

# Finesse

N. UMBENHOWER

Mrs. Brooks flipped the pages of her cook book back and forth. The lemon pie would be easier; but it wouldn't take much longer to make the spice cake that Martin liked. Yes, it would be the cake, she decided, because that was Martin's favorite dessert. She was a little tired of it; but, as long as Martin insisted that each cake was better than the last and that nothing else compared with it, he should have spice cake, all he wanted of it, every week, all summer too. September would come soon enough when he would have to go back north to that little college close to the Canadian border. Teaching physics year after year there where the snow covered the ground most of the winter could, she suspected, become monotonous, for each spring in June when Martin arrived at his sister's farm home he would dash upstairs two steps at a time to change suit and dignity for overalls and a happy grin. Fun loving Martin! He was not only her favorite brother, but her son's favorite uncle too. Bill was probably out with Martin now. She would have to see that he came back in time to take his music lesson. After the cake was in the oven, she would go find them.

Bill kicked up the dust in the lane that led to the east wheat field. He had had a bare two weeks in which to forget geography, arithmetic and all the other necessary evils that accompanied the winter months and curtailed his enjoyment of the spring when this new evil, this horror, raised its threatening head. Piano lessons! He loathed the thought. How would he ever catch up with all the things he had planned to do this summer? It took hours to find a bird's nest and days and days of watching to catch a glimpse of the opossum.

He never had found the log where it lived, but early this spring he had seen it sunning itself on top of the rail fence about half a mile back in the woods.

All that would be ended now. Piano lessons! And practicing too, hours and hours of it. The whole summer vacation would be spoiled. Bill's soul was filled with disgust. He was on his way to find Martin, for Martin was his only hope.

Martin might have an idea; he usually did. Martin could solve almost any problem. One summer when the hayloader picked up a bunch of tough ragweed growing at the edge of the ditch across the low field and stopped working then and there, Martin brought out pliers and baling wire and a bolt or two, and he put it in working order before you could say "Jack Robinson." Maybe, if he could fix the hayloader, he could break the piano! Martin was taller than any of the men who helped on the farm in the summer, and he wasn't skinny either; he must have weighed at least a hundred and sixty-five in his overalls and straw hat. He had a fine head with lots of gray hair, prematurely gray, Bill's mother said, and dark brown eyebrows. He never seemed to take life on the farm seriously; but when Bill came to him with his problems, Martin's eyes were serious and understanding.

Only last summer he had convinced Bill's mother that books from the library had no place in a boy's life in summer. It was better for him to saddle Snip and carry cool jugs of water to the men working in the fields. Martin had a way with him.

This afternoon he had gone back to look over the east wheat field, the one farthest away, to see how soon it would be

ripe for the binder. The field was beautiful in the afternoon sun. An erratic breeze swept little valleys here and there in the wide expanse of heavy, rich tan heads.

As Bill reached the end of the lane and climbed up on the gate to wait for Martin, he saw none of this beauty; he saw only himself chained to the piano bench, wearing his fingers to the bone on the implacable piano keys. He didn't even see Martin at first.

"What's the matter, Bill?"

"What? Oh, nothing much."

"Out with it!" Martin removed his straw hat. The upper part of his forehead which it had covered was very white and contrasted along a sharply-defined line with the flaming sunburn on the rest of his face. "What's Sue up to *this* summer?"

"Piano lessons," muttered Bill, kicking his heels absent-mindedly against the third board from the top of the gate. He stared out across the field. "She talked to Miss Redfield this morning."

"Redfield?"

"They're the people who bought the Dorman place. Mr. and Mrs. Redfield and the two girls moved in early this spring. Ruby is the oldest one; she's the one who gives piano lessons. She's an old maid, past twenty-five at least. Mother talked to her this morning, on the phone."

"When do you start?"

"Right away. Today. She's coming late this afternoon."

"Hmm." Martin fanned his forehead very slowly with the old straw hat. Finally he said, "Well, let's go up to the house, if she's there, we'll see what she looks like."

Her long green Buick came to a stop under the locust tree at the end of the walk, and Miss Ruby Redfield rolled the window down. She looked over the lawn. Everything seemed peaceful, the dark cool

shadows of the trees on the grass, the long open veranda with rosebushes and honeysuckle trimming it at the corners. Overhead, though, in the branches of the locust tree, a frustrated bumblebee buzzed up and down the scale.

Ruby was very small and thin. Her hair was dark and neatly waved, and her black eyes were intelligent. With a manner not exactly of determination; but rather of methodical purpose, she quickly stepped out of the car, picked up her purse and music roll from the seat and turned to go up the walk. Coming around the side of the house with Bill was Martin, impressive and distinguished even in overalls.

For a fraction of a second Miss Redfield's eyelids flickered and she unconsciously tightened her grip on the music roll. Going straight to him, she held out her hand and said, "I'm Ruby Redfield. You're Bill's father?"

Martin swung his old straw hat awkwardly. "Noo ma'am! No siree, I just work here."

Bill caught his breath. That didn't sound like Martin. Why, Martin was talking like a farm hand or worse; he was slouched over, most of his weight on one foot. What was going on, wondered Bill. Then it dawned! Of course, Martin was going into action. Good for Martin! The piano lessons were practically a thing of the past before they were ever begun.

"Come right on in and start to work, ma'am," Martin said. "Here, let me help you with your music." He took the roll awkwardly and unaccountably the strap around it loosened allowing the sheets to scatter far and wide. Miss Redfield helped to locate and gather them up, seeming to enjoy the accident. Not a shade of annoyance was even indicated by her expression. She calmly proceeded up the steps to the veranda, was greeted cordially by Mrs. Brooks, shown the piano and very shortly

thereafter left to introduce Bill to the mysteries of music.

Miss Redfield had barely begun to explain the few simple notes on page one of "The Beginners Book" when Martin opened the screen and stepped inside. "Don't mind me, ma'am. I remember my first music lesson, and I thought I'd give Bill a little moral support. He helps me with my work, and I help him, so to speak. You go right ahead. I'll sit on the other end of the bench here."

Miss Redfield smiled a funny little smile, and she did go right ahead. She and Bill had plowed through the first bar or two when Martin said, "That reminds me of my first piece, the only one I ever did learn to play right. Here, Miss Redfield, you play the soprano and I'll play the bass. Bill, you're in the way. You sit over there a while. Now, Miss Redfield, it goes like this—"

Out in the kitchen Mrs. Brooks thought that Bill must be doing very well considering that it was his first lesson; but as the music became gayer, she suddenly realized what was happening. "Martin," she thought, "This is one time you are not going to change my plans." Half an hour later she interrupted them, and with very little persuasion convinced Miss Redfield that she should stay for dinner. Indeed, Miss Redfield's acceptance was a trifle enthusiastic and Martin for once seemed to have nothing at all to say. Bill, a forgotten boy, was sitting quietly in one corner of the room, still trustful but unable to follow the turn of events. He did not notice that his mother looked for a second, very, very straight at Martin and lifted her chin a shade higher. For some reason she was smiling and Martin was not.

Throughout dinner Miss Redfield's enthusiasm remained undampened, and Mrs. Brooks' enjoyment of her brother's discomfiture was scarcely concealed. Martin

said almost nothing, and for the first time Bill was assailed with doubts regarding the omnipotence of his uncle. He had never seen panic or fear in Martin's eyes; but now he sensed that something was wrong, something very definitely was not going according to schedule. Looking at his mother, he thought she seemed positively victorious.

After dinner the two women sat in comfortable rockers on the veranda and talked, mostly about music. Sitting on the steps nearby, Bill listened with a heart of lead. He wondered what had become of Martin. Had even Martin deserted him? He realized that they were defeated, that the long anticipated summer, his vacation, was lost. The weeks to come would be nothing but tantalizing torture. Tied to the piano bench, he would have to listen all summer long to the vireo's monotonous triple note and its minor echo without ever knowing exactly where it nested. The sun was already down and daylight was nearly gone, taking with it the last ray of hope too. In the twilight a solitary bat flew dizzily around catching its dinner of tiny bugs. Once or twice as it sailed around in irregular circles between the veranda and the big locust tree, it narrowly missed Bill's quiet head. But, suddenly, the bat was chasing bugs no longer; it was fleeing something.

The kitchen broom jerked around the corner of the house. Wham! Swish! Wham! It thrashed in wide arcs, now in front of the terrified bat, now close behind it. Now it sailed out into the lawn with Martin hanging on to the end of the handle. In the darkness it was impossible to tell whether he was madly wielding the broom like a live weapon or whether the broom itself was witched to life and held Martin in desperate thrall. He had tied a paisley bandana over his distinguished gray head. This and the extreme height of his abandon to the chase robbed him of the last hint of dignity. But to Bill he was a rescuing hero.

"By gravy," shouted Martin. "The smart little dee-vill. Bet I get him next time." With a mixture of facile awkwardness and incredible agility, he pursued the frantic creature to the point of his own exhaustion and the utter rout of the women.

A queer look had come over Miss Redfield's face. With the few shreds of composure left to her, she gracefully accepted her share of defeat, rose to her feet and murmured that perhaps it would be better to wait until fall and cooler weather to start Bill's lessons. With a supreme effort Mrs. Brooks unfroze from the edge of her chair,

released her anguished grip on its arms and bade her guest godspeed. When the Buick had pulled away, she collapsed into her chair and remained silent for a while. The bright evening star came out in the sky just over the black outline of the west woods. For Bill the world was again in tune.

After a moment or two Mrs. Brooks remarked slowly and emphatically, "Martin, if I ever visit one of your classes, you may be prepared for anything. I suppose, though, I should forgive you. You're probably right; a vacation ought to be a vacation."

## Lucky

JOHN J. MILLER

The heavy oak bar looked solid enough, but the short, slight man at the end, face loosely cupped in his hands, was holding it down with his elbows. The tic on the right eye of the pale-faced bartender twitched slightly as he flicked a dirty towel across the top of the bar.

Removing his chin from his hands, the little guy emptied his beer bottle into a glass, tipping the glass expertly. "Gimme another beer," he remarked absently—drank the glass and replaced his chin in his hands.

Opening the bottle with a practiced jerk, the bartender lumberingly placed it on the bar. "How goes it, stranger?" he addressed the smaller man. "You look like you lost your best friend."

The stranger raised his eyes from a point fixed on the floor and, running a hand through his sparse hair, replied "You

married?"

"Yep," the bartender sounded satisfied. Pursing his lips, he leered at the little man. "Married a family tailor-made; she already had two children. I wouldn't even know her ex if he came in here, but I'll bet he ain't so happy. My wife gets fifteen bucks a week alimony." He made another pass at the bar with the towel. "Pretty good deal, huh?"

"Yeah," the stranger replied, draining the rest of the beer in a gulp. "Yeap, you're sure lucky." He rocked off the stool, teetered slightly and moved toward the door.

"Wait a minute," called the bartender. "It's slow tonight—have one on the house."

The stranger turned in the doorway, looking at a point to the right of the bartender. "I'd *still* be buyin'," he remarked and passed out into the street,