by Daryl Brower
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Halfway between mainland Shetland and Orkney sits the island known as Fair Isle. It's a tiny island to be sure—six miles square at most— but its coves harbor some of the most treacherous tides to be found. Long, long ago (in 1588 if you must be exact about these things) *El Gran Grifon*, the great flagship of the Spanish Armada, went to wreck along the cliffs of the most treacherous of them all, Stroms Hellier.

El Gran Grifon was under the command of Don Alonso Pérez de Guzmán el Bueno, better known as the seventh Duke of Medina. Now the Duke was a quick-thinking man and when faced with the sinking of ship, he ordered his sailors—three hundred of them in all—to climb up the mast and over the yards onto the cliffs of Fair Isle. This was no easy matter. The ship was listing and the cliffs were high, but the men were strong and quick and so made their way safely to land. From the top of the cliffs they made their way south down the moors to more sheltered flatland, and there they found the inhabitants of Fair Isle, a rugged lot of no more than dozen families. They lived contentedly, if not very comfortably, in rough little crofts and spent their days tending to their cows and sheep, relying on fish, bannocks, butter and milk to get them through their hardscrabble days. Their life was not an easy one, but still they welcomed the newcomers, offering them what meager food and drink they had to spare.

Now the Spanish sailors were a handsome (if somewhat soggy) lot, decked out in caps and gloves rich in color and pattern. And the ladies of Fair Isle were a resourceful and sharp-eyed bunch, clever with a needle and quick to learn new ways of working wool. They admired the fine handwork of the sailors' caps and gloves and remarked excitedly over the rich colors that made up the designs. Their own woolens you see, though finely worked, were colored only by the natural browns, creams and grays of the sheep that roamed the isle. "How can it be," they asked Spaniards, "that you create such wonderful colors?"

It's the rare Spanish sailor (or sailor of any origin, really) who can resist the interest of the fairer sex. Eager to encourage the attentions of the women of Fair Isle—and with little else to do while they awaited rescue—the sailors of *El Gran Grifon* went searching over the moors and brought back bits of lichen. They taught the women how to transform these into lovely purple, orange and yellow dyes and showed them how to dip their wool in them to make more colorful yarns. "*Ach*!" said the ladies. "That's all *verra* nice, but how do you make the patterns?" And so the sailors, who were quite accomplished knitters themselves (as are most who spend long hours at sea), showed them how to strand two colors together along the back of the work (a nifty trick they'd learned from

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their visits to the Nordic lands), creating a fabric that was both thick and sturdy and wonderful to behold.

And so for a time the Spaniards and the islanders got along famously, sharing food and drink (for which the Duke paid with gold coin), spinning and stitching. But as the winds blew colder and the days grew shorter, things began to change. Winter on Fair Isle is a fierce thing, with both warmth and food in short supply. The men of the island began to fear that there would not be enough to eat. “Spanish gold *canna*' fill hungry bellies,” they said. “Our food will be gone and our families will starve. We must be rid ‘o the strangers.”

Fifty of the Spaniards did their bit to ease the burden by succumbing to cold and hunger as the land frosted over. Several more, walking alone along on the cliffs, fell to their deaths on the rocks below, aided, it’s whispered, by a well-timed push from an islander who happened to be traveling the same path. Even so, there were still far too many mouths to feed. That difficulty was solved one dark night when the flagstone roof over the cottage where the Spaniards slept suddenly collapsed, crushing the slumbering bodies of those within.

The few Spaniards who managed to crawl from the rubble (the Duke of Medina among them) wisely decided that their welcome had been overstayed and fled to neighboring Orkney. There they enjoyed the hospitality of a Shetland laird whom, it seems, had more food, wealth, and political favor to share. The Duke dearly wished to return to Spain and petitioned the great Queen Elizabeth for permission to do so. The queen, being a most generous ruler, gave her word that the Duke and all who wished to go with him could sail to Spain, unmolested by English ships. But by then, several of the Spaniards (known to this day as the Westerly Dons) had taken a fancy to the girls of the isle and decided to stay put. As it turns out, the Dons were quite wise in their choice, for half of the remaining survivors of *El Gran Griffon* met their end at the hands of the Dutch, who set upon them with their gunboats. Elizabeth, you see, had promised only that no harm would come from English hands and may have made mention to her allies that their mutual enemy was en route to Spain.

On Fair Isle, they remember the Spaniards fondly, and to this day stitch the beautiful patterns brought with *El Gran Grifon*.

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The Fact Behind the Fable

El Gran Grifon *did meet its untimely end on the cliffs of Fair Isle in 1588, but its role in the development of Fair Isle knitting is more than likely a romantic tale spread by the savvy spinners and clothiers who had both an eye for fine knitwear and a natural affinity for self promotion. Historians have found no examples of or other evidence two-color stranded knitting on Fair Isle during the three centuries passed between the wreck of* El Gran Grifon *and the early nineteenth century. Most of the historical record indicates that the sailors kept to themselves during their stay on the island, though there is some mention of them teaching the islanders how to create dyes.*

The first account attributing the patterns to the Spaniards appeared in 1856 in the account of a Shetland resident named Eliza Edmondson, who expresses her “belief” that the sailors of the Armada taught the islanders “the art of knitting.” Fifty Spanish sailors did perish from starvation and exposure during their short stay on Fair Isle, whether or not they were hastened to their deaths by the inhabitants of Fair Isle is open to debate.

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