Chapter 4: The Rattrap

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Exercise 4.1 — Understanding the Text

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

SOLUTION

The peddler views the world through the lens of his rattrap philosophy — that the world is a giant trap baited with riches, shelter, food, and warmth to ensnare the unwary. He applies this cynical framework to interpret each act of hospitality he receives.

The crofter's generosity — the porridge, tobacco, card game, and ultimately the display of the thirty kronor — the peddler treats as a bait. He steals the money, and when he is trapped in the forest, he recognises that he has fallen into his own metaphorical rattrap: 'He had let himself be fooled by a bait and had been caught.'

When the ironmaster mistakes him for an old regimental comrade and invites him to the manor house, the peddler initially refuses, sensing that accepting would be 'like throwing himself voluntarily into the lion's den,' since he carries stolen money. He fears the hospitality is a trap that will expose him.

Edla Willmansson's compassion, however, affects him differently. Her gentle, non-judgmental invitation — assuring him he could leave as freely as he came — inspires a measure of trust and, ultimately, genuine gratitude. Her kindness is the one act he does not treat as a snare. Instead, it awakens his better self, and he returns the stolen money along with a letter signed 'Captain von Stahle,' acknowledging that her goodness raised him above the level of a trapped rat.

Answer: The peddler sees the crofter's and ironmaster's hospitality as baits in the world's rattrap; only Edla's selfless compassion breaks through his cynicism and redeems him.

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?

SOLUTION

The ironmaster and his daughter, Edla Willmansson, are contrasted throughout the story in their motivations, perceptions, and responses to the peddler.

The ironmaster acts on superficial recognition: he mistakes the peddler for his old regimental comrade, Captain Nils Olof, purely on the basis of a fleeting resemblance seen in the uncertain firelight. He invites the peddler not out of genuine compassion but out of a sense of social obligation towards an imagined old friend. Once the mistake is discovered in daylight, his hospitality evaporates instantly, and he even threatens to call the sheriff.

Edla, by contrast, notices the man's fear and correctly infers he is either a thief or a fugitive. Yet she chooses to invite him anyway, promising freely that he can leave as he came. Her motivation is purely human: she does not want a person to spend Christmas alone, unwelcome and afraid. Even after learning at church that he is a real thief, she defends her decision on the grounds that they had given him a promise of Christmas cheer and should honour it.

The ironmaster is driven by status and self-interest; Edla is driven by empathy and principle. He would have sent the peddler away — or to the sheriff — the moment his mistake was clear. Edla's intercession, 'I don't want him to go,' saves the peddler and ultimately triggers his moral redemption. The story implicitly endorses Edla's humane generosity over her father's conditional charity.

Answer: The ironmaster acts on mistaken self-interest and quickly turns hostile when deceived; Edla acts from genuine empathy and upholds her kindness even after learning the truth.

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

SOLUTION

Several moments in the story defy the reader's — and characters' — expectations, giving the narrative a quality of pleasant and moral surprise.

First, when the peddler knocks on the crofter's door seeking a night's shelter, he expects, as usual, 'the sour faces which ordinarily met him.' Instead the old man welcomes him warmly, serves him porridge, shares tobacco, and plays cards with him — a wholly unexpected display of friendship from a stranger.

Second, the peddler — who has just been shown such trust and kindness — repays it by stealing the crofter's thirty kronor the very next morning. This betrayal, following such warmth, is itself a surprise and underscores the story's moral irony.

Third, the ironmaster's repeated invitations to a ragged stranger he believes to be an old friend strike both the peddler and the reader as unexpected. When the peddler repeatedly refuses, the ironmaster sends his daughter rather than giving up — an unexpectedly persistent gesture.

Fourth, even after Edla and the ironmaster discover the man is a fraud and a thief, Edla unexpectedly insists he stay for Christmas, defying both her father's anger and practical wisdom.

Finally, and most surprisingly, the peddler — a thief who had broken a kind man's trust — leaves behind the stolen money in a rattrap along with a gracious letter for Edla, signed 'Captain von Stahle.' This act of unexpected honesty and gratitude is the story's most striking surprise and its moral climax.

Answer: The story's key surprises are: the crofter's warmth to a vagabond, the peddler's subsequent theft, Edla's insistence on keeping a known thief for Christmas, and the peddler's final return of the money.

Q4 What made the peddler finally change his ways?

SOLUTION

The peddler's change of heart is brought about specifically by Edla Willmansson's unconditional compassion and trust.

Throughout the story, the peddler encounters two kinds of people: those who are generous for selfish or mistaken reasons (the crofter, who enjoys company; the ironmaster, who thinks he has found an old friend), and Edla, who is kind with full awareness of the man's likely wretchedness and possible criminal past. When she notices his fear and still promises that he may leave as freely as he came, she offers him something he has perhaps never received — trust without conditions.

At the manor house, the peddler sits at the table, eats, sleeps safely, and is treated with dignity — first as a 'captain,' then, even after the truth emerges, simply as a human being deserving of Christmas peace. Throughout Christmas Day he watches Edla and wonders 'Why had she done it? What could the crazy idea be?' Her inexplicable goodness unsettles his cynical rattrap view of the world.

When he finally leaves, he repays this trust in the only way open to him: by returning the thirty stolen kronor and the rattrap, accompanied by a letter that shows he has internalised a new identity — 'Captain von Stahle,' a man of honour. In his own words, Edla raised him to the rank of captain and gave him the 'power to clear himself.' It is her genuine, selfless kindness that breaks the rattrap and frees him.

Answer: Edla's unconditional compassion and the dignity she extended to him — treating him as 'Captain' without any obligation — gave the peddler the moral courage to return the stolen money and reclaim his honesty.

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

SOLUTION

The rattrap is the story's central metaphor. The peddler, while walking the lonely roads and thinking of his rattraps, suddenly perceives the whole world as a giant rattrap: 'It had never existed for any other purpose than to set baits for people. It 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.'

This metaphor captures a fundamental human predicament: the temptation of material gain. People are lured by wealth, comfort, and social position — just as rodents are lured by bait — only to find themselves trapped, losing their freedom or their integrity. The peddler knows this from his own marginal existence and has observed it in others.

The irony is that the peddler himself falls into the very trap he theorises about. He steals the crofter's thirty kronor — cheese and pork — and immediately finds himself lost in the dark forest, an 'impenetrable prison.' His own philosophy catches him.

The metaphor also extends to Edla's act of redemption. By treating the peddler with dignity and not as a 'rat,' she effectively dismantles the trap around him and allows him to escape — not through cunning but through moral elevation. The letter he leaves behind declares that he 'would have been caught in this world's rattrap if he had not been raised to captain.' The rattrap thus illuminates both the danger of greed and the possibility of transcending it through human goodness.

Answer: The rattrap metaphor shows that material temptations ensnare human beings just as bait traps animals; the story further shows that selfless human goodness can break the trap and redeem even the fallen.

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?

SOLUTION

Despite his miserable condition — rags, hunger, and a life of petty theft — the peddler has a wry, philosophical mind that periodically surfaces as dry humour, making him an engaging and sympathetic character rather than a merely pitiable one.

His rattrap philosophy itself has an element of dark wit: comparing the entire world with its lands and seas to a wire rattrap baited with cheese and pork is an absurdist conceit that makes the reader smile even as it makes a serious point. He takes obvious pleasure in the idea: 'It gave him unwonted joy to think ill of it in this way,' and it becomes his 'cherished pastime.'

When the ironmaster addresses him as Captain von Stahle and he chooses not to correct the mistake — reasoning that a supposed old acquaintance 'might perhaps throw him a couple of kronor' — the calculation is comically astute. He plays along just enough, neither confirming nor denying, in a manner that is roguishly funny.

His speech defending himself before the ironmaster in the morning — warning the ironmaster that he too might one day want 'a big piece of pork' and get caught in the trap — is delivered with such composure and wit that the ironmaster himself laughs and says, 'That was not so badly said, my good fellow.'

Finally, signing his letter to Edla as 'Captain von Stahle' and describing himself as 'a rat who would have been caught in this world's rattrap' is both touching and gently self-deprecating. This humour prevents the story from becoming a heavy moral fable; it humanises the peddler and makes his ultimate redemption all the more moving.

Answer: The peddler's dry wit — the rattrap philosophy, his calm self-defence before the ironmaster, and the self-deprecating final letter — lightens the moral seriousness and makes him endearing rather than merely pathetic.

Exercise 4.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning of the story. Why is this so? Is the sympathy justified?

SOLUTION

From the opening lines the peddler is presented as a man crushed by poverty, not by moral failing alone. He makes rattraps from scraps obtained by begging, resorts to petty thievery only to 'keep body and soul together,' wears ragged clothes, has sunken cheeks, and hunger gleaming in his eyes. Selma Lagerlöf gives us his interiority — his loneliness, his dark philosophy, his weary plodding — so we understand him as a thinking, feeling person, not merely a social outcast. This access to his inner world naturally generates sympathy.

His rattrap philosophy, rather than making him seem bitter or hardened, reveals a reflective mind finding a kind of entertainment in ideas even in the bleakest circumstances. When he is kindly treated by the crofter — far beyond what his experience of the world has led him to expect — his surprise is palpable and touching.

The sympathy is broadly justified. The peddler does steal the crofter's money, which is a genuine betrayal. Yet the text shows that his moral environment has always been one of suspicion, sour faces, and survival. The key point is that he is not irredeemable: when genuine unconditional kindness is shown to him, he responds with an act of honesty that goes beyond what anyone expected. The story suggests that what looked like a hardened criminal was really a man who had never been given a reason to be good — until Edla provided one.

Answer: Sympathy is earned by the detailed portrait of the peddler's poverty and inner life; it is justified because the story shows he is redeemable — his theft was a lapse, not his nature, and Edla's trust brings out his innate honesty.

Q2 The story also focuses on human loneliness and the need to bond with others.

SOLUTION

Loneliness runs through the story as a quiet but persistent theme. The peddler is described as a vagabond 'left to his own meditations,' with 'no one' who can imagine how monotonous and sad life appears to him. His only companion is the abstract entertainment of his rattrap philosophy.

The crofter is equally lonely — 'an old man without wife or child,' who is 'happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness.' His generosity with food, tobacco, and cards flows directly from this loneliness; he craves human connection. Ironically, it is this very need for company that makes him show the thirty kronor and thus become vulnerable to theft.

The ironmaster, though wealthy, admits that with his wife dead and his sons abroad, 'there is no one at home except my oldest daughter and myself,' and they found it 'too bad we didn't have any company for Christmas.' Even he reaches out — though wrongly — to the stranger for companionship.

Edla's compassion is also a response to isolation: she says of the peddler that '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.' She wants to give him 'a day of peace' — a single day of belonging.

The story suggests that loneliness makes people reach across social boundaries — the crofter to the peddler, Edla to the thief — and that these connections, however unlikely, carry the possibility of redemption. Bonds formed across social distance, grounded in genuine empathy, are the story's moral centre.

Answer: Loneliness drives all major characters toward one another — the crofter craves company, the ironmaster misses his old comrade, Edla sees the peddler's isolation and acts; these bonds across social distance carry the story's redemptive force.

Q3 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?

SOLUTION

This question invites a personal or heard-of account. A model response follows.

One widely recounted example is that of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, which has a direct structural parallel to this story. Valjean, a hardened ex-convict, is shown unexpected kindness by the Bishop of Digne — given shelter, food, and silverware — only to steal the silver during the night. When the police bring him back, the Bishop tells them he gave Valjean the silver freely and adds two more candlesticks. This unconditional act of grace, which asks nothing in return and refuses to punish, fundamentally alters Valjean's view of humanity and sets him on the path to becoming a just and generous man.

In real life, teachers, social workers, and counsellors often describe moments when a single gesture of genuine trust — not pity, but respect — unlocked change in a person who had been written off. The common thread is that conditional kindness (given because of who someone is thought to be) rarely transforms, whereas unconditional kindness (given despite who someone is known to be) can.

The story of 'The Rattrap' belongs to this tradition of moral tales where goodness, freely offered, proves more powerful than punishment or suspicion in reforming a person.

Answer: Acts of unconditional kindness — as with the Bishop and Valjean, or Edla and the peddler — can transform a person's worldview precisely because they are given without expectation or judgement.

Q4 The story is both entertaining and philosophical.

SOLUTION

The story entertains through its fairy-tale plot structure — a wanderer, unexpected kindness, near-disaster, and a redemptive ending — and through the peddler's dry wit and the ironmaster's comic case of mistaken identity. There is suspense (will the peddler be caught?), surprise (Edla insists he stay even knowing the truth), and a satisfying, almost fable-like resolution when the rattrap gift is discovered.

At the philosophical level the story explores several serious ideas. The central metaphor — the whole world as a rattrap baited with material temptations — is a genuine moral insight: human beings are perpetually at risk of compromising their integrity for comfort, wealth, or status. The peddler falls into his own trap almost immediately after formulating it, which underlines the universality of the danger.

The story also raises questions about human nature: is it fundamentally good or corrupted by circumstance? Lagerlöf's answer, given through Edla, leans toward the former: the essential goodness in a human being can be awakened through understanding and love — a theme she makes explicit in the 'About the author' note. The peddler is not irredeemably bad; he is simply someone whom society's cruelty has pushed toward dishonesty.

The two dimensions reinforce each other: the entertainment keeps the philosophy from becoming didactic, and the philosophical depth prevents the fairy tale from remaining merely charming. This balance is the hallmark of Lagerlöf's storytelling.

Answer: The entertaining fairy-tale plot and the peddler's humour carry the reader along, while the rattrap metaphor and Edla's redemptive act ground the story in serious reflections on temptation, human nature, and the power of goodness.

Exercise 4.3 — Working with Words

Q1 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?

SOLUTION

The following labels are used in the story for the rattrap seller, along with what each reveals:

'Vagabond' — used by the narrator in the opening pages, indicating the man's homeless, wandering social status and the low regard society has for him.

'Peddler' / 'rattrap peddler' — the narrator's neutral, occupational description; it identifies him by his trade and keeps him at a social distance without being openly hostile.

'Stranger' — used by the narrator when the peddler arrives at the crofter's cottage and at the forge; it signals that he is an unknown, anonymous outsider with no social identity in these settings.

'Tramp' — used by the narrator and by the ironmaster's household, indicating the attitude that he is a social vagrant of the lowest order, not deserving of courtesy.

'Ragamuffin' — used by the narrator when the ironmaster first sees him; it conveys the ironmaster's initial (though brief) view of him as a dirty, disreputable figure.

'The intruder' — used when he enters the forge; it signals that the blacksmiths see him as someone who does not belong and whose presence is merely tolerated.

'Captain' / 'Captain von Stahle' — used by the ironmaster (in mistaken identity) and later by Edla (intentionally, as a form of respect). Edla's use of the title is the most significant: by addressing him as 'Captain,' she confers dignity on him and treats him as someone of worth, which ultimately inspires his moral recovery.

'The man with the rattraps' — a recurring neutral phrase used by the narrator that humanises him without labelling him by social class, keeping the reader's attention on his actions rather than his status.

Answer: The labels shift from 'vagabond' and 'intruder' (social contempt) through 'stranger' and 'tramp' (indifference) to 'Captain' (Edla's dignity-conferring address), tracking the change in how people perceive and treat the peddler across the story.

Q2 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.

SOLUTION

The three words from the story — 'plod' (to walk slowly and heavily, with effort), 'trudge' (to walk with slow, weary steps), and 'stagger' (to move unsteadily, as if about to fall from exhaustion) — all describe effortful, weary locomotion.

Five other words with similar meaning:

1. Shuffle — to walk without lifting the feet properly, dragging them along the ground out of fatigue or listlessness.
2. Lumber — to move in a slow, heavy, awkward manner.
3. Slog — to walk or work doggedly with great effort, especially through difficult terrain or conditions.
4. Totter — to move in a faltering, unsteady way, as though about to collapse.
5. Shamble — to walk with a slow, shuffling, unsteady gait, feet barely leaving the ground.

Answer: Five words indicating weary movement: shuffle, lumber, slog, totter, shamble.

Exercise 4.4 — Noticing Form

Q1 Notice the way in which reflexive pronouns have been used in the given examples. Pick out other examples of the use of reflexive pronouns from the story and notice how they are used.

SOLUTION

The textbook notes two uses of reflexive pronouns in the given examples:

• Emphatic use (sentences 1 and 4): 'He made them himself at odd moments' and '…you yourself may want to get a big piece of pork.' Here 'himself' and 'yourself' add emphasis — the action is performed by the subject alone, with no outside help.

• Reflexive use (sentences 2 and 3): 'He raised himself' and 'He had let himself be fooled by a bait.' Here the pronoun signals that the subject and the object of the verb are the same person.

Further examples from the story:

'…she went up and closed the door herself' (emphatic) — Edla personally closes the door to prevent the peddler from being sent away; the emphasis is on her own decisive act.

'He only sat down and helped himself to the food' (reflexive) — the peddler serves himself at the Christmas table; subject and object are the same.

'…he said to himself' — an idiomatic reflexive construction indicating internal speech; the subject and recipient of the speech are the same person.

'…the splendour had come to an end…He saw at once [that he must defend himself]' (reflexive, implied) — the peddler must act in his own interest; subject and object coincide.

'…you will be allowed to leave us just as freely as you came' — while this uses 'you' rather than a reflexive, it is worth noting Edla's phrase, because the reflexive form 'yourself' would also fit naturally, reinforcing her point that he retains agency over his own person.

In general, the story uses reflexive pronouns to mark moments of solitary action or self-directed thought, which is fitting for a character whose inner life — his philosophy, his decisions, his ultimate moral choice — is the real subject of the narrative.

Answer: Reflexive pronouns in the story are used either to emphasise that the subject acts alone (emphatic) or to show that subject and object are identical (reflexive proper); both uses recur naturally in passages focusing on the peddler's solitary, self-directed existence.

Exercise 4.5 — Thinking about Language

Q1 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 used in the specific context of an iron plant. Pick out other such phrases and words from the story that are peculiar to the terminology of ironworks.

SOLUTION

The story is set in and around the Ramsjö Ironworks and contains a number of terms specific to the iron-making industry of the period:

'Smelter' — a furnace or installation for smelting iron ore to extract the metal.
'Rolling mill' — a workshop where heated metal is passed through rollers to produce sheets, bars, or other shapes.
'Forge' — the workshop where iron is heated in a furnace and shaped by hammering; the blacksmiths work here.
'Furnace' — the large fire-chamber in which pig iron is heated to extreme temperatures for working.
'Pig iron' — crude iron as it comes from the smelting furnace, before it has been refined; used as a raw material.
'Anvil' — the heavy iron block on which heated metal is placed and hammered into shape.
'Master smith' — the senior, skilled blacksmith who oversees the forging work.
'Bellows' — the large pumping device used to force air into the furnace to raise the temperature of the fire; 'the big bellows groaned.'
'Fire boy' — a worker (often a young assistant) whose job is to feed fuel (charcoal) into the furnace.
'Charcoal' / 'charcoal crates' — the fuel used in iron smelting; the story mentions 'the roads near the mill were black from all the coal dust which sifted down from the big charcoal crates.'
'Iron bar' — used by workers to stir the glowing mass of pig iron in the furnace.
'Master blacksmith' — used interchangeably with 'master smith'; the head of the forge.

Answer: Terms peculiar to the ironworks context include: smelter, rolling mill, forge, furnace, pig iron, anvil, master smith/blacksmith, bellows, fire boy, charcoal crates, and iron bar.

Q2 Mjolis is a card game of Sweden. Name a few indoor games played in your region. 'Chopar' could be an example.

SOLUTION

This question asks for games from your own region. Some examples of traditional Indian indoor games are:

Chopar (also called Chaupar) — a cross-and-circle board game played with cowrie shells as dice, popular across North India.
Carrom — a finger-flicking board game played with small discs on a smooth square board; extremely popular across India.

Pachisi — a traditional board game played on a cross-shaped cloth board, considered the precursor to Ludo.
Ganjifa — a traditional card game played with hand-painted circular cards, once common in royal courts.
Kabaddi (indoor variant) — while primarily an outdoor contact sport, it is sometimes played in indoor settings in a reduced format.
Chess (Shatranj) — an ancient strategy game that originated in India (as Chaturanga) and is played widely indoors.
Antakshari — a popular Indian parlour game in which participants sing songs beginning with the last letter of the previous song.

Different regions have their own specialities: for instance, 'Pallankuzhi' in Tamil Nadu and Kerala uses a carved wooden board with seeds or shells.

Answer: Traditional Indian indoor games include Chopar/Chaupar, Carrom, Pachisi, Ganjifa, Chess (Shatranj), and Pallankuzhi, among others that vary by region.

Q3 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.

SOLUTION

A 'crofter' is specifically a Scottish and Nordic term for a tenant who holds and works a small plot of land. Other uncommon or regional terms for a small farmer include:

Yeoman — historically, a small freeholder who farmed his own land in England; implies a degree of independence.
Smallholder — a British English term for a person who owns or rents a small piece of agricultural land.
Peasant farmer — a general term used across cultures for a subsistence-level farmer with a small plot.
Cottager — a rural person who lives in a cottage and works a small adjacent plot of land.
Ryot (Hindi: रैयत, raiyat) — a term used in colonial and pre-colonial India for a tenant farmer or cultivator who held and worked land under a landlord.
Kunbi — a term used in Maharashtra for a traditional farming caste engaged in small-scale cultivation.
Kisan (Hindi: किसान) — the common Hindi/Urdu term for a farmer, often a smallholder in the context of Indian agriculture.
Marginal farmer — the modern administrative term in India for a farmer holding less than one hectare of agricultural land.

Answer: Terms for a small farmer include yeoman, smallholder, cottager (English); ryot, kisan, kunbi (Indian contexts); the specific term used depends on the country, era, and the farmer's tenure status.