

The Trollfjord is a narrow fjord in Lofoten, northern Norway, with a large seasonal cod fishery. In 1890, a steamer closed the opening of the fjord with a net and wanted to charge small-scale fishers a fee to enter. Enlarged, they attacked the steamer and broke through the net. This historic incident led to new regulations for the Lofoten fishery. The use of seines was banned and lift-nets limited to a few areas.



The Battle in the Trollfjord

A ballad written by N.D. in April 1890

You hear from everywhere
that the fisheries are good:
But where there are big fish,
there are small ones as well.
Some have tried to catch the cod
by closing the fjord with a seine;
but there is nothing against that,
neither from the king nor the law.

And in the Trollfjord,
here the other day,
we got a taste of this;
but it ends as it usually does—
you stroke the cat until
you get scratched yourself.

Four ships were on guard
with chains and with ropes,
while half the fiord was covered in ice
and the fishery was drained.
And the price of entry
was to pay for a share.

This the fishers did not like
as catches were so low.
A war was thus declared
and a water hose used.
This was in the morning,
but by noon the steamers had
lowered their flags.

Which side was right
is really hard to tell
because feelings are mixed
on fencing in the cod. But if,
from land and out to the isle of Rost
the ocean was sealed with a net,
then I think our voice
would not bear a friendly tone

for, You know, our industry
here in the north is but fisheries
and if, for the good of all,
it should remain so,
it should certainly be done at sea.

* * *

The Trollfjord

by Cornelius Moe, written in 1939

There is a legend about the devil
being arrested by his great grandmother.
He was expelled from the comfort of home
to a cold place in the high north,
to a hole in the mountains of Lofoten,
to a cavern under stones and scree
where the icewater dripped down his neck
there sat His Highness, and froze.

His lodgings were far from regal.
As can be expected, time stood still
and he found he could do an awful lot
to make his abode less cramped.
At night, he ran and kicked and scratched
so hard that the mountain walls broke
and the mountain split up
out to the Raftsund;
Thus the sea came rolling in.

"So, the house has become agreeable,"
said the devil, as he stuffed his pipe.
"Now we have a comfortable mansion
for trolls and similar rabble."
And the trolls swarmed and crawled
into the midst of their mountain home
and grinned down into
the mirror of the fjord
and gave it its proper name.
A summer day
we stood on deck;
the boat glided easily
into a narrow chink.
We saw just a splinter of the blue sky
as a ribbon between
the mountain peaks,
a vertical wall cutting upwards
like the edge of a knife.

We didn't see much
as we slowly slipped in
through the trollcastle gate,
only a woman who, frightened and scared,
pointed her head to a loose pile of rocks,
and said, "God, if it fell, it would kill us like flies
crushed to atoms. That risk is too gross."
Then we were inside, in the basin of the fiord.
We stood there, spellbound, watching the scene
It must be so, for spirits and the riff-raff.
This is the work of the Devil!
The trollfence around, with peaks and glaciers,
giants frozen, mountain sides drenched,
icicles hanging
icerivers frowning
rockjaws grinning
and black, black cliffs.

Pieces of mountain in chaos
around dancing waterfalls
twisting and bending.

And under the peaks
and around their necks
a collar of glaciers
sparkling icegreen.

Words failed us
at the savagery of the place.
We stood there in a shudder.
What a cubistic panorama of creation!
A devilishly captivating disharmony...
Ugly or beautiful?
Terrifying? Impressive?
Well, at any rate, inspiring it was.

The castle of giants, oh yes, but a memory
of the struggles amongst men reached out to me
as we made our way out of the summer blue bay
and whistled farewell to the highest of mountains,
here, where the devil himself was the landlord,
here ensued the famous battle of the Trollfjord.

I see them so clearly, through to this day:
A fishing fleet, coming by oar or by sail,
arrayed for battle, at the mouth' of the bay,
attacking like Vikings, bound to prevail.
And furious men in their old fishing garbs,
waving their oarsready to fight.
Now we should sock it to them,

the big, the rich and the mean,
and the man in the boat
should then claim his rights

For, at the mouth of the fjord, sprawled across,
was a steamer blocking the path
with purse-seines, winches and modern gear.
It whistled and people aboard began proclaiming,
"Away, this is our fiord.

We have closed the whole opening.
It is filled to the brim with the finest of cod.
No one will enter through this narrow opening.
We've got the power, and we've got the rights."

And there, beside the giants,
a battle was fought on this wintry morning:
skulls mercilessly battered,
amidst the waffles, broken necks.
But fiery it became when the captain
chose as the sharpest of weapons,
steam from his engine.
But the hose was cut,
and after a beastly fight,
the eager victors
flung him overboard.

Then the steamer was boarded
by hundreds of fishers
who slashed its ropes and sunk its nets
and into the Trollfjord they sailed,
fishing in peace until their boats were brimful.
But the steamer left, yearning
for its lost glory.
But what was it searching for?
The Trollfjord should be free—
like all other oceans.

The wind is whistling old stories
of the anguish of poor fishers,
forced to attack men with money,
showing no mercy.

And closing in behind us,
the gate of the Devil
grins at us,
as we are pushed to our places
at the railing.
And the Trollfjord glimmers,
disappearing behind us.

—free translation from the Norwegian by Gunnar Album

