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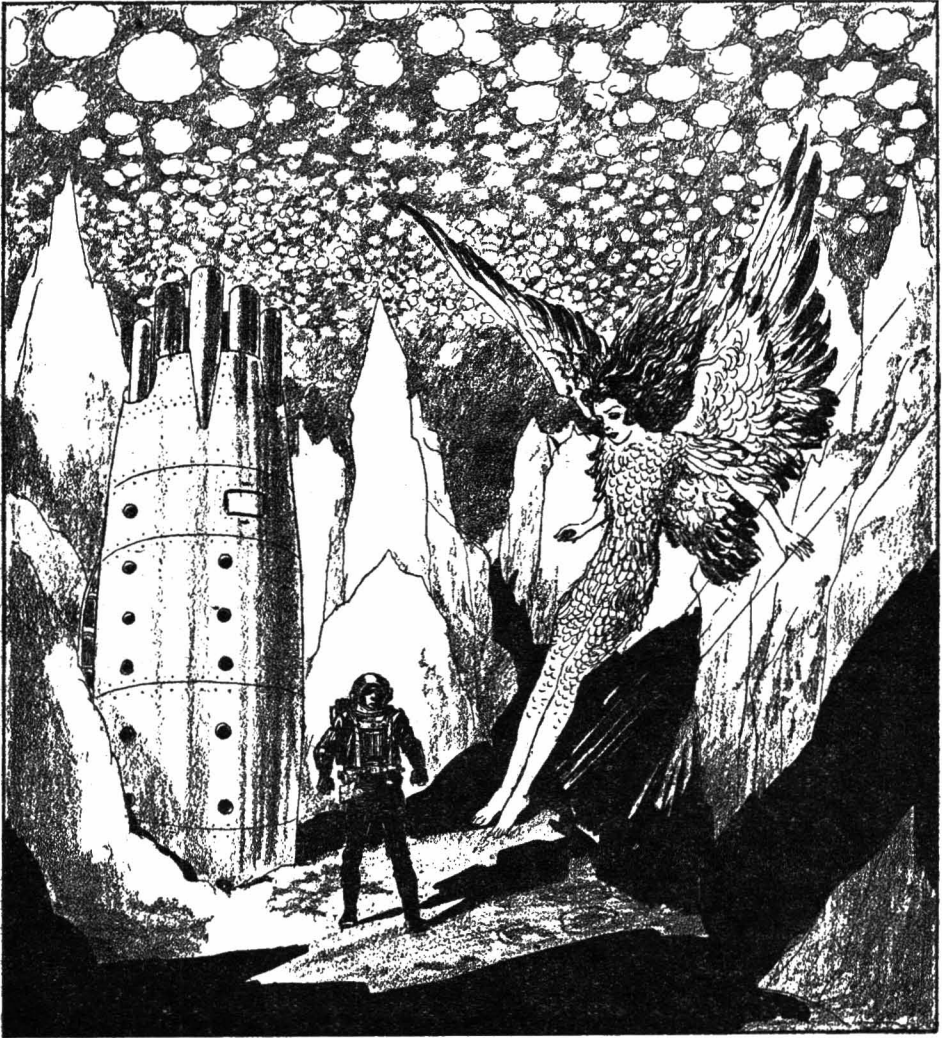
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*Wings thrown back and red hair streaming stiffly, she
was falling like a plummet!*

En Route to Pluto

by Wallace West

WHY do we keep spinning around like this?" sang Yahna plaintively as she stared out of a porthole and watched the stars chasing each other madly across the black sky. Then once more she flapped her great

red wings until they stirred up every speck of dust in the control cabin.

"I've told you a thousand times before"—I tried to keep the irritation out of my voice and stifle a sneeze at the same time—"that the gyroscopic stabi-

lizer is broken and that it's a two-man job to fix it while we're in flight. You'll just have to get accustomed to seeing the galaxies shoot past until we arrive on Pluto."

"Why can't I help you repair the gyroscope, dearest?" She struck a perfect high C on the last word; so perfect a note, in fact, that I had to resist the impulse to pick up a monkey wrench and brain her. Why, oh, why had I ever yielded to that temptation to elope with a Martian bird woman?

It had all seemed so perfectly logical that night three months ago, when I had sat in the Agan Café at Crotan, the underground capital city of Mars, and imbibed six pipes of gurlack one after the other. Here was I, Jack Harkness, outward bound from the Earth to Pluto on the first journey of exploration to that outermost of the planets.

And there was Yahna, tired of exhibiting her feathered charms, and ready to chuck it all—she had had six pipes of gurlack, too—and escape the responsibilities of one who could trace her ancestry back through ten thousand generations of entertainers, and, if she had to die, do so in the cold, clean depths of interstellar space.

It had all seemed to smack of ancient knight errantry—ladies in distress and so forth. I muffled my new-found friend in furs so that her wings wouldn't be so noticeable, slipped her past the guards, who naturally wouldn't have been at all anxious to lose one of Mars' few thousand remaining bird people, and sneaked her through endless dim passageways to the airport.

There I forced the amazed commandant to marry us at the point of a heat gun—after all, I had no desire to create a scandal which might lead to interstellar complications—and high-tailed it out into space with most of Crotan's patrol fleet at our heels.

For several weeks thereafter life had been one grand sweet song. Yahna was

charming, well-educated and beautiful, although so fragile that I sometimes feared she would break if I touched her. She talked—or rather sang—English like a Metropolitan Opera star. The bird people are unable to talk in monotones, but accompany the words with the loveliest harmonies which greatly enhance their meaning.

At first her naïveté about things Earthian intrigued and amused me. But finally the confinement and those eternal wide-eyed questions began to get on my nerves. I tried to ignore this irritation at first. Then I fought it bitterly. But by the time we were nearing Pluto, Yahna's mere presence was on the verge of driving me insane.

I really believe that it was our difference of outlook rather than our physical differences which caused the trouble—that plus the fact that long space journeys are nerve racking in themselves. I've been co-pilot with a Martian on plenty of hard trips, and managed beautifully. However, this was something different.

THE AVERAGE MARTIAN, such as one sees so often in New York these days, is hardly to be distinguished from an Earthian—a trifle taller and more slightly built—except for his massive, somewhat humped shoulders, queer, fiery-red hair and downy face and hands.

But the primitive Martian of, say, one hundred thousand years ago, was quite a different creature. His body was covered with bright-red feathers as protection from the cold, while, due to the lesser gravitation of the planet, he had developed a pair of splendid wings.

Then, as Mars' atmosphere became more and more rarified through the millennia, these wings were unable to sustain its inhabitants any longer. The structures naturally atrophied, as did those of our own penguins, for exam-

ple. To-day the puny stumps are amputated at birth.

Even in those times, however, the Martians were highly civilized, and when they were forced underground by the growing cold and lack of air, they strove to preserve their former ability to fly in one special class of the population.

In the course of time the latter became the entertainers of the planet—dancers, singers, actors, etc. In order that their wings might not atrophy, great gymnasiums with artificially high air pressure were constructed, where those of the entertaining class could exercise each day. In addition to this their every want was cared for. The result is that after all these centuries they still can fly as well as their ancestors could, and are almost objects of veneration for the average Martian.

I was jerked out of my reverie by the melting music of Yahna's voice.

"I said, dearest, why can't I help you repair the gyroscope?" she chanted as she slipped a caressing wing over my shoulders. It was then that I noticed that the long confinement without her usual exercise was doing Yahna's plumage no good. In fact—perish the thought!—she showed signs of molting.

"Look, sweetheart," I pleaded as gently as I was able. "You wouldn't know a gyroscope if you saw one. Why don't you read a book or something? I couldn't think of you getting your pretty self all covered with grease, fixing machinery. You're made for singing and dancing and flying. Now run along like a good girl. I've got all I can do keeping the course."

"But why are we going on this crazy trip, after all?" She sat down on the floor near the control seat and wrapped her wings around her until only her piquant, snub-nosed face showed amidst the shimmering plumage. "I thought that space travel was exciting. But I find it very dull."

"We're out here because Earth needs

a new supply of cheap raw materials," I answered doggedly, after shifting a quadrant which gave the starboard rocket more juice. "If Earth can find a source of radioactive minerals on Pluto she can claim it for herself and sell it to Mars and Venus. That will put some of the unemployed to work and prevent any more attempts at revolution."

"Why won't Mars and Venus get the same idea?"

"But that's impossible. They don't know the secret of our heat guns." I nodded toward the cabin wall, where I always kept the ugly little weapon hanging ready in case of emergencies. "Your scientists were using that same idea to produce great extremes of cold. We stole the invention, turned it upside down, so to speak, and produced the heat-ray transformer, and still they can't figure out how we did it. Those foreigners——" I stopped, embarrassed by my own enthusiasm.

"But I still don't see why you're spending most of your life shut up in a stupid little box spinning through space when you could be dancing in the sunshine and singing with the birds," she persisted. "I suppose you'll say it's to make money. All you Earthians do." Her large green eyes became troubled. "What is this money you're so fond of?"

"Well," I began, "money is—well—you buy things with money. Now if I have five apples——"

Suddenly an unreasoning rage seized me as I realized that this girl had no conception of the unlimited power which wealth could give or the tragedy a lack of it could bring. She had never had to buy or sell—to fight for her very existence, to see her friends starve——

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, shut up," I yelled. "Why? Why? Why? Nothing but fool questions. What are you trying to do? Make a groundling out of me? Listen! A space pilot is the luckiest man alive. If he's ambitious there are no heights he may not climb

to. With the inside information he picks up on his journeys he may become banker, captain of industry, even dictator. Oh, you don't understand. You're just a throwback—a myth—a fairy tale. There's no place for you in modern life. Why on Earth did I ever hook up with you! Go on—read your book!"

Her wings drooping forlornly, and tears trembling on her long lashes, Yahna wandered over to the window seat under one of the portholes and picked up a volume of the "Rubáiyát" which I had given her.

"A book of verses underneath the bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread—and
thou——"

She sang the words, giving them a beauty which I had never imagined, and causing my face to burn with shame.

"Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh, wilderness were paradise enow!

"What's a wilderness, Jack?" she murmured pathetically. "It—it sounds nice."

For answer I hooked the controls, went over and took her quivering little body in my arms. Poor kid! Of course she was perfectly useless out here. But it was all my fault. As I kissed her I made another of my vows never again to hurt her feelings.

LANDING a rocket plane is a ticklish job under the best of conditions. You have to coast down on the fading forward beams with enough momentum to keep the ship from tipping sidewise, yet not so much that she splits her seams when she hits. Bad judgment either way is bound to have unpleasant results, especially on a strange planet.

If we weren't killed on a smash landing, we still didn't have the equipment necessary to repair any leaking seams. On the other hand, if we fell over, the ship would be as helpless as a fish out of water, until we built some kind of a

scaffolding and hoisted her upright—another impossible job.

Multiply those difficulties about a thousand times and maybe you'll realize the spot I was in, with my vessel spinning around on her nose about once every two seconds. How I wished for good old Bob Filgus, my engineer, whom I had deserted so gaily at Crotan so that I might elope with Yahna. The two of us could have fixed that gyroscope in an hour. However——

I squinted through the porthole at the forsaken surface of Pluto, which now was rushing upward at the rate of several hundred miles an hour, despite the fact that I was braking with every ounce of power. It made my head swim to watch the dizzy spectacle, and the dazzling white beams of the four forward torps made my eyes water.

Although the Sun was only a pin point behind us, it still lighted up the planet about 200 times brighter than the Moon does the Earth when it is full. Under this illumination I finally managed to determine that the terrain ahead consisted of saw-toothed mountains of tremendous height, pushing themselves upward through an otherwise solid sheet of ice or snow.

Snow meant plenty of atmosphere. Air would cushion us to a great degree and make avoidance of a crash landing much easier. Pluto's temperature, I must explain, is so low during half of its circle around the Sun that its air congeals. But when it dips inside the orbit of Neptune for the other half of its slow swing, the surface becomes only about 100 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit; the air gasifies and life is theoretically possible for human beings.

The fact that I might be able to make a blind landing without a crack-up reassured me somewhat. But what about tipping over and becoming stranded? Even the most delicate altimeters wouldn't help me there. I needed my eyes and stable ground at which to look.

"This reminds me of the time when I was a little girl and we used to play with those funny Earth toys called tops," chimed Yahna, who was peering through the window over my shoulder. "Why do they stand on end, Jack? I suppose I'm being awfully stupid again, but I never could understand why they didn't fall over——"

"You wouldn't!" I grunted before I could stop myself. Then I let out a whoop of astonishment and delight. Why, of course! Why hadn't I thought of it before? A ship couldn't possibly tip over while spinning. No matter how softly I brought her down, she'd stay upright if I landed on a fairly level surface. The nose probably would drill itself into the ground for a yard or so, and the rocket ports would be clogged, but I could fix that easily.

I grabbed Yahna by the shoulders and kissed her enthusiastically—on the nose, it so happened—then made a dash for the controls. We'd make it yet!

WE CAME DOWN soft as a feather, blasting the snow beneath us into nothingness and drilling into the frozen earth beneath it. As I had anticipated, the sudden stoppage of our spin sent both of us sliding round and round the floor of the control room until we jammed under the chart table, out of breath, but with no other injuries than a few bruises.

I staggered to my feet only to fall on my nose, so dizzy that I could hardly see. Yahna did the same thing, after which we sat and laughed helplessly at each other until the vertigo wore off.

When we could navigate once more we started exploring the ship, and found that no appreciable damage had been done. The forward ports were, of course, buried in the ground, and it was not until we reached the rocket firing chamber in the stern that we saw daylight. The snowdrift into which we

had dived had fallen in on the ship and almost buried it.

"Now what do we explore?" chanted the girl as she stared through the rear porthole at the forbidding gray landscape. "Those raw materials you spoke about certainly look raw enough to satisfy anybody."

"Well"—I hesitated after studying various meters—"the air pressure is about the same as that on Earth and its composition seems breathable. Gravity about that of Mars. Temperature 172 below zero. I think we could chance going outside in space suits——"

"Space suits." She laughed, ruffling her feathers. "Well, you can wear one of the ugly things if you want to, but I'm going out this way. After all, the temperature back home often drops about as low as this during the night. And, oh! I want so to fly again!"

"You'll freeze your feathers off," I grunted as I wriggled into my suit and adjusted the helmet. "I'll take some blankets outside, anyway, in case you get a chill."

"Aren't you going to take your heat gun along, too?" Yahna trilled as I threw my weight on the levers which opened the outer port.

"What for?" I grunted as I heaved and twisted. As usual, the cursed door had been slightly calcined during our passage through the atmosphere, and didn't want to budge. "There's no life on Pluto at this temperature."

"Why not?"

"Well, because——" I groaned; then, in order to stop a further flood of senseless questions, yanked the holster out of the rack and buckled it around my waist.

The port swung open at last, letting in a thin blast of air so deathly cold that I snapped the glass front of my helmet shut at once.

But Yahna didn't seem to mind in the

least. She threw her arms wide and took in great gasps of air.

"Oh, how lovely," she chanted as I again marveled at the ability of Martians to withstand great extremes of temperature. "It's like the wine your 'Rubáiyát' talks about after all these weeks of synthetic atmosphere. I'm going out."

Springing gracefully through the port-hole, she landed on the snow outside, spreading her gleaming ten-foot wings, beat them together exactly as a bird does, and fairly screamed with delight. A moment later she left the ground and went swooping up into the gray twilight.

I paused a moment to toss out a roll of blankets and to close the port. I was afraid the batteries in the engine room might freeze otherwise. Then I, too climbed out on the snow bank surrounding the ship.

AFTER WATCHING YAHNA swoop and glide like a swallow until I began to get dizzy, I turned my attention to the surrounding landscape. The first thing which puzzled me was the snow. Under ordinary circumstance, if a space ship, its surface heated by passage through an atmosphere, should land in a snow bank, it would melt a great hole in the drift. In this case, however, although the snow was slowly receding from about the vessel, there was no sign of melting.

The next thing I noticed was that the vent from my helmet was not surrounded by a cloud of vapor as it should have been, but that my breath, upon reaching the outer air, formed a sort of miniature snowstorm, which eddied around me and finally fell to the ground.

Frowning, I picked up a double handful of snow in my electrically heated mittens and stared at it in bewilderment. It vanished almost at once; but when it was all gone the gloves were not wet. The snow really seemed to evaporate rather than melt. For a moment the

thing baffled me. Then I remembered the temperature reading I had made in the cabin. Of course! At 172 below zero, Fahrenheit, carbon dioxide would congeal. The stuff which covered the surface of Pluto was not snow, but solidified gas!

My curiosity satisfied on this point, I began examining the outcroppings of shiny gray rock which pierced the drifts. I broke off a chunk and hefted it. Queer stuff! It had scarcely any weight at all. Could it be? After some difficulty I fished out a match from one of my pockets, lighted it and touched it to the rock. There was a blaze of light as the stuff ignited. I dropped it just in time to avoid a bad burn, then was almost knocked over as the heat gasified part of the snow bank on which it had fallen.

"Good Lord," I gasped as I watched the flame burrow deeper and deeper into the drift. "If the whole plain is covered with magnesium and this sets it off, I'll go up in a cloud of smoke in about thirty seconds." Luckily, the specimen I had dropped was so small that it burned itself out before it melted its way through to the bottom of the drift.

When the great flare died out I blinked helplessly, until my eyes became reaccustomed to the surrounding twilight. Then, as I was recovering from this shock, I heard Yahna screaming high above me. A moment later I located her. Wings thrown back and red hair streaming stiffly, she was falling like a plummet!

Just as it seemed certain that she would crash, the girl swung her wings forward and landed, light as a feather, not ten feet from me.

"The flare? What was it, Jack?" she crescendoed.

"Nothing important," I lied. "Just a little magnesium I touched off accidentally."

"And those clouds," she continued, pointing upward breathlessly.

"Clouds!" I jeered. "If it's cold enough to freeze carbon dioxide there can't be any clouds. Even you ought to know that!" To humor her I glanced at the sky; then, despite the cold, I opened the visor of my helmet to look again. Yahna was right! The sky was full of little puffy white clouds. What was more, they didn't act like human clouds should. Instead of drifting with the wind, they seemed to be drifting *toward us* from all directions, as though attracted by the recent flare.

"I'm—I'm cold." Yahna shivered.

"I should think you would be, gallivanting around up there like that. Let's get back to the ship."

It did seem cold, even inside my suit, as we hurried back to the hole in the snow above which projected the stern of the rocket.

"Could it be the clouds causing it?" chattered my companion as she stumbled along beside me. "They seemed unfriendly, somehow—up there."

"Of course not," I answered, but I could not resist an apprehensive glance over my shoulder at those queer, diaphanous puffs of white. There were hundreds of them now, not only behind us, but also closing in in front. "Maybe you're right," I muttered grudgingly at last. "Come on. Let's run."

"I—I can't," she quavered. "My legs—feel funny."

For answer I picked her up bodily and dashed for the ship, those red wings brushing the snow into strange whispers behind me.

BUT when we reached the *Pluto* another shock awaited us. Due to the radiation of the still-warm hull, the walls of carbon-dioxide snow had evaporated so that they now stood all of ten feet away from the ship. There was no way of reaching the stern port. The forward port, down at the ground level, was, of course, still locked from the inside.

"Could I help, Jack?" quavered Yahna, struggling out of my arms.

"Well, I guess maybe you could at that," I conceded. "If you would fly to the door, pull it open and go inside and throw me a rope, I might make it."

She sprang forward lightly, reached the handholds on the port, braced herself against the side of the ship and tugged with all her strength, wings fluttering wildly. Nothing happened.

"It's stuck, Jack," she called at last. "I'm not strong enough."

"Come on back then, and get under these blankets," I directed. "We'll have to try something else."

"I'm sorry," she whimpered as she fluttered back and nestled under the pile of blankets I had prepared. "I never was so cold in all my— Oh! Jack! Look at those clouds now!"

I glanced up, then ducked instinctively. There was no doubt about it. Those clouds were alive, and they meant us no good. From all directions they were closing in upon us, until they resembled a great, fleecy blanket which dimmed the light of the Sun. And as they came closer the cold steadily increased.

"I've worked in a space suit in open space," I groaned as I beat my arms against my chest to restore circulation, "but I never felt cold like this. It must be close to 250 below zero. What on earth's causing it, do you think?"

"Could they be alive—some sort of frost people?" she whispered. "Look, they move as though under some central command! On Mars there are legends—" She moaned as the cold bit deeper, even under the thick pile of blankets.

I started to say "Nonsense!" then bit my lips as I recalled that Yahna had been right on a number of occasions recently.

"Well," I amended, "if they're some sort of frost demons, my heat gun should

stop them." My hands were clumsy and slow as I struggled with the holster, but the gun finally came loose. I pressed the trigger and sent a pencil of flame sweeping back and forth across the cloud blanket, which now hung only a few hundred feet above our heads.

Again nothing happened! The ray was absorbed as though by a mass of cotton. This gun, which could stop a yaggoth or a welk at 500 paces, was as useless as a cap pistol against these devils.

"I can hardly breathe," whimpered Yahna. "They're doing something to the air, Jack." She buried her head under the blankets.

And once more she was right. The very air around us seemed congealing into a snowstorm. Undoubtedly the oxygen and other gases were beginning to behave as the carbon dioxide already had done. I switched on my artificial air supply and got some relief, but could not avoid the gnawing cold. The temperature was undoubtedly hovering at the unbelievable level of 275 below, much lower than that of outer space. To make it worse, a hurricane, caused no doubt by the vacuum created through the air's solidification, began raging about me and threatened to sweep me off my feet.

THROUGH IT ALL the clouds looked down, soullessly, calculatingly, it seemed, to my dimming senses, but unquestionably alive in some alien fashion. I laced them frantically with my heat gun, but produced not the slightest retreat. We were slowly being frozen. A few moments now and we would become specimens for some un-Earthly laboratory.

"Yahna," I wheezed painfully, "can you hear me? Those devils have beaten us. Good-by sweetheart. You're a swell egg. I'm sorry I've been so rotten."

"Good-by, Jack," she sang hysteri-

cally as she flung off the blankets, staggered to her feet and crept into my arms. "I'm sorry, too—that I've been so—useless. But I thought you humans said you could always fight—devil—with—fire."

"What's that you said?" I yelled.

"Getting—warmer—now," she gasped as she crumpled in a forlorn little heap at my feet.

"Yahna," I pleaded wildly as I heaped the blankets over her again.

"Guess—have fight frost devils—with ——" Her voice trailed off into a discord and stopped.

"With what?" I screamed, shaking her frantically. "Don't give up, Yahna. With what?" In my hysterical fright I was suddenly convinced that if only she would say the right word we could be saved.

"Go 'way," she whimpered. "Wanna go sleep. Cold!"

"Cold!" I sprang upright and shook my fist madly at the hovering cloud people. "Cold!" I beat my hands against my chest until some vestige of circulation returned to them, then searched my pockets for a screw driver. What a fool I had been!

Crouching down on the snow, I worked desperately on the heat gun. Of course, you are familiar with the way those weapons work—just the opposite of the old-style electric refrigerator—building up heat by a sort of transformer until it emerges as pure vibration.

Could I do it in the few minutes of life yet remaining to me? Again and again I dropped the screw driver into the snow and scratched frantically to retrieve it. But at last I succeeded in reversing the circuits.

Too weak to stand now, I lifted my leaden arm, aimed at the living cloud banks, pressed the trigger and prayed.

The gun snarled, louder than the storm. A narrow column of snowflakes

formed between the muzzle and the drifting mists above. Then a strange, agonized ululation tore through the darkness. The gun bucked and jumped as I swung it back and forth. Was it my imagination, or were the clouds thinning, breaking up, drifting away? Was it possible that these frost beings, although impervious to flame, could be fought in their own medium?

Things grew black around me. A pleasant lethargy stole over my body. But I clung doggedly to the gun with both hands as my thoughts raced like those of a drowning man. Let's see—gun has amplification to the fortieth power. That means close to—460 degrees below zero—absolute zero—nothing. Absolutely nothing living could exist—that temperature—— Poor, dear Yahna—smart girl, after all—— If I——

"JACK! Jack!" Somebody was shaking me fiercely. "Are you alive, Jack? They're all gone. Why don't you speak to me?"

"Another of your fool questions. How can an icicle speak!" I groaned as I forced open my eyes. Then I blinked in astonishment. Yahna was bending over me as I lay in the cabin of the *Pluto*.

"After the frost devils ran away I

went back to the ship, managed to pry the door open, tied a rope around you, hitched the other end to a windlass and pulled you across," she trilled, looking as proud as a peacock—if peacocks were feminine and had red feathers.

"Well, you little devil!" Even had I tried I would not have been able to restrain my admiration—and I did not try.

"I'm glad you took my suggestion about the frost people," continued this new Yahna. "Now, as soon as you feel better I'll help you fix the gyroscope. I'm tired of being treated like some sort of doll."

Several hours later—I was not really much the worse for wear if you discount frostbitten ears, nose and fingers—we finished the job on the gyroscope.

"Do you think I could ever become a space pilot, Jack?" asked the grease-smearred, weary girl, as she crawled out from under the big machine and sat down beside me on the floor. "This has been fun."

"Well"—I grinned judicially as I kissed the only clean spot on her face—"if you feel like that I'll let you help pilot the *Pluto* home after we finish our explorations. And I'll coach you for the quizz, too. But I don't think," I added as I surveyed her thoughtfully, "that you ought to face the examiners until I have you dry-cleaned."