



Discretion is thrown to the four winds when  
a conservative man of forty takes to the air with an old flame.

## CUPID ON INSTRUMENTS

By MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI

**I** AM STANDING ON MY LAWN one lovely summer evening, leaning against a maple tree and whistling "The Happy Wanderer" while I contemplate the fact that once I was a daring sixteen, whereas now I am conservative and forty.

I live a studious life—study Arabic grammar and literature, detest crooners with fuzzy voices, am completely unaware of beebop and don't have much patience with levity in general.

What few people know is that I fly an airplane.

I fly an airplane because for me it is a combination of exhilaration, refreshment and escape. When I circle the neighborhood at a couple of thousand feet I feel regal. No other human accomplishment is such a complete conquest of the tenacious forces of nature.

My magic carpet is a 1949 Clipper which I keep at Westchester Airport in Armonk, N. Y., where I get excellent practice in maneuvering in and out of small fields. However, I frequently head north over the mountains to Dutchess County, 30 miles away, where the level farmland offers no problems in case of forced landing.

So I am standing on my front lawn when, up the street, strolling in my direction trips a willowy-type blonde who most certainly would have evoked a whistle from me at age 16. I stared through my spectacles as she drew nearer, and saw she was smiling in my direction. I looked behind me to see who the lucky fellow might be.

There was no one but myself, so I returned the smile—which well I might, because it was the girl who, at thirteen, had me, at sixteen, alternately wishing I was dead and singing with all my might at being alive.

"You haven't changed a bit," she says, knowing full well that I would believe her, which I did. I returned the

compliment with a vengeance for I had heard that she was now a widow with three children and not having seen her for many years, never expected to see her looking quite like this.

Well, Dot used to ride with me a lot in my old roadster. Could she have any idea that I might now be any different, temperamentally, than I was in those wonderful, scatterbrained years? Might I not be forgiven a soft deception? I have an airplane and 100 hours, the sun is shining brightly on her golden hair, and tomorrow is a holiday. What kid with a roadster ever had a chance like this?

I tell her to pack a picnic lunch, and tomorrow we will celebrate the holiday.

When dawn breaks, it is pouring rain. We have had nothing but sunshine for the past two weeks, but today it rains. It is a tragedy of cosmic dimensions.

Here I made my first mistake. The most elementary aeronautical logic called for a 180 on the flying picnic idea, but no—I must call for Dot and we would drive past the airport in the rain to show her my airplane.

Dot climbs into my car and I sense a perfume which I thought I had forgotten. We drive in the rain, but truly the sun is trying to break through.

When we reach the field the sun, sure enough, has broken through. To the north, south, east and west the clouds continue to encircle us, but they have a bright, fluffy air about them, while directly overhead the sky is blue, dotted with a few wisps of cumulus which have broken from the circle.

Being sensible older folks (?) we decided that there will be no harm in taking off and just having a look. We'll make a turn around the field, then land. I untie



the ship and we climb aboard. I do not neglect the routine checks and run-up, but am in the grip of such a virulence as makes small boys stand on their heads on rail fences, and converts Arabic scholars into daredevil birdmen. I take off into the south and the wheels have no sooner left the ground than we are ploughing through the aforementioned cloud fragments. This shocks me a little, for I had thought the patch of blue overhead would give me a clear arena for a rectangular course around the airport.

"These little clouds are cute," says Dot, so I don't turn immediately downwind for a landing approach, but climb above the surrounding masses to see if the condition is not purely local. At 2,000 feet we are above the cloud bank, but the only hole is the one over the airfield which we are leaving. However, the engine is purring smoothly and Dot is snuggling comfortably on my shoulder and an Arab scholar would need to have common sense indeed to turn back so soon. We'll go northward ten minutes longer, and if there are no more holes in this plateau of vapor, we'll turn back then.

She is quite impressed, I think, with my competence. I explain the instruments. I let her handle the controls and smilingly take over when a wing dips a bit too low. "You see, it's perfectly simple," I tell her. She says it's not simple at all, and it's just wonderful how I handle the ship. I have no choice but to believe her.

But now I am sure we will see nothing but clouds, so I explain regretfully that we must turn back. I show her how we make our course the reciprocal of 330. I bank around and look for that hole. It's not where I thought it would be.

What have I done? All I can see about me are rolling, opaque mountains of clouds. I feel the warm press of this shoulder next to mine. I know that I have done an unconscionable thing. In this instant I have matured as an aviator, not in a technical way, to be sure, but morally, for I am overcome by a sense of responsibility. I strain a bit to maintain a glib air, and say something about not knowing anyone I would rather be lost in the clouds with. Dot laughs pleasantly. But I am faced with the most delicate of procedures—me, with my 100 hours—a let-down into the clouds to see where we have drifted.

In strictly VFR conditions I have covered this country



"Once . . . I climbed the Great Pyramid of Cheops . . . When I made my way down at dawn, I kissed the sand of the desert."

countless times. If I can get a glimpse of the terrain I will be able to navigate once again. I offer Dot no explanation as I pull on carburetor heat and reduce the rpm's. Now there is the silent swish of engulfing clouds, and I recall that, when we took off, the ceiling had proven alarmingly low over the wooded hills.

Dot says this is just like the old days, when we parked in the rain and I played the ukulele. I laugh in my teeth. My palms are wet on the controls, a phenomenon attributable only in part to this day's renaissance of puppy love. I pray that in a few moments we may break through over the level farms of Dutchess and not in the hills of Westchester.

We finally do break through at an indicated 400 feet over neither Dutchess nor Westchester, but over an expanse of blue water! This I had not contemplated. It must be the Hudson River; then Poughkeepsie must be on its east bank not far away and we are safe, for the countryside will be level and we have only to skim along under the overcast for a few minutes to reach the flat haven of Dutchess County Airport.

Amazing how the air of the cool and competent birdman returns to me as I direct Dot's attention along the riverbank to a city visible down below. "Can I navigate or can I navigate?" I ask in the tone that demands and gets an affirmative answer.



"Dot climbs into my car and I sense a perfume which I thought I had forgotten. We drive in the rain . . ."

"You're wonderful," she sighs, "tell me, what are those funny colored things all lined up in rows down there?"

I know very well what those objects are. We are not over Poughkeepsie at all. That's one of the General Motors storage lots and those are hundreds of new cars. We have broken out near Tarrytown and have been reliving our youth above the clouds in a continuous circle around the field from which we took off. We are not five minutes from Armonk!

This discovery is not altogether a solace to me. In the first place I am properly disgraced as a navigator. Secondly, I am now faced with the hilly, wooded terrain over which I cannot skim at 400 feet, that being approximately the elevation of my airport.

So there is nothing for it but to press off the carburetor heat, pour on power, and venture [\(Continued on page 74\)](#)





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## Cupid on Instruments

(Continued from page 35)

once again over the top, with a prayer of prayers that that hole is still open over the field, whose exact location I now know.

It is! I don't deserve it but there it is, a beautiful opening directly over Armonk and nowhere else. The clouds are not hovering still in the air. That hole has opened and closed, and opened and closed,

since we first left it. I plunge into it as if pursued by demons, and my wheels touch down on the sod.

Once upon a time I climbed the Great Pyramid of Cheops at the stroke of midnight. I was so terrified when I reached the top that I spent the entire night trying to keep from freezing to death. When I made my way down at dawn I kissed the sand of the desert.

On this day, when my plane stopped rolling and in the absence of sand, I kissed Dorothy.

END

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