

Prologue

The Bay

THAT'S THE SEA YOU can hear making satisfied gasps against an impenetrable coastline, with irregular splashes, hisses and whispers, spatters and fizzles. She is playing – at the moment. And whilst her gown of glistening light swells beneath a winter's late-afternoon sunset, there's another sound, much nearer.

Tap! Tap! Scratch! Tap! Tap! Tap-tap-tap ... Scratch! Scratch!

And there's a face: a girl's – maybe eleven, twelve years old. She may even be older, but it's hard to tell, until you get to know her, if that is possible. Her round pretty features are framed within a faded woollen headscarf, her skin a darkened pallor with grime streaks like tide marks around her eyes. And when she looks at you ... well, something tells you that whatever you say might need to be put in simpler terms. Better make that fifteen years old – in fact, she will be sixteen in a couple of days.

She is concentrating, wielding some instrument before her. On any other day her movements would tell you this is her craft; this is what she has been doing for more years than she can count. But right now she's rushing. She backs off and wipes her grubby hand across her brow. Glancing around to the incoming tide, her experience and instincts alert her to the imminent danger, and she shivers, but nevertheless continues.

If you move back just a little you'll see more of her. She's wearing a thick shawl across her shoulders, its ends crossing over her chest, round her waist to the front and tied together. Underneath is her bodice, the sleeves of which have been purposely, if crudely, cut away, so they finish partway down her forearms. If she were standing, you would see that her legs aren't completely covered, although in its day, twenty years ago, the skirt would have concealed its original owner's legs right down to her ankles.

Around her is a no-man's land of rocky shelves with deep fissures and pools and jagged crusts of torn earth from past millennia, decked with kelp and bladderwrack. These shelves are the green-grey scaurs that, in this inhospitable landscape, seem to suck the very light from the sky.

She is kneeling before a rock, one of many, far out near the ends of the scaurs, where they seem to reach out to the sea like stretching fingers. At first glance the rocks appear to be arranged one after the other in succession, of similar heights, like rows of gravestones. But of course, it's only an illusion.

The girl's knees rest in a shallow pool, and her feet are black and bare. A deep wicker basket containing limpet shells – her spoils of the day – is by her side. Beyond it the sea is growing restless and gains another inch or two with every successive

sigh. Soon the scaur will be flooded. It's time to go back, but she can't leave what she has already begun, and again digs the blade of her knife between the shell of the sea creature and the large rock to which it is firmly anchored.

The girl cries out, almost a scream. She holds out her left hand in which she has clutched the knife, and stares unbelievably at the blade, jagged, incomplete. Looking into the pool of water at her knees, she makes random grabs at the sand, churning the water into a maelstrom until she holds the two parts of the blade together. Her expression of disbelief turns into one of resignation and she sits into the pool, the seawater seeping through her dress. Without her knife she will be unable to collect any more limpets – or *flithers* – with which to bait her father's long fishing lines.

This is Wyke Bay, on the North Yorkshire Coast. It is March 1915: Britain is at war with Germany, the young fishermen have gone off to fight, and Amy Trott is the last remaining flither lass in the village.

1

The storm

Day 1

IT WAS THE ROAR of the North Sea steadily growing louder that made Amy stop. It was something her father had said that morning: that the rent was due, and because her mother had been nagging him about not having enough coppers to buy a loaf of bread, that he and Mr Clough might go out in their coble, *Crimson Lady*, and shoot some fishing lines if the weather would hold off for just a bit. There was no denying that going out to sea on this day would be against his better judgement. The thought of it filled her with a peculiar uneasiness.

Standing in the Square, a stone-flagged area at the top of the short slipway, and closing her eyes for a second or two, she listened to the sound of the restless sea in the bay, breathing in the air charged with prickles and tingles by which she could sense the dangerous energy of the sea. And she knew there was little chance that the weather would not turn foul; a storm was due, of that she was in no doubt, maybe even a full gale from the south-east. It would reach the peak of its strength sometime late afternoon. To her, that such a thing would happen was as reliable as knowing that night follows day. Her father, a fisherman since he was a boy, would also know this, and yet even he often marvelled at Amy's unerring ability to sense – nay, *predict* – the moods of the ocean. She dared to breathe; there was no way he would set sail in the present conditions, with their promise of danger, loss of equipment, damage

to his fishing coble, or risk to his own and Mr Clough's safety. With a sigh of relief, she could rest easy and go about her work.

She ran up Ogden's Steps, a winding arrangement of uneven stone blocks that zig-zagged up the hillside between the cottages, many of them over three hundred years old and built back-to-earth against the southern side of the ravine. Her day's catch of flithers she left outside the cottage door, with some seawater to keep them alive, and covered to protect against village cats. The next morning, when the tide would still be in, was when she would sit outside the cottage and separate – or *skane* – the shells, leaving the fleshy limpet morsels for her mother and her sister Beth to bait her father's lines, nearly two hundred feet long. She picked up the bucketful of empty shells from that morning to take them to be dumped on the land behind some nearby cottages, and wondered what her mother and sister had done with her flither harvest from the day before.

That was when she heard a voice. It wasn't even a complete word; it didn't need to be. Just a stray tone on the air was enough to tell her who it was. Turning on the steps, she looked out over the Square. Berthed close by the harbour wall (although it was only a sea wall as there was no harbour as such) were the sagging tarpaulins covering the fishing cobles of their absent owners. Now there were only two fishing boats still in commission. One of them, a corfe about fifteen feet long, had belonged to a larger herring boat, sunk by a German U-boat captain. The crew had been cast adrift in its corfe, and, having enabled the men to get safely back to port, it had been abandoned, and then acquired by a village fisherman whose own coble had been holed.

Amy's father and Mr Clough were walking towards *Crimson Lady*, a longer and leaner coble, dedicated for line fishing off the coast. Each was wearing knitted ganseys – pullovers, with identical patterns – and carrying a heavy circular skep containing the fishing lines, baited that morning from her previous day's catch.

She called out to them. Her father waved. Mr Clough, the junior partner, was on his knees, beneath the fishing coble, loosening the chocks of its cart wheels. Running down to the Square she grabbed her father's arm.

"Dad, you want help pulling 'em up there?" she asked, pointing to the open space further along the street where the fishing cobles were drawn for protection during ferocious weather.

When he didn't look at her, she knew something was amiss.

"Dad, what you doing? What you doing, Dad? You mu'n't go out! Don't you know it's coming on bad? I can tell."

Instead of breaking off to speak with her, as he usually would, he continued to steady the coble on its cart as Mr Clough scrambled from beneath, pulling himself to his feet.

"It's alright, lass, we're not gonna be long."

His calmness didn't convince her.

"It's growing, Dad. The sea's growing. I can feel it."

Now he held her by the arms, gently to care, firmly to protect, struggling to find

the words that would explain why it was so necessary for them to go out in the bay, if only for a short time, and shoot a line. It would be hard work in a sea like this, but her father was the undoubted expert along this stretch of coast between Scarborough and Middlesbrough.

She went on:

"You mustn't go, Dad, you know you musn't."

He shook his head, wishing she wasn't here.

"Why are you doing it?"

He let go of her and sighed, looking around at the resting cobbles, some of them already without owners, and the short, shuffling women – it didn't matter that some were young and others were old because they all looked the same – each with a stoop that they wore like a badge of poverty.

"We'll be alright. We know what we're doing."

There was something about his tone that Amy didn't like. He sounded agitated, impatient.

"No, no," she shook her head and stepped away from him, as if wanting to separate herself from the recklessness.

"I've got to do it!" he snapped at her. "You won't understand. It's my fault – I've never explained to you about money, and I should – I know I should. And I will, soon as we get back. But your mam and Beth have done the lines and it'd be a waste, can't you see that? All your hard work will have been for nothing."

"It doesn't matter –"

"Well I say it does! And that's an end to it. Right?"

She was standing a few feet away from him.

"It's not safe –"

"Neither is going without food or a roof over your head. No great deed is done by falterers who ask for certainty. That's from Eliot. Don't worry, lass. Should be some cod for us, end o' the scaurs. Then we'll be back home for some tea. How's that, eh?"

He hugged her, and she knew he had closed his eyes, like she had seen in the mirror once. She felt him tremble, and didn't want to let him go; she never did.

After dumping the shells she walked back along Friar Terrace, still, with the gas street lamp shining its pulsing greeny-yellow glow on the wet flags. With only the roar of the sea in the background, she went along the tightly-packed cottages and stopped when she heard what sounded to be a woman in agony. Shaking, Amy had never heard such screams. Maybe a beast had attacked her. The screams became worse, and the woman called out, crying her husband's name, and God's, and Jesus's, and her husband's name again.

Over the years, Amy had seen village men beating their wives, even in public, as if it were the most natural thing to do. But she had never seen her father beat her mother. So maybe this woman had been particularly bad, or naughty, or nagging. Whatever she had done, Amy wanted to know more so that she might avoid being so chastised when she got married, as she expected she would one day – after all,

that's what all of the other village girls did, except the odd one.

Whatever this particular woman's crime, Amy feared that she had gone too far, because when concerned neighbours knocked on the door they were turned away, having taken sheets, cloths, basins of water. All looked concerned, with knowing expressions, as if this was some tortuous process that just had to be gone through.

The unfortunate Mrs Larkin was now crying for The Lord to get whatever *it* was out of her belly, whatever such a thing could mean. And Amy wanted to be there; this was an opportunity too good to miss, to satisfy her curiosity, let her discover what no one was actually talking about.

When Amy looked in Mrs Larkin lay on her back, on a thin straw mattress on a strange arrangement, so Amy thought, of small tables of differing heights in the ground floor kitchen, thus allowing Amy an uninterrupted view through the window. There were no curtains, and, peeking around for a better view whenever the street door was opened, there were even fewer possessions inside the cottage than in Amy's – not that the cottage was hers; her mother had made that clear many times. No, Amy must learn, she'd been told, that she owned nothing, not even the skirt and the bodice she stood in, nor the boots that she hated wearing, and she must always be thankful for each mouthful of food she was given, and never dare to forget it.

And right now, this poor woman was in agony, her knees raised, and with her small children getting under the feet of the other woman that was fussing around. Amy knew that the seeing-to woman was Mary Dunkerdill, who she occasionally saw visiting women, but never seemed to stay neighbourly with them for long. Maybe she wasn't any good at staying friends.

After an agonising shriek that made Amy shiver, the activity inside became frenzied. The woman shouted at the children to stay in the corner and cover their eyes and not dare move. Then, when Mrs Dunkerdill grabbed the woman's knees and dragged them apart, for the first time Amy saw the thick, black mass of matted hair at the top of her legs, and the sliver of pink, like a large eye of a drunken man, or maybe it was the demon eye from so many of the stories she'd heard as a young child, that now opened a little wider.

Mrs Dunkerdill, shouting words and looking anxiously towards the door, and pointing menacingly at the cowering, but curious, children in the far corner, thrust both of her hands towards the woman's now grossly-deformed pee-hole, and blocked Amy's view.

Then it went silent. And the silence was followed by the sound of a baby crying. Then the women flitting in and out were also crying. Amy wanted to cry too. She didn't know why.

"Is Mrs Larkin dead?" she asked one of them.

The woman smacked the back of her hand against Amy's ear, which hurt, and told her to bugger off and mind her own business.

Then Amy heard the rushing of many feet on the street below. Standing up, the water running from the wide brim of her hat and down the neck of her bodice, she

realised that so engrossed had she been with the spectacle at number 9 that she had not been aware of the storm. An easterly wind was blowing in a wall of rain. It would be enough to make every villager stay at home, close the curtains (the few who had them), bank-up the fires and be thankful they were dry. And safe. Only, they were not staying at home; instead they were heading, she could tell by the sound of the echoes, for the harbour wall, which could mean only one thing.

Above she could see dark clouds scudding across the grey sky. Great waves were breaking against the cliffs on either side of the small slipway, thrashing it forcefully, relentlessly, gushing slime up on to the street, now misted in spray. Staring down at her feet, Amy watched the froth drain from between her bare toes. She looked towards the crowd of villagers, all staring out to sea, some pointing, all of them huddling against the bitter wind.

She was amongst them, fighting through their legs, crawling under the laid-up cobbles, grabbing arms, fighting to get to the front, pleading with them to tell her what was happening, not giving anyone time to respond, not wanting her fears to be confirmed. It seemed that no one could see her, had realised she was there, who she was. This was no different to any other day living in Wyke Bay. Amy felt she was a no-one.

The marine biological laboratory stood beside the slipway. Larry, a young man of twenty-one, stood in the doorway, watching her fight what looked like a losing battle to get to the front. He saw the uncaring looks on their faces, the impassive concern. It seemed that all they cared about was the entertainment that was unfolding before their pinched, mean faces. He stepped out, intending to take the girl from the moronic onlookers and bring her into the comparative warmth of the lab where he could offer her some comfort. No sooner had his feet landed on the cobbles than a hand grabbed his shoulder and eased him back inside.

Dan spun him round, clasped his arms. Larry tried pulling away.

"Let me go, she needs someone—"

"But not you! It's not your place."

"Then who? Who else has she got?"

"Her mother—"

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

Both stared out across the Square, watching as Amy struggled to fight her way forwards to the harbour wall. Despite his detachment, Dan was puzzled.

"Why can't she get through? I don't understand what's happening. "

"Neither do they – the villagers, that lot out there. To them she's just someone they can call names, poke fun at, that their kids can chuck stones at in the street. That's Amy Trott."

"Sounds rather harsh."

"If they'd ever taken proper notice of her, they'd realise who she is."

On her hands and knees, and being kicked and knee-nudged, Amy forced her way through, until she heard a voice telling the others that she was "his lass" and to "let her get to t' front", "Aye, come on lass, tha's reight, come on ..." And the way

cleared, someone helped her to her feet. A young man's hand grasped hers, but she didn't see whose, nor the flash of white apron as he dissolved back into the crowd; she was too intent on getting to the front.

Larry grimaced. "The buggers are letting her through."

"You should be pleased. It's what you wanted, isn't it?" said Dan.

Amy emerged at the front, spray battering her face, and forced herself to take in the spectacle: in the great swell only a couple of hundred yards or so before her was a small fishing boat, seeming much smaller than it should be, but its distinctive painted strakes of white, brick red, and blue seemed at odds with its surroundings, brighter – almost glowing, as if it didn't really belong there, like it was incongruously stuck in the middle of a grey painting. It was being tossed like a cork in a tub. She could make out the strong shoulders of her father as he struggled with the oars to regain control of *Crimson Lady*. Behind him, not so visible in the spray, Mr Clough frantically hacked at something on the gunwale.

Aye, she thought, he'll be wanting to cut the lines to stop the drag, and get *Crimson Lady* in to shore. He stopped. The axe was gone. She tried to get a better view but wherever she moved there was a wall of gawping bodies pushing in front of her. She didn't see her father, Albert Trott, hand his knife to his friend Peter Clough.

END OF EXTRACT

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