

PROLOGUE: LONGING

1886

They met in a place of smoky bricks and smoky fogs and a million pigeons nesting by a million chimneys. Sea winds blew the fog from the docks to the depot, from the railroad tracks to the high road, from there to the lane, working into all the hidden alleys as narrow as needles. In the mud of the alley, cobblestones separated so donkeys and barrows could enter, brick walls leaned back to make room for stalls, and up high hung clothes that trembled in the air. Everything born and everything made found its way over the river to London. And here they met, the two mothers, the one we remember and the one we forget. The river brought them, the docks received them, the streets took them in.

It was in Whitechapel with the wind sweeping up the high road past the hospital and the convent and the bell foundry tolling bells. Carts and carriages jammed the wide road, steam came from cookshops and drizzle from the heavens. In the wind, street matrons held onto their hats, for every woman wore one, even if it was just a battered sailor hat and she used her nails to fight instead of hat-pins. It was time to retrieve the Sunday boots from the pawnshop, for wage packets were in hand, and shopkeepers stood in doorways shouting their wares above the sound of wheels and wind and the rattle of trains, their windows bright in the grey-green rain. The wind raged past new warehouses six stories high, holding all the goods of the empire for the West End, it swept past the Jerusalem Music Palace with its twenty-seven thousand crystals in the gas lit chandelier, past the gin palace of dazzling colour, past the club, the assembly

room, the shooting gallery, past all the old houses, built after the Great Fire, now crumbling from stone and brick into the ash of the street. The wind saw the nuns and the Salvation Army Band, with its brass instruments and its bold uniforms, and everywhere the placards and posters in Yiddish: "Milk fresh from the cow!" "Cheapest and best funerals!" "New Melodrama starring the Great Eagle, Jacob Adler!"

This was the high road of the ghetto, the one square mile where Yiddish was spoken, the irritating pimple on the backside of London, the subject of parliamentary debate, the hundred thousand newcomers among the millions, ready to take fog as their mother's milk here in the East End where all the noisy, dirty, and stinking industries were exiled from the city.

The Jewish streets stretched up from Whitechapel Road, pushing into the twisting alleys, pushing back the pimps and the prostitutes and the thieves whose stronghold was just above in Dorset Street. Smack in the middle was the Jews' Free School, to the right was the steam bath, to the left the rag market. The dairyman from Ilford was carting his milk cans full of vodka to sell. If you liked to gamble, down below was Shmolnik's coffee house and if you were hungry, you could have the best fish and chips, invented up here by a Dutch Jew in the Lane.

It was Saturday night in the Lane, meaning Petticoat Lane and all its contiguous streets. Among the tailors, the corset-sellers, the letter-writers, the cigar and boot makers, naphtha lamps flared in the darkness. People spoke Yiddish, they spoke English, they spoke in the language of the street where their lives took place. "Hi! Hi! See the strong man! See the singing dwarf! See the contortionist! Only a penny!" In the dusk there were crowds of buyers and sellers and between the stalls, one man juggled

fire and another swallowed it. The fortune teller's bird picked out cards with its beak and every card told a fortune. Signs advertised marvels. Oilcloth guaranteed to last twenty years. Magic firelight that a little child could use. Medicine sure to cure the ills of all five million cells in the human body. Here you could buy used goods of every kind except for one thing. Even in the rain there was a queue for it, people eating supper and talking and waiting. And what did they want that they couldn't get second-hand? A ticket to the Yiddish theatre of course.

No one in the world loved theatre more than a Londoner, and among them none more than the Jews. When they came to the free land, the old made a match with the new, and a butcher from home who changed his name to Smith built the Yiddish theatre. And what a theatre! It had a parterre and a balcony, curtains with pulleys, chandeliers, trap doors in the stage for every sort of magical effect discussed by the people waiting in the rain to buy balcony tickets. The great Jacob Adler was playing the lead tonight and even the beigel seller, whose husband gambled her meagre earnings, had found the pennies for tickets to the theatre.

There were other important people waiting in the queue, a boot-maker who wrote poems, a presser who wrote bad plays, a tailor who told bad jokes and his wife, who was pregnant and dreaming of the baby. All around them was tobacco smoke and the talk of the street, of work and no work, the horse that won, the husband that ran away, the children's boots given out by the school. Someone spat and someone hissed while ticket-holders for the good seats went inside, among them an old man and his grandson, a journalist who had no idea that his future wife was on her way from Minsk. For in the court of heaven, there is a golden throne and a golden desk where God puts

strange matters into a golden book. And so it was written: the young woman from Minsk and the tailor's wife. Only King Solomon the Wise could judge between them.

It was all very well for the Holy One above to make such plans in heaven. But earth is for people and the mother of a people has to go with them. She can't be left behind with nothing but her shroud crumbling into dust. And so she rose from the graveyard—maybe it was in Minsk or Pinsk or Plotsk—and came with the boats to Irongate Stairs. And though her grandchildren would speak a different mother tongue and have customs unknowable to her, they would also rise from the graveyard for the sake of their children, so that they would not be abandoned in their exile. The human heart, knowing it will die alone, needs to belong to others so it can live; those others who are somehow like us—and in being like us—raise us out of the uncountable billions that rise and fall, rise and fall, unremarkable as ants, as cells, as the hands clapping when the curtain rises, torch lights burning at the foot of the stage.