CHAPTER

7

Character

It is a bit misleading to devote separate chapters to plot and character. The novelist Henry James often stressed that the two are interdependent; a good novel or short story, he said, is an "organism," which possesses vitality and hence is lifelike because its parts form a coherent, unified whole. Using the word "incident" for almost any sort of action, large or small, James said,

> What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?

In fact, James was very clear that an "incident" need not be of the magnitude of a train wreck or even a slap in the face:

> It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way.

That is, what we are—our personalities, our characters—are what we *do*, are the "incidents" we participate in. And "incidents" are the demonstrations of what we are, what our characters (personalities) are.

Still, just as some stories are mostly plot—the whodunit is a good example, where the reader's interest is almost entirely in what happens next rather than in the personalities—some stories are mostly character, mostly revelations of personalities.

Among the most ancient stories in Western literature are the fables of Aesop, some of which go back to the seventh century BCE. These stories also teach lessons by recounting brief incidents from which homely morals may easily be drawn, even though the stories are utterly fanciful. Among famous examples are the stories of the hare and the tortoise, the boy who cried "Wolf," the ant and the grasshopper, and a good many others that stick in the mind because of the sharply contrasted characters in sharply imagined situations. The fables just mentioned take only four or five sentences apiece, but brief as they are, Aesop told some briefer ones. Here is the briefest of all, about a female fox and a lioness.

AESOP

Aesop, a semi-legendary Greek storyteller, was said to have lived in the sixth century BCE, but some of the stories he told are found in Egypt, in texts that are hundreds of years older.

The Vixen and the Lioness

A vixen sneered at a lioness because she never bore more than one cub.
"Only one," the lioness replied, "but a lion."

Just that: Nothing much happens, in the sense of a plot with comings and goings. Just a confrontation between two strongly opposed kinds of creatures: The mere confrontation of a fox and a lion brings together the ignoble and the noble. There is no setting (we are not told that "one day in June a vixen, walking down a dusty road in Nairobi, met a lioness"), but none is needed here. What there is—however briefly set forth—is characterization. The fox's baseness is effectively communicated through the verb "sneered" and through her taunt, and the lioness's nobility is even more effectively communicated through the brevity and decisiveness of her reply. This reply at first seems to agree with the fox ("Only one") and then, after a suspenseful delay provided by the words "the lioness replied," the reply is tersely and powerfully completed ("but a lion"), placing the matter firmly in a new light. Granted that the story is not much of a story, still, it is finely told, and more potent—more memorable, more lively, we might even say more real, despite its talking animals—than the mere moral: "Small-minded people confuse quantity with quality."

The fable is frankly imaginative, made-up; no one believes that foxes and lions discuss their offspring, or, for that matter, that tortoises and hares engage in races. Here is another of Aesop's animal fables, again with a striking contrast of personalities.

The Ant and the Grasshopper

One cold winter day an ant was dragging out a grain which he had buried during the winter. A hungry grasshopper asked for a bit of the grain.
"What did you do all summer?" asked the ant.
"I was busy all summer long, singing," replied the grasshopper.
"Well," said the ant, "since you sang all summer, now dance all winter."

YOUR TURN

1. Let's rewrite the ant's final remark, thus: "Well, since you spent the whole summer singing, I guess you'll dance now in the winter." We assume you agree that the original version is more effective. Exactly what makes the original better?
2. Grasshoppers make great leaps, whereas ants are earthbound. Write a fable in which the grasshopper represents the imaginative thinker and the ant represents the unimaginative plodder.
3. Do you think we can draw lessons from nature about how we should behave? Is a significant part of the argument (so to speak) of an Aesop

> fable that it is "natural," that it shows us "nature's way"? Think of some other fables, such as "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse" and "The Fox and the Grapes," that draw upon the nonhuman world. (The gist of "The Fox and the Grapes" is this: A starving fox, seeing bunches of grapes hanging from a vine, but out of reach, went away saying, "Those grapes aren't ripe, they're sour.")

What do such fables gain by being set in the nonhuman world? Why not just say, "A starving man, seeing bunches of grapes that were out of reach, said 'Those grapes aren't ripe, they're sour'"? Again, what, if anything, is gained by using talking animals? Is the moral enforced by nature?

Let's return to this matter of plot and character: Plot is character in action, and character is the motivation for plot. This is the view that James and many other writers have expressed. There are stories in which plot is more prominent than character, and vice versa, but it is hard for us to imagine one without the other. We focus both on the events of the story and on the person or persons involved in the action, the characters that are in the midst of it. A comment by Tobias Wolff, a contemporary writer who is represented in this book with stories and observations in fiction (pages 338–362) is relevant:

> Stories are about problems, and not the kind of problems that result from a safe falling out of a window, but from somebody having a choice and having a problem with that choice, and then the series of consequences that follow from making that choice.

Wolff clearly is very much in agreement with Henry James and E. M. Forster that plot is the result of character in action, the result of (in Wolff's word) "choice."

One of the reasons we turn to novels and stories is for the pleasure we experience in the company of interesting characters. We know that they are not real persons, we know that authors use their skills to imagine and invent the characters we meet in fiction. But in a good work of fiction, we often feel nonetheless that we are coming to know and understand a character as if he or she were a person—someone whom we might meet in real life. This character's words and actions, thoughts and feelings, lead us to become interested in them. We enjoy being in their company, and this even is the case when we are reading about a character whose actions we deplore. Why is this character like that? What would it be like to be such a character? Characters need not be sympathetic, but they must be *interesting*. Consider the following very short story, a story about two, no, three characters.

RON WALLACE

Ron Wallace, born in 1945, is the author of numerous books of poems and stories. He is a professor of English and the codirector of the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Worry [1996]

She worried about people; he worried about things. And between them, that about covered it.

"What would you think of our daughter sleeping around?" she said.

"The porch steps are rotting," he replied. "Someone's going to fall through."

They were lying in bed together, talking. They had been lying in bed together talking these twenty-five years: first, about whether to have children—she wanted to (although there was Down's Syndrome, leukemia, microcephaly, mumps); he didn't (the siding was warped; the roof was going fast)—and then, after their daughter was born, a healthy seven pounds eleven ounces ("She's not eating enough," "The furnace is failing"), about family matters, mostly ("Her friends are hoodlums, her room is a disaster," "The brakes are squealing, the water heater's rusting out.").

5 Worry grew between them like a son, with his own small insistencies and then more pressing demands. They stroked and coddled him; they set a place for him at the table; they sent him to kindergarten, private school, and college. Because he failed at nearly everything and always returned home, they loved him. After all, he was their son.

"I've been reading her diary. She does drugs. She sleeps around."

"I just don't think I can fix them myself. Where will we find a carpenter?"

And so it went. Their daughter married her high school sweetheart, had a family, and started a health food store in a distant town. Although she recalled her childhood as fondly as anyone—how good her parents had been and how they worried for her, how old and infirm they must be growing, their house going to ruin—she rarely called or visited. She had worries of her own.

YOUR TURN

In our discussion of plot, in the previous chapter, we quoted E. M. Forster on plot and surprise. The episodes in a plot, Forster said, ought to be "unexpected. This shock, followed by the feeling, 'Oh, that's all right,' is a sign that all is well with the plot: characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise." Were you surprised to hear, at the end of Wallace's story, that the daughter married her high school sweetheart, started a health food store, and recalled her childhood fondly? And were you surprised to learn that although she worried about them, "she rarely called or visited" because "she had worries of her own"? Did you experience a slight surprise as well as a sense of "Oh, that's all right"?

Kinds of Characters

Soon in this chapter you will be making the acquaintance of characters in longer stories. Each of these stories offers its own special reward, with a vivid set of characters; each will become all the more rewarding for you when you complete your reading of this chapter and consider the stories as a group, comparing and contrasting one to the others. But before we turn to these stories, we should do some further thinking about character in general—what it is and how we might approach it as readers, interpreters, and writers of analytical essays.

In simplest terms, a character is the representation of a person in a literary work. In this chapter we are focusing on short stories, but there are characters in poems and, of course, in plays as well. The author presents a character to us through

- what the character says (dialogue),
- what the character does (actions),

- what the author explicitly tells us about the character (authorial comment), and
- what the author tells us about where the character lives (setting)—but that is a topic treated in the next chapter.

Through these techniques, the author makes a character come to life, and to many authors their characters are "alive" indeed. The English short-story writer and novelist Graham Greene noted, "I have to watch my characters crossing the room . . . . I have to see everything they do, even if I don't write it down." Deborah Moggach, a contemporary British novelist, screen writer, and author of many short stories, says this:

> Once a character has gelled it's an unmistakable sensation, like an engine starting up within one's body. From then onwards one is driven by this other person, seeing things through their eyes, shuffling round the shops as a 57-year-old man and practically feeling one has grown a beard.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, from which we have already quoted, E. M. Forster makes a distinction between **flat characters** and **round characters.** "Flat" implies a person who is two-dimensional, fairly simple, and probably unchanging: the character who we encounter at the outset is more or less the same from first appearance to last. Clearly Aesop's characters are flat: The vixen is mean-spirited, the lioness is noble, the grasshopper is imprudent, and the ant is a workaholic. "Round" characters, on the other hand, are three-dimensional, with depth and complexity. A round character is subject to change and indeed during the course of the story might change significantly. We take a special interest in round characters; we want to get to know them, and we give close attention to their words and actions—which sometimes, as in real life, can surprise us. Such characters, we could say, are dynamic, growing and progressing, moving to a new level of insight and understanding. The chief interest in such a story may be in the character's change—for instance, in the loss of innocence.

Some mention should be made of the so-called **stock character.** This term is not quite just another name for a flat character. True, stock character are highly typical or stereotypical, characters whom we recognize because we have seen others like them in other literary works, TV shows, or films. There is the damsel in distress, for example, and the absent-minded professor, the tough-as-nails army sergeant, the prostitute with a heart of gold, and so on. But good authors can give an individuality to a stock character that a flat character cannot have. We can enjoy seeing this or that variation on a stock character, especially if it is a kind of character whom we like. To say that we like the character is not to say that we need to admire him or her (In *Seinfeld*, George Costanza is a blowhard and a loser, but there is something engaging about him. You just don't want him to be your roommate, or even to work at the desk next to yours.) It can also be interesting to observe how an author may begin with stock characters and develop and deepen them, making them more complex, giving them a distinctive personality.

When you turn to the stories that follow, and to others that are in this book, you might find it useful to keep these tips and questions in mind:

1. **Protagonist:** Is there a main character in the story, one who is the center of our interest? Note: "protagonist" derives from a Greek word for "first actor" or "first contender," from *protos* (= first) and *agonistes* (= contender).

Do not confuse *protos* with the Latin *pro,* meaning "for." Avoid using the word (not only in your essays in English classes but in your daily speech) in the sense of an advocate, as in "He was a protagonist for vegetarianism."

2. **Antagonist:** Is there a character who is in conflict with the main character? What is the nature of this conflict? How does it reveal itself in the story? *Note:* Here, the Greek word means "against the contender."
3. **Foil:** Is there a foil or are there foils in the story? That is, are there characters who bring out the qualities of the protagonist, as a sheet of gold or silver foil sets off a gem? (In *Hamlet,* Laertes and Fortinbras are foils to Hamlet: each has lost a father, and each behaves differently.)
4. **Appearance:** What does the character look like?
5. **Action:** What does each character do in the story?
6. **Dialogue:** What does each character say, and with whom (and in what ways) does the character speak? Dialogue is—though this at first sounds odd—a kind of action. As the novelist Elizabeth Bowen said, "Dialogue is what characters *do* to each other."
7. **Thoughts and feelings:** What do we learn about how the character thinks and feels—about himself or herself, other people, work, politics, and other things? That is, what is the character's inner life?
8. **Setting:** Does the locale (place and time)—nineteenth-century New England or contemporary South, for instance—help to shape the character?
9. **Point of view:** Does the author *show* or does the author *tell*—that is, does the author let us see and hear the characters in action, thereby allowing us to draw our own conclusions, or does the author tell us about them, giving us explicit guidance, perhaps even offering an explicit judgment of the character? Showing (rather than telling) is frequently termed the **objective** or the **dramatic method** of characterization.
10. **Making connections:** How is *this* character in *this* story you are studying similar to and different from the characters in other literary works you have read in this book, or have encountered in reading you have done on your own?

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) was the son of an English traveling salesman and a Basque-Jewish woman. The couple met in Puerto Rico and settled in Rutherford, New Jersey, where Williams was born. He spent his life there, practicing as a pediatrician and writing poems in the moments between seeing patients. In addition to many books of poetry and literary and cultural criticism, Williams also published fifty-two short stories, many of them, such as "The Use of Force," reflecting his experiences as a practicing physician.

The Use of Force [1938]

They were new patients to me, all I had was the name, Olson. Please come down as soon as you can, my daughter is very sick.

When I arrived I was met by the mother, a big startled looking woman, very clean and apologetic who merely said, Is this the doctor? and let me in.

In the back, she added. You must excuse us, doctor, we have her in the kitchen where it is warm. It is very damp here sometimes.

The child was fully dressed and sitting on her father's lap near the kitchen table. He tried to get up, but I motioned for him not to bother, took off my overcoat and started to look things over. I could see that they were all very nervous, eyeing me up and down distrustfully. As often, in such cases, they weren't telling me more than they had to, it was up to me to tell them; that's why they were spending three dollars on me.

The child was fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes, and no expression to her face whatever. She did not move and seemed, inwardly, quiet; an unusually attractive little thing, and as strong as a heifer in appearance. But her face was flushed, she was breathing rapidly, and I realized that she had a high fever. She had magnificent blond hair, in profusion. One of those pictures children often reproduced in advertising leaflets and the photogravure sections of the Sunday papers.

She's had a fever for three days, began the father and we don't know what it comes from. My wife has given her things, you know, like people do, but it don't do no good. And there's been a lot of sickness around. So we tho't you'd better look her over and tell us what is the matter.

As doctors often do I took a trial shot at it as a point of departure. Has she had a sore throat?

Both parents answered me together, No . . . No, she says her throat don't hurt her.

Does your throat hurt you? added the mother to the child. But the little girl's expression didn't change nor did she move her eyes from my face.

Have you looked?

I tried to, said the mother, but I couldn't see.

As it happens we had been having a number of cases of diphtheria in the school to which this child went during that month and we were all, quite apparently, thinking of that, though no one had as yet spoken of the thing.

Well, I said, suppose we take a look at the throat first. I smiled in my best professional manner and asking for the child's first name I said, come on, Mathilda, open your mouth and let's take a look at your throat.

Nothing doing.

Aw, come on, I coaxed, just open your mouth wide and let me take a look. Look, I said opening both hands wide, I haven't anything in my hands. Just open up and let me see.

Such a nice man, put in the mother. Look how kind he is to you. Come on, do what he tells you to, he won't hurt you.

At that I ground my teeth in disgust. If only they wouldn't use the word "hurt" I might be able to get somewhere. But I did not allow myself to be hurried or disturbed but speaking quietly and slowly I approached the child again.

As I moved my chair a little nearer suddenly with one catlike movement both her hands clawed instinctively for my eyes and she almost reached them too. In fact she knocked my glasses flying and they fell, though unbroken, several feet away from me on the kitchen floor.

Both the mother and father almost turned themselves inside out in embarrassment and apology. You bad girl, said the mother, taking her and shaking her by one arm. Look what you've done. The nice man . . .

For heaven's sake I broke in. Don't call me a nice man to her. I'm here to look at her throat on the chance that she might have diphtheria and possibly die of it. But that's nothing to her. Look here, I said to the child, we're going to look at your throat. You're old enough to understand what I'm saying. Will you open it now by yourself or shall we have to open it for you?

Not a move. Even her expression hadn't changed. Her breaths however were coming faster and faster. Then the battle began. I had to do it. I had to have a throat culture for her own protection. But first I told the parents that it was entirely up to them. I explained the danger but said that I would not insist on a throat examination so long as they would take the responsibility.

If you don't do what the doctor says you'll have to go to the hospital, the mother admonished her severely.

Oh yeah? I had to smile to myself. After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat, the parents were contemptible to me. In the ensuing struggle they grew more and more abject, crushed, exhausted while she surely rose to magnificent heights of insane fury of effort bred of her terror of me.

The father tried his best, and he was a big man but the fact that she was his daughter, his shame at her behavior and his dread of hurting her made him release her just at the critical moment several times when I had almost achieved success, till I wanted to kill him. But his dread also that she might have diphtheria made him tell me to go on, go on though he himself was almost fainting, while the mother moved back and forth behind us raising and lowering her hands in an agony of apprehension.

Put her in front of you on your lap, I ordered, and hold both her wrists.

But as soon as he did the child let out a scream. Don't, you're hurting me. Let go of my hands. Let them go I tell you. Then she shrieked terrifyingly, hysterically. Stop it! Stop it! You're killing me!

Do you think she can stand it, doctor! said the mother.

You get out, said the husband to his wife. Do you want her to die of diphtheria?

Come on now, hold her, I said.

Then I grasped the child's head with my left hand and tried to get the wooden tongue depressor between her teeth. She fought, with clenched teeth, desperately! But now I also had grown furious—at a child. I tried to hold myself down but I couldn't. I know how to expose a throat for inspection. And I did my best. When finally I got the wooden spatula behind the last teeth and just the point of it into the mouth cavity, she opened up for an instant but before I could see anything she came down again and gripping the wooden blade between her molars she reduced it to splinters before I could get it out again.

Aren't you ashamed, the mother yelled at her. Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of the doctor?

Get me a smooth-handled spoon of some sort, I told the mother. We're going through with this. The child's mouth was already bleeding. Her tongue was cut and she was screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. Perhaps I should have desisted and come back in an hour or more. No doubt it would have been better. But I have seen at least two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases, and feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I

could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it.

The damned little brat must be protected against her own idiocy, one says to one's self at such times. Others must be protected against her. It is social necessity. And all these things are true. But a blind fury, a feeling of adult shame, bred of a longing for muscular release are the operatives. One goes on to the end.

In a final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was—both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes.

YOUR TURN

In paragraph 16, the doctor grinds his teeth "in disgust" after the mother has called him "a nice man," and in paragraph 18 he specifically tells the mother not to call him a nice man. How would you characterize him? Keep in mind, of course, the basic situation in which he must act.

JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce (1882–1941) was born into a middle-class family in Dublin, Ireland. His father drank, became increasingly irresponsible and unemployable, and the family sank in the social order. Still, Joyce received a strong classical education at excellent Jesuit schools and at University College, Dublin, where he studied modern languages. In 1902, at the age of twenty, he left Ireland so that he might spend the rest of his life writing about life in Ireland. ("The shortest way to Tara," he said, "is via Holyhead," i.e., the shortest way to the heart of Ireland is to take a ship away.) In Trieste, Zurich, and Paris he supported his family in a variety of ways, sometimes teaching English in a Berlitz language school. His fifteen stories, collected under the title of Dubliners, *were written between 1904 and 1907, but he could not get them published until 1914. Next came a highly autobiographical novel,* A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man *(1916).* Ulysses *(1922), a long and complex novel covering eighteen hours in Dublin, was for some years banned by the United States Post Office, though few if any readers today find it offensive. Joyce spent most of his remaining years working on* Finnegans Wake *(1939).*

Nine years before he succeeded in getting Dubliners *published, Joyce described the manuscript in these terms:*

> *My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis. . . . I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very*

bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard.

Araby [1905]

North Richmond Street, being blind,[1] was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two stories stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room. Air, musty from having long been enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp: *The Abbot*, by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant* and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*.[2] I liked the last best because its leaves were yellow. The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle-pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister.

When the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had well eaten our dinners. When we met in the street the houses had grown somber. The space of sky above us was the color of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odors arose from the ash-pits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness. When we returned to the street light from the kitchen windows had filled the area. If my uncle was seen turning the corner we hid in the shadow until we had seen him safely housed. Or if Mangan's sister came out on the doorstep to call her brother in to his tea we watched her from our shadow peer up and down the street. We waited to see whether she would remain or go in and, if she remained, we left our shadow and walked up to Mangan's steps resignedly. She was waiting for us, her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door. Her brother always teased her before he obeyed and I stood by the railings looking at her. Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side.

Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlor watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my

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[1]**blind** a dead-end street. [2]**The Abbot** was one of Scott's popular historical romances; **The Devout Communicant** was a Catholic religious manual; **The Memoirs of Vidocq** were the memoirs of the chief of the French detective force.

eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.

Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance. On Saturday evenings when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels. We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of laborers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a *come-all-you* about O'Donovan Rossa,[3] or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration. But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.

One evening I went into the back drawing-room in which the priest had died. It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house. Through one of the broken panes I heard the rain impinge upon the earth, the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden beds. Some distant lamp or lighted window gleamed below me. I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: *O love! O love!* many times.

At last she spoke to me. When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to *Araby*. I forget whether I answered yes or no. It would be a splendid bazaar, she said; she would love to go.

—And why can't you? I asked.

While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her wrist. She could not go, she said, because there would be a retreat that week in her convent. Her brother and two other boys were fighting for their caps and I was alone at the railings. She held one of the spikes, bowing her head towards me. The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease.

—It's well for you, she said.

—If I go, I said, I will bring you something.

What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts after that evening! I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. I chafed against the work of school. At night in my bedroom and by day in the

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[3]**come-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa** A "come-all-you" was a topical song that began "Come all you gallant Irishmen." In this case, the song is about Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (1831–1915), a popular Irish leader in the struggle for Irish independence from England.

classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read. The syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me. I asked for leave to go to the bazaar on Saturday night. My aunt was surprised and hoped it was not some Freemason[1] affair. I answered few questions in class. I watched my master's face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle. I could not call my wandering thoughts together. I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child's play, ugly monotonous child's play.

On Saturday morning I reminded my uncle that I wished to go to the bazaar in the evening. He was fussing at the hallstand, looking for the hat-brush, and answered me curtly:

—Yes, boy, I know.

15 As he was in the hall I could not go into the front parlor and lie at the window. I left the house in bad humor and walked slowly towards the school. The air was pitilessly raw and already my heart misgave me.

When I came home to dinner my uncle had not yet been home. Still it was early. I sat staring at the clock for some time and, when its ticking began to irritate me, I left the room. I mounted the staircase and gained the upper part of the house. The high cold empty gloomy rooms liberated me and I went from room to room singing. From the front window I saw my companions playing below in the street. Their cries reached me weakened and indistinct and, leaning my forehead against the cool glass, I looked over at the dark house where she lived. I may have stood there for an hour, seeing nothing but the brown-clad figure cast by my imagination, touched discreetly by the lamplight at the curved neck, at the hand upon the railings and at the border below the dress.

When I came downstairs again I found Mrs. Mercer sitting at the fire. She was an old garrulous woman, a pawnbroker's widow, who collected used stamps for some pious purpose. I had to endure the gossip of the tea-table. The meal was prolonged beyond an hour and still my uncle did not come. Mrs. Mercer stood up to go: she was sorry she couldn't wait any longer, but it was after eight o'clock and she did not like to be out late, as the night air was bad for her. When she had gone I began to walk up and down the room, clenching my fists. My aunt said:

—I'm afraid you may put off your bazaar for this night of Our Lord.

At nine o'clock I heard my uncle's latchkey in the halldoor. I heard him talking to himself and heard the hallstand rocking when it had received the weight of his overcoat. I could interpret these signs. When he was midway through his dinner I asked him to give me the money to go to the bazaar. He had forgotten.

20 —The people are in bed and after their first sleep now, he said.

I did not smile. My aunt said to him energetically:

—Can't you give him the money and let him go? You've kept him late enough as it is.

My uncle said he was very sorry he had forgotten. He said he believed in the old saying: *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.* He asked me

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[1]**Freemason** A Freemason was a member of the Free and Accepted Masons, a fraternal organization viewed with suspicion by Irish Catholics.