

Act II

Scene Six

The **COMPANY** rearranges the stage to the **STROON** parlor on Mott Street. **ASRIEL STROON** enters down left.

TZALEL

One morning, Asriel took a long and troubled walk, to a neighborhood far from his own—

TAMARA

—to a distant synagogue, on Delancey Street, to attend the service there.

GOLDY

He didn't have the heart to visit his usual place of worship in the neighborhood.

NATHAN

On the way he kept his hat brim down and avoided meeting the eyes of those he knew from his own congregation.

ASRIEL

What do they see when they look at me? Asriel the boor, fooled by the brilliant prodigy he's brought back to marry his daughter!

HEYMAN

But when he entered, he could not help himself, and asked around about Shaya among the regulars there.

DAVID

To his fresh consternation, he learned that his daughter's bridegroom had not been seen for weeks.

TZALEL

So, Asriel held his counsel, and set out to shadow the young man.

ASRIEL

That youngster trick Asriel Stroon! A cholera into him!

Music up. The **COMPANY** arrange themselves upstage of him in a dance that pantomimes the street life around him.

ASRIEL IN PURSUIT

ASRIEL

I followed him!

COMPANY

He followed him!

ASRIEL

I followed him!

COMPANY

He followed him!

ASRIEL

He left the house at nine o'clock
And I slipped out a half a block behind him.
I followed him past Essex Street
And, careful that I should not meet
A soul who knew us both, I followed him.

With my collar up and my hat pulled down,
I trailed behind across the town,
Cursing him, cursing her, cursing every penny of her dowry.
Until at last I caught him on
The steps of some grand building on the Bowery.

COMPANY

The Bowery!

It had a flight of stairs so high
They might have mounted to the sky
And marble pillars—four
On each side of a broad brass door—
No synagogue, of that much I was sure!

COMPANY

Of that much he was sure!

ASRIEL

(Plucking NATHAN out of the dance, speaking.)

Tell me, sir, if you would not mind—this grand building here, with the pillars and all these stairs—is this a church?

NATHAN

A church? No, it's a library—the Astor Library!

ASRIEL

Ah, a lot of gentile books!

NATHAN

If that's what you're looking for.

ASRIEL takes a newspaper from a member of the **COMPANY** and sings while he 'hides' behind it.

ASRIEL

I bought a paper there to hide
My face while he was gone inside,
And so I waited there to see
Where he'd go next. But who did he
Come out with but his former tutor, Heyman!

ASRIEL collars **HEYMAN**, pulling him from the dance and standing him up at downstage center.

ASRIEL

With his gentile books and Geometry,
And his surly jokes—who was he to me,
Cursing him, cursing them, cursing every lesson that I'd paid for?
They set off down the street again,
Neither one suspecting that I'd laid for'm.

ASRIEL

I followed them!

COMPANY

He followed them!

ASRIEL

I followed them!

COMPANY

He followed them!

ASRIEL

From Hester Street, across the park
At Eldridge Street, I drew my mark—
I followed them from haunt to haunt
Until they reached a restaurant—

COMPANY

A restaurant?!

ASRIEL

A *gentile* restaurant!

The **COMPANY** strikes a tableaux of shock and despair; moaning
chorus under.

ASRIEL

And they went inside and they sat right down
Like any *goyim* on the town,
And a man in an apron, yes sir—

COMPANY

No sir!

ASRIEL

Took their bill, like an uptown grocer,
For a lunch that wasn't fit to eat—
A meal that wasn't kosher, no sir!

COMPANY

No sir!

ASRIEL

And I cursed myself, and I cursed my luck, and I cursed my foolish heart!
So as they settled in to eat
I made my way back to Mott Street.
I made my long trip home—

(Spoken:)

You have been cheated out of your boots by a stripling, Asrielke—woe to your
foolish head! I'll show him how to fool Asriel Stroon!

The **COMPANY** disperse, leaving **FLORA** and **SHAYA** behind a stack of
books on the dining room table at left. **ASRIEL** enters dejectedly.

FLORA

You missed supper, Papa. Have you been to evening service?

ASRIEL crosses right, past her, not answering.

FLORA

Where have you been so late, papa?

ASRIEL

Deep in the earth. You care much where your papa is, do you?

FLORA

Papa! Are you mad? Why, what's the matter?

ASRIEL

Matter? Bluff a dead rooster, not me—my head is still on my shoulders. Here it is, you see?

ASRIEL seats himself in the rocking chair at right and busies himself with the newspaper.

FLORA

See if papa ain't getting on to what you are doing, Shayie.

SHAYA

Pshaw! Is it the first time you see him out of humor? He must have had some trouble with some tenant or a janitor.

FLORA

He must have. But what if he gets wind? I'm worrying the life out of myself about it.

SHAYA

So am I. I love your father just the same as if he were my own papa. I wish the wedding were over, don't you?

(To **ASRIEL**.)

I studied at the Souvalk Synagogue today.

ASRIEL

(Not looking up.)

You did, did you? I didn't see you there.

SHAYA

It was very crowded, of course.

ASRIEL

It was—full of the holy men you glory in getting the better of in an argument. You've made quite an impression among them. They told me they had not seen you, either.

(Dropping the pretense.)

But I did see you at lunch, Shaya. How was the pork—did it taste good to you?.

SHAYA

(Caught.)

It was not pork. It was veal cutlet.

FLORA

Veal cutlet?

ASRIEL

There. You see? It's all up, Flora.

(Dropping the paper and standing.)

You thought your papa was a fool, didn't you? Well, you are a poor hand at figuring. Just this afternoon I saw him in a Gentile restaurant—may he be choked with his *treife* gorge!

FLORA

You've got no business to curse him like that!

ASRIEL

I have no business? And who is to stop me, pray?

FLORA

(Crossing to him at down right.)

I am. It's not my fault. You brought him home. You know I did not care at first.

TAMARA enters from left.

TAMARA

Reb Stroon! You've missed supper. Let me make up a plate for you. Sit down.

ASRIEL

(With an effort to restrain himself.)

Flora, you are not going to marry him.

FLORA

I am. I can't live without him.

ASRIEL

No? Then you can have him—and cook the veal cutlet for him too! Get out!

TAMARA

Veal cutlet?!

ASRIEL

Go! Get out!

SHAYA and **FLORA** exchange a long look. **SHAYA** draws himself up and extends his hand to her, and she takes it. They exit left.

TAMARA

Mr. Stroon, what have you done?

ASRIEL

My candle is blown out. It's all gone, Tamara! There is no Shaya any longer. He is dead and buried and gone from the marketplace. Worse than that—a convert Jew is worse than a dead one.

TAMARA

Convert?! Shaya? Certainly there has been some misunderstanding.

ASRIEL

Today I saw him eating veal in a gentile restaurant.

TAMARA

Veal! Woe is me. Does he not get enough to eat here? Don't I serve him the best food there is in the world?

ASRIEL

Any king would be glad to get such dinners.

TAMARA

And still, you saw him. Well, it seems *treife* tastes better.

ASRIEL

We must have evil-eyed the child—we have devoured him with our admiring looks. A calamity upon my sinful head! I have lost everything, Tamara.

TAMARA

Oh, Mr. Stroon—

ASRIEL

It has flown away and you can't catch it. Gone, and that's all.

TAMARA

(Crossing down to him.)

But it is a sin to take things so close to heart. You must take care of your health. Let me get you something to eat.

ASRIEL

No, Tamara, it is gone, all gone. It was all a dream—last year's lemon pie! I will never eat again, Tamara. I will die all flesh and bones, with no one to say Kaddish

for me!

TAMARA

Bear up under your affliction like a righteous Jew, Reb Asriel. All is surely not lost.

ONLY MOMENTS

TAMARA

Try to remember the happiest day that you've known.
Try to remember the happiest day that you can—
And, chances are, you can't, can you?

You can tell yourself that you were happy then,
Or here or there, that you were happy when
One thing or another made you glad.

But one whole day? We have the grace
To think of things that made the heart race,
Made the rumble of the traffic seem to sing,
But one whole day? Not quite the thing.

No single day was good or bad so much
As what we best remember—look, or touch
Or quiet words once whispered in our ear.
We live out lives in weeks or months or years

But we remember moments, only moments.
A child's head on your shoulder, fast asleep.
The way the moon lit up a certain smile.
The way you knew you'd loved someone all the while.

So we remember moments, only moments,
And steel ourselves to turn away from pain.
And look out for the warmth within the rain,
And find ourselves content with what remains.

Who's to remember the happiest day we'll have known?
Moment by moment by moment we find them—we make them—our own.

TAMARA

(Speaking.)

Trust to the Uppermost, and you will live to rejoice in your child and in her children,
if God be pleased.

FLORA and **SHAYA** enter hesitantly from left.

ASRIEL

Where have you been?

FLORA

It was my idea, and I couldn't help it, papaly. It's all my fault. He didn't want to go, but I insisted. Don't blame Shaya. He is awful fond of you.

ASRIEL

He ought to be! Where have you been?

FLORA

We've been to the city court and got married by a judge.

TAMARA

You married! In court—without a canopy—like the gentiles?

FLORA

We'll do everything to please you. If you don't want him to be a doctor, he won't.

ASRIEL

A doctor! Is that what you have been up to? I see—you have got the best of me, after all.

FLORA

Yes, but don't be angry, papa darling.

ASRIEL

What have you done, Flora? I had no son—this I knew already. So I have no daughter, either. I am all alone in the world—alone as a stone.

FLORA

Papa, papa—don't! You know I'm not to blame for it all.

ASRIEL

I know you are not to blame. But what is the use talking! It's gone, and I am not going to take another sin upon my soul. I won't let you be his wife without canopy and dedication. Let the Jewish wedding come off at once—this week—tomorrow.

FLORA

Do you mean that, papa? Really?

ASRIEL

Of course I do—what should I mean? You have got the best of me and I don't kick, do I? It seems God does not want Asriel the Boor to have some joy in his old age, nor

a Kaddish for his soul, when the worms will be feasting upon his silly bones—

FLORA

Oh, don't say that, papa. It'll break my heart if you do. You know Shaya is as good as a son to you.

SHAYA

I'll say your Kaddish. I promised to, and I will!

ASRIEL

An unbeliever for my son? A gentile for my Kaddish? No.

FLORA

Shaya is no gentile, papa. Your daughter married a Jew—and a good man, if not your idea of a righteous one.

EVERYTHING WE NEED

FLORA

When you first set out from the place you started from,
Did you know it would turn out as you wanted it to?
Of course not. How could you?

And when you finally found what you were looking for,
Did it look like what you'd been wanting all along?
Why would it? Is that so wrong?

There are things that we search for all of our lives—
The things that we work for, things that we strive
To reach with our outstretched hands.

And then there are things that we find on the way,
Things that we save up for some future day,
And sometimes the things that we never expected

To matter that much, whatever our plans—
End up as the things we concede
Are everything we ever need.

No one plans the future—that's what the future's for.
No one knows the answer, but still we try the door,
And whatever's behind it—that's what we came for.

So I wasn't expecting to find myself a man,
And I didn't imagine that he would come my way,

But he did. What can I say?

And I didn't ever expect to find myself a bride,
But a husband I never expected came along
And here we are. Is that so wrong?

No one plans the future—that's what the future's for.
No one knows the answer, but still we try the door,
And whatever's behind it—that's what we came for.

ASRIEL

Well, there's enough of that. Even a starving man may have his fill of figs. You—

(To **SHAYA**.)

You are to fetch the rabbi—go now. Tell him what you've done and ask him to come this evening for dinner and to say the blessing. That's all I'll ask of you.

(To **FLORA**)

And you—go up and pick out your wedding dress. We will have the ceremony tonight and then you are truly man and wife. Go!

SHAYA and **FLORA** exit left.

ASRIEL

You know what? They have got the best of me. Let them live as they please and be responsible to the Uppermost for themselves. I cannot change the world. I shall give Flora half my property and the rest I'll sell.

TAMARA

Sell? What are you thinking?

ASRIEL

It is everything that I want—to let someone else have what I once had. Let some other poor fool struggle with it and maybe he will win out in the end.

TAMARA

You are generous, then—and a good man, Reb Asriel—a righteous man!

ASRIEL

And you are a righteous woman, Tamara. Let us go to the Land of Israel. Why not marry and end our days serving God in the Holy Land together?

A long pause. **TAMARA** stares at him intently.

ASRIEL

We'll have a comfortable living and plenty of money for deeds of charity.

(He takes a step toward her, pleadingly:)

I know I am only a boor. Do I say I am not? But is a boor no human being at all?
Can't I die a righteous Jew?

TAMARA stands still, expressionless.

ASRIEL

You know that I have on my tongue what I have on my lung, Tamara. I mean what I say, and we want no matchmakers. America is now treife to me. I can't show my head.

(He kneels at her feet.)

The world is dark and empty to me. Come, take pity, Tamara. I shall see Flora married according to the laws of Moses and Israel, and then let us put up a canopy of our own and set out on our journey. Well?

(He takes her hands.)

Well, Tamara?

Finally, **TAMARA** drops his hands and turns away.

TAMARA

Since it is the will of God.

ONLY MOMENTS (REPRISE)

TAMARA and ASRIEL

Try to remember the happiest day that you've known.
Try to remember the happiest day that you can—
And, chances are, you can't, can you?

But we remember moments, only moments.
A child's head on your shoulder, fast asleep.
The way the moon lit up a certain smile.
The way you knew you'd loved someone all the while.

Who's to remember the happiest day we'll have known?
Moment by moment by moment we find them—we make them—our own.

They exit left.