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Ladies' Column: "FLITHER" GIRLS

The sky stretches in an endless, cloudless blue expanse overhead; the sea below is broken by scarcely a ripple as the tide slowly advances along the rocky shore; and the almost angry heat of an August sun is tempered by a gentle breeze.

"Its all along o' trawlers!"

These are the first words, uttered in the broadest Yorkshire dialect, that catch my ear as I emerge at a little railway station on the cliff top, many miles north of fashionable Scarborough.

"And what about the trawlers?" I enquired from the woman whose words I have just overheard.

"Well, you see, it's all along o' them trawlers that our lads 'as to leave the fishing, and our lasses go out to place; its the ruination of this ere town, and of a sight more bonny fishing towns as well."

"Them trawlers" are large steam fishing craft, introduced some few years ago, which go out to deep sea fishing all the year round, dredge the banks, and (the fisher folk say) destroy tons of spawn and young fish, to the great detriment of the industry. Moreover, these craft, being in the hands of companies, the trade is being congested into big centres; hence there is much waiting all along the coast in the hamlets which stud the cliffs.

I wend my way through the stony, precipitate street of the straggling, red-roofed village, clustering on the cliff side, between two high bluffs, and soon find myself on the slope which leads to the shingly beach. The fishermen, cutty in mouth, are taking their ease. The boats have just come in with women already boarded the boats, and girls "turn to." They have herrings; it is the time when they counted the herrings, and now they come tripping across the rocks, their dresses turned up around their waists, over short blue serge petticoats, displaying beneath them, instead of the maligned trousers of the pit-brow women, pairs of shapely legs and feet, some bare, others encased in woollen stockings, and trim, stout, leather shoes. A fine sturdy set of lasses these are, with straight,

strongly-knit frames and well-set heads, on which they poise with ease their heavy loads of fish or lines.

"What is that you are carrying?" I asked a woman whose burden had just been skilfully packed upon her head by a young girl.

"Them's the 'overs' which I'm carrying upon my 'skip' (basket)."

"And what do you mean by 'overs'?"

" Well, you see, the 'overs' is the heavy fishing lines which the men take out with them, alongside o' the net. I'm taking of 'em home to bait with 'flithers;' and they must be alive when we do it. We take 'em out of the shell and bait 'em, so that the men has 'em all ready."

"May I see one of the 'flithers'?" I enquire.

A judicious handful of gooseberries poured into the palm of a little girl close by sends her scampering off to the nearest pool, and in a minute she is back with an unfortunate little "flither" or limpet, the collection of which has for generations been a distinct female employment along the coast.

"And how old do you begin?"

"As little as that 'un," pointing to a small maid of some seven summers, who stands rubbing one little bare sandy foot against the other, "they begin to do what they can; but the grownup [lasses] hire their sons, and make a regular trade on it."

"And what time do you go out?"

"That depends on the tide. We go out many a bitter cold morning at [3] o'clock, with lanterns, and we take out sharp knives and creels and go down on the Scar to look for 'flithers.'"

"I suppose you get home in good time for breakfast?"

"Oh no; we wandered miles along the Scar—ten, twenty, thirty, and more, may be to Whitby, Robin Hood's bay, and Scarborough. Sometimes it's that cold we come back wi' nought—our hands tremble so—but sometimes we get a lot of flithers."

"If you go so far, how do you manage at nights?"

"There's many a farm and cottage along the cliffs where they'll give us a lodging. We go out in parties of ten, may be, and we pay threepence each

for the night. I've slept with five other lasses in a bed, for them packed as close."

"And do they give you food?"

"We take our victuals along with us when we stay out some days or a week."

"Then how do you keep your bait alive?"

"We pack 'em careful and give 'em a sup o' salt water now and then."

"What can you earn?" I now ask, wishing to be more practical, and finding it somewhat difficult to keep my ready-tongued friends to the point.

"Sometimes tenpence or a shilling a day if we sells the flithers, or even one and elghtpence or two shillings if times are extra good. Some of the girls hires theirsens out for half-a-crown a week and their victuals, and go flithering for fishermen

"Are not you afraid of being out at all hours and in all weathers?"

"No"—with almost a derisive laugh. "We're a jolly lot, we are; when it's dark we go singing along, hymn hymn—and songs too"—this *sotto voce*, for the good folk here are very religions, and in some quarters "worldly songs" are entirely tabooed.

"I suppose the train makes a great difference in your work?" „

"Yes; that's been here this three year, and they take us cheap, but not as they do the Scarborough gels; they go for nothing, as a kind lady left money in her will to free them over the lines."

"Well I remember," here chimed in an elderly dame, "when I was a lass I've started off with a dozen others at one o'clock in the morning, walked to Whitby, got a cup of tea, and then on to the flither ground. I've known the police turn us back, a saying we were a meddling with ther folks' flithers."

As I watched these healthy, bronzed, active lasses, my thoughts travelled back to the pale match-box girls toiling in our great city. The pay of these fisher lasses is as small, the work is harder, but the very hardihood of their lives; the spirit of adventure engendered by daily contact with the ocean, and the winds, and the rocks, developed in them capacity and self-reliance. We may well despond when we consider what we shall do with some of our poor city girls; but in these country lasses there is the making of a fine, useful womanhood.

National Library of New Zealand (n.d.), *Papers Past* [online]. Available at:
<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=HBH18880128.2.20.8>
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