

## Knitting the Herring 1/3

### Three Ply

**A story inspired by the traditional tale: 'Fair Maids Tresses', set on the Isle of Barra, knitted together with George W. Macpherson's story 'Ramasaig -The Three Witches'.**

Three women are sitting by fire; they are busy knitting. A mother, a widow and her two daughters, Lanis is the elder and Rona the younger and there are only two years between them. The mother is knitting stockings; boot stockings for a young Eriskay fisher-lad and the two girls are each intent on knitting a wedding gansey and as they knit the girls ask their mother to tell them the stories of the stiches and the combinations of patterns that she collected on her route around the coast of Scotland when she was younger, when she was a herring-lass.

These lassies worked their way around the coast of Scotland, over to Stornaway and then down the East Coast to all the way to Yarmouth Town. If weren't gutting or packing the herring they were knitting. Their mother told them of this pattern that was found in one port, this combination in another, each lassie knitted a unique pattern and at the end of the season there was a big gansey market in Yarmouth.

"Sure that's how I met your father, he bought my gansey!"

The girls share a secret smile but the mother catches them and the girls blush, lower their eyes and busy their fingers.

The mother is worried she has set them a task to knit a wedding gansey but her two daughters are knitting a wedding gansey for the same lad for they are both in love with the same boy.

The young Eriskay fisherman loved the sea but he was frequently at their door with a fresh fish whenever he sailed to Barra...but whom did he love best? Lanis' fingers fair dance over her wires and the grey gansey she is knitting is starting to pool in her lap. Rona, the younger girl, her face set deep in concentration, is struggling with her knitting then she drops a stitch.

"Och!" She pulls her wires away and stabs them into the padded arm of her chair as she starts to unravel inches of ink- blue yarn she'd been struggling with.

" Oh Rona, have some patience! There's no need to rattle your knitting down, the welt was fine enough!"

"It's his initials, mother! I can't do the E or the S"

Then cat jumped down from the window ledge and started playing with the tangle of yarn at Rona's feet.

“Och!” Rona cries out, she picks him up by the scruff of his neck and pulls the yarn from him she carries him from the room and throws him out of the cottage and slams the door. Rona turns to see that her sister’s shoulders shaking with laughter and she stamps up the wooden stairs to the bedroom they share. Lanis feels sorry she wasn’t laughing at Rona but at the cat, Kipper looked so funny all wound up in the navy wool, maybe she could knit him a wee gansey.

The mother sighs then stoops and starts to untangle and re-wind Rona’s yarn into a ball of sorts before anchoring the steel knitting wires and what is left of the gansey into the barely worn leather whisker and places them into Rona’s basket ready for the morning.

The next morning Rona wakes early, slips out of the bed and dresses silently. She turns and looks back at her sister, Lying like a starfish Lanis has settled into the dip of the straw mattress Rona just left and her golden hair is spread out on the pillow like the seaweed on the seashore.

Rona leaves the cottage, with her shawl and a basket and as she steps out onto the path she can hear her mother snoring in the wee box-bed. She takes the path to the village, she is going to see the Hen-wife, it is a misty day and as Rona reaches the Hen-wife’s house she sees the Hold woman’s familiar form in the yard, clucking happily as she bends to feed her chickens. The Hen-wife turns and peers through the mist...

“Rona, is it you - back again saw soon?”

“Aye.”

“Come on inside lass”.

Rona’s enters the dark cottage and sits by the fire in the centre of the floor, the white smoke snakes around her trying to find the hole in the roof.

“Let me see your knitting”

Rona gives the Hen-wife the basket.

“Did the cat get at it?”

“Aye.”

“Well! Maybe it’s the yarn Rona? Let me see if I have anything you can use.”

It is dark in the room, the old woman goes over to a drawer, and pulls out a skein of wool

“Close your eyes and hold out your hands!” the old woman orders and Rona does as she is told. The Hen-wife hooks the skein of wool around the girl’s upright hands and starts to wind a ball of the magic yarn.

“Let me tell you the story of this yarn Rona, it comes from my three sisters on Skye who live by the Bay of Ravens and every year in the November my sisters went down to the beach to dance and sing in the water...and each year three red rams sprang out of the water and my sisters followed them up to the house where they serviced their sheep. Aye, those red rams tup the sheep and the lambs that are born the next spring have red coats just for a year and from that red fleece yarn is spun and knitted into magical garments. Their good neighbours, those who have been kind to them that winter, my sisters allow the red rams to tup their sheep so they can knit some red ganseys. But the bad neighbours, those that call them witches, my sisters do not allow their red rams anywhere near their sheep. The bad neighbours are jealous, they too want the magic wool and they notice that each year the red rams simply wander back to the beach and walk into the sea they are not enclosed. So one year they built an enclosure away from the sisters’ house and they trapped those red rams as they returned to the sea and then they put in their sheep in and when my sisters found out they were so furious, they ran down to the sea shore and sang and as they danced and the walls of the enclosure crumbled and soon they saw, coming down the winding path to the beach, their three red rams and they are followed by every single red lamb born that season, and every single sheep that belonged to the bad neighbours disappear back into the sea, and then there were no more red rams from the Bay of Ravens.... but I have a few skeins left that will do just fine!”

Then the Hen-wife started to sing...

Rona was sleepy she thought about the story and she could hear the click of the wires, the sound of knitting, but when she opens her eyes she is once more outside the gate on the path from the Hen-wife’s house and now her basket is heavy. The sun is burning a hole in the mist and she turns again to see the familiar form of the old woman feeding the chickens. Had she dreamt her visit, the past hour in the house, the song and the story? Rona looks down at her basket and gasps, there inside the willow nest hanging from the silver steel wires is an almost complete red gansey the patterns snake around the basket the colour, rich and bold, is the colour of the rams of Raven Bay, the colour of fresh blood. She quickly re-covers the knitting with her shawl so the nosy neighbours cannot see it and hurries home. She knits in secret at the dead of night with the Hen-wife’s tune going round and round in her head and by the end of the week, spread out on the kitchen table there are two beautiful ganseys.

Each has a story to tell from the patterns, Lanis’ grey gansey glimmers in the moonlight, her bands are horizontal her patterns tell of the sea, the ropes for the boat, the horizontal diamonds are the fishing nets. Up the gansey they climb to the yoke where in the centre a four-cornered starfish was flanked by two anchors. Under each arm there is a diamond with a wee heart in the centre to ease the movement of the wearer for this is a practical garment, even a wedding gansey would one day be come work-wear. At the neck opening are three small mother-of-pearl buttons.

The second blood red gansey catches the firelight and the vertical patterns tell a different story, a story of life on land. There are ladders, cables snake up the

tree of life and in the centre front lies a bold zigzag path with a double border the symbol of the ups and downs of married life and Rona's diamond patterns stand upright like the glass panes of church windows.

Which one would their fisher lad choose? That evening the long awaited chap on the door came and the lad stood on the threshold, the girl's mother bustled him in and points to the kitchen table and the two ganseys. He hands her a string of fish and off she goes off to gut them. The two girls are stood either side of the fire dressed in their Sunday best. Rona speaks first:

"It is time to choose"

The lad is nervous, he likes them both but he has his heart set on one, but which gansey belongs to which?

Rona steps forward she indicates to him to raise his hands above his head then she pulls off the salt stained gansey that his mother had made. She takes the red gansey and pulls it over his head, the muscles on his arms slither through the sleeves, it is tight - perfect against the wind, but the neck is high and the lad pulls at the neck with his fingers as he begins to sweat. Rona steps back to admire her handiwork and Lanis steps forward. The lad puts his hands above his head again and she pulls the red gansey from him, he blushes as he stands there in his singlet. Then she takes the grey gansey and slips it over his head, it is a perfect fit. Her fingers tremble as she buttons the neck and she breaths in the sweet smell of his sweat. He sighs with relief and goes down on one knee. He has chosen the older sister, the fair sister, the grey gansey.

Only three fish were eaten that night, Rona took to her bed, she wept for weeks and out of respect they delayed the wedding until Rona's heart had healed a little. The lad went back to the fishing for he loved the sea. One morning when Lanis caught Rona's eye her sister smiled back and spoke:

"Come with me sister, lets walk to the beach like we used to when we were young."

The season had turned but it was still cool so they put on their cloaks. They walked up to the cliffs and down the zigzag path to the beach, and then they ran across the sand with their cloaks floating behind them in the wind. The tide was way out and they could just see a tiny dark shape of a fishing boat on the horizon, perhaps it was the fisher-lad pulling in his nets.

They looked in all the rock pools and as their shadows got shorter and the day grew warmer they sat and Rona took a comb out of the pocket of her cloak.

"Come sister sit in front of me and let me comb your hair, I have a story for you and a new song."

Lanis sat looking out at sea with her back to her younger sister, as Rona combed her thick golden tresses she started to sing and before she could tell the story Lanis was asleep. Rona plaited her sister's hair tightly into the

seaweed that clung to the rock on which she sat. Then she stood up; she left the comb by her sister's side and started to walk up the beach. When she reached the bottom of the cliff she turned, she could see the tide had reached her sister's toes. On she sang and still her sister slept. Rona started to climb the zigzag path and at each turn she looked back at her sister, the water reached her waist, then her breast, then the tip of her chin and by the time she reached the top of the cliff and turned her sister had disappeared.

She looked to the horizon, the fishing boat had gone but something was moving through the water, catching the light, a seal was sleek and swimming fast. The silver grey seal swam to the place she had left her sister and dived, then the heads of two seals broke the surface of the sea. They turned and looked at Rona with their dark eyes and it was then she realised what she had done.

"I'm Sorry!" she cried and held out her hands under her cloak then the wind took her into the air, but she did not fall, she flew then she soared down the side of the cliff and landed on a rock and lifted her wings, her cormorant wings, to dry in the sun. She stretched out her long neck and snapped her sharp beak at the two seals, the Selkie and his bride, that frolicked in the waves around her.

The next morning a neighbour knocked on the mother's door, he was holding a silver grey gansey the patterns of which told the story of the sea. The widow knew the gansey, she knew the three little mother-of-pearl buttons and she knew then for certain, that she had lost them all.

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October 2020