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Editorial

With the recent low levels of inflation it was a shock to find our grocery bill at Sainsbury's had gone up by £70 in a week. Scanning the receipt I noticed I had been billed for 3 packets of 200 Lambert & Butler cigarettes, which was strange because none of my family smoke. I asked the girl at the till how this could be. "It's impossible", she said, "I'm not allowed to sell cigarettes at the checkout". We went to get the supervisor, who was most suspicious. "You must have bought them", she said, "the machine doesn't make mistakes like that", and she started to search through my shopping. Meanwhile I puzzled over the bill. "Grapefruit!" I announced triumphantly. "The machine has mixed up fags and grapefruit". "Hmm..." said the supervisor. "Yes. The silly girl keyed in 5180 which is cigarettes, instead of 0518 for grapefruit. It's an operator error; she is to blame. I'll give you a refund." "No", I said, getting on my importance-of-elementary-mathematics high horse, "it's the fault of the system. I want to tell your management about error-correcting codes. You see you shouldn't have products with numbers so close together. There ought to be a check digit or ...". "Here's your money back sir, I've put it through the till". She signed the void card, writing firmly CHECKOUT ERROR, and gave the cringing operator an admonishing stare. I was still thinking hard about parity check matrices when I found myself at the car and remembered that in effect I had shoplifted the three grapefruits. We ate them with a clear conscience: much better for you than Lambert and Butler.

The editor is aware that the article *The Portrait of Fra Luca Pacioli* which he has written is unprecedentedly long. He hopes it is of sufficient interest to justify such length. It was originally intended to be in two parts, but there has been considerable media excitement about it, occasioned by the 500th anniversary of the *Summa* next year, and he wanted to get it all published somewhere respectable before bits of it are mangled in publications that often contribute gleanings to our journal.