

The Singing Fire

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

The Singing Fire

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!"

The Singing Fire

“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.

The Singing Fire

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.

The Singing Fire

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

The Singing Fire

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

The Singing Fire

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.

The Singing Fire

ACT I

“Here I take from your hand the deep bowl of staggering, the cup of my anger; you shall not drink it again. I will put it in the hands of the tormentors who commanded your soul, ‘Get down, that we may walk over you’ so that you made your back like the ground, like a street for passersby.”

--Isaiah 51: 22-23

The Singing Fire

Chapter 1: THE SEA SOUNDS CLOSER LONDON 1875

ST. KATHERINE'S DOCKS

The girl was sitting on the step of a shop that sold parrots, their English accent better than hers. She had her bag by her feet on the wet ground, her hands folded in her lap while the Tower of London rose grey and crumbly above dockhands moving cargo. Around them milled men in aprons and caps, owners in silk hats, horses pulling carts, cats eating rats and snarling dogs fighting over treacle leaked from a burst cask. The girl was seventeen years old and alone, so she prayed to God, Help me please, because that is what a person does when there is no one else.

To her surprise, someone answered.

“Hello there!” A portly man pushed aside the Chinese sailor who was leaving the shop with a bird in a cage. It took a moment for her to realize that she understood him. “Can I help you?” the man asked in

The Singing Fire

Yiddish. He wore a bowler and a sack coat like the foremen on the dock.

“I’m just not sure which way to go. It’s so foggy,” she said as she stood up.

“Anyone can see that you’re a newcomer, so how could you know? That’s why I’m here. I’m from the Newcomer Assistance Committee. My name is Mr. Blink. It used to be Blinick. Do you have any family waiting for you? A friend?”

“I came by myself.” She tried to sound as self-possessed as her oldest sister. There were five older sisters in Poland, all of them either intelligent or married and some of them both.

“Well—don’t worry,” Mr. Blink said. “I’ll take care of everything. What’s your name, my girl, and where are you from?”

“Plotsk. I’m Nehama Korzen.”

“Such a coincidence!” He beamed. What a friendly face he had. It was all pouches, smaller ones under his eyes and bigger ones under his cheeks and an extra chin that told her this was a man who ate

The Singing Fire

meat every day, as much as he liked. “I’m a Plotsker, myself. I don’t know any Korzens. Too bad. But a *landsmann* is as good as relations, right? You just come with me. First thing we’ll go to the city office to pay the entrance fee.”

“I didn’t know about any fee. How much is it?” she asked, putting her hand over her waist, where she’d sewn a hidden pocket with all the money she had. It had seemed like so much at home. But what was a rouble worth in London?

Mr. Blink stopped abruptly. “You mean no one told you? My dear child, this is terrible. How could they send you off like that—completely unprepared?”

“Nobody sent me. It was my own idea.”

“And you didn’t know. What a shame. A real pity.”

“A Jew doesn’t give up a *landsmann* to the authorities, does he? Please, don’t do that,” she said.

“You see that man standing there?” Mr. Blink pointed at someone holding a torch as he led his

The Singing Fire

horse through the fog. “A policeman. But if you’re with me, he won’t pay any attention to you.”

“What will I do? I can’t go home.”

“Maybe I can do something.” He put his hand on her elbow. “I might be able to draw on the committee’s loan fund.”

“Oh would you?” A black snow was falling on her. It smelled of burnt tobacco. She covered her nose with her hand.

“A promise I can’t give, but I’ll do my best,” he said.

“I’d be so grateful. And a job?”

“There’s always something.”

“I’m a hard worker.” She could picture the tickets to London in her mother’s hand. She’d send for all of them, mother and father, her five sisters with their families. They wouldn’t think that she was so stupid anymore.

“But first you come home with me,” Mr. Blink said. “You have a good meal and a good sleep and

The Singing Fire

things will look better. Tomorrow, I'll make the proper inquiries."

In the beginning, she hadn't thought to run away. She was working with her father, sewing in the sleeves of a satin gown. He was a custom tailor, and she was the last of his daughters to work in his shop. She was singing and sewing and daydreaming about her future, which would include a house of her own and, even more importantly, some heroic act that would surprise everyone. She cut the thread. "Father," she said.

"Mmm?" He worked carefully, his glasses low on his nose, a religious man in a worn caftan, who was bothered by the impieties of younger men but would say nothing, showing disapproval just in his glance and the dismissal of a waving hand.

"I hear that in London a Jew can stand for Parliament," she said. "Isn't that something?" He agreed that it was something. "It's the free land. Nobody has to do anything he doesn't want."

The Singing Fire

“But in Poland a Jew can own his grave,” Father said. “You want something more?” Nehama laughed but Father didn’t as he added, “Your home is your home. Nothing else is the same.”

The back door was open to the courtyard surrounded by small houses that were old and rundown. In them lived Nehama’s married sisters. She was always surrounded by sisters. She couldn’t open her mouth to sneeze without one of them saying Bless you, Where’s your handkerchief, Why aren’t you wearing woollens, Where’s your head? The other sisters were all fair, like Father. Only she and Mama were dark. She’d been named for her grandmother because she was born just after Grandma Nehama died. “Nehama” means consolation, but her mother had been inconsolable. She was depressed for a year, ignoring all her fair-haired children who pinched and slapped the baby when no one was looking. It was their duty to curb the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, because she was the youngest and Mother let her get away with murder. They should

The Singing Fire

have pinched harder. Nehama still had a strong *yetzer hara*.

“If I was young, I’d go to London in a minute,” Mama said. The shop was small, the back door propped open with a stone. In the courtyard the sisters’ laundry hung like angels in the smoke from the nearby feather factory.

“Then you’d let me go?” Nehama asked.

“Who’s talking about going? I only meant in theory,” Mama said. Her hair was still dark, her hands scrubbed raw after baking so she wouldn’t stain the fine cloth when she came to sew.

“But in theory a boat ticket costs less than a dowry,” Nehama said.

“Don’t be silly. Sending away a child, that’s for desperate people.” Mama shook her head. While she sewed she sighed as if it was hard to breathe in the smoky air that blew in from the feather factory.

“But I’d send for you. I’d send for everybody!”

“You and who else?” Hinda called from the other room. She was the prettiest of the sisters.

The Singing Fire

“You’d better keep the price of the ticket for your dowry. You’ll need it because no one’s marrying you for your beauty.”

“So who needs beauty if you know business?” Rivka said. She was the oldest sister and had a business importing cotton. “I can’t keep the store closed more than an hour to take inventory. What are you waiting for, Nehama?”

“Go, go. I’ll finish here,” Mama said.

Nehama crossed the courtyard with her oldest sister to the small house where the store took up the front room. Rivka planned to have a real shop soon, with two stories and heavy shutters that locked out thieves and rioters.

“Do you think I’m ugly?” Nehama asked, seating herself at the table to write up the accounts.

“Ugly? I wouldn’t say that. Your hair is too curly, but it matters more that it’s dark.” Rivka lifted a bale of fabric onto the counter, unrolling it and checking for holes. She wore a kerchief over her hair, but wasn’t too pious to let a few golden strands fall

The Singing Fire

across her forehead. “Too bad you don’t have our colouring. I mean mean me and Father’s. Jewish boys go crazy for fair hair. But your eyes are nice. Very blue. And you wouldn’t be so dark if you ate eggs.”

“I hate eggs.” Nehama erased the sum with a rubber. She added every column twice and each time it came to something different.

“You hate everything good for you.”

“Not everything. I’d like a shop. I could run it.”

“There’s no money for you to have a shop. You have to be practical about what you can do.”

Nehama kept a list of things she might do. Page one: businesses. Importing cotton, wheat, eggs, oranges. Selling corsets, rope, kerosene, wooden barrels. Page two: occupations. There wouldn’t so many for a woman but never mind. She wrote them in large letters to fill up the page, all her pent up energy making the pencilled letters as dark as black ink. “Why doesn’t anyone listen to me? I could be a teacher like Leah and Shayna-Pearl.”

The Singing Fire

“You want to talk ugly? Leah’s scarred from the small-pox. It’s a mercy from God she became a teacher. And Shayna-Pearl is so bad-tempered no one could stand her for a week. Thank God that there was enough money for them to go to school. But now, unfortunately—well when it’s the youngest’s turn there just isn’t much left. You never liked to face reality, but there comes a time when you have no choice.”

“You could send me to school, Rivka.” It wasn’t fair. Nehama added up the accounts herself. She knew what was going in and going out.

“And don’t I have my own children to consider? Someone has to tell you how the world works and I can see it’s up to me. Make yourself into an attractive girl, Nehama, and your dowry will stretch further. I mean attractive in temper, not just in looks. You should eat eggs because they’re good for you and never mind if you like them. That’s what makes a nice girl.”

“Fine. If I can’t do anything I want here, then I’ll go somewhere else.” Along the river she’d seen the

The Singing Fire

large boats that carried everything a person might dream about. She could be on such a boat, the force of her desires powering the steam. A life that she made herself, one that was worth remembering at the end of it. “Maybe I’ll go to London. Girls don’t need dowries there.”

“I never heard anything so stupid. You don’t know what you want.”

“How am I supposed to know? Every time I take a step, I have a sister telling me when to lift my foot and when to put it down.”

“Thank God or who knows where you’d end up. Just because Mama makes you a dress in the latest fashion, you think you’re a special salami. Let me tell you, Nehama, someday you have to find out that you’re just plain beans and you give everyone gas.” Rivka slapped a roll of cotton onto the counter. “You see this? It would make a serviceable dress for everyday. The dirt won’t show on it. If you want I’ll give it to you at cost, Nehameleh, and you can save a couple of yards if you make it up yourself without any

The Singing Fire

fancy-shmancy business. A mother that sees you in this will realize that you know what's what and she'll think of giving her son to you."

"I don't like it," Nehama said. "It looks like an old woman's."

"All right. Insult me. That's what I should expect. Just remember when you end up depending on hand-outs for a piece of bread that if you weren't so stubborn, it could have been avoided."

Rivka went back to her bales of fabric in a huff and Nehama added up the column of numbers once again, hoping that with God's help the sum would stay the same.

On *Shobbos* they all sat together in the women's gallery of the synagogue, Nehama, her mother, and all her sisters. It was a modern synagogue with an open balcony where the women could look straight down at the Holy Torah as it was paraded in its crown of silver and its gown of velvet. Her next older sister, Bronya, was breathing noisily. Seven months pregnant and still she did business

The Singing Fire

every market day, charging a few pennies to weigh goods on the scale she brought to the market square in a wheelbarrow. Her husband was a carpenter, not a bad trade, but he stank of onions. How could Bronya stand him? “Your turn next, Nehama,” she said.

“Not me. I’m helping Father. He can’t afford to marry me off.”

“I hear the matchmaker’s been sniffing around.” Hinda shifted her baby from one breast to the other. “I ought to give her some tips about you.”

“There’s a fine young man on the next street to ours,” Bronya said. “You can smell him coming. Ahh—dead animal skins. But a tanner can still be very pious. And just think how you can help him by collecting cow shit for tanning.”

“Such language! Don’t tease your sister,” Mama said. “You know how sensitive she is to odours.”

Down below among the men, the Holy Torah, which has no odour, was unrolled all the way to the

The Singing Fire

beginning. The reader chanted: “And the earth was chaos and void. On the face of the deep, in the darkness, there was a great wind from God sweeping over the face of the waters...”

She'd show them all. The time for thinking was over.

Nehama secretly bought the ticket the day that one of her sisters pointed out the tanner and another told her to keep her ideas to herself when the matchmaker came. She didn't consider everything she was leaving until she stood on the boat, looking back at the docks where no one waved good-bye. The spray from the river and the rain from the heavens splashed her face, diluting her tears the way London merchants diluted milk with water and mixed flour with sawdust. And in the blink of an eye, the Vistula River, queen of Poland, flowing between green banks of willow trees, became the Thames, empress of the world, slapping the base of the Tower of London, where queens were beheaded. On the grey waters of a nation that disdained spices and ate

The Singing Fire

boiled beef, steaming ships came in with the west wind, carrying perfume and elephant tusks and Sardinian sailors with great gold earrings.