

Act I

Scene One

A corner on Grand Street on New York's Lower East Side, the night before Passover: beggars and peddlers ply their trades as snow falls on a landscape of shops and tenement buildings.

Enter **COMPANY**. Some set up as peddlers and begin to hawk their wares as others stroll about.

THE CRIES OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE

COMPANY

Meat! Meat! Kosher from the butcher!
Chickens for the stewing pot and brisket for the oven.
Hurry, hurry, Sabbath is coming!

Bread! Buy bread! I've bread to sell!
It started out fresh this morning, fresh,
And now, this evening, well—
I have day-old bread to sell!

Do you need a tablecloth fit for your table,
Embroidered for the holiday, best as hands are able?

Spices and herbs, both savory and bitter!
If your wife can't cook with these, you may as well quit her!

I can write a letter, post it in the mail—
Tell me what your news is, I'll send it on its way!
Think of how they'll wonder, back in the homeland,
How you've prospered, how you've risen,
How you've thrived so far away!

Oranges and lemons, apricots and raisins,
Currants and apples and limes!
Fresh fruit in season, spotless and juicy,
Currants and apples and limes!

Candles for Passover! Light them at your seder!
They're sure to burn the whole evening through!
You're sure to find they'll never sputter and smoke,
Or, on my honor, I'm no... merchant for you!

ASRIEL

(Aside.)

If you had chanced to be on Grand Street on that starry February night, the night before Passover, it would scarcely have occurred to you that the ghetto was groaning under the weight of a long season of enforced idleness and distress.

SHAYA

(Aside.)

The air was exhilaratingly crisp, and the glare of the cafés and millinery shops flooded it with contentment and kindly good will.

TAMARA

(Aside.)

The sidewalks were lined with peddlers and alive with shoppers and courting couples and promenaders.

FLORA

(Aside.)

Yet the dazzling scene had many a tale of woe to tell.

Enter **NATHAN**, carrying a peddler's tray on a shoulder-strap, piled with dishes.

BIELE

Pausing forlornly at peddler's carts and window displays, men and women would feast a hungry eye on an imaginary purchase, only to pay for their momentary joy with all the pangs of awakening to an empty purse.

TZALEL

Many of the peddlers, too, called out with the desperation of imminent ruin; others implored the passers-by as if they were begging alms—

NATHAN

(Crossing. Hawking unenthusiastically:)

Buy nice dishes for the holidays! Cheap and strong! Dishes for Passover! Buy nice dishes for the holidays!

DAVID

—while still others disguised this feverish urgency with an air of martyrdom or

shame, as if peddling were beneath the dignity of their station, and they had been driven to it by sheer famine.

Enter **GOLDY**. She spots **NATHAN** in the crowd and sneaks up behind him.

NATHAN

Dishes for Passover! Buy nice dishes for the holidays! Cheap and strong!

GOLDY

(Mocking him playfully.)

Di-i-shes! Buy nice di-i-shes! A big lot you'll make! Mind that you don't fall asleep murmuring like this.

NATHAN

Goldy! What brings you here? You know I hate for you to see me peddling.

GOLDY

Are you really angry? Bite the feather bed, then. Where is the disgrace? As if you were the only peddler in America! I wish you were. Wouldn't you make heaps of money then!

NATHAN

I made fifteen dollars a week blocking caps.

GOLDY

And how long ago was that? Two years—two years ago! I know it to the very day, my dearest. You proposed one day, and the next you were laid off! And yet I said to myself, 'This is my predestined one.'

NATHAN

Goldy!

GOLDY

But I wouldn't have it any other way! And I still wouldn't. But you have been yelling long enough today, anyhow.

NATHAN

Two years!

GOLDY

Do you suppose it does not go to my very heart to think of the way you stand in the cold screaming yourself hoarse? Everything will improve in time, my little crown that you are. But here now—

GOLDY plunges her hands into his pockets, rooting around for the

day's earnings. He surrenders meekly. She counts the money as
NATHAN speaks.

NATHAN

Two years! We'd planned for three months. We had almost a hundred and twenty dollars between us then—imagine that!

GOLDY

(Counting.)

Seventy-five... eighty... a dollar—I imagine it every night in my dreams, my love—a dollar and five...

NATHAN

And that would have been enough—and we would have been married all this time! We could have done it then.

GOLDY

(Stops counting suddenly.)

Done what? For only a hundred and twenty dollars—done what, my darling?

NATHAN

You know already. A modest wedding, Goldy. A simple wedding. And furniture—enough for two rooms, at least. It would have been enough.

TZALEL crosses upstage of them with his cart, then pauses, watching.

GOLDY

A modest wedding? A simple wedding—enough? And together, you and me, in two rooms! I see it now: imagine us married and living in two rooms! What would our friends say—our married-already friends?

NATHAN

Goldy—

GOLDY

All along, you, Nathan, my light, my joy—a wedding with no bard, no supper, and the sort of life that one hundred and twenty dollars could bring us—all along you have been bent upon making me the target of universal ridicule!

NATHAN

May the Uppermost strike me down! That's not how I meant!

GOLDY

(Drawing herself up. Tearfully.)

I would rather descend into an untimely grave than be married in such a slipshod manner!

TZALEL

(Nudging **NATHAN**, sympathetically.)

So, tell me, is it for the wedding or the untimely grave that she cries?

NATHAN shrugs **TZALEL** off and turns back to **GOLDY**. He puts his arms around her.

GOLDY

One does not marry every day, and when I have at last lived to stand under the bridal canopy with my predestined one, I will not do so like a beggar maid. Give me a respectable wedding, or none at all, Nathan, do you hear?

NATHAN

A respectable wedding?

GOLDY

A respectable wedding—and nothing less!

NATHAN

But Goldy—how much longer can we wait?

A RESPECTABLE WEDDING

NATHAN

When you see a couple walking down the street,
Clearly very much in love,
And you wonder to yourself, 'Now how did they meet?
Was it on a streetcar—did he give her his seat?
Did he follow her to work and discreetly ask the clerk her name?'
You know it doesn't matter, still it's nice to figure all the same.

GOLDY

When you know a married couple settled in their home
In dignity befitting their estate,
With a fine Brussels carpet and a peer-glass besides
With the comfort a comfortable parlor provides,
And folded in the press their best linen bedding—
Rest assured you're in a home that began with a respectable wedding.

A respectable wedding, with a white satin gown—

NATHAN

And slippers to match?

GOLDY

—and slippers to match,
A gown trimmed in lace, like the canopy above,

NATHAN

And you see it in their eyes: they're very much in love—

GOLDY

And a veil to match them both, with lace around the netting!
They're assured of a home that comes of a respectable wedding!

A cantor and a bard and a five-piece band
For dancing afterwards. Their guests—
Their relations and all their married friends—
Know just how this fine sort of evening ends:
With a carriage for the couple to see them on their way
To the sort of home a respectable wedding fortends.

NATHAN

But it's been two full years, Goldy, two long years!
And we've waited and saved, and the money we've spent
Could have started us out, could have covered the rent
And bought us your dishes and pressed-copper ware,
With a sofa and a dresser and table and a chair—
Enough to fill a parlor at the front of two rooms
And coal enough to keep us warm—
What's the harm in that, Goldy, what's the harm?

GOLDY

A slipshod wedding is the sort of affair
That announces to the neighborhood
That a couple's in a hurry. 'Why the hurry, why the care?
Maybe a look inside the oven would show us something there!'
That's the sort of thing you hear down the hallway, on the stairs.
Is that what we want, Nathan, the sort of start we'd be getting?
That's what comes of a slipshod wedding!

But a respectable wedding is the sort of start which,
Rising far above reproach.
Guaranteeing two souls, joined at the heart, such
A future full of promise as the smallest apartment—

NATHAN

(Spoken.)

Three rooms, then!

GOLDY

But feted with a dinner of a hundred fifty settings—
In a hall full of music and laughter and dancing—

BOTH

A respectable match, with a respectable wedding!

GOLDY

But Nathan, darling, dearest little heart—guess what a plan I have hit upon! You see, in a week or two we shall have about seventy-five dollars, shan't we?

NATHAN

Well, maybe, but—

GOLDY

And what is seventy-five dollars? Nothing! We could barely afford the plainest furniture, and no wedding worth speaking of. Now, if we have no wedding, we shall get no presents, shall we?

NATHAN shakes his head thoughtfully.

GOLDY

So is it not foolish of us to be racking our brains about the wedding while there is such a plain way of having both a respectable celebration and fine furniture--Brussels carpet, pier-glass, and all--with the money we now have on hand?

NATHAN

What is it, Goldy?

GOLDY

Well, if you hear me out, and you don't say that Goldy has the head of a cabinet minister, then--well, then you will be a big hog, and nothing else.

NATHAN

(Morosely.)

Come, out with it, then.

GOLDY

Let us spend all our money on a grand, respectable wedding, and send out a big lot of invitations, and then--well, won't Uncle Leiser send us a carpet or a parlor set? And Aunt Biele, and cousin Shapiro, and Charley, and Meyerke, and Wolfke, and Bennie, and Sora-Gitke--won't each provide something or other, as is the custom among respectable people?

NATHAN

But Goldy—

GOLDY

Why, did not Cousin Sarah get a fine carpet from Uncle when she got married? And am I not a nearer relative than she? May God give us a lump of good luck as big as the wedding present each of them is sure to send us!

NATHAN is silent, thinking it over.

GOLDY

So, you see, we will have both a respectable wedding that we shan't have to be ashamed of in after years and the nicest things we could get if we spent even two hundred dollars.

NATHAN

Two hundred dollars!

GOLDY

Why shouldn't we be up to snuff and do this way? What do you say?

NATHAN

What *shall* I say?

GOLDY

Don't be uneasy, Nathan. You and I are orphans, and you know the Uppermost does not forsake a bride and bridegroom who have nobody to take care of them. If my father were alive, it would be different, but...

NATHAN

May your father rest in a bright paradise. But what is the use of crying? Can you bring him back to life? I will be a father to you.

GOLDY

If God be pleased. Would that mamma, at least—may she be healthy a hundred and twenty years—would that she, at least, were here to attend our wedding!

(Singing:)

And when you receive in the evening mail
A fine invitation with gilt-edged trim,
And you open it to see—is it her you know or him?
The neighborhood's abuzz—all the talk, all the betting
On a fine affair, on the finery they'll wear,
On who'll they dance with, who'll they'll see,
And the following morning, they'll all agree
That what began with a copperplate, hand-engraved heading
Turned out to be a most a respectable wedding!

NATHAN

But when you remember, years down the road
A hall full of laughter and a canopy,
What you'll remember is who you'd see—
How young they were then, and what they all said
As they wished their best wishes and sent you off to bed—

GOLDY

(Speaking:)

There's more than enough time to consider that, darling!

NATHAN

And the following morning, they'll all agree
That what began with a copperplate, hand-engraved heading
Turned out to be a most a respectable wedding!

GOLDY

By the way, Nathan, guess what I did! I am afraid you will call me braggart and make fun of me, but I don't care.

(She produces a strip of carpet from her purse.)

I went to a furniture store, and they gave me a sample three times as big as this. I wrote a letter to Mamma that this is the kind of stuff that will cover my floor when I am married. Then I enclosed the sample in the letter, and sent it all to her back home.

NATHAN

(Laughing. Amazed as much as amused.)

But how do you know that is the kind of carpet we will get for a wedding present?

GOLDY

How do I know? How *do* I know! As if it mattered what sort of carpet! I can just see Mamma going the rounds of the neighbors and showing off the 'costly tablecloth' her daughter will trample upon. Won't she be happy!

GOLDY gives **NATHAN** a kiss on the cheek and skips off. He stares after her for a moment before pulling off his cap and waving it. The **COMPANY** surges around him, singing as he picks up his cart and exits.

CRIES OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE (First Reprise)

I can write a letter, post it in the mail—
Tell me what your news is, I'll send it on its way!
Think of how they'll wonder, back in the homeland,

How you've prospered, how you've risen,
How you've thrived so far away!

Dishes for Passover, cheap and strong.
Beautiful dishes, sold for a song!

Oranges and lemons, apricots and raisins,
Currants and apples and limes!
Fresh fruit in season, spotless and juicy,
Currants and apples and limes!

Bread! Buy bread! I've bread to sell!
It started out this morning, fresh,
And now, this evening, well,
I have day-old bread to sell!

Do you need a tablecloth fit for the table,
Embroidered for the holiday, best as hands are able?

Meat! Meat! Kosher from the butcher!
Chickens for the stewing pot and brisket for the oven.
Hurry, hurry, Sabbath is coming!