

## THE FISH AS TREASURE KEEPER.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE fish plays an important part in the folklore and poetry of almost all nations as treasure keeper or guardian of hoarded wealth, and lost gems or rings are frequently discovered in the stomach or mouth of a fish. The gospel story is well known that when Jesus is expected to pay toll he makes Peter find the needed money in the mouth of a fish. We read (Matt. xvii. 24-27) :

“And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute? He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?”

“Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.”

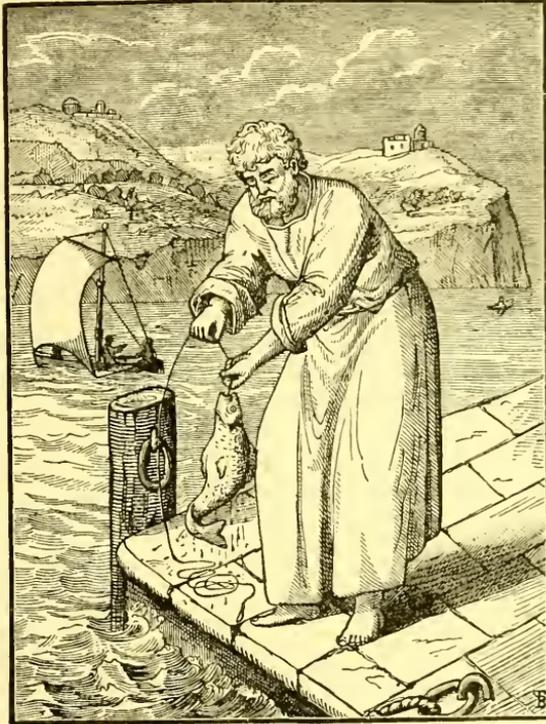
In comment on this most perplexing story Origen compares the fish to a miser whose only treasure is money;<sup>1</sup> but a little further up he seems to identify this same fish with Christ. The interesting part of Matthew's tale consists in the paganism of the tradition that a coin is discovered in the mouth of the dead for the purpose of paying Charon the ferry toll for the passage over the Styx. It is difficult to say how the story of the fish bringing the toll money slipped into the canon.

In the most beautiful drama of Indian antiquity the heroine Shakuntala loses the ring of identification which King Dushyanta has given her, but in the sixth act a fisher discovers it in the stomach of a fish.

The story of Polykrates as told by Herodotus is well known

<sup>1</sup> Origen's commentary on Matthew xiii. 10, Ed. Bened. III, p. 586.

and has been cast into ballad form by Schiller in his poem "The Ring of Polycrates." Amasis, King of Egypt, hesitates to enter into an alliance with Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, because the uninterrupted series of his successes bodes a final and terrible downfall. Polycrates, to atone for his ominous good luck, sacrifices a valuable ring which as a rare treasure is very dear to him, but soon afterwards a big fish is caught which the fisherman offers as a present to the ruler of Samos, and in its stomach the ring is found.



PETER FINDING THE TOLL MONEY.

Hereupon King Amasis, the friend of Polycrates, severs their connection so as not to participate in the doom that threatens to crush his ally.

Similar stories may be traced in the folklore of many nations, the most remarkable one of which is preserved in the Edda where the dwarf Andwari in the shape of a fish is the guardian of a treasure of gold. The gods Odin, Hönir and Loki needed the gold to pay a ransom, and so Loki was sent out to deprive Andwari of his

hoard. Loki caught the fish in the water and compelled him to give up his gold. When the latter tried to retain a little gold ring because with the ring he could always replenish his treasure, Loki demanded even that, and now Andwari uttered a curse saying that each owner of the hoard should pay for its possession with his life. And this curse was fulfilled, beginning with Hreidmar to whom the treasure was handed over as a ransom, down to the Niflungs, Sigurd and Högni, who in the German version of the Nibelung saga are called Siegfried and Hagen. Before Hagen dies, however, he sinks the Niflung hoard into the Rhine whence it has never been recovered.

In another story of the Edda, Loki tries to escape the wrath of the gods by assuming the form of a salmon, but is finally caught in a net of his own devising.

In the former story we have an ancient myth which contains traces of a still more primitive belief in a great treasure guarded by a fish. The treasure can be gained, but if we take it all, including the ring that can reproduce the gold, a curse will fall on the greedy owner whereby the very possession of the treasure will bring about his ruin. It is the same idea as when Ilsebill demands the impossible or when a fool kills the goose that lays the golden eggs.