The Rocking-Chair
by Sarah Perkins Gilman

A WAVING spot of sunshine, a signal light that caught the eye at once in a waste of commonplace houses, and all the dreary dimness of a narrow city street.

Across some low roof that made a gap in the wall of masonry, shot a level, brilliant beam of the just-setting sun, touching the golden head of a girl in an open window.

She sat in a high-backed rocking-chair with brass mountings that glittered as it swung, rocking slowly back and forth, never lifting her head, but fairly lighting up the street with the glory of her sunlit hair.

We two stopped and stared, and, so staring, caught sight of a small sign in a lower window-’Furnished Lodgings.’ With a common impulse we crossed the street and knocked at the dingy front door. Slow, even footsteps approached from within, and a soft girlish laugh ceased suddenly as the door opened, showing us an old woman, with a dull, expressionless face and faded eyes. Yes, she had rooms to let. Yes, we could see them. No, there was no service. No, there were no meals. So murmuring monotonously, she led the way up-stairs. It was an ordinary house enough, on a poor sort of street, a house in no way remarkable or unlike its fellows. She showed us two rooms, connected, neither better nor worse than most of their class, rooms without a striking feature about them, unless it was the great brass-bound chair we found still rocking gently by the window.

But the gold-haired girl was nowhere to be seen. I fancied I heard the light rustle of girlish robes in the inner chamber—a breath of that low laugh—but the door leading to this apartment was locked, and when I asked the woman if we could see the other rooms she said she had no other rooms to let. A few words aside with Hal, and we decided to take these two, and move in at once. There was no reason we should not. We were looking for lodgings when that swinging sunbeam caught our eyes, and the accommodations were fully as good as we could pay for. So we closed our bargain on the spot, returned to our deserted boarding-house for a few belongings, and were settled anew that night.

Hal and I were young newspaper men, ‘penny-a-liners,’ part of that struggling crowd of aspirants who are to literature what squires and pages were to knighthood in olden days. We were winning our spurs. So far it was slow work, unpleasant and illpaid—so was squireship and pagehood, I am sure; menial service and laborious polishing of armor; long running afoot while the master rode. But the squire could at least honor his lord and leader, while we, alas! had small honor for those above us in our profession, with but too good reason. We, of course, should do far nobler things when these same spurs were won!

Now it may have been mere literary instinct—the grasping at ‘material’ of the pot-boiling writers of the day, and it may have been another kind of instinct—the unacknowledged attraction of the fair unknown; but, whatever the reason, the place had drawn us both, and here we were.

Unbroken friendship begun in babyhood held us two together, all the more closely because Hal was a merry, prosaic, clear-headed fellow, and I sensitive and romantic.

The fearless frankness of family life we shared, but held the right to unapproachable reserves, and so kept love unstrained. We examined our new quarters with interest. The front room, Hal’s, was rather big and bare. The back room, mine, rather small and bare.
He preferred that room, I am convinced, because of the window and the chair. I preferred the other, because of the locked door. We neither of us mentioned these prejudices.

'Are you sure you would not rather have this room?' asked Hal, conscious, perhaps, of an ulterior motive in his choice. 'No, indeed,' said I, with a similar reservation; 'you only have the street and I have a real "view" from my window. The only thing I begrudge you is the chair!'

'You may come and rock therein at any hour of the day or night,' said he magnanimously. 'It is tremendously comfortable, for all its black looks.'

It was a comfortable chair, a very comfortable chair, and we both used it a great deal. A very high-backed chair, curving a little forward at the top, with heavy square corners. These corners, the ends of the rockers, the great sharp knobs that tipped the arms, and every other point and angle were mounted in brass. 'Might be used for a battering-ram!' said Hal. He sat smoking in it, rocking slowly and complacently by the window, while I lounged on the foot of the bed, and watched a pale young moon sink slowly over the western housetops.

It went out of sight at last, and the room grew darker and darker till I could only see Hal's handsome head and the curving chair-back move slowly to and fro against the dim sky. 'What brought us here so suddenly, Maurice?' he asked, out of the dark.

'Three reasons,' I answered. 'Our need of lodgings, the suitability of these, and a beautiful head.'

'Correct,' said he. 'Anything else?'

'Nothing you would admit the existence of, my sternly logical friend. But I am conscious of a certain compulsion, or at least attraction, in the case, which does not seem wholly accounted for, even by golden hair.'

'For once I will agree with you,' said Hal. 'I feel the same way myself, and I am not impressionable.'

We were silent for a little. I may have closed my eyes,-it may have been longer than I thought, but it did not seem another moment when something brushed softly against my arm, and Hal in his great chair was rocking beside me.

'Excuse me,' said he, seeing me start. 'This chair evidently "walks," I've seen 'em before.'

So had I, on carpets, but there was no carpet here, and I thought I was awake.

He pulled the heavy thing back to the window again, and we went to bed.

Our door was open, and we could talk back and forth, but presently I dropped off and slept heavily until morning. But I must have dreamed most vividly, for he accused me of rocking in his chair half the night; said he could see my outline clearly against the starlight. 'No,' said I, 'you dreamed it. You've got rocking-chair on the brain.'

'Dream it is, then,' he answered cheerily. 'Better a nightmare than a contradiction; a vampire than a quarrel! Come on, let's go to breakfast!'

We wondered greatly as the days went by that we saw nothing of our golden-haired charmer. But we wondered in silence, and neither mentioned it to the other.

Sometimes I heard her light movements in the room next mine, or the soft laugh somewhere in the house; but the mother's slow, even steps were more frequent, and even she was not often visible. All either of us saw of the girl, to my knowledge, was from the street, for she still availed herself of our chair by the window. This we disapproved of, on principle, the more so as we left the doors locked, and her presence proved the possession of another key. No; there was the door in my room! But I did not mention the idea. Under the circumstances, however, we made no complaint, and used to rush stealthily and swiftly up-stairs, hoping to surprise her. But we never succeeded. Only the chair was often found still rocking, and sometimes I
fancied a faint sweet odor lingering about, an odor strangely saddening and suggestive. But
one day when I thought Hal was there I rushed in unceremoniously and caught her. It was
but a glimpse—a swift, light, noiseless sweep—she vanished into my own room. Following her
with apologies for such a sudden entrance, I was too late. The envious door was locked again.
Our landlady's fair daughter was evidently shy enough when brought to bay, but strangely
willing to take liberties in our absence. Still, I had seen her, and for that sight would have
forgiven much. Hers was a strange beauty, infinitely attractive yet infinitely perplexing. I
marveled in secret, and longed with painful eagerness for another meeting; but I said nothing
to Hal of my surprising her—it did not seem fair to the girl! She might have some good reason
for going there; perhaps I could meet her again. So I took to coming home early, on one excuse
or another, and inventing all manner of errands to get to the room when Hal was not in.
But it was not until after numberless surprises on that point, finding him there when I
supposed him downtown, and noticing something a little forced in his needless explanations,
that I began to wonder if he might not be on the same quest. Soon I was sure of it. I reached
the corner of the street one evening just at sunset, and—yes, there was the rhythmic swing of
that bright head in the dark frame of the open window. There also was Hal in the street
below. She looked out, she smiled. He let himself in and went upstairs.
I quickened my pace. I was in time to see the movement stop, the fair head turn, and Hal
standing beyond her in the shadow. I passed the door, passed the street, walked an hour-two
hours—got a late supper somewhere, and came back about bedtime with a sharp and bitter
feeling in my heart that I strove in vain to reason down. Why he had not as good a right to
meet her as I it were hard to say, and yet I was strangely angry with him.
When I returned the lamplight shone behind the white curtain, and the shadow of the great
chair stood motionless against it. Another shadow crossed—Hal—smoking. I went up.
He greeted me effusively and asked why I was so late. Where I got supper. Was unnaturally
cheerful. There was a sudden dreadful sense of concealment between us. But he told nothing
and I asked nothing, and we went silently to bed.
I blamed him for saying no word about our fair mystery, and yet I had said none concerning
my own meeting. I racked my brain with questions as to how much he had really seen of her;
if she had talked to him; what she had told him; how long she had stayed. I tossed all night
and Hal was sleepless too, for I heard him rocking for hours, by the window, by the bed, close
to my door. I never knew a rocking-chair to 'walk' as that one did. Towards morning the
steady creak and swing was too much for my nerves or temper.
'For goodness' sake, Hal, do stop that and go to bed!' 'What?' came a sleepy voice.
'Don't fool!' said I, 'I haven't slept a wink to-night for your everlasting rocking. Now do leave
off and go to bed.' 'Go to bed! I've been in bed all night and I wish you had! Can't you use the
chair without blaming me for it?' And all the time I heard him rock, rock, rock, over by the
hall door!
I rose stealthily and entered the room, meaning to surprise the ill-timed joker and convict him
in the act. Both rooms were full of the dim phosphorescence of reflected moonlight; I knew
them even in the dark; and yet I stumbled just inside the door, and fell heavily.
Hal was out of bed in a moment and had struck a light. 'Are you hurt, my dear boy?'
I was hurt, and solely by his fault, for the chair was not where I supposed, but close to my
bedroom door, where he must have left it to leap into bed when he heard me coming. So it was
in no amiable humor that I refused his offers of assistance and limped back to my own
sleepless pillow. I had struck my ankle on one of those brass-tipped rockers, and it pained me
severely. I never saw a chair so made to hurt as that one. It was so large and heavy and ill-balanced, and every joint and corner so shod with brass. Hal and I had punished ourselves enough on it before, especially in the dark when we forgot where the thing was standing, but never so severely as this. It was not like Hal to play such tricks, and both heart and ankle ached as I crept into bed again to toss and doze and dream and fitfully start till morning. Hal was kindness itself, but he would insist that he had been asleep and I rocking all night, till I grew actually angry with him. 'That's carrying a joke too far,' I said at last. 'I don't mind a joke, even when it hurts, but there are limits.' 'Yes, there are!' said he, significantly, and we dropped the subject.

Several days passed. Hal had repeated meetings with the goldhaired damsel; this I saw from the street; but save for these bitter glimpses I waited vainly.

It was hard to bear, harder almost than the growing estrangement between Hal and me, and that cut deeply. I think that at last either one of us would have been glad to go away by himself, but neither was willing to leave the other to the room, the chair, the beautiful unknown.

Coming home one morning unexpectedly, I found the dullfaced landlady arranging the rooms, and quite laid myself out to make an impression upon her, to no purpose.

'That is a fine old chair you have there,' said I, as she stood mechanically polishing the brass corners with her apron. She looked at the darkly glittering thing with almost a flash of pride.

'Yes,' said she, 'a fine chair!' 'Is it old!' I pursued.

'Very old,' she answered briefly.

'But I thought rocking-chairs were a modern American invention!' said I. She looked at me apathetically.

'\text{It is Spanish,}' she said, 'Spanish oak, Spanish leather, Spanish brass, Spanish.' I did not catch the last word, and she left the room without another.

It was a strange ill-balanced thing, that chair, though so easy and comfortable to sit in. The rockers were long and sharp behind, always lying in wait for the unwary, but cut short in front; and the back was so high and so heavy on top, that what with its weight and the shortness of the front rockers, it tipped forward with an ease and a violence equally astonishing.

This I knew from experience, as it had plunged over upon me during some of our frequent encounters. Hal also was a sufferer, but in spite of our manifold bruises, neither of us would have had the chair removed, for did not she sit in it, evening after evening, and rock there in the golden light of the setting sun. So, evening after evening, we two fled from our work as early as possible, and hurried home alone, by separate ways, to the dingy street and the glorified window.

I could not endure forever. When Hal came home first, I, lingering in the street below, could see through our window that lovely head and his in close proximity. When I came first, it was to catch perhaps a quick glance from above—a bewildering smile—no more. She was always gone when I reached the room, and the inner door of my chamber irrevocably locked.

At times I even caught the click of the latch, heard the flutter of loose robes on the other side; and sometimes this daily disappointment, this constant agony of hope deferred, would bring me to my knees by that door, begging her to open to me, crying to her in every term of passionate endearment and persuasion that tortured heart of man could think to use.
Hal had neither word nor look for me now, save those of studied politeness and cold indifference, and how could I behave otherwise to him, so proven to my face a liar? I saw him from the street one night, in the broad level sunlight, sitting in that chair, with the beautiful head on his shoulder. It was more than I could bear. If he had won, and won so utterly, I would ask but to speak to her once, and say farewell to both for ever. So I heavily climbed the stairs, knocked loudly, and entered at Hal's 'Come in!' only to find him sitting there alone, smoking—yes, smoking in the chair which but a moment since had held her too! He had but just lit the cigar, a paltry device to blind my eyes. 'Look here, Hal,' said I, 'I can't stand this any longer. May I ask you one thing? Let me see her once, just once, that I may say good-bye, and then neither of you need see me again!' Hal rose to his feet and looked me straight in the eye. Then he threw that whole cigar out of the window, and walked to within two feet of me.

'Are you crazy,' he said, 'I ask her! I! I have never had speech of her in my life! And you—' He stopped and turned away. 'And I what?' I would have it out now whatever came. 'And you have seen her day after day—talked with her—I need not repeat all that my eyes have seen!' 'You need not, indeed,' said I. 'It would tax even your invention. I have never seen her in this room but once, and then but for a fleeting glimpse—no word. From the street I have seen her often—with you!' He turned very white and walked from me to the window, then turned again. 'I have never seen her in this room for even such a moment as you own to. From the street I have seen her often-with you!' We looked at each other.

'Do you mean to say,' I inquired slowly, 'that I did not see you just now sitting in that chair, by that window, with her in your arms?' 'Stop!' he cried, throwing out his hand with a fierce gesture. It struck sharply on the corner of the chair-back. He wiped the blood mechanically from the three-cornered cut, looking fixedly at me. 'I saw you,' said I.

'You did not!' said he.

I turned slowly on my heel and went into my room. I could not bear to tell that man, my more than brother, that he lied. I sat down on my bed with my head on my hands, and presently I heard Hal's door open and shut, his step on the stair, the front door slam behind him. He had gone, I knew not where, and if he went to his death and a word of mine would have stopped him, I would not have said it. I do not know how long I sat there, in the company of hopeless love and jealousy and hate.

Suddenly, out of the silence of the empty room, came the steady swing and creak of the great chair. Perhaps—it must be! I sprang to my feet and noiselessly opened the door. There she sat by the window, looking out, and—yes—she threw a kiss to some one below. Ah, how beautiful she was! How beautiful! I made a step toward her. I held out my hands, I uttered I know not what—when all at once came Hal's quick step upon the stairs. She heard it, too, and, giving me one look, one subtle, mysterious, triumphant look, slipped past me and into my room just as Hal burst in. He saw her go. He came straight to me and I thought he would have struck me down where I stood.

'Out of my way,' he cried. 'I will speak to her. Is it not enough to see?'—he motioned toward the window with his wounded hand—'Let me pass!'

'She is not there,' I answered. 'She has gone through into the other room.'

A light laugh sounded close by us, a faint, soft, silver laugh, almost at my elbow. He flung me from his path, threw open the door, and entered. The room was empty. 'Where have you hidden her?' he demanded. I coldly pointed to the other door.
'So her room opens into yours, does it?' he muttered with a bitter smile. 'No wonder you preferred the "view"! Perhaps I can open it too?' And he laid his hand upon the latch. I smiled then, for bitter experience had taught me that it was always locked, locked to all my prayers and entreaties. Let him kneel there as I had! But it opened under his hand! I sprang to his side, and we looked into a closet, two by four, as bare and shallow as an empty coffin!

He turned to me, as white with rage as I was with terror. I was not thinking of him. 'What have you done with her?' he cried. And then contemptuously-'That I should stop to question a liar!' I paid no heed to him, but walked back into the other room, where the great chair rocked by the window.

He followed me, furious with disappointment, and laid his hand upon the swaying back, his strong fingers closing on it till the nails were white.

'Will you leave this place?' said he.

'No,' said I.

'I will live no longer with a liar and a traitor,' said he. 'Then you will have to kill yourself,' said I. With a muttered oath he sprang upon me, but caught his foot in the long rocker, and fell heavily.

So wild a wave of hate rose in my heart that I could have trampled upon him where he lay-killed him like a dog-but with a mighty effort I turned from him and left the room. When I returned it was broad day. Early and still, not sunrise yet, but full of hard, clear light on roof and wall and roadway. I stopped on the lower floor to find the landlady and announce my immediate departure. Door after door I knocked at, tried and opened; room after room I entered and searched thoroughly; in all that house, from cellar to garret, was no furnished room but ours, no sign of human occupancy. Dust, dust, and cobwebs everywhere. Nothing else. With a strange sinking of the heart I came back to our own door. Surely I heard the landlady's slow, even step inside, and that soft, low laugh. I rushed in.

The room was empty of all life; both rooms utterly empty. Yes, of all life; for, with the love of a lifetime surging in my heart, I sprang to where Hal lay beneath the window, and found him dead.

Dead, and most horribly dead. Three heavy marks—blows—three deep, three-cornered gashes—I started to my feet—even the chair had gone!

Again the whispered laugh. Out of that house of terror I fled desperately.

From the street I cast one shuddering glance at the fateful window. The risen sun was gilding all the housetops, and its level rays, striking the high panes on the building opposite, shone back in a calm glory on the great chair by the window, the sweet face, down-dropped eyes, and swaying golden head.