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ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON!

MERLIN X. HOUDINI, IV

In the May 1973 Kickshaws, David L. Silverman presents the problem of halving a six-letter word to form two three-letter words, in each of the ten mathematically possible subdivisions of the six letters involved. All words used must appear in boldface type either in the Second or in the Third Edition of the Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary.

The proponent of the problem points out that a logical gambit is to start with a word consisting of three consonants and three vowels, but that this tack runs into the difficulty of finding one combination of an all-vowel word and an all-consonant word.

The problem is an elementary one, solved in a few minutes if we start with an all-vowel word (AIE, IAO, AUE, etc.) and an all-consonant word (TCH, NTH, TCK, etc.), mixing the two letter groups to form a six-letter word. The real difficulty lies in constructing a solution that does not offend our esthetic sensibilities by employing objectionable words: hyphenated and apostrophized words, abbreviations and capitalized words, archaic and obsolete words, dialectal, provincial, and Scottish words, and words stigmatized as foreign by two vertical bars placed in front of them.

I have devoted a couple of hours to the problem, and have devised a solution to it that comes within a whisker of meeting the highest standards of logological esthetics. Here is that solution, with the rationale for its acceptance.

The six-letter starting point is THEINA, a spelling of THEINE (synonym for "caffeine") no longer in vogue among chemists. The Second Edition callously labels the word obsolete. According to the standard set by the Second Edition, this means that the word has not appeared in print since the year 1660. The Third Edition has moved the cutoff date to the year 1755. I submit that the dictionary editors are in error. The Oxford English Dictionary includes two quotations using THEINE, dated 1838 and 1842, which isn't all that long ago; The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia, published as recently as 1914, gives THEINA simply as an alternate form of THEINE; and Webster's Third Edition derives THEINE from THEINA as a New Latin word, investing it with the cloak of modernity right there.

With a base of operation established in THEINA, the rest of the solution follows quickly. The ten combinations are:
AIE, NTH aie: a cry of grief or anguish
HEN, TAI tai: a Japanese food fish
HIN, TEA hìn: an ancient Hebrew liquid measure
HAN, TIE han: a Japanese feudal barony
HAT, NEI nei: a Moslem flute
THE, ANI ani: a black cuckoo
HIT, ANE ane: one
TIN, HAE hae: have
TEN, HIA hia: the hawk parrot
TAN, HIE

Webster's Third Edition describes two of the three-letter words, ANE and HAE, as being "chiefly Scottish". That is unkind. However, "chiefly" does not mean "exclusively", leaving room for occasional use of these words in standard English. Moreover, both words are also included in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, indicating that they are reasonably common English words. On top of that, both words occur in the poetry of Robert Burns, in passages important enough to be included in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*.

ANE: John Anderson my jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither,
And monie a cantle day, John,
We've had wi' ANE anither;

HAE: A man may tak a neebor's part,
Yet HAE nae cash to spare him.

Note the word NAE following HAE in the second quotation. It is an anagram of ANE, and is defined by Webster's Third Edition as a dialectal British variant of the chiefly Scottish word NA, which means "no" or "not".

Mr. Silverman closes with the intimation that the analogous 8-letter problem, in which an 8-letter word is successively divided into 35 pairs of 4-letter words, is just about hopeless. Not so, if we perceive Webster's Second Edition in the proper light. Start with ESTHONIA, a name in the Gazetteer section. Divide it into NTH' S, the quotation noun plural of NTH, and EIAO, a small island in the Marquesas listed in Webster's Geographical Dictionary which is really only the Gazetteer section of the unabridged dictionary expanded and brought to a state of fulfillment. Proceed from there!