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THE BEST  
SHORT  
STORIES OF  
O. HENRY

*Selected and with an Introduction by*

BENNETT A. CERF

AND

VAN H. CARTMELL



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## *Introduction*

IN THE LATE FALL of 1944 the editor of a great metropolitan newspaper wrote a book about New York. It was a very good book; the reviewers liked it. The highest praise they could give it was to say that here, at last, was another author who knew and loved New York as well as O. Henry. Forty years after the O. Henry stories about "Bagdad on the Subway" first began to delight the reading public they still remain the standard by which all other literature on the subject is judged. The "four million" have become the "eight million," the slang that high lights his dialogue has been superseded by other passing catch phrases, restaurants and hotels that served as his locale were razed a generation ago, but O. Henry remains secure in the hearts of the public as the prose laureate of Manhattan Island.

Among the hundreds of stories O. Henry left behind him are many laid in Central America, and New Orleans, and the rolling plains of Texas. This volume, seeking to present the cream of his writings, includes a goodly representation of them all. The majority of the tales that you will find here, however, center about New York. That is the way the author would have wanted it. His heart belonged to that narrow strip of land that lies between the East River and the Hudson.

O. Henry, it is surely unnecessary to say, is a pseudonym. His real name was William Sydney Porter. He was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1862, went to school there, and worked for five years in his uncle's drugstore. In 1882 he moved on to Texas, where he operated a short-lived hu-

morous weekly called the *Rolling Stone* and contributed a column to the *Houston Daily Post*. He also served as teller in an Austin bank, and that proved his temporary undoing. The bank was mismanaged. There was a shortage of funds. Porter was indicted.

Friendly biographers have hinted that Porter was innocent, but his own actions belie that theory. He fled to New Orleans, and then to Honduras, returning only when he heard that his wife was desperately ill. Sentenced to five years' imprisonment at the Ohio Federal Penitentiary, he actually served a little over three. It was during this dark period in his life that he developed into an author to be reckoned with. One of his cellmates gave him the plot for "A Retrieved Reformation" (reprinted in this volume), which Paul Armstrong later dramatized under the title of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*. It was a smash success—the forerunner of a whole school of "cops-and-robbers" dramaturgy—but Porter, unfortunately, got little of the proceeds. It was in the penitentiary too that he met the guard, Orrin Henry, from whom he borrowed a name.

In 1902 he first laid eyes on New York, and as "O. Henry" soon began to flood the magazines with his stories. Words—and plots—came easily to him—too easily perhaps. For eight years he maintained a prodigious output, goaded continuously by editors who had advanced him varying sums. He left over six hundred complete stories behind when he died of tuberculosis at forty-eight. "Pull up the shades so I can see New York," were his last words. "I don't want to go home in the dark."

O. Henry's first published book was *Cabbages and Kings*. It appeared in 1904, and consisted principally of tales of adventure and revolution in Latin America. The stories "Shoes" and "Ships" (really two parts of a single narrative) reprinted here are from that volume. His next book, two years later,

really established his literary fame. This was *The Four Million*. It contained not only some of the best of his New York tales, but introduced to the public a relatively new device—the surprise or “twist” ending. To this day writers are striving to surpass him in this type of story, only to prove anew the truth of that old adage of the prize ring: you can’t beat a champion at his own game. No fewer than eleven of the thirty-eight stories in this volume come from *The Four Million*.

*The Trimmed Lamp*, published in 1907, and *The Voice of the City*, a year later, proved even more popular than *The Four Million*. There are nine stories from the former in this collection; four from the latter. There were two O. Henry books in 1909: *Options* and *Roads of Destiny*, and two more in 1910, the year he died: *Whirligigs* and *Strictly Business*. Three other collections of his stories appeared after his death, and then all of them were assembled in one bumper volume that has enjoyed an enormous sale to this very day.

The bulk of O. Henry’s written work, truth to tell, does not measure up too well against the exacting standards of the present day. Many of his stories were glib and superficial rather than profound, obviously hurried and cut closely to a pattern that had proven serviceable. His characters, like his plots, tended to repeat themselves, and sustained him only because he was a master at contriving every possible variation of a familiar theme. This volume of selected stories is conclusive evidence, in the editors’ opinion, that O. Henry at his best, however, deserves rank with America’s greatest masters of the short story. Such tales as “A Municipal Report,” “An Unfinished Story,” “A Blackjack Bargainer,” “A Lickpenny Lover,” “The Gift of the Magi,” “Mammon and the Archer,” and “Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen” (by actual count the O. Henry stories most often reprinted in anthologies) are

gems of their kind; mellow, humorous, ironic, ingenious, and shot through with that eminently salable quality known as "human interest." It is no accident that five of his seven most famous stories are laid in the New York he loved so well.

BENNETT CERF and VAN CARTMELL



BEST STORIES OF O. HENRY

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## *The Gift of the Magi*

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, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as 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: "Mme. 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 of saying little silent prayers 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 stepped 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 it 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 on my head were numbered," she went on with a 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 for 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