

# The Gift of the Magi

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 **negotiating** with the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher. 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 lie down on the little couch and cry. So, Della did it. Life is made up of **sobs, sniffles**, and smiles, with sniffles the most common.

Take a look at her home. A **furnished flat** that cost \$8 per week. Downstairs was a mailbox which never contained a letter, and an electric button which never rang. Above both the mailbox and the electric button was a card with the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young." But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home, he was called "Jim" and hugged by Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and **wiped** her cheeks. She stood by the window and looked out 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. 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. She had planned to buy something nice for him.

Suddenly, Della turned from the window and stood in front of a mirror. **Rapidly** she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length. Now, there were two **possessions** of the James Dillingham Youngs they were very proud of. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. So now Della's beautiful hair fell down, shining like brown water and reached below her knees. And then she put her hair up again nervously and quickly. A tear or two hit the old red carpet.

She put on her old brown jacket and her old brown hat. **In a rush** she went out the door and down the stairs to the street. She stopped in front of a store with a sign that read: "Madame Sofronie. Hair Products of All Kinds." Della ran into the shop and saw Madame 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."

Down came the brown water of her hair.

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

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

She went all over town to look 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. It was a platinum watch chain, simple in design. As soon as she saw it, she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the chain and the 87 cents. As beautiful as the watch was, Jim sometimes looked at it secretly because of the old leather **strap** that he used instead of a chain. But that would all change.

When Della reached home, she decided to do something with the hair she had left. Within forty minutes her head was covered with small curls that made her look like a schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror carefully. "If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he might say I look like a **chorus girl**. But what else 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 dinner. Jim was never late. Della held the watch chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door. Then she heard his footsteps on the stairs, and she **turned white** for just a moment, and 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. He was only twenty-two—with a family! He needed a new coat, and he had no gloves. Jim stopped inside the door. He stared at Della, and there was a strange look in his eyes, and it scared her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor horror, nor anything that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her with that strange look on his face. Della went to him.

"Jim," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and I sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you don't mind, do you? I just had to do it. My hair grows very fast. Come on, say, 'Merry Christmas!' and let's be happy. I've got a beautiful, nice gift for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm still me, aren't I?"

Jim looked around the room. "Your hair is gone?" he said.

"Don't look for it," said Della. "It's sold—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve. Be good to me, I sold it for you. Should I start cooking dinner, Jim?"

Jim seemed to wake up. He hugged his Della. For ten seconds let us think about this. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician would give you the wrong answer.

Jim took out a package from his coat pocket and threw it on the table. "Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "I don't think there's any haircut that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll **unwrap** that package you will understand."

Della opened the string and paper. And then a scream of joy; and then, a quick change to tears. Inside the package were the set of **combs**, that Della had seen in a **Broadway** window and fallen in love with. Beautiful combs—just perfect for her hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and now, they were hers, but all her hair was gone! But she hugged them to her chest, and after a moment she smiled and said: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!" And then Della jumped up and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him in her open **palm**. "Isn't it wonderful, Jim? I looked 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, Jim lay down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled. "Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep them a while. They're too nice to use now. I sold my watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now why don't you start dinner."

The **magi**, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to **the Babe in the manger**. They invented the **custom** of giving Christmas presents. Being **wise**, their gifts were wise ones. And here I have told you the story of two poor people in a flat who most unwisely **sacrificed** for each other the greatest treasures of their house. All people who give and receive gifts in this way, are the wisest. They are the magi.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you feel about the end of the story?
2. Della cut off her hair to buy Jim a watch chain. Jim sold the watch his father had given him to buy hair combs for Della. In your opinion, who made the bigger sacrifice?
3. What is the best present you have ever given someone else? What is the best present someone has ever given you?
4. If you could receive any gift right now, what would it be?