

Our Weekly Serial Story Installment

STRAIT GATE

By RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

Copyright D. Appleton—Century Co., Inc.
WNU Service

CHAPTER XVI—Continued

—16—

Ed Dana and his sons came home to dinner and it was a merry meal. Once the door-bell rang and Gim Jung said mysteriously, "Missie Dana, you come!" and Mrs. Dana hurried to the reception-hall, her heart slipping in her breast, to find a high school youth in a soiled sweat-shirt asking for young Bill. He was embarrassed by the warmth of her greeting.

After their always formal coffee in the drawing-room the family separated, the older sons off on their own occasions, the youngest reluctantly to his books, the husband to a directors' meeting at the San Jose Chamber of Commerce, and the mother went upstairs with Duncan and Sarah Lynn.

Duncan read a solid biography aloud in his pleasantly modulated, cultured voice and Sarah Lynn leaned back in her chair, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her eyes half closed. The pretty room was quiet and warmly and softly lit: the canaries' cages were covered with gay chintz and the Persian kittens were asleep in their basket in endearing attitudes. Framed photographs of plump babies looked down from the walls in dewy innocence, and Mrs. Dana began to have a sense of safety, of sanctuary so complete that she started in on her rhythmic breathing again.

Then the door opened without a preliminary knock and Miss Pennington walked in. The harsh color had drained out of her hard, round cheeks and her pale eyes appeared to protrude farther than ever. She stood still in the middle of the room.

"Sarah Lynn," she said abruptly, "Gunnar Thorwald is here."

Sarah Lynn gave a muffled cry, her clenched hands at her mouth.

"Hush, Miss Pennington!" her employer said sharply. "I forbid you to—"

The governess went steadily on. "Sarah Lynn, he has come back for you."

Duncan was on his feet. "Miss Pennington, this makes no difference to Sarah Lynn now!"

"Listen to me, Sarah Lynn! He came back, thinking you were still helpless, that you would never walk again. He came to take you away with him, or to stay with you forever."

"This means less than nothing to you, at this late date, darling," the mother said. "Remember, he went away at the moment when your condition seemed most hopeless."

"Because you turned from him in horror," Miss Pennington said quickly. "You know that you deliberately sent him away."

Sarah Lynn was out of her chair, wide-eyed, shaking. "Yes—because I knew how he despised weakness! Because I didn't want to spoil his life—because I wanted him to be free!"

Duncan stepped close and put a protecting arm about her. "That's all over, Sarah Lynn. Nothing matters now except ourselves, and we're going to be married in three days!"

"Oh Penny!" Sarah Lynn turned to her.

She nodded. "We had to tell him. We told him you were well again, and that you were to marry Mr. Duncan. If you could have seen his look—"

"Hush!" Mrs. Dana said violently, her beautiful face darkly crimson. The gentle walls, so lately a sanctuary, now looked down on a battlefield. "Leave the room! Do you hear me, Miss Pennington?" The first bitter and truculent tones the pretty place had ever heard. "Leave the room and leave my house!"

The governess turned a stricken look to her. "I hear, Mrs. Dana, and I understand." If in that instant she visioned the inconvenient cottage of her brother, the curate, the sharp-tongued sister-in-law, it failed to give her pause. "I will go

at once. But first"—she addressed herself to Sarah Lynn—"I must tell you this. He is going away tonight; he is going away forever."

The blood came into Sarah Lynn's face and into her heart; she could feel the exquisite agony of coming alive again. She heard her own voice vaguely, as if from a distance, saying stupid and futile things to her mother and Duncan Van Doren about being sorry. Then she was running. She ran down

coming down in the parachute. "I want Gunnar."

"At the field, lambie. He's with Conrad Jordan now, and he's flying to Los Angeles tonight. He thinks Conrad's going with him, but he isn't. You are, Sarah Lynn!" Mary Dana Webster was crying. "You are!"

"Yes," she said contentedly. "When will I see him?"

"At the field. But we'll be there first. I told Conrad to give us a

hand, patting her shoulder, wishing her luck. Then there were the good-bys, too hurried to be heard. The women kissed her and Mary Dana Webster wept happily. Sally Ann said, "I'm sailing soon, too, Sarah Lynn. Write me—Paris!"

Sarah Lynn tried to say something to her Uncle Lynn, who had made this hour; who, sitting still in his chair for more than half his lifetime, was the one to give her wings. "Uncle Lynn, Uncle Lynn!"

Vance Le Roy took her elbow in a hard grip and walked her to Jordan's plane, lifting his voice over the din to say this was a great break, to wish her Happy Landings.

They helped her into the cabin and handed in her bag and arranged the robes so she could pull them over her.

She could see nothing, but sounds and smells reached her, and she could imagine the progress of the plan—someone of the conspirators catching Conrad Jordan's eye and drawing him aside, Conrad Jordan making an excuse to Gunnar for not flying south with him, and Gunnar climbing into the ship alone. She could feel the faint jar when he took his seat and she cuddled closer under her stifling covers.

Then they were taxiing down the field—the familiar feel of it, bumping along the earth they were about to spurn—and presently they were rising and rising, turning, circling, climbing, banking, climbing high and higher.

The moment had arrived now, to lift the prisoning robes and look at Gunnar, but she delayed. It had been too much—the suddenness, the lightning transition from the lassitude of patience and submission and tolerance to this blaze of joy. Panic overwhelmed her. She was afraid to look. Gunnar would not be there; it would be Conrad Jordan or Vance Le Roy; she had lived so long with renunciation that happiness seemed an impossible phantom.

But at last she had courage enough to drop the corner of the robe she was holding, and she saw him. Very cautiously and lightly she lifted herself to a seat, her eyes still on him, assured and comforted, and fears fell away forever toward the dark earth far below. She thought of her mother with an uprush of remorseful tenderness, of poor, defeated Duncan, of old Penny, fighting like a lioness for her cub; she remembered her Great-grandmother's flight—"I don't want to go down, Sairy Lynn! I want to keep on going up and up and up!"

Now she would stand and take the brief steps which separated her from her lover; she would put her hand on his shoulder and speak to him, just as she had done all those ages ago on the night of Ardine's prank hatched in the Stewed Prune, but this time he would not scorn her. He would make a place for her beside him and she would be always beside him, and their cold cheeks would touch, and he would turn his head and kiss her; the queer, dark Dana girl, the Ladybug, flying away in the night.

As she had delayed to look at him through terror that he might not be there, so now she dallied with the rapture of the impending moment, her heart hammering, until her gaze which had not left him for an instant began to evaluate the change she saw. It was Gunnar Thorwald, Norwegian ace, who held the stick, but it might well have been another, for the proud carriage of the head was missing, the stern set of the squared shoulders, the hard certainty, the harsh young arrogance were gone. His chin was on his breast, and he sat slumped in his seat, and in every lean line was a hurt so deep, so lonely, so intolerable that there were quick tears of tenderness in her eyes as she rose and went forward to comfort him.

[THE END.]



"I want to keep on going up and up and up."

the hall and down the stairs and out of the house, and someone ran beside her, breathing hard, holding her hand. She knew it must be the old governess but she did not turn her head to look. There were dim shapes in the dark garden, figures converging upon her, figures without faces, familiar voices in unfamiliar words, Lightning, the greyhound leaping and bounding in beautiful joy.

"Come! The car's waiting!" someone said.

"I've packed a bag for you! Hurry!" said another.

There was the drumming of wings in the sky. Sarah Lynn flung her head back until it hung between her shoulder-blades to watch one star detach itself from its fellows and move steadily away.

"Oh, Gunnar, wait for me!" she gave a desolate cry.

"That isn't Gunnar, goose!" Sally Ann said raggedly. "But we'll take you to him! Come along!"

They were hurrying her down the driveway, one on each side of her, another pattering behind.

Miss Pennington's voice said, "Bless you!" and then there were no footsteps following. Sarah Lynn heard her saying, "Oh, Mr. Duncan, I'm so truly sorry, but it's no use, sir! I tell you, it's no use!"

Mary Dana Webster flung words back over her shoulder, kind words but final, breathless with her haste, and there was Duncan's voice, bitter and proud and hurt, and then silence.

"Here we are! Uncle Lynn's car—he's here! Get in, Sarah Lynn!"

Her Uncle Lynn's hand, his arm about her; excited voices, kind, concerned, triumphant; a cloak wrapped round her; a hat pulled down on her head, things of no importance whatever.

"Gunnar?" she said as she had said that day in the meadow after

good margin of time," Lynn Dana told her.

Sarah Lynn said suddenly, "Penny! Didn't Penny come? I didn't say good-by to Penny!"

"Don't you worry about Penny!" her cousin said robustly. "I'll take care of Penny!"

"I'll bring her over to you, by and by, if you like," Sally Ann promised. "And I'll bring Lightning, too."

They were all promising things: they would see her mother, they would see her father, they would talk to Duncan, they would take care of old Penny; there was absolutely nothing for her to worry about.

But the numbness was going out of Sarah Lynn's head and heart, and she knew how silly she was requiring long devotion; behind her was shock and grief and wounded pride, and she was wrung with remorse, but before her was Gunnar, and she had no choice.

"Gunnar?" she said again.

"When—"

"Almost there, Sarah Lynn!"

Then they were at the field, and Vance Le Roy was handing her out of the car, grinning, and the mechanics were crowding up, and Old Pete was gulping and blowing his nose.

"Well, God love you, Ladybug! You're a sight for sore eyes!"

"Where is Gunnar?"

"Not here yet, Miss, nor Mr. Jordan, but the ship's warmed up for 'em. Well, now, will you be stowing away again?"

Sarah Lynn laughed aloud. "Yes! I'll stow away, Pete! Help me!" That was the perfect way. Then she would not have to see him first before them all; their first moment would be their own.

The drama of it caught their fancy. They were all laughing, skurrying about, bringing robes from the car, carrying the bag, shaking her

"Hi! Make it snappy! Here they come!" a mechanic called.

Old Pete said, sniffing loudly, "Well, God love you, Ladybug!"

Sarah Lynn flattened herself and covered her head, and it was a comfort to hide, to be still, after the hubbub of the last hour. She was dizzy and faint and confused with the breathless excitement, the high emotional strain, after long months with blooming houseplants and trilling canaries and purring kittens; with coming to life again.

Ocean's Age Put at Half Billion Years; Experts Cite Saltiness as a Time Gauge

How old is the earth? There are about forty ways of arriving at the answer. For the most part the answers do not agree, observes a writer in the New York Times.

The best method of estimating the earth's age seems to be that of measuring the radioactivity of rocks. They were with us when a solid crust was formed. The rate at which they send forth energy can be determined. With that to guide them, geophysicists have decided that the earth is at least two billion years old.

Before this radioactive method was developed geologists relied in part on the saltiness of the ocean to appraise the earth's age. Salt was washed out of rocks and carried to sea by rivers, ran the argument. Measure the annual increase in saltiness and it is easy enough to find how old the oceans are—a step in discovering the age of the earth.

In this way the geologists decided that the oceans must be about a hundred million years old. The answer was patently wrong, because fossil salt-water fish have been

found which are much older. Forced to revise their estimates, the measurers of the ocean's saltiness raised their figures to 350,000,000 years after making new chemical analyses. But even this was too low.

Drs. A. C. Spencer and K. J. Murata of the United States Geological survey have attacked this problem anew. They find that some salt is removed by the silt that is carried down to the sea and that the salt in the silt is not easily dissolved. Hence saltiness is not a true indication of the ocean's age. Making the proper allowance, they arrive at a new figure for the age of the ocean. It is 500,000,000 to 700,000,000 years. Geophysicists who use the radioactivity of rocks as their clock will regard this revision as still too low.

A Coat of Arms

A coat of arms is a garment of light material worn over the armor in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries, often charged with the heraldic bearings of the wearer. Also—a tabard or surcoat embroidered with armorial bearings."