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Elijah L. Jacobs

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## *Cum What?*

By ELIJAH L. JACOBS

THE END of the summer session!

Bates' examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy was scheduled to begin at eight-thirty. At eight-twenty-five he was waiting in the Department office. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen. Roberts, another candidate for a degree, looked in the door as he was passing, saw Bates, and stopped. "I'll pray for you today if you'll pray for me tomorrow," he said.

At last a secretary came and said, "Mr. Bates." He followed her through a door into a room where the committee of examiners sat about a long table.

"Sit down, Bates," Professor Blaine told him, affably. Blaine was a genial soul, as Bates knew. Some graduate students said that he smiled while he stabbed. Others believed that he knew everything, and was genuinely disappointed when, after three or four years of research, a candidate knew only two-thirds of everything. Anyhow the offer of a cigarette was friendly.

The questioning began—questioning on Bates' thesis first. What was his method of working up his bibliography? What had he found of significance in the learned journals? What of *Pauls Grundriss*? The *Revue des Deux Mondes*? The *P. M. L. A.*? Bibliographical questions. Bates answered them easily. Professor Blaine, who was doing most of the introductory examination, had a mania for German thoroughness.

How much of the underbrush for Bates' investigation had been cleared away by previous studies in the same direction? That question came from Dr. Jessel, a spare man with beetling white eyebrows and a white moustache. Bates was glad that he had found in the files of the university library the dissertation which Jessel had written many years before, when he was a callow youth with one year of

graduate study. "Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Arts," said the title page. The little monograph had the marks of immaturity in its style, and it had probably not been read three times during the thirty years of its repose in the library sub-basement. But Bates had brought it to light, and he was ready to cite it—without mentioning the error in the reading of an old manuscript which had made Jessel's conclusions misleading.

Half an hour gone. Professor Ross was testing Bates' knowledge of philology. Explain the origin of *you*—an old oblique case. Where does colloquial speech get *'em*—probably the correct historical form of Anglo-Saxon *hem*, rather than a corruption of the Scandinavian *them*. Why does modern English agree with Gothic in the phonetic of *grass* rather than with Anglo-Saxon? How account for the Middle English plural *hors* instead of *horses*? The difference between Anglo-Saxon *waeron* and an early Middle English *waeron*?

Suddenly Bates stopped. What was the difference? At last he gave up the puzzle.

"I see none," he admitted.

"There is none," said Ross. It had been a trick question.

Bates was annoyed by what he thought the trivial irrelevance of such a query in a serious examination. But for the most part, the linguistic test went easily enough. He was not certain that he had not made a mistake in the matter of Gothic reduplicating verbs, but the Anglo-Saxon dual number, the noun and adjective inflections, and the umlaut vowels were easy. The final *e* of Chaucer was well known to be a pet of Professor Hindon, and Jones was waiting for it. The Northern, Midland, and Southern English consonants stood in file for him.

Back to the First Consonant Shift in Germanic Philology. Why should Ross not get some decent order into his questions? Leaping from the fourteenth century back into

the mists of prehistoric antiquity. A trick intended to confuse, of course. No valid test of one's knowledge of linguistics. Simply a trick. Jumping about like a lawyer or a kangaroo. Ross as a kangaroo—

"I beg your pardon, Sir?"

"Grimm's Law?"

"A system of consonant changes, affecting High German but not other Germanic languages. *Z* becomes *tz*, *th* becomes *t*.—"

Ross leaned forward in his chair. Jessel stroked his pink chin. Blaine slouched down, his chin sunk on his chest, his kindly eyes intent. Bates felt a tightening in the atmosphere. One of the committee scraped a shoe sole on the floor.

What a ghastly mistake! Bates had mixed the babies. Grimm's Law was the First Consonant Shift, not the Second. Hindon had once walked out of a class in which no one knew the Second. He would not lecture to people so hopelessly ignorant. Bates' forehead was clammy. He must be nervous. He had long known Grimm's Law, and yet he had made this blunder.

Dr. DeKoven and Dr. Railsbach joined in asking questions concerning medieval literature—the Court of Love, the history of the *Auchinleck* manuscript, the other-world journey, the chastity test, the *Awnters of Arthur*, the method of determining a critical reading of a lost manuscript. Professor Hindon inserted a question about the nature myth in the Arthur cycle. Before he became engrossed in some other matters, Hindon had written a monograph on this subject. Bates felt his forehead sweating again. Curse these old men who could not forget the follies of their youth. Hindon still believed in that nature myth.

"I don't believe in that interpretation of the romances," Bates said. "The theory is generally discredited, and, I think, properly so." Better let Hindon think him a fool, than let all the rest of the committee think him one. But

this watching out for the older scholars' prejudices made the examination a more ticklish business.

Tickle o'the sear. The sear and yellow leaf. My heart leafs up when I behold—

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Hindon." Childish to let the mind wander to such silly things.

"Libius Disconius?" What a foolish name. But who was it?

Suddenly Bates felt panic. He had never really doubted his ability to pass his examination. Other men, and some of them frightful asses, had passed, and had taken their degrees. But now he could not remember Libius Disconius. He saw two little girls whose music lessons had been deferred for his graduate work. June would be waiting outside Finley Hall. Would he walk out or be carried out? He would have to tell June that he could not remember Libius Disconius.

"I can't recall, Sir."

"Wait a minute, Bates," De Koven interposed. "You do know. You were talking with me not more than a week ago."

"Oh yes. Thank you. The name is an English corruption of the French name given not to the hero but to the romance. The story of a fair unknown knight. Le Beau Desconnus." God bless the Jews. De Koven's fine, dark countenance was sympathetic.

"Catch your breath, Bates," he said. "You have a considerable distance to go yet."

Bates thought that Hindon was not pleased with the lift that De Koven had given him. Hindon leaned back in his seat and asked nothing more concerning the medieval period. Others of the committee continued the examination.

It came to Bates that he had been more disturbed than the failure to remember Libius would have justified. After all, any candidate for the doctor's degree must be unable to answer some of the questions put to him in the Orals. But Bates' agitation went deeper than that. He felt that his

mind had played a trick on him, as it had done in the matter of Grimm's Law. If he had to go back to his teaching at the end of his leave of absence, and to admit that he did not have his degree because he had been rolled in the examination—. And the committee might roll him. A chap had jumped into the river last summer.

For perhaps an hour the questioning went smoothly again. Blaine led through the Elizabethan period, and Bates thought that he was giving a fair account of himself. As one after another questioned him over various fields, he grew more confident. He was not answering every query put to him, but he thought he was doing creditably enough. It was Railsbach who set him off again.

"Who was Dougal MacCallum?" he asked.

Bates felt suddenly somewhat nauseous. His lips were so dry that he moistened them with his tongue. His skin felt a sensation of heat. The strength left his limbs. Who was Dougal MacCallum?

"I don't know," he answered, after a pause.

When Railsbach told him that Dougal was a minor character in *Redgauntlet*, Bates was resentful. The question seemed to imply that a doctor of philosophy should know all the unimportant characters in all the unimportant books. A test of scholarship.

Railsbach asked him to identify three more names: one from the sentimental novel, *A Man of Feeling*, one from *Lavengro*, and one from the *Morte Darthur*. All of them, Bates thought, insignificant.

Then Bates was unable to recall that it was Ben Jonson who gossiped with William Drummond about the virginity of the virgin queen. And the rest of the examination was painful. Bates was trembling. He was unable to recall facts which he had known for years—facts so elementary that when Blain or De Koven asked him leading questions to remind him, he knew that only an ignoramus could have forgotten them. He was seeing June and the children again.

June was to be waiting outside for him. She was out there now, probably. Waiting. Thinking that he was going to take his degree. Unsuspicious of the jackass he was.

Finally, when he could not remember the name of *Hall's Chronicle*, which he had cited freely in his thesis, he became nauseous again.

The thing might as well stop. He was done for. He rose unsteadily. The room was darkening before his eyes, and pitching like a ship in a heavy sea. He did not know that it was De Koven who caught him and steadied him through a door into the office before he passed completely out.

When Bates reeled back into consciousness, he was stretched on the floor. Above him the drawer of a desk stood open. As his senses cleared, he took in other details—Blaine and DeKoven squatting over him, Blaine holding amber bottle. When Bates struggled to rise, Blaine pushed him down, and put the bottle to his lips. The fiery liquid brought back recollection of what had happened.

Bates sat up. "I'm sorry," he said, rather thickly. "I'm done for. My wife will be waiting." He got slowly to his feet.

Blaine and De Koven rose too. Blain put the bottle away, and pushed the drawer shut. De Koven had his hand at Bates' elbow.

"I must tell you, Bates," said Dr. Blaine, "to get ready for a shock. And accept my congratulations." He shook Bates' hand.

"Dr. Bates," he said.

"*Cum laude*," added De Koven.

Bates was angry at that. It was enough to have failed in his examination, without being insulted. "*Cum* what?" he asked foolishly.

De Koven was also shaking his hand. "*Cum laude*," he said. "That's what we give those who faint. If we have to call for help, we give *magna cum laude*. *Summa cum* means that we had to use the pulmotor. Did you say that your wife is waiting?"