

## Knitting the Herring 2/3

### Poor man's Wealth

A story inspired by the Scottish tradition of travellers tales and Hugh Millar's 'Scenes and Legends of The North of Scotland'

A tall stranger is walking down the coast of the Moray Firth. His name is Thomas and he is a tailor, a travelling tailor for these are the days before shops and in a way he also followed the herring lassies as they travelled around the coast of Scotland – a month or so behind the fisher-lassies because making clothes for a living, well if the fishermen and the coopers and the curers had a successful season then they'd be looking for some new clothes to be made or at least a canny repair or two.

A tailor was always welcome wherever he went, certainly by the weavers because he always bought his cloth locally but also because everyone was happy to hear the stories that he brought with him for the travellers and the peddlers and the tailors were the best source of news, gossip and stories.

It was nearing the end of October and Thomas was weary, he had blisters on his blisters and his backpack seemed to get heavier everyday with his scissors, his sewing thread, and his tailors chalk all the tools of his trade and he had walked a fair few miles that season along the Moray Firth coastline.

He was looking to get to Cromarty for the November market but this year things were different, times were hard for the season had failed, the herring, usually so plentiful here had simply not appeared and the fisher-lassies, the coopers and the curers had moved on continuing their long journey south to Yarmouth Town.

When Thomas entered the town and started knocking on the doors of his regular customers the answer was always the same

"Sorry Thomas times are hard, we've no money for new clothes this year."

And the children had dark rings under their eyes they clung to their mother's skirts and they were hungry.

No work meant no money for Thomas and no money meant that he couldn't afford to stay at a local inn as he usually did. He hung around the market place where the women stood knitting and the old men gossiped:

"Perhaps it had been the winter weather?"

"Aye the storms the winter had been the worst!"

"It must be a witches curse!" cried another

“The herring is a fickle fish sometimes it likes to play hide and seek!”  
An old fisherman grumbled.

Poor Thomas moved on from town to town and village to village but the leather of his boots was so thin by now it was almost worn through so every sharp stone on the road made him wince in pain. As Thomas walked the weather got worse, a mist came down as he passed Pickletown and he could barely make out the path that turned this way and that just like the road to Duffus. He didn't recognise this part of the coast but then again the storms around here could change this coastline.

Thomas realised he was lost but then he saw that the path in front of him wound past a row of white-washed cottages three gates and three paths led to three doors. And by the side of each door hung an old wood and wire sieve - the ones folks used for washing the sand from the cockles and mussels.

Now Thomas didn't remember seeing these cottages last year when he past but then last year the herring had been so plentiful his customers had all wanted new clothes for their Sunday best he'd fair skipped to the next town! There was smoke coming from the three chimneys and he could smell cooking. He knocked on the first door and as he waited his mouth began to water and his tummy began to rumble...eventually the old door creaked open. An old woman stood bent in the doorway:

“ Thomas is it?” she asked as she peered out into the mist  
A shiver ran down the back of Thomas' neck, he'd never seen the old woman how did she know him?

“ Aye I'm Thomas the Tailor at your service...” he was starting to feel frightened perhaps it was a trick of the firelight but he thought he saw a cat arch its back before he walked in.

Thomas reasoned that with word of mouth his fame had gone before him... the cottage was dark inside and it took a while for Thomas' eyes to adjust to the darkness, he looked for the cat but did not see it and in the hearth and a sooty caldron hung on a huge iron hook at the end of a big chain that disappeared up the chimney. He turned around and saw a small table and three chairs. The old woman signalled for him to take off his coat and hang it on a wee silver hook between her box bed and a wooden door propped open with a besom, a witches' broom that led to some narrow stairs to the attic.

He sat down at the table and he noticed a wooden loom that stood by the only window. There on the loom was the most beautiful piece of woven cloth Thomas had ever seen. It was pale green, the colour of the sea at dawn and it seemed to shimmer in the light from the window.

The old woman watched him as he stared at her weaving she noticed how his tailor fingers started to twitch.

“I’m wanting a skirt made for my granddaughter Thomas, she’s awa’ - with the fisher-lassies, but she’ll be home soon enough wanting a new rig. I have no money but I’ll give you food and a bed in return.”

She shuffled over to the press and took two tin plates placing them on the table with trembling hands. Then she shuffled over to the old iron stove where a round pie dish was keeping warm. As she placed the dish on the table Thomas noticed her knuckles were swollen. The pie was fine enough and the pastry a rich golden colour, a five-cornered pastry star sat in its centre and spaced around the crimped edge were the silver faces of three fat herring their heads poking out of the pastry.

The smell of the fish pie was delicious, he remembered his mother used to make Stargazey pie she made it every year at the end of the fishing season with fish from the last catch – she called them lucky fish.

Well once his plate was clean the old woman returned to the stove and reached above her head and took a handful of herbs that hung from the rafters to dry, she sprinkled them in a tin mug and filled it with hot water then stirred the leaves to make a tea. She stood over him waiting and watching as he drank it.

“Now you’ll be tired, you can sleep in the attic and she pointed to the small door behind the broom. She gave him the knuckle-end of the candle to light his way, he picked up his backpack and climbed the stairs and as he entered the attic room he could just make out a single bed with a sheet, and a pillow. He had to bend his head to get under the eaves of the roof and he noticed a small skylight above the bed but no moonlight came from that window he stepped onto the bed to try and open it but it appeared to be painted with thick black paint and boards nailed over it.

Suddenly the candle spluttered out, Thomas felt so sleepy so he lay down on the bed and listened to the sound of the sea lapping on the shore below the cliff on which the cottages stood. He heard his chair squeak downstairs and thought he could make out the murmur of voices in the room below and the soft clicking of needles knitting.

He wasn’t sure how long he slept but he dreamt of a beautiful girl with red hair the colour of the sunrise wearing his skirt, made from the cloth he had seen on the loom downstairs.

Thomas awoke to the familiar smell of fried fish, he went down stairs and there on the table was a tin plate with a juicy fat herring rolled in oatmeal fried in butter and it was delicious. Once the table was cleared and scrubbed the woven cloth was laid out Thomas asked a question...

“What size is your granddaughter – the fisher-lassie?”

“Oh, she’s the same size as me just a wee bit taller and straighter!”

Thomas threaded his tape measure around her tiny waist then cracked his knuckles one by one and set to work. The fabric was soft to the touch, it seemed to flow through his fingers and as he worked the old woman sat opposite him and carefully cast on 8 score of stitches then started to knit with her swollen fingers.

He smiled his mother used to knit gansey's and he knew these patterns, the waves of the sea, and the links of love, his mother used to knit lines of stitches at the yolk that she called Poor Man's Wealth.

"Why are they called that?" Thomas had asked her.

"Because they are difficult to count." She had answered.

He didn't understand that then but he did now.

As he worked Thomas remembered walking into town earlier that day – he thought about the poor folk there...

"There were no fish in the town yesterday why would that be?" he asked the old woman.

"Whissh! Work and wait and dree your weird Thomas!"

Thomas swallowed hard and got on with his work trying not to dread his fate! As he started to sew the old woman's stiff fingers continued to knit ...

"Mind the herring don't like blood Thomas, maybe blood has been spilt at the start of the season... my mother told me of a time when the herring hid, it was the last day of the fishing season and a fine season it had been, but the fishermen grew greedy and when two boats found their nets tangled together the crew of one got out their knives and cut away the other's nets saving the catch for themselves. The crew of the second boat got out their knives and coming in close they started to slash at their rivals' nets and one man thrust his knife into another man's arm and his blood poured into the sea... and after that the herring were away for years."

By late afternoon Thomas had finished the skirt and the old woman had completed the sea-green gansey. Thomas noted the sleeves were short - finished above the elbow just like the fisher-lassies wore down at the gutting yards. The yarn of the gansey matched the colour of the skirt, the colour of the sea at dawn. Then he remembered his dream – the bonny lassie he had seen had been wearing one just like it. The old woman thanked Thomas, took his coat from the hook by her box bed and gave to him and showed him to the door.

He was ready to move on but his stomach was rumbling again.

"If you're still hungry Thomas call next door, my sister may need something?"

And so it was that Thomas went up the first path, went out of the first gate entered the second walked down the second path and stood outside the middle door, as he knocked he noticed that the rusty sieve hanging on that wall beside it was dripping wet.

He knocked, eventually the door creaked open an old woman stood bent over in the doorway. Her cottage was dark too but similar in many ways to one he had just spent a night and a day in, she too had a loom on which a cloth had been woven, she too needed a skirt made for her granddaughter who was away following the herring. He also sat down to a fine Stargazey pie followed by a herb tea. The cloth on her loom was the colour of the sea at sunset and his fingers began to twitch and he smiled imagining his work the next day.

With the stub of a candle in one hand he started to climb the stairs and half way up he felt a cat brush past his legs, he bent down to stroke it but when he looked down there was nothing there. Then the besom, the broom by the door at the bottom of the stairs fell over with a crash and Thomas leapt up the last few steps to the attic bedroom and lay down on the bed. The candle guttered just before he saw that once again above his head was a skylight, it too had been blacked out and boarded over. He fell asleep to the sounds of the waves on the shore, the click of knitting wires and voices murmuring in the room below him and this time he dreamt of another beautiful girl, one with auburn hair.

He awoke to another fat fried herring, the table cleared and scrubbed he soon felt that fine fabric warm between his fingers...

"What size skirt?" he asked

"Oh, she's the same size as me just a wee bit less crooked!" The old woman said.

And so it was, as Thomas started to tailor, the old woman started to cast on, 8 score stitches on her wires and her fingers were bony.

When the skirt was cut and pinned he looked up and saw how her gansey was glowing and her patterns were moving up to a star, a five-pointed star on the yolk. Then Thomas remembered the market place and asked again:

"There were no fish in the town the day before yesterday, why would they be so hungry, why did they have no fish?"

"Whissh! Work and wait and dree your weird Thomas!"

Thomas got on with his work...

"There might be a curse Thomas... my mother told me of a time – one season when it was so hot and the herring were so plentiful that the gutting girls had to work on a Sunday to fill the barrels before the fish went soft in the heat and the minister stood to start his sermon and was faced with bare pews.

So he marched down to the gutting yard and started to preach there that failure to observe of the Sabbath was a sin! So the lassies pelted him with stinking fish and he prayed that God would take a large besom and sweep all the herring from the Moray Firth. And God did just that; there were no herring the next season.

A second skirt finished, the old woman took his coat from the hook by her wee box bed and showed him the door and thanked him. At the open door he turned to thank the old woman– he was sure he could smell... coming from the last cottage yes next door he could smell a fish pie was cooking and his stomach started to rumble!

“You could do worse than call next door my sister may have something for you Thomas...”

Third time lucky Thomas thought as he swung out of gate number two and through gate number three and down the path to the final wooden door next to on which a wet sieve hung on the wall there was sparkling with herring scales.

Thomas shivered as he remembered that it was almost all Halloween.

Now by the time he had agreed with a third old woman to exchange bed and board for a third skirt for her grand daughter he was feeling decidedly hungry. Indeed by the time his belly was full and the Stargazey Pie dish lay empty he felt his fingers itching to get his fingers on the inky blue- black cloth on the loom - the colour of the sky just before dark - Indigo Blue! So Thomas picked up his backpack keen to get out his scissors and work through the night for if it was Halloween he wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep at all...

“You'll be ready for your bed!”

The old woman handed him his hot tea and gave him an even shorter candle, picked up her besom, opened the door that led up to the attic room and slammed it shut behind him.

The candle was out before he reached the top step and he tripped and spilt his tea. He entered the attic room but as he started to feel around him for the bed he realised that this room wasn't pitch black there were some thin shafts of moonlight coming through the wooden slats they made a criss-cross pattern on his pillowcase a five- pointed star of light.

He looked up and saw that although the planks of wood were nailed together over the skylight this glass had not been painted, so Thomas opened his backpack and took out his heaviest scissors. Standing on the bed he slipped the shears between the wooden boards and wiggled them, they were nailed to the sides of the window but then he pulled them away and when they were free he pushed open the small window and poked his head up and out of the small opening in the roof.

The moon was almost full and he could see a path running down to the sea from the kale yard below. Two young lassies came into view the first was the girl he had seen the night before in his dream the second was even more beautiful. One wore a skirt the colour of the sky at sunrise, one the colour of the sky at sunset and as they started down the path a ginger cat slunk out of the shadows and followed them. They were both wearing new ganseys, they each had a leather knitting belt, a whisker and they were 'wyvin' as they walked and they started singing...

When Thomas woke the next morning he was shivering but the sky was blue through the open skylight. As Thomas enjoyed his fat juicy herring fried in butter that morning and he thought about the bairns he had seen just three days before in the town, how hungry the children had looked and he remembered the gossip about the lack of fish that season and he wondered where these fine fat fish were coming from?

Thomas and the woman worked away together, he at the skirt for her granddaughter who was away gutting herring and she at a new blue-black gansey. The old woman sang as she worked...

Thomas was not sure what the words meant and his mind was racing...perhaps they were... they were...witches... no! Suddenly her song changed:

"Why should I sit and sigh pulling bracken pulling bracken  
Why should I sit and sigh on a hillside dreary."

"What song is that?" Thomas asked.

"Oh it's just a song my mother used to sing about a lassie falling in love with a fairy boy."

Thomas sighed these weren't three weird witches they were simply old women, just three good neighbours, the song wasn't magic, the tin mug didn't hold a sleeping potion. He must have heard her and her sisters singing the tune when he was asleep. He must have dreamt about the two lassies or perhaps they were back early from Yarmouth Town?

The inky – blue cloth was so fine that Thomas finished the indigo blue skirt before the end of that afternoon. The old woman cast off her knitting and took Thomas' jacket from the hook by her box bed and thanked him and showed him to the door. As he walked up the path with his pack on his back, Thomas had the feeling that three pairs of eyes were watching him. He walked on along the coast and when he was a distance away he looked back and realised that the row of cottages stood in the middle of nowhere. From where he stood – at this angle in the road he could see both the front and back of the cottages, he could see where the sea had stolen half the kale yard and that there were steps cut into the peaty cliffs that led down to the shore. Down on the shore there were no boats; there was nothing but a large wooden barrel. Perhaps that was where the old women kept their secret stash of herring he thought and he decided to sit down in the evening sun to wait and watch the

cottages. As the sun set he started to feel sleepy, then an owl hooted and the doors to the three cottages opened as one and out stepped three young lassies, they each took their sieves from beside their door and walked down the path, through their gates and turned and entered the kale yard. Each wore the long skirt he had tailored for them and the new gansey their Grannies had knitted and slung over their shoulders each had a brown fishing net and each carried a 'crook', a length of chain with a large iron ring on one end and a hook from which a cauldron had hung above the fire in all three cottages.

A full moon rose and out to the sea as Thomas watched and he saw the water out to sea begin to bubble and the herring started to leap in the moonlight. He watched as the three young women breached their skirts their long slim legs skipped down the steps in the cliff to the shore. He followed them, silently scrambled down the cliffs to the beach and hid behind the barrel; he looked inside and saw that it was empty. The fisher lassies had hooked their three sieves together with their chains and he watched them as they stepped aboard their sieves and bobbed out to sea towards the dancing herring. They were casting their nets now and he could hear them singing that song again... three beautiful young women were fishing in the moonlight it was such a beautiful sight he called out a blessing:

May you wear my garment to shreds!  
May you wear my garment to tatters!  
May you wear my garment with food and music!  
In every place as I would wish:  
With confidence  
With health  
With friends  
With love  
With the grace of the threefold spirit!

And at that blessing three terrible shrieks pierced the air and he watched as the three magical sieves started to sink into the sea. Thomas realised that a rope led from the barrel to the waters edge to the ring at the end of in the first crook, the first chain that led to the first sieve and he ran down to the water's edge and he heaved and he hauled on that rope. By now he was in the water, almost out of his depth he pulled one last time until the three sieves were within his grasp but the young women were under the water now, their hands were still clinging to the sieves. In the cold blue moon light Thomas looked at those hands and saw that they were bony hands, swollen hands, arthritic hands, they were not the hands of young women... then the six hands lost their grip on the three sieves and the three old women sank down to the bottom of the sea.