LIZZIE: MY LANDLADY

by FRED BASON

Ten years now I've been writing in this annual, and most of the time have written about myself. This year I want to write about someone else—my faithful friend and greatest fan, my ever loyal housekeeper, Liz.

Over the years I must have had at least five hundred letters and postcards asking me why I've never married Lizzie. Let's get that cleared up. Lizzie is a good deal more than twenty years older than me. She's a grannie five times over, and very proud of it! We have stayed together through genuine affection, true respect, and the fact that it suited the two of us.

Ours was not an accidental or even a romantic meeting. Lizzie, who was born, like myself, in Walworth, has known me all my life. There has always been Lizzie somewhere in the background. Some twenty-five years ago she and her son and daughter came to live in the top flat of 152 Westmoreland Road, S.E.17, where I lived downstairs, with my own people. Lizzie had been a widow for a long time. I lived a lonely and rather unhappy life, for my parents were over forty when I was unexpectedly born, and I always felt (and was sometimes told) that I wasn't wanted.

Upstairs there was always a welcome for me, and the kind of encouragement a young chap wants. Time went by and Lizzie's son and daughter left home to get married. Lizzie, who had a bad heart, retired with a little pension. There she was, always upstairs, alone.

One day my mother said to me: 'Fred, you're upstairs so often you might as well stay up there.' Without a moment's hesitation I took up my goods and chattels. Lizzie gave me one of her rooms and became my landlady. Two lonely folks found in each other's company the solution to a lot of problems. From that day to this I've never regretted it. Almost all I am I owe to Lizzie. At least four times through the years I'd have died if it hadn't been for her.

Let's go back and try to fill in the picture of this good and brave and genuine Cockney.

Lizzie never went to school. She was taught her ABC by her own

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daughter, when the said daughter was just fourteen. Letter-writing is a great and grave task for her, and I have to be at her side to spell even the simplest of words. But in a year she writes to at least fifty Saturday Book readers, who have heard about her through me.

Lizzie's mother died when she was seven, and Liz had to be mother for her sister age six and brother age four. Her dad was a jobbing free-lance printer, travelling around with three children and a great liking for wallop. Liz says she was very very often hungry.

The years went by and Lizzie married. Again came tough times, when she was left a widow with two children under four to bring up and not a shilling capital behind her. Having no trade and no education—just a weak heart—she was forced to take any job that would keep body and soul together. She became a ladies' cloakroom attendant. Long hours and little wages... long hours in a badly ventilated basement. Often and often she was on duty 14 hours a day. She had that job for twenty years!

Now allow me to describe her. She is just under five foot two. Weighs a little less than seven stone. Is very slim and neat and fragile... rather like a Dresden china figure when she's all dressed up. Her real name is Mrs Elizabeth Keep, but if you called her that she'd say: 'You ain't Royalty—is you? I'm Lizzie.' There is nothing starchy about Liz and although at times very famous folks call upon me (and I best say here that our 'At Home' day is Thursday) dear Lizzie soon breaks down formal barriers, and everything is all friendly like—as, for instance, when Ruth Draper came to tea and Lizzie said in a loud whisper: 'You can see as how she's a real lady because she keeps her hat on for tea!'

Ruth Draper never fails to ask after Lizzie every time we meet. Once she sent Liz a food parcel all for herself, but Liz shared it with all the neighbours. She'd share her last shilling (my last shilling) with anyone in need.

Liz is very superstitious. You could never get her to walk beneath a ladder or pick up a fallen knife. She couldn't put a shoe on a table or touch spilt salt unless she threw it over her left shoulder. Never will she empty her teacup till she has explored her fortune in the tea leaves.

If the morning is wet she doesn't say it's raining. 'The angels are crying,' she says: 'Some one did wrong last night.' Or, if it's a sunny morning: 'The angels are smiling. Good was done yesterday.' She talks of death as 'God's welcome.'

On October 20 last year I came into the room just too late to hear the opening of the six o'clock news so I asked Lizzie if there was any news. 'Oh, the Queen has given Mr Eden her garter, or something,' says Liz. 'I wonder what Mrs Eden will have to say about that?'

But she isn't by any means as slow as you might think. Here's one of her sayings, straight out of the blue: 'All men are on the look-out for a dream woman. Meanwhile they get's married.'

When she wouldn't believe there was a real person called Lady Docker, because only men work at the docks, I showed her a photo of Lady Docker in a newspaper. 'Docker's not a name; it's an occupation,' says Lizzie; 'Lady Regal would be a better name for her.' And, after a minute or two: 'Then she'd be a picture palace!'

Politics isn't Lizzie's strong point. She has always voted Tory, but only because the local Tory candidate is a man she respects. 'He looks as though he'll do something when he's got something to do.'

Her favourite man of the world is Alec Clunes, the actor, 'He talks so lovely,' says Liz, 'Hearing him talk so nice is worth the price of the ticket.' On January 5 this year Alec Clunes sent Lizzie the largest box of chocolates she'd ever seen in her life. She took hours to pen her thanks—must have torn up twenty pages before she got the letter how she wanted it. No gift can ever have given anyone more joy. One chocolate a month is her ration, and I don't doubt there's still some left in the box as you read these words.

She's also a fan of Frank Pettengell, the character actor—'He looks so comfortable; you sort of feel he wouldn't take a part unless he could do it all proper.'

Jane Wyman and Kirk Douglas are her film favourites. The kind of film she likes is 'one you can get into as one of them—not like a stranger looking in.'

On the radio she likes Bernard Braden, Ted Ray, Tommy Trinder and Susette Tarri. And whenever the announcer ends off a programme by saying 'Harry So-and-So is appearing at the Palace Theatre,' Lizzie adds, 'All the rest are out of work and wish they too were appearing with Harry So-and-So even at the Battersea Power Station.'

One thing that annoys her on the radio is the studio audiences, turning on their laughter and applause like a tap. I've told her how helpful a studio audience is to a performer. 'Let them take their mothers-in-law,' says Liz, 'Then they'll get a real opinion.'

She's never seen a play by Shakespeare or read a book by Dickens. One evening I gave her a volume of Keats to look at. It sent her to

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sleep. When she woke up she said: 'Don't he use a lot of funny words! He gets nowhere ever so fast.'

One Sunday afternoon I was walking through Nelson Square, off the Blackfriars Road, when I saw a plaque on a house saying Shelley lived there once. When I got home I told Liz how much I'd like to live in that house. 'Don't Shelley live there any more?' asked Lizzie. 'No, dear,' says I, 'he don't live there any more.' 'Oh,' says Liz. 'Perhaps he's moved to the L.C.C. flats round the corner.'

When I took her to a classy first night Lizzie nodded her head at some women in very low-cut gowns who were going into the theatre ahead of us and said: 'They look as though they was going in for a good wash instead of a good play.' And, seeing some gentlemen in tails she said: 'Take after their ancestors, don't they? They had tails, too.'

Once when I was in funds, after doing a radio series, I asked Liz if she'd like me to take her abroad. She's never been outside England, not even to Wales or Scotland. 'No, I'd rather not,' she said. 'Why?' I asked her. 'Because I'd meet such a lot of foreigners,' she answered.

Lizzie's never seen a professional golf, tennis or cricket match. But she gets worked up to wild excitement over a big fight on the radio. And she has a system of backing horses which makes a steady little profit year after year. With her permission I'll pass it on. She bets on horses whose last three placings have been third, second, and then unplaced. She says: 'Tried once, got a place. Tried again, nearly got there. Then a nice restful outing. Next time he'll win.' And he does—for Liz.

Lizzie's greatest joy is a deckchair on the sands of a crowded seaside resort. She isn't one for the country. 'Nothing to see but fields. And I'm not a cow.' But she loves flowers and she loves to potter about in the little garden we've got, no bigger than a good-sized dining-table. She's real pleased if anything she's planted is allowed by the cats to come up.

All through the Blitz Lizzie stayed in London, forever bright and cheerful. Golly, the times I was frightened! But Lizzie was unmoved. A bomb destroyed half of her home, but nothing touched her spirit. 'Foolish man, that Hitler. Not guts enough to have a real go. Not sense enough to give up before he's caused a commotion.'

Although our life together has been more successful than most marriages Lizzie says she'll be real happy when she's seen me married. I know—and she knows—I'm no use on my own. 'Have two children,' she says to me, 'and if one of them's a girl I'll be happy if you'll kindly call her Lizzie.'