

# **THE VAN ROON**

BY  
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# **THE VAN ROON**

# I

NORTH of the Strand, east of the National Gallery, a narrow street winds a devious course towards Long Acre. To the casual eye it is no more than a mean and dingy thoroughfare without charm or interest, but for the connoisseur it has its legend. Here Swinburne came upon his famous copy of "The Faerie Queene"; here more than one collection has been enriched by a Crome, a Morland, a choice miniature, a first proof or some rare unsuspected article of bigotry and virtue.

On the right, going from Charing Cross, halfway up the street, a shop, outwardly inconspicuous, bears on its front in plain gilt letters the name S. Gedge, Antiques.

A regard for the *mot juste* could omit the final letter. S. Gedge Antique was nearer the fact. To look at, the proprietor of the business was an antique of the most genuine kind, whose age, before he was dressed for the day, might have been anything. When, however, he had "tidied himself up" to sit at the receipt of a custom, a process involving a shave, the putting on of collar and dickey, prehistoric frock coat, new perhaps for the Prince Consort's funeral, and a pair of jemimas that also were "of the period," his years, in spite of a yellow parchment countenance of an incredible cunning, could at conservative estimate be reckoned as seventy.

On a certain morning of September, the years of the proprietor of S. Gedge Antiques, whatever they might be, sat heavily upon him. Tall, sombre, gaunt, a cross between a hop-pole and a

moulting vulture, his tattered dressing gown and chessboard slippers lent a touch of fantasy to his look of eld, while the collar and dickey of commerce still adorned the back kitchen dresser.

Philosophers say that to find a reason for everything is only a question of looking. The reason for the undress of S. Gedge Antiques so late as eleven o'clock in the morning was not far to seek. His right hand man and sole assistant, who answered to the name of William, and who was never known or called by any other, had been away for an annual holiday of one week, which this year he had spent in Suffolk. He was due back in the course of that day and his master would raise a pæan on his return. In the absence of William the indispensable S. Gedge Antiques was like a windjammer on a lee shore.

There was a further reason for his lost air. He was "at outs" with Mrs. Runciman, his charwoman, a state of affairs which had long threatened to become chronic. An old, and in her own opinion, an undervalued retainer, the suspension of diplomatic relations between Mrs. Runciman and her employer could always be traced to one cause. S. Gedge attributed it to the phases of the moon and their effect on the human female, but the real root of the mischief was Mrs. Runciman's demand for "a raise in her celery." For many years past the lady had held that her services were worth more than "half a crown a day and her grub." The invariable reply of her master was that he had never paid more to a char all the time he had been in trade and that if she wanted more she could keep away. This Thursday morning, according to precedent when matters came to a head, Mrs. Runciman had taken him at his word. The old

man knew, however, that her absence would only be temporary. A single day off would vindicate the rights of woman. As sure as the sun rose on the morrow Mrs. R. would return impenitent but in better fettle for charring. But as he made a point of telling her, she would play the trick once too often.

Char-less for the time being, assistant-less also, this morning S. Gedge was not only looking his age, he was feeling it; but he had already begun to examine the contents of a large packing case from Ipswich which Messrs. Carter Paterson had delivered half an hour ago at the back of the premises by the side entry. Handicapped as S. Gedge Antiques at the moment was, he could well have deferred these labours until later in the day. Human curiosity, however, had claimed him as a victim.

By a side wind he had heard of a sale at a small and rather inaccessible house in the country where a few things might be going cheap. As this was to take place in the course of William's holiday, the young man had been given a few pounds to invest, provided that in his opinion "the goods were full value." By trusting William to carry out an operation of such delicacy, his master whose name in trade circles was that of "a very keen buyer" was really paying him the highest compliment in his power. For the god of S. Gedge Antiques was money. In the art of "picking things up," however, William had a lucky touch. His master could depend as a rule on turning over a few shillings on each of the young man's purchases; indeed there were occasions when the few shillings had been many. The truth was that William's flair for a good thing was almost uncanny.



Adroit use of a screwdriver prised the lid off the packing case. A top layer of shavings was removed. With the air of a *dévo*t the old man dug out William's first purchase and held it up to the light of New Cross Street, or to as much of that dubious commodity as could filter down the side entry.

Purchase the first proved to be a copy of an engraving by P. Bartolozzi: the *Mrs. Lumley and Her Children* of Sir Joshua Reynolds. An expert eye priced it at once a safe thirty shillings in the window of the front shop, although William had been told not to exceed a third of that sum at Loseby Grange, Saxmundham. So far so good. With a feeling of satisfaction S. Gedge laid the engraving upon a chair of ornate appearance but doubtful authenticity, and proceeded to remove more straw from the packing case. Before, however, he could deal with William's second purchase, whatever it might be, he was interrupted.

A voice came from the front shop.

"Uncle Si! Uncle Si! Where are you?"

The voice was feminine. S. Gedge Antiques, crusted bachelor and confirmed hater of women, felt a sudden pang of dismay.

"Where are you, Uncle Si?"

"Com-ming!" A low roar boomed from the interior of the packing case. It failed, however, to get beyond the door of the lumber room.

"That girl of Abe's" ruminated the old man deep in straw. In the stress of affairs, he had almost forgotten that the only child of a

half brother many years his junior, was coming to London by the morning train.

“Uncle Si!”

With a hiss of disgust worthy of an elderly cobra he writhed his head free of the straw. “Confound her, turning up like this. Why couldn’t she come this afternoon when the boy’d be home? But that’s a woman. They’re born as cross as Christmas.”

A third time his name was called.

S. Gedge Antiques, unshaven, beslippered, bespectacled, slowly emerged from the decent obscurity of the back premises into the fierce publicity of the front shop. He was greeted by a sight of which his every instinct profoundly disapproved.

The sight was youthful, smiling, fresh complexioned. In a weak moment, for which mentally he had been kicking himself round the shop ever since, he had been so unwise as to offer to adopt this girl who had lost her father some years ago and had lately buried her mother. Carter Paterson had delivered her trunk along with the packing case from Ipswich, a fact he now recalled.

Had S. Gedge had an eye for anything but antiques, he must have seen at once that his niece was by way of being a decidedly attractive young woman. She was nineteen, and she wore a neat well-fitting black dress and a plain black hat in which cunning and good taste were mingled. Inclined to be tall she was slender and straight and carried herself well. Her eyes were clear, shrewd and smiling. In fact they appeared to smile

quite considerably at the slow emergence from the back premises of S. Gedge Antiques.

In the girl's hand was a pilgrim basket, which she put carefully on a gate-legged table, marked "£4.19.6, a great bargain" and then very fearlessly embraced its owner.

"How are you, niece?" gasped the old man who felt that an affront had been offered to the dignity of the human male.

"Thank you, Uncle Si, I'm first rate," said the girl trying for the sake of good manners not to smile too broadly.

"Had a comfortable journey?"

"Oh, yes, thank you."

"Didn't expect you so soon. However, your box has come. By the way, what's your name? I've forgotten it."

"June."

"June, eh? One of these new fangled affairs," S. Gedge spoke aggrievedly. "Why not call yourself December and have done with it?"

"I will if you like," said June obligingly. "But it seems rather long. Do you care for De, Cem, or Ber for short?"

"It don't matter. What's in a name? I only thought it sounded a bit sloppy and new fangled."

The eyes of June continued to regard S. Gedge Antiques with a demure smile. He did not see the smile. He only saw her and she was a matter for grave reflection.

## II

S. GEDGE ANTIQUES peered dubiously at his niece. He had a dislike of women and more than any other kind he disliked young women. But one fact was already clear; he had let himself in for it. Frowning at this bitter thought he cast his mind back in search of a reason. Knowing himself so well he was sure that a reason there must be and a good one for so grave an indiscretion. Suddenly he remembered the charwoman and his brow cleared a little.

“Let me have a look at you, niece.” As a hawk might gaze at a wren he gazed at June through his spectacles. “Tall and strong seemingly. I hope you’re not afraid of hard work.”

“I’m not afraid of anything, Uncle Si,” said June with calm precision.

“No answers,” said S. Gedge curtly. “If you intend to stay here you’ve got to mind your p’s and q’s and you’ve got to earn your keep.” He sighed and impatiently plucked the spectacles from his nose. “Thought so,” he snarled. “I’m looking at you with my selling spectacles. For this job I’ll need my buying ones.”

Delving into the capacious pockets of his dressing gown, the old man was able to produce a second pair of glasses. He adjusted them grimly. “Now I can begin to see you. Favour your father seemingly. And he was never a mucher—wasn’t your father.”

“Dad is dead, Uncle Si.” There was reproof in June’s strong voice. “And he was a very good man. There was never a better father than Dad.”

“Must have been a good man. He hardly left you and your mother the price of his funeral.”

“It wasn’t Dad’s fault that he was unlucky in business.”

“Unlucky.” S. Gedge Antiques gave a sharp tilt to his “buying” spectacles. “I don’t believe in luck myself.”

“Don’t you?” said June, with a touch of defiance.

“No answers.” Uncle Si held up a finger of warning. “Your luck is you’re not afraid of work. If you stop here you’ll have to stir yourself.”

June confessed a modest willingness to do her best.

S. Gedge continued to gaze at her. It was clear that he had undertaken an immense responsibility. A live sharp girl, nineteen years of age, one of these modern hussies, with opinions of her own, was going to alter things. It was no use burking the fact, but a wise man would have looked it in the face a little sooner.

“The char is taking a day off,” he said, breaking this reverie. “So I’d better give you a hand with your box. You can then change your frock and come and tidy up. If you give your mind to your job I daresay I’ll be able to do without the char altogether. The woman’s a nuisance, as all women are. But she’s the worst kind of a nuisance, and I’ve been trying to be quit of her any time this ten years.”

In silence June followed Uncle Si kitchenwards, slowly removing a pair of black kid gloves as she did so. He helped her to carry a trunk containing all her worldly possessions up a steep, narrow, twisty flight of uncarpeted stairs to a tiny attic, divided by a wooden partition from a larger one, and lit by a grimy window in the roof. It was provided with a bedstead, a mattress, a chest of drawers, a washing stand and a crazy looking-glass.

“When the boy comes, he’ll find you a couple o’ blankets, I daresay. Meantime you can fall to as soon as you like.”

June lost no time in unpacking. She then exchanged her new mourning for an old dress in which to begin work. As she did so her depression was terrible. The death of her mother, a month ago, had meant the loss of everything she valued in the world. There was no one else, no other thing that mattered. But she had promised that she would be a brave girl and face life with a stout heart, and she was going to be as good as her word.

For that reason she did not allow herself to spend much time over the changing of her dress. She would have liked to sit on the edge of the small bed in that dismal room and weep. The future was an abyss. Her prospects were nil. She had ambition, but she lacked the kind of education and training that could get her out of the rut; and all the money she had in the world, something less than twenty pounds, was in her purse in a roll of notes, together with a few odd shillings and coppers. Nothing more remained of the sum that had been realized by the sale of her home, which her mother and she had striven so hard to keep together. And when this was gone she would have to live on the charity of her Uncle Si, who was said to be a very

hard man and for whom she had already conceived an odd dislike, or go out and find something to do.

Such an outlook was grim. But as June put on an old house frock she shut her lips tight and determined not to think about to-morrow. Uncle Si had told her to clean out the grate in the back kitchen. She flattered herself that she could clean out a grate with anybody. Merely to stop the cruel ache at the back of her brain she would just think of her task, and nothing else.

In about ten minutes June came down the attic stairs, fully equipped even to an overall which she had been undecided whether to pack in her box but had prudently done so.

“Where are the brushes and dust pan, Uncle Si?”

“In the cupboard under the scullery sink.” A growl emerged from the packing case, followed by a gargoyle head. “And when you are through with the kitchen grate you can come and clear up this litter, and then you can cook a few potatoes for dinner—that’s if you know how.”

“Of course I know how,” said June.

“Your mother seems to have brought you up properly. If you give your mind to your job and you’re not above soiling your hands I quite expect we’ll be able to do without the char.”

June, her large eyes fixed on Uncle Si, did not flinch from the prospect. She went boldly, head high, in the direction of the scullery sink while S. Gedge Antiques proceeded to burrow deeper and deeper into the packing case.

Presently he dug out a bowl of Lowestoft china, which he tapped with a finger nail and held up to the light.

“It’s a good piece,” he reflected. “There’s one thing to be said for that boy—he don’t often make mistakes. I wonder what he paid for this. However, I shall know presently,” and S. Gedge placed the bowl on a chair opposite the engraving “after” P. Bartolozzi.

His researches continued, but there was not much to follow. Still, that was to be expected. William had only been given twenty pounds and the bowl alone was a safe fiver. The old man was rather sorry that William had not been given more to invest. However, there was a copper coal-scuttle that might be polished up to fetch three pounds, and a set of fire irons and other odds and ends, not of much account in themselves, but all going to show that good use had been made of the money.

“Niece,” called Uncle Si when at last the packing case was empty, “come and give a hand here.”

With bright and prompt efficiency June helped to clear up the débris and to haul the packing case into the backyard.

The old man said at the successful conclusion of these operations:

“Now see what you can do with those potatoes. Boil ’em in their skins. There’s less waste that way and there’s more flavour.”

“What time is dinner, Uncle Si?”

“One o’clock sharp.”



S. Gedge Antiques, having put on his collar, and discarded his dressing gown for the frock coat of commerce, shambled forward into the front shop with the air of a man who has no time to waste upon trivialities. So far things were all right. The girl seemed willing and capable and he hoped she would continue to be respectful. The times were against it, certainly. In the present era of short skirts, open-work stockings, fancy shoes and bare necks, it was hard, even for experts like himself, to say what the world was coming to. Girls of the new generation were terribly independent. They would sauce you as soon as look at you, and there was no doubt they knew far more than their grandmothers. In taking under his roof the only child of a half-brother who had died worth precious little, S. Gedge Antiques was simply asking for trouble. At the same time there was no need to deny that June had begun well, and if at eight o'clock the next morning he was in a position to say, "Mrs. R. you can take another day off and get yourself a better billet," he would feel a happier man.

A voice with a ring in it came from the shop threshold. "Uncle Si, how many potatoes shall I cook?"

"Three middling size. One for me, one for you, one for William if he comes. And if he don't come, he can have it cold for his supper."

"Or I can fry it," said the voice from the threshold.

"You can fry it?" S. Gedge peered towards the voice over the top of his "buying" spectacles. "Before we go in for fancy work let us see what sort of a job you make of a plain bilin'. Pigs

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