

The Gift of the Magi

by O. Henry, 1905, Manhattan, NY
(modernized American English by AI, July 2025)

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 butcher and the vegetable man until her cheeks burned with embarrassment. 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 cry. So Della did just that. While the tears flowed, we'll take a quick look at the home.

It was a furnished flat—eight dollars a week. It didn't exactly scream "poverty," but it certainly whispered it quietly. In the hall downstairs was a letterbox that no longer worked and a doorbell that no longer rang. Also in the hallway was a card with the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had a proud sound when the name was first placed there during better times. Now, when Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat upstairs, he was simply "Jim," and he was greeted by Mrs. James Dillingham Young—better known to us as Della.

Della stopped crying and fixed her face. She stood by the window and looked out, feeling dull and gray. Tomorrow was Christmas, and she only had \$1.87 to buy Jim a present. She'd spent months saving that money. A present that was truly worthy of Jim. She'd often dreamed of giving him something fine, rare, and special—something that showed how deep her love was.

Suddenly, she whirled around away from the window and looked in a mirror behind her. Her eyes lit up, but her face lost its color for just a second. Quickly, she let her hair down.

There were two things in the Dillingham Young home they were both very proud of. One was Jim's gold watch—it had been his father's, and his grandfather's before that. The other was Della's hair. When she let it fall, it reached below her knees and almost looked like a robe around her.

She stood still for a moment, letting it fall around her like a stream of brown silk. Then she quickly put it back up. A few minutes later, she had thrown on her old, brown coat, put on her battered hat, and was hurrying out the door.

She stopped at a shop with a sign that read "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your hat off and let's see it."

Down came the brown waterfall.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with expert hands.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

The next two hours passed like a blur. She searched shop after shop to find a gift for Jim.

She finally found it. It was made for Jim and no one else. A platinum watch chain, simple and elegant. It was quietly valuable—just like Jim. It was exactly right for his gold watch. As soon as she saw it, she knew. It cost twenty-one dollars. She paid up and rushed home with eighty-seven cents left.

When she got home, she picked up her curling iron, lit the gas, and began to fix her damaged-looking hair. She worked carefully, trying to make herself as presentable as possible before Jim came home. She looked at herself critically in the mirror.

"I hope he'll still think I'm pretty," she whispered to herself.

At 7 o'clock, the coffee was made and the frying pan was heating on the back of the stove, ready for the pork chops.

Jim was never late. Della held the chain in her hand and sat near the door, listening.

Then she heard his step and turned white for a moment. She whispered a prayer, "Please God, make him think I'm still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in. He looked thin and serious. Poor guy, only twenty-two years old and already with such burdens. He needed a hug as soon as he walked in.

Jim stood still by the door and stared at Della with a strange expression.

"You've cut off your hair," he said slowly.

"Yes, and sold it," said Della. "But it'll grow back. You're not mad, are you? I sold it to get you a Christmas present. It's still me, Jim, even without the hair."

Jim looked around slowly.

"You say your hair is gone?" he asked, almost dazed.

"You don't have to look for it," she said. "I sold it, understand? It's Christmas Eve, and I had to get you something. My hair grows fast. Be happy—it's for you."

Jim seemed to snap out of it. He hugged her.

"Nothing," he said, "could make me love you any less. But...open this. You'll understand why I was so surprised."

He took a package from his coat and handed it to her.

She tore the string open. And then she screamed in surprise—but almost immediately began crying.

Because there were the combs—beautiful combs, the ones she had dreamed of for her hair. Pure tortoiseshell, with jeweled edges—just perfect. Expensive. Her heart had longed for them without hope. And now they were hers—but her hair was gone.

She hugged them to her and finally looked up with teary eyes and a smile.

"My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

Then Della jumped up like a little cat and cried, "Oh! My gift for you!"

She proudly held out the chain.

"Isn't it perfect, Jim? I hunted all over for it. Give me your watch—I want to see how it looks on it!"

Jim sank down onto the couch and smiled.

"Dell," he said, "let's put our presents away for a while. They're too nice to use right now. I sold the watch to buy your combs. Merry Christmas, sweetheart."

The magi, as you know, were wise men—gifted ones—who brought presents to the Christ child. They started the tradition of giving Christmas gifts.

And here in this tiny apartment were two people who gave gifts out of deep love—each sacrificing their most prized possession for the other.

Of all those who give gifts, these two were the wisest.
They are the Magi.