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Title: Wings Across the Cosmos

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross) (1908-1960)

Date first posted: Jan. 23, 2021

Date last updated: Jan. 23, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210159

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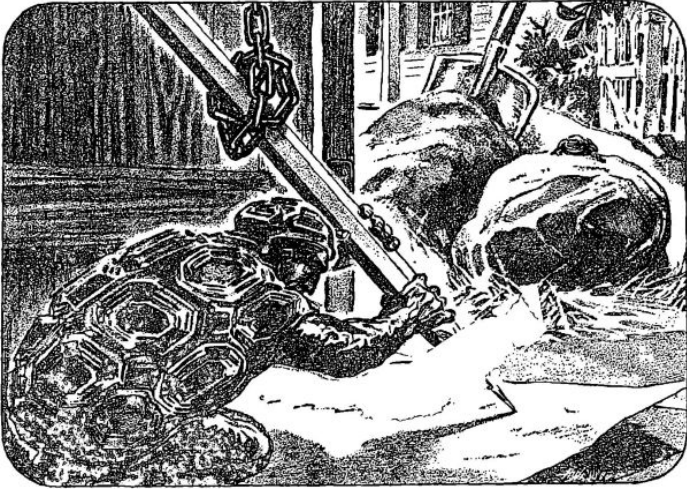
WINGS ACROSS
the
COSMOS

By
POLTON CROSS

Author of "Chameleon Planet," "Hybrid Space," etc.

First published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*,
June, 1938.

*The Last Surviving Member of a Mighty Race Speeds Through the Void on a Strange
Quest!*



A chain is supporting the pencil.

My name is Amos Latham, and I am I hope a reasonably intelligent man. I know nearly all the subjects encompassed in a modern education, but I must admit my knowledge fell far short on the day that I found an object resembling the half shell of a walnut lying at the bottom of a neatly drilled five-foot hole in my best sweet pea bed.

My job? In a way, I'm a farmer. I like to experiment in grafting, pursue if possible hybrid experiments on the lines laid down by Mendel.

I found the walnut on June 7th, 1961, just six days ago. It was a perplexing puzzle in itself to decide how an object so small, unless it were a meteorite, had got to such a depth overnight—but the puzzle deepened when I found that by no means at hand could I begin to budge it!

I began to suspect the thing had some sort of underpart that went down like a shaft into the ground at the bottom of the hole it had burrowed—that what I saw was only the upper part of some sort of buried spear. That being so, the only thing to do was to clear the sides of the thin shaft and dig the object out.

It took me half a day to make the shaft wide enough to permit me getting down it, but even then I was no better off. I could see clearly enough that the walnut was simply a hemisphere of shell-like substance—but of a vastly incredible weight! I strained and tugged at it until my fingers ached. But I couldn't shift it in the slightest. I just couldn't convince myself that such a fact was true—but it was.

To say my curiosity was aroused is putting it mildly. I went into the garage and brought out a block and tackle. I erected it on a pretty stout scaffolding tripod and fixed the chain clamp around the inch-square lump. The tripod snapped; but the object didn't budge!

That settled it. Beyond question I'd happened on something that was outside all normal laws, at least in the matter of weight. I remembered something about electrons and protons in contact—neutrons—and went inside the house to telephone Bradley.

Bradley is a physicist, in the employ of the Bureau of Standards. He arrived late that afternoon. Bradley, with his usual foresight, had brought along a powerful breakdown truck, complete with crane, trailing behind his car.

I greeted him warmly as he came toward the house, but as he returned the greeting there was doubt in his closely set gray eyes.

"Where is this walnut of yours?" he asked, after we had had a drink.

I took him out to the sweet pea bed, or rather what was left of it after my excavational work.

The thing was still there, and the faint smile vanished from Bradley's face as he tried vainly to shift it.

"Boy, you have got onto something!" he whistled in amazement. "If that stuff belongs on this world I'm clean crazy. Anyway, we'll soon see."

Scrambling back to the top of the small crater he signaled the truckmen. They backed their conveyance clumsily into the garden and watched curiously as they lowered the crane chain. Finally we managed to encompass the walnut in the clamp and gave the pullway order.

A terrific strain was thrown on the chain as it slowly creaked and groaned over the winch. Powerful though the truck's engine was, it took every vestige of it to lift that absurdly tiny thing from the ground. Very slowly it rose up, inch by inch. We saw that the underside was apparently like the rest of it. Brad was watching the thing keenly.

Finally, we had the object deposited on a huge stone block that had once been part of a well at the bottom of the garden. There the task of the astounded truckmen ended. They went

off round-eyed and puzzled in a settling haze of dust, leaving us both to our own devices.

Smoking pensively, Bradley studied the object for a while, then turned to me.

“Dense as hell,” he said bluntly. “Pretty similar to the stuff that must exist at the core of Earth, though infinitely denser than even that.”

I nodded slowly and waited for him to continue.

“That lump came from somewhere out in space,” he resumed. “Where, we don’t know, but we can hazard a guess—probably from the region of the giant star areas. Specks of substance like this floating around in space probably made up the cores of the very worlds around us—stuff so densely packed that it had an unbelievable weight. It may be a fragment from a sun where matter is densely packed.”

“You mean a white dwarf?” I suggested.

He nodded.

“That’s it. Take the Companion of Sirius, for example. That is a white dwarf, and Adams at Mount Wilson Observatory proved long ago that the density there is two thousand times greater than that of platinum. Take a matchbox full of the stuff and it would require a derrick to raise it. That’s the kind of thing we’ve got here. That’s why it ploughed so deep into the earth when it arrived. Strange it didn’t burn up; can’t quite figure out that angle.”

I pondered. Physics isn’t entirely in my line; but Brad hadn’t finished talking. He studied the object more closely for a while, then went on.

“Come to think of it, this substance might not be from a sun, but from a cooled world. Eddington tells us that heat is not entirely necessary for compressibility of matter. It is not essential to have a temperature of about ten million degrees in order to smash atoms. Terrific pressure alone will suffice.

“The shell of satellite electrons which can be broken by the attacks of X-rays, or the fierce collisions going on in the interior of a star, can also break by the application of continued pressure on a dense world. This produces an almost bare nucleus with the heavier atoms retaining a few of the closest electrons, forming a structure of perhaps one hundredth of a complete atom.

“The consequent compression produces vast weight by comparison with sizes to which we’re accustomed. Take the example in physics: in a monatomic gas like helium a thirty-two fold increase in pressure gives an eight fold increase of density, if the heat of compression is retained in the gas. There you have an example of heat pressure—but on a world that is a child of a compressed sun—the Companion of Sirius for example—the very pressure of that world would produce similar, even far greater results. At the very roughest estimate this thing here weighs about one ton to the cubic inch—and that’s plenty heavy!”

“And now that it’s here what do we do with it?” I asked quietly.

He shrugged.

“Nothing we can do, except give it to the meteorite section of the museum. I’ll make arrangements for it to be picked up. It’ll be about two weeks, though; I’ve a special Government job waiting for me.”

Talking, we went into the house and had dinner. It was late when Brad finally left with the promise to return in two weeks. Once I’d seen him off I strolled over in the moonlight calm to survey again that uncanny lump.

But it had changed! I got quite a shock as the rays of the amber moon smote now upon a tiny, tortoiselike head. Bent legs, exceptionally powerful, jutted outward from the shell. The

legs moved slowly as I went toward the thing, but it stopped on the stone. Perhaps it realized that to fall off would mean another five foot plunge into the ground.

I studied the creature from a distance, observing the viciously curved scar of a mouth. Its resemblance to a tortoise was now quite remarkable. It was smaller, of course, and incredibly heavier!

I shall never know if it was impulse or plain curiosity that prompted me to extend an ingratiating hand toward it. Not knowing what type of intelligence the thing possessed that seemed the only way I could show friendship.

A second later I regretted it. The tiny head shot forward toward my outstretched hand, faster than the striking paw of a cat. Before I knew it the creature's terrible mouth had scissored open and shut. There was a momentary gleam of small, needle-pointed teeth, then I was gazing at a numbed, crimsoned finger from which the top, to the first knuckle, had been completely severed!

For a second or two I hardly knew what to think, the shock stunned me. I blundered back into the house, cauterized and bandaged the numbed member. Then, fuming with anger both at the hostility of my visitor and my own stupidity, I sat down to figure the thing out.

I didn't get very far. I couldn't understand how a thing like the walnut had traveled through the void of space and arrived with an impact that had buried it five feet in the ground—yet could live here in an atmosphere of oxygen and hydrogen. Either it was completely adaptable to both space and air, or else it had traveled in some kind of protecting case that had fallen away at the frictional heat of our upper atmosphere.

I meditated once upon killing the infernal thing, but I refrained for two reasons. The bullet would probably glance off such armor-plated density. Secondly, the object was going to interest the scientists. I made up my mind to call Bradley the next day.

My sleep was strangely disturbed—physically by the burning pain of returning sensation in my injured finger, and mentally by the memory of the walnut and the realization in my occasional wakeful spells that it was still outside, a densely heavy, vicious-jawed devil.

At times I dreamed, but they were dreams of a quality surely denied to any sane man. I beheld a world of intense darkness lying still and airless under a sky powdered with unfamiliar nebulae and constellations. There was a sense of vast loneliness and incompleteness, of enormous stretches of time occupied by an abstract state that I could only roughly determine as meditation. Meditation? By the walnut? Well, that was how it looked.

As though to substantiate my guess I glimpsed the walnut upon this darkly empty plain, surrounded by the outlines of what dimly appeared to be a city—but a city with no earthly similarity, ruled by machines and yet deserted. In the midst of these perplexing immensities the walnut brooded alone—

Suddenly I was awake, feverishly hot, with a name burning in my brain, the oddest, most astounding name. It sounded like—Yithan Kan.

I screamed it out three times, then suddenly remembered where I was. Dazedly I looked through the window toward the dawn light. That ton weight dark object was still on the block of stone. I shuddered. The memory of that ghastly dream with its terrific sense of weight and loneliness was still seared into my mind.

I felt ill as I got up and dressed. My finger had ceased bleeding but was anything but healthy to look at. It had taken on a curious brittle appearance most unusual for normal

coagulation. The finger itself felt curiously different—lead is the only way to describe it.

I thought once of phoning Doc Shaw to come over. Then, mainly because I detest the fussiness of physicians and because of my complete faith in my own first aid efforts, I let the idea drop. Instead I phoned New York, but to my annoyance Bradley was already in Washington.

It occurred to me with a sudden panicky feeling that for another two weeks I would be alone with this atrocity from an unknown world—unless of course I took the obvious course and left.

I decided against that. Don't ask me why: I can only put it down to the same lure that drives perfectly sane men into absolute danger by the very force of some intangible fascination. I went outside and watched the walnut in the hot morning sunshine. Its capacity for motionlessness amazed me. It did not seem to have budged a thirty-second of an inch since it had been placed there.

Keeping a respectable distance away I decided to call out that absurd name.

"Yithan Kan! Yithan Kan," I shouted, "can you hear me? Can you understand me?"

The beady eyes, like microscopic garnets, studied me unwaveringly, and I returned the stare like a man hypnotized by a snake. That very act did something to me. I could feel a groping and plucking at the neurones and receptive cells of my brain.

That which followed was not exactly an exchange of communications—in fact I do not believe my brain was developed enough to pass any coherent thought. It was more a series of mental images from which I gathered that this weird object, on arrival, had been stunned by the terrific impact. Only its super hardness and density had saved its life.

It was, as I had guessed, perfectly adaptable to any conditions. Its natural environment was one of intense cold—interstellar cold. Here on Earth it had apparently adapted itself immediately to the drastic change in conditions. I have heard of plants with such amazing adaptability, but the idea of an intelligent organism with similar abilities was unbelievable. Much to my surprise I learned that Yithan Kan was the female of its species.

So much I gathered on that first communication, then the spell was broken by some slight sound made by the wind. Disturbed in both mind and body I went into the house and tried to figure out what I ought to do, particularly how to improve my physical condition. I felt bone weary, and for no apparent reason.

It occurred to me that I might have been poisoned by the bite, but a second examination of my injured finger and a study of a droplet of blood through my microscope revealed no such signs. I wasn't poisoned; it was something else that had gripped me—something subtly different.

Several times I wondered if I ought to feed the walnut, then decided it didn't seem necessary. From what I could gather it absorbed energy directly—probably from the shorter cosmic rays which abound freely in space and also to a good extent on Earth.

With the passage of time my conviction of illness increased. From my injured finger the leaden sensation had traveled the entire length of my arm, changing it from normal color to a stone gray hue. I began to become really alarmed.

As I prepared lunch, though I did it more from force of habit than because I was hungry, I received another shock. I'd decided on canned beans to go with some cold meat, and in the most natural fashion possible I grabbed the tin with my injured hand to pull it from the shelf.

The can felt like pulp in my grasp—I found myself staring in amazement as juice and squashed beans spurted from the cracks in the tin, so tightly had I gripped it! I doubt if a hammer could have flattened it more effectively. I dropped the battered can in stupefied horror, then looked at my hand. It wasn't scarred or cut by the can's sharp edges—only weighted, almost without feeling, horribly numb. I flexed my fingers that I could hardly feel—all save the injured one which wouldn't move at all.

I forgot all about a meal; the complexity of this new happening forced me to start pacing around, trying to figure out what had occurred.

From a sense of horror I graduated by easy stages to one of interest, even triumph. I spent some time testing my strength on the hardest things I could find, felt a certain joy in discovering that most metals would bend easily in my one-handed grip, that even small stones crushed into powder as though cramped in a vise.

Of course, I knew that the walnut was at the bottom of it. But how had this thing come about? Had the bite it had given me started some condition of matter such as could only exist on the unknown, unimaginably heavy world from which the creature had come? What was the explanation?

Man, clearly, is what the scientists vaguely call a "fortuitous concourse of atoms in the shape of a man," a concourse that has the mystic power of thinking. He is in effect a very definite movable knot of energy condensed into a visible form. In the beginning of time some cosmic radiation changed a free energy state into a definite material build-up called protoplasm, and after the intermediate stages it became Man.

Somewhere, the enigmatic occurrence of mutations had come about—the definite change from one species into another effected by— Just what? Science is still hazy on that. Maybe radiations once again—unseen, undetectable, operating upon material structures at certain intervals of time.

These radiations have produced through the ages a change so enormous as to elevate protoplasm into living man. Nothing has been destroyed because nothing in the universe can be destroyed: only change is possible. Unseen forces altered atoms into a new concourse, formed a new pattern, and ultimately built them into the shape of Man.

But if this entity possessed—as was highly probable—many of these spatial radiations as part of its natural make-up, it was also possible that in the fashion of radium's hideously destructive emanations, a good deal of radiation had entered my body at the moment of that finger severance. And, since this creature was infinitely more powerful than I, representing a far mightier state of condensed matter, it would be possible to bend me entirely to its own matter state just as a strong will can overpower a weak one.

In that case the atoms and electrons of my body were even now undergoing a change! Pressures and radiations, operating on an infinitely small scale, were at work within me, changing my whole natural formation into a new condition of matter!

My strength! The dead weight increasing in my arm! The crawling numbness creeping around my shoulders and neck!

"God!" I cried hoarsely, leaping up as the searing truth struck home to me. "God—" I brought my hand down bitterly on the table with the intensity of my thoughts. The tabletop splintered as though split with an ax.

I scarcely heeded it. I had become accustomed by now to the frightful power of that left arm. With every hour it was growing heavier, tauter, more unwieldy—yet as the same

conviction of strain passed around my shoulders I began to feel an awareness of new balance. I felt less one-sided. It could only mean that my new weight was distributing itself equally by slow degrees.

Struck with a sudden thought I hunted up a tape line and, standing flat against a wall, measured myself. I felt a queer sensation at my heart when I discovered I was two inches shorter in height! Then a compressing, contracting effect was in force! My mass was becoming smaller and denser. . .

Frightened, I went outside and tried to communicate with the walnut, but my brain emanations were useless. Nor did the thing attempt to communicate with me, though it watched me with motionless intentness.

But the reason for it all? That was what I could not understand. That bite had been deliberate; the walnut had purposely impregnated me, but to what purpose? Sheer malice? No: an intelligence so profound would not stoop to so earthly a thing as malice. There was another reason—perhaps it lay somewhere in the realms of those weird, disturbing dreams I had had.

And still no thought of leaving entered my head, or if it did I refused to heed it. I believe the creature itself was responsible for that, holding me by some indefinable shackle of will power, forcing me onward into a state I could only guess at, but which savored with every passing hour of a place unworldly, lying across inconceivable distances.

Quite suddenly, toward evening, the sickly feeling that had persisted with me all day passed off. I became ravenously hungry. I had an appetite that would have done credit to a lumberjack.

In the space of an hour I had emptied my small but well stocked refrigerator, but even then I only felt vaguely satisfied. I knew that it would not be long before I would have to eat again.

Energy, of course—strange, mysterious changes within me that demanded a sudden terrific influx of supply to keep pace with my rate of increasing strength. Very similar, I decided, to the tautness of a spring governing the exact amount of potential energy it must possess.

By the time I went to bed—after a final dubious look at the motionless walnut in the rising moonlight—I was feeling very top heavy indeed. The effect seemed to be working downward from my arms and shoulder—for my other arm was now likewise affected to the lower extremities.

The bed creaked noisily as I lay upon it. I was asleep almost immediately and once again strange, incredible dreams penetrated my mind. But this time my brain was much clearer, remarkably sharpened. I saw the things that were offered to me by some kind of extra sensory reception. Records of a strange race buried in a long-lost antiquity on a world of huge weight, were laid bare before me.

I saw again that dark, unfriendly airless world with its vaulted dome of unfamiliar stars. This time I saw others of the Walnut race—spawning thousands. Through flickering, kaleidoscopic flashes I watched a strange disease, apparently an unfavorable radiation from outer space, attack one after another of the beings, wipe them out with the efficiency that lethal gas kills a man.

I realized more clearly than ever that these beings did sustain themselves by radiations. To them, a sudden influx of abnormal radiation was a perfect cosmic Black Plague, absolutely fatal in effect. I saw the death of thousands upon thousands of the creatures until there could not have been more than five remaining.

Here the disease stopped, but four of the five died slowly from after-effects, leaving only one—Yithan Kan!

One, a female of the species, surrounded by the glory of a magnificently intelligent race's discoveries, yet unable alone to do anything with them. Unable to mate, unable to perpetuate the superb science of her species.

She seemed to meditate over the perplexity of this problem for years. I saw her study machines that had no earthly meaning. Telescopes of surpassing power revealed to her the unraveled depths of the cosmos on polished mirrors of floating mercury. The dead worlds of Sirius, the half-formed worlds of Arcturus, the rich but lifeless worlds whirling around vast Antares and Betelgeuse—these she studied, without avail.

Then the instruments' powers reached out across immeasurable light years to the regions of the dwarf G-type suns, to the Solar System. Mercury, Venus, Mars, and the outer planets were mirrored perfectly in the instruments, but Yithan Kan found no traces of life in any of them. That seemed to be the treasured possession of the third world alone.

Yithan Kan seemed to come to a decision. Her head and legs folded inside her shell-like body. She generated gravity neutralization as simply as a spider spins its web, and hurtled bullet-like into the swirling, dusty emptinesses overhead. . . .

I awoke suddenly with visions of galaxies, suns and planets whirling before my vision. It was morning, and I was no longer in bed. No! The bed had collapsed under my weight in the night, precipitating me onto a floor that was showing signs of cracking.

My heaviness now was a terrific burden. During the night I had changed incredibly, was literally half my previous size with an energy and strength beyond belief.

Hunger, terror, wonderment—these three things battled in my mind as I lumbered creakingly across the cracking floor. I gained the doorway safely enough, but I fell through the staircase and landed in the kitchen below! I wasn't hurt. No indeed! Where I had struck myself against the woodwork it had splintered and left my hardened, stone-gray flesh untouched!

I went into the yard, strangled a dozen chickens one after the other and ate them raw. I was no longer Amos Latham; I was something metamorphosing into an unknown state for an equally unknown purpose. I knew now how Yithan Kan had come to Earth, but the *why* still defeated me.

I knew, too, that if she wanted she could easily get off that stone block without dropping to the ground. Her natural power of gravity neutralization would accomplish that. Only when she had been unconscious from her great fall had she weighed her normal ton to the cubic inch.

Her wine-red little eyes watched me as I ravenously ate the fowls. I didn't try to communicate: I had all my work cut out to master my own movements and control my will power. Going back into the house I thought of the idea of recording my experiences, and up to now I think I have managed to maintain a certain coherency.

It is not easy to write this because I have to have my hand fastened to a rope slung to a beam in the garage roof so that the weight of my arm and hand does not interfere with writing. If this writing is thick and heavy it is because I am constantly wearing down the pencil point, frequently breaking the pencils themselves. The very lightest of pressure suffices.

I feel now that I may revert to the present tense because I have caught up with my experiences to date. There is nothing for me now but to state events as they happen, and I have the oddest conception that they will happen soon.

I have been resting. At least I call it that for want of a better term. In truth, it was more a comatose condition occasioned, I think, by exhaustion. The vast change in my make-up, the enigmatic forcing together of electronic spaces by un conjecturable radiations, the consequent denser packing of materials by scientific powers that I can hardly guess at, tires me with amazing rapidity. But during that sleep, if sleep it was, I dreamed again.

Yithan Kan is more than a mere scientist. She has the knowledge of a brilliant race at her command. The forces of light, space, gravitation and pressure are solved riddles to her mind. I have learned that my earlier hypothesis—that a matter formation can be altered by radiation into what is possibly a new and unthought of state—is correct. By radiations from her own body she has mastered mine, literally is bending its formation to conform with her wishes.

I have eaten again, and now I feel that that huge hunger is abating, maybe by the establishment of some new level of change. I am smaller, infinitely smaller, yet the mass of my body is infinitely increased, compressed to an unbelievable weight.

I no longer dare to go inside the house. Floors and furniture splinter under my weight. I have substituted a chain for a rope to support the pencil, but live in fear that the beam, a foot thick though it is, will smash in two if I do not stop writing. Yet I must go on.

I think I have been unconscious again—it seems to me that days have drifted by. Perhaps it is a good thing I am so far from town; people rarely pass around here. With my last awakening I became conscious of a new sense, which still persists.

I can sense the inflow of cosmic radiations such as are quite undetectable to normal human beings. They give me life, strength, an abounding energy that is both glorious and yet oddly terrifying.

Around me is a world of giantism. The garage seems to me like a vast hall; this very pencil is far bigger than I. I am forced to work it like a lever—but now it is simpler because I have taken on a neutralizing power. The radiations I absorb from space I can convert within myself to neutralizing uses.

You wonder? Why should you? A plant breaks down nitrogen: a human being inhales oxygen and hydrogen and exhales, by the use of inner chemistry, carbon dioxide. Is it so wonderful that I absorb energies and transmit them in their most needed form—for the nullification of weight? No, it is not so impossible but—I forget! I am no longer human, therefore I no longer think properly along human lines.

Do not ask me to explain the full state of my metamorphosis; I have tried to do that already, to tell by the stages through which it happened how Yithan Kan reassembled my bodily atom so completely as to give me a body no more than an inch in diameter, yet weighing very nearly a ton, without neutralization.

All this she has accomplished without causing death, as easily indeed as in my own experiments I have grafted cuttings from one tree onto another without killing either. Organic life is truly indeed simply an arrangement—in the higher states—of living, thinking matter which, by a mind clever enough, can be altered into a new and entirely unpredictable state.

From this doorway I can see Yithan Kan very clearly. She is as big as I, high atop a mighty block of stone—a stone that was only an ordinary block on the day she was first put there. I am like a microscopic tortoise, hardly visible. I am no longer an Earth being, for I am not breathing—only absorbing radiations. The entity of Amos Latham has gone and instead I am — *What?*

At last I grasp the purpose of Yithan Kan's visit. I can feel her mental radiations coming to me, and with those radiations the faint leftover human traces of my mind evince a certain admiration for the nobility, the relentless purpose, of her aim.

For the perpetuation of her race and science she needs a mate—a male. I am still a male. She metamorphosed me into a being identical with herself save in the matter of sex—as easily as a sculptor can model a piece of clay into a woman and then into a dog without changing the clay. He merely reforms the atoms and molecules of the clay into a new shape.

And what does he use for his tools? Basically, force! In like manner, but fully understanding the absolute nature of the force *behind* force, Yithan Kan has remoulded me.

She needs me . . . and I need her! I know I do. I feel it. She is compelling to me now—fascinating. Our children on that far distant world beyond Sirius will carry on the heritage of a race entirely eliminated excepted for this indomitable one—Yithan Kan. Afterward, the nucleus of a new race, a reaching upward toward achievement.

I must go to Yithan Kan. Earth no longer holds me. At will I can, and shall, leave it behind—wing across the cosmos with Yithan Kan to her distant planet.

I shall go. I must go. Now!

[The end of *Wings Across the Cosmos* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]