

Up in the Clouds

by Beulah Earle

SECOND INSTALMENT

She wondered about that. What could it be that made this seem so much the same? Much water had flowed under the bridges of the world since that gay night. She had gone two years to the university. Then her father had died and with his insurance money she had taken a secretarial course.

For a year she had been chief clerk in her uncle's law office. But he had gone into corporation practice and there hadn't been any place for her in the new scheme of things. Since then there had been a few weeks work here and there but for ten days there had been nothing. No wonder she had now forgotten what parties were like.

Besides, at the high school dance, she had been in love.

She laughed a little at herself as she thought of that. How mad she had been about Roger Yarnell! And Roger was married now and had a good-looking baby and the last time she had seen him he had merely looked funny to her.

That was the way with love. It made funny-looking people seem wonderful for a little while.

Natalie glanced up at the handsome features above her. Really, he was wonderful looking, this Mont Wallace. Or did he only seem like that because of something in her? Heavens, maybe she was in love with this man!

His eyes caught hers now and found them smiling.

"What's so funny?" he wanted to know.

"You'd die if you knew," she laughed aloud.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, reddening.

"You make me feel as though I'd forgotten to put on something, some really vital part of the old costume."

"Oh, it's nothing like that. I just had a queer thought and it made me laugh in spite of myself. Don't you ever do that?"

"What? Have queer thoughts or laugh in spite of myself?"

"Have thoughts that make you want to laugh at the silliness of them?" she tried to explain.

"Well, I've got one now that will seem pretty silly if you can't see it." He held her a little closer and her heart quickened. The smile faded quickly from her eyes. That little skip in her heart beat had told her. She was. She was in love with this boy as she had been with Roger Yarnell and he was a hundred times more splendid in her eyes already than Roger had ever been.

It was frightening, a discovery like that. He had danced with her now to the shadowy corner once more. Before she knew it, he was kissing her again and she was kissing him.

This was madness but glorious, glorious madness. How could life do such amazing things?

"Was that your funny idea?" she said softly, standing in the circle of his arms.

"Yes," he said, suddenly serious. "I'm wild about you. I never met anyone so gorgeous in all my life before. I want you. I want you to go somewhere with me—tonight."

She was caught by his mood but she hadn't heard too much of his words because of a blare in the music.

"Where?" she asked.

"Anywhere," he told her eagerly,

his lips on hers again.

In the very kiss, the warmth fled from her lips. Glory died in an instant. That lifting of her heart that had seemed like the levitation of her whole body suddenly failed.

Everything crashed that seemed to be worth while.

"Oh," she cried "I'm sorry about that. I should have seen it coming."

"I was afraid," he said contritely. "that the idea might be a bust. Will you forget it?"

"It can't be done, Mont Wallace," the girl said slowly. "I had just very suddenly, decided that I loved you. And so . . ."

She flung her arms out helplessly.

It was at the bus station that she made him set her down. There on that yesterday morning that now seemed so long ago she had left her few belongings. She claimed them at the checker's desk and trudged through the cool, sweet night to a family hotel only a block or two away.

Registering, she chose an inexpensive room and put off the bell boy with smiling thanks in lieu of a tip.

But the smile came hard. Here was lonely night on the heels of a ruined evening.

Love. For a moment it had caught her in its spell. For a single instant it had glorified the vistas of life. And now it was gone, like the fading afterglow of northern lights.

She lay long staring into the dark, wondering if stolen ecstasy could be the searing thing she had been taught, wondering if love must always die so tragically, wondering why a heart without a wound could hurt so fearfully.

And lying there, it seemed as though a presence filled the room, as though Mont Wallace stood there holding out his arms and smiling contritely. Instantly the feeling was gone but now her heart had come alive again. Hurt there still was in her breast but it was sweet pain.

Life would go on. Struggle and woe and sorrow, glowing delight and fearful ecstasy would make its lights and shadows. But this one day would color the whole fabric of it for it was the day on which her love had been born.

She knew that this much was real out of the tumult of the evening. This much could never be taken away, that she loved Mont Wallace and would love him always.

Even in loving she laughed. Wouldn't he smile at that? Wouldn't he grin to know this thing he

had left in the crushing hurt beneath her breast?

And now Natalie knew what she would write. It was one story, at least, that all the girls would read.

She took from the pile of rough copy paper that lay beside her typewriter. She fitted carbon paper between two sheets and then she wrote the one line she knew would free her from the rules of newspaper writing that she knew so vaguely.

"By Natalie Wade," she wrote in the middle of the line. It would be a by-line story and she alone of all the girls and women in the world could write it. Perhaps it would not be published. Perhaps when she had finished she would find that she could not let it be published. But it must be written. And the lead wrote itself before her unbelieving eyes.



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had left in the crushing hurt beneath her breast?

It was a jest of fate. Only her heart had been ravished but she knew there would be no forgetting. Lightly he might go on from one kiss to another, gathering them like trophies of his prowess in the air. Lightly he might test them in the crucible of passion, even to find one that finally claimed his own eternal desire.

But always there would follow him the adoration of herself, of Natalie Wade. Her heart could not bow down. It could not abuse itself. But it could burn with an eternal fire that he had kindled even though he might never know.

Sleep came at last, deep dreamless sleep that would not summon even a phantom of this youth to her arms but in the morning she knew some glory burned in her before ever her mind remembered that she loved Mont Wallace.

Consciousness of him went with her to breakfast in the hotel dining room. It crossed the street with her to the morning office of the Express. It stood with her beside the day editor when he complimented her on the story she had done and ratified the agreement of his assistant that she should have a trial on the staff.

Her name was on the assignment book. It thrilled her to find it there.

"Follow Wallace," was the assignment.

Natalie had enough of her father's tradition in her to know the meaning of that. She was to bring in another story of the new hero, and she was to telephone him. She was to see him, and spend what time she could with him until the deadline of the afternoon paper and perhaps until the final edition, that sporting extra for which she had written the afternoon before.

She was to chronicle every slightest incident in his life of that morning of that day. Yet, strangely, she was not to write the tremendous story of that night, at least not as it had burned itself into her heart.

She thought of the eager readers all over the nation who would be waiting for her story. It would be carried on the wire. It would, if she could do it well, bring a hundred million people to sit beside this one man, to question him and to hear whatever he had to say that would reveal the man.

Millions of girls, she knew, would be among those readers. Millions of girls would want to know what this man was like. Girls made heroes of men like Mont Wallace. They would follow him. They would write him. They would send foolish

"I danced last night with Mont Wallace," it read. "I danced with him and loved it. For Mont Wallace dances as he flies, gaily, easily, excellently well. Unwearied by the long grind at the controls of his little black plane, by the prodigious effort it must have cost to hurl that plane from coast to coast in faster time than ever man made the flight before, he danced as lithely as though it were the first exertion of the day."

She wrote on and on, in each line something that would give the girls for whom she wrote an instant in the hero's arms.

And as she wrote she thought of that other story she might have written but did not. "I kissed Mont Wallace last night," it should have read. "I kissed the man who flew from coast to coast straight to my feet. I kissed again the man who had bent to kiss me before ever he knew my name or I his."

There were in the story she was actually writing some touches of this man's humor, of the physical splendor of him, of the cleft in his chin that had fascinated her and of the brown hair that lay unruly on his brow.

Natalie had lost herself in the writing of her story. She did not know when the day editor came to stand behind her chair and to read the lines she had written.

She did not know when he hurried back to his desk and bellowed for Jimmy Hale, the staff photographer. It was not till she had finished what she was writing and had written the conventional "30" at the bottom of her copy that she looked up to find the photographer standing beside her and with him the familiar figure of Mont Wallace.

"Listen, kid, the old man wants a special picture on this."

It was Jimmy Hale's husky voice, Jimmy's slightly bleary grin that backed the request.

"Come on in here now. I've got to make it snappy."

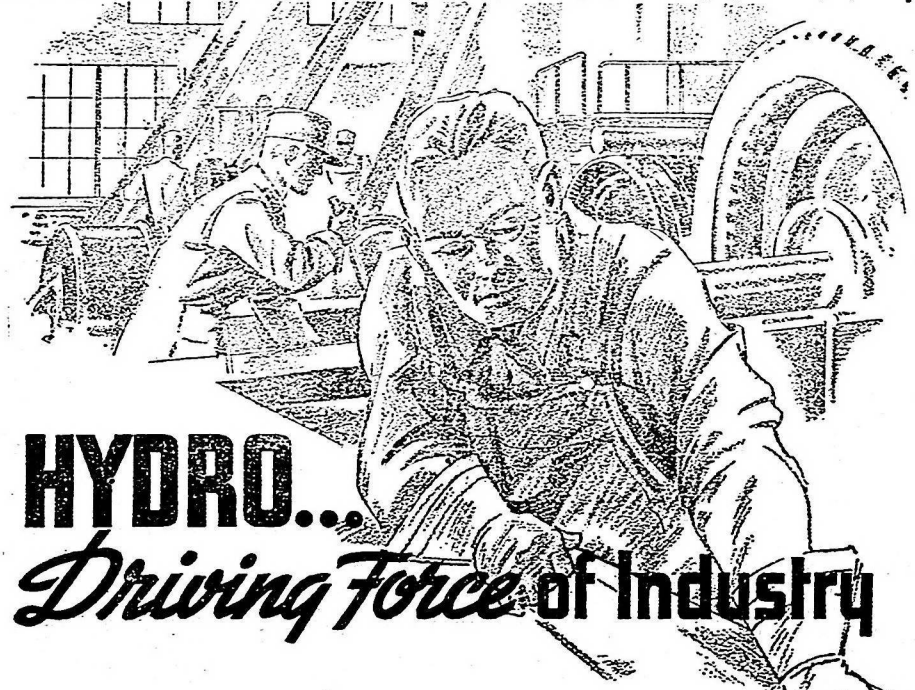
Natalie followed him, a little confused, with Mont coming behind.

And presently she stood in the cluttered room that was the photographer's office. Mont Wallace's arms were around her once more. And for the picture's sake she looked up into his eyes as she had done that night before while Jimmy Hale took the picture that was to tell more than all her story had done and that was to bear as caption her opening line—"I danced last night with Mont Wallace."

That was the day Natalie came to know Jimmy Hale. A likeable boy who swore he couldn't write a line

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