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IN MEMORIAM
PROFESSOR JAMES W. JEANS, SR., A LIFE IN VERSE

Professor F. LaGard Smith[†]

I could never quite decide whether Professor Jeans was like a father to me or like the older brother I never had. He was certainly the most knowledgeable man I have ever known – a true Renaissance man who would quote poetry at the drop of a hat, and come up just the right scripture verse for whatever the occasion demanded. Whether of encouragement, rebuke, or sheer silliness, there was always a word fitly spoken.¹

Professor Jeans was an advocate's advocate, with punch, and wit, and fire in his belly. "Quit gumming the veins when you can go for the jugular," he would say to me. He was also a raconteur extraordinaire. During the Major League World Series, not only could he rattle off the usual statistics that every avid fan knew by heart, but he also could tell stories about old-timers in the game as if he knew them personally.

His sense of humor kept dull faculty meetings alive. In one of our meetings, when endless debate had ensued over whether the word ought to be "and" or an "or," Professor Jeans waited patiently until we had made up our minds, then put it all into perspective, saying: "The mountain rumbled and roared . . . and brought forth a mouse!"²

Just hours before he died, I was lamenting about a prayer breakfast talk I had given the Saturday before, feeling I had made a bit of a hash of it. But Professor Jeans was quick to assure me: "No, no, there were flashes of . . . mediocrity!"

Poetry was not just a passion for Professor Jeans, but even a means of pedagogy. I asked his wife Sheryle if she might come up with some of his favorite poems, which she did from a book that he had marked. It is amazing how descriptive these three short poems are of his sublimely interesting life.

† Professor Smith taught at Liberty University School of Law with Professor Jeans. This piece has been adapted from a eulogy Professor Smith delivered at Jim Jeans' memorial service at Liberty University on November 2, 2006. F. LaGard Smith has written more than 20 books, and has devoted a lifetime to teaching both law and religion at Christian universities.

1. See *Proverbs* 25:11 ("A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver" (KJV)).

2. Joking reference to a fable attributed to Aesop. The moral of the story is that one must not "make much ado about nothing." Aesop, *The Mountain in Labor*, in *THREE HUNDRED ÆSOP'S FABLES* 16 (Rev. Geo. Fyler Townsend trans., 1867).

The first, titled "A Bag of Tools," spoke of a man whose life was all about what he did with the "tools" he was given to work with in this life:

Isn't it strange how princes and kings,
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
and common people, like you and me,
are builders for eternity?

Each is given a list of rules;
a shapeless mass; a bag of tools.
And each must fashion, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone.³

Professor Jeans was given a quite incredible bag of tools: a sharp, penetrating intellect; a remarkable memory; keen wit and a wonderful sense of humor; boundless energy despite physical impairments; uncommon wisdom; a passion for the cause of right and justice; and integrity beyond reproach. Most important of all, like Nathaniel, he was a man in whose heart there was absolutely no guile.⁴

But Professor Jeans was also an earthy man whose feet were solidly in the dust of human frailty, even while his heart and soul ascended to celestial heights. He was no "goody-two-shoes," as men of his era might have put it. There was the time, for instance, when one of his sons was driving without a license and Professor Jeans said to himself, "If there's an accident, I'm switchin' seats!"

With far more reason for uncircumspect pride than lesser men, Professor Jeans was self-effacing and void of an inflated ego. One of the greatest attributes found in his bag of tools was humility. And what did Professor Jeans do with his extraordinary bag of tools? He placed in it a "book of rules" (as in the poem) and made, not a stumbling block, but a stepping stone.

The second poem, titled "The Bridge Builder," was about a man who built a bridge over a precarious abyss:

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast, and deep, and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

3. R. Lee Sharpe, *A Bag of Tools*, in *THE BEST LOVED POEMS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* 99 (Hazel Felleman, ed., 1936).

4. Recalling the story of Nathaniel in the Gospel of John. *John* 1:47.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
 The sullen stream had no fears for him;
 But he turned, when safe on the other side,
 And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim, near,
 “You are wasting strength with building here;
 Your journey will end with the ending day;
 You never again must pass this way;
 You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide –
 Why build you a bridge at the eventide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head:
 “Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
 “There followeth after me today,
 A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
 To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
 He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
 Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”⁵

Surely, it was the teacher in Professor Jeans that identified so closely with that poem. Occasionally sitting at the master’s feet in class, I marveled at the man, just sitting there with hardly any notes, drawing from a lifetime of experience in order to build bridges for the next generation.

The third poem, titled simply “Tragedy,” told the story of a young boy who wanted to buy a balloon at the fair – a *red* balloon:

I always wanted a red balloon,
 It only cost a dime;
 But Ma said it was risky,
 They broke so quickly,
 And beside, she didn’t have time,
 And even if she did, she didn’t
 Think they were worth a dime.
 We lived on a farm & I only went
 To one circus and fair,
 And all the balloons I ever saw were there:
 There were yellow ones & blue ones,

5. Will Allen Dromgoole, *The Bridge Builder*, in *THE BEST LOVED POEMS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* 137 (Hazel Felleman, ed., 1936).

But the kind I liked the best
Were the red, and I don't see why
She couldn't have stopped and said
That maybe I could have one –
But she didn't – I suppose that now
You can buy them anywheres,
And that they still sell red ones
At circuses and fairs.
I got a little money saved;
I got a lot of time,
I got no one to tell me how to spend my dime;
Plenty of balloons – but somehow
There's something died inside of me,
And I don't want one now.⁶

Why was this poem a favorite for Professor Jeans? I wonder what his “red balloon” was that he never had. Was it a sports career cut short when his eye was injured? I don't know. Did he, perhaps, want a wider fame when he was a young man? I don't know. What did he think about while riding the tractor on his farm back in Missouri when he was retired and more than a bit embittered with the direction legal education had taken? I don't know.

But whatever it was, he did not want it anymore. Or need it anymore. What he needed and what he wanted was the last chance he never dreamed of having, a chance to bring his un-pious piety to bear upon his love of the law at Liberty University Law School. And how he soared, just like a balloon! But maybe (as in the poem) his Ma was right after all – “balloons *are* risky” . . . they break so quickly.

Two weeks before his death, Professor Jeans gave the faculty a master class in how to teach. It is a shame we did not record it. At one point, the wise old evidence professor began talking about dying declarations, about how a man's last words often say a lot about him. On the day Professor Jeans died in the midst of a faculty meeting, his own last words were a reference to the Sermon on the Mount and the plight of the poor. On the field of intellectual and spiritual battle, this aging advocate was fighting, in his last moments on earth, for the poor and the oppressed—just as he had done throughout a long legal career of defending the underdogs against the fat cats and bad guys. But this time he was advocating in the name of a gracious, loving, and compassionate Christ.

6. Jill Spargur, *Tragedy, in THE BEST LOVED POEMS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* 389-90 (Hazel Felleman, ed., 1936).

In his lecture two weeks earlier, his own example of a poignant dying declaration was the highly successful man who was asked on his deathbed what lessons he had learned in life. “What legacy of wisdom could he leave?” they asked. The man thought for a moment, then answered, “Jesus loves me, *this* I know . . . ,” at which point Professor Jeans broke down in tears. Moments passed before he could gain sufficient composure to finish with the familiar words, “For the Bible tells me so.”

What had moved this rock of a man to tears in front of his colleagues? Surely, it was his own personal faith in Jesus, who loved him so; and in the inspired Word of God that had taught him of such love even as a little child. For all his intellectual acumen, Professor Jeans had a childlike faith and trust in Jesus. As we say farewell to Professor Jeans and fold him within the deepest recesses of our hearts, let us learn from a master teacher and capture anew that same childlike trust in Jesus.

