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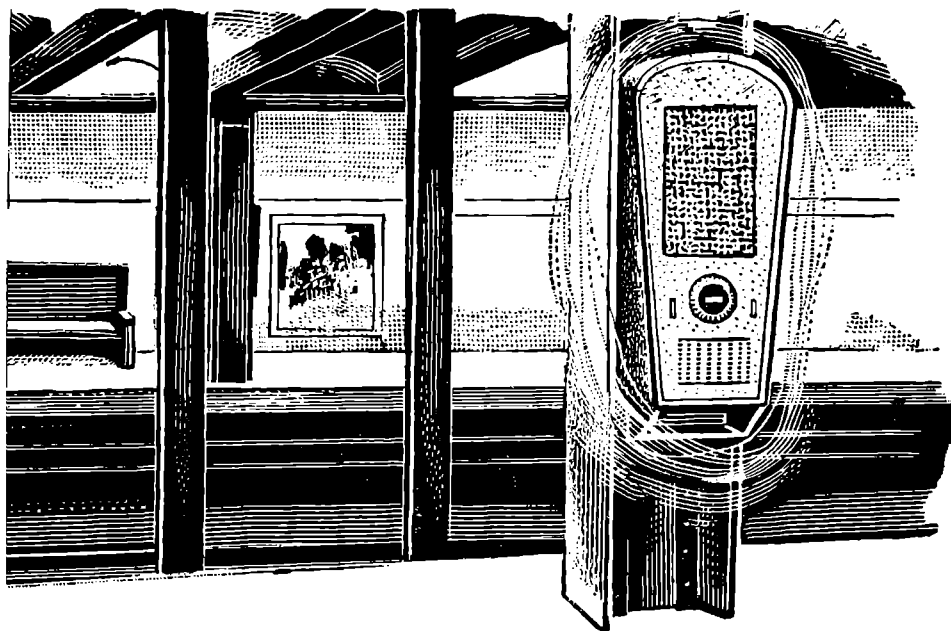


THE COLLECTORS

By GORDON DEWEY

On the bus this morning you reach for a dime to pay the fare. Only there is no dime. A couple of quarters, a nickel, four pennies and a trouser button. But that can't be right! You distinctly remember having at least three dimes mixed in with your change. The fact that there's no hole in your pocket is final proof: your memory has played you a dirty trick!

Maybe this never happened to you. But it has to us, as well as to a lot of other people. Absent-mindedness, or is there a more sinister reason? Gordon Dewey, who's been losing too much money lately, comes up with a startling explanation!



Illustrator: Harry Rosenbaum

FRED LOWRY stood before the mirror on the wall of his apartment living room. Gaze attentively fixed on his reflection, he repeated the words, even-spacing them in a firm, determined tone: "I am a methodical man."

He watched his lips move in the mirrored image; heard his voice clearly, distinctly. Perhaps it was a bit louder than normal, perhaps slightly more emphatic; but there was no lack of his customary preciseness of enunciation.

He seated himself again at his little desk, then, convinced that

there was nothing wrong with him. He knew what he was doing. He underscored that mentally.

Nevertheless, there were the figures. His own daily records did not lie. Somewhere, somehow, during the day, fifty cents had disappeared from his pocket.

And this was not the first time.

He spread out his records for the past ten days, adjusted his desk lamp to shed an even illumination over them. It had happened every day. Except last Sunday—he'd stayed in that day. Each night, when he recorded his expenditures for the day and

balanced them against his cash-in-pocket at the starting of the day, there was a discrepancy. It had never happened before.

Fred Lowry never lost anything, never misplaced anything, never spent a cent that he could not account for. His earnings, to the last penny, were recorded in his personal account books. His spendings, to the last penny, even to computation of sales tax, were efficiently distributed in his books of account. His monthly trial balances always worked out accurately.

He looked around the apartment. The shelves of books were in orderly precision — he knew where each book belonged on the shelves, and each book was in its place. Every piece of furniture in the room was placed for the most efficient utilization of the available space. In one corner stood a file cabinet. In its drawers reposed his correspondence and other records, each item exactly where it should be.

Fred Lowry was a methodical man.

But now he was both puzzled and annoyed. He turned back to his daily records, examined them searchingly once again.

This time he noted something which he'd missed at first. There seemed to be a correlation between the missing sum, each day, and the amount of money he'd

started out with. He made some rapid calculations, and was even more incredulous.

Roughly, his shortage approximated ten per cent, day after day. If he started out with ten dollars, a dollar, or a little more or a little less, could not be accounted for at night. If he started out with five dollars, from forty to sixty cents would be missing.

It looked as though he were being — tithed!

Lowry leaned back in his chair, uttered a short, nervous laugh which was not a laugh. The sound of it punctuated his unease.

If he were a religious man, he supposed that he would tithe, faithfully giving ten per cent of his earnings to the Church. But he wasn't; and he resented *being* tithed. If that was it. He shook himself in annoyance. This was silly — but there it was, in black and white, in his own handwriting: each day ten per cent of the money in his pockets had vanished.

To add to his irritation, there was no ledger account in his books to absorb either miscellaneous losses or gains. He had never needed one. He was a methodical man.

He pursed his lips meditatively, gazing off into space. Then, coming to a sudden resolution, he began to move swiftly, purposefully.

Gathering up the records, he

placed them in precise order by date, clipped them together, and attached a bit of note paper to the bundle on which he wrote, with pen and ink, in his neat book-keeper's hand: "Pending — out of balance." Then he pulled open the top drawer of the desk, placed the bundle in the lower right corner, taking care not to disturb the arrangement in the drawer, and carefully closed it so that the edges of the drawer did not protrude beyond the frame of the desk.

Then he locked the drawer and tested it to be sure that it was indeed locked.

Pushing back his chair, Fred Lowry got to his feet. In his mind was the determined resolve to go into this tomorrow, and somehow find out where and how and why he was being relieved — he thought of it that way — of a little money each day. He knew he was not losing it, nor spending it unaccountably. There was only the one alternative: it was being taken from him. It had to be that way. That, too, was impossible — but there it was.

But wait! Why not do it tonight? If it happened in the daytime — if it happened at all — might it not happen just as readily one time as another? *No time like the present*, he reminded himself wryly. That motto, along with others like "Do it now," "It is later than you think,"

"Don't say it, write it," "A place for everything and everything in its place," was posted at a strategic spot in the office where he worked.

He emptied his pockets on the desk. Everything. Money, keys, cigarettes, wallet, notebook, pen and pencil, lighter — the works. Then he examined each pocket with meticulous thoroughness. There were no holes.

He replaced everything in his pockets, except the money — loose change and wallet — and his notebook and pencil. There were a five and two ones in the wallet. Opening the notebook to unused facing pages, he recorded that fact on the left page, checked the wallet again, to be sure, and replaced it in his hip pocket. He buttoned the pocket flap securely, and checked that.

From a small cash box which he took out of another drawer of his desk, he added coins to those from his pocket, to make, with the banknotes in his wallet, a total of ten dollars. He recounted it to preclude any possibility of error.

In his notebook he recorded the change: three halves, four quarters, three dimes, three nickels, five pennies. Total, ten dollars. He put the money in his pocket. On another slip of paper he made a duplicate of the money record in his notebook, noted the date and the time on it, put the

duplicate record in the cash box, relocked the box and returned it to the desk drawer.

Then he simply sat there for several minutes turning the matter over in his mind, searching for any possible flaw in his plan, examining it for either improvement or for a possible better course of action.

At last he snapped off the desk light, got up, put on his hat and coat, and checked his wrist watch against the time on his electric desk clock. They agreed.

He left a floor lamp burning, then gave the apartment a quick once-over. Except for the lighted lamp, everything was just as it would normally be, if it were morning and he were leaving for work.

He picked up the notebook and pencil from his desk, walked to the door and opened it. Then, on the page facing the money record in his notebook, he made a terse entry: Left apartment, 10:50 P.M., \$10.00.

Closing and locking the door behind him, he left the building and walked briskly to the bus stop. Here he checked his money again, counting it carefully, and made another entry in his notebook: Bus stop, 10:58 P.M., \$10.00.

He had to wait longer than usual — the buses did not run as often this late at night as they did during the day. The cool night air

felt good on his face, and there was the perfume of night-blooming flowers threading through the light breeze. Overhead the stars struggled against the glowing nimbus of the city at night. There was no moon.

A few sleepy birds, in nearby trees, talked over the day's events — and then the bus, a yellow-eyed glaring monster, tires swishing on the pavement, pulled up to the stop and Fred Lowry boarded it.

He dropped twenty cents into the till box and found a seat. There were only two other passengers — this time of night most persons would be going away from the city, not toward it. Lowry frowned. For the purposes of his test he would have preferred a packed bus with only standing room left.

He made another entry in his notebook: Bus, 11:16 P.M., 20¢. He counted his money. So far so good. He had nine dollars and eighty cents left. He recorded that on the cash record side of the notebook pages.

Step by step, as he made his way to the office building where he worked, he recorded time and expenditures, painstakingly checking his remaining cash at each point. At the subway stop; as he boarded the subway; as he left it. At the cafeteria, where he ordered a breakfast he did not want and barely touched.

He signed the night register in the lobby of the office building — this too was a deviation from the daytime pattern, but it couldn't be helped, of course. He got on the elevator and said "Eleven" as it started upward.

The night watchman eyed him curiously. "Working late tonight, sir?" he asked.

"Just remembered something I had to check," Lowry replied, using what he hoped was a casual tone. "Getting close to the end of the month, you know."

"That's right. . . . Here's your floor, sir."

Fred Lowry unlocked his office door, entered, switched on the lights, hung up his hat and coat, and went directly to his desk and sat down. Turning on his desk lamp, he checked his record. So far he had spent one dollar and thirty-seven cents. He should have eight dollars and sixty-three cents left. He counted the money. Right. So far, then, everything was as usual.

He thought about himself, tried to sort out his feelings. No apprehension, no tension, no foreboding — not one thing could he feel that was different from, say, what it would be if he were here at his desk, at nine in the morning, on a regular work day.

He spread out some papers, flipped the cover off his calculator, lit a cigarette, and went through the motions of doing some work.

Presently he went out, rang for the elevator, told the watchman as they descended to street level that he would be back soon, and at the dairy lunch where he always ate he ordered a sandwich he didn't want. But he paid for it — breaking the five-dollar bill this time — and drank the coffee he ordered with it.

Back in his office, he checked his records and cash again. Still nothing missing. He went through the motions of some more work, then replaced the papers neatly in his desk, put the cover back over the calculator, checked his money once more, put on his hat and coat, locked the office and left the building, signing out on the way out.

At the station where he left the subway on his way home, everything still checked. Still no shortage.

He went up to the bus stop, sat down on the bench and waited. He was disgusted with the whole business by now. Nothing had happened. Conditions were wrong, that's what was the matter. No crowds. Maybe in crowds someone had been picking his pockets. But for pennies? That hardly made good sense. Maybe in busy restaurants he had been short-changed — the five-dollar bill he used in the dairy lunch had been an invitation. But not enough people around — no one would try a hold-out unless

crowds were pushing him along.

Well, it had been a good try.

Half-heartedly, while waiting for the bus, he checked his pockets once more. A plan was no good unless one followed through on it. But he'd been the sole passenger to alight from the subway; he'd met no one either on the platform, on the steps to the street, or from the subway entrance to the bus stop. No other person was waiting for a bus. So obviously there was no chance for any money to disappear.

He was seventy-five cents short!

Suddenly excited, alert, blood pounding in his ears, he counted his money again, slowly, with scrupulous care. The bus came, paused, and went on — he was scarcely aware of it.

There were six dollars and fifty-eight cents in his pockets: the notebook record showed that there should be seven dollars and thirty-three cents.

Somewhere, seventy-five cents had vanished!

He sat there stiffly upright, tense, searching his memory of the past few hours. Yes, he could recall every time he had handled money, had spent it, how much, and for what. The record was accurate, according to his recollection. Those factors checked out.

His balance had been correct just before he left the subway — there was the last entry: Leave subway, 2:44 A.M., \$7.33.

Somewhere, then, between the platform and the bus stop, seventy-five cents somehow had left his possession. Not stolen; no pocket picking — he'd met no one, seen no one. So, he lost it. He looked for the hole in his pocket. No hole. Still . . .

He was on his feet, retracing his steps, peering searchingly at the sidewalk, the pavement, the steps as he followed them back down to the subway platform, the platform itself. Every crack, every corner, every cranny. Maybe a grating? But there wasn't one. Just bare concrete. Nothing else. No place for a coin to hide. No coins.

And now Fred Lowry began to feel something disturbingly akin to fear. This time he had some feelings to sort out. And he didn't like what he sorted. Money just did not vanish like that, in a sane world. No trained investigator could have kept closer tab on his movements, on the handling of his funds, than had Fred Lowry this night.

He heard the *click-clack* of nimble feet coming down the steps, the *tap-tap* of high heels as she came toward him where he stood near the edge of the platform. He turned, looked her over very deliberately.

She swerved somewhat away from him, flushing, and her chin went a little higher.

Lowry found himself wondering about her. It was late. Had she been working until this hour? Been to a party, maybe? What time did she have to get up in the morning? It reminded him that there wasn't much time left for his own sleeping; he'd better call it a night.

The girl was young, not more than twenty-two, Fred guessed. Well built, slender. Not a beauty, but definitely on the nice-looking side. Nice firm features. You could see that she knew her way around — the right way.

She was peering past him into the murk of the tunnel. He found himself listening with her, but there was no tell-tale humming of the rails to herald the approach of a train.

She walked past him, not seeming to avoid him, but it was there. He felt that he could understand how it was with her — a girl and a strange man alone on a deserted subway platform. Sure, she'd be watchful.

He kept his eyes on her as she reached the end of the platform, hesitated, then turned and started back. She stayed near the tunnel wall, studiously avoiding a meeting of their eyes. Lowry knew that she knew that he was watching her.

He saw the sudden veer she made toward the recess in the wall. There was something in there—he couldn't quite make

it out from where he stood.

But he could see her actions clearly enough. She opened her purse, took out a wisp of bright blue cloth, reached in again and brought out some coins.

Then she moved closer to the alcove, and now he could see that it was a vending machine she faced, almost hidden in the dimness of the recess where it had been placed. She dropped several coins into the machine, put the rest back in her purse, stuffed the blue handkerchief in also, and snapped her purse shut. The sound of the snap seemed magnified in the deserted underground.

Fred Lowry felt that quick alertness tingle through him again. The girl was walking away from the machine toward him; and as she came closer he felt certain that the bright vitality of her face was dimmed as though with a thin film of — what?

Quickly deciding, he moved forward to intercept her.

"Excuse me —" he began, not liking the approach, but unable to put his tongue to a better opening.

She paused, looked at him with no sure expression on her face, a touch of not-quite awareness in her eyes.

"Forgive me, but — well, I saw you put coins in the machine. You didn't get anything out. I thought if it were stuck . . ."

Sudden expression, aliveness,

flooded back into her face, awareness into her eyes. She stared at him a moment, shook her head uncertainly, started to walk past him.

Fred Lowry felt his face getting red, knew his best course was to let it go. He persisted, doggedly. "I mean," he stammered, "you — you —"

She whirled to face him, angry annoyance in her eyes. "Look, mister!" The words were clipped. "Guys like you —" As suddenly as it came, her anger subsided, giving way to an almost-twinkle in her eyes. "Okay, I'll play it out with you. *What machine?*"

Lowry felt the rebuff, felt the rebuke, did not like being laughed at. "Seriously, Miss, I wasn't trying to — well . . . suppose we just skip it." It was his turn to be dignified.

Again the girl shook her head, and a little frown creased her brow. "You *seem* all right," she said, eyes searching his face intently. "But I didn't put any coins in a machine. What machine are you talking about?"

He pointed to the alcove, and her gaze swung to it as he told her: "You walked over to that machine. You opened your purse. You took out a bright blue handkerchief. Then you took out some money, dropped coins in the machine, and walked away from it. You didn't get anything for your money — you didn't wait

to see if anything came out."

The frown came back to her face. "I do have a sample of bright blue cloth in my purse — it's *not* a hanky. But I haven't had it open since I left the turnstile."

He stared at her. "One of us is kidding one of us. . . . Okay, if that's the way you want it."

He could have sworn that she was sincere, but — He half-turned away from her.

"Wait!" Her voice was low, almost pleading; her hand light on his arm. "I don't know how you knew about the blue cloth — I could, I suppose, have snapped my purse open and shut without thinking. . . . But I certainly did *not* go anywhere near that gum machine!"

"But I saw you . . . Hey! Hold on! *Gum machine?*" Taking her by the arm, he led her nearer to the alcove, to a point where the machine was clearly visible. "Gum machine? That's a cigarette machine!"

The anger was back in her voice. "All right. Buster," she snapped. "A joke's a joke, but this one isn't even funny. That's a gum machine. . . . Besides, I'll prove it to you. Even if your story is correct, I don't smoke. So what would I be doing putting money in a cigarette machine?"

Suddenly everything clicked!

Lowry had his problem; he had his answer. And a bigger problem

now began to take its place.

At least, now he knew where his missing money had gone, for whatever that was worth.

He narrowed his eyes, looked at the machine, *saw* it. Unobtrusive.

The blood was singing in his ears again as Lowry, feeling an edgy curiosity, walked toward the machine.

He was facing the girl, walking toward her. There was bewilderment on her face. And the hint of a smile, mostly on the lips. The eyes were grave, wary, definitely disturbed.

"You do make your points," she said. "Is that just the way you claim I did it?"

"Did what?"

"Are you serious? You said you saw me drop some coins into that machine, then walk away from it without getting anything for my money." She laughed, mirthlessly. "Neither of us will get rich this way."

He stared at her.

He had been going toward the machine. Then he was facing the girl — he could not remember getting close to the machine. . . . He eyed it moodily. This thing could be — was — dangerous.

While the girl watched him with faint amusement on her face, Fred Lowry counted his money. Five dollars and ninety-three cents! Another sixty-five cents vanished!

He shook his head. "I — what

did I do? What goes on, anyhow?"

"You walked over to the machine. You took some coins from your pocket. You dropped them in the slot. Then you walked away from it — you didn't wait for whatever you bought. . . . Do you chew gum?"

"No! It's a cigarette machine. I don't remember — being near it."

"One of us," the girl said mockingly, "is kidding one of us."

Lowry's voice was almost a whisper. "I saw you put some coins in it. I don't remember putting any in."

The girl looked at him searchingly. "This could be a fine practical joke, for strangers. . . . Let's pretend for right now that we aren't strangers. I'm Sally Chamberlain —"

"I'm Fred Lowry."

"— and I saw you put money in that machine. I don't remember putting any in myself."

"Hmmm. And neither of us took anything out of it — neither of us waited to find out."

They looked at the machine.

"Cigarette machines," Lowry said musingly, "are usually wider than that."

"It's a gum machine!"

"Now look," Lowry said, impatiently. "You keep saying it's a gum machine."

"It is. And I don't smoke."

"And I don't chew gum. Scout's honor, now; do you really see a

gum machine? Tell me — do you?"

Sally nodded. Her face was pinched, frightened.

"Okay — I see a cigarette machine. But let that part go for now. We both agree that it's a machine, at least?"

The girl nodded again.

Lowry said: "Then watch me."

He started toward the machine. There was a gasp from the girl — Sally. He felt the skin crawling on his back. He kept on walking.

He was facing the girl, approaching her.

Lowry counted his money. Five dollars and twenty-eight cents — this time the bite was fifty-five cents. He looked at Sally, raised an eyebrow.

"You dropped some coins in the machine."

He tried to remember being close to the machine, but it was no use.

"How did I act?"

"Normal. Except for not getting anything for your money, and not waiting to see what happened."

"What happened?"

"Nothing." She came closer to him, stood beside him, her arm touching his. "I don't understand." She shivered, her arm trembling against his.

"I could make a guess —"

The look in her eyes told him to go on.

"Well, suppose . . ." He hesitated. When it came right down

to wrapping it up in words, it was pretty far-fetched.

"Yes?"

Then the words came in a rush. "You don't drop in more than a little at any one time. Two or three coins. A small percentage of what you're carrying, say ten per cent, or less, even. Not so much that you'd ordinarily notice the dent in your cash —"

"But that happens to me all the time." She was clutching his arm tightly now. "I'm sure I have a dime, or a nickel, but when I look in my purse it isn't there."

"Of course!" He remembered all the times in the past days when he had less change than he *had* to have unless he'd been short-changed, or had dropped coins he'd never heard fall. "It happens to everyone." He remembered people staring at coins in their hands, looking for coins they knew must be there, digging again into pocket or purse, coming up without them.

"Okay," he said. "Suppose there are dozens — hundreds — thousands of these machines. Spotted where not more than a few persons would be likely to see them at any one time. Out of the way places, but busy enough — like this one. Waiting for one person at a time."

Her laugh was shaky, forced. "Certainly a gum machine couldn't —"

He flicked a glance at the one

standing serenely in the alcove.

She didn't finish the sentence.

"Suppose," he went on, "there is something in the machine. A mechanism. Maybe something like a radio transmitter working with a battery. Controlling people's minds when they come near enough. Making them put a few coins in the slot, not many; then making them go away and forget it completely. Tithing them!"

"But surely — Who would do that?"

Lowry shrugged. "Who wants money?"

He tried to imagine people behind the machines, behind the thousands of machines. He saw men going about with canvas bags collecting the take, filling them; counting rooms with big hoppers into which the coins were fed; machinery sorting and adding and totalling. And the machines spreading — the city, the country, the world!

He realized that she was talking.

"I said: 'We don't *have* to do anything about this, of course.' But — but I think we should do *something*."

"What?"

"We could tell someone. Report it. The police . . ."

"Sure." He grimaced. "They'd have you in Observation after the first hundred words!"

"But someone ought to —"

"How would you like to try

convincing someone? It might be interesting."

"I see what you mean." She shivered again, and her fingers dug into his arm. "I can't really believe this when I'm here. When I know."

"You know?"

"That you weren't kidding me."

He found her hand, took it in his. "I wonder —"

"Yes?"

"I wonder how many people the machine can control at once. Suppose we both go over. Could it make both of us drop money in the slot? We'll count our coins, then see how much we have left after we've blanked out and come to again. . . . See if its control is strong enough to make us both forget."

She looked up to him, eyes luminous. "Fred —"

"Yes . . . Sally?"

"I'm frightened."

"What is there to be afraid of? It's only a machine. Let's see if it can take money from both of us. . . ."

She nodded, squeezed his hand. He liked what he saw in her eyes.

Together, hand in hand, they walked over to the machine, the quiet, waiting, unobtrusive machine there in the shadowed alcove.

They stopped in front of it.

They were still standing there when the collectors came.