

The Rattrap



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SELMA LAGERLÖF

Selma Lagerlöf was born in Värmland in western Sweden, and was the fifth child out of six. Her parents were upper-class and her father was an alcoholic army lieutenant. In 1882 she attended a teachers' college in Stockholm, and in 1885 became a teacher at a girls' secondary school, where she liked to tell stories and parables to her students. In 1891 she published her first (and most popular) work, *Gösta Berling's Saga*. In 1894 she met the writer Sophie Elkan, who became her close friend and possible lover. Lagerlöf went on to travel to Jerusalem (which inspired her book *Jerusalem*) and then several other countries, eventually giving up teaching and focusing on writing. Lagerlöf wrote prolifically, with her children's book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* becoming especially popular, and also became an outspoken member of the women's suffrage movement in Sweden. In 1909 she became the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Lagerlöf died in 1940, and remains one of the most beloved figures in Swedish literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Rattrap" takes place somewhere in rural western Sweden, in a vaguely nostalgic past that is not specified—but its very vagueness helps give the story its timeless, fairy-tale quality. Still, an ironworks figures prominently in the work, and its setting relies on the culture of mining and the iron processing industry dominant in Varmland in the early to mid-1800s. Varmland's iron trade then faltered in the late 1800s when central Europe and the U.S. became more dominant in the industry, as reflected by the narrator's comment that the once-thriving Ramsjö Ironworks is now shut down.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lagerlöf rejected the realism that was in vogue in Sweden in the 1880s (as exemplified by the writer August Strindberg, author of *The Red Room*), and instead wrote in a fairy-tale, romantic style that reflected the folk tales of her upbringing and hinted at the later genre of magical realism (which is largely associated with Gabriel García Márquez, author of [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#)). Lagerlöf's first novel, *Gösta Berling's Saga*, refers to the Icelandic sagas in its title and style, and much of her work was similarly influenced by the form of fairy tales or myths. Another famous writer from the Varmland region of Sweden is poet Gustaf Fröding, who was likewise influenced by the area's tradition of storytelling and folk tales. "The Rattrap" is also technically a Christmas story, part of other famous

literature centering around the holiday including Charles Dickens's [A Christmas Carol](#) and O. Henry's [The Gift of the Magi](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Rattrap"
- **Where Written:** Sweden
- **Literary Period:** Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century literature
- **Genre:** Short story, Swedish literature
- **Setting:** Rural Sweden
- **Climax:** Edla returns to find the peddler's package.
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The Silver Screen. Lagerlöf's first novel, *Gösta Berling's Saga*, was made into a silent film in 1924, starring the famous actress Greta Garbo.

Scriptural Influence. At the age of ten, Lagerlöf read the Bible cover to cover, hoping that doing so would make God heal her sick father.



PLOT SUMMARY

The peddler lives as a tramp, wandering the roads and selling **rattraps**. He likes to think of the world as one big rattrap that offers bait for people in the form of luxury and pleasure, and then ensnares them.

One evening in late December, the peddler comes to a cabin and asks for shelter. The old man who lives there welcomes him in, offering food, tobacco, and conversation. He shows the peddler thirty kronor that he has earned from selling his cow's milk.

The next morning the peddler leaves, but then he returns to steal the old man's money. He goes into the forest to avoid detection, but soon finds himself lost. He realizes that he has been caught in the "rattrap," and fears that he will die. The peddler then hears hammering and finds that he is near an ironworks. He takes shelter there by the warm furnace, where the master blacksmith and his apprentice are working.

The ironworks are owned by a wealthy ironmaster, who frequently visits the forge. He comes by that night and sees the peddler. Mistaking the peddler for an old regimental comrade, Captain von Stahle, the ironmaster invites him to come back to his manor house and spend Christmas with him and his daughter. Though the peddler first pretends to be von Stahle,

he declines the ironmaster's invitation, afraid to go to the house with his stolen money. The ironmaster reluctantly leaves.

Soon after, the ironmaster's daughter Edla Willmansson arrives at the forge, sent by her father to persuade the peddler to come to their home. She notes that the man looks afraid and is probably hiding from some past crime, but she treats him kindly and assures him that he can leave freely whenever he wants. The peddler agrees to come with her.

The next morning, the ironmaster and Edla greet the peddler, who has been bathed and dressed in fine clothes. The ironmaster realizes he made a mistake—the stranger is not Captain von Stahle—and gets angry. The peddler offers to put his rags back on and leave, but the ironmaster threatens to call for the sheriff. This angers the peddler, who rants about how the whole world is a rattrap, and the ironmaster should consider that he might be caught one day too. This amuses the ironmaster, who agrees to let the peddler go without calling the sheriff. Edla stops him, however, and says that she wants the peddler to stay. She knows that he has a hard life and declares that he should have some warmth and safety on Christmas Eve, especially because they already promised him their hospitality. The ironmaster grumbles but agrees.

The peddler, amazed by Edla's words, sleeps for most of the day, only waking for meals. At dinner, Edla tells him that he is to keep the suit he's wearing as a gift. She also tells him that he will be welcome back next Christmas. The peddler is again amazed.

The next morning, which is Christmas, the ironmaster and Edla go to church, where they learn that the stranger staying with them is a thief who stole money from the old man. Edla is ashamed, and the ironmaster worries that they might have been robbed as well. When they return home, however, the peddler has left, taking nothing and leaving behind a package for Edla. Inside is the stolen money, a rattrap, and a letter. The letter thanks Edla for her kindness, and states that she has freed the peddler from being caught in the "rattrap" of life. He signs the letter as Captain von Stahle.

seems that the peddler's only pleasure in life comes from thinking of the world as one large, cruel rattrap, and ruminating on other people he knows who have been ensnared. After experiencing true kindness from Edla Willmansson, however, the peddler seems to change his mindset. He returns the stolen money and declares that he wants to "be nice," having been freed from the "rattrap" of life by Edla's compassion and generosity. The peddler's transformation shows Lagerlöf's idea of the latent potential for goodness in all human beings.

Edla Willmansson – The daughter of the ironmaster, Edla is described as "not at all pretty, but [...] modest and quite shy." She is exceptionally kind, convincing the peddler to come to her house and then convincing her father to let the peddler stay for Christmas Eve, even when he is revealed to not actually be Captain von Stahle. Edla is also wise and perceptive, as she can immediately tell that the peddler is afraid, and has probably committed some crime that he is running from. She is the most positive figure in the story, and her compassion and generosity are the reason for the peddler's transformation.

The Ironmaster – The man who owns Ramsjö Ironworks, and Edla Willmansson's father. Described as a "very prominent ironmaster," he stops by to watch the work at his forge every day and night and inspect the quality of his products. The ironmaster was in the military in his younger days, as he mistakes the peddler for his "old regimental comrade," Captain von Stahle.

The Old Man / The Crofter – An old man who lets the peddler spend the night at his house. The old man is clearly lonely and glad to have company, and provides the peddler with food, tobacco, and conversation. He used to be a crofter (someone who rents and works a small farm) at Ramsjö Ironworks, but now survives by selling the milk from his "extraordinary" cow. The old man is kind and generous, but the peddler repays his generosity by stealing thirty kronor from him after the crofter shows him where he keeps the money.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Master Blacksmith – The master blacksmith at Ramsjö Ironworks, who works hard at the forge and agrees to let the peddler warm himself and sleep by the furnace.

The Apprentice – A boy who helps the master blacksmith in his work at the forge at Ramsjö Ironworks.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Peddler / The Stranger – The protagonist and central character of the story is an unnamed man who lives as a tramp wandering the countryside and selling **rattraps**, which he makes out of wire in his spare time. Because he does not make enough money from this to survive, the rattrap peddler also engages in petty thievery and begging—though even with this he still wears only rags and is constantly on the verge of starvation. At the start of the story, the peddler is cynical and opportunistic. He has a difficult lot in life, and takes whatever he can get and trusts no one. He even steals money from the crofter after the old man offers him his hospitality. Indeed, it



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 Willmansson 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.

When the story opens, the homeless peddler lives a hard and opportunistic life in rural Sweden—he has never known kindness, and so he himself is unkind. As he wanders the road begging and peddling his rattraps, the only pleasure he can find is in thinking “il” of the world by imagining it as one big rattrap, and by ruminating on other people he knows who have been “trapped.” He finds joy in other people’s misfortunes, having only known misfortune himself.

The clearest example of the peddler’s initial lack of kindness comes when he takes the decidedly immoral action of stealing the crofter’s money. The crofter, an old man who lives alone, welcomes the peddler in to stay with him for the night, generously offering him food, shelter, and companionship. Over the course of the evening, the crofter boasts about having earned thirty kronor by selling his cow’s milk, and he pointedly shows the peddler where he keeps the money. The next day, after bidding the crofter farewell, the peddler returns and steals the thirty kronor. The old man offered him nothing but generosity and friendship, but the peddler returned this generosity by stealing all of the crofter’s meager savings. The peddler even feels pleased with himself because of this—he doesn’t even think in terms of compassion or generosity, but only opportunism and what he can do to survive in a cruel world.

Eventually the peddler has his “rattrap” worldview overturned by experiencing further kindness. This comes primarily from Edla Willmansson, the daughter of the Ramsjö Ironworks’ ironmaster. The ironmaster initially mistakes the peddler for his old regimental comrade, Captain von Stahle, and invites the peddler back to his manor house for Christmas Eve. When the ironmaster later realizes that the peddler is not von Stahle, he wants to kick him out of the house or even arrest him. Edla protests, though, and declares that she wants the peddler to stay. She reminds her father of the peddler’s hard, harsh life, where he never knows kindness or companionship, and declares that she would like to offer him a safe and comfortable place for at least one day a year. The peddler is amazed by this, and thinks, “What could the crazy idea be?” He still assumes that this must be some new “trap,” and that Edla is trying to get something out of him.

Over the course of the next day and night, the peddler’s amazement only grows, and he seems to recognize that Edla is simply a kind and compassionate person. She gifts him the suit he is wearing as a Christmas present, and then offers that he would be welcome back at the manor house next Christmas Eve if he should again want a safe and warm place to stay. While the narrative doesn’t describe the peddler’s thoughts at this point, it’s clear that he experiences a fundamental change as a result of Edla’s compassion. This is shown the next day, when the ironmaster and Edla return from church, where they learned that the peddler is actually a thief. Upon getting back to the house and expecting the peddler to have stolen from them as well, they instead find that the peddler has left behind the crofter’s stolen money, a rattrap as a Christmas present, and a letter for Edla. In the letter, he explains how her kindness has helped him to “clear himself” of the rattrap of life, and says that because she was so “nice” to him and treated him like a real captain, he wants to be nice to her in return.

This significant turn exhibits Lagerlöf’s point about the power of human kindness. The peddler always had the latent potential for goodness within him, but because he experienced only hardship and unkindness in life, he thought of the world as an antagonistic place and was antagonistic to others in turn. When he experiences true understanding and compassion from Edla Willmansson, however, he is able to adjust his “rattrap” philosophy and find the goodness within himself, even being kind to Edla by not only giving back the stolen money but also offering a rattrap as a Christmas present. He then goes back to his difficult life of wandering and peddling rattraps, but it’s assumed that the peddler has been fundamentally changed for the better by his experience of Edla’s kindness. While “The Rattrap” doesn’t shy away from the reality that the world can be a harsh and unkind place, it ultimately takes an optimistic view of human nature, and advocates for the power of the virtues of kindness and compassion.



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.

At the story’s beginning, the peddler is cynical and opportunistic, assuming that the world is out to get him and that he can’t trust anyone. He has lived a difficult life, and so has

learned this cynicism through hard experience. The old man who lets him stay the night, however, is exceedingly trusting, welcoming the peddler into his home (whereas the peddler is used to seeing “sour faces” when he asks for shelter) and even showing him where he keeps his savings of thirty kronor. The peddler then steals the money, and feels no remorse for what he’s done—in fact, he feels “pleased with his smartness.” He assumes that the old man was foolish, and never even considers why he might have trusted the peddler, whose company the old man clearly enjoyed.

Edla Willmansson is the second person to offer the peddler her trust. While her father, the ironmaster, welcomes the peddler into his home only because he thinks the peddler is his old regimental comrade, Edla decides to trust him to stay even after learning his true identity. She and her father go to church the next day, where they learn that the peddler recently robbed the old man (who used to be a crofter at Ramsjö Ironworks). This sets up the expectation that the peddler might have robbed them as well—and this is what the cynical ironmaster believes, as he criticizes his daughter for trusting the stranger and letting him into their home.

The story ultimately comes down on Edla’s side, however. The peddler does not steal from the wealthy ironmaster, and even leaves them with the money he stole from the old crofter. Edla’s kindness and trust apparently showed him an alternate way of dealing with people, one that is about more than just taking advantage of each other to get ahead in the “rattrap” of life. This then illustrates Lagerlöf’s moral point: that even though the world can be an unkind place, people should be willing to trust each other (within reason) and not give in wholly to cynicism and opportunism. To be cynical like the peddler at the story’s start is to be alone and unhappy, and to take advantage of others’ trust, acting immorally in the assumption that morality is meaningless. The old man seemed to find genuine pleasure in spending an evening with the peddler, playing cards and talking about his life, and this brief community was only possible because of the old man’s decision to trust the peddler. To be trusting like Edla or the old crofter is to put oneself at risk, but also to truly enjoy the company and friendship of others.



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 Willmansson, 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.

The peddler’s loneliness is largely a result of his poverty and difficult lifestyle. He wanders the roads by himself, peddling his **rattraps**, begging for food and shelter, and sometimes even stealing to survive. Despite all this, he still can barely “keep body and soul together,” and in general leads a “sad and monotonous life,” finding pleasure only in thinking negative thoughts about others and the world in general. This initial portrayal emphasizes the fact that the peddler is driven to loneliness because he has no other option. He cannot build any kind of friendships or community as he must always keep moving, and he is even forced into the *opposite* of community (stealing from others and then fleeing) because of his extreme poverty. An unfair society keeps him poor and isolated, despite the fact that he tries to make a living through work. The story doesn’t offer much specific social critique, but it does suggest that this is a sorry state of affairs. Someone like the peddler should not be forced to live such a sad and lonely life while someone like the wealthy ironmaster enjoys stability and luxury, and the opportunity to enjoy a community of family and friends.

The old crofter is not as desperately poor as the peddler, but he does still lead a meager, lonely existence. It’s stated directly that this is the reason he takes in the peddler so willingly, as he is “happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness.” The old man is able to find some brief companionship with the peddler as they talk, play cards, and smoke together, and it’s clear that this gives him great pleasure. The story doesn’t state the peddler’s reaction to this evening, as he mostly seems focused on the money that the crofter later reveals, but it’s likely that he also enjoys a night of warmth and community, no matter his cynicism, as he too is obviously lonely.

When Edla Willmansson decides that she wants to the peddler to stay with her and her father for Christmas Eve, it is largely because she recognizes the man’s loneliness and wants to give him a brief respite from his isolated existence. In her speech to the ironmaster she emphasizes this fact, saying that the poor peddler is not usually “welcome” anywhere, and “wherever he turns he is chased away.” She knows that people need companionship and pities the peddler for his lonely life. This pity then leads to her many compassionate acts, which in themselves start to build a new kind of companionship between her and the peddler. This is shown in the peddler’s final act of the story, as he leaves a Christmas present—a sign of friendship—for Edla, and even signs his letter to her as “written with friendship.” He has been transformed by her kindness and trust, but also simply by the fact of being around another human being and having positive interactions together.



IDENTITY AND NAMING

While it is primarily focused on the potential for goodness within people and the interactions between them, “The Rattrap” also concerns itself with issues of identity, especially the construction of identity through actions and choices, and the role that names can play in this process. Ultimately, the story suggests that identity is a fluid thing, and people can change or be changed to inhabit different identities based on their choices and the actions of others.

The story itself is told in a somewhat fairy-tale style, without a specific setting or even specific names for most of the characters. Even the protagonist is only referred to as “the rattrap peddler,” “the stranger,” or “the tramp.” Other principle characters are called “the old man” (also referred to as “the crofter”) and “the ironmaster.” This makes these characters seem almost like archetypes rather than specific people, and contributes to the story’s feeling of being a folk tale or myth. The only named characters (other than a brief mention of the master smith at Ramsjö Ironworks) are Edla Willmansson, who is the ironmaster’s daughter, and Captain von Stahle, who never actually appears in the story but is the man the ironmaster mistakes the peddler for, as an old army comrade of his.

It’s notable that Edla and von Stahle are the only two named characters. Edla is something of a hero in “The Rattrap,” if not the protagonist, for she shows the greatest compassion and understanding and helps reveal the core of goodness within the previously cynical, bitter peddler. She takes many specific positive actions in the story, such as persuading the peddler to come to the manor house, declaring her desire to provide him with a safe place to stay, and gifting the peddler with a suit and the offer of returning for Christmas Eve the next year. Actions and decisions like this give her a sense of identity within the story, one reflected by the fact that she is also given a name.

This idea then shows the importance of the peddler’s final letter, which he signs as “Captain von Stahle.” He is not really von Stahle, of course, but it’s suggested that in being transformed by Edla’s kindness and taking his own positive actions of returning the stolen money and leaving **a rattrap** as a Christmas present, the peddler has taken on a new identity and been given a name to go with it. He has been treated like a “real captain” and so wants to act like a captain in turn, even symbolically using the title and name he previously lied about. This doesn’t mean that he now is (or wants to be) an upper-class leader in the army, but rather someone others might treat with dignity and kindness, and who can treat others with dignity and kindness in turn.

The story thus suggests that identity is not necessarily fixed, and one’s situation and choices contribute to the identity a person inhabits at any given time. This then becomes part of

Lagerlöf’s positive message in “The Rattrap”—that people can change, and that means they can change for the better.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RATTRAPS

The central symbol of the story is also that which gives it its name: the rattrap (or rat trap). The peddler manages to survive by, among other things, selling rattraps, which he makes out of wire that he finds or steals. As he trudges along the road, he likes to think of the world as one big rattrap, offering the “bait” of luxury or pleasure to ensnare people. Because he’s had a hard lot in life, he finds this amusing, and he enjoys thinking of other people who have been caught and had their fortunes turn to the worse. When he goes on to steal the money from the crofter and then get lost in the woods, the peddler feels that he too has been caught in the world’s rattrap, having taken the bait of the money and become ensnared. He then feels this way again when he agrees to go to the ironmaster’s house with Edla, thinking that he has let himself be trapped with the stolen money. When the ironmaster realizes that the peddler is not his old comrade Captain von Stahle and threatens to call the sheriff on him, the peddler’s tirade about the world being one big rattrap actually amuses the ironmaster enough that he decides to let him go without consequences. Finally, after being transformed by Edla’s generosity and kindness, the peddler leaves her with the gift of a rattrap and a note saying how her compassion has helped him “get free” from the rattrap of life.

As a complex symbol in the work, the rattrap starts out as a straightforward representation of the peddler’s cynical worldview and harsh life, and ultimately shifts to symbolize the limitations of this ideology in the face of true human kindness and compassion. At first, the rattrap illustrates the world the peddler has always known—cruel, unforgiving, and constantly trying to ensnare someone in one way or another. Because the peddler himself has always been “trapped,” he can only find pleasure in contemplating the ways that others have been trapped as well. It is this cynical, self-interested mindset that leads the peddler to steal the crofter’s money and then distrust Edla’s motives when she invites him to stay for Christmas Eve, even once she recognizes that he is not actually Captain von Stahle. However, after he realizes that her generosity and kindness are pure, he leaves her a rattrap as a Christmas present, with the stolen money inside and a letter declaring that she has helped him escape the “rattrap” of his situation. In this way, the symbol of the rattrap comes to represent human kindness, as it is now a Christmas present from the newly

changed peddler, and the vehicle bearing the money that he is returning to the crofter. At the same time, in its smallness and meanness, the rattrap shows the limitations of the peddler's previous worldview. One *could* see the world as nothing but a rattrap, but there are also kind and loving people like Edla who are not trying to ensnare anyone, and life is a larger experience than just a game of entrapment.

The peddler takes a cynical view of life at the beginning of "The Rattrap," having not yet known the power of true kindness and compassion. It is this "rattrap philosophy" that must be upset by the story's end, as Lagerlöf seeks to show that life is not always cruel, and people can indeed be kind and worthy of trust.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the National Council of Education Research and Training edition of *Flamingo* published in 2014.

The Rattrap Quotes

●● He had naturally been thinking of his rattraps when suddenly he was struck by the idea that the whole world about him [...] was nothing but a big 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.

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.

●● As he walked along with the money in his pocket he felt quite pleased with his smartness. He realized, 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 walked and walked without coming to the end of the wood, and finally he realized 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.

Related Characters: The Peddler / The Stranger

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes near the very start of the story, shows the rattrap peddler laying out his initial philosophy of life. As a homeless wanderer, he has known only unkindness and hardship, and so he thinks of the world as an antagonistic, inherently cruel place—a "big rattrap" that exists only to trick people and ruin them. Because of his own misfortunes, the peddler can only find pleasure in a kind of *schadenfreude*, or savoring the misfortunes of others. This is a decidedly unkind practice, but it is borne of the peddler's isolation and unhappiness.

Related Characters: The Old Man / The Crofter, The Peddler / The Stranger

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The peddler has just stolen the thirty kronor from the crofter, after the old man let the peddler into his home and generously provided him with dinner and a bed. Notably, the peddler initially feels no guilt for what he has done—his cruel act of repaying the old man's kindness and trust by robbing him of his savings—and is even pleased with himself for seizing what was dangled in front of him. This connects to the peddler's initial cynical mindset, where he must be opportunistic and even immoral if he is to survive in the harsh "rattrap" of life. There is no space for kindness or the consideration of others in this philosophy, and the peddler acts accordingly.

When he gets lost in the woods, then, the peddler finds himself on the negative end of this worldview. He has taken the "bait" in stealing the crofter's money, and now he finds himself caught in the trap. This shows the limitations of his rattrap philosophy, as it implies that there is no way to better one's situation or find any sense of community or trust with other people without being ruined in some way.

The peddler thus finds himself at his lowest point here, and so has the potential to become open to the unconditional kindness and generosity he will soon experience from Edla Willmansson.

●● 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 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 rattrops 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 undecieve him all at once.

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

Related Characters: The Ironmaster, The Peddler / The Stranger (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The peddler has wandered into the Ramsjö Ironworks seeking warmth and shelter, and the master smith agreed to let him sleep near the forge, barely sparing the stranger a glance and a nod. Later, the ironmaster of Ramsjö comes by to check on the work at his forge, and he notices the ragged stranger. The ironmaster then examines his face, and mistakes him for his old army comrade, Captain von Stahle. The peddler knows the ironmaster is mistaken but hopes to gain something from this misunderstanding, so he goes along with it.

Though this is a case of mistaken identity, it is also the start of the peddler changing to assume a new identity. He is not Captain von Stahle, but after being treated kindly—as if he were a real captain and upper-class man—he tries to act like a new person too. The ironworks workers saw the peddler as faceless and nameless, but the ironmaster at least gives him a name, even if it is the wrong one.

This passage also shows the peddler continuing to seize opportunities wherever they are offered, even if this means

being dishonest. He is still operating under his “rattrap” philosophy, and so assumes that everyone else is out to get him, and he must do whatever he can to survive. In this case, that means pretending to be someone he is not.

●● 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.

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

Related Characters: Edla Willmansson, The Peddler / The Stranger (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

After the peddler rejects the ironmaster’s offer to come stay at his manor house for Christmas Eve, the ironmaster leaves and then sends his daughter, Edla Willmansson, to try and persuade the peddler instead. When she sees him, Edla recognizes that the peddler is afraid, and discerns that he must have committed some kind of crime and so does not want to join the ironmaster at his home. Here Edla shows herself to be not only compassionate but also perceptive and empathetic, as she recognizes the peddler’s plight but still offers her kindness. Her father’s generosity depends on the peddler being a former upper-class army comrade of his, but Edla is generous simply because the peddler is a fellow human being. It is then this sense of being seen for who he truly is and still being treated gently that persuades the peddler to come with Edla.

“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.”

Related Characters: Edla Wilmansson (speaker), The Ironmaster, The Peddler / The Stranger

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This is a major turn in the story, as the ironmaster recognizes that he was mistaken—the homeless peddler is not actually his old army comrade Captain von Stahle—and tries to kick the peddler out or even have him arrested, but Edla stops her father and declares that she wants the peddler to stay. Here she gives her reasoning for her decision and manages to convince her father, though he grumbles about it.

As her speech illustrates, Edla’s compassion is not naïve, but is rooted in empathy and an understanding of the lonely, harsh life the peddler usually leads. She emphasizes his isolation and constant distrust of everyone, and wants to offer him whatever sense of companionship and safety she can, however briefly. Her father’s generosity was strictly reserved only for his friends and colleagues, but Edla tries to be kind to the peddler simply because he is a fellow human being, and because he is suffering. Notably, this is also tied to the Christmas holiday, which traditionally celebrates virtues like generosity and family, so Edla feels that it’s especially important to avoid being selfish and cruel on Christmas Eve.

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.

Related Characters: Edla Wilmansson, The Ironmaster, The Peddler / The Stranger

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

On the day of Christmas Eve, Edla continues to show great kindness to the peddler, who slowly has his cynical, opportunistic “rattrap” worldview overturned by the experience of true human compassion. The rattrap philosophy assumes that the world is a cruel, antagonistic place, and has no room for kindness that is freely given and expects nothing in return. The peddler is thus amazed, and though the narrative doesn’t portray his thoughts in this moment, it later becomes clear that he is rethinking his life because of Edla’s actions.

Edla and the ironmaster gifting the peddler the suit (which the peddler had previously been dressed in when they still assumed he was Captain von Stahle) also represents him beginning to assume a new identity, one based around the kindness, companionship, and trust he has experienced for the first time through Edla. Of course, he is not really Captain von Stahle, but he is taking on those aspects of his identity that represent dignity and morality—and later he even symbolically takes on von Stahle’s name.

●● “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.

“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.”

Related Characters: The Peddler / The Stranger (speaker), Edla Wilmansson, The Old Man / The Crofter

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This is the text of the letter that the peddler leaves for Edla, along with the crofter’s stolen money and a present of a rattrap. These lines also close the story. The letter shows the true extent to which the peddler has been transformed

by Edla’s understanding and compassion, and how he has found a new sense of identity for himself in the process, having “been raised to captain” by her kindness.

Notably, the peddler doesn’t just return the stolen money, but also leaves as a present the only thing he has to offer: a rattrap. As an upper-class woman, Edla could offer him food, shelter, and fine clothes, but in order to be “nice” in return, the peddler can really only offer this meager gift—yet, it’s suggested, this makes it no less valuable. The peddler has been changed to the degree that he now passes on kindness himself, going above and beyond simply making amends for his earlier crime. He also recognizes the limitations of his earlier “rattrap” view of the world and declares that he has been freed through Edla’s friendship and compassion. He escaped the rattrap of his poverty (and being lost in the woods) only briefly, but he has escaped his cynical, pessimistic mindset more permanently.

Finally, it’s significant that the peddler signs his name as “Captain von Stahle.” He is not pretending to actually be the captain, but feels like he has “been raised to captain” through Edla’s treatment of him. She treated him with dignity and kindness even after she realized he was only a homeless stranger, and this gives him a new sense of pride and a positive identity, as if he were a real captain. He has now known kindness and community, and so has taken on an identity (and with it a symbolic name, in the letter at least) that can offer kindness and community to others.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE RATTRAP

The narrator describes the peddler, a vagabond who wanders the road making and selling **rattraps**. He doesn't make enough money from this to survive, though, so he also has to "resort to both begging and petty thievery to keep body and soul together."

The peddler's life is "sad and monotonous" as he walks the roads, but one day he has an idea that he finds entertaining. He imagines the world as one big **rattrap**, and thinks of all the people being trapped inside, caught by the "baits" of wealth, food, luxury, and pleasure. Because the world has been cruel to him in life, it amuses the peddler to "think ill" of the world in turn, and to think of people he knows who have been "caught."

One evening, the peddler comes to a cottage and decides to ask for shelter. He is greeted by an old man, who welcomes him in and is happy to have someone to talk to. The old man gives the peddler food and tobacco, and they play cards together. The old man says he used to be a crofter at the nearby Ramsjö Ironworks, but that now he makes money selling his "extraordinary" cow's milk. He boasts that last month he received thirty kronor in payment for the milk. The peddler seems incredulous, so the old man shows him the money—he keeps it in a leather pouch hanging in the window frame.

The next morning, both men wake up, say goodbye, and go their separate ways. Half an hour later, however, the rattrap peddler returns to the crofter's cabin. He breaks the window and takes the thirty kronor from the pouch, stuffing it into his pocket.

The story opens by introducing its fairy-tale style, with its protagonist going unnamed and seeming like an archetypal struggling vagabond. This also presents the idea that this society is economically unfair and isolating—though he tries to make a living making and selling things, the peddler is also forced to beg and steal just to survive.



The peddler has had a hard lot in life, and so he thinks of the world at large as antagonistic. Because of this, it gives him pleasure to think negative thoughts about the world, and even about other individual people. Here he is showing his cynical worldview by indulging in schadenfreude, or taking pleasure in other people's misfortune.



A crofter is someone who rents and works a small farm, and kronor is the plural of the monetary unit of Sweden. This passage sets the story's scene as a rural area near to an iron-processing factory. This is also the first example of the peddler, despite his cynical worldview, receiving total generosity without strings attached. The old man even seems to be purposefully tempting the peddler to steal by showing him exactly where he keeps his money (and by keeping it right next to the window in the first place). He is exceptionally open and trusting, whereas the peddler is neither of these things. It's also clear that the old man is lonely, and much of his openness comes from his delight at having companionship for a night.



The peddler is still stuck in his cynical, selfish mindset as a result of his harsh life, and so he takes his advantages where he can get them—even at the expense of others. He has repaid the crofter's generosity by robbing him of his meager savings.



The peddler feels pleased with himself, but knows he now must stay off the road for a while. He goes into the woods, but after a few hours of traveling he finds himself lost. The peddler then thinks back to his notion of the world as a **rattrap**, and realizes that now he himself has been caught. The forest comes to seem like an “impenetrable prison” to him.

It starts to get dark, and as it is late December the forest grows cold and gloomy. The peddler lies down on the ground and despairs, thinking that “his last moment had come”—but then he hears the sound of hammering nearby, and he gets up. The noise comes from the Ramsjö Ironworks, which the narrator says “are now closed down,” but in those days were busy and productive.

At the ironworks, the master smith and his young apprentice are working hard at the forge. Outside, it starts to storm, and the forge and bellows are very loud, so at first the two don’t notice the peddler enter. He goes to stand near the furnace and warm himself, and the workers barely spare him a glance, but they note the **rattraps** hanging on his chest. The peddler asks permission to stay, and the master smith just nods without saying a word.

The Ramsjö Ironworks are owned by a “very prominent” ironmaster, who comes to his forge every day and night to check on how the work is going. That night as he makes his rounds, the ironmaster notices the ragged stranger warming himself by the furnace. The ironmaster is curious, and approaches the man. He pulls off the peddler’s hat and cries out in recognition—the ironmaster thinks the peddler is an old friend, whom he calls “Nils Olof.”

The peddler knows that the ironmaster is mistaken, but thinks that he might be able to get some money out of this misunderstanding, so he goes along with it. He says that “things have gone downhill” for him, and the ironmaster says he never should have resigned from their regiment. He then invites the peddler to have a meal at his manor house.

While he was stuck at the bottom of society, it gave the peddler pleasure to think of others who were more successful being ruined. But now he has seized a chance for greater prosperity and immediately finds himself caught in the “rattrap” as well.



Lagerlöf here introduces the month, setting things up for the introduction of Christmastime as a motif. She also places the story in a vague timeframe, when the iron-processing industry was still booming in western Sweden. Upon becoming lost, the peddler almost immediately despairs and feels like he has learned his lesson—the world is antagonistic, and all who attempt to improve their positions within it will be “trapped” and punished.



The narrative perspective briefly moves to follow the workers at Ramsjö Ironworks, as they witness the peddler’s entrance. The master smith and his apprentice just see him as a nameless tramp, and don’t even spare him a word. It’s clear that this is not the first time a homeless person has sought shelter by the warm furnace—a sign of the isolating poverty in this society.



The ironmaster is the first truly wealthy man introduced into the story. It’s later revealed that “Nils Olof” was a captain and companion of the ironmaster during his days in the army. It’s also notable that this case of mistaken identity is one of the few names given in the story, as an identity for the nameless peddler to grow into.



The peddler is still being cynical and opportunistic, and so goes along with the ironmaster’s mistake in the hopes of earning a few extra coins. The ironmaster extends his generosity, but it’s also suggested that he wouldn’t have invited just any homeless stranger to his manor house—only someone he assumes to be upper-class (if fallen on hard times) like himself.



The peddler thinks that going up to the house with his stolen money would be like “throwing himself voluntarily into the lion’s den,” so he refuses the ironmaster’s offer. The ironmaster insists, saying that only his daughter is at home, and they would love to have company for Christmas Eve. The peddler declines over and over, and finally the ironmaster relents. He leaves, referring to the peddler as “Captain von Stahle” as he goes.

Half an hour later, a carriage arrives at the forge and a woman enters—the ironmaster has sent his daughter to persuade the peddler to come stay with them. The young woman, who is “not at all pretty, but [...] modest and quite shy,” wakes the sleeping stranger and introduces herself as Edla Willmansson.

Edla speaks kindly to the peddler, saying she is sorry that he has fallen on such hard times. She notices that the man is afraid, and thinks “either he has stolen something or else he has escaped from jail.” With this in mind, she assures the man that he “will be allowed to leave just as freely” as he comes. The peddler is won over by the woman’s friendliness, and he agrees to join her and the ironmaster.

Edla offers the peddler a fur coat, which he puts on over his rags, and he gets into the carriage with her. As they ride up to the manor house, however, the peddler starts to regret his decision. He also regrets stealing the crofter’s money, and thinks that he is now “sitting in the **trap** and will never get out of it.”

The next morning, which is Christmas Eve, the ironmaster comes into the dining room and discusses the peddler with his daughter. Edla says that the peddler doesn’t seem like an educated man, but the ironmaster assures her that when he is clean and fed, “the tramp manners will fall away from him with the tramp clothes.” Just then the peddler enters—he has been bathed, given a shave and haircut, and dressed in the ironmaster’s fine clothes. He looks much better, but now the ironmaster realizes that he made a mistake—the stranger is not his old regimental comrade.

It’s implied to be Christmas Eve the next day, as Lagerlöf more explicitly brings the holiday into the plot of the story. The ironmaster is trusting and generous (because he assumes the peddler is a former upper-class man like himself), while the peddler is still suspicious and wants to isolate himself and avoid being “trapped.”



Notably, Edla is only the second character given a full name, after the peddler’s mistaken identity of Captain von Stahle. This introduces her as a unique entity, with her character built up through her specific positive actions.



Edla is shown to be not only kind but also perceptive. Though she seems to suspect that her father was mistaken about the peddler (or recognizes that just because he is a captain doesn’t mean he isn’t also a criminal), she still warmly invites him to their home, and provides him with a way out to soothe his fears. It is this kind of gentle understanding that persuades the peddler.



The peddler was briefly swayed by Edla’s kindness, but he is still firmly entrenched in his mindset of the world as a rattrap, with everything always out to get him. In donning the fur coat, however, he is already assuming the trappings of a new identity.



It is now Christmas Eve, and the idea of the holiday as a time of generosity and goodwill comes fully into play. By being bathed, shaved, and dressed, the peddler has externally assumed the identity of a former captain, but these physical changes also cause the ironmaster to realize he made a mistake (even though it seems that Edla knew this all along). Because the ironmaster no longer sees the peddler as a former captain and upper-class man, he will also no longer be kind to him.



The ironmaster is angry, and the peddler makes no attempt to prolong his charade. He reminds the ironmaster that he begged to be left alone at the forge, and offers to put on his rags and leave, saying “no harm has been done.” The ironmaster says he “was not quite honest,” though, and threatens to call the sheriff. This angers the peddler, who strikes the table with his fist and goes on a rant about how “the world is nothing but a big **rattrap**.” He warns the ironmaster that he too might get “caught in the trap” one day, and so he shouldn’t have the peddler locked up.

This amuses the ironmaster and defuses his anger, but he still tells the peddler to leave immediately. Edla stops him, however, and says that she wants the stranger to stay with them. The ironmaster is incredulous and demands to know why. Edla, who had been thinking of “how homelike and Christmassy she was going to make things for the poor hungry wretch,” explains that the poor peddler walks all year long and has no home of his own, and so she would like him to “enjoy a day of peace” with them—“just one in the whole year.”

The ironmaster grumbles to himself, and Edla continues, saying she doesn’t think it’s right to “chase away a human [...] to whom we have promised Christmas cheer.” The ironmaster is displeased but relents, and Edla leads the peddler to the table to eat. The peddler eats, but keeps looking at Edla, wondering why she interceded on his behalf. He thinks, “What could the crazy idea be?”

The rest of Christmas Eve passes normally, with the stranger sleeping all day and only waking up for meals, and once to see the lighted Christmas tree. At dinner, Edla tells the peddler that it is her father’s intention that he keep the suit he is wearing as a Christmas present. She also tells him that he will be welcome back next Christmas Eve if he once more wants a place to sleep in peace and safety. The peddler has no answer to this, and only stares at Edla in “boundless amazement.”

The next morning, Edla and the ironmaster wake up early and go to the Christmas service at church, leaving the peddler still sleeping. They return at around ten o’clock, and on the way back Edla is upset—at church they learned that one of the ironworks’ old crofters was robbed by a man peddling **rattraps**. The ironmaster chastises Edla for letting a thief into their house, and suggests that they won’t have much silver left when they get back home.

The ironmaster’s generosity depended on the peddler’s supposed status as a former army comrade and fellow member of the upper class. This sudden withdrawal of generosity—and its replacement with suspicion and the threat of arrest—only serves to reinforce the peddler’s idea of the world as a fundamentally antagonistic place, where one must be selfish and opportunistic to survive. At the same time, the bitterness in his speech moves the ironmaster.



This is one of the fundamental turns of the story. The ironmaster’s generosity was reserved only for his friends, and his mercy only for those able to persuade him, but Edla offers her kindness freely, even after knowing that the peddler was dishonest about his identity. Her speech also ties this kind of freely given generosity to the Christmas holiday specifically.



In this passage, the peddler starts to be truly affected by Edla’s kindness. He is still thinking opportunistically, assuming she must be trying to “trap” him in some new way by offering even more generosity, but he has also had his expectations upset in a personal way.



The Christmas holiday is again associated with the story’s themes of kindness and companionship. Edla continues to extend her generosity and understanding, slowly overturning the peddler’s worldview and making him reconsider the world as a cynical, opportunistic rattrap. The gift of the suit also represents the peddler growing into a new identity. He is not Captain von Stahle, but he could still be someone who is treated kindly by others and treats them kindly in return.



This revelation seems to confirm the ironmaster’s more suspicious, selfish mindset and criticize Edla’s freely offered kindness. At the same time, it sets up expectations that the story can soon overturn, if the peddler has indeed changed his ways.



When Edla and the ironmaster return to their house, they learn that the peddler has left, but he didn't take anything with him—in fact, he left something behind as a Christmas present for Edla. Edla opens the badly wrapped package and inside finds a **rattrap**, a letter, and the thirty kronor stolen from the crofter.

The letter is addressed to Edla, written in the peddler's "large, jagged" handwriting. In it, he thanks her for being so kind to him and treating him like a "real captain," and so declares that he wants to be kind to her in return and save her from being "embarrassed at this Christmas season by a thief." For this reason, he is leaving the money to return to the crofter, and also a **rattrap** as a 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." He signs the letter as "Captain von Stahle."

In this final reveal, it's made clear that the peddler has been changed by the experience of Edla's unconditional kindness, and the ironmaster was wrong to assume that just because the peddler stole once, he was immoral at heart.



The peddler's note shows that Edla has helped him recognize the limitations of his rattrap vision of the world. While life can be harsh and unforgiving, the rattrap mentality does not take true kindness into account, and doesn't allow for the latent potential for goodness within all people. Notably, the peddler does more than just return the stolen money—he also tries to be "nice" to Edla in return, and so leaves her the only the thing he has to offer: a Christmas present of a rattrap. This shows the peddler doing more than just making amends for his wrongdoing, but also acting kind and generous in his own way, having had these virtues awakened within himself. Finally, the fact that the peddler describes himself as having been "raised to captain" and actually signs the letter as "Captain von Stahle" means that he has assumed a new identity as another aspect of his transformation. He is not really Captain von Stahle, but he can be someone who conducts himself like a man whom others could be kind to, and who can be kind to others in return. It is this act of kindness that gives him a real identity, as he symbolically joins Edla in the story's short list of named characters.





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