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A Lunch Basket Romance.

By HARRIET WHITNEY SYMONDS.

From early youth Lucena Cottle had thirsted in secret for a romance, and now she was face to face with her thirtieth birthday and none had come her way. Nor was the outlook for the future at all dazzling. Sidetracked by circumstances, in the home of her widowed cousin-in-law, Mrs. Drusilla Fifer, who took boarders for a livelihood, Lucena had few advantages and little opportunity to make the most of her natural charms of person. She was tall and slim, and with proper draping might have attained the distinction of "Style", but Diana's self could scarcely be stylish in a perpetual brown apron of the shapeless, flapping bungalow pattern; and what good was pretty brown hair with a twisty curl born in it, when prisoned in a serviceable dust cap? Furthermore, how could one, handicapped by a disposition both slow and shy, win the tributes that go to those of a nimble wit, ready tongue, and easy manner. Not that Lucena would have been able to exercise those fascinations freely, had she possessed them. Too wary was the eye Mrs. Drusilla Fifer kept upon her, and also upon her young men boarders, to admit of such a course. In these days of maidless kitchens, Lucena was, in a domestic sense, priceless; her culinary accomplishments were not to be wasted upon an outsider—not if Mrs. Fifer knew her own tenacity of purpose; and not to mention that it would have shortened her list of boarders by one!

However, as it chanced, the rank and file of Mrs. Fifer's boarders—slangy young clerks, mostly, whose brains ran to "swell" ties, "grand" movie shows, and the like—made slight impression upon the fancy of Lucena. One, only one, was there whose stock stood high with her, and he, sad fact, was as helplessly shy as she, herself.

Dutton Filbert was not stylish, and his ties never bothered him. He was with an automobile company, and no doubt wore greasy overalls when at work, but he was always neat in the house, and Lucena liked his twinkling brown eyes, and his good-natured way of taking the world. She also admired his freedom from false pride. The other fellows complained—a bit boastfully—of the number of "bucks" their downtown lunches cost them; but Mr. Filbert cheerfully carried his lunch each day in a covered brown basket, the same, of course, being duly taken into account in his weekly board bill.

The task of filling Mr. Filbert's lunch basket daily was Lucena's and was one that she executed with zest. For, of all branches of cuisine duty, the preparing of sandwiches was one she especially loved and excelled in. No crude structures of slab-like bread and ragged, gristly meat were those turned out by Lucena. Her's—to see them was to taste them, and to taste them was to call for more. And no day-in-day-out sameness of construction dulled the appetite of the fortunate partaker thereof. One day, sliced cold, roast beef, thin, even, finely lean with narrow edging of delicate fat nestled between the smooth, daintily buttered slices of white bread and brown. Another day plentiful shavings of sweet boiled ham, mustard-embellished, took the place of beef; or minced chicken, mingled with gravy; or scrambled egg, skilfully blended with chopped bacon of the alluring streak-of-fat-and-streak-of-lean kind, served as filling. Indeed, the variety of Lucena's sandwiches was something wonderful, for she delighted in the invention of new combinations at frequent intervals. Moreover, the adjuncts to the sandwich course were as admirable in their way as was the former. There were jelly tumblers of creamy rice pudding, and meringue custards, and marvelous mixtures of savory and spicy things baked in little brown casseroles; there were crisp, golden-bronze turnovers, flat and bulgy, merely hinting, by a splash or two of candied red or orange-tinted juice, at the delights of their interiors, and cakes, never alike, two days in succession, but ranging widely from thin-edged wafers to wedges and triangles of loaf and layer cakes.

Mr. Filbert fully realized the fact that he was a lucky man. He was perfectly aware that Lucena was the genius of the lunch basket, and countless were the moments when he yearned for an opportunity to express his appreciation of her artistic work in his behalf. Two things, however, stood in the way of this viz.:



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his own shyness and Mrs. Fifer's eternal vigilance, for, on the one or two occasions when he had scraped enough boldness to essay a little confidential chat with the young lady, as a scrap of opportunity offered, Mrs. Fifer had found means to nip it, even before it had attained the proportions of a bud.

One happy day Lucena got together a new gingercake that was a dream of joy—a sublimated thing, spice-breathing, raisin-spotted, of a spongy lightness and a delightful dark red-brown hue. She placed two large blocks of this gingercake in Mr. Filbert's lunch basket, and when next she overhauled the latter, she found not so much as an edge or a corner left. She did, however, find a bit of paper folded up in the napkin, which bore the following tribute:

"Oh, gentle lady, who dost make Such heart-enthalling gingercake, Accept from me my thanks sincere For treat the best I've had this year; I'd like to ask you, if I may, Please make another one some day."