

Hamsters Have Tertiary Education

“Order! Order!” squeaked Broccoli Bill at the top of his voice, “Hamsters have order!” The milling crowd of hamsters, brown, grey, white and black, continued to investigate the buffet of chocolate drops, carrots and choice walnuts, and paid little attention to the Chairperson.

“Please!” squeaked Bill.

Immediately, there was a dead silence, apart from some rather unfortunate noises from one hamster who had over-fed himself on brussels sprouts and was now paying the price. Bill glared at the unfortunate hamster, and then turned majestically to the assembly.

“Stumpy Endive’s University proud to host ninth conference of Society of Learned and Outstanding Teaching Hamsters.”

“Hamsters need SLOTH™,” murmured several of the hamsters indulgently, settling back into their piles of sawdust and nibbling at the rather generous snacks they had managed to pull from the side-tables.

“Hamsters also welcome, for first time,” continued Broccoli Bill, turning suavely to a group of rather thin hamsters who were clustered around the table of water-cress, “Members of the Society of Lecturers for the Eradication of Extensive Pouches. Please put paws together, fellow-academics!”

There was a polite, if rather frosty, round of applause. One rather young hamster shouted “Hamsters want SLEEP™ !” and was immediately sat upon by a portly old hamster next to him. The nervous Lecturers for the Eradication of Extensive Pouches bowed timidly and then hid their faces in the water-cress. This visit was a first, entirely experimental, and they had not expected a warm welcome, given the nature of their research.

“Now to business,” Bill continued hastily. “Professor Bleu give us report on Maths Department.”

Gordon Bleu waddled up to the lectern. “Bonjour, mes amis!” he beamed. “I am verr pleased to report that le mathématique is most ‘ealthy in Stumpy Endive’s Université. When I began ‘ere, there is juste trois mois - ‘ow you say, tree moths ageu? - as a simple undergraduate, little did I expect zat le mathématique could be so neglected. But I am verr content to say that ‘amsters ‘ave now made ze révolution in ze département and all ze skinny pouches ‘ave gone. Vive le mathématique!” To enthusiastic applause, Professor Bleu bowed deeply and blew kisses to his audience.

Broccoli Bill consulted his notes, part of which had already been nibbled away. “Next on agenda, Dr Parker, whose long distinguished academic career well known to all hamsters.”

Teddy Parker made his way to the platform, nodding right an left to his admirers. A long and distinguished career indeed. Had he not, after all, been the very first hamster to attend university, six months ago; and, within weeks, had been appointed to lecture in English at the University, and then last month became the Professor of Anagrams. It was his seminal and witty thesis entitled “**Anagrams: Thames ‘r Us; or Streams of Hydrogen**”, which he had published last week under the pseudonym “*Master H*”, that had brought to the attention of an admiring world the agile philosophy of hamsters.

Teddy Parker was brief and to the point: “Hamsters have Cross Words.” he said quietly. There was several seconds of silence in the room; hamsters looked at each other,

puzzled. Many started to wash their whiskers energetically. At last, a light went on somewhere. Young Arthur Choke, a post-graduate student studying the effect of yoghurt drops on the growth of baby hamsters, blurted out, "Brilliant! Crosswords - cross-words!" The communal penny dropped and Dr Parker, beaming, left the dais to a rapturous ovation and repeated shouts of "Hamsters have cross-words, OK!".

"Thank you, Master H.!" squeaked Broccoli Bill over the noise. "Trenchant exposition as ever, sir!" Finding that the next item on the agenda had been completely nibbled away in a moment of nervous forgetfulness, Bill recalled that his old colleague, Haricot Bert, had prepared a special report, which - he said - would dazzle and astound.

"Next speaker is Professor Haricot Bert, of the Department of Narcoleptic Studies." Broccoli Bill looked around for his friend. No one in the audience had moved. "Professor Bert?" repeated Bill in a louder tone. Heads turned, noses twitched, but there was no sign of the speaker. Just then, a young hamster scuttled up to Bill and whispered in his ear. Bill nodded and examined the agenda. "Sorry to say Professor Bert unexpectedly fallen asleep. Next item: report from Spanish Department."

A black-furred hamster swaggered up to the lectern. "Ola!" he said, twirling his rather sumptuous whiskers. "For those who not know, me Raul Ratatouille, visiting lecturer in Iberian Studies from the College of Santiago de Compostela." At the mention of compost, more than a few hamsters, slumbering peacefully, woke up and muttered "Where? Where?"

Raul Ratatouille proposed to give a long and rather dull report on a book he had read, named "Donkey Hotty" This book on the Spanish Ass, he announced, was written some time ago by an ancestor of his and proved just how learned Spanish hamsters had become, long before any other hamsters on the globe. This provoked patriotic cries of "Rubbish!" and "Hovis!" and - rather more coarsely, from some of the post-graduate members of the Society - "Gerbils!". Also, a shower of half-eaten carrot-tops and ends of broccoli. As Raul Ratatouille dodged the incoming vegetables, thanking his lucky stars for his early training at the Matador Academy, he dropped his huge sheaf of lecture-notes. One or two of the more agile hamsters scampered up and, with a great pattering of paws, made off with the notes, distributing them right and left as they fled, and, within the space of ten seconds, the Spanish Department's contribution to the conference was concealed in a score of bulging pouches.

Broccoli Bill thanked the unfortunate Iberian hamster for the brevity of his report and observed that it had given food for thought to many of those present. Several hamsters snorted and giggled. Broccoli Bill moved on sharpish to the next item, which was a report from Patty Perkins of the Classics Department.

Patty had drawn one of several short straws for his position on the agenda, since, after already ten minutes of the conference, it was time for the majority of the audience to have a long snooze. Old-hands were well aware that every fourth to sixth item on the agenda was likely to be met with nothing beyond the closed eyes and contented snores of fellow academics.

Making the best of the situation, Professor Perkins rambled on at great length on his subject of choice, *Jason and the Aggronauts*. It was not to be supposed, suggested the Professor, that the Aggronauts were a collection of adventurous humans; rather, the Professor's own researches in the library - a place, incidentally, he would strongly recommend to all his fellow-academics, as a place of somnolence and warmth - had unearthed evidence that Jason himself was one of the original Syrian hamsters, and that his followers were therefore a family of rather fierce hamsters, perhaps Ukrainian in

origin. The fact that they had sailed in the Black Sea strongly supported the Ukrainian connection. Furthermore, the Professor had read a book recently (at this, from those few hamsters who had just turned in their sleep, muttered “Shame!”) - no, he was not ashamed to say so, although it was not a whole book, only part of a book; with lots of pictures; more mumbles of “Outrage!” and “Hamsters have no shame!”; in which book, he repeated, or more precisely, in which part of a book with lots of pictures, the Professor had discovered references to Jason’s meetings with Gorgons - manifestly, a purveyor of gorgonzola cheese; and now proposed the thesis that the Aggronauts were in reality Cosmonauts, travellers in Flying Saucers - for which hypothesis he would like, at this point, to pass on his thanks to his esteemed colleague, Dr Dumble of the HamLabs™ School of Science, for his valuable assistance...

Professor Perkins droned on and on for many minutes, providing a cottonwool atmosphere of unbroken soporific noise on which all the hamsters in the audience, and Broccoli Bill, gratefully slumbered. Eventually, the eyelids of the Professor himself slowly closed and he slumped forwards on the lectern and snoozed contentedly.

Towards late afternoon, the first hamsters awoke, and consulted the still heavily-loaded buffet-tables. The sound of crunching cabbages and cracking nuts woke up everyone else in the room, and soon there was a free-for-all. Not until everyone had grabbed and pouched what he or she wanted did Broccoli Bill call the conference to order again. It was his turn now, with his full academic title, Dr Broccoli Bill, Regius Professor of Vegetable Studies, to deliver the keynote speech of the day: **“Vegetables - Subitaneous or Post-Marsupial Consumption?”**

“The question posed to the leaders of hamster academia is this,” began Broccoli Bill, importantly, “Should vegetables be eaten immediately or pouched for later use?”

“Good question...” muttered several hamsters, nodding sagely. “Challenging,” they added.

“Immediately,” said some to their friends, cleaning their ears assiduously.

“After pouching,” murmured others to their neighbours.

“Hamsters have good questions,” said a small minority, undecided as yet on the great questions of the day and voting forthwith to try out both methods there and then.

Understandably, the colleagues from SLEEP™ were of the opinion that anything which was pouched was inherently bad for hamsters’ physical well-being. Opposed to this camp were the younger hot-heads from a sect known only as FAT (some said this stood for *Freedom to Act Terribly*; but the truth was that no one really knew), whose considered view it was that pouching always left options open for eating more food on the way home.

Broccoli Bill never really knew what happened next. For, no sooner had he posed the first question, than the entire assembly erupted into a noisy, squeaking, squealing, fighting maelstrom of scurrying and arguing hamsters. Fur flew, tails were nipped, bottles of water were tossed, apple-cores cascaded from the air. FAT hamsters scuffled with SLEEP™ hamsters. In despair, Broccoli Bill banged with his little hammer, calling for quiet: to no avail.

The ninth conference of SLOTH™ had found the most interesting item on the agenda so far...