



# RETURNED WITH HONOR

*I didn't want to be a thief, even by accident.*

By Valerie Best

After my classes finished in the late afternoon, I stopped by a tiny antique store just before I made my way home—an errand I wanted to finish despite the increased intensity of the rain. I was the only person in the store, and the woman working there helped me with the lamp I'd had my eye on.

As she opened a shopping bag, I noticed a display of brightly colored bracelets on the counter. I reached for one just as she placed the lamp into the bag. She brushed the display, and about half the bracelets clattered to the floor. She looked a little flustered but finished ringing up my purchase. I left the store, umbrella in one hand, bag with a lamp in it in the other.

I walked home, took off my wet boots, and put on some music. As I took the lamp out, I noticed something at the bottom of the bag. It was a red bracelet. It must have fallen from the display into my bag. I smiled, thinking how much this moment was beginning to resemble a story from the old Young Women manual: *"Then Valerie thought of the lesson they'd just had in Laurels class."*

I tossed the bracelet on my bed and plugged in my lamp. It created a warm glow in the gray afternoon. I looked out the window. It was raining even harder, and the snow on the ground was turning to dirty slush.

I looked at the bracelet. It was cherry red. I slipped it on my wrist. The price tag swung—\$20. Of course I would return it. It never entered my mind not to. I pulled it off and put it on top of a pile of books I'd been meaning to put away. I walked into the other room to make a cup of hot chocolate.

Then I walked back in.

How long had I put off dealing with those books anyway? A while. How long would that bracelet be there if I put off taking it back?

My *intention* was to return it. But when would that be? Would I wait so long that I would feel awkward returning it? Would I forget about it?

I hesitated a little more. I looked out the window again. I thought about how my feet had just warmed up. I thought about my delicious hot chocolate.

Then I grabbed the bracelet, pulled my boots back on, and headed back out.



When I arrived at the store, the woman was helping someone else. I stood and waited. When she finished, I pulled the bracelet out of my coat pocket, explaining how it had come to be there. She looked sort of surprised, a little confused, said thank you, and that was it. She didn't offer

me a reward for my honesty. She wasn't excessive in her thanks. And no one else was around to see it.

As I walked home, I thought about how I'd always considered myself an honest person. It is a quality I value and look for in others. But real honesty, like real love and real charity, is

an active attribute. However honorable and true my intentions, I only became an honest person when I put those rain boots back on and acted on my intentions.

I felt my bare wrist inside my coat and smiled a little. ■

*The author lives in New York, USA.*