

The Silver Shilling

There was a shilling, it came gleaming bright from the mint, it clinked and chinked: 'Hurrah! now I'm off into the wide world!', which it was.

The child held it tight in its warm hands and so did the miser in his cold, clammy hands, the old man turned it over and over, while the young man immediately let it move on. The shilling was made of silver, had very little copper in it and had already been out in the world for a whole year, or rather around and about in the country where it had been minted; then it travelled abroad, it was the last coin of his native country left in the purse its journeying gentleman had with him, he didn't know himself he had it before he found it between his fingers.

'Well, here's yet another shilling from home!' he said, 'it can come along with me on my journey!' and the shilling clinked and chinked with joy when the man put it back into the purse. Here it lay among foreign companions that came and went; the one made room for the next, but the shilling from back home was always there; that was a high honour.

Several weeks had already passed, and the shilling was way out in the world, without knowing exactly where; it heard from the other coins that they were French and Italian; one of them said that now they were in this town, the next that they were in that, but the shilling couldn't imagine any of this, one cannot see the world when one is always in a bag, which it was; but as it lay there one day, it noticed that the purse wasn't shut, and so it sneaked out to the opening to have a look out; it ought not to have done that, but it was curious, and curiosity kills the cat; it slid into the trouser pocket, and when the purse was laid aside that evening, the shilling was still where it lay and was put out in the passage along with the clothes, where it straightway fell onto the floor; no one heard it, no one saw it.

The next morning, the clothes were brought in, the gentleman put them on, departed, and the shilling was left behind, it was found, had to do service once more, went out with three other coins.

'It's rather nice to have a look around in the world!' the *shilling* thought, 'get to know other people, other customs!'

'What kind of a shilling is that,' people said at once. 'It's no coin of our country! it's a fake! no good!'

Yes, this is where the shilling's story begins, as it later told it.

'A fake! no good! it sent a shudder through me,' the *shilling* said. 'I knew I was made of sterling silver, with a fine chink and a genuine stamp. They must definitely be mistaken, they couldn't be referring to me, but they were! I was the one they were calling a fake, I was no good! "I must try to palm it off when it's dark!" said the man who had it, and I was palmed off in the dark, only to be cursed when it was daylight, – "fake, no good! we must make sure we get rid of it".'

And the shilling quaked between people's fingers each time it was to be surreptitiously passed off as a coin of the country.

'Oh, what a wretched shilling am I! What use is my silver, my value, my stamp when they all mean nothing. One's value in the world is what the world believes it is! But it must be awful to have a bad conscience, to slink around with foul intent, when I, who am completely innocent, feel so miserable just because that's how I seem to be! – Each time I was taken

out, I dreaded the eyes that were going to look at me, I knew that I would be rejected, thrown back across the table as if I was a complete fraud.

I once ended up with an unfortunate poor woman, she was given me as a day's wages for her toiling and moiling, but she simply couldn't get rid of me, no one would accept me, I was an utter disaster to her.'

'I simply have to fool someone with it!' she said. 'I can't afford to hold onto a fake shilling; the rich baker shall have it, he can best stand the loss, but what I'm doing is wrong even so!'

'Now I even have to burden the woman's conscience!' it sighed within the *shilling*. 'Have I really changed so much in my old age?'

'And the woman went to the rich baker, but he knew all too well which shillings were valid currency, I wasn't allowed to lie where I lay, I was thrown back in the woman's face; she didn't get any bread for me, and I felt so intensely sad at having been minted in a way that led to other people's misfortune, I who in my young days had been so cheerful and so self-assured; so well aware of my value and my genuine stamp. I became as melancholy as a poor shilling can be when no one wants to own it. But the woman took me home again, gazed at me closely with a warm, gentle and kindly look. 'No, I won't try to fool anyone with you!' she said. 'I'll make a hole in you, so that everyone can see that you are a fake – though it suddenly occurs to me – perhaps you are a lucky shilling, yes, that's what I'll believe! the thought just struck me. I'll make a hole in the shilling, thread a string through the hole and give the neighbour's young child the shilling round its neck as a lucky shilling!'

And she made a hole in me; it's never pleasant to have a hole made in one, but when the intention is a good one, one can put up with a great deal! a string was threaded through the hole, I became a kind of medallion to be worn; I was hung round the neck of the young child, and it smiled at me, kissed me, and I rested for a whole night on the child's warm, innocent breast.

The next morning the child's mother picked me up between her fingers, looked at me and I quickly sensed she had other ideas for me. She took out a pair of scissors and cut through the string.'

'Lucky shilling!' she said. 'Well, we'll see about that!' and she soaked me in vinegar till I turned green; then she filled in the hole with putty, rubbed me a little, and when twilight came went to the lottery agent to buy a lottery ticket that would bring good fortune.

How ill at ease I was! I felt oppressed as though I would break in two; I knew I would be called a fake and thrown out and that this would be in front of a whole crowd of shillings and coins that lay there with inscriptions and faces they could be proud of; but I escaped such a fate; there was so many people at the agent's, he was so busy, I went clinking into the drawer among all the other coins; whether or not the ticket proved to be a lucky one, I do not know, but I do know that already the following day I was seen to be a fake, laid on one side and sent out to deceive time and time again. This is quite intolerable when one has an honest nature, and that I cannot deny myself.

For days and years I passed in this way from hand to hand, from house to house, always cursed, always reviled; no one believed me, and I didn't believe myself, nor the world – it was a difficult time.

One day a traveller came along, naturally I was foisted off onto him, and he was unsuspecting enough to assume I was current coinage; but then he tried to pay with me, I once again heard the cry: 'no good! fake!'

'I was given it as a genuine coin!' the man said and now inspected me closely; then a smile lit up his whole face, and no face ever normally gave me a look of pleasure: 'Well, what is all this!' he said. 'This is one of our own country's coins, a good, honest shilling from back home that's had a hole made in it and been called a fake. That's most entertaining! I'll keep you safe and take you home with me!'

A surge of joy passed through me, I had been called a good, honest shilling and I was to return home, where everybody would recognise me and know I was made of sterling silver and had a genuine stamp. I could have sparkled with joy, only it's not my nature to sparkle, steel does that, but not silver.

I was wrapped in fine white paper so as not to get mixed up with the other coins and get lost; and only on festive occasions when fellow-countrymen met was I taken out and talked about exceedingly kindly; they said that I was interesting; it's quite amusing that one can be interesting without saying a single word!

And so I came home! All my trials were over, my happiness began, for I was of sterling silver, I had the genuine stamp, and it was in no way detrimental that a hole had been made in me as a fake; it doesn't mean a thing when one is not! One must stick it out; eventually one will come into one's own! That's my belief at any rate!' the *shilling* said.