

CHAPTER 30

Devotion

A story about lifelong devotion by Josephine Haver

"Grandfather, let's take a walk in the park. I'd like to get an ice cream," Jana said, picking up the worn brown sweater from the hall closet.

"OK, some fresh air will be good for these old bones." The 80-year-old picked up his cane and accepted the folded arm of his granddaughter as they walked carefully toward the park.

"I've seen you at the fountain in the east end of the park almost every morning this past month as I walk to school," remarked Jana. "Are you feeding some special pigeons there?"

Grandfather chuckled softly, "No, not exactly. I am meeting with someone special – my dearest friend."

"Really?" Jana said with surprise. "Who's that?"

"Well, your grandmother, of course."

"Uh, Grandfather ... Grandmother died two years ago."

"Yes, I know, but she never left my heart, and we used to feed the pigeons and talk about world affairs, the troubles of our friends and our different tastes in books ... oh, all sorts of things we'd talk about. I go early in the morning to carry on our talks during a time when no one is around. People might think that I'm crazy – talking to a ghost!"

"I guess she must be very real to you, even now," Jana said somberly. "Why do you have a conversation when you are not sure she can hear you?"

"Well, the kind of friendship and love that we shared remains after the body is long gone. It's kind of like a special telephone line connected directly to that person's heart. I don't know if she can hear the words or the topics, but I know that she can feel the feelings. ... Yes, I send my feelings to her every day. I know that she gets them because they are returned. When I think about her love for me, I still feel that I can conquer the world and solve any problem. Why, there's nothing I wouldn't have done for her."

Jana sat down slowly on the bench near the ice cream stand, carefully handing the cane, worn smooth by years of use, to her grandfather's wrinkled hands.

"You know, Jana, I was so awed by your grandmother, I didn't even ask for a kiss until we were at the altar. She was like a precious treasure to me, and I wanted to let her know

that my kiss represented lifelong devotion, not just desire or immediate pleasure. I remember that kiss so well." Grandfather looked into the distance.

"Well, there are plenty of nice ladies who would love your company, your jokes and your laughter now," Jana said, thinking that he must be lonely.

"Jana, I have lady friends – but none would be able to replace those special memories, and I want to respect those memories. Please understand that I am not lonely. I am alone, but I am still devoted to your grandmother. She holds my heart forever."

Jana grew silent. She thought about last Saturday night's pajama party when her 8th grade girlfriends were sharing secrets about their "first kiss." She had felt awkward because there was no story for her to tell. "I want *this* kind of story," she thought, "the kind that Grandfather has. I want someone who will love me forever and be that devoted."

Her decision not to give away her first kiss did indeed make a good story, and Jana wrote many more in her future as a successful author, mother of two children and devoted wife of a wonderful man.



Questions for Discussion



- Do you admire the grandfather's devotion to his deceased wife? Why do people often visit graves or special places to reflect on or talk with friends or loved ones who have died? Is this a weakness in human nature, a special quality, or evidence of emotional bonds that last beyond death?
- What effect did the story about her grandfather's first kiss have on Jana?
- Do you think that Jana's friends made fun of her for not kissing boys?
- Do you think that boys respected Jana because of her decision? Why or why not?
- Did Jana's husband benefit from her decision? Why or why not?
- When is devotion to a deceased spouse not a positive thing? Is it possible to be devoted to someone's memory but be open to making new relationships for a good purpose?

The Gift of the Magi

This is another story about devotion, this time between a young married couple. It is an abridgement of a story written by the famed American short story writer 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. 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. Their home was a furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly fit beggar description, but it certainly was close.

Although the salary of Mr. James Dillingham Young was shrunk from \$30 to \$20 a week, whenever he 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.

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 very 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.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before a mirror. 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 grandmother'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 of two splashed on the worn 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. Sophronie. Hair Goods of All Kings." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sophronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your 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 practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. 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 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 shyly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

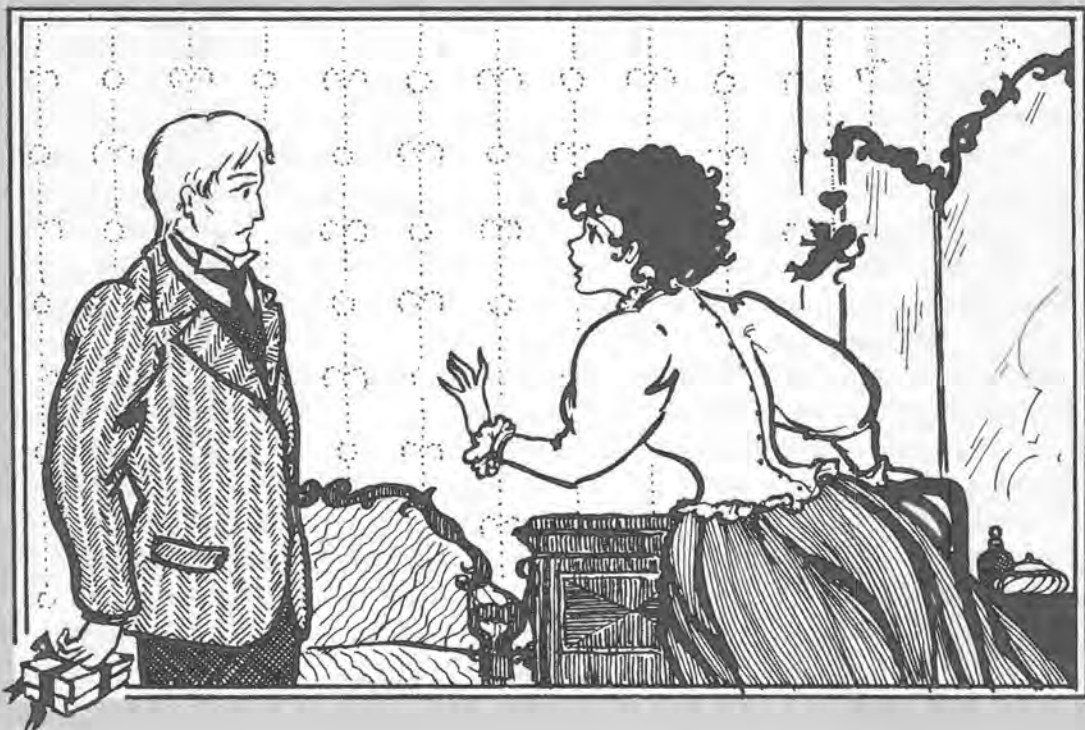
When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends — a mammoth task.

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 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 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 Jim.

"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 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 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 to wake quickly. He embraced his Della. Then he 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 so long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled 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, finally 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 you combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."