

## A MATTER OF BREAD

The Martins, father and son, were in partnership. Mr. Martin, a visionary person with no practical experience, mismanaged the Shingleton end of the business, where noisy sawmills cut mighty northern Michigan logs into lumber. Robert ran the office in Bayport, the nearest shipping point. Owing to a curious lack of judgment, both men proved round pegs in square holes.

When the once considerable Martin property dwindled to two idle mills, hopelessly remote from available timber, and a few acres of stumpage that nobody wanted for farming purposes, Mr. Martin died.

Before this the older Martin had lived in Shingleton. Robert and his young wife had dwelt in Bayport, twenty miles distant. Now Robert sold all that was portable of the Shingleton property, and, with many misgivings, decided to move his mother to Bayport.

'You'll never agree in the wild world,' said Robert, divulging his plan to his wife. 'Both you and mother are first-class of your kind; but you're not the same kind.'

'I'm not perfect,' said Petrina modestly. 'And you know, Bob, I've always prided myself on my adaptability. If you'll just keep me bolstered with tiny bits of information, I'll have things just the way your mother likes them. I'm going to pose as a model daughter-in-law.'

'Wouldn't it be safer and a whole lot easier to be just yourself? I'm sorry that the business—'

'Cheer up, dearie; things might be worse, and so far your mother and I have agreed beautifully.'

'At a distance,' demurred Robert. 'You've never lived together. But until I've discovered exactly how poor we are, one roof is all we can afford.'

'I'll make it big enough,' assured Petrina comfortingly.

Mrs. Martin, senior, was squarely and solidly built. She made one think of a substantial business block constructed for utility only. She swept on Friday, baked beans on Thursday, washed on Monday, wound her clock at nine every Saturday night, and bought six new pillow-cases every January.

Mrs. Martin, junior, sent her washing out, swept only when the house demanded sweeping, and at irregular intervals bought beans ready-baked from a woman's exchange. Yet Petrina made Robert comfortable, her household expenses were not excessive, and, moreover, she trimmed her own hats and made her own shirt-waists.

Petrina knew that Mrs. Martin had baked bread every Wednesday and Saturday for thirty years, and had grown gray worrying over what to do with the surplus. Petrina had purchased a loaf at the time, as she needed it, from a bread-making neighbor.

Instead of confessing, however, that her bread was acquired in this easy manner, young Mrs. Martin, feeling certain that the knowledge would shock Robert's mother, foolishly attempted to conceal it. She colored guiltily when the older woman praised the loaf; yet, having failed at the proper moment to disclose the truth, Petrina felt obliged thereafter to smuggle bread in at the back door.

'Robert,' she confided one morning, 'I'm afraid I'll have to live up to my reputation for bread-baking. But I couldn't attempt to set bread with your mother looking on. Couldn't you take her sightseeing for a few hours? If the coast was clear until one o'clock, the worst of the agony would be over. I'll use compressed yeast—they say that rises quickly. But I never could handle sticky things gracefully—she'd detect my inexperience at once.'

'Why not get mother to show you how?'

'And let her discover that I married her son without knowing how to make bread? I wish to keep her admiration and respect. Take her to the Indian Museum by the Elmwood trolley—it's the slowest. Please help me out, Bob.'

So Robert yielded. The coast clear, Petrina set her bread. Now bread dough, as everybody knows, is the most untrustworthy stuff in the culinary kingdom. Occasionally even an experienced cook encounters a batch that seems possessed to go wrong. At other times dough that seems in its early stages unpromising develops into good bread.

Petrina's dough misbehaved from the very outset to the bitter end. The flour refused to associate with the water; the little gray-green puddles of yeast declined also to mix; the shortening floated loftily on exclusive islands.

'It's either too wet or too dry,' said Petrina, peering doubtfully into the pan. 'Yet three quarts of water ought surely to be enough. I think I'll try the egg-beater. Ugh! What spatterly stuff!'

Although Petrina likewise tried the toasting-fork, the potato-masher, and various other stirring implements, the mixture still refused to mix.

'Perhaps it'll run together as it rises,' breathed Petrina, washing the discarded utensils. 'But I wish to goodness I hadn't pretended to be a bread-maker when I'm not. Think of all this twice a week!'

An hour later the doubtful cook added flour and a pair of reluctant hands to her still exceedingly sticky batter.

In time, however, the sticky mess grew smoother and firmer, until at last the huge cold ball looked and felt like real dough. Petrina scraped the dried batter from her coated fingers and looked at the clock. It was later than she had supposed.

'But,' said she, complacently, 'the worst is over. I'll get all that flour cleaned up, and nobody'll ever guess what a siege I've been through. I'll have that bread in the oven by 1 o'clock.'

But Petrina reckoned without her dough. The yeast, chilled by the long mixing, had perhaps become discouraged. At the end of an hour the leaden mass showed no sign of rising.

At half-past 12, the telephone rang.

'Hello!' sounded Robert's warning voice. 'If you've any evidences of guilt to conceal you'd better be about it. Mother's had enough of sightseeing, and is on her way home.'

Anything to conceal! That hideous mound of leaden dough—surely no mother-in-law could be permitted to behold a failure like that! But where, in that tiny, one-storeyed cottage, could one conceal a crime of such magnitude?

'Perhaps,' thought Petrina, 'that dough might be squeezed into something smaller.'

She seized the shining water-pail, and poked and punched the enormous cold lump into it. But where should she hide the pail? Apparently the house afforded no concealment for large tin pails of dough. She was about to move the heavy davenport in the living-room, in order to make space behind it for the pail, when Mrs. Martin became visible from the window.

Darting impetuously into the guest-room, Petrina hastily lifted the lid of her mother-in-law's trunk, which she knew to be empty, dropped the pail inside, and thought she closed the lid. Unfortunately, she did not know that the lid had a trick of sticking.

Of course, with all that dough on her conscience, Petrina was not entirely care-free that afternoon; but now, at least, she possessed a definite plan. The ash-barrel, unfortunately discovered overflowing in her moment of need, should be emptied the next day. Robert should once more spirit the guest away, and Petrina would remove the dough to the barrel, cover it neatly with ashes, and run to the exchange for a ready-made batch of bread. It seemed a good plan, but it was never carried out.

While dressing for dinner that evening, Mrs. Martin noticed that the trunk lid was ajar, and by the same token knew at once that some one had had it open. She had an immediate and alarming vision of thieves in the house—quickly modified to her intense bewilderment when, seeing something white through the open crack, she realised that whoever had tampered with her trunk had put something into it! In the next second she guessed what had happened. The thieves, interrupted, had thrust their booty hastily into the trunk!

Summoning all her courage, Mrs. Martin raised the lid and looked in.

Now it happened that the trunk, with the pail resting in the deep, open tray, stood within two inches of an active hot-air register; and bread dough, as everybody knows, is contrary, untrustworthy stuff. Having refused to rise at the proper time, now, when nobody wanted it to rise, it was making up for its earlier deficiency. Swollen to four times its original bulk, the clean, vigorous dough filled the tray with rounded, puffy billows. The trunk seemed literally filled with it.

'It's—it's bread!' stammered Petrina, guiltily. 'I spoiled it and—and hid it.'

'Spoiled it!' exclaimed Mrs. Martin. 'Why, it's just right to go in the pans. But, my dear child, there must be enough here for fifteen loaves. Do you always make so much? And why did you put it here?'

Of course, since there was nothing else to do, Petrina told the whole story.

'Dear, dear!' laughed Mrs. Martin. 'And I thought thieves had been here! Don't scare me like this again. There's that "woman's exchange" place, with everything so good and so reasonable. Why in the world do you bother to bake when you live almost next door to a treasure like that? I'd have suggested it long ago but for fear you'd think I was criticising. Bless you, child, if I were as smart with a needle as you are, I'd buy all my bread, too!'

'This is the last time,' declared Petrina, scooping armfuls of dough into the bread-pan, 'that I'll ever pretend to be more of anything than I am.'