

## A FORTNIGHT ON THE NORTH SEA.

One fine day last June I went aboard the smack *Edward Birbeck*, belonging to the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, to spend a fortnight among the men who all the year round are hard at work providing fish for the market.

Perhaps you don't know that there are, all the year round, some 12,000 to 15,000 smacksmen on the North Sea, busy catching fish for our consumption ashore. Too far from shore, 100 miles or more, to be able to run into port in a gale, they have to ride out the storm, or founder, as is too often the case.

Each smack carries six hands, including the skipper and a somewhat grimy little cabin boy, who is ship's cook. Aboard every smack there is a net 50 ft. wide and 100 ft. long, called the trawl, and fastened to a heavy wooden beam, but of this more anon.

A smacksmen spends eight weeks out and one at home; so it is clear that if Christianity is to affect their lives, it must go out to them. With this object the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen was started some fifteen years ago, and has, doubtless, been the means of many a changed life on the wild North Sea.

But to return to the smack *Edward Birbeck*. The second day that we were out from Yarmouth hunting for the Short Blue Fleet, our shifting destination, we passed not far off a small fleet of some half-dozen smacks, hailing from Grimsby—one, at least, of which we saw wanted to speak to us. So we lie to, and off comes a small boat dancing wildly on the waves, with about ten men crowded into her. They know the Mission ship well enough, and welcome the chance of something to read.

As soon as the boat is near enough, a rope is thrown and caught, and the boat drawn alongside. When she rises on a wave, a pair of strong hands grasp our bulwarks and their owner half vaults, half tumbles on deck, while the boat sinks back in the hollow of the swell.

The process is repeated till all are on board, and we shake hands with our new acquaintances as if they were old friends with the universal North Sea expression, "What cheer, what cheer oh?"

Wild-looking fellows some of them are, but good-hearted—if rough—and ready enough to talk. Mugs of tea are handed round, and all goes well. After some time spent thus, we go below to the fo'c'sle, and

there, seated on empty fish boxes, we hold a simple and hearty little service, the small harmonium being almost drowned by voices accustomed to hail a passing smack, or give orders in half a gale of wind.

The few hymns and prayers and short talk of the Saviour's love being over, we go on deck, and after supplying our visitors with literature, they tumble into the boat again, and, with a cheery farewell, start back to their smacks. Not, however, before I had time to write a post card and give it to a skipper who sails for home next day. It is carefully wrapped up in a tract and stowed away in his hard felt hat, and reaches its destination some four days later.

On we sail then in search of the fleet, which we sight late in the afternoon, and come up with it about 8 p.m. A prettier sight it is hard to imagine than the dark brown sails of the smacks stretching away to the distance, with their bright lights at every masthead, while above the stars shine brightly on the now almost calm sea.

But I must now describe a sight peculiar to the North Sea fishing fleets, namely, hauling the trawl. Imagine yourself pacing the deck some night, about midnight, beguiling the hours by joining the watch in the lusty chorus of some favorite hymn; it helps to lull the men below to sleep, as does the tramp of your heavy sea-boots. Suddenly, away in the distance, you see a rocket lighting up the dark sky. "Admiral is signalling!" exclaims the watch, and dives below shouting, "All ahaul, haul, the traw-a-a-a-l!" or something to that effect; and you remember that each fleet is led by an admiral, who gives orders by signal flags by day, and by rocket at night, as to when the trawl is to be dropped and when hauled.

In a few minutes the smack is brought up to the wind, and the donkey-engine goes clatter, clatter, clatter, while the sixty, eighty, or one hundred fathoms of hawser is being hauled in, at the end of which is the trawl.

When the net begins to come aboard, it has to be hauled in inch by inch by hand (it is not too warm in summer, so imagine what that work is like when deck and ropes are covered with ice), till the "cod end" of the net, in which are all the fish, can be swung over the bulwarks and hung from the mizzen mast.

There is not much light, for it is a dark night, but by the flickering flame of an oil lamp you see hanging there a ball, three to five feet diameter, of fish with gasping mouths sticking out between the meshes.