# The Rocker

Oliver Onions

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# I

There was little need for the swart gipsies to explain, as they stood knee−deep in the snow round the bailiff of the Abbey Farm, what it was that had sent them. The unbroken whiteness of the uplands told that, and, even as they spoke, there came up the kill the dark figures of the farm men with shovels, on their way to dig out the sheep. In the summer, the bailiff would have been the first to call the gipsies vagabonds and roost−robbers; now . . . they had women with them too.

"The hares and foxes were down four days ago, and the liquid−manure pumps like a snow man," the bailiff said. . . . "Yes, you can lie in the laithes and welcome—if you can find 'em.

Maybe you'll help us find our sheep too—"

The gipsies had done so. Coming back again, they had had some ado to discover the spot where their three caravans made a hummock of white against a broken wall.

The women—they had four women with them—began that afternoon to weave the mats and baskets they hawked from door to door; and in the forenoon of the following day one of them, the black−haired, soft−voiced quean whom the bailiff had heard called Annabel, set her babe in the sling on her back, tucked a bundle of long cane−loops under her oxter, and trudged down between eight−foot walls of snow to the Abbey Farm. She stood in the latticed porch, dark arid handsome against the whiteness, and then, advancing, put her head into the great hall−kitchen.

"Has the lady any chairs for the gipsy woman to mend?" she asked in a soft and insinuating voice. . . .

They brought her the old chairs; she seated herself on a box in the porch; and there she wove the strips of cane in and out, securing each one with a little wooden peg and a tap of her hammer.

The child remained in the sling at her back, taking the breast from time to time over her shoulder; and the silver wedding ring could be seen as she whipped the cane back and forth.

As she worked, she cast curious glances into the old hall−kitchen. The snow outside cast a pallid, upward light on the heavy ceiling−beams; this was reflected in the polished stone floor; and the children, who at first had shyly stopped their play, seeing the strange woman in the porch—the nearest thing they had seen to gipsies before had been the old itinerant glazier with his frame of glass on his back—resumed it, but still eyed her from time to time. In the ancient walnut chair by the hearth sat the old, old lady who had told them to bring the chairs. Her hair, almost as white as the snow itself, was piled up on her head à la Marquise; she was knitting; but now and then she allowed the needle in the little wooden sheath at her waist to lie idle, closed her eyes, and rocked softly in the old walnut chair.

"Ask the woman who is mending the chairs whether she is warm enough there," the old lady said to one of the children; and the child went to the porch with the message.

"Thank you, little missie—thank you, lady dear—Annabel is quite warm," said the soft voice; and the child returned to the play.

It was a childish game of funerals at which the children played. The hand of Death, hovering over the dolls, had singled out Flora, the articulations of whose sawdust body were seams and whose boots were painted on her calves of fibrous plaster. For the greater solemnity, the children had made themselves sweeping trains of the garments of their elders, and those with cropped curls had draped their heads with shawls, the fringes of which they had combed out with their fingers to simulate hair—long hair, such as Sabrina, the eldest, had hanging so low down her back that she could almost sit on it. A cylindrical−bodied horse, convertible (when his flat head came out of its socket) into a locomotive, headed the sad cortège; then came the defunct Flora; then came Jack, the raffish sailor doll, with other dolls; and the children followed with hushed whisperings.

The youngest of the children passed the high−backed walnut chair in which the old lady sat.

She stopped.

"Aunt Rachel—" she whispered, slowly and gravely opening very wide and closing very tight her eyes.

"Yes, dear?"

"Flora's dead!"

The old lady, when she smiled, did so less with her lips than with her faded cheeks. So sweet was her face that you could not help wondering, when you looked on it, how many men had also looked upon it and loved it.

Somehow, you never wondered how many of them had been loved in return.

"I'm so sorry, dear," Aunt Rachel, who in reality was a great−aunt, said. "What did she die of this time?"

"She died of. . . Brown Titus . . . 'n now she's going to be buried in a grave as little as her bed."

"In a what, dear?"

"As little . . . dread . . . as little as my bed you say it, Sabrina."

She means, Aunt Rachel,

"Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed,"

Sabrina, the eldest, interpreted.

"Ah! . . . But won't you play at cheerful things, dears?"

"Yes, we will, presently, Aunt Rachel; gee up, horse I . . . Shall we go and ask the chairwoman if she's warm enough?"

"Do, dears."

Again the it seemed as enough, for and brought message was taken, and this time if Annabel, the gipsy, was not warm she gathered up her loops of cane the chair she was mending a little way into the hall−kitchen itself. She sat down on the square box they used to cover the sewing machine.

"Thank you, lady dear," she murmured, lifting her handsome almond eyes to Aunt Rachel.

Aunt Rachel did not see the long, furtive, curious glance. Her own eyes were closed, as if she was tired; her cheeks were smiling; one of them had dropped a little to one shoulder, as it might have dropped had she held in her arms a babe; and she was rocking, softly, slowly, the rocker of the chair making a little regular noise on the polished floor.

The gipsy woman beckoned to one of the children.

"Tell the lady, when she wakes, that I will tack a strip of felt to the rocker, and then it will make no noise at all," said the low and wheedling voice; and the child retired again.

The interment of Flora proceeded. . . ..An hour later Flora had taken up the burden of Life again. It was as Angela, the youngest, was chastising her for some offence, that Sabrina, the eldest, looked with wondering eyes on the babe in the gipsy's sling. She approached on tiptoe.

"May I look at it, please?" she asked timidly.

The gipsy set one shoulder forward, and Sabrina put the shawl gently aside, peering at the dusky brown morsel within.

"Sometime, perhaps—if I'm very careful—" Sabrina ventured diffidently, "—if I'm very care−ful— may I hold it?"

Before replying, the gipsy once more turned her almond eyes towards Aunt Rachel's chair.

Aunt Rachel had been awakened for the conclusion of Flora's funeral, but her eyes were closed again now, and once more her cheek was dropped in that tender suggestive little gesture, and she rocked. But you could see that she was not properly asleep. . . . It was, somehow, less to Sabrina, still peering at the babe in the sling, than to Aunt Rachel, apparently asleep, that the gipsy seemed to reply.

"You'll know some day, little missis, that a wean knows its own pair of arms," her seductive voice came.

And Aunt Rachel heard. She opened her eyes with a start. The little regular noise of the rocker ceased. She turned her head quickly; tremulously she began to knit again; and, as her eyes rested on the sidelong eyes of the gipsy woman, there was an expression in them that almost resembled fright.

## II

They began to deck the great hall−kitchen for Christmas, but the snow still lay thick over hill and valley, and the gipsies' caravans remained by the broken wall where the drifts had overtaken them. Though all the chairs were mended, Annabel still came daily to the farm, sat on the box they used to cover the sewing machine, and wove mats. As she wove them, Aunt Rachel knitted, and from time to time fragments of talk passed between the two women. It was always the white−haired lady who spoke first, and Annabel made all sorts of salutes and obeisances with her eyes before replying.

"I have not seen your husband," Aunt Rachel said to Annabel one day. (The children at the other end of the apartment had converted a chest into an altar, and were solemnising the nuptials of the resurrected Flora and Jack, the raffish sailor−doll.)

Annabel made roving play with her eyes. "He is up at the caravans, lady dear," she replied. "Is there anything Annabel can bid him do?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Aunt Rachel.

For a minute the gipsy watched Aunt Rachel, and then she got up from the sewing machine box and crossed the floor. She leaned so close towards her that she had to put up a hand to steady the babe at her back.

"Lady dear," she murmured with irresistible softness, "your husband died, didn't he?"

On Aunt Rachel's finger was a ring, but it was not a wedding ring. It was a hoop of pearls.

"I have never had a husband," she said.

The gipsy glanced at the ring. "Then that is—?"

"That is a betrothal ring," Aunt Rachel replied.

"Ah! . . ." said Annabel..Then, after a minute, she drew still closer. Her eyes were fixed on Aunt Rachel's, and the insinuating voice was very low.

"Ah! . . . And did it die too, lady dear?"

Again came that quick, half−affrighted look into Aunt Rachel's face. Her eyes avoided those of the gipsy, sought them, and avoided them again.

"Did what die?" she asked slowly and guardedly. . . .

The child at the gipsy's back did not need suck; nevertheless, Annabel's fingers worked at her bosom, and she moved the sling. As the child settled, Annabel gave Aunt Rachel a long look.

"Why do you rock?" she asked slowly.

Aunt Rachel was trembling. She did not reply. In a voice soft as sliding water the gipsy continued:

"Lady dear, we are a strange folk to you, and even among us there are those who shuffle the pack of cards and read the palm when silver has been put upon it, knowing nothing. . . . But some of us see—some of us see."

It was more than a minute before Aunt Rachel spoke.

"You are a woman, and you have your babe at your breast now. . . . Every woman sees the thing you speak of."

But the gipsy shook her head. "You speak of seeing with the heart. I speak of eyes—these eyes."

Again came a long pause. Aunt Rachel had given a little start, but had become quiet again.

When at last she spoke it was in a voice scarcely audible.

"That cannot be. I know what you mean, but it cannot be. . . . He died on the eve of his wedding. For my bridal clothes they made me black garments instead. It is long ago, and now I wear neither black nor white, but—" her hands made a gesture. Aunt Rachel always dressed as if to suit a sorrow that Time had deprived of bitterness, in such a tender and fleecy grey as one sees in the mists that lie like lawn over hedgerow and copse early of a midsummer's morning.

"Therefore," she resumed, "your heart may see, but your eyes cannot see that which never was."

But there came a sudden note of masterfulness into the gipsy's voice.

"With my eyes—these eyes," she repeated, pointing to them.

Aunt Rachel kept her own eyes obstinately on her knitting needles. "None except I have seen it. It is not to be seen," she said.

The gipsy sat suddenly erect.

"It is not so. Keep still in your chair," she ordered, "and I will tell you when—"

It was a curious thing that followed. As if all the will went out of her, Aunt Rachel sat very still; and presently her hands fluttered and dropped. The gipsy sat with her own hands folded over the mat on her knees. Several minutes passed; then, slowly, once more that sweetest of smiles stole over Aunt Rachel's cheeks. Once more her head dropped. Her hands moved.

Noiselessly on the rockers that the gipsy had padded with felt the chair began to rock. Annabel lifted one hand.

"Dovo se li," she said. "It is there."

Aunt Rachel did not appear to hear her. With that ineffable smile still on her face, she rocked. . .

Then, after some minutes, there crossed her face such a look as visits the face of one who, waking from sleep, strains his faculties to recapture some blissful and vanishing vision. . . .

"Jal—it is gone," said the gipsy woman. Aunt Rachel opened her eyes again. She repeated dully after Annabel:."It is gone."

"Ghosts," the gipsy whispered presently, "are of the dead. Therefore it must have lived."

But again Aunt Rachel shook her head. "It never lived."

"You were young, and beautiful? . . ."

Still the shake of the head. "He died on the eve of his wedding. They took my white garments away and gave me black ones. How then could it have lived?"

"Without the kiss, no. . . . But sometimes a woman will lie through her life, and at the grave−side still will lie. . . . Tell me the truth."

But they were the same words that Aunt Rachel repeated: "He died on the eve of his wedding; they took away my wedding garments . . . From her lips a lie could hardly issue. The gipsy's face became grave. . . .

She broke another long silence.

"I believe," she said at last. "It is a new kind—but no more wonderful than the other. The other I have seen, now I have seen this also. Tell me, does it come to any other chair?"

"It was his chair; he died in it," said Aunt Rachel.

"And you—shall you die in it?"

"As God wills."

"Has . . . other life . . . visited it long?"

"Many years; but it is always small; it never grows."

"To their mothers babes never grow. They remain ever babes. . . . None other has ever seen it?"

"Except yourself, none. I sit here; presently it creeps into my arms; it is small and warm; I rock, and then . . . it goes."

"Would it come to another chair?"

"I cannot tell. I think not. It was his chair."

Annabel mused. At the other end of the room Flora was now bestowed on Jack, the disreputable sailor. The gipsy's eyes rested on the bridal party. . . .

"Yet another might see it—"

"None has."

"No; but yet. . . . The door does not always shut behind us suddenly. Perhaps one who has toddled but a step or two over the threshold might, by looking back, catch a glimpse. . . . What is the name of the smallest one?"

"Angela."

"That means 'angel' . . . Look, the doll who died yesterday is now being married. . . . It may be that Life has not yet sealed the little one's eyes. Will you let Annabel ask her if she sees what it is you hold in your arms?"

Again the voice was soft and wheedling. . . .

"No, Annabel," said Aunt Rachel faintly.

"Will you rock again?"

Aunt Rachel made no reply.

"Rock . . ." urged the cajoling voice.

But Aunt Rachel only turned the betrothal ring on her finger. Over at the altar Jack was leering at his new−made bride, past decency; and little Angela held the wooden horse's head, which had parted from its body.

"Rock, and comfort yourself—" tempted the voice.

Then slowly Aunt Rachel rose from her chair.."No, Annabel," she said gently. "You should not have spoken. When the snow melts you will go, and come no more; why then did you speak? It was mine. It was not meant to be seen by another. I no longer want it. Please go."

The swarthy woman turned her almond eyes on her once more.

"You cannot live without it," she said as she also rose. . . .

And as Jack and his bride left the church on the reheaded horse, Aunt Rachel walked with hanging head from the apartment.

## III

Thenceforward, as day followed day, Aunt Rachel rocked no more; and with the packing and partial melting of the snow the gipsies up at the caravans judged it time to be off about their business. It was on the morning of Christmas Eve that they came down in a body to the Abbey Farm to express their thanks to those who had befriended them; but the bailiff was not there. He and the farm men had ceased work, and were down at the church, practising the carols. Only Aunt Rachel sat, still and knitting, in the black walnut chair; and the children played on the floor.

A night in the toy−box had apparently bred discontent between Jack and Flora—or perhaps they sought to keep their countenances before the world; at any rate, they sat on opposite sides of the room, Jack keeping boon company with the lead soldiers, his spouse reposing, her lead−balanced eyes closed, in the broken clockwork motor−car. With the air of performing some vaguely momentous ritual, the children were kissing one another beneath the bunch of mistletoe that hung from the centre beam. In the intervals of kissing they told one another in whispers that Aunt Rachel was not very well, and Angela woke Flora to tell her that Aunt Rachel had Brown Titus also.

"Stay you here; I will give the lady dear our thanks," said Annabel to the group of gipsies gathered about the porch; and she entered the great hall−kitchen. She approached the chair in which Aunt Rachel sat.

There was obeisance in the bend of her body, but command in her long almond eyes, as she spoke.

"Lady dear, you must rock or you cannot live." Aunt Rachel did not look up from her work.

"Rocking, I should not live long," she replied. "We are leaving you."

"All leave me."

"Annabel fears she has taken away your comfort."

"Only for a little while. The door closes behind us, but it opens again."

"But for that little time, rock—"

Aunt Rachel shook her head.

"No. It is finished. Another has seen. . . Say good−bye to your companions; they are very welcome to what they have had; and God speed you."

"They thank you, lady dear. . . . Will you not forget that Annabel saw, and rock?"

"No more."

Annabel stooped and kissed the hand that bore the betrothal hoop of pearls. The other hand Aunt Rachel placed for a moment upon the smoky head of the babe in the sling. It trembled as it rested there, but the tremor passed, and Annabel, turning once at the porch, gave her a last look.

Then she departed with her companions.

That afternoon, Jack and Flora had shaken down to wedlock as married folk should, and sat together before the board spread with the dolls' tea−things. The pallid light in the great hall−.kitchen faded; the candles were lighted; and then the children, first borrowing the stockings of their elders to hang at the bed's foot, were packed off early—for it was the custom to bring them down again at midnight for the carols. Aunt Rachel had their good−night kisses, not as she had them every night, but with the special ceremony of the mistletoe.

Other folk, grown folk, sat with Aunt Rachel that evening; but the old walnut chair did not move upon its rockers. There was merry talk, but Aunt Rachel took no part in it. The board was spread with ale and cheese and spiced loaf for the carol−singers; and the time drew near for their coming.

When at midnight, faintly on the air from the church below, there came the chiming of Christmas morning, all bestirred themselves.

"They'll be here in a few minutes," they said; somebody go and bring the children down;" and within a very little while subdued noises were heard outside, and the lifting of the latch of the yard gate. The children were in their night−gowns, hardly fully awake; a low voice outside was heard giving orders; and then there arose on the night the carol.

"Hush!" they said to the wondering children; "listen! . . ."

It was the Cherry Tree Carol that rose outside, of how sweet Mary, the Queen of Galilee, besought Joseph to pluck the cherries for her Babe, and Joseph refused; and the voices of the singers, that had begun hesitatingly,

grew strong and loud and free.

". . . and Joseph wouldn't pluck the cherries," somebody was whispering to the tiny Angela. . .

"Mary said to Cherry Tree,
'Bow down to my knee,
That I may pluck cherries
For my Babe and me.' "

the carollers sang; and "Now listen darling, the one who held Angela murmured. . . .

"The uppermost spray then
Bowed down to her knee;
'Thus you may see, Joseph,
These cherries are for me.'
'O, eat your cherries, Mary,
Give them your Babe now;
O, eat your cherries, Mary,
That grew upon the bough.' "

The little Angela, within the arms that held her, murmured, "It's the gipsies, isn't it, mother?'

"No, darling. The gipsies have gone. It's the carol−singers, singing because Jesus was born."

"But, mother . . . it is the gipsies, isn't it? 'Cos look. . . ."

"Look where?"

"At Aunt Rachel, mother. . . . The gipsy woman wouldn't go without her little baby, would she?"

"No, she wouldn't do that."

"Then has she lent it to Aunt Rachel, like I lend my new toys sometimes?".The mother glanced across at Aunt Rachel, and then gathered the night−gowned figure more closely.

"The darling's only half awake," she murmured. . . . "Poor Aunt Rachel's sleepy too. . . ."

Aunt Rachel, her head dropped, her hands lightly folded as if about some shape that none saw but herself, her face again ineffable with that sweet and peaceful smile, was once more rocking softly in her chair.