

CH. 4 -THE RATTRAP

-By Selma Lagerlof

About the author:

Selma Lagerlof (1858-1940) was a Swedish writer whose stories have been translated into many languages. This story is set in the middle of the mines of Sweden which are rich in iron ore. The story is narrated in the manner of a fairy tale. It gives us the message that the emotions of love and acceptance can reform others.

Summary of "The Rattrap"

"The Rattrap" is about a man who is a peddler. He has a pessimistic attitude towards the world. The peddler has not always been like this and was a fine man before. However, due to misfortune, he now resorts to selling rattraps, begging and even stealing to survive. Moreover, he also views the world as a big rat trap. He believes that much similar to the cheese we put for mice, the world offers us materialistic things to lure us. So, when we fall for these things, it traps us and takes everything away from us. In this story, a young generous woman takes in the rattrap seller. Thus, the generosity and kindness she shows changes his pessimistic take on life. This story teaches us about the essential human goodness we all must possess.

The story begins with a rattrap peddler who is in a rugged condition. He is dressed in rags and is very frail and looks starved. We learn he has no home and sometimes even begs and steals to survive in the world. He leads a lonely life with no one to care about him. One fine day, it strikes to him that this whole world is a rattrap itself. If we touch it, it will trap us and never let us go. He goes on to think that there are people out there who are already in this rattrap and reaching for the bait. On one cold evening, he reaches at a cottage to ask for shelter. An old crofter lived in that cottage who took in the peddler.

The crofter needed company so he welcomes the peddler. He gives him hot food and even tobacco to smoke. They play cards and start talking. The peddler learns that the crofter got thirty kronor for selling his cow which he keeps in a pouch on the window frame. The peddler leaves the next day but after seeing the crofter leave his cottage, he comes back to steal the pouch of money.

After stealing it, he takes the woods to remain unsuspected. In the wood, the peddler meets an ironmaster who mistakes him to be his old comrade. He invites him over for Christmas but he

refuses. After that, the ironmaster's daughter, Edla visits him and insists him to stay with them. In between, he feels sorry for stealing the crofter's money. They help the peddler get a makeover and dress him in nice clothes and shave his beard off. After this, the ironmaster realizes he has made a mistake; the peddler was not his comrade.

Thus, the ironmaster thinks he is a fraud and decides to turn him in. However, Edla insists on letting him stay and celebrate Christmas with them. Her father agrees, and they celebrate Christmas together. Next day, the ironmaster and Edla learn that the peddler was a thief through the church about the incident at the old crofter's. They head home in a hurry thinking he must have stolen all the silver. However, to their surprise, the peddler did not steal a thing. He left a note for Edla in the form a tiny rattrap. There was also a note thanking her for her kindness which saved him from the rattrap he got caught in. Most importantly, he also left the crofter's money asking to return it to him.

To sum up, The Rattrap summary, we learn that we can change the world through kindness and compassion; in addition, it teaches us that materialistic things never bring inner joy, only love and respect does.

The Rattrap: Summary (in detail)

Once there was a man who went around selling small ratttraps of wire. He made them himself but his business was not profitable. So, he had to beg and steal a bit to keep himself alive. His clothes were in rags, his cheeks were sunken and hunger could be noticed in his eyes. His life was sad and monotonous. He had no company.

One day, he was struck by an idea that the whole world was nothing but a big rattrap. It set baits for people by offering riches and joys, shelter and food, heat and clothing exactly as the rattrap offered cheese and pork. As soon as anyone let himself be tempted to touch the bait, the rattrap closed in on him, and then everything came to an end.

One dark evening he was walking slowly with heavy steps when he saw a little gray cottage by the roadside. He knocked at the door to ask shelter for the night. The owner was an old man. He had no wife or child. He was happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness. He served him porridge for supper and gave him tobacco for his pipe. Then he got out an old pack of cards and played "mjölis" with his guest till bed time.

The host had been a crofter at Ramsjö Ironworks in his days of prosperity. He had worked on the land. Now he was unable to do day labour. It was his cow that supported him. This extraordinary cow could give milk for the creamery everyday. He informed the stranger that last month he had received all of thirty kronor in payment. The crofter showed his guest three

wrinkled ten kronor bills, which he had taken out of a leather pouch hanging on a nail in the window frame.

The next day both men got up early. The crofter was in a hurry to milk his cow. The other man did not want to stay in bed when his host had got up. They left the cottage at the same time. The crofter locked the door and put the key in his pocket. The man with the rattraps said goodbye and thanked his host and went away. Half an hour later the rattrap peddler returned. He broke a window pane, stuck in his hand, and got hold of the pouch with the thirty kronor. He took out the money and thrust it into his pocket. Then he hung the leather pouch very carefully back in its place and went away.

He felt pleased with his smartness. Then he realised that he dared not continue on the public highway. So, he took to the woods. He got into a big and confusing forest. He kept on walking without coming to the end of the forest. He realised that he had only been walking around in the same part of the forest. He thought that he had let himself be fooled by a bait and had been caught. The whole forest seemed to him like an impenetrable prison from which he could never escape.

It was late in December. Darkness increased the danger as also his gloom and despair. He sank down on the ground as he was quite tired. He heard the sound of hammer strokes. He summoned all his strength, got up and staggered in the direction of the sound. He reached a forge where the master smith and his helper sat near the furnace waiting for the pig iron to be ready to put on the anvil. There were many sounds-big bellows groaned, burning coal cracked, the fire boy shovelled charcoal with a great deal of clatter, the waterfall roared, a sharp north wind whipped the rain against the brick-tiled roof. On account of all these noises the blacksmith did not notice that a man had opened the gate and entered the forge until the stranger stood close up to the furnace.

The blacksmiths glanced only casually and indifferently at the intruder with a long beard, dirty, ragged and with a bunch of rattraps dangling on his chest. The peddler asked for permission to stay. The master blacksmith nodded a haughty consent without saying a word. Just then the ironmaster who owned the Ramsjo iron mill came into the forge on one of his nightly rounds of inspection.

The ironmaster saw that a person in dirty torn clothes had moved so close to the furnace that steam was rising from his wet rags. He walked close up to him, looked him over very carefully. Then he tore off his hat, which had a wide flexible brim, to get a better view of his face. He called him 'Nils Olof and wondered how he looked.

The man with the rattraps had never before seen the ironmaster at Ramsjo and did not even know what his name was. He thought that the ironmaster might perhaps throw his old

acquaintance a couple to kronor. So, he did not tell him that he was mistaken. The ironmaster observed that he should not have resigned from the regiment. Then he asked the stranger to come home with him. The tramp did not agree. He thought of the thirty kronor. Going up to the manor house would be like throwing himself into the lion's den.

The ironmaster assumed that he felt embarrassed because of his miserable clothing. He said that his wife, Elizabeth was dead, his boys were abroad and only his oldest daughter was with him. He invited the stranger to spend Christmas with them. The stranger said "no" thrice. The ironmaster told Stjernstrom, the blacksmith that Captain von Stahle preferred to stay with him that night. He laughed to himself and went away.

Half an hour later, the sound of carriage wheels was heard outside the forge. The ironmaster's daughter came there, followed by a valet, carrying a big fur coat. She introduced herself as Edla Willmansson. She noticed that the man was afraid. She thought that either he had stolen something or else he had escaped from jail. She, however assured him that he would be allowed to leave them just as freely as he had come. She addressed him as captain and requested him to stay with them over Christmas Eve. She said this in such a friendly manner that the rattrap peddler agreed to go with her. The fur coat was thrown over his rags and he followed the young lady to the carriage. On the way the peddler thought why he had taken that fellow's money. He was sitting in the trap and would never get out of it.

The next day was Christmas Eve. The ironmaster came into the dining room for breakfast. He thought of his old regimental comrade whom he had met so unexpectedly. He felt satisfied and talked of feeding him well and giving him some honourable job. His daughter remarked that last night she did not notice anything about him to show that he had once been an educated man. The ironmaster asked her to have patience and let him get clean and dressed up. Then she would see something different. The tramp manners would fall away from him with the tramp clothes.

Just then the stranger entered in a good-looking suit of clothes, a white shirt with a starched collar and whole shoes. Although he was well groomed, the ironmaster did not seem pleased. He realised that he had made a mistake last night. Now in broad daylight, it was impossible to mistake him for an old acquaintance. The stranger made no attempt to dissemble. He explained that it was not his fault. He had never pretended to be anything but a poor trader. He had requested the Ironmaster to let him stay in the forge. He was ready to put on his rags and go away.

The ironmaster thought that it was not honest on the part of the man and wanted to call the sheriff. The tramp then told the ironmaster that the whole world was nothing but a big rattrap. All the good things that were offered to him were nothing but cheese rinds and bits of pork, set out to drag a poor fellow into trouble. The sheriff may lock him up for this. He warned the

Ironmaster that a day might come when he might want to get a big piece of pork, and then he would get caught in the trap.

The ironmaster began to laugh. He dropped the idea of informing the sheriff. However, he asked the tramp to leave and opened the door. Just then his daughter entered and asked her father what he was doing. That morning she was quite happy. She wanted to make things for the wretch quite homelike. So, she spoke in favour of the vagabond. She wanted him to enjoy a day of peace with them-just one in the whole year. She knew that there was a mistake but they should not chase away a human being whom they had asked to come there and promised Christmas cheer. The ironmaster hoped that she wouldn't have to regret that.

The young girl led the stranger up to table and asked him to sit and eat. The man did not say a word but helped himself to the food. He looked at the girl and wondered why she had intervened for him. Christmas Eve passed at Ramsjo just as it always had. The stranger did not cause any trouble because he did nothing but sleep. They woke him up that he could have his meals. In the evening, the Christmas tree was lighted. Two hours later he was around once again to eat the Christmas fish and porridge. After getting up from the table he went around and said 'thank you' and 'good night' to everyone present. The girl told him that the suit he wore was to be a Christmas present and he did not have to return it. If he wanted to spend the next Christmas Eve in peace, he would be welcomed back again. The man with the rattraps did not answer. He only stared at the young girl in limitless amazement.

The next morning the ironmaster and his daughter got up early and went to Christmas service. They drove back at about ten o'clock. The young girl sat, and hung her head even more dejectedly than usual. At church she had learnt that an old crofter of the iron works had been robbed by a man who went around selling rattraps. The ironmaster feared that the man might have stolen many silver spoons from the cupboard. As the wagon stopped at the front steps, the ironmaster asked the valet about the stranger. The valet told him that the stranger had left. He had not taken anything with him at all, but he had left a package for Miss Willmansson as a Christmas present.

On opening the package, she gave a little cry of joy. She found a small rattrap, and in it lay three wrinkled ten kronor notes. There was also a letter addressed to her. He did not want her to be embarrassed by a thief but act as a captain. He requested her to return the money to the old man on the roadside, who had money pouch hanging on the window frame as a bait for the poor wanderers. The rattrap was a Christmas present from a rat who would have been caught in this world's rattrap if he had not been raised to captain, because in that way he got power to clear himself.

The Rattrap: Summary (Short)

The Rattrap is a story about a rattrap seller who leads a very poor life as his earnings are very low. He has to resort to thievery and begging to make both ends meet.

He is alone in this whole world and leads a miserable life. So he starts knitting up various kinds of thoughts. One of these thoughts is of supposing the whole world as a big rattrap. His views are that the world offers us various types of baits in the form of comforts of life. This in return traps us into the rattrap of the world and leads us to various types of miseries.

Every night, the peddler had to search for shelter as he has no home. One evening he was offered shelter by an old crofter. The next morning he stole the crofter's money which he had earned by selling his cow's milk. To safeguard himself, the peddler chose the path through the forest which was secluded, but soon found himself trapped in the forest as he wasn't able to find the way out of the dense forest. Later on, he finds a way to a forge and takes shelter there. Something unusual happens. The ironmaster mistakes him as an old friend and invites him to his house. The poor peddler rejects the offer due to the fear of being caught. Soon he is invited by the ironmaster's daughter. The next morning he is somehow stopped by the ironmaster's daughter for Christmas Eve even after being caught that he was a peddler and not Captain Stalhe.

The next day after Christmas, when the iron master and his daughter visit the church, they come to know that the man is a thief who had stolen money from the old crofter. The iron master and his daughter repent for sheltering a thief and wonder at what all things he would have stolen by that time. Here comes a twist as instead of stealing, the peddler gifts the ironmaster's daughter a rattrap. She finds a letter of thanks and the stolen money inside the rattrap. The peddler thanks Edla for her kindness and requests her to return the stolen money to the crofter. This story gives us the message that goodness in a human being can be awakened at any time with your own good deeds.
