

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES.

By Annie Hamilton Donnell.

Carefully dropping the fluffs of dough into the two tins, Aunt Ellen patted them gently to make them fit into the corners.

"Light as feathers," she nodded, approvingly. "Well, the poor child deserves a little help, I suppose. I'll just run across and tuck them into her oven; mine isn't hot enough. The way the smoke's pouring out of that chimney, she's got all her drafts wide open—as usual. It beats me how Corinna's child can possibly be—Barbara!"

Corinna's child had been Barbara for sixteen years. She had grown tall and comely and "scatter-brained"—that was Aunt Ellen's word. She had not a trace of Corinna's housewifely talent even in embryo. Her mother could make bread and beds when she was six better than Barbara could at sixteen!

"I taught Corinna myself," Aunt Ellen thought then added honestly, but with a grimace, "And I taught Barbara! Well, I'm not going to shoulder the responsibility of that child—she could do a good deal better if she tried. What riles me is her indifference."

All this while Aunt Ellen had covered the delicate loaves with a fresh towel, put on her sunbonnet, and started forth across the green space between the two houses. The two loaves would help the child out. It was rather an undertaking for a school-girl to keep house for a live man and three live boys.

"I ought to be more charitable," gentle Aunt Ellen repented. She entered the littered, hot little kitchen with a resolve to see nothing but the oven door.

But on the very threshold an acrid, penetrating smell greeted her; she had to see that smell!

With a groan she sped to the stove, threw open the oven door, and discovered two black and smoking loaves of what Barbara might have meant for bread.

"Black as your hat—flat as pan cakes!" was her grim inventory. "Well, all is, I pity those men!"

Barbara was evidently nowhere in sight or sound—or smell. The little loaves had been put into the oven, all the drafts of the stove opened wide to insure their burning, then left to the tender mercies of providence. That was Barbara's way of baking.

"It's lucky I made bread myself; I'm not going to have my brother-in-law and nephews starve to death in sight of my kneading-board!"

Aunt Ellen was on her knees, doing energetic things. The black loaves came out with a sweep of her arm, the white, perfect ones went in, the oven door snapped shut.

"Now I'll regulate this fire—all it needs is toning down. Those loaves'll bake in half an hour. Barbara! Barbara! Where is the child? You couldn't surprise me any, telling me she'd gone visiting! Well, all is, I've got to go home and run across again in twenty minutes or so. I'm going to have that bread baked right! I'll take this mess of charcoal home with me and throw it into the hen-yard—charcoal's healthy if it isn't appetizing. And I might's well swap bread tins with Barbara, too; these are just like mine, and it will save some fetching and carrying."

Aunt Ellen bustled home, stopping only a minute to toss Barbara's bread into the midst of her flock of chickens.

She had hardly washed and set away

the tins when wheels clattered rapidly into her little side yard. It was her son Dana, and calamity sat beside him on the seat. Aunt Ellen ran to the door. "Which is it?" she gasped. "Mary! The baby!"

"Both. They fell down stairs. Don't stop to take your apron off, mother!" The man's face was white with anxiety.

When Aunt Ellen, a few minutes later, locked up her little house and rode away, she did not know it would be many anxious weeks before she came back. Once and for all, driven out of her mind by the calamity that had ridden into the yard with Dana, the little episode of Barbara's burned bread and the exchange of loaves vanished from her memory. The dread of the weeks to come was to fill all the nooks and crannies of her mind.

Barbara, browsing dreamily among her books, did not remember her ill-fated loaves. It was mere chance that sent her back to her kitchen, and even then only the sight of her kneading-board that suggested bread. It was a kind chance that brought it all about just at the right time.

"Mercy, my bread! It must be burned to a cind—"

It was baked to a delicate golden brown! The dainty loaves were puffed up, dimpled, beautiful. A warm, delicious odor gently buffeted Barbara's face.

"Oh! Oh!" breathed she, in delight. "Oh, it's perfect! It's magnificent!"

It was exactly the right time to take it out. Barbara took it out and sat back on the floor with it in her lap. It burned through to her knees, but she wanted to be burned. She was in her first rapture of success. It was beautiful, beautiful bread! She kept leaning down to sniff the delicious odor, to admire the puffiness and delicate brownness, to be proud of it.

Barbara had never been proud before of anything that came out of that oven. Burned things, raw things, heavy, flat, unsightly things had come forth in a steady procession—a dreary, dismal procession. But here—here were two golden-brown, puffy, wonderful things! She saw them, felt them, smelled them!

"You beauties! You darlings!" exclaimed Barbara. "I could kiss you! And to think you are mine! What will father and the boys say? Oh, I can hardly wait for supper-time!"

But the thought of supper-time raised thoughts of the cake baked that morning and the scorched apple-sauce. Suddenly it appeared to Barbara as sacrilege that this beautiful bread should be served with anything less perfect than itself! With soggy cake and scorched apple-sauce—bah! Never! Barbara scrambled to her feet and deposited her loaves tenderly on the table. She went into the pantry and brought out her dreary cake, and set it beside them. The contrast appalled her.

"Never!" she cried, setting her lips together hard. "They've got to match better than that. I'll try another rule of cake, and we'll see. Anybody that can make bread like that—" She laughed softly to herself.

She was a stranger to this new enthusiasm that possessed her, and the pleasant tingle of it sent the color to her cheeks. When had she ever wanted to cook anything before! Sam would laugh at her and Rich and Jeff say teasy things, and her patient father—why, how it would please him! And save his life, too, perhaps, and all their lives! They were all of them starving by inches.

"Well, let 'em wait—let 'em see to-night!"

Barbara's mother had been away at the hospital more than a month, mending slowly from a broken hip. The accident had happened while she was away on a shopping trip, and she could not be brought home. Barbara had come home from boarding-school to "take care" of father and the boys!

Good-luck cake would be a good rule to make; it sounded propitious. Barbara got together her materials and went earnestly to work. She remembered as she followed directions with much painstaking that she had never made cake just this way before. It had not seemed worth while to bother much with rules; she had scrambled sugar and eggs and butter together hurriedly, to get it over with. Perhaps—Barbara was honest—perhaps that was what had been the matter with her cake!

The first trial of good-luck cake belied its name. It was a distinct improvement on the morning loaf, but it did not match the beautiful bread. With all her care Barbara had left out the cream of tartar, and the soda, left twinned, refused to do the work of both. Barbara sighed once, sighed twice, set her lips a little harder, and began over again. She had resolved to match her beautiful bread.

While the second loaf was baking she made more apple-sauce. Aunt Ellen always sweetened hers in the beginning. Why had she not ever thought of that before? And Aunt Ellen never stirred hers. Barbara sweetened her apple-sauce in the beginning, and did not stir it. She remembered she had seen Aunt Ellen set hers back on the stove, where it could not burn. Barbara set hers back. Always before she had been in too much of a hurry to get it cooked.

Good-luck cake was a good rule. Number two came out prettily rounded and browned. It did not quite "match," but it would do. And the apple-sauce really did look tempting this time. Barbara sang little tune-snatches as she cleared away.

She was very tired when it was all done, but she was still humming little tunes as she waited. She meant to appear very natural and careless, as if nothing had happened, and then they would come suddenly upon her supper—her beautiful supper. "Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la!" sang Barbara industriously, when heavy steps sounded on the walk. Out in the kitchen at the sink they took turns washing their hands. She sang on loudly and clattered plates, but she could still hear bits of what they said.

"Wish mother was here. I'm hungry as a bear!" mumbled Rich, behind a towel.

"Two bears here!" Sam's voice. "I'm always hungry nowadays. We never get anything fit to eat."

"Sh!" That was father. Barbara thanked him in her heart. But to night—She laughed softly.

She caught another bit later.

"Do you s'pose we'll have lead-bis quits again?" Rich said.

"With burnt sauce?" asked Jeff, mournfully.

"Oh, come on, boys, brace up and face the cannon's mou—"

"Sh!" again sharply. Bless father! And then they came trooping in. Barbara was looking out of the window.

"Hello!"

There were four separate exclamations; they may have all been "hellos"—Barbara never was sure. She was always sure of the tone they were exclaimed in. It was a triple blend of