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English Core

I.A. & I.Com.

By Manish Prabhakar Singh

The Rattrap

- Selma Lagerlof

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Selma Otilia Lovisa Lagerlöf (1858-1940) was a Swedish author and teacher. She published her first novel, Gösta Berling's Saga, at the age of 33. She was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, which she was awarded in 1909.

SUMMARY

A rattrap peddler went around selling small rattraps. His clothes were in rags. His cheeks were hollow. He had the look of a starved man. He made wire traps. He begged the material from stores and big farms. Sometimes he resorted to begging and a little stealing to survive. The world had never been kind to him. He had no home, no shelter.

The peddler led a lonely life. One day while he was thinking about his rattraps, an idea struck him. He thought that the world itself was a rattrap. As soon as anybody touched it, the trap closed on them. He was amused to think of some people who were already trapped, and some others who were trying to reach the bait in the trap. It was a cold evening in December. He reached a cottage on the roadside. He knocked at the door and asked for a night's shelter. The owner of the cottage was a lonely old crofter. He wanted someone to talk to. He welcomed the peddler. He gave the peddler hot porridge to eat, and tobacco to smoke. Then they played cards. The crofter was generous as well as trustful. He told the peddler that he had a cow and sold her milk to a creamery. He also told him that he received thirty kronors as payment the previous month. Then he took down a pouch and showed him the money. Then he put the money back in the pouch and hung it on a nail in the window frame.

Next morning the peddler left. The crofter locked his cottage, and went away. The peddler came back to the cottage. He had been tempted to steal the money that hung like bait in the window frame. He smashed the pane and stole the money. Now he thought it was not safe to walk along the public highway. So he went into the woods. There he walked and walked but could not get out. He moved in circles. He was tired. He looked upon the forest as a rattrap in which he was caught. He thought his end was near. He lay down to die.

After a while he heard regular thumping of a hammer's strokes. He knew the sound was coming from Ramsjö Ironworks. He stood up and walked in the direction of the sound. He opened the gate of the ironworks and went into the forge. The owner came on his nightly rounds and noticed the ragged wretch near the furnace. The ironmaster looked intently at the peddler's face. He felt sure that the peddler was one of his old regimental comrades, Captain von Ståle who had fallen on evil days. He invited the peddler to go home with him for Christmas. But the peddler was alarmed. He thought it was risky for him to accept the offer. He firmly declined it. The ironmaster went home. The ironmaster sent his daughter Edla to

persuade the peddler to come home. She spoke gently to him. The peddler felt confidence in her and agreed to go with her. On the way he was sorry to have stolen the crofter's money that had put him in a trap.

The ironmaster was happy to have his old regimental comrade under his roof. He planned to feed him well and give him some respectable work. The servant cut the peddler's hair, shaved him and bathed him. The peddler appeared wearing one of the ironmaster's fine suits. But when the ironmaster looked at him in daylight, he felt that he had made a mistake. The peddler was not captain von Stable. He thought that the man had deceived him. He even thought of handing him to the sheriff. The peddler said that he had not pretended to be what he was not. He had not been willing to go to the ironmaster's house. Even then he was willing to put on his rags and leave. He also told the ironmaster that the world was a rattrap, and he himself might one day be tempted by big bait and get caught in the trap. The ironmaster told him to leave at once. Edla did not like her father's asking the poor peddler to leave. She thought it was unfair to turn away the man whom they had invited. She wanted to have the joy of entertaining a homeless wanderer on Christmas Eve. She stopped the peddler and her father agreed to it.

Edla served food to the peddler. He was given Christmas presents which he thankfully received. Edla told him that her father's suit that the peddler was wearing was also a Christmas present. She assured him that he would be welcomed again if he liked to spend the next Christmas Eve with them. Next morning the ironmaster and his daughter went to church. There they learned that the peddler was a thief. He had robbed the crofter. The ironmaster was sure that the peddler must have made away with their silver. Edla was dejected. But when they reached home they learned that the peddler had left. But he had taken away nothing. On the other hand he had left a Christmas present for Edla. Edla opened the present. It was a tiny rattrap. Edla was happy to see that the peddler had left the crofter's money behind. There was a letter also. It was addressed to Edla. He thanked her for her kindness. He wanted to repay her kindness. So he had left the crofter's money and

had requested her to return it to the crofter. He said he had been raised to captain. That was why he could come out of the rattrap in which he had been caught. He signed the letter Captain von Stahle.

CHARACTERS:-

1. A peddler with rattraps.
2. An Old man: A crofter
3. Master Smith in the Ramsjo Iron Mill in Sweden
4. Helpers in the Mill: blacksmiths
5. Iron mill owner
6. Edla Williamson – daughter of the Iron Mill owner.

SETTING

This story is set amidst the mines of Sweden, rich in iron ore which figure large in the history of that country. The story is told somewhat in the manner of a fairy tale.

Gist of the lesson:-

- The peddler was a vagabond who sold rattraps with a little thievery on the side to make both ends meet. Had no worldly possession to call his own, not even a name. It amused him to think of the world as a rattrap.
- Takes shelter at a crofter's cottage. The crofter welcomed him, gave him dinner, shared his pipe, played "mjolis" with him also confided in him about his income and showed him where he put it.

- Next morning, the Peddler steals the money and takes the back roads to keep away from people and gets lost in the jungle at night. While he wanders in the forest he realizes that he has also got caught in the rattrap and that the money was the bait.
- Finally reaches Ramsjo ironworks, where he takes shelter for the night. The blacksmith and his assistant ignore him but the master mistakes him to be an old acquaintance and invites him home. Though the Peddler does not correct the ironmaster, hoping to get some money out of him, he declines his invitation.
- The ironmaster then sends his daughter who persuades him to go home with her. She notices his uncouth appearance and thinks that either he has stolen something or he has escaped from jail.
- The Peddler is scrubbed, bathed, given a haircut, a shave and a suit of old clothes of the ironmaster. In the morning light, the iron master realizes he is mistaken and that he is not the Captain. He wants to call the Sheriff. The peddler is agitated and breaks out that the world is rattrap and he too is sure to be caught in it. The ironmaster is amused but orders him out. The compassionate Edla convinces her father that he should spend the Christmas day with him.
- The Peddler spends the whole of Christmas Eve eating and sleeping. The next day at church, Edla and her father come to know that the Peddler is a thief who stole thirty kroners from the poor crofter.
- Back home, they found a letter addressed to Edla, signed as Captain Von Stahl and a rattrap as a gift from the crofter. In the rattrap were the three ten kroner notes of the crofter.

THEME:-

The theme of the story is that most human beings are prone to fall into the trap of **material** benefit. However, every human being has an essential goodness that can be awakened through understanding and love. A human being has the tendency to redeem himself from dishonest ways.

- **Human Kindness**

“The Rattrap” is a short, almost fairy-tale story that centers around the transforming power of human kindness. An unnamed peddler of rattraps goes from seeing the world as “one big rattrap” and engaging in robbery to returning his stolen money and proclaiming himself free—all as a result of experiencing true kindness and generosity from Edla Williamson on Christmas Eve. By showing the peddler’s potential for positive change, Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf expresses a belief that there is a core of goodness in all people, and that this goodness can be unlocked through compassion and kindness.

- **Trust vs. Cynicism**

As “The Rattrap” begins, the homeless peddler is defined by his “rattrap” philosophy of life: that the world is nothing but a big rattrap that offers “bait” in the form of luxuries and pleasures, and then ensnares and ruins anyone who reaches for this bait. This is a fundamentally cynical worldview, and one that the story ultimately undercuts by showing its limitations and offering an alternate philosophy. Though life can be harsh and cruel at times, Selma Lagerlöf suggests that being wholly cynical only leads one to isolation, immorality, and unhappiness. Instead, the story advocates for a more trusting worldview, one that takes human kindness into account and can build community between people.

- **Loneliness and Companionship**

Connected to the themes of kindness and trust, “The Rattrap” also explores the basic human need for companionship and community, and shows the negative effects of loneliness, whether as a result of poverty, cynicism, or unkindness. At the start of the story, the peddler leads an incredibly lonely existence, and this affects him in extremely negative ways, causing him unhappiness and bitterness, and driving him to steal from and lie to others. Through the peddler’s transformative interactions with the old man, the

ironmaster, and Edla Williamson, however, the story shows the importance of human companionship, and suggests that a society should bring people together rather than isolating them or turning them against each other.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:-

**1. In what sense was the world a big rattrap according to the peddler?
Or
why did the peddler think that the world was a rattrap?**

ANSWER: - The peddler was a very poor man who earned his living by selling rattraps he made himself from the materials he got by begging. His mind, thus, was always preoccupied with rattraps. One day, he suddenly thought of the whole world was a big rattrap. He felt that the shelter, food, clothes, riches and joys that the world provided were all baits set to entrap man just as a rattrap offered cheese or meat to entrap rats. As soon as one was trapped, everything came to an end.

2. Why did the peddler derive pleasure from his idea of the world as a rattrap?

ANSWER: - The world had never been kind to the poor peddler. Wherever he went, he was greeted with sour faces and was turned or chased away. Therefore, he derived pleasure from thinking ill of the world in this way. Moreover, he perhaps envied those whose lot was better than his, and was rather amused to think that some day they too would be tempted by the bait and be caught in the Rattrap.

3. Why did the peddler knock on the cottage by the roadside? How was he treated by the Owner Of the cottage?

ANSWER: - The peddler knocked on the cottage by the roadside to seek shelter for the night. The owner of the cottage was a crofter who lived there alone. He regarded the peddler as welcome company and treated him quite hospitably. He not only put him up for the night, but also offered him food and played cards with him.

4. Why did Edla plead with her father not to send the vagabond away?

Or

why did Edla still entertain the peddler even after she knew the truth about him?

ANSWER: - Edla had always thought the peddler to be a poor, homeless tramp. Therefore, she didn't feel cheated when his true identity was revealed. Instead, she felt very bad for him and his miserable condition, and pleaded on his behalf. She and her father had promised him Christmas cheer, and she felt that it would be wrong to send him away.

5. What conclusion did the ironmaster reach when he heard that the crofter had been robbed by the peddler?

ANSWER: - It was at the church that the ironmaster and his daughter heard that the crofter had been robbed by a peddler, who, no doubt, was the one they had sheltered at the manor house. The ironmaster at once concluded that the peddler would probably have stolen all his silverware in their absence, and run away.

Q6. What made the peddler think that he had indeed fallen into a rattrap?

Ans: The peddler realised that he must not walk on the public highway with the stolen money in his pocket. He went into the woods. He kept walking without coming to the end of the wood. Then he realised that he

had fallen in the rattrap. He had let himself be fooled by a bait and had been caught in.

Q7. What made the peddler accept Edla Williamson's invitation?

Ans: Miss Edla Williamson looked at the peddler quite compassionately. She noticed that the man was afraid. She assured him that he would be allowed to leave just as freely as he came. She requested him to stay with them over Christmas Eve. Her friendly manner made the peddler feel confidence in her and accept her invitation.

Q3. The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others' behaviour. Pick out instances of these surprises.

Ans: The peddler is surprised at the warm welcome, generous supper, cheerful company and intimate confidences by the crofter. The ironmaster addresses the peddler as Captain von Stahle. He is surprised when the ironmaster calls him "Nils Olof. The ironmaster assumes his declining the invitation a result of embarrassment caused by his miserable clothing. The peddler's comparison of the world to a rattrap make the ironmaster laugh and he drops the idea of calling in the sheriff. The peddler looks at Edla in boundless amazement when she tells him that the suit is a Christmas present. She also invites him to spend next Christmas with them. She does all this even after knowing the mistake about his identity. The crofter is robbed by his guest, the rattrap peddler, in return of his hospitality.

Q6. How does the metaphor of the rattrap serve to highlight the human predicament?

Ans: The world entices a person through the various good things of life such as riches and joy, shelter and food, heat and clothing. These were just like the baits in the rattrap. Once someone is tempted by the bait, the world closed on him. The peddler was tempted by thirty kronor of the crofter. It makes him hide himself. He walks through the wood. He is afraid to go to the Manor house. He gets peace only after returning the bait (money).