ARABY by James Joyce

North Richmond Street being blind\(^1\), was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers’ School\(^2\) set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours 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 been long 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\(^3\), The Devout Communicant\(^4\) and The Memoirs of Vidocq\(^5\). 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 sombre. The space of sky above us was the colour 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 odours arose from the ashpits, 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 areas. 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 open door 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 parlour 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 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 labourers, 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,\(^6\) 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 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 forgot whether I answered yes or no. It would be a splendid bazaar\(^7\), she said she would love to go.

"And why can't you?" I asked.

While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and

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1. A dead end street in Dublin, Ireland. The story is taken from a collection titled *Dubliners* (1914).
2. A parochial school run by the Roman Catholic Teaching order Institute of the Brothers of Christian Schools.
5. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—W. B. Yeats.
6. Irish revolutionary opposing British rule.
7. Cup for wine used in Christian communion rite.
8. Arabic word for market—here used to designate a charity sale with an exotic Arab theme (hence, “Araby”).
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
cought 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 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 affair. I answered few questions in
class. I watched my master's face pass from amiability to
stermess; 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."

As he was in the hall I could not go into the front parlour
and lie at the window. I left the house in bad humour 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
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.

"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 where I was going and, when
I had told him a second time he asked me did I know The
Arab's Farewell to his Steed. When I left the kitchen he
was about to recite the opening lines of the piece to my
aunt.

I held a florin tightly in my hand as I strode down
Buckingham Street towards the station. The sight of the
streets thronged with buyers and glaring with gas recalled to
me the purpose of my journey. I took my seat in a third-
class carriage of a deserted train. After an intolerable delay
the train moved out of the station slowly. It crept onward
among ruinous house and over the twinkling river. At
Westland Row Station a crowd of people pressed to the

9 She attends a convent school for girls and must attend a
religious retreat.
10 Metaphorically annoyed by (as in chafed, or irritated
skin).
11 Freemasons or Masons are a secret male organization
organized into lodges—the narrator's Roman Catholic
Aunt may think that the bazaar is anti-Catholic.

12 Sentimental poem by Caroline Norton (1808-77) in
which an Arabic boy sells his prized horse only to regret
his action.
13 A two shilling coin worth one-tenth of a pound.
carriage doors; but the porters moved them back, saying that it was a special train for the bazaar. I remained alone in the bare carriage. In a few minutes the train drew up beside an improvised wooden platform. I passed out on to the road and saw by the lighted dial of a clock that it was ten minutes to ten. In front of me was a large building which displayed the magical name.

I could not find any sixpenny entrance and, fearing that the bazaar would be closed, I passed in quickly through a turnstile, handing a shilling to a weary-looking man. I found myself in a big hall girdled at half its height by a gallery. Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness. I recognised a silence like that which pervades a church after a service. I walked into the centre of the bazaar timidly. A few people were gathered about the stalls which were still open. Before a curtain, over which the words Cafe Chantant\(^\text{14}\) were written in coloured lamps, two men were counting money on a salver.\(^\text{15}\) I listened to the fall of the coins.

Remembering with difficulty why I had come I went over to one of the stalls and examined porcelain vases and flowered tea-sets. At the door of the stall a young lady was talking and laughing with two young gentlemen. I remarked their English accents\(^\text{16}\) and listened vaguely to their conversation.

"O, I never said such a thing!"

"O, but you did!"

"O, but I didn't!"

"Didn't she say that?"

"Yes. I heard her."

"O, there's a... fib!"

Observing me the young lady came over and asked me did I wish to buy anything. The tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty. I looked humbly at the great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance to the stall and murmured:

"No, thank you."

The young lady changed the position of one of the vases and went back to the two young men. They began to talk of the same subject. Once or twice the young lady glanced at me over her shoulder.

I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

1. What is the narrator's attitude toward Mangan's sister?
2. Is the narrator's love sacred or secular?
3. Does the narrator consider himself a boy or man? Give specific examples.
4. Give examples of how the narrator juxtaposes images of the sacred and the profane.
5. Give examples of how the narrator implies British colonial control over Ireland. How does the narrator allude to the divisions between the Roman Catholic Irish and Protestant British?
6. The conclusion of the story is often referred to as an “epiphany” or moment of profound self-awareness. What does the narrator realize about himself and his society?

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14 Coffee House (in French to add to the supposedly “exotic” nature of the bazaar.)
15 A plate, often silver.
16 To the Irish narrator the English accents may sound foreign—the reference may also remind the reader that the British maintain colonial social and economic control over Ireland.