

# The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bargaining with the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent guilt of being cheap. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which makes one believe the fact that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles the most common.

While the mistress of the home is gradually going from sobbing to sniffing, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. In the entryway below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and a doorbell which no finger could cause to ring. Also there was a card on it with the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been added during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting it to a modest "D. " But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all

very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with some powder. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and silver--something worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There were narrow mirrors between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen such mirrors in a cheap flat. A very thin person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of these long narrow mirrors, get a fairly accurate reflection of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the mirror. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which

they both took great pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across from theirs, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to make the Queen's jewels and gifts less valuable. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pull at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her flowing and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and was almost like a dress. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she fumbled for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

She put on her old brown jacket; she put on her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign said: "Madame Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your hat off and let's have a look at it."

The brown cascade rippled down.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the hair with a skilled hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours flew by on rosy wings. Forget the fancy metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and pure in design, showing its value by substance alone and not by ornate decoration--as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value--the description applied to both. They took twenty-one dollars for it, and she hurried home with the remaining 87 cents. With that chain on his watch, Jim would be eager to check the time in any company. As wonderful as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it secretly because of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her excitement changed a little to reason. She got out her curling irons and went to work trying to fix her hair, which was now a mess made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends--a gigantic task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island

chorus girl. But what could I do--oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della held the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stairs down on the first floor, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying a little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty two--and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he had no gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as still as a dog at the scent of bird. He stared at Della, and there was a look in them that she could not understand, and it scared her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the feelings that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again--you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it.

My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice--what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, slowly, as if he had not understood, even though he had thought hard about it.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, seeming almost stupid.

"Don't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you--sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for I sold it for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Jim seemed quickly to wake out of his trance. He hugged his Della. For ten seconds let's not watch them. Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a scholar would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark statement will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's a haircut that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why I acted like I did."

White fingers tore at the string and

paper. And then a happy scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick change to tears and crying, requiring the immediate comfort of her husband.

For there lay The Combs--the set of combs that Della had admired in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims--just the right color for her beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had yearned for them without believing she would ever have them. And now, they were hers, but the hair that should have held the beautiful combs was gone.

But she held them tightly, and she looked up with sad eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly with her open hand. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright spirit.

"Isn't it wonderful, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim sat down on the couch, leaned back, and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use right now. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were wise ones, perhaps ones you could exchange if you got two. And here I have told you the dull story of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.