Lo, the Poor Solver*

Some years ago there lived in a small village in a certain large, western state a puzzler long since forgotten. The village in which he was born and spent his life is not now, unfortunately, represented in the directories of puzzlers. You may, possibly, think that the village was too small to be represented by more than one puzzler in its entire history. After all, at the time that the events recounted here took place, the village had a population of only 243. Yet, the village was not nearly small enough to be used in the construction of a 9 x 9 word square, even though its name happened to be spelled with 9 letters.

The puzzlers who spend their time poring over word lists in order to produce more and more of the 9 x 9 squares, and geographic names appearing in such squares are, as likely as not, to be found only in some 18th-century atlas or gazetteer. Accordingly, an ordinary village name, recorded one of the United States Official Postal Guides, has never stood a good chance of appearing in a large word square, and the village in which our puzzler lived was no exception.

Anyway, the puzzler whom this narrative concerns went under the pseudonym LO. In all his years of puzzle activity, LO had never met another puzzler personally. He had never attended a puzzlers' convention, being a teetotaler; neither had he ever visited or corresponded with other word devotees. Keeping within his shell so much, he was hardly a model puzzler, but he was certainly a model solver.

At this point, we should explain that he belonged to The National Puzzlers' League, and eagerly attacked the word puzzles appearing in its monthly publication, THE ENIGMA. These puzzles included various sorts of rhymed posers, word

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THE JOURNAL OF RECREATIONAL LINGUISTICS
squares and other word forms, and cryptograms. In the case of the word squares, the puzzlers who had constructed them in the first place supplied the definitions of the words and names constituting them, as is done with crossword puzzles, and would-be solvers attempted to duplicate them from the definitions. In fairness to the solvers, the constructors specified the more obscure sources from which words and names had been taken, along with the definitions. Thus, if one of the names defined for a word square could be found only in *A Pronouncing Gazetteer and Geographical Dictionary of the Philippine Islands*, published in 1902 by the United States War Department in Washington, solvers were given that bit of information with the definition of the name, to give them a sporting chance of solving the word square.

On the Friday night following receipt of the monthly issue of *THE ENIGMA*, our puzzler would close up his general store and prepare for a fifty-mile trek on the following day to the nearest metropolis. The town he headed for boasted a ten million dollar library, the gift of an eccentric multimillionaire; so it can be seen that it was likely to contain the reference works LO needed to solve all of the puzzles in *THE ENIGMA*, especially those fearsome word squares.

LO always started with Puzzle No. 1 and solved the puzzles in order, until he had finished with the very last cryptogram. Exactly one week from the date on which he had received *THE ENIGMA*, he would mail in a complete list of answers, and watch for the appearance of his name in the list of complete solvers published in next month’s issue.
In the case of the word squares, that place supplied the definitions one with crossword puzzles, and from the definitions. In fairness to secure sources from which words selections. Thus, if one of the names in A Pronouncing Gazetteer and handbooks, published in 1902 by the solvers were given that bit of in- the library, and it was not long before he had solved the entire square with the exception of that first name. Since the square was 9 x 9 in size, and he had suc- ceeded in identifying the last eight words in it, he knew that the missing name was of the form -AMBSCAVE: only the first letter of the name in its horizontal posi- tion was unknown, because it intersected the first letter of the same name in its vertical position.

LO patiently searched every atlas and every gazetteer in the library, without coming across an -AMBSCAVE. He then borrowed whatever additional reference works he could obtain from the townsfolk, but to no avail.

For the first time in his career as a puzzle solver, LO became a little peeved. To put it plainly, he was quite irritated. "Why didn't that blankety-blank, hell-fired, low-down formist back East identify the source of the name?" muttered LO to him- self: a sentiment with which many other solvers were doubtlessly in complete sym- pathy. LO, however, had never had to ask for help before, either from the con- structor or from fellow solvers, and he didn't intend to start now. Neither had he ever taken a guess at a word, letting it go at that, hoping for a kindhearted, under- standing editor who would credit him with solving the puzzle completely even if the guess was wrong.

The name that baffled LO had been defined as "A hamlet of Blank County, Montana, 8 miles from Somewhere." Blank County just happened to be adjacent to the county in which LO lived, and LO conceived the idea of asking all prospec- tors and others who came into his local emporium if they had ever heard of a place ending -AMBSCAVE. At the end of a week, during which he had questioned more than 100 persons without tangible results, LO abandoned that method as unpro- ductive. The county containing the hamlet was larger than the entire State of Connecticut, and the hamlet could easily have passed out of existence many years ago.

Another week went by, but the only thing LO obtained in that time was a letter from the editor of THE ENIGMA, inquiring as to whether he had moved, or died, or something. You see, LO's list of puzzle solutions was late for the first time in history, and the editor was alarmed.

That was the last straw. LO had to find the missing word, and find it soon. There was only one way—he must go and find the place itself. So, LO closed up his store and mail in a complete list of an- other in the list of complete solvers.

Although LO did not himself own any extensive word lists, and had only a Web- ster's unabridged at home, he invariably succeeded in solving every single puzzle presented in the pages of THE ENIGMA. Seemingly, no puzzle made could stump him. Since he never missed any solutions, he never complained of the ex- tremes to which certain of the puzzle constructors, particularly the formists, went in order to make their offerings inhumanly difficult.

Then, one day—or, rather, one month—something happened that stirred LO's soul to the very depths. A word square appeared in THE ENIGMA with a geo- graphical term in first position, but with a definition for that term which omitted the reference source in which the name could be found. LO made his customary trip to the library, and it was not long before he had solved the entire square with the exception of that first name. Since the square was 9 x 9 in size, and he had suc- ceded in identifying the last eight words in it, he knew that the missing name was of the form -AMBSCAVE: only the first letter of the name in its horizontal posi- tion was unknown, because it intersected the first letter of the same name in its vertical position.

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THE JOURNAL OF RECREATIONAL LINGUISTICS
LO had hopes that someone in the village would have heard of the hamlet only eight miles away. He was disappointed, however, because none of the 62 inhabitants of the place even knew that there was a hamlet eight miles away, with the exception of an old Indian who had the reputation of being half-crazy.

In spite of warnings from other villagers, LO decided to accompany the Indian who led him through the roughest piece of country he had ever seen. The distance may have been eight miles in a straight line, but it was actually about eighty, mostly up and down, not to mention across and back. It took them two days of hard labor to get there, and all they found upon their arrival was an old hermit sitting in front of the entrance to a large cavern. This was the Indian’s “hamlet.”

LO didn’t know whether he was more tired than disappointed, or more disappointed than tired, but he was a mighty lot of both. Being exhausted, he sat down to chat with the hermit. It was his plan to rest up and then set out upon a fifty-mile circle about the village he had left two days ago. He hoped that he might come upon the ruins of the hamlet, if any, and find a clue to its name there. In the meantime, his business would probably go to pot, but that word square had to be solved, business or no business.

While LO was reflecting on man’s inhumanity to man, as evidenced by a formist’s inhumanity to a solver, the hermit let drop a remark which brought LO up with a start. The anchorite had asked whether LO had ever heard of a man named “Smith”. The name seemed strangely familiar to LO. He remembered clearly, that was the unusual name of a man who had compiled a small atlas about fifty years earlier. The atlas, because of its obscurity, was undoubtedly used by formists for their creations.

“Not, by any chance, John Smith?,” inquired LO.

“Yes, John Smith,” replied the recluse. “We went to school together. My name is Lamb. The last time we saw each other was 35 years ago, right on this spot. He was writing some kind of a book that he promised to dedicate to me, but I’ve never heard anything since about or from him. Can you tell me about him?”

LO told him all he knew, which wasn’t much, and the hermit thanked him. Whereupon LO hit the trail for the nearest railroad—a flash of inspiration struck him. When he reached the railroad, he purchased a ticket for Washington, D.C. That was and is the city where the Library of Congress is located. An idea would have it, the Library of Congress possessed the only existing copy of John Smith’s Atlas. All other copies had been destroyed by fire in a warehouse just after their printing, and the edition had never been replaced by the publishers. The Library’s copy must have been the one used by the formist, LO reasoned. Arriving in Washington, LO went straight to the Library of Congress, obtained the atlas in question, and checked its index under L. Eureka! There it was, LAMB’S CAVE. LO’s reputation as an unbeaten solver was saved. John Smith must have put the name into his atlas as a testimonial to his friend, in lieu of the promised dedication, which did not appear to be there.

There is a sequel to this story. LO waited until the next time that the formist responsible for ruining his business came through town. LO had seen his picture in THE ENIGMA and immediately recognized him. LO introduced himself, invited the formist to his home for a chat, and quietly murdered the man.

The moral of this tale, for other formists, needs no elaboration.