

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Jared Brown

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The Value of Books (Short Story)

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THE VALUE OF BOOKS

By

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Other Mysteries*)

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Francis Xavier Duffy was a little man. He was small in stature, had a little head with only a little hair on the sides, had a short nose and little feet. Moreover, Francis was so bland that his co-workers, his neighbors and Mr. Prybnzki, the proprietor of the small grocery store where Francis always shopped, never spoke to him or even recognized him. His job as a part-time clerk at the small-town public library where he lived was an insignificant one, for Francis's only duty was to sit at the counter and stamp the date on the books customers wished to check out. His salary was insufficient to cover his needs, and was supplemented by the generosity of his mother, who sent him a check for fifty dollars every week – except when she forgot, as she often did, for Francis was forgettable even to the members of his own family. Many other examples could be offered, but they all come down to this: Francis Xavier Duffy was a little man.

But for eight long years he had harbored one big plan. He had fallen in love with Muriel Peabody, who worked on the second floor of the library. Muriel had earned a Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of Iowa and was employed as the reference librarian, a position of some importance. Francis had never spoken to Muriel – he had never found the right occasion – but he loved her, nevertheless, for she had the sweetness, the loveliness, and yes, even the full-time job he could only long for. In truth, no one else who knew the thirty-nine year old Muriel with her salt-and-pepper hair would have called her pretty, but she was everything Francis aspired to. It was his dream to initiate a conversation with Muriel one day, and end the conversation with a proposal of marriage.

“I beg your pardon,” he would say, when she was on her way out of the library at the end of the work day, “I have been meaning to introduce myself for several years now, but my natural reticence has not permitted me to intrude upon your privacy. This, however, seems to be the appropriate moment. My name is Francis Xavier Duffy, and I have loved you from afar for eight years.”

“Why, Mr. Duffy,” he dreamed she would say, “I wish you had spoken before, for I have never failed to admire the efficiency with which you perform your duties, and have always believed you to be a man of considerable distinction.”

“Miss Peabody – or may I call you Muriel?” he would ask, “I have not declared my love to no purpose, for it is my intention to offer my hand in marriage.”

“Mr. Duffy,” she would say, “or may I call you . . . ?” She would pause, for she would have forgotten his first name by this time.

He would prompt her. “Francis. Francis Xavier,” he would say.

“Francis,” she would respond, “I have waited many years for this day. I accept from the bottom of my heart.”

At least Francis hoped that their conversation would end in such a satisfactory way. But he was uncertain, so he refrained from speaking to her as she passed him on her way out of the library every afternoon (on Mondays through Thursdays) and evening (on Fridays and Saturdays).

His hopes were crushed, however, when he overheard Mr. Gleede, the library’s business manager, speak to Mrs. Bailey one afternoon in the office behind the counter at which Francis sat throughout his four-hour shift. “Well,” Mr. Gleede said, “you’ll be

interested to know that a new – chapter – yes, I think that’s a good word to use in the context of the public library – is about to begin in my life.”

“What’s that, Mr. Gleede?” Mrs. Bailey asked.

“Muriel Peabody and I are going to be married,” he said. “On June twenty-fourth at the First Methodist Church. Please consider this your invitation to attend. Of course, we’ll be sending out more formal invitations early in May.”

“Oh, congratulations,” Mrs. Bailey said. “I would never have known that you two were an item, much less a couple so close to tying the knot, as it were.”

“Yes,” Mr. Gleede answered, “we’ve been rather quiet about our relationship. Quiet – in fact, that’s also a word that’s appropriate for a library, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Bailey giggled appreciatively. But Francis Xavier Duffy, overhearing the conversation, clenched his teeth in bitter regret. “If only I had spoken earlier,” he thought to himself.

That night, Francis lay awake in the tiny attic room in his sister’s house, where he lived, staring at the crack in the ceiling that looked for all the world like the little scar he had noticed on Muriel Peabody’s arm, the one just below her right elbow. He set his mind to figuring out how he might break the engagement of Mr. Gleede and his beloved, and how to persuade Muriel that she would find greater happiness with him. He would have been glad to share his dilemma with his sister, Ramona, but he and Ramona had not spoken, except to say “Good morning” and “Good night” for several years.

When Francis noticed that dawn had broken, he had made no progress. Separating a couple who had decided to marry was not an easy task, he concluded. But he devoted the entire day – until he had to leave the house at 3:30 in order to get to work – to lying

on his bed or sitting in the little chair in the corner of his tiny room thinking about his problem. He did go downstairs to the kitchen for a bite to eat around noon, but he did not stay long, for Francis ate very little even on days when he had nothing to occupy his mind.

Later, in the library, shortly before five o'clock, Muriel entered Mrs. Bailey's office to give her the same news Mr. Gleede had announced the day before. Francis wished he could put his hands over his ears, for he did not wish to hear once again of the terrible event Muriel and Mr. Gleede had decided upon. But he kept one hand on the counter and the other holding the date stamp at the ready in case a customer came to check out a book. "Surely," Francis thought, "Mr. Gleede could not love Muriel as much as I do. Clearly, he could not be as devoted to her every wish as I would be. Without a doubt, Mr. Gleede is unworthy of her love."

But how could he convey this to the object of his affections, when they had never once exchanged a word? Wait. There was that one day, four years earlier, when he had been entering the library and she was on her way to the restroom. "Pardon me," he had said, and she inclined her head. However, she hadn't spoken, so, technically, it was in fact true: they had never once exchanged a word.

The library was particularly quiet that day. Few patrons checked out books, so Francis had time to concentrate every fiber of his being on his problem. He could sweep Muriel away and transport her to a justice of the peace, where they would be married before two smiling witnesses – but the police might not interpret this as a romantic gesture. They might even accuse him of kidnapping. That would never do.

He could write her a note, pouring out his affection in the most delicate fashion. But Muriel, whose voice, which he had overheard speaking to Mrs. Bailey, was still reverberating in his ears, did not seem inclined to desert Mr. Gleede even for the most ardent admirer. It seemed that she was quite content to marry the odious Gleede, as baffling as the idea was to Francis Xavier Duffy.

Or he could speak to Mr. Gleede. Now there was an idea, he thought. He could attempt to poison Mr. Gleede's mind against Muriel in some way or other. He could say, for example, that Muriel was not the woman she appeared to be – that she was, as Francis's mother might have called her – a tramp, perhaps even a gold digger, interested in him only for his money. On the other hand, Mr. Gleede might not possess a great deal of money, in which case Francis's accusation would seem ridiculous. And Francis did not wish to seem ridiculous.

As quickly as Francis could invent a scenario, he rejected it. Every idea seemed to be intertwined with a flaw, a flaw so glaring that Francis's idea would surely fail.

No, he decided at last. There was only one way to resolve the dilemma. Mr. Gleede must somehow be gotten out of the way.

But how? Surely the diminutive Francis could not overpower the well-built and odious Gleede. He possessed no gun and had no idea where to purchase one. In any case, Francis was terrified of guns. And the nausea he felt at the sight of (or even the thought of) blood made using a knife an impossibility. Poison? He dimly recalled having seen a film in the company of his mother when he was about twelve years old that revolved around a woman who poisoned her husband. But what kind of poison would be effective? And how in the world would he obtain it? And even if he managed to get it,

how would he administer it? His head spun as he tried to work out a method of getting Mr. Gleede out of the way with the use of poison.

Not being a man of intellect or, to be candid, of much imagination, Francis could think of no other way to eliminate the odious Gleede. When the library closed at 8 p.m., Francis had nearly reconciled himself to the notion that Muriel was lost to him forever. He returned home to his tiny room in Ramona's attic, took two aspirin tablets for a headache, and went immediately to sleep.

On Sunday morning, however, Francis discovered that he was developing an idea. He found this feeling peculiar, for ideas did not come easily or often to Francis Xavier Duffy. Nor did this idea reveal itself quickly. Indeed, after dinner, as he was washing up the few dishes he had used, the idea was still in the developmental stage. Still, he dimly perceived that he might be in the process of discovering a way to rid himself (and the world) of Mr. Gleede after all.

Not until Wednesday did Francis's idea fully disclose itself to him. (To be completely honest, the idea had still not been *fully* developed, for, as even Francis was aware, many details had yet to be accounted for.) But he had the basic outline of a plan. It was perhaps the first plan he had devised since he had determined to propose to Muriel Peabody. But he had no intention of waiting eight years before putting this plan into practice.

Francis's notion was this: he would speak to Mr. Gleede in the business manager's spacious office. He would request that, after having worked in the library for seventeen years, he ought to be considered for full-time employment. He would also ask for a raise in pay, since his salary had not increased by so much as a penny during his employment

at the library. Mr. Gleede would undoubtedly refuse Francis's requests, but that would be perfectly all right, for Francis would only express these wishes in order to distract Mr. Gleede from his real purpose. And, when the odious Gleede was sufficiently distracted – when, in fact, he was so irritated that he was on the verge of becoming furious and throwing Francis out of his office – Francis would say, “Mr. Gleede, I know that you and Miss Peabody are planning to wed in June. And normally I would congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials. But I have to inform you that I, too, am deeply in love with Miss Peabody and it is my intention that she become *my* wife.” At that point, Mr. Gleede would say one of three things. He would either say, “Why, Mr. Duffy, I had no idea you felt this way about Miss Peabody. I do not wish to stand in opposition to your desire, so please permit me to break my engagement with Miss Peabody so that the two of you can be married.” More likely, however, Mr. Gleede would say, “I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Duffy, but our plans have been made and it is certainly not my intention to change them at this late date.” Even *more* likely, however, was that Mr. Gleede would become enraged, shout at Francis to remove himself from the office and pick up whatever meager belongings he had placed under the counter where he sat for four hours every day, then leave the library forever.

Unfortunately, Francis had no notion of how to deal with Mr. Gleede if he did not respond as Francis fervently hoped he would. So, it became obvious to him that he would need to develop a better plan, one that would lead to only a single possible conclusion: that Mr. Gleede, whether by persuasion or by force, would give up all thought of marrying Muriel Peabody, leaving Francis to return to his original plan of proposing to Muriel, with the all-but-certain result that she would accept him on the spot.

Two days later, as Francis dutifully stamped the books that patrons placed in front of him, a thought faintly intruded upon his concentration. As the hours went on, the thought became more and more prominent. “Books,” Francis thought. “How strange that the idea never occurred to me before. Books.” Francis realized that he was surrounded by thousands of books, and at least one of them could probably supply the idea for which he was so desperately looking. He had access to technical books, which might tell him how to commit a murder – but he feared that such books would be *too* technical for him to understand. On the other hand, suppose he were to check out murder mysteries by various authors. Each of them would undoubtedly contain at least one idea that he might find useful. That evening, Francis returned home to his sister’s house carrying five books by various authors.

Many of the books, it developed, were not very helpful. The criminals portrayed in them employed violent acts, acts of which Francis knew he was incapable. Weeks later, after having read, or at least skimmed, what seemed like hundreds of books but was probably more like fifty, Francis read a mystery by Petronella McQuade, a mystery that contained an ingenious crime that Francis felt, with a few slight adjustments, he might be able to apply to his situation.

In Miss McQuade’s book, the villain utilized a sort of psychological torture until his victim decided that he could no longer live with his torment and took his own life. Surely, Francis felt, I could employ this technique.

That afternoon, on the way to the library, he stopped at a sign-maker’s shop and ordered six small nameplates, all of them saying, “Marvin Swendlow, Business Manager.” The next day he picked up the nameplates, all of them with a hole drilled at

each end. Francis then purchased a screwdriver from the Everything From Scoop to Nuts hardware store. When he arrived at the library, he waited until 4:55, at which time he heard Mr. Gleede tell his assistant, Mrs. Bailey, that he and Muriel were going to a nearby coffee shop for a piece of pie and, as he put it, “a cup of hot java.” “I’ll see you in the morning, Mrs. Bailey,” he said. Then, after Muriel came down the staircase from the second floor, Mr. Gleede met her in front of Francis’s counter, and together they walked briskly out of the library. A minute or two after 5:00, Mrs. Bailey locked her door and she, too, left for the day.

Francis, now the only employee on the first floor, used the skeleton key he had been given in case of emergencies, and walked stealthily through Mrs. Bailey’s office, holding the screwdriver and the new nameplate in a paper bag. He unscrewed the nameplate that said “George Gleede, Business Manager,” and, in its place, put up one of the new nameplates he had ordered.

The next morning, Mr. Gleede was about to open his door when he saw the nameplate, stared at it quizzically, and said, “Marvin Swendlow? Mrs. Bailey, can you explain this?”

Mrs. Bailey looked up from her work, placed spectacles upon the bridge of her nose and rose to look at the nameplate. “My word, Mr. Gleede,” she said. “This is puzzling, indeed. I have no knowledge of a Marvin Swendlow.”

“Well, then,” said Gleede, “let’s tell this Swendlow to vacate my office immediately.” He put his hand on the doorknob and attempted to turn it, but the door was locked. “Locked?” thought Mr. Gleede. “As a man who has nothing to hide, I never lock the door to my office.” He banged quite loudly on the door. A voice came from

within. "Please stop that pounding," said the voice. "I'm extremely busy and you're making it difficult for me to concentrate." The voice belonged to Francis, who had not gone home the evening before but had spent the entire night in Mr. Gleede's office. He spoke in what he hoped was an authoritative manner and disguised his voice by speaking through a piece of tissue and lowering his voice by several notes.

Mr. Gleede turned to Mrs. Bailey. "Come with me," he said. "Let us find out what this is all about," and they rushed to the staircase, which they climbed swiftly in search of Miss Redmond, the librarian-in-chief. Hearing their footsteps on the stairs, Francis opened the door to Mr. Gleede's office, took out his screwdriver, unscrewed the nameplate and replaced it with the one he had earlier removed. Once again, the nameplate on the door read, "George Gleede, Business Manager." Then he walked through Mrs. Bailey's office and went immediately to the men's room, where he stood against the door, listening for the sounds of footsteps.

Only a moment or two later, Mr. Gleede and Mrs. Bailey returned, accompanied by Miss Redmond. Francis heard Mr. Gleede say, "I can't imagine who this Swendlow fellow is, but . . ." He stopped, looked at the nameplate on the door, turned the knob, and went in. The office was untouched: as tidy as it always was. Mr. Gleede, dumbfounded, turned to Miss Redmond. "I don't understand this," he said. "A moment ago, there was a different nameplate on my door and the lock refused to turn."

"Is this some sort of joke, Mr. Gleede?" Miss Redmond said. "If so, I must tell you that I am not amused. Two patrons, waiting upstairs for my assistance, have been inconvenienced by my absence. Please do not waste my time again." With that, Miss

Redmond turned, walked out of the office and back up the stairs to her patrons waiting on the second floor.

Mr. Gleede and Mrs. Bailey exchanged confused looks. “Have we been hallucinating?” Mr. Gleede asked. “I could have sworn that the sign on my door bore the name of Marvin Swendlow and that the door was locked.”

“I cannot vouch for the door being locked,” returned Mrs. Bailey, for she had not attempted to turn the doorknob, “but I *can* vouch for the fact that the nameplate did not bear your name.”

“Peculiar, most peculiar,” said Mr. Gleede. “However, apparently no damage has been done, so perhaps we should both return to work.” With that, Mrs. Bailey sat at her desk and Mr. Gleede entered his office.

Francis thought it best not to leave the restroom, in case he should be seen. If someone entered, he could always hide in a stall. Precisely at the stroke of noon, he reached into his pocket and took out two cucumbers and a slightly bruised pear, which he proceeded to eat for lunch. Not until two minutes before four o’clock did Francis leave the restroom and walk directly to his position behind the counter. Mr. Swenson, who had been manning the counter until then, said, “Good afternoon, Mr., uh . . .”

“Duffy,” Francis said. He was not at all upset about Mr. Swenson’s having forgotten his name, for Mr. Swenson had failed to remember it a single time in the twelve years he had been working at the library.

“Duffy, that’s right, of course,” said Mr. Swenson, collected his things, and exited the library as Francis sat upon his chair. Francis turned to look behind him and observed that Mrs. Bailey’s office was still bathed in fluorescent light, but he knew that she would

go home at five o'clock. When the hour arrived, Mrs. Bailey did indeed collect her purse, put a scarf on her head and began walking toward the exit, saying, absently, "Goodnight, Mr., uh . . ." Mr. Gleede was only a moment or two behind her, and he greeted Francis with precisely the same words.

Francis waited for ten minutes to be sure that Mrs. Bailey would not return – she might have left something in her office and have come back to fetch it – and when he felt certain that she was truly gone for the day, he entered her office once again, opened the door to Mr. Gleede's office, turned on the lights, and placed a carefully-written note on the desk. "Gleede," it said, "I can't imagine what you've been doing in my office, but I warn you not to return. Suffice it to say that I am a powerful man and could subdue you without difficulty. You would be well advised to leave immediately and not to return. Yours truly, Marvin Swendlow. P. S. I am the new business manager. Miss Redmond will probably deny knowledge of my existence, but I assure you that she hired me precisely one week ago. However, she will not admit to having done so, for I am holding her brother-in-law, Walter Entwistle, hostage, and I have threatened to cut off his ear if Miss Redmond reveals that she selected me to be the library's new business manager." For good measure, Francis overturned Mr. Gleede's wastebasket and scattered the trash about the office. Francis then returned to his counter, took the second nameplate from his paper bag, along with a screwdriver, removed Mr. Gleede's nameplate and replaced it with the plate of the fictitious Marvin Swendlow. He then closed Mr. Gleede's door, being careful not to lock it, and returned to his chair behind the counter.

On each of the next four nights, Francis repeated the procedure he had devised, replacing the nameplate reading "George Gleede" with the nameplate reading "Marvin

Swendlow.” Every morning, the reaction of Mr. Gleede and Mrs. Bailey became progressively more alarmed. They dared not complain to the librarian, for they did not wish to be the cause of the severing of the ear of Miss Redmond’s brother-in-law. Having no idea where else to turn, Mrs. Bailey became so agitated that, at the end of those four days, she resigned her position and went off with Mr. Bailey to visit their grown children in California.

Mr. Gleede was made of sterner stuff. Although terrified of meeting Marvin Swendlow, whom he believed to be the powerful man and potentially brutal ear-cutter Francis’s note had announced him to be, Mr. Gleede each morning pried the Swendlow nameplate from his door, dropping it into his wastebasket. At some later time each day – Francis made certain always to vary the time – Mr. Gleede discovered that his own nameplate had replaced Swendlow’s.

Mr. Gleede was so puzzled, irritated and frightened at the events of these six days that he found he could not concentrate upon his work. And without the daily attention of the business manager, the library’s finances began slowly but surely to fall into disarray. Consequently, on the sixth day of his ordeal, Philip Bovus, the chairman of the library board, showed up to visit Mr. Gleede. “Gleede,” he said, “I can assure you that the board has been fully satisfied with your work for the past twenty years. We had contemplated giving you a bonus at the end of this year and possibly a substantial raise at the beginning of the next. Now, however, we find that the library’s finances have begun slowly but surely to fall into disarray. We are dismayed, Mr. Gleede, and the board has delegated me to tell you that your services will no longer be required after April tenth. Please prepare to vacate your office on or before that date.”

“This has all the earmarks of a plot by Marvin Swendlow,” said Mr. Gleede through clenched teeth. “I am correct, am I not, that Swendlow is behind this wretched business?”

“Swendlow?” thought Mr. Bovus, who had never heard the name. Aloud, he said, “Marvin Swendlow? I cannot imagine what you can be thinking, Mr. Gleede. However, I can assure you that no one of that name has had any influence over me or any other member of the board.” And with that Mr. Bovus took his leave, marching out of Mr. Gleede’s office, through the office formerly occupied by Mrs. Bailey, past Francis Duffy’s position at the check-out counter and out of the library.

“Splendid,” thought Francis. “I do believe that my plan is working to perfection.” Indeed, he could hear Mr. Gleede cursing loudly inside his office and throwing various items against the wall. Francis offered a silent tribute to Petronella McQuade, who had explicated the basic idea Francis was now following.

The next morning, Francis went to Mr. Gleede’s house – he had no difficulty in discovering the address, for his fingers had tripped firmly through the White Pages – and spoke to Mr. Gleede’s housekeeper. “My name,” he told her, “is Lysander Beauregard. I am here in my capacity as an inspector with the department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Would you please inform Mr. Gleede when he arrives home that he is suspected of having committed eleven federal offenses in nine states and that he is likely to be arrested at any time. You may further tell Mr. Gleede that the FBI plans to ask for the ultimate penalty in his case, or should I say cases?”

“Goodness,” said the housekeeper. “Mr. Gleede will be terribly alarmed, I dare say.”

“As well he ought to be,” Francis replied gravely. “We at the Bureau do not take lightly the actions of a malicious felon.”

“I will certainly deliver your message, Mr. – uh . . .” said the housekeeper.

Francis began to say “Francis Xavier Duffy,” when he recalled that he had given the housekeeper a pseudonym. But he could not remember the name he had mentioned.

Nor, without being given enough time to cogitate could he think of another.

Consequently, he stood frozen in the doorway, unable to speak.

“Mr . . .” the housekeeper prompted.

Francis remained silent. He could envision his entire plan about to crumble, when at last the name came to him. “Beauregard,” he said. “Alberto Beauregard.”

“Alberto?” asked the housekeeper. “I could have sworn you told me ‘Lysander.’”

“Quite,” said Francis, after an agonizing interval of thirty-eight seconds. “Lysander Alberto Beauregard. To my friends I am Alberto, but at the agency I am called Lysander.” Without another word, Francis turned and walked hurriedly away. When he turned the corner he began to run, looking almost exactly like a penguin. When he reached “The Little Tea Shoppe” on Johnson Street he entered and ordered a steaming hot cup of tea – “the most calming tea on offer,” he told the waitress as he wiped the perspiration from his brow.

When he went to work that afternoon, he saw that Mr. Gleede was still in his office, working with an unaccustomed frenzy. Undoubtedly, Francis thought, he is trying to make amends for having permitted the library’s finances to deteriorate so frightfully. Undoubtedly, too, his housekeeper has not yet given him my message.

But on the following day, events occurred that told him his plan had worked even beyond his fondest expectations. Inside Mr. Gleede's office (or, more accurately, his former office), Francis saw, was the unlikely figure of Miss Redmond, picking up piles of debris and bric-a-brac on the office carpet and trying to make some sense of the papers that had been scattered about the room. Francis heard footsteps on the stairway. Then, to his surprise and delight, his beloved, Muriel, appeared. She was twisting a handkerchief in her hand, her cheeks wet with tears. She entered Mr. Gleede's office and Francis could hear her say, "Miss Redmond, I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but could I have a word?"

"Certainly, Miss Peabody," answered Miss Redmond, "although, as you can see, I am practically up to my knees in the mess that Mr. Gleede has made."

At the mention of Mr. Gleede, Muriel began sobbing. "Why, what is it?" Miss Redmond asked.

Francis could not help himself. He turned, got off his chair, and maneuvered himself into a better position so that he could peer into Mr. Gleede's office. He saw Muriel handing Miss Redmond a note. Miss Redmond studied it carefully. "Why, this is disgraceful!" she said.

Muriel agreed. "If you find it distasteful, Miss Redmond, you can only imagine the horror with which I read it."

"Where on earth did you find it?" Miss Redmond asked.

"It was on the corner of my desk," Muriel answered. "I did not find it until a few moments ago, for it was hidden under a small stack of papers."

Francis yearned to know the contents of the message, but he could not simply have burst into the office and asked to see it, could he?

“I shall crumple this note and toss it in the wastebasket,” said Miss Redmond.

“There. It’s done. Now come with me, dear, into my private office on the second floor. I happen to maintain a small supply of brandy in my desk, and I think you might find it the best medicine.”

Miss Redmond, leading the tearful Muriel, left Mr. Gleede’s office and together they ascended the staircase. Looking both to the right and the left, making sure that he would not be seen, Francis crept into Mr. Gleede’s office, reached into the waste paper basket, and pulled out a crumpled note. He opened it and, putting it on the desk, began to read the note, which, he could tell, had been written in haste. “Muriel,” it said. “Must leave. Today. Now. Am in danger. Leaving the library. Leaving the state. Sorry, but must break off engagement. Affectionately, George.”

Francis smiled. He returned to his counter and stamped a patron’s book, after first carefully pressing the stamp into an ink pad. To the patron’s surprise, Francis did so with a vigor and an enthusiasm he had never displayed before. “Thank you,” said Francis. “No, no, thank *you*,” said the customer, “and have a nice day.”

Francis had never been the recipient of such a wish before, but, indeed, the day was as nice as any he could possibly imagine. He wondered if this would be a good time to rush upstairs and declare his love for Muriel. On the other hand, it might be wiser to allow her enough time to recover from her present grief. Francis turned these alternatives over and over in his mind. At last he decided that he would come to the library early – before his shift was set to begin – on Monday afternoon. Saturday and Sunday should

give her more than enough time to get over her disappointment with the odious Gleede, he thought.

Instead of proposing to Muriel immediately, then, he took the bus marked “Blue” home to his sister’s house. There, for the first time, he unburdened himself to Ramona, telling her of his love for Muriel, his long-standing plan to propose to his adored one, his discovery of her engagement to Mr. Gleede, his plot to drive Mr. Gleede insane, and his ultimate victory. “Why, Francis,” she said, “you shock me – but in the most pleasant way. You have undertaken a large and ambitious enterprise and I am delighted to see that you have succeeded admirably. You, Francis, are, despite my lifelong belief to the contrary, a big man.”

“Success? Big?” thought Francis. The notion was entirely new to him. In all his fifty-one years he had invariably been described as little, tiny, small, inconspicuous and of no consequence. He sat more erectly at the kitchen table. His chest swelled with pride, although he had no idea that it was expanding. “I think, Ramona,” he announced, “that I must give you a kiss.” And with that, he leaned across the table and kissed Ramona on the cheek.

“Francis,” she said, blushing, “that may be the first time I have received a kiss from you.”

“But not the last,” Francis assured her. “In fact, I believe this calls for a celebration.”

“A celebration? Why, what can you be thinking?”

Looking at the clock on the wall, Francis said, “It is now fifteen minutes before nine o’clock. If my calculations are correct, Mr. Prybnzki’s grocery store is still open and is

not scheduled to close until the clock strikes nine.” He stood, seeming to Ramona to have grown several inches taller. “I shall walk immediately to the store and return with what I hope will be a delightful surprise.”

Francis strode briskly down MacArthur Boulevard, stopped to pat a Girl Scout on the head, and entered the store with five minutes to spare. “Mr. Prybnzki,” he said, commandingly, “I should like to purchase your finest fruitcake. Please fetch it for me at once.”

Mr. Prybnzki did not recognize Francis, but he responded instantly to the note of decisiveness in Francis’s voice. “Yes, sir,” he said, and reached into his bakery case, pulling out a fruitcake that, he said, was second to none in moistness and succulence. “May I wrap it for you, Mr. . . .”

“Duffy is the name, and do not forget it hereafter,” Francis said. “You may indeed wrap my cake, but handle it carefully, Mr. Prybnzki.”

“I shall, Mr. Duffy, I shall,” said the grocer, and wrapped it in a large piece of aluminum foil. “If I may, I should like to offer you a multi-colored ribbon, to commemorate what I sense is a momentous occasion.”

“By all means,” Francis answered, “but please affix the ribbon with some haste, for I do not wish you to continue working in your store beyond its scheduled closing time. And, I should add, I must rush, for my time is valuable and the evening is growing late.”

Mr. Prybnzki tied the ribbon around the package and presented it to Francis, who took it with one hand and extended the other. The grocer wiped his hands on his apron, thereby removing the accumulated dust and grime of the day. He shook Francis’s hand while bowing slightly at the waist.

“Do not bow to me, Mr. Prybnzki,” said Francis, commandingly. “Do not bow to any man. For you, like all members of the human race, should hold your head high on every occasion.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Mr. Prybnzki, gratefully raising his head.

Sir. Never before had Francis been addressed so deferentially. He allowed the word to linger in his mind, and found that he liked it. He reached in his pocket and withdrew a five-dollar bill.

“Oh, please accept the fruitcake with my compliments, sir. I only ask – humbly, of course – that you remember my store whenever you are in need of items such as meat, vegetables, cereal, sugar . . .”

“Yes, yes,” Francis interrupted. “You can be certain that I shall forget neither your store nor your kindness, Mr. Prybnzki. I shall return.” And with that, he marched smartly out of the store, package in hand, his head held high.

That night, he and Ramona devoured the fruitcake and drank several cups of steaming hot coffee. When they were quite sated, Ramona said, “Francis, I know that you have never touched a drop of alcohol, but tonight, on this happiest of occasions, I should like to offer you a glass of strawberry liqueur.”

Francis nodded approvingly. “Please feel free to pour me a glass,” he said. He sipped the liqueur, allowed the taste to linger in his mouth, found it to his liking, then drank the rest in a single swallow.

“You know,” said Ramona, “I think I should like you to move into the large room adjoining the parlor, Francis. Together we can reassemble Father and Mother’s barely-used double bed and you may consider it your own.”

They proceeded to do so at once. When Ramona went to her room, Francis settled into his new, comfortable bed, pulled the covers up to his neck, and drifted into a sound sleep. In his dreams, he imagined himself to be six feet four inches tall. He pictured himself racing around town, preventing robberies and putting out fires with only the minimal assistance of the fire department. He bought Girl Scout cookies at every opportunity, even when he was not hungry. And he envisioned Muriel sleeping peacefully beside him.

When, on Monday morning, he strode into the library, Francis confidently ascended the stairway to the second floor, taking two stairs at a time. He expertly maneuvered his way between two patrons who were browsing through a pair of oversized volumes, and quickly arrived at the desk of the reference librarian.

“Yes?” said Muriel, looking up. “May I help you?”

“You may,” Francis said. “In fact, we may of incalculable help to one another. My name is Francis Xavier Duffy . . .”

“Ah yes,” Muriel said, “I have seen your name on the list of library employees.”

Barely pausing for her interjection, Francis continued, “. . . and I have worked in the library for seventeen years. You, I believe, have been employed for a somewhat briefer period, but even in so short a time you have taken your place among the leading reference librarians of the entire county, perhaps the entire state.”

“Thank you, Mr. Duffy. I am proud to have been affiliated with an institution of such immaculate reputation.”

“But I digress,” said Francis. “My purpose is to tell you that in the years I have observed you on an almost daily basis I have fallen desperately in love with you, and I wish to offer my hand in marriage.”

“Why, Mr. Duffy, this comes as something of a surprise” was Muriel’s rejoinder. “I had no idea you felt this way about me. In fact, I must confess, I cannot recall ever having made your acquaintance. At any rate, I am afraid that I must reject your proposal, at least for the foreseeable future, for I have just lost one fiancée, and I am, as you may have noticed, dressed entirely in black to signify my grief.”

“Can you mean Mr. Gleede?” asked Francis. “I realize that you were in his thrall, but you have me to thank for freeing you from his odious grip. For it is I, I alone, who have contrived to drive Mr. Gleede to a state of such distraction that he has broken off his engagement to you, left our town, left our state, and, for all I know, now resides in a lunatic asylum.”

“You?” said Muriel, slowly rising from her chair and looking intently at Francis. “You have done these things? I have you to thank, you say? You mean, Mr. Duffy, that I have you to blame. You have – and I do not understate the case – ruined all my plans and destroyed my life.” With that, she slapped him quite cruelly on the side of his face. Involuntarily, Francis sank to his knees. Muriel came out from behind her desk and stood over him. She then pounded him several times on the top of his head, whereupon Francis lost consciousness and lay prone on the floor.

The head librarian, Miss Redmond, rushed over to the scene when she heard the raised voices. She saw Muriel’s blows land on Mr. Duffy’s face and head. She stared at him lying senseless on the floor.

“Why, Miss Peabody,” she said, “what on earth is going on? I would hazard the guess that my eyes were deceiving me, but I clearly see this man stretched out, quite unconscious. How has this occurred?”

“This runt,” said Muriel, “this conniving nonentity has driven my beloved sweetheart away, and now he has had the audacity to propose to me, despite my position of authority in the library and his laughably insignificant position. This moron, this minuscule runt, who has successfully sabotaged my relationship with George Gleede, the only man I have ever loved, has the impudence to ask me to become his life’s companion.”

Francis, slowly returning to consciousness, heard Muriel call him a runt and a moron. He felt the sting of her slap and the pain of the pounding she had inflicted on his head. He groaned as he thought about the notions that had invaded his dreams on Friday night. How could he have thought himself to be a patron of the Girl Scouts, a pursuer of criminals, an extinguisher of fires, he wondered? How foolish he had been.

Ramona and Mr. Prybinzki had been quite wrong in their estimation of him, he now came to see. He shrank to think that he had shared a fruitcake with his sister, had moved into his parents’ large bed and had brazenly imbibed an alcoholic beverage. He repented of his successful plan to drive Mr. Gleede to the brink of insanity. He wished he had never spoken to Muriel Peabody.

The world has not changed, he thought. And neither have I.

But at that moment, Miss Redmond kneeled down to wipe away the trickle of blood from the top of Francis’s head. “You poor little man,” she said. “You have been the victim of this vile woman’s attack upon you, and I can only recoil in horror.

Furthermore, I must tell you that I have admired you from afar for lo, these many years. Yes, you may be small, but do not forget that I am even smaller. You may have perpetuated an underhanded scheme to get rid of Mr. Gleede, but you should know that I have been attempting to rid the library of his shameful influence for longer than you can imagine. In short, Mr. Duffy, if you are looking for a mate to share your life – and it is my judgment, based upon your proposal to Miss Peabody, that that is precisely what you are seeking – I urge you to consider me for that exalted position.”

Francis could hardly believe his ears. “You mean . . .?” he asked, tentatively.

“That is precisely what I mean. If you are looking for a wife you need look no further.”

With Miss Redmond’s assistance, Francis rose somewhat unsteadily to his feet. He gazed deeply into Miss Redmond’s hazel green eyes. “I do believe that I have misplaced my affection all these years,” he said. “Miss Redmond, it is you I love, and I believe we shall be happy until death, or some other calamity I cannot foresee, does us part.”

Miss Redmond slipped her arm through Francis’s, which was resting on Muriel’s table, since he was not yet able to stand without assistance. Miss Redmond lifted him into an upright position and, without shame, offered him her lips. He took her face in his small hands and, closing his eyes, gave her a gentle kiss.

As he wobbled and Miss Redmond walked through the library, on their way to the nearest justice of the peace, Francis said, “I must tell you how strong the influence of good books has been on my life, Miss Redmond. Undoubtedly, it is thanks to you that

the library contains so many fine volumes. I have not worked my fingers to the nub without absorbing the lessons of literature.”

“That is music to my ears, Francis,” she said. “It validates my entire existence as a public librarian. And what great author has had the greatest influence, have you found?”

“There are many great authors, Miss Redmond, my darling, but one stands above them all. Miss Petronella McQuade, whose writings have changed my life.”

“Petronella McQuade?” said the startled Miss Redmond. “Can you be speaking about the author of what we in the trade call murder mysteries?”

“Precisely,” Francis responded.

Miss Redmond turned to look deeply into Francis’s eyes. “But I am she. In my spare time I composed the volumes that are attributed to Petronella McQuade. I did not wish to employ my own name in the writing of such drivel, and so I adopted a pseudonym.”

How appropriate, thought Francis. How delightful. I owe my happiness to Cordelia Redmond and to Petronella McQuade, and I have found them both in the same woman.

Ah, life’s peculiar ironies, he thought. They are available to all men, the strong and the weak. Even to the most diminutive of little men, like Francis Xavier Duffy.