

STRAIT GATE

By RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

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CHAPTER XIII

Gunnar Thorwald was pacing the corridor when Duncan Van Doren got out of the elevator. Duncan's head was down; he did not see the fier. Gunnar stared incredulously, striding toward him, thrusting out an arm to block his way.

"You have seen her?" There was an emphasis on the first pronoun which made the question at once a demand and a protest.

Duncan looked at him with swimming eyes, nodding, his face convulsed. He manifested no resentment, no conviction that before him stood the cause of the tragedy; only an engulfing flood of sympathy and sorrow. He gulped, groping for his handkerchief—"Horrible—cruel—"

Gunnar pushed past him toward the elevator, but it rose as he reached it, so he turned and went leaping up the stairs. A woman with a big bouquet of garden flowers shrank out of his way.

"Mercy!" she said to her husband. "That fellow looks like a mental case!"

He flung himself through the door in spite of the card in the brass frame which read:

Dana
Drs. Dunn and Bixford
NO VISITORS

but he stood still on the threshold, staring.

Mrs. Dana, standing at the window, her back to him, turned at the sound of his entrance. "Please leave the room!" she said in an angry whisper. "No callers are permitted. My daughter is—"

Gunnar was not listening. There was nothing she could tell him about her daughter. He continued to stand still, looking at her.

"Leave this room instantly! I will ring for an orderly to put you out!" Mrs. Dana cried wildly. "Haven't you done enough? Aren't you satisfied with the suffering, the agony—?" she was bearing down on him in soft fury. "Do you want to kill her?"

But Gunnar had reached the bed. He had leaned over Sarah Lynn, shaking, and said her name.

She was as nearly white as the olive and amber and ivory of her skin could be, and her nose, her brow, her chin, her cheek-bones were as sharp and salient as if they had been chiseled from marble. Her eyes flew open, bigger and darker than ever, sunk in shadowed hollows, and a startled recognition came into them at once and a blazing joy.

"My heart!" Gunnar said hoarsely. "My dearest heart!" He could not have known what he looked like, but he remembered to smile at her. Mrs. Dana came and pulled at his arm but he shook her off and bent lower, still smiling. "My heart—"

Sarah Lynn's eyes widened, the pupils distending, and a strange look of fright and something stranger still came into them. "No!" she cried. "Go away! Please, please go away!"

Mrs. Dana was pressing the button. "Now, do you hear?" she triumphed. "Do you hear?"

Gunnar thought it was delirium. He said gently, "It is Gunnar, my dearest one—to stay with you always!" He bent to kiss her.

But Sarah Lynn, pinioned and helpless, able to move nothing but her eyes, nevertheless, with every fiber of her being repelled him. "No, no! Go away! Never come again—never—come again!"

The press played it up and the radio buzzed with bulletins about Gunnar Thorwald's return flight

across the Atlantic, but no newspapers came into Sarah Lynn's hospital room, and they never tuned in for news flashes—only for music or comedy programs, or an occasional playlet which was known to be pleasant and amusing.

Gunnar's name was not mentioned after the day of his visit. When, at length, he had been compelled to leave the room, he could hear Sarah Lynn's voice, spent but shrill, saying to her mother, "Make him go away! Make him go away!"

He had not waited to hear her mother's answer, hovering over her in an agony of protective tenderness, and he did not know that Sarah Lynn had cried, quietly, ceaselessly, for three days. The tears trickled out of the corners of her eyes and slid down her temples into her hair, and she could not lift her hand to wipe them away.

Her doctors and nurses were disturbed, but they didn't seem able to control it. "This isn't helping any," Miss Burke said.

"It is just the reaction, the great relief, after that distressing and cruel interview the other day," Mrs. Dana insisted. "Darling, you are safe with Mother, and no one is going to bother you again! Mother's right here!" She saw the nurse's cool gray eyes upon her and followed her out into the aggressively clean-smelling corridor. "It is perfectly natural," she said rather combatively. "She regards him as the cause of her misfortune, so of course she shrinks from him."

"You think so?" Miss Burke said levelly. "Well, I can't give all the answers, but that wouldn't be my diagnosis." She went away with her noiseless, heelless tread. She was glad she was going on her vacation; she hated to have cases get her as this one did.

Sarah Lynn persistently asked for the old family doctor from Los Gatos and they were obliged to send for him. He could contribute nothing, they felt sure, but if it was a comfort to the child—

"Suppose you just step out and let us have our visit alone," he said mildly. Then he sat down and patted her hand. "Well, Sarah Lynn, I brought you into the world, as the old saying goes, and I saw you through measles and chicken-pox and the rest of 'em. I'm mighty sorry about this. Was there anything special you wanted to say to me?"

She could not turn her head, but her eyes turned to him. "You tell the truth, always. Am I going to die?"

"No," he said heartily. "I'm not up on all the details of your case, of course, but I had a talk with Dunn. No, there's no doubt about it, Sarah Lynn; you're going to live."

"Must I?"

He cleared his throat. "I guess you must, girl. I guess that's your chore."

Sarah Lynn said after a long pause, "I know doctors can't—kill people. It's only animals that can be—what do they say?—'put out of their misery.' But can't they—just not make people live?"

He shook his grizzled head. "That's their chore, Sarah Lynn, making people live." Then he said briskly. "But it's not going to be like this, you know, always."

Sarah Lynn said, "They used to give me stuff all the time to make me sleep. I wish they still did. If I have to live, I think they might do that for me."

"Pain still bad?"

"Not my back . . . my head, my heart. Will you ask them to give it to me again?"

"No," the old country doctor said. "I won't do that, Sarah Lynn. You wouldn't want me to. I guess it took plenty of grit to go up in your plane, and more than plenty to come down in a parachute. But I believe you have a lot of grit left." He stood up, looking down at her, his eyes very bright. "Yes, you've got to live, Sarah Lynn."

Conrad Jordan was Gunnar's only defender. All Danavale condemned him hotly. The elders considered it a blessing that he had gone—his presence, they understood from her mother, was only a torment to the poor child—but certainly he had acted most shabbily.

"What a heel!" Sarah Lynn's young brother said. "Gosh—what a heel!"

Because of his defection, because he was the alien, the intruder in the clan, Danavale had convinced

itself that Gunnar Thorwald was, indirectly, the reason for Sarah Lynn's tragic accident.

Lynn Dana and Conrad Jordan agreed to cease discussing it. The fier stood loyally by the ace.

"I don't see what else the boy could do, Lynn. She turned from him—she shrank from him—in horror. She begged him to go away forever; she told him repeatedly



She begged him to go away forever.

that she never wanted to see him again."

"But—in her condition—"

"No; she was not under opiates; she was absolutely clear. Upon my word, I don't see how he could have acted otherwise."

Conrad Jordan went back to Tahoe to close his lodge for the winter. The man in the wheeled-chair wrote to his traveling cousin:

"I cannot help feeling that Gunnar acted ignobly. And yet—what could he accomplish by staying? If Sarah Lynn is to be helpless, what, after all, would they have in common? It was, we must in justice remember, a plant of hasty growth; not deeply rooted, I dare say. Flying brought them together. But now—even without her injury, I doubt if he could have fitted himself into our scene; eagles don't make barnyard fowls."

"They are bringing her home from the hospital in a few days. Her mother has turned over her own sitting-room to Sarah Lynn. Duncan Van Doren is a pattern of devotion, they tell me—constantly there, reading aloud, always on the job. Well, perhaps it helps a little; the test comes later, when they know whether she has a chance of more than partial recovery."

The typewriter was silent while he looked up at the pipe-rack above his fireplace, done in painstaking pyrography with unconvincing poppies painted in, and below, in rather wobbly letters, the verse:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The girl who had made that for him, the golden-curved, violet-eyed, mother-of-pearl maiden who had sobbed that she would sit beside his chair all the long days of her life, had not been put to the test. If she had not died—He wondered. It was a fragrant memory.

Mrs. Edwin Dana's upstairs sitting-room had always been a place of cozy cheer, but now it fairly radiated and exuded joyous serenity. People came into the room with rising infections, stepping lightly on the balls of their feet. They sometimes paused outside the door to arrange their smiles.

Miss Pennington sat there with her sewing, and young Bill racketed in on his return from school, and her father and the older brothers came for brisk and breezy chats before or after their dinner.

Her mother and Duncan, one or the other, were always there.

"Did you ever see such devotion?" people asked, almost reverently. "If Cousin Adelaide isn't the very essence of self-sacrificing mother-love! And Duncan, well, if ever a fellow deserved a reward—"

Mary Dana Webster told her husband, "I loathe having to admit it, because I never could see him with a binocular, but Duncan is certainly a wonder about this. Honestly, he is. I never gave him credit for really caring, tremendously; I thought the whole affair had been motivated by the mothers. But he must care, Neddy."

Her husband turned a lathered face. "Probably does, poor kid."

"Of course, I think he's getting a great kick out of his own nobility. No, really—I don't say that cattily. It doesn't detract from his credit. But I do think he dramatizes himself—Gunnar Thorwald, Norwegian ace, heartlessly flying home, deserting his helpless, paralyzed sweetheart; Duncan Van Doren standing by. Well, that's natural enough. And as for Cousin Adelaide, actually, she gets more beautiful by the hour, and I don't believe she was ever happier in her life."

"Oh, come, now," he reached for his shaving lotion. "That's pretty thick, old gal! After all her grief and shock and—"

She stood her ground. "I can understand it. Cousin Adelaide is one of those born-to-commanders, and for the first time Sarah Lynn is obeying. Even as a baby, she wriggled away, and was a contrary child, and she wouldn't make a proper debut, and she wouldn't be engaged to Duncan Van Doren. And then she would fly, and she would marry a strange foreign fier. Now her mother's got her, utterly. She's just as much in a cage as those jittery canaries. She broods over her and feeds her like a baby bird in a nest."

To her husband's bewilderment she burst into angry tears.

(Continued next week)

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It is authoritatively stated that the price of an average movie ticket in the United States includes 41 Federal taxes.

NORTH CAROLINA, WAKE COUNTY,

IN THE SUPERIOR COURT

Thelma L. Brauer, Plaintiff vs.

A. H. Brauer, Defendant.

NOTICE SERVING SUMMONS BY PUBLICATION

The defendant A. H. Brauer will take notice that an action entitled as above has been commenced in the Superior Court of Wake County, N. C. to obtain an absolute divorce and the said defendant will further take notice that he is required to appear in the office of the Clerk of Superior Court of said county in the courthouse in Raleigh, N. C. within thirty days after 4th day of March, 1939 and answer or demur to the complaint in said action, or the plaintiff will apply to the court for the relief demanded in said complaint.

This 6th day of Feb., 1939.

W. H. SAWYER,

Clerk of Superior Court,
Wake County,
North Carolina

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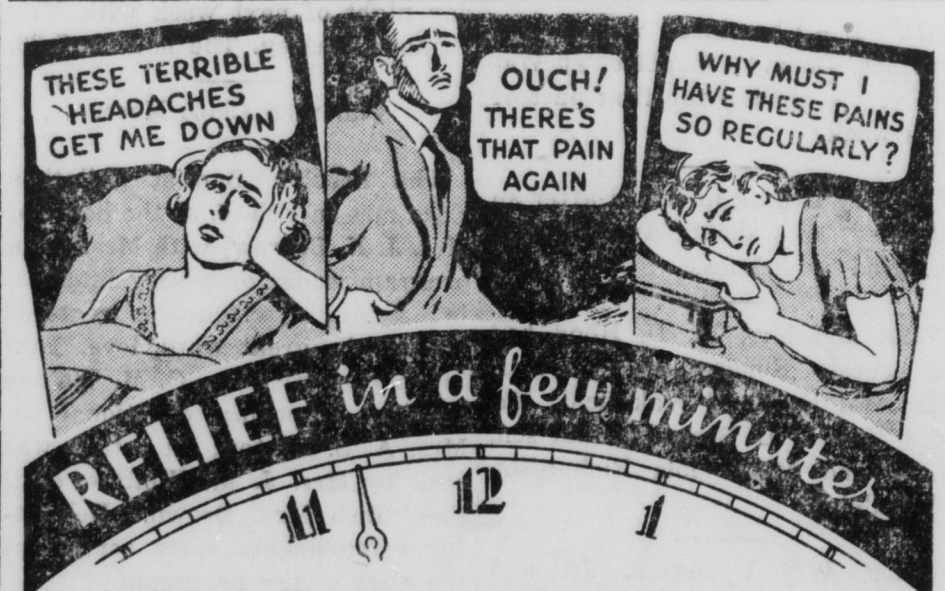
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