The San Francisco Sunday Call

WOMEN'S HOUSEHOLD GIRLS'

PAGE OF FICTION | TWO PAGES OF RECIPES AND IDEAS | PAGE FOR MISSES

LEM TIBBETTS' CELESTIAL CAMPAIGN

by Hugh Pendexter

YES, Martha, I should be a happy wife today, despite my 50 years of married life, if Aretus Hopeful Carr would quit meddling with other folks' affairs and trying to run the universe. Love a duck, Martha! when that man can't stir up trouble to settle in any other way he'll write letters to the editor of the Weekly Clarion and sign 'em Nux Vomica or Probonobocis, and such like heathen names. And yet, if it hadn't been for one of his crusades, as he calls 'em, Lemuel Tibbetts wouldn't be a happy married man today, with three to provide for. A. H. Carr is a natural born matchmaker, you know, and always argues that as men were created to marry, the quicker they git married the sooner they'll git used to it. And what from his letter writing and crusading Lem got his wife.

I know, Martha, that you know how A. H. Carr's last crusade had to do with town meeting and Lem's election as head s'lectman, but you don't know the true inwardness of it all—no one does but A. Hopeful Carr—so, I'll tell you.

Aretus H. wrote a stinging letter to the Clarion, complaining of bossism in our town. I never knew we had any bossism here, being a farming community, largely; but Aretus H. C. said the town was reeking with it. I only knew that most of the men were born republicans, except old Orlando Whitten, who being sot in his ways, walks four miles every election to cast a democratic vote for General McClellan. When I read A. H. Carr's latest in the paper I didn't know he wrote it. It was signed "Invincible Defender."

"Who is he?" I asked, not suspecting Mr. Carr, as he usually gits his signing names from the back of the dictionary.

"Me," he chuckled.

I scented danger in a jiffy, and jostling my spectacles into a firmer position I demanded: "What be you going to defend?" I'll admit, Martha, I spoke rather sharp, but drat the man. At times I feel as if I'd married the St. Vitus dance, or some rare nervous disease, he is that uneasy to save somebody or something.

"I'm going to defend your hearth and home, Abigail," he replied, speaking coldly.

"We have no hearths since we bricked up the fireplaces," I suspiciously reminded.

"I spoke meteorically," he frowned. "I am about to strike a deathblow to the machine. I'm about to sound the knell of bossism. I am about to tie a can to Edgar Rollins by naming the next head s'lectman of this place." And he flapped the paper before my eyes.

Well, Martha, I sighed to think we never had any peace and quiet but what he had to be took with intellectual measles, as I call it, and break out. In a chilly tone I asked who his candidate was and he said he hadn't any. Said he always believed in writing a stinging letter and then living up to it.

"And you don't know who'll run against Rollins?" I asked in disgust; for if he will be a conspirator, my pride demands that he beat the rest of them.

"That's only a detail," he smirked. "The song must be finished before the singer can sing. I'll pick my candidate later."

"You'll pick him now," I observed, intending he shouldn't select some one who would make him the laffing stock of the whole neighborhood. "I must know his name at once."

He frowned and bit his thumb, but I had on my steel specs. If I'd had on my gold ones he'd 'a' defied me. But behind the steel ones I'm adamite and he knew it.

"I'd been thinking of Lemuel Tibbetts," he admitted.

"He ain't lived here but a very short time," I gloomily reminded.

"He's in love with a Porterville girl and needs the $300 a year salary to marry on," said Aretus.

Well, Martha, I must admit that A. H. C. is a tender hearted man and my bosom always palps when he speaks of youth and love and says; "Remember, Abby, when I was soft headed and placed the band of courage on your finger?"

So I smoothed out my apron and said, "Lemuel Tibbetts it is then, if you put it on them grounds."

"But dod rot his name," groaned A. Hopeful, to quote him ad litem, Martha.

"Why?" I gasped.

"My candidate has got to have a short name," he sheepishly explained. "My scheme—I'll confess I have one—depends on the candidate's name being short."

Blessed land of sin, Martha! His words struck me in a heap. I was afraid Aretus Hopeful C. had been believing in signs, or sending a lock of his hair away to some fortune teller, or having his hand read. "Mr. Carr," I demanded—and nervous in the speaking I'll warrant you, Martha—"you aint been cutting cards, or studying the tea cup, have you?"

"I aint," he chuckled, pleased to see me worried. "I'm simply planning to conquer the demon bossism and to git the pure eagle of liberty to screaming over this town. I had planned on Tibbetts, and still I can't sacrifice our liberty on the altar of sympathy. I feel for Tibbetts, but dinged if I can see that I can reach him."

"It's better if you can't," I agreed.

"He aint known here very well and you'd better put some one up, who at least will git two votes. So far as names go Lem Tibbetts is short enough—"

"Hooray!" he gently cried, raising a finger for silence while he rassled in thought. "Lem Tibbetts! Yep; that's short enough and will fit. What a fool I was to think only of Lemuel Tibbetts, which is two syllables longer."

But bless you, Martha! beg as I would, he would explain nothing more. If Aretus H. Carr had lived a few hundred years back he'd have made a collection of all the thrones of Europe.

Now, Martha, some of what I am about to tell I witnessed and heard with my own naked eyes, and some Aretus told me when in a meller an' confidential mood.

As A. is always uneasy in hours of scheming he rushed off and told Lemuel to be prepared to run for office. Of course Lemuel was tickled to death, only he didn't know which way to run. "I'll fix that. It's only a detail," said Aretus H. C.

His idea of fixing it was to go to Deacon Witham's store and announce as how Lemuel was to be the next s'lectman. For the first time in 20 years, Martha, Deacon Witham counted a crate of eggs without finding one missing, so great was his surprise. Then after the numb feeling wore off, the loungers began to laff and even Parson Durgin joined in.

"You'll all vote for him, I know," said A. H. Carr, backing to the door. When he got home his face was creased with new lines of setness and his mouth was drawn down till his chin looked islandy despite his whiskers. One reason why he was vexed was because Rollins badgered him to bet a quarter's worth of Witham's best seegars that Lem wouldn't git more'n two votes.

"He knew that as a Christian man you couldn't gamble," I soothed.

"I offered him odds and he backed down because the parson was there and he wants the church vote," gloomily replied Aretus, much to my sorrow.

Well, Martha, the following week was a trying one for both of us, for Aretus H. Carr was the town's talk with nearly every one making fun of him. Them that didn't laff tried to humor him, thinking he was crazy.

Minerva Porter's aunt made him herb tea and tried to coax him to drink it by using baby talk. Then the fish peddler told Mel White that they was going to hold special services at the Pugger schoolhouse and pray for him. All this stirred him mightily, but it wasn't nothing to when he discovered that Lemuel was ashamed to be seen with him. When it come to us that Lem told Witham he never intended to run till Aretus urged him and didn't want folks to blame him for being shoved into the race by A. H. C., Aretus said if it wasn't for innocent womanhood waiting to git married he'd see Lemuel hung before he'd stir a hand to help him.

And Rollins said, "You aint running, Lemuel. You aint in any race. You aint even slipped your halter yet and got into a walk."

Then Mel White, drat him! asked, "Where's your trainer keeping hisself these days?"

This was meant for sarcasm, as Aretus had just left town and some folks believed he'd skun out and left Lemuel to battle alone.

But I knew better, although he wouldn't tell me where he was going, except as he promised not to go to any theater shows. But I knew he had a purpose; I knew there were some mighty bright plans floating around in that queer shaped skull of his.

And thus, Martha, the neighbors laughed and asked me questions as to where Aretus Hopeful C. had gone, and I kept my temper only by degrees. Then about 10 days before town meeting A. Hopeful returned home in the dead of night. Lawd love us, Martha! but wasn't I glad to see that pesky critter! The minute I heard the hoss in the yard I grabbed a lantern and rushed forth.

"Abigail, go back immediately and to once," was his welcoming words. And when Mr. C. speaks in that tone of voice I usually humor him and let him have his own way.

"Vote for Lem Tibbetts," I heard some one confidentially growl as I closed the kitchen door.

"Bully for you," snickered Aretus. And I knew he had got one vote for Lemuel, but how I couldn't imagine.

When he came into the house he kept laughing softly, but refused to tell me who was with him in the yard. "I'll have more voters seeing the blessed light of truth inside of 24 hours," he added.

I recalled his words next evening when we heard a groaning noise at our front door, and on going out found Parson Durgin lying earthward. We pulled him to his feet and got him inside.

"Has—has Lemuel Tibbetts any hidden strength?" he whispered, sinking into a rocker. "Is there a secret political undercurrent flowing his way? Is there a silent protest being made against Mr. Rollins' re-election?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired A. C., twisting his whiskers over his mouth.

"How did you come to fall?" was my humaner question.

The parson sighed dismal like and explained: "While walking along this evening I hear several men say, 'Vote for Lem Tibbetts.' There was a deadly sameness in their voices that impressed me as being meant for Mr. Tibbetts. Else it was the pass word of some secret society. I became nervous and agitated and in hurrying up your path caught my toe and fell."

"Who were the men?" choked Aretus.

The parson's face, Martha, looked awfully troubled—some would have said wild—and his voice trembled as he answered: "I don't know. I think one man was on the roof of the church. I heard him call, and then he was answered from the second story of Deacon Witham's house."

"Strange!" mumbled A. H.

"The voices smacked of threats," whispered the parson. "Can it be a secret society is using the garret of the church?"

"Mebbe," muttered my husband. "You might go up and investigate, parson."

But the parson refused violently, and then I suggested that Deacon Witham ought to be notified if any secret society was prowling around in his second story.

"I'll drop in and tell him," shivered the parson; and despite his religion, Martha, he was scared.

Well, I lit him to the door, Martha, and, believe me, my hair stood on end, false and all, when a hoarse voice near by cried out, "Vote for Tibbetts." I nearly dropped the lamp.

"There it is again," whispered the parson in a chattering voice. "It sounds like a command." And he drew back.

"It is a command," groaned E. Hopeful from behind me. "Can you see him?"

"He's up in a tree," I whispered, judging by the sound.

"Oh, blessings of peace and sin!" babbled the parson. "He's up in a balloon." And true as I sit here, Martha, there rang out them fatal words from on high, "Vote for Lem Tibbetts."

Aretus advised the parson to say nothing about the matter, but next day the whole village seemed to know about it, there being several besides us and the parson who claimed to have heard the celestial voices. Some said it was the work of a ventriloquist; others believed some one had been using one of the college contraptions they call a megaphone; while the Bean boy, being a dime novel individual, said it was a man in an airship and, what's more, he had seen the ship. I held my tongue in public, but I'll warrant you, Martha, A. H. Carr was never questioned so keenly before. And I learned nothing. He would only smirk and grin, and after reaching the door remind me that "what women don't know never happened." He's very tiring when he has a mystery on his mind and won't tell me.

On the evening after he plucked the parson from the gravel, as it were, I could feel the excitement in the air. The nightly visitors at Witham's store didn't wait for dusk before congregating, and more'n one man was glad to wait for a neighbor and walk along in company. The fish peddler, who had drove in from Porterville late in the afternoon, announced that the Tibbetts slogan had been dropped from the skies, all the way from Porterville to Otisville. It was his budget of news that made the sneering ones draw a long face. He also told how old Miss Thurlow, whose grandmother was said to be a witch and who herself claims the power to dry up cows and make warts, told him the voices was prophetic and had better be heeded.

I went to the store with Aretus and took up a position back of the stove, rather keen to hear the news and gossip. The peddler had just finished repeating his story and was leaving when we arrived. The circle kind of tightened and then broke open and lost a link, as no one seemed to care to be next to the door. One man sort of aimlessly wandered up to the stove and his neighbor sauntered over to the candy counter, until their shifting about reminded me of an old time square dance. Fast as a man was forced into a position near the door he would melt away, as it were. And I was ashamed to see Aretus Hopeful Carr a-carrying on as if he was scared worse'n any one.

"I'm gitting tired of these danged yarns," sneered Edgar Rollins, but his voice was faintlike, Martha.

"If you can find out who started all this rumpus you can have the law on 'em," spoke up Mel White, crowding by Orlando Whitten to git to the stove.

"No," hurriedly says Rollins, "I have no hard feelings against anybody or anything." And he looked at the door and spoke in a loud voice.

"Well, it's your funeral, not our'n," said old man Cookson, following Mel White.

"We all have our troubles and that is his," sighed a man on the soapbox.

"It ain't my trouble," cried Edgar. His tone was very angry and yet sort of quivery like. "I ain't got no kith nor kin with voices what yelp from the clouds. I'll be danged—"

"Hush!" hoarsely cried the deacon, backing behind the sugar scales, "what's that?"

"What's what?" whispered the parson.

"I don't hear nothing," muttered Aretus, wandering in my direction.

"Mebbe it's the wind," gulped Mel White. "Anyway, it don't concern me, thank the Lawd!"

"Nor me," sniveled old man Cookson. "I don't even expect to vote this year. Shows how much I'm interested in politics."

"It certainly ain't nothing to me, even if voices do ring and rampage all the night. I ain't in politics," declared Orlando Whitten.

"Wish you wouldn't always be talking about politics," groaned the deacon. "The parson and me ain't interested and I'm gitting sick of having my store used for a debating society. Hark!" and, Martha, he was a picter to behold as he held a hand to his ear and leaned half over the counter.

"See anything?" stuttered the parson. "I thought I heard a moaning sound—a creeping, slinking sort of a sound," choked the deacon. And, Martha, it began to git on my nerves and I shuddered as I see them men knit closer together.

"If all politicians was to quit this store you probably wouldn't hear nothing unpleasant or mysterious," murmured Aretus, walking on tiptoe toward the counter.

Instantly the circle turned a severe gaze on Edgar Rollins, while he, Martha, for all the world looked like some dumb critter run to earth. "For 2 cents I'd quit this race and not run for office," he cried, peeking over his shoulder at the moon.

"Will ye kindly quit talking politics?" bitterly demanded the deacon, his face looking sweaty and his head twisted so he could always look behind him.

"Can't a man say he ain't in politics?" cried Edgar. "Be I to be snapped up and my head snapped off just because I refuse to run for office? I don't want no dod rotted, measly—"

"Hark!" cried A. H. Carr, raising a hand.

And, horrors, Martha! somewhere outside there rose a long, shrill bleat. Love a duck, Martha! if it hadn't been for the cracker barrel I should have flung myself on Aretus' bosom. I knew he was behind the mystery in some way, but it was too creepy and shivery just the same. Besides, that long drawn out cry puzzled him, I could see by the startled expression on his face. Old man Cookson said it sounded like the screech of an Injun devil, while the deacon behind the counter, I noticed, began weighing out an ax handle.

"It's the wind," faltered the parson.

"No! no!" choked Edgar Rollins. "It's the cuss that's hanging over me for gitting the deacon to agree to throw me the church vote if I would see he furnished all the supplies for the poorfarm," and he half staggered, half run to the counter and crowded in beside the deacon.

"Oh, Lawd! It's coming nearer," gasped Mel White, racing for the counter. "Ed Rollins, if you're a man leave this store. It's you that it's interested in."

"I'd rather be a stalled ox in the house of the righteous than to hold any office in the tents of the wicked," bleated Edgar, but no one seemed to hear him. Every eye was strained in watching the open door, where a black patch of night would soon be livened up by the mysterious Something, everybody believed. Every mouth sagged open about two inches, and every man behind the counter—all being there by this time—leaned forward as if to be the first to discover the yeller.

Now the hooting was very close and I got more nervous when I see Aretus H. Carr fondle his brow in perplexity and reach for a two pound weight. Then, Martha, there was one prolonged scream and every man ducked from sight behind the counter, leaving the store empty—and I sank behind the cracker barrel until only my head showed.

And, land of everlasting sorrow, Martha, what d'ye s'pose it was? It was Lemuel Tibbetts, who had been making the noise; when he struck the door he was revolving like a hoopsnake and at first I thought he was a runaway serpent. When he straightened out, I saw his face was aching with terror and he let out another yelp that made the row of heads on the counter vanish like grain before the reaper. But he caught a glimpse of them, and with a smothered cry of joy bounded over the counter and into their midst.

"Keep back!" commanded Deacon Witham. "Keep your distance till you explain what you mean by disturbing our private conversation."

"And a conversation what was making you our unanimous choice for head s'lectman," loudly cried Edgar Rollins.

"It—it chased me!" panted Lemuel, not seeming to hear what they was saying, but snuggling up closer to the men.

"Chased ye?" dully repeated old man Cookson, slowly drawing out his jackknife. "And, fellers, he's come here and left the door open."

"Go out! Go away!" stuttered the deacon.

"Go your way in peace and—close the door," said the parson.

Lemuel said that according to religion they was all brothers and that several of them belonged to his lodge. "I feel easier here," he wound up. "If I'm going to be got, I'd rather be got here among my friends—my dear old friends—than out there in the road."

"What—what might you opine was chasing you?" asked Aretus H. Carr in a weak voice, while Mel White closed the door with a rake handle.

"I should say it was like a—a flying swordfish with the ears of a man eating bloodhound," groaned Lemuel. "It—it called my name."

"Great Scott!" whispered Orlando Whitten, rolling his eyes roofward.

"It's probably out there now," muttered Edgar.

"Out there, awaiting for Lemuel Tibbetts," said Mr. Cookson.

"Then it can wait till it waits its derned head off—" began Lemuel.

"Stop!" commanded the deacon, raising a trembly hand. "Don't speak ill of the unknown."

"Mr. Tibbetts," gravely informed the parson, "we don't know what you have to do with these mysterious forces, but we wish to say you are choice of all of us for head s'lectman. Be I right, brother?"

"You be," heartily cried Edgar.

"I ain't," roared Lemuel, smiting his hands together. "I'm clinging to the old wreck of Zion. I'm a church member. My heart ain't in earthly things. I won't run. I'm not going to be chased all over the country by flying devils a-yelling out my name as common as if I was a tooth powder!"

"Lemuel," kindly but firmly explained the deason, "it's too late for you to back out. We have accepted you. It seems—ahem—that if not a supernatural, at least a derned unusual power wants you elected. What that power is don't concern any of us, as none of us are in politics."

"We are out of politics, except as we vote for Neighbor Lem," declared Rollins.

"No friend of mine will vote for me," fired back Lemuel, speaking bitterly. "Ain't I got troubles enough without being voted for?"

Then up spoke A. H. Carr and said: "It ain't a question of liking, or disliking. It's simply a question of duty. Every loyal citizen will vote for L. Tibbetts."

And, Martha, like an echo a-harking from a ghostly tomb, there came drifting down miles and miles up in the black sky the hoarse, solemn reminder, "Vote for Lem Tibbetts." It was awesome, Martha, and the men turned a pasty white.

When they went home they all kept together as far as they could. Parson Durgin kept along with us, walking in between, till we got to our gate; then he started and run. The Bean boy's dog couldn't keep up with him.

Well, on the next day you couldn't coax a man to talk politics, or even mention town meetings, except as Lemuel went around with a petition and tried to get the neighbors to sign that they wouldn't vote for him. Of course, he had some argument on his side. He said he wanted to get married, but he doubted if a woman wanting to enjoy housekeeping would take kindly to a man who was haunted.

However, Martha, his petition did no good. They'd have voted for him if he'd been a dead man. "If I was incorporated," he moaned to me, "I could sue the town for what I've suffered in my feelings."

But all the time Parson Durgin was repeating, "We have no time to think of men," and no one listened to Lemuel. The last two days before election he spent largely in the cellar. And on town meeting day every vote was cast for him, except his own. He voted for Aretus. He refused to accept the office, but the crowd was cheering him so you couldn't hear his refusal, and to stop his chatter Aretus dragged him to our house for dinner.

As true as I am a helpmate of Aretus Hopeful Carr, those voices were nothing but tame crows. A. H. C.'s nephew, over in Porterville, catches them young and splits their tongues, or something, and learns them to talk. They'll talk a parrot blind. Even as we climbed up into the cupola, where they were kept, they both croaked: "Vote for Lem Tibbetts."

"I feed 'em corn, and after I put them out at night they're anxious to get back as soon as they've tried their wings," said Aretus.

And eyeing A. H. C. knowingly, they repeated their one little speech. "Dang your cute little picters," cried Lemuel, now very happy. "Of all the nifty, double barrel schemes— Say, Aretus, I'm mighty glad I didn't blab anything about not being naturalized. Moved into this state from Canada, you know."

"Not naturalized!" howled Aretus. "Then you can't serve in office."

But Lemuel allowed he could, and as Aretus didn't care to tell the truth about the crows, he did.

And that's the true inwardness of Aretus Carr's crusade and the explanation of how Lemuel was able to marry the Porterville girl.

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