

Act I

Scene Two

The company disperses. DAVID and HEYMAN reenter from left with a table, which they place left of center. FLORA enters from right with a chair, which she places at right before sitting and opening a book.

FLORA

(Aside.)

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. Aside.)

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. Aside.)

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

Enter ASRIEL on the street outside. He pauses, consulting his watch. DAVID and HEYMAN return with three chairs, which they place around the table.

TZALEL

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

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!

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

HEYMAN

(Entering with a basket of bread, which he sets on the table. Aside.)
As to Flora, she was burning to be a doctor's wife.

FLORA

(Aside.)
A doctor's wife!

DAVID

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

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

HEYMAN

(Entering with a soup tureen, which he sets on the table. Aside.)
Previously he had had been too busy to live, much less to think of death.

DAVID

(Aside.)
What with his flour store—

BIELE

(Aside.)
—two bakeries—

HEYMAN

(Aside.)
—and his real estate!

DAVID

(Aside.)

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

ASRIEL

(Aside.)

I am as full of sins as a watermelon is full of seeds!

BIELE

(Aside.)

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

(Aside, before exiting.)

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.

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 to the table. We are now in the dining room of ASRIEL STROON's house on Mott Street. TAMARA exits left as BIELE and DAVID finish arranging the table.

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, handing it to DAVID, who exits.)

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, handing it off to BIELE, who exits. 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!

(Speaking, music under.)

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?

(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!

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!

(Heading her off.)

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
Pravly.

TAMARA

Pravly!

FLORA

But you haven't been there over thirty-five years. You won't remember anything

about it.

ASRIEL

I don't remember Pravyly? Better than Mott Street. Better than my nose. I was born there, my daughter,

TAMARA

Are you really going?

ASRIEL

I feel like seeing my folks. 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.

FLORA

But Papa, it's so far away!

ASRIEL

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

FLORA

But the Russian police will arrest you for staying away so long. Didn't you say they would?

ASRIEL

Show a *treif* gendarme a *kosher* coin, and he will be shivering with ague. Long live the American dollar!

TAMARA

And Flora—will you take her along?

ASRIEL

What for? That she might make fun of our ways there, and that the pious people should point their fingers at her and her books and call her 'gentile girl,' hey?

FLORA

Papa! It's *Little Dorrit*, by Charles Dickens!

ASRIEL

Even as I said. I'd barely read the books of Moses when I was put to work as a boy, heckling flax with my father—may he rest in peace on this, the anniversary of his death!

TAMARA

Amen!

ASRIEL

And today, for him, I lit a candle at the cantor's desk and said *kaddish*—but the words were ashes on my tongue!

TAMARA

Oh, Mr. Stroon—

ASRIEL

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! So I will go to Pravly!

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

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

ASRIEL

Tamara, hand me my Psalter, will you?