

Act I

Scene Four

Evening, just before the start of Sabbath, outside the village of Pravly, in Russia.

SEVERAL cast members cross the stage left to right, on their way to Sabbath services. **TZALEL** enters upstage left, pulling his cart, with **ASRIEL** seated on the open back end.

HEYMAN (as **RABBI**)

(Pausing as he crosses.)

On a serene afternoon in May, Asriel Stroon drove up to Pravly in a peasant's wagon, gazing at the unbroken line of wattle-fences and running an imaginary stick along the endless zigzag of their tops.

HEYMAN exits. **SHAYA** and **TAMARA** (as **SHAYA's MOTHER**) enter, pausing to speak as they cross the stage.

SHAYA

A whiff of May aroma awakened his eye to the plushy clover knobs in the fields before him, and the dandelions and the golden buttercups.

MOTHER

He felt as though there were no such flowers in America, and that he had not seen any since he had left his native place.

SHAYA and his **MOTHER** exit right. **GOLDY** enters, with **NATHAN** a few steps behind her, as **TZALEL** and his cart, with **ASRIEL** aboard, circles downstage.

ASRIEL

(Exclaiming excitedly.)

None, I tell you, not a one!

GOLDY

Echoes of many, many years ago called to Asriel from amid the whispering host. His soul burst into song.

ASRIEL

Look—look at them!

NATHAN

His senses were in confusion: he beheld a sea of fragrance; he inhaled heavenly music; he listened to a symphony of hues.

The wagon comes to a stop down left of center.

TZALEL

(Coming to a stop.)

And here we are Reb—

ASRIEL

Asriel. Asriel Stroon of New York City, America! But—this! This is Pravly?

TZALEL

Reb *Asriel*. Just over the hill is Pravly.

(Indicating downstage.)

This is, more particularly—as you’ll notice—the cemetery.

NATHAN

(Over **ASRIEL**’s shoulder, pointing it out to him.)

And yonder—behold! A long, broad streak of silver gleaming on the horizon!

GOLDY tugs **NATHAN**’s sleeve, pulling him off right.

ASRIEL

(In wonder, he crosses downstage and looks over the village.)

O Lord of the Universe! There glistens the brook—what do you call it?

TZALEL

Repka.

ASRIEL

Repka, dear one, may she live long! And there is the mill—the same mill, as sure as I am a Jew! Over there, on the other side, my father once chased me for bathing during Nine Days. I bumped my head against a rock, the little scamp I was—look! The mark is still there!

TZALEL

(Interrupting the reverie.)

If you’ll excuse me, Reb Asriel, the Sabbath is approaching, and I have time enough before the service begins, so the Most High is willing, to leave a stone at the graves of my father and mother, and of my dear wife.

ASRIEL

Of course, of course! Here—
(He fishes in his pocket for a coin.)
—for your troubles, sir. With my thanks.

TZALEL

(Grandly.)
And my thanks to you, Reb Asriel—and welcome to Pravly!

TZALEL exits right, leaving the cart behind. **ASRIEL** stands for a moment, surveying the scene.

ASRIEL

The cholera take it, how delicious! What a treat to breathe! What a paradise! Do you deserve it, old sinner you? Ten plagues you do! Were you not a daredevil and a loafer—Asrielke! Pshaw!

Music up. **ASRIEL** considers the cemetery.

ASRIEL

But the cemetery! How many of my fellow truants will I find alive now?

ASRIEL AMONG THE DEAD

Look at them! Every one according to his station.
Wives and husbands, mothers, children—all!
Every one! Look at them! Near and far relations,
Aunts and uncles, cousins—grown and small!

And here is one that I knew as a boy, whom I chased with a stick,
Who chased me back and shoved me down—how we wrestled in the mud!
He blacked my eye, I broke his tooth, and we were boys together.
And Sabbath morning in the *shul* we learned our prayers together.

(Speaking to a headstone. Fondly.)
Shmulke! Shmulke, Angel of Death, an inflammation into your bones!

Look at them! Not a one among them forgotten.
Not a marker here without its stone!
All of them, look at them—well- and woe-begotten,
Everyone at rest, their struggles done.

Yet here is another that I knew long ago: Old Sarah ran a shop.
Dried grapes into raisins, sold spices, mixed tonics for the sick,
Sent her sugared almonds to every wedding, every funeral—
But who brought almonds, Auntie Sarah, to your funeral?

(Speaking.)

Don't you know me, auntie? Can it be that you don't know Asrielke, who used to steal raisins from your grocery? She no longer understands anything.

And who is that, there among the others?
Asriel, surely you should know.
Your father's here—there he is, exactly as you left him,
Exactly as he was when you left home.

And now you're back at your father's grave. Papa have you slept
In blessed peace all these long years—have you rested in your grave
While your Asriel, your son, grew old in a foreign land
And now returns, and here he stands in his native land!

(Speaking.)

Father! Father! It is I, Asriel, your son—do you remember how you used to hold me on your knees and say prayers with me at the synagogue? Has it all flown away? Has it really? Thirty-five years!

(He looks up, listening.)

But hush Asriel! The field is praying—

Behind **ASRIEL**, the **COMPANY** has taken their places as the citizens of Pravly—men to the left, women to the right. They sing wordlessly as they set the upstage area for the scene in the synagogue to follow.

ASRIEL

You know, father dear, that I am only a boor, and woe is me! I am stuffed full of sins. But, anyhow, I care more for Flora—Bloome, her Yiddish name is—she is a flower.

(Taking **FLORA's** photograph from his pocket)

Here, see? She is a good girl, father. She lost her mother when she was a baby, poor child, and she is the only consolation I have in the world. I have come all the way from America to ask you to pray for us. Will you?

Look at me here, on my knees I'm asking—
Surely, Father, you are near Him now.
For Asriel, for Flora, your grand-daughter,
A word in God's Own Ear for those below?

Here am I whom you held as a boy, took me on your knees,
Boxed my ears when I misbehaved—now with a child of my own!
Please pray for her, please pray for us until we pray together—
Until that day when all of us, at last, will pray together!

TZALEL re-enters from right.

TZALEL

The sun is setting, Reb Asriel—it is nearly time. The Sabbath is approaching. Shall I take you to the inn?

ASRIEL

No—no, not the inn! The synagogue. I will go to the synagogue before I go anywhere else, as the Uppermost is my witness.

(Aside.)

Your father is silent, Asriel! All is gone! All is lost forever!

TZALEL

Climb in, then! It is almost the Sabbath!

The **COMPANY** place a lectern at upstage center and the **RABBI** takes his place behind it, (**DAVID** as) **CANTOR** to one side. The service has begun. Meanwhile, the wagon circles the stage again as **ASRIEL** acquaints himself with Pravly.

ASRIEL

There! The nobleman's palace! And here is Posner's inn. I remember every room! But how rickety it has become! Hello! The same marketplace, the same schoolhouse with the bailiff's office by its side!

ASRIEL dismounts the wagon down right of center.

ASRIEL

It is my Pravly—and at the same time it is not! No, it certainly is the same dear old Pravly, but... but—but...

TZALEL

Thirty-five years, Reb Asriel! Thirty-five years have fallen about our town. You'll get used to it again. Have a good visit—and a good Sabbath!

TZALEL exits right with his cart. A sudden realization strikes **ASRIEL**.

ASRIEL

Good Sabbath to you, sir!

(Relapsing into the Mott Street landlord.)
But look at it. Why, I could buy it all up now! I could discount all the rich men in town put together! And yet there was a time when I was the meanest here, a crack-brained rowdy, a poor devil living on oatmeal and herring. Hey, there! Where are your big-bugs—Reb Zorach Latozky, Reb Lippe, Reb Nochum? Are they alive? Thirty-five years ago I considered it an honor to shake their palm branch on the Feast of Tabernacles, while now—out with your purses, you proud magnates! Measure fortunes with Asrielke the Heckler, if you dare!

The music rises. **ASRIEL** sings as he takes his place among the congregation. We are now in the synagogue.

ASRIEL's PRAYER (Reprise)

ASRIEL

Reb Tzalel told me the first three stars mark the Sabbath.
And there they are, where they always were—where I'm standing now!
God brought me all this way, to Pravly, on 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!

(DAVID as) CANTOR

(Resuming the service.)

And now we come to the reading of the Third Section in the week's portion of the holy books, and our Rabbi considers that it is our honor to offer the reading to our visitor, Reb Asriel Stroon, just this evening arrived from America!

The **COMPANY** applauds. **TZALEL**—now **LIPPE**—hurries in from right and joins the scene.

ASRIEL

The reading—of course! An honor! But first a donation to the synagogue of my youth!

LIPPE

What? What is this? I am deeply sorry, all, I have only now arrived—and on the night we are to announce the engagement of my daughter! Let me take my place beside the Ark. Where is Shaya? Where is my daughter's betrothed?

(Noticing **ASRIEL** nearby.)

And who is this man?

CANTOR

Reb Lippe, welcome. Perhaps you remember Asriel Stroon, who left us so many years ago?

LIPPE

Stroon? Asriel Stroon? That layabout?

CANTOR

He is now here, back from America where he has returned to us flush with his good fortune in a foreign land.

LIPPE

Stroon? That no-good son of—

ASRIEL

(Brushing past **LIPPE** on his way to the podium.)

That one, yes! I am ready, Rabbi. I am honored to give the reading.

LIPPE

The reading? The portion—Asriel Stroon, that young gadabout—that thief?!

The **COMPANY**, shocked, falls silent. **LIPPE** pulls the **RABBI** aside.

LIPPE

Surely you remember, Rabbi, that this night, of all nights, was to be the night when I announce the betrothal of my daughter, my only child, to this—to this...

(He pulls **SHAYA** downstage.)

To this light among our learned men, Shaya Golub!

ASRIEL

And who is he? Who? The beard hardly begins to darken his chin! See?

LIPPE

Reb Asriel, may I introduce Shaya—

MOTHER

(Pushing in front of **LIPPE**.)

Shaya Golub! My son!

LIPPE

—and his mother. Shaya is an *illouim*, you know—a prodigy of the scriptures.

RABBI

He is a student of the holy books and a learned man, Reb Asriel, a wonder in his youth!

LIPPE

Indeed, you need only point to some word of a volume, and he can tell you the word beneath your finger on any other page you might name!

MOTHER

My son! My Shaya!

CANTOR

—and his mother!

ASRIEL

(Taken aback.)

An *illouim*, do you say? Reb Golub!

RABBI

Not even the sharpest mind in all the district is a match for him in learned debate! Why some two thousand books of the Talmud are literally at his finger's ends!

ASRIEL

(Examining **SHAYA**'s fingers.)

A marvel! Is this true?

LIPPE

And he is to marry my daughter!

(Back to the **RABBI**.)

So surely our distinguished visitor will understand? This is the night of my daughter's betrothal. And who is he to us, this Asriel Stroon, who ran off so many years ago? Pardon me. I shall read the portion!

CANTOR

But Reb Asriel has promised a donation in acknowledgement of the honor, Reb Lippe.

LIPPE

A donation? You wish for a donation? A donation, then! I, too, can make a donation!

ASRIEL

And I can make an even larger one. But I have already offered. The honor is mine!

LIPPE

You can, can you? Let us see, then. Open your purse, Reb Asriel. Let the reading be auctioned off!

CANTOR

An auction for the reading? What do you say, Rabbi?

RABBI

Well? For the good of the synagogue, then—and the money for the poor. That would be a fine thing. Let it begin.

The **COMPANY** applauds. Music up, dialogue over throughout.

THE AUCTION

CANTOR

Very well then. We will start at five gildens. Five gildens for the reading!

LIPPE

Six gildens for the reading!

ASRIEL

Seven!

NATHAN

I'll go! Eight gildens for the honor of the reading!

LIPPE

Ten gildens!

ASRIEL

Eleven gildens!

NATHAN

Twelve!

LIPPE

Thirteen—thirteen gildens!

ASRIEL

Fourteen gildens for the reading—and for the synagogue!

LIPPE

Twenty!

NATHAN

Thirty!

LIPPE

Thirty—thirty-five!

NATHAN drops out.

ASRIEL
Forty gildens for the reading of the service!

LIPPE
(Showing the strain.)
Forty... five!

ASRIEL
Fifty!

LIPPE
Fifty... fifty—

ASRIEL
(Pouncing.)
Sixty! Sixty gildens for the poor, for the synagogue, and for the honor of the reading!

A pause. **REB LIPPE** draws himself up, eyes **ASRIEL**, and renews the battle.

LIPPE
Seventy gildens for the reading!

ASRIEL
Seventy-one.

LIPPE
Seventy-two.

ASRIEL
Three!

LIPPE
Four!

ASRIEL
Five!

LIPPE
(His honor at stake. Increasingly desperate.)
Seventy-six!

ASRIEL
(Confidently.)
Eight!

LIPPE

Nine!

ASRIEL

Eighty gildens for the synagogue!

LIPPE

One hundred—I say one hundred and not a copper kopek less! One hundred gildens! Ten full rubles!

ASRIEL

Two hundred! I will give for the poor of Pravly twenty—twenty rubles!

LIPPE

(Losing steam at last.)

Twenty? Then I say twenty-five.

ASRIEL

(Knowing he's won.)

Twenty... *eight*. Twenty-eight rubles!

A pause. **REB LIPPE** struggles with his pride for a moment, then shrugs and turns away angrily. The **COMPANY** erupts in applause and cries of *mazeltov!* as **REB LIPPE** motions the **CANTOR** aside and speaks a few words to him. The music concludes. The **CANTOR** takes his place at the podium.

CANTOR

And now, for the reading of the Third Portion—Reb Lippe!

ASRIEL

(Stupefied.)

Hold on! That won't do! I have bought it and I mean to have it!

NATHAN

Unfair, unfair! It was Asriel Stroon!

ASRIEL

Is he really going to get it? Milk a billy goat! You can't play that trick on me! Mine was the last bid. Twenty-eight scurvy rubles! Pshaw!

NATHAN

By my own eyes as they saw it—Stroon!

CANTOR

(Smugly.)

But is there disagreement? Pray let us then defer. Perhaps Reb Lippe's prodigy, his future son-in-law, would be so kind as to give his opinion?

ASRIEL

Why? Who is he that I should give way to his judgment? He is no older, certainly that I was when I left Pravly to make my fortune in America! What is he, then?

LIPPE

Why, name but the first word of a verse and he can quote it, down to the letter, and a commentary besides—and the law, and the commentary on the law!

(Pointedly.)

Go on, go on—would you not like to see for yourself? Name your text Reb Asriel!

ASRIEL

Name a text? You want me—to name a verse?

LIPPE

Any one you like. Pick a difficult one, why don't you?

ASRIEL hesitates.

GOLDY

See? He's a boor! Has no learning!

MOTHER

He can't do it! That's what he's gained in America!

ASRIEL

(In desperation.)

No! Rabbis! Rabbis all, I name... I choose as my verse... I choose....

The **CONGREGATION** grumble in disgust.

CANTOR

Hush! Hush!

LIPPE

Well, Reb Asriel? Or perhaps it should be here, rather, *Mr. Stroon*?

ASRIEL

(Humiliated.)

What! I could name the verse—I could! I could! But I was last to bid!

LIPPE

Of course you could. But never mind that. Let us do for the reading then as our Cantor suggests—Shaya, my boy? Settle then our dispute for us: who was the last to

bid?

SHAYA

(Carefully.)

Why, I do think the other man was the last to nod.

MOTHER

Shaya! Hush!

SHAYA

(Firmly.)

He was—may I be ill if he was not.

ASRIEL

There! It is my right by purchase and goes to no one else!

(Raging.)

I am willing to pay a hundred, two hundred, five hundred. I can buy up all Pravly—
Reb Lippe, his gold lace and all—and sell him at a loss, too!

ASRIEL makes a dash at the podium as **ALL** erupt in indignation.

GOLDY

Is this a market place?

NATHAN

Shut the mouth of that boor!

CANTOR

Put him out!

LIPPE

If he can't behave in a holy place let him go back to his America!

SEVERAL men restrain **ASRIEL**. The **RABBI** approaches him.

RABBI

Reb Asriel, I knew your father—peace upon him! He was a righteous Jew. Obey me,
my son, ascend the platform, and offer the congregation a public apology.

ASRIEL draws himself up and crosses to his place at the podium.

RABBI

The Holy One—blessed be He—will help you.

ASRIEL

Do not take it hard, my rabbis! I meant no offense to any one, though there was a

trick—as big as a fat bull. Still, I donate two hundred rubles, and let the cantor recite a *Kaddish* for the souls of my father and mother—peace upon them!

CANTOR

And say we *Amen*!

ALL

Amen!

KADDISH

(To the tune of **ASRIEL AMONG THE DEAD.**)

CANTOR

Yithgaddal weyithkaddash scheméh rabba
be'olmà diverà 'khire' outhé
veyamli'kl mal'khouté'khön,
ouvezome'khôu ouve'hayyé de'khol beth yisraël
ba'agalâ ouvizman qariw weimrou, Amen.

ALL

Amen.

ASRIEL

Amen!
And who am I, here among the others?
Asriel, surely you should know.
Your place is here—here it is, exactly as you left it,
Exactly as it was when you left home.

ALL

Amen.

CANTOR

Yithbara'kh Weyisctaba'h weyith paêr
weyithroman weyithnassé weyithhaddar
weyith'allé weyithhallal
scheméh dequoudschâ beri'kh hou,
l'êla ulé'êla min kol bri'khatha weschi'ratha
touschbehata wene'hamathâ daamirân ah!
Be' olma ah! Ah! Ah! We imrou. Amen.

ALL

Amen.

[or:]

CANTOR

Magnified and sanctified be the name of God throughout the world
which He has created according to His will.
May He establish His kingdom during the days of our life and the life of all
speedily and soon, and let us say Amen.

ALL

Amen.

ASRIEL

Amen!
And who am I, here among the others?
Asriel, surely you should know.
Your place is here—here it is, exactly as you left it,
Exactly as it was when you left home.

ALL

Amen.

CANTOR

Exalted and glorified, lauded and praised,
Acclaimed and honored be the name of the Holy One
Blessed be He, praised beyond all blessings and hymns,
beyond all tributes that mortals can express and let us say Amen.

ALL

Amen.

RABBI

But enough of this sadness. Tonight is no time for mourning, after all. For now we
have here with us Reb Shaya Golub, who is betrothed to Reb Lippe's youngest
daughter.

CANTOR

Much happiness upon them both!

ALL

Mazeltov!

CANTOR

But what is more, Reb Lippe has undertaken to support Shaya in his studies. He has
provided for the couple a dowry of five thousand rubles!

ALL

Mazeltov!

RABBI

It is a well-known saying that one should be ready to sell his all in order to marry his daughter to a scholar. On the other hand, to give your daughter in marriage to a boor is like giving her to a lion. Again, we hear that to give shelter to a scholar bent upon sacred studies, and to sustain him from your estates, is like offering sacrifices to God; and to give wine to such a student is, according to a passage in scripture, tantamount to pouring it out on an altar.

ASRIEL

(Aside.)

Five thousand? I'll show them who they are—and who Asriel Stroon is!

Music up, beneath. Dialogue continues over, as before.

THE AUCTION (Reprise.)

ASRIEL

(Producing the portrait of **FLORA**.)

Five thousand rubles? I say six! Six thousand rubles to come with me to America and marry my daughter—my only child—my Flora!

(Handing the portrait to **SHAYA**.)

There! Is she not a beauty? Yes? And with her comes six thousand rubles!

CANTOR

What?!

LIPPE

Seven! I say seven, and I will not be outdone!

SHAYA

(Aside, to the picture of **FLORA**.)

An American girl! From America! And she wears a hat! A hat with feathers and roses of the brightest silk!

ASRIEL

Eight.

LIPPE

Nine! I—I pour it out on the altar—nine thousand rubles!

SHAYA

(To the picture of **FLORA**.)

Pshaw! You are a Jewish girl after all, and I am not afraid of you a bit!

ASRIEL

(Nudging SHAYA.)

Nine thousand... and one!

SHAYA

(To the picture.)

But what makes you so sad? You barely smile. Are you lonely, perhaps, in America?

LIPPE

Don't trifle with me, Stroon, you—you boor!

ASRIEL

Yes, I am only a boor! But you know it is not myself I want the boy to marry. Twenty thousand rubles, spot cash, then, and when the old boor takes himself off, Shaya will inherit ten times as much. She is my only child, and when I die, may I be choked if I take any of my houses into the grave.

SHAYA

(To the picture.)

Do take off that hat, will you?

MOTHER

(Taking the portrait from **SHAYA**.)

Your girl looks like the daughter of some titled Gentile. My Shaya is a Jewish boy!

ASRIEL

You don't like my girl, don't you? And why, pray? Is it because she is not a lump of ugliness and wears a hat? On my way here, I saw the grand rabbi of Vilna, and his daughter, and she also wore a hat and was pretty.

(Taking the portrait back from her.)

If you don't like my Flora, don't marry her then! Twenty thousand rubles!

LIPPE

Ten thousand rubles and five years' board!

ASRIEL

(Tauntingly.)

Is that all?

NATHAN

He can't do any better! Reb Lippe is tapped out!

MOTHER

(To **SHAYA**.)

But Reb Lippe is a learned man! And he lives right here in Pravly—

(To **ASRIEL**.)

—not in your New York, America! What kind of place would you take my boy? How will you care for him there, tell me, far from his family—far from his mother?

ASRIEL

(Triumphantly.)

Thirty thousand rubles, and life-long board, and lodging, and bath money, and stocking darning, and cigarettes and tobacco for his pipe, and matches, and mustard, and soap—and... and what else?

Music ends. **SHAYA** bursts into laughter; his **MOTHER** silences him, but the **CONGREGATION** erupts in excitement.

ASRIEL

What else, Reb Lippe? Did I leave something out?

LIPPE

You can keep the bargain—and be choked with it!

CANTOR

What is your hurry, Reb Lippe? Why, the thing is not settled yet. We don't know whether Shaya—

LIPPE

You don't, but I do. I won't take that boy if *he* brings twenty thousand rubles to *his* marriage portion.

MOTHER

What?!

LIPPE

Good night!

REB LIPPE stalks downstage, away from the scene. **SHAYA** takes back **FLORA**'s portrait.

ASRIEL

Good night and good year! Why does the cat hate the cream? Because it is locked up.

(To **SHAYA**.)

But now receive my blessing! *Mazeltov* to you, Flora's bridegroom! *Mazelttov* to you, my daughter's predestined one! I am only a boor, but you shall be my son-in-law. And I'll shelter you and feed you, as the rabbi commanded. Pearls will I strew

on your righteous path, a crown will I place on your head!

CANTOR

A boor, but a pious man!

GOLDY

A heart of gold!

ASRIEL

(To himself.)

And what will Flora say? Will my American young lady marry this old-fashioned fellow?

(He considers **SHAYA**, mooning over **FLORA's** portrait.)

Hold your tongue, you fool! She will marry him, and that settles it. It's for her good as well as for mine.

(He claps **SHAYA** on the back, referring to the portrait.)

Keep it. Wear it in good health, my child. This is your first present from your sweetheart. But wait till we come to America!

SHAYA

America!

ASRIEL crosses down to **LIPPE**, who turns his back on **ASRIEL**.

ASRIEL

Reb Lippe, your pardon. You live here, so you can get another prodigy. But one cannot get such goods in America. Besides, you can read Talmud yourself, while I am only a boor, and what have I done to make sure of my share in the world to come?

(He pulls a purse from his pocket and hands it to **REB LIPPE**.)

Here! Here are three hundred rubles for charity. Do forgive me, Reb Lippe, will you? What will you lose by it?

A pause. **LIPPE** shrugs and turns to face **ASRIEL**.

LIPPE

I forgive you—with all my heart. There will be another young man worthy of my daughter; and Shaya—may the Holy One, blessed be He, grant him the will and the power to spread His Law in America. May the Uppermost bring you home in peace and bless the union.

The **CONGREGATION** breaks out in applause and cries of *Mazeltov!*
LIPPE shakes **ASRIEL's** hand.

LIPPE

The Jews there want a young man like him, and I am glad he is going with you. You

are taking a precious stone with you, Reb Asriel. Hold it dear.

ASRIEL

You bet I will!

MOTHER

You bet he will!