

## SMALL CHANGE

By Parke Godwin

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GONVILLE LEMMING, CONTRary to his name, would not run headlong over a cliff for anyone, not even his boyhood friend, Hibbert Snodgrass. For Shoddy, Lemming wouldn't step off a curb, for fear of missing a dropped coin. Both were compulsive collectors, though their tastes diverged early on. Snodgrass made a false start in matchbook covers at ten and built an impressive collection before enthusiasm waned. At thirteen he foresaw no future in the field — but his fate was sealed when, scuffling along the street with Lemming en route to a Saturday matinee of *I Walked with a Zombie*, Shodgrass snatched from the sidewalk a freshly discarded, still fragrant Wrigley's spearmint gum wrapper. Simultaneously, Lemming spotted a dime, dulled and worn, barely discernible from the concrete it lay upon.

Within a few years each became a master tracker of his particular quarry. The scion of well off people, Snodgrass gave little thought to money but could spot a gum wrapper at thirty paces: new ones, old ones, foot-stamped, grimy or rain-sodden, they added to his burgeoning horde.

“A penny found is a penny earned,” Lemming maintained, poorer but equally sharp of vision. No carelessly dropped coin or bill escaped the radar sweep of his relentless quest. A steady jingle of copper and silver flowed into his poke, though he never spent any of it without severe crisis of principle. He developed the eyesight of a raptor, the whole paved city his mousing ground, able to detect a penny — the dark steel 1943 penny, mind you, rare in itself — on new pavement of the same hue fifteen yards away.

With time and maturity, Snodgrass and Lemming passed from practice to higher theory. Lemming could never convince Shodgrass that gum wrappers held no investment value even in the esoteric world of collecting. Jaded, unheeding, Shodgrass sought new heights. Spearmint, Juicy Fruit, Beeman's, PlenTipak, Carefree and Cinnaburst he regarded as mere prelude to ultimate triumph. He heard of a fellow wrapper enthusiast a thousand miles away and negotiated for a year by mail to buy the collection, offering a handsome price, for it contained one of the very few grails of the narrow field: War Card wrappers from 1938, almost unobtainable in any condition. Snodgrass's offer passed from ridiculous to fabulous, but the owner adamantly refused to sell. How Shodgrass finally acquired that trove and went on to plan the capstone of his career was whispered darkly in the dusty meeting places of his kind.

Think of objets d'art so rare they are only rumored to exist, the stuff of legend. The actual cask in which once lay the myrrh bestowed on the infant Jesus by an oriental king, a handful of the grave earth of Vlad the Impaler, a piece of the True Cross — these are comparable. For Snodgrass had tracked down Fleeer Flickers

gumball wrappers ca. 1940 with a cartoon strip printed on the inner side of each. He was envied, of course . . . but colleagues muttered of his methods and the lengths to which Snodgrass was prepared to go with price clearly no object.

At forty, obsessed, neglecting the business he inherited until it failed, Snodgrass was forced to offer his treasures for sale just to live. Futile and far too late. Only a handful of collectors specialized in gum wrappers and none could afford his legendary prizes at a fraction of their worth. He died a broken man, never losing his pathetic faith in Fleeer Flickers, clutching the rarest of them to his breast as he expired.

Of a sterner breed, Lemming never loaned a penny without the return of two. In an expansive mood he might tip a waitress nine percent, but such generosity withered early and died as his love of found money distilled at last to the Absolute with his retrieval of a damp twenty dollar bill from the unpleasant floor of a YMCA men's room. Unlike the late Snodgrass, this was not culmination to I Lemming, but a new door flung wide on vistas shimmering with genius. He trembled with his vision. On any given day he could find a coin on any street. Multiply that by whole towns, cities, the entire country: a fortune daily falling unheeded to pavements everywhere. Today America, tomorrow the world . . .

If he could somehow sweep up all of it every day. Impossible, of course, but suppose . . .

The ambition would not fade but grew in Conville Lemming. A vast, untapped grid of streets, cities, and states where lost coins lay star-scattered over a concrete cosmos, gleaming in imagination, firing his dreams at night.

Suppose . . .

The wings of Icarus had eventually to pass from fancy to fact; Lemming's vision must translate from chimera to fait accompli. As Snodgrass was rumored to have done, he overleaped human possibility to the possible at any cost. From a retired Satanist who had renounced the black arts to marry and care for an alcoholic church organist, Lemming purchased a grimoire guaranteed to contain the spells he needed, an arcane volume bound in foxed pigskin with parchment folio leaves. Counting her exorbitant price, the erstwhile lady of shadows offered practical advice.

"Some of these spells are tricky and all are dangerous. When you're ready to make the call, I recommend a large asbestos mat."

Lemming practiced, Lemming delved, fired by the undeniable truth that while he learned, sharp-eyed children, bag ladies, unworthy homeless, anyone and everyone was reaping daily the harvest rightfully his. His first invocations were flat failures, intermediate stages frustrating. Within his circle he was amazed, despite

technique fast approaching mastery, how often he could summon one entity and receive another, like Mexican telephone service. Shady stock brokers, real estate speculators, collection agents, languid and androgynous Californians committed to health food, even a Scientologist loyal to the movement beyond death, who exhorted Lemming to join. So it went for weeks and months of abortive agony illuminated only by the distant gleam of profit.

Then, late one evening in the dark of the moon, when a heavy fog hung over Lemming's street and morale, the flames leaped suddenly higher on the asbestos. There came to his nostrils not the expected reek of sulfur but a subtler effluvium of expensive aftershave, together with a few bars of elevator music — and a natty young man in a sixties vintage suit with narrow lapels and a slim funereal tie peered at him from behind black, very mod horn-rimmed glasses. His fulsome Power Lunch smile flashed from thirty-two precisely capped teeth. He raised a manicured hand in greeting. A jeweled Rolex winked below platinum-linked cuffs.

“Hey, guy. Glad you got it together. Call me J.B.”

Lemming felt like a man battering for hours at a door that opened unexpectedly, hurling him through on his own impetus. “Uh . . . yes.”

“Formerly with BBD&O,” his visitor said briskly. “I handle the power accounts. Don't want to hype you, but I'm the guy who thought of squeezing the Charmin. Sorry it took you so long to get through. I'm backed up on calls, but the Front Office is wholly in sync with your efforts. You want to explore the area of options, or do we cut to the chase and deal?”

A man able to spot a 1943 steel penny on dark concrete is not long without presence of mind. When Lemming regained his, he presented his strategy. Every dropped coin from every state (lower forty-eight for a start; later he might expand) every day for the rest of his life. Delivery at midnight in paper bank wrappers, daily statement included. Innovative, of course, but could they handle it, yes or no?

J.B. — even he who put entertainment into toilet paper and eroticized hair cream for television — was impressed. The capped teeth flashed in a smile that would have wooed Magdalene away from Christ.

“Well?” Lemming waited. “Can do?”

“Bottom line, G.L.? It's big. Overwhelming. Inspired.” The flames sprang up and disappeared with the apparition. Lemming fidgeted and mumbled for an hour, convinced he'd blown El Dorado for good. He was just settling down to read a best-seller stolen from the local library, when J.B., sans combustion or music, abruptly filled the air in front of him. Lemming felt a bit jangled. “Hey, give some warning. Don't you always come in flames?”

“Only at first. The Satanists expect it, like holly at Christmas. G.L., you’ve done it. I told the front office— played it cool, trotted your idea around the block to see where it stopped—” J.B.’s expansive gesture carved success in the air — “and they fucking lit up, even the Prince.”

Who, he informed Lemming with genuine respect, had the cosmic foresight to sell capitalism to the Russians. “He’s on fire with it. Challenging, he said. Original, immense! The only glitch . . .”

“What, what ?” Lemming caught him up, unable and unwilling to turn back now. “I know there has to be a contract.”

That was the obstacle: almost no precedent for Legal to go on. No felony was involved, just lost and found and finders keepers. “The Front Office wants the deal for the pure top drawer thinking, guy. You are in.” J.B.’s ferret-sharp features glowed with the transcendent joy of seraphim. “No problemo. We always cut the contract to the deal; that’s why we’ve lasted in business. And here’s the beauty part. It’s gratis.”

The magic word plucked true music from the untuned strings of Lemming’s heart. “Free . . .”

J.B. shrugged; the narrow lapels rose and fell. “Well, almost free. Sweetie, that’s a detail. We’re talking moon walk here. Mars walk, a giant step for mankind.”

“Not yet. Back up.” Lemming braked hard as the modifier twanged a more typical note in his soul. “What’s this ‘almost’?”

Okay, up front, cards on the table. Front Office was willing to take the contract at or near cost, but naturally not a dead loss. “Quid pro quo, G.L. Our quid measured exactly to your quo. Not a day, not a second more. Hey, did I say this was gorgeous?”

J.B. flourished a short-form contract before Lemming, offering a tasteful Waterman pen for signing. The client deferred until he had microscopically scrutinized every line for the boiler plate of legal grief: hidden clauses, default penalties. There were none. Cut and dried, straight as a ruler. However long he lived, he repaid that much time and not a day longer. Lemming signed, J.B. pocketed the contract and consulted his Rolex with a flick of the platinumed wrist.

“Five to midnight — uh, that’s my pen, G.L. He’ll be here soon.”

Lemming surrendered the silver mounted pen regretfully. “Who?”

“Collector Number Five, one of our best. Solid rep, great on detail.”

“Here?” Lemming swallowed hard. “He’s coming here now?”

“On the dot. In good faith you get credit for today. Where do you want the stash?”

An embarrassment of gilded fate. As the clock hands closed to scissor off the day, Lemming gestured vaguely. “Upstairs . . . guess. In the spare bedroom.”

“You got. Oh, baby, just one teensy thing. Come midnight, don’t bug the delivery man, okay? By twelve he’s worked his buns off and in no mood to klatsch. Just let him do his thing, then go in and start counting. Ciao.”

By way of farewell, J.B. simply imploded. A hole opened in the air, sucked him in and away. Minutes later Lemming heard a muffled poof! above, then movement and the sound of much bulk set down heavily about the floor and furniture. Then another pool and silence.

Elated but unnerved, Lemming crept upstairs to listen outside the bedroom. After a timorous five minutes he opened the door cautiously and snapped on the lights. No sulfurous smell, only the rank locker room odor of heavy physical exertion and — perhaps his stressed imagination— a sourness beyond the olfactory in the air, as if someone had left bitter curses in his wake like the reverberation of a slammed door.

A moment’s impression, no more. On the bed, chairs, nightstand, stacked on a side table, sprawled over the floor, was a small fortune in neatly rolled pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and Kennedy halves, pyramids of coins on the table, other piles collapsed under the sheer weight of their worth, spilling into the adjoining bathroom. Tucked into a sheaf of grimy bills, in a hand precise to the point of fussiness, was the accounting in each denomination and the day’s total: seven hundred dollars and thirty-six cents.

Lemming trembled and gibbered, sinking to his knees and fondling the bills, groping through rolled quarters, stroking like a lover’s breasts the solid half dollars. One day, just one, and seven hundred clams! Speculation ran riot: times seven was forty nine hundred a week, near twenty thousand a month. In a year over two hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars, to say nothing of potential bank interest.

Speak of miracles. Like a child at the beach, Lemming piled the coins about him in a high bastion of currency. He’d done it, dreamed the impossible dream and made it real. At two A.M. his play fortress had attained the embellishments of a late Norman castle. With a nihilistic cackle, Lemming destroyed it with a sweep of his arm. He yawned, deciding henceforth to sleep here in his Collection room where cold cash could warm his heart. He cleared the bedspread of lucre, and the sound of it clunking heavily to the floor was the benediction of manna pattering down upon his parched soul.

“And it’s legal,” Lemming chortled into darkness and the unlimited future overhead. “No eternal price, just day for day. Can I cut a sweet deal?”

What price after all? Forty, fifty years. No more than alternate service, he thought blissfully as his eyes closed, like joining the Peace Corps to avoid the draft.

If the faceless Collector slaved unceasingly, Lemming toiled as well. He grew accustomed to the midnight ritual on the last stroke of the hour, and poof! scrabble, clunk, and thump overhead, muffled muttering poof! again . . . and silence. Heavy days on a Superbowl weekend, light on April 15 after taxes when no one had much to drop, but never a day missed. Always the same meticulous accounting by his Collector, the rank smell of undeodorized sweat, and more money. Lemming lost five pounds sacking and carrying the loot to the bank before he gave in with bitter reluctance and bought a fourth-hand Econoline van to transport his wealth.

His first bank and then a second grew concerned with currency storage. After a fierce agony of scruples— you didn’t spend money, for God’s sake—Lemming purchased a condemned house and then another, fitting each with barred windows and time-locked steel doors. At length, when he could no longer spread out or up, Lemming delved down, adding cavernous vaults under his houses. He loved to sit in his treasure rooms as in a church. When the subways rumbled beneath, his horde responded in a silver choir. To this monetary hymn the IRS sang their own gleeful counterpoint. Lemming groaned at their assessments, but that was how the nickel flipped. In the tenth year, arrogance growing apace with affluence, he allowed himself an indolent joke at Revenue’s expense.

“Look,” he condescended graciously, offering the harried tax rep the remains of a Diet Cola. “Instead of auditing all this, just tell me how much the President needs. And come on, join me for dinner. McDonalds has a special on small burgers.”

The decades paraded stately by in a jingling serenade of profit. Gonville Lemming grew indifferent to the muted sounds above at midnight, grew old with Collector Number Five who was ever punctual, ever precise in report. One Christmas Eve, seized with uncharacteristic Yule spirit, Lemming left an offering in the collection room of last week’s meatloaf, yesterday’s salad, decal coffee and a thrift shop card from the cheerful donor commending the loyalty of Number Five.

He should not have eavesdropped for gratitude. Beyond the door the sentiments were more audible than usual and graphic, their general drift defining Lemming as a mother-groping tightwad sonofabitch who would bum down an orphanage for fun and profit if he wasn’t too effing tight to buy matches.

Then poof!— silence and the smell of sweat lingering in the blistered air, ripe as the declined meatloaf.

In his last year of life, during a severe national depression and an odd shortage of hard money, Lemming brought off the coup of an acquisitive lifetime, loaning the government ten billions in ready cash at a mere eighteen point seven percent. The President flinched but signed.

“What’s so bad?” Lemming comforted him, retrieving the pen as a memento. “You people pay that much on your plastic.”

What the hell, he needed the vault space anyway. He considered allowing the truculent but tireless Number Five to shorten his route, at least skip the less solvent southern states, but thought better of it. Not the money but the principle; next the shlep would want weekends off.

On the eve of his death, Lemming nibbled a day-old pastry and wrote a foreclosure notice on the White House, adding that he might extend their loan if the Pentagon were put at his disposal for coin storage, mints to issue a new Letoming Penny. The tottering government would have no choice but to accept. He sealed the notice and retired in the warm glow of a cup run over, a life full and well applied. He always slept in the Collection room these sunset years, closing his eyes on the sight of the day’s haul and opening them to the same comforting vista. This night, with a last loving caress for a roll of quarters, Lemming slept the sleep of the just and never woke.

The first hint of his demise came when he sat up next morning and left his body still supine, cold and stiff. Reaching for money as comfort, his hand simply passed through it.

“The bread’s real. You’re not,” J.B. announced from the second-hand Morris chair as he paged through Lemming’s contract now due for execution. “Wakey, wakey, G.L. Number Five has gratefully retired to pasture and pastimes after years of unfailing service to you. On behalf of the Front Office, I hope there’s no regret.”

From pure habit Lemming could wish for one more good Manhattan sweep. Fun City was always good for a bundle, and he’d planned to make it early to the local Army/Navy store for a sale on surplus C-rations. “No, I guess not.”

“Good boy. A deal is a deal, right?”

“Did I say it wasn’t?” Lemming squared his ectoplasmic shoulders with no more than a sigh for bargains forever lost. “Day for day per agreement.”

“Check.” J.B.’s homrims swept over the contract. “Forty-three years, three months, two weeks, and change. Piece of cake, baby. We tried to get you Sundays off, maybe a coffee break now and then, but Number Five said no: he didn’t get. Always was a kind of a twitch; now he’s a pissed off prick.” The capped teeth

gleamed in a corporate smile. “And fair is fair.”

Lemming felt a February chill of premonition, remembering meatloaf and curses. “Who’s Number Five?”

The contract vanished into J.B.’s coat pocket. “Sweetie, I’m running behind again, so can we split like now? I gotta sell the American public on a new war with Iraq for God, Country, Mother, and Oil.”

Lemming allowed tacitly that he who squeezed the Charmin could surely wring the American heart.

“And you have to learn your route, G.L.”

Another chill —late February this time. “Route?”

“Put you in the picture as we go.” J.B. invited him to the door which opened of itself on misty limbo. “Today you learn New York, toughest part of your circuit. Hey, I won’t blue sky you. You know how many gum wrappers there are in the sewers of New York alone?”

Gum wrappers. The shade of Conville Lemming emitted a pitiful sound. “Snodgrass . . .”

“Good old Number Five,” J.B. confirmed with institutional reverence. “And I mean he wants it all: Cinnaburst, Carefree, Trident, Beeman’s, Juicy Fruit, the whole nine yards. Bottom line, sweetie, you won’t have time for coffee. He gets Alaska and Hawaii thrown in.”

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Parke Godwin made his last appearance in F&SF in our February, 1982 issue with “Sergeant Pepper Variations,” which he wrote in collaboration with Howard Roller. Since then, he has published some very fine novels, including *Sherwood and Robin and the King* (Avon Books)

About “Small Change,” he writes, ‘I’ve always been very lucky at finding pennies and nickels — sometimes quarters and, once, ten dollars —dropped on the pavement. In the last few years, I’ve wondered: what if a guy could get it all? Just how much money would he reap in one day? One week? One year? There must be a substantial piece of small change jingling unnoticed to the pavements of America. Since the notion wouldn’t go away, I eventually wrote it down.’”