

The North Sea Mission

By Jacob A. Riis

TWO round, smooth stones lie on my desk for use as paper-weights, to which a recent cable dispatch gives a sad interest. I picked them up this past summer on the desolate Danish coast where, according to the dispatch, 127 fishermen perished in the great storm that swept the North Sea. I learned something then of the hard life of these men. The coast itself told the story with terrible eloquence, for along the sandy beach, upon which the surf beat even on that calm July day with voice of thunder, stood wreck upon wreck, and every few miles some great sand-dune was pointed out as a "dead man's mount," meaning that drowned sailors were buried there. The whole coast was one long, treacherous reef, with scarce two or three safe inlets in a stretch of a hundred miles or more for the fishing fleets that, with the salvage from wrecks, form the chief, indeed the only, dependence of the hardy shore-dwellers. Yet there are greater hardships on the North Sea than those endured by these fishermen. They, for the most part, fish independently, and bring home their daily or occasional catch. The English trawlers have reduced ocean fishing to a system which compels them to stay out on the deep for months together.

They fish—sometimes as many as two hundred sail together—in large fleets, fitted out by speculating firms on shore, which make the Dogger Bank, the Silver Pets, and the other rich fishing-grounds yield them a handsome profit. Their smacks are larger than the Danish boats, from forty to eighty tons burden, and carry crews of from five to seven men, so that a fleet like the Short Blue, the Red Cross, or the Great Northern has as large a population as many a good-sized village—say from 1,200 to 1,400 men and boys, who labor in all kinds of weather, week in and week out, Sundays included, at their hard and dangerous calling, often two hundred miles from shore. Their fishing is done chiefly at night. The "Admiral," the most experienced and trusted skipper of the fleet, signals "trawls down" at sunset, and the great trawling-beam, with its huge scoop-net, is shot from the side of each smack in the fleet, which is going before the wind—rarely, indeed, less than a gale on this boisterous sea. The net scrapes the bottom, gathering into its huge pocket everything that comes in its way, until the signal-rocket from the Admiral's boat orders the crews to "haul in." Then all hands turn to with a will. The catch is drawn on board, and quickly sorted, cleaned, and packed. The early dawn warns the fishermen that it is time to get their boxes ready for transfer to the fishing-steamer.

Every morning these swift little vessels, specially constructed for their purpose, seek out the fleet and bring their catch to Billingsgate or Shadwell markets. The delivery of the boxes on board the steamer is a most dangerous business if the sea runs high, in rough weather. A hundred boats and more are striving to be first at the rail. Collisions, with loss of life, occur frequently. It sometimes happens that a boat-crew, fish and all, is tossed upon the deck of the steamer, and never without some dire injury to some one or all on board. Up till a few years ago the men so injured, and those who succumbed to the hardships of their life of constant exposure, and fell ill of pneumonia or other diseases, had to take their chances on board, and the chances were those of death in nine cases out of ten. It is not strange that the North Sea fishermen, separated from home, from their families, and from every refining, ennobling influence, ever battling with the treacherous sea, with storm and ice and biting cold, with opportunity for dissipation constantly held out, but never a helping hand, grew to a large extent into an abandoned, desperate lot of ruffians to whom nothing was sacred, and whose brief sojourn at home was too often only a continuation of their wild orgies on board.

The opportunity at sea was furnished by the *coper*, a

trading-smack, in fact a floating grog-shop, that followed the fleets wherever they went, offering the vilest of rum and worse abominations to their crews. The *coper* was very rarely an Englishman, for the reason that the chief attraction for the fishermen, the bait upon which they were caught, was cheap tobacco. Tobacco the fishermen will and must have. It is their one comforter in the bitter midnight watches on the heaving deck. To argue the point with them would be useless as well as foolish. They want tobacco, and a great deal of it. But tobacco is very dear in England because of the duty upon it. The foreign *copers* paid no duty, and were able to sell for 1s. 2d., or about twenty-seven cents, a pound, the tobacco which the men had to pay a dollar for on shore. They went to the *copers* for tobacco, and took the rum that was offered them. When their money gave out, the *coper* was willing to take their fish, tackle, anchor, sails, anything that could be turned into money. Beastly drunk, the crews turned thieves to satisfy their craving for more of the vile stuff. They would sell a trawling-rope worth £30 for half a dozen bottles of schnapps worth perhaps a shilling a bottle. Numbers were drowned on their way back to their own smacks, or pitched each other overboard in their drunken fights. The scandal became so great that Parliament discussed ways and means of putting an end to it, and to the loss of life it caused every year on the sea.

Not by legislation, however, was this great evil to be overcome. It remained for the Christian conscience of the English people to be aroused to effectual battle with it. It is now twelve years since the Thames Church Mission, a river mission society, took the field against the *coper* by sending out a trawling-smack manned by a Christian crew to join the North Sea fishing fleets. The Ensign sailed in 1882 from Yarmouth quay, with the God-speed of a few, and the taunts and jeers of many, on its errand of mercy. It carried, besides its trawl, a well-stocked medicine-chest, a library of good, wholesome reading, lockers full of warm woolen clothing furnished by friends on shore, and a skipper who could not only spread a poultice with his horny thumb as well as any doctor, and set a broken bone, but who was not afraid to declare his trust in God rather than in the rum-flask, in and out of season. It came as a revelation to the seamen out on the deep, and in a few brief months it had demonstrated that here was indeed a field whitening for the harvest—but what a harvest if the reapers did not come quickly! They did come. By the end of the following year three mission smacks were trawling and laboring with the fleets, and in 1884 a fourth was added. In that year the Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen became an independent organization. Up till that time it had been, properly, a Church society, though a Nonconformist had lent the first vessel, and its spirit had been in all things most catholic and broad. Thenceforward it went on record as a *Christian* mission.

Within a year the opportunity came to these men to show that they were eminently the right men in the right place. In the battle with the *coper*, who was the evil source of all the mischief, the odds were tremendously in his favor through his monopoly of cheap tobacco. The Board of Customs had refused to allow the Mission to take tobacco out of bond, and the duty was practically prohibitive. The managers decided that between satisfying the custom and doing their duty to the fishermen, the latter had the greater claim. In effect they became smugglers. They arranged with a Bristol firm to export the tobacco they needed to Ostend, then ran their smacks over there to get it. By this means they were enabled to undersell the *coper* and to drive him from the sea. The sincerity of the fishermen who said, "We don't want his rum; we do want his tobacco," was proved. The Government looked on, but did not interfere. When it tardily gave its

consent, the enemy had been already beaten along the whole line.

To-day there is not a coper on the North Sea where a smack flying the blue flag of the Deep-Sea Mission fishes with a fleet. With the banishment of this curse, drunkenness among the crews has disappeared. They bring their earnings ashore, and many a family that formerly dreaded the coming home of the breadwinner as a time of trial has been made happy and comfortable. The loss of life on the North Sea is not nearly as great as it was. Some of the roughest fishermen, who once bore the reputation of being champion brawlers and drunkards, are now among the most earnest professing Christians, through whose efforts and example many souls have been won for Christ's cause. The Powers have been shamed into half-hearted international legislation against the coper, whose doom is finally sealed.

The blue flag to-day flies from the mastheads of eleven mission smacks. Three of them are hospital ships with surgeons on board. The captains or stewards of the other eight have certificates from the St. John's Ambulance Corps and the National Health Society, warranting their ability to give first aid to the injured. These fish with the rest. The hospital boats alone do not. At the very beginning of the work it was found that the boat which was scrubbed cleanest by a crew with nothing else to do was not the one that attracted the most fishermen to the Sunday services or the week-day meetings. The fishermen, in their oily clothing, which probably had not been dry once or off their backs since they left shore, were afraid of smudging the clean boat. They did not feel at home. So it was decided that the mission crews, to be effective fishers of men, must fish with them, share their work, their hardships, and their anxieties. They do that to this day, and they have no lack of caliber. The tobacco has ceased to be the chief attraction, though it is yet, and always will be, in the first rank. The crews come not only to get broken limbs set and bruises bandaged; very many come with an eager request for "something to read"—a longing which can never be fully appreciated by the landsman who finds his newspaper on his door-step every evening. Out in this watery desert the well-filled book-chest on board the mission smack means, often, escape from the gambling devil whom the coper left behind to continue his foul work when he fled. To the Sunday services the crews come in force, and very often on week-days delegations of skippers request the missionary to hold a meeting on this or that smack.

The Deep-Sea Mission spends something over a hundred thousand dollars a year in its great work. In 1891 it had nearly nine thousand patients under medical or surgical treatment on the various North Sea fleets; distributed over 400,000 magazines, nearly 300,000 tracts, and 11,837 books, not including 2,336 Bibles; 1,743 religious services were held on board its ships; and the tobacco, sold at cost or a trifle below, aggregated in value about \$15,000.

Last year the Mission sent one of its ships, the *Albert*, across the Atlantic to the fishermen who in summer leave their Newfoundland homes and camp on the bleak coast of Labrador. These bring their women with them, and their condition during their stay there, when some 25,000 persons gather alongshore with neither priest nor doctor within reach, is described as most deplorable. In the coming season another boat, the *Princess May*, is to follow, so that the beneficent activity of this truly Christian movement is about to be extended to American shores, with who can tell what ultimate result? Is there no need of a mission to deep-sea fishermen, on the practical English pattern, on this side of the Atlantic? On the Great Banks alone there is a population of quite 5,000 men fishing from April to October, often in old and unseaworthy boats, wretchedly equipped, suffering great hardships during their four, five, and six weeks' stay out at sea. It is true there are no copers on the Banks, but neither are there hospital ships or churches afloat. The great difficulty in attempting to relieve their wants would be that, unlike the North Sea fishermen, they do not fish in fleets, but singly and independently, as a rule.

Hampton's New Principal



The Rev. H. B. Frissell, successor to General Armstrong as Principal of Hampton Institute, is a man who, by descent and training, seems particularly fitted for the work to which he has been called. His father is the Rev. Amasa C. Frissell, now of Plainfield, N. J., one of the Secretaries of the American Tract Society—a man who never failed in the troublous times before the war to take his stand on the side of the

oppressed slave, and who was ready to sacrifice himself, when the occasion demanded, for his convictions. Through an aunt, who was one of the early missionaries to the Indians, we can trace a tie that binds him to the second race for which Hampton is working.

Mr. Frissell's own labor as a boy for self-support and education fits him perhaps better than most men of similar culture to appreciate the fight that Hampton students are making. While fitting for college at Dr. Dwight's school on Broadway, New York, his mornings of study were followed by afternoons of hard work as agent of the Boston Tract Society. In this occupation he performed not simply the duties of a clerk, doing up and directing all packages of publications distributed by that Society from New York, but also those of a porter, carrying about the bundles on his own back to the different points from which they were to be sent out. Much information was thus obtained concerning out-of-the-way parts of the city—information that stood him in good stead later—as well as a fund of knowledge of human nature in its various aspects.

His school life closed with a year at Phillips Academy, Andover, under Dr. Samuel Taylor, and he entered Yale in the fall of '69 to work his way through his college course. Here his fine voice helped him, and, by singing on Saturdays in the Jewish synagogue and on Sundays in a Baptist as well as in a Congregational church, he made his way at the same time that he broadened his ideas and fitted himself unconsciously for his future work. As President of the Yale Glee Club he engineered that society through the longest vacation trip that they had ever at that time undertaken, and, after visiting Chicago, Cincinnati, and other Western cities with them, brought them safely back to college with a fund of seven hundred dollars net profit to contribute to the Yale Boat-house, then just building. A severe attack of typhoid fever delayed his graduation for a year, bringing him to the end of his course in '74.

After graduation Mr. Frissell spent two years in teaching at a school on the Hudson, at the same time beginning his theological studies under an Episcopal clergyman. The Centennial year found him in New York, studying at Union Seminary, and in charge of the home and mission schools of Dr. Robinson's church. For a year after his graduation he continued with Dr. Robinson as assistant, and a very hard year of mission work, combined with worry over the heavy indebtedness of the church, nearly broke down the young man's health, and forced him to give up the field that he had chosen.

Then came an invitation to Hampton from General Armstrong. The position of chaplain, made vacant by the departure of the Rev. J. H. Denison, was offered to Mr. Frissell, and he went down to take up there the work which was to prove so much more to him than he could possibly have expected at that time.

At first, in his capacity as chaplain of the school, he spent much time in the study of the people from whom the students came, as well as of the work done by graduates in their country school-houses. Long horseback journeys were undertaken—one of five hundred miles, through the Carolinas and back to Hampton by way of Washington—during which he learned to know and sympathize with the