# Three Years with *Sylvia*

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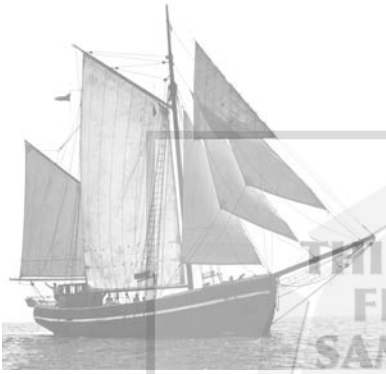

# Contents

# The Three-Year Plan

It was a hot and humid Sunday afternoon in the middle of a Singapore summer. I was relaxing on the veranda of the Tanglin Club feeling very imperial when inspiration visited me. As the afternoon grew hotter inspiration blossomed into a plan. Native caution suggested that the plan might be more acceptable to my wife if it were restricted by some limitation as to time. It became a three-year plan.

I felt like a member of the Politburo as I explained my three-year plan to Phyllis. We go to the Baltic, buy an old Baltic trader for almost nothing, convert it to yacht, install the family as crew, and sail around the Mediterranean for the next three years and then sell it for a fat profit! Like most of my plans it had tinsel round the edges.

Of course there was no reason why such a magnificent plan should not go on for ever after, but Phyllis torpedoed the suggestion by saying that three years was just about as much as flesh and blood could stand of that way of life. In any case it could not be longer, three years was the maximum my finances would allow even if I got a good price for one of the children somewhere along the line. No matter how I looked at it the plan had merit. It was simple and appealing. It grew even more attractive when I considered the alternative—to find a job.

Hitherto the plan had been a magnificent daydream, a chimera which had sustained me through the years in odd parts of Africa. Always I saw the same image—the brave ship sailing along smoothly under clear blue skies, children playing happily on deck, Phyllis

emerging from the galley all smiles, my hero at the helm in his captain's cap, blue blazer and white flannels, turning from time to time to mark the ship's steady progress towards some romantic port. But no feasibility study had ever been made of this worthy project, as they say in business circles, for the best of reasons. I knew it must crumble into dust under the weight of financial considerations, schooling for the kids, crew problems, and the hundred and one other things which make it easier for a man to deny himself an adventurous life than to undertake it.

Nevertheless perseverance prevailed, and a few days later we took a flight to Copenhagen, stopping only at Teheran to buy a ten-dollar Astrakhan fur hat with which to impress prospective sellers of Baltic traders. Hardly had I the time to study the plethora of pornography on offer in that great northern city, when our stay was cut short by a telephone call from my old friend Dave Morgan in Ibiza. Dave was now a leading and successful yacht broker in those parts and said there was a small Baltic trader already converted to yacht lying at San Antonio in Ibiza Island which could be bought very reasonably. 'She's more or less what you are looking for,' said Dave, adding cautiously, 'but she looks as though she could do with a bit of doing up.'

An icy wind which had been born somewhere in the Pyrenees swept the port of San Antonio. We battled our way along the mole, backs to the wind, to get our first sight of the ship which was for sale. We approached her stern end. In the cold light of a mid-winter morning we saw her exactly as she was—an old and battered Baltic trader, her black hull marred by numerous scars, her whale painted a horrible signal red by a nervous amateur hand. Knotted warps held her to the side. 'Oh no!' said Phyllis, which told me all. Battle was now about to commence. With my ranging shot I explained that ships can be very deceptive, they are not always what they might appear to be. At least I hoped not. 'Let's just go on board and have a look,' I said, persuasively.

She was 71 feet 6 inches from stem to stern, and her bowsprit stuck out another 19 feet. She was gaff-rigged on the main but not on the mizzen, and these were her original spars, said the mate, a man from

Portsmouth who had sailed in her for the last two seasons. They were beautifully proportioned, strong without being massive, dead straight, varnished at some time in the past, and free from shakes. She looked more like a yacht than a trader. I could see from her fine run aft she would sail well, possibly very fast. Her name was carved into a board on the sloping transom—'Sylvia, Copenhagen 1898'.

Mike Bunn, the mate, told us she had traded under sail until 1953 when she was fitted with a Grenaa single cylinder semi-diesel engine which developed 45 hp. In the same year a handsome teak wheelhouse had been built on the quarter-deck. Her Danish owner had retired from trading in the Baltic in 1967 and had then sailed her to Alicante in Spain with a view to retirement.

Brian May, a young Englishman, had bought her and planned her conversion to yacht. He turned the cargo space into a spacious saloon and had furniture custom-built for it. Three cabins, a galley and a bathroom with a small bath were added, and with the existing four-berth foc'sle and two-berth captain's cabin aft, the yacht could sleep twelve people in comfort.

I checked her inventory which was full but not lavish, and noted that she had two anchors and a lot of chain, a magnificent winch, three heads, a four-plate galley stove, and a large and ugly water tank on the deck abaft the main mast which held 150 gallons, and was the ship's main water supply. As the handle was in the deck pump I assumed, correctly, she must be taking water.

She was not a beauty, there was an awful lot wrong with her, her sails were a disgrace, and she was desperately in need of a coat of paint. I don't suppose there was another man in the whole world who felt what I did about her as I paced her foredeck. She was sturdy, solid and dependable, and with a lot of care and affection I would change her whole appearance and bring her to life. Strange to say that is exactly what she did to me! However, at this precise moment these romantic notions struck no responsive chord in the distaff side of the family, but sensing that I intended to buy the boat anyway, Phyllis very wisely suggested that I should stipulate in my offer that it was subject to survey.

I think she thought that from the look of the ship that would be the end of the story, which it very nearly was.

A few days later we set sail for the mainland bound for Villajoyosa, a small fishing port 30 miles north of Alicante, where Brian May had slipped *Sylvia* previously and said the work had been done well and inexpensively. A Levanter blew steadily on our quarter, so we raised the main, a Bermudan mizzen and two headsails and ran before it. During the night the wind freshened blowing out the mizzen which was no great loss. Under this rig she rolled along at a steady 6 knots much as I had expected. At three in the morning Cabo de la Nao lay dead ahead with Benidorm Island a few miles south. An hour before dawn we were lying off the sea wall which turns Villajoyosa into a port, ready to go in, but the skipper, Brian May, decided to hang around until light before crossing the bar.

As soon as dawn came in I could see a tiny harbour with twenty or thirty fishing boats rafted together, lying up against a wharf. From the shore a stubby mole came out to meet the sea wall leaving a gap of about 70 yards as the entrance to the port. We lined up and approached the bar at a fair speed. We were dangerously close to the breakers and I would have been a lot happier if the skipper had flaked out 15 fathoms of heavy chain with an anchor all ready to drop just in case the engine stalled. I mentioned this to him.

'The only time this engine has ever stopped involuntarily in the last four years,' he said, 'was when I forgot to switch over from port to starboard fuel tank!' This was reassuring but I was glad when we slid through the rocky gap and fetched up gently alongside the fishing boats.

Villajoyosa owes its existence principally to the chocolate factories in the town. It also has a fishing fleet of about 200 vessels and two Astilleros, or boat repair yards, on which they rely for maintenance. The bigger yard, Santa Marta, for which we were destined, is one of the best in Spain and includes in its work-force many experienced shipwrights. Wood is the material they love and understand. The adze is their fundamental tool.

My first duty on stepping ashore was to visit the local Comandan-

cia de Marine to report our arrival, the names of the crew, the purpose of our visit, and where we had come from. In Spain no maritime movement of any sort can be made without the prior knowledge and permission of this department. To slip a boat requires a permit. To put it back in the water requires another. In due course armed with the necessary *permiso* I returned to the boat yard to persuade Señor Ramon, the owner-manager, to haul us out as soon as possible. Ramon was a man of about forty-five who had seen it all. He was quiet-spoken, courteous, unruffled and deliberate. Marco, his right-hand man and foreman of the yard, was altogether a different personality. He was a man of enormous build with a bull-like bellow. He could easily have been mistaken for an RSM in a Guards Regiment. And he certainly got the work moving.

As *Sylvia* slowly emerged from the water, secure in a massive cradle, I could see that it must have been at least two years since her last visit to dry land. On her water-line she sported a variegated greenery, below that a proliferation of molluscs and large patches of tunicates. The remainder of the hull right down to the keel was encased in a living plaster of ordinary acorn barnacles which were now about one inch in diameter. They must have weighed several tons. When I passed my hand across them they closed their Cyclopean eye at once, making a sound just like surf hitting a pebble beach.

Any hope that *Sylvia's* hull might be better than Dave Morgan had expected was dashed the minute she was cleaned off with the pressure hoses and shovels. Ramon shook his head despondently. Marco exploded. At first sight it looked as though the job would be too much for them, but after an hour long discussion Ramon finally decided that repairs could be effected, 100 feet of new planking would be needed, and all of this might take five or six weeks to do and would cost an unknown sum but certainly not less than 170 thousand *pesetas,* at that time about £1,000 sterling. After taking everything into consideration I decided to risk it, and after getting a small reduction in the price, I bought the boat.

Now that she was up on the slip I could get a really good look at

her from abeam. Seen from the side she had a sweet run, accentuated by the parallel lines of the whale and the bulwark capping which ended with a pleasing sheer. I measured her draught. She was 6 foot 3 inches at the stern and rose to 4 foot 9 inches at the bows. At this point her underwater section was unexpectedly fine for I had imagined a continuation of her rather bluff and ugly bow line. But ugly though her bows may have been, from a cargo carrying point of view, and as a reserve of buoyancy, her design was unbeatable. Later on I loved to lean over her bows at sea to watch her breasting the oncoming waves, spreading the water on either side like a giant duck.

Her run aft would have done credit to a racing yacht. I suppose this is where she got her turn of speed. She had a beam of 18 feet measured just aft of the mainmast, and this tapered to 10 feet at the taffrail. When this was viewed from the mizzen hounds she was a pretty sight, with the water slipping past her with no fuss or hindrance.

Brian May had told me that on one occasion she had sailed from Puerto Andratx to San Antonio, a distance of 66 sea miles, in exactly 6 hours 30 minutes carrying a mast 110 feet long which weighed several tons, for the Spanish trader *Abel Matutes.* I thought at the time that this might be a legitimate piece of sales talk, or pride in the ship's sailing prowess, but subsequently, on several occasions I was able to prove to my own satisfaction that she was capable of speeds in excess of 11 knots if I had the nerve to sail her that way and the crew to take it.

The hull was of oak, on oak frames, and where it was still original it was as hard as iron. The caulking was in poor condition, the rudder was rotten along the water-line and would need replacement, and the false keel was worm-eaten and would have to go. This meant a new piece of wood the length of the boat, a foot wide and five inches thick, but of course several pieces would be scarfed together to make it. The bows had been badly scored by the anchor flukes where some careless skipper in the past had allowed the anchors to swing free at sea instead of catting them. A sloppy bit of seamanship which was annoying because there is little one can do about the score marks.

It was whilst I was examining these things in a rather depressed

state of mind, with Marco giving out strongly in the background about English *capitanos* who don't know how to look after their boats—Spanish trawlermen take a fanatical pride in their hulls—that a grey-haired chap in a blue deck coat and yachting cap came over and spoke to me. He soon discovered that I was new to the Mediterranean yachting scene and boats of this size in particular. He took it upon himself to give me some advice on ship care and maintenance, based on years of hard experience. We were examining the ship's long straight keel.

'A ship of this size will have a deadweight well over 100 tons,' he said, 'consequently when she is being hauled out of the water and up a slip you must make sure she is properly chocked up under her keel and shored evenly on both sides. But the chocking below is the most important. The chocks must be evenly spaced and not too far apart, and above all they must be placed in such a way that the keel is kept dead straight.' I hurried to the end to cast my eye along the length of the keel to see if it was straight. It was. Marco knew his stuff. 'Now,' he added, 'you can see at a glance from the side if she is hogged.' She was not.

The Sage took me on a conducted tour of the hull and pointed out the places beloved of worm. 'The false keel is favourite,' he said, 'because it is usually the place where there is no anti-fouling, due perhaps to having been rubbed off, or more likely because it was too difficult to put on in the first place. And just here between the rudder and the stern post. And of course all along the water line where the water is warmest anyway and where dieseline does the most damage—it dissolves paint you know.'

He could see his enthusiasm was doing me good so he kept on. 'Inspect the hull minutely yourself and when you are satisfied with it slap on everything you can in the way of protection—tar, paint and more paint. And don't forget to insist on having the chocks removed and the bare patches below painted before you go back in the water.'

His advice was all good sound common sense. He also knew something about life on board. 'Bring your wife and family over from Ibiza,' he advised, 'and make them comfortable in a beachfront flat. You are in for a long job. Spend money on the galley and install a hot-water

system on board if you want to keep your wife happy. Unhappy wife, unhappy ship, and then no ship at all!' he propounded, like Confucius.

I immediately found a flat for my wife and two small sons in a block overlooking the port, and set about finding a plumber to discuss the hot-water system on board. I began at the Bar Panchito, an Algerian style bistro with Moorish arches without and a low-beamed ceiling within, run by Pepé and his wife Sylvia, two *pieds noirs* with sad memories of better times in Algeria and a host of much thumbed photographs to keep them green. The bar overlooked the small boat basin, and it was here that I first met Chris, a most helpful and intelligent young Swiss who could speak several languages and who soon found a plumber for me, and offered to act as interpreter during the negotiations.

The plumber was a hard-case Spaniard with a shock of black hair, flashing teeth and dazzling smile. 'Speedy Gonzalez' I began by calling him, but speedy he most definitely was not, so I reverted to his true name which was Pedro. As he always turned up at the ship after working hours I assumed he was doing a bit of moonlighting, but I was not worried as long as he got the job done. The quotation for the job was reasonable and included the installation of a low pressure gas geyser and an impressive console of taps on a varnished board.

I took great pains to explain to Pedro that I was very concerned about the water pressure for the new geyser. The 150-gallon tank was located just abaft the mainmast and thus only a matter of 5 feet above the bulkhead on which he intended to install the geyser. The tank was the sort of thing you see at the corner of a farmhouse to collect rain water off the roof; an ugly asbestos affair which I was determined to get rid of at the first possible moment. I discussed this point at length with Pedro. Was the difference in levels between the water tank and the geyser sufficient? Would the geyser work properly as a result? The geyser was of that type which bursts into flame as soon as water starts coursing through its veins, but it needs a certain minimum pressure to bring it to life.

Pedro assured me all would be well, *no problema señor,* promised the finished article for seven days hence and promptly forgot all about

it. Three weeks later I tracked him to a bar in the old town and threatened him with extinction if he didn't finish the job *pronto.* A week later he finished the installation with a flourish and proceeded to demonstrate its efficiency to Chris and me.

Perhaps we had different things in mind. He seemed perfectly satisfied with its performance when a small trickle of water dropped from the tap to fall sluggishly into the bath and a halfhearted form of ignition lit up the gas burners in a sullen and discontented way. He put his hand under the flow and pulled it away smartly as though fearful of being scalded. It was barely warm—'*mucho malo,*' I said, exhausting my Spanish vocabulary.

An animated conversation then took place between Pedro and Chris, at the end of which Chris took me by the arm and advised me to take a philosophical view of life, not to think uncharitable things of Pedro's father for failing to marry Pedro's mother, and to steel myself, for worse, much worse was to come. But to savour its full iniquity we must examine the tank above, *in situ,* so that Pedro could expound more fully. Standing by the monster water tank he delivered himself of a masterly explanation of the malfunction of the geyser.

'You see *señor,* it is not really my fault. These geysers depend for their efficiency entirely on one thing—adequate pressure. This is supplied by the weight of the water passing through a small pipe which controls the flow of gas to the burners. More flow, more gas—hotter water.'

He paused like a professor faced with an imbecile class.

*'Comprende?'*

'Si.'

'Now,' he continued, all sweet reasonableness and light, 'you can see that your water tank is far too near the deck to give sufficient pressure for this purpose.' Blandly he rested his case. If he had been a barrister he would have begun to shuffle his papers. I was struck speechless. No good telling him that this is what I had said right at the start.

'Well then, Pedro, what do you suggest we do about it,' I churned out between clenched teeth.

'*No problema señor,'* a flash of teeth, the dazzling smile, 'all you have to do is raise this barrel of water 15 feet up the mast.'

I cried on Chris's shoulder with sheer frustration. Then I looked around hastily for Pedro's monkey wrench, intent on striking him a mortal blow, but he had forgotten to bring it, as usual!

It was the parting of the ways but you may be interested to know how I solved that one. First of all I dumped the garden water tank over the side in a convenient depth like 2,000 fathoms, and then I had two large steel tanks made out of 11-mm mild-steel sheet, with large inspection covers, and these I installed on either side of the saloon under the existing cupboards. After connecting them one to the other I arranged for the water to be lifted out of one of them with a Jabsco Puppy which fed it to the geyser under pressure. And this worked perfectly; 15 feet up the mast!

Chris turned out to be a real friend and a constant help with translation. He was about thirty-two I suppose, handsome, industrious and mild-mannered. He was a schoolmaster by profession but at this moment of his life the owner and skipper of a 45-foot sailing ship called *Northern Dawn.* And the ship was his life.

Like most yachtsmen I met in the Mediterranean, Chris was perennially broke but knew where to get everything at the cheapest. He took me to the rope factory in Villajoyosa where I ordered enough rope to renew our running rigging completely. I selected tarred sisal because the local fishermen were using it and it smelt so shippy. If it was good enough for them, I figured, it must be good enough for me. I stipulated four strand, which I believe lies better on a sheave and lasts longer, and ordered it in two sizes only—25 mm (diameter) for the peak and throat halyards on both masts, and 18 mm for everything else. In addition I bought a coil of 13 mm for the ratlines, but as I foresaw the large number of eyesplices I would have to make when seizing their ends to the shrouds, I asked for this to be three strand. I am glad I did.

*Northern Dawn* had started life as a Scottish fishing boat, her lines proclaimed it, but you had to look closely for Chris had removed the original sentry-box wheelhouse and given her a flush deck. Her bold

sheer ended in a perpendicular forefoot and this gave her a defiant air. Her masts were old telegraph poles, and her standing rigging made up from several strands of fencing wire twisted together and spliced around large thimbles which were strained down to chain plates by telegraph pole rigging screws.

Now he and his crew were doing the boat up for a charter which they hoped would bring them in some money this summer. The crew were all Swiss. George, the mate, was just twenty-one and hooked on sailing. A few years previously he had invested everything he possessed in a share in a three-mast Baltic schooner which foundered in the English Channel, a story which is told later in this book. The third member of the crew was a quiet man of enormous strength named Zepp. Finally there was a diminutive, excessively handsome chap with bobbed hair whom they called Mignon. Even so he was quite the hardest worker on board as well as the cook. None of them had a *sou* but they got by on happy talk and plans for the summer charter when everything would turn out better. Well, they said, they just had to, they couldn't be any worse! But apart from a real love of sailing for itself they all had one thing in common—a genuine respect for Chris, their skipper. Perhaps it was this which made the events of the next few days so poignant.

We were still on the slip and I was working on the anchor winch when a loud knocking on the hull below brought me to the side. It was Marco. In the background two Guardia Civil were retreating to the Fisherman's Bar.

*'Capitano—amigo—muerto!'* shouted Marco, crudely, drawing his hand across his throat in that gesture which cannot be misunderstood. Worried, I nipped down the ladder and made enquiries of Ramon at the office. Marco explained what the police had told him. It seemed that Chris had thumbed a lift into Benidorm the previous evening to visit his fiancée. On the bend leading into the town, a notoriously badly cambered slope, the car crashed head-on into another, burst into flames and killed all five people including Chris, who was burnt to death.

It was a dreadful shock. Even in the midst of life, I said to myself . . . and nothing is the same again. I hurried down to *Northern Dawn*

to see if I could help in any way. Mignon was up the mast on the bosun's chair scraping away as usual. Zepp was overhauling the steering gear. Life went on. George was not there. Indeed he was not. He was busy now discarding the last vestiges of his carefree youth to become a man, and this is how it happened.

George was now the skipper of *Northern Dawn.* It was his duty to arrange the funeral, to inform Chris's mother and friends of the tragedy, and to do all those sad tasks which have to be done at a time like this, heartbreaking at the best of times, and no easier when one is young and, even worse, desperately poor.

Later we heard George had identified the body, collected it from the mortuary in Benidorm, moved it to a funeral parlour in a hired truck, washed the corpse himself and prepared it for burial, providing the cheapest coffin possible. All his friends assembled for the funeral at the cemetery three kilometres outside Villajoyosa. Phyllis and I went on our scooter, passing groups of young people coming on foot. At the gates small groups were waiting, talking, even laughing amongst themselves quite normally. Chris's mother was there, a pleasant-faced woman in her middle fifties, who had come from her home in France. She was talking to Chris's fiancée, a pretty German girl of perhaps twenty-three.

George then came out of the chapel and announced that anybody who wished to see Chris for the last time could do so now. There was that in his manner which suggested he hoped nobody would. We watched expectantly as Chris's mother went inside. Seconds later a heart-rending scream smote the air and a voice laden with tragedy and woe called out *'Mon fils, mon fils . . . pauvre petit . . . enfant loyal, enfant loyal . . .*' and subsided in dreadful deep-throated sobs.

The cry triggered off an instant change of mood. One after another we began to cry and soon there was not a dry eye in the place, including my own. We followed the pitiful coffin, innocent of brass handles or plate or embellishment of any kind, to the graveside, and watched in silence as his crew lowered him to his final rest. The two women stood with their arms around each other, united in sorrow and love for the same man.

As soon as the ritual had ended I suggested to Phyllis we should try to make our way home before the cars could cover us, on our scooter, with dust. We got to the gates in time to see George closing them from within.

He shook us by the hand and accepted our sympathy.

'Mike,' he began, diffidently, 'I hate to ask you this . . . it is really a most difficult thing . . . I know you will understand . . . you see I . . . I am obliged to ask all friends for a contribution.'

It was a privilege to be able to help where help was really needed. By his resourcefulness George was able to pay for everything, and there was enough over from his collection to assist Chris's mother with her expenses back to France.

And *Northern Dawn,* his ship? Well, I would like to say she had a happy ending after all but it was not to be. We held a wake at the Bar Panchito immediately after the funeral when it transpired that Chris was the father of an eleven-year-old boy by a divorced wife. The son would inherit the ship when he was eighteen but until then George would act as skipper and lessee.

A few days later George hauled *Northern Dawn* out at Ramon's slip. She was hardly clear of the water when it became obvious that her hull was very badly hogged and would never stand the journey up the slip or the drying out process to follow. Any such disturbance to her timbers must prove fatal to her, or so it seemed to George. As swiftly as they could the crew scraped down the hull, slapped on a quick coat of anti-fouling, and had her back in the water before any damage was done.

After a month they set sail for the Costa Brava to begin their charter, but the ship was sad after the death of her skipper and when she was several miles out to sea she opened up, and cried, and sank.