

## Act II

### Scene Two

Enter **COMPANY** from either side. They strike the **STROON** parlor and re-arrange it for **DAVID** and **BIELE's** tenement apartment.

TAMARA

Altogether, the residence of David and Biele consisted of three small uncarpeted and scantily furnished rooms—

ASRIEL

—and occupied a part of the top floor of a veteran tenement house on Madison Street.

BIELE

They had decided on a quick wedding—

GOLDY

(Not enthusiastically.)

—a plain wedding at the synagogue with only a few friends to share their joy, with the bride married in an everyday dress and the groom in a workday suit—

NATHAN

—and a simple dinner afterward at her mother's apartment.

DAVID

He had found work in a pearl-button factory—

HEYMAN

—where he earned, at piecework, from six to seven dollars a week.

BIELE

He forbid his wife to work, sparing her the indignity—

FLORA

—the *indignity*, so he said—

SHAYA

—of having to be treated as she had been at the Lipsky establishment.

BIELE

(Handing **DAVID** a wrapped package.)

And together they got along quite nicely—

DAVID

—with an occasional visit to the pawn broker.

**DAVID** exits right.

HEYMAN

But work was scarce, and the distribution of it was, to a considerable extent, a matter of favoritism.

GOLDY

To eke out their rent they had to forego meat.

TAMARA

Sometimes David was laid off for a week—

ASRIEL

—and once, even two.

NATHAN

So, for several days they lived on bread and butter and coffee.

HEYMAN

And while Biele was happy keeping house and doing mending for neighbors—

BIELE

—which she did not tell her husband about—

FLORA

—eventually, David grew nervous and irritable.

SHAYA

He wanted better for them, so he put his mind to finding a way to improve their circumstances.

DAVID

And one day, he hit upon a plan!

TAMARA

It was near seven o'clock one evening when David came home from looking for work—

ASRIEL

—with a stop at the pawn-broker's on the way to dispose of a salt-cellar—

GOLDY

—which was the last of their wedding presents!

BIELE

(Running down right to meet him. Lightly.)

David! My beloved! Don't get angry, David, but I am afraid I have flunked on my soup again.

DAVID

Again, you say? I'm sure it's fine.

BIELE

I added too much salt—and I tried to boil a potato, as Momma does, to take away some of it. That was the trouble—too much salt. I would have poured it out, but I had already added the turnip and the onion.

DAVID

It smells delicious! And we *have* soup, do we not? The salt will do us good.

(He sits at the table.)

There will come a time when we will no longer worry about salt. And you will grow more skillful with the soup.

BIELE

Oh, David! All afternoon I have been thinking, Here is a man who deserves a sweeter soup! You work so hard, dearest. And when you do not work, you work harder still at finding work.

DAVID

If I were more industrious, I might not now have to stick in a button factory— would it were regular, at least—or wear out my shoes walking to find piecework. I went by the factory again today.

BIELE

So?

DAVID

I'm afraid that we may again have a slack season, Biele.

BIELE

(Brightly.)

Well, we have heard it before. Let us have some soup!

**BIELE** busies herself setting the table.

DAVID

You may laugh, but I swore a promise to myself today—to us, to you—and from this day on I shall be a different man.

BIELE

And if you were a different man, would I love you quite so much? I wonder!

DAVID

From now on, everything will be different. It will take some work. But I have considered everything carefully.

BIELE

What, you should want even more work? Or is it that you begrudge me the few minutes' talk we have together?

(Turning away, mock-tearfully. Aside.)

The whole day I am all alone, and when he comes home, he plunges into a catalogue of our worries or falls asleep like a murdered man. All there remains is a quiet half-hour over salty soup; and that, too, he would willingly deprive me of!

DAVID

I have a plan—but everything depends upon you, Biele.

BIELE

(She seats herself beside him.)

Well then, a plan.

DAVID

The greatest trouble is the rent, is it not? It eats up the larger part of my wages—provided I work full time—and you know how we tremble as the first of the month draws near. We must admit that I am a common workingman. Well, just so: every workingman's family around here keeps a boarder or two. Let us also take one.

BIELE

A boarder? David!

DAVID

Just listen! The boarder's pay would nearly come up to the rent. We would be free from the worry, and even maybe have a little left over. In six months' time we could save up enough for a newspaper stand. How would you like that?

BIELE

A newspaper stand! And a boarder.

DAVID

(Eagerly.)

And then I could even study English after work, and in the course of time I would know the language well enough to teach it to others—and we would not lack for books or reading material!

BIELE

No, certainly not—not with a newspaper stand. And a boarder.

DAVID

And we would be liberated from this factory yoke. We could even open a little school, and I could be a teacher of English! A school is a fine thing, Biele. We would never want for money again.

BIELE

A newspaper stand, and a school. Just so. But first a boarder?

DAVID

And I had just considered that this morning when who should I meet? Our old co-worker, Heymann—that's who. He's tutoring a rich man's son, Biele, and that's how he supports himself. But he's looking for a place to live. It was a message, I tell you. I thought to myself, Why should I not offer him our parlor?

BIELE

(She stands.)

Heyman! The parlor!

DAVID

We could do well enough with the kitchen and the bedroom. Besides, Heyman we know already. He would be one of the family—and he would have only partial use of the parlor. You could still sit there during the day, if you like.

**BIELE** bursts into tears.

BIELE

No, David, no! Now no more laughing. God knows you give me little enough of your company, as it is.

(She crosses away from him.)

I must have tired you capitally, if you seek somebody to save you from being alone with me!

DAVID

You know it is the rankest nonsense you are saying! And what is the use crying like that?

BIELE

David, dear! I also have a plan. I shall also go to some factory. We will get along

without boarders. I have done it before.

DAVID

You know, my angel, that I would put a bullet through my forehead before letting you go to work.

BIELE

All the worse for both of us then. I want no strangers to hang around the house all the time.

(She sits. Decisively.)

I want to be with you alone. I want nobody, nobody else in the world!

DAVID

As if I took a delight in the whole affair! Cry to our circumstances, not to me.

**DAVID** presses into her hands the package he has been holding.

**BIELE** unwraps it and sets the salt-cellar on the table between them..

BIELE

Our fine salt-cellar!

DAVID

I tried, Biele, I did. They wouldn't take it. It is not worth anything, they say.

BIELE

(Gathering herself.)

Well, circumstances then. What is the good of grieving, dearest?

DAVID

The rent, then a newsstand—or whatever you'd most desire, my darling. Then I will come home to you at the end of the day the owner of a business and not an unemployed worker from the pearl-button factory, our salt-cellar in my hand. But first I have promised Heyman an answer.

BIELE

We have three rooms, after all. I suppose people who hang about pawn shops have no right to three whole rooms.

DAVID

(Not sternly.)

Everything depends upon you, Biele.

BIELE

Well. Let him move in, then. And now for our soup, salt and all.

DAVID

Salt and all.

Dimout.