

RATTRAP

Summary in detail

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 a 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 Stable 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 a 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 Stable.

Main points

1. 'The Rattrap' is a story that underlies a belief that essential goodness in human beings can be aroused through sympathy, understanding and love.
2. Once a man went around selling small rattraps but he took to begging and thievery to keep his body and soul together.
3. One day he was struck with the idea – the whole world is a big rattrap and it offers riches as bait.
4. People let themselves be tempted to touch the bait then it closes in on them bringing an end to everything.
5. One dark evening the rattrap peddler sought shelter in an old crofter's roadside cottage.
6. The old man gave him food, tobacco they enjoyed the card game too.
7. Next morning the peddler stole away his thirty kroners.
8. The rattrap peddler escaped into a big confusing forest and got lost.
9. While resting on the ground he recollected his idea that the world is a rattrap and thought his end was near.
10. Hearing a thumping sound he reached Ramsjo ironworks for a night shelter.
11. The owner came on his nightly rounds and noticed the ragged wretch near the furnace.
12. He took him as an old acquaintance 'Nils Olof.'
13. He invited him to stay with them for Christmas but the stranger declined the offer.
14. His daughter Edla Willmansson persuaded to go home with him.
15. She requested him to stay for Christmas Eve only.
16. On his way to the Manor House the peddler thought that he had thrown himself into the lion's den.
17. The next day in broad day light the iron master realized the stranger was not captain and threatened to call the sheriff.
18. Edla pleaded for him and asked him to stay back.
19. Christmas Eve at Ramsjo was as usual and the stranger slept and slept.
20. 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.
21. Next morning they went for early church service leaving behind the guest who was asleep.

22. They learnt at church that a rattrap peddler had robbed an old crofter.
23. Edla becomes very upset.
24. They reach home immediately and learn 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.
25. She opens the packet and finds a rattrap, three wrinkled ten-Kronor notes and also a letter with a request to return the Kroners to the crofter.

Short Answer Type Questions

Q1. From where did the peddler get the idea of the world being a rattrap?

Ans. The peddler went around selling rattraps that he had made himself from wire he had begged or stolen. One day the thought occurred to him that the world was very much like a rattrap which offered men shelter, food, clothing and other comforts for entrapping them.

Q2. What was the peddler's philosophy about rattrap? Why did it amuse him?

Ans. The peddler's philosophy was that the whole world is a rattrap with several baits in it. As one is tempted to bait and touches it, the door is closed and everything comes to an end like in a rattrap. The thought amused him because he has so far been selling rattrap; but not fallen in this world's rattrap.

Q3. What kind of host was the old crofter?

Ans. The old crofter was an affectionate and generous host. He warmly welcomed the peddler as he got someone to talk to in his loneliness. He served him porridge for his supper and offered a pipe with tobacco roll to smoke and finally played with him Mjolis till bedtime.

Q4. The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning? Is it justified? Give reasons.

Ans. The rattrap peddler draws reader's sympathy because of his poverty. The author's description of his clothes and appearance like –“his clothes are in rags, his cheeks are sunken and hunger gleams his eyes” and his resorting to begging and petty thievery to keep his body and soul together evoke reader's sympathy.

Q5. Who do you think was at fault-the ironmaster or the peddler? Give two reasons.

Ans. I think the ironmaster was at fault because it was he who invited the tramp to his house for the Christmas thinking him to be his old acquaintance; but on knowing he was not his acquaintance, he could not oppose his daughter's decision to offer him Christmas cheer.

Q6. Why was the peddler grateful to the ironmaster and his daughter?

Ans. The peddler was grateful to the ironmaster and his daughter as they empowered him to release himself from the world's rattrap through their selfless hospitality, love, sympathy, compassion, and understanding.

Q7. Did the peddler expect the kind of hospitality that he received from the crofter?

Ans. The peddler was surprised that the crofter not only invited him into his cottage but also shared his porridge with him. He also talked to him, played cards with him and shared confidences with him.

Q8. Why was the crofter so talkative and friendly with the peddler?

Ans. The crofter was alone, and had no wife or child and was perhaps lonely. Therefore he became happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness.

Q9. Why did he show the thirty kroner to the peddler?

Ans. The crofter told the peddler that he was comfortable and had earned a reasonable sum of money from his extraordinary cow that gave a lot of milk and he had earned thirty kroner last month. The peddler expressed disbelief and thus the crofter showed him the money.

Q10. Did the peddler respect the confidence reposed in him by the crofter?

Ans. The peddler abused the trust reposed in him by the crofter because as soon as he could, he came back, opened the window of the cottage and stole the crofter's hard-earned money.

Q11. What made the peddler think that he had indeed fallen into a rattrap?

Ans. Having stolen the crofter's money, the peddler was forced to stay off the road and walk in the forest. When night fell, he could not see where he was headed to and seemed to be walking round and round the same spot. He was tired and in his frustration felt that he was caught in the trap.

Q12. Why did the ironmaster speak kindly to the peddler and invite him home?

Ans. The ironmaster mistook the peddler to be an old acquaintance, Nils Olof, a comrade from the regiment. It appeared to the ironmaster that the man had fallen on bad days and so he invited him to his home, especially as it was Christmas time.

Q13. Why did the peddler decline the invitation?

Ans. The peddler declined his invitation, as he was afraid of being detected as the thief. He felt that by accepting the invitation to go to the ironmaster's house, he was voluntarily walking into the lion's den.

Q14. What made the peddler accept Edla Willmansson's invitation?

Ans. Edla Willmansson came to invite the peddler. She requested him to come home with such an apparent and genuine kindness that the peddler could not refuse. She instilled a certain confidence in him.

Q15. What doubts did Edla have about the peddler?

Ans. Edla noticed that the peddler was afraid and she at once concluded that he was either a thief or had escaped from jail. She told her father that it was strange that his regimental comrade had fallen on such bad days and also that he had nothing about him to show that he had once been an educated man.

Q16. When did the ironmaster realise his mistake?

Ans. The ironmaster had first seen the tramp in the dim glow of the furnace. He had taken him to be his old regimental comrade, but when the tramp had come down cleanly shaven and dressed in a borrowed suit of the master, the ironmaster at once realized that it had been a case of mistaken identity. He had taken the tramp to be his old regimental comrade.

Q17. What did the peddler say in his defence when it was clear that he was not the person the ironmaster had thought he was?

Ans. The peddler pleaded that it was not his fault. He had never pretended to be anything but only a poor trader. He only begged that he should be allowed to stay for the night near the forge. Since he had done them no harm, so he was ready to put on his old rags again and would leave at once.

Q18. Why did Edla still entertain the peddler even after she knew the truth about him?

Ans. Edla was a kind woman at heart and understood how difficult the peddler's life had been. She realized how hard it must have been for him to be homeless and to have had to wander from place to place. She empathised with him and was thus kind to him even though she knew who he was.

Q19. Why was Edla happy to see the gift left by the peddler?

Ans. The ironmaster and Edla had expected that the peddler would have made away with all their silver and were indeed pleasantly surprised to find that he had not stolen anything but had left the thirty stolen kroners in a rattrap along with a letter. He requested that the stolen money be returned to its rightful owner and stated in his letter that having been treated with such dignity and having had his status elevated to that of a captain, he felt that he could not embarrass them.

Q20. Why did the peddler sign himself as Captain von Stahle?

Ans. The pedellar was touched by the kind treatment Edla gave him. Edla, despite knowing his real identity, treated him like a captain. Now it was his turn to show her that the guest she had honoured was as honourable as the captain and not merely a petty thief. Latent goodness of his heart awakened, he behaved in a dignified manner. Signed himself as Captain von Stahle.

Long Answer Type Questions

Q1. How does the peddler interpret the acts of kindness and hospitality shown by the crofter, the ironmaster and his daughter?

Ans. The peddler feels absolutely no compunction about accepting the hospitality of the crofter and then robbing him of his hard-earned kroner. He enjoys playing cards with his host all evening and then makes away with his money the next morning. When the ironmaster having mistaken him for a regimental comrade invites him to his house to share his Christmas lunch, he feels a sense of entrapment, having the stolen money on his person, and thus declines the invitation. He feels that to accept the hospitality of the ironmaster would be like voluntarily throwing himself into the lion's den. However, he does not at the outset disclose his true identity because he hopes to profit from the mistake thinking perhaps a few kroner would come his way but now he only wants to rest near the forge at night and quietly slip away in the morning. The kindness of the ironmaster's daughter touches the tramp's heart making him feel

more worthy. She makes him feel comfortable and raises his self-esteem. Even after his true identity has been discovered, she feels sympathetic towards him and convinces her father to let him stay and share Christmas cheer with them. She does not for a moment doubt his integrity and the tramp repays this faith and kindness by leaving behind the stolen kroner to be returned to the rightful owner along with one of his rattraps as a present and a letter addressed to the daughter thanking her for elevating his status to that of a captain and for the chance to redeem his mistake.

Q2. 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 is a man of power whose ambition was to ensure that good iron was shipped out. He believed in closely supervising the work at the ironworks to make sure that all was in order. When he saw the tramp, he was not overcome with sympathy. His arrogance came to the fore and he commenced to give him a piece of his mind regarding his unwise decision of not resigning at the appropriate time. His invitation to the tramp to come to his house stemmed more from a sense of superiority rather than true philanthropy. He was most indignant to discover that the tramp had deceived him regarding his true identity. The ironmaster's daughter sensed something amiss on her very first meeting with the tramp. She was not convinced that he had ever been in the army and when she was proved right, her reaction was not one of indignation but one of sympathy, understanding and kindness. She realised how he must always have to contend with being turned away and not being made welcome anywhere and decided that she would give him that opportunity of feeling secure and welcome in their home. She had more faith in him than did her father and when the tramp did nothing but eat and sleep, she was able to appreciate the fact that he had probably never felt so secure in his life. She even convinced her father to gift him the suit that was loaned to the tramp as a Christmas gift.

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

Ans. The peddler, walking along on a winters evening, is able to avail the unconditional warmth and hospitality of the owner of the cottage. The host shares his food, his home and his confidences, showing the stranger the money that he had made. The tramp, the next day, feels no remorse for stealing the money and walking away. When he is seeking shelter from the cold and has the opportunity to spend the night at the ironmaster's house, he declines as he has the stolen money with him and feels that he will be walking into the lion's den. However, when the same invitation is extended by the ironmaster through his daughter, the tramp accepts as her kindness filters through. Left alone in the

ironmaster's house, the tramp has every opportunity to make away with the valuables. On the contrary, the tramp goes away leaving behind the stolen money to be returned to the rightful owner along with a rattrap as a present for the ironmaster's daughter.

Q4. What made the peddler finally change his ways?

Ans. The peddler had lived a life of privation and constant rejection. It had made him cynical and embittered. Self-preservation had become his sole objective and he could not sense the difference between right and wrong. He had lost his sense of self-worth, having lived in penury with no home to call his own and not even a name to answer to. He had to resort to begging and petty thieving to survive and life offered no pleasure at all. The sadness and monotony of his life had convinced him of the fact that life was like a huge rattrap and just as the cheese and pork in the traps that he made were the bait, so also the riches, joys, shelter and the food that life offered were the bait. As soon as anyone let himself be tempted, it closed in around him and all came to an end. He took pleasure in thinking of all the acquaintances who had been caught in this trap. However, the meeting with the ironmaster's daughter was the turning point in his life. The kindness, the concern and the understanding that she showed him touched the core of his heart and transformed his way of thinking.

Q5. How does the metaphor of the rattrap serve to highlight the human predicament?

Ans. The tramp during his wanderings hit upon the thought that just as the cheese and the pork are the bait in the ratttraps that he makes so also the joys, the warmth, the shelter and the comforts that life offers are the bait to trap humans in the huge rattrap of the world. It gave him immense pleasure to ruminate about all his acquaintances who had fallen into the trap. Though these were the thoughts of an embittered man who envied those whose lot was better than his, yet the metaphor of the trap holds some truth when one thinks about life. The more one has, the more one wants and sometimes the reasons for wanting those things become secondary to the wants themselves. Jealousy and rivalry are the corollary of material acquisitions and the only motivation to possess things is to outdo another. The rattrap of the world entraps us and we are so occupied with chasing the state of fulfilment that ever evades us that we are again engulfed in despair and discontentment.

Q6. 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?

Ans. The peddler, with his subtle sense of humour was able to make an equation between the rattraps that he made and the world, which he likened to a huge rattrap, offering bait and then closing in, round those who fell for them. This was his way of consoling himself that no matter what his lot, he was better off than those who fell for the worldly bait of joy, warmth, shelter and other such comforts. This makes the sad, the weary and melancholy tramp very human and real. He manages to arouse the sympathy of the reader despite his thieving ways and his dead conscience for he makes the reader examine the merits of self-preservation. His preoccupation with remaining undetected as the thief who has made away with the thirty hard-earned kroner of the crofter makes him refuse the luxury of spending Christmas at the fine house of the ironmaster. The kindness with which the ironmaster's daughter treats him touches the core of his hitherto hardened heart. The restoration of his dignity results in his transformation into a responsible human being, sensitive, courteous, grateful and gracious.

Q7. The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning of the story. Why is this so? Is the sympathy justified?

Ans. The peddler earns the sympathy of the reader because on every occasion when his woes seem to be ending, he is assailed by fresh problems, as if caught in a rattrap with no escape. After receiving hospitality from a crofter, he is assailed by feelings of guilt as he stoops to temptation and steals the crofter's earnings. Paradoxically, he loses his way in a forest even though he is a vagabond who has always found his way through the woods. At the smithy when he is mistaken for an acquaintance of the iron master he plays along, only to be discovered subsequently and being threatened with imprisonment. When Edla offers him unconditional love and hospitality, he does truly reform. He rids himself of the stolen wealth and presents the girl with the kroner in a symbolic rattrap, and becomes a carefree and satisfied individual.

Q8. The story also focuses on human loneliness and the need to bond with others.

(a) Festivities are not complete without bonding with other human beings. Thus the ironmaster takes home the peddler mistaking him for his former acquaintance Captain von Stahle because he cannot bear to leave an acquaintance stranded on Christmas Eve.

(b) The daughter and father welcome the stranger as they like to have company to share their joys on Christmas.

(c) Even after finding out that the stranger is not the former acquaintance, the daughter insists on his staying with them because of the need for human company.

(d) The story illustrates that lonely people are willing to take in any human beings because of the innate need for human company. Thus the crofter welcomed the vagabond under his roof.

(e) The confession of the man to stealing or acquiescing to a false identity did not alter the generosity of his hosts as they were hungry for company at all costs.

Q9. The story is both entertaining and philosophical.

Ans. (a) The story is entertaining because of the many sudden twists in the storyline that is maintained throughout the content. Each time, the stranger seemed to have overcome his troubles, he met with fresh hurdles.

(b) It is entertaining because of the differences in the locales where the various incidents occur, and the dialogue of the characters. The scene of mistaken identities reveals this point.

(c) The story maintains an air of suspense right through and even the concluding part of the story is a startling one.

(d) The story is philosophical because it poses an open-ended query as to whether our lives are conditioned by our fate or are a direct follow-through of our own follies, caught as we are in a giant rattrap.

(e) It also brings to the fore that human love, in the form of hospitality when given unconditionally, brings about real change as was revealed through the character of the ironmaster's daughter towards the peddler.