

In Re John D. Clark

by Isaac Asimov

I first met John in 1942 when I came to Philadelphia to live. Oh, I had known *of* him before. Back in 1937, he had published a pair of science fiction shorts, “Minus Planet” and “Space Blister,” which had hit me right between the eyes. The first one, in particular, was the earliest science fiction story I know of which dealt with “anti-matter” in realistic fashion.

Apparently, John was satisfied with that pair and didn’t write any more s.f., kindly leaving room for lesser lights like myself.

In 1942, therefore, when I met him, I was ready to be awed. John, however, was not ready to awe. He was exactly what he has always been, completely friendly, completely self-unconscious, completely himself.

He was my friend when I needed friendship badly. America had just entered the war and I had come to Philadelphia to work for the Navy as a chemist. It was my first time away from home, *ever*, and I was barely twenty-two. I was utterly alone and his door was always open to me. I was frightened and he consoled me. I was sad and he cheered me.

For all his kindness, however, he could not always resist the impulse to take advantage of a greenhorn.

Every wall of his apartment was lined with books, floor to ceiling, and he loved displaying them to me. He explained that one wall was devoted to fiction, one to histories, one to books on military affairs and so on.

“Here,” he said, “is the Bible.” Then, with a solemn look on his face, he added, “I have it in the fiction section, you’ll notice, under J.”

“Why J?” I asked.

And John, delighted at the straight line, said, “J for Jehovah!”

But the years passed and our paths separated. The war ended and I returned to Columbia to go after my PhD (which John had already earned by the time I first met him) while he went into the happy business of designing rocket fuels.

Now it is clear that anyone working with rocket fuels is outstandingly mad. I don’t mean garden-variety crazy or a merely raving lunatic. I mean a record-shattering exponent of far-out insanity.

There are, after all, some chemicals that explode shatteringly, some that flame ravenously, some that corrode hellishly, some that poison sneakily, and some that stink stenchily. As far as I know, though, only liquid rocket fuels have all these delightful properties combined into one delectable whole.

Well, John Clark worked with these miserable concoctions and survived all in one piece. What’s more he ran a laboratory for seventeen years that played footsie with these liquids from Hell and never had a time-lost accident.

My own theory is that he made a deal with the Almighty. In return for Divine protection, John agreed to take the Bible out of the fiction section.

So read this book. You’ll find out plenty about John and all the other sky-high crackpots who were in the field with him and you may even get (as I did) a glimpse of the heroic excitement that seemed to make it reasonable to cuddle with death every waking moment—to say nothing of learning a heck of a lot about the way in which the business of science is *really* conducted.

It is a story only John can tell so caustically well from the depths within.