

On a Slow Boat to Greece

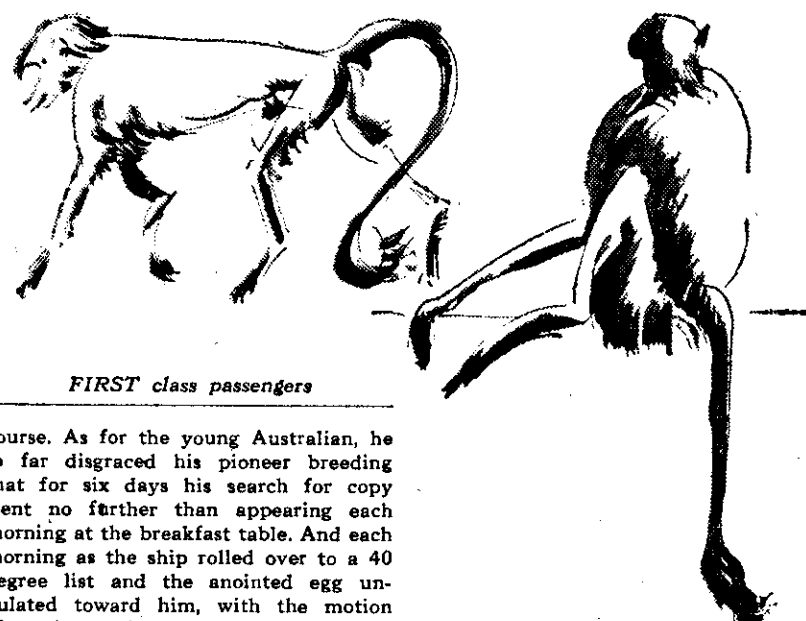
THE author of this article is a New Zealander who is now on her way to Greece, where she intends to spend several months before going to other parts of south-eastern Europe. Further articles will be received from her at irregular intervals.

TRAVELLING steerage to Europe on a Greek ship was not advocated by those who claimed to know. Any quarters but first class were bound to smell, moreover the other passengers would be—italics of horror—"all Southern Europeans." The ship was a very old passenger boat redesigned to catch the immigration trade to Australia, and to pack in as much human cargo as possible. I insisted that I liked Europeans, Southern and other, and that if smells were characteristic of them, I should have to become acclimatised sooner or later, as I intended to spend several years in Europe, especially in the Mediterranean countries.

A first visit below proved that she did in fact smell rather less than the average ship, although there certainly was a pervasive smell, faint and quite unfamiliar, of which more anon. As for the other passengers in third class, eleven all told, only three are "Southern Europeans," all Greeks going home, one a middle-aged widow born in Odessa of Greek parentage, who converses wordlessly but charmingly with little shrieks

of horror, hands upcast, and peals of laughter; one an aged Macedonian, who sits in a corner all day with folded hands, crooning to himself and looking like a Biblical fisherman. The rest—a Polish solicitor, a gentle Viennese and a wandering Jew with four passports and no nationality, all going to join families in Palestine; a merry Bengali and two Somalis, one a fine-boned old man with fez, fringe-beard, hookah and the graceful dignity of an Abyssinian emperor; myself, a New Zealander bent on seeing the world, and a young Australian journalist bound for Italy in search of copy.

BREAKFAST the first morning out on a full-blooded swell revealed the source of the pervasive smell: when my breakfast egg slid towards me with an unctuous leer, light dawned—olive oil, of course. Brought up to regard oil as a smelly, unpleasant substance intended to reduce friction in bicycles, I know that seeing the world can hold no worse ordeal than the first two days of sitting down at every meal to face and encompass olive oil—olive oil and egg, olive oil and spaghetti, olive oil and veal, olive oil and salad, etc., *ad infinitum*. Only a concentration on higher things pulled me through, together with much sprinkling of pepper. This battle won, I was free to enjoy our drunken prancings as we bucked and cavorted across the Australian Bight. Not so the rest, for apart from some ex-seamen and myself, all went into hibernation as it were, retiring to their cabins till the winter of their sorrows was past. There was even an alarming occasion when I dined alone, with ten stewards to wait upon me, each intent on doing his full duty by each



FIRST class passengers

course. As for the young Australian, he so far disgraced his pioneer breeding that for six days his search for copy went no farther than appearing each morning at the breakfast table. And each morning as the ship rolled over to a 40 degree list and the anointed egg undulated toward him, with the motion of a stingray idling around the edge of a bay on the turn of the tide, he waited no longer to hear what kitchen secrets it might confide, but fled outfaced to his cabin for the next twenty-four hours. At the first port of call he vanished without a word.

This left me the only passenger speaking English as native tongue; only the wandering Jew knows enough English for normal conversation. However, four of us at one table together speak, with the exception of the Scandinavian and two Balkan tongues, every European language from Spanish to Russian, including Hebrew and Yiddish, Latin and ancient Greek, so that much varied conversation is possible. On this polyglot ship radio announcements are made in

Greek, French, Italian and English. Any of the first three is easier to follow than the interpreter's English.

LET no one go abroad believing the old story that every other foreigner speaks fluent English. Many of the passengers, after several years' residence in Australia, speak only a dozen words of English and perhaps two dozen of Australian. Of the Greek crew, only two or three know more English than the little required for their special duties, though most speak some French or Italian. Many speak not a word of English, a few have only one word which must be put to various uses, for example, the normally taciturn steward who, meeting one in a corridor some time after the dinner gong has finished ringing, or the bell for boat drill, approaches crying in tones of supplication, "Missus, missus!" from which one gathers that the soup is growing cold or that one is in theory going down with the ship.

Although modern Greek has basically the same grammar as classical Greek it is so different phonetically and in details that I decided to keep silence until I had mastered a modern grammar, apart from uttering such common-places as "Tea without milk" or "Be sparing with the oil, I beg." The first real reward of this system came yesterday when I found that a steward who has hitherto insisted on speaking French to me—very good French, too—was unconsciously chatting to me in Greek. Modern Greek has also a generous sprinkling of Turkish words and phrases. The long Turkish domination is reflected in many customs, from the method of drinking coffee, very black and thick with sediment and sugar, followed by a glass of cold water, to the habit among older men of playing with and carrying everywhere in their hands a string of beads, said to be an aid to clear thinking. It has also influenced Greek popular music, which has a large body of songs *that sound Oriental in their lamentations, and unrelieved minor monotone.

As for the more numerous passengers of the first and second classes, to the steerage elite they seem a very dull lot,

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smiled reminiscently. "Producing is a colossal job. The ideal producer is a man who writes the play, produces it, designs the scenery, composes the music, and in New Zealand probably takes the tickets at the door."

People were measuring and cutting cardboard, pursing their mouths and calculating. "The secret is to work accurately to scale," a lady said, laying down her compass. "When you have the measurements of your home stage you can make replicas, so that any set can be made to fit any stage."

We digested this slowly. She moved a scale cardboard table and grinned. "I'll take this set home and be so much the wiser, unless the kids get hold of it for a doll's house."

Play Writing

"One of the things I've noticed," said a play-writing student, "is the frequent use in everybody's lectures of three words: balance, conflict, and action. I'm just beginning to find out what they mean."

A play-writing tutorial was in full swing under a tree. Professor Musgrove and his students were working on an exercise: a political satire for radio.

"Radio only assaults the ears," Professor Musgrove said, flat on his back, staring at the tree above him. "You must establish very quickly the difference between your characters, but at the same time you must build in a balanced

way. You can't jump into your climax on the first page. It's the empty phrases that build, the colourless ones that put flesh on the skeleton, cover the baldness of the dialogue.

"Those are my chief criticisms of this script. You haven't established character; any of these sentences could have been spoken by any of the characters. And you haven't built smoothly to your climax. Now let's take it sentence by sentence . . ."

Later Professor Musgrove talked about the course.

"You can't teach imaginative writing," he said. "So I've tried to keep to practical problems. I've found that most help is needed in structure, and with dialogue of a strongly dramatic nature.

"But it's not enough to help playwrights with their construction problems cold, as it were. They must hear their own stuff read or performed. That can be done in a residential school of this nature. And they must also be encouraged in every way to write. Prizes like those offered by the Canterbury Centennial Committee are a worthwhile encouragement to young playwrights."

Run Through

That evening there was a full run through of a series of excerpts assembled by Frederick Farley, and held together by an interpolated commentary he wrote himself. He calls it *World Theatre*. Farley is a concentrated and animated, progressive but eminently sensible producer. As a member of the School said:

"He is not a producer who rises in the middle of a rehearsal and cries, 'No! That is not it at all. Everything must be purple!' He can relate what he wants to the ability and experience of his actors."

There were bits from Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Saroyan's *The Beautiful People*, and many more. The audience was a tough one. The producer in each member struggled with the simple, joyful, theatregoer. The simple theatregoer wanted to say: "Yes, I like it. I am convinced and carried away." The producer screwed up his eyes and wanted to wring more and more out of the actors. Conflicting emotions made it a strenuous evening on and off the stage.

But with the strenuousness went the stimulation. Among the last lines of *World Theatre* were these:

Farley: . . . No other art form has the theatre's imaginative stimulus.

Reactionary from Body of Theatre: Ah, ha, here it comes—here comes the message. When I go to the theatre I want only amusement and relaxation. I don't want to think.

Farley: I see. And in the larger theatre—the theatre of life—do you think there, my friend?

Reactionary: Of course I do, but the theatre has nothing to do with life.

Farley: I believe that the theatre has everything to do with life; that it is a necessity of your existence . . . and you would find that in learning to enjoy the theatre you would learn to enjoy life.

The people at the Masterton Drama School seemed to be doing both these things.