

The Wedding Guest

by **Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919**

Published: 1903

in »Harper's Monthly« magazine

Re-published: 2016

Richard M. Woodward



Tressilian surveyed with interest the dress, features, and general manner of the man who, in a measure, had thrust his friendship upon him, and he decided that while credit might be given to the apparel, which was of a holiday nature, it must be denied otherwise. The features were too heavy, inclining to brutality, and the mouth, in particular, was coarse and sensuous. But his doublet and breeches were of purple velvet slashed with gay satin, and his hose was silken. A brilliant jewel shone in the cocked hat lying upon the table beside him, and the sword that swung from his belt had a hilt of gold.

„One of fortune who goeth to a festival,” was the thought of Tressilian.

„Wish me luck, sir,” said the man. „You knew it not before, but I tell you now that it is to be a merry night for me.“

He lifted his glass of wine, gazed lovingly for a moment or two at the dark red bubbles on its surface, then drank it at a draught.

It seemed to Tressilian that his chance companion's joviality had begun already, but an easy bearing, a courteous acceptance of any situation, a manner that told of a good mind and some experience of the world, were among Tressilian's gifts, and he used them now. He lifted his own glass of wine, holding it level with the other's, and when the man drank he sipped a little and put the glass back on the table.

The stranger struck the board with his fist, not by way of anger, but to put emphasis upon his words.

„Sir,” he said, “a momentous event in my life is approaching: two hours from this moment I shall take to myself a bride.”

„Ah!” said Tressilian; „then I make to you my congratulations. You spoke truly when you prophesied that it would be a fair evening for you.“

But it seemed to Tressilian, although he was inclined to no narrow ways of thinking, that if ever he was so near his own wedding the hour would not find him in a coffee-house freely drinking wine, and with equal freedom enlarging to strangers upon that which should be dearest to him. He glanced about the room, which was heavy and Dutch in its nature, including the host, who sat silently in a great oaken chair, smoking a pipe with a long curiously coiled stem tipped with a silver mouthpiece, Tressilian and the stranger were the only guests, although the dark was falling and a cold wind whipped a cold rain down the narrow street. But in the room the fire burned brightly and a generous warmth came from the heart of the red coals.

„It is a good night for one's bridal,” said Tressilian, wishing to be agreeable.

„The cold and the darkness and the rain without will only color more deeply the joyous tints of love and beauty within.”

„You speak, sir, with sense and discrimination,” said the stranger. „When I first put eyes upon you I knew—I have the same qualities myself—that you were a man of parts, of a natural wisdom, reenforced by a knowledge of the world.”

„Then we are indeed well met,” said Tressilian, gravely.

„My name,” said the stranger, increasing his volubility with more wine, „is Philip Augustus Vanderheyden, and it is not unknown in this town.”

His tone had a definite touch of pomposity, and Tressilian saw that he was expected to show himself impressed. But he said quietly:

„And mine is Arthur Tressilian. I am, and I take it you are too, a native of this town, but I have been away a long time in various and odd parts of the world, and upon my return I find changes; even the name is different: it was New Amsterdam then, it is New York now.”

„Sir,” said Vanderheyden, „the change of flag troubles us little.”

„I inferred as much; I myself felt no alteration in the air I breathed until I was duly informed of it. Our host, who sits so much at ease in the corner, and who does not remember me, but whom I remember, has not changed by a hair. The last time I saw him, now some ten years ago, when I was a boy, he sat in the same chair and smoked the same pipe. As a lad, sir, I coveted a silver mouthpiece.”

„Then, my dear Tressilian,” said Vanderheyden, who was growing over-friendly as well as effusive, repeated libations inciting him to the highest spirits, „you have

come home most opportunely; one who has been so long absent wishes a warm welcome, and I take it that it would be a friendly act upon my part to invite you to my wedding to-night. And you, sir, would requite me in proper fashion by coming and smiling upon my bride and myself. It will call for no sacrifice on your part. The lady, I assure you, is of great beauty and of a dignity corresponding. If you have any ailment of the eyes, whether trifling or severe, it is sure to find a cure."

"I thank you, sir," said Tressilian, departing in no measure from his grave manner. Nevertheless he felt embarrassment. He did not wish the comradeship to extend beyond the coffee-house; even there it had not been of his seeking—merely beyond his avoidance, without a quarrel. Vanderheyden was not of the kind that he would seek for friend. It was quite plain that he lacked all the finer and more delicate essences of human nature, being full fed and gross of mind and body. Tressilian felt pity for the lady, whatever she might be, condemned to mate with one who described her so freely to a stranger but two hours before the marriage altar. "I shall tear myself from him," he resolved, "or the lady will have to give him physical support before the clergyman. I will not be even remotely the cause of such a shameless procedure."

He rose as if to take his departure, but Vanderheyden again smote the table violently with his fist, and now it was in anger and not by way of emphasis.

"Sir," he said, "I take it ill of you that you have not responded to my most courteous invitation."

Tressilian was in no mood to quarrel, in particular with one about to take to himself a bride; he would not spoil so festive an occasion with unseemly words or anything in the fashion of a blow, and he sat down again.

"That is done like a gentleman," said Vanderheyden, who was growing lighter of head. "I wish you to go with me, and insist that you do so. Then I shall compel you to acknowledge that I am a gallant of true taste. The lady, sir, hath eyes of divine blue, a most noble arm, and a fine ankle. The recital of her charms would be like the catalogue of Homer's ships."

Tressilian, as he gazed at the coarse and complacent bridegroom, felt a singular repulsion, and his feeling of pity for the unknown bride deepened. Truly she must have many charms and the patience of an angel if she would balance the faults of him who was about to become her lord. Even as he looked, Vanderheyden drank again, and so deeply that his eyes became dim, and he laughed like a foolish child.

"My dear Tressilian," he said, in voluble confidence, "I shall be a good husband; none better, I assure you; but I mean to assert myself. I will be master in my own house."

"To that I fancy a lady so fair and gentle as you describe would make no protest."

"There was some little objection on her part to the match, a trifling need of moral compulsion from her relatives. But, my good sir, can you see the shadow of an excuse why any girl should object to me as a spouse? It is true that I have been a bit of a rake in my time, but what man of the world is not? With a lady of sense I should think it a recommendation rather than a hindrance."

As he spoke his heavy jaw lowered, his narrow, dull eyes contracted yet further and shed a cruel light, his entire aspect becoming brutal and repellent to the last degree. It suddenly occurred to Tressilian that he should rather see a sister of his,

if he had one, be taken by death than become the wife of such a man. But he avoided an answer to Vanderheyden's question.

„I trust, sir,” he said, „that you will not think I am intrusive if I inquire the name of the lady who is so soon to become your wife.”

„Clotilde Van Zeyl.“

Tressilian pondered a moment, and then came a flash of pleasant memory. Clotilde Van Zeyl! He remembered a slim, long-legged girl of nine or ten, whom he had carried on his shoulders through the deep snow. She seemed to have in her the promise of a fine woman, and doubtless she was one now; even then she had a wit, and a charm, too, quite her own. It was an evil thing that little Clotilde, with her grace, her beauty, and her mind, should be sold to the heavy, coarse man who sat on the other side of the table.

„I take it that you will come?” said Vanderheyden.

„I fear, sir, that I cannot be a guest at your wedding. I am not properly clothed. These garments of mine would be much out of place upon so joyous an occasion.”

Vanderheyden laughed foolishly.

„Behold my cloak, sir,” he said, lifting a most gorgeous piece of apparel from the back of his chair. „It may be that you can wear this; a few shakes of the dice will determine it.”

„Sir, I would not deprive you of your wedding-cloak; it has been said of me that I am lucky in games of chance, and I do not deny it.”

„Should I lose, I can with ease obtain another. It seems to me, man, that you are reluctant to accept a fair invitation, reaching hither and thither in obscure corners for the shadow of an excuse. Should it go further, which I am loath to believe will happen, I shall consider it an affront to myself, and, above all, to the lady who is about to become Madame Vanderheyden.”

Tressilian flushed slightly. Much drifting about a variable world had taught him how to bear and forbear, but his natural ease of temper was ruffled. Upon occasion he could be as stiff and unyielding as the best of them, and he did not like to be driven into an affair for which he had no taste and which did not concern him, and yet there was a flickering desire to see little Clotilde again. In her scarlet dress and with her eager face she had been as bright as a flame, and he smiled again at the memory.

„You smile, sir,” said Vanderheyden. „Am I to understand that you already regard my cloak as yours? He who boasts of his favor with fortune should be willing to put it to the proof.”

Obviously his words were a taunt, and Tressilian took them as such. From a small leather pouch fastened under his belt he drew forth ten gold coins of goodly size and put them upon the table.

„If these do not fairly match the value of your cloak,” he said, „I shall add to them.”

„It is enough,” replied Vanderheyden. „I see that you are a man of proper spirit.”

His heavy eyes blazed up with a new flame, the love of gaming, and he rested both elbows upon the table, while he shook the dice with an uplifted and fat right hand.

They threw alternately until the decision was given, and as Tressilian had predicted, fortune was in his favor. Vanderheyden tossed the garment to him.

„It is yours,” he said; „you have won it fairly.”

But Tressilian felt repugnance.

„I cannot take your wedding-cloak,” he said.

„Would you insult me, sir? I play fairly. When I win I expect to be paid, and when I lose I pay.”

The red of Vanderheyden’s face turned to purple, and he put his hand threateningly upon the hilt of his sword. Tressilian felt no fear of him, but in such a case, being averse to a quarrel, he saw there was nothing for it but to take the cloak.

„I see that it is mine,” he said, and he put it across the back of his chair, where its purple and gold glowed richly in the firelight.

„I feel, sir, that I shall have a speedy revenge,” said Vanderheyden, shaking the dice again. „My hat, which has a jewel in the feather, as you can see, against your cloak.”

Again Tressilian felt embarrassment, but under the code he could not refuse to give Vanderheyden his chance to square himself with fortune. He looked about, seeking an excuse, however slight, to escape from this unpleasant pass, but they were yet alone in the coffee-house, save the landlord, who smoked placidly, and who watched with a satisfied eye the rings of smoke rise and break against the oaken ceiling. There was nothing upon which he could fairly hinge an interruption.

Illustration:

Make your cast

„Make your cast,” he said.

Vanderheyden threw, and the score was bad.

„I begin ominously—for myself,” he said.

But the fever of gaming was in his eyes and his manner. He hung over the dice, intent upon every throw, forgetful of all else, even of the marriage altar and the bride who awaited him, now scarcely an hour distant. Once Tressilian’s hand by accident touched Vanderheyden’s, and he felt a shudder of repulsion at the coarse, unpleasant contact. A thrill of pity, deeper and stronger than ever, for the little Clotilde, ran through him.

Vanderheyden lost the hat with the jewel in the feather, and, still insisting upon his revenge, sent his sword and his doublet after it. As he played and lost, a great ill-humor grew upon him, and he moistened it with brandy until he saw but dimly, and his hands when stretched for the dice often missed them.

„I refuse to play further, even at the risk of your anger,” said Tressilian, when the doublet was passed to him. „It is not fitting, and you have, sir, an occasion to celebrate, upon which it is time that you should start.”

„What is it?” said Vanderheyden. „I do not seem to remember.”

He rubbed his brow with his thick hand and closed his eyes, as if he would draw back the memory that had slipped from him. The effort was vain, the eyes remained shut, and presently Tressilian was startled by his heavy breathing. Vanderheyden, overpowered, had fallen asleep. Tressilian quickly recovered the coolness and ease which lay at the base of his nature.

„I do not think it likely that I shall fall asleep on the eve of my wedding—if I ever have one,” was his silent thought. „Now, what a pretty spectacle we have here!”

He rose and surveyed the man sprawled in his chair, his head resting upon the back of it, his mouth wide open and giving forth muffled sounds. Such a creature was not worthy of a wife. Poor little Clotilde!

Tressilian lay the gorgeous cloak across his arm and looked at it, admiring its richness of color and texture; then he put on the doublet and draped the cloak over his shoulders, and, having a fine figure, turned to the Dutch mirror to see how they became him. The effect was admirable, as he and Vanderheyden were of a height, and the fit was perfect.

„I won them in fair contest,” he said, nodding to the host, who never took his pipe from his mouth, but nodded back, so much as to say that he understood.

Tressilian had a certain love of color which belongs to an easy and joyous spirit, and having found the doublet and cloak to sit so well, he was fain to try the hat and the sword, too, and again the effect was harmonious and pleasing to a degree. In the mirror he showed both the figure and spirit of a gallant knight, and the contemplation of himself gave him pleasure. Then he bestowed one look of commiseration upon the recumbent and sleeping figure of the groom-elect.

„At least I am not the cause of this,” was Tressilian’s thought; „it was forced upon me.”

His look lingered upon Vanderheyden, as if he had summoned all his faculties for deep thought. Then he raised one hand and made a gesture to the inert figure, as if bidding it a peaceful good night, after the graceful doing of which he walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the outer air.

The cold rain had turned to a fine snow, whipped about and driven hither and thither by a wind that bit through Tressilian’s new cloak and made him shiver.

A heavy Dutch carriage, half veiled in the drifting snow, was standing before the step, and the driver, leaning forward, said, respectfully, through the white mist, „If we tarry longer, sir, we shall be late.”

Tressilian, without a word, stepped into the carriage, and it drove swiftly away, bearing him northward. But he opened the window now and then and glanced out, keeping a good watch upon his course, as long absence had not dimmed his familiarity with the city and its salient points. Nor did he feel apprehension. The question troubling his mind at that moment was whether he partook in any degree of the character of Vanderheyden when he put on his garments and sword; had he been convinced that it was so, he would have opened the carriage door at once and cast raiment and weapon alike into the street.

The night was yet stormy; the houses, so solid in the day, looked ghostly in the dusk and the driven snow. A nightwatchman lifted his lantern as they passed and nodded to the driver. Once they heard the beat of waves, and Tressilian caught a glimpse of the long narrow sea that girts the eastern side of the city like the arm of a lover. When he opened the door of the carriage the snow swept in, and closing it again, he shivered slightly—the act being purely physical, and in no sense of the nerves. Tressilian was of an easy temperament, never taking his position ill, and nature had given him great mental curiosity; he was always eager to know what would follow logically. So he drew his new plumage more closely to shut out the

cold, and calmly awaited the effect of arrangement, as qualified by happy or unhappy chance.

The carriage stopped, and the driver, descending from his seat, announced with respect that they were at the church. Tressilian stepped out, and was forced to bend his head to keep the snow from driving into his eyes. Shading them with his hand, he saw a dark church with an open door, and a lantern shining dimly in the vestibule. Near him a half-dozen people were gathered, and a linkboy held aloft a torch, which sputtered badly, and gave forth so faint a light that Tressilian could see the face of no one.

„The bride awaits you, Mynheer Vanderheyden,” said a voice in his ear. „She is already at the church, and there is comment on your tardiness.”

„But I am here—an accident—unavoidable,” replied Tressilian in tones half lost in the shriek of the wind about the walls of the church.

The spirit of the knight errant was in Tressilian, and at that moment he was animated by chivalry, pride, and the underlying sense of mental curiosity that always led him on. He held himself proudly erect, and, with a gesture of inimitable grace, touching the hilt of his sword as if half in salute, walked boldly into the church, the little group forming a line on either side of the door.

The vestibule was dim, and not more than a dozen people were gathered there. Tressilian could see only their figures, not their faces, but a heavy man said in his ear,

„The lady is within; she awaits the bridal kiss.”

He opened a door, and Tressilian, alone, stepped into a small inner room, closing the door behind him with his own hand.

The room, like the vestibule, was dim, but not too dim to hide from Tressilian the slender, drooping figure of a girl, in bridal white, who stood at a window, looking out at the falling snow and the gloom of the night. She started, turning when the door creaked, and into her eyes came such a look of horror and repulsion as Tressilian hoped never again to see on the face of any one. He had not thought until then what must be the feelings of a woman when, on her bridal night, the man whom she does not love comes to her.

And yet Vanderheyden had told but a part of the truth when he boasted of her beauty and her radiance. The little Clotilde was tall and slender, but with the ample graces of womanhood. Hair black as night encircled a face as fair as sunlight and all the whiter by the contrast, save where the delicate red bloomed in either cheek. Tressilian looked into eyes of a dark blue, a divine tint that he loved well, though they were now shadowed by unshed tears of pain.

Every fibre in Tressilian was stirred. He had a deep and tender feeling for woman, believing that the Supreme Being had been less kind to her than to man; hence, without irreverence, it was the duty of his sex to atone as far as might be for the difference. But here the case was of a nature most extreme, appealing to every noble impulse in him.

He saw the horror and repulsion growing in her eyes as he approached her, himself in the shadow, she in the light from the window. She shrank back against the hard sill and put up both hands, as if she would protect herself.

Illustration:

Don't touch me now!

„I did not know it would be so hard,” she breathed, and he saw her figure moving in a nervous shudder.

Tressilian stopped quite still, his heart melted with pity; in her dread her beauty was heightened, and a desire to protect her, to shield her from any one whom she feared, overpowered him.

He moved a step nearer, and again she threw up her hands, cowering against the window-sill.

„Oh, don't!” she cried. „Don't touch me now!”

She looked away from him and at the night, with its sombre shadows and driving snow, and then, as if held by a cruel fascination, her eyes came back to him.

„Clotilde!” said Tressilian, softly.

She moved at his tone, and gazed at him with startled eyes.

„Clotilde!” repeated Tressilian, in a voice full of protection and tenderness, as he took off his hat and opened his cloak.

„Ah!” she cried, and fell back against the window.

„It is not Vanderheyden who comes,” said Tressilian, „and he will not come. I am here in his place at this juncture; it does not matter how. The groom is absent from the wedding, but the guest is here; there is no need that anything should tarry.”

She did not speak, her startled gaze still upon him.

And yet Tressilian thought that he saw in her eyes relief, the joy that comes of a momentary escape from danger, brief though the moment be.

„I repeat it—there is no need that anything should tarry. I come in the bridegroom's place. Do I fill it badly? At least I can love as well as he. My heart is as warm—maybe warmer. I shall leave those things to the intimate testimony of my wife, a testimony not to go beyond us two, and I shall know how to defend her.”

With the lofty gesture that became him so well he touched the gold-hilted sword by his side, and stood before her a gallant knight, young, strong, and with tender eyes.

„Clotilde—ah, you remember now—the bridegroom whom you awaited does not come to-night, but unless that which I wish happens, he will come to-morrow night, and there will be no escape. Clotilde, I have been in various lands and on the great seas, but there has been in my heart, as there is in the heart of every young man unwed, a picture of the bride whom I wished some day to be mine, and in this picture she was tall and slender. Her hair was gloriously black, but her face was gloriously fair, and her eyes, by way of contrast to her hair, were of blue, a dark, a tender shade that I have seen but once. It was in my heart, Clotilde, even then, that if ever I met this woman I should know her at one glance, and she would know me. Few words would pass between us two, only a gaze that should carry with it our love. Clotilde, am I right?”

A low and swelling sound, the note of solemn music, came from the church without.

„Clotilde, they await us; if we do not go, another will be in my place here tomorrow night. Ah, Clotilde, I spoke no idle words when I said that I would love my wife, that I would shield her and cherish her as bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.”

There was a gentle knock at the door.

„The clerk with the papers which they said he was to sign,” exclaimed Clotilde, in terror.

Tressilian opened the door, took the papers and pen from the hand of a little man who stood there in the dim light, and signing them, thrust them into his own pocket, after which he shut the door in the clerk’s face.

„Clotilde,” he said, in fervent tones, „our affair begins well. I have complied with the forms of the law, and the law makes no objection. Listen! they still await us.”

Louder swelled the volume of the music, solemn, majestic, and insistent.

„It is calling us, Clotilde.”

Outside the darkness had thickened and the window-panes rattled under the driven snow. She shivered, and with a movement that went to the heart of Tressilian came a step nearer to him, as if here stood her champion. In her eyes shone a glorious radiance like sunlight flooding through the storm.

He put his arm around her waist, and kissed her on lips which she did not turn away. The swell of the music, solemn, haunting, and still insistent, filled all the church, even the room in which these two stood, their pulses beating.

„Come, Clotilde, they shall wait no longer.”

He drew her arm within his own, threw open the door, and walked down the dim aisle toward the altar. Some in the shadowed seats said that the groom bore himself with a strange, new dignity.

They knelt at the altar, and Tressilian felt the hand upon his arm tremble a little and then grow firm.

„Fear not, dearest one,” he whispered; „it was decreed long ago that it should be.”

The clergyman, little and old, scarcely of this world, repeated the marriage service in muffled words, and when he came to the name of the groom he paused, as if he could not remember, as he had paused more than once before.

„Arthur Tressilian,” said Tressilian, in low tones, and „Arthur Tressilian” the little old man said after him in tones equally low.

They rose, the two now one, and up the aisle they walked, while the music became loud and triumphant.

In the vestibule the people were gathered and the lights blazed up. There Tressilian paused, and, his bride on his arm, stepped into the heart of the glow. He heard the astonished „Ah!” from all, and then with that old indescribable gesture, a movement that was now full of defiance, he said aloud, for all to hear:

„Friends, I bid you Godspeed; I am about to take my wife home, and we wish no company to-night.”

