

Up in the Clouds

by Billie Earle

THIRD INSTALMENT

Monty Wallace has just arrived in California, having broken the East-West cross country airplane record. Natalie Wade, mistaken for him by a newspaper reporter, writes the exclusive account of Monty's arrival, and succeeds in securing a trial job with a paper in exchange for the story. Natalie becomes attached to Monty.

Altho she discovers Monty's love for her is not sincere, Natalie admits that she loves him. She is assigned by her paper to report Monty's activities for publication. Jimmy Hale, the newspaper's photographer, becomes Natalie's co-worker.

Mont cracked his palm across that pink and white cheek. The noise of it made a little echo from somewhere and when the others had rushed onto the balcony there was deep silence while Sunny slipped limply into Mont's arms and Jimmy Hale came quickly to stand beside Natalie.

"Cripes Nat," the photographer said in an awed voice, "that kid is wild. A few drinks and she's half nuts. We better get her out of here."

"Now, Jimmy," Natalie said slowly, "she was just hysterical—that's all. She sure came out of it when Monty hit her."

"Yes, and what a mistake that was. She'll never leave him alone now. He's given her the biggest thrill she's had since she was a little punk in rompers. She'll throw herself at his feet from now on."



"Mont," she almost whispered, "will you do something for me?"

Natalie laughed.

She tried to take Sunny's arms as she began to lead her back into the house but Sunny shook her off.

"You better keep away from her," Jimmy advised. "You only stir her up. Come on out here with me."

She turned back with him to the balcony and stood with him looking across the parapet. Her mind now was a tumult at thought of the tragedy so narrowly averted. The chasm was a great bowl of darkness. It seemed impossible that death lay surely there only a hand's breadth away from the security of the place where she stood.

That the bright-haired girl had been a witness of the sentimental passage between herself and Monty Wallace there could be no doubt. It must have been this that had set her to the temporary madness of that climb to the parapet.

How much of that act had been true emotion and how much the prompting of her mild intoxication, Natalie could not say, but she knew there must be some instinct of desperation in what Sunny had come near doing. It was not likely, she finally decided, that Sunny actually contemplated throwing herself from the balcony. More probably she intended to merely frighten the two.

She said as much to Jimmy.

"The blonde is dizzy," he rasped out in his husky voice. "I suppose you were kissing that bird of prey. Or he was kissing you, which amounted to the same thing. She's nuts anyway and a little liquor makes her more so. She took one look and shrieked. Then she had to start her dive to cover up. Anything to get his mind off you, probably."

Natalie sighed. "It was a close thing. I'm scared yet."

"And no wonder. But the trouble is she'll throw her arms around his neck and make him talk up. If I

know that wren, she's likely to put out her diving clothes now every time he takes a look at you. Are you still knee-deep about that guy?"

"Well, not at least to the point of wanting to throw myself off anything higher than a chair."

"You wouldn't be. But I'm afraid you'll crack up some other way. Will you promise me something?"

"What please, Jimmy?"

He took his eyes away from that chasm of death and darkness. With one hand he gripped her wrist until it hurt.

His gray eyes were searching her face. What she saw there surprised her.

"What—what do you mean, Jimmy?"

"Nothing kid," he said quickly, "except that I'm on the spot too. I'd just about jump over there—sober—if I thought it would do you any good."

"Jimmy!" the girl cried.

"Now, Nat. Don't get excited. It isn't your fault. And I'm not drunk—It's really better with me when I am. I can laugh at myself easier then."

"Don't laugh, Jimmy," the girl cried. "It isn't any laughing business. Believe me, I know."

"I thought that was about it," the boy said softly. "Oh, well."

"Jimmy!" the girl cried again.

"Don't say a word Nat. Forget about it. But if you ever get to the point where you want to do any high jumping, promise me you'll come and—let me jump with you."

"That's a bet, Jimmy. She thrust out her other hand. "We'll do our high jumping together, when we do."

"I'm afraid you're right, Jimmy"

out of instinctive liking for the girl reporter as because of her recurrent suspicions.

Jimmy went on as Natalie's guide and mentor with little to say about the secret he had divulged that night. Indeed, Natalie might have taken it as a bit of unsober pretense if it had not been for his remarks of the next morning.

"Sorry I got lit up last night, Nat," he told her. "I'd never have coughed what I did if I hadn't had a couple too many. It's all true but I didn't intend to have you know about it. You've probably got enough on your hands already."

She reminded him of their pact and declared that it helped to know he was back of her. After that they went on as before.

The other great difference in the relations of the four developed between Mont and Sunny. They were together almost constantly, it seemed. Mont was much engaged at the airport and Sunny was inevitably at hand in the bright car in which she made such a perfect picture.

Much as she tried, Natalie could not entirely conquer her jealousy of Sunny and tried to make amends for it by thoughtfulness and kindness toward the girl when they were together.

She was presently convinced by the things that Sunny dropped in her conversation and by Mont's attitude on occasion that there was a understanding between the flyer and his employer's daughter.

Not until then did Natalie determine finally that she must see less of Mont Wallace. Feeling about him as she did, it was exhausting to sit beside him knowing that barriers between them held them apart. To these there was now added the fact that Sunny Marion claimed him for her own in sly ways that could not be challenged.

It did not ease the torture of his presence to find that he still battled occasionally against her philosophy of love and that his defenses seemed always in some indefinable way to be weakened afterward.

She determined to avoid self-torture by seeing him less often and had managed without seeming to do so to evade his presence several times.

One afternoon, however, there came a challenge to her professional instincts that ran counter to this determination. Two fliers were reported missing somewhere in Lower California. They had been gone for 24 hours and it seemed certain that they had cracked up in some inaccessible section of the peninsula.

Scout planes from their home airport were already winging south on the hunt for them. It occurred to Natalie that the one man with the instinct and luck to find them was Mont Wallace. He was already testing a fast plane for a new attempt against his own record. A word from her, she was sure, and he would join the hunt with herself as his passenger.

She was out on an assignment with Jimmy when the idea occurred to her. She stifled the impulse to tell him about it, being certain that he would put up a fight.

"Listen, please, Jimmy," she cried "Drive out to the airport and see if we can pick up any news of the two lost pilots."

"That's a hunch," the boy commented and turned his car toward the port.

They went first to the hangar office to inquire about the fate of the men but nothing could be learned. Then they crossed the field to the big MAC hangar of the Marion Aircraft Corporation.

Mont was swathed in coveralls and elbow-deep in work on the new plane. Natalie knew an instant of alarm lest the ship be out of commission. She greeted him and waved at Sunny who sat nearby.

While Jimmy stopped to talk with the two, she slipped into the small office and telephoned the Express. Mack Hanlon answered the phone.

"Listen, Mack," she said. "This is Nat. I'm out at the airport. Don't say anything to anybody till I'm gone, but I'm going to see if I can get Mont Wallace to take me on the hunt for Conrad and Sturm."

"We already tried the company," he told her. "They said they could do nothing right now. Two of their pilots are working out of San Diego trying to find them. The outfit figures that's enough."

"Well, I'm going to try. And if you don't hear from me, that's where I've gone."

She hung up the phone and went

out to talk with Mont.

"How's the ship? Got it all apart?" Her first queries went to the important point.

"Just got it back together, nat," Mont replied. "I could hop off this minute for Mexico City and come close to making it."

"Come here a minute," she told him. "I want to show you something."

Beckoning, she led him into the small office and closed the door.

"Mont," she almost whispered, "will you do something for me?"

"Most anything," he laughed.

"Well, listen. I want to find those two boys that are down the other side of the border. It will put me on top of the heap in the newspaper business if I can pick them up. I'm going to grab some sandwiches and pop or something. You get set and we'll slip out of here in a couple of minutes."

He stared at her for an instant and then he grabbed her by both arms.

"It's a bet, kid. Make it snappy. I'm ready whenever you are."

"Don't tell them out there, Jimmy and Sunny will put up a terrible holler. Just tell them you're going to take me for a little hop."

She seized the phone again and ordered a great carton of food and a case of soft drinks. If she found the lost pilots, something to drink would probably be their greatest need, and the fountain liquids were handy.

She did manage to get a thermos jug of water from the field office and she sent all this to be loaded into the cabin plane which Mont was now using.

They got off with no one the wiser. Sunny and Jimmy Hale paid no attention to the boys who put the sandwiches and drinks aboard. Mont did a neat bit of pretending when he badgered Natalie to ride with him.

With apparent reluctance, she went aboard, sitting close beside him in the narrow forward cabin of the plane.

The rear seat space had been used for auxiliary fuel supply so that there was no great comfort for two persons in the craft but it did not matter on so short a flight.

Natalie had never been aloft before, but she gave the matter little thought. Mont Wallace, she knew, was an expert pilot. That was sufficient for her. During the takeoff she was watching as best she could to see whether Jimmy Hale suspected her purpose and at the last instant was sure he did.

Reverberations of the motor made conversation difficult even in the little cabin, and Natalie was content to be quiet. She had time now to note that they were rising slowly as Mont set his course for the peninsula across the border.

She had a strange feeling that they two were in a small planet of their own, winging thru space; that they were the only inhabitants and that nothing mattered but themselves. There was a thrill in the thought. A world with Mont Wallace was world enough for her.

She settled herself beside him and he smiled across at her but said nothing.

Hour after hour they winged over the brown California countryside. It was a glorious, golden afternoon. The roar of the motor lulled the girl into deeper contentment. She gave herself up to the ecstasy of each moment and was sure that success must somehow be theirs on this sudden journey.

When she moved a little, hunting for a more comfortable position after an hour or two, she shifted so that his arm went about her and he drew her toward him. It seemed the natural thing in their flying little world and she let herself lean pleasantly against his shoulder.

It was some hours before they began their search in earnest.

"Keep an eye out on your side," Mont shouted at her. "If you see anything, signal and I'll circle. Watch for smoke in unusual places or for any sign of a wrecked plane."

She nodded but when she found that there were mountains and sandy wastes alternately below, she suddenly realized how futile was their quest, for almost any of the dark valleys might hide the two men and their small plane.

"I'm afraid it's no use," she cried once and he cut the motor to reply.

"There's a chance," he said. "I've got into trouble down here once and I'm headed for the same place. There are down currents in some of these valleys that you don't expect. We may not be able to do much tonight, but in the morning there's a possibility."

The girl had known that they must spend the night somewhere on the peninsula, but she had given it little thought. Her reputation might suffer but it was a matter of life and death for the two pilots and she could not think of herself in their extremity.

It was true, of course, that there had been no need for her to make

the trip but it was a chance to help the lost pilots and do a good job for the paper as well. She offered a little prayer for their success and scanned the distant earth more eagerly than before.

But there was still no sign of the men and the impression grew on her that only sheer luck could bring them to the rescue in time to be of any service.

Once they passed another plane and veered toward it till they discovered that it was another searcher. For an hour or more, however, they had been beyond the territory of the rest of the hunt and Mont still flew with that serene confidence that gave her hope.

When the shadows below grew so long as to be grotesque, and they knew that the quick night would presently close them in, Wallace headed the plane for the open country and just as the sun sank over the horizon he set it down in a careful landing as near as he could to a patch of low woods that indicated the presence of water.

They had not for some time seen one of the small coast villages or any other human habitation.

When they had climbed out and stretched cramped limbs, Mont's first thought was for the safety of his own plane and from a tool compartment he took iron stakes and rope with which he fastened it securely.

"Let the wind blow now," he said when he had finished. "The ship will be here in the morning and that's the main thing."

Natalie set out what food they needed and they ate sparingly.

"It's going to be a little cold tonight," Mont said. "I think we'd better have a little fire to warm us up before we turn in."

He gathered some sticks from the nearby underbrush and built a generous fire in the shelter of a dune at some distance from the plane.

"You may have to sleep in the plane to keep warm," he told her, "but it will be better here if we can keep you comfortable."

He scooped out a little hollow and heaped a sandy pillow for her head in the most sheltered spot and kept the fire going until Natalie dozed in the grateful warmth.

"I wish we'd thought to bring some blankets," he said presently. "We may need them before morning. The nights get pretty cool sometimes."

The girl slept then while he sat beside her to reassure her. When she waked, the fire had burned low and she moved to draw her light coat more closely about her. Then she reached out her hand to touch him and found that he had gone.

For an instant she knew terror. She swept the circle of the fire's dim light with her eyes for sight of him but he was nowhere to be found.

Natalie sat up shivering.

She glanced toward where the plane had been and caught the outline of its dark wings against the sky. She tried to assure herself that everything was all right. But she knew that without Mont she faced death.

It was a strange fact, but somehow it wasn't new. Somewhere in her consciousness that feeling had existed before. She wondered about that and then she knew why it seemed so. Subconsciously her whole life was anchored to this man. Her love made him necessary to her everywhere as he was to her here on the bald desert.

She must hold him somehow. She must find him here in the dark and grapple him to herself with every bond she could discover.

But just then a sudden crash in the darkness sent her screaming to her feet. Something alive was there in the shadow of the line of brush, something that moved thru the dark. And then she knew what it was. Monty's voice hailed her in answer to her cry.

"Here I am," he called. "I was getting some more wood for the fire. Are you all right?"

Instantly her terror died. The world righted itself. Yes, she told him, everything was all right—she had been alarmed to find him gone and then that crashing had startled a scream out of her.

"It was a small dead tree," he laughed. "I swung my weight on it to bring it down and it came with a crack. There'll be all the wood we need."

He appeared now dragging the tree with him. When he drew near he saw her teeth were chattering and without a word he took her into his arms.

"Be quiet now," he told her. "You're mostly scared. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd wake while I was gone. You seemed to be sleeping soundly."

When he had reassured her, he tossed wood on the fire till it blazed high. Then he made her sit beside him and held her close once more till she was warm.

"You won't go away again," she said presently. "Stay where I can touch you."

He told her he would.

"I'm afraid you've not been sleeping any sleep," she said a little later. "You lie down there in a place you made for me. I'll be against you for warmth and watch the fire."

When he had slept a little, she moved to thrust the log farther into the coals. "But he waked quickly and took the task from her hands."

"This is no good," she said. "We will be sleepy when you're flying tomorrow. We'll let the fire go and huddle together. Then we can both get some sleep."

And when she had gone into his arms she slept again and knew that he held her tightly while he slept.

In the morning she waked warm and happy. The rising sun had crept over the desert rim. A soft warm breeze heralded the day. She knew that his cheek touched her hair and for long minutes she lay still so as not to disturb his rhythmic breathing.

The sun waked him in a little while and he found her smiling down at him. "You were very sweet to me," she said. "It makes up for some of the things I've held against you."

She bent to kiss his rough cheek. "There's a time and place for everything," he laughed as he sat up. "This is the time and place for hunting lost pilots. We'd better get aloft."

He lifted her up and kissed her. "I love you to death when you are like this," she told him. And he kissed again.

While Natalie dived again into the box of provisions and brought out enough for a meager breakfast, Mont Wallace was busy losing the ropes that held the plane.

They were presently aloft again and this time she went into the crook of his arm as naturally as tho the place belonged to her.

"We're right about where they are likely to be," he told the girl and bade her keep close watch of the rough country below.

At noon they were still hunting from one canyon to another and they munched sandwiches as they flew. It was while they still ate that the girl started suddenly up and peered thru the window at her side.

"There's something down there," she cried, over the motor's roar. Monty nodded and swung the plane in a steep bank about the spot as that they could both look down.

"It's a plane," he bellowed, and circled cautiously downward.

They could see presently that the wreck of a biplane lay in a small canyon. There was no sign of life about it. As they came about on one of the arcs of the circle their own ship whipped suddenly over and Natalie saw that Mont made a quick movement to right it.

He zoomed the frail monoplane then, and told Natalie of the treacherous air currents that would make landing difficult.

"Wait," she cried. Don't land yet. If they were alive and around the wreck they would be up and waving at us now, wouldn't they? Either they're dead or they have started out somewhere. Let's hunt around to see if we can find some sign of life."

He nodded at the suggestion and began widening the circles in which they flew. Now and then he swooped low over some moving object but found usually that it was a shadow or some movement of tree or bush.

They were about to give up after half an hour of this when suddenly below them two pigmy figures rushed into a clearing and danced madly, waving their arms at first and then ripping off their coats and hats.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

For Pete's Sake

Hostess: "Did that rude husband of mine ask you not to play?"

Musical Guest: "Oh, no, Mrs. Jones, he only asked me not to play a certain tune."

Hostess: "What was it he said?"

Guest: "He said, don't play 'For the Love of Pete.'"

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Davis Hill

(Mrs. Floyd Sloan, Reporter)

July 19.—Mrs. Orville Green, Mrs. Jennie Hitchcock were guests of Mrs. Green's sister, Miss Green, at Millport, Pa., last week.