

Original title: "Fløtar-Lars"

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Floater-Lars

In the Northern gap of the valley Rendalen he lived. There, where the Finstad Dune stands snow-speckled and bluish straight North and the Unsett River is going steeping and thundering squeezes between the Fonnaas Mountain and the Unsett Bergs. Alone he lived, in the desolate forest. No one there to care for him, nobody to live with him. Only a black brownish Finnish dog, leached by the wall and a short bear gun over the bed. Steep bergs straight up, and the waterfall straight down.

He started as a shepherd at one of the Unsett community's greatest farms and worked there till he was a grown man. But in those years it happened, the old story that transformed him from the happy youth to the lonesome, modest man. The old story about the childhood's infatuation and the youth's grief. About the poor, touchy boy and the rich, weak girl.

It happened in the cloudberry marshes at the Skjelaa Mound the first time. It was midsummer, and they were going to the priest for confirmation preparation the same fall. The sun burned the mountains with its sunrays; the air shivered from heat, the air bluish, sun filled. Under the birch tree, in the shadow they had put down their buckets of cloudberry. She lay stretched out in the grass, humming; he sat beside her with a birch twig in his hand, chasing away the mosquitoes. He could not help himself touching her hair, cheek or neck with the tiny leaves, making her smile and push the twig off.

"Now I will slap you," he suddenly says, lifting the soft twig. "Yes, slap me, if you want to!" She throws her arms out, tilting her head backwards and calmly lay there with closed eyes.

"Eli!" he whispers, bending over her. He knows nothing of the next moment, but her bare arms firmly around his neck and her soft mouth touching his, in a flash of a moment. Then she stands up, flushing red.

"Great grief!" She whispers, taking the bucket, running away. – As if this brief moment had delayed them way too long.

But that same winter he became a worker on the farm, struggling with moving the timber until the first bare spots of forest floor were appearing.

The following year it happened again.

It was when it was time to bring the hay to the barn. Eli and himself and a couple of girls were shuffling the hay in place at the barn out on the fields. Then it was shouted from the drivers, everyone had to run out and save the hay due to a heavy rain coming from the south of the valley. The other girls had come out to the hay on the ground, laughing and eager. Eli is just about to do the same. Then he grabs her waist, holding her back.

"Oh, Eli!" He whispers, as out of himself. She relieves a heavy breath, smitten, blushing, tilting her head slowly backwards, looking at him. He let her go immediately. But the whole summer he is not like himself. He understands that this cannot be, him, the farm worker, and her, the rich girl.

Next spring he has made his decision. One day in May with a fresh spring breeze and melting snow he stands in the firewood-din chopping wood. Eli comes and goes, carries bundle after bundle, they are baking bread in the firehouse.

Then he tells her.

"It will soon be the last bundle I chop for you now, Eli – in a long time." He forces the axe into the log and leaves it there. The pine log gives a heavy, internally crack, but does not split.

"Last bundle!" She stops with a couple of firewood pieces she has lifted, her blood slowly going up to her face.

He is taking a new grip on the shaft of the axe, breaking through the log. "I am contracted for the timber floating in the river of Unsett," he says without looking up.

"Are you leaving?" her hand slowly droops. One log slides out of her grip - then the other.

He looks at her with compassion and love.

"I must make an effort being my own man – me too." He takes a new log, putting it carefully in place.

She is standing with eyelids shut down, moving the wood chips on the ground with her foot.

"Will you come back?" She asks, with a pale face.

It is quiet.

"No," he finally answers. "Others may come to me, if it should be." He splits the log in one blow.

She is standing like before, pale and staring out in the air. Under her white shirt her chest goes fast, uneven. Then she says, strained and low:

"Wouldn't it be better, you stayed!"

He stops chopping, stretching his back, looking quietly at her.

"Then it would never be different," he says in a serious voice.

"Or it would be rather disastrous," he added in a low voice, almost for himself.

She doesn't look up. Only breathing heavier. "You do best in staying," she says fast and shivering.

Then he grabs her hand, firmly, almost brusque. "I must go; but could it happen you came, Eli?"

She turns her head away. "Will see," she says with a low, hurt voice. Then she bends down, picks up a full bundle of firewood – and leaves.

Three years in a row Floater-Lars worked with a non-stop spirit for Eli. Month after month out in the wild, logging in the freezing cold winter, where his beard froze onto the bedside because of his damp breath, week after week in the ice-cold rivers in spring, wet all through the clothes from morning till night, with no change, no drying, no rest.

Everything for Eli.

But when he, a Sunday evening in the third year came home from the floating in Mistra, he heard about the proclamation of the marriage of Eli Nordistu and the son at the neighbor farm.

He said nothing. He just took his boat hook, backpack and axe, and went away. But the next morning, when Eli was going to the barn to let the cows out, an axe stood in the wall of the barn, way in to the shaft. Eli got white like snow. It was Floater-Lars' broad lumber-axe.

From that day he lived in his lonely cottage on the other bank of the river way up north, nobody to care for him, no one there to live with. Only a brown black, leached angry Finnish dog and a short bear gun over the bed.

But in the floating time in spring he was not recognizable. He was the merriest of all the men. Took the hardest shifts in the most dangerous rivers, was a leading shanty and gave these short, merry answers which got a reputation all over the community, always

in rhymes; because that was his way when he as a little boy got strongly agitated either because of joy or sorrow.

It is the big flood of the year 1858. The spring came with quivering warmth from the sun over every hill, sparkling, blue-white air and a snow melting so untamed as no man could ever remember. The rivers Kverninga and Finnbekken had been taking out massive mountain avalanches with timber and big rocks, now they were foaming white and thunderous as gigantic grinders day and night. And the rivers Uggel-oa and Neka stood there splashing over any crack in the rocks, bridges torn apart, mills lifted and moved randomly into the woods – or they lay half ripped throughout the river shores. But the lowest part of the valley was like a flood wonderland. Over the fields and grounds there was a lake, silent, growing, grey sea of lush foam in the edge of the water, and the grass sprout growing brown-green under water. Farm fences and bushes broke through the water here and there, outhouses stood in the middle of the water, randomly a barn or hay barn came floating slowly along the river-stream, floated into a small bay and stayed there. And timber everywhere, log by log following the riverbed passing by in a hurry, small timber got left on a bend on the riverside, laying heaving between pieces of bark and foam, huge spurs with root and top was sailing heavily and fairy-tale-like passing by. And in the air, the scent of a prospective summer.

The floating team of Unsett had not reached further than Engene. The heat of the coffee lit and fumed back on the river bend, scattered around, on the rocks and big logs they sat and laid around their knapsacks, soaked to the bone, the water running off them. Him Seven-lice-Peer and him Red-Knut, him Lucky-Knut and the Finn-boy. Him Crazy-Simen and him Self-made-Syver, him Blacksmith-Jo and him Sack-Erik, him Untidy-Torberg and him Floater-Lars.

The wind of May gave a cool caress from the North. The thunder from the steep falls below sounded strong and cool, the river went broad and flooding over from the slow part of the Maelstrom, but straight on the other bend the smoke stood blue and warm up from the fireplace at Nordistuben. The owners were there. "Wet is needed, said Long-Jacob, he ate beef jerky in the hay-drier!" Blacksmith-Jo, who says this, throws his log-hook away and settles down. His shoes gurgle as he sits down. "Oh, well, I think you'll dry up within fall" the Finn-boy says, tilting his head, pouring more coffee onto his plate, glaring at Floater-Lars.

But there are no cheering words from Floater-Lars today. Because they have met the man of Nordistu and the petite, light girl of his rowing up the river, and there, where they sit now, they can see Eli go out and in grooming, sometimes pausing at the door, and turning, staring upwards, as if she waited. Each time she turned to the point she could see over there where they were sitting, he and the others.

Floater-Lars felt a heavy weight on his chest. He pulls up his smoking pipe, prepared the strong tobacco, staring out in the air, put the tobacco into the pipe, taking a spark from the fire, firing the tobacco.

"What you say, you Lars?" Says Seven-lice-Peer, smiling, waiting for a reaction. The others laugh.

"The world is harsh – she never goes backwards." Floater-Lars answers, turning around, looking indifferent upwards the river.

Then, suddenly, it is like something strange, far away takes his senses.

"What's that?" He says standing up.

The woodsmen turn their heads too, eager to hear. They too have noticed something. Was it a call?

Yes. It is a call. One man's distant, struggled call. The men on the river bend all rises up. And from Nordistubua Eli comes hurried, staring North in angst, stopping, listening and then goes into a quick run uphill.

Because there he comes, the husband, along the riverside running fast, with the boat hook in his hand, yelling.

It must be something wrong on the river. Maybe the boat! Or maybe little Eli! Yes, there it comes! With root and top a huge spruce floating at high speed, the boat stuck between it's branches and in the front of the boat with her small hands clinching the railings – the child, little Eli girl.

The mother stops, looks, slaps her arms together above the head, gives a scream and falls. The husband is running past her, onto the shore, maybe he can still reach the girl, - then the tree slowly moves out away from them, slowly over to the other side. He wades out as far as he can go, the boat hook splashes hard in the water – it is over. Pale he's standing on the same spot, staring.

But on the other side the floaters stand with lifted hooks, waiting. Now the tree is as close as it can be. The hooks fall, one by one. Too far away! Only one gets a grip, at the top of the tree. It brakes. Now the tree turns again, getting more speed on it's way into the maelstrom.

From the other side sounds a helpless scream, - the pale men look at each other. It's deathly silent.

Then a yell sounds back there, close by, loud, singing:

"Out of the way!"

Involuntarily they all squat down. Something heavy darkens in a huge bow passing by, the gravel splashes under the steel hook, and Floater-Lars stands, with an uncontrollable leap in the middle of the boat, which moans and tilts.

"Down there!" He yells back, pointing to a big rock nearer to the maelstrom.

Then he takes the oars. It's no use in trying to take it loose. Now a fight between the power of the water and the man starts, wildly, till death. With clenched teeth and short, angry pulls Floater-Lars is rowing against the maelstrom. A yellow gush is under the oars, and the heavy spruce looses its speed. Downward it goes, slowly, slowly, and always closer to the rock.

If only the others reach the boat! It is rugged stones and hard to move where they work their way down to the water.

And on the shore Eli stands with her fingers clenched to her head like claws while her husband stands in the stream, pale as before.

No, they're not reaching – that he understands –and this is like rowing into death!

Then he throws away the oars, trembling taking a couple of turns around the nearest branch with the boat chain, taking the boat hook, jumping in one leap to the root, which is now closest to the rock. With all his power he clinches his legs around the root, spits in his hands, and slowly lifts the hook. A half hundred alen below is the steep fall, and now the tree passes the rock. The boat hook is falling, slowly, careful, scratches fumbling for a grip, but doesn't get it, is lifted, hits sounding again – and gets a grip. And once again the fight for life and death begins between the man and the water's powerful forces.

With his face red from the struggle and the knuckles white Floater-Lars is holding firmly. The tree turns slowly, stops and takes a swing under the rock. But the water gushes between the branches, and the boat moves with brute force in the maelstrom.

The spruce turns again and stretches his arms with a heavy moan.

"Oh, no!" He says to himself, as in wrath, and slowly bends them together again. Saliva is foaming around his mouth.

It begins to sing in the ears and flicker in the eyes with a strange coldness. He draws a sob, half cry, half animal sound – the arms are stretched once again. And once again he bends them with the utter exertion together again.

"Oh, no!" He screams with all the power of his voice.

But now they are there also, the men on the shore. A crushing sound against the rocks, then one more, then another one, it flashes white through the air, and the Finn-boys heavy boat hook is whizzing in to the spruce body with a cascade of water. And in the next second on both sides flashes of floater hooks grabbing dry and safely from Blacksmith-Jo and Self-made-Syver, Untidy-Torberg and Seven-lice-Peer, and they stand there, those strong, hardy, quick-witted men with tendon-strong grips on the white shafts, while the spruce top and the boat waved and turned in the foam of the waterfall.

"Now you shall stay!" Lucky-Knut roared.

"Must so now," Floater-Lars answered. He let loose and looked around for the child, pale by the strain.

There she lay, scared, with both hands firmly gripping the railing as before and the face hidden.

He carefully lifts her up, holding her tight and walks unsteadily ashore on the rock.

Blacksmith-Jo tries to take her.

"No!" Floater-Lars says harshly and carries the child on his arm onto safe ground like a dog with a bone. There he puts her down.

"Come on, guys," He shouts.

"Bad for the boat," Seven-lice-Peer says.

"Got what it deserved," Floater-Lars answers. He's walking upwards with the child's hand in his.

In the next moment all hooks are loose, and the waterfall takes the tree. It takes a slow turn falling over the edge of the waterfall. It splashes all up to the boat – you can hear the heavy dunk against the rocks, and next time the spruce-root lifts over the swirl – the boat is gone.

"That was darn close" Finn-boy says and takes a bite of chewing tobacco.

There was no further talk.

When Floater-Lars reached the shore with little Eli, both parents stood there. Sack-Erik, who jumped to the floater-boat intending to do so, did row them over.

When Eli saw the child, she took some steps forward, quickly, but then she stopped and started to cry. Floater-Lars approached her.

"Oh, my precious little girl! Precious girl!" She bursts out, falling to her knees with her chin against the child's hair. But Floater-Lars turns halfway. He has felt, like a flash, Eli's head stroking his when she bent down, felt her ice-cold hand touch his as a thank you, when she bent down.

And the mood from the cloudberry marshes at the Skjelaa Mound has once again struck him, sorely.

Then Eli whispers without looking up:

"This I will never forget as long as I live!"

"Oh, it will pass," Floater-Lars says with failing voice, turns and leaves. But by the floaters the Nordistu-man stands, telling in a low and quietly manner, how it all came to

happen.

Then Lucky-Knut pulled up a bottle of liquor, approached Floater-Lars and gave him a dram.

"You deserve a dram now," He says.

"Thanks, it's a shame," Floater-Lars answers. He takes the glass, empties it and sits down on a rock near the fire. Grabs a burning stick, fires his pipe, like nothing ever happened.

The story of Floater-Lars went around the community, and his half-forgotten youth story with it. Many things was thought and said about what could happen next. But at his house everything was as before. Lonely he lived in the desolate forest. No one to care for him and nobody to live with him. Mountain-avalanche up and the waterfall all the way down.

And when old Mistra finally took him the one year, it was only one mourning, and nobody who held his burial. Because they never found him. But awhile a skinny brown-black Finnish dog ran around between the farms before it too was gone.