

Winner 2018 OutStanding LGBTIQA+ Short Story Competition

What Might Have Been by Garry Wotherspoon

Marcel drew his brocaded morning gown closer around him, and wandered out of the darkened bedroom, so quiet with its walls of cork. Was it day? Perhaps it was already past noon, or even later? Maybe night had come.

'Celeste, Celeste, where are you? Bring me some tea'.

There was a small flurry of noise in the kitchen, and Marcel dropped down into the nearest chair.

He had to get to work, to finish this final volume of his novel. Six down, only one to go. He had promised his publisher that it would be ready by last Christmas, and that was months ago now.

'Celeste', Marcel raised his voice.

More noises came from nearby, a rattle of crockery.

Irritated, he stood, and walked over to the heavy drapes that covered all his windows. Pulling the nearest one slightly apart, he peered out.

Dark. Another Paris evening. Nothing new. The Boulevard Haussmann was so dull, nothing much happened there. The streets were always the same. And then, in the flickering light of the gas lamps, he saw two gendarmes walking past, the click of their heels echoing in the night.

Ah, memories. He recalled his younger days in Auteuil, those contingents of young guardsmen marching past to the nearby Versailles Palace. Such firm thighs, and those broad shoulders. And it made him remember: 'I gave Baron de Charlus's character a little of what I fancied then, a taste for a guardsman - or two. Yes, that fitted his persona quite well'.

He had also embellished Charlus's character with what he had felt for Reynaldo, dear Reynaldo ...

But at the moment he had writer's block, a big problem. He spent most of his time in bed these days, trying to write, although nothing had come. But he knew how it could be solved - and it always worked. All he had to do was dunk that little madelaine biscuit in his tea and a story would evolve and the words would instantly come. But first he needed an idea, something to write about. And he had to have the madeleines actually right at hand when that happened.

With a sigh, Marcel turned: 'Celeste, where are you?'

He had slept badly. His chest hurt, and he coughed too much. Was there blood on the hankie? He preferred not to look.

He drummed his fingers, musing. 'I can't keep writing about the same old crowd and their intrigues. I need something new'.

'I need something that all the world will want to read, even in the colonies'.

'The colonies. We've got one on the other side of the world. In the Pacific. Nouvelle Calédonie. Yes, even there'.

He paused: 'Near there is that place called Australie. I read that it was a convict colony, all those men locked up there together, no women. It was even called a 'sodom' in the newspapers'.

"And they have these criminal cowboys there, called bushrangers. In one gang, their leader wears a bucket with eyeholes on his head, like old Dumas's "Man in the Iron Mask". Another gang member rides around in a gown. Une travesti. So délicatesse!"

'And in another gang, their leader, Captain Moonlight, wanted to be buried in the same grave as another gang member, his dear 'special friend' James, who had been shot dead by police'.

Marcel pondered: 'Maybe that sodomite gang leader, who is in prison, can escape like Edmond Dantes and come to Paris. He would meet Charlus, who would take him around the city's salons - and boudoirs - where he can perhaps meet a new young 'special friend'.

Marcel paused: 'Yes, this could be the central plot for my last volume'.

'Mon Dieu, that's it. "Moonlight ... and romance!" So avant-garde. So outre'.

'This will be bigger than the Bible; even bigger than that lightweight Anglaise trash "The Forsyte Saga".'

'And as for that prissy Andre Gide .. pah!'.

Marcel smiled. At last he had it. This story would make the Academie sit up; it would surely be THE NEXT BIG THING. No more of that bloody Guermantes family.

It was an ingenious idea for the plot, and the right words would flow as soon as he had what he needed, and he needed that spark now. Instantly. Urgently. Otherwise no story ...

He turned, and scabbled for the notepad he kept on his ormolu table.

Celeste appeared, and furtively set down the Sevres tea-set.

Marcel turned to it - and shrieked 'merde!'

'Celeste, Celeste, please don't tell me you have run out of madeleines'.