

The Gift of the Magi

(O. Henry)

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. She had put it aside, one cent and then another and then another, in her careful buying of meat and other food. Della counted it three times. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was nothing to do but fall on the bed and cry. So Della did it.

Only \$1.87 to buy a gift for Jim. Her Jim. She had had many happy hours planning something nice for him. Something nearly good enough. Something almost worth the honor of belonging to Jim.

The James Dillingham Youngs were very proud of two things which they owned. One thing was Jim's gold watch. It had once belonged to his father. And, long ago, it had belonged to his father's father. The other thing was Della's hair.

If a queen had lived in the rooms near theirs, Della would have washed and dried her hair where the queen could see it. Della knew her hair was more beautiful than any queen's jewels and gifts.

If a king had lived in the same house, with all his riches, Jim would have looked at his watch every time they met. Jim knew that no king had anything so valuable.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, shining like a falling stream of brown water. It reached below her knee. It almost made itself into a dress for her.

And then she put it up on her head again, nervously and quickly. Once she stopped for a moment and stood still while a tear or two ran down her face.

She put on her old brown coat. She put on her old brown hat. With the bright light still in her eyes, she moved quickly out of the door and down to the street.

Where she stopped, the sign said: "Mrs. Sofronie. Hair Articles of all Kinds."

Up to the second floor Della ran, and stopped to get her breath.

Mrs. Sofronie, large, too white, cold-eyed, looked at her.

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Mrs. Safronie. "Take your hat off and let me look at it."

Down fell the brown waterfall.

"Twenty dollars," said Mrs. Safronie, lifting the hair to feel its weight.

"Give it to me quickly," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours seemed to fly. She was going from one shop to another, to find a gift for Jim.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and for no one else. There was no

other like it in any of the shops, and she had looked in every shop in the city.

It was a gold watch chain, very simply made. Its value was in its rich and pure material. Because it was so plain and simple, you knew that it was very valuable. All good things are like this.

It was good enough for the watch.

As soon as she saw it, she knew that Jim must have it. It was like him. Quietness and value – Jim and the chain both had quietness and value. She paid twenty-one dollars for it. And she hurried home with the chain and eighty-seven cents.

With that chain on his watch, Jim could look at his watch and learn the time anywhere he might be. Though the watch was so fine, it never had a fine chain. He sometimes took it out and looked at it only when no one could see him do it.

When Della arrived home, her mind quietened a little. She began to think more reasonably. She started to try to cover the sad marks of what she had done. Love and large-hearted giving, when added together, can leave deep marks. It is never easy to cover these marks, dear friends – never easy.

Within forty minutes her head looked a little better. With her short hair, she looked wonderfully like a schoolboy. She stood at the looking-glass for a long time.

“If Jim doesn't like me,” she said to herself, “before he looks at me a second time, he'll say I look like a girl who works for money. But what could I do – oh! What could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?”

At seven, Jim's dinner was ready for him.

Jim was never late. Della held the watch chain in her hand and sat near the door where he always entered. Then she heard his steps in the hall and her face lost color for a moment. She often said little prayers quietly, about simple everyday things. And now she said: “Please God, make him think I'm still pretty.”

The door opened and Jim stepped in. He looked very thin and he was not smiling. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two – and with a family to take care of! He needed a new coat and he had nothing to cover his cold hands.

Jim stopped inside the door. He was as quiet as a hunting dog when it is near a bird. His eyes looked strangely at Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not understand. It filled her with fear. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor anything else she had been ready for. He simply looked at her with the strange expression on his face.

Della went to him.

“Jim, dear,” she cried, “don't look at me like that. I had my hair cut off and sold it. I couldn't live through Christmas without giving you a gift. My hair will grow again. You won't care, will you? My hair grows very fast. It's Christmas, Jim. Let's be happy. You don't know what a nice – what a beautiful nice gift I got for you.”

“You've cut off your hair?” asked Jim slowly. He seemed to labour to understand what had happened. He seemed not to feel sure he knew.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me now? I'm me, Jim. I'm the same without my hair."

Jim looked around the room.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said.

"You don't have to look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you – sold and gone, too. It's the night before Christmas, boy. Be good to me, because I sold it for you. May be the hairs of my head could be counted," she said, "but no one could ever count my regard for you. Shall we eat dinner, Jim?"

Jim folded his arms before him. For ten seconds let us look in another direction. Eight dollars a week or a million dollars a year – how different are they? Someone may give you an answer, but it will be wrong. The Magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. My meaning will be explained soon.

From inside his coat, Jim took something tied in paper. He threw it upon the table.

"I want you to understand me, Dell," he said. "Nothing like a haircut could make me careless for you. But if you'll open that, you may know what I felt when I came in."

White fingers pulled off the paper. And then a cry of joy; and then a change to tears.

For there lay the combs – the combs that Della had seen in a shop window and loved for a long time. Beautiful combs, with jewels, perfect for her beautiful hair. She had known they cost too much for her to buy them. She had looked at them without the least hope of owning them. And now they were hers, but her hair was gone.

But she held them to her heart, and at last, was able to look up and say:

"My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then she jumped up and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful gift. She held it out to him in her open hand. The gold seemed to shine softly as if with her own warm and loving spirit.

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

Jim sat down and smiled.

"Della," said he, "let's put our Christmas gifts away and keep them a while. They're too nice to use now. I sold the watch to get the money to buy the combs. And now I think we should have our dinner."

The Magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were the first to give Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were doubtlessly wise ones. And here I have told you the story of two children who were not wise. Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak the last word to the wise of these days: Of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise. Everywhere they are the wisest ones. They are the Magi.

About the Author

O. Henry was the pen-name of William Sydney Porter (1862 – 1910), one of the most famous American short story writers. He lived in extreme poverty in New York, writing short stories to support himself. His tragic life gave him a profound knowledge of human character, especially of dwellers in big cities whose life is full of misfortunes. As a storyteller he is remarkable for his ingenuity in the use of ironical coincidences and for his skillful plots. In 1918 the American Society of Letters honoured his name by founding the O. Henry Memorial Award, which gives an annual prize for the best American short story.

Theme

Della and Jim had great love for each other and could not think of celebrating Christmas without presenting the gifts. But they had no money so they sold their most beautiful and valuable things to buy gifts, which proved too nice to use on the occasion. The story reveals that exchange of gifts on the holy occasions makes life most lovable.

Reading Notes

Christmas	yearly celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, December 25
made itself into a dress for her	can cover her whole body
nervously	excitedly
seemed to fly	looked in hurry
quietness and value	sober and precious
large-hearted	generous

EXERCISES

1. Choose the correct answer.

- i. James Dillingham Youngs had two valuable things
 - a) a house and a car.
 - b) a necklace and a clock.
 - c) TV and VCR.
 - d) Jim's gold watch and Della's hair.
- ii. Della's hair was more beautiful than any
 - a) painting.
 - b) palace.
 - c) queen's jewels and gifts.
 - d) scene.
- iii. Della's hair reached below her
 - a) neck.
 - b) back.
 - c) feet.
 - d) knees.

- iv. "Down fell the brown waterfall" means
- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a) the stream flowed down. | b) the brown waterfall fell down. |
| c) Della's hair fell down. | d) the brown water fell down. |
- v. What did she buy for Jim?
- | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| a) a watch | b) a gold watch chain |
| c) a necktie | d) a shirt |
- vi. What was common in Jim and the watch chain?
- | | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| a) simplicity | b) quietness |
| c) value | d) quietness and value |
- vii. With her short hair, she looked wonderfully like a
- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| a) young girl. | b) school boy. |
| c) dame. | d) woman. |
- viii. What did Della pray?
- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a) may he think her still pretty | b) may she live long |
| c) may she had long hair again | d) may she remain pretty |
- ix. No one can count Della's
- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| a) feelings. | b) love. |
| c) hair. | d) jewels. |
- x. Jim bought a gift of
- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| a) a watch. | b) shoes. |
| c) clips. | d) the combs. |

2. Mark the sentences true or false.

- i. The gold watch belonged to Jim's father.
- ii. Jim knew that no king had anything so valuable as the gold watch.
- iii. Della sold her hair for twenty dollars.
- iv. For three hours she seemed to fly from shop to shop to find a gift.
- v. She could not do anything with a dollar and eighty-seven cents.
- vi. Jim took his dinner at eight.
- vii. Jim was paid 20 dollars a week.
- viii. Both couldn't live through Christmas without exchanging gifts.
- ix. She refused to have the gift of the combs.
- x. The gifts were too nice to use on Christmas.

3. Answer the following questions.

- i. How much did she save for Christmas?
- ii. Why did she feel proud in the beauty of her hair?
- iii. Why did she sell her hair?
- iv. Why did Jim sell the gold watch?

- v. Why did they want to exchange the gifts?
- vi. Why did she feel sad on losing her hair?
- vii. Why did Jim not welcome her when he stepped in?
- viii. What did he bring out of his coat?
- ix. How beautiful was the gold watch chain?
- x. What was the wisdom in selling the most valuable things?

4. **Answer the following questions in 50 - 100 words.**

- i. How did the Magi want to celebrate their Christmas?
- ii. How much were they attached to each other in the story?
- iii. Why did they sell their beautiful valuable things?
- iv. Describe the story in your own words.
- v. What is the moral of the story?

5. **Connect the sentence in Column I with the relevant sentence in Column II.**

Column I	Column II
She had had many happy hours	into a dress for her.
It had once belonged	me look at it.
It almost made itself	rich and pure material.
She stood still while	strange expression on his face.
Take your hat off and let	the chain and eighty-seven cents.
Its value was in its	a tear or two ran down her face.
She hurried home with	planning something nice for him.
He simply looked at her with the	to his father.

6. **Punctuate the following lines.**

i want you to understand me Dell he said nothing like a haircut could make me careless for you but if you ll open that you may know what i felt when i came in

7. **Read the passage and answer the questions given at the end.**

The Magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were the first to give Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were doubtlessly wise too. And here I have told you the story of two children who were the wisest. Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak the last word to the wise of these days. Of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give gifts, such as they are, the wisest. Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the Magi.

- i) Who were the wise men?
- ii) Who were the first to give Christmas gifts?
- iii) Were these two the wisest?
- iv) Write the main idea of the passage.