

Act II

Scene One

Outside the **STROON** House on Mott Street, a few days later. Enter **COMPANY** from either side. **NATHAN** at down right, with his peddler's tray, hawks his wares in dumbshow as others stroll about.

SHAYA enters and seats himself at the parlor table, left of center, with a book propped open before him, while **FLORA** takes up her place with an embroidery hoop in her rocking chair at right.

ASRIEL

(Aside.)

Several days have passed—

GOLDY

(Crossing excitedly to **NATHAN**)

—and a wedding is fast approaching!

TAMARA

(Crossing through the parlor with a feather duster.)

And while some friends of the happy couple-to-be are preparing to attend a grand reception—

NATHAN

—a catered affair in a hired hall—

GOLDY

—with a seven-piece orchestra for dancing—

DAVID

—still others are wondering how they can meet the expense of a present—

Enter **TZALEL** with his cart at right, crossing to left.

BIELE

—especially if they've had a wedding of their own!

ASRIEL

For the ghetto is still enduring its season of distress.

TZALEL

And tell me when, exactly, is it not?

TZALEL exits left.

HEYMAN

Some, who can read, work as tutors when they can.

TAMARA

And at the house of Asriel Stroon on Mott Street—

SHAYA

(Hopefully.)

Flora was getting used to Shaya's presence in the house—

FLORA

(Shooting him down.)

—as if he were a newly-discovered *brother* of hers.

GOLDY and **NATHAN** exit left.

HEYMAN

They often talked together, and she quizzed him about his manners—

SHAYA

—and once or twice even went over his English lessons with him—

DAVID and **BIELE** exit right.

FLORA

—laughing at his mispronunciations—

TAMARA

—and correcting them in the imposing manner of her former schoolteachers.

FLORA

But Flora was amazed by his rapid progress, and how quickly he mastered his Arithmetic and English Grammar—

ASRIEL

—in neither of which had she herself been strong at school.

The **COMPANY** exit as **SHAYA** rises and crosses to **FLORA**, standing behind her chair and watching her work.

SHAYA

Ah, it is so nice!

FLORA

(Jumping up.)

What are you doing here? Ladies' things ain't for a 'holy child' like yourself.

SHAYA

Don't say that. You always like to tease me.

(Playfully.)

Why don't I tease you?

FLORA bridles at the implication, staring him down. **SHAYA** takes a different tack.

SHAYA

Well then. Guess where I have been.

FLORA

Not in the synagogue, studying?

SHAYA

No—at the Astor Library. They have such a lot of books there, Flora!

FLORA

(Sitting down again, her back to him.)

In a library. Who ever heard.

SHAYA

(Crossing down and sitting at her feet.)

With shelves all over the walls, all full of books! They have everything in the world, I tell you.

FLORA

What did you do there?

SHAYA

I just looked at the books—oh, what a lot! Upstairs and downstairs—large rooms like rich synagogues!

(A thought strikes him.)

Have you ever been there, Flora?

FLORA

N—no! Can ladies come in?

SHAYA

Certainly! Though I didn't see any. I suppose they have a separate place for them. For decency's sake.

FLORA

Of course.

SHAYA

Oh, it's so nice to be sitting and reading there! Only you must sit still.

FLORA

I'll bet you, you were singing in that funny way you have when you are studying the Talmud.

SHAYA

Yes! I had a book about Algebra, and forgot myself as I was figuring out some nice point—I began to reason aloud.!

FLORA

(Imitating an elder at prayer.)

And working your hands and shaking like the old men in the synagogue—like Papa when he pretends to read!

SHAYA

(Standing and pacing, enraptured.)

A fine old gentleman stepped up and touched me on the shoulder. Oh, I got so scared, Flora! But he only told me to be quiet. Will you go there with me?

FLORA

Maybe—someday.

SHAYA

Will you? I never knew there were so many Gentile books in the world. I wonder what they are all about.

(Crossing back to her.)

Only I am so troubled about my English. When I asked them how to ask for a book, how to get one, they could not understand me.

FLORA

Don't be silly.

(Standing.)

I can understand everything you say when you speak English. You're all right.

SHAYA

You can, but other people can't. I wish I could speak it like you, Flora. Let me read a page or two of a book—and you read it with me, will you?

(Taking her hand to lead her to the table.)

Shall I?

FLORA

What's your hurry? Can't you wait?

TAMARA enters at left with **HEYMAN**, who carries a bookbag and sets himself up at the table.

TAMARA

(Calling from the parlor.)

Shaya, the tutor is here!

SHAYA

Oh, do hear me read—may you live long, Flora! I love reading in English! It somehow draws me as with a kind of *impure* force.

FLORA

(More amused than shocked.)

A kind of what?!

SHAYA

(Looking down at her hand in his.)

It is so smooth!

SHAYA impulsively raises her hand to his face and kisses it.

FLORA

(Pushing him away.)

Bad boy! You must not do that again. Is this the kind of pious man you are?

SHAYA

Don't say that, Flora—please don't. You know it hurts my feelings when you speak like that.

FLORA

You and your kind-of-impure force!

(A sudden light of inspiration coming into her eyes.)

Hold on! How would you like to be a doctor, Shayie?

SHAYA

A doctor?

FLORA

Well, I want you to be a doctor. If you are, I'll care for you, and you'll be my birdie boy, and all. If not, you won't.

SHAYA

I won't—a doctor!

FLORA

Oh, won't it be lovely when everybody knows that you go to college and study with nice, educated uptown fellows! We would go to theaters together and read different books.

(Aside.)

And then you'd finally know your keister from a hole in the ground.

SHAYA

But your father would turn me out if I studied for it.

FLORA

But suppose he had no objection?

SHAYA

Oh, then I should be dying to study doctor books—any kind of books you wanted me to, Flora. But Reb Asriel won't let me.

FLORA

Listen! Can you keep a secret?

SHAYA

You mean about your being my sweetheart?

FLORA

No—I mean the other thing—about your studying. If you are so smart, we can fix that. Papa needn't get wind of it till it's too late—you understand?

SHAYA

I am awful clever at keeping a secret.

TAMARA

(Impatiently.)

Shaya! What keeps you?!

FLORA

So keep a secret.

(Imitating TAMARA, teasingly.)

Shaya, the tutor is here!

SHAYA, at a loss, turns to leave, then turns back.

SHAYA

Will you tell your father that you want to be my sweetheart?

FLORA

How do you know I do?

SHAYA

Why—don't you?

FLORA

You'll make a daisy of a college boy, too—you bet. Would you like to wear a high hat, and specs, and ride in a buggy with a driver?

(Pulling him closer.)

Would you—would you, you bad boy, you?

(She paces a few feet away, then turns and holds out her arms.)

Hello, Doctor Golub! How are you?

They kiss. The deal is sealed.

FLORA

You know what, Shayie? When papa comes I'll stay hid, so you can tell him—you know what I mean. Will you tell him? It'll make it so much easier to fool him.

SHAYA

(A last tug from his conscience.)

I should be ashamed.

FLORA

Should you? Well—I won't tell him.

SHAYA

Don't be angry—I will. I shall always do everything you tell me, Flora—always, always!

SHAYA turns and crosses left. **HEYMAN** draws him to the table.
Music. **FLORA** sings.

THE SUBJECT OF CURRICULUM (A HOLE IN THE GROUND)

FLORA

When considering the subject of curriculum—
The case of what one should and shouldn't learn—
The matter of Anatomy, from tympanum
To cingulum, from knee-bone to reticulum,

Determines what a future doctor learns.

If his study of Biology's assiduous,
A genius at determining the genus
And the kingdom, phylum, species and the class,
Then he's sure to rise due to native keen-ness
And know a hole in the ground from his—

HEYMAN

(Interrupting her. Music under.)

And that, Shaya, is Arithmetic—and all in one week, my brilliant pupil.

SHAYA

Arithmetic! What comes next?

FLORA

(Calling out, sarcastically.)

Go on! Why not Geometry!

SHAYA

Geometry! Bring me a Geometry, please.

HEYMAN

Patience, genius—I have already. But don't say a word to Mr. Stroon about it.

HEYMAN produces a book from his bag and hands it to **SHAYA**, who opens it eagerly as **ASRIEL** enters above them and stands watching. **FLORA** continues.

FLORA

If undertaking studies in Math'matics,
A fellow ought to have a certain stamina
To stomach the dreary daylong list of theorems—
The postulates, the axia and all them querems—
To get down the esophagus and twixt the scapula.

If his learning in Geometry's compendious,
His command of Trigonometry is sound,
He can then progress to Integrated Calculus
And rise to study beings *animalculus*,
And know his keister from a hole in the—

SHAYA

(Interrupting her. Music under.)
How cunning! Of course, it is not as deep as Talmud, but I never dreamed there were such subtle things in the Gentile books—may I be ill if I did.

HEYMAN

This is only the beginning of it. Wait till you get deeper into it. And then there are other books, far more interesting.

FLORA

And when at last he concentrates on medicine,
And learns an awful lot about physique,
And names a new disease, like Bright's or Addison's,
Like Salmonella, Klinefelter's, Hodgkin's, or caisson—
He's sure to be esteemed a man unique!

SHAYA

(Drawing on his earlier song.)
Maybe in what scripture calls it—measuring—
Here are wonders equally worth treasuring.
Geometry proves there are never wonders enough.

FLORA and SHAYA

If his stint in Cardiology proves him still the prodigy,
If clever with his instruments he's found,
He'll earn a certificate attesting to his doctorate,

SHAYA

And skill in physic methodology—

FLORA

He'll know his keister from a hole in the ground!

ASRIEL crosses down, into the parlor.

ASRIEL

Say, young fellow!

HEYMAN

(Standing.)

Mr. Stroon?

ASRIEL

You need not trouble your righteous legs to bring you here anymore. You are getting too thick with the boy.

HEYMAN

But Mr. Stroon—

ASRIEL

Let there be no argument. All week long you've taken him all about the city. He knows it better than I do.

SHAYA

Reb Stroon!

ASRIEL

He is a holy child, and he needs none of your modern monkey-tricks.

(He picks up the book.)

Geometry? No!

SHAYA

The Talmud calls it *The Wisdom of Measuring*.

ASRIEL

So it does? So it may!

(To **HEYMAN**.)

But I have taken a measure of my own. Now go.

(He hands the Geometry book back to **HEYMAN**.)

We can find another tutor for my Shaya, and you can still see him at the synagogue—where you can discuss the holy books with him. Go!

ASRIEL hands **HEYMAN** offstage left, then turns back. **FLORA** hisses to **SHAYA** from her room.

FLORA

Well, what are you waiting for? Now, dearie—this is the perfect time!

SHAYA draws himself up.

SHAYA

Mr. Stroon? Flora wants me to tell you that she is satisfied.

ASRIEL

Satisfied with what?

SHAYA

To be my sweetheart.

ASRIEL

Is she? Did she say so? When?

(Calling offstage.)
Tamara!
(Back to **SHAYA**.)
She said so?

TAMARA
(Entering from left.)
What is this? Is the house on fire?

ASRIEL
Tamara! May you live long! The Uppermost has taken pity upon me after all.

TAMARA
He has?

ASRIEL
Floraly has come around—blessed be His Name!

TAMARA
Come around? So. Mazol-tov! Blessed be the Uppermost! When He wills, walls of iron must give way.
(To **SHAYA**.)
It is a divine match—anyone can see it is. May you live a hundred and twenty years together!

ASRIEL
Mazol-tov to you and to all of us. But where is Flora? Fetch some drink, Tamara.
(Crossing to center.)
I thank and praise thee, O Lord of the Universe, for thy mercy toward me!

TAMARA exits left. Overcome, **ASRIEL** drops to his knees as **FLORA** enters.

FLORA
Papa! Are you well?

ASRIEL
(Under them.)
Mayest Thou grant the children long years and keep up in Shaya his love for Thy sacred Law. You know the match is all of your own making, and you must take care of it. I am only your slave, that's all.

FLORA
(To **SHAYA**.)
You told him, did you?

SHAYA

I sure did!

ASRIEL falls to the floor in abject gratitude.

FLORA

You sure did.

FLORA and **SHAYA** exchange a confidential smile. Dimout.