

The Silver Shilling

Hans Christian Andersen

There was once a shilling; it came out bright and shiny from the mint, and sprang up, shouting, "Hurrah! Now I'm going out into the wide world!" And into the wide world he went. The child held it with soft, tender hands; the miser clutched it with cold, clammy fingers; the old man turned it over many times before letting it go; while the youth immediately passed it along. The Shilling was of silver, with very little copper in it; already it had been in the world for a whole year now-that is, in the country where it was made. But one day it started to travel to foreign lands; it was the last native coin in the purse that the traveling gentleman had with him. He himself didn't know he had this coin until it happened to come between his fingers.

"Why, here's a shilling from home I still have," he said. "It can make the trip with me."

And the Shilling rattled and jumped for joy as it was put back into the purse. So here it lay among foreign companions, who came and went, each making a place for the next one. Only the Shilling from home always stayed in the purse, which was a mark of distinction.

Several weeks passed, and the Shilling was far out in the world, without knowing exactly where it was, although it did hear that the other coins were French or Italian. One said they were in a certain town, another reported that they had reached another place, but the Shilling hadn't any idea about it. Anyone who keeps his head in a bag can't see a thing; and that was the case with the Shilling.

But as it lay there one day it noticed that the purse was not completely shut, so it sneaked forward to the opening to take a peek. It shouldn't have done that, but it was full of curiosity, and people often have to pay for that. It slipped out into the trouser pocket, and when the purse was taken out that night the Shilling remained behind and was taken with the clothes to the hall closet. There it dropped on the floor; no one heard it, and no one saw it.

Next morning the clothes were returned to the room; the gentleman put them on, and started on his journey again, but the Shilling was left behind. It was found, required to do service again, and was sent out with three other coins.

"It's an interesting thing to look about you in the world," thought the Shilling, "and to get to know different people and customs."

"What kind of coin is that?" said someone at that very moment. "That's not a genuine coin! It's a fake! It's no good!"

Yes, now began the real history of the Shilling, as told by itself.

"'False! No good!' Those words really hurt me," said the Shilling. "I knew I was made of good silver, had a good ring and a genuine stamp on me. People were certainly mistaken; they couldn't mean me! But they did mean me; I was the one they called false and no good! 'I must get rid of that fellow in the dark!' said the man I belonged to. So I was passed on at night, and then again chided in broad daylight. 'False-no good! We must hurry up and get rid of it!' "

And the Shilling trembled in its master's fingers each time it was to be passed on as a native coin.

"What a wretched shilling I am! What good is my silver to me, or my value, or my stamp, if all these things are considered worthless? The world gives you only such value as it chooses. It must be really dreadful to have a bad conscience, and to sneak about in the path of evil, if I, who am quite innocent, can feel so wretched just because I have my looks

against me!

"Each time they brought me out I shuddered at the thought of the eyes that would glare at me, because I knew I would be rejected and flung back on the counter like a liar and a fraud.

"One time I came into the hands of a poor old woman, who received me as wages for a hard day's toil and labor, and she couldn't get rid of me at all. Nobody would accept me, and I was a real worry to the old woman.

" 'I shall certainly have to fool somebody with this shilling,' she said, 'for I can't afford to keep a false shilling. I'll pass him on to the rich baker; he'll be able to stand the loss better than I can; but still it is an injustice I will be doing.'

"What a weight I must be on that woman's conscience, too," sighed the Shilling. "Am I really changed so much in my old age? And the woman went to the rich baker, but he knew the current shillings too well to accept me; I was thrown back in the woman's face, and she got no bread for me. And I felt grieved that I should be the cause of trouble to others-I, who in my young days had been so proud of my value and the soundness of my coinage. I was as melancholy as a poor shilling can be whom no one will accept; but the woman took me home, looked at me earnestly, with kindly, friendly eyes, and said, 'No, I won't deceive anyone with you. I'll bore a hole through you, so everyone can see you're false. And yet-a thought just occurs to me-perhaps you are a lucky shilling; yes, I believe you are; I have such a strong feeling about it! I'll make a hole through the coin, pass a string through it, and then give it to the neighbor's little child to hang around her neck as a good-luck shilling.'

"And she drilled a hole right through me. It certainly isn't very pleasant to have a hole bored through you, but you can stand many things when you know the intentions are good. A thread was passed through the hole, and I was hung around the child's neck like a kind of medal. The child smiled at me and kissed me, and all that night I slept on its warm, innocent breast.

"Next morning the child's mother took me up and looked at me and had another idea about me-I could feel that immediately. She brought out a pair of scissors and cut the string.

" 'A lucky shilling!' she cried. 'Well, we'll see about that!'

"Then she soaked me in vinegar, until I turned quite green, puttied up the hole, rubbed me a little, and that evening took me to the lottery collector, to buy a lottery ticket that would make her fortune.

"How utterly unhappy I felt! There was a stinging inside me as if I were going to break in half. I knew that I should be called false and thrown away, and before a crowd of other coins, too, who lay there proud of their inscriptions and faces. But I escaped that time, for there were many people in the collector's office-he was very busy, so I rattled into the box with the other coins. I don't know if my ticket won anything or not, but I do know that the very next morning I was recognized as a bad coin and sent out to deceive again and again. That is a very trying thing to endure when you have a good character, and this I cannot deny that I have.

"For years and days I wandered this way from house to house, from hand to hand, always rebuked, always unwelcome; nobody believed me, and finally I lost confidence in the world and myself; those were hard times. One day a traveler arrived, and naturally I was passed on to him, and he was courteous enough to accept me as good. But when he tried to pass me on again, I heard once more the cry, 'That coin's no good! It's false!' "

" 'I accepted it as genuine,' said the man, and looked closely at me. Then he smiled all over his face; never before had a face looked like that after a close examination of me.

'Why, what's this?' he said. 'That's a coin from my own country, a good honest shilling from home, that someone has bored a hole through and called false. Now, that's a strange coincidence. I'll just keep it and take it home with me.'

"A thrilling glow of joy shot through me when I heard him call me a honest shilling; now I would go home, where each and everyone would know me and realize that I was of good silver and bore a genuine stamp. I felt like throwing out sparks of happiness, but after all it isn't my nature to throw out sparks; that's something for steel to do, not silver.

"I was wrapped up in a clean white piece of paper, so that I wouldn't be mixed up with the other coins and be lost; and only on special occasions when people from my own country got together was I shown around, and they said nice things about me. They thought I was interesting-and it's surprising how interesting you can be without saying a single word.

"So at last I was home again. All my troubles were over, and I was happy again, for I was made of good silver and had the genuine stamp. I had no more misery to endure, even though a hole had been bored through me as if I were false; that doesn't matter if you're not really false. Just wait for the end, and everything will come out all right. That is my firm belief," said the Shilling.