

One

Mensa and the Bank Manager

I have to agree that Danielle's thinking is certainly different. However, to describe her as a 'lateral thinker', as some do, is at the very least open to question. Despite an IQ that enabled her to become a member of MENSA, I can still recall her bank manager's astonishment when at sixteen, in response to a letter requesting her to reduce her overdraft, she sent him a cheque by return of post.

The first words she ever spoke to me were,
'I hate you, I hate you!'

I never did discover why. She must have been about ten at the time and despite the passage of some thirty odd years, she still succeeds in confounding me with sudden equally direct statements on a variety of subjects, some of which I am nearly convinced she understands.

However, we are all different; some are just a little more different than others! For instance, I wonder how many children would do as Danielle did when confronted with the problem of tethering her first tortoise. Concerned that it should not be restrained at the end of a piece of string, as the gardener suggested, she attached it instead to a long piece of elastic originally intended for her knickers. The tortoise must have been terribly surprised when, having stretched his tether to its elastic limit on his slow journey across the lawn, he was quite suddenly and violently lifted off his feet and catapulted backwards through the air at great speed. The sad tale of the tortoise continued when winter came and Danielle, broken hearted, thought her pet had died. She gave him a touching burial at the end of the garden and it was only the timely intervention of the gardener that saved the poor little creature's hibernation from becoming permanent.

I have often thought that there must be a moral to that story: if you are one of life's tortoises, be sure to choose your mentor carefully.

Whenever I am in trouble and Danielle offers to help, I always say, sometimes hysterically, depending upon the situation,

'No, no keep away, I am in enough difficulty already without your help!'

She never does and the events that follow are almost invariably catastrophic.

For instance, just recently we were sitting at the bottom of our garden watching television (no, I am not eccentric too, it just happens that we keep our TV in a studio so that it does not disturb us in the house), when we heard a sound outside. Suspecting that we had intruders, I bravely leapt to my feet ready to defend us to my last drop of blood, when Danielle did the same, inadvertently extending one long elegant leg across the room, directly in my path. I fell flat on my face, the studio door burst dramatically open as in some Hitchcock thriller, Danielle yelled and our large, stupid Irish setter, Benson, padded over my prostrate body and licked my ears.

He had decided it was becoming cold in the garden and thought it time to have a warm in front of the fire. Why he doesn't just bark to be let in like other dogs, I shall never know! Perhaps he is a lateral thinker too. Alternatively, it may be that his ability to follow Danielle's example and create chaos and confusion wherever he goes may have something to do with the accident he had when he was about a year old. I was just loading the car in the drive to go away for Easter when Benson saw another dog about fifty yards away on the other side of the road. Being a gregarious creature like his mistress, he ran across the road to talk to it, just as a car passed.

It hit him square on the head, throwing six stone of setter about ten feet on to the pavement where he landed unconscious beneath a low dwarf wall in front of the house two doors away. My heart stopped and I thought him dead. Fortunately, however, he proved to have a skull as thick as his brain and he recovered with only minor cuts and abrasions.

He had not seen the car coming and presumably thought he had been struck down by a thunderbolt. Thereafter he always crawled past our neighbour's house on his belly, carefully keeping his head below the top of the dwarf wall.

As he passed the same house daily, people often remarked on his slightly unorthodox method of progress.

'He always does that,' Danielle would say. 'It's because he was knocked down by a car when he was a puppy.'

Her explanation used to surprise them almost as much as the dog's antics. Mistress and hound would then proceed to the local shops in Blackheath, where between them they would demolish the local supermarket, trip a few unsuspecting passers-by with the leash, baffle the local bank with a request for 'a set of "unminted" commemorative coins in a Perspex case', try on any new fashions that had appeared in the windows of the boutiques (to be honest, the dog never did this), or call at the local station to buy a ticket, 'to that station at the coast where the trains don't go to from here! You know the one I mean, it's near Cooden Beach,' after which Danielle would either take a taxi home carrying her 3 cwts. of shopping, or find two willing male friends to help her carry it up the hill.

Often, on arriving home, my daughter would enquire,

'Where's Benson?'

'Oh my God,' Danielle would reply, 'I've left him tied up outside the newsagents again.'

This never surprised my daughter since when she was a baby, Danielle had on more than one occasion returned home only to realise that she had left the pram behind complete with baby.

Fortunately, neither ever came to any harm and were no worse for the experience.

The local shopkeepers are really most understanding and even seem to enjoy her chaotic sorties into the village, where they tell me she adds a dash of style and glamour, and brightens up their day, particularly when stories of her latest exploits spread rapidly through the village.

'They are all so kind and understanding,' she tells me.

This goes to explain why the supermarket will only let her loose on their shelves accompanied by a staff member, who pushes her trolley and escorts her safely outside. She believes that this is just part of the usual service, blissfully unaware that the assistant has been detailed off to act as her 'minder'.

'For some reason, my trolley never goes where I want it to. I am always running people over,' she tells me, and then more ominously, 'You never guess how easily those tall point of sale notices fall down,' or another familiar line is, 'Why don't they make bottles stronger? A whole shelf of tomato ketchup and sauce fell on top of another one full of chutney and gherkins. Most of them broke and you have never seen such a mess.'

Clearly, the minder was having an off day, but then you need eyes in the back of your head as well as handcuffs and a ball and chain to keep Danielle out of trouble. You also need to be quick on your feet to avoid the falling debris.

I later discovered that after leaving the supermarket, she visited her hairdresser's elegant salon. Later, Martin, the hairdresser, was surprised to find large, sticky footprints everywhere she had been. It was only later when he met the manager of the supermarket, that he put two and two together and came up with the answer: Danielle.

The same year, at Christmas, she visited Fortnum & Mason in Piccadilly. No one had warned them of her proposed visit; consequently they had been unwise enough to build a large display of jars of Christmas fare and goodies near to the entrance.

On her way out, Danielle, who had bought Hula Hoops for my daughter and some of her friends, had a minor altercation with the display, which crashed down, shattering glass shelving, bottles and jars. She later told me, her large brown eyes wide with wonder,

'They would not even let me stay and help them put it all together.'

Later, on the train home, she realised that in the heat of the confusion she had left the Hula Hoops behind.

The next day she returned to see if she could have them back. The assistant or window-dresser who had rebuilt the display had assumed that they were part of the decoration and entwined them into the merchandise. I am told that Fortnum's was the only London store to use Hula Hoops in their Christmas display that year.

Two

Teamwork and Early Days

Sometimes we do a double act. Danielle sets me up and then I create the chaos. I remember this happened a few years ago when we were holidaying in a remote and beautiful part of Majorca, called Deyja. We had driven along the winding coastal mountain road to a place called Banalbufa, when we decided to stop for a coffee and brandy at a restaurant perched on the mountaintop with a spectacular view over the olive trees and pines out to the startling blue Mediterranean. The place was cool and deserted except for one other customer who turned out to be German. We enjoyed a quiet respite from our travels with courteous service from the Majorcan waiter. I paid our bill and announced that I intended to visit the toilet before departing. I went downstairs in search of the gentlemen's room but took the wrong turning and ended up in the kitchen. Apologising, I retraced my steps along the long dark passageway until I found the loos. Just as I did so, a great commotion broke out in the gentlemen's. Danielle, wrongly assuming I would be peeing peacefully in peace and solitude had crept downstairs and surprised the German by striding into the urinals, shouting,

'Pow, pow! Caught you in the act.'

Pointing her finger at him as she did, pretending it was a gun, the poor man nearly had heart failure. He zipped up his pants like lightning and fled.

Danielle was taken with a fit of giggles and retreated to the adjacent ladies' loo. Also unaware of the German's presence, and hearing Danielle's voice, I was misled into believing that the rapidly approaching footsteps of the fleeing German were Danielle's. At this point I did something quite silly and out of character. I hid behind the pillar until the footsteps had almost reached me in the dimly-lit passage, then I jumped out, doing a reasonable imitation of the ghost in *Macbeth*,

'Oowl,' I yelled, my arms held high above my head in ghostly guise.

The poor devil jumped six feet and fled away at high speed towards the kitchen. As he did not speak Spanish, he must have had considerable difficulty explaining what was distressing him! I expect the kitchen staff thought he had had too much sun. Meanwhile, Danielle and I escaped to the car. So convulsed with laughter were we that I nearly drove off the cliff top. No wonder the Germans think the British are a strange race.

Later that evening, we were recounting the incident to friends in our hotel, who clearly thought we were exaggerating, when Danielle excused herself from the table to pay a call.

We watched her cross the lobby, and then, by mistake, disappear into the door marked 'caballeros'. Two seconds later, an embarrassed man backed out, apologising profusely. We all watched in wonder as he then proceeded to disappear through the door of the ladies, only to reappear ten seconds later, embarrassed and totally confused, followed by an irate lady.

Danielle eventually returned to our table quite unaware that anything untoward had occurred.

'What did I do?' she said innocently as we all stared at her.

'Nothing much,' said one of our friends, chuckling, 'but if Mrs Pankhurst had had you in her team of Suffragettes, I bet women would have got the vote a lot quicker.'

His wife considered for a while and then turned to us,

'I think you are all so unfair to Danielle; I think she would make a superb intelligence officer.' We all listened with interest.

'With her on the other side, we would be invincible.'

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Danielle always says that the reason she is completely at home with men is because she grew up with boys at school.

In fact, she was the first girl to be accepted at the boys' preparatory school which I occasionally attended (I was always a bad student and tried hard to attend school only on sports days. This is probably why I grew up totally illiterate and unable to spell; more on that later).

The school was called St. Dunstan's and was run by a forward thinking headmaster called Warren Hastings who's ancestor assisted Clive of India in the eighteenth century. I imagine that it must have been Hastings who first started Danielle on her career of lateral thinking. She claims he influenced her mind very considerably, although his attempts to teach her geography proved one of his less successful ventures. She still thinks an escarpment is like a baked apple and rivers meander because they have nothing better to do. At about fifteen, Danielle had grown long, attractive legs and a few other interesting assets which she displayed provocatively on the tennis court wearing very brief sharkskin shorts. She so distracted the male pupils that Hastings eventually came to the conclusion that she did it on purpose and was a bad influence on his boys. Danielle says it was not her fault that the boys had developed good taste at an early age, and anyway, she was assisting with their education.

Hastings cannot have fully accepted this line of reasoning, for he wrote to her father complaining that she was deliberately driving all the boys mad and in the interests of school discipline would he please restrain her. Quite what her father was supposed to do, I have no idea. I doubt that he had either.

Sharkskin shorts or not, Danielle became a very good tennis player and played at Beckenham and Junior Wimbledon, where she would either lose six-love, six-love or confound her critics by winning by the same margin, with no apparent rhyme or reason why. Brilliant at algebra, she found it impossible to complete the simplest arithmetic question and ended up in the by now co-educational school as Head Girl and sports captain, studying the vast curriculum of French, English, algebra and tennis. All other subjects had given her up.

The education we received at St. Dunstan's was as unique as Hastings' teaching methods. He always took the sixth form for the first period of the day and would march regally into class wearing his robe and mortarboard, carrying a bundle of morning papers of various political persuasions. He would then distribute them around the class and discuss world events. I am convinced that this was possibly the most effective attempt at educating young minds that I have ever witnessed and, to this day, I never decide my view on world events before I have read accounts in several papers, including the heavies and the tabloid press.

In between educating us and preventing Danielle from inciting the boys to riot, Hastings kept a wife in his flat above the school, and a mistress at the bottom of the orchard in a caravan. This was a constant source of interest and amusement to all the pupils, as were his photograph albums locked in his study. These contained quite beautiful photos of our stately headmaster and his family, in the altogether at the nudist camp he frequented. This resulted in some of the boys writing hilarious ditties and telling gorgeous jokes, which was only stamped out when Hastings found one album marked up with witty captions. He never did discover who had picked the lock to his desk, but then, talent abounded at St. Dunstan's.

Strange to say, although Hastings' extra-marital and nudist activities were common knowledge amongst the pupils, none of the parents ever found out. Presumably when their offspring announced, 'Our headmaster keeps a woman at the bottom of the garden – in a caravan,' no one would believe them.

Another character at St. Dunstan's was Mrs Curtiss, the cook. Large and fat, she had problems with her false teeth. One day when it was my turn to serve the lunch tables, I remember waiting about in the kitchen for plates of stewed apples and custard which was about as revolting as everything else served up at school. Mrs Curtiss was just ladling the custard onto the plates when, to my surprise, her teeth fell out and disappeared into

the giant pot. Undeterred, she plunged her hand into the hot custard and pulled out the offending dentures, which she replaced in her mouth and continued serving.

The incident completely put me off school lunches. As a result, I persuaded my parents to let me opt out and go instead to the local pub, where I was well fed and watered in comfort. I think this must be why I still have a soft spot for pubs.

Recently, at a rather starchy dinner party, a Cabinet minister asked me what school I had attended, I told him. For a moment he was nonplussed,

‘But isn’t St. Dunstan’s a school for the blind?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘that’s why I did so well, I was the only one who could see.’