

**A Freak of Fortune**

By RALPH HAMILTON

"A penny for your thoughts, Wilbur," spoke pretty Erna Barton, and the somber face of Wilbur, evidencing a mood of profound meditation, brightened up magically, as always did when this charming girl was beside him.

"Am I sure of the compensation offered?" challenged the young man lightly.

"There!" and Erna pressed an old battered copper coin into his hand. "Now confess, sir! Not only do I reward you with the conventional penny, but I present what may be a rare coin."

"So rare and old that its inscription is fairly undecipherable," replied Wilbur. "It seems to wear the green and grime of the centuries."

"I found it among a lot of relics of the olden, olden time that poor dear grandfather so cherished," explained Erna. "He also left some old pieces of delttware and ancient firearms."

"I shall keep the coin always, Erna," said Wilbur. "I hope it will be a guardian of good fortune."

"But what about the pay?" inquired Erna, archly. "I bought your thoughts—what were they?"

"Well, Erna," answered Wilbur, his glance softening and replete with sentiment, "I was thinking how dearly I loved you when I came home for the holiday vacation."

Erna's fair golden head dropped, but she drew nearer to him on the porch seat.

"And how much more I love you now," continued Wilbur seriously. "And when I come home next summer I hope I can add to it all by asking you to become my wife."

"I hope so," said Erna spontaneously, lifting her clear, honest eyes to meet his own, "but you must not think of that until you are sure that little Erna and I will not be a burden to you. All grandfather has left us is this little place, and some money is on that."

"I hope to be able to clear up everything and more," spoke Wilbur confidently. "Send your sweet, best wishes after me when I go back to work in the city, that I may find some way of earning more money than I do now."

"Be patient, dear," soothed Erna encouragingly. "Our ship is sure to come in some day, and it will be the more precious for the waiting."

Wilbur was employed in a brokerage office. Opportunity came to him through this business connection of making money, but he had no capital to invest. About two weeks after his return to the city a close friend, Paul Warfield, dropped into his room at the boarding house.

"I wish I had a thousand dollars, Wilbur," he said. "I've got a tip that would make me a fortune in a month."

Wilbur smiled incredulously. He had always kept away from tips and speculative propositions generally, and, besides, he realized that Warfield was a good deal of a dreamer.

"Don't laugh at me, Wilbur," said Paul. "This is no wild fantasy, but a sure thing."

"Some stock on the boom, eh?" "Nothing of the sort. It's a sure prospect, with a sound, substantial basis. It's land—land that never decays, never burns up, never wears out. Wall street can't play with it."

"What do you mean?" "I mean prospect?" intimated Wilbur quizzically.

"No, Wilbur, it's an eight-acre strip and last week on the next forty a prospector made a strike. He sealed the well, and is trying to keep his discovery quiet until he can interest some capitalist to buy up all the other land in the vicinity. The very choicest is the piece I have a chance to buy. My old aunt is willing to invest half of the money required. Couldn't you raise the other five hundred in some way, Wilbur?"

"Oh, yes, sure; certainly!" derided Wilbur. "See," and he emptied his pocket of the few coins it held. "I might buy a hundredth part of an acre," and just then one of the coins slipped through his careless fingers and rolled against Paul's foot.

The latter picked it up to restore it to its owner. Then with a profound stare and a voluble: "Hello! Where did you ever get that?" He held close to the light the copper penny Erna Barton had given to Wilbur. He rubbed it, took out a magnifying glass and added: "Say, did you know that you have a treasure?"

"What do you mean?" questioned Wilbur.

"Why, that this is a Clarendon penny of the period of King Stephen, probably one of the rarest coins in the world, centuries old. Will you let me take it to an old collector I know? I'll be back in an hour."

The hour was just up when Paul, excited and breathless, returned. "One of the only two known!" he fairly shouted. "The other is in the British museum. I have an offer of six hundred dollars."

"Take it!" cried Wilbur impulsively, "and use five hundred dollars of it for your wonderful speculation."

Which turned out just as Paul had predicted. There was a later division of twenty thousand dollars' profits, and Wilbur Gray went back to his native village to make Erna Barton the happiest girl in the world.



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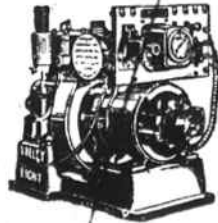
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Stage jokes are evidently made of kind words, for they never die.