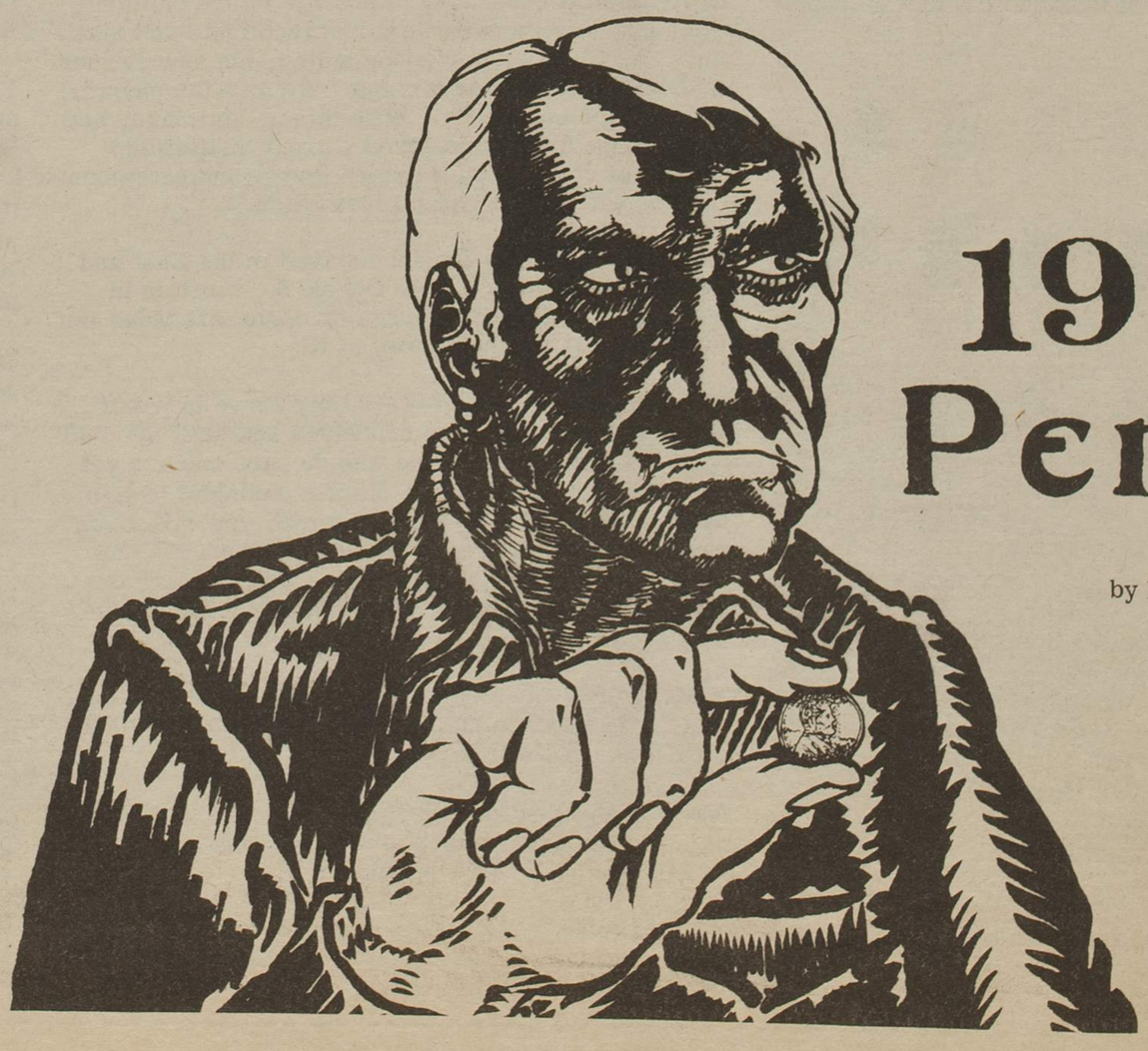
# 1923 Penny

by Hobert Parker, Jr.



The expertly painted sign with red letters--readable from half a block away--on the side of the yellow moving van said:

HANK'S MOVING SERVICE
IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE IT
BE FRANK
CALL HANK
DAY OR NIGHT 266-5250

The flags on top of Fraser Hall about two miles away to the west were flapping in the mild summer breeze as the driver closed the rear doors and padlocked them. There was no traffic on the street or pedestrians on the sidewalk. A shutter, on the front of one of the many deserted houses, banged against a wall. The grass on lawns, long uncared for, had turned brown. Occasionally a homeless cat or dog would wander, undisturbed, in and around the houses. The moving van had just been loaded with furniture, kitchen appliances, old newspapers, memorabilia, cooking utensils, books, magazines, silverware, clothing and other miscellaneous household items taken from the large white weather-beaten house. It was the last house to be vacated to make way for the new roadway. Behind the van, looking for a news story, was a reporter in a car with a TV station sign on the side. Behind the TV station car was a police car and two policemen sent there in case of trouble.

Hank, the husky, heavily-tanned, partially bald, forty-year-old van owner and operator dusted his hands off by clapping them together with a sliding motion. He was tired as he slowly walked over and plopped down on the running board, and waited for the owner of the house, and old man, who had asked if he could have a ride to his new house. Hank glanced at his watch. The time was 2:45. It had taken him and his slender, dark-haired. bearded,25-year-old helper, named Mark, five hours and forty-five minutes to load the contents of the house into the van. Mark sat down on the curb in front of Hank. Hank wiped his sweaty brow with a red, bargain-store handkerchief, lit a cigarette, looked at Mark and said, "Glad that's over. Sure wish I hadda beer now. Sonuvabitch, it's hot!"

"Yeah, a beer would be great. Want me to go get a six-pack?" Mark asked.

"No, that's alright. We can pick some up on the way."

Hank continued to sit on the running board and smoke. His cigarette burned to a stub. He took out another one and lit it with the butt before throwing it aside. He took a deep drag and silently looked at the ground with his elbows resting on his knees, as if he was in deep thought. Mark sat on the curb, with his eyes closed, catching his breath. Hank was barely winded. He was an "old hand" at moving furniture. Occasionally he would flick the ashes off of his cigarette.

Hank looked up and began to inspect the recently emptied one-story house. It was old but solid. The peeling white paint gave it a weather-beaten look. The ends of some branches of an oak tree brushed against the eave on the south side. There were several shingles that needed replacing along with a few window and door screens.

"Hell, it ain't bad," thought Hank. "If it had a little work and money put into it, it would be a damn good house. Some of these newer ones don't last nearly as long."

Hank looked at Mark and asked, "When the old man asked if he could ride with us, how long did he say he'd take?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes, he said."

Hank glanced at his watch and muttered, "Sure hope the old geezer hurries up, we gotta go!" He looked sideways at the police car and the TV station car, knowing why they were there. Then his voice took on an edge and became a little louder, "You know...it's shit like this that I hate. I don't like it but I gotta make a living too. Goddamn politicians!"

To emphasize his point, Hank kicked contemptously at a rock on the pavement. Mark nodded his head in agreement, shrugged his shoulders and sighed, "Yeah, I know."

In the basement of the house the former owner, a widower, was taking a last look at what had been his home. He was thin, old, grey-haired and slightly stooped. He stopped at a corner, leaned on his cane with his left hand and adjusted his glasses. In front of him, lying on the floor, he saw one of his dead wife's dresses that he had overlooked. He got down on his knees and picked it up. The doctor had warned him not to bend over. He examined the dress carefully. His wife had worn it before she had become pregnant, in 1927, with their third son. There were a few moth holes in it. He poked a finger through one of them as he began to reminisce. A grin covered his face and "Well, I'll be darned! Don't that beat all! ...Sonuvagun!...This is the one that Martha was wearing that Saturday morning when the kids were out playing."

He looked toward the wall where the old couch had been and continued to talk to himself. "Yeah. She protested and slapped my hands at first and never would admit it but I always knew she enjoyed it."

The old man decided to take the dress along. Holding it in his right hand and using his cane with his left hand, he stood up. The effort winded him so he rested for a couple of minutes. Then he looked up at the floor joists. They were thick and heavy. He could see that they were as solid as they were the day he put them in --back in '23. He looked over at a crayoned tick-tack-toe game on the wall about four feet from the concrete floor. "One of the grandkids must have done it, he thought. Martha never would've let it stay there if she'd seen it."

"Wonder which one it was?" he muttered. "Wish they were here now." Tears came into his eyes and he walked over and began slowly climbing the stairs. To do this the old man had to put his cane and left foot on the step then raise his right foot to the same step and repeat the process until he got to the top of the stairs. Then he leaned against the side of the door frame for five minutes and rested before walking into his former kitchen. He looked at the sink and remembered the time that Sharon, his youngest daughter, had chased Billy through the kitchen and knocked the pan of chocolate pudding off the drain board.

"Damn was Martha mad," he said to himself as he remembered how she had paddled and sent them to bed without any supper. "Damn was she mad," he added.

A square pile of dust lay where the refrigerator that he had bought in 1956 had been. Martha never would've allowed that, he thought. She was the damndest cleaner I ever saw, and the prettiest, he remembered affectionately.

The old man walked through the open doorway into the dining room. He took his package of chewing tobacco out of his pocket and put some into his mouth. The door knob was still missing. It had fallen off about a year after Martha died sixteen years before and he had never felt the need to replace it. In a large circle were scratches made by seven chairs. He rubbed the tip of his cane across the scratches. Then he walked into his two sons former bedroom. Over by the window was where their bunkbed had been. He smiled as he remembered all the times that he had had to break up fights at night and then come back in ten minutes and tell them to stop laughing and go to sleep.

The old man relieved himself in the bathroom between his two sons' and three daughters' bedrooms. He didn't flush the commode because the water had been turned off the day before. "What the hell does it matter now," he thought. "Tommorow they'll be tearing it down!" But his mood soon changed and he chuckled as he remembered the many times that his sons had become impatient and angry because his daughters had spent too much time primping.

Next he walked into Martha's and his bedroom. In the corner was where the baby crib had been. All five of his children had slept in it. At the end of the crib, by the other wall, had been their double bed which Martha had made up every day unless she had been sick. The old man walked on into the living room--the memories of their late-night laughter, talks and lovemaking, too painful to continue recalling.

In the living room between where the rocking chair had been and the wall was where Jimmy had bled on the carpet when he cut his foot. Martha had put iodine on the cut and bandaged it and never once complained as she washed the carpet. The old man looked over where their living room couch had sat near the window and remembered all the times after he had retired that Martha had fussed at him for "having just one more glass of wine." He said aloud, "If only she was here now, I'd let her do all the fussing she wanted." Tears came again to his eyes.

He looked at the front door and his eyes lit up. I wonder if it's still there, he thought. After he had built the house, Martha had put a new 1923 penny on top of the door jamb. Every time she had dusted--which was often--she had replaced it.

He locked around for something to climb on to see if it was still there. There wasn't anything suitable in the bare room. Leaning against the wall was a broom that the movers had overlooked. The old man put Martha's dress on the front door knob and raked the broom straws across the top of the door jamb. A penny clattered to the floor. He got down on his knees, arthritis paining him, picked up the penny and examined it before putting it in his pocket. Using his cane with his left hand, he stood up and rested while he looked around the room.

Looking at the bare walls caused him to become angry. "Goddamnit," he thought, "I paid taxes on this place for fifty years. These young whippersnappers that are kicking me out now weren't even born when I built this house. There weren't any paved streets, sewers or electricity then. Whenever they raised the taxes, I always paid. Never once did I complain."

The old man's face became flushed and his eyes blazed. He began to talk to himself again. "Always was loyal to my country and did my duty. Goddamnit, I slogged through the mud in France and went without food and water for three days in the Argonne Forest. And this is what I get in return." He waved his arm with a sweeping motion.

He needed to spit out some tobacco juice. "They'll be tearing it down tomorrow," he thought. So he spat on the floor and kicked the screen door open and walked out on the porch. He saw the moving van, the police car, the TV station car and the state-owned car. About a block away was a bulldozer that would tear his home down the next day to make way for the bypass. The old man began to gasp for breath and there was a pounding in his chest. Quickly he took a glycerin pill. After he had calmed down, he walked down the stairs, still carrying Martha's dress.

The old man looked at the police car and snorted, "Wonder if they thought I'd give 'em any trouble," as he chuckled softly to himself.

At the bottom of the stairs, the young TV reporter was waiting on the sidewalk with a tape recorder slung over his shoulder and a microphone in his hand.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to the old man. "You are the last person to leave this neighborhood. Would you like to say anything?" he asked thrusting the microphone in the old man's face.

The old man looked the reporter in the eye, became angry again and began to express himself, but stopped. Instead he reached into his pocket, took out the old penny, grasped the reporter's hand, pressed the coin into his palm and shuffled--without looking back at the astonished reporter--over to where Mark and Hank were waiting beside the van. They helped him into the cab, got in themselves, and drove away.