

More About **The Gift of the Magi**

O. Henry is the pen name of American writer William Sidney Porter (1862-1910), and **The Gift of the Magi** is probably his most popular and best-loved short story. First published in 1905, it tells of a young married couple who have very little money, but dream of buying extravagant Christmas gifts for each other. It is a tale of love and sacrifice that features one of O. Henry's characteristic "twist" endings.

Cast

(in order of appearance)

Jim Baritone
Della Soprano
passersby on the street; an onstage brass quartet

Scenes

1. A cheap flat
2. A city street
3. The flat

Time: Christmas Eve Day, 1898

Duration: approx. 30 minutes

Orchestration: 1-1-1-1, 2-1-1, Strings

Synopsis:

SCENE 1: It is the morning of Christmas Eve, 1898. Jim is in the parlor of the cheap flat he shares with his wife Della reading the morning paper. It is nearly time for him to leave for work and he wants to say goodbye to Della, but she is still in the bedroom putting up her hair. She emerges, obviously proud of it, and Jim pokes some good-natured fun at her: if the Queen of Sheba lived nearby, Della would be sure to brush her hair in full view, just to make her envious. Della responds, pointing out that Jim is just as proud of his pocket watch, and if King Solomon kept his treasure in the basement, Jim would be sure to show off his watch to him to every chance he had. Jim then defends his watch. After all, it has been in his family for three generations and has run perfectly for over a hundred years! Then Jim notices the time and rushes off, almost forgetting the precious watch. As soon as he is gone, Della takes out her purse and counts the money she has saved for Jim's Christmas present: \$1.87. She laments about how hard it is to save money when they are so poor. Jim deserves a really special gift, but there is nothing exceptional that she can buy with such a small sum of money. As she is drying her tears, she notices her reflection in the mirror, takes down her hair and studies it for a moment. Then she collects her things and leaves.

SCENE 2: Jim is out in the streets, bustling with holiday shoppers and a band playing Christmas carols. His dilemma is the same as Della's: he wants to buy her a truly special gift, but has no money. While Jim window shops and soliloquizes on the extravagant gifts he wishes he could buy for her, Della is briefly seen entering a business in the background. As Jim pulls out his watch to check the time, he stops and looks at it thoughtfully for a moment and then walks off purposefully.

SCENE 3: Back at the flat, Della has cut off and sold her hair to a wigmaker to get twenty dollars to buy a present for Jim. Now she is having second thoughts: Jim will be appalled when he sees her like this! But he will certainly like the gift she has bought him. It is a very fine gift. As she hears Jim coming up the stairs, Della panics. He'll call her a Coney Island chorus girl! He enters and is struck dumb at the sight of her. She stammers that she had to do it; she couldn't bear the thought of not having a gift for him, and her hair will grow back. After recovering from the shock, Jim assures Della that he likes her just as well with short hair or even no hair. He gives her a little package, explaining that she will see why he was so shocked. She opens the package to find the set of tortoise shell combs that she had been admiring in a store window. She is thrilled, then remembers that her hair is gone. Jim gently reminds her that her hair grows awfully fast. Then Della gives Jim the present she has bought him, a beautiful silver chain for his watch. When she urges him to put it on his watch, Jim just smiles and suggests that they both put their gifts away and keep them for a while. He has sold his watch to buy the combs for her hair. Embracing, they wish each other Merry Christmas.

This opera has been recorded by soloists Bree Nichols and Pavol Kubáň with the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra and released on the album **The Gift of the Magi** by Navona Records. Please see the Discography page on my website for more information.