, is her knitting.

Bless you Chatty! Ina thinks, she must have collected it on the pier. Ina takes it from his hands and starts to trace the surface with her fingertips counting the raised stitches to remind her of the next pattern sequence.

“So was your name chosen in the ballot?”

“No! Thankfully not!”

“Who is going to London then?” Ina’s fingers paused mid stitch for a second.

He listed the four names and Ina smiled, their wives would be so happy they’d make sure that their men would look their very best! Those four ganseys would travel over 450 miles to be worn at the grand opening at the International Fisheries Exhibition on the 12th of May! Four hundred fisher folk, men in their finest ganseys and fishwives in their gala dress would be on display there to meet the finest in the land, the royal family.

Each man would wear a gansey fit for a queen for her right royal majesty Queen Victoria.

Ina sighs and stops knitting, it had been a long couple of days so she closed her eyes.

“There’s word that there’s to be a second delegation though, maybe in July,” her husband muttered.

Ina’s eyes snap open, her fingers tighten on her wires - so there’s still a chance he could go to London? Well she continued to knit by moonlight and notices that her knitting is glinting. She picked at it nervously as all the silver fish scales from the pier were caught in the patterns and looks over it carefully for any further damage? She’s nearly out of wool too and there’ll be no spare money now for yarn, what with the bairn newly born. Ina shrugs in despair and thought, what she needed was to find a gold mine.

Over the next fortnight Chatty called in to see Ina every day. The bairn would not settle long and was awake most of the night, always hungry.

Ina was as pale as the half finished gansey that was gathering dust on its wires because Ina had run out of wool... but there were lines to bait, her man to feed and the restless bairn.

One morning Chatty brought in a cradle she no longer needed. She sat Ina down and showed her how to tie a string around her shoe and attach it to the cradle so she could rock the child to sleep by tapping with her foot whilst her hands were busy.

Chatty couldn't put her finger on what was wrong. Ina simply wasn't herself since the birth. Chatty noticed the knitting under the bed so she pulled it out and looked inside the pillowcase.

“Its time to separate the front and the back so you can start the gussets for the arm, now what are you planning to put in the centre of the yolk?”

Ina shrugged.

“Now, a ‘heart in the home’ would be braw, none of the chosen men had that on their chests?” Chatty ventured but Ina didn’t pay her any heed. Chatty was bursting with the gossip from London so on she sailed:

“The papers said that although the Queen was unable to attend, the Prince and Princess of Wales and their children had been there and their were Beefeaters and umpteen Lords and Ladies all in their finery, the royal dais had been decorated with Neptune’s tridents and Cellardyke fishing nets had hung from the tridents like swathes of lace. There was a huge tank full o’ fish and can you believe it...a Newhaven fishwife had even been heard chatting with the Princess asking how her mither’s leg was mending? And the first trip had been such success that a second delegation of men would go down in July and spend six whole days at the Fisheries Exhibition and visit the House of Parliament, it had all been arranged; they were to stay at the Shipwrecked Mariners Home and be able to go to the Tabernacle on the Sunday, maybe your man will be chosen this time Ina? Come on now you need to keep knitting!”

Ina could go no further without more wool. She wondered whether she should unravel the whole garment, start again and knit simple stocking stitch up to the yolk to save on yarn but even then she would still be short.

Ina’s fingers ached as she filled her willow skull with coil after coil of baited line. She separated each coil with a handful of grass so the line would pay out smoothly at sea. The bairn started crying and she was so tired that she fell asleep feeding her. When she awoke the next morning she knew what to do. She wrapped the child in her shawl and placed her carefully in her willow creel, put the pillowcase in the pocket of her coat, gently swung the creel onto her back and walked to the station.

She only had enough money for a Third Class single ticket so it would be a long walk home. The Train Guard watched the pale lassie get off the train at Largo station, there was something about the girl with her creel, maybe it was the far away look in her eye that spooked him? He waved at her as the train pulled out but she was looking up to the hill behind the station nervously wringing her fingers. He was in Burntisland before he realised what it was about the young woman that had looked odd, she had nothing in her hands – she hadn’t been knitting.

Ina looked up Largo Law, the path was steep but she smiled as she saw hoof prints in the mud as she walked across the fields.

An hour later half way up the hill her back was aching, it was taking longer than she thought to fill her creel with fleece, she pricked her fingers as she scoured the broom bushes to find fistfuls of soft wool. The coats of the sheep were ready to be shorn, they were heavy and she could have pulled handfuls of fleece from their backs if they’d only stop and let her, but they ran quicker than she could. Higher and higher she climbed until she reached the seven

stone steps. At the summit she sat down and peered into the creel, it was time to feed the bairn but she was sleeping so soundly in the creamy cloud of wool. Ina had time to look up at a blood red sky, the expanse of the Firth of Forth stretched like a shining finger from East to West, she'd been so intent on looking for wool that she hadn't realised the time. The Isle of May was a dark thin blur and the Bass Rock glowed pink in the sunset. A cloud of black smoke hovered over the roofs and spires of Edinburgh; 'Auld Reekie was putting on her nightcap' that is what her father used to say.

The baby's cry pierced the chill evening air. Ina pulled her from the soft nest and held her close feeling her warmth as she fed greedily, she remembered the lullaby her mother used to sing....

"Coorie doon, coorie doon, coorie doon my darling
Coorie doon the day,
Coorie doon, coorie doon, coorie doon my darling
Coorie doon the day..."

How long she sat and sang she didn't know but then an owl screeched and the hair stood up on the back of her neck. She looked around her and saw the mist had come down and she felt that she was being watched. She couldn't see a soul, but then a wind blew a portal in the mist and there behind that portal was a dark shape, a tall man his face dark with mud, a candle flickered on his hard mole-skin hat – a Miner?

She could hear: chink - chink- chink...there it was again, chink – chink - chink - chink - chink- chink like a heavy pick tapping on a rock surface, distinct but muffled, as if coming from an underground mine. She crouched and felt the grass and sure enough it trembled at each blow of the Phantom Miners' pickaxe... chink - chink- chink

Then the Miner stepped out of the portal and grew bigger and bigger and she was frozen to the spot with fear.

"What is it you seek lassie?" a deep voice called:

"I was just gaitherin some wool for my knitting, you know, for my gansey, for my man, we've got nae money and we've got a new bairn."

"Wool? Fishermen's Iron? Whit do you want with wool when a fortune lies beneath your feet? Aye there's a gold mine under your feet lassie and only I know the secret of the entrance to that mine!"

Ina wanted to run but the phantom Miner started dancing around her, leaping around her as the candle whirled faster and faster its bright eyes flickering, and then the Miner started to speak again:

"If the cock disnae craw
And the cow-herd's horn disnae blaw

I'll tell ye where the gold mine is in Largo Law"

Mesmerised by that candle Ina followed his devilish dance through the mist until she was dizzy and stumbled to her knees. The bairn woke with a sharp wail that sounded, for the entire world, like the sound of a cockerel crowing.

The phantom stopped dancing and then it started to be sucked down into the hill...

"Now I must roam for ever more!" It roared and disappeared into the hillside.

With the bairn still crying in the creel Ina ran as fast as her legs could carry her and she reached the station just as the train steamed in. The Guard recognised that pale lassie with the creel.

"Come on step up!" He called but Ina shook her head

"If you've no ticket come and get into the guards-van and you can travel with me."

He held out a gloved hand and Ina stepped up into the cosy guards-van and realised that there was a stove and on the stove there was a kettle bubbling away.

"You're trembling lassie, you look like you've seen a ghost!"

Ina nodded and the Guard poured hot water into a tin cup and handed her a mug of tea.

"So you've seen a ghost? Maybe it was the ghost of Largo Law...did he offer to show you where the entrance of the gold mine?" His eyes twinkled.

Suddenly there was a snuffling noise from the creel and the guard looked inside the creel and saw all that creamy wool.

"You've not stolen a lamb lassie?".

Ina smiled she picked out her daughter and held her in her arms

"Oh lassie! You must both be hungry?"

The Guard gave her a package from his coat pocket and when she unwrapped it there were two slabs of bread with a golden lump of cheese in the middle and oh it was delicious! The bairn continued to sleep and by the time she got home and put the bairn in the cradle, it was time she got the fire going and the porridge bubbling. Ina sat down and rocking the cradle with her foot, she started to spin and started to sing...

"Coorie doon, coorie doon, coorie doon my darling
Coorie doon the day,
Coorie doon, coorie doon, coorie doon my darling

Coorie doon the day...”

When her man came home he could hardly believe his eyes, the bairn was sleeping, his wife knitting, the fire was roaring and the cat was stretched out.

“Have you heard?” he said

“Whit?” Ina opened her eyes

“I’ve been chosen, chosen tae go to London.”

Ina couldn’t believe it, now she could get her gansey finished.

“You’ll go to London and you’ll wear this gansey!” she cried

She knitted like the devil the next few days and then ‘the day’ came, she’s at the station to wave him off. Oh he looks so handsome in his gansey under his Sunday jacket. She is proud of him, and she is proud of his new gansey. There across his broad chest is a raised diamond with a heart in moss stitch at its centre, ‘The Heart in the Home’ just as Chatty had suggested. Hoof prints lead down his shoulder straps to meet the marriage lines either side of the yolk and his chest shimmers in the sunlight! Ina smiles as she knew the secret of this sweater. Chatty is there too, her man has also been chosen and Chatty looks at Ina’s gansey... whit was her neighbour’s secret? Ina had certainly finished that gansey fast!

Ina stands on her tiptoes and holds the bairn up for the last glimpse of its father for the next six days, then the Guard’s whistle blew and small black clouds raced from the funnel as the train steamed out of the station. Ina sighs with relief and tiredness, the bairn had slept through the night and she had knitted like the devil himself.

On the way back from the station Chatty offers to carry the bairn home, so Ina pulls her knitting wires from her pocket and fixes them into her belt. Her belt is buckled tighter now and her steel wires are shorter, a small cream ring is starting to form - a baby gansey. Chatty notices the new piece of knitting and reaches out to touch it the yarn is sparkling in the sunlight and glinting with flecks of gold.

“Where did you get this yarn?” Chatty asks

“From Largo.” Ina replies

“Whit’s that in it then?”

“Oh that’s just the gold from the mine – you know – the gold mine underneath Largo Law.”

Ina smiles as Chatty's eyes widen and she continues to knit, and Chatty, for the first time in her life, is lost for words.