

HOME-MADE BREAD.



REAL old-fashioned brick oven!" exclaimed the house-band enthusiastically, as together we went through the back regions of our new domain. "Now, dear, we can have home-made bread."

"More easily said than done," I answered briefly, in a tone less hopeful than his own. In

our seven years of married life I had often heard regretful mention of the home-made bread of his boyhood, and once or twice I had made tentative attempts at loaf-making and baking with the aid of cookery-books and range-oven. But the latter was one of the worst specimens of its kind, with a talent for the unexpected and an inherent depravity of extremes that nothing could cure. Did a milk pudding require slow and gentle cooking? Straightway that oven became a fiery furnace, and the result was, only too often, a blackened ruin. Did cake or pastry require brisker heat? Then was the most scientific stoking labour lost, for the oven, obstinately cool, resisted all persuasion.

Of my first loaf attempted in this unsatisfactory cooking-place, nothing need be said.

The second looked better, and was placed on the tea-table with some modest pride. Alas, when cut, the husband aforesaid asked inquiringly, "Is it damper, dear, the result of that bush story you were reading the other day?" We laughed good-humouredly, but my bread-making zeal was "damped" effectually for awhile. Now we had moved our household to a new dwelling-place across the country, and before us stood, invitingly, a cave-like oven in which, doubtless, generations of crisp brown loaves had been done to a turn. Could I, dare I, hope to fill it, and earn my title to ladyhood by becoming a loaf-giver indeed?

There and then I resolved to learn and to get, if possible, one or two practical hints from some breadmaker of experience.

A motherly farmer's wife was found willing to give a demonstration lesson, and, bravely confessing my ignorance, I watched her doings with breathless interest. One peck of best household flour, two ounces of fresh German yeast, two level table-spoonfuls of fine salt, about three pints of warm water, a sixpenny earthenware pan (warmed), and a small barrow-load of cord-wood, constituted her demands, and all were in readiness when she came.

Into the pan the peck of flour was shaken, a few handfuls abstracted for kneading purposes, and then a hole made in the middle of the flour, the yeast crumbled into a basin and dissolved in a little of the warm water, and thoroughly stirred with the blade of a knife.

(Why a knife should be better than a spoon I have not to this day discovered, but the command was so rigorously laid down that I have never dared to disobey it.)

The water was mixed half boiling and half cold, with an extra teacupful of cold thrown in, and cool enough for the hand to be held in it without any discomfort. Then the dissolved yeast was mixed with the three pints of water and (still with the knife) stirred vigorously into the flour, till the mass in the middle was thick as double cream; then covered with a cloth it was set aside for an hour to rise.

The oven fire was now lighted, an hour earlier than usual, as it had not been used for a long time—a shovelful of hot coals put far back on its floor, plenty of deal kindlings and sticks laid on these, and, finally, the sturdy logs of oak—and soon the cavern was filled with wreathing flames.

At the end of an hour another three-pint jugful of warm water was prepared, the salt sprinkled over the leaven that had risen mightily, and, with the confidence born of long practice, the Teacher dashed in an amazing quantity of warm water, and began to mix and toss and turn the dough. Five minutes of this, and then the mass was whisked out on to a deal table (well scoured and floured in readiness), and Learner was invited to try her hands.

Fists doubled, one up and one down alternately, then both together, hands across and down the middle, this way and that way and everhow that dough was pommelled and kneaded till it became smooth and elastic, and delightful little bubbles cracked under the unsparing fists, and guaranteed the lightness of the bread to be. Finally it was returned to the pan with a few farewell pats, and then covered with a lily-white cloth and left for two hours to rise.

In later bakings the fire was lighted at this stage, the two hours being ample for its heating. The teacher now departed for a spell, and I made some toothsome fruit pies and tarts, and then mixed an everyday cut-and-come-again dough cake as follows. One and a half pounds of dough, four ounces of butter or lard, two ounces of sugar, one pound of stoned raisins, and a wineglassful of warm milk, all thoroughly blended and then put into greased tins near the fire to "prove" for at least an hour before baking. Raisins may be omitted and caraways and candied peel used for a change. The next business was a "best Sunday cake." Six ounces of butter and two ounces of lard were beaten to a cream, with six ounces of white sugar; four eggs were then beaten and added to the mixture. (N.B.—Three or even two will do for this during the days of egg-famine.) Three ounces of well shred peel and ten ounces of sultanas were now added, and lastly, just before oven time, one pound of self-raising flour was stirred in, and the whole well shaken before baken!

Meanwhile the dough in the pan had risen high enough to look out on the world, and was porous as a sponge, the oven wood, after many stirrings, had burned down till only a thin coating of fiery embers remained and walls and roof were a dull white—sure sign that the oven was hot. Then the master bakeress came and gathered up the refuse in spadefuls and with birch besom and mop (first plunged in cold water) cleared the oven thoroughly, and left it a quarter of an hour to cool. Then, with well-washed hands, the dough was taken up, divided into six portions and rolled round, then subdivided into two unequal parts, rolled round again, one portion in each hand, a distinct join, and behold, the loaves were made and notched, cottage fashion. A pinch of flour thrown into the oven turned a deep biscuit brown, and proclaimed its fitness, the loaves were dexterously inserted at the

back and middle, the cakes, Sunday and week-day, near the sides, and the pastry in front, and the door was shut for thirty-five minutes. At the end of that time the pastry was found perfectly cooked, the dough cakes ditto, and the best cake was drawn nearer to the mouth to finish. At the end of the hour this was deftly taken out and found done, and the loaves, whose vaulting ambition had taken them far up towards the roof, were left for thirty minutes more, an hour and a half in all. When taken out and struck sharply underneath with the fist, they rang true and were delectably crisp and sweet smelling. The peck of flour had made twenty pounds of wholesome bread that would keep, in an earthen pan and cloth-covered, for a week in the warmest weather, and be sweet to the last. During our first week in the new home five bakers had called for orders, each claiming to have served the last tenants.

We could now smilingly dismiss them all, serene in the consciousness of a well-stocked larder.

For our small family of two selves, one child and one servant, the peck of flour proves ample for a week's supply, and though the saving in cost is not very much, when time and cordwood are taken into account, the gain in quality and appetite together is immense.

For three years the weekly baking has been successfully accomplished and no further teaching has been required, and there has been only one failure, when the yeast was not fresh and the dough refused to rise.

The old-fashioned brewer's barm makes delicious bread (a pennyworth being sufficient for a peck), but as it cannot be obtained without recourse to the The Wheat-Sheaf or Green Dragon, or some other sylvan resort, we are content with the grocer's article. A Coburg loaf is a good variation from the plain bread, made as follows: one ounce of lard and one ounce of fine white sugar rubbed into one pound of flour, half an ounce of yeast mixed in half a pint of warm milk and stirred in, the later proceedings being exactly the same as for the plain bread, though, at the last moment before baking, the Coburg should be brushed over with a little candied peel sugar dissolved in water. And the sultana cake is often varied by using a quarter of a pound of desiccated cocoa-nut, or half a pound of glacé cherries—the latter cut through with a hot knife before use—instead of sultanas.

Probably no town architect ever dreams of including a brick oven in his building plans to-day, but there are thousands of cottage-homes scattered up and down the land where baking is a lost art, and the oven, that does exist, is filled with lumber instead of loaves.

And in every town there is some baker of integrity to be found who would, for a charge of one penny or three-halfpence per peck, bake the home-made bread entrusted to his care, though the resulting flavour might not be quite the same as that attributed to the use of the royal oak of the forest.

From my own joyful experience I would advise every housemother, or big daughter at home, to try this pleasant and profitable work. The kneading is at least as good exercise as lawn-tennis, the male members of the family will assuredly support this home industry, and, fed with the staff of life of the best and purest, they will feel stronger and better for their toil.

"Bake? Ay, many's the batch I've kneaded and baked myself when the missus was ill," remarked a brawny labourer, in my hearing, the other day. "Why, bless you, we should starve on the boughen!"

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