

Act I

Scene Two

The **COMPANY** disperses. **DAVID** and **HEYMAN** re-enter from left with a table, which they place left of center. **FLORA** enters from right with a rocking chair, which she places at right before sitting and opening a book.

FLORA

(Aside, as before.)

Flora was alone in the back parlor, in front of the stove, absorbed in her book.

BIELE

(Entering with a tablecloth, which she spreads over the table.)

She was the only girl of her circle who would read Dickens, Scott, or Thackeray in addition to the *Family Story Paper* and the *Fireside Companion*, which were the exclusive reading of her former classmates at the Chrystie Street Grammar School.

TAMARA

(Entering with dishes and silverware. She sets the table with **BIELE**.)

A month or two before we make Flora's acquaintance she had celebrated her twentieth birthday, having been born in this private house on Mott Street, which was her father's property.

Enter **ASRIEL** and **TZALEL** opposite, as if on the street outside. **ASRIEL** pauses, consulting his watch. **DAVID** and **HEYMAN** return with chairs, which they place around the table.

TZALEL

(Crossing with his cart, he pauses, extracts a candelabrum, and sets it on the table.)

A matchmaker had recently called, and he had launched into a eulogy of a young Jewish physician; but her father, Asriel, had cut him short: his only child was to marry a God-fearing businessman—

ASRIEL

(Overlapping **TZALEL**.)

—a God-fearing businessman, and no fellow deep in Gentile lore and shaving his

beard need apply!

TZALEL lingers a moment, speaking with **ASRIEL**, then exits.

HEYMAN

(Entering with a basket of bread, which he sets on the table.)

As to Flora, she was burning to be a doctor's wife.

FLORA

A doctor's wife!

DAVID

(Entering with a soup tureen, which he sets on the table.)

Flora pictured a clean-shaven, high-hatted, spectacled gentleman jumping out of a buggy, and the image became a fixture in her mind.

FLORA

(Standing, book in hand.)

I won't marry anybody except a doctor!

TAMARA

Flora, come help with the table. Your father's home from the synagogue—he's just outside now!

BIELE

When Asriel Stroon had retired from business, he suddenly grew fearful of death.

HEYMAN

(Entering with a bottle, which he sets on the table.)

Previously he had had been too busy to live, much less to think of death.

DAVID

What with his flour store—

BIELE

—two bakeries—

HEYMAN

—and his real estate!

DAVID

But now it suddenly burst upon him that he was very old and very wicked.

ASRIEL

Now I am retired, I sit in the synagogue every day, dear God, chanting the psalms—and understanding not a word! What am I to do? I am as full of sins as a

watermelon is full of seeds!

BIELE

And while his valuable papers lay secure between the fireproof walls of his iron safe, his soul was left utterly exposed to the flames of Judgment.

HEYMAN

He grew more pious and exalted every day, and by degrees fell prey to a feeling to which he had been a stranger for more than three decades. Asriel Stroon grew homesick.

The **COMPANY** finish setting the stage and exit.

ASRIEL'S PRAYER

ASRIEL

(Outside, looking up at the evening sky.)

Reb Tzalel tells me the first three stars mark the Sabbath.
And there they are, as they've always been—and will always be!
When God said "Good! That's enough!" he started the Sabbath.
He rested on the seventh day,
And here I'm resting, here today,
And the same three stars that shone down then
Shine down here and now—now it's the Sabbath!

ASRIEL turns and crosses around to the table. We are now in the dining room of the **STROON** house on Mott Street. Music under.

FLORA

(Crossing to **ASRIEL** and giving him a peck on the cheek.)
Just coming from the synagogue, papa? This settles your fast, doesn't it?

ASRIEL

(He removes his coat and sits.)

It is not so easy to settle with Him, my daughter. You can never be through serving the Uppermost.

(Calling off.)

Hurry up, Tamara!

(To **FLORA**.)

It is not potato soup; you can never have enough of it.

(Singing.)

When I was a child, those same three stars marked the Sabbath.
And the same three stars shine down now as they shone down then,
And they shine down there, while I'm far away on the Sabbath—
Far from the land where my parents lie,

But the same three stars in the same dark sky
Still shine as they did when I was a child
In the village where I was born—now it's the Sabbath!
(Calling off, again.)

Tamara! It's time to break the fast, isn't it?

TAMARA

(Entering with a platter, which she places on the table.)

You can take your chair, Mr. Stroon. Supper is ready.

TAMARA removes her apron and the family arranges itself at the table, **FLORA** absently glancing into her book beside her plate.

TAMARA

Will you say grace, Mr. Stroon?

ASRIEL

(Noticing **FLORA's** book.)

Off with that lump of Gentile nastiness while holy words are being said!

TAMARA

(Good-naturedly.)

You can read your book a little after. The wisdom of it will not run away. Mr. Stroon?

ASRIEL

(Singing.)

Yet other wise men say that the start of the Sabbath
Comes when trees and houses stand out as silhouettes
Against a sky still lighted by—

TAMARA and FLORA

(Singing.)

—the Sabbath!

ASRIEL

The sun just set—and yet, and yet—
I listened close but I forget!
When one says this, and one says that—
Well, who am I to find out what
Exactly is the hidden thought
Of the Uppermost, whose wish begot the Sabbath!

TAMARA

(Ladling out soup.)

That was lovely, Mr. Stroon. Flora, your bowl?

FLORA

(Passing **TAMARA** her bowl.)

But Papa doesn't know what it all means—do you, Papa? You never learned.

ASRIEL

Every line melts like sugar in my mouth. I drink it in like—like soup!

FLORA

But still—

ASRIEL

The kernel of a hollow nut!

(Singing.)

I'm a poor, unlettered man—just a boor! But the Sabbath

Comes to the learned and the simple, no matter where.

Tonight I pray and I think of home,

And I wonder at how far I've come,

And I wonder at how far I'll go

Back to where I started from.

I'll return to say a *kaddish* there

With the first three stars in the darkening air—on the Sabbath!

(To **FLORA**.)

Flora! I am going to Europe.

FLORA

Going to Europe! What are you talking about?

ASRIEL

Just what you hear. After Passover I am going to Europe. I must take a look at the place where I come from, my village of Pravly.

TAMARA

Pravly!

FLORA

Where you came from? But you haven't been there in—in thirty-five years! You won't remember a thing about it.

ASRIEL

I don't remember Pravly? Better than Mott Street. Better than my nose. I was born there, my daughter. I will find a scholar—one who knows the words *and* what they mean to the ears of the Uppermost—to say the *Kaddish* over my parents' graves.

TAMARA

Amen!

ASRIEL

I'd barely read the books of Moses when I was put to work as a boy, by my father—may he rest in peace on this, the anniversary of his death! And today, for him, I lit a candle at the cantor's desk and said *kaddish*—but the words were ashes on my tongue!

FLORA

But Papa, it's so far away!

ASRIEL

Never mind, my child; I won't have to walk all the way.

TAMARA

And Flora—will you take her along?

ASRIEL

Flora will stay here and collect rent. I did not have her in Pravly, and I want to be there as I used to.

(Picking up **FLORA**'s book.)

And what would she do there, anyway? She'd only make fun of our ways and pious people would point their fingers at her and her books and call her 'gentile girl,' hey?

FLORA

Papa! It's just Charles Dickens.

ASRIEL

Even as I said. I am an unlettered man—a boor—but this much I know: American prayers are as tasteless to me as American cucumbers and American fish!

FLORA

Mister, you aren't going anywhere.

ASRIEL

Are you finished? Then off with you—and take that gentile book away!

FLORA

Papa!

TAMARA

I'll join you in the kitchen in a moment, Flora.

FLORA exits, piqued.

ASRIEL

It is pulling me by the heart, Tamara!

TAMARA

Then it is the will of the Uppermost, Mr. Stroon.

(She stands, clearing the soup tureen.)

And I will look after Flora in your absence.

ASRIEL

Good—then it's settled. So I will go to Pravly!