

precise, as of yore, and her hard, red cheeks glowed like apples above the elaborate embroidery of her dress.

"Here, Mis' Black, let me take your cake!" offered Abby Daggett. "I sh'd think your arm would be most broke carryin' it all the way from your house."

"Thank you, Abby; but I wouldn't das' t' resk changin' it; I'll set it right down where it's t' go."

The brisk chatter and laughter, which by now had pervaded the big place, ceased as by a preconcerted signal, and a dozen women gathered about the table toward which Mrs. Solomon Black was moving like the central figure in some stately pageant.

"Fer pity sake!" whispered Mrs. Mixer, "what d' you s'pose she's got under all that tissue paper?"

Mrs. Solomon Black set the great cake, still veiled, in the middle of the table; then she straightened herself and looked from one to the other of the eager, curious faces gathered around.

"There!" she said. "I feel now 's 'o' I could dror m' breath once more. I ain't joggled it once, so's t' hurt, since I started from home."

Then slowly she withdrew the shrouding tissue paper from the creation she had thus triumphantly borne to its place of honor, and stood off, a little to one side, her face one broad smile of satisfaction.

"Fer goodness' sake!"

"Did you ev—er!"

"Why, Mis' Black!"

"Ain't that just—"

"You never done that all yourself?"

Mrs. Black nodded slowly, almost solemnly. The huge cake which was built up in successive steps, like a pyramid, was crowned on its topmost disk by a bridal scene, a tiny man holding his tiny veiled bride by the hand in the midst of an expanse of pink frosting. About the side of the great cake, in brightly colored "mites", was inscribed "Greetings to our Pastor and his Bride."

"I thought 't would be kind of nice, seeing our minister was just married, and so, in a way, this is a wedding reception. I don't know what the rest of you ladies'll think."

Abby Daggett stood with clasped hands, her big soft bosom rising and falling in a sort of ecstasy.

"Why, Phoebe," she said, "it's a real poem! It couldn't be no han'somer if it had been done right up in heaven!"

She put her arms about Mrs. Solomon Black and kissed her.

"And this ain't all," said Mrs. Black. "Lois Daggett is going to fetch over a chocolate cake and a batch of crullers for me when she comes."

Applause greeted this statement.

"Time was," went on Mrs. Black, "and not so long ago, neither, when I was afraid to spend a cent, for fear of a rainy day that's been long coming. 'Tain't got here yet; but I can tell you ladies, I got a lesson from her in generosity. I don't mean to forget. 'Spend and be spent' is my motto from now on; so I didn't grudge the new-laid eggs I put in that cake, nor yet the sugar, spice nor raisins. There's three cakes in one—in token of the trinity (I do hope th' won't nobody think it's wicked t' mention r'ligion in connection with a cake); the bottom cake was baked in a milkpan, an' it's a bride's cake, being made with the whites of fourteen perfectly fresh eggs; the next layer is fruit and spice, as rich as wedding cake ought to be; the top cake is best of all; and can be lifted right off and given to Rever'nd an' Mrs. Wesley Elliott. I guess they'll like to keep the wedding couple for a souvenir."

A vigorous clapping of hands burst forth. Mrs. Solomon Black waited modestly till this gratifying demonstration had subsided, then she went on:

"I guess most of you ladies'll r'member how one short year ago Miss Lyddy Orr Bolton came a-walkin' int' our midst, lookin' sweet an' modest, like she was; and how down-in-th'-mouth we was all a-feelin', 'count o' havin' no money t' buy th' things we'd worked s' hard t' make. Some of us hadn't no more grit an' gumption 'n Ananias an' S'phira, t' say nothin' o' Jonah an' others. I c'd name. In she came, an' ev'rythin' was changed from that minute! Now, I want we sh'd cut up that cake—after everybody's had a chance t' see it good—all but th' top layer, same's I said—an' all of us have a piece, out o' compliment t' our pastor an' his wife, an' in memory o' her, who's gone from us."

"But Lyddy Orr ain't dead, Mis' Black," protested Mrs. Daggett warmly.

"She might 's well be, 's fur 's our seein' her's concerned," replied Mrs. Black. "She's gone t' Boston t' stay f'r good, b'cause she couldn't stan' it no-how here in Brookville, after her pa was found dead. The' was plenty o' hard talk, b'fore an' after; an' when it come t' breakin' her windows with stones an' hittin' her in th' head, so she was 'bleeged t' have three stitches took, all I c'n say is I don't wonder she went t' Boston. Anyway, that's my wish an' d'sire 'bout that cake."

The arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Elliott offered a welcome interruption to a scene which was becoming uncomfortably tense. Whatever prickings of conscience there might have been under the gay muslin and silks of her little audience, each woman privately resented the superior attitude assumed by Mrs. Solomon Black.

"Easy f'r her t' talk," murmured Mrs. Fulsom, from between puckered lips; "she didn't lose no money off Andrew Bolton."

"An' she didn't get none, neither, when it come t' dividin' up," Mrs. Mixer reminded her.

"That's so," assented Mrs. Fulsom, as she followed in pretty Mrs. Mixer's wake to greet the newly-married pair.

"My! ain't you proud o' her," whispered Abby Daggett to Maria Dodge. "She's a perfec' pictur' o' joy, if ever I laid my eyes on one!"

Fanny stood beside her tall husband, her pretty face irradiating happiness. She felt a sincere pity welling up in her heart for Ellen Dix and Joyce Fulsom and the other girls. Compared with her own transcendent experiences, their lives seemed cold and bleak to Fanny. And all the while she was talking to the women who crowded about her.

"Yes; we are getting nicely settled, thank you, Mrs. Fulsom—all but the attic. Oh, how'd you do, Judge Fulsom?"

The big man wiped the perspiration from his bald forehead.

"Just been fetchin' in th' ice cream freezers," he said, with his booming chuckle. "I guess I'm 's well 's c'n be expected, under th' circumstances, ma'am."

An' that r'minds me, parson, a little matter was s'ggested t' me. In fact, I'd thought of it, some time ago. No more 'n right, in view o' th' facts. If you don't mind, I'll outline th' idee t' you parson, an' see if you approve."

Fanny, striving to focus attention on the pointed remarks Miss Lois Daggett was making, caught occasional snatches of their conversation. Fanny had never liked Lois Daggett; but in her new rôle of minister's wife, it was her foreordained duty to love everybody and to condole and sympathize with the parish at large. One could easily sympathize with Lois Daggett, she was thinking; what would it be like to be obliged daily to face the reflection o' that mottled complexion, that long, pointed nose, with its rasped tip, that drab lifeless hair with its sharp hairpin crimp, and those small greenish eyes with no perceptible fringe of lashes? Fanny looked down from her lovely height into Miss Daggett's upturned face and pitied her from the bottom of her heart.

"I hear your brother Jim has gone t' Boston," Miss Daggett was saying with a simper.

From the rear Fanny heard Judge Fulsom's rumbling monotone, earnestly addressed to her husband.



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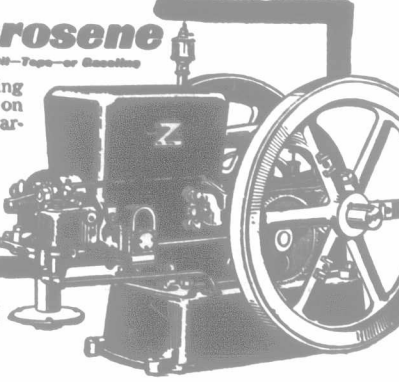
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