

Our Weekly Serial Story Installment

STRAIT GATE

By RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

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SYNOPSIS

Sarah Lynn Dana, youngest of the Dana women of Danavale, Calif., chafes at the well-ordered life approved by her mother, Adelaide, who is trying to marry her to Duncan Van Doren, Detroit society youth. Great-Granny Dana, covered-wagon pioneer, and community matriarch, recognizes in the girl the restless adventurousness of the "dark Dana," a trait shared by her and Cousin Sally Ann Dana, traveler and author, and pleads with Sally Ann to take the girl abroad. Uncle Lynn, wheelchair invalid, adds his plea to Sally Ann to save Sarah Lynn, as does the girl's young brother, Bill. Another plea comes from Miss Pennington, "Penny," adoring governess of the girl, saying she is unhappy and misunderstood. At a family dinner party, Sally Ann first hears of Keston Dana's ultra-modern wife, Ardine, who runs a roadhouse called the Stewed Prune, and is trying to wrangle a fight with Gunnar Thorwald, Norwegian ace, famous for his refusal to fly women through their mutual friend, Jim Allison. Gunnar Thorwald arrives with Jim Allison, and Sarah Lynn is attracted to him. Duncan invites her to the Stewed Prune, but she refuses to drink anything but ginger ale. Cousin Mary Dana Webster tells Sarah she suspects Ardine and her friends of framing on Gunnar, and Sarah Lynn, in an increasing stupor, decides to warn him. When Gunnar arrives, angry at Jim Allison for missing connections, he hears Sarah Lynn cry, "Go away! Don't come in! Ladybug fly away home," and sees her carried out to the ladies' room, unconscious. Gunnar arrives at the airport. Sarah Lynn, partly out of her stupor, imagines the sensations of flying, with Gunnar at the controls. Gunnar, flying to Los Angeles, senses someone standing behind him. When he realizes it is Sarah Lynn, he shouts, "Keep away from me, drunken fool! Will listen to no explanation, and detours to Fresno. Thrown out at Fresno. Like a sack of mail, Sarah Lynn is greeted by a group headed by a bride and groom, who recognize Gunnar. While the "bride" drives Sarah Lynn to the hotel to await her father, one of the party phones the story to the newspapers, identifying the two fliers, and the "bride" as Kitty Medill, wild stunt flier. Danavale is convinced Sarah Lynn had been drugged. Uncle Lynn promises to get the truth to Gunnar. Sally Ann takes Sarah Lynn abroad, and writes Uncle Lynn of her plan to make an aviatrix out of her. Sarah Lynn receives a cable from home, saying her mother is threatened with pneumonia. Sarah Lynn arrives home. Gunnar comes to ask her pardon and invites her to fly.

CHAPTER VII—Continued

Conrad Jordan observed him with satisfaction. "That lad will never smash up through his own carelessness," he nodded. He amplified it for her—"Most of the crashes occur on the ground."

"I see," Sarah Lynn said quickly. He considered her shrewdly. "I believe you do." They were stepping nearer to the plane and he said above the roar, "You can get aboard now." He took her elbow in a firm hand and helped her into the cabin.

She sat down quickly in the rear seat, fastening the belt about her waist, calmly folding her hands in her lap.

The Hermod taxied sturdily down the field and took off trimly. There were instants when it seemed to hang in the clear air, suspended over the field. She could see Conrad Jordan waving. Presently he lost dignity and importance and became a tiny toy figure in a world of playthings and vanished altogether.

They flew over the Santa Cruz mountains, brown, green, compact as if they had been carved out of wood and painted.

They circled the water and turned inland again, picking up the mountains, Danavale, San Jose, the airport, like dropped stitches.

Sarah Lynn caught her breath. "Quick! Such heavenly quickness!" He nodded. "I have named him for Hermod, the swift one. You know?"

"I know. Hermes—Mercury."

"Yes. We go down, now."

The west was darkening when they swooped to earth with a suave landing and rolled briskly to the hangar.

The old attendant came limping to open the door and help her out. Conrad Jordan was not in sight.

"He said would you come speak to him in the 'phone booth," the man addressed Gunnar, and the Norwegian ace followed him in.

The older flier stood with the receiver in his hand. "Hello, Gun-

nar! Do you mind? I'm waiting for this Glendale connection. Will you run Miss Dana home for me?"

"Please don't trouble," she said quickly. "They will send a car for me." But Gunnar was already stepping toward the roadster and she followed him.

He drove a car as smoothly as a plane. They had ticked off a twilight mile before he spoke. "You have no fear?"

"No."

"That is good."

After a moment she said, "I want to be a flier."

"That is also good."

"Then, you think women should fly?"

"Why not? Women have courage; the skill they may learn. In the ancient history of my country the women fought often beside their men."

"I know." She remembered the governess' books from the library.

"My grandmother," he began again, his voice warmer than she had heard it before, "there could be no more of courage in woman or man." Presently he said, "Your grandmother I also like."

Sarah Lynn kindled. "Oh, Great-

granny's splendid! She ran away from home when she was fifteen

and joined an emigrant train and came across the plains in a covered wagon, and there were Indians and hunger and thirst and—"

They were running into Danavale.

"Oh, not my uncle's house! I want to go home, please. To the left."

It would be over in a moment and there was a thing she must ask.

"I've been wondering. There isn't any fear, I know that, of course, but when you're flying alone, hour after hour, do you ever think about death?"

"Often," he told her readily.

"With great interest. But not with—what is your word?—eagerment?"

She nodded; it seemed an excellent word.

"This house?" The large, commonplace dwelling of Edwin and Adelaide Dana was all golden windows.

"Of death, yes. An adventure," Gunnar Thorwald said, stopping the car. "Life is one adventure; death is another. I wish you the good-evening."

Sarah Lynn stepped out, and instantly, without another word, he was away.

Gunnar Thorwald drove Conrad Jordan's car swiftly back to the airport and found the Hermod put away for the night and his friend waiting for him outside the hangar.

"So," the Norwegian ace said gravely, "you are satisfied? I have asked the pardon; I have taken her to fly. It is finished."

It must have been almost at the same instant that Lynn Dana was typing to his traveling cousin in Geneva. "And so, Sally Ann, my dear, it has begun!"

Sarah Lynn was twenty years old on the fifteenth of June. Her first waking thought was, "Now I'm exactly old enough to begin my flight training!"

For months she had been saying, "I'd like to fly," and "I want to fly," and finally, "I'm going to fly!" but without any deeper delving into the proposition.

Sarah Lynn's place at the breakfast table was festive with flowers and tissue-and-ribboned packages. Her mother made much of birthdays.

Her dark and difficult daughter opened her gifts with grateful warmth and ran to kiss and thank her.

"I'm so glad they make you happy, darling. But you haven't looked at the big box yet," she reminded her archly.

It would be from Duncan Van Doren, of course, from the smartest of San Francisco florists. She lifted away damp layers of glistening green paper and registered authentic appreciation. She touched lilies-of-the-valley and forget-me-nots and tiny pink rosebuds with her brown

finger-tips. "Duncan has perfect taste."

"Ah, yes, hasn't he?" her mother said gratefully. "Will you arrange them now, dear? The low green bowls and the little crystal vases for the lilies?"

"You fix them for me, Mother, please! You do it so much better—and Penny's waiting. I promised to walk with her."

Mrs. Dana was wistfully cheery about it, sure that a brisk walk would do her child good. "But don't stay away too long, darling!" she said with the look which meant her sly, sweet hopes. "Happy plans for the birthday."

Sarah Lynn found the governess and the greyhound waiting for her. They set off together through the increasing loveliness of the day.

"Queer! No presents from Great-granny and Uncle Lynn!"

"Ah, well, the day's not done!"

Miss Pennington wagged her head in its stern, out-dated sailor hat.

"Penny, where shall we go? The high meadow? Remember how I used to tease the ladybugs and make them fly away home and tell

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There were dabs of dull crimson on her cheek-bones and she was laughing in her shrill, cackling giggle.

Her great-granddaughter managed a strangled whisper. "What—what is it?"

"It's your covered wagon, Sairy Lynn!"

"For me? To keep?" Questions going off like a string of small fire-crackers.

"Yours," Lynn Dana answered from the windows of the car.

She ran to him, her mouth working. "Uncle Lynn, Uncle Lynn! Not—belonging to me? To fly?"

"All yours and only yours. Many happy returns from Great-Granny and me. We let Conrad Jordan and Gunnar Thorwald pick it out for us, but we were very firm about having a Gipsy Moth." He grinned at her. "It was the nearest we could get."

Then she saw what he meant. The little ship was painted a clear, sharp, lacquer red with its name in black letters—L A D Y B U G.

The pilot tugged briefly at his cap. "Le Roy's my name. Flew her over for you." He had a deeply scarred face and a bitter mouth, but there was a look of weathered and seasoned youth about him.

"Want to take a hop?"

"Yes! But first I must look!" She walked round and round the plane, several times putting out a hand to touch it. Then she went back to the donors and gave a hand to each and stood staring at them.

"Great-granny, Uncle Lynn—"

she began, trying to assemble an adequate sentence. She shut her eyes and kept the lids tight for a long instant before she opened them again, and the nonagenarian and the man who had sat still in a chair for more than half his life would always remember the drowned glory of them. "Do you mind if I go?" she asked huskily.

"You just up'n put out, Sairy Lynn," the ancient woman told her, shrilly competing with the noise of the motor.

The man said with his good grin, "Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home!"

Then she ran back to the plane, Lightning beside her. "Are you going to teach me?"

The pilot nodded without undue enthusiasm.

"How long will it take?"

She shrugged. "Depends."

She flushed. "Of course. But, I mean, if I try with all my might—if I'm not too dumb—if I study and work—"

"Just for a Private, of course. Private Flying License. That's the quickest. Ten hours instruction, ten hours solo flying; that's the minimum."

"Yes," she said contentedly.

"When is my first lesson?"

"Tomorrow."

"Oh, not today?"

He shook his head. "Physical examination—lots of details to fix up. But I'll hop you over to the field, now, and your folks'll drive over

after you. Ready?" With swift strength he swung her up and into the cockpit and climbed in himself.