

THE GIFT of the Magi

*Adapted from O. Henry's original story
By Mindy Starns Clark*

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Perhaps the most perfect Christmas parable ever written is O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* published in 1906. Here in play version is the timeless story of Della and Jim, a struggling young couple who seeks to give the other the ideal Christmas gift. They barter their most valued possessions to purchase each other's gifts: Della's beautiful long hair for a watch fob and chain for him; Jim's watch for a tortoiseshell comb set for her. While the physical gifts prove useless, the couple's love is enriched beyond measure.

Premiere Production

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI premiered Sunday, Dec. 6, 1992, at the First Baptist Church of Red Bank, NJ. It was presented by "ACTS" (Always Creative Theatre Specialists), directed by Carl N. Swenson and featured Marti Bookstein as Female Angel, Michael Kosakowski as Male Angel, Mary Keefe as Della and Carl N. Swenson as Jim.

SYNOPSIS

- Scene 1:** A cloud in heaven, DSR, and Jim and Della's apartment, CS. Night of Dec. 23 in the early 1900's.
- Scene 2:** Jim and Della's apartment, the next morning. Also Mme. Sofronie's shop DSR.
- Scene 3:** Dickerson's Jewelry Store, DSL, and heaven DSR.
- Scene 4:** Later that day, Christmas Eve, at the couple's apartment and heaven, DSR.

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CHARACTERS

(2 m, 2 w with doubling)

FRAN: Older, richer kindhearted sister to Jim; also plays female angel and Madame Sofronie.

PETER: Jim's boss and Fran's husband; also plays male angel and Mr. Dickerson the jeweler.

JIM: Young husband to Della, poor but proud of his watch.

DELLA: Jim's lovely young wife with beautiful, long hair.

SETTING

“Cloud” DSR for Angels can be played before curtain if desired. Jim and Della’s apartment consists of a sparse table and two chairs. There is a small kerosene heater on the floor, a cracked mirror on the side wall, and a bare window on the back wall. SL is a “freestanding” door in a frame through which all enter and exit. For hair shop all that is needed is a sign reading, “Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds,” and a counter and chair. For jewelry store all that is needed is a sign reading, “Dickerson Jewelers,” and a small counter.

PROPS

Bowl of grapes; wad of money in Fran’s purse, wad of money in Peter’s pocket; half-sewn dress for Della; gold watch on a worn leather strap for Jim; small coffee can with money inside for Della; large pair of scissors for Madame; storekeeper’s apron, rag, and watch fob for Dickerson; small wrapped package of hair combs for Jim.

COSTUMES

White angel robes for Fran and Peter over their good street clothes. Poorer street clothes for Jim and Della. Winter coats for both couples including a hat for Della and purses for both Fran and Della. The actress playing Della will also need a wig the same color as her natural hair. The wig should be either short if she has long hair or long if she has short hair.

SCENE 1

(BEFORE CURTAIN: LIGHTS up DSR where FEMALE ANGEL and MALE ANGEL, each dressed all in white, are lounging comfortably on a cloud. They are chatting as they leisurely eat from a large bowl of grapes.)

FEMALE ANGEL: How about wisdom? Tell me. Can you define wisdom?

MALE ANGEL: Certainly. Wisdom. Noun. The quality of being wise. Good judgment, which comes from knowledge and experience in life. Wisdom.

FEMALE ANGEL: No, no, no. Not that way. Not the words that define it, the actions. Can you *show* me wisdom?

MALE ANGEL: Well ... *(Thinking.)* What about the Magi?

FEMALE ANGEL: The Magi?

MALE ANGEL: Yes. The Magi, the Wise Men who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. *(HE leans forward to make his point.)* They had wisdom.

FEMALE ANGEL: *(Shaking HER head.)* Of course they had wisdom. They set the precedent! That doesn't count. What I want to know is ... does the spirit of the Magi still exist? Can truly wise men still be found? Show me ... where are the Magi now?

MALE ANGEL: *(Thinking, HE takes the challenge.)* I can show you.

FEMALE ANGEL: You can? Not just words.

MALE ANGEL: Nope. Not just words. I'll even let you play some small part, if you'd like.

FEMALE ANGEL: Sounds delightful.

MALE ANGEL: But of course. The pursuit of true wisdom is always an adventure.

(LIGHTS fade on MALE ANGEL and FEMALE ANGEL who exit SR. LIGHTS up on CS, Jim and Della's apartment. After a moment, we hear JIM and DELLA, PETER and FRAN talking as they enter from the door.)

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(Jim and Della are poor but dressed in their nicest outfits; Peter and Fran are slightly older and much better dressed. Their white robes have been removed.)

PETER: *(Smiling.)* So what are you saying, Della? That it isn't really going to be Christmas unless it snows?

(JIM closes the door behind THEM as they fully enter the room.)

DELLA: No, just that it feels a whole lot more like Christmas when it does snow.

FRAN: I know what she means.

(JIM bends down and fiddles with the heater, trying to get it to light. EVERYONE else waits, rubbing their arms together, trying to get warm.)

JIM: Yeah, I do too. But some of us still have to get up and go to work tomorrow. It's bad enough -

FRAN: Whoa, wait a minute, Jim. *(To PETER.)* You two are working on Christmas Eve? You didn't tell me that. *(PETER hesitates.)* Well? *(PETER shifts uncomfortably; JIM smiles and speaks to FRAN.)*

JIM: Uh, Fran, management has the day off.

FRAN: Peter! That's awful. You're making my brother work on Christmas Eve while you and your cronies take the day off? Why, that's a terrible thing to do. Don't you think he'd rather spend the day with Della? Or, better yet, *(SHE flashes a smile at DELLA.)* shopping for some lovely Christmas present for Della?

JIM: Now hold on, Sis. I told Peter when I took this job I didn't want any special favors just because he was my brother-in-law. If the other fellas in my department have to work on Christmas Eve, then it's only fair that I work too.

PETER: *(To FRAN.)* I told him he could have off if he wanted.

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DELLA: And you should've known he'd say no, Peter ... Jim's not that kind of guy. Jim's got ... integrity. *(DELLA gazes at JIM with pride; they smile at each other sweetly. FRAN notices and rolls her eyes.)*

FRAN: Ah, young love. It's just so ... young.

JIM: Anyway, Della, as far as the weather goes, I'm afraid I have to disagree about the snow. As I said, some of us still have to get up and go to work tomorrow. It's bad enough how cold it is. Now you want me to be wet and miserable from trudging through snow, too?

DELLA: Oh, but Jim, how can you say that? *(DELLA runs to the window.)* What's miserable about the whole city turning into a winter wonderland? For me, snow is like a little bit of Christmas magic ... a beautiful, sparkling blanket of white everywhere you look ... *(DELLA turns away from the window, back toward the OTHERS while JIM finally gets the heater started and stands, rubbing his cold hands together in front of it for warmth.)* Kind of like the world's biggest free Christmas decoration.

JIM: *(Laughing.)* Well, considering how broke we are, I guess if it's free, I'm all for it. *(EVERYONE laughs. Finally warm, they remove their coats and lay them on the table. Jim walks to Della.)* I guess it is kinda nice to see you with snowflakes in your hair. You look just like ... like an angel. Your beautiful hair ... *(JIM strokes DELLA's hair as PETER and FRAN smile at each other.)*

FRAN: Tell me, darling. Were we ever so consistently nauseating?

PETER I think for about a week once, before we knew better.

DELLA: *(Tearing HER eyes from JIM.)* So ... who would like some hot coffee?

FRAN: Oh, no, none for us, thanks. We have to be heading out. We just wanted to see you two home. In this part of town, at this hour of the night, well ... as they say, there's safety in numbers.

PETER: Francine.

JIM: Don't be dramatic, Fran, the neighborhood's not that bad.

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