



The World Chief Guide

Olave Baden-Powell

Patience

Whenever the Chief Guide travelled, her visit was the reason for special functions: a tidy up of headquarters, and often for members to have new uniforms; so she said that not only was she the Movement's Chief Guide but also the Chief Excuse.

In this year which marks the centenary of her birth I understand there are to be celebrations, and how she would laugh at being the cause of yet more fun and events.

I first came to know the Chief Guide when I married her grandson twenty-five years ago. We became close friends and enjoyed fourteen happy years spending much of our lives together. She was a most engaging character full of enthusiasm, not exactly a 'sweet old lady' as it was once enquiringly suggested to me — she would not have achieved all she did had she been one. She was not only dedicated to continuing the work of her 'darling man' or 'my darling' as she referred to her husband but also never stinted herself in doing all in her power to foster and promote Scouting and Girl Guiding and caring for members of the Movements. Visitors arrived almost constantly from all parts of the world to visit their Chief at her Grace and Favour apartment in Hampton Court Palace - some by invitation or appointment and many just turned up ... the group might be as large as fifty ... all were made welcome, latecomers always were rebuked.

Hampton Court Palace was cold, so it was convenient that countries in the southern hemisphere preferred her to visit them during their summer and the northern hemisphere during their winter. So she was able to 'perch' at the Palace during the more clement months. During these months, there were regular lunchtime parties, when up to about thirty people were asked, and she had what she called a 'finger lunch' of sandwiches, curry puffs, fruit salad and coffee served in her large drawing room, long passage, and sometimes we also had to use the bed-sitting room too.

When the eating was over, she would stand by her desk and introduce everyone in turn, often with amusing anecdotes. She would then ease herself up to sit on the large desk and with legs swinging would regale her guests with a talk about her recent travels and guiding in the countries and places she had visited.

The Chief Guide received a huge mail daily which included reports and magazines from the various countries. Dull some of them may have appeared, but not to her, for she read them, seeing in her mind's eye the people and places that she knew and cared for - congratulations and encouraging words would then be written.

Every moment possible during the day and evening, often well into the early hours of the next day, the Chief Guide sat at her desk, bolt upright on a stool, a rug over her legs with her feet on a hot water bottle. She typed with two fingers, 'hunt and pick' style but at great speed, on a large old typewriter. The routine continued even when she was travelling, for she carried a portable machine with her, and the tap, tap, tap could be heard from her bedroom. The typing was very personal, not a trained style but came

onto the paper like her speech. The words had great warmth and lots of emphasis expressed in capital letters, underlining, great spaces, missed lines. Confirmation of arrangements were always clearly set out in letters and as she taught me, the day and date were both written to avoid any errors - also typed were lists, for she was very keen on itemising things.

Lady B.-P. was a great talker with a deep voice and a charming, unusual turn of phrase. A senior commissioner of the Korean Girl Guides was always amused as being regarded as 'delicious Mrs Lee'.

While she would refuse to go to bed in the evening before her desk was clear, a lie-in in the morning was her reward. After she had a heart attack while on tour in Canada, it was not too difficult to persuade her to remain in bed for breakfast and then take her bath late so that the rooms could be cleaned before she appeared to start her day's work. She slept with her bedroom door closed, but once she was awake and had collected her breakfast on a tray from the kitchen, the bedroom remained open so that any family or friends staying could go in and pull up a chair for a cosy chat - 'sagas', as she called them, were very much relished.

From her father, the Chief Guide, she inherited a love of gardening and this was her great joy and relaxation. She had an allotment in an old walled garden in the Home Park at Hampton Court. She would escape to her 'plot' all she could once her deskwork and entertaining was done. Hour after hour she weeded, bending over hoop style. Flowers were not a present she welcomed, as she was proud of growing enough to fill her apartment. She also grew large quantities of rhubarb which was an asset in easing the household budget, but it was a rather constant item on her menu - it was even bottled and served out of season.

It was a great pleasure to assist her in any way, for she was always charming and courteous - one was always thanked. We sometimes teased her saying she wrote and thanked people for thanking her. Wherever she had been or whatever one did for her you were thanked, and she died with this accomplishment. My husband had the task of tidying up her possessions and affairs. In her desk he found an envelope addressed to me. In the envelope were two letters of appreciation, the first written much earlier another more recently, exactly her husband had done for her.

Patience Baden Powell, grand-daughter-in-law of the Chiefs