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# RIVER and SEA

by H. E. BATES

THOSE who are looking for a travel book that is purely a medium of escape will not find it in *Down River* by John Lehmann (Cresset Press, 12s. 6d. net). This deceptively titled, deceptively illustrated book, the work of a man who has spent most of his time these last few years somewhere or other on the banks of the Danube that gives the book its title, is concerned very little with the geography of the tourist. More political than geographical, more concerned with the back-stage behaviour of international financiers than with the show set out for travellers, it opens up few vistas of enchantment that are not ultimately soiled by blood. The book belongs to the class of *Insanity Fair* and *Fallen Bastions*, though it lacks the emotional and despairing prophecy of the first and the too-calm, too-factual analysis of the second. By contrast I find it a warm, human, persuasive book, its facts carefully but never heavily documented, its emotions strongly defined but never hysterical. Its aim is not, as in the case of Mr. Douglas Reed, argument and prophecy mixed with emotional reminiscence, but the presentation of historical and everyday fact in a warmly moving panorama, making the book a sort of film of middle Europe, with Vienna as the heroine and the Danube itself as the protagonist in the drama.

The book has naturally certain things in common with other and

less recent commentaries on Danubian affairs. It is deeply tinged with nostalgia—Mr. Lehmann's picture of Vienna is full of charm and regret and knowledge of an uncommon kind ("unknown to the ordinary tourist . . . there used to be about seventy weight-lifters' clubs in Vienna"); and it is heavily clouded with that particular smell which arises as soon as the muck-heap of European politics is stirred. The first half of the book, dealing with Austria in general and Vienna in particular, stinks aloud with the political intrigue of Dollfuss and Starhemberg and the German-controlled industry; the second half, dealing more with those countries whose life and problems spring more directly from the Danube, is no less a tragic mass of corruption, stupidity, and political cynicism. The main facts that have shattered Central Europe for the last ten years are here more or less as the headlines report them—the Workers' revolutions in Vienna, the death of Dollfuss, the Anschluss, Czechoslovakia. It has been Mr. Lehmann's job to fill in the rest: the stinks, the betrayals, the intrigues, the blunders, the people, the beauty. Greatly to his merit, he has succeeded in doing it without bias or hysteria. He has let the facts speak for themselves: knowing quite well that, like the spirit of the Vienna workers shot down in revolt, they have a most singular power of survival.

Mr. Lehmann's book is clearly the result of some years of first-hand contact with his subject; half the success of his book is due to the fact that he has lived it or has watched it being lived about him. I make this point in order to show up some of the weakness of Mr. F. D. Ommanney's *North Cape* (Longmans, 10s. 6d. net). Apparently with the intention of writing this book, Mr. Ommanney took a sort of honorary job on a Grimsby trawler bound for North Cape,



Ice-land. The trip lasted three weeks. Mr. Ommanney was able to watch the trawling, the gutting and packing of fish, to swap the usual stories with the crew, to tackle the football-enthusiast skipper as he dribbled an orange round the deck-house, to spend a dreary hour or two in a pub in port, to lend an occasional hand with the catch. But all the time he was simply on the ship, and not of it. The voyage was at first monotonous because there were no fish; then it was monotonous because there were fish day and night, and no rest, no getting back home until the storage space was packed. The food, supplemented by a witches' brew of tea made from cold water, condensed milk, and sugar boiled up and kept boiling all day, was coarse and got on Mr. Ommanney's nerves a little. Then by radio came the news of the Munich crisis, with the prospect of war. Fishing seemed suddenly of little account to all except the skipper, who calmly and insistently remained fishing, and it was with great relief, I think, that Mr. Ommanney once more set foot in Grimsby. Out of all this there has come only a fair book: honest, robust, a faithful picture as far as it goes. But Mr. Ommanney, though at most times an extraordinarily good writer, is starved for real material, so that much of the monotony of the voyage has seeped into the book. One thing is certain: any romantic notions of deep-sea fishing will not survive a chapter.

The same goes for *Endless Voyage* by Nils Fredericson (Harrap, 8s. 6d. net.) This book, written in English by a young Swedish sailor, is as far removed from the romantic conception of the sailor's life as can be. Ill-paid, ill-fed, overworked, socially insignificant (in Sweden a sailor is, apparently, looked down on), the sailor of the small cargo boats leads

a life for which the romantic compensation appears to be precisely nil. Fredericson begins by telling of that fatal boyish longing to go to sea: then of first ships, dirty, overloaded timber-boats sailing between Finland and Scotland, colliers from Tyneside to Teneriffe, sailing-ships, oil-tankers, whalers. He writes of ports which are always to be different, and never are. His pictures are the inevitable ones: women, booze, quarrels, bad food, the longing for life ashore, the everlasting return to the sea. How much of the book is half-fictitious it is not possible to say. The style is brisk and has, on the editor's confession, been slightly touched up here and there; occasional scenes appear to have been dramatized. But the general effect, disillusionment, bitterness, a sort of weary cynicism, is beyond doubt.

Lastly, a book of travelling and mountaineering that will nowhere take you beyond Skye or higher than Ben Nevis, but which is extremely adventurous, always amusing, and written with dry, attractive brevity: in short, a first-rate little book about Scotland by a Scotsman—*Always a Little Further*, by Alastair Borthwick (Faber & Faber, 7s. 6d. net). Mr. Borthwick's chief pursuit is mountaineering. It was not always so, and he describes his beginnings with dry and charming candour. His record of how, with three others, he set out to walk thirty miles across Skye, took two and a half days, and nearly died of starvation is an epic of amateur endeavour. He tells the rest of the book with the same irrepressible humour, freshness, and enthusiasm. His only fault is that he appears to take it for granted that the rest of the world knows Scotland as well as he does himself. It is in his power to rectify that mistake by giving us a real book on Scotland, and I hope he will.