

Great Danes and Little Darlings

Years ago before villagers in Nose got rich and started widening and asphaltting all the grassy paths around so that they no longer needed to walk but could drive everywhere, we used to explore all the trails on horseback. We had some fairly hair-raising escapades as the ordinance survey maps clearly hadn't been updated since the War and a lot of the paths had fallen into disuse or collapsed or just been buried beneath years of undergrowth. Our mounts were two horses named Fortnum and Mason. They were complete opposites in temperament and character: whereas Mason was a cautious foot-careful Arab, Fortnum, a thoroughbred, dissolved into a nervous wreck outside his stable. If he saw something as formidable as a paper bag fluttering on the river bank he'd rather fall into the river than put a hoof on it. Manhole covers and pigs were his special bogeys and the day when we (stupidly in hindsight) attempted to ride past a chicken farm where all several thousand feathered inmates in tiered cages had hysterics in unison, doesn't bear repeating. Suffice to say a bolting horse is like a brakeless bus on a steep hill only that time it wasn't a hill but the main road we flew along. Apart from me, arms nearly torn from their sockets, hands in ribbons and Fortnum looking as if he'd just emerged from a bubble bath, we returned home shocked but unscathed from the ordeal. From that day we gave all poultry establishments a wide berth, not hard to do as even a whiff of one would send him into a tizzy. But give me open country riding to the stifling confines of a riding arena any day. One constant companion on these daily rides was a large lanky Great Dane known as Thor. So big was

he, at least to locals accustomed to regular-sized dogs, that he was known as 'the third horse.' I think Thor himself sometimes believed he was one.

Once cantering along a wide grassy track we found our way barred by a line of tents. A troupe of Boy Scouts were preparing their sundown meal. If you were brought up on a diet of Westerns like I was, you may have romantic images of camps in the wild; smoke rising from the campfires, sizzling stripes of beef, smokey beans, steaming coffee, reclining bodies couched on saddles, horses, heads lolling, tails swishing in the background, the occasional howl from a lone wolf on the ridge. Not so this campsite. Japanese Scouts are far removed from the dream that Baden-Powell envisaged when he set up his corps of fledging Empire builders, sternly imbued in the art of survival and sense of honour, ready at all times to serve society whether it be helping blind old Bill with his shopping or hauling a drowning swimmer to safety. *Kyoiku mamas* together with that awesome body the P.T.A. see to it that their little darlings are shielded from life's dangers – knives, fires, ponds, rivers – which precludes all the fun of real scouting and means that instead of learning how to cook in the open over a wood fire their skill gets no further than opening a tinned *bento* can which they heat on a bottled gas burner.

That evenings as we picked our way gingerly among guy ropes fearing that a hoof, wrongly placed could leave them all without shelter for the night, Thor, never one to pass up a free meal when the chance arose, walked leisurely past the tents sniffing carefully then sampling the tastiest morsels of their bento suppers. Their faces showed not anger but total disbelief. We beat a hasty retreat, Thor bringing up the rear licking his lips.

A more recent encounter with scouts has dispelled a lot of my feeling that scouting is nothing more than a recreational alternative to video games. An international group of scouts based in Kobe wanted to volunteer their services. Volunteer? That's a word I thought had gone the

way of the Empire. We fixed a date. The weekend weather had all the ingredients to dampen the spirit of camping. It had been bucketing down for days, was still pouring and the ground was a quagmire. It's one thing to set up your camp in fine weather and be able to retreat into a dry tent when it does rain, an entirely dismal prospect to unpack and raise tents in a downpour. But far from crying off as I thought they would, they not only came and cleared the river bed (the project in mind) but they also camped in the forest nearby coaxing a fire with damp kindling and pretending the cold and rain didn't exist. Weeks later they phoned again. "Was there something more for them to do?" (If they came every weekend for a year the project list would hardly have dent in it.) Yes, indeed yes. The day bode rain, scout's weather. The phone rang. Sorry they couldn't make it. With the rain now drumming merrily on the roof, I could understand. "No, it's not because of the rain," they explained, "we've just lost the map to your house on the computer." Marvellous.

There are a lot of activities which look simple at first glance but need a certain knack or expertise to do them properly. We've spent a great deal of the past year moving rocks and trees. If you don't know how to move these correctly you're likely to end up as a hospital statistic. The secret is to let the weight of the object do the work not your back. Some macho male volunteers have sweated their guts out trying to move an embedded rock which a coordinated team of girls levering with iron bars could shift easily. Likewise barbecuing. Control of the fire is all important. One person with a lot of patience is needed to oversee this. Before starting the wind speed and direction must be assessed so that you don't end up with steaks cooked to perfection in the embers of your house. Various people taking turns between drinks guarantees half the food burnt to a cinder and the other half raw. Cooking with charcoal should be easy but so often the fire is at its best just when everybody's leaving. To be really professional you don't use charcoal but wood. Every piece of wood is different depending on variety of tree, thickness state of dryness,

burn-ability i.e. degree of heat produced by wood and its speed of burning. The smoke is what produces the flavour not the sauces which people dollop on to mask the burnt taste.

It's sad nowadays that kids, have very little chance to learn practical skills, to use their initiative and faculty of observation to gain a bit of old-fashioned common sense. The aforesaid mamas and the P.T.A. stifle any activity that hints of danger and teachers are reluctant to take the risk fearing heavy lawsuits if things go wrong. “*Abunai*” they all shout without explaining why it is ‘abunai’. Children should be allowed (preferably under the guidance of someone able to answer questions rather than say “No”) to wander freely in fields and mountains to observe nature first-hand. To learn when a river is dangerous, which trees or plants are poisonous, which insect not to touch, whether it's safe or not to light a fire and what precautions to take if one does. Only by observation and practice does one obtain skills.

A couple of town kids came to look at the menagerie here the other day. When I put a warm brown egg that one of the hens had just laid into their hands, they squirmed with delight. You see they'd always believed eggs were laid on supermarket shelves.

Elizabeth Oliver