

STRAIT GATE

By RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I—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 Danas," a trait shared by her and Cousin Sally Ann Dana, traveler and author, and pleads with Sally Ann to take the girl abroad.

CHAPTER II—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. Charmed with Sarah Lynn at their first meeting, she pleads with her to take her to the States.

CHAPTER III—At a family dinner party, Sally Ann first hears of Keaton Dana's ultra-modern wife, Ardine, who runs a roadhouse called the Stewed Prune, and is trying to wangle a flight with Gunnar Thorwald, Norwegian ace, famous for his refusal to fly women, through their mutual friend, Jim Allison. Sally Ann tells Adelaide of her desire to take Sarah Lynn abroad. At the height of Adelaide's displeasure, Gunnar Thorwald arrives with Jim Allison, and Sarah Lynn is instantly attracted to him. Duncan invites her to the Stewed Prune.

CHAPTER IV—Sarah Lynn, loathing the Stewed Prune, refuses to drink anything but ginger ale, which Ardine herself serves. 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.

CHAPTER V—Jim Allison and two friends arrive at the airport and warm up Gunnar's plane, but when Gunnar arrives, he is told Allison is ill. Sarah Lynn, partly out of her stupor, imagines the sensations of flying, with Gunnar at the controls. Gunnar, in a cold rage, senses someone standing behind him. Thinking it Ardine, his rage mounts, and when he realizes it is Sarah Lynn, he shouts, "Keep away from me, drunken fool," will listen to no explanation, and plans to detour to Fresno.

The big and beautiful lobby of the Hotel Californian was dimly lit and drowsy, the exquisite Regency cocktail room was asleep, but the man behind the desk was wide-awake and cordial.

"Why, hello, Miss Medill!" Then he laughed. "Beg pardon! I mean, Mrs. Van Dalton!"

"Old stuff, big boy. Don't you ever read the papers? Sure, I'm another bride. I checked the groom out at the field while I brought you a customer. This is Miss Dana from up north. She was flying to Los' and changed her mind, and she wants to stay till her folks come for her. Make her comfortable, will you?"

"Gladly!" His puzzled gaze went from her bridal finery to Sarah Lynn's blanket. "Will you register, Miss Dana?" A buzzer sounded behind him and he turned to answer the telephone. "Yes, Mr. Pond?—just arrived this minute. Very well, Mr. Pond." He turned back to them. "Miss Dana, your father telephoned. Mr. and Mrs. Pond will be right down. Won't you have a chair?"

"Then everything's jake, and here goes the bride!" She waved aside Sarah Lynn's stammered thanks with a heavily jeweled, well-decorated hand which was slightly grimy. "You tell your Big Swede I don't like his fireman's hat! Tell him all the regulars over here wear boudoir caps." She gave her a comradely hug. "Don't let it get you down, dearie! By!" She spread out her satin train, dropped her eyes with maidenly reserve, folded her hands and went out of the lobby with slow and timid steps, balancing uncertainly on the balls of her feet at every pace, humming tenderly—"Here comes the bride—"

The hotel man and his wife came hurrying down immediately, kind, concerned. Mr. Pond understood perfectly; her father had explained the situation and asked them to make her at home until he arrived; it was a privilege to be of some

slight service to her father's daughter.

Sarah Lynn felt that Mrs. Pond understood even more perfectly. She was equally hospitable, but her shrewd, bright eyes were evaluating the frowsy hair, the bedraggled dress, the blanket. "I'll make you a cup of chocolate, and you must have a good hot tub."

"And a sound sleep," her husband added. "Your father can't make it under four hours, so you must just relax and be comfortable."

Danavale rang and rocked with Sarah Lynn's exploit. Mary Dana Webster went at once to the parents and stated her firm conviction that the child had been drugged, but Ardine slid out of their questionings like quicksilver.

The nonagenarian summoned Sarah Lynn. "Your Great-grammer wants you should come over, quick's ever you can get here," the flat tones of Emma Waters, the maid, stated over the telephone.

The girl set out at once, the greyhound flashing on ahead. Lightning was a solace in the first very vocal days of Danavale's disapproval.

The matriarch was chirping and cackling with excitement and approval. "Well, I declare, Sairy Lynn, if you didn't up'n put out same's I did! Crawled into the flyin' machine and hid just like I did in the covered wagon! Don't surprise me a mite! Proud of you. And I'd admire to meet your beau sometime. You fetch him over to see me, Sarah Lynn."

Her great-granddaughter cringed. "Great-granny, he isn't at all! He despises me. You don't understand. He is furious because—"

"Oh, well, now, don't you fret!" the ancestress comforted her. "Your Great-grammer was kind of like that, first off. Some are. Thought they'd ought of sent me back and was real harsh in his talk, but land—he come round in no time. You'll see!"

Sarah Lynn went upstairs where her Cousin Sally Ann was having tea with her Uncle Lynn. They were the most satisfactory of all her adherents.

"After all, it was a gorgeous adventure," the traveling clanswoman said. "At your age I'd have adored it."

"I did," Sarah Lynn said quickly. "I do. Only—the way it happened—"

Lynn Dana said, "I've just remembered a chap I know rather

well, an airman, Conrad Jordan. He's undoubtedly met this Gunnar lad, or he will, and I intend to see, Sarah Lynn, that he gets the truth."

She flushed hotly. "Oh, that's good of you, Uncle Lynn, but you mustn't bother. It wouldn't make a bit of difference to him. I mean—he has such contempt for—for everybody mixed up with it—"

"When you come abroad with me we'll do a lot of flying, Sarah Lynn," the older woman said. "I like it enormously. The glamour never goes out of it for me."

They were casual, comfortable; Sarah Lynn stayed on and on, listening while they talked to each other. She walked home in the dusk with her greyhound pacing demurely beside her.

She found the old governess reading ardently, with four library books opened about her.

"I'm just refreshing my mind a bit on Norse history and legend, my dear," she greeted her charge, lifting pale, protuberant eyes. "I was rather rusty, so to speak. Quite marvelous people, the Norsemen. The Vikings, voyaging all about Europe, conquering, learning, amazing. Women and children went along to the wars, you know. Valiant, but hard, they were. Listen to this bit"—she lifted a worn volume of history—"The early Norseman had a keen mind, but his heart was as much steel as his sword; he loved battle and stormy seas; he admired the brave, the clever, the strong; for the old and feeble he had no interest, for the suffering no sympathy; the weak he despised."

"Yes," said Sarah Lynn. "I know."

Sarah Lynn liked Europe—Sally Ann's Europe, and Sally Ann's Europe liked Sarah Lynn. She sat in silence for the most part, looking and listening ardently, and presently people began to notice her, clad to type for the first time in her life, and to speak pleasantly to her, and

after a while she was answering with confidence.

One day in Paris Sally Ann hooded her typewriter and said, "Let's fly somewhere, shall we?"

She let Sarah Lynn savor the timetables first—"Imperial Airways"—"Suddeutsche Lufthansa"—She read avidly—"Baggage—Refreshments—Noise—Air-sickness"—enchanted to learn that a four-course lunch would be served on the Silver Wing . . . glamorous name! she pored over the pictures—the Koln cathedral from the air—Regensberg beside the Danube—

"We'll buzz over to Munich and hear some music, first. I need it. Music motivates me," the writer said.

Sarah Lynn reveled in every stage of it, the motor to the field, the brisk and business-like comings and goings of planes. She vibrated to every bump as they taxied down the field and took off with the sudden sense of lifting wings.

"Yes," Sally Ann nodded, watching her understandingly. "I adore this instant always. Elan!"

Germany from the air was an orderly universe; every tree in the toy forests seemed to have been set in with perfect precision; the tidy towns looked as if a careful child had placed its play villages in neat patterns on a great, green rug.

"You liked it?" her cousin wanted to know when they came down. "No reason why you shouldn't do a lot of it over here."

She wrote that night to Lynn Dana:

"I wish you might have seen the flush and shine of her! I think she's found her element. After all, isn't the air the last frontier for the queer, dark Danas of the day? Why don't we make an aviatrix of her? I'm sure Great-granny would finance her."

His answer came in something under four weeks.

"I liked hearing of her first flight, and I like your idea enormously. Great-granny kindled to it at once, but we must be wise as serpents. Cousin Adelaide may have lost a battle, but the war is not over. Young Van Doren is back from Detroit."

"I wrote my flying friend, Conrad Jordan, and he made it his business to meet young Thorwald and tell him the truth about Sarah Lynn's stowaway. He said the lad took it very decently. Jordan's very keen about him. That's a break for Thorwald; Jordan will be a far better guide for him over here than poor Jim Allison."

"You'll want to tell Sarah Lynn that the blot is off the scutcheon. I imagine it still matters."

Sally Ann gave it just enough importance. "Oh, Sarah Lynn—wait a minute! Letter from Lynn, and you'll be glad to know that his aviator friend has told Gunnar Thorwald all about Ardine's low-comedy prank." She was painstakingly fitting purple carbon between her crisp pages and kept her eyes on her work. "Nice to have it cleared up, isn't it?"

"Yes," her young cousin said.

Sarah Lynn went out of doors and looked up at the sky. She would never see Gunnar Thorwald again, but when she came into his mind—not of her own importance, but because she was the symbol of his rage—he would not say, "Keep away from me, drunken fool!" He would say, "Poor thing!" But would he? She remembered every word of the old governess' historical excerpts: "His heart was so much steel as his sword; for the suffering he had no sympathy; the weak he despised." But at least it would be a somewhat different quality of contempt.

Sally Ann took her gaily to Salzburg where a friend was singing in the "Rosenkavalier" and left her there for a blissful week, and told her she might fly back to Paris by herself. Sarah Lynn would always remember that long day's flight as her actual initiation to the air. The through plane was booked solid, and she was elated to have to change three times and to do it alone.

Sarah Lynn talked excitedly to Sally Ann about her long day's thrills all the way into Paris from the airport, but her traveling cousin was quiet and unusually affectionate. She must have been worried! She made her drink a cup of hot broth and drew a steaming tub for her, and when she was in the bath a mood of high happiness came over Sarah Lynn. After her bath she

threw on a yellow robe and when Sally Ann's voice sounded at the door she faced her, glowing, sparkling.

"I'm frightfully sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid you must sail tomorrow. Your mother. There's a cable. They're afraid of pneumonia." Continued next week

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