

Christmas Presents

[This was a letter of thanks mailed on Jan. 2, 1992, for Christmas presents received from my sister Connie and her family. –S.H.]

Dear Con, Jere, Tim and Scott (in abstensia):

From what I heard from Mom, sounds like y'all had a nice Christmas. Too bad we can't get back there during the Yule season, but we are planning another trip back to Wisconsin around mid-May.

Sara says thanks for the nice Parker pen & pencil set, and also for the crew socks. I should mention that the way the socks were packaged caused me a certain amount of real puzzlement. "*THREE of them!*" I said as she opened the present. "Oh, I get it! You put one on your left foot, one on your right foot, and you use the third one for a stocking cap."

"Don't be stupid," said Sara, with her usual appreciation of my defective sense of humor.

"OK, then," I said, "the third one is a *spare* sock... so you don't have to mend whichever of the original two first develops a hole. It makes sense you know. After all, you wouldn't think of driving without a spare tire would you? You can carry the spare sock in your hip pocket. Of course, what if you happened to develop holes in *both* of the first two socks at the same time? Then you should really have *two* spares to save the situation. And what if the spares then develop holes?? Really, you should have spare spares just in case! And what if *those* develop holes?! Really you should have..."

At this point, just as I was enthusiastically getting into this lovely infinite regress, a SOCK or two of a different kind made its presence known. I soon noticed the loud raps on my forehead: "Hello in there!" Sara said. "*Look, dummy!*" And she pointed out that each of what I had originally taken to be a single sock, was actually a *pair*, one inside the other.

"Well, how about that!" I said. "It just goes to show you that Con & Jere *did* think to include spare spares, and spare spare spares..." Once again there came a loud and painful *bonk* on my noggin, which suggested to me that perhaps it would be wise to move on to another topic...

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Many thanks from me for the two great books. Did you glance through the *Age of Propaganda* before you sent it to me? Lots of interesting stuff in there about the sneaky tricks of advertisers, how people are manipulated by politicians (including that bourgeois master, Adolf Hitler), etc. Probably the most important single element of a sound education (something rarely achieved these days), is a healthy skepticism about the things that everybody around us is trying to push down our throats. I'm not saying that *everything* anybody tells us is wrong or a lie, but certainly a huge part of it is. The *political* gullibility

of the masses, in particular, is one of the most fundamental problems in the world. If people could just see through all the bullshit and understand their own real interests the world would soon be vastly different and better...

And that brings me to why I wanted to get this book and study it; it relates strongly to one of my own books I have been writing since the beginning of time: "The Mass Line". The ideological bias of the authors of the *Age of Propaganda* is that of the liberal wing of the bourgeois ruling class. But the book should still be useful to me in helping to expose the techniques used by the capitalists to maintain their vicious and exploitative rule through fooling the masses about their own essential and long-term interests.

The other book, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, is not for any political purpose, but just for my enjoyment. Since I know most of the melodies (at least) of the songs being referred to, I find it impossible to just *read* the lyrics discussed in book; I have to *sing* them! This, unfortunately, creates a severe contradiction between my perusal of the book, and the sanity of anybody else within earshot.

On Christmas Day, I delved first into the discussion of my favorite lyricist, Ira Gershwin, singing first excerpts from *They All Laughed* (how appropriate, you say?), then *Lady, Be Good!*, *The Man I Love*, and *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Sara's initial amusement soon turned to annoyance. "Are you going to *sing that WHOLE book?!?*" she asked.

"Er, well, just the quoted lyrics," I answered.

"Then either *you or me* are going to have to go into the *other room!*" she said menacingly, showing no sign of moving herself. I tend to readily pick up on such subtleties and nuances. I can read between the lines. I can take a hint. I beat a hasty retreat.

Well some people just don't appreciate good music, I guess. Anyway, about that time I came to '*S Wonderful*, which is not only one of George Gershwin's best songs, but is also one of Ira Gershwin's cleverest and best lyrics.* Do you know how the nifty introductory verses go? (I'd sing it to you, but the U.S. Mail won't allow that kind of thing.)

Don't mind telling you,
In my humble fash,
That you thrill me through
With a tender pash.
When you said you care,
'magine my emosh;
I swore then and there,
Permanent devosh.
.....

* Instrumentally the best two versions I know of are both based on the same arrangement by Ray Conniff: first for Artie Shaw, and later for Conniff's own orchestra and chorus. There's a wonderful, marvelous, awfully nice false ending in the middle. But to savor the lyrics, I recommend another nice version, the one by Ella Fitzgerald in her *Gershwin Songbook* album.

And then we get to the chorus:

'S awful nice! 'S paradise—
'S what I love to see!

Followed by the play between glamorous/amorous and the “ous” of 'S marvelous... Great stuff!
'S wonderful how Ira plays with the words, clipping them up so cleverly. It's really brilliant poetry, if you ask me. Far better than almost anything you're apt to find in poetry books. (And far cleverer than the lyrics by songwriters of the rock era, even the best of them such as John Lennon.)

Anyway, thanks again—it's right up my jazzy Tin Pan Alley!

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I'll close with a couple news items from 1991 which you may have missed (both reported by Bill Mandel in the *San Francisco Examiner* (Dec. 29, 1991). First, HOLY VEGETABLES: On March 21, 1991, the Colorado legislature passed a bill to allow the filing of libel suits against people who make disparaging remarks about vegetables. Imagine spending 6 months in the pokey for insulting a parsnip!

This may seem like an especially silly law, but as with almost all laws, there were private economic interests behind the thing. Certain big farmers thought they were losing sales (and hence profits) because of “unjustified” disparagement and “ill-directed” humor aimed against their defenseless produce. And where profits are impacted, lawsuits to invoke the force of the state against the atheistic-communistic culprits are the bourgeois's natural recourse. That is what the state and lawsuits are for.

In this case however, I believe the Governor had to veto the bill—not because it violated free speech (that's seldom deemed an important consideration)—but because certain misguided comedians were starting to pick up on it. Politicians don't like to be made fun of. Perhaps the Governor was afraid of coming out of the brouhaha with cauliflower ears...

My final item is that old favorite, *nakedness*: In June 1991, the British navy fined and reprimanded a male navy flier and a female officer for being found naked together on a frigate (yup, that's right, on a *frigate*) during the Gulf War. They had pleaded guilty to being naked together “without reasonable excuse”.

Now this seems to me to show a serious lack of imagination on the part of the defense counsel. Let's see what we can do in the way of constructing some plausible excuses:

- 1) “We were trying to conserve the limited fresh water supply aboard ship by preparing to shower together...”
- 2) “It was just too damned hot in here...”
- 3) “We were comparing tattoos...”
- 4) “We were just checking each other for body lice...”

- 5) “As the ship steamed closer and closer to the original site of the Garden of Eden, this uncontrollable urge came over us to dress only in fig leaves, which unfortunately we could not locate...”
- 6) “We are both considering sex-change operations and we wanted to try on each other’s clothes to see how we would look...”

Well, if you don’t like those suggestions, maybe you’d like to give it some thought yourself!

* * *

I’m sure that’s more than enough for now!

Scott