

# Up in the clouds

by Beulah Earle

**FIRST INSTALMENT**

Humming out of the east, the little black plane sped straight for the landing field. Natalie Wade watched it idly. She had nothing else to do.

The plane had held her gaze mostly because of the directness of its flight. Other bees from the busy hive of San Carlos Airport circled or looped or dived as though in sheer abandon at having found their wings, but this black ship dived straight for the searchlight towers and the sagging windsock as though all life must perish if it did not reach the field within the instant.

Then suddenly someone yelled in the field office. Grease monkeys came heads up at the cry. Then racing feet pounded on the concrete where the girl stood and shirt-sleeved men rushed past her to the open field.

Crossing the light breeze, the ship skimmed low. Its motor roaring more and more loudly as it neared. Then, at the last possible moment, it seemed the roar died. The ship sat down on the far tarmac but taxied straight on as though it would crash the high barrier before the hangars.

Moved by the rushing feet about her, the girl slipped through the barrier gate. A burst of hoarse cheering drew her on. Field men were mobbing the flier, now, as he flipped out of the open cockpit and clambered to the ground.

"Atta boy, Monty," someone yelled behind her.

"Yeah," came an answering shout. "An hour and a half off the East-West record. What do you know about that?"

Then the girls' voices added their shrill note to the clamor. A bevy of gay creatures from the

motor park beyond bore down upon the knot of men about the record-breaking Monty—whatever he might be—and carried Natalie along with it.

He stood there grinning, grimy but happy, beside the small plane. He had jerked off the helmet he wore and the mark of it crossed his forehead beneath a mop of tousled brown hair.

Natalie recognized him now, though she had never seen him before. This was Monty Wallace whose cross-country flights were already famous. She had seen his picture in a score of papers.

She knew now what the excitement was all about. Monty Wallace had finished another of his great flights. He had broken the coast-to-coast record flying from east to west. An hour and half, the excited shouter had declared.

And now he was declaring the reward of glory, the girl thought, and she laughed, for the bevy of sweet young things had fung itself upon him, had caught at his hands and arms and now they were taking turns kissing him.

Natalie chuckled as she stood there watching. Just like fool women to spoil a good-looking boy like this by too much adulation.

But the crowd was moving toward her. Girls and men both moved down upon her and those behind blocked her retreat so that they suddenly stood face to face.

Natalie smiled up into his laughing eyes, in their mask of oil and grime. She tried to step aside, but his hand, still holding the helmet, reached out to stop her.

"Come on," he laughed, "don't be bashful. A few more kisses and my face will be clean."

Without ado, he bent to kiss her squarely on the lips and then swept her along beside him to the apparent chagrin of the shrieking admirers.

At the hangar office, Natalie would have drawn away but the hero thrust her through the screened door. Screams and shrieks rose from the other girls when they were stopped at the entrance with the mechanics and a queue of loitering boys.

Inside, Monty lifted the girl quickly to one of the desks.

"Now stay put there," he laughed down at her. "I'll give you that interview in a few minutes. Got to clean up first and sign the papers."

Natalie "stayed put." There wasn't anything else to do and, after all, what did it matter?

The brown-haired Monty had disappeared into the wash room. Presently she could hear him sloshing water over himself with much puffing and splashing. A gray-haired man who seemed to be the port manager was yelling questions at him and writing in a big book. Monty belowed back the details of his flight.

His wrist watch was handed out to be compared with the office clock and the watches of the other men.

When, presently, he came back into the office, his face was clean and the tousled brown hair had been ruthlessly plastered back from his forehead. Natalie saw now that his chin was cleft in a somewhat fascinating way.

"You're with the paper, you said," he offered with a chuckle and a little wink. "We'll go down to the office and you can do your story there."

Natalie made no response but his grin was so infectious that she smiled. This man worked fast, she thought; He was just as swift with adoring femininity as he was in breaking records.

He was at the telephone now ordering a taxicab. Offers of other cars he spurned lightly.

There would be a fast ride into town the girl knew, and she thought she could guess what came afterward. She must match wits with him and a daring plan came to her as she swung her heels from the desk where she sat.

Her father had been a newspaper man. She knew the machinery of news getting. She would make him play out his hand.

And so when the cab arrived she named the office of one of the local papers, bade the man drive swiftly.

"Now is that nice?" Monty grinned. "I wanted to take you to dinner."

"I thought so," Natalie grinned impishly.

"You aren't really one of those writing women?"

"I wasn't," the girl laughed. "I was out of a job. I didn't know where dinner was coming from. But with a story like this in my pocket, I have an idea that I've got a job as well."

"What if I run out on you?"

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't do

that. You're a hero, you know. And heroes never act like that even in real life."

And so it was that, when the taxicab pulled up at the newspaper office, Natalie Wade led her youthful captive straight to the editorial room, pounced upon an unused typewriter and began pounding out the story of the flight as she thought her father would have done.

"Boy," she called presently. The loitering office-boy moved reluctantly toward her.

When he stood at Natalie's side, she spoke to him quickly.

"I'm new here," she said. "Tell the city editor I want a job and that I'm writing Monty Wallace's exclusive story of a new record flight."

The boy looked at her with a fishy eye and then ambled off to the desks where two or three men worked apparently at getting out the sporting extra.

One of these with worn suspenders and with his green eyeshade drawn down so that it formed an almost perfect mask, looked up in startled fashion. He reached for a piece of paper, started at it, and then came over to the girl's side.

"What's all this about?" he demanded.

"I'm looking for a job," she jerked out between bursts of typewriter pounding. "This is Monty Wallace who just broke the East-West flight record. I'm writing the story and he's going to sign it. If I do a good job. Does that rate a tryout from you?"

The small man peered up at Wallace. Then he thrust out his hand.

"I got a flash on the yarn from the airport," he said. "My men were late at the spot and they told me someone else had grabbed you. If you'll give the young lady your story, she goes on the pay-roll right away. I can't promise how long she'll stay there until she'll get a trial."

Wallace grinned.

"About how long," he questioned "would that trial last?"

"But the girl spoke up quickly. "It doesn't matter about that," she said. "If I can't hit the ball I'll know it quickly enough and so will they. My name's Natalie Wade. Put it on the payroll and let me draw enough when the story is done to take the big boy here out to dinner."

"I'm Mack Hanlon," the city editor said, glancing wisely at the flier. The dinner goes on office expense account if you keep on the way you're going. Slap her out fast. We go down in twenty minutes."

Sitting across from Monty Wallace over the very excellent dinner that was to be charged to the San Carlos Express, Natalie laugh merrily.

"This," she exclaimed, "is what I call getting the breaks. No job no money, no place to go. I wander out to the airport because it is a long walk and I like to watch the planes. Then you buzz in, kiss me sweetly, and carry me off. I use you to muscle into a job and a good dinner with the hero of the hour. Isn't life a joke?"

"All perfectly sensible," Monty assured her. "You are young. You are beautiful. And you have a head on your shoulders. That's all any girl needs in this world."

"The evening will soon be complete," bantered Natalie. "You don't by any chance happen to have fallen in love with me? That's about all that could possibly occur to add to the occasion."

"Well," the youth laughed, "You can add that up too. I guess. Something happened to me when I saw you standing there at the field. That's why I kissed you. And if it isn't love, it's sure a perfect counterfeit. You might as well give it the benefit of the doubt."

"That," she chuckled, "is what I consider the response of a gentleman. I wouldn't call it an impassioned declaration but it certainly fills the bill. I am very greatly obliged to you."

"Never kid an aviator, Natalie Wade," Monty laughed. "Give me a few drinks and I'll make it just as impassioned as you like. What say we go somewhere to dance after dinner?"

"That would be very nice," Natalie accepted. "But please omit the drinks. I am quite satisfied and I don't know you well enough yet to try hopping up our acquaintance with cocktails."

"All right," he agreed with evident reluctance. "Just as you say. But you have no idea how a few drinks ripen the affections."

When dinner was over he became host. He insisted on hiring a car and they drove first along the beach road. At length they found an attractive spot where an abandoned lighthouse had been turned into a sort of roadside inn and there they sat for a long time looking out toward the Pacific.

It was not till the girl found that they were sitting side by side without speech that she realized something unusual had happened to her. This was no ordinary evening, no commonplace flirtation. There was something about their sudden acquaintance that turned night glorious and that made the first strains of the small stringed orchestra send them into each other's arms without realizing it.

They had risen when the music sounded and stood upon the tiled terrace. It was only a step from the shadow that clothed them to the moonlit outdoor dance floor. But for long moments they did not take that step.

Other couples began moving from the tables within, but the two were not aware of it. When he bent his head, her lips met his without shyness or confusion. It was as though the moment were preordained.

Then she gave a low laugh.

"Aren't we supposed to be dancing?" she asked gaily.

"He kissed again quickly."

"Perhaps we are," he chuckled, as he swept her out onto the floor with swift, rhythmic strides. "but it seems like a waste of time and of very excellent music that might be much better employed."

He danced, she found, with grace and ease. It was as though he really enjoyed the music and as though there had been no need for him to learn the steps through which he guided her. For the first time, she reminded herself, since her high school class dance, she was enjoying—really enjoying—a party like this.

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