

Dictating a Letter

I recognized [Crosswordland] immediately, for admis were grazing under a dhava and an ai hung from a tondo in one of the salas.

— Russell Baker, “Crashing into Crosswordland”

It is well-known and well-lampooned that crossword puzzles have their own peculiar (and quite so) vocabulary, for reasons of practicality and tradition. However, the great bulk of the crossword as it is printed and as it is read isn’t the ghostly forms of the solution, still miles off in tomorrow’s edition or, if you work at it, in your own ink, but rather the clues, actually the only tangible, printed part of the whole thing. And they, too, are worded in such a way that if a person next to you on the train turns to you from their folded broadsheet and inquires “Four letters: They peck holes in your milk bottle tops,” you already have a general idea that they are not trying to remember for personal reasons or because it’s the name of a song they once heard, and you can be at least marginally assured that they aren’t either a madman trying to warn you that a quartet of aggressive items of postage have it in for your household dairy products.

For the purposes of accessibility and humor, I have generally avoided technical or trivial identifiers, leant toward interchangeably referring to letters and homophonic English words, and included perhaps a few more popular culture references than I at first intended.

THE CROSSWORD ENTHUSIAST’S ALPHABET

Canadian shibboleth;
 commonest verb;
 Mel Blanc’s dialogue on *The Jack Benny Program*;
 ½ of M, to Gaius;
 sports network owned by NBC;
 bottommost grade;
 a greater general has never sat one;
 following glyph sideways, when seriffed;
 affirmative vote;
 sitcom’s Pritchett patriarch;
Schloss inspector;
 masculine article in La Mancha;
 Bond’s boss;
 arbitrary degree;
 vocative ejaculation;
 in a pod, alike to one;
 it’s often waited in;
 plaything emporium’s verb of being;
 logograph on Kal-El’s chest;
 links artifact;
 bell-wether’s mate;

terrorist from award-winning graphic novel;
propreatepeneltime, duplicated;
variable quantity; what Al-Kwarizmi didn't know;
predecessor of 'Because';
oft-quoted *Fantasy Island* article.

Of course, this wouldn't be a *proper* poem if it didn't rhyme, so traditionalists may be more satisfied with the following emendation:

THE PUZZLEMASTER'S PRIMER

Indefinite article; uppermost grade;
dumbledore (flying); whence honey is made;
Columbus sailed it, deep and blue;
in hexadecimal, 221_{10} is two;
absentee in Georges Perec;
U.S. troop neighboring tribe starting "Hek-";
nag or cob or bay or steed;
a Cockney will add one when there is no need;
me & myself; *Bluest* ___ word;
a blue bird but not a bluebird;
glyph the same to Sam or Pavel;
to Pierre, a Haggard novel;
German Expressionist Lang antagonist;
only chequered signal flag;
media mogul's magazine;
insomnia cause for the daughter of a queen;
Ian Fleming's gadget guy;
spacer word for a crook with one eye;
pluralizer (from many, one);
afternoon meal with jam and a bun;
a full 180°, on a road;
Beethoven's fifth's start, in Morse code;
erstwhile POTUS, son of same;
a past paramour; a snuffed Old Flame;
public gym that will give you a bed;
Brooks world war when we'll all be undead.

"Egad," said Monk. "Bah," said Evita. "Hah," said Ava. (Exclamations.) ■