

A Desert Eden

A NOVELETTE

By Edwin L. Sabin

CHAPTER I The Entrance

The mesa waited, its flat gray-green top upward lifting above the yellowish desert country around about.

As it waited it gently shimmered, blending, in ethereal way, with the blue sky over. Its sides were very steep, it stood alone, as if it might be a gigantic fungus growth.

It was beautiful, for even a fungus sometimes is beautiful!

Far and near below all else was gravelly sand, dry, stiff brush and cactus; and that blue sky o'er-bending contained but a single spot.

The spot increased in size, and changed in shape, as if drawing onward.

Presently it resembled an enormous bird, seeking the mesa for its aerie.

And presently it was an aeroplane unskilfully handled or with something wrong.

It swerved and jibed, tilted and with an awkward flop (accompanied by feminine shriek and masculine exclamation), came down upon the mesa's upturned face. A youth in white flannel trousers and white soft-silk shirt sprang first from the machine; he was followed, less agilely, by a rotund, red-countenanced man, in khaki trousers, leather puttees, white blouse and white helmet.

The youth hastily helped a middle-aged, stout woman to extricate herself; he then would have helped a girl—but she had helped herself.

The rotund man, puffing and evidently mentally expostulating, in the meantime was glaring defiantly about him, as if blaming the mesa for having got in his way.

"Anybody hurt?" he demanded curtly. "You, my dear?"

The middle-aged woman agitated her ample skirt, and adjusted her toque.

"I haven't found out yet," she said. "But I am sure I must be dreadfully shaken. I shall never fly in one of these machines again. I shall complain to the adjutant-general or to the Secretary of War. I insist upon my complaint being forwarded at once, Benjamin!"

She smoothed her ruffled plumage, and viewed the little company.

"Nonsense." In the tone was finality. He addressed the girl, whom the young man was eyeing anxiously. "You, my dear?"

"Not a bit."

"Examine the machine and report." This time he addressed the young man. About voice and manner was a military brusqueness, which was well explained by the eagle shoulder-straps and by the device upon the front of his helmet.

He was a colonel in the regular service—colonel of infantry. The machine was an army model. This, evidently, was an army party.

And here we may as well present at once to the reader of these lines Colonel Benjamin Bool, of the traditionally gallant Forty-Fourth; Mme. Bool, his spouse, fairish, distinctly fattish, and fifty, joint head of the regiment; and Mistress Bowie Bool, fair, not fat, her name alone reminiscent of past years.

Old Fort Bowie of the Yuma trail had been the colonel's initiative fort, after the academy.

As for the young man, he was only Danny Daviess, not of "the service"—save Bowie's.

He poked here and there about the aeroplane—shaking it, surveying it, testing it.

A pleasant-featured young man he was, with tanned, smooth-shaven face, and muscular, alert figure.

"Nothing wrong, sir, as far as I can see," he reported.

"Then what made it wobble so?" asked the girl.

"Bowie, if you cannot choose your language better, do not talk," reproved her mother. "Yes," she continued severely to the young man. "If there is nothing wrong what made it wab—wobble so, as my daughter expresses herself?"

"The engine missed. It needs tightening."

With a quick, sidelong glance at the girl, whose eyes seemed to twinkle demurely in response, he again bent over the machine, examining the motor. This he slowly revolved by hand, listening.

"Fix it up. We'll get out of here," ordered the colonel testily. "Bless my soul, what a place to land."

"It was better than down below, papa," corrected the girl. "We didn't have so far to go."

"Bowie," reproved her mother; and majestically opened a parasol.

The young man had thrown the battery and had started the motor. He shut it off again, and reexamined.

"Well, well?" prompted the colonel impatiently.



"Oh, isn't it wonderful," she breathed.

The young man raised his head, and with back of blackened hand gingerly wiped his forehead.

"There's a bolt gone."

"Where did it go to?"

"I couldn't tell you, sir."

"Put in another. Where's your tool-bag?"

The young man smiled.

"I don't think a tool-bag would carry such a part. There are plenty of nuts and washers, but not one of these little connecting bolts."

"Did you look?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel's face grew redder, and he swelled indignantly.

"Outrageous!" he declared. "This shall be looked into. Make a mental note of it, my dear."

"I shall appeal to the Secretary of War," announced Mrs. Bool.

"Mama!" expostulated the girl. "The idea! Any machine goes wrong some time."

"Gross negligence," sputtered the colonel. "You will consider yourself under arrest, sir, for not having your apparatus in condition for service." He stamped and fumed.

"But, papa! You can't arrest a civilian, off the reservation," protested the girl. "And Danny is our guest. Lieutenant Kunke had the machine out last, you know. It worked beautifully then."

"Bowie!" reproved her mother. "You must not oppose your father."

"All right, colonel," answered the young man. "I'm arrested. Bring on the drum-head jury. But I plead not guilty. We took the machine on somebody else's say-so. I'm very sorry, however, that you and Mrs. Bool and Bowie have this inconvenience. I picked out the best landing-place in sight."

The colonel snorted.

"Explore the plateau, sir, and report its topographical features, practicability of descent, etc. We must get help."

The young man trudged away, cheerfully whistling. The girl gazed rather wistfully after.

When he glanced back he saw the little party, conducted by the colonel, making careful way thru the brushy growth toward a couple of pinon trees.

The two elders, he well knew, were toiling and perspiring; the girl would be lithesome and cool and dainty, as always.

She waved at him quickly. He waved back, a gladness in his heart.

She was a dear girl, was Bowie; dear to him, dear to Lieutenant Kunke (confound him), dear to sundry others.

He sighed; he was not a West Pointer—he was entitled to no straps or stripes.

However, being a healthy, wholesome young man, he put infinite faith in the future and proceeded upon his mission.

The mesa was perhaps forty acres in extent, slightly undulous, with some sage bushes of species unknown but flowered with yellow and purple; a few pinons, and a clump of gigantic cedars—gnarled, squatty, thick-trunked.

No bees hummed, no birds twittered or flitted; a perfect quiet reigned; under the blue, cloudless sky the mesa lay as enthralled.

Reaching the edge, the young man halted, surveying.

The edge was cut sheer, like the edge of a precipice. Down three hundred feet lay spread they desert, calm, purplish yellow, a vast tinted Persian carpeting mellowed beige, extending on and on. Between it and the sky nothing moved.

It strangely wooed; but descent to it, from this point of the mesa, was manifestly impossible.

As the young man's eyes travelled over it, and right and left along the brink upon which he stood, his ears caught a rustle behind him.

He turned, to see the girl near at hand. She smiled brightly upon him, and advanced to his side.

"Hello!" he said, much content.

"They're both asleep," she explained. "Mama under her parasol, and papa with a handkerchief over his face. But I wanted to explore." She gazed out. "Oh, isn't it wonderful," she breathed. "I love the desert."

"At a distance," he supplemented. "I thought that maybe we could place the post from up here; but I don't see it."

"How far did we come, do you think?"

"Not more than eighty or a hundred miles. The thing zigzagged, so it's hard to tell. The post ought to be somewhere off there, in that haze along the horizon."

They peered. No army post differentiated itself among the misty outlines of far, nebulous up-lifts, before.

"How still everything is," spoke the girl wonder-

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