

ABIGAIL - KEEPER OF GOATS

By Gladys Whitlock

Abigail in the Bible was the widow of a wealthy man who owned many goats.

Abigail Trehearne, better known as Gabby, was also a widow who kept goats, but there the similarity ends. The late Rev. Trehearne had left his widow a very modest eight acre farm complete with a small flock of goats. There were often other animals on the farm, as she was an avid horse trader, but the goats were her way of life. She subsisted largely on goats milk, evangelized her product, and sold it to a faithful band of converts. Of course, she never let any of these activities interfere with the pleasure of talking.

On Sunday morning Gabby finished milking early and turned the goats out to pasture with little delay. She had to hurry to get everything done in time to make the early services at church. She closed the barn door on the hay and animal smells and stepped briskly up the path balancing a small pail of warm foamy milk in each hand. Her back was straight and she marched rather than walked.

In the too warm kitchen the pails were placed on the little white enamel table while Gabby unwrapped. It was quite a process. There were two pair of gloves, a wool pair inside a disreputable old pair of leather ones. Then off came the brown wool crocheted cap, tied under her chin like a baby's bonnet, and decorated with a huge crocheted rose over each ear. Under her plastic raincoat was a heavy wool coat with a moth-eaten fur collar and then a man's suit coat, and finally a shapeless blue sweater. Nor had she neglected her feet. Black rubber boots gave way to sensible brown oxfords and long wool hose were drawn over her Sunday service weight stocking. When Gabby was finally down to her print dress and apron she had shrunk to a skinny vigorous little body with a mop of bleached golden curls falling to her shoulders.

Several kindly souls had attempted to tell her that such a teen-age hair style only accented her wrinkled face and crepey throat, but Gabby's snapping blue eyes had a way of unnerving the most courageous, and instead of making their point, they found themselves weakly agreeing that she looked much younger than her admitted sixty years.

In the face of such admiration, Gabby was usually forced to confide that men still found her irresistible and she was forever having to repel their amorous advances. And it wasn't always

an acknowledge sinner, either. Sometimes she would hint darkly, “You would be surprised at the animal lust lurking in the breast of some professing Christians. They will put on a big show in church every Sunday with their families and then sneak around trying to take advantage of an unprotected widow.”

The unprotected widow always stopped right there and left her exasperated listener helplessly searching for a clue to the identity of the beast in their midst. It was known that Gabby didn't lie, exactly. True, an incident might take on a remarkable coloration seen through her eyes but there was always a morsel of fact somewhere in the story. The mind boggling task was to separate the cloth from the embroidery.

When free of her cocoon of clothing Gabby turned her attention to the milk, carefully straining it through a clean white cloth into quart fruit jars. She capped them, placed two in a brown paper bag for her milk customers and the remaining quart and a half went into the refrigerator for her own use. Next came breakfast: a bowl of cereal and two liver pills. She was free to dress for church.

A cold dizzily day seemed to call for bright color so she chose a red wool dress, red wool coat with a real mink collar and red oxfords. Every closet in the house was packed with such matching outfits which she obtained at rummage sales and auctions. Most of them were hopelessly out of date but Gabby was a skilled seamstress and spent many hours altering them to fit her spar little frame. A brown wool crocheted cap decorated with huge red roses over the ears and a pair of brown gloves completed her costume to her mirrored satisfaction.

Abigail picked up a large basket and a collection of other items and loaded them into the back of the small red chevy in the garage. Besides milk for her customers, there was a sort of survival kit with special water, and things suitable for her delicate stomach. The most vital of all was a small brief case, completely filled with an assortment of pills and patent medicines, for Gabby truly enjoyed her self-diagnosed ill health.

With a last survey for any forgotten article the lady of the house locked the back door and entered her chariot. She pressed the accelerator till the garage shook with the roar, backed quickly out, then shot down the driveway scattering gravel behind her.

Both curbs were solidly lined with parked cars when Gabby arrived but she finally found a place in the next block and hurried into the little church just as the first hymn began. It was one

she knew and her voice was raised in joyful song as she proceeded to her favorite seat in the first pew. There was little room left but her bright blue eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles so obviously looked for those seated to provide room that the line shifted on the bench and uncovered a narrow space at the end.

Gabby's body was small but her voice was not, nor was it tuneful. She approached singing as a contest in volume which she usually won. Often people sitting near her could not hear their own voices and when they could they did not seem to be singing the same tune. But Gabby loved to sing. Sometimes she felt the joy of a good hymn lifting her right into heaven and she simply had to shout a heartfelt, "Hallelujah!" in spite of some hoity-toity poker-faces in the congregation. She suspected they didn't have much real religion anyhow; they were too cold and stiff.

Abigail dozed a little during the sermon. She did wish Rev. Marker would stand up and shout for the Lord once in a while. He was a good man of God but a little dull to listen to.

Now when her dear husband was alive, there was a Preacher! Fire and brimstone and thunder! He brought the joy of Heaven and the fear of Hell right into the pulpit and shook them at you. No one went to sleep during one of the Rev. Trehearne's sermons!

The little widow wiped away a tear. One must trust in the Lord's wisdom but sometimes it was hard to carry on his work alone.

As the service ended Gabby stood up purposefully and without pausing for her usual visiting with those around her and hurried up the aisle. Her goal was a broad-shouldered man already walking out the door. She passed Rev Marker with only a smile, catching up with Mr. Johnson just as he reached his car. Both men sighed; Rev. Marker with relief, Mr. Johnson with resignation.

As she called his name the big man turned. "What can I do for you, Gabby?" But Abigail was not one to spoil a visit with a direct question and answer as he well knew.

First, he was required to report on his sick wife's condition, then it appeared only fair to listen to the many details of Gabby's daily fight for health, covering the state of her stomach, liver and bowels.

He at last extracted the information that it was the plumbing under her sink which needed his attention and since she was short of cash, he was to become the proud owner of a valuable

bird dog she had recently acquired in trade. As he did not hunt Mr. Johnson had no use for a bird dog, valuable or otherwise, but Gabby was off on a new subject before he could say so. Thinking of his waiting Sunday dinner he eventually interrupted her to say he would send his helper out on Monday but Gabby immediately vetoed that plan.

She didn't like Tom Fleming. He wasn't a Christian. He drank. He used foul language and what's more, he wasn't much of a plumber in the first place.!

Mr. Johnson floundered for a reply. There was a good deal of truth in her accusations; enough that if he lost his job Tom would have a very difficult time finding other work. It made a real problem because the man had somehow become a responsibility as well as an employee. Loyalty demanded a defense, honesty made it a rather lame one.

"I know he isn't the best, Abigail, but he's all the help I have."

"This was the opening Gabby had been waiting for and she sailed into it with a direct broadside. She knew the very person he needed; a fine young man with a wife and a baby and no job. He was strong and honest and a hard worker, in short, the ideal apprentice. And beside that, he had a baby who was allergic to everything they gave him till the doctor prescribed goat's milk. He was already gaining weight on his new diet but they couldn't afford to pay Abigail until Jimmy could find a job.

The big man patiently waited out the barrage. He saw that he had been neatly trapped and was both a little annoyed and a little amused. However he was not a man to be pushed into firing an employee out of hand. With genuine regret he explained he could not afford two helpers, but promised to work out something for her young friend soon if it was possible.

Reluctantly, Gabby had to accept this answer and let him escape to his dinner but they both knew that this was not the end of her efforts.

From the empty sidewalk the bright old eyes surveyed the area but there was no one left to talk to She was alone. She tucked the fur collar a little tighter under her chin and hurried up the quiet street to her car.

Not till she saw there was someone in it did she remember her promise to drive Emma Wilson home. Emma was really a good person even if she was horrible fat and suddenly Gabby felt a little less lonely.

"I forgot you were waiting, " she said as she opened the car door. "Mr Johnson and I had

such a nice visit.”

“I didn’t mind waiting.” Emma was always pleasant.

The smaller woman drew out her brief case and the jar of water and swallowed a delicate pink nerve pill before settling herself in the seat. The key turned, the motor roared and the red car was firmly wheeled into the street.

Instantly from behind their car there was a terrific screech of punished tires and an outargued horn blast as the driver of a swiftly approaching car made desperate attempts to avoid a collision. He succeeded by swinging around the Chevy, narrowly missing a parked car on the left and barely regaining his side of the street in the face of oncoming traffic.

When Emma found her voice, she gasped, “Oh Lordy, Gabby! Didn’t you see him coming?”

“Well, yes,” Gabby admitted defensively, “But he’s the one in the wrong. He was speeding and this is only a twenty mile zone.”

Emma’s mouth opened and closed several times but her voice was lost again. Abigail didn’t notice. She glared after the other car only until it was a block down the tree-lined street. She was too full of her newest enthusiasm to let her attention be diverted for long.

Luckily it was a quiet afternoon. There were very few other cars on the street and Emma’s composure gradually returned so she could concentrate on what Gabby was telling her.

The impish old face sparkled as the little widow recounted her conversation with the plumber. It was faithfully detailed and Gabby did not lie, but she did interpret. Mr. Johnson would have been surprised to learn that his real intention was to do exactly as she wanted him to. He just needed time to find a way to get rid of Tom Fleming. Really the man was just too kind-hearted for his own good, letting someone take advantage of him like that.

Abruptly Gabby interrupted her monologue and made a sudden left into a grocery store parking lot. She assured her startled passenger she would only be in the store a minute.

Forty-five minutes later the store’s weary assistant manager knew the full story of Jimmy Murchison and his allergic baby, Mr. Johnson and Tom Fleming. Poor Emma was miserably cold and heartily resolved to find another way home from church next Sunday.

As Gabby deposited her purchase in the back seat and started the car, the very cold lady drew a breath of relief on which she nearly choked as her driver shot the car out into the street

without a glance in either direction.

“I just couldn’t get away,” Gabby explained serenely as the sparse Sunday traffic gave way to her charge. “The assistant manager is a good friend of mine and he wanted to know all about Jimmy.” This, of course, was a statement that would have surprised the assistant manager on both counts.

They were only two blocks from Emma’s home and she was just beginning to feel sure of making it when the little car darted off the street again into a driveway. Fishing in the back of the car, Gabby came up with a quart of goat’s milk.

“This old man has been buying my milk for two years. Won’t drink anything else,” she announced. “I won’t be so long this time,” and disappeared around the back of the house.

True to her word she was only forty minutes this time, but when she returned her passenger was no where to be seen. Gabby looked at the empty seat uncertain for a moment.

“Some people sure are impatient.” Then she shrugged. “Fat as she is, it’ll probably be good for her to walk a little.”

It was after two-thirty and Abigail realized she was hungry. This seemed as good a place to eat as any. Getting into the back seat, she wrapped her legs snugly in the wool car robe. After unpacking various parcels from the big basket, she bent her head in a brief thanks to her Lord. On her lap lay a small piece of fried chicken, crackers, hot goat’s milk in a thermos and a handful of sticky sweet dates.

With her wrinkled old child face dwarfed between the crocheted wool bonnet and the fur collar, she munched away contentedly. After her lunch the briefcase yielded a bottle of thick white liquid labeled, “The Ideal Aid to Digestion.” A dose of this left a suspiciously alcoholic smell in the car. She neatly re-packed the basket and matter-of-factly curled upon the back seat for a nap.

Once a man’s face appeared at the house window to look out at her. He grinned and shook his head but didn’t disturb her.

The cold seeping through the car robe woke her half an hour later and Gabby climbed stiffly out of her car. She stretched and swung her arms before getting back into driver’s seat. The motor roared to life and a refreshed spirit was backing out and heading for her next and last errand of the day.

Because she so enjoyed the young Murchison family, their milk delivery came last so that

she could visit with them till time for the evening church service. Maybe they could even be persuaded to go with her. It would be almost like going with the family she had never had.

But Abigail met with disappointment at the end of the ride. The neglected little house at the edge of town was empty and quiet. For a while Gabby waited in the old chair on the front porch, idly pushing back the stuffing where it crawled out of the worn upholstery, but it was too cold there. After a while she tried the door. It was unlocked and picking up the quart of milk, she went in.

She put the milk in the noisy old refrigerator and looked around. There was a banked fire in the old coal burning stove indicating they would be back before long. She decided to wait. A shovel full of fresh coal and an open draft did very satisfactory thing to the fire. Abigail laid aside her coat and bonnet and pulled the wooded rocker up to the warmth of the stove. She was dosing softly over her little pocket Bible when Jimmy's old pick-up rattled into the driveway.

If Jimmy and Mary Ellen were a bit taken back by their unexpected welcome, they didn't show it. Jimmy sat down and listened hopefully to Gabby's optimistic forecast for his future, while Mary Ellen prepared a bottle for the baby. They both had reservations about sharing the old lady's high enthusiasm, but they couldn't help feeling a bit elated.

When it came to the subject of the evening church service neither of them really wanted to go. In common with many of their generation they had little interest in formal worship but Gabby looked so hurt at their attempts to refuse that they stumbled over the words and glanced questioningly at each other. When she offered the enticement of introducing Jimmy to the man who might soon be his employer they surrendered and hurried to dress.

On one point, however, Jimmy was adamant. They would not ride with her. She could take her car or ride with them in the pick-up but Jimmy was doing his own driving. Gabby, afraid of losing what she had gained, quietly decided on both vehicles.

It was dark when they arrived at the church but the street lights showed many gaps in the parking spaces along the curb. There wouldn't be much of a crowd tonight but to Gabby, it would be a special service. She almost felt there should be trumpets announcing the triumph of her arrival with these new souls in the house of the Lord.

The warmth of the vestibule clouded her glasses and Abigail had to wipe them before she could find Mr. Johnson near the front of the church. Proudly she led her young people up and

presented them. She was glad they were early. It would give them time to become acquainted with everyone before the service began.

The door opened again, then slammed shut. Several people looked back and were suddenly still. Gabby saw Rev. Marker staring past her with a shocked look. She turned and there was Tom Fleming standing unsteadily in the vestibule doorway with an old-fashioned forty-five pistol in his hand making wavering circles in Mr. Johnson's direction.

"You psalm-singin' ol' hypocrite," he shouted. "You can't fire me, I quit! But first I want what's coming to me!"

Mr. Johnson looked stunned. "What gave you the idea I was going to fire you?"

"That ol' Bitch is spreadin' it all over town!" He pointed the gun at Gabby and then swung it back toward his employer. But I 'm sick and tired of workin' like a dog for you, anyway. I can make more right in my basement than you ever paid me. Just gimme what I got comin'.

Jimmy was the only one to move. Without a word he stopped in front of the plumber blocking Tom's view.

"Out of my way, you!" There was an ear splitting blast as the gun went off, damaging only the corner of the ceiling, and leaving the drunken man with a stupid look of surprise on his face.

That made Gabby angry.

"Tom Fleming!" she said in a voice that made him jump. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Mr. Johnson's been better to you than you deserve." With a no-nonsense stride and forward jutting chin she marched up the aisle, shaking her finger at him. "You give me that gun before you really hurt someone!"

The shock of having actually fired the gun had partially sobered the man and he stood there looking confused and meekly let her take the weapon out of his hand. Then he slumped into the seat and hid his face against the next pew.

Mr. Johnson walked up the aisle. "Gabby, did you tell someone I was going to fire Tom?"

Abigail squirmed and felt her face grow very warm. "Not really, Mr. Johnson. Someone may have taken it that way but I didn't actually say it."

"It don't matter," Tom said sullenly. "I was quittin' anyway."

Happily for Gabby, at that moment the sheriff walked in and she carried the pistol over to him. He slid it into his jacket pocket and looked around at the agitated faces.

“I heard a shot. What happened?”

For once the talkative old lady let others tell the story. She didn't really think she was to blame for Tom's predicament, yet she felt distinctly uncomfortable about it.

When Sheriff Graham heard how Abigail took the gun he frowned in her direction. “That was a pretty dangerous thing to do, Gabby.”

“I have complete trust in the Lord's protection, Sheriff.”

It was in the officer's mind that she might have considered a little earthly caution as well, but he returned to his questioning.

At last, the sheriff was satisfied and he grinned at the unshaven miscreant. “So you can make a lot of money in your basement, Tom? I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut that's where the still is that I've been trying to find all year!”

Tom's glare showed the sheriff had made a hit and Abigail saw the light. If the man was a bootlegger perhaps the Lord had been guiding her unruly tongue, after all.

By the time the sheriff had departed with his prisoner and the congregation settled in the pews for evening worship, Gabby was feeling quite virtuous. By the time the service ended it was obvious to her that she had been the instrument of Divine Providence meant to free Mr. Johnson from his shackles.

It was very late that night when the widow got her bloated goats upon the milking stand. They seemed grateful to be relieved of their tight udders.

It had been a long cold day and Abigail was very tired but the Lord had made everything come out all right. Tom was where he deserved to be and Mr. Johnson's new apprentice would be out next week to fix the leak under her sink.

As the milk hissed rhythmically into the pail Gabby yawned and was well satisfied with her thoughts.

