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Mrs. Mary Mueller
4930 138th Circle W
Apple Valley, MN 55124

William Sidney Porter

1862-1910

The author known as "O. Henry" (the most famous American pen name next to "Mark Twain") became an extremely popular writer during the first decades of the twentieth century. In fact, even today his work remains a favorite with many readers. His thoroughly American stories have been admired by French and English readers but especially by the Russians, who issued a commemorative stamp in 1962 on the centennial of his birth. The humor and compassion, mixed with the delightful surprise of his endings, make his work a sharp artistic contrast to the pessimistic works of the naturalists.

O. Henry was born William Sydney (later Sidney) Porter on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. When fifteen, he left school to work with his pharmacist uncle and eventually became a licensed pharmacist himself. In 1882, because of ill health, Porter moved from North Carolina to Texas, where for two years he lived on a cattle ranch. Then for four years he worked as a bookkeeper in Austin, Texas. In 1887 he married Athol Estes. Before his marriage Porter had been somewhat unsettled and apparently had felt little shame living off the generosity of friends, whom he charmed with his humor, sketching, and writing. After his marriage he settled down first as a draftsman in the Texas Land Office, then as a teller in the First National Bank of Austin.

Porter soon ran into financial trouble. His young wife became seriously ill after the difficult birth of a daughter in 1889. *The Rolling Stone*, a humorous weekly newspaper he had published for a year, failed. In 1894 Porter was accused of stealing bank funds. Although his friends posted bond and proclaimed his innocence, Porter's actions suggested otherwise. Two years later, when several indictments were issued against him, he skipped bond and fled to Honduras and then wandered through South America and Mexico. After several months he returned to Austin only when it became clear that his wife was soon going to



die. Following her death, he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to five years' imprisonment in the federal penitentiary in Columbus, Ohio.

While Porter awaited trial, he received word that his first story, "The Miracle of Lava Canyon," had been accepted for publication. During the next three years (he was released early for good behavior), he wrote more than a dozen stories published by national magazines. When he emerged from prison in 1901, he was a professional writer. He moved to New York City, where he quickly gained fame under the pseudonym "O. Henry," a name he supposedly borrowed from a guard at the Ohio Penitentiary, Orrin Henry. Editors were soon bidding for his stories, and Porter found himself busily writing to meet their demands. At his peak he produced an average of one story a week, writing quickly and revising little. His first book, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), was a collection of short stories tied together to resemble a novel. In 1906 he published his most famous collection, *The Four Million*, whose title indicates the population of New York City at the time. These collections were followed by a dozen more.

Porter's last years were sad ones. Although he married his childhood sweetheart in 1907, the marriage was a failure. He had no close friends and, according to one biographer, died at the age of forty-eight, "a gentle, alienated, and lonely alcoholic."

Unlike much of the serious literature of the day, Porter's stories are not naturalistic. In fact, they refute many of the naturalists' pessimistic assumptions about life. While the naturalists insisted on revealing the "stark reality" that they believed defined life, Porter "lifted the veil from stark reality and showed the romance beneath it." In his well-known story "The Gift of the Magi," Porter details the poverty of a young couple. Only through costly sacrifice are the two able to give a gift to each other. Porter, however, does not stop with this couple's hardships but shows the beauty of their self-sacrificing love. Their positive, humane values thus shine out through the "stark reality" of their lives.

Porter's trademark is the surprise ending. Donald Heiney explains the way Porter used this device: "The trick in a typical O. Henry story consists in withholding an important piece of information from the readers as long as possible, so that only as he finishes the story does he fully understand the significance of the previous action." Both "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Ransom of Red Chief" illustrate Porter's talent in employing this literary device.

Porter's place in American literary history, it is true, is a relatively minor one. Critics list sentimentality, contrived endings, exaggerated characters, and shallowness among his artistic shortcomings. Oftentimes, Porter's stories only amuse. Nevertheless, as one critic remarks, Porter "knew precisely how much of the sugar of sentimentality the great average reading public must have, and how much of the pepper of sensation, and the salt of facts, and the salad dressing of romance." Further, Porter's stories convey many parts of reality that escape the naturalists: the

humor, the incongruities, the possibility for success, the inviting reality of human life. Unfortunately they do not give insight into human life as it is described in God's Word.

The Gift of the Magi

This is one of the four million stories Porter thought could be written about the inhabitants of New York City. The story is also one of his most ingenious tales. Notice that he concentrates primarily on the development of the plot.

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 bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent [imputation](#) of [parsimony](#) that such close dealing implied. 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 instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the [mendicancy](#) squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze 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 to a modest and unassuming 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 the powder rag. 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 sterling--something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. 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 a mighty 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 the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to [depreciate](#) Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. 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 pluck at his beard from envy.

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

On went her old brown jacket; on went 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 read: "Mne. 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 yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed 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 chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by [meretricious](#) ornamentation--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. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends--a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a [truant](#) 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 doubled 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 stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying 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 was without gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly 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, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"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, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn'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 it went 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?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year--what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion 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 anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs--the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims--just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

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

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

"Isn't it a dandy, 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 tumbled 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 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. 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 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. 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. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

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OF THE MAGI.