

Excerpt from Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter: The Bridal Wreath*. Vintage Books, 1987. Translation by Charles Archer & J.S. Scott

Kristin Lavransdatter is a pretty, wilful, 14th-century teenager, the pride and bane of her father Lavrans, who has long ago arranged her marriage to his friend Simon Andressön. Simon is kind, gentle, rich, and slightly clunky – not at all the kind of dashing partner Kristin dreams of. Because she is still too young to marry but is already showing unseemly interest in other young men, Lavrans sends his daughter to Nonneseter, a distant convent where, he assumes, the nuns will carefully mind the girls in their custody. Sad to say, the nuns are not at all vigilant, and the girls are remarkably crafty, so Kristin soon forms a secret, passionate relationship with a handsome knight, Erlend Nikulaussön. On a midsummer evening, the convent girls are given leave to attend a wholesome outdoor dance – another opportunity for a tryst with Erlend!

Three red bonfires were burning upon the green; around them moved the many-coloured chains of dancers. The fiddlers sat aloft on heaped-up chests and scraped their fiddles – they played and sang a different tune in every ring; there were too many folk for *one* dance. It was nearly dark already – northward the wooded ridge stood out coal-black against the yellow-green sky.

Under the loft-balcony folk were sitting drinking. Some men sprang forward, as soon as the six maids from Nonneseter came down the steps. Munan Baardsön flew to meet Ingebjörg and went off with her and Kristin was caught by the wrist – Erlend, she knew his hand already. He pressed her hand in his so that their rings grated on one another and bruised the flesh.

He drew her with him to the outermost bonfire. Many children were dancing there; Kristin gave her other hand to a twelve-year-old lad, and Erlend had a little, half-grown maid on his other side.

No one was singing in the ring just then – they were swaying in and out to the tune of the fiddle as they moved round. Then some one shouted that Sivord the Dane should sing them a new dance. A tall, fair-haired man with huge fists stepped out in front of the chain and struck up his ballad:

"Fair goes the dance at Munkolm
On silver sand..."

The fiddlers didn't know the tune, they thrummed their strings a little and the Dane sang alone – he had a strong, tuneful voice:

"Mind you, Queen of Danemen
That summer fair
They led you out of Sweden
To Denmark here?"...

The fiddles struck in again, and the dancers hummed the new-learned tune and joined in the chorus...

It was far on in the night, and the fires were only heaps of embers growing more and more black. Kristin and Erlend stood hand in hand under the trees by the garden fence. Behind them the noise of the revellers was hushed – a few young lads were

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hopping round the glowing mounds singing softly, but the fiddlers had sought their resting places, and most of the people were gone. One or two wives went around seeking their husbands, who were lying somewhere out of doors, overcome by the beer.

"Where do you think I can have laid my cloak?" whispered Kristin. Erlend put his arm about her waist and drew his mantle around them both...

Some time later, Erlend notwithstanding, Kristin and Simon Andressön are officially betrothed. With Simon's his family, they attend a Christmas feast at the King's palace. To Kristin's consternation, Erlend is there, too.

Erlend was not in the hall where the young folk were feasted, and where they danced when the tables had been taken away; this evening it was Simon with whom Kristin must dance.

Along one of the longer walls stood a fixed table, and there the King's men set ale and mead and wine the whole night long. Once when Simon drew her there and drank to her, she saw Erlend standing near, behind Simon's back. He looked at her, and Kristin's hand shook when she took the beaker from Simon's hand and set it to her lips. ...

Soon after, Simon led her back to the dance. She didn't know how long this dancing lasted – the music seemed as though it would never end, and each moment was long and evil to her with longing and unrest. At last it was over, and Simon drew her to the drinking table again.

A friend came forward to speak to him and led him away a few steps, to a group of young men. And Erlend stood before her.

"I have so much I would like to say to you," he whispered.

She could not see him clearly; it seemed as though there were running water between their two faces. He took a goblet from the table, drank from it and handed it to her. Kristin felt as though it was all too heavy for her, or as though her arm had been cut off at the shoulder; do as she would, she could not lift the cup to her mouth.

... "Is it so, then, that you will drink with your betrothed, but not with me?" asked Erlend softly; but Kristin dropped the goblet from her hand ...