

Socialite and wife of Lady Thatcher's closest aide tells of the enchanting menagerie of

Tony Blair loves having his ears tickled, Gordon Brown digs a lot and Lord Hesketh fancies Nicholas Soames...

by Lady Carla Powell

Not long ago I asked a nun, a fellow animal lover, whether there were dogs in heaven. Immediately and without batting an eyelid she replied: 'Of course! If they are needed they will be there.' In my grief at losing my Yorkshire terrier Douro, to a murderer who deliberately kicked the love of my life to death, this was the answer I desperately needed to hear.

I had searched the huge number of internet sites devoted to the subject. But what struck me most was that the nun's reply to my question was clearly based on a love she had experienced herself, which gave her insights often denied to those dry-as-dust theologians who blithely teach the opposite. I wondered what Pope Benedict, known for his love of cats, would have said.

The nun told me to ignore the patronising smiles and the suppressed scorn that some folk have for people such as myself, who glory in the personalities, loyalty, devotion, affection, even sometimes altruism of animals.

I know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But Douro – a gift to me from two treasured friends, Lady Palumbo and Victoria Lady de Rothschild, on my 60th birthday – was truly beautiful. He was a miniature Yorkshire, though I prefer to say is, since his spirit lives on.

As a pup I named him after the Marquess of Douro – the title given to the Duke of Wellington and his heirs – as a reflection of his aristocratic pedigree. (Wellington had battled his way across the broad Douro river in his campaign to rescue Portugal from Napoleon.)

He had a proud, devoted and determined nature, and the courage of a lion. He slept on my bed and was never more than a few feet from me.

On the rare occasions I had to go away, he would lie pining at the gates until my return. We understood each other perfectly and, unlike a husband, he never argued, never grumbled, never raved that I was late or that it was time to go. It was a perfect relationship and now I am bereft.

Douro was with me for six glorious years and I hoped I had created a little dog heaven for him on Earth. Now that he has been taken away in the most distressing of circumstances, I feel it is my duty to mark his passing.

He had long tan-coloured hair (washed and bathed by me every day), ears that stood upright and a docked tail. His appearance was periodically ruined by my attempts at home hairdressing with nail scissors. I sent him only once to a professional pet hairdresser and he came back so shorn that my incorrigible daughter-in-law called him a chihuahua.

Douro made it his priority to protect me against all-comers, especially the noisy windscreen-wipers on my car, which he chased mercilessly up and down the dashboard whenever I was driving in the rain. He jealously thought of them as too close for comfort.

He also possessed a penetrating bark that, once begun, was a signal to set off



all the other of God's creatures in my care. Several horses, cats and my large collection of dachshunds would invariably follow Douro's lead with a far-sounding fanfare whenever guests – or intruders – risked entry.

At the moment all my animals are subdued and quiet, as though mourning the loss of Douro, their leader.

I should explain something about my life here in rural Italy. For many years I followed my husband Charles around the world in diplomatic posts. He was later to be national security adviser to Lady Thatcher. My years in London were good, although I could not think of having a career of my own and had to be a full-time wife and mother of two sons.

It was fortunate that I enjoyed the endless entertaining that came with the role. I was not able to enjoy the luxury of keeping animals, not least because the beastly quarantine rules would always separate us when we returned from travelling.

My dream had always been to come back to Italy, my native country, choose a sunny spot convenient for my family and friends to visit me and do exactly what I most enjoy. I was fed up with the cold, damp winters of London and wanted a little warmth in my bones. It was also important to me to enable my very British grandchildren to spend their holidays close to the heart of Roman civilisation, so that they would absorb something of their Italian heritage.

I bought a farm in Lazio, in the Sabine Hills, about half an hour north of Rome. I renovated and extended the house and grounds – with ecology in mind, of course. I am very much a supporter of the Prince of Wales and his concern for climate change. I farm organically. I have installed water reservoirs and a number of photovoltaic solar panels which I use to heat the house.

It is an excuse, too, to indulge my passion for cooking, using the eggs from

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