

*5 Classic Christmas Stories
for Reading Aloud*

Compiled By

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Table of Contents

Good King Wenceslas.....	3
The Background	3
The Story	5
In the Great Walled Country.....	8
The Background	8
The Story	10
Little Piccola	15
The Background	15
The Story	17
The Gift of the Magi.....	19
The Background	19
The Story	21
The Legend of the Poinsettia	27
The Background	27
The Story	27

Good King Wenceslas

The Background

The Life of a Saint, 907-929/935 AD

Wenceslas is the Germanized form of “Václav the Good.” He was born to the first Christian Duke of Bohemia (part of the modern day Czech Republic) and became Duke himself at age 18. His brother murdered him in either 929 or 935 (sources vary), and he was soon thereafter honored as a saint.

Though Wenceslas was well known in his native land, he was virtually unknown in the English speaking world until John Mason Neale, translator of the carols “Good Christian Men Rejoice” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” popularized his story in the song “Good King Wenceslas.” Neale was a Latin scholar who patiently researched the records of European lands in order to bring the great music and traditions of the past to England.

Since Neale devoted himself to the needs of the poor and oppressed, he was understandably intrigued by the gracious and generous life of Wenceslas. Though Neale is best known for his work as a translator, his lyrics for “Good King Wenceslas” were an original work. He set his words to a 14th century tune, *Tempest adest floridum*, which was formerly sung in the spring and means “the time has arrived for flowers to bloom.” Neale’s song, however, was first published in *Carols for Christmastide* (1853). Though the song is set on St. Stephen’s Day, December 26, and though there is no mention of Christmas, Neale wrote it at a time when the greatest celebrations of Christmas took place on the 12 days following the holiday. Thus, as the song gained popularity, King Wenceslas came to be intimately associated with Christmas. The words of Neale’s song tell a beautiful story and are as follows:

“Good King Wenceslas looked out,
On the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even:
Brightly shone the moon that night,
Though the frost was cruel,
When a poor man came in sight,
Gathering winter fuel.

“Hither page and stand by me,
If thou know’st it, telling —
Yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?’
‘Sire, he lives a good league hence,
Underneath the mountain,
Right against the forest fence,
By Saint Agnes’ fountain.’

“Bring me flesh and bring me wine!
Bring me pine logs hither!
Thou and I will see him dine,
When we bear them thither.’
Page and monarch forth they went,
Forth they went together;
Though the rude winds wild lament,
And the bitter weather.

“Sire, the night is darker now,
And the wind blows stronger;
Fails my heart, I know not how,
I can go no longer.’
‘Mark my footsteps, good my page,
Tread thou in them boldly:
Thou shalt find the winter’s rage
Freeze thy blood less coldly.’

“In his master’s steps he trod,
Where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod
Which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,

Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.”

It should be noted that though Wenceslas was a duke, the title of “king” was conferred on him after his death by Otto the Great, who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 962.

Today, most Americans are only vaguely familiar with the story of King Wenceslas, if at all. However, his life is a model for Christian living, and the traits for which he is honored, kindness and generosity, are qualities that are especially valued during the Christmas season.

Without doubt, Wenceslas was a historical ruler and a faithful Christian. However, the details of his life exist mainly in oral tradition. The following story is woven into the known history of the era and is drawn from both the Catholic Encyclopedia¹ and the Oxford Dictionary of Saints.²

¹ Mershman, Francis. “St. Wenceslaus.” Catholic Encyclopedia. Robert Appleton Company, 1912. Retrieved October 4, 2008 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15587b.htm> and Ott, Michael. “St. Ludmilla.” Robert Appleton Company, 1910. Retrieved October 4, 2008 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09416a.htm>.

² Farmer, David Hugh. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 534-535.

The Story

Reading Time: 5 minutes

Though born of the same parents within moments of each other, Wenceslas and Boleslaus, twin brothers, could not have been more different. From infancy, Wenceslas was full of warmth and smiles; Boleslaus, on the other hand, was cold and aloof.

Wenceslas’ pleasant nature and early interest in things of God won him special favor in the eyes of Ludmilla, his paternal grandmother. Ludmilla had converted to Christianity in her youth through the influence of Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, two brothers from Thessalonica, who served as missionaries to the Slavic people. Ludmilla and her husband Boriwoi, the first Christian Duke of Bohemia, withstood great difficulties on account of their faith, since there were very few believers in their pagan land. Yet, these trials only served to increase Ludmilla’s faith, and she committed to raise her family up in the Lord. Unfortunately, her son Wratislav married a woman who only pretended to be a Christian. Drahomira was the daughter of a pagan tribal chief and was baptized into Christianity so she could marry into a powerful family.

When Wratislaw died, his boys, Wenceslas and Boleslaus, were only 8 years old. Devastated by the loss of her son, Ludmilla devoted herself all the more to her beloved grandson, Wenceslas. The growing intimacy between Ludmilla and Wenceslas sparked bitter jealousy in the heart of his mother Drahomira. Furthermore, she began to openly oppose Christianity. Seizing on tensions between believers and non-believers, Drahomira incited two noblemen to murder Ludmilla. Though her life on earth ended, Ludmilla's influence on Wenceslas remained. Christian friends continued to encourage him in his faith and to educate him in the things of God.

Meanwhile, the ambitious Drahomira was acting as regent in Bohemia, and her evil reign caused unhappiness and discord throughout the land. When Wenceslas, the older of her twins, turned 18, he easily took the reigns of government from her.

Wenceslas proved to be a capable young leader, and he initiated many changes for the benefit of his people. For example, he reduced the arbitrary power of judges in order to create a system of justice for all, and he worked hard to establish good relations with surrounding nations. Yet, of all Wenceslas' efforts on behalf of his nation, the most striking involved his personal acts on behalf of the poor. He was known to carry provisions on his own shoulders and travel through difficult weather in order to provide for his people. Every year, as Christmas ushered in the cold season, a time that could devastate the poor, Wenceslas would exert his greatest effort to supply the poor with basic necessities. As a result, Wenceslas was an extremely popular ruler among his people, and the Lord used him to draw many pagans to Christianity.

However, Wenceslas' Christian influence was not welcome by all, particularly by those of the noble class. He was known to encourage the work of German missionaries in their efforts to Christianize Bohemia. And furthermore, in order to prevent war, Wenceslas agreed to pay a tribute to Germany for the protection of his people. This was very unpopular among the noble and nationalistic Bohemians, and it gave Drahomira the opportunity to start building alliances within the kingdom on behalf of her other son, Boleslaus.

Drahomira exercised great influence over Boleslaus, and though he loved Wenceslas, Drahomira spent many years and used many persuasive words to incite him against his brother. By 935, believing that he was doing what was best for his country, Boleslaus submitted to his mother's evil plan. He invited Wenceslas to a religious feast, and on the way to church, he had his brother murdered.

When Boleslaus arrived on the scene, his dying brother looked mercifully into his eyes and said, "Dear brother, may God forgive you and may you seek him that I might see you again in heaven." As Wenceslas breathed his last, Boleslaus was overcome with remorse and wept

bitterly over his brother's dead body. Within hours, Boleslaus received news of the birth of his own son. Ominously, he named him "Strachkvas" meaning "a dreadful feast."

Though his murder earned him the title "Boleslaus the Cruel," his reign (929-967) was marked by acts of repentance. He trained his children in the Christian faith and even sent his daughter Mlada (a nun) to Rome requesting permission to allow a bishop the authority to govern Prague. His son who succeeded him as Duke of Bohemia came to be known as Boleslaus II the Pious. Boleslaus was also largely responsible for establishing Wenceslas' place in history. He set up a memorial for his brother at St. Vitus' Cathedral in Prague, and he encouraged the people of Bohemia to remember Wenceslas' good and generous life. By 985, a feast for Wenceslas celebrated him as a martyr of the faith, and by the early 11th century, he became the patron saint of Bohemia. His picture was engraved on coins, and his crown became a symbol of the Czech nation.

In the Great Walled Country

The Background

Raymond Macdonald Alden, 1873-1924

Fairy Tale, 20th Century

Raymond Macdonald Alden was born in New York to Gustavus Rossenberg Alden and Isabella Macdonald, both committed Christians. His father was a pastor and his mother was a well-known author who dedicated her pen “to the direct and continuous effort to win others for Christ and help others to closer fellowship with him.”¹

Alden’s mother began writing at an early age and used the pseudonym “Pansy,” a pet name given to her by her father. Soon after Raymond’s birth, she started a weekly children’s magazine that she affectionately titled “The Pansy.” Though it began as a small Sunday School publication, it quickly grew into a full subscription magazine. It included fictional stories, illustrations, news of new inventions, and updates on missionary endeavors.² This magazine gave Raymond’s mother the opportunity to train him, as well as his cousin Grace Livingston Hill (1865-1947), in writing; Hill would later become a famous Christian romance novelist.

As a young teen, Raymond began contributing stories to the magazine using the pen name “Paranete.” One year, in response to his mother’s request for a Christmas story, he produced “Why the Chimes Rang” (a story that would later establish itself as a classic).³ In 1908, it was published in a book with the same name along with ten additional children’s stories, one of which is his other Christmas classic “In the Great Walled Country.” Though Alden published two books full of children’s stories during the course of his life, he spent the majority of his career as a literary scholar.

In 1894, Alden graduated from the University of Pennsylvania as valedictorian. He obtained an M.A. from Harvard and then returned to the University of Pennsylvania to earn a Ph.D. In 1899, Alden was hired to teach at Stanford, and with the exception of a three year-leave when he headed the English department at the University of Illinois, he remained at Stanford throughout his career.⁴

In 1904, Alden married Barbara Hitt, and eventually they had five children together. Despite the demands of a large family, Alden excelled in his work. He wrote more than a dozen scholarly works and was recognized as an authority on Shakespeare, Tennyson and Thoreau. The Academic Council of Stanford University said that Alden’s original research was “thorough and

judicious”; his literary criticism showed “sympathy and finesse”; his fiction showed “cleverness and feeling,” and his writing of verses showed a “sense of beauty and sincerity.”⁵ In addition to his literary talents, Alden was also a gifted pianist. Yet, of all his accomplishments, his associates at Stanford noted the following in a memorial resolution written after Alden’s death:

“One of the chief moving forces of his nature was strong religious convictions and emotions, and he was a conscientious and orthodox, though liberal, Christian. None of his qualities were more conspicuous than his courage, which was put to a severe test during the suffering tedium and discouragement of long and distressing illnesses.”⁶

Alden’s illness ultimately claimed his life, and he passed away in 1924. However, his legacy in literature remains alive and well. His writing continues to inspire a variety of readers, from children to scholars.

Alden’s Christian commitment is evident in the following story, “The Great Walled Country.” It is a Christmas fairy tale that creatively brings to life the biblical lesson: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Galatians 2:3-4).

¹ Alden, Isabella Macdonald. Edited by Grace Livingston Hill. *Memories of Yesterdays*. J.P. Lippincott, 1931.

² Creel, Daena. “About Pansy.” Retrieved October 19, 2008: <http://www.isabellamacdonaldalden.com/about.html>.

³ Creel, Daena. “Dr. Raymond Macdonald Alden, ‘Paranete.’” Retrieved October 19, 2008: <http://www.isabellamacdonaldalden.com/rma.html>. Most of the basic biographical data for Alden is drawn from this source.

⁴ The Academic Council of Stanford University. “Memorial Resolution, Raymond M. Alden (1873-1927).” Retrieved October 19, 2008: <http://histsoc.stanford.edu/pdfmem/AldenR.pdf>.

⁵ The Academic Council of Stanford University.

⁶ The Academic Council of Stanford University.

The Story

Reading Time: 12 minutes

Away at the northern end of the world, farther than men have ever gone with their ships or their sleds, and where most people suppose that there is nothing but ice and snow, is a land full of children, called The Great Walled Country. This name is given because all around the country is a great wall, hundreds of feet thick and hundreds of feet high. It is made of ice, and never melts, winter or summer; and of course it is for this reason that more people have not discovered the place.

The land, as I said, is filled with children, for nobody who lives there ever grows up. The king and the queen, the princes and the courtiers, may be as old as you please, but they are children for all that. They play a great deal of the time with dolls and tin soldiers, and every night at seven o'clock have a bowl of bread and milk and go to bed. But they make excellent rulers, and the other children are well pleased with the government.

There are all sorts of curious things about the way they live in The Great Walled Country, but this story is only of their Christmas season. One can imagine what a fine thing their Christmas must be, so near the North Pole, with ice and snow everywhere; but this is not all. Grandfather Christmas lives just on the north side of the country, so that his house leans against the great wall and would tip over if it were not for its support.

Grandfather Christmas is his name in The Great Walled Country; no doubt we should call him Santa Claus here. At any rate, he is the same person, and, best of all the children in the world, he loves the children behind the great wall of ice.

One very pleasant thing about having Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor is that in The Great Walled Country they never have to buy their Christmas presents. Every year, on the day before Christmas, before he makes up his bundles for the rest of the world, Grandfather Christmas goes into a great forest of Christmas trees, that grows just back of the palace of the king of The Great Walled Country, and fills the trees with candy and books and toys and all sorts of good things. So when night comes, all the children wrap up snugly, while the children in all other lands are waiting in their beds, and go to the forest to gather gifts for their friends. Each one goes by himself, so that none of his friends can see what he has gathered; and no one ever thinks of such a thing as taking a present for himself. The forest is so big that there is room for every one to wander about without meeting the people from whom he has secrets, and there are always enough nice things to go around.

So Christmas time is a great holiday in that land, as it is in all the best places in the world. They have been celebrating it in this way for hundreds of years, and since Grandfather Christmas does not seem to grow old any faster than the children, they will probably do so for hundreds of years to come.

But there was once a time, so many years ago that they would have forgotten all about it if the story were not written in their Big Book and read to them every year, when the children in The Great Walled Country had a very strange Christmas. There came a visitor to the land. He was an old man, and was the first stranger for very many years that had succeeded in getting over the wall. He looked so wise, and was so much interested in what he saw and heard, that the king invited him to the palace, and he was treated with every possible honor.

When this old man had inquired about their Christmas celebration, and was told how they carried it on every year, he listened gravely, and then, looking wiser than ever, he said to the king:

“That is all very well, but I should think that children who have Grandfather Christmas for a neighbor could find a better and easier way. You tell me that you all go out on Christmas Eve to gather presents to give to one another the next morning. Why take so much trouble, and act in such a round about way? Why not go out together, and every one get his own presents? That would save the trouble of dividing them again, and every one would be better satisfied, for he could pick out just what he wanted for himself. No one can tell what you want as well as you can.”

This seemed to the king a very wise saying, and he called all his courtiers and counselors about him to hear it. The wise stranger talked further about his plan, and when he had finished they all agreed that they had been very foolish never to have thought of this simple way of getting their Christmas gifts.

“If we do this,” they said, “no one can ever complain of what he has, or wish that someone had taken more pains to find what he wanted. We will make a proclamation, and always after this follow the new plan.”

So the proclamation was made, and the plan seemed as wise to the children of the country as it had to the king and the counselors. Everyone had at some time been a little disappointed with his Christmas gifts; now there would be no danger of that.

On Christmas Eve they always had a meeting at the palace, and sang carols until the time for going to the forest. When the clock struck ten every one said, “I wish you a Merry Christmas!” to the person nearest him, and then they separated to go their ways to the forest. On this particular

night it seemed to the king that the music was not quite so merry as usual, and that when the children spoke to one another their eyes did not shine as gladly as he had noticed them in other years; but there could be no good reason for this, since everyone was expecting a better time than usual. So he thought no more of it.

There was only one person at the palace that night who was not pleased with the new proclamation about the Christmas gifts. This was a little boy named Inge, who lived not far from the palace with his sister. Now his sister was a cripple, and had to sit all day looking out of the window from her chair; and Inge took care of her, and tried to make her life happy from morning till night. He had always gone to the forest on Christmas Eve and returned with his arms and pockets loaded with pretty things for his sister, which would keep her amused all the coming year. And although she was not able to go after presents for her brother, he did not mind that at all, especially as he had other friends who never forgot to divide their good things with him.

But now, said Inge to himself, what would his sister do? For the king had ordered that no one should gather any presents except for himself, or any more than he could carry away at once. All of Inge's friends were busy planning what they would pick for themselves, but the poor crippled child could not go a step toward the forest. After thinking about it a long time, Inge decided that it would not be wrong if, instead of taking gifts for himself, he took them altogether for his sister. This he would be very glad to do; for what did a boy who could run about and play in the snow care for presents, compared with a little girl who could only sit still and watch others having a good time? Inge did not ask the advice of any one, for he was a little afraid others would tell him he must not do it; but he silently made up his mind not to obey the proclamation.

And now the chimes had struck ten, and the children were making their way toward the forest, in starlight that was so bright that it almost showed their shadows on the sparkling snow. As soon as they came to the edge of the forest, they separated, each one going by himself in the old way, though now there was really no reason why they should have secrets from one another.

Ten minutes later, if you had been in the forest, you might have seen the children standing in dismay with tears on their faces, and exclaiming that there had never been such a Christmas Eve before. For as they looked eagerly about them to the low-bending branches of the evergreen trees, they saw nothing hanging from them that could not be seen every day in the year. High and low they searched, wandering farther into the forest than ever before, lest Grandfather Christmas might have chosen a new place this year for hanging his presents; but still no presents appeared. The king called his counselors about him, and asked them if they knew whether anything of this kind had happened

before, but they could tell him nothing. So no one could guess whether Grandfather Christmas had forgotten them, or whether some dreadful accident had kept him away.

As the children were trooping out of the forest, after hours of weary searching, some of them came upon little Inge, who carried over his shoulder a bag that seemed to be full to overflowing. When he saw them looking at him, he cried:

“Are they not beautiful things? I think Grandfather Christmas was never so good to us before.”

“Why, what do you mean?” cried the children. “There are no presents in the forest.”

“No presents!” said Inge. “I have my bag full of them.” But he did not offer to show them, because he did not want the children to see that they were all for his little sister instead of for himself.

Then the children begged him to tell them in what part of the forest he had found his presents, and he turned back and pointed them to the place where he had been. “I left many more behind than I brought away,” he said. “There they are! I can see some of the things shining on the trees even from here.”

But when the children followed his footprints in the snow to the place where he had been, they still saw nothing on the trees, and thought that Inge must be walking in his sleep, and dreaming that he had found presents. Perhaps he had filled his bag with the cones from the evergreen trees.

On Christmas Day there was sadness all through The Great Walled Country. But those who came to the house of Inge and his sister saw plenty of books and dolls and beautiful toys piled up about the little cripple’s chair; and when they asked where these things came from, they were told, “Why, from the Christmas-tree forest.” And they shook their heads, not knowing what it could mean.

The king held a council in the palace, and appointed a committee of his most faithful courtiers to visit Grandfather Christmas, and see if they could find what was the matter. In a day or two more the committee set out on their journey. They had very hard work to climb the great wall of ice that lay between their country and the place where Grandfather Christmas lived, but at last they reached the top. And when they came to the other side of the wall, they were looking down into the top of his chimney. It was not hard to go down this chimney into the house, and when they reached the bottom of it they found themselves in the very room where Grandfather Christmas lay sound asleep.

It was hard enough to waken him, for he always slept one hundred days after his Christmas work was over, and it was only by turning the hands of the clock around two hundred times that the committee could do anything. When the clock had struck twelve times two hundred hours, Grandfather Christmas thought it was time for his nap to be over, and he sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, sir!” cried the prince who was in charge of the committee, “we have come from the king of The Great Walled Country, who has sent us to ask why you forgot us this Christmas, and left no presents in the forest.”

“No presents!” said Grandfather Christmas. “I never forget anything. The presents were there. You did not see them, that’s all.”

But the children told him that they had searched long and carefully, and in the whole forest there had not been found a thing that could be called a Christmas gift.

“Indeed!” said Grandfather Christmas. “And did little Inge, the boy with the crippled sister, find none?”

Then the committee was silent, for they had heard of the gifts at Inge’s house, and did not know what to say about them.

“You had better go home,” said Grandfather Christmas, who now began to realize that he had been awakened too soon, “and let me finish my nap. The presents were there, but they were never intended for children who were looking only for themselves. I am not surprised that you could not see them. Remember that not everything that wise travelers tell you is wise.” And he turned over and went to sleep again.

The committee returned silently to The Great Walled Country, and told the king what they had heard. The king did not tell all the children of the land what Grandfather Christmas had said, but, when the next December came, he made another proclamation, bidding everyone to seek gifts for others, in the old way, in the Christmas-tree forest. So that is what they have been doing ever since; and in order that they may not forget what happened, in case anyone should ever ask for another change, they have read to them every year from their Big Book the story of the time when they had no Christmas gifts.

Little Piccola

The Background

Celia Thaxter, 1835-1894

Classic, 19th Century Poem (Adapted into a story in 1914 by Frances Jenkins Olcott)

Celia Thaxter was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper on the Isles of the Shoals, a small group of islands situated near the New England coast. Growing up in an isolated environment gave Celia time to freely enjoy the beauty of the landscape that surrounded her, and she cherished her island world.

After living on both White Island and Smuttynose Island, Celia's family settled on Appledore Island, the largest of the Isles of the Shoals.¹ Her father built a large resort hotel, and hired a man named Levi Thaxter to manage it. Levi also worked as a tutor to Celia, and though he was fifteen years old than her, they married in 1851. Celia was only sixteen.

After settling in Massachusetts in 1856, the Thaxter marriage began to suffer. Celia was nostalgic for the islands and worried about her husband's financial extravagance.² She found expression in verse, and one of her poems (titled "Land-Locked" by an editor) was printed without her knowledge in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861. It expressed her longing for the "caressing murmur of the wave that breaks in tender music on the shore."³

Realizing that her poetry could contribute to the family finances, Celia began to devote more time to writing, and her work was accepted by a variety of publications. Unfortunately, her success seemed only to further tension with her husband who resented her growing popularity. Though the couple had three sons together,⁴ they began to live separate lives. They never divorced; however, Celia would often travel back to Appledore Island and spend long periods of time there.

Celia proved to be a popular hostess at her father's hotel. She welcomed and entertained some of the most notable literary people of her day including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though Celia was always self-conscious about her lack of formal education, these reputable visitors undoubtedly considered Celia to be their literary equal.

Celia felt at home on Appledore Island. A significant part of her time there was spent with her mother, so she was completely devastated when her mother passed away in 1877. However, this loss turned her to God for the first time, and her later works reflected this change. Her poem

titled "Submission," in the book *Drift-Weed* (1878), speaks of "groping to find hope" in "death's awful mystery" and "reaching empty arms above" to "clasp God's hand."⁵

In 1884, Celia published *Poems for Children* in which she included a poem called "Piccola." The poem beautifully illustrates God's provision for a poor girl on Christmas Day. The Bible speaks frequently about God's concern for those in need, and Celia's use of a bird in her poem calls to mind two different passages that quote the words of Jesus. The first is about worry:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:25-27).

The second is about fear:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31).

Celia's poem presents a lovely example of God's tender concern for the poor, and another great author, Frances Jenkins Olcott (1873-1963), recognized its worth. Olcott adapted Thaxter's poem into story form for her collection of *Good Stories for Great Holidays* (1914). In addition to writing many children's books herself, Olcott was head of the Children's department at Carnegie Library. She is widely known for her effort to distribute children's literature throughout the United States.

¹ McHenry, Robert. *Famous American Women: A Biographical Dictionary from Colonial Times to the Present*. Courier Dover Publications, 1983, p. 410.

² Walker, Cheryl, editor. *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century, An Anthology*. Rutgers University Press, 1992, p. 294. Much of the biography for Thaxter is drawn from this source.

³ Thaxter, Celia. *Poems*. Hurd and Houghton, 1874, p. 10.

⁴ Johnson, Rossiter, editor. *The Twentieth Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans*. The Biographical Society, 1904, entry on “Celia Thaxter.”

⁵ Thaxter, Celia. *Drift-Weed*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894, p. 90.

The Story

Reading Time: 3 minutes

In the sunny land of France there lived many years ago a sweet little maid named Piccola. Her father had died when she was a baby, and her mother was very poor and had to work hard all day in the fields for a few sous [coins].

Little Piccola had no dolls and toys, and she was often hungry and cold, but she was never sad nor lonely.

What if there were no children for her to play with! What if she did not have fine clothes and beautiful toys! In summer there were always the birds in the forest, and the flowers in the fields and meadows — the birds sang so sweetly, and the flowers were so bright and pretty! In the winter when the ground was covered with snow, Piccola helped her mother, and knit long stockings of blue wool.

The snow-birds had to be fed with crumbs, if she could find any, and then, there was Christmas Day.

But one year her mother was ill and could not earn any money. Piccola worked hard all the day long, and sold the stockings which she knit, even when her own little bare feet were blue with the cold.

As Christmas Day drew near she said to her mother, “I wonder what the good Saint Nicholas will bring me this year. I cannot hang my stocking in the fireplace, but I shall put my wooden shoe on the hearth for him. He will not forget me, I am sure.”

“Do not think of it this year, my dear child,” replied her mother. “We must be glad if we have bread enough to eat.”

But Piccola could not believe that the good saint would forget her. On Christmas Eve she put her little wooden patten on the hearth before the fire, and went to sleep to dream of Saint Nicholas.

As the poor mother looked at the little shoe, she thought how unhappy her dear child would be to find it empty in the morning, and wished that she had something, even if it were only a tiny cake, for a Christmas gift. There was nothing in the house but a few sous, and these must be saved to buy bread.

When the morning dawned Piccola awoke and ran to her shoe.

Saint Nicholas had come in the night. He had not forgotten the little child who had thought of him with such faith.

See what he had brought her. It lay in the wooden patten, looking up at her with its two bright eyes, and chirping contentedly as she stroked its soft feathers.

A little swallow, cold and hungry, had flown into the chimney and down to the room, and had crept into the shoe for warmth.

Piccola danced for joy, and clasped the shivering swallow to her breast.

She ran to her mother's bedside. "Look, look!" she cried. "A Christmas gift, a gift from the good Saint Nicholas!" And she danced again in her little bare feet.

Then she fed and warmed the bird, and cared for it tenderly all winter long; teaching it to take crumbs from her hand and her lips, and to sit on her shoulder while she was working.

In the spring she opened the window for it to fly away, but it lived in the woods near by all summer, and came often in the early morning to sing its sweetest songs at her door.

The Gift of the Magi

The Background

O. Henry, 1862-1910

Classic, 20th Century Story

O. Henry is the pen name for William Sydney Porter. He was born in North Carolina to a physician father and a mother who died of tuberculosis when he was only three years old. After his mother's passing, his aunt (a teacher) and his paternal grandmother raised him. His aunt, in particular, helped to instill in him an early love for literature. Though he read constantly, he was restless with school, and at age 15, he began a career working in his uncle's drugstore.

Five years later, Porter moved to Texas hoping to relieve a persistent cough that he feared might be the first sign of tuberculosis. Fortunately, his health improved, and he eventually left the ranch for Austin. However, his experience on the ranch made a lasting impression. He learned customs and mannerisms that would show up later in his many western stories.¹

Porter worked a variety of jobs in Austin, and in 1887, he married Athol Estes. Their first child, a son, died shortly after childbirth, but by 1889, a daughter, Margaret, was born. To support his growing family, Porter took a position as a teller at the First National Bank of Austin. On the side, he spent his time writing for various publications. His passion for writing led him to resign from the bank in 1894 and create his own humorous weekly publication called *The Rolling Stone*. Unfortunately, this entrepreneurial effort failed, so he took a position as a reporter and columnist with the *Houston Post*.

By 1895, Porter's previous work as a bank teller came back to haunt him. Though charges of embezzlement were initially dropped, a persistent bank examiner pressed the issue until Porter was indicted in 1896. Porter chose to flee the country rather than face a trial, but he was forced to return when he learned of his wife's failing health. He was present for her death in 1897. The following year, he was convicted of embezzling money and was sentenced to five years in an Ohio penitentiary.

Though Porter's attempt to avoid his trial did not help to support a case for his innocence, there has been much debate over his actual guilt. Apparently, his bank had very informal policies and was negligent about record keeping. Porter maintained that he was innocent of wrong-doing and believed that he was a scapegoat for lax banking practices.² There has also been speculation

that Porter may have used funds, with the support of a bank official, to finance *The Rolling Stone* – a “loan” that he intended to repay.

Whether he was guilty or not, Gale’s Literary Database records, “In the Ohio State Penitentiary, Porter became familiar with many of the men whose stories he would later create in fiction.”³ Furthermore, he had time to focus on and develop his writing. Though he used a variety of pseudonyms, his first story written in prison, “Whistling Dick’s Christmas,” published in McClure’s in 1899, was signed “O. Henry.” This name would remain with him the rest of his life.

In a New York Times interview, Porter described how he chose his pen name:

“I said to a friend: ‘I’m going to send out some stuff. I don’t know if it amounts to much, so I want to get a literary alias. Help me pick out a good one.’ He suggested that we get a newspaper and pick a name from the first list of notables that we found in it. In the society columns we found the account of a fashionable ball. ‘Here we have our notables,’ said he. We looked down the list and my eye lighted on the name Henry, ‘That’ll do for a last name,’ said I. ‘Now for a first name. I want something short. None of your three-syllable names for me.’ ‘Why don’t you use a plain initial letter, then?’ asked my friend. ‘Good,’ said I, ‘O is about the easiest letter written, and O it is.’”⁴

Understandably, Porter made no mention of the fact that his pseudonym was chosen during his days in prison. It was a period of his life that he tried to hide, even from his daughter. However, the penitentiary had a significant effect on him as a person and as a writer. He developed a love and sympathy for people there. This may give credibility to the theory that the pen name “O. Henry” was actually drawn from the letters in “Ohio Penitentiary.”

Porter emerged from prison in 1901 after having his sentence reduced to three years for good behavior. In 1902, he moved to New York City and spent “hours talking with characters of the city – gangsters, shopgirls, hobos, prostitutes, actors – and transmuting them into fiction that he sold at a rapid rate to magazines and newspapers.”⁵

Between 1903 and 1906, Porter had an arrangement with New York’s *World* publication to produce one story per week. The classic tale “The Gift of the Magi” was first published in the 1905 Christmas issue of *World*. The editor decided to feature a Porter story on the front page with a large, full color illustration. However, as usual, Porter was late in submitting his story. Reportedly, the illustrator, Dan Smith, went to beg Porter for some indication as to what he

should draw. Porter, “having no plot in his conscious mind,” described a room with two people in it – a man with a watch in his hand and a girl with beautiful long hair.⁶ The story later developed in Henry’s mind, and no one ever suspected that it had been written after the picture was drawn.

Porter spent the next five years publishing at a frenzied pace. But by 1920, he “was suffering from nervous exhaustion and ill health, as well as financial desperation caused by his own generosity and financial irresponsibility.”⁷ He died that same year.

At the time of his death, Porter had published 10 collections and over 600 short stories. He was considered the most popular short story writer in the world, and the term “O. Henry style” is still used to describe stories, generally humorous, with ironic twists or surprise endings.⁸ “The Gift of the Magi” is a perfect example of Porter’s unique style. Full of both humor and wit, the story also offers insight into the true wisdom of generosity. As Proverbs teaches, “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:25).

¹ *Contemporary Authors*. “William Sydney Porter.” Gale, 2002. Retrieved October 15, 2008 from Gale Literary Databases. Much of the biography for Porter is drawn from this source.

² *Contemporary Authors*.

³ *Contemporary Authors*.

⁴ *New York Times*. “‘O. Henry’ on Himself, Life, and Other Things.” April 4, 1909, Page SM9. Retrieved October 16, 2008: <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Library/ohenry/Public+Library/on+himself.htm>.

⁵ *Contemporary Authors*.

⁶ Montgomery, Elizabeth Rider. *The Story Behind Great Stories*. Robert M. McBride & Company, 1947, p. 201.

⁷ *Contemporary Authors*.

⁸ *Contemporary Authors*.

The Story

Reading Time: 10 minutes

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, 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 pierglass 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: "Mne. 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 a little silent prayer 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 him.

“Jim, darling,” she cried, “don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold 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 of my head were numbered,” she went

on with 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 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, 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 sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on.”

The magi, as you know, were wise men — wonderfully wise men — who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

The Legend of the Poinsettia

The Background

Legend, Mexican

When Mexico was Christianized in the 16th century through the influence of Spain, the poinsettia (or “star flower” in the language of the Aztec people) came to be associated with Christmas (see pp. 126-128). A charming legend was spread throughout Mexico telling of how a simple weed was miraculously transformed into the first poinsettia plant on Christmas Eve. The plant came to be known in Mexico as the *Flores de Noche Buena* (Flowers of the Holy Night).

There are several variations of the legend of the poinsettia. Most include a poor young girl in Mexico who was distraught over the fact that she had nothing but a weed to present to the Lord at a Christmas Eve service. But the weed was miraculously transformed into a brilliant poinsettia plant. The following account adds several details to the story in order to build the characters. It highlights how God often chooses “the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him” (James 2:5). Enjoy this retelling of “The Legend of the Poinsettia.”

The Story

Reading Time: 5 minutes

Maria always wore a lovely red ribbon in her hair. It was the ribbon her mother wore the day she was born, and it served as a daily reminder of the person that Maria was said to reflect, both in form and character. The villagers agreed that though a great beauty had been lost to them when Maria’s mother died, it had blossomed again in Maria.

The children in particular adored Maria. She was kind to them and patiently instructed them in the trade of her small village in Mexico, weaving beautiful blankets. Among the children, Maria had a special affection for Ana, a child 7 years her junior. Ana’s mother had died at birth as had Maria’s. Their fathers, to whom they were particularly devoted, raised them, and neither girl had any other siblings.

Maria was a diligent worker. She worked hard weaving blankets to sell at the market. Since she had no mother, she also managed her home and cared for her father. The little spare time afforded to Maria was dedicated to working on an elegant tapestry. Maria had spent several years

working on a Nativity design, and it was her desire to present it to the Lord on the Christmas Eve following her 15th birthday.

For many in the village, presenting a gift at church on Christmas Eve was a bit of a competition. It seemed that each year the gifts had become more elaborate. Though many simply tried to out-do their neighbor, Maria's work was a true labor of love. She sincerely desired to please the Lord with the care and attention she put into the tapestry.

When the long awaited Christmas Eve finally came, Maria spent the morning looking and re-looking over the tapestry to make sure it was perfect. Just as she had carefully placed it in her bag, she heard Ana's voice in the distance. Ana was running frantically toward her and spoke almost unintelligibly when she finally arrived. With great care, Maria extracted that Ana's father had fallen dangerously ill. The village doctor had sent Ana to a visiting merchant in a hurried effort to reach him before he left with the rare herbs that were required for treatment. Ana attempted to buy the herbs, but the merchant refused to accept any of her fine blankets in trade. He claimed the herbs were far more valuable than any of the blankets made in her village. Though the thought pained her, Maria knew exactly what the merchant would accept as a fair trade . . . the tapestry. Maria made haste to complete the exchange.

Hours later, after Maria had obtained the herbs and delivered them to Ana's father, the village doctor announced that the danger had passed. Though little Ana had been so brave throughout the trial of her father's life, she sobbed when she heard the news. Maria held her as she cried.

Both girls were stunned when Ana's father spoke. Weakly, he asked that Ana deliver his gift to the church service that evening. He had worked all year on a wood carving, and considering the events of the day, he especially wanted to express his gratitude to God for sparing his life. Ana and Maria looked to the doctor who nodded approvingly and assured them that he would remain with his patient throughout the night.

Maria had completely forgotten about the Christmas Eve service. She rushed home to dress. As she hurried along the path alone, she was filled with joy at how God had saved Ana's father on this special night. Yet her heart ached over the fact that she had no tapestry to present to the Lord. In fact, she had nothing to give. Maria and her father, though poor themselves, had given all they had to neighbors in greater need.

At that moment a plant caught Maria's eye. She had never noticed it before. As she surveyed it, she determined that the green leaves were quite lovely. A brief hesitation filled her heart. Surely the other villagers would scoff at her for presenting a weed to the Lord, but she reasoned

that if he himself had created it, than it would be a worthy, though humble gift. She would bear the scoffing. If only she had a ribbon to tie around it. Though tempted to ignore the thought that she ought to use the ribbon in her hair, Maria knew somehow that it would please the Lord. It pained her to think of giving away the only tangible connection that she had to her mother. Surely the Lord, more than anyone, knew how precious the ribbon was to her, but it seemed to her that it was he who filled her with the strength to loosen it from her hair and fasten it to the leaves.

On arriving at the Christmas Eve service, Maria's ears rang with the boasting of villagers in regard to their various gifts. One by one, she watched as each laid their gift before the Christ Child of the Nativity scene. A wave of doubt filled Maria. Would she offend the Lord if she presented such a gift? She prayed quietly as she approached the statue and thanked God in faith that he knew her heart. Maria heard whispers all around her and once more, nearly lost heart. But as she glanced down at the plant, she gasped. Bright red leaves in the shape of a star had burst open. The ribbon that had added such vibrant color to the green plant now paled in comparison to the brilliance of the red leaves.

The villagers all praised God for his magnificent creation — it seemed like the perfect flower to honor the birth of Christ. With much celebration, the flower was planted outside Maria's church, and it soon grew into a plant of marvelous size. It produced an abundant display of flowers every Christmas season. Many were given to visiting merchants who carried the flowers throughout Mexico and spread the story of the miracle that had taken place in Maria's village. The flowers came to be known as the *Flores de Noche Buena*, or Flowers of the Holy Night.