

A Baking
of
Gingersnaps

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1910

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A BAKING OF GINGERSNAPS

L. M. Montgomery

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“I believe this plum cake must be done—there’s nothing comes off on the straw, anyhow. Bessie, come and see what you think.”

The speaker held the oven door partly open and a warm, plummy odor steamed out. The girl who was filling tart shells at the table came over and peered in.

“Yes, I should say it was, Alma. You’d better take it out and then help me with the tarts. That’s all we have to cook, isn’t it?”

“Yes, unless Aunt Clem takes a notion to have something more made at the last minute. It would be just like her.”

Bessie shrugged her shoulders and went back to her tarts. She was a very pretty girl—slender and graceful, with a straight, feminine nose and long-lashed round eyes. Her fair hair curled around her blue-veined brow, and her pink and white skin was rather too ripely flushed with the heat.

Alma was the taller of the two, and some thought her the prettier. Her hair was dark and shining as brown nuts; her eyes were deep gray, with a certain undercurrent of roguishness in their depths; and when she smiled, the most delicious dimples started into unsuspected being in her round cheeks and the corners of her mouth.

Both girls were enshrouded in kitchen aprons of dark blue print, rather becoming and dainty with their wide frills—a waste of material which Aunt Clem considered rank extravagance.

Alma had just gone into the pantry with her plum cake when Aunt Clem entered the kitchen. She was a handsome, dignified old lady, with snowy curls and keen, dark eyes. Both of her nieces stood in awe of their imperious aunt, for her undeniable kindness to them was mingled with a great deal of scrutinizing and, as it seemed to them, unjust severity.

Bessie, who was perched on the edge of the table, slipped quickly down, hoping her aunt had not seen her in such an undignified position and wondering uneasily what could be keeping Alma so long in the pantry. What if she were up to anything Aunt Clem would disapprove of?

“There is something else I want you to make,” said Aunt Clem. “I forgot to tell you this morning; but thinking of my old schoolmate I have remembered that, when we were girls together, she was exceedingly fond of gingersnaps. So I want you girls to make some of your very best. Be sure and have them thin and crisp, and don’t burn them. I shall go and take a nap now; you may call me when dinner is ready.”

As soon as Aunt Clem disappeared Alma emerged cautiously from the pantry.

“What were you up to in there?” demanded Bessie. “I expected Aunt Clem would march in to inspect our cookery, and I was in mortal terror that you were doing something that would make her cross. That would be too bad, for

she is unusually good-humored this morning.”

“Well,” admitted Alma, “when I went in I saw the dish we took the jam for the Washington pies out of, and there was a little left, so I began to eat some and it was so good I couldn’t stop. I was eating all the time she was here, although I expected nothing else but that she would come in and catch me at it.”

“Did you hear what she said about the gingersnaps?” asked Bessie. “It’s too mean. You’ll have to make them, Al, for I never have good luck with them. I’ll get the dinner while you are at it.”

“I was relieved to find it was only gingersnaps,” said Alma, getting briskly to work. “It might have been pound-cake or something it would have taken ages to make. Aunt Clem is quite capable of it. But these won’t take long—I’ll just make the big square pan full—that will be plenty.”

Alma had just put her pan full of satiny, golden-brown circles in the oven when a knock came at the front door. “That’s Mrs. Simmons—I know her knock,” said Alma. “You go, Bess—I’m all over flour.”

Bessie went to the open front door. On the step stood a chubby little woman with a cup of brown sugar in her hand.

“Good morning, dearie. I s’pose you’re busy as a bee just now and won’t thank the old woman for bothering you. But I’ll not keep you a minute—not a minute. Says I to myself this morning, ‘Now, I’ll just run over to Clementiny’s with that cup of brown sugar I borrowed a spell ago,’ and just as I was putting on my hat Fannie Robinson runs in and asked me if I’d take a note up to you for her. So here it is, dearie, and it ought to excuse the old woman for bothering you.”

She handed it to Bessie with a significant smile. The girl crimsoned as she took it. She and Fanny Robinson’s brother, George, had been “going together” for so long that the neighbors viewed it as a settled affair, although no one was certain, for Bessie was impervious to hints and nobody dared ask Aunt Clem anything about it. Just as Bessie unfolded her note Alma came through the hall, to preserve her sister from falling helplessly into Mrs. Simmon’s clutches.

“I hear you are going to have company to-day—quality folks from town,” insinuated Mrs. Simmons. “I suppose you’re tired getting ready for them? I said to Josiah, says I, ‘What in the world is going to happen that Clementiny is having company?’ It did seem so surprising. Are they Clementiny’s relations?”

“Aunt Clem expects two of her cousins,” said Alma composedly, “and a Mrs. Roscoe, a lady whom Aunt Clem went to school with. She hasn’t seen her for years, and they used to be great friends.”

Mrs. Simmons looked lingeringly past Alma at the parlor door. She would have liked very much to have gone in and seen if the plush set was uncovered, and heard if Aunt Clem deemed the occasion worthy of her rarely displayed

old silver and eggshell china, together with several minor details. With Bessie alone she could have managed to get in; but she stood considerably in awe of Alma, so, with a rather disappointed farewell, she took her departure.

“What made you tell her who Aunt Clem was expecting?” reproached Bessie. “That is just what the old thing came here for—to pry and peer around. And she’ll tell everything far and wide.”

“Well, she would have made up a lot and told if I hadn’t,” said Alma, “so it is just as well she should know the truth. I knew she wouldn’t go till she found out something. What is in your note, Bessie?”

“Fannie wants us to go over to tea to-morrow afternoon. You know that young Rogers who is such a friend of George’s is there for his holidays. Do you think Aunt Clem will let us go?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Alma, dimpling with delight over the possible pleasure, “she’s in good humor to-day and if everything goes well and the tea is all right she will be quite willing for us to go. We’ll ask her after they—my goodness, what is that I smell? O, Bessie!”

They rushed frantically into the kitchen. It was filled with pungent smoke. Alma whipped open the oven door, and then dropped in a disconsolate heap on the floor beside it.

“O Bess, they are utterly ruined! What will Aunt Clem say? No gingersnaps for tea! And she will be furious over the waste. We can give up all idea of going to Fannie’s. O, I wish Mrs. Roscoe had never been heard of!”

Bessie had retained sufficient presence of mind to close the door and prevent the telltale odor from permeating the house. Now she set the pan on the table and looked ruefully at the blackened gingersnaps.

“O Alma, isn’t it mean? What shall we do?”

Alma was not of a nature to yield tamely to despair. She picked herself up.

“If we could only keep Aunt Clem from finding it out, Bess!”

“But she would know there were no gingersnaps and that would be just as bad.”

“No, I could mix another panful right up and have them ready before she could suspect. Can’t we hide them?”

“That’s it,” said Bessie, delightedly. “Put them in the pig’s barrel.”

“That would never do. Aunt Clem would be sure to see them, and even if she could forgive us for spoiling them she never would for hiding it on her. Let’s put them in those burdocks back of the house.”

“My goodness, no,” counter-argued Bessie. “Aunt Clem was hunting for eggs there last night and she’s liable to go any time again.”

“Well, let us take them down to the brook and hide them in that old rotten stump. No one will ever find them.”

“Come on, then,” said Bessie, resolutely. “We have got to be quick. Here

are four or five real good ones in this end of the pan, not burnt a bit. Shall we save them?"

"No, bring all the unlucky things along," answered Alma, unconsciously voicing the decree of fate. "Here, put them in my apron. Now, come."

They slipped guiltily out of the house, climbed the fence, and hurried down the sloping pasture field beyond. At the foot of the hill, in a strip of woodland, ran a brook; the girls reached it breathless.

"Here is just what we want," said Bessie, stopping before a decayed stump. "It's all hollow. Pile them in, Al—so there. Now, pile some brush over the top. I guess those gingersnaps will never trouble any one again."

"That stump is on George's land," said Alma, as they went back. "If he should ever find them—but he couldn't, of course. It is only my guilty conscience. I must hurry with a fresh baking, for if there is any delay Aunt Clem will suspect—she is so given to suspecting things."

Alma mixed up the new supply while Bessie set the table, nor would she budge from beside the oven until they were done to a brown nicety. Then she put them away in a tin box in the pantry and ate her dinner.

The afternoon was in all respects a pleasant one. The expected guests came. The tea was a decided success. And when Mrs. Roscoe helped herself to her third gingersnap, she said:

"I see, Clementina, that you have not forgotten my old partiality. These gingersnaps are simply delicious. Did you make them?"

"Why, no, it was my niece. She is quite a good cook. I am so glad you like them." Both girls felt assured that their morrow's pleasure was certain. After her visitors had gone Aunt Clem said:

"Well, my dears, you really did very well to-day. I must say I was very much pleased, especially about the gingersnaps."

Here Bessie nudged Alma, to intimate that this was the golden moment for preferring her request. So Alma plucked up heart of grace and was rewarded by so kind and cordial a permission that, remembering the deceit practiced in regard to the gingersnaps her conscience smote her severely.

Nevertheless, it did not spoil her next day's pleasure. Both girls enjoyed themselves to the utmost. The afternoon was fine and the much-wondered about Mr. Rogers proved charming. He seemed particularly interested in Alma, who was looking very pretty in her white gown, with a spray of yellow honeysuckle in her dark hair.

The conversation was enjoyably smooth until they went out to tea. A plate of gingersnaps was on the table and Bessie and Alma exchanged significant glances when it was passed. Then, with a thrill of horror, Alma became conscious that George was speaking. What was he saying?

"Gingersnaps! That reminds me, mother. I forgot to tell you. Fred and I

found a whole store of gingersnaps in an old stump down by the brook yesterday.”

“Why, George,” said his mother. “Gingersnaps! In a stump! What joke are you silly boys up to now?”

Alma turned pale and caught Bessie’s hand convulsively under the table. Both girls felt a chill premonition of coming disaster. Those fatal gingersnaps! Even Aunt Clem’s wrath would have been preferable to this.

Quite calmly George went on.

“No joke at all. It is the sober truth. Fred and I were trouting up the brook yesterday and we came to that spring below the sheep pasture on the other farm just about dinner time. We stopped to have a drink and a rest. Fred was sitting against an old rotten stump and just as he said that he was fearfully hungry and wished he had something to eat he leaned back. And, upon my word, if that stump didn’t collapse and out tumbled a whole lot of gingersnaps. You needn’t laugh. It is the sober truth.”

“But, George, who would go and put gingersnaps in a stump down there?”

“That is just the mystery. Neither of us could explain it. But they were nearly all burnt black except five that were just right. They were the best gingersnaps I ever tasted in my life. Fred declared that if he could find the girl who made them—we agree that it must be a girl—he’d marry her.”

Just at this point an awful thing occurred—Bessie laughed. It was not a spontaneous ripple that might have passed for a disinterested amusement, but a horrible, self-conscious little giggle that tried to smuggle out of sight as if ashamed of its very existence. Alma shot a furious glance at her, and poor Bessie made matters worse by blushing crimson. Then Fred deftly turned the talk into another channel.

But the girls’ pleasure in the day was gone. Alma felt the worse of the two, since she was the most involved. She felt sure that George would never rest until he had ferreted out the truth—perhaps he suspected it now; and then Mr. Rogers would know. Why this should disturb her so she did not ask herself.

George and Fred walked home with the girls in the twilight. Presently George and Bessie lagged behind, while Alma and Fred walked ahead through the cool, green lanes. It was a still, dim night; a few luminous stars blinked in and out in the sky; a full moon was rising redly in a hill-gap. The girl held her white skirt daintily up from the damp road and walked erectly along, the honeysuckle enwrapping her with a faint, moving atmosphere of sweetness.

Once or twice from far behind came a sound of hearty laughter which made Alma glance over her shoulder uneasily. What was George laughing at? Surely Bessie could never be telling him—she rather mistrusted her sister under the influence of George’s persuasive tongue.

Alma and Fred waited at the gate until George and Bessie came up, and the

two young men went off down the road. Alma pounced like a vindictive fate on Bessie before she was fairly within the gate.

“Bessie, you mean thing, did you go and tell George about those gingersnaps?”

“O, Al, don’t be cross. I couldn’t help it.”

“Bessie, you’re the biggest goose I ever saw.”

“But, Al, he guessed all about it—he really did. He said he knew we had something to do with it when he heard me laugh at tea-time. He wouldn’t give me any peace till I told him the whole thing.”

“He’ll tell Fred Rogers,” moaned Alma.

“I don’t see why you’d mind that,” said innocent Bessie. “He is only a stranger. But George will torment us about those wretched gingersnaps as long as we live.”

“O, it’s all right for you,” said Alma, petulantly. “You didn’t make the things, or suggest hiding them in a stump. O, it’s an awful muddle—but it is comical!” And Alma’s shoulders shook with laughter. She possessed a sense of humor.

“Fred, I’ve found out about the gingersnaps,” laughed George, when he was safely out of earshot. “I knew those sly pusses were at the bottom of it. And it was Alma made them. They were frightened of their aunt—she is a regular old Tartar, you know—and hid them so that she might not know. Well, Fred, my boy, are you going to do what you said—marry the girl who made those gingersnaps?”

“I am, if I can win her,” said Fred, decidedly.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

The misplaced sentence: After her visitors left, Aunt Clem said: was removed; at the end of the following paragraph was the sentence: After her visitors had gone Aunt Clem said: which was probably the intended text.

[The end of *A Baking of Gingersnaps* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]