Fly, Getting Sad On A Fair Amount Of Alcohol? (10)

K. S. Sarkaria

1. The worthy editors of our (mainly political) newspapers are every bit as sanctimonious and smug – and just as likely to admit their mistakes – as our esteemed politicians. Only the crosswords in their dailies deserve our serious attention.

Thanks to some serious time thus spent, I can now, on most days, do the ‘quicks’ of The Times of India, The Hindustan Times or The Tribune quickly enough.

ToI carries (in its Times of Chandigarh section) the extremely popular DAILY CROSSWORD of the Chicago Tribune. The reprographic process used gives a faithful copy, only shrunk so much – perhaps to save on ‘valuable space’? – that reading the minute numbers in the boxes can be hard. However it is worth this effort: the daily dose of knowledge, wisdom or wit that I’ve gleaned by decoding this beautiful puzzle has often made my day! Till recently, ToI used to lag behind the original by some weeks, but today’s (June 25, 2008) puzzle is the latest. Solving it, I have just worked out that:

Local poet = Carl Sandburg,
Local sobriquet = City of the big shoulders,
Local collection = Chicago poems.

Memo. I should ask our daughter Mallika (she writes poetry, and graduated from the University of Chicago two years ago) and son Manpreet (now with us, he starts his first job in Chi next month) whether they know about Carl Sandburg, and that ‘windy city’ is also the ‘city of the big shoulders’ because of a poem which he wrote.

HT carries (in its HT City section) the GUARDIAN’S QUICK CROSSWORD – which is witty and in the Queen’s English – but with a huge time lag, and recycles its old and limited stock a lot. Also, they re-typeset the original, often quite sloppily – at times the clues don’t even pertain to the grid shown – but one can argue that these typos only make it wittier and more challenging than the original? Anyway, HT has never seen the need to apologize for these repeated mistakes.

Chandigarh’s very own, The Tribune, carries on all seven days (in its main section) a QUICK CROSSWORD. Though unpretentious and austere – it takes no liberties with words, neither does it attempt to be witty – it is surprisingly good. Quite frugally, it makes do with only a few grids, and can be challenging on days when the whites are in four parts, linked to each other only in the middle. The Tribune does not give us any clue as to the provenance or authorship of this puzzle (but I would guess that it is probably an Indian with an excellent command of precise English). What makes this reticence even more mysterious is that The Sunday Tribune carries another crossword, for children, but in this case the name of its authoress is prominently displayed. Also, unlike the puzzle of which I am talking, this juvenile puzzle is available on-line.
2. We subscribe, at any given time of the year, to 2 out of 4 newspapers: the 3 named above, and the *Indian Express*. The choice is Minni’s, and changes, more or less at random, after every 6 months or so. For the last 3 months, it has been *ToI* and *IE*.

The *Indian Express* has a CROSSWORD of its own (in Mindsquare of Simplicity in Chandigarh Newsline section) but this time it is a ‘cryptic’. The *IE* too has no qualms about running its crossword, which is about the most creative thing in it, without any attribution. (As against this, all four newspapers do give the names, sometimes even the mug shots, of the experts contributing the usual trivial tripe to their op-ed pages and columns.) On Sundays, the cryptic clues are accompanied by alternative and very easy ‘quick clues’ for the same grid. Unfortunately, these are made up by a person who is very limited (outside of cricket) so he makes a real hash of it.

Recently, *IE* stopped giving the cryptic clues altogether on weekdays, and replaced them with these Sunday horrors. Equally suddenly, and again without a word of explanation, the cryptic was restored after a week or two. Taking this unnerving episode to be an omen of the impending extinction of this charming puzzle, I decided to preserve my efforts of the next 12 weekdays. These are displayed on the next 4 pages.

A cryptic is a completely different kettle of fish, and those with a natural talent for these puzzles are wired quite differently from me. However, with a lot of effort, and even more luck, I was able to solve the puzzle four days running, from Monday, April 21, 2008 through Thursday, April 24, 2008. The next day I failed miserably, but as you can see from the scans, my luck returned on Saturday, and then continued to hold through the next week. In fact, Monday through Thursday of that week was a total breeze. The puzzle set on each of these dates coincides with the puzzle set seven days before! Once again, in keeping with the hoary traditions of journalism as practiced in India, the editor in question saw no reason to offer an explanation, let alone an apology, for this lapse.

For beginners to cryptics, here are 4 clues with answers, from each of these 12 – er, 8 – puzzles. If you can’t see the rationale, my scribblings in that scan might help.

From the puzzle of 21/04/08 (or its duplicate on 28/04/08):

- Quite satisfied with what spring holds? (4,7) = Well content
- Word that is coined for an eccentric person (6) = Weirdo
- It doesn’t allow English doctor on Greek ship (7) = Embargo
- A closure arranged in a roundabout way (8) = Carousel

From the puzzle of 22/04/08 (or its duplicate on 29/04/08):

- Introductory letter (7) = Initial
- An explanation of an attitude no longer held? (10) = Exposition
- Man out in storm reaching peak (8) = Mountain
- African oil refined in America (10) = California
From the puzzle of 23/04/08 (or its duplicate on 30/04/08):

- Queer togs strangely incongruous (9) = Grotesque
- Spirit rises after the French animal appears (5) = Lemur
- Ladies who reform become perfect examples (6) = Ideals
- Kindly feeling not hard to place (4,4) = Soft spot

From the puzzle of 24/04/08 (or its duplicate on 01/05/08):

- Loses equilibrium about amounts that remain (12) = Overbalances
- Two things aviators might do for a wad of cash (8) = Bankroll
  - Clerk upsets a group of people (6) = Circle
- Any call for it means changes in part (12) = Fractionally

From the puzzle of 25/04/08 (‘the one that got away’):

- Confirms what Goldilocks found (5,3) = Bears out
- Respect in which a variety of corn dies (8) = Consider
- Fashion model glad to win first prize (4,4) = Gold medal
  - Dad set out with sticks (5) = Paste

From the puzzle of 26/04/8:

- Surliness I shall need to moderate (3,6) = Ill temper
- It sounds like the height of resentment (5) = Pique
- Presumably they had good reasons for being late (7) = Murders
  - Victor may show it when inclement (2,7) = No quarter

From the puzzle of 02/05/08:

- Is set back by my French name (5) = Simon
- Stupidly dim male may present a problem (7) = Dilemma
- Vegetables are running out of water, we hear (5) = Leeks
  - The piper starts late, showing no feeling (7) = Deadpan

From the puzzle of 03/05/08:

- List on a train sets out details for changing (12) = Transitional
  - Wrongly tagged labour saving device (6) = Gadget
- Unsuitable piece of music for a quickstep? (4, 8) = Slow movement
  - Condemn in just a few words (8) = Sentence
3. The above April-May period is par for the course for Mindsquare. On 18/06/08, I think I got all the answers for that day’s Crossword 1309, but I’m not sure, because the Solutions printed the next day do not pertain to 1309’s grid. On the other hand, on 23/06/08, I was able to verify that I had solved the previous day’s puzzle, but this time, I was unable to attempt Crossword 1313 of that day, because the lengths of the printed clues do not fit the accompanying grid. Ditto for Crossword 1314 of 24/06/08.

Nevertheless, my skills are steadily improving. I have nothing to crib about yesterday’s – it is June 26, 2008 now – Crossword 1315 (except that, once again, no apology or explanation was given by the concerned editor for the previous two days’ lapses) and I didn’t do badly at it either. Some friends – Sandeep, P.P. and J.P. – were over for dinner, so I was not able to take the customary second look at this puzzle before nodding off, but (I am an early riser) I did mop it off in the morning. Or at least that’s what I thought. However, unlike a careful student taking an examination, I did not recheck my answers, and felt like kicking myself when I later found out that – of course! – Service chiefs? (4,7) = Head waiters, not my (distinctly second-best) Head pastors. So I got only 24½ out of 25 on yesterday’s puzzle.

An editor might bristle with righteous anger at the suggestion that he had marred a puzzle by not giving the correct grid: ‘Stop whining and make the grid yourself, I only made the puzzle more interesting!’ And he would have some reason on his side too. After all, assuming that the clues are of a correctly composed puzzle, there is at least one, and at most finitely many, compatible grids to consider. So one should be able to work out the puzzle, only it can take more time. I once worked out, but not ‘quickly,’ the gridless version of a Guardian’s Quick Crossword that appeared in the Hindustan Times of November 13, 2007. I was so pleased that I have kept the scrap of paper on which I wrote down my solution ever since. Its scan is given on the next page. I’ve lost the clues but you can have fun playing puzzle-setter and make your own funny clues.

Indeed, it might be interesting to dispense with clues also! That is, the task could be to find all grids of a given size such that the types and lengths of its words form a given sequence. Here, a grid means a centrally symmetric square of 0’s (blacks) and 1’s (whites) such that, by starting at any 1, and moving only one square up/down or left/right to another 1, it is possible to reach all the 1’s; and by a word we mean a maximal horizontal (type h) or vertical (type v) string of 1’s of length at least two. For example, the size 13 grid of the next page (which HT forgot to print on 13/11/2007) has 25 words whose types and lengths form the sequence \{h6, v7\}, \{v7\}, \{v9\}, \{h5, v5\}, \{v7\}, \{v6\}, \{h6\}, \{h4\}, \{h8\}, \{v9\}, \{h11\}, \{v7\}, \{v7\}, \{v7\}, \{v6\}, \{h8\}, \{v5\}, \{h4\}, \{h6\}, \{h6\}, \{h5\}, \{h6\}. Is this the only such grid, if not how many, and which?

Thus there are combinatorial questions about crosswords not requiring any language skills, the reason advanced by some who prefer Su Doku. I too am intrigued by Su Dokus, but mainly because I feel they exemplify an interesting homology which I am struggling to define satisfactorily. However, I find solving an individual Su Doku quite boring – as compared to solving a crossword – because of the inherent predictability: one can always grind it out, only it takes some more time if the difficulty rating is higher.
K. S. Sarkaria,
213, 16-A,
Chandigarh 160015, INDIA.

E-mail: sarkaria_2000@yahoo.com

Website: www.geocities.com/sarkaria_2000