

THE GOLD PIECE.

Along the shining shore close to where waves dashed and broke into long undulating lines of foam a little boy gleefully rolling a yellow gold piece on the paler yellow of the sand. The human wind caught his hair and laughter danced in his eyes. The gold piece flashed in the sunlight that gleamed across the beach and struck the white cliffs beyond with a dazzling effect. Again and again the child caught the gold in his chubby hand and set it spinning in swift curves. Then at once a roguish breeze lifted his hair, and striving to keep his headgear in place he let his eyes wander for an instant from his treasure; when his childish feet reached the place where he supposed it would be lying, the gold piece was not there—it had mysteriously disappeared.

A look of chagrin darkened his jubilant face. He wondered what had become of his money. Perhaps it had slipped into a crevice of the jutting rock that sprang from the bluff overhead, or might it not have rolled into the water? Anyway, he could not find it, and he was disconsolate at his loss. Presently he abandoned the search, and sitting down in the sand he began to cry bitterly.

The sunlight grew dim, and a tall man, whose figure resembled a silhouette drawn on the pale forget-me-not sky, approached from the other end of the beach. He wore a rough dress and walked with a limp. Across his shoulder hung a long string of silvery fish. He saw the little boy, and pausing in front of him spoke almost tenderly:

"Well, my little man, what is the matter?" he asked.

The child lifted his tear washed face. "I've lost my gold piece," he answered.

"How was that?" inquired the man, interested.

"Why, I was rolling it along the sand, and all at once it was gone. I shall be punished for losing it," and he sobbed fresh.

The man came a step nearer. "Was it your own? Did it belong to you?"

"Yes; today is my birthday and my grandmother gave it to me."

"Poor little chap," said the lame man kindly. "Let me help you look for it."

He began without delay to search in the wet sand and among the pebbles, the boy, his small body bent almost double, following him with eyes riveted upon the ground. The fisherman's glance was keener than the child's, and it was not long before he caught the mild gleam of something lying under a fragment of projecting rock. He looked again; yes, he saw a yellow speck much brighter than the surrounding sand—a mere, tiny dot of flashing gold, and as he gazed his heart beat a trifle more quickly. He drew himself up, turned his eyes elsewhere, opened his lips, then closed them again and said nothing. By and by he spoke in a strangely calm voice.

"There's no use looking," he said. "It is lost; you will never find it."

The boy's mouth quivered, his breath came in gasps. "Perhaps if I came tomorrow with my governess we might find it," he replied; but there was hopelessness in his tone.

"Are you staying at the hotel?" asked the fisherman, looking dreamily at the sea.

"Yes, and I must go home now," with a sigh; "I promised not to stay after sunset, and the sun is nearly gone." The man made no reply and the child added, "Do you think the gold piece could have been washed away by a wave?"

"Possibly."

"I only took my eyes off of it for a moment. It was spinning along like a little golden wheel and then—well, I will come back tomorrow early in the morning and see if I can find it."

Still the man made no answer. All the light had shifted from his figure and the silver scales of the fish had turned to gray.

"Goodby," said the boy. Then, as an afterthought, "What is your name?"

"Caspar—they call me Lame Caspar because—of this," and he pointed sullenly to his right leg.

"Well, I thank you for helping me to look for my gold piece, Lame Caspar," said the boy; and he turned away with a little choking sob and began to ascend the steps that led in winding curves up the cliffs. He glanced back when he reached the top and saw Lame Caspar walking slowly on, his string of fish over his shoulder, his head bent forward. He did not walk far, however. By and by he stopped, and wheeling about on his lame leg, retraced his steps in the direction he had come. He crept to the overhanging rocks that now cast great purple shadows on the sand. The short lived afternoon was dying and the sky was aflame in the west. Slowly and cautiously the man approached the projecting corner where he had seen the

minute yellow speck, and crouching on hands and knees he drew forth the gold piece. Then he stood up and moved away into a deeper shadow farther on. A thrill of excitement swept over him as he examined what he had found—a gold eagle, polished, heavy and beautiful. He had never seen one before and to his untutored mind it represented untold wealth. A quick ecstasy shot through him as he felt the cold surface of the metal on his rough palm, and he began to think of what it would buy—a whole winter's store of tobacco and bacon, or else a new peajacket and fresh fishing tackle. He was in luck for once! Fortune had smiled on him.

"Hallo!" cried a voice, rudely interrupting his reverie. "What's that you've got?"

Caspar started in affright and a horrible sense of guilt overcame him. He shook like an aspen leaf until his dazed senses discovered who had spoken. Then his fear left him and he grew angry and defiant. A fellow fisherman with a string of fish and a net stood beside him, having approached unperceived from behind the crags.

"What's that you've got?" repeated the newcomer.

Caspar's hand closed over the gold piece like a vise. "Nothing," he retorted.

"But I saw it. It was gold. Does gold grow in the sand or on the rocks?" and he laughed coarsely.

Caspar hesitated. He knew it would be useless to attempt any denial, so he replied indifferently: "I sold some fish to a lady and she paid me for them. Now are you satisfied?" and he frowned darkly.

"What luck?" exclaimed the other. "I wish she'd bought of me." Then he added, with a tinge of suspicion, "Did she carry them herself?"

"No, she had a servant," answered Caspar angrily. He did not wish to prolong the conversation, so he turned away, remarking, "Good night," in a surly accent.

"But you'll treat first?" called the other after him. "I'm chilled to the bone."

"No, let me alone; I've something to do at home," and he strode on.

"You'll give all the lads a drop at the Bull tonight, anyway?" cried the man.

"When one has such luck as that he doesn't forget his friends. I'll tell the lads to expect you."

Lame Caspar's anger arose. He muttered an oath as he limped on in the darkening twilight. Treat! Not he! He meant to keep the gold piece for himself. It was hard, indeed, if a man couldn't keep what belonged to him. "But it doesn't belong to you," a voice seemed to cry within him. "It belongs to the golden haired boy." Caspar turned to see if any one was following him. He saw nobody, yet a peculiar dread possessed him. When he reached his hut, on the outskirts of the settlement, he carefully bolted the door before he lighted the candle that he stuck into the neck of a bottle. He sat down by the rickety old table and examined the gold piece leisurely. It scintillated in the dim, red candle light like a living thing. He was afraid to sit there holding it in his hand for any length of time. It had already been discovered in his possession and soon the whole village would know of it. Possibly the news might spread to the little boy's ears, and then—

As this thought occurred to him his fingers trembled so violently that the gold piece fell clattering on the table. He began to regret that he had not given it to the boy, but it was too late now, and besides he wanted it. He loved to look at it. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen; but he must hide it away somewhere—hide it until he made up his mind to spend it. He therefore placed it in a cup and locked the cup in a closet. After this he cooked his supper and went to bed.

Through his feverish dreams all night long brilliant showers of gold danced and twined themselves into fantastic shapes. Sometimes they seemed to fall from an immense height and threaten to crush him beneath their weight, and he cried out in desperate terror. His rest was broken and frightful visions assailed him. Once or twice the face of a golden haired boy rose before him alternately wreathed in smiles and bathed in tears.

With the advent of the dawn Lame Caspar awoke, troubled and unrefreshed. As he walked to his boat, that was moored some distance away, a woman's fresh voice called to him from a window: "Good morning, Caspar. I hear that you have a gold piece that a lady gave you for a few fish. What luck?"

He stopped short and scowled back at her. "Well, what of it?" he snapped. "I've a right to my own, I suppose."

"Nobody said you hadn't, but the lads seemed to think you might treat for once. They waited for you at The Bull

last night and were vexed because you didn't come. Are you going to treat tonight?"

"No!" he answered and passed on out of sight into the dull tinted morning.

All day, sitting among his nets and tackle, he reflected upon what he had done and the possible result. It would be silly in the extreme to keep the gold piece forever in the cupboard when he stood in need of so many things. Still he did not feel like spending it immediately. A superstitious dread overcame him whenever he contemplated parting with it.

Generally speaking, he was a successful fisherman, but today he got scarcely anything, and he came home in the evening tired and out of temper. Upon one point his mind was made up. He would not go near the tavern. He resented being pressed to spend the money in drink. But the other fishermen, when they found he did not come, sent a delegation to his house. About six men rapped loudly on the door, more in spirit of mischief than downright vexation, but it was sufficient to rouse Lame Caspar to furious opposition.

"What do you want?" he shouted, flinging the door wide open and confronting them with fierce hostility depicted on every line of his countenance.

"We want you to treat. Aren't you coming to The Bull?"

"No; I'm sick. Go away and let me alone." And he tried to shut the door.

But the men resisted the action. Sick, nonsense!" cried one. "What's come over you, man? Have you turned miser?"

"Let's see your gold piece anyway," said another. "We never get such things. Let's see what it looks like," and he tried to force his way into the cabin.

"Yes, let's see the gold piece!" shouted the others in a chorus. But Caspar's features grew livid with passion. He strode forward with clinched fist.

"Out of here every mother's son of ye!" he shouted. "I'll not spend a penny to make ye more drunken than ye are. Out of here, I say!"

The men drew back surprised at this strange outburst. For a moment no one spoke. Then one said, with slow deliberation: "Come away, lads, come away! From the way he talks it looks as if he'd stolen the money instead of coming honestly by it. One would think he was a thief afraid of being found out."

With a stifled exclamation Caspar raised his hand to strike the speaker a blow. But his uplifted arm dropped as though stricken with palsy. His face whitened. He turned away with a groan and sat down.

"Come, mates," cried another voice, and the men vanished in the darkness.

How long he remained sitting, Lame Caspar did not know. But long after, when he looked up into the obscurity and silence, the word "Thief!" rang through his brain like the clashing of discordant bells. He a thief? Yes, he had stolen the gold piece. He was a thief!

He did not go fishing on the following day. A sudden resolve had come to him. He would clear his conscience by finding the little boy and returning the money. He did not mean to confess his guilt. He could not bring himself to such a humiliating avowal. He would say he had found the gold piece accidentally.

Toward noon he clambered up the steep pathway leading to the hotel on the cliff. He trembled with nervousness as he neared the great white building, with its flying flags making spots of vivid color against the pine groves beyond. He glanced eagerly about among the groups of people who were seated on the veranda, but he could not distinguish any one resembling the little boy. Then he went inside and, hardly able to control his voice, put a few timid questions to the clerk, who eyed him suspiciously. "A little boy, with eyes colored like the sea, and bright hair that floated on his shoulders—where was he?"

"His name?" the clerk inquired in a businesslike way.

"I don't know his name, but I want to find him. It is—it is something important."

The clerk reflected a moment, then shook his head. Yes, there had been a little boy answering to that description in the hotel, but he had gone away with his parents the day before. Where to? Ah, that he did not know.

Tears sprang into Lame Caspar's eyes. Horribly disappointed, he moved away and mechanically descended the sunlit cliffs to the shore. What should he do now? The gold piece carried with it a curse—a curse from which he would never free himself. His conscience tortured him. His luck had changed. He caught hardly any fish nowadays, and his companions were estranged from him. They looked upon him with dis-

trust and suspicion, and all the while that hideous word "Thief!" rang in his ears and seemed branded upon his soul.

Weeks passed. He never went near the cupboard where the gold piece lay shining at the bottom of the cup. He was afraid to look at it. Nobody spoke to him and he spoke to no one. He shut himself up in his cabin, and his one thought night and day was how to get rid of the curse that overshadowed him. His superstitious nature grew morbidly sensitive. Often he fancied he was going mad.

The winter came—the severe winter of the north. The angry sea lashed itself into glittering spray. The great bluff was carpeted with snow and the sky was gray. Lame Caspar became a hermit. When he did go out it was early, so that no one could see him, and he returned only when night had fallen. The gold piece haunted him as might some frightful specter. It was as though the cupboard concealed a grim presence that he dared not face. In the village the people tapped their foreheads significantly.

"He is crazy," they said. "Better not go near him or he may do harm." So they let him alone.

Gradually the situation became so intolerable that Lame Caspar concluded he must end it or else put an end to himself. He began to devise ways and means. By and by he thought of a plan and resolved to carry it out.

One bleak December night, with a terrible sinking of the heart, he unlocked the cupboard, took the gold piece in his hand, and stealing quietly from the house walked to the edge of the cliffs. The moon had burst from behind a cloud and spangled the sea and the snow covered bluffs. Caspar had a knife in his pocket; but he had not quite decided to use it.

He wasn't sure whether it would be better to dig a hole and bury the gold piece, or to fling it into the sea and himself after it. Life had no longer any charm or interest for him. He had become a coward and an outcast. He would rather die than live. However, he could do nothing while the moon shone so brightly. He must wait awhile until it hid itself behind another cloud. He paced impatiently to and fro in the frosty night. Then all at once came a loud jingle of sleigh bells and the sound of merry laughter. Lame Caspar started and stood still as a large sleigh drew up almost in front of him and a man jumping out ran to the horses to arrange a displaced plume. Voices floated toward the solitary figure on the cliff, and among them was one that caused Caspar's heart almost to stand still, while a great sob rose in his throat.

"It was just here," said a clear, childish treble, "that I lost my gold piece—just below there on the shore. Such a nice, kind fisherman came and helped me to look for it—and"—The boy stopped speaking. Then continued in an altered tone: "Why, see that man yonder! What can he be doing there? Something is the matter with him."

In another moment the boy had sprang from the sleigh and had advanced toward Lame Caspar, who stood with outstretched arms in the pale moonlight like one transfigured. Tears were rolling down his weather beaten cheeks and splashed heavily upon the ragged peajacket he wore.

"Oh!" cried the child joyfully to his companions. "This is the very man—the nice, kind man who helped me to search for my lost gold piece! But," he added, "you are in trouble, Lame Caspar, you are crying! What is the matter? Why are you acting so strangely out here on the cliffs?"

The child's companions, attracted by the intensity of the tones, approached and stood looking from one to the other.

Then the tension in Lame Caspar's breast gave way as though something had snapped. With his utterance still choked by sobs he held the gold piece forth in the argent moonlight and professed it to the boy, who gave an exultant shout.

"My gold piece! And you found it for me, you found it?" he exclaimed joyously.

For the first time Lame Caspar discovered his voice. "Yes, I—I found it, and I went to find you, but you were gone. I kept it. I have had it by me ever since. I have hoped and waited—hoped and waited!"

A man's voice called to the child: "Come, Ralph, the plume is fixed. We must go on!"

The child was sober and evidently overcome by a vague emotion. He turned the gold piece over in his hand and cast a lingering look on the semi-crouching form of Lame Caspar, who almost knelt at his feet. Then he said softly:

"Goodby, Lame Caspar, and thank you. I've always prayed for you because you helped me. Good night and goodby."

"God bless you!" cried Caspar in a loud voice. "You have saved me!"

"Saved you from what?" asked the child perplexed.

"Saved me from myself," said the fisherman and bowed his head.

The boy turned away reluctantly. Something in that drooping, sorrowful figure seemed to chain his attention. "Good night," he whispered once more. "How odd that I should have seen you and got back my gold piece."

"Give it to him again for his honesty," said a gentleman of the party brusquely.

"I'll give you another, Ralph. Let the man keep it."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the child, and he offered the newly found treasure to Caspar, who drew himself up sternly.

"No!" he said, brushing away his tears with a firm hand. "No! not for worlds—not for worlds!"

"Come, dear!" said the gentleman to the child dryly.

As they re-entered the sleigh and he cracked the whip the speaker added: "How proud these people are! For myself, I have no patience with their ridiculous independence!"

"Ridiculous, indeed!" replied a lady, and the sleigh glided away, leaving Lame Caspar standing still in the moonlight with a prayer of thankfulness on his lips.—Marquise Clara Lanza in Philadelphia Press.

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