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4 The Rattrap

About the author

Selma Lagerlöf (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.

Notice these expressions in the text.
Infer their meaning from the context.

- keep body and soul together
- plods along the road
- impenetrable prison
- eased his way
- things have gone downhill
- hunger gleamed in his eyes
- unwonted joy
- nodded a haughty consent
- fallen into a line of thought

Once upon a time there was a man who went around selling small rattraps of wire. He made them himself at odd moments, from the material he got by begging in the stores or at the big farms. But even so, the business was not especially profitable, so he had to resort to both begging and petty thievery to keep body and soul together. Even so, his clothes were in rags, his cheeks were sunken, and hunger gleamed in his eyes.

No one can imagine how sad and monotonous life can appear to such a vagabond, who plods along the road, left to his own meditations. But one day this man had fallen into a line of thought, which really seemed to him entertaining. He had naturally been thinking of his rattraps when suddenly he was struck by the idea that the whole world about him — the whole world with its lands and seas, its cities and villages — was nothing but a big rattrap. It had never existed for any other purpose than to set baits for people. It

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offered riches and joys, shelter and food, heat and clothing, exactly as the rattrap offered cheese and pork, and as soon as anyone let himself be tempted to touch the bait, it closed in on him, and then everything came to an end.

The world had, of course, never been very kind to him, so it gave him unwonted joy to think ill of it in this way. It became a cherished pastime of his, during many dreary ploddings, to think of people he knew who had let themselves be caught in the dangerous snare, and of others who were still circling around the bait.

One dark evening as he was trudging along the road he caught sight of a little gray cottage by the roadside, and he knocked on the door to ask shelter for the night. Nor was he refused. Instead of the sour faces which ordinarily met him, the owner, who was an old man without wife or child, was happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness. Immediately he put the porridge pot on the fire and gave him supper; then he carved off such a big slice from his tobacco roll that it was enough both for the stranger's pipe and his own. Finally he got out an old pack of cards and played 'mjolis' with his guest until bedtime.

The old man was just as generous with his confidences as with his porridge and tobacco. The guest was informed at once that in his days of prosperity his host had been a crofter at Ramsjo Ironworks and had worked on the land. Now that he was no longer able to do day labour, it was his cow which supported him. Yes, that bossy was extraordinary. She could give milk for the creamery every day, and last month he had received all of thirty kronor in payment.

The stranger must have seemed incredulous, for the old man got up and went to the window, took down a leather pouch which hung on a nail in the very window frame, and picked out three wrinkled ten-kronor bills. These he held up before the eyes of his guest, nodding knowingly, and then stuffed them back into the pouch.

The next day both men got up in good season. The crofter was in a hurry to milk his cow, and the other man probably thought he should not stay in bed when the head of the house had gotten 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 good bye and thank you, and thereupon each went his own way.

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But half an hour later the rattrap peddler stood again before the door. He did not try to get in, however. He only went up to the window, smashed a pane, stuck in his hand, and got hold of the pouch with the thirty kronor. He took the money and thrust it into his own pocket. Then he hung the leather pouch very carefully back in its place and went away.

As he walked along with the money in his pocket he felt quite pleased with his smartness. He realised, of course, that at first he dared not continue on the public highway, but must turn off the road, into the woods. During the first hours this caused him no difficulty. Later in the day it became worse, for it was a big and confusing forest which he had gotten into. He tried, to be sure, to walk in a definite direction, but the paths twisted back and forth so strangely! He walked and walked without coming to the end of the wood, and finally he realised that he had only been walking around in the same part of the forest. All at once he recalled his thoughts about the world and the rattrap. Now his own turn had come. He had let himself be fooled by a bait and had been caught. The whole forest, with its trunks and branches, its thickets and fallen logs, closed in upon him like an impenetrable prison from which he could never escape.

It was late in December. Darkness was already descending over the forest. This increased the danger, and increased also his gloom and despair. Finally he saw no way out, and he sank down on the ground, tired to death, thinking that his last moment had come. But just as he laid his head on the ground, he heard a sound—a hard regular thumping. There was no doubt as to what that was. He raised himself. "Those are the hammer strokes from an iron mill", he thought. "There must be people near by". He summoned all his strength, got up, and staggered in the direction of the sound.

Think as you read

1. From where did the peddler get the idea of the world being a rattrap?
2. Why was he amused by this idea?
3. Did the peddler expect the kind of hospitality that he received from the crofter?
4. Why was the crofter so talkative and friendly with the peddler?
5. Why did he show the thirty kroner to the peddler?
6. Did the peddler respect the confidence reposed in him by the crofter?

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The Ramsjö Ironworks, which are now closed down, were, not so long ago, a large plant, with smelter, rolling mill, and forge. In the summertime long lines of heavily loaded barges and scows slid down the canal, which led to a large inland lake, and in the wintertime the roads near the mill were black from all the coal dust which sifted down from the big charcoal crates.

During one of the long dark evenings just before Christmas, the master smith and his helper sat in the dark forge near the furnace waiting for the pig iron, which had been put in the fire, to be ready to put on the anvil. Every now and then one of them got up to stir the glowing mass with a long iron bar, returning in a few moments, dripping with perspiration, though, as was the custom, he wore nothing but a long shirt and a pair of wooden shoes.

All the time there were many sounds to be heard in the forge. The big bellows groaned and the burning coal cracked. The fire boy shovelled charcoal into the maw of the furnace with a great deal of clatter. Outside roared the waterfall, and a sharp north wind whipped the rain against the brick-tiled roof.

It was probably on account of all this noise that the blacksmith did not notice that a man had opened the gate and entered the forge, until he stood close up to the furnace.

Surely it was nothing unusual for poor vagabonds without any better shelter for the night to be attracted to the forge by the glow of light which escaped through the sooty panes, and to come in to warm themselves in front of the fire. The blacksmiths glanced only casually and indifferently at the intruder. He looked the way people of his type usually did, with a long beard, dirty, ragged, and with a bunch of rattraps dangling on his chest.

He asked permission to stay, and the master blacksmith nodded a haughty consent without honouring him with a single word.

The tramp did not say anything, either. He had not come there to talk but only to warm himself and sleep.

In those days the Ramsjö iron mill was owned by a very prominent ironmaster, whose greatest ambition was to ship out good iron to the market. He watched both night and day to see that the work was done as well as possible, and at this very moment he came into the forge on one of his nightly rounds of inspection.

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Naturally the first thing he saw was the tall ragamuffin who had eased his way so close to the furnace that steam rose from his wet rags. The ironmaster did not follow the example of the blacksmiths, who had hardly deigned to look at the stranger. He walked close up to him, looked him over very carefully, then tore off his slouch hat to get a better view of his face.

"But of course it is you, Nils Olof!" he said. "How you do look!"

The man with the rattraps had never before seen the ironmaster at Ramsjö and did not even know what his name was. But it occurred to him that if the fine gentleman thought he was an old acquaintance, he might perhaps throw him a couple of kronor. Therefore he did not want to undeceive him all at once.

"Yes, God knows things have gone downhill with me", he said.

"You should not have resigned from the regiment", said the ironmaster. "That was the mistake. If only I had still been in the service at the time, it never would have happened. Well, now of course you will come home with me."

To go along up to the manor house and be received by the owner like an old regimental comrade — that, however, did not please the tramp.

"No, I couldn't think of it!" he said, looking quite alarmed.

He thought of the thirty kronor. To go up to the manor house would be like throwing himself voluntarily into the lion's den. He only wanted a chance to sleep here in the forge and then sneak away as inconspicuously as possible.

The ironmaster assumed that he felt embarrassed because of his miserable clothing.

"Please don't think that I have such a fine home that you cannot show yourself there", He said... "Elizabeth is dead, as you may already have heard. My boys are abroad, and there is no one at home except my oldest daughter and myself. We were just saying that it was too bad we didn't have any company for Christmas. Now come along with me and help us make the Christmas food disappear a little faster."

But the stranger said no, and no, and again no, and the ironmaster saw that he must give in.

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"It looks as though Captain von Stahle preferred to stay with you tonight, Stjernstrom", he said to the master blacksmith, and turned on his heel.

But he laughed to himself as he went away, and the blacksmith, who knew him, understood very well that he had not said his last word.

It was not more than half an hour before they heard the sound of carriage wheels outside the forge, and a new guest came in, but this time it was not the ironmaster. He had sent his daughter, apparently hoping that she would have better powers of persuasion than he himself.

Think as you read

1. What made the peddler think that he had indeed fallen into a rattrap?
2. Why did the ironmaster speak kindly to the peddler and invite him home?
3. Why did the peddler decline the invitation?

She entered, followed by a valet, carrying on his arm a big fur coat. She was not at all pretty, but seemed modest and quite shy. In the forge everything was just as it had been earlier in the evening. The master blacksmith and his apprentice still sat on their bench, and iron and charcoal still glowed in the furnace. The stranger had stretched himself out on the floor and lay with a piece of pig iron under his head and his hat pulled down over his eyes. As soon as the young girl caught sight of him, she went up and lifted his hat. The man was evidently used to sleeping with one eye open. He jumped up abruptly and seemed to be quite frightened.

"My name is Edla Willmansson," said the young girl. "My father came home and said that you wanted to sleep here in the forge tonight, and then I asked permission to come and bring you home to us. I am so sorry, Captain, that you are having such a hard time."

She looked at him compassionately, with her heavy eyes, and then she noticed that the man was afraid. "Either he has stolen something or else he has escaped from, jail", she thought, and added quickly, "You may be sure, Captain, that you will be allowed to leave us just as freely as you came. Only please stay with us over Christmas Eve."

She said this in such a friendly manner that the rattrap peddler must have felt confidence in her.

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"It would never have occurred to me that you would bother with me yourself, miss," he said. "I will come at once."

He accepted the fur coat, which the valet handed him with a deep bow, threw it over his rags, and followed the young lady out to the carriage, without granting the astonished blacksmiths so much as a glance.

But while he was riding up to the manor house he had evil forebodings.

"Why the devil did I take that fellow's money?" he thought. "Now I am sitting in the trap and will never get out of it."

The next day was Christmas Eve, and when the ironmaster came into the dining room for breakfast he probably thought with satisfaction of his old regimental comrade whom he had run across so unexpectedly.

"First of all we must see to it that he gets a little flesh on his bones," he said to his daughter, who was busy at the table. "And then we must see that he gets something else to do than to run around the country selling rattraps."

"It is queer that things have gone downhill with him as badly as that," said the daughter. "Last night I did not think there was anything about him to show that he had once been an educated man."

"You must have patience, my little girl," said the father. "As soon as he gets clean and dressed up, you will see something different. Last night he was naturally embarrassed. The tramp manners will fall away from him with the tramp clothes."

Just as he said this the door opened and the stranger entered. Yes, now he was truly clean and well dressed. The valet had bathed him, cut his hair, and shaved him. Moreover he was dressed in a good-looking suit of clothes which belonged to the ironmaster. He wore a white shirt and a starched collar and whole shoes.

But although his guest was now so well groomed, the ironmaster did not seem pleased. He looked at him with puckered brow, and it was easy to understand that when he had seen the strange fellow in the uncertain reflection from the furnace he might have made a mistake, but that now, when he stood there

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in broad daylight, it was impossible to mistake him for an old acquaintance.

"What does this mean?" he thundered.

The stranger made no attempt to dissimulate. He saw at once that the splendour had come to an end.

"It is not my fault, sir," he said. "I never pretended to be anything but a poor trader, and I pleaded and begged to be allowed to stay in the forge. But no harm has been done. At worst I can put on my rags again and go away".

"Well," said the ironmaster, hesitating a little, "it was not quite honest, either. You must admit that, and I should not be surprised if the sheriff would like to have something to say in the matter."

The tramp took a step forward and struck the table with his fist.

"Now I am going to tell you, Mr Ironmaster, how things are," he said. "This whole world is nothing but a big rattrap. All the good things that are offered to you are nothing but cheese rinds and bits of pork, set out to drag a poor fellow into trouble. And if the sheriff comes now and locks me up for this, then you, Mr Ironmaster, must remember that a day may come when you yourself may want to get a big piece of pork, and then you will get caught in the trap."

The ironmaster began to laugh.

"That was not so badly said, my good fellow. Perhaps we should let the sheriff alone on Christmas Eve. But now get out of here as fast as you can."

But just as the man was opening the door, the daughter said, "I think he ought to stay with us today. I don't want him to go." And with that she went and closed the door.

"What in the world are you doing?" said the father.

The daughter stood there quite embarrassed and hardly knew what to answer. That morning she had felt so happy when she thought how homelike and Christmassy she was going to make things for the poor hungry wretch. She could not get away from the idea all at once, and that was why she had interceded for the vagabond.

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"I am thinking of this stranger here," said the young girl. "He walks and walks the whole year long, and there is probably not a single place in the whole country where he is welcome and can feel at home. Wherever he turns he is chased away. Always he is afraid of being arrested and cross-examined. I should like to have him enjoy a day of peace with us here — just one in the whole year."

The ironmaster mumbled something in his beard. He could not bring himself to oppose her.

"It was all a mistake, of course," she continued. "But anyway I don't think we ought to chase away a human being whom we have asked to come here, and to whom we have promised Christmas cheer."

"You do preach worse than a parson," said the ironmaster. "I only hope you won't have to regret this."

The young girl took the stranger by the hand and led him up to the table.

"Now sit down and eat," she said, for she could see that her father had given in.

The man with the rattraps said not a word; he only sat down and helped himself to the food. Time after time he looked at the young girl who had interceded for him. Why had she done it? What could the crazy idea be?

After that, Christmas Eve at Ramsjö passed just as it always had. The stranger did not cause any trouble because he did nothing but sleep. The whole forenoon he lay on the sofa in one of the guest rooms and slept at one stretch. At noon they woke him up so that he could have his share of the good Christmas fare, but after that he slept again. It seemed as though for many years he had not been able to sleep as quietly and safely as here at Ramsjö.

In the evening, when the Christmas tree was lighted, they woke him up again, and he stood for a while in the drawing room, blinking as though the candlelight hurt him, but after that he disappeared again. Two hours later he was aroused once more. He then had to go down into the dining room and eat the Christmas fish and porridge.

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As soon as they got up from the table he went around to each one present and said thank you and good night, but when he came to the young girl she gave him to understand that it was her father's intention that the suit which he wore was to be a Christmas present — he did not have to return it; and if he wanted to spend next Christmas Eve in a place where he could rest in peace, and be sure that no evil would befall him, he would be welcomed back again.

The man with the rattraps did not answer anything to this. He only stared at the young girl in boundless amazement.

The next morning the ironmaster and his daughter got up in good season to go to the early Christmas service. Their guest was still asleep, and they did not disturb him.

Think as you read

1. What made the peddler accept Edla Willmansson's invitation?
2. What doubts did Edla have about the peddler?
3. When did the ironmaster realise his mistake?
4. What did the peddler say in his defence when it was clear that he was not the person the ironmaster had thought he was?
5. Why did Edla still entertain the peddler even after she knew the truth about him?

When, at about ten o'clock, they drove back from the church, the young girl sat and hung her head even more dejectedly than usual. At church she had learned that one of the old crofters of the ironworks had been robbed by a man who went around selling rattraps.

"Yes, that was a fine fellow you let into the house," said her father. "I only wonder how many silver spoons are left in the cupboard by this time."

The wagon had hardly stopped at the front steps when the ironmaster asked the valet whether the stranger was still there. He added that he had heard at church that the man was a thief. The valet answered that the fellow had gone and that he had not taken anything with him at all. On the contrary, he had left behind a little package which Miss Willmansson was to be kind enough to accept as a Christmas present.

The young girl opened the package, which was so badly done up that the contents came into view at once. She gave a little cry of joy. She found a small rattrap, and in it lay three wrinkled ten

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kronor notes. But that was not all. In the rattrap lay also a letter written in large, jagged characters —

"Honoured and noble Miss, "Since you have been so nice to me all day long, as if I was a captain, I want to be nice to you, in return, as if I was a real captain — for I do not want you to be embarrassed at this Christmas season by a thief; but you can give back the money to the old man on the roadside, who has the money pouch hanging on the window frame as a bait for poor wanderers.

Think as you read

1. Why was Edla happy to see the gift left by the peddler?
2. Why did the peddler sign himself as Captain von Stahle?

"The rattrap is 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.

"Written with friendship
and high regard,
"Captain von Stahle."

Understanding the text

1. How does the peddler interpret the acts of kindness and hospitality shown by the crofter, the ironmaster and his daughter?
2. 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?
3. The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others' behaviour. Pick out instances of these surprises.
4. What made the peddler finally change his ways?
5. How does the metaphor of the rattrap serve to highlight the human predicament?
6. The peddler comes out as a person with a subtle sense of humour. How does this serve in lightening the seriousness of the theme of the story and also endear him to us?

Talking about the text

Discuss the following in groups of four. Each group can deal with one topic. Present the views of your group to the whole class.

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1. The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning of the story. Why is this so? Is the sympathy justified?
2. The story also focuses on human loneliness and the need to bond with others.
3. Have you known/heard of an episode where a good deed or an act of kindness has changed a person's view of the world?
4. The story is both entertaining and philosophical.

Working with words

1. The man selling rattraps is referred to by many terms such as "peddler, stranger" etc. Pick out all such references to him. What does each of these labels indicate of the context or the attitude of the people around him.
2. You came across the words, **plod**, **trudge, stagger** in the story. These words indicate movement accompanied by weariness. Find five other such words with a similar meaning.

Noticing form

1. He made them **himself** at odd moments.
2. He raised **himself.**
3. He had let **himself** be fooled by a bait and had been caught.
4. … a day may come when **you yourself** may want to get a big piece of pork.

Notice the way in which these reflexive pronouns have been used (pronoun+self)

- In 1 and 4 the reflexive pronouns "himself" and "yourself" are used to convey emphasis.
- In 2 and 3 the reflexive pronoun is used in place of personal pronoun to signal that it refers to the same subject in the sentence.
- Pick out other examples of the use of reflexive pronouns from the story and notice how they are used.

Thinking about language

1. *Notice the words in bold in the following sentence.*

"The fire boy shovelled charcoal into the **maw of the furnace** with a great deal of clatter". This is a phrase that is used in the specific context of an iron plant.

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Pick out other such phrases and words from the story that are peculiar to the terminology of ironworks.

2. *Mjolis* is a card game of Sweden.

   Name a few indoor games played in your region. 'Chopar' could be an example.

3. A crofter is a person who rents or owns a small farm especially in Scotland. Think of other uncommon terms for 'a small farmer' including those in your language.

About the Unit

Theme

The trap of material benefit that most human beings are prone to fall into.

Sub-theme

The human tendency to redeem oneself from dishonest ways.

Comprehension

- Factual understanding of events.
- Inferring motives for human actions.

Talking about the text

Small group discussion on:

- the portrayal of characters in fiction.
- human emotional needs and human behaviour.
- real-life recounting of similar incidents.
- narrative style.

Working with words

- Choice of synonyms to reflect personal attitudes 'Noticing form'.
- Focus on the uses of the reflexive pronoun.

Thinking about language

- Vocabulary specific to a particular field.
- Culture-specific games (especially indoor).
- Region-specific synonyms.

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