

## Toasting the Groom

By John C. Tremblay

“Welcome,” Lord Wickershins said to the four men in his sitting room. “I have gathered you here today because you have all expressed interest in marrying my daughter, Melanie. According to our customs, you must each offer up a gift that shows why you are the most worthy suitor.”

Marcus looked to his competition and his knees turned to jelly. The first man wore rings that were worth more than Marcus’s entire estate. Next to the second man, Marcus looked like a scrawny blemished squire. And the third man? His reputation with the lyre was legend; Marcus couldn’t even carry a tune.

“Before we begin, I should like to stress how serious this is.”

Lord Wickershins clapped his hands and a servant presented each suitor with a crystal goblet.

“In your hands you hold a brew that will alter your form. My son-in-law will receive the antidote; the others will remain changed men for all time. Are you willing to take that risk?”

Although they all nodded, the handsome one spoke, "Your Lordship, how exactly will this change us?"

"As with marriage, you never know how your persona will be shaped until after it has already happened. The only way to know for sure is to drink up."

Marcus thought of his beloved: her long brown hair, her velvet lips, and her glowing smile. He thought of them laughing together at the traveling players and crying together when Melanie's youngest sister was taken back to be with Annūt . Marcus wanted nothing more than to make her happy for all eternity.

He brought the cup to his lips. It smelled sweet and buttery. Marcus fought back anxiety and gulped down the potion.

Pain tore through his body followed by intense heat. The scent of warm bread filled his nostrils. His mouth went dry. His skin prickled and itched. His muscles went stiff. He shuffled clockwise to look at the other suitors. They were all walking, talking, baked goods.

"Let us begin," Lord Wickershins said.

The first suitor shuffled forward, his jewelry making him look as though he were adorned with candied fruit. "I offer Melanie wealth beyond her wildest dreams: a manor house filled with servants and a table brimming with lavish banquets. She will always be provided for and poverty will never touch her."

Lord Wickershins smiled politely.

"That is a noble gift, but not appropriate for my daughter. Although money may buy her a lifetime of security, it does not guarantee happiness."

As was custom, the first man bowed.

SNAP.

Both halves of his body fell onto the richly patterned carpet. The other suitors trembled slightly, causing a flurry of breadcrumbs to sprinkle beneath them.

The second man stepped forward slowly, his once demigod-like torso now looking as though it might snap even without bowing.

“I offer your daughter beauty from now until her dying day. As you saw before this vile transformation, I am the most beautiful man in Ratriopot. My potions shall make Melanie ageless, so we will always be the envy of others and we will always look perfect for one other.”

Lord Wickershins nodded.

“Your gift is one that is sought by many, but alas is not appropriate for Melanie. There is no shame in growing old or in being less attractive than your friends. Your relationship should be about each other, not what people think of you.”

The second suitor gasped. “I’ll never see my gorgeous self again.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks, causing his torso to melt into a gooey puddle of gruel

Looking far too confident under the circumstances, the third suitor dashed forward.

“I offer the gift of love,” he sang. “I offer sonnets and flowers, sweets and passion, songs and dreams. My eyes will never wander and my heart will never falter.”

Marcus’s stomach lurched. That’s it; he was toast... permanently.

Lord Wickershins sighed.

“I have no doubt that love would make my daughter happy, but all the romance in the world cannot solve the challenges a couple must face. I’m afraid your gift, although one to be treasured, is not quite enough.”

“Not enough?” the man scoffed. “Love is fire. Love is magic. Nothing can stand in the way of love!”

The man reached for his dagger so quickly that his arm snapped off. He shook his other arm in fury and lost that one as well. He stomped on the floor and snapped both of his legs. With nothing left but a torso and a head, he recited a poem about loss and then smashed himself against the floor.

“Well, Marcus, what can you offer that will convince me to grant Melanie’s hand in marriage?”

Marcus almost bit his lip, but stopped just in time. He took a deep breath and spoke. “Though I am a Lord’s son, I am not the most wealthy, the most handsome, or the most romantic. The only gift I can offer Melanie is the gift of myself: my friendship, my companionship, and my devotion. I shall be her partner until my dying day and do all that I can to make her happy.”

Lord Wickershins smiled.

“You have answered wisely, my boy, for marriage is more than money, beauty, or love. Only when people dedicate themselves to each other completely can they ensure their success. Remember this when life tosses struggles your way. You can overcome poverty, sickness, and sadness if you do it together.”

The next evening, Marcus and Melanie were married in a joyous celebration, where both the bride and groom avoided eating anything of the bread persuasion. As the years passed, the couple learned that “Happily ever after” seemed more the ideal than the reality. However, because they were committed to each other, with friendship, understanding, and love; they triumphed over all of life’s hardships and lived together as happily as possible.

The End