

The Gift of the Magi

Once upon a time, there lived a young couple, Della and Jim. They were madly in love with each other, but their feelings were about the only things they possessed. Each day they would head out to work, he as a barrow-boy and her as a flower seller, and each night they would count their pennies by candlelight.

One year, as Christmas approached with the speed of the noisome steam-train, Della realised that she couldn't afford a present for her beloved. Despite saving all year, she had a meagre handful of pennies and nothing more. She wept and snivelled and racked her brain for something that she could buy him. With a turn of her head, the answer came to her like a flash in the broken looking glass.

In their house, there were two possessions that Jim and Della prized almost as much as their adoration for each other. Jim had inherited his father's gold watch, which he, in turn, had inherited from his father. Della had long been proud of her silken hair. It was so beautiful that it was often said that the Queen of Sheba would weep had she ever seen it.

Snatching up her purse, Della headed down into the back alleys of London. When she saw the towering pole, freshly painted in red and white, she knew she had found what she needed. She stepped into the barber's and asked the man behind the till, "Do you buy hair for wigs?"

It was the work of a few minutes to shear Della's glorious locks. Before long, she left the shop sobbing but twenty pounds better off. Immediately, she set off hunting for something worthy of her betrothed. His watch was magnificent and priceless, but he often looked at it in secret: the leather band that held it was scuffed and ripped. In the third shop, she found her present. Nestled at the bottom of a jeweller's tray was a golden chain worthy of the watch. She grabbed it quickly and headed back to her humble home.

Della sat and waited by the light of a single candle until Jim finally returned from a day at the market. A kaleidoscope of emotions raced across his face when he saw what she had done to her hair. "Don't you love me just as much?" she asked him sadly. "I did this for you! I sold my hair to buy a present worthy of my love for you."

Sadness filled Jim's eyes but was soon replaced by a shining tear of love. "Of course I do, my love. If you open your present from myself, you will see why I was momentarily taken aback." With his words, he handed Della a carefully wrapped package which she tore open with glee. When she saw what was inside, a

beautiful set of hair combs that she had coveted for months in the shop window, she saw why he had been so shocked. She finally possessed the thing she had desired, and yet the hair for them to adorn had been sold. Sniffing, she handed Jim his own present.

When he tore open the wrapping, his own eyes welled up, and a laugh escaped his lips. "My love," he began with a smile, "the only way I could afford the combs was to sell my father's watch!" And with that they both laughed and hugged.

*A note from O. Henry, the original author of *The Gift of the Magi* - The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.



VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Find two synonyms that tell you Jim was Della's partner.
2. Which word or phrase tells you that Della and Jim liked their hair and watch?
3. What does the metaphor "a kaleidoscope of emotions" mean?
4. Find a word that means "a very short time".
5. Which word or phrase tells you that the chain was hidden away?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

What was Della's job?

S

How many shops had Della looked in before she found Jim's present?

I

How did Jim feel when he opened his own present? How do you know?

E

What do you think is the moral of this story?

R

Where had Jim's watch come from?

Answers:

1. Beloved/betrothed
2. Prized possessions
3. Great courage in the face of danger.
4. Momentarily
5. Nestled

R: A flower seller

S: 2 (She found it in the third shop)

I: Sad and amused - his eyes welled up and he laughed

E: There are more important things than feeling pressured to give gifts.

R: His father and grandfather