



The Ragman by Walter Wangerin

I saw a sight so strange and experienced something so amazing that it is hard for me to explain it. If you can give me a few minutes, I'll do my best to describe it to you.

Before dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking through the back alleys of the city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new. As he pulled the cart he was calling out in a clear, powerful voice: "Rags! Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags!"

The air was foul in these dark streets, tainted by the filth and trash that living unleashes on the world. And yet as the man called out, the air became tinged with the faint scent of cleanliness, as though the breeze that carried the sweet music of his voice also carried with it the promise of a cleansing rain.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" The man continued to move through the dim light of early morning, his strong voice echoing from building to building and street to street.

"Now, this is a curious thing," I thought, for the man stood 6'4" and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular. His eyes flashed with intelligence. What was he doing here, in a city that had no need for such a useless profession? Who recycled rags anymore? Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the heart of a city? Driven by my curiosity, I followed him. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on the porch of a small house. She was crying into a handkerchief. Her body language said it all as she seemed folded in on herself, shoulders down, back slumped forward, knees and elbows making a sad X. She had no hope. Her heart was breaking, and she was wracked with sobs. Her body may have been alive, but her soul wanted to die.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly he walked over to the woman, stepping round empty beer cans and old newspapers, dead toys and broken furniture. "Give me your rag," he said gently as he knelt beside her, "and I'll give you another." The woman looked up into his powerful, compassionate eyes and saw something there that

paused her tears. The Ragman slipped the handkerchief from her hand and used it one last time to dry away the flow of tears from her face. Never taking his eyes from hers, he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She looked down at the new cloth and then back again to the eyes of man who had given it to her. The Ragman slowly leaned forward and kissed the woman's forehead and then turned and walked back to his cart.

As he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her old, stained handkerchief to his own face and then he began to weep.

He sobbed as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking as the tears flowed down his face in a torrent of grief.

But looking back to the woman on the porch I could see that she was left without a tear. She sat with her shoulders high and a look of wonder on her face.

"This is amazing," I thought, and I followed the sobbing Ragman. Like a curious child who cannot turn away from a mystery, I watched the Ragman from a distance.

"Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" rang forth his voice. Though it was still strong, it also shook with emotion as he wept. "Rags! I take your old rags! Rags!"

In a little while, the sky showed gray behind the rooftops. It was light enough to make out the shredded curtains and damaged blinds that hung in dark windows.

The Ragman came upon a girl sitting on the kerbside whose head was wrapped in a bandage, eyes as vacant as the windows around her. Blood soaked her bandage and a single line of blood ran down her cheek.

The Ragman paused and turned his weeping eyes upon this empty, injured child. Reaching into his cart, he withdrew from it a beautiful yellow hat and walked towards the girl. "Give me your rag," he said softly, "and I'll give you mine." The child did not move and could only gaze at him vacantly while he loosened the bandage, removed it from her head, and tied it to his own instead. I gasped at what I saw: with the bandage went the wound. The girl's head was left unblemished, while the Ragman's head began to bleed.

He set the hat on the girl's head and suddenly her eyes took on an understanding and intelligence that had been missing before. She placed her hand to the side of her head where the bandage had covered the wound that was no longer there. Smiling in wonder, she watched as the Ragman rose unsteadily to his feet and moved back to his cart.

"Rag! Rags! I take old rags!" cried out the sobbing, bleeding Ragman. "New rags for old! Rags!" With his powerful arms pulling the cart, he continued on his way. He seemed to be moving faster now with an urgency I hadn't noticed before.

He stopped again in front of a man who was leaning against a telephone pole. "Are you going to work?" he asked. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?"

The man looked him up and down, making note of the Ragman's weeping eyes and bleeding head before replying. "Are you crazy?" he sneered as he leaned away from the pole, revealing that the right sleeve of his jacket was flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

"Give me your jacket," said the Ragman firmly, "and I'll give you mine." Such quiet authority in his voice! The one-armed man looked into the other's eyes and then slowly took off his jacket.

So did the Ragman. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief as I trembled at what I saw: the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put on the Ragman's jacket he had two good arms, strong as tree limbs. The Ragman was left with one. "Go to work," he said as he moved back to his cart.

Struggling to make do with his one arm, the Ragman began to pull his cart again, this time much faster and with greater urgency. He came upon an unconscious old drunk lying beneath an army blanket, hunched, wizened and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. He was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely from the forehead. He struggled to pull his cart with one arm while stumbling from drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, and sick. Yet he moved with terrible speed nearly sprinting through the alleys of the city covering block after block and mile upon mile.

I wept to see the changes in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow and ached each time I saw him stumble and fall. When he began to move through the industrial area of the city, away from the houses and apartments, I wanted to stop following and turn away, to leave him behind and go back to my life. But I could not. I needed to see this story through to its end. Who was this Ragman? Why had he done what nobody else would have done? Where was he going in such a hurry? How would it end?

The once strong Ragman was now old and frail, weeping and bleeding, staggering, and falling, his body wracked with pain, sorrow, and disease. I watched as he came to an old abandoned lot that was filled with piles of trash, old furniture, and the rusted-out shells of cars and construction equipment. He moved among the garbage pits and piles of human refuse and finally climbed to the top of a small hill made from the trash of a thousand lives. He struggled to pull his cart and its sad, pathetic burden. With tormented labour he cleared a little space on that hill.

With a deep sigh, he slowly made a bed from the contents of his cart and lay down on it. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his old, aching bones with an army blanket. His body shook under the load of its injuries and pain

and disease. His eyes wept and the wound under his bandage continued to bleed. With one last, deep sigh, he closed his eyes and died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I sat down in an old, abandoned car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope. I wept because I had come to love the Ragman. As I had followed him, I had watched him work wonders and change lives so profoundly that it didn't seem fair that he was gone.

He had taken those things that were soiled and damaged beyond repair and had replaced them with the new and the whole. He had offered hope to the damaged and lost of the city. But if the Ragman was gone, then my hope was gone as well. I felt such an overwhelming sense of grief and loss that I remained in the seclusion of the old car and sobbed myself to sleep. I did not know – how could I know — that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and on through Saturday night as well.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was awakened by a violence that shook me to the core of my being. Light – pure, hard, insistent light – slammed against my face and demanded that I awake. When I was finally able to open my eyes, I blinked against the light and squinted in the direction of the pile of trash where the Ragman's body had been. As I looked, I saw the last and the first wonder of all.

The Ragman was there, yes! But he was no longer dead. He was alive! There he stood, folding the old army blanket carefully and laying it atop the neatly arranged handkerchief and jacket. Besides the scar on his forehead, there was no other evidence of what he had previously taken upon himself. There was no sign of sorrow or age, no evidence of illness or deformity. His body was whole and strong and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

I wept to see him again. When I thought that hope had died along with Ragman, I had abandoned any hope for my own life. And yet there he stood, healthy and whole. Climbing from my shelter I moved toward the Ragman, trembling from what I had seen and because of what I knew I needed to do. Walking to him with my head lowered, I spoke my name to him with shame. Looking up into his clear, loving, compassionate eyes I spoke with yearning in my voice, "Rags. Please take my tired rags and replace them with new ones."

And he did just that. Taking the old, tired rags of my existence that covered the griefs and wounds of a life sadly lived, he replaced them with the new clothes of a life spent following Him. He put new rags on me and I am now a reflection of the hope he offers to us all.

The Ragman.

The Christ.