## Silly Asses

Isaac Asimov

Naron of the long-lived Rigellian race was the fourth of his line to keep the galactic records.

He had the large book which contained the list of the numerous races throughout the galaxies that had developed intelligence, and the much smaller book that listed those races that had reached maturity and had qualified for the Galactic Federation. In the first book, a number of those listed were crossed out; those that, for one reason or another, had failed. Misfortune, biochemical or biophysical shortcomings, social maladjustment took their toll. In the smaller book, however, no member listed had yet blanked out.

And now Naron, large and incredibly ancient, looked up as a messenger approached.

“Naron,” said the messenger. “Great One!”

“Well, well, what is it? Less ceremony.”

” Another group of organisms has attained maturity.”

“Excellent. Excellent. They are coming up quickly now. Scarcely a year passes without a new one. And who are these?”

The messenger gave the code number of the galaxy and the coordinates of the world within it.

“Ah, yes,” said Naron. “I know the world.” And in flowing script he noted it in the first book and transferred its name into the second, using, as was customary, the name by which the planet was known to the largest fraction of its populace. He wrote: Earth.

He said, “These new creatures have set a record. No other group has passed from intelligence to maturity so quickly. No mistake, I hope.”

“None, sir,” said the messenger. “They have attained to thermonuclear power, have they?”

“Yes. sir.”

“Well, that’s the criterion.” Naron chuckled. “Andsoon their ships will probe out and contact the Federation.”

“Actually, Great One,” said the messenger, reluctantly, “the Observers tell us they have not yet penetrated space.”

Naron was astonished. “Not at all? Not even a space station?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“But if they have thermonuclear power, where then do they conduct their tests and detonations?”

“On their own planet, sir.”

Naron rose to his full twenty feet of height and thundered, “On their own planet?”

“Yes, sir.”

Slowly Naron drew out his stylus and passed a line through the latest addition in the smaller book. It was an unprecedented act, but, then, Naron was very wise and could see the inevitable as well as anyone in the galaxy.

“Silly asses,” he muttered.

###### \*\*\*

This is another story with a moral, I’m afraid. But, you see, the nuclear danger had escalated when both the United States and the Soviet Union developed the fusion H-bomb, and I was bitter again.

As 1957 ended another turning point was upon me. It came about in this wise:

When Walker, Boyd, and I wrote our textbook we all spent school time freely on it (though naturally much of the work overflowed into evenings and weekends).It was a scholarly endeavor and part of our job.

When I wrote THE CHEMICALS OF LIFE I felt that that, too, was a scholarly endeavor, and worked on it during school hours without any qualms. I worked on other books of the sort during school hours, too.\* [\* I must stress. again. that I *never* worked on science fiction during schoolhours.]By the end of 1957 I had in this fashion written seven nonfiction books for the general public.

Meanwhile, though, James Faulkner, the sympatheticdean, and Burnham S. Walker, the sympathetic department head, had resigned their positions and there had come replacements-who viewed me without sympathy.

Dean Faulkner’s replacement did not approve of my activities, and he had a point, I suppose. In my eagerness to write nonfiction I had completely abandoned research, and he thought it was research on which the school’s reputation depended. To an extent that is true, but it is not *always* true, and in my case it wasn’t.

We had a conference and I presented my view in a frank and straightforward manner, as my unworldly father had always taught me to do.

“Sir,” I said, ''as a writer I am outstanding and my work will reflect luster on the school. As a researcher, however, I am merely competent, and if there is one thing Boston University School of Medicine does not need, it is another merely competent researcher.”

I supose [sic] I might have been more diplomatic, for that seemed to end the discussion. I was taken off the payroll and the spring semester of 1958 was the last in which I taught regular classes, after nine years at that game.

It didn’t bother me very much. Concerning the school salary I cared nothing. Even after two pay raises it only came to sixty-five hundred dollars a year, and my writing earned me considerably more than that already.

Nor did I worry about losing the chance to do research; I had abandoned that already. As for teaching, my nonfiction books (and even my science fiction) were forms of teaching that satisfied me with their great variety far more than teaching a limited subject matter could. I didn’t even fear missing the personal interaction oflecturing, since from 1950 onward I had been establishing myself as a professional lecturer and was beginning to earn respectable fees in that manner.

However, it was the new dean’s intention to deprive me of my title, too, and kick me out of the school altogether. *That* I would not allow. I maintained that I had earned tenure, for I had become an associate professor in 1955, and could not be deprived of the title without cause. The fight went on for two years and I won. I retained the title, and I *still* retain the title right now. I am still associate professor of biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine.

What’s more, the school is now happy about it. My adversary retired at last and has since died. (He wasn’t really a bad fellow; we just didn’t see eye to eye.) And lest I give a false impression, let me state emphatically that, except for that one period involving just one or two people, the school, and everyone in it, has always treated me with perfect kindness.

I still do not teach and am not on the payroll, but that is my own choice. I have been asked to come back in one way or another a number of times, but have explained why I cannot. I do give lectures at school when requested, and on May 19, 1974, I gave the commencement address at the medical school-so all is well, you see.

Nevertheless, when I found I had time on my hands, with no classes to take care of and no commuting to do, I found that my impulse was to put that extra time into nonfiction, with which I had fallen completely and helplessly and hopelessly in love.

Remember, too, that on October 4, 1957, *Sputnik I* had gone into orbit, and in the excitement that followed I grew very fervent concerning the importance of writing science for the layman. What’s more, the publishers were now fiercely interested in it as well, and in no time at all I found I had been hounded into so many projects that it became difficult and even impossible to find time to work on major science fiction projects, and, alas, it has continued so to the present day.

Mind you, I didn’t quit science fiction altogether. No year has passed that hasn’t seen me write something, even if only a couple of short pieces. On January 14, 1958, as I was getting ready to start my last semester and before the full impact of my decision had struck home, I wrote the following story for Bob Mills and his (alas) short-lived *Venture.* It appeared in the May 1958 issue.