

# **LESSON - 4**

## **THE RATTRAP**

### **About the author**

**Selma Lagerlof** (1858-1940) was a Swedish writer whose stories have been translated into many languages. A universal theme runs through all of them — a belief that the essential goodness in a human being can be awakened through understanding and love. This story is set amidst the mines of Sweden, rich in iron ore, which figure large in the history and legends of that country. The story is told somewhat in the manner of a fairy tale.

### **Characters and Places**

**A tramp with rattraps**

**A crofter**

**Master Smith** in the Ramsjo Iron Mill in Sweden

**Iron mill owner**

**Helpers in the Mill :** Blacksmiths

**Edla Willmansson :** Daughter of the Iron Mill owner



### **Gist of the lesson**

- 'The Rattrap' is a story that underlines the belief that essential goodness in human beings can be aroused through sympathy, understanding and love.
- Once a man went around selling small rattraps but he took to begging and thievery to keep his body and soul together.
- One day he was struck with the idea – the whole world is a big rattrap and it offers riches as bait.
- People let themselves be tempted to touch the bait then it closes in on them bringing an end to everything.
- One dark evening the rattrap peddler sought shelter in an old crofter's roadside cottage.
- The old man gave him food, tobacco they enjoyed the card game too.
- Next morning the peddler stole away his thirty kroners.
- The rattrap peddler escaped into a big confusing forest and got lost.
- While resting on the ground he recollected his idea that the world is a rattrap and thought his end was near.
- Hearing a thumping sound he reached Ramsjo ironworks for a night shelter.
- The owner came on his nightly rounds and noticed the ragged wretch near the furnace.
- He took him as an old acquaintance 'Nils Olof.'
- He invited him to stay with them for Christmas but the stranger declined the offer.
- His daughter Edla Willmansson persuaded to go home with him.
- She requested him to stay for Christmas Eve only.
- On his way to the Manor House the peddler thought that he had thrown himself into the lion's den.
- The next day in broad day light the iron master realized the stranger was not captain and threatened to call the sheriff.
- Edla pleaded for him and asked him to stay back.
- Christmas Eve at Ramsjo was as usual and the stranger slept and slept.
- She made him understand that if he wanted rest and peace he would be welcome next Christmas also. This had a miraculous effect on him.
- Next morning they went for early church service leaving behind the guest who was asleep.
- They learnt at church that a rattrap peddler had robbed an old crofter.
- Edla becomes very upset.
- They reached home immediately and learnt that the peddler had already left but had not taken anything at all with him. Instead, he had left a small packet for the young girl as a Christmas present.

- She opened the packet and found a rattrap, three wrinkled ten- Kroners notes and also a letter with a request to return the Kroners to the crofter.

### **THEME OF THE STORY**

The human beings are prone to fall into the trap of material benefits. It is the human tendency to redeem oneself from dishonest ways. Hence, the whole world is called a big rattrap which tempts the people towards its materialistic benefits, and brings about their doom and never ending predicament. It also highlights the themes like human loneliness, status and treatment meted out to have-nots and callous attitude of society and government towards such people. One of the themes is that man is inherently good by nature. The society and environment make them bad. Human goodness and kindness can bring about the change in their attitude.

### **MESSAGE OF THE STORY**

The rattrap is an interesting story. It has been told somewhat in the manner of a fairy tale. The rattrap peddler is a poor man. He robs the same who gives him shelter and food. But he is reformed by the compassionate behaviour of a young girl Edla. This story gives the message that the essential goodness of man can be awakened through love and understanding.

### **TITLE OF THE STORY**

"The Rattrap" is an appropriate title as it is the story of a rattrap peddler. The author has used the metaphor of a Rattrap to highlight the human predicament. Just as a rat is fooled by bait and gets trapped, most human beings also fall into the trap of material benefits. The story revolves around the incident of a man getting trapped due to his greed. Hence, the title is an apt one.

### **BACKGROUND**

Selma Lagerlof talks about the universality of human goodness that can be awakened through understanding love, compassion and belief. Experience is the best of school masters and the peddler was able to get a vital lesson after his encounter with situation and people both. Finally his goodness surfaces and temporary phase of his bad practices ends. The world turns to be a good place to live in.

**Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 words.**

**1. From where did the peddler get the idea of the world being a rattrap?**

**Ans.** The peddler was a very poor man who earned his living by selling the ratttraps, he made himself from the materials he got by begging. His mind, thus, was always preoccupied with ratttraps. The shelter, food, clothes, riches, and Joys that the world provides are all bits to entrap man. When one is trapped, everything comes to an end.

**2. Why was the tramp amused by the idea of the world being a rattrap?**

**Ans.** The world had never been kind to the peddler. So he was full of bitterness against the world. He had become a cynic and he enjoyed visualizing the world as a rattrap ready to enter anybody who was tempted by the baits it had to offer. He knew that many people had been ensnared and the others were still circling around the bait.

**3. Did the peddler expect the kind of hospitality that he received from the crofter?**

**Ans.** The peddler had never been treated kindly by the world. He has meted out a cold treatment wherever he went. He was pleasantly surprised when the crofter treated him with warmth and hospitality. Ordinarily, he always mates "sour faces" when he knocked anyone's door for shelter and food.

**4. Why was the crofter so talkative and friendly with the peddler?**

**Ans.** The old man was lonely and leading a dreary existence as he had no wife or children. The old man was happy to get someone to talk to, even though it was a tramp. So he welcomes the peddler and extended his hospitality towards him.

**5. Why did the crofter show the 30 kroner to the peddler?**

**Ans.** The crofter had nobody to share his happiness with. He was really satisfied and overjoyed to earn 30 kroner in a month. Hence, he showed the amount to the peddler. Another possible reason is that he suspected that his guest did not believe him.

**6. Did the peddler respect the confidence respond in him by the crofter?**

**Ans.** The peddler found it a little difficult to make both ends meet. His life was involved in better struggles for mere survival. So, the moment he gets to know about the thirty kronor, he is on an lookout to grab them as soon as possible. Finally, he steals the money by smashing a windowpane and has no regard for the crofter's faith.

**7. What made the peddler think that he had indeed fallen into a rat trap?**

**Ans.** After grabbing the money from the crofters the peddler is cautious enough to avoid the public highway. He gets into The Woods but finally realizes that it is a big and confusing forest. The end of the forest is nowhere in sight. He feels he has come to a dead end as he has been walking around the same part of the forest. That's when he recalls his thoughts about the world being a rattrap and he realizes that he had indeed fallen into a rattrap.

**8. Why did the ironmaster speak kindly to the peddler and invite him home?**

**Ans.** In the glow of the furnace, the ironmaster mistook the peddler to be Nils Olof, his old regimental comrade. He was overwhelmed with sympathy for his comrade when he saw him in terrible condition. The ironmaster wanted the peddler to shed his inhibitions and enjoy on the occasion of Christmas. Moreover, the ironmaster wanted to better his comrade's future prospects.

**9. Why did the peddler decline the invitation?**

**Ans.** The peddler did not disclose his real identity and did not make an effort to clear the ironmaster's misconception. This is because he thought he might get some money in the bargain. But he had to decline the invitation also because of the fear of getting caught as he had stolen the 30 kronor from that old man. To go up to the manor house would be like "throwing, himself voluntary into the lion's den".

**10. What made the peddler accept Edla Williamson's invitations?**

**Ans.** The peddler was taken in by Edla's compassion and friendly behavior. He felt confidence in her when she said: "you will be allowed to leave us just as freely as you came". Thus the warmth and sincerity shown by the ironmaster's daughter mitigated all his fears.

**11. What doubts did Edla have about the peddler?**

**Ans.** Although young, Edla was a better judge of human character as compared to her father. When she invited the peddler to the manor house, she concluded immediately that he had either stolen some money or had an escaped from the Jail.

**12. When did the ironmaster realize his mistake?**

**Ans.** The ironmaster brought the tramp to his house mistaking him to be his old regimental comrade. However, it was not so. The ironmaster realized this when the valet had given the peddler a bath, a shave, a haircut and fine clothes. When he was brought before the ironmaster in broad daylight, he understood that he had mistaken the tramp to be his formal comrade in the light of the Furnace.

**13. What did the peddler say in his defense when it was clear that he was not the person the ironmaster had thought he was?**

**Ans.** The peddler told the ironmaster that he never pretended to be the captain. Moreover, he did not accept the ironmaster's invitation to come to the manor's house. In fact, he had implored him to stay that night in the forge itself.

**14. Why did Edla still entertain the peddler even after she knew the truth about him?**

**Ans.** A compassionate girl, a true Christian, Edla could not bear the thought of a poor wretch been turned out of the house on the evening of Christmas. She is pained at the idea that everybody chases the vagabond away. So she wanted that the peddler should "enjoy a day of peace with us here just once in the whole year."

**15. Why was Edla happy to see the gift left by the peddler?**

**Ans.** Edla became happy after seeing the gift of the peddler because "the gift" provided by her father's rigid belief that the peddler was a thief and nothing, including her belief in the part of human being, could change him. However, "the gift" proved that her "belief" was right, so she felt immense joy.

**16. Why did the peddler sign himself as Captain Van Stahle?**

**Ans.** Throughout his life, the peddler had never known respect. He was always treated coldly by the world. For the first time in his life, he was honoured and respected as if he were a captain. Even after the truth was exposed, the daughter continued to treat him in a similar way. The way he was treated encouraged him to behave in a like manner. He signed the letter as Captain von Stahle so as to underline the impact of Edla's goodness on him.

**Answer the following questions in 100 in 120 Words.**

**1. What are the instances in the story that show that the character of the ironmaster is different from that of his daughter in many ways?**

**Ans.** The ironmaster misunderstood the peddler for an old acquaintance, whereas his daughter could make out that the man was afraid, which was suggestive of him having stolen something. Though the father and the daughter express compassion for the vagabond both do so for different reasons. The ironmaster was sure to help the vagabond get over his tramp manners because he had mistaken the latter for his old comrade. The daughter however wishes to feed him and welcome him in spite of knowing that he was not Captain Von Stahle. The father acts impulsively and casually and invites him without confirming the stranger's identity. On realizing his mistake, he recklessly wants to hand him over to the sheriff. Only when he is threatened or ensnared by the rattrap of this world that he thinks otherwise. Edla on the other hand shows a strong sense of observation. She rightly judges him to be a tramp without any education. She persuades her father to let him stay because they had promised him Christmas cheer. When the blacksmith's daughter infects the protagonist with her true altruism the peddler's inner soul experiences a rapid transformation from an ugly duckling to a dazzling swan.

**2. The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others' behaviour. Pick out instances of these surprises.**

**Ans.** The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others. Used to being greeted by sour faces the crofter seems taken aback at the peddler's request for accommodation for the night. Then the peddler's act of stealing does not match the reader's expectations. The breach of trust comes as a bit of a shock. Then the ironmaster's sudden invitation to the tramp comes as the next surprise. The peddler's vehement refusal to accompany him and later on accepting the invitation at Edla's insistence all generate surprise. Edla's readiness to entertain the peddler even after knowing his reality was quite unexpected. The most unexpected of gestures is when the peddler leaves for Edla a Christmas gift, a letter of thanks and the stolen money to be returned to the old crofter. His transformation is that which completes the chain of unexpected reactions.

**3. The story "The Rattrap" focuses on human loneliness and the need to bond with others. Comment.**

**Ans.** 'The Rattrap' tells us the story of a lonely peddler who has nothing and no one to call his own. He wanders from place to place mistreated and mistrusted by the world. Then we come across the old crofter who leads a solitary life and hungers for company. He accords a warm reception to the peddler as he views him as someone to talk to and pass a few lonely hours with. It is his need to bond that makes him trust the peddler and show him his money.

Similarly, the ironmaster shows his eagerness for the peddler's company mistaking him for an old acquaintance. His wife is no more, his sons are abroad. And he has no one but his eldest daughter at home. He offers his hospitality to the peddler wanting some suitable company to ward off his loneliness. Even his daughter, a shy and modest girl, persuades the peddler to stay with them on Christmas Eve as she has no one to look after and make comfortable except her father. She looks forward to some company to make the occasion more festive. Finally the peddler is also enticed by the kindness of the ironmaster's daughter and the proposition of peace, rest, good food and excellent company for a change. The theme of loneliness and the need to bond is projected strongly in all the characters in the story.

**4. The story is both entertaining and philosophical. Discuss**

**Ans.** The narrative enthralls the reader toning down its philosophical didacticism. The fast paced third person narrative together with graphic description of characters, elements of humour, drama and irony make it an interesting read (Give examples). The element of surprise with regard to the flow of events holds our interest. This is true of being accepted as a guest by the crofter, breaking his trust, getting lost in the forest, being invited by the ironmaster and subsequent refusal together with Edla's insistence and peddler's final submission. The final acts of transformation and redemption make the narrative quite gripping and entertaining. The author has used the metaphor of a rattrap to highlight the human predicament. Just like the rats are trapped by cheese and food similarly men are lured by land, food, shelter, clothing etc. these are baits. Those who touch them are trapped by material benefits. The rattrap brings home the fact that human goodness is an intrinsic part of one's nature. It can be forever kept alive through love and understanding. No one is infallible and in one's weak moments is susceptible to falling to temptation. There could be some individuals with the strength of character to break through the rattrap and discover the essential human goodness. Thus the story comes across as both entertaining and philosophical.

**5. The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning of the story. Why this is so? Is the sympathy justified?**

**Ans.** The peddler wins the readers' sympathy for his way of life and how the world treats him. The vagabond moves about selling small ratttraps. As his business is not rewarding, he takes to begging and petty thievery to keep his body and soul together.

His life is sad and monotonous. He plods along the road lost in his own meditation. He considers the Whole World as A Big Rattrap. The world has never been kind to him and it gives him unwonted joy to think ill of it. Whenever he asks shelter for a night, he meets sour faces. He is an unwelcome, unwanted and undesirable figure. The blacksmith at first glance at him only casually and indifferently. The master smith nods a haughty consent without honouring him with a single word.

His sympathy is justified not only because he was a victim of circumstances but also because he redeems himself in the end. Edla Willmanson's kind and compassionate behavior arouses the tramp's goodness. He thanks her for her sympathy and returns the stolen money.