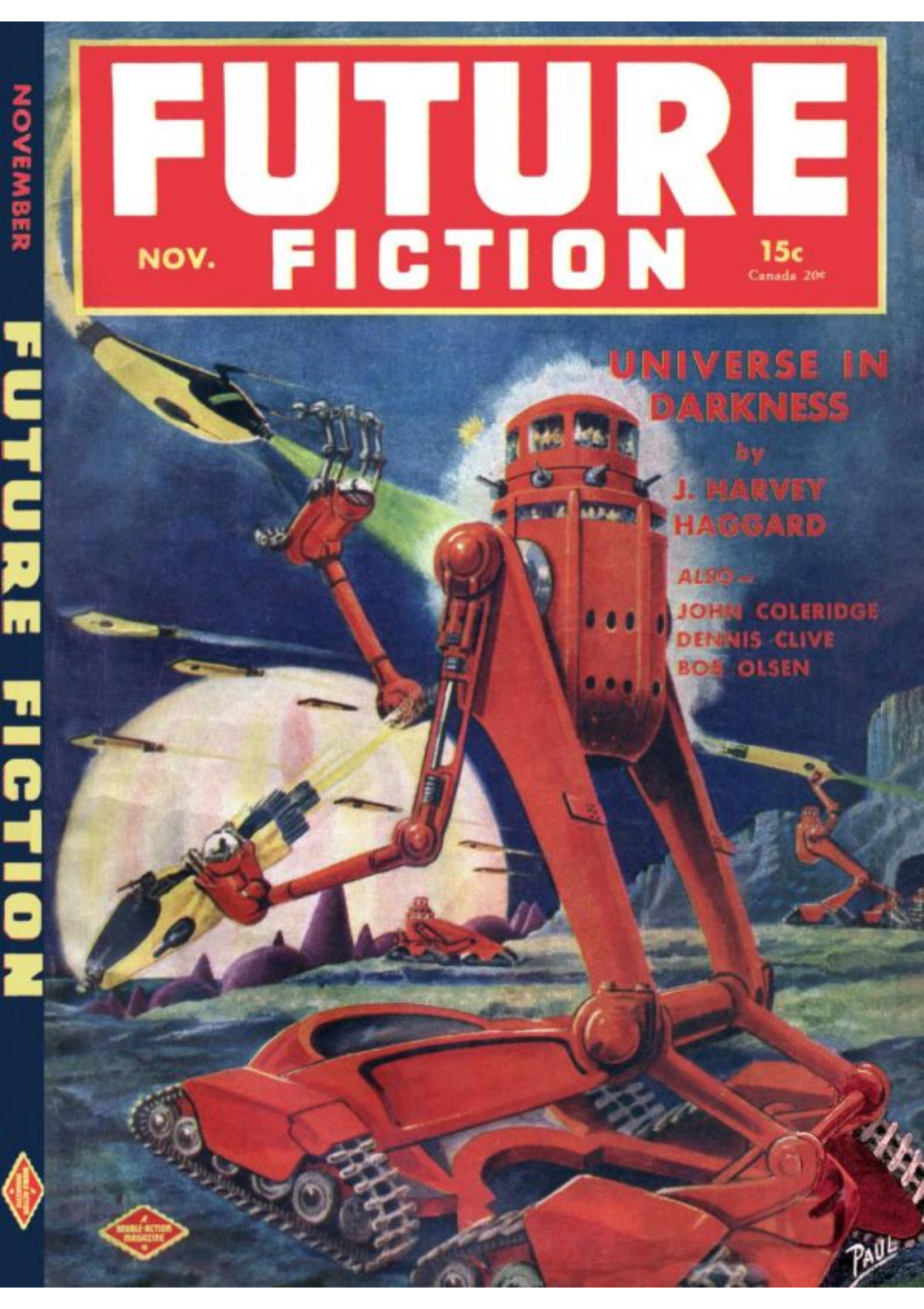
FUTURE
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UNIVERSE IN DARKNESS
by
J. HARVEY HAGGARD
ALSO—
JOHN COLERIDGE
DENNIS CLIVE
BOB OLSEN
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE
PAUL
NOVEMBER
FUTURE FICTION

Title: The Flat Folk of Vulcan
Date of first publication: 1940
Author: John Russell Fearn (as Dennis Clive) (1908-1960)
Date first posted: Mar. 15, 2021
Date last updated: Mar. 15, 2021
Faded Page eBook #20210336

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THE FLAT FOLK OF VULCAN

by

John Russell Fearn
writing under the pseudonym
Dennis Clive

First published in *Future Fiction*,
November, 1940.

An accidental landing upon the fiery planet Vulcan is a horrible enough fate, but at least it's better than a plunge into the sun! Paul and the Professor find themselves in the midst of a weird adventure amidst the outlandish beings of the planet nearest old Sol!

"Vulcan ahead, Paul—we're landing there instead of dropping into the sun!"

Professor Jeffords, skipper of the space-rocket *Hope* that had tried for Venus and missed, relaxed his grip on the control levers and gazed even more fixedly into the periscope. The sun's great, glowing disc almost filled the vision screen and, in the center of it, like an inkblot upon a mirror, showed a black, circular shadow. Jeffords nodded his lean, gray head with the impersonal satisfaction of a scientist checking an observation.

"Vulcan," he repeated. "A dozen astronomers claimed that such a planet existed, Paul—a planet even closer to the sun than Mercury. They took the trouble to give it a name, sight unseen—Vulcan, after the sooty blacksmith—god of the Hellenes. But the thing wasn't visible by day and it set with the sun at night, so it's taken us, sailing past Venus like a wild arrow, to discover it." His tone took on enthusiasm. "And we've not only seen it first, we'll land on it first!"

His nephew, Paul Jeffords, also bent above the vision screen to study the images of the sun and its innermost planet. Paul was a well-knit, blond youth. His clear blue eyes were shrewd as they took in details of the reflection.

"Our cross-hairs are exactly on that little black spot, sir," he agreed. "That means we're steering dead at it. But is it really a planet? It seems mighty puny."

"A planetoid, let us call it," amended Jeffords. "About twenty miles in diameter, I judge—the old scientists computed that it wouldn't be much more than thirty at most, and they were right." He glanced at the instruments on the metal bulkhead beside him. "So far as I can figure, it's solid, with little or no atmosphere or water, surface gravity about an eight of Earth's—"

"An eighth?" echoed Paul, amazed. "Why, that's nearly as much as the Moon has, and you say that Vulcan is only twenty miles through? But there are asteroids bigger than that, sir."

Jeffords smiled. "Where's your astronomy, youngster? And your physics? Size isn't everything; there are mass and density. Isn't a lump of lead heavier than a piece of cork many times its volume?"

Comprehension dawned into Paul's young face, and Jeffords continued:

"We haven't time to go into higher mathematics just now, but Vulcan, small as he is, must have the substance of a world much more sizeable." He glanced again at his instruments. "It's only that he's been hammered down, so to speak—shrunken and concentrated upon himself in the laboratory of the universe."

"In other words, Vulcan is made of something denser and heavier than rock or metal," added Paul, eager to develop the idea. "A handful of Vulcan's earth might weigh a ton or so." He whistled. "What a place to go for geological samples!"

He and his uncle grinned at each other over the thought, grinned their comradeship and understanding as they faced each other in the tiny metal-walled cabin of the rocket. That comradeship, that understanding, had been well tried—tried in figurative fires as fierce in their way as the literal heat of the threatening sun. First had been the weary days that followed the departure of the craft from Earth en route to Venus, the pioneer attempt of man to reach another planet. Then had come the sudden transition from boredom to consternation as they found their course faulty and the *Hope* carrying them past their goal, sunward. Followed almost maddening despair, new days of it, while they contemplated their seemingly inevitable finish in the destroying flames of Old Sol. Yet never had they quarreled, blamed each other, or collapsed in horror.

And now the sudden dawning of a chance for escape, however fantastic or unforeseen, gave them new strength, new cheerfulness. Their smiles grew broader.

It was hours later. Slowly, gingerly, the rocket craft lowered itself toward the dark face of Vulcan, stern down. The flare of the rear tubes lighted a smooth, lead-colored plain below. Jeffords, his eye ever on the vision screen of the now reversed periscope, shifted one control lever, then the other.

"What does the elevation magno-gauge read?" he demanded crisply.

"Surface at hand," reported Paul, checking instruments. "Elevation six hundred feet—four hundred—three hundred fifty—better slow down, sir."

"Slow down it is," Jeffords called back, pulling more levers. "Sound off at elevation one hundred."

Silence for full half a minute. Then, "Elevation one hundred," reported Paul. "Ninety—eighty—seventy—sixty—fifty—forty—thirty—"

"And down!" almost whooped Jeffords, lifted out of his usual quiet dignity by triumphant relief as the impact of landing jarred the craft to its rivets.

Paul, too, was delighted. He skipped halfway across the floor in a joyous jig.

"So this is Vulcan!" he cried. "Prepare to receive welcoming committee!"

"Put on your space-overall and we'll arrange our own welcome," directed Jeffords. Stepping to a locker, he slid back its metal door and drew out two clumsy-looking suits of air-proof fabric. One he handed to his young companion, then commenced struggling into the other. A few moments later they had fastened themselves in, adjusted their radio head-sets, put the oxygen feeders in action, and finally regarded each other through the glassite windows of their helmets. Paul stared a little. His uncle was strapping a rectangular case, with dials and levers, to the front of his suit.

"Hey!" said Paul, the radio carrying his surprised voice to Jeffords' ear-phones. "Isn't that the thought-interpreter? The thing you use to talk to monkeys and dogs and record stimuli on plants, and so on? Do you really expect to find and converse with life here—intelligent life—when the gauges say no oxygen or water?"

“Hold on,” replied Jeffords, “all the old-fashioned scientists made that mistake. They were so busy in debunking the theory that life might exist on other planets, that they let their own vision grow narrow.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Paul, still perplexed. “Isn’t oxygen necessary to life? And water?”

Jeffords drew tight the straps that held the thought-interpreter to his chest. “Look at it this way,” he appealed. “Life came to Earth, we know not how. It found a planet nearly covered with water and completely enveloped in an oxygen-bearing atmosphere. Stop and think. Did life appear because of these things, or did it adapt itself to them?”

Paul shook his head inside the helmet. His face behind the glassite pane creased in bafflement.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Neither do I, nor anyone else. So I go prepared.” Jeffords tapped the interpreter case. “And you carry the sample pouch and that big canteen.”

Paul was more mystified than ever. “Water?” he almost gasped. “What will we be doing with water? We can’t drink, with our helmets on.”

“No, but you yourself spoke of how heavy a sample might be. We may have to carry infinitesimal particles, picked up in a solution of water.”

Paul rummaged in the locker, slung the sample pouch like a musette over his shoulder and tucked the carrying strap of the four-quart canteen into his belt.

“All right,” approved Jeffords. “Let’s go.”

Paul opened the panel of the air-lock and both crowded into the tiny compartment. There was just room for both, side by side. Closing the panel behind to save as much of the cabin’s oxygen as possible Paul opened the outer valve-door. A small volume of air rushed from around them and out of the lock. The youth pressed himself sidewise.

“After you, sir,” he said. “You’re senior—you should have the honor of being first to set foot on a strange world.”

“Thanks,” acknowledged the professor, and swung through the opening and down the succession of grab-irons that were clamped like a ladder on the hull. Paul followed, descending toward the base of the craft. Once out of the ship’s interior and its field of artificial gravity, they felt as light as squirrels, for all their cumbersome garments and burdens.

“One-eighth the gravity of Earth,” Paul reminded himself as they came to a stand at the bottom. “Well!” he added aloud. “This *is* a sight, eh?”

Standing together beside the great erect cigar of their ship, they looked their first on the landscape of Vulcan.

CREATURES OF TWO DIMENSIONS

It was as though they stood upon a great, smoothly-curved mountain top. Overhead showed the black of space's night, with the hard glow of all the myriad stars, like spangles sewn haphazard in strings and clusters upon black velvet. At twenty degrees from zenith glowed the little orb of Venus, a silver farthing shedding soft white light upon them, and farther away and almost overhead the green dab that was Mother Earth. By Venus-light they made out the flat gray uniformity on which they stood and which extended around them and their craft on every hand—shaping into a smooth arc as it gained distance, without a dint or hummock to relieve. Away and away it curved, for furlongs that seemed small for the clearness of vision and lack of surface-modification, until it was lost in light.

Light—an unbroken circle of it, pinky-red as blazing coals upon a home hearth. The mountain in space on which they seemed to stand was ringed about with that pink radiance. It was as if the sun were about to rise, no matter which way you looked—rather an unbroken ring of suns, ready to move forward and upward as one around the full sweep of the horizon. The professor stood at gaze like a shrouded, helmeted statue in his space-overall, motionless in concentration. Paul, younger and less raptly scientific, swung around and around on the pivot of his metal heel, trying to see every point of the glory at once.

"What is it, sir?" he asked at length.

"The sun," replied Jeffords.

"The sun?" repeated Paul. "Oh, I understand. We're at about the center of the dark face of Vulcan, and that's the light that overflows from the other half."

"Right," said the professor.

"But how can sunlight be refracted and diffused into the range of our vision without an atmosphere?" Paul pursued.

"There is no gaseous atmosphere," said Jeffords, as casually as though lecturing to a classroom. "But space here isn't empty, after all. There seems to be a cloud of particles around Vulcan—countless specks of dust, I would say, each whirling about the planet like a tiny satellite. That cloud catches and carries the sunlight around the edge."

They returned to their observation of the scene. Neither spoke for some minutes—the boy silent in awe, the scientist in mental note-taking.

"Well, I say it's worth it," pronounced Paul at last. "Worth the wait and the worry and the danger. The trouble is, I'll find it hard to remember—it's all I can do to believe it while I'm looking at it." He paused again. "We're on top of a flying island, it seems, with tides of light washing up all around. If this is the dark side of Vulcan, what's the bright side like?"

"Like a furnace of the angry gods," his uncle answered at once. "As far as I can make out, Vulcan revolves once on his axis to one turn around the sun. Therefore one half is always sunward, and the other—this one—always away—like a roast before a fire, with nobody to turn it."

"One side burnt and one side raw," supplemented Paul. He stamped a metal shoe. "Hmmm! The ground's harder and smoother than ice."

Both stooped to examine this wonder. Jeffords tried to kneel, but his knee slipped sidewise and he almost fell flat. "Careful," he cautioned Paul. "Keep to your feet—those magnetic

shoes will hold you steady." His gloved forefinger tested the glassy surface. "It was bound to be like this. Ice, you say? Rather super-adamant."

"And polished," Paul added, feeling in his turn.

"Yes, polished, but not by rubbing. Didn't I speak of a great density, a concentration of substance in the laboratory of the universe?" The older man gazed about him. "Vulcan is so hard—look, Paul, not even our rocket blasts scarred his surface. We haven't the tools or the chemicals to test Vulcan's makeup."

"Not even diamonds?" suggested Paul. From the sample pouch he drew a chisel-like rod, on the tip of which a diamond twinkled softly in the Venus-light. Stooping, he bore down on the smoothness with all his strength. A moment of effort, and something gave. He lifted the tool and examined its marred end.

"No," he answered his own query. "Not even diamonds." But his quick eye caught a new marvel. "What's that little patch of light, sir?"

"Eh?" said Jeffords, and then he, too, saw it—a moving shimmer of orange that seemed to play around their feet like a beam from a colored lamp.

For a moment, it paused at Paul's toe and they made out its shape—a sort of luminous tadpole, a little oval the size of a pigeon's egg with a vibrating streak like a tail. Then it was sliding quickly around the entire metal sole of the shoe, and finally away.

"It's alive, intelligent," exclaimed Jeffords. "Follow it."

They ran, light and sure-footed on their magnetized boots, but the beam easily kept ahead, taxing their utmost powers to keep up. More moving lights seemed to break out ahead.

"Look, a whole swarm," panted Paul, and a moment later their little guide was lost among its mates. Pausing on the edge of the bright, dancing array, the two Terrestrials stared in uncomprehending wonder.

There were scores, perhaps hundreds, of the bright little tadpoles, each moving independently of the others. Paul stooped and tried to pick up the nearest of them. It struggled under his pressing fingers, then slipped away as if greased.

"It hasn't any substance," reported the youth. "It's like light, or a moving stain of color. What are they?"

"Living, intelligent beings," repeated Jeffords, also genuinely excited. "Look at those diagrams yonder."

He pointed. Several steps away stretched a row of rectangular figures, like sketches or geometrical designs. Each was perhaps three feet long by two wide, and each had one or more breaks in its boundaries. Through these breaks as through doors, the little tadpole-creatures flickered in and out. Carefully skirting the excited throng of beams, Paul and Jeffords approached the rectangular delineations.

Beyond the first row, they now saw, were other rows, drawn in purple, lavender, green, red—all colors, some shining as with phosphorescence, others reflecting the soft radiance of Venus overhead, still others flat and dull.

"What are they? What's it all about?" asked Paul, a helpless note in his voice.

Jeffords did not reply. He was fiddling, his fingers clumsy inside their gloves, with the dials of his thought-interpreter.

"Why, sir!" cried Paul, newly astonished. "Do you truly think you can communicate with those little bugs?"

"They're intelligent," his uncle insisted firmly. "These geometrical diagrams of theirs show that. Look, there in the thickest push of the things—apparently the little scout we first saw is telling them all about finding us."

The motor of the interpreter began to hum.

"I have the psychic beam directed into the thickest of them," announced Jeffords. "I can get thought-impressions, excited ones. I'll try to get across to them."

A switch moved under his fingers.

"Hello, hello, I say," came Jeffords' voice, slow and clear. "We have come from far off to visit you. We are friends." He spoke to Paul aside. "Tune in on my frequency if you can, and you'll get any answer that may come."

"Right," agreed Paul breathlessly, his eyes wide.

Silence a moment. The churning scurry of the tadpole-beams was slower. Then both felt, rather than heard, a response in the machine:

"Friends. We understand. I speak for the others. What are you?"

"We have one of them!" shouted Paul wildly. "He's answering—"

Jeffords waved unceremoniously for him to be silent. "Yes, friends," he repeated clearly. "We are men. From another world. Can you see us?"

"Friends," came back the thought-response yet again, spelling the idea into the consciousness of both explorers. "You are—men." The word-idea repeated itself rapidly, indistinctly. "Menmenmenmenmen. We do not know—men."

Jeffords groaned disappointedly, then made another attempt. "We are living things, as you are. We think, move, take nourishment. We come from another place, another world, as I have already said. Can you not see us?"

"Again we understand," came the answer, readier this time. "You live, think, eat." Then, a trifle hesitantly, "You won't eat—us?"

"Poor little devil!" muttered Paul, and Jeffords made haste to say, "No, we won't eat you."

"Friends, then," was the more assured rejoinder. "Yes, we see you. You are like this."

The throng, almost quiet, stirred to action again and opened a space in its center. One of the bright tadpoles moved into the clearing. It moved suddenly erratically, but decisively. A trail of green, luminous color appeared in its wake.

"It's drawing for us," whispered Jeffords.

He was right. In less than a quarter of a minute the tiny creature had finished its task—a simple but unmistakable outline, accurate in both shape and size, of Paul's shoe-sole.

"Look!" Paul cried. "That's the one that swung 'round my foot, all right. But he never bothered to look up; he thinks I look like that."

Jeffords spoke again, into the thought-interpreter. "We see and comprehend," he informed the little artist. "You have drawn only our foot plan, however. Up above—"

"Up above?" came the quick repetition. "Aboveaboveabove . . . I do not understand." The thought-images became plaintive. "We are aware of you, beside us. That is all."

"They *can't* see up, then," said Paul decisively.

"Our feet are beside you," Jeffords explained patiently. "They are like what you have drawn. But there is much more of us, stretching up and overhead."

"Overhead?" again the plaintive note. "We cannot understand."

"Yet you understand *beside*?" prompted Jeffords.

"Yes, we know beside—behind—before. But not those other things. Not above, not overhead. . . ." The thoughts became vague.

"There are many of you?" Jeffords tried a new tack. "Many individuals?"

"Oh, yes. This is only one community, not the largest."

"You live long? Happily?"

"Not always happily." A tremor came into the thought-reply. "There are the fire-things."

"Fire-things?" Jeffords repeated.

"They are large, very bad." The little informant's mental voice trembled. "They live in the hot zones and feed upon our lives."

Both Paul and Jeffords felt a thrill of interest at this piece of information. "What are the fire-things?" asked Jeffords eagerly. "Anything like you?"

"No, not like us." A moment of hesitation, as if summoning powers of description. "More like you."

"How like us?" Jeffords insisted.

"Wait." It was a desperate plea. "Wait where you are. A wise one will come and tell you everything."

"We shall wait," promised Jeffords, and shut off the precious power of the interpreter. Then he spoke solemnly to his nephew.

"Youngster, do you realize? Do you appreciate?"

"A little," said Paul thoughtfully. "They understand front and back and sidewise, but not up or down."

"They are two-dimensional, Paul. They *live flat*."

More silence. Finally Jeffords spoke again. "How does that realization make you feel?"

"Stunned," confessed Paul. "It's too much to grasp at once, sir. Fate let Columbus down easy. He only thought he'd found India's back door. He couldn't have realized the significance of a new continent." He gazed down at the moving, eddying color-blots. "Think how *they* must be agonized at our mystery!"

"The square and rectangular diagrams must be their houses," went on Jeffords. "With no knowledge of height or depth, a pencil mark would be to them as an eternal wall of graphite."

"But they live on a curved world," pointed out Paul. "Can't they see the curve?"

"To their viewpoint it is flat. The belt of fire keeps them from circumnavigating the globe. Vulcan is to them what space is to us—you know, we used to think that space stretched straight away—only until Einstein and others demonstrated that it curves—here, what are they doing?"

THE FIRE-BEING

The tadpole-blots had marshaled themselves into orderly ranks, some hundreds of them, a brilliant, many-hued carpet. One, a little larger than average and as pure white and brilliant as a sunbeam, was pushing forward.

"That's the 'wise one' they promised us," ventured Paul. "Quick, sir, get him on the line."

Jeffords switched on his thought-interpreter. "Hello," he called once more. "Hello. Will you speak to us? We are friends."

A stronger reply than before came back to them: "I greet you. I think that I appreciate something of what you have been trying to tell these others. You are—" Hesitation. "You are more complex beings?"

"We are three-dimensional." Jeffords put all the meaning he could into the statement. "Do you know what that signifies?"

"Yes." Another pause. "To some of us, to those who study and think most, it is evident that there is a third dimension."

"I congratulate you, my friend," Jeffords almost cried in his delight. "We are travelers, then, from another world, a world of the third dimension. We come in peace, we wish to exchange good-will and knowledge."

"Knowledge." They felt the yearning in the repeated thought. "Teach us, please. Teach us of the third dimension."

"I will try." Jeffords sounded daunted. "Please realize that there are others of my kind who are wiser and clearer of thought. I am only a traveler and a minor scientific observer."

"Teach us," again pleaded the little creature at their feet, and its whole being seemed to vibrate longingly.

Jeffords waited a moment. "I will try," he said again, "though it is like telling of a color to a blind one. You know that a creature, like yourself or like us, might possibly be confined to one dimension only."

"Yes. It could move forward or backward, not sidewise," was the quick elaboration.

"If it came to an obstacle it could move only backward," pursued Jeffords. "But you and your kind, knowing and operating in two dimensions, could go to one side and so around the obstacle."

"If it were not too great," qualified the tadpole-savant heavily.

"But the object blocks only two dimensions," Jeffords continued. "Perhaps in a third dimension an individual can move past it, around the corner, so to speak, of its substance."

"We have surmised that." The transmitted thought seemed tinged with impatience. "We know that such a thing can be. What we want is the knowledge itself, not the assurance of the knowledge—wait! *Danger!*"

"Steady, sir," said Paul at the same moment. "Something's coming—something big and three-dimensional."

Both he and Jeffords looked away across the little diagram-city. It was in the middle distance, a great moving lump like a legless elephant in size, and shining as with brick-red inner flame.

"The fire-thing," came the quick, worried warning through the thought-interpreter. "It feeds upon our lives—we must flee. You say you are friends. Take friendly warning, then."

Paul's hand slid to his belt and caught the handle of his holstered automatic. His young eyes were fearless as they watched the approach of the new creature. Jeffords gazed also, the contemplatic scientist as usual.

The details of the shining shape were clearer now as it came humping and hurrying closer. It had no head or legs, unless the sheeny rippling of its underside was a succession of limb-motions too fast for eye to follow. Its bulk swelled upward, like a fiery tortoise-shell, but seemed to bend and quiver like jelly. The inner light waxed and waned as if to the pulse of a powerful heart. The glow it shed lighted up the gray, smooth plain for many yards around.

"Look," said Paul tensely. "It's at the other edge of the city—eating those poor little bugs!"

It was. A scurrying little pool of colors showed where some of the tadpole-people had been overtaken. The front of the blister-like nemesis swelled and elongated, like the pseudopod of an amoeba. The extension wiped an end across the muddle of tiny fugitives, and they were no more.

"Say," choked Paul, "I can't let them go like that."

He was suddenly running in a curve, skirting the corner of the flat city as though he feared to hurt it by treading upon it. His automatic was in his hand.

"Watch out, lad," called Jeffords quickly. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into!" A moment later he ran after his nephew.

Fire spat from Paul's automatic, spat again. The glowing carapace of the fire-thing quivered, as if under impact, then grew more lurid—green, red, violet, livid. It swung away from the edge of the city, lumbering toward Paul.

"Shoot again!" yelled Jeffords, and brought his own automatic into play as he ran. Bullets rained from the two guns, and again the monster quivered, but slackened its advance for an instant only. Gaining Paul's side, Jeffords sped one more shot. Then, as the fire-thing loomed fairly upon them a dozen yards away, he flung his pistol at it.

For an instant the weapon showed in silhouette against the fiery bulge, then it exploded in a white glare. At the same moment a long, red streak of substance struck out from the very midst of the thing. It jabbed at Jeffords like the long, darting arm of a boxer. He staggered back.

"I'm blinded!" he yelled in dismay.

Paul had dropped his own useless pistol. He fumbled at his waist for something, anything that might be used in defense of himself and his now helpless uncle. A strap met his gloved fingers, the sling of the big canteen. With a jerk he freed it from his belt, swung the thing around his head, then hurled it at the enemy.

Again an explosion of white fire—and a sudden blot of blackness, a growing blot upon the incandescent rind of the creature! The round grossness seemed to shrink backward, to shudder as if in agony. It writhed, turned with clumsy speed and went wriggling and hunching away.

Jeffords still pawed at the front of his helmet. "Are you safe, Paul?" he quavered.

"I'm all right, sir, and the fire-thing's on the run." Paul caught his uncle's trembling arm in a reassuring grasp. "I threw the canteen, and apparently water is poison to the fellow—as it is to fire in general." He gazed after the swiftly decreasing blob of flame. "It's headed home to the sunny side of the planet."

He thrust his own head close to Jeffords, gazing intently at the scalded-looking helmet of the professor. "You're all right," he reported. "That streak of fire melted some of the metal,

and it ran down over the glassite."

"Yes, my eyes are all right," answered Jeffords. "They're getting used to the dark; they can see a little." He felt his way over the dials and switches of the thought-interpreter.

"Friends," he spoke into it, "we have driven away your enemy. We have a material that can damage and pain it. When we come again we will bring more."

"Thank you," came a response, not from one mind, but from many. Jeffords shut off the device once more.

"Lead me back to the rocket, lad," he directed. "We've had enough of Vulcan for the time being."

Again in space, course laid for Earth and their ship trained upon it, uncle and nephew relaxed and faced each other.

"We started for Venus," summed up Paul, "and we landed on Vulcan. We took a walk, found a race of things that were a dimension short, had a turn-up with a creature that shook off bullets but ran from water. Interesting—but where's the profit?"

"The profit will come," Jeffords answered, more seriously. "We'll return, and bring along a real scholar to teach our friends about the third dimension." He grew thoughtful. "In teaching them to leave the flat life and enter the full, we ourselves will learn new things."

"We'll learn—" began Paul, and then he laughed, not in amusement, but in exultation. He spread his arms, as if in greeting and approach to a greater universe.

"Fourth dimension," he cried, "here we come!"

[The end of *The Flat Folk of Vulcan* by John Russell Fearn (as Dennis Clive)]