

# **BREAD**

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

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## BOOK III BREAD

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SALT

OR THE EDUCATION OF GRIFFITH ADAMS

“Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost his savour,  
wherewith shall it be salted?”

—*Matthew V:13*

BRASS

A NOVEL OF MARRIAGE

“Annul a marriage? ’Tis impossible!  
Though ring about your neck be brass not gold,  
Needs must it clasp, gangrene you all the same!”

—*Robert Browning*

**DEDICATED TO**  
THE WORKING WOMEN OF AMERICA

# **BOOK I**

## **BREAD**

## CHAPTER I

“*One* and two and three and four and—*one* and two and three and four and....”

Mrs. Sturgis had a way of tapping the ivory keys of the piano with her pencil when she was counting the beat during a music lesson. It made her little pupils nervous and sometimes upset them completely. Now she abruptly interrupted herself and rapped the keys sharply.

“Mildred, dearie—it doesn’t go that way at all; the quarter note is on ‘three.’ It’s one and two and *three* and.... You see?”

“Mama.” A tall dark girl stood in the doorway of the room.

Mrs. Sturgis affected not to hear and drew a firm circle with her pencil about the troublesome quarter note. There was another insistent demand from the door. Mrs. Sturgis twisted about and leaned back on the piano bench so that Mildred’s thin little figure might not obstruct the view of her daughter. Her air was one of martyred resignation but she smiled indulgently. Very sweetly she said:

“Yes, dearie?” Jeannette recognized the tone as one her mother used to disguise annoyance.

“It’s quarter to six....” Jeannette left the sentence unfinished. She hoped her mother would guess the rest, but Mrs. Sturgis only smiled more sweetly and looked expectant.

“There’s no bread,” Jeannette then said bluntly.

Mrs. Sturgis' expression did not change nor did she ease her constrained position.

“Well, dearie ... the delicatessen shop is open. Perhaps you or Alice can run down to Kratzmer's and get a loaf.”

“But we can't do that, Mama.” There was a note of exasperation in the girl's voice; she looked hard at her mother and frowned.

“Ah....” Mrs. Sturgis gave a short gasp of understanding. Kratzmer had been owed a little account for some time and the fat German had suggested that his bills be settled more promptly.

“My purse is there, dearie”; she indicated the shabby imitation leather bag on the table. Then with a renewal of her alert smile she returned to the lesson.

“One and two and three and four and—*one* and two and——”

“Mama, I'm sorry to interrupt....”

Mrs. Sturgis now turned a glassy eye upon her older child, and the patient smile she tried to assume was hardly more than a grimace. It was eloquent of martyrdom.

“I'm sorry to have to interrupt,” Jeannette repeated, “but there isn't any money in your purse; it's empty.”

The expression on her mother's face did not alter but the light died in her eyes. Jeannette realized she had grasped the situation at last.

“Well ... dearie....” Mrs. Sturgis began.

Jeannette stood uncompromisingly before her. She had no suggestion to offer; her mother might have foreseen they would need bread for dinner.

The little music-teacher continued to study her daughter, but presently her gaze drifted to Mildred beside her perched on a pile of music albums.

“You haven’t a dime or a nickel with you, dearie?” she asked the child. “I could give you credit on your bill and your papa, you see, could pay ten cents less next time he sends me a check....”

“I think I got thome money,” lisped Mildred, wriggling down from her seat and investigating the pocket of her jacket which lay near on a chair. “Mother alwath givth me money when I goeth out.” She drew forth a small plush purse and dumped the contents into her hand. “I got twenty thenth,” she announced.

“Well, I’ll just help myself to ten of it,” said Mrs. Sturgis, bending forward and lifting one of the small coins with delicate finger-tips. “You tell your papa I’ll give him credit on this bill.”

She turned to Jeannette and held out the coin.

“Here, lovie; get a little Graham, too.”

There was color in the girl’s face as she accepted the money; she drew up her shoulders slightly, but without comment, turned upon her heel and left the room.

Mrs. Sturgis brought her attention once more cheerfully back to the lesson.

“Now then, Mildred dearie: *one* and two and three and four and—*one* and two and *three* and four and.... Now you have it; see how easy that is?”

Jeannette passed through the dark intervening rooms of the apartment, catching up her shabby velvet hat from her bed, and came upon her sister Alice in the kitchen.

There was a marked contrast between the two girls. Jeannette, who was several months past her eighteenth birthday, was a tall, willowy girl with a smooth olive-tinted skin, dark eyes, brows and lashes, and straight, lustreless braids of hair almost dead black. She gave promise of beauty in a year or two,—of austere stateliness,—but now she appeared rather angular and ungainly with her thin shoulders and shapeless ankles. She was too tall and too old to be still dressed like a schoolgirl. Alice was only a year her junior, but Alice looked younger. She was softer, rounder, gentler. She had brown hair, brown eyes and a brown skin. “My little brown bird,” her mother had called her as a child. She was busy now at the stove, dumping and scraping out a can of tomatoes into a saucepan. Dinner was in process of preparation. Steam poured from the nozzle of the kettle on the gas range and evaporated in a thin cloud.

“Mama makes me so mad!” Jeannette burst out indignantly. “I *wish* she wouldn’t be borrowing money from the pupils! She just got ten cents out of Mildred Carpenter.”

She displayed the diminutive coin in her palm. Alice regarded it with a troubled frown.

“It makes me so sick,” went on Jeannette, “wheedling a dime out of a baby like that! I don’t believe it’s necessary, at least Mama

ought to manage better. Just think of it! Borrowing money to buy a loaf of bread! ... We've come to a pretty state of things."

"Aw—don't, Janny," Alice remonstrated; "you know how hard Mama tries and how people won't pay their bills.... The Cheney's have owed eighty-six dollars for six months and it never occurs to them we need it so badly."

"I'd go and get it, if I was Mama," Jeannette said with determination, putting on her hat and bending her tall figure awkwardly to catch her reflection in a lower pane of the kitchen door. "I wouldn't stand it. I'd call on old Paul G. Cheney at his office and tell him he'd have to pay up or find someone else to teach his children!"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Janny!—You know that'd never do. Paul and Dorothy have been taking lessons off Mama for nearly three years. Mama'd lose all her pupils if she did things like that."

"Well—" Jeannette drawled, suddenly weary of the discussion and opening the kitchen door into the hall, "I'm going down to Kratzmer's."

In the delicatessen store she was obliged to wait her turn. The shop was well filled with late customers, and the women especially seemed maddeningly dilatory to the impatient girl.

"An' fifteen cents' worth of ham ... an' some of that chow-chow ... and a box of crackers...."

Jeannette studied the rows of salads, pots of baked beans, the pickled pig's-feet, and sausages. Everything looked appetizing to her, and the place smelled fragrantly of fresh cold meat and creamy cheeses. Most of the edibles Kratzmer offered so invitingly, she

had never tasted. She would have liked to begin at one end of the marble counter and sample everything that was on it. She looked curiously at the woman near her who had just purchased some weird-looking, pickled things called “mangoes,” and gone on selecting imported cheeses and little oval round cans with French and Italian labels upon them. Jeannette wondered if she, herself, would ever come to know a time when she could order of Kratzmer so prodigally. She was sick of the everlasting struggle at home of what they should get for lunch or dinner. It was always determined by the number of cents involved.

“Well, dearie,” her mother invariably remonstrated at some suggestion of her own, “that would cost thirty cents and perhaps it would be wiser to wait until next week.”

A swift, vague vision arose of the vital years that were close at hand,—the vital years in which she must marry and decide the course of her whole future life. Was her preparation for this all-important time ever to be beset by a consideration of pennies and makeshifts?

“Vell, Miss Sturgis, vat iss it to-night?”

Fat Mrs. Kratzmer smiled blandly at her over the glass shelf above the marble counter. Jeannette watched her as she deftly crackled thin paper about the two loaves, tied and snapped the pink string. Kratzmer and his wife were fat with big stomachs and round, double chins; even Elsa Kratzmer, their daughter, who went to the High School with Jeannette and Alice, was fat and had a double chin. The family had probably all they wanted to eat and a great deal more; there must be an enormous amount of food left on the platters and dishes and in the pans at the end of each day that

would spoil before morning. Kratzmer, his wife and daughter must gormandize, stuff themselves night after night, Jeannette reflected as she began to climb the four long flights of stairs to her own apartment. It was disgusting, of course, to think of eating that way,—but oh, what a feast she and Alice would have if they might change places with the trio for a night or two!

As she reached the second landing, a thick smell of highly seasoned frying food assailed her. This was the floor on which the Armenians lived, and a pungent odor from their cooking frequently permeated the entire building. The front door of their apartment was open and as Jeannette was passing it, Dikron Najarian came out. He was a tall young man of twenty-three or-four, of extraordinary swarthy beauty, with black wavy masses of hair, and enormous dark eyes. He and his sister, Rosa,—she was a few years older and equally handsome,—often met the young Sturgis girls on the stairs or fumbling with the key to the mail-box in the entrance-way below. Jeannette and Alice used to giggle sillily after they had encountered Dikron, and would exchange ridiculous confidences concerning him. They regarded the young man as far too old to be interested in either of themselves and therefore took his unusual beauty and odd, foreign manner as proper targets for their laughter.

Jeannette now instinctively straightened herself as she encountered her neighbor. Upon the instant a feminine challenge emanated from her.

“Hello,” Dikron said, taken unawares and obviously embarrassed. “Been out?”

For some obscure reason Jeannette did not understand, she elected at that moment to coquet. She had never given the young

Armenian a serious thought before, but now she became aware of the effect their sudden encounter had had upon him. She paused on the lower step of the next flight and hung for a moment over the balustrade. Airily, she explained her errand to Kratzmer's.

“What smells so good?” she asked presently.

She thought the odor abominable, but it did not suit her mood to say so.

“Mother's cooking mussels to-night; they're wonderful, stuffed with rice and peppers.... Have you ever tasted them? Could I send some upstairs?”

Jeannette laughed hastily, and shook her head.

“No—no,—thanks very much.... I'm afraid we wouldn't....” She was going to say “appreciate them” but left the sentence unfinished. “I must go on up; Mother's waiting for the bread.”

But she made no immediate move, and the young man continued to lean against the wall below her. Their conversation, however, died dismally at this point, and after a moment's uncomfortable silence, the girl began nimbly to mount the stairs, flinging over her shoulder a somewhat abrupt “Good-night.”

“Get your bread, dearie?” Mrs. Sturgis asked cheerfully as Jeannette came panting into the kitchen and flung her package down upon the table. Her daughter did not answer but dropped into a chair to catch her breath.

Mrs. Sturgis was bustling about, pottering over the gas stove, stirring a saucepan of stewing kidneys, banging shut the oven door after a brief inspection of a browning custard. Alice had just

finished setting the table in the dining-room, and now came in, to break the string about the bread and begin to slice it vigorously. Jeannette interestedly observed what they were to have for dinner. It was one of the same old combinations with which she was familiar, and a feeling of weary distaste welled up within her, but a glimpse of her mother's face checked it.

Mrs. Sturgis invariably wore lace jabots during the day. These were high-collared affairs, reinforced with wires or whalebones, and they fastened firmly around the throat, the lace falling in rich, frothy cascades at the front. They were the only extravagance the hard-working little woman allowed herself, and she justified them on the ground that they were becoming and she must be presentable at the fashionable girls' school where she was a teacher, and also at Signor Bellini's studio where she was the paid accompanist. Jeannette and Alice were always mending or ironing these frills, and had become extremely expert at the work. There was a drawer in their mother's bureau devoted exclusively to her jabots, and her daughters made it their business to see that one of these lacy adornments was always there, dainty and fresh, ready to be put on. Beneath the brave show of lace about her neck and over the round swell of her small compact bosom, there was only her "little old black" or "the Macy blue." Mrs. Sturgis had no other garments and these two dresses were unrelievedly plain affairs with plain V-shaped necks and plain, untrimmed skirts. The jabots gave the effect of elegance she loved, and she had a habit of flicking the lacy ruffles as she talked, straightening them or tossing them with a careless finger. The final touch of adornment she allowed herself was two fine gold chains about her neck. From the longer was suspended her watch which she carried tucked into the

waist-band of her skirt; while the other held her eye-glasses which, when not in use, hung on a hook at her shoulder.

The tight lace collars creased and wrinkled her throat, and made her cheeks bulge slightly over them, giving her face a round full expression. When she was excited and wagged her head, or when she laughed, her fat little cheeks shook like cups of jelly. But as soon as her last pupil had departed for the day, off came the gold chains and the jabot. She was more comfortable without the confining band about her neck though her real reason for laying her lacy ruffles aside was to keep them fresh and unrumpled. Stripped of her frills, her daughters were accustomed to see her in the early mornings, and evenings, with the homely V-shaped garment about her withered neck, her cheeks, lacking the support of the tight collar, sagging loosely. Habit was strong with Mrs. Sturgis. Jeannette and Alice were often amused at seeing their mother still flicking and tossing with an unconscious finger an imaginary frill long after it had been laid aside.

Now as the little woman bent over the stove, her older daughter noted the pendant cheeks criss-crossed with tiny purplish veins, the blue-white wrinkled neck, and the vivid red spots beneath the ears left by the sharp points of wire in the high collar she had just unfastened. There were puffy pockets below her eyes, and even the eyelids were creased with a multitude of tiny wrinkles. Jeannette realized her mother was tired—unusually tired. She remembered, too, that it was Saturday, and on Saturday there were pupils all day long. The girl jumped to her feet, snatched the stirring spoon out of her mother's hand and pushed her away from the range.

“Get out of here, Mama,” she directed vigorously. “Go in to the table and sit down. Alice and I will put dinner on.... Alice, make Mama go in there and sit down.”

Mrs. Sturgis laughingly protested but she allowed her younger daughter to lead her into the adjoining room where she sank down gratefully in her place at the table.

“Well, lovies, your old mother *is* pretty tired....” She drew a long breath of contentment and closed her eyes.

The girls poured the kidney stew into an oval dish and carried it and the scalloped tomatoes to the table. There was a hurried running back and forth for a few minutes, and then Jeannette and Alice sat down, hunching their chairs up to the table, and began hungrily to eat. It was the most felicitous, unhurried hour of their day usually, for mother and daughters unconsciously relaxed, their spirits rising with the warm food, and the agreeable companionship which to each was and always had been exquisitely dear.

The dining-room in the daytime was the pleasantest room in the apartment. It and the kitchen overlooked a shabby back-yard, adjoining other shabby back-yards far below, in the midst of which, during summer, a giant locust tree was magnificently in leaf. There were floods of sunshine all afternoon from September to April, and a brief but pleasing view of the Hudson River could be seen between the wall of the house next door and an encroaching cornice of a building on Columbus Avenue. At night there was little in the room to recommend it. The wall-paper was a hideous yellow with acanthus leaves of a more hideous and darker yellow flourishing symmetrically upon it. There was a marble mantelpiece over a fireplace, and in the aperture for the grate a black lacquered

iron grilling. Over the table hung a gaselier from the center of which four arms radiated at right angles, supporting globes of milky glass.

Mrs. Sturgis' bedroom adjoined the dining-room and was separated from it by bumping folding-doors, only opened on occasions when Jeannette and Alice decided their mother's room needed a thorough cleaning and airing. The latter seemed necessary much oftener than the former for the room had only one small window which, tucked into the corner, gave upon a narrow light-well. It was from this well, which extended clear down to the basement, that the evil smells arose when the Najarians, two flights below, began cooking one of their Armenian feasts.

In the center of the apartment were two dark little chambers occupied by the girls. Neither possessed a window, but the wall separating them was pierced by an opening, fitted with a hinged light of frosted glass which, when hooked back to the ceiling, permitted the necessary ventilation. These boxlike little rooms had to be used as a passageway. The only hall was the public one outside, at one end of which was a back door giving access to the kitchen and the dining-room, and, opposite this, a front one, opening into the large, commodious sitting-room, or studio—as it was dignified by the family—in which Mrs. Sturgis gave her music lessons.

It was this generous front room, with its high ceiling, its big bay window, its alcove ideally proportioned to hold the old grand piano, which had intrigued the little music-teacher twelve years before, when she had moved into the neighborhood after her husband's death and begun her struggle for a home and livelihood. Whether or not the prospective pupils would be willing to climb the four

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