

## THE BOSS

I had a privileged childhood at my home in Ulster, when we had servants who were our close friends.

Though Mum and Dad might kid themselves that they ran the house, they soon learned that the real power lay in the horny hands of Annie, the little Irish maid.

Mum learned who was the boss when she came down to breakfast, streaming with cold, to be met by an indignant Annie, sturdy arms akimbo, a hand pushing her specs back on her hilarious cherry nose.

“And where d’ye think yer off till?” she challenged. “Yew should be in yer bed!”

“Well, Annie,” quavered Mum, “I thought what with the milder weather ...”

“Ach, shure we were through all this last time,” said Annie impatiently. “Get yew away up till yer bed.”

Mum went ... and a little later some steaming porridge was brought up to her by a less indignant Annie, who said: “Get them intil ye.”

Mum, who knew her place, complied.

Another time, when Mum was getting out the best silver for a party, she was reproved with: “Them’s the Master’s good spoons.”

Once, after an exchange of hot words with Mum, Annie burst out: “How the Master suffers yew!”

Mum said, inwardly, she was inclined to agree.

Dad did not meet his Waterloo till months later, when Mum and he had been having “words” at breakfast and Annie said: “Now that’s enough o’ thon!”

Flabbergasted, Mum and Dad obeyed! Annie had her colours nailed firmly to the mast.

Greatly daring, Mum thought her sufficiently trained to risk a dinner party. Hints were dropped about serving the meal, but Mum was on tenterhooks.

The guests arrived and the ladies were shown upstairs to remove their wraps. Annie thought they were being slow, so she came to the foot of the stairs and, arms akimbo, called up: “Come on down, fer Sarah’s the pertaters mashed on yez!” and pushed her specs back, to emphasise the point.

The meal proceeded smoothly enough. Then, towards its close, Annie, ever mindful of her guests, stuck her head round the door and called out: “Anybunny here for chiz?”

History doesn’t record the guests’ reactions, but I suppose she expected a forest of hands to go up.

In these early days, guests were new to Annie’s ways, but she came to be regarded as one of the house’s chief attractions. Few visitors were so indifferent to her good opinion that they did not pass a few words with “the lady of the manor,” as she came to be called.

And the greatest compliment you could pay her was to say she was “brave and fat got, and the beef was hangin’ round her.”

Sometimes, when a favoured guest was leaving, Annie would present her with a cake, as a parting gift from herself, but made with Mum’s materials. Annie always accepted to herself praise for the cook’s meals.

An overnight guest named Tom, whose tip was thought inadequate, was dubbed “Suxpenny Tom.”

She reprov'd a guest for putting cigarette-ash on a saucer: “You’d better stop that fer I have tae wash them.”

When Mum tried to dissuade a visitor from helping with the dishes, Annie said: “Let her. It’ll save me.”

Asked why she hadn’t invited a caller’s chauffeur into the kitchen for tea, she replied disparagingly that he was only “a wee nyab o’ a man,” as though his size affected his appetite.

Years having rolled by since Annie had seen a certain visitor, she greeted her with: “Heth, but yer stannin’ it well!”

The woman said it made her feel bowed beneath the weight of the years.

With the postman, exchanges ran on economical lines: “Butiful day.” - “Ay, beautiful.” Or “Damp.” - “Ay, damp.”

Members of her inner circle of informants were referred to as “a bunny what knows.”

After watching the university boat race on TV she rushed in to say: “Oxbridge has won!”

It took Dad some time to understand her turn of phrase. One day she entered the drawing room where he was writing letters and announced: “Master, yer lukin’ at th’ dur.”

Dad, puzzled, replied: “No, Annie, I’m looking at the desk.”

Scornfully Annie explained: “There’s ... a maan ... lukin’ ... fer ... ye ... at ... th’ ... dur.”

Once she announced: “The milkman’s been an’ gone an’ never come.”

She told one caller: “She says she’s out,” and another that Mum was “in bed wi’ th’ doctor.”

Annie didn’t like answering the door and was heard muttering: “Thinks peoples has nothin’ tae do only answer th’dur.”

When some callers arrived in the evening, Annie - confused by the upper-class use of the word “dinner” for the evening, instead of the midday meal -told them: “They’re at breakfast.”

Annie, with the Ulster gift of coining phrases, talked of walking across a field diagonally as “trianglewise” or “slantindicular.”

She said two wee boys were found by a policeman hiding a stolen bike in some bushes, “and they took to their two wee beaters” i.e. ran off.

She described someone raised in poverty as “riz coorse.”

With the Irish love of death, disaster and disease, her favourite song was: “As They Carried the Corpse Down the oul’ Bog Road.”

Gleefully recounting her brother’s operation for a swelling, she said: “They tuk a knife till ut, an’ ut hut th’ ceilin’ wi’ a bounce.”

That was the brother “who got his temper riz in the war,” and also suffered from “various veins.” But fortunately he didn’t have to go into “a constipation camp.”

When he died, it was “with all his facilities,” though sadly he was a great loss, as he was described by Annie as “the breadman of the family, with three children living and one in Belfast.” One of them did so well at school that he was described as being “as far as the books’ll put him.”

Hearing that a woman had been taken to an asylum, Mum asked Annie “Did they break it gently to her?”

“No,” said Annie, “They jest sprang it intil her.”

When she first came to us, Annie was unsure about whether or not we stacked the plates after meals, so she asked: “Are yez gentry or does yez stack?”

Annie was obliging, and when asked to help out on her half-day, she agreed, adding that she “knowed th’ way th’ family was circumcised.”

To improve the servants spiritually, I thought some Biblical texts on the wall of their bedroom might help, and I suggested, from Romans: “BE CONTENT WITH YOUR WAGES.”

*Desmond Clark*