

Adventures of a Sixpence in Guernsey by A Native eBook

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Contents

Adventures of a Sixpence in Guernsey by A Native eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Page 1.....	4
Page 2.....	5
Page 3.....	7
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	11
Page 6.....	12
Page 7.....	13
Page 8.....	14
Page 9.....	16

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
ADVENTURES OF A SIXPENNY IN GUERNSEY.		1



Page 1

ADVENTURES OF A SIXPENCE IN GUERNSEY.

The breakfast was ready laid on the table, and a gentleman was standing by the fire waiting for the rest of the family, when the door burst open, and two little girls ran in.

“A happy new year, papa!—a happy new year!” shouted each as she was caught up to be kissed, and found herself on the floor once more after a sudden whirl to the ceiling.

“Now catch,” said their father, as he started aside and flung a sixpence to each.

Of course they did not catch, for little girls have a strange propensity for turning just the wrong way on such occasions; but the bright new sixpences were none the duller for their fall, and called forth none the less admiration from their proud owners.

Many were the calculations which passed through those curly heads during breakfast-time as to what a sixpence could buy; and it was with many bright visions that they darted away to be dressed to go into the town with their mother.

It was New-year’s day; but there was no snow, no bitter cold wind, no beggars shivering in their scanty clothing, none of the scenes of poverty which those accustomed only to an English winter might expect to cast a gloom over the enjoyment of the day. It was a bright sunny morning, every leaf sparkling with dew-drops; groups of neatly-dressed people were to be seen flocking in from the country in every direction; and though the air was fresh enough to incline them to walk briskly along, their hands were not hidden away in muffs and coat-pockets, but were ready for the friendly shake which, with “all the good wishes of the season,” awaited them at every step.

Mrs. Campbell and her little girls, after many a greeting of this kind, found their way into the town at last; and the children soon forgot everything in the twelfth-cakes which adorned the pastry-cooks’ windows, till the sixpence, which was tightly clasped in each little hand, recalled them to their errand, and they joined the busy crowd in the toy-shop. Who does not know what it is to take a child into these abodes of Noah’s arks, cats, dogs, mice, and dolls, and all that is so charming? How each toy is seized on in its turn, to be relinquished in a moment for one more beautiful! It was no easy task that Mrs. Campbell had undertaken; but at last, in a moment of ecstasy over two blue-eyed dolls, the sixpences were paid, and the young purchasers drawn away from further temptation. And we, too, must wish them good-by, with the hope that the next new year may find them bright and happy still, and that before many more have passed over them they will have learnt a wiser and a better way of spending their father’s gift; a way in which their sixpence, though it be but a sixpence, will be returned in tenfold blessings on their heads.



Page 2

It is with one of the little pieces of silver which have just rung in the till that we have to do. It had lain there for about two hours, the same scenes going on around it which we have witnessed with its owner of the morning, when a tall moustachioed young man entered the shop, which was not exclusively devoted to toys, and asked to be shown some gold pencil-cases. His choice was soon made, the money paid, and our friend the Sixpence received in change. Ah, Sixpence! what sort of hands have you fallen into now? We have undertaken to follow your fortunes for a time, and therefore, uncomfortable as our quarters may be, we must take up our abode with you in Captain Crawford's waistcoat-pocket, and go where he pleases to lead us. Up High Street and Smith Street to Grange Road, where we mount and away from houses and streets and the fashionable world; among the fields and hedges, just decking themselves with Daisies and Celandines, and every now and then, at the top of the many little hills which the road crosses, comes a peep of the bright blue sea, from which, go where we will, we can never get very far away in Guernsey. After a short ride, Captain Crawford pulled up his horse, and giving it into the care of a boy who answered his call, he walked down an avenue to a pretty rose-covered house, which he entered, and made his way to the drawing-room.

"Well, my little one, what have you been about all the morning?" was his greeting as he opened the door to a delicate-looking girl who lay on the sofa.

"Oh, Edward!" she answered, "I was just wishing for you. I feel rather better than usual to-day, and mamma says I may take a turn in the garden. I was only waiting for your arm. Will you ring for my bonnet?"

"Look, here is a New-year's gift for you, Ellen," said her brother, taking the gold pencil-case out of his pocket and hanging it on her chain.

"Oh! thanks—thanks, Edward!" she said warmly, as she pulled his head down to her, and threw her arms round his neck; "My own brother, how good of you! this is just what I wanted."

"I never yet knew you have anything which was not *just* what you wanted, Ellen. Is there anything in the world you wish for now?"

"No, I am very happy. You none of you give me an opportunity of wishing for anything; as soon as I wish, I have it. You all spoil me."

"I know what I wish," said her brother; "and that is, that I had your secret of finding everything so very comfortable. What is it, little one?"

He had seated himself by her side, and was stroking the hair back from her forehead, while she lay in quiet enjoyment of his gentle touch; but on hearing his last question she raised her large dark eyes, fixing them earnestly on his face for one moment, but



without speaking. She was soon ready for her walk, and, leaning on her brother's arm, let him half carry half lead her out.

"Let us go to the gate, Edward," she said, when they reached the door; "the children will be coming out of school, and I may see some of my little friends."



Page 3

They walked very slowly, and neither spoke for a few moments, till Ellen said, in rather a hurried tone, "I was wrong just now when I told you I never wished for anything; there is one thing I want very much, and which you can never give me."

"What is it?" asked her brother.

"To be able to live over again the twenty years of health which have just passed from me, and to have again all the money I spent in that time."

"Why, my dear Ellen," said Captain Crawford gaily, "you are the last person in the world to say anything of the sort. I am sure the greatest pleasure of your days of health was to take puddings and sixpences to old women; and if that is not a satisfactory way of spending one's time and money, I don't know what is. But really, Ellen," he said, more seriously, as he saw her grave face, "I do not see what reason you have to blame yourself, after such a life as yours has been. I should have thought the recollection of it would now have been your greatest comfort; and that, after taking care of others for so long, you might enjoy being taken care of yourself now. But, my little one! what is the matter?"

Ellen had stopped, and, with her head resting on his shoulder, was sobbing violently.

"Edward, don't!" she said, as soon as she could command herself; "I can't bear it! Think of the handsome allowance papa makes me, and how little of it has been well spent! And then, what was given away did not do a quarter of the good it might have done, because I did not go and give it myself, and kind words with it, which are far more comforting than food or money. And if you will believe me, Edward, extravagance has become such a habit with me, that though I resolved last quarter to be economical and save up something for the new church, I had hardly anything left at the end of it. It is true I did teach at the school a little, and visit a few people, but what is that compared to what I ought to have done?"

By this time they had reached the gate, and Ellen, drying her tears, was soon talking almost merrily with the children, who ran up eagerly at the sight of their former teacher. Edward had forgotten the little Guernsey French he had once known, and stood by, glad to see his favourite sister so happy; but wondering what pleasure she could find in talking to a set of dirty little things like those. Captain Crawford called them dirty, because most officers in her Majesty's service, if they think on the subject at all, think rags and dirtiness necessary attendants on poor children; but if Captain Crawford had looked, he would have seen as clean and *neat* a flock of little ones around his sister as the United Kingdom could produce.

Just as they were going to return to the house a man passed by, and touched his hat to Miss Crawford in the somewhat off-hand manner which (we must confess it) our fellow-countrymen usually employ. Ellen stopped a moment to make some inquiries of him

about his wife and children, and then turned home-wards, saying, as she took her brother's arm,—



Page 4

"I dare say a good dinner would do that man's daughter a world of good; she is ill, and they are very poor: but then there is no way of sending it."

"Where do they live?" asked Edward.

"Oh, it is half-an-hour's walk: they live close to the beach."

"I'll take it," said he; and added, by way of apology, "I should rather like a walk before dinner."

A happy gleam passed over Ellen's face, but she only said,—

"Thank you, Edward," and gave him one very bright look, when he left her on her sofa and went to fetch some meat for the sick girl.

It was with feelings of amusement, rather than anything else, that Edward set out on what was probably the first errand of mercy he had ever undertaken. He had done it merely to please his sister, and could not help laughing at the idea of what some of his brother-officers would say if they could see Crawford of the —— Regiment carrying food to a sick girl. But his conversation with Ellen soon returned to his mind, and the thought struck him, "If my good, unselfish little sister, thinks her time and money have been wasted, what have mine been? According to her, the sixpence which I have occasionally thrown to a beggar to quiet my conscience was only half charity, because I did not add 'kind words,' as she would say. But I wonder what people would say if I were to inquire after the birth, parentage, and education of every street-sweeper I came across? No, my vocation is to defend my Queen and country, and not to act the charitable." Something whispered, "Cannot you do both?" but Edward would not listen, and soon arrived at his destination. The door was opened by the sick girl's mother, who, with her "*Bon jour, monsieur! Entrez, s'il vous plait,*" took Edward rather by surprise, and would by no means hear of receiving the gift outside the door. This was more than he had bargained for; he had come on a message from Ellen, not for a charitable visit on her own account: but there was no alternative, and go in he must. The woman spoke a little English; and while she poured forth her gratitude to Miss Crawford, together with a long account of her daughter's maladies, saying so much in one breath that it became a question whether she would ever breathe again, Captain Crawford looked at the sick girl lying pale and thin by the fire; and when he thought how miserable her lot was compared even with his sister's, whose sufferings were soothed by all that affection could suggest or that money could buy, his heart—for he had a heart, and a warm one too—was touched, and his hand went to the waistcoat pocket where the sixpence had been deposited in the morning. He was disappointed to find so little there, and wondered whether it was worth giving her. "If Ellen were here to add some of her 'kind words,'" he thought, it might do very well; "however, I'll try."

Next time Mrs. Tourtel stopped to take breath he went and stood by the poor girl, and said,—



Page 5

“Miss Crawford is ill too and cannot come to see you, but she often thinks of you. Perhaps this will buy you a small loaf of white bread, as your mother says you cannot eat brown.”

She only said, “*Mercie, monsieur;*” but the bright colour, which spread itself over her pale face at the mention of Ellen’s thought of her, told Edward that he had said the right thing; and with a gentle “Good-by, I hope you will soon be better,” he left the cottage. He walked fast with his head bent, as if to hide his face; but we must run after him, and have a peep at it. He is smiling, and—can it be?—he is blushing! Captain Crawford, who never turned pale before the Russians at Alma or Inkermann, is now blushing scarlet before his own approving conscience and the gratitude of a sick girl. The smile and blush were not gone when he reached home, and Ellen saw both and smiled too, but wisely said nothing. The ice on Edward’s heart was broken; a few “kind words” had flowed out and melted it. He went to sleep that night, and dreamed that angels were saying “kind words” to him; Ellen went to sleep, too, and dreamed of her brother reading the Bible to the dying on a battle-field; and the sick girl lay awake all night, thinking how good it was of Miss Crawford to think of her, and how good of the Captain to tell her so.

The Sixpence had done a good day’s work; had a shilling been in its place, it would probably have failed in accomplishing it; and Captain Crawford, thinking money the best way to the heart of the poor, would never have tasted the joy of soothing sad hearts by kindness. Alas! little Sixpence, that you who have been such a blessing to-day, should become a curse to-morrow; that you who have gone forth on errands of mercy to-day, should dwell in scenes of drunkenness and theft to-morrow!

Early next morning Mrs. Tourtel went to market, and left the Sixpence at a baker’s shop in payment for a white loaf for her daughter. There it spent the day—a quiet day—broken by few events. It might have seen the fresh bread taken out of the oven, and packed in the cart which waited at the door to receive it; and it might have seen many people bustle in and out of the shop, from the little child to buy a penny loaf, to the gentleman’s housekeeper to pay the week’s bill; but it remained undisturbed till the shutters were taken down on the following morning, when a man came to buy a small loaf for his breakfast, and received the Sixpence in change. Appearances were far more against it this time than they had been before. John Barker had an unshaved beard, a scowling eye, and a red face; his dress consisted of a blue woollen shirt, coarse blue trousers grimed in mud, and a low-crowned black hat; on his shoulder he carried a spade and pickaxe. As he walked along he was joined by others of an equally unprepossessing appearance, and found many more already assembled at the scene of their labours—the new harbour.



Page 6

The sun was not yet risen, and a mist hung over the sea, through which the signal-post at Castle Cornet, and the masts of the vessels in the roads, were the only objects visible; but there was a faint red streak in the sky, which grew brighter and brighter every moment, till the sunrise gun fired; and then the mist changed into a golden veil, which floated insensibly away, leaving every geranium-leaf outside the windows white with hoar-frost, just to tantalise the townsfolk more distant islands became just visible, mingling the blue of the sea and the violet of the sky so mysteriously in their delicate colouring, that they were scarcely distinguishable from either. And then the carts began to roll along the quay, and work commenced on board the ships in the harbour, and the sailors' cry as they hoisted the sails, mingled with the rattling of chains and the creaking of the cranes outside the stores. At about nine o'clock up ran the ball at the signal-post, which announced the approach of the mail-boat, and as she steamed behind the Castle, and anchored in the roads, there were hasty embraces and shakes of the hand on the pier, and the passengers were rowed out to embark. A few minutes, and the tinkling of a bell was heard from the shore; another—one more; her wheels were turning, she was off for Southampton, and the passengers from Jersey were landing at the quay.

All this, and much more, might John Barker have seen, and probably he did see it, but found nothing beautiful or exciting in it. He did not hold his breath as that cutter approached and ran between the pier-heads, her sail dipping in the wave which bore her in. He saw it a dozen times that day, and had seen it a hundred times before, but never cared to see it again. He worked sullenly on, exchanging few words with his fellow-labourers, till the twilight compelled them to shoulder their tools; and they then made their way, alas! to the many public-houses near, and one of them we must enter with John Barker, and see the Sixpence, that little messenger of good—that talent committed to his care—far worse than wasted by its responsible owner. Happily, the payment was not long delayed, and glad shall we be to hide our eyes and stop our ears from all that goes on without in the till with our little friend.

It is about midnight, the noisy guests are gone, the people of the house are in bed, and we may now venture forth from our hiding-place to look through the chink in the door. It is a clear frosty night. The moon, just rising, is brightly reflected in the water. The stars are looking silently down on the sleeping town. Castle Cornet rises gloomily out of the sea. The moonlit sky, which shows us its outline only, leaves much to the imagination. We may fancy it a frowning fortress of modern days; or we may go back two hundred years, and think we see the ruin which told of its nine-years' siege. But we would rather think of Castle Cornet as we know it now, with its old keep standing as a monument of



Page 7

bygone days; or better still, we would thank the rising moon for veiling it in such solemn mystery, and would let our fancy share the rest which seems to pervade all around, while we enjoy the perfect stillness. There is not a sound, except the ripple of the water. Houses, streets, ships, men, women, and children, all seem resting peacefully in the silent night. But, hark! there was a sound of cracking from the window! Again and again we hear it, and whispering too outside. A few moments more, and the window is opened, and two men have crept in. They are some of the guests of the evening come to recover thus what they and their companions have wasted here to-night, that they may have it to waste once more. The till was quickly rifled, and at a slight noise overhead the thieves beat a precipitate retreat, and, in their haste, dropped our Sixpence in the street outside. Happy little Sixpence! to have escaped such hands; better to lie on the cold, hard pavement, curtailed by the freezing air, than stay to be used as the fruits of theft invariably are.

It was only just light when a little girl, whose rosy cheeks told that the country air had kissed them that morning, passed by with a basket on her arm nearly as big as herself. Her bright eyes soon spied the little piece of money, and with a dart she caught it up; but, like an honest girl, looked round to see if any one had dropped it. There was nobody near but a dirty, good-tempered-looking coalheaver, who, seeing her perplexity, said, "It must have been there all night, for nobody but me has passed this morning; so you may keep it, if you like." Quite content, she tripped away with her basket to join her mother in the market, and tell of her good fortune.

Being a wise little maiden, Mary Falla did not spend her money that day, but took it home all safe and sound, to gain time for consideration on so important a subject. No selfish thoughts mingled with her calculations, and therefore she very soon came to the decision that it should go towards a pair of stockings for her grandmother; and happy in the hope of giving pleasure, she only longed for the accumulation of a little store sufficient to buy the necessary materials, and enable her to begin her work. But even sixpences are not to be picked up every day, and when a month had passed, only one penny had been added to the fund. Just at this time there was a sermon one Sunday morning for the same new church of which Miss Crawford had spoken to her brother. Mrs. Falla was one of the few who were to be found regularly in their places in church; and Mary, who was always with her mother, heard the sermon. We cannot boast of our little heroine that she always listened to the sermon; sometimes she did not understand it, sometimes she did not find it interesting; but this sermon she did find interesting, and liked very much, for it was about a church which she saw every day of her life; and it told how much the church was wanted by sick and old people who could



Page 8

not reach the parish church; and Mary knew she liked to go to church, and was very sorry for her old grandmother, and many others whom she had heard regret the distance. As they walked home she seemed to have something very interesting to think about, for she dropped behind, and kept her eyes fixed on the ground in a manner most unusual with this merry little maiden; at last, however, she settled the question to her own satisfaction, and ran up to her mother,—

“*Ma mere*, don’t you think I had better give my sixpence to the new church? Grandmother would rather have a church near to go to, than a pair of stockings next winter, I’m sure; and it would do good to so many other people besides.”

“As you like, *ma chere*,” answered her mother: “it is your own money.”

Not many days after this, there was a knock at the door after Mary had returned from school, and Captain Crawford entered, now no stranger in the cottages round, for the last few weeks had worked a wonderful change in this respect. The first time he did a kindness to the poor, it was because he could not help it; the second time it was because he had found it pleasant; but the third time there was a shade of another motive mingling with it. Ellen had told him why she was always happy; she had told him where he might learn the way to be happy too better than she could teach him. He had taken her advice, had read the Bible, and now was humbly endeavouring to obey its commands; and in conformity to his sister’s entreaty, not to misspend his days of health, scarcely a day was now permitted to pass without his doing something for the good of his fellow-creatures. He always told the poor that he was come on a message from his sister, lest they should be inclined to be grateful to him, and make him blush, as the sick girl had done. Some questioned, however, whether Miss Crawford told him always to add a franc or two to the gift which she sent; or whether Miss Crawford dictated to him all the “kind words” which now made him so welcome a visitor; and when the old blind man complained of having no one to read to him, and Captain Crawford took the Bible and read him “*deux superbes chapitres*,” he was quite sure that Miss Crawford had nothing at all to do with it.

His present visit to Mary’s grandmother was to tell her that ten pounds had been collected the Sunday before for the new church; and that as some handsome contributions had been since received, he hoped she would soon see it finished. Mary ran away as soon as she had let him in, and soon came back with cheeks as red as fire, eyes cast down, and something clasped very tight in her hand, looking altogether much more like a thief than the good, honest little Mary that she was. But when Captain Crawford got up to go away, she went to him, and as he stooped to hear what she had to say, she repeated very quick, in a very low voice, the little speech she had prepared in her best English: “Please to give dat to Miss Crawford, to go for the new church dat’s being builded.” Happy Mary! how full of love that little heart was! how it rejoiced in

giving pleasure! and how she did wish that she was rich, that she might make everybody comfortable!



Page 9

“Here is a contribution to the church, my little one,” said Edward, when he reached home, “which I think you will agree with me is worth more than all the five-pound notes we have received. Sixpence from Mary Falla!”

“Dear little Mary! Put it into the church-bag, Edward. If our church could be all built with such sixpences as those—”

And in the church-bag we must leave the Sixpence, resting a little while before it goes forth again on its errands of joy and sorrow, of blessing and cursing.

There was a little stone in the church-tower far more precious than all the rest. It was not a cut stone; it did not sparkle in the bright sun which shone on the consecration-day; none of the colours of the ruby, emerald, or amethyst, beamed from it; it was a richer gem than they—the gift of a willing heart.

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