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RESILIENCE

by

Damon Knight

And the Little Men just kept on marching!

"IT WAS here that the Little People made their last stand," said the conductor of the rubberneck bus, looking boredly at the stone ruins. His audience yawned, craned, or just goggled, after the manner of sightseers everywhere.

"Their high-powered projectiles were at this time inflicting some damage," the conductor went on, in a monotone, "so the Army of Conquest, under General Drlnac, retired and starved them out. Their almost incredibly delicate bodies were preserved in the Tzino Museum."

He yawned.

"BAH!" said the General of the Little Men, scowling at his aides. His antennae quivered fiercely. "This is no time for sentimentality! Whether or not this world is inhabited, we shall take it over for the use of our expanding race.

"Besides," he went on, looking up at the deserted barn beside which the Little Army stood, "this structure convinces me that we have to deal with a very low order of mentality. We can expect no great resistance."

He turned. "Onward—march!"

Their metal caps flashing above the dandelion tops, the Little Men moved on.

"Oh, look!" said the girl, pointing

excitedly. Metal caps gleamed across the road from their car. "Jim, what are they? Why, there are hundreds of them!"

"Huh? Where?" asked Jim, wiping lipstick off his cheek. "Oh! Well—I'll—be—damned!"

"What are they?" asked the girl, again.

"Elves, or—or gnomes, or something," he said, dazedly. "But there just aren't any of those—I mean, we must be dreaming or something."

"Little, tiny men in sky-blue coats," she said. "It's just like a fairy-tale! See, they even have 'feelers.'"

"Jim, I'm afraid," she ended, unreasonably.

He laughed. "What of—them?"

"But they're pointing something at us," she said.

It was true. The foremost of the Little Men were aiming tiny, bright tubes at the couple.

Then they turned abruptly around and started off down the road.

"I think they're funny," said Jim, as the last of the column passed. "They look so—so serious and determined. Let's follow them." He pressed the starter.

Then things began to happen. Instead of the powerful, contented purr usually associated with the pressing of that button, there came a series of loud clanks, ending in a louder crash, from the hood of the car.

The boy and girl looked at each other.

"What—" began the girl.

Then the car seemed to shake itself, gave a lurch and settled wearily.

"Earthquake!" yelled Jim, jumping to conclusions. "Let's get out of here!" He opened the door and leaped out, pulling the girl with him.

Outside, he stopped suddenly and looked down at his hand with a puzzled air. In it was the plastic handle of the door. The rest of the door was a pile of rusty dust scattered between him and the car.

Then, as they watched, the metal body of the car ran away in little streams, leaving the upholstery and the plastic windows and fittings lying in a pile of the same dust.

The two looked at each other in silence.

"SO HELP me God," muttered Traffic Officer Koehler, as he threaded his way among the jammed cars, "if another of them women has tried to make a U-turn at that corner, I'll tear off my badge, and then I'll take her by the hair and yank her out of her car—and I'll get at least twenty years, but it'll be worth it."

Then he stopped short and stared speechlessly ahead of him. Between two cars came the cause of the jam; a string of little men in sky-blue coats and metal caps, swinging tiny tubes back and forth at the cars and buildings around.

The foremost of the Little Men calmly rayed Officer Koehler, and started to pass on. Koehler, however, came to his official self with a start, and made a grab for him.

As his fingers closed about the mite's body, he was horrified to feel it bend inward like a piece of rubber. He let go hastily. Then he dazedly

watched the Little Man's belly snap back into place, also like rubber. He marched on, as if nothing had happened.

A few seconds later, Officer Koehler failed to notice that his metal suspender clasps had given way, on account of the fact that a street-full of cars and a number of buildings were falling at the same time as his trousers.

"IS THAT them?" asked one of the soldiers incredulously, looking through the bushes at the column of little figures.

"Yep," whispered another. "They have some kinda ray that makes your gun fall to pieces. That's why we gotta ambush 'em."

"Ready," came the command. "Aim . . . Fire!"

The rifles barked.

"Hell," said a soldier, clearly. "We only got five!"

"They're too damn small," another replied. "Whadda they think we are, Dead-eye Dicks?"

The surviving Little Men swiftly scattered out and fell flat, raying the bushes. The next volley got none of them.

As their guns fell to dust and the Little Men marched on past them, a soldier said, disgustedly, "Hell, we shoulda used fly-swatters."

"AS I UNDERSTAND it," said Professor Ferrin, "the — ah — invaders employ a ray which induces what is known as 'fatigue' in metals, making them lose their molecular cohesion. If it were not for that, our militia would no doubt have been able to pick them off from ambush, but, you see, they are so very small that it is—ah—extremely difficult to hit one. Machine guns are no good, either,

because they can get behind little rocks and into tiny holes.

"But they have no actually destructive weapon, so it should be quite simple to merely—ah—swat them," he finished. "That is why we civilians have been asked to volunteer."

"Wot abart the ruddy militia?" asked Hemingway, the tobacconist. "W'y carn't they swot 'em?"

"Well, as I understand it," said the professor, "the militia have so much metal about them, you know—buttons and belt-buckles, and so forth—that it's simpler just to turn the thing over to the—ah—civilians than to remove it all. There's really no danger at all, of course."

"Ah," said Hemingway, doubtfully.

"Here they come!" came the word along the line.

The Little Men marched into view, scattered out now, and with ray-tubes at the ready.

"Up and at 'em!"

Armed with baseball bats, pokers, and clubs, the civilian volunteers rushed the Little Men.

"There, you rascal!" panted Professor Ferrin, as he smote the foremost with his club.

Then he halted and stared. Where a bloody pulp, or at least a lifeless body, ought to have been, was an unharmed Little Man, calmly marching onward.

Taking a firmer grip, the professor followed him and smote him again. This time he distinctly saw the Little Man telescope under the blow and then pop up again.

"Amazing!" he breathed, a scientific gleam in his eye.

This time he hit the Little Man horizontally. Again he conducted himself like a rubber ball; bending with the blow, then snapping back out again. He picked himself up, apparently unhurt, and went ahead without a backward glance.

"Amazing!" the professor said again.

The Little Men marched on.