

TATLER

Edited by GERRI GALLAGHER

Photographed by JAMES MERRELL

SEX AND POWER...

... are an irresistible combination, as Carla Powell, political hostess and incorrigible raconteuse, tells David Jenkins from her exquisite Italian hideaway

Lady Powell with her house manager Dario and part of her menagerie at her Torre Fiora estate in Lazio, Italy



ABOVE, IN THE DINING ROOM: CHERRIES FROM THE ESTATE, A CARRARA-MARBLE DINING TABLE, CHAIRS DESIGNED BY LADY POWELL & A REPRODUCTION OF GEORGE STUBBS'S CHEETAH AND STAG WITH TWO INDIANS. BELOW, THE SITTING ROOM



It's 9am in the Sabine Hills, 30 minutes from Rome, and a sprightly sun is playing on the donkeys, ponies, dogs and assorted livestock gambolling in a landscape dominated by the Torre Fiora, a magnificent Roman tower. 'Do you love my erection?' giggles Carla Powell – or 'Sister Tartufa of the Miraculous Breasts', as Stephen Fry christened the 71-year-old Italian salonnière-cum-force of nature-cum-honorary Zulu (honestly). 'Twenty-eight metres,' she goes on suggestively, her English still heavily accented and erratic despite the 50 years she's been married to Charles (Lord) Powell – diplomat, private secretary to Lady Thatcher and, now, international businessman. 'It reminds us of happier times. Italians love sex; they lose themselves in bonking so they don't have to think about the country going to hell.' As for her: '*La bestia è morta* [my libido's gone]. So relaxing' – though she does like to recall the last time her bottom was pinched, 10 years ago, down by the Spanish Steps.

Now it's her home – 'glory on a shoestring' – that delights her, and the tower is crucial to that. 'It was Arabella Lennox-Boyd – you know Arabella? She lives 20 minutes away – she said, "Carla, you must make this tower central."' And so Carla has, creating a tree-girt avenue that leads from the tower to the loggia of her low-slung house, a loggia from which to watch sunsets that 'John Julius Norwich says are better than in Burma'. Low-slung? As Carla's great friend Nicholas Ward-Jackson said when he first saw the ochre building, 'Do we all have to have a nervous breakdown over a bloody bungalow?' That's to underplay the elegant sweep of the one-storeyed building. And anyway, as Carla says, Jimmy Goldsmith's Mexican palace was 'one huge bungalow'. A bungalow where she spent one New Year's 'feast' with Silvio Berlusconi. And Berlusconi – 'hands like a toad' – she'd first met as a child, when he bribed her with ice cream to effect an introduction to her beautiful cousin, Maria. ▷

LEFT, PART OF THE HOUSE AND ITS GROUNDS. RIGHT, THE FOUR-POSTER BED IN THE MAIN BEDROOM



A portion of Lady Powell's hat collection



Simon, one of Lady Powell's dachshunds



LEFT, LADY POWELL WITH SIX OF HER SEVEN DACHSHUNDS



HOME

◁ But what about the nervous breakdown? Well, when she arrived here, in 2000, she found herself in battles with both the Mafia and the local Communist authorities. When finally she defeated the authorities, her husband took Lady Thatcher out to the Ivy to celebrate; when well-wishers approached, the former prime minister would rejoice: 'Carla beat the Communist mayor!'

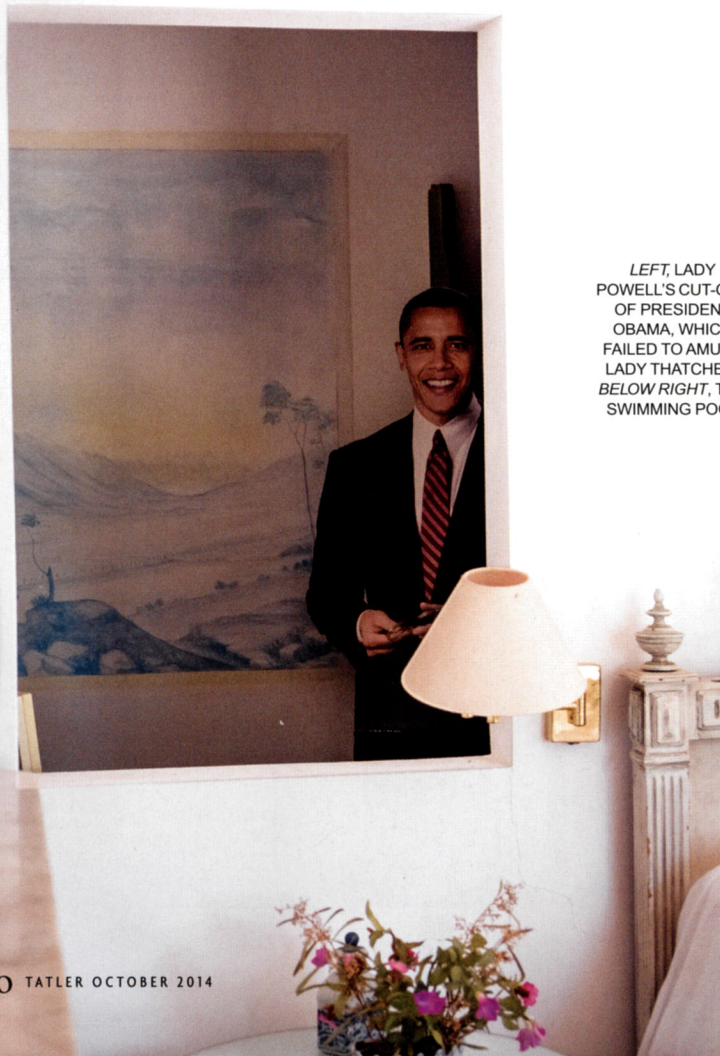
And so Carla rattles on – 'Verbal diarrhoea! I'm like a tap! A tap! You turn me on!' – scattering names (Tony, Cherie, David and Samantha, the Pope, the Douros, Sean Connery, the Italian aristos who showed up on their motorbikes and sat on upended Coke cases, scoffing picnics, as they turned her purchase into what she calls 'a *capriccio*, a playful thing') and sharing high-class tittle-tattle: Hillary Clinton isn't clever, a very good source has told her, she's just done her homework; David Cameron (one of whose children was, she says, conceived at the house) has let her know that her character sketch of Matteo Renzi, the new Italian prime minister ('rough trade', but he's Italy's last hope), was spot on; not only does she regret the part she played in getting Tony Blair introduced to Berlusconi, she also shudders at the memory of the lascivious Silvio failing to show up for a dinner she'd arranged in Rome for him and Lady Thatcher, going instead to the arms of a Russian mistress... About only one thing does she wish to be discreet: the exact location of her house – 'for security reasons'. It's a bit remote, there've been robberies and there she sits, alone save for her animals and her multilingual house manager, Dario. 'Not that there's anything to steal.'

There was, alas. Just a fortnight later, the thieves came, through the one weak point in the electrified fence surrounding her estate, with guns. They broke Carla's ribs and fired rounds into the wall of the▷

A reproduction of George Stubbs's *Mares and Foals Under an Oak Tree* (1773) in the dining room



LEFT, LADY POWELL'S CUT-OUT OF PRESIDENT OBAMA, WHICH FAILED TO AMUSE LADY THATCHER. BELOW RIGHT, THE SWIMMING POOL





LEFT, THE VIEW FROM THE TERRACE. RIGHT, ONE OF THE BEDROOMS



Photographs of Carla's friends, including Pope Benedict XVI, Tony Blair and Lady Thatcher

◁ little house she prefers to sleep in, 20 yards from the main house – her seven dachshunds sharing her duvet with her. 'I never was frightened in my life,' she says. 'Not when Charles was with Thatcher and we were under threat from the IRA, from Libya. Now I see shotguns through my pictures.' She didn't hear the shots – 'they tell me it's quite normal, because of the shock' – but the bullet holes are in the wall and hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of jewels are gone. 'I'm not going to leave,' she tells me, when I ring her. 'And I'm not going to hospital. Hospital is for wimps.' Her dogs – in particular her German shepherd, Tony Blair – were useless, merely yapping wildly. Now she's got an attack dog, the sort used by the SAS, Rocky by name: 'Very sweet and very violent. I hope he doesn't eat my dachshunds for breakfast.' But as she jokes, she's suddenly petrified. 'There's a shadow,' she shrieks, terror in her voice, a shadow she thinks is a returning gunman. In fact, it's only Dario, but it's indicative – and understandable.

Less understandable, really, is her husband's reaction. In Singapore at the time of the attack, Lord Powell flew back – for one day – then jetted off to a conference in the US (he chairs the Atlantic Partnership and is also a director of LVMH and an ex-director of Jardine Matheson and much else). 'I begged him not to,' she says, and she did tell the press that Charles was 'a little shit'. 'But I didn't expect them to publish it.' That he'd failed to insure her stones fully was no surprise: 'He'll notice my boobs, but jewellery – he doesn't care.' Indeed, she once bought some gorgeous rocks while on holiday in Brazil with Vicky de Rothschild and Lady Palumbo, which she had made into a necklace for Charles to give her on her birthday. Impulsive as she is, she couldn't wait that long and 'wore it around London for three months. And

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you can't miss it – it's huge.' But Charles Powell did, true to form.

In truth, she admires her husband's devotion to duty. They've been married for 50 years and their marriage is, she says, 'what the EU should be: cooperation, not integration'. An example: in the main house is a splendid bedroom, with a four-poster bed. On it are the mock coat of arms and motto she had painted when Charles was ennobled: "Pedibus standibus" – feet on the ground. On this side, I put the diplomat's [cockaded] hat, and on my side some chimneys, because I descend from chimney sweeps, and a pig, in honour of my father [he was big in ham]. It's a terrific bed and a magnificent room, its bookshelves heavy with political biographies, its side tables laden with antique pistols and daggers, its majestic main table equipped with a bottle of Ardbeg malt, a Buddha and a huge bowl of cherries collected from the 450 trees on the estate. Lady Thatcher liked picking them, and Charles used to pay her to do so – 'minimum wage'. But Charles (who lives largely in London) has been banished from it; so often did Carla demand he give it up for her grand guests that he's been exiled – 'he loves to be a victim, you see' – to a smaller bedroom, its walls decorated with the tendrils of his family tree, through to their adored grandchildren, six of them, by way of their two sons. There's a whole suite of rooms burrowed into the side of the house where those grandchildren can come and stay, and a pool where all can swim. But not, alas, the jacuzzi filled with sulphur water that Carla

planned for Lady Thatcher, who came to stay year after year. She'll never get in it, scoffed Charles, so Carla filled it with wine – 'cheaper than water round here'. And certainly cheaper than the olive oil she makes from her 1,000 trees. 'Charles says it costs £500 a bottle.'

Thatcher was guest of honour at grand lunches – '20 inside, 20 outside under the umbrella' – held in the dining room, which looks, unsurprisingly, onto the tower. Two faithful reproductions of Stubbs paintings decorate the walls ('clever of you to keep the originals in the bank,' says a friend), the table is marble, bought 'for very little money' from Carrara, and the 'priest's' chairs were made to her own design by Dario. There's to be a visit from the gentlemen with long dresses' (clergy) the coming weekend, just as there were cardinals at Torre Fiora to celebrate the recovery of her beloved donkey, Giuseppe, from the savage mauling a pack of wild dogs gave him. Giuseppe's hee-haw has been made into her telephone's ringtone by a young Douro, and like his mistress, Giuseppe is an exhibitionist, mounting Sterlina, her pony, in front of guests and 'making four mules with her'. (Many of the mules have gone as therapy for disturbed children.)

Animals are her passion: the donkeys, the ponies, the chickens,

the pigs ('My piggery I call White's; all my friends in England, they are huge, like Nicholas Soames and Alexander Hesketh, so to honour them I paint their faces onto the pictures of pigs I have on the outside of the building'), the rabbits and her dogs ('I've given two pugs to Tony Blair; [Blair's daughter] Kathryn's got Wolfie.') Her dachshunds share not only her bed – where they munch her hearing aids – but her car, shedding hair so vigorously that she wears a dressing gown as Dario drives her. As for the poochy pong, she suggested a dog-smell spray to the people behind Santa Maria Novella, and she employs it vigorously in her Fiat Multipla. It's not her only animal beauty tip. She's not, she says, had Botox for eight years; now she uses donkey saliva on her skin, 'and my complexion's never been better'.

Perhaps the animals mask a disappointment. Born in northern Italy, she married young, led a Foreign Office life, then flowered in London as the political hostess of her era. When she came back to Italy, 'I was trying to do what I did in London. But better, because I have a lovely house here [bought from a noble family] and I wanted to show off. So I invited the actors, the politicians, the journalists. And I got really fed up with the bad manners – they wouldn't arrive on time, or they wouldn't show up. I realise in the country it's difficult...'

So though Colin Powell once said that his Italian visiting priorities were, 'First Carla, then the Pope, then the foreign secretary,' she didn't draw the crowds, though she and Tony Blair did have an audience with Pope Benedict. Carla was as stricken with shyness as a teenage girl: 'Tony said I went "eek".' (She adores the current pope, unlike many of her aristocratic friends.) But now Tony's tainted, and Thatcher can be



a lure no more. And Obama – well, she's got a cardboard cut-out of Obama, which she placed at the door to greet Thatcher, who sniffed and turned the President back to front. (The Iron Lady liked Blair, and on a photo of the two prime ministers together is Blair's handwritten comment: 'To Carla: I think we make a not bad couple!')

And Carla Powell herself has had not at all a bad time, living the life of an 'aristopeasant', chivvying Dario, throwing me a glamorous dinner in a grand club in Rome – waiters in green velvet knickerbockers, red and white striped waistcoats, white ties, white gloves and swallowtail coats – and being driven home, festooned with dogs. There, she takes me through her mural-painted drawing room and out to the loggia, and we gaze by moonlight at her 'erection'. And then she says, 'You must be exhausted – Charles only has to be with me half an hour and he has to have a nap.' And I go to the grand bedroom that once was Charles's and I eat one of the cherries this magnificent eccentric has picked and, mentally, I salute her and the idyll she's created.

And then, a fortnight later, the thieves strike, and brutality invades her existence. There's always trouble in paradise. □