

MICHAEL SHEAFOR EVERY TATTER IN ITS MORTAL DRESSAn aged man is but a paltry thing --A rag of flesh upon a stick, unlessSoul clap its hands and sing, and louder singFor every tatter in its mortal dress!--W.B. YeatsWHEN I CAME OUT OF THE pawnbroker's, I found that a little old man had chainedhis leg to the rim of one of my pushcart's wheels."Rat crap!" I shouted, "What is this?"The old man looked down at the cobblestones stubbornly. Silence.It was near sunset. At the precise moment the sun sank, I was supposed to be atthe palisades to meet my zounce connection. The old man stood still as Isearched his pockets, and somehow managed to ignore me completely while I didit. He had no key.Let him be damned, I decided. After my connection I would find a smith. I shovedoff the cart and we set out down Sevens Lane. The wheel the little old man waschained to gave a regular jolt as it went over the iron collar."You might at least have chained it to a spoke," I snarled, merely to relieve myfeelings, for I knew words wouldn't affect him. He marched along still ignoringme.We turned on Wraith, where I spared a moment to hustle the fishwife to buy oneof the rings I'd just got from the pawnbroker. She wrinkled the wartless half ofher nose."Frippery. What about pictures?""Five lictors for a scintillating deck of twelve." "Bah!" shouted the little old man, startling both of us. "I've viewed them,madam. Softcore cartoonery. Not a hard-on in the lot."The fishwife spat on the ground and bought two decks. We started off again, thewheel still limping. "A smith will soon set us right," I told him. "Impudence!Why is all I ask. What am I to you?"Of course he didn't answer, or even glance at me. And after some moments Idecided: why struggle? Soon I would cut him loose. Meanwhile, in civilconversation, something might be gained from him -- a bit of news, some arcanefact, an anecdote. For I always try to approach situations constructively. Isearched for a topic. After a minute I said:"Ah well, the world does go oddly on. Perhaps you can confirm what I've heard --they say that Death is back in the vicinity, and perhaps even in the town."The old man shivered in the dark breeze."When was he here last?" I continued. "Not since last spring, a full year ago,it seems to me."This got an answer, though the old man didn't seem to be addressing it to me:"Death was here two months gone," he told his feet. "At the Smugglers Hallduring the winter dramas. He slew full half the guild." "Just so," I said. "And now I think, he came in the fall as well. Yuley Wiperthe herdsman and all his flock were found scattered through the highest branchesof the trees round Pastor's Common." "He came twice in the summer," the little old man said with a quick glancebehind him. "At second sowing he came in the form of a dream contagious to theold. And then again at early harvest he came as a pennyballad man, and soldlove-songs with fiend-summoning spells imbedded in the lyrics. Nubile girlssuffered most."We turned down Firkitt, which the dusk made crookeder with shadows. The littleold man was terribly skinny. He seemed almost to vibrate slightly, like a hollowreed in the wind. I suddenly felt that death had been a tactless topic, and wassilent.But after a short time, as we neared the palisades, the little old man sniffedthe sea air with gusto. Flinging out his arms he embraced the world at large."This is the choicest style of life!" he exclaimed. "To move about! Tocirculate! It is a marvelous stimulant to the mind. It aids digestion, andpromotes ample and regular bowel movements. In truth I've always felt it," heconcluded admiringly to himself. "I've always scorned the sedentary and theconstipated. I've made the right move!"We had reached the palisades. My cart roiled smooth as a boat over the grass ofthe cliff top, which softened the wheel's limp. I felt high in advance, steeringamong the tree trunks toward the brink of the grassy cliff, with the leaves ofthe pungent silvergum rattling and splashing in the wind, all gilded.The sun was two-thirds sunk, and there leaned Kirp against a cliffside treeahead. I leaned blithely on my rudder, coasted in and docked near, so to speak,the little old man bobbing alongside. I snapped down the cart's kickstand, andtold him: "Kindly sit on this side of the cart. View the sea." I pointed towere it stumbled in, two hundred feet below. "We will be off again instantly."Then I stepped over to Kirp."I managed four knuckles of excelsior," he said."Princely! What sum?" "Nine lictors and a double deck of illos." "Equally

princely, alas. So be it."At this point the little old man, straining the length of his chain, howled at us from less than a yard away: "ZOUNCE?? ZOW-W-WNCE? THUGS! HELP! HELP!DEGENERATES!" And pointed at us in horror.Kirp looked wildly around -- the palisades are never empty. The four knuckles which had not yet left his hand, like suddenly live coals, he flung from the cliff. Glaring outrage at me, he fled.I recall the little old man's face--the only thing I could bring to focus in my dismay. His jaw still flapped on a broken spring of outrage, and he grew calm only after he had gasped one grim consummating ZOUNCE locking me up, as it were.By the time things had focused more, I was sitting near a tree, hugging my knees. My legs had ceased their struggle to reach the little old man, but he was not yet safe. I rallied my raging heart:"Naturally you feel disturbed. You planned to tour the stars tonight on wings of zounce. Instead you will go to the smithy, to dinner, and to bed. You have been robbed of a miraculous night, perhaps one of those irreplaceable high points allotted to you by your calendar." My heart agreed and blazed within me."Consider this old man," I tried again. "There he crouches, half shod, grooming his crooked toes. Though more goatish, complacent, and officious than most men, surely he is like many another whom senility has made vapid and spiteful.Undeniably, he is a man like others then, and as such, possesses values...views.He approves of the peripatetic life. He disapproves of zounce and those who snort it." "Chained as he is," my heart replied, "he'll be assumed your slave. No one will question your swift amputation of his leg." "Fool!" I sternly chided. "Let it pass. Call the zounce undestined. We are well-heeled with time. He is a pauper near the end of his hours. And, we'll soon be free of him." So I shoved off to find a smith. The little old man had to hop like a cricket to keep up. But the divorce failed. The smith, swearing windily, fractured two chisels and a sledgehammer on the unscathed chain, then he charged me the standard wizard's consultation fee, indicating that recourse to a wizard was the method of spell-unbinding universally preferred outside the fraternity of those who walk around ass-first. The old man warmly confirmed that the chain had a spell on it, as he had said himself from the first. The difficulty lay, he portentously assured the smith, in trying to tell anyone anything these days. When we left he represented the smith with a deck of illos from my cart, exiting with jovial disclaimers. The next day I spent learning that my two cart wheels were unique in all the city, and no spare existed to substitute for the wheel he was chained to. Only the radical surgical solution remained -- a loathsome work. I resolved to wait awhile in the hope of alternatives. Thus, since my livelihood had to roll, we went my rounds, and he met my customers. Some he liked, and for these he often proclaimed fifty percent discounts from my stated price, pressing my merchandise on them heartily. Those he disliked he utterly ignored, slouching nearby during the sale, and emitting unmuffled flatulences from time to time, to emphasize that he considered himself alone. Still it was just bearable, and I might have wavered to my ruin, for my purse could not long withstand him. But on the third night, as I copulated strenuously with the fishwife's comely niece, I beheld the little old man crouched at chain's end in my tent's doorway, our avid audience with both hands employed -- one of them in holding up the tent flap. That dawn I wheeled us out of town on the north highway, determined to sunder us. He had already ruined two of my best nights, and soured three potentially good days. If I did not act he would just keep on whittling down my life with his senile interferences. Still I couldn't actually get out the sword and strike. It was too revolting. He was ruinous to my life, but still hadn't done anything to me as directly or deliberately hurtful as hewing off my leg. On we limped up the north road -- plodding with arms paralyzed and feeling the sky begin to lean on me in my bondage like a huge stone. Meanwhile the little old man didn't like our whereabouts. Trying tact first, he started out by grumbling, asking himself loudly where that idiot was driving us now, and had he forgotten our customers -- all as if I lived upstairs, and overheard, would take the hint. I kept plodding. So he addressed me directly, but in voice only, staring ahead, his words as sideways nudge he

was no party to: "Turn us back to the city. This trekking wastes my strength." It suddenly came home to me that only in the zounce panic, and again as I'dhumped the fishwife's niece, had the old man ever looked straight at me. So I watched the road and said aloud to myself: "Son of a turd, why does the old fart jabber so?" "Plunderers watch roads like this." He was still looking ahead. "Ah the open sky!" I exclaimed. "Surely I will walk forever! Farewell sour urbantoil, I'll not be soon returning!" "Plunderers take their daily bread from such roads as this, where a body is somuch more conspicuous and easy to spy out. A man has nothing that can't betaken, and appetites for every part of him hunt and thrive on just such roads asthis." He still didn't see me, and I decided I was mute until he did. He went on: "It's a bitter damned injustice. My life takes up almost no space at all. Younger lives are full of roomy comers going to waste. But the damned FoulSnarler hounds me for the very footprints I stand on! I'm snatched blind and bald and still I'm hunted for my rags and my paltry budget of hours." He was moved to a greater fear -- by his own words or something he heard, I could not tell -- and this at last made him look at me. He squinted up with a terror remote from me, as if my face was a dangerous crackin a high ceiling. His runny eyes gauged the threat without believing his voice could alter it. "We're in danger here," he said. "I'm a besieged man. Haven't I with the greatest pains stayed strictly in unused nooks of your life? In its closets and service-porch? Humbly in its basement?" "Emphatically not," I cried. "You crowd me from the parlor floor of my life! You gorge yourself in its kitchen and sprawl grunting in its bedroom." He looked down the road ahead and now I could tell he was straining his ears. He spoke with both voice and eyes again withdrawn: "My body shrinks every year. Scant flesh and dry bones. A trifle. An alleycat could step over me even when I'm standing up. Obstacle? But talk can't help. We must turn back." His fear made him shrink in closer to the cartwheel, even as he unresistingly kept my pace up this road he dreaded to walk. I suddenly knew, with certainty, that I owned him. It is well known that anchoring spells often entail a clause of enchattlement, and render the Anchored the property of the Anchorage in myself in this case. My alternative had appeared, fruit of my forbearance. He would submissively change hands in legal sale. I glanced him over. He was rheumy, rambling, feeble. But I might just get the price of a new wheel custom made -- far beyond my means after what I'd had to pay the smith. The old man could then be sawn loose, and the new owner could use the undamaged chain as a leash, an added bonus. Still my heart misgave me: who would pay even this relatively small sum for a man so small and old? And then ahead of us, just by the road, there was a thin man sitting by a fire. On the grass beside where he sat lay hundreds of pieces of baggage, in large piles and smaller stacks -- trunks, chests, casks, hatboxes, valises, crates. The little old man fell dead still and crouched even lower behind the wheel, though still obediently keeping pace. We drew up to the thin stranger. He had black eyes, a pale disappointed face, and a very wide level mouth. He said: "Whose life is that sneaking along under the shadow of yours?" "Why, do you not see him here with his chain, this little old man?" "Indeed, I do make him out now," the stranger said, "despite the glare of your greater energy. I note his chain has a spell on it. You cling tightly to what seems a feeble, slight property. Or could it be he clings to you?" He to me. Though I own him, he made himself my chattel. But as he neither shares my views nor craves my conversation, his motive in doing so remains obscure to me. "You find it so?" the stranger asked with remote courtesy. He focused on the little old man with a visible dilation of his eyes' black centers. The little old man pressed right against the now still wheel, looking back at the stranger for a moment, and then stubbornly withdrawing his eyes to the ground. The stranger drooped slightly his pale lids. Instantly I recognized the drowsy apathy of a browser who has seen something he must possess. He looked at me and indicated a camp chair (which I had not noticed) beside the fire. "Warm yourself against the morning chill, my friend," he said. I accepted, trying to radiate the stranger's own languid amity, though the chair was disturbingly cold to my posteriors and remained so, while the fire's heat had a way of dodging around my hands, forcing me nearly

to touch it for any warmth, with a result of constant burns on my cold fingers. I praised his choice of a campsite. It was too close to the road, he answered modestly. I said that I for one preferred roadside camps over all others, as the least reclusive. "My friend," said the stranger, sitting forward, "I would touch a matter personal to you -- your chattel there." "You mean my pushcart?" "I mean the old man," and he smiled a little smile of anger which dispersed only slowly, like a smoke, into the black vaults under his drowsy lids. Somehow due to this smile, certainty clear and full now came to me about where it was I sat. I must make a killing now, I reflected. It is said that each man's calendar features one and only one truly open portal to wealth. This was surely mine. But neither did I dare show a completely outrageous greed. It seemed clear that this was not the stranger's day with me -- but if outraged he might violate my calendar and cancel it altogether. A grave act, but the stranger's lawlessness is known. "Your honor," I said, "I will lay aside ploys which can only insult you, and speak concisely. I will gladly sell you yon little old man for ten thousand dhroons in gold specie, but this price is not subject to debate." "I am sure you speak jocosely," said the stranger with an elegant smile. "The sum you name was paid but once in history for a slave, and he was a wizard in his prime with four hundred years of prodigies left in him. What you sell is a husk, an asthmatic skeleton of straw whose death is thirteen years past due. Quite droll, most amusing. What is your serious price? A half dhroon?" "My deep apologies, your honor, but I know with whom I deal. You are a glutton with the wealth of empires. It is well known how you especially crave those who, however briefly, have eluded you. You must and will pay what I demand." "How if instead, my friend" -- he gently touched my knee and stared into my eyes -- "how if instead I pay you by withholding -- now -- my hand from your naked heart, by forbearing -- now -- to snatch the soul from your frame and send it wheeling through blizzards of thorns in darkness?" His eyes made mine feel like a pair of locks being picked. I said quickly: "Neither of us is given you on this day or you'd have taken us instantly. The old man's mine to give, and he's quickly given, for a price that is truly as nothing to you." My knee where his hand touched it was freezing cold and felt like an icy wound that my life had already started draining out of. He studied me and the black centers of his eyes drowned out all the rest of my eyesight. "Agreed," he said quietly. "Bring me a coffer or the like." I brought him a pair of leather shoulder-bags such as pilgrims use. Over one of these he shook his pale hands and coins rattled against the bottom. He filled both bags in this way. "My profound thanks," I said. "How is the transfer accomplished?" "Relinquish him at heart and utter any clear statement of transference." Naturally I felt at this point how ironic it was. If the old man had been asked, he would have chosen amputation over the alternative I'd found for him. Still I had meant to spare him. Luck had given him a bad first bidder, but after all he was a parasite and I owed him no further efforts. My heart had already yielded him promptly, and now that my mind was caught up I said: "I make wholly yours this old man's life." The stranger got up and went to the cart. The old man's crouched legs strained, bones and tendons stark, but without producing movement beyond a shivering of his meager shoulders. The stranger crushed the chain in half with one hand, and with the other plucked up the old man by the neckscruff, kittenwise, though the stranger was the taller by no more than a foot. With his free hand he peeled the clothes off the old man, bringing him to the fireside. He bound his hands behind, and bound his ankles. Then laying him by, the stranger took up a stick and began to scatter out the coals of his fire and this, instead of thinning them, made the embers thicker and redder. He spread them till he'd laid out a hot shimmering bed six feet wide, then drove fork-topped sticks into the ground at either end. "A dodger of great reputation," he said as he worked. "As I let slip, he has escaped me these thirteen years. When I came on his just day, he bit my hand as I reached for his life, while his soul got away in a scream which I lost amid the noises of the city outside." The stranger picked up a pole which suddenly lay in the grass, and passed it behind the little old man, between his arms and legs. He

set this spit upon the forked supports, and the old man sagged from wrists and ankles, his ribs swelled with agony over the coals, his yellowed hair shrinking to singed brown stubble. With a howl of pain he emptied his bladder -- astonishing volumes of piss crackled and stank on the embers. "Pagh!" shouted the stranger. "You've turned my stomach, senile worm!" He snatched up the spit and unbound the little old man, and laid him shaking on the grass. The stranger took a suitcase from the nearest stack and set it on the ground by the old man. Producing a small ring of keys from his waistcoat, the stranger opened the case, which looked just big enough to hold the old man if you folded him a couple of times. But what the old man did in fact was unfold. That heap of shaking bones sprang straight up off the ground, plucked the keys from the stranger's fingers, and fell back -- not to the grass, but into the open suitcase. The whole of his sprawling, failing body plunged neatly in, and the suitcase banged shut. The stranger threw himself on the suitcase, and hammered on it as on a door set into the earth. His blows echoed widely underground, where nothing stirred. A long time passed as he lay there. I shifted my gold quietly behind me, out of view. Slowly, the stranger got to his feet. Facing to the north, he flung out his arm, and a wind began to blow against his heaps of baggage. All of it -- chests, tubs, bales, and trunks -- tumbled away as light as dead leaves before this breeze, and rustling softly, moved in a roiling flock up the road. The stranger looked back at the suitcase, which alone hadn't blown away, and then at me. "He's sealed my own gates against me," he said. "He's locked up his death and left it by a back door. That miserable, mulish scrap of soul." The stranger's voice was a desolation matched only by the chasms in his eyes. But it wasn't tanguish only. He was also impressed. I was sure of it. So I took a plunge. "Your honor. Your honor, listen. Give me some luck. Match the heroism of the departed, and show heroic liberality in defeat." He looked at me for a long time, stroking his lower lip. "Excellent," he said quietly. "I will give you luck. Your luck will be in the sealed door of your slave's escape. Let no day pass without putting your ear to the suitcase. For the most part you will hear perhaps nothing, perhaps cryptic echoes. But there will be one day when you will get your luck, for you will hear a warning telling you I am coming on the following day." "My luck is one day's notice?" "Just so." "My sincere thanks," I said firmly. I was disappointed, but did not want to seem churlish. It was more luck than none at all. I watched him out of sight, his baggage tumbling before him across the plain, himself a smaller and ever smaller shape, but always of a blackness so perfect he seemed a hole, a leak in the scenery through which it all -- all the wide sky and rolling earth -- might swiftly drain and vanish utterly away. Then I loaded the suitcase on the wagon, and went my own way. Through the years it has proved a weighty burden, that suitcase -- far more vexing than the old man himself. For of course, it holds me thrall. I must crouch and lay my ear to it every morning without fail -- to hearken for my warning. I must do this though I've learned to curse and scorn the brief and pointless prescience the case contains for me. I am living off my interest now, and life is good, but this baggage of futile foreknowledge that I bear is more a torment than anything else. I would long past have hurled it from a cliff into the sea, but for... something else. For I have yet to hear my warning sound within it, but neither have I yet heard only silence. It seems the old man, in the rush of his escape, left some kind of inner door ajar behind him. And from that inner door there is a faint leakage of... sounds, echoing in the case's tomblike hollowness. The old man, it seems, passed to some Other Country, and left its gate agape, and now I hear the rumors drifting out -- the faint and ragged cheers of distant multitudes... the shout of surf on rocks... a voice, unearthly sweet, that sings while thousands weep... and other voices boldly raised in dialogue that I can almost decipher. From time to time, at odd moments during the day or night, my hand darts out and grabs the air. I do this because I am seeing again the old man's fingers as they plucked the key from Death's. So quick and fierce it was, that old man's hand! Will my hand prove as quick and fierce as his?