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Concerning The Answer To That Conundrum

I went out, several days ago, to see the whale—I speak in the singular number, because there was only one whale on the beach at that time. The day was excessively warm, and my comrade was an invalid; consequently we travelled slowly, and conversed about distressing diseases and such other matters as I thought would be likely to interest a sick man and make him feel cheerful. Instead of commenting on the mild scenery we found on the route, we spoke of the ravages of the cholera in the happy days of our boyhood; instead of talking about the warm weather, we reveled in bilious fever reminiscences; instead of boasting of the extraordinary swiftness of our horse, as most persons similarly situated would have done, we chatted gaily of consumption; and when we caught a glimpse of long white lines of waves rolling in silently upon the distant shore, our hearts were gladdened and our stomachs turned by fond memories of sea-sickness. It was a nice comfortable journey, and I could not have enjoyed it more if I had been sick myself.

When we got to the Cliff House we were disappointed. I had always heard there was such a grand view to be seen there of the majestic ocean, with its white billows stretching far away until it met and mingled with the bending sky; with here and there a stately ship upon its surface, ploughing through plains of sunshine and deserts of shadow cast from the clouds above; and, near at hand, piles of picturesque rocks, splashed with angry surf and garrisoned by drunken, sprawling sea-lions and elegant, long-legged pelicans.

It was a bitter disappointment. There was nothing in sight but an ordinary counter, and behind it a long row of bottles with Old Bourbon, and Old Rye, and Old Tom, and the old, old story of man's falter and woman's fall, in them. Nothing in the world to be seen but these things. We stayed there an hour and a half, and took observations from different points of view, but the general result was the same—nothing but bottles and a bar. They keep a field-glass there, for the accommodation of those who wish to see the sights, and we looked at the bottles through that, but it did not help the matter any to speak of; we turned it end for end, but instead of increasing the view it diminished it. If it had not been fashionable, I would not have engaged in this trivial amusement; I say trivial, because, notwithstanding they said everybody used the glass, I still consider it trivial amusement, and very undignified, to sit staring at a row of gin bottles through an opera-glass. Finally, we tried a common glass tumbler, and found that it answered just as well, on account of the close proximity of the scenery, and did not seem quite so stupid. We continued to use it, and the more we got accustomed to it, the better we liked it. Although tame enough at first, the effects eventually became really extraordinary. The single row of bottles doubled, and then trebled itself, and finally became a sort of dissolving view of inconceivable beauty and confusion. When Johnny first looked through the tumbler, he said: "It is rather a splendid display, isn't it?" and an hour afterwards he said: "Thas so -'s a sp-(ic!)-splennid 'splay!" and set his glass down with sufficient decision to break it.

We went out, then, and saw a sign marked “CHICKEN SHOOTING,” and we sat down and waited a long time, but finally we got weary and discouraged, and my comrade said that perhaps it was no use—maybe the chicken was not going to shoot that day. We did not mind the disappointment so much, but the hiccups were so distressing. I am subject to them when I go abroad.

We left the hotel, then, and drove along the level beach, drowsily admiring the terraced surf, and listening to the tidings it was bringing from other lands in the mysterious language of its ceaseless roar, until we hove in sight of the stranded whale. We thought it was a cliff, an isolated hill, an island—anything but a fish, capable of being cut up and stowed away in a ship. Its proportions were magnified a thousand-fold beyond any conception we had previously formed of them. We felt that we could not complain of a disappointment in regard to the whale, at any rate. But we were not prepared to see a magnified mastodon, also; yet there seemed to be one towering high above the beach not far from the whale. We drove a hundred yards further—it was nothing but a horse.

Then the light of inspiration dawned upon me, and I knew what I would do if I kept the hotel, and the whale belonged to me. I would not permit any one to approach nearer than six or eight hundred yards to the show, because at that distance the light mists, or the peculiar atmosphere, or something, exaggerates it into a monster of colossal size. It grows smaller as you go towards it. When we got pretty close to it, the island shrunk into a fish—a very large one for a sardine, it is true, but a very small one for a whale—and the mastodon dwindled down to a Cayuse pony. Distance had been lending immensity to the view. We were disappointed again somewhat; but see how things are regulated! The very source of our disappointment was a blessing to us: As it was, there was just as much smell as two of us could stand; and if the fish had been larger there would have been more, wouldn't there? and where could we have got assistance on that lonely beach to help us smell it? Ah! it was the great law of compensation—the great law that regulates Nature's heedless agents, and sees that when they make a mistake, they shall at the self-same moment prevent that mistake from working evil consequences. Behold, the same gust of wind that blows a lady's dress aside, and exposes her ankle, fills your eyes so full of sand that you can't see it. Marvelous are the works of Nature!

The whale was not a long one, physically speaking—say thirty-five feet—but he smelt much longer; he smelt as much as a mile and a half longer, I should say, for we traveled about that distance beyond him before we ceased to detect his fragrance in the atmosphere. My comrade said he did not admire to smell a whale; and I adopt his sentiments while I scorn his language. A whale does not smell like magnolia, nor yet like heliotrope or “Balm of a Thousand Flowers;” I do now know, but I should judge that it smells more like a thousand pole-cats.

With these few remarks I will now proceed to unfold a conundrum which I consider one of the finest that has ever emanated from the human mind. My invalid comrade produced it while we were driving along slowly in the open country this side of the Ocean House. I think it was just where we crossed the aqueduct of the Spring Valley Water Company, though I will not be certain; it might have been a little to the east of it, or maybe a little to the west, but at any rate it was in the immediate vicinity of it. I remember the time, though, very distinctly, for I was looking at my watch at the moment he commenced speaking, and it was a quarter of a minute after 3 o'clock—I made a memorandum of it afterward in my note-book which I will show you if you will remind me of it when I visit the CALIFORNIAN office. The sun was shining very brightly, but a light breeze was blowing from the sea, which rendered the weather pleasanter than it had been for several hours previously, and as it blew the dust in the same direction in which we

were traveling, we experienced no inconvenience from it, although, as a general thing, I do not enjoy dust. It was under these circumstances that my invalid comrade, young John William Skae, who is in the quartz-milling business in Virginia City, now, but was born in the state of Pennsylvania, where his parents, and in fact most of his relatives, still reside, except one of his brothers, who is in the army, and his aunt, who married a minister of the gospel and is living out West, sometimes having an improving season in the vineyard and sometimes chased around considerably by the bushwhackers, who cannot abide preachers, and who stir them up impartially, just the same as they do those who have not yet got religion; and also except his first cousin, James Peterson, who is a skirmisher and is with the parson—he goes through the camp-meetings and skirmishes for raw converts, whom he brings to the front and puts them in the corral, or the mourner's bench, as they call it in that section, so that the parson can exhort them more handy—it was under these circumstances, as I was saying, that young Skae, who had been ruminating in dead silence for a long time, turned toward me with an unwholesome glare in his eye, at a quarter of a minute after 3 o'clock, while we were in the vicinity of the aqueduct of the Spring Valley Water Company, and notwithstanding the light breeze that was blowing and the filmy dust that was drifting about us, says he: "Why is a whale like a certain bird which has blue feathers and is mostly found in the West, where he is considered a good bird though not remarkable? It is, because he is the Kingfisher—the king fish, sir.)"

There was no house nearby, except an old shed that had been used by some workmen, but I took him to that and did what I could for him; his whole nervous system seemed prostrated; he only raised his head once, and asked in a feeble voice, but with an expression of ineffable satisfaction in it—"How's that?" I knew he did not want medicine—if anything could save him, it would be rest and quiet. Therefore, I removed the horses to a distance, and then went down the road, and by representing the case fairly and openly to all passengers, I got them to drive by him slowly so that they would make no noise to excite him. My efforts were successful; his pulse was at two hundred and ninety when I put him in the shed, and only forty-two when I took him out.

Now I thought that conundrum would have done honor to the finest mind among us, and I think it especially good for an invalid from Pennsylvania. How does it strike you? It is circumscribed in its action, though, and is applicable only to men; you could not say "Because it is the king fish, madam," without marring the effect of the joke by rendering the point in a manner obscure.

Some friends of mine of great powers and high intellectual culture, and who naturally take an interest in conundrums, besought me to procure the answer to that one about Napoleon and the Sanitary cheese, and publish it. I have written to the author of it, and he informs me that he and his mother, who is a woman of extraordinary sagacity and a profound thinker, are ciphering at it night and day, and they confidently expect to have the answer ready in time for your next week's issue. From what I can understand, they are making very encouraging progress; they have already found out why Napoleon was like the cheese, but thus far they have not been able to ascertain in what respect the cheese resembles Napoleon.