

Dermuche
by Marcel Aymé (1947)

*Translated by Jeffrey Miller
(Translation copyright 2016, Burden of Proof
Research Inc. All rights reserved.)*

He had assassinated a family of three so that he could have a phonograph record he'd coveted for several years. M. Leboeuf, the prosecutor, overplayed his furious eloquence, while that of Me. Bridon, for the defence, was useless. The accused was unanimously sentenced to lose his head. Not a single voice rose against this. He was bull-necked and had massive shoulders and an enormous flat face with narrow little vacant eyes, bereft of a forehead, all jaw. Had there subsisted any doubt of his guilt, a sensitive jury would have convicted him on his brutish demeanour. Throughout argument, he remained immobile in the dock, seemingly indifferent and uncomprehending.

"Dermuche," the presiding judge asked him, "do you regret your crime?"

"Yes and no, Your Honour," Dermuche responded. "I regret without regretting."

"Explain yourself more eloquently. Do you feel remorse?"

"Scuse me, Your Honour?"

"Remorse. You don't know what remorse is? Well, does thinking of your victims trouble you?"

"I'm feeling fine, Your Honour, thank you very kindly."

The only time during the trial that Dermuche showed real interest was when the prosecution produced the phonograph record. Leaning against the railing of the dock, he wouldn't stop staring at it and when the phonograph, wound by the court clerk, unleashed his ritornello, a smile of profound satisfaction passed over his idiotic face.

Pending the carrying out of his sentence, he occupied a cell on death row, calmly

awaiting his final day. It's imminence didn't seem to preoccupy him. He never opened his mouth to the guards who entered his cell. He displayed no need to address them, contenting himself with responding politely to their questions. His sole activity was to hum the offending ritornello that had motivated his crime, and which he knew just slightly. Afflicted as he was with a sluggish memory, it was perhaps the agony of being unable to retrieve the music on the recording that had led him, one night in September, into the villa of the pensioners in Nogent-sur-Marne. Two old girls were there, and a shivering grandad, decorated with the Legion of Honour. Once a week, during dessert at each Sunday lunchtime, the oldest of the two sisters played the phonograph record. In good weather, the window to their dining room stayed open, and for three years Dermuche had known enchanted summers. Huddled at the foot of the villa's wall, he listened to the Sunday melody and tried, during the ensuing week, to recall it whole, without ever quite succeeding. Beginning in early autumn, the shivering grandad would close the dining room windows and the phonograph record played only for the pensioners. Three years running, Dermuche had known long, widowed months without music or joy. Little by little the ritornello escaped him, slipping away day after day, so that by the end of winter nothing was left to him but regret. The fourth year, he couldn't abide the thought or yet another such drought and one night let himself into the old duffers' home. The next morning the police found him, surrounded by three

corpses, listening to the song on the phonograph record.

For a month, he had it by heart, but the day before his trial he had forgotten it. Now, on death row, he rehearsed the bits the hearing had restored to his memory and which each day became more uncertain. *Ding, ding, ding*, sang the condemned man, from morning to night.

The prison chaplain came to visit Dermuche and found him in good humour. He wished, though that the poor wretch had been more open in spirit so that the Good Word could penetrate his heart. Dermuche listened, as docile as a tree, and his brief responses, like his idiot look, gave no sign that he was interested in saving his soul, let alone in whether he had one. However, one day in December the priest spoke to him of the Virgin and the angels, and he thought he saw a light dawn in the little dull eyes, albeit a light so fugitive he wondered if he might have been imagining things. At the end of the visit, Dermuche brusquely asked, "And the baby Jesus, does he still exist?"

The chaplain didn't hesitate a second. It was certainly true that the baby Jesus had existed but, with his having died on the cross at the age of thirty-three, one wouldn't talk of him in the present tense. Yet Dermuche was as thick as two short planks; it was difficult to get him to understand. The story of the baby Jesus was more accessible to him and could open his soul to the light of the sacred truths. The priest told Dermuche the story of how the Son of God had chosen to be born in a stable, between a bullock and an ass. "You understand, Dermuche, that this was to show that he was among the poor, that he came for them. He could just as well have chosen to be born in a prison, among the most unhappy of men."

"I understand, Father. At the end of the day, the baby Jesus could have been born in my cell, but he would have refused to come into the world in a house full of pensioners."

The chaplain could only nod his head. Dermuche's logic was incontestable, albeit adjusted a bit too closely to his own particular case, in a way unlikely to dispose him to repent. Having bobbed his head between yes and no, the chaplain moved along to the Magi, the Slaughter of the Innocents, the flight, and he recounted how the baby Jesus, once he had grown a beard, died crucified between two thieves, so that he could open Heaven's gate to man.

"Think of it, Dermuche, the soul of a good thief undoubtedly would have been the first of all souls to enter Heaven, and this was no accident, because God wanted to show us that all sinners can expect mercy. For Him, the greatest crimes are simply accidents of life..."

But Dermuche had stopped following the chaplain long before, and the story of the good thief was as obscure to him as the miraculous multiplication of the fishes and loaves.

"So that's how the baby Jesus was returned to his stable?"

All he could think about was the baby Jesus. In leaving the cell, the chaplain reflected that this murderer had no more understanding than a child. He even began to doubt that Dermuche could be held responsible for his crime, and he prayed to God that he would be hanged out of pity.

"It's the soul of a child in the body of a furniture mover. He killed three little old codgers without the slightest malice, just as a child guts her doll. He's a child himself, who doesn't know his own strength, a child, a poor child, and nothing but a child, and the proof is that he believes in the baby Jesus."

A few days later, the chaplain visited the condemned man. He asked the guard who accompanied him to the cell door, "It's him who's singing?"

They could hear the masculine voice of Dermuche chanting ceaselessly, like the sound of a great bell, *Ding, ding, ding*.

“He’s at it all day long with his *ding, ding, ding, ding*. It sounds familiar to me, but it’s not really a song.”

It did not escape the chaplain’s worried notice that Heaven would look askance at such insouciance on the part of a man condemned to death. He found Dermuche more animated than usual, his brute’s face softly alert and, with a merry glow that shone around the folds of his eyelids. On top of it all, he was almost chatty.

“What’s the weather like outside, Father?”

“It’s snowing, my child.”

“That’s neither here nor there. A little snow won’t stop things. Bugger the snow!”

Again, the chaplain spoke to him about God’s mercy and the light of repentance, but the condemned man interrupted each sentence to chatter about the baby Jesus, such that the priest’s counsel went for nothing.

“Does the baby Jesus know everybody? Do you believe that the baby Jesus rules Heaven? In your opinion, Father, is the baby Jesus a music-lover?”

It got so the chaplain couldn’t get a word in. As he made for the door, the prisoner slipped into his hand a sheet folded in quarters. “It’s my letter to the baby Jesus,” he said, smiling.

The chaplain accepted the message and read it a few moments later.

“Dear baby Jesus,” the letter said. “I write to ask you a favour. My name is Dermuche. Christmas is coming. I know you wouldn’t have wanted me to whack the three old geezers in Nogent. Those bastards, you wouldn’t have been able to come into the world at their place. I don’t ask you for anything on that account, seeings how I don’t have long to wait before my head’s in the bucket. What I would like, though, once I’m in Heaven, is for you to give me back my phonograph record. I thank you in advance, and I wish you good health. – Dermuche.”

The priest was shocked by the contents of this message, which testified all too clearly to how profoundly the murderer was resistant to repentance. “Certainly,” he thought, “here’s an innocent who has no more insight than a newborn, and this confidence he places in the baby Jesus shows the artlessness of a child. But when he’s before a court with three murders on his conscience and without a shadow of remorse, God himself can do nothing for him, never mind that his little soul is as clear as springwater.”

That evening, he went to the prison chapel and, having prayed for Dermuche, tucked the letter into the crèche of a plaster baby Jesus there.

At dawn on December 24, Christmas Eve, a crowd of well-dressed gentlemen followed the guards into the cell of the condemned man. Yawning, their eyes heavy with sleep, their stomachs grumbling, they stopped a few steps from the bed. In the light of the dawning day, they tried to make out the body sprawled under the covers. The bedsheet moved weakly and emitted a little cry. The prosecutor, M. Leboeuf, felt his spine tingle. The warden adjusted his black tie and moved away from the group. Pulling at his cuffs, settling into the appropriate demeanour, his hands joined at his fly, he pronounced in a theatrical voice, “Brace yourself, Dermuche. Your plea for a reprieve has been denied.”

A cry answered him stronger and more insistent than the first, but Dermuche didn’t move. He seemed to be buried to his head, with nothing emerging from the bedclothes.

“Come on, Dermuche, don’t make us late,” the warden said. “Show a little good will for a change.”

A guard approached the bed, leaning there to shake the prisoner. Straightening, he turned, astonished, to the warden.

“What is it?”

“Well, I don’t really know, sir, it’s moving, but...”

A long wail of overwhelming tenderness escaped the covers. The guard, with a brusque movement, uncovered most of the bed and cried out. In their turn, the assistants standing nearby yelped in shock. In place of Dermuche on the now uncovered bed lay a child, a newborn or a baby only a few months old. He seemed happy to find himself in the light and, smiling, considered the visitors calmly.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the prison warden roared, turning toward the head guard. “You’ve let the prisoner escape?”

“That’s impossible, sir. It’s not been three-quarters of an hour since I made my last rounds and I’m sure I saw Dermuche in his bed.”

“Holy Jesus!” the warden cried, leaning over the child. “Look, there, on his chest, he has the same tattoos as Dermuche.”

The assistants leaned in their turn. On his chest the child had two symmetrical tattoos, one of a woman’s head, the other a dog’s. Sure enough, Dermuche had exactly the same markings, of about the same dimensions. The guards confirmed it. There was a long silence as everyone took this in.

“I could be wrong,” M. Leboeuf said, “but to me the infant looks as much like Dermuche as a child of that age can look like a 33-year-old man. Look at his big head, that flat face, his low forehead, his little squinty eyes, and even the shape of his nose. Don’t you find that?” he asked, turning toward the defence lawyer.

“Obviously, there’s something to that,” M. Bridon agreed.

“Dermuche had a birthmark the colour of cafe-au-lait on the back of his thigh,” the head guard noted.

They examined the infant’s thigh, where they discovered this mark.

“Go get me the forensics on the prisoner,” the warden ordered. “We’ll compare the fingerprints.”

The head guard galloped off. While awaiting his return, each of the men sought a rational explanation for Dermuche’s metamorphosis, which none of them now doubted. The warden stayed out of the discussion, pacing nervously about the cell. When, frightened by the chatter, the infant began to cry, he approached the bed and uttered in a menacing tone, “Just you wait, buddy-boy, and I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Sitting next to the child, prosecutor Leboeuf gazed at the warden, intrigued. “Do you really believe that this could be your murderer?” he asked.

“I hope so. In any event, we’ll soon know.”

In the presence of this delicate miracle, the chaplain offered fervent thanks to God, his eyes moist with tenderness as he considered the semi-divine child lying between Leboeuf and the warden. He wondered a little anxiously where it would all end and decided confidently, “It’s up to the baby Jesus to determine.”

Once the fingerprint comparisons had confirmed the extraordinary metamorphosis, the warden sighed with relief, rubbing his hands. “Let’s hurry along, now,” he said. “We’ve already wasted enough time. Let’s go, Dermuche, let’s go...”

Murmurs of protest filled the cell, and the prisoner’s lawyer cried indignantly, “Surely you don’t intend to execute an infant! That would be a horrible thing to do, monstrous. Dermuche might be guilty and deserve death, but do you really need convincing of a new-born’s innocence?”

“I’m not concerned with such details,” the warden replied. “Yes or no, is this person Dermuche? Did he kill three pensioners in Nogent-sur-Marne? Was he sentenced to death? The law applies to everybody, and

I'm not interested in stories. The preparations are complete, the guillotine's been ready for an hour. You bore me to tears with your innocence of a newborn. All you need to do to escape justice is change yourself into an infant? How convenient!"

Maternally, lawyer Bridon had replaced the cover over his client's plump little body. Happy to feel warm, the child began to laugh and burble. The warden looked at him sideways, judging this resort to gaiety as completely inappropriate.

"Look at that," he said, "such cynicism. He intends to show off to the bitter end."

"Warden, sir," the chaplain intervened, "don't you maybe perceive in all this the hand of God?"

"Could be, but it changes nothing. In any case, it's nothing to do with me. God doesn't give me my instructions, and he doesn't concern himself with how I get on in my career. I get orders, I execute them. Isn't that so, Mr. Prosecutor? Am I not completely in the right here?"

Reluctantly, Leboeuf replied, after some reflection, "Obviously, what you say is logical. It would be profoundly unjust that instead of suffering the death he deserves, the murderer would have the privilege of starting his life over. That would set a deplorable example. On the other hand, executing a child is a rather delicate matter. It seems to me you'd be wise to consult with your supervisors."

"I know them. They'll have my guts for dumping this mess on them. All the same, I'll telephone them.

As the higher officials had yet to arrive at the ministry, the warden was obliged to call them at their homes, where he found them half asleep and completely out of sorts. They took Dermuche's metamorphosis personally, as a disloyal trick, and were enraged with him. Okay, the prisoner was an infant. But the times were unforgiving, and they feared for their careers if they were seen as soft.

Having put their heads together, they decided that "the fact that a murderer has shrunk a little under the weight of remorse or for some other cause is no reason to overturn a lawful sentence of the court."

The prison officials prepared the prisoner, which is to say they wrapped him in the bedsheet and clipped the blonde down growing on the back of his neck. The chaplain took the precaution of baptising him, and it was he who carried him in his diaper to the machine set up in the prison courtyard.

Returning from the execution, he told lawyer Bridon of Dermuche's fascination with the baby Jesus. "God would not welcome to Heaven a killer who shows no sign of remorse. But Dermuche had hope and his love of the baby Jesus. God erased his sinner's life and returned him to the age of innocence."

"But if his life as a sinner was erased, Dermuche committed no crime and the pensioners in Nogent weren't murdered."

Hoping to clear his conscience, the lawyer went to Nogent-sur-Marne. Once there, he asked a street vendor where he would find the scene of the crime, but no one had heard of any such incident. There was no trouble pointing him toward the home of the Bridaine spinsters and the shivering grandad. The three pensioners greeted him a little distrustfully, but soon, reassured, complained to him that, just the previous night, someone had stolen a phonograph record they had left on their dining room table.