

# THE MICROSCOPIC GIANTS

by Paul Ernst

Author of "Devil at the Wheel," "Blood Witches," etc.

Men Go Forty Thousand Feet Below the Surface to Find Copper—and Battle with the Scurrying, Lilliputian Denizens of a Strange Land of Atomic Compression!



Mannikins were walking toward us through the cement wall

**I**T happened toward the end of the Great War of 1941, which was an indirect cause. You'll find mention of it in the official records filed at Washington. Curious reading, some of those records! Among them are accounts of incidents so bizarre—freak accidents and odd discoveries fringing war activities—that the filing clerks must

have raised their eyebrows skeptically before they buried them in steel cabinets, to remain unread for the rest of time.

But this particular one will never be buried in oblivion for me. Because I was on the spot when it happened, and I was the one who sent in the report.

Copper!

A war-torn world was famished for it. The thunder of guns, from the Arctic to the Antarctic and from the Pacific to the Atlantic and back again, drummed for it. Equipment behind the lines demanded it. Statesmen lied for it and national bankers ran up bills that would never be paid to get it.

Copper, copper, copper!

Every obscure mine in the world was worked to capacity. Men risked their lives to salvage fragments from battlefields a thousand miles long. And still not enough copper was available for the maws of the electric furnaces.

Up in the Lake Superior region we had gone down thirty-one thousand feet for it. Then, in answer to the enormous prices being paid for copper, we sank a shaft to forty thousand five hundred feet, where we struck a vein of almost pure ore. And it was shortly after this that my assistant, a young mining engineer named Belmont, came into my office, his eyes afire with the light of discovery.

“WE’VE uncovered the greatest archaeological find since the days of the Rosetta Stone!” he announced bluntly. “Down in the new low level. I want to phone the Smithsonian Institute at once. There may be a war on, but the professors will forget all about war when they see this!”

“Wait a minute,” I said. Belmont was apt to be over-enthusiastic. Under thirty, a tall, good-looking chap with light blue eyes looking lighter than they really were in a tanned, lean face, he sometimes overshot his mark by leaping before he looked. “What have you found? Prehistoric bones? Some new kind of fossil monster?”

“Not bones,” said Belmont, fidgeting toward the control board that dialed our private number to Washington on the radio telephone. “Footprints. Fossil footprints.”

“You mean men’s footprints?” I demanded, frowning. The rock formation at the forty-

thousand-foot level was age-old. The Pleistocene era had not occurred when those rocks were formed. “Impossible.”

“But I tell you they’re down there! Footprint preserved in solid rock. Men’s footprints! They antedate anything ever thought of in the age of Man.”

Belmont drew a deep breath.

“And more than that,” he almost whispered. “They are prints of shod men, Frank! The men who made those prints, millions of years ago, wore shoes. We’ve stumbled on traces of a civilization that existed long, long before man was supposed to have evolved on this earth at all!”

His whisper reverberated like a shout, such was its great import. But I still couldn’t believe it. Prints of men—at the forty-thousand-foot level—and prints of shod feet at that!

“If they’re prints of feet with shoes on them,” I said, “they might be simply prints of our own workmen’s boots. If the Smithsonian men got up here and found *that* a laugh would go up that would ruin us forever.”

“No, no,” said Belmont. “That’s impossible. You see, these prints are those of *little* men. I hadn’t told you before, had I? I guess I’m pretty excited. The men who made these prints were small—hardly more than two feet high, if the size of their feet can be taken gauge. The prints are hardly more than three inches long.”

“Where did you see them?” I asked.

“Near the concrete we poured to fill in the rift we uncovered at the far end of the level.”

“Some of the workmen may have been playing a trick—”

“Your confounded skepticism!” Belmont ground out. “Tricks! Perhaps they’re prints of our own men! Didn’t I tell you the prints were preserved in *solid rock*? Do you think a workman would take the trouble to carve, most artistically, a dozen footprints three inches long in solid rock? off that—if we had any men with feet that small—their feet would sink into the rock for a half inch off more? I tell you these are fossil prints, made

millions of years ago when that rock was mud, and preserved when the rock hardened."

"And I tell you," I replied a little hotly, "that it's all impossible. Because I supervised the pouring of that concrete, and I would have noticed if there were prints before the rift."

"Suppose you come down and look," said Belmont. "After all, that's the one sure way of finding out if what I say is true."

I reached for my hat. Seeing for myself was the one way of finding out if Belmont had gone off half-cocked again.

It takes a long time to go down forty thousand feet. We hadn't attempted to speed up the drop too much; at such great depths there are abnormalities of pressure and temperature to which the human machine takes time to become accustomed.

By the time we'd reached the new low level I'd persuaded myself that Belmont must surely be mad. But having come this far I went through with it, of course.

Fossil prints of men who could not have been more than two feet high, shod in civilized fashion, preserved in rock at the forty-thousand-foot level! It was ridiculous.

WE got near the concrete fill at the end of the tunnel, and I pushed the problem of prints out of my mind for a moment while I examined its blank face. Rearing that glancing concrete wall had presented some peculiar problems.

As we had bored in, ever farther under the thick skin of Mother Earth, we had come to a rock formation that had no right to exist there at all. It was a layer of soft, mushy stuff, with gaping cracks in it, slanting down somewhere toward the bowels of the earth. Like a soft strip of marrow in hard bone, it lay between dense, compressed masses of solid rock. And we had put ten feet of concrete over its face to avoid cave-ins.

Concrete is funny stuff. It acts differently in different pressures and temperatures. The concrete we'd poured down here, where atmospheric pressure made a man gasp and the temperature was above a hundred and eighteen in spite of cooling systems, hadn't acted at all like any I'd ever seen before. It hadn't seemed to harden as well as it should, and it still rayed out perceptible, self-generated heat in the pressure surrounding it. But it seemed to be serving its

purpose, all right, though it was as soft as cheese compared to the rock around it. . . .

"Here!" said Belmont, pointing down in the bright light of the raw electric bulbs stringing along the level. "Look!"

I looked—and got a shock that I can still feel.

A half inch off so deep in the rock floor of the level at the base of the concrete retaining wall, there were footprints. The oddest, tiniest things imaginable!

Belmont had said they were three inches long. If anything, he had overstated their size. I don't think some of them were more than two and a half inches long! And they were the prints of shod feet, undeniably. Perfect soles and heels, much like those of shoes we wear, were perceptible in the stone.

I stared at the prints with disbelief for a moment, even though my own eyes gave proof of their presence. And I felt an icy finger trace its way up my spine.

I had spent hours at this very spot while that concrete fill was made over the face of the down-slanting rift of mush rock. And I hadn't seen the little prints then. Yet here they were, a dozen of them made by feet of at least three varying sizes. How had I missed seeing them before?

"Prints made millions of years ago," Belmont whispered ecstatically. "Preserved when the mud hardened to rock—to be discovered here! Proof of a civilization on earth before man was thought to have been born. . . . For Heaven's sake! Look at that concrete!"

I stared along the line of his pointing finger, and saw another queer thing. Queer? It was impossible!

The concrete retaining wall seemed slightly milky, and not quite opaque! Like a great block of frosted glass, into which the eye could see for a few inches before vision was lost.

And then, again, the icy finger touched my spine. This time so plainly that I shuddered a little in spite of the heat.

For a moment I had thought to see movement in the concrete! A vague, luminous swirl that was gone before I had fairly seen it. Or *had* I seen it? Was imagination, plus the presence of these eerie footprints, working overtime?

"Transparent concrete," said Belmont. "There's one for the book. Silicon in greater than normal amounts in the sand we used? Some trick of

pressure? But it doesn't matter. The prints are more important. Shall we phone the Institute, Frank?"

For a moment I didn't answer. I was observing one more odd thing.

The footprints went in only two directions. They led out from the concrete wall, and led back to it again. And I could still swear they hadn't been there up to three days before, when I had examined the concrete fill most recently.

But of course they must have been there—for a million years or more!

"Let's wait a while on it," I heard myself say. "The prints won't vanish. They're in solid rock."

"But why wait?"

I stared at Belmont, and I saw his eyes widen at something in my face.

"There's something more than peculiar about those prints!" I said. "Possible footsteps of men two feet high are fantastic enough. But there's something more fantastic than that! See the way they point from the concrete, and then back to it again? As if whatever made them had come out of the concrete, had looked around for a few minutes, and then had gone back into the concrete again!"

It was Belmont's turn to look at me as if suspecting a lack of sanity. Then he laughed.

"The prints were here a long, long time before the concrete was ever poured, Frank. They just happen to be pointing in the directions they do. All right, we'll wait on the Smithsonian Institute notification." He stopped and exclaimed aloud, gaze on the rock floor.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"An illustration of how you could have overlooked the prints when you were supervising the fill," he said, grinning. "When I was down here last, a few hours ago, I counted an even twelve prints. Now, over here where I'd have sworn there were no prints, I see four more, made by still another pair of feet back before the dawn of history. It's funny how unobservant the eye can be."

"Yes," I said slowly. "It's very—funny."

FOR the rest of the day the drive to get more out of the ground, ever more copper for the guns and war instruments, drove the thought of the prints to the back of my mind. But back there the thought persisted.

Tiny men, wearing civilized-looking boots, existing long, long ago! What could they have looked like? The prints, marvelously like those of our own shod feet, suggested that they must have been perfect little humans, like our midgets. What business could they have been about when they left those traces of their existence in mud marshes millions of years ago. . . .

Yes, of course, millions of years ago! Several times I had to rein in vague and impossible impressions with those words. But some deep instinct refused to be reined.

And then Carson, my foreman, came to me when the last of the men had emerged from the shafts.

Carson was old; all the young men save highly trained ones like Belmont and myself, who were more valuable in peace zones, were at the various war fronts. He was nearly seventy, and cool and level-headed. It was unusual to see a frown on his face such as was there when he walked up to me.

"Mr. Frayter," he said, "I'm afraid we'll have trouble with the men."

"Higher wages?" I said. "If they had a spark of patriotism—"

"They're not kicking about wages," Carson said. "It's a lot different than that. Steve Boland, he started it."

He spat tobacco juice at a nail-head.

"Steve works on the new low level, you know. Near the concrete fill. And he's been passing crazy talk among the men. He says he can see into the concrete a little way—"

"That's right," I interrupted. "I was down there this afternoon, and for some curious reason the stuff is a little transparent. Doubtless we could investigate and find out what causes the phenomenon. But it isn't worth taking the time for."

"Maybe it would be worth it," replied Carson quietly. "If it would stop Steve's talk, it might save a shutdown."

"What is Steve saying?"

"He says he saw a man in the concrete, two hours ago. A little man." I stared at Carson.

"I know he's crazy," the old man went on. "But he's got the rest to halfway believe it. He says he saw a man about a foot and a half high, looking at him out of the concrete. The man was dressed in strips of some shiny stuff that made him look like he had a metal shell on. He looked at Steve for

maybe a minute, then turned and walked away. He walked back through the concrete, like it was nothing but thick air. Steve followed him for a foot or so and then was unable to see him any more."

I smiled at Carson while sweat suddenly formed under my arms and trickled down my sides.

"Send Steve to me," I said. "I'll let him tell me the story too. Meanwhile, kill the story among the men."

Carson sighed.

"It's going to be pretty hard to kill, Mr. Frayter. You see, there's footprints down there. Little footprints that might be made by what Steve claimed he saw."

"You think a man eighteen inches high could sink into solid rock for half an inch—" I began. Then I stopped. But it was already too late.

"Oh, you've seen them too!" said Carson, with the glint of something besides worry in his eyes.

I told him of how and when the prints had been made.

"I'll send Steve to you," was all he said, avoiding my eyes.

**S**TEVE BLAND was a hulking, powerful man of fifty. He was not one of my best men, but as far as I knew he had no record of being either unduly superstitious or a liar.

He repeated to me the story Carson had quoted him as telling. I tried to kill the fear I saw peering out of his eyes.

"You saw those prints, made long ago, and then you imagined you saw what had made them" I argued. "Use your head, man. Do you think anything could live and move around in concrete?"

"I don't think nothing about nothing, Mr. Frayter," he said doggedly.

"I saw what I saw. A little man, dressed in some shiny stuff, in the concrete. And those footprints weren't made a long time ago. They were made in the last few days!"

I couldn't do anything with him. He was terrified, under his laborious show of self control.

"I'm leaving, Mr. Frayter. Unless you let me work in an upper level. I won't go down there any more."

After he had left my office shack, I sent for Belmont.

"This may get serious," I told him, after revealing what I'd heard.

"We've got to stop this story right now."

He laughed. "Of all the crazy stuff! But you're right. We ought to stop it. What would be the best way?"

"We'll pull the night shift out of there," I said, "and we'll spend the night watching the concrete. Tell all the men in advance. Then when we come up in the morning, we can see if they'll accept our word of honor that nothing happened."

Belmont grinned and nodded.

"Take a gun," I added, staring at a spot over his head.

"What on earth for?"

"Why not," I evaded. "They don't weigh much. We might as well carry one apiece in our belts."

His laugh stung me as he went to give orders to the crew usually working at night in the forty-thousand-foot level.

We started on the long trip down, alone.

**T**HERE is no day or night underground. Yet somehow, as Belmont and I crouched in the low level we could know that it was not day. We could sense that deep night held the world outside; midnight darkness in which nothing was abroad save the faint wind rattling the leaves of the trees.

We sat on the rock fragments, with our backs against the wall, staring at the concrete fill till our eyes ached in the raw electric light. We felt like fools, and said so to each other. And yet—

"Steve *has* some circumstantial evidence to make his insane yarn sound credible," I said. "The way we overlooked those footprints in the rock till recently makes it look as if they'd been freshly formed. You observed a few more this afternoon than you'd noticed before. And this ridiculous concrete is a shade transparent, as though some action—or movement—within it had changed its character slightly."

Belmont grimaced toward the concrete.

"If I'd known the report about the footprints was going to turn us all into crazy men," he grunted, "I'd have kept my mouth shut—"

His voice cracked off abruptly. I saw the grin freeze on his lips; saw him swallow convulsively.

"Look!" he whispered, pointing toward the center of the eight-by-thirty-foot wall.

I stared, but could see nothing unusual about the wall. That is, nothing but the fact we'd observed before: you could look into the thing for a few inches before vision was lost.

"What is it?" I snapped, stirred by the expression of his face.

He sighed, and shook his head.

"Nothing, I guess. I thought for a minute I saw something in the wall. A sort of moving bright spot. But I guess it's only another example of the kind of imagination that got Steve Boland—"

Again he stopped abruptly. And this time he got unsteadily to his feet.

"No, it's *not imagination!* Look, Frank! If you can't see it, then I'm going crazy!"

I stared again. And this time I could swear I saw something too.

Deep in the ten-foot-thick retaining wall, a dim, luminous spot seemed to be growing. As though some phosphorescent growth were slowly mushrooming in there.

"You see it too?" he breathed.

"I see it too," I whispered.

"Thank God for that! Then I'm sane—or we're both mad. What's happening inside that stuff? It's getting brighter, and larger—" His fingers clamped over my arm. "Look! *Look!*"

But there was no need for him to tell me to look. I was staring already with starting eyes, while my heart began to hammer in my chest like a sledge.

As the faint, luminous spot in the concrete grew larger it also took recognizable form. And the form that appeared in the depths of the stuff was that of a human!

Human? Well, yes, if you can think of a thing no bigger than an eighteen-inch doll as being human.

A mannikin a foot and a half high, embedded in the concrete! But not embedded—for it was moving! Toward us!

**I**N astounded silence, Belmont and I stared. It didn't occur to us then, to be afraid. Nothing occurred to us save indescribable wonder at the impossible vision we saw.

I can close my eyes and see the thing now: a manlike little figure walking toward us through solid concrete. It bent forward as though

shouldering a way against a sluggish tide, off a heavy wind; it moved as a deep-sea diver might move in clogging water. But that was all the resistance the concrete seemed to offer to it, that sluggish impediment to its forward movement.

Behind it there was a faint swirl of luminosity, like phosphorescent water moving in the trail of a tiny boat. And the luminosity surrounded the thing like an aura.

And now we could see its face; and I heard Belmont's whispered exclamation. For the face was as human as ours, with a straight nose, a firm, well-shaped mouth, and eyes glinting with intelligence.

With intelligence—and something else!

There was something deadly about those eyes peering at us through the misty concrete. Something that would have sent our hands leaping for our guns had not the thing been so little. You can't physically fear a doll only a foot and a half high.

"What on earth is it—and how can it move through solid concrete?" breathed Belmont.

I couldn't even guess the answer. But I had a theory that sprang full grown into my mind at the first sight of the little figure. It was all I had to offer in the way of explanation later, and I gave it to Belmont for what it was worth at the time.

"We must be looking at a hitherto unsuspected freak of evolution," I said, instinctively talking in a whisper. "It must be that millions of years ago the human race split. Some of it stayed on top of the ground; some of it went into deep caves for shelter. As thousands of years passed, the latter went ever deeper as new rifts leading downward were discovered. But far down in the earth is terrific pressure, and heat. Through the ages their bodies adapted themselves. They compacted—perhaps in their very atomic structure.

"Now the density of their substance, and its altered atomic character, allows them to move through stuff that is solid to us. Like the concrete and the mush rock behind it, which is softer than the terrifically compressed stone around it."

"But the thing has eyes," murmured Belmont. "Anything living for generations underground would be blind."

"Animals, yes. But this is human; at least it has human intelligence. It has undoubtedly carried

light with it."

The little mannikin was within a few inches of the surface of the wall now. It stood there, staring out at us as intently as we stared in at it. And I could see that Steve Boland had added no imaginative detail in his description of what he had seen.

The tiny thing was dressed in some sort of shiny stuff, like metal, that crisscrossed it in strips. It reminded me of something, and finally I got it. Our early airmen, trying for altitude records high in the Stratosphere, had laced their bodies with heavy canvas strips to keep them from disrupting outward in the lessened pressure of the heights. The metallic-looking strips lacing this little body looked like those.

"IT must be that the thing comes from depths that make this forty-thousand-foot level seem high and ratified," I whispered to Belmont. "Hundreds of thousands of feet, perhaps. They've heard us working at the ore, and have come far up here to see what was happening."

"But to go through solid concrete—" muttered Belmont, dazed.

"That would be due to the way the atoms of their substance have been compressed and altered. They might be like the stuff on Sirius' companion, where substance weighs a ton to the cubic inch. That would allow the atoms of their bodies to slide through far-spaced atoms of ordinary stuff, as lead shot could pour through a wide-meshed screen. . . .

Belmont was so silent that I stared at him. He was paying no attention to me, probably hadn't even heard me. His eyes were wild and wide.

"There's another of them. And another! Frank—we're mad. We must be!"

Two more luminous swirls had appeared in the depths of the concrete. Two more tiny little human figures slowly appeared as, breasting forward like deep-sea divers against solid water, they plodded toward the face of the wall.

And now three mannikins, laced in with silvery-looking metal strips, stared at us through several inches of the milky appearing concrete. Belmont clutched my arm again.

"Their eyes!" he whispered. "They certainly don't like us, Frank! I'm glad they're like things you see under a low-powered microscope instead of man-sized or bigger!"

Their eyes were most expressive—and threatening. They were like human eyes—and yet unlike them. There was a lack of something in them. Perhaps of the thing we call, for want of a more definite term, Soul. But they were as expressive as the eyes of intelligent children.

I read curiosity in them as intense as that which filled Belmont and me. But over and above the curiosity there was—menace.

Cold anger shone from the soulless eyes. Chill outrage, such as might shine from the eyes of a man whose home has been invaded. The little men palpably considered us trespassers in these depths, and were glacially infuriated by our presence.

And then both Belmont and I gasped aloud. For one of the little men had thrust his hands forward, and hands and arms had protruded from the wall. Like the hands of a person groping a way out of a thick mist, theory hovered there; and then the tiny body followed it. And as if at a signal, the other two little men moved forward out of the wall too.

The three metal-laced mannikins stood in the open air of the tunnel, with their backs to the wall that had offered no more resistance to their bodies than cheese offers to sharp steel. And behind them there were no holes where they had stepped from. The face of the concrete was unbroken.

The atomic theory must be correct, I thought. The compacted atoms of which they were composed slid through the stellar spaces between ordinary atoms, leaving them undisturbed.

But only a small part of my mind concerned itself with this. Nine-tenths of it was absorbed by a growing, indefinable fear. For now the three little men were walking slowly toward us. And in every line of their tiny bodies was a threat.

Belmont looked at me. Our hands went uncertainly toward our revolvers. But we did not draw them. You don't shoot at children; and the diminutive size of the three figures still made us consider them much as harmless children. Though in the back of my mind, at least, if not in Belmont's, the indefinable fear was spreading . . .

The three stopped about a yard from us. Belmont was standing, and I was still seated, almost in a paralysis of wonder, on my rock fragment. They looked far up at Belmont and almost as far up at me. Three little things that didn't even come up to our knees!

AND then Belmont uttered a hoarse cry and dragged out his gun at last. For one of the three slid his tiny hand into the metal lacing of his body and brought it out with a sort of rod in it about the size of a thick pin, half an inch long. And there was something about the look in the mannikin's eyes that brought a rush of frank fear to our hearts at last, though we couldn't even guess at the nature of the infinitesimal weapon he held.

The mannikin pointed the tiny rod at Belmont, and Belmont shot. I didn't blame him. I had my own gun out and trained on the other two. After all, we knew nothing of the nature of these fantastic creatures who had come up from unguessable depths below. We couldn't even approximate the amount of harm they might do—but their eyes told us they'd do whatever they could to hurt us.

An exclamation ripped from my lips as the roar of the shot thundered down the tunnel.

The bullet had hit the little figure. It couldn't have helped but hit it; Belmont's gun was within a yard of it, and he'd aimed point-blank.

But not a mark appeared on the mannikin, and he stood there apparently unhurt!

Belmont fired again, and to his shot I added my own. The bullets did the little men no damage at all.

"The slugs are going right through the things!" yelled Belmont, pointedly.

Behind the mannikins, long scars in the rock floor told where the lead had ricocheted. But I shook my head in a more profound wonder than that of Belmont's.

"The bullets aren't going through them! *They're going through the bullets!* The stuff

they're made of is denser than lead!"

The little man with the tiny rod took one more step forward. And then I saw something that had been lost for the time in the face of things even more startling. I saw how the tiny tracks had been made.

As the mannikin stepped forward, I saw his advancing foot sink into the rock of the floor till the soles of his metallic-looking shoes were buried!

That small figure weighed so much that it sank into stone as a man would sink into ooze!

And now the microscopic rod flamed a little at the tip. And I heard Belmont scream—just once.

He fell, and I looked at him with a shock too great for comprehension, so that I simply stood there stupidly and saw without really feeling any emotion.

The entire right half of Belmont's chest was gone. It was only a crater—a crater that gaped out, as holes gape over spots where shells bury themselves deep and explode up and out.

There had been no sound, and no flash other than the minute speck of flame tipping the mannikin's rod. At one moment Belmont had been whole; at the next he was dead, with half his chest gone. That was all.

I heard myself screaming, and felt my gun buck in my hand as I emptied it. Then the infinitesimal rod turned my way, and I felt a slight shock and stared at my right wrist where a hand and a gun had once been.

I heard my own yells as from a great distance. I felt no pain; there are nerve shocks too great for pain-sensation. I felt only crazed, stupefied rage.

I leaped at the three little figures. With all my strength I swung my heavily booted foot at the one with the rod. There was death in that swing. I wanted to kill these three. I was berserk, with no thought in mind other than to rend and tear and smash. That kick would have killed an ox, I think.

It caught the little man in the middle of the back. And I screamed again and sank to the floor with the white-hot pain of broken small bones



spiking my brain. That agony, less than the shock of a losing a hand, I could feel all right. And in a blind haze of it I saw the little man smile bleakly and reach out his tiny hand toward Belmont, disregarding me as utterly as though I no longer existed.

And then through the fog of my agony I saw yet another wonder. The little man lifted Belmont's dead body.

With the one hand, and apparently with no more effort than I would have made to pick up a pebble, he swung the body two inches off the floor, and started toward the concrete wall with it..

I TRIED to follow, crawling on my knees, but one of the other little men dashed his fist against my thigh. It sank in my flesh till his arm was buried to the shoulder, and the mannikin staggered off-balance with the lack of resistance. He withdrew his arm. There was no mark in the fabric of my clothing and I could feel no puncture in my thigh.

The little man stared perplexedly at me, and then at his fist. Then he joined the other two. They were at the face of the concrete wall again.

I saw that they were beginning to look as though in distress. They were panting, and the one with the rod was pressing his hand against his chest. They looked at each other and I thought a message was passed among them.

A message of haste? I think so. For the one picked up Belmont again, and all three stepped into the concrete. I saw them forge slowly ahead through it. And I saw Belmont, at arm's length of the little man who dragged him, flatten against the smooth side of the stuff.

I think I went a little mad, then, as I understood at last just what had happened.

The little men had killed Belmont as a specimen, just as a man might kill a rare insect. They wanted to take him back to their own deep realms and study him. And they were trying to drag him through the solid concrete. It offered only normal resistance to their own compacted

tons of weight, and it didn't occur to them that it would to Belmont's body.

I flung myself at the wall and clawed at it with my left hand. The body of my friend was suspended there, flattened against it as the little man within tried to make solid matter go through solid matter, ignorant of the limitations of the laws of physics as we of earth's surface know them.

They were in extreme distress now. Even in my pain and madness I could see that. Their mouths were open like the mouths of fish gasping in air. I saw one clutch the leader's arm and point urgently downward.

The leader raised his tiny rod. Once more I saw the infinitesimal flash at its tip. Then I saw a six-foot hole yawn in the concrete around Belmont's body. What was their ammunition? Tiny pellets of gas, so compressed at the depths they inhabited that it was a solid, and which expanded enormously when released at these pressures? No one will ever know—I hope!

In one last effort, the leader dragged the body of my friend into the hole in the concrete. Then, when it stubbornly refused to follow into the substance through which they could force their own bodies, they gave up.

One of the three staggered and fell, sinking in the concrete as an overcome diver might sink through water to the ocean's bed. The other two picked him up and carried him. Down and away.

Down and away . . . down from the floor to the forty-thousand-foot level, and away from the surface of the concrete wall.

I saw the luminous trails they left in the concrete fade into indistinct swirls, and finally die. I saw my friend's form sag back from the hole in the concrete, to sink to the floor.

And then I saw nothing but the still form, and the ragged, six-foot crater that had been blown soundlessly into the solid concrete by some mysterious explosive that had come from a thing no larger than a thick pin, and less than half an inch long . . .

THEY found me an hour later—men who had come down to see why neither Belmont nor I answered the ring of the radio phone connecting the low level with the surface.

They found me raving beside Belmont's body, and they held my arms with straps as they led me to the shaft.

They tried me for murder—and sabotage. For, next day, I got away from the men long enough to sink explosive into the forty-thousand-foot level and blow it up so that none could work there again. But the verdict was not guilty in both cases.

Belmont had died and I had lost my right hand in an explosion the cause of which was unknown, the martial court decided. And I had been insane from shock when I destroyed the low level, which, even with the world famished for copper, was almost too far down to be commercially profitable anyway.

They freed me, and I wrote in my report—and some filing clerk has, no doubt, shrugged at its impossibility and put it in a steel cabinet where it will be forever ignored.

But there is one thing that cannot be ignored. That is, those mannikins, those microscopic

giants—if ever they decide to return by slow stages of pressure—acclimation to the earth's surface!

Myriads of them, tiny things weighing incredible tons, forging through labyrinths composed of soft veins of rock like little deep-sea divers plodding laboriously but normally through impeding water! Beings as civilized as ourselves, if not more so, with infinitely deadly weapons, and practically invulnerable to any weapons we might try to turn against them!

Will they tunnel upward some day and decide calmly and leisurely to take possession of a world that is green and fair, instead of black and buried? If they do, I hope it will not be in my lifetime!

