

# Up in the clouds

by Beulah Earle

## FOURTH INSTALMENT

Monty Wallace has just arrived in California, having broken the East-West cross country airplane record. Natalie Wade, mistaken by him for 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.

Mont was predatory; there was no denying that. If he loved at all it was with a man's love that lived only for instants, for episodes of the sort he had sought the night before. Even now, Natalie had no doubt, he was weighing first his chances of success with one girl and then with the other.

And honestly as she could, she tried to estimate those chances for herself. For her own part, she knew she was playing with fire. She was fighting the age-old woman's fight without the alliance of her own heart. There would be times, she knew, when something within would trick her. Always there would be some part of her that would hold out arms of surrender to Mont Wallace.

But at the last, she was sure of her own victory. Reason and breeding were strong anchors and in them she had full confidence so long as she did not try them too far.

As for Sunny Marion, Natalie was not sure. There was force in the girl but in a measure it was the force of the spoiled darling. Against the yearnings of her own heart, she felt, Sunny would not be strong. There was not in her the power to bring up reason as an ally, if Natalie read the girl aright.

And with this decision she found a new fear within herself. For if she could see things, as she thought she could, might not the same be apparent to Mont Wallace?

He might not be clever at reading character, but some man instinct in him must surely tell him that the blond charmer was a possible willing victim. That instinct had slyly warned him in her own case, but he had not let it rule him. Surely he would not hold back in dealing with the younger girl.

There was, she thought, only the single hope that Sunny's ego would stand proof against her love. If she were sufficiently spoiled and self-centered, she

might stand out against the ardent Mont. But that would mean she did not love him deeply, and this, on account of her own adoration for him, seemed utterly impossible.

This was as far as reason would let her go. Suddenly her love surged up within her so strongly that jealousy would not be held back. After all, the other girl was not perfection. Her hair had been so bleached by the sun that there were shadows in it of darker texture. The wave in it was sufficient for beauty but it was not the equal of her own. Sunny took advantage of the lack by drawing the ash-blond hair rather severely back. It was becoming, but no more so than the dark waves of Natalie's soft black.

There was a touch of the artificial in the darkness of Sunny's eyebrows, she thought, and there was at least the chance that her beauty would fade early.

One by one she went over Sunny's features in search of flaws but when she realized that this was the foolish exercise of jealousy she cried out within herself.

"This is silly, Sunny Marion is beautiful. She is more beautiful than I can ever hope to be. More than that, she is wise in her beauty and knows men. If she is not to have Mont Wallace at her feet, I must give everything I've got in love and tact and inspiration. And it may not be enough."

"This much at least was honest, she thought. Moreover it was intelligent to recognize the strength of the enemy."

It was to be a battle between these two at best. Perhaps there were many others to take part in the engagement. But for she and Sunny must be. Which was very queer, for she suddenly found in the deeper recesses of her heart an honest liking for the girl.

And now suddenly the first test came between them, for Mont was speaking:

"Let's all go to the lighthouse place and dance. Can't we find a fourth?"

Very quickly the quick-witted Sunny turned to Natalie.

"You must know someone. I'm fed up on the people I've been going around with. Please find another handsome boy."

But Natalie was not to be caught entirely napping.

"I know someone you'll adore. He's grand company and I've just discovered him. You know him,

Mont. See if you can get Jimmy Hale."

It was the first time she had used Wallace's first name but surely kisses carried title to its familiar use.

Sunny accepted the suggestion. "You mean your photographer? Of course, I think he's adorable."

Natalie was a little uncertain how she had come off in the brief exchange.

"Be careful of your secrets when he is about," she said laughingly. "He's a seventh son or something. He can guess more than most people ever know."

That was the first of many nights they made a foursome for dancing, dinner or some outing. They paired off variously but circumstances finally left Natalie for the most part with Jimmy and Sunny twosing with Mont Wallace.

Natalie had beaten down her jealousy so that she was now well satisfied with the arrangement most of the time, for her live intelligence told her that Monty could not easily forget her even in the flattering company of Sunny Marion.

Jimmy treated her, generally on these evenings as he did during the day when they were much together at their work. It was not till one evening when dinner was delayed and there were too many rounds of cocktails that a new element entered the situation.

They had driven to a famous mountain resort for the occasion and Jimmy, as was often the case had taken one or two stiff drinks before setting out. Monty had been delayed by a business conference where highballs tended to speed negotiations and, for the first time, Natalie saw that he was not quite himself.

It was a mad drive along the mountain roads with Monty at the wheel of Sunny's car. But they arrived safely and both girls, slightly shaken by the perils of the trip, were persuaded to steady their nerves with cocktails.

They had missed their reservations and were forced to wait until a table was cleared so that the huge shaker was filled and emptied more than once before they took their places.

Jimmy held his drink easily, becoming even more talkative than usual but steady of hand and clear of eye. Monty Wallace, on the other hand, grew moody and intense. Chiefly the drink had served merely to lighten the dull hurt in Natalie's heart so that she felt relaxed and content, but Sunny was very gay and noisy.

With dinner and the liquors following, Jimmy grew sentimental and Monty a little quarrelsome, so that there was an edge to his banter, which was directed mostly at Sunny. At each sally the girl screamed with laughter, apparently delighted at his abuse.

"Leave me alone, pest," he told her finally. "Come on, Nat. Let's dance."

He caught Natalie by the hand and drew her onto the dance floor. The girl realized at once that there was something imminent between them. He held her a little more tightly than usual and with the exertion of the dancing she presently found herself trembling so that she could hardly follow the music.

"I'm sorry," she whispered when she missed a change in his step.

"Never mind," he told her brusquely. "What do we care how we dance? I'm still mad about you. I wish you could really care about me."

Tears came into the girl's eyes and she knew then that her weakness was from some cause other than her own spirit. She fought to get herself in hand. But her lips betrayed her.

"No one," she said with a little catch in her voice. "No one will ever love you more than I do. Some day—some day I think you will forget your madness and bring me love instead."

"What do you want?" he flared. "The love of some housebroken ape or the love of a man? Man's love is a different thing from this warmed over passion that women seem to crave. There was no woman ever made that could love like a man but I think you could come close if you ever really cared about anyone."

He whirled her suddenly onto a balcony that overlooked a mountain chasm. There he caught her up and carried her to the parapet.

"Kiss me," he whispered huskily.

"Kiss me before I throw you a thousand feet straight down."

The girl laughed. For an instant she seemed to dare him to make good his burlesque threat. And then with sudden abandon that she could not check, she gave him the kisses he asked.

He clasped her more tightly in his arms and rained answering caresses upon her lips.

They were the first of his kisses that she had allowed since that first evening with him, and suddenly she was afraid. But it was not fear of the man or his love. It was fear of her own heart, for something had gone wrong within her. Some governor upon her heart had failed.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "But I don't care for the caveman stuff."

He was angry then and caught her roughly trying to kiss her

again. But she laughed at him and fended him easily.

"I ought to drag you out of here," he declared furiously. "I ought to take you the way men used to take their women. Why should I play the game of the tame ape? You would love me in a minute if I took you and made you like it."

"Don't be silly," she taunted. "All that stuff went out with the stone age. Even in those days there was only a handful of men who could take a mate against her will. Sometimes they used a stone axe but if the woman didn't care for that she used the stone axe first or very shortly afterward."

"Bah. A man's love is dynamic."

She stood from his arms quickly.

"A man's love," she said coolly, "is what a woman chooses it to be. If she wants to be kicked around, she picks the man who can do it. But you may be assured that even those who choose to be kicked have a reason for their madness."

"What reason?"

"They have a streak of that in themselves to be beaten by a man's strength and they are willing to buy the luxury with bruises for coin."

"All right. Have it your way. What kind of love would you choose?"

Natalie laughed lightly.

"That," she said, "is better. After all, it is the woman who chooses. Hold me nicely and don't try to bite me and I will show you what kisses really can mean."

She waited then and very gently Mont Wallace's arms went around her and she turned her lips to his with a smile that seemed to brighten the starry night. Her fingers crept up to caress his cheek.

And at that instant a terrifying shriek frightened them apart.

There was another shriek and the flash of a white dress across the balcony. A ghostly figure rose against the stars from the top of the parapet and then Mont Wallace leaped.

Sunny was hysterical with fear when they dragged her back from that wall. Monty had reached her just in time.

Apparently she had gone farther than she intended. She had meant to give them a scare and then had found herself swaying

unsteadily over the lip of the abyss.

Her screams echoed across the canyon as Monty caught her and drew her back to the balcony floor. Natalie clug to her and tried to quiet her.

"Get away from me," Sunny shrieked. "Leave me alone. I never want to see either of you again."

She went off into another pa-

roxysm of screams that brought a rush of footsteps from the ballroom.

"Quick," hissed Natalie. "Hit her. Slap her hard. That will bring her out of it."

Continued Next Issue

Some day there's going to be a football game as exciting as the announcer sounds in broadcasting the average game.

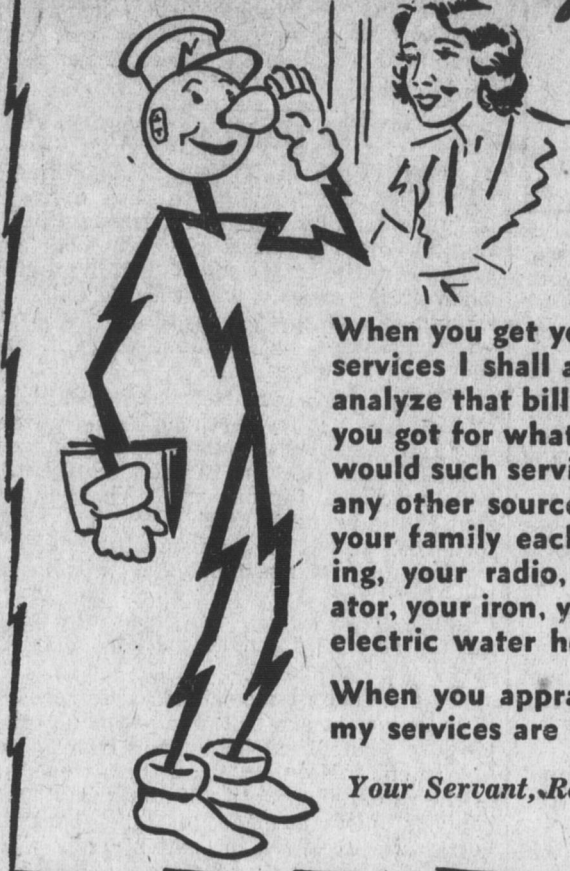
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