

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

by Dan Neidermyer



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SYNOPSIS: A poignant story of two young, impoverished newly-weds - Jim and Della Dillingham of New York City in the early 1900's who find themselves on their first Christmas Eve together as husband and wife with no Christmas presents to share and little money to purchase that special gift each very, very much wants to buy for the other. What Jim and Della do on Christmas Eve to acquire the money needed to buy that special gift shows forth true love.

CAST OF CHARACTERS*(1-3 males, 1-2 females)*

JIM (m)A newly-wed living in New York City in the 1900's. *(71 lines)*

DELLA (f)Jim's new bride, sharing a very small apartment with him. *(65 lines)*

MR. CROCKERTY (m)Jim's employer. *(9 lines)*

MADAME SOFRONIE (f).....The proprietor of a hair good shop. *(9 lines)*

MR. MAYER (m).....The owner and sole employee of a pawn shop. *(10 lines)*

DURATION: 15 minutes**SETTING:** Christmas Eve, Small New York Apartment**TIME:** Early 1900's**SET**

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI is written to be staged in any type of facility without a major set. Several small pieces of furniture can suggest Jim and Della's apartment. A sign can suggest Madame Sofronie's hair goods shop, also the pawn shop. Or a director can create and construct a set (or sets) as elaborate as desired and feasible.

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SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

All action of the play takes place on Christmas Eve day in Jim and Della's little apartment in New York City during the early 1900's or in the streets and shops nearby. "Scenes" are listed more as a reference for a change of time than for a change of location.

SCENE 1: Jim and Della's apartment

SCENE 2: Jim and Della's apartment

SCENE 3: Jim's place of employment

SCENE 4: Madame Sofronie's hair goods shop

SCENE 5: A pawn shop

SCENE 6: Jim and Della's apartment

COSTUMES

Appropriate apparel for an impoverished newlywed couple in New York City in the early 1900s. Ditto for Mr. Crockerty, Madame Sofronie, and Mr. Mayer.

OPTIONAL DOUBLING

FOR FOUR ACTORS:

Eliminate the character of MR. CROCKERTY. JIM can "tell" the audience what happened with his employer earlier in the day when he asked to "leave work early." JIM can simply use much of the dialogue spoken by Mr. Crockerty and incorporate these speeches into his own re-telling of the events of that Christmas Eve afternoon—very similar to how he (JIM) tells Della what Mr. Crockerty will say if he (JIM) is late to work on that day—(see page 7 in the script).

FOR THREE ACTORS:

One male actor can play both MR. CROCKERTY and MR. MAYER with a simple change of his appearance.

FOR TWO ACTORS:

Both JIM and DELLA can involve the audience spontaneously in recounting what happened that Christmas Eve afternoon. The dialogue of such characters as Madame Sofronie, Mr. Crockerty, and/or Mr. Mayer can be shortened and "fed" to the audience member spontaneously playing the character. Or JIM and DELLA can "tell" what happened that afternoon, asking the audience members to "act out" what they've just told.

AS READERS' THEATRE:

This script works quite well for individuals to sit in front of an audience and read. Readers would read only the dialogue of the various characters. There is no need for reading any other stage directions or stage business. The dialogue lends itself to the audience using their imaginations.

PROPS

- Treasured fob (pocket watch) (Jim)
- Two combs wrapped as a gift (Jim)
- A purse containing \$1.87 in coins (Della)
- A chain for a pocket watch wrapped as a gift (Della)
- A small box containing several old and small Christmas decorations (Jim, Della)
- A bow found in the box that is a Christmas tree ornament, but which could also be worn as a hair bow (Jim, Della)
- Twenty dollars cash (Mr. Mayer)

A NOTE ABOUT DELLA'S HAIR

Wigs will greatly aid in the telling of this story. Either Della can wear a wig of long, long hair in the beginning of the production, removing this when she sells her hair, thus revealing her own short hair or vice versa.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

AT RISE: Newlyweds DELLA and JIM enter the staging area. Within seconds, both begin speaking, obviously very excited about being newly married and very excited to be married to each other. All appears well. Simultaneously—(moving throughout the staging area, "greeting" many individuals, perhaps everyone in the audience.)

DELLA: (Speaking directly to individuals within the audience.) Hello!

JIM: (Speaking directly to individuals within the audience.) Good morning. (Or "afternoon/evening," depending upon the time of the performance.)

Having greeted everyone, or as many as possible/feasible—

DELLA: I'm Della.

JIM: I'm Jim.

DELLA: (Very proudly, telling the audience.) Actually, he's Mr. James Dillingham Young.

JIM: Yes, dear, I'm Mr. James Dillingham Young, but I'm "Dillingham" only when my salary is \$30 a week. Lately, my salary has been so meager—only \$20 a week—that somehow "Dillingham" no longer seems appropriate. Perhaps I should only be Mr. James D. Young.

DELLA: Nonsense, my love. To me—rich or poor—(SHE gives him a huge and tight hug.)—you'll always be my wonderful Jim! What does your weekly salary have to do with our love?

JIM: Everything, Della. My salary determines what I'm able to buy you and all the things I want to give to you. No, shower upon you!

DELLA: (With a smile and warm graciousness.) Again, nonsense, my wonderful Jim! Wonderful, wonderful thoughts, yes, my love, yes, yes! But to me, your weekly salary matters little; our being together everything.

JIM: (Turning to explain to the audience.) Della and I—we've just been recently married. So, we're really newly—

DELLA: (To the audience; with sincere joy.)—weds! And this—(Moving about the staging area.)—this is our first apartment, Jim's and mine.

JIM: (*With a twinge of shameful embarrassment.*) Not much of an apartment, Della. No rug—

NOTE: As JIM describes each aspect of the apartment, DELLA whispers her feelings. SHE sounds sincere, gracious, understanding, and—above all—honest and loving. JIM'S description continues as if uninterrupted by Della's whispers.

DELLA: No matter.

JIM: —old, torn, faded, and tattered curtains—

DELLA: No matter.

JIM: —very little furniture—

DELLA: How much more do we really need?

JIM: —an old sofa that some other family long ago discarded as worthless—

DELLA: But still useful for us.

JIM: —and two rickety chairs rather desperately in need of upholstering—

DELLA: But still very, very comfortable.

JIM: I feel so badly, Della, that I can't give you more.

DELLA: As I said before, "How much more do we really need?"

JIM: What you might not feel we need, Della, but what I feel I want to give you. (*Quickly describes what he'd like to give his lovely bride.*) A golden chandelier... gleams over a long mahogany table... which is holding a shiny polished silver tea service... on top of a very dainty Belgian lace tablecloth.

DELLA: My funny, silly Jim, a candle will do what a golden chandelier does. And a polished silver tea service only brings so much work polishing and polishing to keep it so shiny and shining—

JIM: But—if I had my way—your hands would never do such work!

DELLA: But how—?

JIM: Servants!

DELLA: Servants?

JIM: Yes, lots and lots of servants; in every room of our huge house, if you need.

DELLA: (*His desire to give her so much totally overwhelms her.*) Not even the King and Queen of England can boast such luxurious grandness!

JIM: Ah, my love, if I were but able to provide you even half of what my love desires to give you, you would have more than any king or queen on earth ever dared to treasure!

DELLA: (*Moving about the apartment.*) But Jim, my wonderful Jim, your love has already provided me more than any king or queen on earth could desire!

JIM: What!?

DELLA: This apartment—little though it might be, Jim—this is our home—yours and mine—and with our love—yours for me, mine for you—our love makes this apartment very beautiful.

JIM: But I want to do so much more for you.

DELLA: Your wonderful love, Jim—what more could I ever want? (*She complements her sincere expression of love with another huge and tight hug.*)

JIM: (*With a smile.*) You almost make me believe that, dear, dear Della—

DELLA: (*Whispering while hugging.*) It's true.

JIM: (*Pulling himself from the hug.*) Then someday—(*Pulling his pocket watch from his pocket.*)—Oh, dear! It's almost time for me to leave for work!

DELLA: Not for at least an hour!

JIM: I mustn't be late. I can't be late, especially not today; the day before Christmas.

DELLA: (*Musing.*) Christmas. Tonight's Christmas Eve. (*Looking around the apartment.*) And we haven't even decorated this little apartment. We've been so busy these last few months. We simply haven't had the time.

JIM: The truth, Della: we've had no money to buy decorations.

DELLA: We've got a few. Let's put them up, Jim. Now!

JIM: Now?

DELLA: Yes. (*Hurrying to the side of the staging area.*) Of course!

JIM: (*Checking his fob again.*) I've got to get to work.

DELLA: (*Searching for a box of decorations.*) Not for an hour.

JIM: You're right. With the few decorations we've got, our entire apartment will be decorated—with fifty minutes left over for me just to stand around and look at the decorations!

DELLA: *(Finding a box of decorations.)* Ah, here it is, Jim, the box with our Christmas decorations.

JIM: *(Looking into the box.)* What shall we put where?

DELLA: *(Pulling out of the box a small Christmas tree ornament.)*
For our tree.

JIM: What tree?

DELLA: The tree in our imagination

JIM: *(Picking out a beautiful bow, another Christmas tree ornament.)*
And this beautiful bow—

DELLA: *(Quickly.)* That's for the tree too.

JIM: No, no, my dear. Such a beautiful bow's made only for one purpose—*(Holding the bow up close to her hair.)*—adorning your lovely hair. *(Placing the bow in her hair.)* Such beautiful hair, Della, such long, beautiful hair! *(Pointing at the bow now in her hair.)* Now made even more beautiful!

Both JIM and DELLA laugh, they're having so much fun. Then—quite spontaneously—as they pull several small Christmas decorations from the box and move about the staging area, they begin singing a traditional Christmas carol: "Deck the Halls" (or any carol desired, even an original Christmas song written for this purpose).

Laughingly completing the carol and having danced about the small apartment, simply having a most enjoyable time, JIM once again looks at his fob.

JIM: I really must be going, Della. My boss will never understand why I was late to work. "Sorry, Mr. Crockerty, I tried to get to work this morning, I really did. But my beautiful wife—you should see her, Mr. Crockerty—so beautiful is she, especially her long brown (*Or auburn or black, depending upon the color of the actress' hair.*) hair which flows—no, cascades—down her back while framing her very lovely dancing blue eyes and her exquisite china face. You see, Mr. Crockerty, my wife and I were dancing and singing, decorating our tiny apartment and making a Merry Christmas for ourselves." (*Now becoming a most cantankerous MR. CROCKERTY.*) "What about our customers, Mr. Young?" Mr. Crockerty will bellow, "They too want a Merry Christmas." Then he'll snap, "Couldn't you have looked more closely at that precious fob of yours?" (*JIM taps his pocket watch as if he were MR. CROCKERTY himself.*)

DELLA: (*Pointing toward Jim's pocket watch.*) Such a beautiful pocket watch to be making such a harsh demand upon you, Jim.

JIM: (*Lovingly admiring his fob.*) Yes, my dear, such a beautiful watch, a very prized possession, my most wonderful possession. And next to you—what I cherish most in life.

DELLA: (*Laughingly agreeing.*) So you've told me—often.

JIM: (*Continuing to admire the fob.*) This fob belonged to my father and to his father before him.

DELLA: And now to you; a family heirloom indeed.

JIM: And someday handed down to our son.

DELLA: (*Wistfully.*) Someday.

JIM: (*Rushing toward the door.*) But now, I've got to go to work. (*Turning to kiss DELLA goodbye.*) Goodbye, Della, dear. See you this evening. (*While exiting.*) Merry Christmas!

DELLA: (*Smiling; happily.*) Merry Christmas, Jim.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

Now alone, DELLA'S smile slips from her pretty countenance. She becomes sad, repeating slowly—

DELLA: Merry Christmas... Jim... dear.

DELLA now crosses to her "secret hiding place" in the apartment. She locates and removes her purse, lovingly fingering the purse, opening, then dumping its contents onto a table: money—lots of coins: nickels, dimes, mostly pennies.

DELLA counts the money, her fingers quickly moving the pennies to one side of the table.

DELLA: \$1.50... \$1.55... \$1.60... \$1.70... \$1.75... 76... 77... 78... 79... 80... 81... 82... 83... 84... 85... 86... 87—(*Becoming rather discouraged.*)—\$1.87. Only \$1.87! What will \$1.87 buy? Maybe I've miscounted. (*She quickly counts the money again, her fingers moving through the coins as if she is hoping this time to find even more coins, but no—*) \$1.87. Still only \$1.87.

DELLA leaves the money, then moves about the room, feeling quite badly, expressing her sadness.

DELLA: What kind of Christmas present can I possibly buy for Jim with only \$1.87? I wanted to find my wonderful Jim the most beautiful gift, only the finest of gifts for my wonderful Jim. But with only \$1.87—

DELLA begins crying, sobbing gently, rehearsing the last several months through her sobs.

DELLA: I've been saving every penny I possibly could for months. "Please, Mr. Vegetable Man, could I have those tomatoes? They're quite bruised. Surely you'll sell them to me for less." "Please, Mr. Grocer, only a pint of milk today, I'm trying to save my pennies." And pennies I've saved, sixty of them. But what will sixty pennies buy? Two bruised tomatoes. A pint of milk, a bit of almost-spoiled meat, several spongy potatoes, but no—no beautiful Christmas gift for my wonderful Jim.

DELLA crosses back to the table, reluctantly counting her money again, but with the same result:

DELLA: \$1.87... only \$1.87. And it's Christmas Eve... (*Moving to the apartment's window, looking out, observing the afternoon's weather.*) Getting dark outside... soon the shops will be closed. No matter. What could I possibly buy with \$1.87 even if the shops remained open all Christmas Eve? (*As she is looking out the window, her fingers—without her even being aware of their actions—are twirling loose strands of her hair.*) ...Look at all those people down there, out on the streets, happy people, rushing about, buying presents for their loved ones, doing what I most want to be doing—

Suddenly, and for the first time, DELLA "feels" the hair she's been twirling and twisting between her fingers. A thought obviously crosses her mind. Then:

DELLA: I wonder?

Her countenance, her attitude changing, she rushes back to the table, quickly pushes the \$1.87 into her purse, finds and puts on her coat, and hurriedly leaves the apartment all this busy action without even a sound. Or was she quietly humming a carol as she hurried about the apartment?

DELLA exits the staging area.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

JIM enters, explaining to the audience—

JIM: Oh yes, I went to work this morning. During early afternoon, I asked Mr. Crockerty if he might let me off early.

Entering another section of the staging area:

MR. CROCKERTY: *(A bit blustery.)* Why should I do that, Mr. Young?

JIM: I've just got to leave work before all the shops close.

MR. CROCKERTY: But it's Christmas Eve, Mr. Young. My—

JIM: That's exactly why I must leave.

MR. CROCKERTY: Ehh?

JIM: I've got to buy the most beautiful of gifts for my new bride. You should see her, Mr. Crockerty. She's—

MR. CROCKERTY: You should have thought about buying her a gift before Christmas Eve.

JIM: I did, Mr. Crockerty. I've been thinking about buying my Della gifts for the longest time. If you could just see her, Mr. Crockerty, her long brown *(Auburn/black, etc.)* hair flows—no, cascades—down her back while framing her very lovely dancing blue eyes and her exquisite china face. She's so very beautiful, with a personality to match, so gracious and loving. So you see—

MR. CROCKERTY: You've just got to buy her a Christmas present on my time.

JIM: I'll make the time up, Mr. Crockerty. But it just wouldn't be Christmas if I didn't buy my Della a beautiful gift.

MR. CROCKERTY: And what are you planning to buy her?

JIM: That's just it. I don't know. I've so little money.

MR. CROCKERTY: Then you best be going.

JIM: *(Hopefully.)* In an hour, Mr. Crockerty?

MR. CROCKERTY: Right now, Mr. Young. With very little money, you'll have to search all afternoon to find something fitting for such a beautiful and wondrous bride.

JIM: (*Overjoyed.*) Oh, thank you, Mr. Crockerty. Thank you. Thank you. (*Rushing out of this section of the staging area.*) Thank you and Merry Christmas to you.

MR. CROCKERTY: Merry Christmas to you, too... and to your new bride. Trust you find just the right gift for her. (*He exits.*)

JIM never hears MR. CROCKERTY's last sentiment because he is rushing to another section of the staging area.

Once there:

JIM: (*Explaining to the audience.*) I've got a mere \$1.90, saved a penny at a time over these last several months. "Please, Mr. Tailor, make me a less fine suit so I can save several cents." "Please, Mr. Barber, not quite a full cut today. I'm saving my pennies to buy my new bride a Christmas gift." "I'll take no lunch today, Mr. Crockerty, and I'll gladly work later this afternoon, even into the night, if I can but earn a few more pennies." But even with all of that, I've still only got \$1.90. What can I possibly buy for \$1.90 that would be beautiful enough for my dear Della? But Mr. Crockerty gave me the afternoon off to search all the shops for just the right gift.

JIM moves throughout the staging area as if looking into shop windows.

As JIM window shops—

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

DELLA hurries into the staging area. From all appearances—unlike her husband, JIM—she knows where she is going. Several more steps and she stops, looking up at a sign hanging in a shop window. She points to the sign (which can be imaginary) and reads:

DELLA: *(Reading the sign.)* "Madame Sofronie Hair Goods of All Kinds."

She enters MADAME SOFRONIE's shop.

DELLA: *(Calling.)* Madame Sofronie... Madame Sofronie.

From another section of the staging area, entering—

MME. SOFRONIE: *(As she enters.)* Yes? May I help you?

DELLA: Will you buy my hair?

MME. SOFRONIE: *(Slowly.)* I do buy hair.

DELLA: Then, please—*(She models her hair.)*—please, Madame Sofronie, buy mine.

MME. SOFRONIE: *(Thinking as she examines DELLA's hair.)* Well—

—

DELLA: *(Quickly listing the qualities of her hair.)* My hair's quite long and very smooth, even silky, just the kind of hair woven into the finest of wigs.

MME. SOFRONIE: *(Still thinking.)* Mmm—

DELLA: A wig made from my hair would be prized by any woman, I'm most certain. Please, Madame Sofronie, please buy my hair.

MME. SOFRONIE: You sound quite desperate on this Christmas Eve, Miss—?

DELLA: Mrs. James Dillingham Young. I'm a new bride, and I want to make the first Christmas gift I've ever bought my Jim something truly wonderful. But I have no money.

MME. SOFRONIE: *(Realizing.)* And that is why you want to sell your hair to me.

DELLA: Jim loves my long hair so much—

MME. SOFRONIE: Then to cut it off—?

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DELLA: But I love him so much more. I just couldn't go through Christmas without buying my Jim a gift.

MME. SOFRONIE: (*Nodding.*) I will buy your hair—for twenty dollars.

DELLA: (*Overjoyed; almost can't believe it.*) Twenty dollars! What a wondrous gift twenty dollars will buy! Quickly, Madame Sofronie, cut off my hair.

MME. SOFRONIE: (*Motioning DELLA to follow her.*) This way.

Both MME. SOFRONIE and DELLA exit.

ACT ONE, SCENE 5

JIM is continuing his window shopping, mumbling to himself (ad-libbed) about his plight on this Christmas Eve, still trying to find the perfect gift for his dear DELLA. Then—in the window just in front of him—

JIM: (*His tone, his eyes, his expression indicating—*) That's it! Shiny and bright! They're the most beautiful Christmas gift I could ever buy Della. (*Upon closer inspection.*) But the price! Where will I ever get that much money? (*Taking yet another glance at what's in the window.*) What a beautiful gift for my Della! But with only \$1.90—

he begins to wander aimlessly down the street, muttering—

JIM: Where will I ever get that much money? Oh, I wish Christmas were three months from now—

He continues wandering down the street, downhearted—

JIM: I can't go home, not without a present for Della. Somehow—if I went home without a present for my Della—it wouldn't be Christmas, not to me. She would love me just the same, but I would feel—



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