

Act I

Scene Three

Music under throughout as **DAVID** and **HEYMAN** enter from right with a treadle sewing machine, which they place at right.

HEYMAN

Mister Leizer Lipman—

DAVID

—currently away from his place of business—

HEYMAN appropriates a chair from the dining room table and seats himself behind the sewing machine as **DAVID, ASRIEL** and **TAMARA** clear away the dinner dishes. **SHAYA** and **BIELE** place a coat-tree at left and move the remaining chairs to center and right of center, respectively.

HEYMAN

—was one of those contract tailors known as ‘cockroaches,’ which means—

ASRIEL

—translating the term into lay English—

TAMARA

—that he ran a very small shop—

TZALEL, with his cart, crosses from right to left, dropping off baskets and bundles of unfinished sewing, before exiting left.

TZALEL

—a shop which gave employment to a single team of workers—

HEYMAN

—consisting of one sewing-machine operator—

BIELE

(Seating herself at center.)

—one finisher—

DAVID enters with a flatiron and takes up his station behind the table.

DAVID

—and one presser.

TAMARA

(Before exiting.)

The shop was one of three rooms on the third floor of a rickety tenement house on Essex Street.

DAVID

It faced a dingy little courtyard, and was connected by a windowless bedroom with the parlor, which commanded the very heart of the neighborhood markets.

ASRIEL

It was also, after working hours, the Lipman family's kitchen and dining room.

ASRIEL exits. We are now in the **LIPMAN** sweatshop.
Music up as **ALL** take up their piecework.

SHAYA

And it was here, as the whole of the Lipman payroll, that David, Biele, and Heyman worked from morning until dusk, struggling to keep up with the demands of the readymade clothing trade.

PIECEWORK PRELUDE AND FUGUE: PRELUDE

BIELE, HEYMAN and DAVID

(Singing, to the rhythm of the sewing machine and iron.)

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

In a small, dim room at the top of the stairs,
In a crowded flat, not a wisp of air
From the open window over there,
Opening onto a window where
Across the air shaft another crew
Sits and sweats and stares back through
Their window that looks back at me and you

And you, and you, and you, and you and

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

From six AM till half-past eight
Morning's early, evening's late.
At noon you pause and contemplate
What's still unfinished on your plate
From dawn to dusk in summertime
And dark to dark in winter. I'm
Forever falling more behind—
No time! No time! No time! No time, and

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

DAVID and BIELE

(Under.)

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

HEYMAN

But the new girl—look at her!
All patience and grace!
How she handles the needle
And knots the thread,
With my foot at the treadle
I study her head—
How that one lock of hair
At the side, over there,
Works free once an hour
When she smooths it back carefully
With a hand as white
In the fading light,
As perfect white as lady's hand can be!

ALL

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

BIELE

He watches me—look at him!
Don't think I don't notice!
And the night before last
He mentioned a ball!
But he's never even asked
If he could walk me home,
Or presented me a token
Of affections still unspoken.

DAVID and HEYMAN

(Under.)

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

But a beard as fine as one could grace
The face of a man,
And a scholar's hands
As clever and nimble as a man's can be!

BIELE

(Solo.)

And a woman waits for a sign of regard,
Something more than a calling-card,
Like an invitation halting and sincere,
To a ball perhaps or an evening stroll,
Or a vaudeville, burlesque and droll.
It starts with introductions to her mother
And ends with the bashful sort of bother
Leading to a kiss, a single kiss, a single—

DAVID

(Spoken. Interrupting her.)

Well, I suppose you might as well stop now. You have been over that song fifty times without taking a breath. You make me tired.

BIELE

(Good-naturedly, without lifting her head from the coat in her lap.)
Don't you like it? Stuff up your ears, then.

DAVID

(All in fun.)

Why, listen to the new girl—not here a month and already she's ordering us around! Let me tell you how it is here at the Lipman shop: I do certainly like it, first-rate and a half. But when you keep your mouth shut I like it better still, see?

HEYMAN

(Stopping his sewing machine.)

And you? It's all right enough when you speak, but it is much better when you hold your tongue.

(To BIELE.)

Don't mind him, Biele. Sing away. I work all the better for it.

A pause. She smiles back at him, then resumes singing.

PIECEWORK PRELUDE AND FUGUE: FUGUE

Theme: BIELE

It's a woman's lot to wait for a man

Who hems and haws, and won't understand
That a forthright declaration of
A feeling not quite unlike love
Is the goal toward which her hopes are bent
When she's set her cap for him—for her man.

Stretto: BIELE and HEYMAN

It's a woman's lot to patiently Sit still the while until he sees That his glances are reciprocated And his advance, anticipated, Stands a chance of her encouragement.	A man's the one who takes a risk, Sends her flowers, buys a gift Like the watch I saved up all last week for, On a chain, now it will speak for Everything I'm too afraid to say.
---	---

DAVID

(Under both, a walking bass)
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!
It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

Stretto: BIELE and HEYMAN

But a girl can't wait forever for A suitor knocking at her door My mother's got her own opinion Hard as nails and sharp as onions: Sit him down and demand his intent!	(Leaving off sewing.) Perhaps on Sunday, at the ball I mentioned to her—I could call And meet her mother formally, Make an impression gentlemanly, Then sit down and declare my intentions.
--	--

Episode: music continues under.

DAVID

You had better stick to your work, Heyman. Why, you might have made half a cent the while. And we could all use it since it was you, wasn't it, who started that collection for a birthday present for the boss?

HEYMAN

And am I to blame that it was to me that the boss's wife threw out the hint about that present? Did I compel you?

BIELE

Of course, we couldn't help chipping in. A job is a job, after all—even if you have to pay for it!

HEYMAN

(To DAVID.)

Precisely. It's so slack everywhere, you ought to thank God for the steady work. Anyone can press a coat, can't they?

DAVID

And you? You're such a treasure?

HEYMAN

(Self-mockingly important.)

I operate machinery. I am an engineer!

BIELE

(Kiddingly.)

And a very skillful one, too--when you don't tangle the thread!

HEYMAN

(Under both, a walking bass)

Stitch! By stitch! By stitch! By stitch!

Stitch! By stitch! By stitch! By stitch!

Stretto: DAVID and BIELE

She's a catch all right, what's he waiting for?

He's a match enough, good as me, or more.

She's bright and kind and an honest worker—

A woman I could work to deserve. Her

Mother ought to demand his intent!

She's a catch all right, why's he waiting? Her

Mother ought to demand his intent!

But a girl can't wait forever for

A suitor knocking at her door

My mother's got her own opinion

Hard as nails and sharp as onions:

Sit him down and demand his

intent!

DAVID and BIELE

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

HEYMAN

Stitch! By stitch! By stitch! By stitch!

Stitch! By stitch! By stitch! By stitch!

DAVID

(To BIELE.)

Well, is Heyman here going to raise your wages? So you will now get *ten* dollars a week? After only a month!

(Draping a coat dramatically around his shoulders.)

I am afraid you will be putting on airs now, won't you?

BIELE

Do you begrudge me? Then I am willing to swap wages with you. I'll let you have my ten dollars a week, and I'll take your twelve.

DAVID

My twelve dollars every week? What twelve dollars? Oh, I see—you mean a week of twelve days!

BIELE

A week of twelve days? How do you make that out?

DAVID

Of course, *you* don't know—but ask an engineer, why don't you?

HEYMAN

You mean me? I'm sorry—so I happen to operate machinery!

BIELE

Tell us, then, so I will know, too.

DAVID

Well you, Biele, get ten dollars a week for finishing, while I, David, get twelve dollars a week for pressing, and Heyman—an engineer at this treadle—fourteen. And a working week has six days, but—*a-hem*—that 'but' gets stuck in my throat—but the calendars are a lot of liars.

BIELE

What do you mean?

DAVID

They say a day has twenty-four hours. That's a bluff. A day has twelve coats.

HEYMAN

You see, a day is neither a Monday nor a Tuesday nor anything else unless we make twelve coats.

HEYMAN

Any moment now, the boss's wife will come up with his lunch—and here I have still two coats to make of the twelve that I got yesterday. So it's still Monday with me. My Tuesday won't begin before about two o'clock this afternoon.

DAVID

They read the Tuesday psalm in the synagogue this morning, but *I* should have read the Monday one.

BIELE

So, how much will you make this week?

HEYMAN

I don't expect to finish more than four days' work by the end of the week, so I will

only get eight dollars on Friday. Accordingly, when it's Friday I'll call it Wednesday. When I am married and the old woman—

(He glances at Biele.)

—when *my beloved* asks me for Sabbath expenses, I'll tell her it is only Wednesday—it isn't yet Friday—and I have no money to give her.

DAVID

See? He is already practicing to be a boss. You know what it is, don't you? It's robbery of the workers by their so-called employers.

BIELE

You sound like a Socialist, David!

DAVID

So what if I do? Fair's fair. Do you see them lift a finger—aside from Lipman totaling it all up in his fine ledger? It's our money they're making from our work for them all day.

HEYMAN

That is, provided Mrs. Lipman has not spent our wages on soda and tea cakes by that time.

BIELE

Shh! He's here!

All fall industriously silent as **(NATHAN as) LEIZER LIPMAN** enters from left, hangs his coat and hat on the coat-tree, dons his *yarmulke*, and lights a cigar with an air of good-natured, businesslike importance. He glances around proprietarily, then crosses to **DAVID's** table and examines a coat.

DAVID

Good afternoon, Mr. Lipman.

LIPMAN

Good afternoon, David.

MRS. LIPMAN

(Off.)

Leizer! What a blessing I've found out on the street! Leizer!

DAVID

Thank you, Mr. Lipman.

(GOLDY as) MRS. LIPMAN, heavily loaded with parcels and panting for breath, comes in with **FLORA** and **ASRIEL**, dressed as **BASSE** and

AVROM, in tow.

MRS. LIPMAN

(Depositing her parcels on the table, disturbing **DAVID's** work.)

Here is Leizer! Leizer, look at the guests I have brought you! They were just outside when I saw them!

(She crosses to center and unseats **BIELE**.)

Reb Avrom; be seated, Basse. This is our factory! It is rather too small, isn't it? but we are going to move into larger and better quarters.

DAVID

(Sympathetically, to **BIELE**)

Greenhorns. Must be fellow townspeople of hers—lately arrived.

MRS. LIPMAN

Leizer, look! Look who I found just now—right on the corner with Hester Street! Our landsmen Reb Avron and Basse—just off the boat not two days! 'Of course,' I said to them, 'come to our home, observe our new, American *factory*!'

BASSE and AVROM

Reb Lipman—

LIPMAN

(Extending his hand—every inch the new American.)

How do you do?

MRS. LIPMAN

Come, Basse, I want to show you my parlor! Leizer, demonstrate to Reb Avrom how we do business here in America.

MRS. LIPMAN pulls **BASSE** from the chair and leads her off right as **BIELE** re-seats herself and the three workers resume their work — and their song.

PIECEWORK PRELUDE (REPRISE)

BIELE, HEYMAN and DAVID

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

LIPMAN

In our spacious rooms on the uppermost floor

Where we reside—who could ask for more?—

Here we employ a staff of three:

A baster a presser and—do you see—

DAVID

Don't budge, Biele! Let her lord it over her landsmen herself—on her own time.

BIELE lifts her head and stares back in refusal. **HEYMAN**, eyes lowered, makes a pretense of resuming his work.

HEYMAN

(Singling dispiritedly.)

It's hot! Hot! Hot! Hot....

BIELE

(Softly, coming to a realization.)

Heyman!

BASSE

Never mind, Zlate. We just had tea.

AVROM

It is not worth the trouble.

DAVID

She's a finisher. Not your parlor maid. She doesn't run errands for you and your guests.

MRS. LIPMAN

What?

(Drawing herself up.)

Either fetch the soda—or leave my shop *at once!*

HEYMAN

It's so noisy in here, with the sewing machine and the iron—a sign of our industry, of course. I'm sure she didn't hear you. Isn't that right, Biele?

DAVID

(Stepping out from behind the table and crossing between **BIELE** and **MRS. LIPMAN**.)

Don't mind her, Biele, and never worry. Come along. I'll find you a better job.

(To **MRS. LIPMAN** and her guests.)

This racket won't work, Missis. Your friends see through it, anyhow, don't you? She wanted to brag to you. That's what she dragged you up five flights of steps.

MRS. LIPMAN

(To **LIPMAN**.)

Do you hear this?

DAVID

She showed off her parlor carpet to you, didn't she? But did she tell you that she shorted us all a week to buy it on the installment plan—and the custom peddler threatened to take it away yesterday unless she paid the balance?

MRS. LIPMAN

Leizer!

LIPMAN

I will go for the soda. Give me the nickel.

MRS. LIPMAN

What, are you—are you drunk?!

LIPMAN

(Timidly—almost a question.)

Get out of here!

DAVID and **BIELE**, with great dignity, put on their coats and hats. **BIELE** gives **MRS. LIPMAN** a cutting stare as **DAVID** joins her at right before they exit.

BASSE

(Nudging her husband.)

Look at it, Avrom! The finishing girl is the lady of the establishment!

DAVID

See that you have our wages ready for Friday—and all the arrears, too!

BIELE and **DAVID** exit right.

MRS. LIPMAN

That's like America! The meanest beggar girl will put on airs! Come Basse, Avrom—Mr. Lipman will bring the soda!

Lights down on the sweatshop as the **COMPANY** clears the stage. As they do this, **BIELE** rushes out and comes to a halt, distressed, at down left of center, **DAVID** close behind her. We are now on the street outside.

DAVID

Biele—

BIELE

And what do I do now? Now I go home to my mother—and I tell her what? I tell her that, for two bottles of soda—for a nickel—I'd lose my employment?

DAVID

Beilke, it's all right.

BIELE

—and I tell her that we can't pay the week's rent?

DAVID

You'll find another place. I'll help you.

(Gently turning her to face him. Wryly:)

After all, we're both unemployed now, right?

BIELE

And it's been so slow all summer! Why, all through the neighborhood, no one is hiring. And we—

DAVID

We'll do it together. I'll look out for you. We'll look out for each other. We'll find work. You'll see.

BIELE

(A thought strikes her.)

And you—you did that for me? All over a nickel's worth of soda?

DAVID

The best nickel I never spent!

BIELE

Oh no, David, you shouldn't have!

DAVID

Who can say that? Can you—can you really? Some things are right—and when they're right, they're right and that's all.

LOOK LONG ENOUGH

DAVID

Funny how, when you look long enough,
It's as plain as day.

No guessing now—think hard enough,
You'll find the words to say.

When something is right, it's right and that's all I knew.
For I had looked—looked long enough—at you.

BIELE

And I had sat, a month or more,

Throughout the day,
And never thought to raise my eyes,
Just a glance away.
Where I had never thought to doubt, now I was sure,
For all of a sudden, I looked up and there you were!

DAVID

And courage is a tricky thing:
It comes and goes
The way the tide obeys the moon—
It ebbs and flows.

BIELE

But the moon on the harbor and the moon at your window
And the moon that lights the streets—it's the self-same moon!

DAVID

And from quarter to crescent, look long enough, and very soon—

DAVID and BIELE

Look long enough, you'll find the light
To find your way.
No dark is ever dark enough—
You'll know the way
Even where you've never gone before,
Even though you've lost yourself, you're sure—
Look over the rooftops, look long enough, and sure you'll see,
Always watching over you—look long enough: it's me.

They exit together. Dimout.