

THE CANDY COUNTRY

Louisa May Alcott

“I shall take mamma’s red sun umbrella, it is so warm, and none of the children at school will have one like it,” said Lily, one day, as she went through the hall.

“The wind is very high; I’m afraid you’ll be blown away if you carry that big thing,” called Nurse from the window, as the red umbrella went bobbing down the garden walk with a small girl under it.

“I wish it would; I always wanted to go up in a balloon,” answered Lily, as she struggled out of the gate.

She got on very well till she came to the bridge and stopped to look over the railing at the water running by so fast, and the turtles sunning themselves on the rocks. Lily was fond of throwing stones at them; it was so funny to watch them tumble, heels over head, splash into the water. Now, when she saw three big fellows close by, she stooped for a stone, and just at that minute a gale of wind nearly took the umbrella out of her hand. She clutched it fast; and away she went like a thistle-down, right up in the air, over river and hill, houses and trees, faster and faster, till her head spun round, her breath was all gone, and she had to let go. The dear red umbrella flew away like a leaf; and Lily fell down, down, till she went crash into a tree which grew in such a curious place that she forgot her fright as she sat looking about her, wondering what part of the world it could be.

The tree looked as if made of glass or colored sugar; for she could see through the red cherries, the green leaves, and the brown branches. An agreeable smell met her nose; and she said at once, as any child would, “I smell candy!” She picked a cherry and ate it. Oh, how good it was!—all sugar and no stone. The next discovery was such a delightful one that she nearly fell off her perch; for by touching her tongue here and there, she found that the whole tree was made of candy. Think what fun to sit and break off twigs of barley sugar, candied cherries, and leaves that tasted like peppermint and sassafras!

Lily rocked and ate till she finished the top of the little tree; then she climbed down and strolled along, making more surprising and agreeable discoveries as she went.

What looked like snow under her feet was white sugar; the rocks were lumps of chocolate, the flowers of all colors and tastes; and every sort of fruit grew on these delightful trees. Little white houses soon appeared; and here lived the dainty candy-people, all made of the best sugar, and painted to look like real people. Dear little men and women, looking as if they had stepped off of wedding cakes and bonbons, went about in their gay sugar clothes, laughing and talking in the sweetest voices. Bits of babies rocked in open-work cradles, and sugar boys and girls played with sugar toys in the most natural way. Carriages rolled along the jujube streets, drawn by the red and yellow barley horses we all love so well; cows fed in the green fields, and sugar birds sang in the trees.

Lily listened, and in a moment she understood what the song said,—

“Sweet! Sweet!
Come, come and eat,
Dear little girls
With yellow curls;
For here you’ll find
Sweets to your mind.
On every tree
Sugar-plums you’ll see;
In every dell
Grows the caramel.
Over every wall
Gum-drops fall;
Molasses flows
Where our river goes.
Under your feet
Lies sugar sweet;
Over your head
Grow almonds red.
Our lily and rose
Are not for the nose;
Our flowers we pluck
To eat or suck.
And, oh! what bliss
When two friends kiss,
For they honey sip
From lip to lip!
And all you meet,
In house or street,
At work or play,
Sweethearts are they.
So, little dear,
Pray feel no fear;
Go where you will;
Eat, eat your fill.
Here is a feast
From west to east;
And you can say,
Ere you go away,
‘At last I stand
In dear Candy-land,
And no more can stuff;
For once I’ve enough.’
Sweet! Sweet!
Tweet! Tweet!
Tweedle-dee!
Tweedle-dee!”

“That is the most interesting song I ever heard,” said Lily, clapping her sticky hands and dancing along toward a fine palace of white cream candy, with pillars of striped peppermint stick, and a roof of frosting that made it look like the Milan Cathedral.

“I’ll live here, and eat candy all day long, with no tiresome school or patchwork to spoil my fun,” said Lily.

So she ran up the chocolate steps into the pretty rooms, where all the chairs and tables were of different colored candies, and the beds of spun sugar. A fountain of lemonade supplied drink; and floors of ice-cream that never melted kept people and things from sticking together, as they would have done had it been warm.

For a long while Lily was quite happy, going about tasting so many different kinds of sweeties, talking to the little people, who were very amiable, and finding out curious things about them and their country.

The babies were made of plain sugar, but the grown people had different flavors. The young ladies were flavored with violet, rose, and orange; the gentlemen were apt to have cordials of some sort inside of them, as she found when she ate one now and then slyly, and got her tongue bitten by the hot, strong taste as a punishment. The old people tasted of peppermint, clove, and such comfortable things, good for pain; but the old maids had lemon, hoar-hound, flag-root, and all sorts of sour, bitter things in them, and did not get eaten much. Lily soon learned to know the characters of her new friends by a single taste, and some she never touched but once. The dear babies melted in her mouth, and the delicately flavored young ladies she was very fond of. Dr. Ginger was called to her more than once when so much candy made her teeth ache, and she found him a very hot-tempered little man; but he stopped the pain, so she was glad to see him.

A lime-drop boy and a little pink checkerberry girl were her favorite playmates; and they had fine times making mud-pies by scraping the chocolate rocks and mixing this dust with honey from the wells nearby. These they could eat; and Lily thought this much better than throwing away the pies, as she had to do at home. They had candy-pulls very often, and made swings of long loops of molasses candy, and bird’s-nests with almond eggs, out of which came birds who sang sweetly. They played foot-ball with big bull’s-eyes, sailed in sugar boats on lakes of syrup, fished in rivers of molasses, and rode the barley horses all over the country.

Lily discovered that it never rained, but snowed white sugar. There was no sun, as it would have been too hot; but a large yellow lozenge made a nice moon, and red and white comfits were the stars.

The people all lived on sugar, and never quarrelled. No one was ill; and if any got broken, as sometimes happened with such brittle creatures, they just stuck the parts together and were all right again. The way they grew old was to get thinner and thinner till there was danger of their vanishing. Then the friends of the old person put him in a neat coffin, and carried him to the great golden urn which stood in their largest temple, always full of a certain fine syrup; and here he was dipped and dipped till he was stout and strong again, and went home to enjoy himself for a long time as good as new.

This was very interesting to Lily, and she went to many funerals. But the weddings were better still; for the lovely white brides were so sweet Lily longed to eat them. The feasts were

delicious; and everybody went in their best clothes, and danced at the ball till they got so warm half-a-dozen would stick together and have to be taken to the ice-cream room to cool off. Then the little pair would drive away in a fine carriage with white horses to a new palace in some other part of the country, and Lily would have another pleasant place to visit.

But by and by, when she had seen everything, and eaten so much sweet stuff that at last she longed for plain bread and butter, she began to get cross, as children always do when they live on candy; and the little people wished she would go away, for they were afraid of her. No wonder, when she would catch up a dear sugar baby and eat him, or break some respectable old grandmamma all into bits because she reproved her for naughty ways. Lily calmly sat down on the biggest church, crushing it flat, and even tried to poke the moon out of the sky in a pet one day. The king ordered her to go home; but she said, "I won't!" and bit his head off, crown and all.

Such a wail went up at this awful deed that she ran away out of the city, fearing someone would put poison in her candy, since she had no other food.

"I suppose I shall get somewhere if I keep walking; and I can't starve, though I hate the sight of this horrid stuff," she said to herself, as she hurried over the mountains of Gibraltar Rock that divided the city of Saccharissa from the great desert of brown sugar that lay beyond.

Lily marched bravely on for a long time, and saw at last a great smoke in the sky, smelt a spicy smell, and felt a hot wind blowing toward her.

"I wonder if there are sugar savages here, roasting and eating some poor traveller like me," she said, thinking of Robinson Crusoe and other wanderers in strange lands.

She crept carefully along till she saw a settlement of little huts very like mushrooms, for they were made of cookies set on lumps of the brown sugar; and queer people, looking as if made of gingerbread, were working very busily round several stoves which seemed to bake at a great rate.

"I'll creep nearer and see what sort of people they are before I show myself," said Lily, going into a grove of spice-trees, and sitting down on a stone which proved to be the plummy sort of cake we used to call Brighton Rock.

Presently one of the tallest men came striding toward the trees with a pan, evidently after spice; and before she could run, he saw Lily.

"Hollo, what do you want?" he asked, staring at her with his black currant eyes, while he briskly picked the bark off a cinnamon-tree.

"I'm travelling, and would like to know what place this is, if you please," answered Lily, very politely, being a little frightened.

"Cake-land. Where do you come from?" asked the gingerbread man, in a crisp tone of voice.

"I was blown into the Candy country, and have been there a long time; but I got tired of it, and ran away to find something better."

“Sensible child!” and the man smiled till Lily thought his cheeks would crumble. “You’ll get on better here with us Brownies than with the lazy Bonbons, who never work and are all for show. They won’t own us, though we are all related through our grandparents Sugar and Molasses. We are busy folks; so they turn up their noses and don’t speak when we meet at parties. Poor creatures, silly and sweet and unsubstantial! I pity ’em.”

“Could I make you a visit? I’d like to see how you live, and what you do. I’m sure it must be interesting,” said Lily, picking herself up after a tumble, having eaten nearly all the stone, she was so hungry.

“I know you will. Come on! I can talk while I work.” And the funny gingerbread man trotted off toward his kitchen, full of pans, rolling-pins, and molasses jugs.

“Sit down. I shall be at leisure as soon as this batch is baked. There are still some wise people down below who like gingerbread, and I have my hands full,” he said, dashing about, stirring, rolling out, and slapping the brown dough into pans, which he whisked into the oven and out again so fast that Lily knew there must be magic about it somewhere.

Every now and then he threw her a delicious cookie warm from the oven. She liked the queer fellow, and presently began to talk, being very curious about this country.

“What is your name, sir?”

“Ginger Snap.”

Lily thought it a good one; for he was very quick, and she fancied he could be short and sharp if he liked.

“Where does all this cake go to?” she asked, after watching the other kitchens full of workers, who were all of different kinds of cake, and each set of cooks made its own sort.

“I’ll show you by and by,” answered Snap, beginning to pile up the heaps of gingerbread on a little car that ran along a track leading to some unknown storeroom, Lily thought.

“Don’t you get tired of doing this all the time?”

“Yes; but I want to be promoted, and I never shall be till I’ve done my best, and won the prize here.”

“Oh, tell me about it! What is the prize, and how are you promoted? Is this a cooking-school?”

“Yes; the prize for best gingerbread is a cake of condensed yeast. That puts a soul into me, and I begin to rise till I am able to go over the hills yonder into the blessed land of bread, and be one of the happy creatures who are always wholesome, always needed, and without which the world below would be in a bad way.”

“Bless me! That is the queerest thing I’ve heard yet. But I don’t wonder you want to go; I’m tired of sweets myself, and long for a good piece of bread, though I used to want cake and candy at home.”

“Ah, my dear, you’ll learn a good deal here; and you are lucky not to have got into the clutches of Giant Dyspepsia, who always gets people if they eat too much of such rubbish and

scorn wholesome bread. I leave my ginger behind when I go, and get white and round and beautiful, as you will see. The Gingerbread family have never been as foolish as some of the other cakes. Wedding is the worst; such extravagance in the way of wine and spice and fruit I never saw, and such a mess to eat when it's done! I don't wonder people get sick; serves 'em right." And Snap flung down a pan with such a bang that it made Lily jump.

"Sponge cake isn't bad, is it? Mamma lets me eat it, but I like frosted pound better," she said, looking over to the next kitchen, where piles of that sort of cake were being iced.

"Poor stuff. No substance. Ladies' fingers will do for babies, but pound has too much butter ever to be healthy. Let it alone, and eat cookies or seed-cakes, my dear. Now, come along; I'm ready." And Snap trundled away his car-load at a great pace.

Lily ran behind to pick up whatever fell, and looked about her as she went, for this was certainly a very queer country. Lakes of eggs all beaten up, and hot springs of saleratus foamed here and there ready for use. The earth was brown sugar or ground spice; and the only fruits were raisins, dried currants, citron, and lemon peel. It was a very busy place; for every one cooked all the time, and never failed and never seemed tired, though they got so hot that they only wore sheets of paper for clothes. There were piles of it to put over the cake, so that it shouldn't burn; and they made cook's white caps and aprons of it, and looked very nice. A large clock made of a flat pancake, with cloves to mark the hours and two toothpicks for hands, showed them how long to bake things; and in one place an ice wall was built round a lake of butter, which they cut in lumps as they wanted it.

"Here we are. Now, stand away while I pitch 'em down," said Snap, stopping at last before a hole in the ground where a dumb-waiter hung ready, with a name over it.

There were many holes all round, and many waiters, each with its name; and Lily was amazed when she read "Weber," "Copeland," "Dooling," and others, which she knew very well.

Over Snap's place was the name "Newmarch;" and Lily said, "Why, that's where mamma gets her hard gingerbread, and Weber's is where we go for ice-cream. Do *you* make cake for them?"

"Yes, but no one knows it. It's one of the secrets of the trade. We cook for all the confectioners, and people think the good things come out of the cellars under their saloons. Good joke, isn't it?" And Snap laughed till a crack came in his neck and made him cough.

Lily was so surprised she sat down on a warm queen's cake that happened to be near, and watched Snap send down load after load of gingerbread to be eaten by children, who would have liked it much better if they had only known where it came from, as she did.

As she sat, the clatter of many spoons, the smell of many dinners, and the sound of many voices calling, "One vanilla, two strawberries, and a Charlotte Russe," "Three stews, cup coffee, dry toast," "Roast chicken and apple without," came up the next hole, which was marked "Copeland."

"Dear me! it seems as if I was there," said Lily, longing to hop down, but afraid of the bump at the other end.

“I’m done. Come along, I’ll ride you back,” called Snap, tossing the last cookie after the dumb-waiter as it went slowly out of sight with its spicy load.

“I wish you’d teach me to cook. It looks great fun, and mamma wants me to learn; only our cook hates to have me mess round, and is so cross that I don’t like to try at home,” said Lily, as she went trundling back.

“Better wait till you get to Bread-land, and learn to make that. It’s a great art, and worth knowing. Don’t waste your time on cake, though plain gingerbread isn’t bad to have in the house. I’ll teach you that in a jiffy, if the clock doesn’t strike my hour too soon,” answered Snap, helping her down.

“What hour?”

“Why, of my freedom. I never know when I’ve done my task till I’m called by the chimes and go to get my soul,” said Snap, turning his currant eyes anxiously to the clock.

“I hope you *will* have time.” And Lily fell to work with all her might, after Snap had put on her a paper apron and a cap like his.

It was not hard; for when she was going to make a mistake a spark flew out of the fire and burnt her in time to remind her to look at the receipt, which was a sheet of gingerbread in a frame of pie-crust hung up before her, with the directions written while it was soft and baked in. The third sheet she made came out of the oven spicy, light, and brown; and Snap, giving it one poke, said, “That’s all right. Now you know. Here’s your reward.”

He handed her a receipt-book made of thin sheets of sugar-gingerbread held together by a gelatine binding, with her name stamped on the back, and each leaf crimped with a cake-cutter in the most elegant manner.

Lily was charmed with it, but had no time to read all it contained; for just then the clock began to strike, and a chime of bells to ring,—

“Gingerbread,
Go to the head.
Your task is done;
A soul is won.
Take it and go
Where muffins grow,
Where sweet loaves rise
To the very skies,
And biscuits fair
Perfume the air.
Away, away!
Make no delay;
In the sea of flour
Plunge this hour.
Safe in your breast
Let the yeast-cake rest,

Till you rise in joy,
A white bread boy!”

“Ha, ha! I’m free! I’m free!” cried Snap, catching up the silver-covered square that seemed to fall from heaven; and running to a great white sea of flour, he went in head first, holding the yeast-cake clasped to his breast as if his life depended on it.

Lily watched breathlessly, while a curious working and bubbling went on, as if Snap was tumbling about down there, like a small earthquake. The other cake-folk stood round the shore with her; for it was a great event, and all were glad that the dear fellow was promoted so soon. Suddenly a cry was heard, and up rose a beautiful white figure on the farther side of the sea. It moved its hand, as if saying “Good-by,” and ran over the hills so fast they had only time to see how plump and fair he was, with a little knob on the top of his head like a crown.

“He’s gone to the happy land, and we shall miss him; but we’ll follow his example and soon find him again,” said a gentle Sponge Cake, with a sigh, as all went back to their work; while Lily hurried after Snap, eager to see the new country, which was the best of all.

A delicious odor of fresh bread blew up from the valley as she stood on the hill-top and looked down on the peaceful scene below. Fields of yellow grain waved in the breeze; hop-vines grew from tree to tree, and many windmills whirled their white sails as they ground the different grains into fresh, sweet meal, for the loaves of bread that built the houses like bricks and paved the streets, or in many shapes formed the people, furniture, and animals. A river of milk flowed through the peaceful land, and fountains of yeast rose and fell with a pleasant foam and fizz. The ground was a mixture of many meals, and the paths were golden Indian, which gave a very gay look to the scene. Buckwheat flowers bloomed on their rosy stems, and tall corn-stalks rustled their leaves in the warm air that came from the ovens hidden in the hillsides; for bread needs a slow fire, and an obliging volcano did the baking here.

“What a lovely place!” cried Lily, feeling the charm of the homelike landscape, in spite of the funny plump people moving about.

Two of these figures came running to meet her as she slowly walked down the yellow path from the hill. One was a golden boy, with a beaming face; the other a little girl in a shiny brown cloak, who looked as if she would taste very nice. They each put a warm hand into Lily’s, and the boy said,—

“We are glad to see you. Muffin told us you were coming.”

“Thank you. Who is Muffin?” asked Lily, feeling as if she had seen both these little people before, and liked them.

“He was Ginger Snap once, but he’s a Muffin now. We begin in that way, and work up to the perfect loaf by degrees. My name is Johnny Cake, and she’s Sally Lunn. You know us; so come on and have a race.”

Lily burst out laughing at the idea of playing with these old friends of hers; and all three ran away as fast as they could tear, down the hill, over a bridge, into the middle of the village, where they stopped, panting, and sat down on some very soft rolls to rest.

“What do you all do *here*?” asked Lily, when she got her breath again.

“We farm, we study, we bake, we brew, and are as merry as grigs all day long. It’s school-time now, and we must go; will you come?” said Sally, jumping up as if she liked it.

“Our schools are not like yours; we only study two things,—grain and yeast. I think you’ll like it. We have yeast to-day, and the experiments are very jolly,” added Johnny, trotting off to a tall brown tower of rye and Indian bread, where the school was kept.

Lily never liked to go to school, but she was ashamed to own it; so she went along with Sally, and was so amused with all she saw that she was glad she came. The brown loaf was hollow, and had no roof; and when she asked why they used a ruin, Sally told her to wait and see why they chose strong walls and plenty of room overhead. All round was a circle of very small biscuits like cushions, and on these the Bread-children sat. A square loaf in the middle was the teacher’s desk, and on it lay an ear of wheat, with several bottles of yeast well corked up. The teacher was a pleasant, plump lady from Vienna, very wise, and so famous for her good bread that she was a Professor of Grainology.

When all were seated, she began with the wheat ear, and told them all about it in such an interesting way that Lily felt as if she had never known anything about the bread she ate before. The experiments with the yeast were quite exciting,—for Fräulein Pretzel showed them how it would work till it blew the cork out, and go fizzing up to the sky if it was kept too long; how it would turn sour or flat, and spoil the bread if care was not taken to use it just at the right moment; and how too much would cause the loaf to rise till there was no substance to it.

The children were very bright; for they were fed on the best kinds of oatmeal and Graham bread, with very little white bread or hot cakes to spoil their young stomachs. Hearty, happy boys and girls they were, and their yeasty souls were very lively in them; for they danced and sang, and seemed as bright and gay as if acidity, heaviness, and mould were quite unknown.

Lily was very happy with them, and when school was done went home with Sally and ate the best bread and milk for dinner that she ever tasted. In the afternoon Johnny took her to the cornfield, and showed her how they kept the growing ears free from mildew and worms. Then she went to the bakehouse; and here she found her old friend Muffin hard at work making Parker House rolls, for he was such a good cook he was set to work at once on the lighter kinds of bread.

“Well, isn’t this better than Candy-land or Saccharissa?” he asked, as he rolled and folded his bits of dough with a dab of butter tucked inside.

“Ever so much!” cried Lily. “I feel better already, and mean to learn all I can. Mamma will be so pleased if I can make good bread when I go home. She is rather old-fashioned, and likes me to be a nice housekeeper. I didn’t think bread interesting then, but I do now; and Johnny’s mother is going to teach me to make Indian cakes to-morrow.”

“Glad to hear it. Learn all you can, and tell other people how to make healthy bodies and happy souls by eating good plain food. Not like this, though these rolls are better than cake. I have to work my way up to the perfect loaf, you know; and then, oh, then, I’m a happy thing.”

“What happens then? Do you go on to some other wonderful place?” asked Lily, as Muffin paused with a smile on his face.

“Yes; I am eaten by some wise, good human being, and become a part of him or her. That is immortality and heaven; for I may nourish a poet and help him sing, or feed a good woman who makes the world better for being in it, or be crumbed into the golden porringer of a baby prince who is to rule a kingdom. Isn’t that a noble way to live, and an end worth working for?” asked Muffin, in a tone that made Lily feel as if some sort of fine yeast had got into her, and was setting her brain to work with new thoughts.

“Yes, it is. I suppose all common things are made for that purpose, if we only knew it; and people should be glad to do anything to help the world along, even making good bread in a kitchen,” answered Lily, in a sober way that showed that her little mind was already digesting the new food it had got.

She stayed in Bread-land a long time, and enjoyed and learned a great deal that she never forgot. But at last, when she had made the perfect loaf, she wanted to go home, that her mother might see and taste it.

“I’ve put a good deal of myself into it, and I’d love to think I had given her strength or pleasure by my work,” she said, as she and Sally stood looking at the handsome loaf.

“You can go whenever you like; just take the bread in your hands and wish three times, and you’ll be wherever you say. I’m sorry to have you go, but I don’t wonder you want to see your mother. Don’t forget what you have learned, and you will always be glad you came to us,” said Sally, kissing her good-by.

“Where is Muffin? I can’t go without seeing him, my dear old friend,” answered Lily, looking round for him.

“He is here,” said Sally, touching the loaf. “He was ready to go, and chose to pass into your bread rather than any other, for he said he loved you and would be glad to help feed so good a little girl.”

“How kind of him! I must be careful to grow wise and excellent, else he will be disappointed and have died in vain,” said Lily, touched by his devotion.

Then, bidding them all farewell, she hugged her loaf close, wished three times to be in her own home, and like a flash she was there.

Whether her friends believed the wonderful tale of her adventures I cannot tell; but I know that she was a nice little housekeeper from that day, and made such good bread that other girls came to learn of her. She also grew from a sickly, fretful child into a fine, strong woman, because she ate very little cake and candy, except at Christmas time, when the oldest and the wisest love to make a short visit to Candy-land.