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## Strange Sea Road<sup>1</sup>

reviewed by H. E. Bates<sup>2</sup>

THE subject, and in fact the heroine, of this book is the Swedish windjammer *C. B. Pedersen*, which put out from Melbourne in the summer of 1935, in ballast, bound for Gothenburg by way of Cape Horn, and was forced by furious weather to take that strange sea road, the Torres Strait, which gives the book its title. Coming by way of Captain Bligh's track through the Arafura and the Timor Sea, and then by the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope, she was altogether five months at sea. She is a beautiful ship — such a ship in fact as makes the average ocean liner look like a floating oil-stove — and she was manned by the usual grain-barque crew of young Swedish apprentices.

So far so good. But there were also eight passengers, and Hollywood itself, except by the introduction of Mr. Gable and Miss Garbo, could hardly have devised a more potentially inflammable company. They included 'two women artists, a woman writer and an adagio dancer; a medico, a retired army major, a schoolboy and a journalist'. This was bad enough, but there was disaffection also among the crew. Their food was disgusting and they cherished grievances which would have been nothing on land but which the sea magnified out of all proportion and even control. The captain, risking a forbidden passage, could hardly be blamed for being jumpy.

And then, as though passengers and crew and forbidden passage were not enough, one of the crew deserted. Not

sensibly, in a ship's boat and within safe sight of land, but in a bath-tub and in the treacherous Torres Strait itself. A man who deserts a ship in a bath-tub deserves some luck and an honourable place in the literature of the sea. This young Scandinavian, I am glad to say, got his due reward. All of which did not sweeten the captain.

Then, on top of it all, Nature herself, as Mr. Bednall remarks, was also playing a game. 'We quarrelled about such footling things as standards of living, religious denominations and the Irish, although none of us had anything whatever to do with them at all . . . There were love affairs, some of which were good for the soul and some of which were desperately vulgar. . . . We wondered where it would end.'

Well, it all ended safely in Gothenburg, after five months at sea and a passage of 20,000 miles and, wonder of wonders, no mutiny and no scratched faces. It is not quite a pretty picture and two things alone save it from being, on paper, an ugly one. The first is Mr. Bednall's own sense of humour, more valuable at sea even than sea legs, and the second the beauty and character of the ship herself. She rides through it all with a serene and superb majesty that would have delighted Conrad. She survives the storms on deck as magnificently as those at sea, and if there are any rewards for heroism or prizes for beauty, they go to her. She is a great lady. 'What disabilities we may have suffered on the *Pedersen* were the fault,' Mr. Bednall says, 'not of the ship, but of ourselves.' It is a pleasure, even on paper, to walk her decks, and Mr. Bednall has given us a narrative in every way worthy of her. Finally, to make the bargain complete, there are twenty superb photographs.

<sup>1</sup> *Strange Sea Road*, by Warren Bednall. Illustrated (Large Crown 8vo. 10s. 6d. net)

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