

The Northern Sporadhes

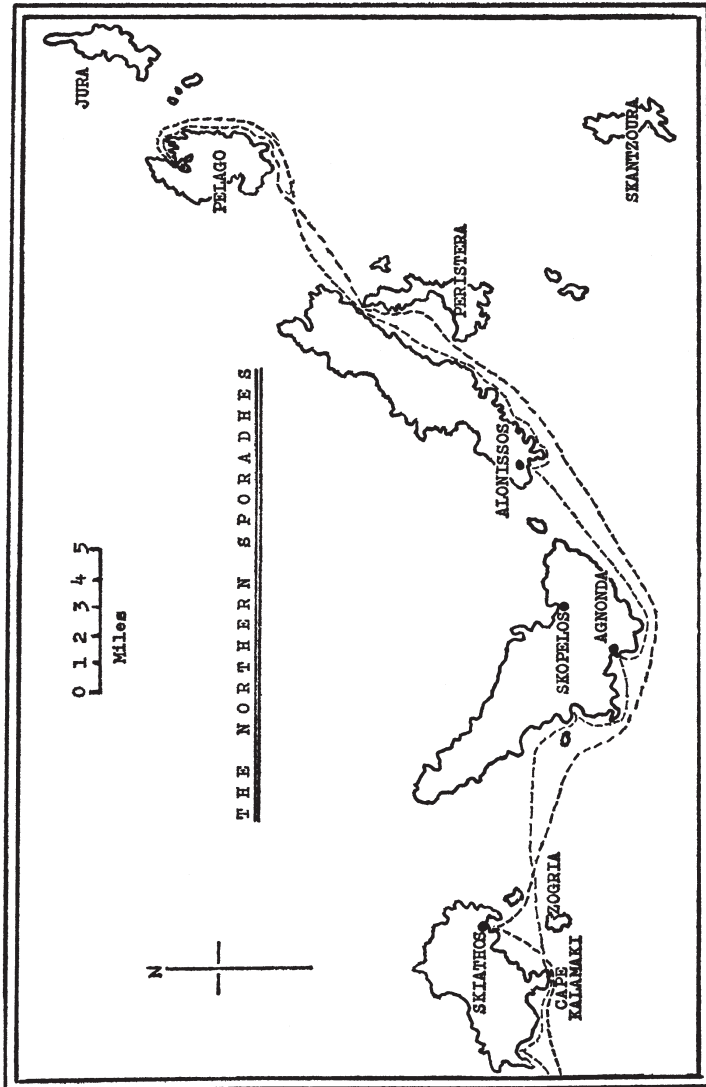
THAT FIRST MORNING after sleeping on the beach it was strange awakening to the brilliance of the white sandy bay, the unbelievably blue cloudless sky, and behind us the shimmering green waves of the olives climbing the hill, their leaves chattering in the early wind. We spread our charts to dry on the white pebbles at the top of the beach, for they had become limp in the night air, and then renewed the fire. While the crackling wood died to a glowing bed of heat for the toast we discussed the days ahead. Our initial hunting ground was to be the Sporadhes, a group of large islands stretching some forty miles eastward of the Gulf. We decided to stick to the original plan of making good somewhere around ten to fifteen miles each day, which would allow a detailed exploration of the coast, and time to get to know the locality of our night berth before darkness fell. We intended to keep so far as possible off the tourist track, seeking the unpublicised and therefore unspoilt islands and bays; indeed our equipment was geared for such a cruise for we carried no clothes suitable for sophisticated shore-going. Our diet, we hoped, would be local produce augmented by our own catch of fish and we had plenty of hooks and lines.

Before breakfast was over that first promise of wind had petered out, leaving a sweltering unprotected world under the blinding sun, and it was good to feel the cool water as I waded out to check the lines we had laid from the boat the previous evening. Both hooks were fouled in a tangle of reddish weed

a fathom down and as I plunged in to free them, B. joined me for a swim. We were both idly circling round the boat when a rustle on shore like a distant sigh caught our attention. A ripple of wind ran over the tops of the olives, and bent a solitary cypress to a sickle shape high on the hill. We watched as the ripple of movement fanned out, for all the world as though giant invisible fingers were stroking the tops of the trees. It died, then swirled with renewed vigour round a single point. A sprig of leaves, ripped from a tree, danced madly in a tight circle, leaping upwards as a pillar of invisible power swept in a line down the hillside. As it advanced, it was as though a huge vacuum cleaner were sucking at the earth, pulling every loose object to join the swirling dance upward. Fascinated, we saw the miniature whirlwind sweep towards us, happy that all *Lugworm's* sails were secured. The column of dust and leaves was gathering momentum now, sweeping across the beach towards the sea. We both remembered at the same moment: too late! Our charts of the Aegean whirled skywards, twizzling madly in a column of rotating air, carried relentlessly over our heads seawards!

Relief mingled with dismay as the vortex abruptly disintegrated, leaving the bay to swelter again in the motionless heat. Motionless that is, save for our charts which languidly descended like falling leaves to settle soundlessly on the water. We rescued them, dragging the limp and delicate paper into shallow water, lifting them carefully by the corners to drip for a while before laying them again, under strict supervision, on the hot white stones. Within minutes they were dry but they had become brittle with it, and never since then have the mountains and sea lost an intriguing three dimensional impression. The parallel ruler never has run smoothly on those charts again, and to this day, when the atmosphere gets damp, they go as limp as rolled pastry.

THE NORTHERN SPORADHES



But a light easterly had now settled in, and we broke camp, hoping that there would be a northerly slant out in the Trikeri Channel to get the sails filling, but it remained light and from the east, which was disappointing because we wanted to make the eastern extremity of the Trikeri Channel before nightfall, ready to strike across to Skiathos the following day.

Out in the channel, free of the protection of the Gulf, the coast had a quite different look. Rounded hillsides fell into the sea and fewer trees climbed their slopes. The shoreline was a pitted sharp escarpment of bleached white rock for a height of ten feet or so, from there up becoming deeply thicketed with bushes of spiny broom and hawthorn which lay densely in the protected cuttings of the small valleys, and thinning on the headlands. Here and there a solitary carob tree spread a ring of shade, its fleshy leaves making a darker patch against the silver-grey of the rock, but compared to the verdant cultivated shores inside the Gulf, this was sparse stunted maquis. We motored gently on within a few feet of the rocks, our time divided between peering into the crystal clear water to where their footings disappeared under the silvery sand, and watching the hillsides above for any sign of life.

There was none. Apart from the occasional low stone building roofed with bamboo laths interwoven with dried leaves and high enough only for goats to shelter against the heat, there was no sign of habitation until we passed the fishing village of Trikeri nestling in a tiny bay at the foot of a hill on whose crown the village of old Trikeri still stands. Throughout these rocky coasts and islands we often found that the main village or 'chora' to give it the Greek name, stood atop some almost impregnable hill, and we learned that this was generally for defence purposes against the pirates of olden times. Once these human predators had been wiped out, the need to build on the

difficult – but easily defended – hilltops was gone, so newer and more accessible hamlets of the same name now nestle on the shoreline. Life still goes on in the majority of the choras but there are signs there of desertion, some of the buildings having fallen into decay.

After a frustrating day of light headwinds, it was late evening by the time we anchored in the bay of Platania just off the village, and prepared for a night afloat.

* * *

The trouble with those first nights sleeping aboard the boat was, quite simply, that we didn't sleep. As a first act of what became a nocturnal ritual, the airbeds would be inflated – three hundred hypnotic stabs of the footpump each – and the stove placed carefully on the flat after deck. We rarely bothered to erect the tent unless the weather was doubtful. Billycans, tea-bags, sugar, dried milk and the water canister would be placed secure against any rolling but ready to hand for making the morning cup while we were still warm in the sleeping bags. We would then snug down, listening to the quiet chuckle of water along *Lugworm's* wooden sides, watching the stars gently circling as she swung to any wind which might blow. Gradually, as the sounds on shore died with the deepening night, another sound, so slight, so gentle yet so disturbing, would creep into the consciousness. It was the faintest crackling, akin to the noise of static electricity when one pulls off a nylon garment, but continuous, insidious, under, in and throughout the whole fabric of the hull. We would lie silent, listening to this peculiar and unaccountable noise.

'Ken.'

'Uh?'

'Do you think we've got Toledo Beetles?'

‘Unlikely – and it’s not Toledo, it’s Teredo. Just keep quiet for a moment and listen.’

We would hold our breaths, trying to locate some source of the sound. Was it a wood borer? The inexorable crackling would continue, to my worried ears sounding more and more like the tearing of minute fibres in the wooden hull. Was it, after all, just small fish nibbling her underparts? That first night, I decided I just had to know. Cautiously, so as to make no noise I raised my hand, bringing it down with a resounding crash on the side deck. The result was electrifying.

‘What the Devil!’ from out of the violent eruption alongside.

‘All right, dear; it’s me.’

‘YOU ...?’

‘I wanted to frighten the fish.’

‘My God ...!’ It was minutes before the thumping of B.’s heart subsided sufficiently for me to concentrate again on the persistent, disturbing crackle. We were both wide awake.

‘It’s the shrimps,’ I said, more to give B. confidence than from conviction. ‘I think every time they jump under there they set up a minute shock wave that drums on the hull – thousands of them.’

‘Oh, DO go to sleep.’

‘If it IS borers, we can’t afford to just ignore it. You know what they do? They get into the keel and eat their way along, drilling a tunnel. When they get to the end do they call it a day? Not they! They simply turn around and drill another tunnel beside the first. Looking at the wood doesn’t give you a clue. I remember a tale where a sailing ship was attacked by them. A gale sprang up off the Horn and there they were swimming around in a mass of sawdust; the ship just disintegrated.’ I was keen that B. should appreciate my concern and I believe she did, but we never, during the whole trip, found the cause of

that crackling. All we knew was that when anchored in deep water it was more echoing and hollow, while in shallow water it became sharp and staccato. A Mediterranean mystery.

But there were other disturbing events. I made the mistake that first night of anchoring *Lugworm* close inshore in about two feet of water with a bow anchor out deep and a stern anchor up the beach. In a sea where there is no appreciable tide it seemed the logical thing to do for it's much easier to be able to wade ashore rather than have to pull the boat into the beach every time. At some unprintable hour of the night I was roused to full consciousness by the distant roar of breakers on rocks farther out in the bay. *Lugworm* gently lifted her bow, levelled off, then dipped. At the same time there was a disturbing tug on the headrope, then the sternrope. I sat up and hoped.

Next time the bow lifted it was too violent to be disregarded. When it came down she hit bottom gently, then lifted again. By the third time I was out and over the side, watching with horror a long line of black looming towards me. It reared: *Lugworm* despite my feeble efforts practically stood on end. As she levelled I felt the crest of the wave lick my armpits and then hurl me shorewards, playfully rolling me up the shingle. Above it all I heard a startled cry.

No, we didn't sleep much those first nights, but one learns quickly. Ships – vast floating citadels ablaze with light – doing their magnificent fifteen knots, make a wake which long after one has forgotten their passing, can turn a quiet beach into a maelstrom. I felt B. ought to understand this phenomenon in detail.

'The fact is,' I explained to her while wringing out my sodden jersey, 'that a large ship tends to make two distinctly separate wakes. This can be tricky because it is just when the first series of waves has died down that the second series catches you off balance. It's logical enough,' I continued, trying to locate a

billycan that was clattering up and down the pebbles. 'If you watch a large ship moving through the water you'll see that the bow wave is augmented by the displacement of the sea as her fat belly forges along. But as this displaced water rushes back to fill in the space behind the ship it meets its counterpart on the other side doing the same thing. The resultant collision sets up another series of waves emanating from her stern.'

'Interesting,' came her voice from the darkness. 'But what are we going to do about it?'

'It's obvious: we will anchor out in deep water. She'll rise and fall out there but with nothing like the violence here in the shallows where the wave is about to break.'

'If you knew that,' said the voice, 'why didn't we anchor out there last night?'

It was a good question.

* * *

Nothing lifts the heart like sun and blue sea. Add a velvety warm wind flowing round your skin, a sky as blue as a kingfisher's tail, the sibilant chuckle of water gurgling away from your transom and ...

'Thou, beside me in the wilderness,' I quoted aloud.

'Some wilderness,' said the straw hat from down on the lee deck. Poking out of the sea ahead was the green crowned isle of Skiathos, the brilliant green of the pines forming a bright contrast to the marble slash of rock at the waterline. A heaven-sent northerly, funnelling between the mainland and the island, was flecking the blue with lines of white laughter.

'I'm going to sing,' I said.

'Don't. Not yet. Last time you tried that we got in irons and I'm comfortably wedged down here. Have a nut instead.' I had a nut.