

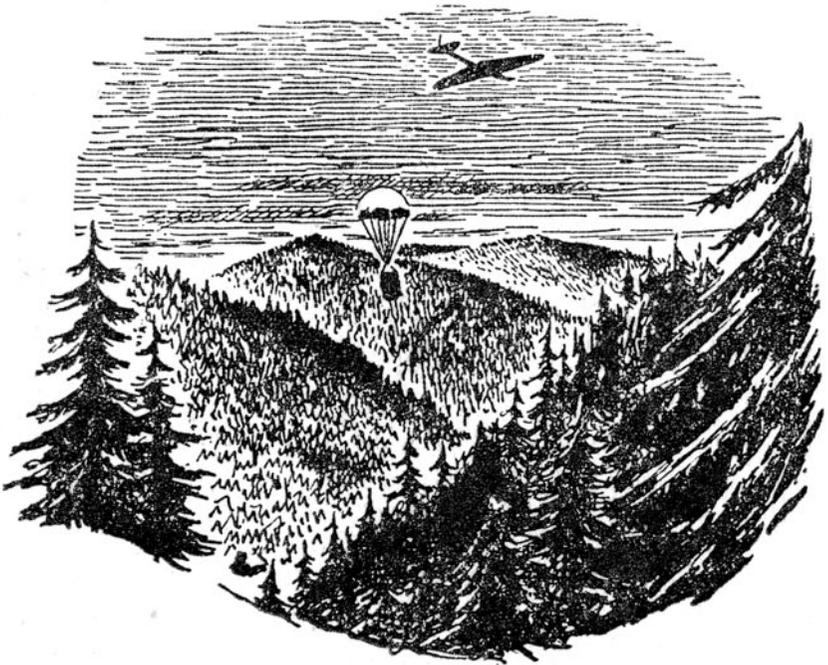
The Tangled Skein

Alta Halverson
Seymour



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The Tangled Skein



Alta Halverson Seymour

illustrated by *Harold Minton*

Purple House Press
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Chapter 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 full of joy, 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 townfolk 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.

Solveig slipped off by herself as soon as she could. Their home place lay a little way down the fjord at the foot of a mountain down which plunged a great waterfall. Perhaps, it was far enough apart from the town so that it had escaped the general devastation. Surely one or two buildings would be standing, and then she could at least find shelter. She thought wistfully of the pretty white house with its blue doors and roof, its great chimney. It had always been one of the best-kept places around, for her father was proud of his home in its beautiful setting.

Her heart was beating fast as she rounded the curve. Then she stood still in the road, her hands clasped tightly together. Only a wreck of the house was left. There were gaping holes in the walls, the front wall indeed almost entirely gone. Windows were shattered, the kitchen wing gone entirely—how much damage she could only imagine. The stable, where their team of little cream-colored fjord ponies had been housed, was only a ruin, and the other buildings—all except the little log house with the sod roof where her grandmother had lived. That was almost unharmed, and Solveig's heart gave a bound of joy. If Grandmother were there, together they could work until everything was right again. She broke into a run and reached the door breathless with eagerness. But the little log house was empty, though an old familiar dress or two still hung in the clothespress and a few dishes were neatly stacked in the cupboard. Her old accordion was there

too—the small one Eric had taught her to play. It had been left.

A feeling of despair and deep loneliness swept over the girl as she sank down on a little bench by the window. What was she to do now? What could she do all alone? Solveig was not much given to crying, but a lump rose in her throat as she looked about the familiar room where she had spent so many pleasant hours, and in spite of herself a big sob forced its way out. She dashed the tears angrily away. “What would Grandmother think of you now?” she scolded herself. “She always said big girls didn’t cry—only babies.”

And then suddenly she remembered a time when she had sat on that same bench long ago, working over a skein of yarn which she had tangled badly. Grandmother had watched her for a moment or two, smiling, and then had said: “See, you find an end somewhere, and carefully follow it through. It will take patience, but presently the skein will be all untangled and you can roll it into a neat ball.”

She sat up resolutely. “Find an end somewhere, and carefully follow it through.” That is exactly what she must do now. At least she had found a place where she could live; and the first thing she must do was to go back to the town and try to join there in helping to forward the work the townspeople were doing. She would start this very minute.

Down near the dock she found Ragna and her mother working in a community kitchen. Everyone was having soup and Ragna handed a large bowlful to Solveig.

Many people who had left home were returning now, coming from all directions—some by boat, some on foot over the mountains, some in light wagons or carts. All were hard at work trying to rebuild their homes, to get the fishing going again, even to start the schools.

As soon as the supper was cleared away, the women went to work arranging cots for those who needed shelter for the night.

"Where are you going to sleep, Solveig?" asked Ragna. "A good part of our house is standing. You are welcome there, you know."

But Solveig shook her head. "Grandmother's house wasn't hurt much. I can sleep there, and you can offer your extra room to someone who needs it," she said. "But I'll be back early in the morning. I want to help all I can."

There was plenty to do; she saw that when she came into the big kitchen the next morning. The cooking and dishwashing occupied many of the girls and women. Some of them were making straw ticks to serve as mattresses; some were piecing together coverlets of bits of woollen materials which had been salvaged. Solveig longed to be in the midst of it, helping as Ragna was. But though Ragna managed to find some things for her to do, no one else seemed to care for her help.

At first she thought this was because they might think her too young and inexperienced. She knew that she was thin and didn't look very strong, but she knew too that she was wiry and could work with the best of them.

"Why is it, Ragna? What's the matter?" Solveig burst

out late the next afternoon, when she had been vainly trying to find a task assigned to her. “Why doesn’t anyone want me to help? I can’t understand it. Help is needed, and I’m a good worker.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Fru Jacobson, laying down her work and looking straight at Solveig. “We want no help from quislings.”

“Quislings!” echoed Solveig, too shocked to take in the full meaning.

“Why Solveig was helping us all she could all the time we were in Scotland!” exclaimed Ragna, almost as shocked as Solveig. “She is no quisling!”

Fru Jacobson looked a little ashamed of her outburst as she heard Ragna’s quick defense of her friend.

But a tall, proud-faced girl named Gertrud Larson exclaimed, biting off her words: “As to that we cannot say. But this we do know. Her grandmother’s house was not much hurt. Why didn’t she stay here, sharing hardships with the rest of us? But no! She goes over the mountain to Baake and lives in comfort with her sister—has lived there a good part of the war—and there are those who have seen Nazi sympathizers, even soldiers, come and go from that house. Then Solveig’s father—word goes out that he is in a concentration camp, and then someone sees him, hale and hearty, down in the south of Norway. As to her brothers—where are they? It’s rumored that Eric has turned tail and fled to Canada. As to Roald, we know for certain that he has been helping the Germans in their oil production. And Fru Strand—where is she? Helping the rest of the family, no doubt. She and Elin disappeared

from this danger spot long ago, you may be sure of that. Can you wonder that the Strands are not welcome here?" All this burst forth in one torrent of words, as if it had been pent up ever since Solveig's arrival.

Solveig rose to her feet and stood there a moment unsteadily, her face so white that Ragna sprang up and put an arm around her. "Even if all this is true," she said fiercely, "it's none of Solveig's fault."

"Very well then," Gertrud's mother spoke up, her eyes hard as she went on with her work, "you may side with quislings if you like, Ragna. As for the rest of us, we will stick by the loyal Norwegians."

"Ragna, don't bother about me," said Solveig in a stifled voice, for she felt that to bring trouble and discredit to the friends who had been so kind to her would be more than she could bear.

She was steady enough now, and thinking fast. There was one thing that she could do, and only one, so far as she could see. Ragna, who knew her well, saw the look on her face that came when she had some difficult decision to make. "Solveig, where are you going? What do you intend to do?" she asked anxiously, for Solveig had turned swiftly to the rough doorway.

"I can't tell you," replied the girl in a low voice, "and please don't try to stop me or come along. You stay here where you are needed, and work. I'll be back, Ragna. You can depend on that."

As she walked out into the late afternoon sunlight, she heard Gertrud say scornfully: "Don't worry. She's safe enough. No one around here will hurt her."

“But she may not stay here, now. I know Solveig!” cried Ragna, restraining herself with difficulty from saying that someone had already hurt her, and very deeply.

“It’s better if she doesn’t,” returned Fru Jacobson bitterly. “As for you, Ragna Skalvold, you can help your Norway best by having as little as possible to do with any of the Strands.”

Solveig was glad that her hurrying feet took her quickly out of hearing. She was anxious now to get away from this longed-for Helsing. She would get a little clothing and be on her way. She planned swiftly as she walked, and if Ragna had known of that plan she could not have forced herself to go on with her work so quietly. Solveig could be trusted; Ragna knew that, and she knew too that there were times when the younger girl wanted to think things out alone. But she had the feeling that perhaps this was a time when she could be of help. She wound up her work as quickly as possible and hurriedly took her way to the old Strand place, hoping to find her friend working out some plan.

But when she reached the little log house of Grandmother Strand, Solveig was nowhere to be seen. Ragna knew it was not like her to leave without a word, and she looked searchingly around. Yes, there on the table was a small note. It said only: “Don’t worry, Ragna. I have a job to do, and I can do it. I’ll come back when it’s done.”

The Tangled Skein

Quislings—Nazi collaborators! Could it really be true that several members of Solveig’s family were quislings—and that her own brother, Roald, had served as a Nazi spy? At the close of WWII, 15-year-old Solveig Strand returns to her beloved Norwegian village after a five-year stay in Scotland and she is greeted, not with open arms, but with harsh words and cold looks.

Now it is up to Solveig to restore her brother’s good name and her family’s honor—picking apart the truth about the past, from the falsehoods and rumors, like a tangled skein of yarn. If she succeeds, her scattered family can finally return—with their heads held high as the patriots she knows in her heart they are.



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