

**INTERMEDIATE.... 2nd Prize -
#4122 - Kastalia age 14**

The Gift

<http://www.vcoins.com/harlanjberk/store/viewItem.asp?idProduct=6021&large=0>

An afternoon off was rare this time of year for a child in a family of workers. And in a remote part of the hills of Rome, a 10-year-old boy was far, far beyond the confines of reality in a place where he could be who he wanted to be, with no expectations from anyone. The autumn air carried with it the essence of the wind, and the trees seemed restless and alive. Anyplace, the boy thought, anyplace away from the reek of fish and sweat in the Forum was a good place. There were no worries here, no responsibilities except to be home by sunset and only if you stood very still and listened for a long time could you hear the meaningless babble of the city before the wind seized it and washed it away.

Beyond the small clearing where Antoninus stood were the trees, glorious tall pine trees that seemed to hold so many secrets. They were so unlike their stunted, gnarled brethren that were crammed between tabernae, or planted in neat rows in the streets of Rome. He saw them when he visited there from his home in the country, and had decided long ago that these were much more alive. The trees here were so different, and so special, that nobody could describe them. So nobody did. Antoninus wished he could climb them every day, and see the world as the eagles and the crows did, from the height of the moon, looking down, down...No matter. He could, and would, climb them today.

He began searching for a suitable tree, a great tall one, to be sure, but one with branches low enough for a boy equipped with only a short tunic and a small sack of grapes and cheeses to climb up unafraid. The outer layer of trees near the clearing had already been stripped for lumber by the few men who ventured for wood this far out of the city, so Antoninus walked further and further into the forest until at last he found his tree. As he circled it looking for the lowest branch, he noticed, at least 30 feet up the tree, a nest. It was barely visible through the dense branches of the tall pine, but it looked like a crow's nest, and it occurred to him that perhaps there would be eggs. He wasn't sure if eggs would be in the nest at this time of year, but the nest marked something new, and something new always needs to be explored. With his eyes set on the crow's nest, Antoninus began to climb. The branches were terribly rough and scratchy, but, he reasoned, my calcei are sturdy enough, and the sooner I can get to the nest and get down, the sooner the scratching stops, and that's that.

At last, with pine needles in his hair and white scratches on his hands and legs, he reached the nest, and with it, a beautiful view of the rest of the forest, for this tree stood well above any of the others. At first he was disappointed to see that there weren't any eggs at all, but the disappointment was quickly replaced with delight, for there was something else, intertwined with the twigs and grasses of the nest wall. Something not an egg, but something wonderful.

A coin.

To someone who has never been poor, material things might seem expendable, or perhaps some sort of temporary entertainment until something better came along. To someone who lives without, especially a child, something like a marble or a coin can become a treasured possession, and that's exactly what happened with Antoninus as he sat in his tree.

It was beautiful. On one side was the head of a man. He looked peaceful and wise; an old man who had seen many summers and could probably remember them all. There were laurel branches around his head, and they shone in the sun when Antoninus turned the coin in his fingers. Antoninus didn't have very much experience with money because he didn't have it all that often, and when he did he was only acting as the messenger, off to run an errand and never giving the coin a second thought. Or, more likely, not even a first one. He knew enough to tell that the man pictured so beautifully must be an emperor, though he didn't know which. Septimius Severus was the emperor now, and he had been for a very long time. But there had been others before him. Many others.

There were symbols around the edges of the coin, which were worn and faded, and they seemed to carry a great meaning, but what, Antoninus couldn't say, because he didn't know how to read. Gently, he turned the coin over to gaze at the other side. His eyes widened. Pictured there, as though mid-stride, was a great creature unlike any he had ever seen. It had four legs and a tail and looked like it might be about the size of a horse. But it was so different! It had an enormous head, and that was the only thing that could have possibly balanced out the great flapping ears, the reason of their size completely eluding Antoninus. Why should any animal need ears as big as these? His grandfather had taught him that everything had a purpose, but he didn't think he could ever imagine the purpose of those enormous ears. The animal had a curiously long nose, or at least he supposed it was a nose, but whatever it might be it stretched far past its face and rose up back into the air. It must have been as long as any of its four legs. The creature also had something else like this long nose, but shorter, attached near the base of its face. It looked like a tusk of wild boar, but this was clearly no wild boar. Antoninus assumed that there must be another on the other side, but the coin was too tarnished to make out what it was. Perhaps they were teeth, if there were indeed two. Perhaps this majestic animal was a man-eating monster, and tore its victims with those great long teeth.

Only as Antoninus looked up did he realize the sun was beginning to set and that he needed to be getting back home, to his father's farm. As he climbed down the tree, he resolved to ask his grandfather about the old man with the kind face, and the creature whose name he did not know. His grandfather knew many things, had lived for many summers, and had answered more of Antoninus' persistent questions about the world than there are waves in the sea. Perhaps he had known the man. His grandfather was also the only member of the family who could read, which was one of the reasons he was so useful to the family. As he reached the base of the tree, he placed the coin gently in his sack of uneaten grapes and cheese, and began the long walk home.

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“Antoninus! Come, boy!”

It had been at least a week since his discovery of the coin, which had remained foremost in his mind, and his family had been so busy harvesting and preparing for winter that there had been no time at all to ask his grandfather or anyone else about it. Each night he was so exhausted that he collapsed on his pallet immediately and had no other thoughts until dawn the next morning, when he was again shaken awake. But he did not mind. Any information given to him had to be perfect, unhurried, and absorbed slowly. Besides, in the meantime he was making up his own stories in his mind. Now, as he helped his father in the fields, he was convinced that the man on the coin had been a great general, riding the long-nosed creature into battle in far-away places, trampling savages and bringing glory to Rome. Antoninus was a very small boy, and it hurt whenever he was pronounced scrawny, useless for manly tasks. He made up for it inside his head, by weaving the most wonderful stories about battle and honor and glory. It was his way to escape the confines of being small and skinny.

“Antoninus! *Now!*”

He shook himself roughly from his fantasies and hurried to join his father. He liked his father. When other men called him worthless, his father stood up for him and told the men that greatness is inside your head, not your body. Antoninus looked up to his father very much.

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“Well, boy what is it?”

Confused, Antoninus shook his head, as if to say, “What’s what?”

“Whatever it is that’s on your mind,” his grandfather replied. “I know that look. It means you’ve found something or heard something that you don’t understand and now you want me to explain it. You’ve been looking in my direction and sighing all day, enough to make a man sick.”

Antoninus hung his in shame, but really he didn’t think his grandfather minded all that much. In fact, he suspected that the old man was merely having a little fun before finding out what it was that needed explaining so badly. He climbed onto his grandfather’s lap and drew out the coin. Then he gently pressed it into the old man’s fingers and looked up at his with pleading eyes. With motions and drawings in the dirt he explained how he had come to find the beautiful coin, ending with how he thought that perhaps a crow had become attracted to the shininess of it and had lifted it up to its nest, for crows are greedy creatures.

“I see. And now I suppose you’ll be wanting a full explanation about the man and the animal, am I right?”

Antoninus nodded.

“Well, let’s see. The man on this side is an emperor, and he ruled when I was a young man. A good ruler. Peaceful. His name was- oh, you’re going to like this. His name was Antoninus Pius.”

Antoninus smiled. Now he knew why he was drawn to this coin so much.

“His reign lasted at least a generation, and it ended, oh, maybe 40 or 50 years ago. Let’s see,” he said as he peered at the writing around the edges of the coin, “this particular coin came from a mint that shut down... at least 50 years ago. I can’t quite tell what most of the writing says, though. The coin’s a very corroded...it must have been up in that tree

for some time...that's really all I can tell you about him. Perhaps if you take it with you to the Forum tomorrow, Flavius will be able to help you."

Antoninus agreed. Flavius, a merchant who was often in the Forum, had traveled the world and seen many things. He could read, write, and speak several languages. Many people went to him when they wanted help for something or other, but he always had a soft spot for Antoninus.

"Now, about this animal...it's called an elephant. It's much, much bigger than anything you've ever seen, and it can be ridden in battle, although some people consider it a gentle creature. That's all I can tell you."

Despite constant pestering throughout the remainder of the day, that was all the information Antoninus could press out of his grandfather. His only comfort was that Flavius was sure to know something more. He had to. Antoninus went to sleep that night with the coin held tightly in his hand.

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Antoninus woke the following morning long before his anyone else had. Careful not to make any noise, he lifted himself off of his pallet and pulled the coin from where it had become wedged between the pallet and the wall. He dressed, and then carefully dropped the coin into a small, crudely woven pouch he himself had sewn to the inside of his clothing. He put on his calcei and collected some bacon to take with him, then walked outside into the cool night air to look at the stars until the sun rose. He was overflowing with excitement. This was the day when he would finally know what great adventures the man on the coin had seen.

Pink streaks of dawn rose up into the sky before he realized he was cold, and then faded, giving way to the bright lights of the sun. His father, somehow looking tired and refreshed by the dawn at the same time, came up behind him.

"We'd best get moving, son. We need to get to the Forum early if we are to find a good place to set up."

And so they left their home together, moving down the very same road that Antoninus had walked many days ago, the day he found the coin.

By the time they reached the marketplace, the sun had truly risen, giving way to a clear day, perhaps one of the last they would see for a while. While his father unloaded the wagon full of bread, grapes, cheese, olives, honey, and rabbit, Antoninus went in search of Flavius. He knew where to look. Flavius could almost always be found in a far corner of the Forum, where he had a stall full of unusual trinkets from faraway lands. As he bargained with a customer, Antoninus toyed with a necklace made of black beads, then some sort of reed instrument he could never have guessed how to play. At last, as Flavius finished haggling with his last customer, he turned to Antoninus with a smile.

"It's about time! I was beginning to think that you'd forgotten all about me. Come to sell me something? Or were you buying instead?" he asked innocently, gesturing to his booth with a flourish.

Antoninus grinned. Flavius was known for being one of the best merchandise sellers around, and he sold plain things at ridiculous prices to anyone unaware of his tactics. Antoninus fixed him with a look that said "Neither" and drew the small coin from his pocket.

“Well, what have we here? That’s Antoninus Pius, is it not? Well, what do you want to know about him?”

Everything, Antoninus thought, but obviously Flavius didn’t know everything. As he searched for some way to convey exactly what he wanted to know, Flavius suddenly snapped his fingers. “I have it. You want to know what great adventures came to this man, what monsters he has slain, where his travels took him...right?”

Antoninus wanted to laugh. Flavius knew him far too well. He looked up at him expectantly.

“Well, I can tell you, but you’re not going to like it. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. This man was a man of peace. He ruled his subjects quietly and well for many years, and died of old age with an untroubled conscience.”

Antoninus stared. No pirates? No great battles? No honor and glory and trophies won for Rome? But then, what-

“Hey, look who’s here, boys!”

Antoninus spun around quickly, and was dismayed to see a tall, unshaven drunken man lumbering toward him. He recognized him, and he hated him. Whenever he was near Antoninus, he never ceased to tease and taunt him mercilessly about his small, skinny, scrawny body, always encouraging his father to throw him out of the house like the worthless thing he was.

“Would you look at that scrawny stick?” he roared to the gathering crowd as he swayed up the street. “Have you ever seen such a worthless piece of sheep’s dung? He stands there eating his family out of house and home while he gives nothing to them! Can’t do a man’s work! Can’t do women’s work! He can’t,” here he paused momentarily, then said softly, “he can’t even say his own name.”

The crowd gasped, then started to snicker, then to roar with the same cruel laughter that was uttered in the amphitheater, when one gladiator ended another’s life with a brutal slash of a sword. Even some of the people who had seen Antoninus before had not known he was a mute. But he was. No more worthy than escaped slaves whose tongues had been cut out. The crowd closed in, laughing, poking at him and trying to get him to say something. He grabbed the coin out of Flavius’ hand and ran.

He followed the same path that he that first day, when the wind and the trees had called him. He ran until he could run no more, until he could not longer hear the brawny laughter of crowd. He kept on going until he reached the clearing with the great pines on all sides, then into the forest until he found his tree. He climbed furiously, as though pursued, and only when he reached the top of the tree before the branches got too weak did he rest. He closed his eyes and slowly shut out the laughter from the ringing in his ears. Another time. Another place. It wasn’t part of him now. He turned his attention instead to the coin clutched in his sweaty palm. He felt as though the man was his friend. The man did not care if Antoninus was a mute. The man did not care if he was small and scrawny and unworthy of manhood and adventure. He opened his eyes. But Flavius had said that the man had had no adventures, slain no great monsters, and galloped forth in no great battles. Perhaps, Antoninus thought, perhaps this man was like me, ruling his life from inside his head. The man had helped him realize that. The coin was his gift. He smiled at the thought. He closed his eyes once more and began to weave stories about Antoninus Pius. Wonderful stories.