

GAFFIN' FISH

W'EN th' tide is out er flirtin',
An' fergits ter shut its door,
An' th' happy clams are squirtin',
Playin' injine with the shore,

An th' kids are ripe fer junkin',
An' fer skippin' rocks an' shells,
An fer woodin' an' fer punkin'
Bobbin' bottles in th' swells,

An' yer hear th' rats er squalin'
Frum th' black cracks in th' walls,
An' yer quiz th' tomcats stealin' Nearer,
nearer ter th' calls,

An' yer mark some ole trap histid,
Like er giddy thing on cogs,
With its body kind uv listid
T'ward th' black spiles an th' logs,

All togged up in robes uv coal tar,
Yaller oaker, sash's an' bo's,
P'r'aps er crimson-pintid five-star
Sunburs'in' its puggy nose,

Like some poor, ole primay donnay
Thet has wobbled all her say,
Now shoved further ter th' corner
W'ile th' daybute works her lay,

P'r'aps er ole T.D. er puffin'
Frum er drollin' mouth er stern,
Use ter bluffin', use ter cussin',
Use ter words I know yer'v hern,

Then yer know time's ripe fer gaffin'
An' fer puntin' roun' th' docks,
Fer it's then th' crews git chaffin'
An' er rattlin' th' pitchforks,

Fer it's then th' strays go slippin'
Frum th' ole caps with er thud,
An' th' guick gaffs raise 'em drippin'
Ter th' sly punts frum th' mud.

Oh, it's art ter watch th' sneakin'
Uv th' puntin' through th' spiles,
Oh, it's art ter watch th' peekin'
Uv th' gaffers an' th' wiles,

Fer it's thievin' pure an simple
An' it's skittish work at bes',
Though th' cheek may wear th' dimple,
An th' eye stan' heaven's tes'.

Oh, it's risky work er gaffin',
Full uv duckin's, fights, an' jaws,
Full uv skuddin', full uv chaffin',
Full uv haul-ups, full uv laws.

Fer if caught, as sure as Moses,
Yer'll be chucked deep in th' dump,
W'ile th' smells uv sweet June roses
Won't c'logne up th' homeward slump.

When the trips are being taken out, often many fish slip from the pitchforks and sink to the docks. A class of young men and boys then row around in little boats, called punts, and gaff up the fish beneath the wharves and sell them. It is an illegal business, and if caught, they are subjected to a fine and imprisonment. It is operated at low tide.

"Ole trap histid": the old-fashioned shore boats that haul up on the dock flats for repairs.

"Pintid five-star": an old-fashioned emblem for decorating ends of bowsprits.

Clarence Manning Falt,
*Wharf and Fleet: ballads of the
Gloucester Fishermen*, 1902 Gaffin' Fish,
p.39-41