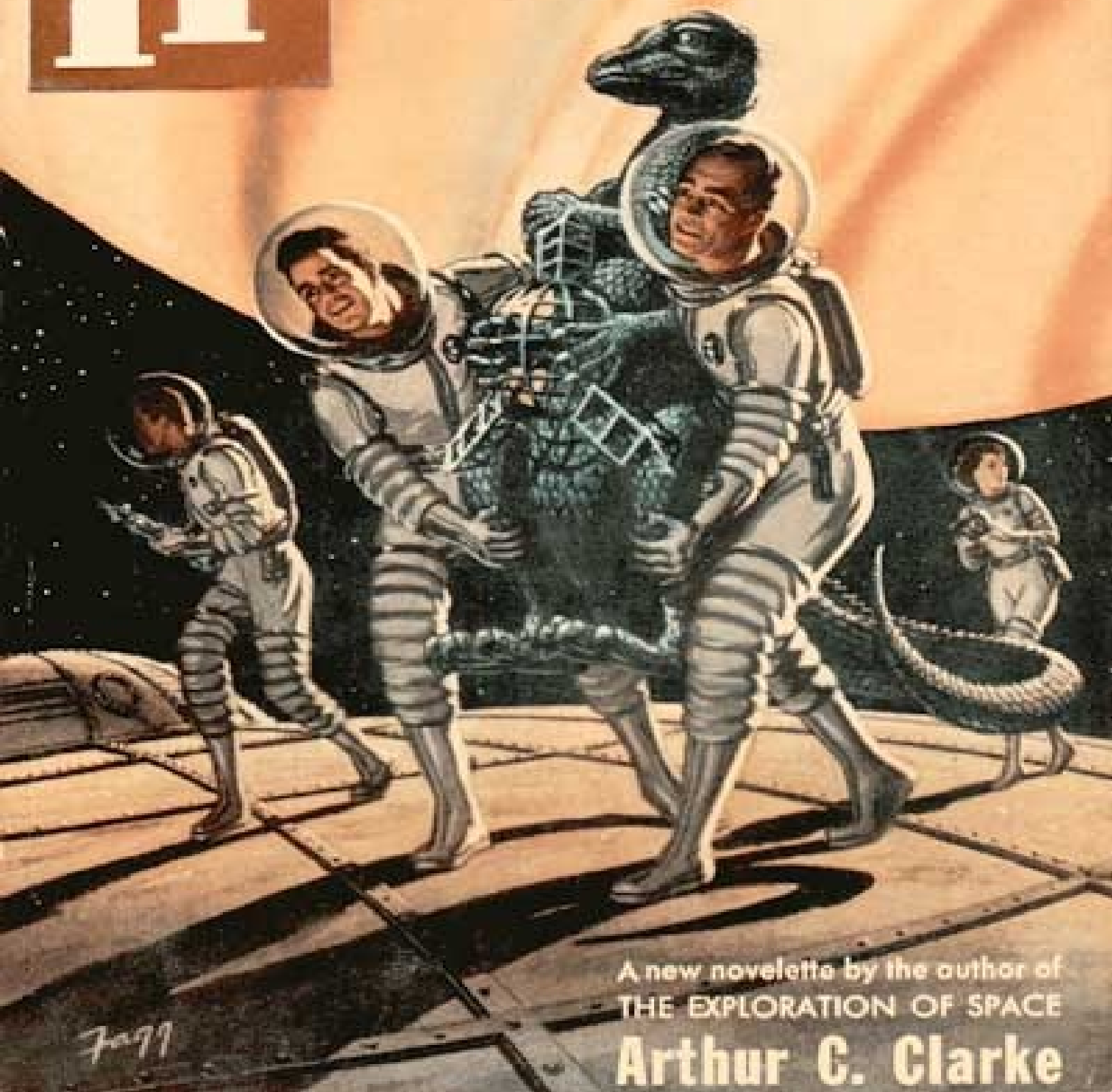


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WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1953 • 35 CENTS



A new novelette by the author of
THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE

Arthur C. Clarke

The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Kenzie Report, by Mark Clifton

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THE *Kenzie* REPORT

By Mark Clifton

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

If this story has a moral, it is: "Leave well enough alone." Just look what happened to Kenzie "mad-about-ants" MacKenzie, who didn't....

T

hat Kenzie MacKenzie was a mad scientist hardly showed at all. To see him ambling down the street in loose jointed manner, with sandy hair uncombed, blue eyes looking vaguely beyond normal focus, you might think here was a young fellow dreaming over how his gal looked last night. It might never occur to you that he was thinking of—ants.

Of course, we fellows in the experimental lab all knew it, but Kenzie wasn't too hard to get along with. In fact, he could usually be counted on to pull us out of a technical hole. We put up with him through a certain fondness, maybe even a little pride. It gave us a harmless subject to talk about when security was too rigid on other things.

Our Department Chief knew it, but Kenzie had solved quite a few knotty electronics problems. The Chief never has been too particular to see credit get back to the guy who earned it. We guessed he figured having Kenzie there was profitable to him. In fact, the little redhead in payroll told me the Chief was drawing quite a few bonus checks.

Personnel probably didn't know about it. Kenzie's papers, buried deep in the files, wouldn't show it; because about the only question they had *not* asked us was, "Where do you stand on the matter of ants?"

There was an unwritten law in the lab for nobody ever to mention insects, or even elderly female relatives. I guess that was why it wasn't mentioned to the new guy, name of Robert Pringle. This fellow Pringle worked along for a couple weeks and showed us he had the old know-how in his fingers. A capable tech, a good joe, and we thought we were lucky to get him.

On this particular morning, it happened that Pringle was working at the bench next to Kenzie. Being a talented tech, like the rest of us, his mind naturally ran along more than one channel at the same time. I expect he was really surprised at the reaction he got when he shouted out to the room at large.

"Hey, fellows," he yelled. "I got little green bugs on my roses. What do you do about it?"

The silence made him look up from his work, and he couldn't help noticing we all stood there with clinched hands and gritted teeth. We were watching Kenzie, who snapped the juice off his soldering iron and pointed the iron at Pringle.

"Those," said Kenzie in a hollow, impressive voice, "are aphids. If you will look closer, Pringle, you will see among them—ants. The aphid is to the ant as the dairy cow is to the human. Those ants are aphid herders, carefully tending and milking their flock."

"Here we go again," moaned one of the fellows across the lab.

"The ants are a highly intelligent life form," Kenzie went on. "I would explain it to you in detail, but I am in the middle of a problem at this moment."

"Thank heaven for that," another tech ground out the words.

"Suffice it to say," Kenzie ignored all interruptions, "Man would well occupy himself trying to communicate with them."

The Chief came to the doorway of his little office down at the end of the lab. He looked us all over patiently and knowingly.

"Now give him your syllogism, Kenzie," he said quietly, "so we can all get back to work."

"You may reflect on this, Pringle," Kenzie stated and waved his soldering iron in the air.

"One: Man wants to communicate with intelligent life from other planets or the

stars.

"Two: We know from observation the ants communicate with one another.

"Ergo: Before we reach so far as to contact extra terrestrial intelligence, had we not better occupy our time with solving a much simpler communications problem; to wit: communicate with the ants? How can we expect to solve communication with really alien beings from the stars, when we have not learned to communicate with the intelligent beings at our very feet?"

All over the room we sighed heavily with relief. We knew the syllogism was the conclusion, the Sunday punch. The boy had really cut it short this time. Usually he was good for a solid hour with facts and figures about how ants built bridges and such stuff.

We all looked at Pringle's face, expecting to see the embarrassed and sheepish grin. This was the usual reaction of a stranger when he first met up with Kenzie's syllogism. It horrified us to see, instead, his shining eyes. We heard him say enthusiastically.

"That's just how I've always felt about it, Kenzie. It's a pleasure to meet a man who isn't afraid of thinking."

"Oh, no-o-o!" we all groaned out in a chorus.

"Only," Pringle said dubiously, and our hopes began to arise again. "Only I've been thinking more along the line of termites." Our hopes fell and were shattered.

We heard the Chief moan to himself and saw him turn and almost run back into his office.

"Two of 'em now," he was mumbling over and over. "Two of 'em now. It ain't worth it. It ain't worth it." He sat down heavily and buried his head in his arms across the top of his desk. Kenzie was watching him too, like he was wondering what had got into the Chief. Then Kenzie turned back to Pringle.

"Ants," he said with determination.

"Termites," Pringle answered him stubbornly. Kenzie glared at Pringle for a minute, then his face cleared.

"Why not both of them?" he asked, like a fellow who was willing to be big about

it.

"Sure, why not?" Pringle came his half way also. Then, like he wasn't to be outdone in generosity. "Ants first, then termites later."

Solemnly the two shook hands. They went back to their work at the bench, and there was an aura of understanding and accord at that end of the room thick enough to be felt.

"I hope you insect lovers will be very happy together," the grid expert mumbled to their backs. The rest of us also settled back into our varied jobs and problems. But we worked as if we momentarily expected an earthquake to rock us. Our hands were not quite steady. Our eyes were not firm and piercing. We almost held our breaths. For a wonder, we agreed with the Chief. Two of 'em now.

The days passed and nothing more was said. More than ever now, we enforced the taboo on insects. We didn't mention trees, or wood, or even the conditional subjunctive. Wood sounded like wood. Wood might bring up the thought of termites.

We could see the Chief was weighing the advantages of keeping them against the risks of upsetting the department constantly. As we expected, greed won. We knew he would not risk giving up the prestige and extra bonuses he got for Kenzie's work. And he knew he had to keep those discoveries coming, because our management has a short memory of what a guy has done in the past.

The Chief even let Kenzie have Pringle as his own personal tech. It served two purposes. It isolated them from the rest of us. It made Kenzie happy.

I will say for the lads, they spent most of their time on Company problems, at first. But gradually, on one corner of Kenzie's bench, a gadget began to take shape. The two of them worked on it when there were no urgent, frantic, must-be-out-today-without-fail problems to be solved first. None of us could figure out the purpose of the mechanism.

We knew if we couldn't figure it, the Chief couldn't. But we could practically see him rub his hands in glee when he thought of the extra bonus he might get for this new gadget.

Of course the Chief wasn't a complete slouch as an electronics engineer. But it was a long time since he did his study, and he had grown hazy by spending too many years as an administrator. The word got around that for hours at a time,

after we had gone home, the Chief would stand at Kenzie's bench.

The way we reasoned it, he figured he ought to know something about the gadget when he took it in to Old Rock Jaw, and palmed it off as his latest discovery. We also reasoned that since we couldn't figure it, the Chief must have been an awfully troubled man.

Obviously, it had something to do with microwave transmission and reception. There was the usual high-frequency condensor, the magnatron tubes, the tuning cavities. All company stock, of course. But then none of us ever worried about cost. That was the Chief's problem.

He didn't worry much about it either, except at budget time. Then there were screams of anguish from the front office over experimental requisitions. Every year, Old Rock Jaw promised to fire us all, if we didn't cut costs, but in a couple of weeks we always forgot about it.

Trouble was, the Chief had been getting edgy about costs lately, so we knew it was about time for the annual budget battle. Significantly, he didn't say a word to Kenzie about the gadget.



A

As luck would have it, I was working late one night on a special permit. My bench is over in a wing of the lab, and I guess the Chief forgot I was around. I saw a very pretty scene.

The Chief had built up a habit of staying late so he could stand and study over the Kenzie gadget. He never touched it, though. He knew enough not to bother anything, because we all knew how bitter Kenzie was when anybody touched his things.

The Chief was standing there this evening when the General Manager, Old Rock Jaw, was showing some important personages through the plant after hours. They came through the lab door, and I saw scrambled eggs and fruit salad shining all over bulging uniforms. There was also one little geezick in a pin-striped suit. Old Rock Jaw was talking, as usual.

"... and it is from this room, gentlemen," he was saying, "That some of those

revolutionary discoveries emanate!"

Then he caught sight of the Chief, who had hastily picked up a cold soldering iron and was tentatively touching a random point on the new mechanism.

"Ah-h!" Old Rock Jaw exclaimed with satisfaction. "Here is our chief scientist now. Still at work. He watches no clock, gentlemen. He knows no time. His whole life is wrapped up in his research!"

The Chief didn't look around, but bent closer to the soldering point. He looked like he hoped they would limit their inspection to a cursory look about and then retire. I hoped they would too, I didn't want them to see me.

But Old Rock Jaw, in more of a blowhard mood even than usual, couldn't let well enough alone. He came up close to the Chief, and looked over his shoulder at the mechanism. He was even more ignorant than the Chief, so I knew he wouldn't recognize any of it.

"Don't let us disturb you, Alfred," he breathed in a hushed voice. "But could you tell the gentlemen what you are working on now?" He cleared his throat importantly and said, "I might add that everyone here has been security cleared, Alfred, so you may speak freely."

The Chief still did not lift his eyes from his work. He didn't dare. He carefully turned an unconnected control knob a hairsbreadth with utmost deliberation and precision.

"Multimicrofrequidometer," the Chief mumbled, and buried his head still deeper into the mechanism.

"Ah yes, of course. But you have a new hook up," the General Manager bluffed. "I hardly recognized it at first. Startling!" he breathed.

He looked around triumphantly at the impressed brass and braid. He looked pointedly at the pin-striped suit who probably controlled congressional purse strings.

"Apparently he is at a point where he cannot divert his attention to us, gentlemen," he breathed in a hushed voice. He placed his fingers to his lips and began to tip-toe backwards toward the door.

The beef trust in fancy uniform came up on their own toesies, and also tiptoed

away from the genius scientist. By now, the genius was beginning to exude large drops of sweat.

The door closed behind them, and the Chief dropped the cold soldering iron with a sigh of relief. He took hold of his tongue, where he must have been biting into it. He wiped his forehead and fingers with his breast-pocket handkerchief.

Both the Chief and I heard the party walking down the hall and into another wing of the building. I still didn't make a sound. It would never do for the Chief to know he had been observed. After a suitable time, the Chief, also, tiptoed out of the lab, and he was mumbling to himself as I have never seen him mumble before.

S

Several days later another thing appeared on Kenzie's work bench. This time it was a large rectangular glass aquarium. It was filled with moist earth. Now here was something new in electronics!

We shook our heads. One of the techs, who fancied himself a psychologist, said the boys were suffering from retrogressive dementia. They had gone so far back into childhood, they had to play sand box. The Chief overheard the tech, and spoke up plaintively.

"But I don't see any celluloid spade and bucket," he said. He seemed relieved when we burst out laughing.

His relief didn't last long, however. It changed to more worry when he saw the boys carefully sprinkling bread and meat crumbs over the surface of the sand. Then on top of that they dropped moist bits of cake icing. When Pringle brought down a marigold plant, all covered with aphids, and transplanted it in a corner of the aquarium, the Chief again ran into his office and began to hold his head in his hands.

More days passed. The gadget became a bristling porcupine of test clips. By now the boys had forgotten they were working for the Company and spent practically all their time on the whoozits. The Chief became so fascinated, in a kind of horror-stricken manner, that he did not mention the aquarium to Kenzie at all.

The rest of us also kept away from that side of the lab. Ever since Kenzie had started on the gadget, he had no time for us, or helping us with our problems. If we spoke to him he snapped back at us, until I guess all our noses were out of joint. By the time the aquarium appeared, we were ignoring him and everything he did.

In a few more weeks the aquarium was swarming with ants. It was easy to see their tunnels running up and down the sides of the glass. I will say this for the boys. They set it in a huge pan of water. None of us could legitimately squawk about getting ants mixed up with our anatomy.

The Chief showed he was mixed with disappointment and elation when the boys asked clearance to work nights in the lab. Disappointed since he could no longer stay late and follow the progress; elated because the boys must really be getting hot.

Annual budget time was getting closer, and we could see the wheels going around in his mind. It would be a nice thing if he could deliver the multiwhoozits gadget just before the big fight for appropriations.

As far as we knew, the only interest the General Manager had shown was the time he asked the Chief in the hall how that multiwhoozits was coming along. Even in that question, it was evident Old Rock Jaw was asking out of a rare politeness only—there being no big shots around to impress.

It was doubtful if the G.M. heard the Chief's vague answer, because the old boy was mumbling to himself about rising costs and having to cut down expenses. He waddled on down the hall. He was still mumbling as he went, but both the Chief and I heard one sentence clearly.

"And certain salaries and bonuses will have to be cut."

The Chief turned pale.

So he granted Kenzie's request with alacrity—and hoped he would finish the gadget in time.

For two more weeks the Chief waited patiently, or maybe impatiently. He knew the boys were working every night, because the security police complained about their pinochle game being interrupted to let Kenzie and Pringle in and out.

Both the boys began to get a feverish look in their faces. Their cheeks grew

hollow. Their eyes were bloodshot. Their regular work suffered even more. The Chief thought he was being considerate when he lifted some of their work and shoved it over to the rest of us.

We were already sore at the boys and we didn't take it too kindly. Just the same, we didn't let our squawk get beyond the walls of the lab. No use letting that nosy Personnel Department get an excuse to start holding hands, patting on the back, and radiating aid and comfort to all.

Then—a certain Monday came.



T

he Chief came in, a little late as usual. Some of the newer guys pretended to be busy, but we were all watching to see what he would do. There is a back door to the Chief's office which he seldom uses and which he always keeps locked. But it opens into the lab wing right at my table. It wasn't my fault, in fiddling around a little with the lock, it came unstuck and the door opened a little so I could hear what went on.

When the Chief came in, both the boys were busy dismantling the gadget. Discouragement and hopelessness were written all over their faces, in the dejected slope of their shoulders, in the lackadaisical movements of their arms. Piece by piece, through the glass partition of his office wall, the Chief watched the gadget being taken apart. Each piece was carefully taken back and placed in stock for re-use.

That alone was enough to create great alarm for their sanity. Imagine a technician putting a piece back to be used over!

Finally the Chief could bear it no longer. He called them into his office. He carefully shut the door, but he didn't notice the back door swung open a little farther. I found it necessary to work close to the crack, and if I turned around, I could get a good view of the entire office.

The Chief waved the boys into chairs across from his desk. He sat down and placed his fingertips together. Even then, I could see his hands were shaking. He leaned forward and asked with careful sympathy in his voice.

"Didn't it work?"

"Yeah," Kenzie answered in a bored voice. "It worked." I was surprised at Kenzie's voice. Usually he talked with the concise enunciation of a professor. Now he sounded like maybe just a good lab tech.

"Then why are you dismantling it?" the Chief asked with a worried frown.

"It wouldn't be good for people to know about it," Pringle burst out.

"I don't understand," the Chief faltered. Then desperately, "Look, fellows. I've given you a lotta leeway. You've sluffed your work something terrible. That's all right to an extent. I've covered for you."

"Thanks, Chief," Kenzie said drily.

"But Old Rock—er—the General Manager," the Chief complained, "knows I've been working on something. Now what with budgets coming on, and all, I gotta have something to show!"

"*You've* been working on something—" Pringle exclaimed.

"I mean my department has," the Chief covered himself hastily. "I'm responsible for what goes on in my department, you know. I gotta have some kind of an explanation." He was almost wailing now. "What with budgets coming on, and all."

"Make up your own explanation," Kenzie answered disinterestedly. "It's a cinch you can't give out with the real one."

The Chief began to wheedle. "You two boys know the explanation. Why can't you tell me? This is your Chief who's talking, boys. The one who has always stood by you and covered for you. Remember? You just gotta tell me, boys." I saw Pringle and Kenzie look at one another.

"I guess he's right, Ken," Pringle said. "That is, if he promises never to tell anybody."

"Yeah. I guess so." Kenzie nodded his head in agreement. "We owe him that much for just letting us alone."

The Chief let out a big sigh of relief.

"It's about ants," Kenzie began.

"Now, now, Kenzie boy," the Chief interrupted hurriedly. "Let's stay on the subject, shall we? Let's not get off on that tangent again, Kenzie boy. Shall we?"

"Nuts," Kenzie said.

"But this is about ants, Chief," Pringle answered. Then shrewdly, "But first you gotta promise, Chief."

"All right, I promise," the Chief acceded testily.

"It's about ants," Kenzie repeated stubbornly. The Chief winced, but he held his peace.

"They're intelligent," Kenzie said profoundly, and stopped.

"I know," the Chief prompted. "I know, Kenzie boy. You've been saying that all along."

"I communicated with them," Kenzie said flatly.

"You what?" The Chief's eyes bugged out. I guess mine did too.

"Sure," Kenzie answered. "After a fashion, that is. In their anthers they've got a chitin cell diaphragm. Modified cellular structure. They communicate with a sort of microwave. Roughly you might say it generates and radiates like our brain wave. Roughly, very roughly. This chitin diaphragm picks up the microwave like our ears pick up sound. Roughly, that is."

"But that's wonderful," the Chief glowed. It didn't take much imagination to see him in the General Manager's office explaining how his multiwhoozits gadget worked. Maybe nothing immediately commercial about it, but when the publicity office got hold of it—man, it would mean plenty of free publicity for the Company. And how Old Rock Jaw loved free publicity!

"We tuned in on them," Kenzie was saying. "By putting different kinds of food around, and by making different kinds of disturbances, we worked out a crude sort of vocabulary."

"You did—" the Chief exclaimed.

"Nothing fancy, you understand," Kenzie belittled his achievement. "But enough so when we broadcast a sugar wave, they came running to the surface to see where it was. When we broadcast a water wave, they rushed to the ant nursery

and started carrying eggs to high ground."

"Glory be—" the Chief breathed. In his eyes there was the vision of world renowned scientists patting him on the back. Maybe even more important, Old Rock Jaw was actually smiling, and telling him he could have unlimited funds in his budget.

"Sure," Kenzie said bitterly. "Sure that was all very fine. Big shots, we were going to be, Pringle and me. First time in history man had talked with an insect. Maybe even get our pictures in the paper, same as if we'd murdered somebody. Fame!"

"Yeah," Pringle chimed in. "First step in learning how to communicate with an alien mind. Nuts!"

"I don't get it," the Chief stammered. "What's wrong with that?"

"Well, we went on perfecting the vocabulary," Kenzie said. "You know. Fining it down. Had the little beggars practically standing on their heads at times with our wave." He grinned at the memory and seemed to shake off some of his lethargy.

"You shoulda been here the night Pringle had them marching in formation." His face fell again.

"We kept on improving the gadget," he said with hangdog attitude. "We still hadn't made direct communication, you understand. Nothing like 'How do you do, Mrs. Ant? This is Kenzie MacKenzie, human, talking.'" Then he sneered at his memory.

"With our microwave we could make them do things. But hell, you can make them run out of the ground by pouring water down their hole. That's not communication! We couldn't seem to contact them direct—make them know we were communicating."

"But you still—" the Chief said. He had visions of every home using a gadget to broadcast "keep away" signals to ant pests.

"Our gadget was still crude at that point," Kenzie interrupted. "We fined it down, more and more. That's when we began to pick up the star static."

"Star static?" the Chief faltered.

"He wouldn't know about that," Pringle said, and I could detect contempt in his

voice, even if the Chief didn't.

"Sure he would," Kenzie corrected. "Everybody knows about the fifty or so stars that send out continuous radio signals, and how we've been trying for years to unscramble them."

"Why certainly," the Chief said, so positively I knew he hadn't heard of it before.

"Anyway," Kenzie said. "The more we worked out the vocabulary code, the more the star signals began to fit right into it. So we decided to break up the thing, and forget all about ants. Honest Chief, you'll never hear me mention the word again."

"Termites either," Pringle chimed in.

"But I still don't understand," the Chief complained. "It still all sounds marvelous. I just don't understand."

"Draw him a picture," Pringle said disgustedly.

"Okay," Kenzie acceded. "How many years would you say ants have been on earth, Chief?"

"Oh, I don't know," the Chief answered. "Quite a few, I'd say."

"Yeah," Kenzie said drily. "Quite a few. At least a million. Unchanged. A perfect life form with a perfect civilization. So perfect, nature hasn't seen any need to change them for a million years."

"So what?" the Chief asked. "They're nothing. We come along and make them do nip ups."

"Yeah," Kenzie was bitter again. "We humans go around talking about how brave and smart we are. How someday we might even get so smart we'll contact other intelligent races on other worlds. Yeah, we're smart. You know those star radiations?"

"That's not my specialty, you know," the Chief answered cautiously.

"Some of those radiations started out from their home planet a million *light* years ago," Pringle said quietly.

"So what again?" the Chief asked.

"Those radiations," Kenzie said, "happen to be communications between the galaxies—beamed at the ants. Sort of a continuous radio program broadcast universe wide. It happens the ants, maybe termites, maybe other insects, are spread through all the galaxies. It happens *they* are the dominant intelligent race throughout the universe." He shrugged in disgust.

"Us big brave humans," he said contemptuously. "Someday we might even reach Mars. Hell, those ants have been colonizing for hundreds of millions of years. They're still communicating. They are the real intelligence on the earth!"

He crushed a cigarette fiercely into a glass ash tray on the desk.

"Only thing man has got, or ever had, was his ego. He's got to believe he's top dog, or else he folds and quits. Yeah, we're smart all right. Hell, we're so far down the scale the ants don't even recognize us as a life form at all."

Pringle nodded soberly. "Yeah," he said to the Chief, "how would you like to explain a gadget that proved ants have more brains than you have?"

The Chief looked at them with incredulous eyes.

He was still staring at them silently, with a bloodless face, when the office messenger came in and told him the General Manager wished to see him in his office to discuss budgets.

I closed the back office door quietly and went back to work. The other guys clustered around and wanted to know what I heard.

"Nothing," I said, and looked them straight in the eye. "Nothing at all."

—THE END—

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