

The Tangled Skein



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TO JEFF
who likes adventure
and tales of adventure

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1. “Norway Once More!”

UNDER THE ROSE-PINK sky of a summer night a small Norwegian freighter rocked steadily ahead through the choppy waves of the North Sea. In the prow a tall, dark-eyed boy stood alone, looking with wonder and delight at the midnight sun which dipped now and then below the horizon, only to bob back up, turning the waters from inky blue to bright rose color.

“Norway once more! Almost there!” he said half aloud.

He thought the few passengers had all gone below and turned in surprise as a girl’s quiet voice behind him echoed, “Norway once more!” Solveig Strand stood there, and as the wind blew her fair hair down across her eyes she shook it back impatiently as if she could not bear to lose one moment of watching. “But what will it be like, Einar? What shall we find?”

“Why, our folks and our friends of course—everyone glad to see us! Plenty of work to do!” returned Einar, not too pleased at this interruption. Solveig had been his neighbor in the old days, and they had played together. But she was only ten when, at the beginning of the war, she was sent to Scotland. And now, five years later, she didn’t seem at all the same. “We’ve had letters, you know,” said Einar. “They’re expecting us. They need us to work with them, to get things back into shape.”

“I haven’t had any letters, Einar,” said Solveig slowly. “I don’t know where any of my people are—what I shall find. Sometimes I almost wonder if I should have stayed in Scotland.”

Einar nodded. Sometimes he too wondered why Solveig had not stayed in Scotland, and he wondered the more now that he found she had had no word from anyone at home. If only she were like Ragna Skalvold, the other girl on the boat who was older than Solveig but laughing and full of fun, it would be pleasant to have her as a companion. But Solveig was quiet. And though a smile sometimes made her thin face very bright, those smiles came all too seldom, Einar thought. Solveig was far more likely to sit for long periods very still, thinking her own thoughts and paying scant attention to what went on about her, even when the talk was hopeful and gay, as it often was, with plans and projects for the life ahead—now that the long-desired V-E day had come and the war in Europe was over at last.

“Maybe you should have stayed,” he returned soberly. “After all, you’ve been in Scotland a long time. It’s almost more like home to you than Norway now. It’s different with me. I’ve been back and forth, helping on the boats. The Carmichaels wanted you to stay, you said, and it’s not too late. You could go back with Captain Jacobson.”

Solveig’s gray eyes grew large as she considered this. She could hear kind Mrs. Carmichael saying: “Remember, this is home for you, Solveig. You can come back here whenever you like, and welcome!”

She glanced up at Einar standing grim-lipped in the prow beside her. What was he thinking, she wondered. She had the greatest admiration for him, for she knew that, though he was only a year or two older than she, he had been a real help in getting men out of Norway and in getting supplies to the people at home. She knew that his family too was scattered—not as much as her own, but in the same way that many Norwegian families were. And their people had been neighbors for generations. They should stand together and help each other now.

Her eyes were anxious and her mouth tense as she considered what lay immediately before them. But her voice was steady as she said: “No. Norway is my home. I want to go there; and there is where I want to stay. I remember Norway as the loveliest place in all the world. I want to help like the rest of you in getting things straightened out and in planning for the future. There will be plenty for everyone to do if all we hear is true.”

They stood silently watching the midnight sun for a short time longer, and then Solveig said good night and went below. All through the journey she had hoped that Einar Utgaard, who had been back and forth many times, could give her some news of her people. But he could not, or would not, tell her anything more than that they were all scattered.

Perhaps Captain Jacobson could tell her something if she could get up her courage to ask him. His home was in their own town of Helsing. But if she meant to do it at all, she must do it soon, for they were planning to dock in the home port within the next day or two.

Solveig knew that Ragna Skalvold was a great favorite of the captain’s. No wonder, for she was exactly what a Norwegian girl

should be—sturdy and blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, with a quick wit and a cheerful remark for everyone. Besides that, those on board knew that, young as she was, Ragna Skalvold had served her country well, helping her father who was engaged in confidential work. Now she was returning to Norway with her mother, while her father stayed in England for a short time longer to complete work in hand.

If only she could persuade Ragna to go with her to the captain, Solveig thought, perhaps she could get some information. She would ask her the first thing in the morning. She must try to find out something if she could.

Ragna, good-natured and kind, was more than willing to go with her. “Why, I would have done that at any time,” she replied in answer to Solveig’s request. “I thought you had talked to him long ago.” She shook her head at the younger girl and said gently: “Solveig, you must learn to put yourself forward a little more. You stay too much in the background. You mustn’t let yourself be pushed around.”

“I—I didn’t like to trouble him,” stammered Solveig, feeling that she had been very cowardly to shrink from this talk with the captain. Fond as she was of Ragna, she could not tell her how she dreaded the news she might hear. If only she could learn that at least one person in her family was safe at home!

And indeed when at last the girls stood on the bridge talking to him, the conversation was quite as bad as she had feared. Had he been in their home town recently, or in a neighboring port? Had he heard anything of her people? The questions came hesitatingly as if she were dreading to ask them and were forcing herself to do it.

But the captain shook his head. It was long since he had touched at their home port. People were scattered, he knew that. Some had been sent to concentration camps, some to work in Germany, some—and they were far from being the best ones sometimes, he said bitterly—held positions of authority in the town or country round.

Solveig stood very still, and her eyes looked bigger than ever as she pondered the captain’s words. It was Ragna who spoke up for her. “Solveig has had no word for a long time,” she explained. “She doesn’t know where her folks are—not one of them. Her father disappeared early in the invasion and her mother soon after.

Her brothers, Roald and Eric, got out of Norway in some of the first boats, but it is long since she has heard from them. And her sister, Elin, who used to be my best friend—we don't know what happened to her or to Grandmother Strand. But we're hoping some of them may have come back."

"Perhaps," said Solveig quietly, and her eyes, bright and keen, seemed to look far ahead, "some of them will be there at the dock waiting to greet us. Or perhaps townsfolk will have some idea where they are, and I can find them."

"The dock—I'm afraid that is gone," said the captain. "There was much bombing of Helsing because the Nazis kept boats in our fjord ready to dart out and attack the convoys."

"Our airmen got those boats finally, didn't they?" asked Ragna.

"They did," replied the captain, "but not before much harm was done to the town. My hope is that a new dock—rough though it may be—is ready." He was looking at Solveig kindly now. No wonder the girl looked so eager and yet so sad. Strand! Surely he had heard some story of a man named Strand! Was it that he had gone over to the Nazis—become a collaborationist? He looked uneasily at Solveig. For her sake he hoped that he was mistaken. He hoped that some of the missing family would have found their way home, that someone would be waiting for her.

It was late afternoon when they sailed up the fjord. As the captain had expected, the old dock was gone. Already the folk of the town had built a rough new one, and it was crowded with people waiting to greet the little vessel. But among them were no kin of Solveig's.

Indeed, though Ragna and her mother and Einar were welcomed with the greatest enthusiasm, the greetings for Solveig were far less cordial. Some spoke to her as if they felt duty bound to do so, since she was all alone. Others barely nodded; and some turned away. Ragna, for her part, was as puzzled as Solveig over this strange behavior, and almost as hurt, for in their years together in Scotland she had become deeply attached to the younger girl.

Einar had been in the town more than once and knew what they would find, but the girls, in spite of the stories they had heard, were not at all prepared for the destruction they saw. Not only had the old dock and the fisheries been destroyed, but of the many substantial homes of the pretty little town only a few were intact.