

A Lofoten Dance Evening

Kristaver Myran, captain of a Lofoten fishing crew, has brought his teenaged son Lars along for the season's work. Lofoten's lucrative cod fishery runs from January to April and attracts fishermen from all over Norway's west coast. While in port, captain and crew live together in simple cabins. Kristaver normally enforces tight discipline, but on this night an older sailor, Kaneles, takes young Lars under his wing to expose him to some more "interesting" experiences.

To "confirm girls"! Lars frolicked away together with Kaneles, and in a fierce mood, he swayed his upper body like his older friend, stuck his hands in his pockets and wore his cap askew. But at the same time he felt as he had the first time he had to go overboard and swim – when he threw himself into something dangerous, he saw his girlfriend, sweet little Ellen Koya, in his mind's eye and heard her say, Take care of yourself, for my sake!

“Where are we going?”

“Oh, I know the way!” said Kaneles.

Most of the houses and fishing cabins lay with closed windows, but in the moonlight they saw a little white cabin with lights, and from inside they could hear singing, hymn singing. Lars stopped uncertainly. “Is this the building?”

“Are you crazy?” said Kaneles, “Those are just the Læstadians. That sect is thick on the ground here!”

The fresh air was good for their glowing hot heads. Here outside there was no tobacco smoke, no odour of coffee and brandy. There was the frosty night and the sea, sky, and moon, they stood among all that and stuck out their chests and breathed. But now Kaneles took the lead – there was a house where he was familiar with the kitchen passage and up the stairs to the serving girls, “Come on, boy”.

It was new, exciting, almost dangerous. It was altogether splendid to be along, for a sixteen-year-old boy. If only the young girl Ellen didn't stand some place in his mind and whimper, Take care of yourself, Lars, for my sake!

He did what the other did, hid himself in the shadow along the cabin wall and on to the kitchen door of the telegraph operator's house. There Kaneles was about to do something with the door lock, quietly and carefully. This wasn't the first time, he was used to getting along well with door locks. But they were both startled when the window was opened and a man's voice shouted, “What the devil are you doing in the middle of the black night?”

The two guys blew away around the corner. An hour later they made their way back again, but they were unlucky altogether, for when they got in, the nest was empty. They would have to look for fun somewhere else, and all this time the girls had been out.

And quite right – they heard accordion music from a brewery, and when they opened the door there, it was a full house, a dance, noisy fun, some four or five hundred seamen and some ten or twelve girls.

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The accordion player sat on a beam under the loft, it smelled of fish, tar, codliver oil, faces were red from drink and dancing. Hallo! Kaneles launched right in, he was like a rubber ball, ready to bounce into the air.

But by the door stood a beardless, grayhaired man in a thick coat with sealskin collar, gloves, and walking stick. He was the postmaster, the serious old bachelor, who never smiled, but who was always to be found where there were young people and lively events.

The accordion played one tune after another, and it can happen that girls are sought after -- oh no, this evening they certainly didn't sit around. When one got let loose, a new fist cut in to grab the girl and pull her along, until she was ready to faint, and all the time there were a hundred eyes around that followed along enviously and waited for their turn.

"If you want to get a knife in your body tonight," said Kaneles, "you can just grab onto a skirt!" But just then he himself got hold of a girl who was nose to nose with a sailor. He sneered at the fellow to annoy him more, and swung into the melee with his prize. No, but Kaneles could dance and manage a woman!

"There we have the Langmo guys," he whispered. And now there was a commotion down by the door, everyone stared that way.

Three big guys came stamping in, wearing rubber boots, blue work shirts, and big leather caps on their heads. Two of them were blond with red tufts under their chins, but the third had a blond goatee and gold rings in his ears. Two were blind in one eye. They chewed tobacco, looked merry, and appeared just to wait for an opportunity to step up and say, "Go to hell, here we are!"

"There are the guys from Storstavær," said a Nordland man and involuntarily drew back toward the wall.

"By gosh," said Kaneles, he had let the girl go and came over to Lars. "Now I don't dare leave you alone, boy, for now there will be some fun. Have you seen them?"

"Yes, I know them from home."

"It is the guy from Ranvær they are looking for now. Let's hope there's another exit, so he can get away!"

The three by the door stood with their hands in their pockets, chewed tobacco and spit. Would they dance, or would they pick a fight right away?

Here and there a bottle went around, and the accordionist played on. The young girls were red and excited from being passed from hand to hand and were much in demand. Each new man who got hold of a girl took off as though he had a predator on his heels -- finally a soft waist to put his arm around, a breath of woman up into a face that otherwise was so disheveled from rain and snow, a scent of the girl's hair instead of fish oil, a gentle voice, yes -- just come and take her from me, I have a knife!

"It looks like they've spotted the guy from Ranvær!" said Kaneles

Lars looked at Henrik Langmo, whose eye had been bashed in last year. It was as though that red wound under his eye was trying to see -- as it searched around the room after something or other that it had a little reckoning with. Yes, there it stopped. And the healthy eye lit up, but still the man stood still and sneered.

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The three brothers put their hands deeper in their pockets and pointed toward a redhaired man, who had stuffed himself in against the wall farthest up in the room, where he thought he was well-hidden. One of the Langmo guys lit a pipe, and Henrik took a step forward. Then he took a quick chew on his tobacco wad and slowly took another step. The two others kept back by the door to make sure the man from Ranvær didn't get away.

People pushed away and watched – where a Storstaværing wanted to go, they would make way.

But it looked as though he just wanted to dance. Out in the milling crowd he had got his eye on a girl who he thought a lot of, and when the couple swung past him, he grabbed the fellow's shoulder. "This girl is mine," he said in a friendly way. "What the hell do you dare to do!" shot back the other and reached for him. What? What did this mean? Henrik didn't hit back. It wasn't anything to bother about – now he was dancing. People stared. A Storstaværing took a box on his ears and didn't hit back!

But Henrik took up more and more of the dance floor. He shoved the other couples to the side, his boots were so heavy and he himself was so big and heavy, one and another stopped angrily and hurled insults. But he needed more and more room, threw the dark-haired girl up in the air, made a circle around on the floor with her and swept people away. People tumbled over each other, the men swore and threatened with their fists.

"Throw that bastard out the door!" cried several at once. The floor started to be empty of people, for Henrik needed more room, and now he held the senseless girl under his arm and used her like a broom. He mopped the floor clean, he pushed everyone away to the walls, hey, what a dance, the girl flew high and low, now Henrik began to have fun. Until a Nordlending jumped up and tripped him so he tumbled over forward, tore the girl away, and as soon as he lay on his nose, a whole bunch threw themselves upon him. But he rose up, shook them off, and the girl was free, when the big fists with blue anchor tattoos started to swing in the air. The women shrieked and began to run for the door. The two brothers had stayed out of it as long they could, but now they couldn't control themselves, they spit on their hands and asked what it meant, that people weren't allowed to go around in peace. And in the next moment they were in the midst of the tumult.

Kaneles wasn't someone to let a good fight go to waste, but this time he had responsibility for the son of the captain. The boy was carried away by the craziness, he clenched his fists and swore and screamed and stood ready to jump into the fistfight, but Kaneles must for once act like a father. He got Lars up on an empty barrel and climbed up himself and held the kid by his collar. "Control yourself now," he said, "and keep your head, you idiot. But look there, it's going great! There was that Gerhardt Langmo who made the guy from Bodø take a dive! There – see that guy Henrik -- Holy heck, he bashed the jaw of that fellow from Tromsø. You should take them by the throat like Peter Langmo does – hey, that guy's nose is bleeding – no, it's going great! Go at it, guys!" And Kaneles

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jumped around and was really fired up. If he'd been alone, he would have jumped right into the wedding party.

But no longer was it the three against everyone. It was a Nordlending who screamed and asked what the hell all these Sørlendings were doing up in Lofoten. Wasn't it time to send the whole bunch of them home? It was as though he had set a flame to straw. Now several southern guys came along. Now it was really fun.

An old dispute was hidden in both the Sørlendings and Nordlendings. Now it came out in the open. Lars and Kaneles jumped down right away. They were lost in a storm of arms, fists, and twisted faces, and didn't see each other again until the day after.

Outside it was the same quiet night, but in the neighbourhood people woke up to the spectacle on the waterfront. Lights were lit, half-dressed men stuck their heads out. The screams of women were heard, who came running with wild loose hair. Help – Sørlendings are being murdered!

Passions were inflamed again. The guys who heard that were Southerners. They put on their clothes and boots in a hurry and dashed out bareheaded. In the next instant a dismayed tailor came shouting, Nordlendings are being murdered!

The Northerners heard that – lights were lit in several cabins. There was a flurry of dressing – and they came out running bareheaded and ran into a bunch of Southerners.

What the devil is this – It is those damned Nordlendings. – We are Nordlendings, but we aren't any more damned than you guys! There was loudmouthing by both sides. They heard noise on the waterfront. They saw pairs of men tumbling out with their fingers around each others' throats, one bunch jumped in to help, but hell no to where that was going – the other bunch flew after, and before you knew what was happening, fistfights were full blown over the whole fishing station. More and more joined in.

A bunch of boats set out over the bay to the other fishing stations, where the cabins lay in the moonlight with darkened windows and slept. But the shouting woke them up and disturbed lights showed up in the windows. What is that? Help -- Nordlendings are being murdered! And a new voice -- Help – Sørlendings are being murdered!

Fire, constant fire in the straw. Old grudges lay deep in sentiments. They were the inheritance from families, long back.

Now there was commotion in all the fishing stations. Now boats flew over all the channels, full of men who were still buttoning their work shirts on again. And they sought out the place where the worst disruption was happening. Now the Namdølers and Staværings were friends, the same people, for they were Sørlendings – Nordlendings with their high-pitched dialect only started at Helgeland.

Windows opened in all the houses, and peaceful people came running as though awakened by an earthquake. In Kristaver Myran's cabin several men stood dressed and wanted to go out, but one door had been locked by Kristaver and the other by Per Suzansa, the two leaders didn't want their men mixed up in some

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nonsense. But to Henrik Rabben, Kristaver said, “Go out and find Kaneles and Lars, and if they won’t come on their own, knock them silly and bring them on your back – you are the man for that.”

It went without saying that Henrik Rabben was the man for that. Certainly he was man enough for that and more still. He went out into the bright, cold moonlight and pulled seven good breaths of air into his nose – Ah! That did so much good for the lungs! Then he walked calmly through the little street. Over there in the snowdrifts fellows were dancing around and fighting, and – good God – how Henrik wanted to get into the action and do a real fist-dance too. What didn’t he long to do, of all the things crazy folks do – drink, women, thievery, fistfights, everything possible. It was as though the big nose of his sniffed in everything that people get up to. He was of the same ilk, the same cut, even worse. It just seemed that nothing ever happened when the occasion presented itself.

And here came a group running at full speed, so he had to get out of the road, and they were Nordlendings. It was a whole phalanx, an army in flight, and after them came another bunch, led by a lame man – yes, truly if it wasn’t Jakob, the lame one, by God. He swung an empty bottle and shouted back the whole time to the crowd, “Go to it, boys! Take them, boys! The devil with those Nordlendings!”

And they went past the house, to where the street widened out around the church. There the deep snow lay white in the moonlight, and the crowd stumbled out into it, sank in to their waists. The next group, who wanted to throw themselves on the first, sank down too – it turned into a turmoil, a wild confusion of arms and legs and flying snow. Finally the two armies swirled together, still the one leader, Jakob, stood completely powerless in snow up to his arms and just swung his empty bottle and screamed “Get them, boys! Go to it, boys!”

But there came one fellow with another right on his heels, and that last was Lars, who was completely wild and had a knife in his hand. In the next instant Henrik Rabben slammed his fist into him, and when the boy, out of control with battle fever, lifted the knife, he got his ear boxed with a flat hand, heavier than his father’s, harder than any hand he had ever known. Soon after, Henrik climbed into the cabin with Lars on his back and threw him over to his father. “Here he is,” was all he said. The next thing the boy knew, was that his father’s hands were more gentle, when they hurled him into his bunk.

But Henrik Rabben had to go out again after Kaneles. Yes, who knew if he might get into a real fistfight himself. But a while later he came back with a living burden on his back. The was Kaneles, still fighting emptyhanded, and he sputtered and swore. He was sent head over heels across the floor, and Kristaver dragged him into bed.

Then Henrik Rabben had to go out one more time. The air was so fresh, he sucked it in, and all that commotion was like a wedding for him.

Some frightened souls came creeping out along the house walls, well bundled up, and they stood and stared with horrified faces – they were a lay-preacher, an

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agent, a watch-seller, and a peddler, folks who circled around the fishermen at a distance, like birds of prey.

Finally dawn started to break. It had been a lively night.

The guy from Ranvær had had an eye smashed in and was carried to the hospital.

But when the police looked for the men from Langmo, they had already been aboard their boat for a long time and made heavily out over the sea, before their big white sail.

They had forgotten to leave word about where they were going. They had been on Lofoten, selling salt and buying fish. Now maybe they were going to a herring fjord to load up with bait, and then they would head back to Lofoten again and sell that to the line-fisherman. But no one could say exactly where they were going.

"Put up the topsail!" shouted the helmsman with the blond goatee, Henrik Langmo. The sail flew up into the air, and the heavy boat began to lurch into the gray swell.

The brothers looked at each other and smiled. Free! They'd had a job to do up in the fishing station, and now it was done, and now they were sailing out over the ocean again and were free men.

From Johan Bojer, *Den Siste Viking (Samlede Romaner III)* Chapter XVIII

Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo 1942

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