

A Service of Love

By O. Henry

Chapter One

Dreamers in a Big City

Joe Larrabee and Delia Caruthers were young and full of dreams.

Joe came from the wide, flat lands of the Middle West. Since he was a child, he loved to draw. At six years old, he drew a picture of the town pump so well that the local newspaper printed it. People in his small town believed he had talent. So, when he turned twenty, Joe left for New York City to become a great artist. He wore a colorful necktie and carried all his money in a small bag.

Delia was a talented singer from a small village in the South. Her voice was so sweet that her neighbors collected money to help her travel “North” and continue her music studies. They believed she had a future in opera. So, just like Joe, she left for New York with hope in her heart.

Joe and Delia met in an art studio where students came to learn painting, music, and art history. They started talking about music and painting, and then about life, and then about love. It didn’t take long before they fell in love with each other.

They soon got married and moved into a small apartment — not much larger than a kitchen. It was located at the far end of a dark hallway. But they were happy. They had each other, and they had their Art — Joe with his painting and Delia with her music.

“Love and Art,” Joe said one day, “are all we need.”

They didn’t have much money, but they had big dreams. Delia was taking music lessons from the famous teacher Mr. Rosenstock. Joe was learning painting from the great artist everyone called “Magister.” His classes were expensive, but his students said he was a genius.

For a time, life was sweet. They had toast and eggs for breakfast. Delia practiced her singing while Joe painted light and shadows in the park. In the evenings, they ate simple dinners and talked about their dreams — of music halls and art galleries, of applause and success.

But one day, the money started to run out.

“We must be careful,” said Joe, “but we’ll be fine.”

“Yes,” said Delia. “When one loves their Art, no service seems too hard.”

And they smiled.

But outside their little flat, New York was big and cold. It was not easy to live on dreams alone.

Chapter Two

Small Sacrifices

Joe and Delia tried their best to continue their art lessons, but life in New York was expensive. They had only a few dollars left.

Joe was studying hard. Every day, he painted pictures in Central Park. He worked on “morning light,” “trees in the mist,” and “the sky after rain.” He wanted to become a famous artist. He hoped one day, someone rich would buy his paintings.

Delia still believed in her dream of becoming a great singer. She practiced daily with her music teacher, Herr Rosenstock. He was a strict man with a big voice and a white beard. His lessons were not cheap, but Delia learned so much from him.

Their apartment was still filled with love. They ate simple meals together — eggs, toast, and tea. At night, they laughed, shared stories, and encouraged each other.

But slowly, their savings disappeared.

One morning, Delia looked at Joe’s tired face. He had not sold any paintings in weeks.

“I want to help, Joe,” she said.

“You already do,” Joe smiled. “You bring light to this little flat.”

“I mean really help. I’ll find work,” she said. “I can teach music.”

Joe shook his head. “But that’s not Art.”

Delia took his hands. “When one loves one’s Art, no service seems too hard. I will give music lessons. It will pay for food and rent. And we’ll still have time to dream.”

Joe didn’t like the idea, but he agreed. “Only for a short time,” he said.

So Delia put on her hat and coat and went out to find music students. For two days she walked around the city, asking families if they wanted their daughters to learn music.

On the third evening, she came home with bright eyes and a big smile.

“I found one, Joe! A student!” she said happily.

“That’s wonderful,” said Joe. “Tell me everything.”

“The family is amazing. The father is General A.B. Pinkney, a very important man. His daughter, Clementina, is only eighteen. She wears white dresses and has such sweet manners. I’ll teach her three times a week. And they’re paying me five dollars a lesson!”

Joe was surprised. “Five dollars? That’s a lot!”

Delia nodded. “Yes! Soon I’ll have more students. You can keep painting. I’ll take care of us.”

Joe hugged her tightly. “You’re my angel,” he whispered.

They sat down to dinner. It was a small meal, but their hearts were full.

Joe laughed, “If I sell a painting, we’ll eat oysters!”

Delia smiled. “If I get more students, we’ll have cake!”

They were poor, but their love made them rich in spirit.

Chapter Three

The Hidden Truth

A whole week passed.

Every morning, Joe woke up early. Delia made him breakfast — bread, tea, and sometimes a bit of jam. She smiled and kissed him before he left to paint in the park.

“Be careful,” she always said.

“And you too,” he replied.

Delia also went out with her music books and returned in the evening, always tired but smiling.

“Clementina is improving,” she would say. “She’s such a sweet girl.”

“And General Pinkney?” Joe asked.

“Oh, he’s very kind. He likes to ask me about my music.”

Delia brought home money — five-dollar bills — and laid them proudly on their small table. Joe brought home paint on his hands and sometimes hope in his eyes.

One evening, Joe returned with even more excitement than usual.

“I sold a watercolor today!” he said, spreading money on the table. “A man from Peoria bought it! And guess what — he wants another painting next week!”

Delia’s eyes sparkled. “That’s wonderful! I’m so proud of you, Joe!”

They had dinner that night like royalty: veal roast, vegetables, and a tiny cake with cream. They laughed like two children and danced in their little flat.

But the next day, something strange happened.

Delia came home later than usual. Her right hand was covered in cloth, and she looked pale.

Joe rushed to her. “What happened, Dele?”

“Oh,” she said, forcing a smile, “just a small accident. Clementina wanted a special meal after her lesson. I burned my hand while serving her.”

Joe looked worried. “That sounds terrible! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, yes,” Delia said quickly. “The pain is not too bad. The General helped me. He’s so thoughtful.”

Joe gently unwrapped the cloth from her hand. It was red and swollen.

He kissed her forehead. “You’re brave. But maybe you should take a break from teaching.”

“No,” Delia said. “We need the money. And besides, when one loves their Art, no service seems too hard.”

Joe stared into her eyes. He wanted to believe her. But something in her voice... something in her eyes... made him wonder.

Still, he smiled. “Then I’ll sell another painting. And we’ll both win.”

That night, while Delia slept, Joe sat silently in the kitchen, thinking.

He remembered how her hands had become rougher. How her face looked more tired. And her clothes smelled faintly... like soap.

He also remembered the cloth and oil he sent upstairs for “a girl who burned her hand.”

Joe closed his eyes and sighed.

He knew.

Chapter Four

A Secret Revealed

Saturday evening arrived. Joe came home first.

He washed the paint off his hands and placed eighteen dollars on the table. “Another painting sold,” he said proudly. “A park scene. The man from Peoria wants one more next week.”

Half an hour later, Delia came in. Her hand was still bandaged, and her face looked tired.

Joe greeted her with a smile. “How’s my girl?”

Delia laughed a little, but it wasn’t a happy laugh.

“Oh, Joe,” she said, sitting down slowly, “Clementina wanted Welsh rabbit again. The General was there too. And I burned my hand worse this time. It’s nothing serious, really. But I spilled hot food and had to go to the drugstore.”

Joe sat beside her and gently touched the bandage. “This burn doesn’t feel like a cooking accident,” he said softly.

Delia looked down.

He asked, “Dele... what time did you burn your hand today?”

“Five o’clock, I think. The food was very hot... I was serving it...”

Joe took her hand, held it warmly. “Dele,” he said quietly, “what have you really been doing these last two weeks?”

Delia’s eyes filled with tears. For a moment, she tried to smile again, but she couldn’t. Her voice shook as she whispered, “I couldn’t find any pupils, Joe. I tried. I really did.”

“You didn’t teach Clementina?” he asked gently.

“No,” she said, crying now. “There is no Clementina. There is no General Pinkney. I couldn’t bear to see you give up your art. So I went to a big laundry on Twenty-fourth Street. I’ve been ironing shirts for two weeks.”

Joe said nothing. He just held her close as her shoulders shook with sobs.

“I made up all the stories,” Delia said between tears. “The big house, the sweet girl, the careful General... all fiction. And I burned my hand today with a hot iron — not in a dining room. I didn’t want to tell you. I wanted to be brave for you.”

Joe smiled a little. “Dele... he wasn’t from Peoria.”

Delia blinked. “What?”

“The man who bought my paintings — he doesn’t exist,” Joe said. “I’ve been working too. In the same laundry. In the engine room, firing the machines. The money I brought home — it wasn’t from art. It was from work.”

Delia gasped, then laughed through her tears. “And I believed your stories...”

“And I believed yours,” said Joe. “Because I wanted to.”

They laughed, even though they both were tired and poor. They held each other and let the truth sit gently between them.

“When one loves one’s Art...” Joe began.

Delia put her hand on his lips. “No,” she said softly. “Just — *when one loves.*”

Chapter Five

More Than Art

The next morning, the sky over New York was cloudy, but inside the little apartment, the air felt warm.

Joe and Delia sat at the table, drinking weak coffee and sharing the last piece of bread.

Neither of them talked about the laundry or the burns or the lies. They had told the truth, and that was enough. Now there was only one thing left: love.

“I wonder,” Joe said with a smile, “how many artists and singers are actually working in laundries and kitchens across this city.”

Delia laughed. “More than we think. But maybe they all believe, like we did, that love makes the work beautiful.”

Joe nodded. “We both gave up our dreams. For each other.”

Delia looked at him with soft eyes. “No. We didn’t give them up. We protected them. I worked so you could paint. You worked so I could sing. We never stopped believing in each other’s gift.”

They sat silently for a while. Outside, the street noises grew louder — horses, carts, voices. Life in the big city went on.

“I’ve been thinking,” Joe said slowly. “Maybe we start again. Not with dreams of fame... but with art that makes us happy.”

Delia smiled. “Yes. I can sing at small events. You can paint portraits. We don’t need rich buyers or fancy teachers. We only need each other.”

Later that day, Joe sold a small sketch to a local café owner who wanted art for his walls. It wasn’t much, but it was honest work, and it came from his hands.

Delia began giving real music lessons to children in the neighborhood. She charged less, but her students loved her kind voice and gentle smile.

Their life was still simple. They didn’t have gold, jewels, or stage lights. But they had warm meals, music in the air, and color on the walls.

And in their tiny apartment, behind a worn curtain and next to a crooked window, lived a love that was real — more real than all the stories they had told.

Because love, after all, is also a kind of art.

— THE END —