

Act II

Scene Three

The **STROON** house and the street outside. At rise **SHAYA** is seated crosslegged on the floor at right with two books, one open over the other, as **FLORA** busies herself in the parlor.

NATHAN

Meanwhile, at the home of Asriel Stroon—

FLORA

—three days after his daughter's betrothment had been celebrated by a solemn ceremony—

GOLDY

—and a sumptuous feast—

SHAYA

Shaya Golub was making a pretense of spending his afternoons—

TAMARA

—and sometimes also mornings—

NATHAN

—at the various synagogues of the Jewish quarter—

HEYMAN

—when he wasn't hard at work, studying at home.

ASRIEL enters from left as the **COMPANY** starts to set the stage for the wedding reception to follow, taking objects from **TZALEL'S** cart, as he enters at down right and pauses there.

TAMARA

But Stroon had postponed the wedding, the crowning glory of his achievement—

GOLDY

—like a rare bottle of wine—

NATHAN

—for some future day.

BIELE

He dreaded to indulge himself in such a rapid succession of worldly joys—

DAVID

—lest he might use up his share in the world to come.

ASRIEL

Is Shayaly in?

FLORA

Of course he is—*papa!*

At this signal, **SHAYA** quickly replaces the book he has been reading with the one that has been under it.

ASRIEL

(Softly.)

Ah—there he is! My crown, my Messiah, my Kaddish! My Share in the World-to-come!

FLORA

Did you have breakfast, papa?

ASRIEL

This is my breakfast. This is for the soul, my child. Everything else is a lot of rubbish. But I am afraid I must not be gloating over him like this, or I may give him the evil eye. And Floraly, I am afraid your company may disturb him sometimes.

FLORA

Papa!

ASRIEL

A pretty sweetheart is apt to stir a fellow's brains, you know, and take him away from the Law. He had better study more at the synagogues.

ASRIEL exits left. **FLORA** crosses to **SHAYA**.

FLORA

You heard me holler, didn't you?

SHAYA

(Trading one book for another.)
Of course I did. He interrupted me in the middle of such a cunning explanation!

FLORA

Did he? What was it about? All about triangles—the same as before?

SHAYA

Yes, but it is even more complicated than what I told you. See here? It's the space inside—the area!

FLORA

That's sweet. But don't be too long. Hurry now—to the synagogue to make papa happy.

SHAYA picks up his books and exits left with **FLORA**. **ASRIEL** re-enters from down left and crosses right to **TZALEL**, who is reading from a small book.

BIELE

The prodigy and his importer were the talk of the neighborhood—

DAVID

—and nothing was more pleasing to Asriel than to hear the praises of his daughter's fiancé sounded by the Talmudists.

ASRIEL

Particularly was his heart longing for the warm eulogies of Reb Tzalel—

TZALEL

—a poor, sickly old peddler—

TAMARA

—who was considered one of the most pious and learned men in the neighborhood.

ASRIEL

Asriel liked the man for his sincerity and uncompromising self-respect.

NATHAN

He often asked him to his house—

BIELE

—but the tattered, underfed peddler invariably declined the invitation.

TZALEL

(From his book, to **ASRIEL**.)

Saith the Book of Job: "He is one that shows no favor to chieftains, and distinguishes

not the rich before the indigent, for all of them are the work of his hands.”

ASRIEL

To hear you talk Reb Tzalel, to hear it spoken among the learned—as when I hear my Shaya at his studies—I am a richer man, and yet I am ashamed as a poor man beside you. Let me but seat you at my table!

TZALEL

What will I do there, Reb Asriel? Look at your costly carpet and furniture, and bear in mind that you are a landlord and I a poor peddler! At the synagogue I like you better, for there we are equals.

(Pause. He closes the book and drops it into the cart.)

But what's the use of playing cat and rat, Mr. Stroon? I may as well tell you what lies like a heavy stone on my heart. Your Shaya is going to the bad. He has become an unbeliever.

ASRIEL

An unbeliever!

TZALEL

An unbeliever. He sins and leads others to sin.

ASRIEL

No!

TZALEL

When he is at the synagogue and you are not, he talks to everybody he can get hold of concerning the way the world swings around the sun, how rain and thunder, day and night—everything—can be explained not as the will of the Most High, but as a matter of science.

ASRIEL

Science?! Not my Shaya!

TZALEL

And that there is no God in heaven, and all that sort of vile stuff that you hear from every unbeliever—may they all be hurled from one end of the world to the other!

ASRIEL

You need not curse him, Reb Tzalel.

TZALEL

Everything can be explained! May the Angel of Death explain it to him! May he—

ASRIEL

Hold on, Reb Tzalel! You don't feed him, do you? What you say is a lie—as big a lie

as Og the King of Bashan!

TZALEL

A lie, is it? Very well then, you shall know all. Little Mendele saw your imported decoration smoking a cigarette last Sabbath.

ASRIEL

Shaya—with a cigarette on the Sabbath? Shaya smoke on the Sabbath! Well, I have this to say: that Mendele and the whole lot are nothing but a set of first-class liars and begrudging gossip-mongers!

TZALEL

I hate to cause you the pain, Mr. Stroon, but he has gone too far in Gentile books.

ASRIEL

It must give Mendele a belly-ache to think that he could not afford such a bridegroom for his girl and that I could.

TZALEL

Mendele hasn't got a daughter, Reb Stroon. Although, if you were by chance to meet his son—

ASRIEL

Well, I have—and I got a prodigy for her, and he has licked the whole lot of you learned fellows to ground coffee. I have got him—see? Let all my enemies burst for envy!

TZALEL

(Turning to go.)

Well, I am not going to argue with you, Stroon—I am not going to argue with a boor. I only want to say that it is not you I pity.

ASRIEL

(Furiously.)

Shut up, Reb Tzalel!

TZALEL

(Unperturbed, he starts to haul the cart off right.)

Why should I? This is not your sky above us. Here on the street I am richer yet than you.

ASRIEL

Wait! Keep still, Reb Tzalel! Forgive me--you know I am a boor. Do take pity and say no more; but all you have said, all they have said, is a lie! The cholera choke me if it is not. Take pity. Don't spill salt over my wounds.

TZALEL

You have been a boor, and that's what you are and will be. But the boy was to become a great man in Israel, and you have brought him over here for bedeviled America to turn him into an unbeliever.

(He turns back.)

Consider your reward for that, Asriel Stroon! Woe! woe! woe!

TZALEL exits right.

ASRIEL

An unbeliever! Smoking on the Sabbath! The world goes 'round the sun! It's a lie!

ASRIEL rushes off left.