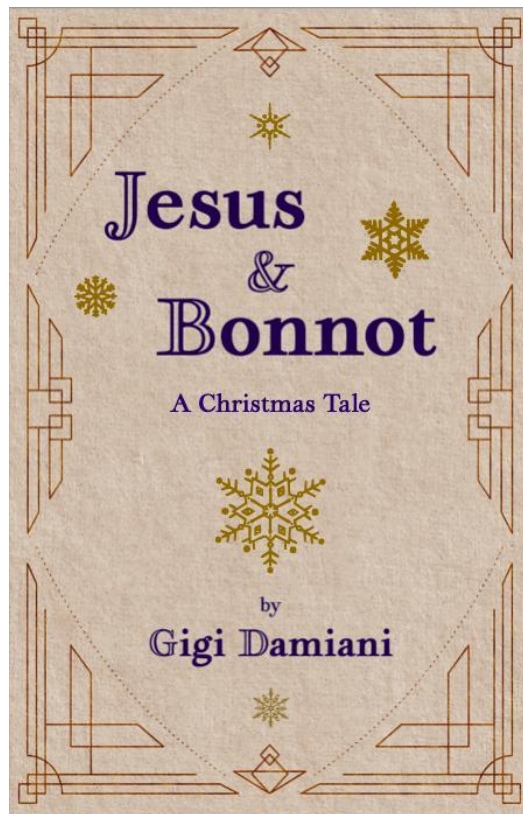


Jesus and Bonnot

A Christmas Tale

Gigi Damiani



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A Note on the Text

“Jésus et Bonnot” appeared in French in *l'en dehors* 6 no. 123–124 (début Décembre 1927), where it was accompanied by a note from E. Armand stating that: “It goes without saying that these conclusions are only those of the author.” As the story suggests that the events take place in autumn, perhaps the identification of the piece as a “Conte de Noël” can be attributed to Armand.

Christmas stories were not uncommon in the anarchist papers and Armand had penned a few of his own. As his own views developed, the uses and messages of those tales developed as well. In the early days of the Christian-anarchist *Ere Nouvelle*, he presented the Christ-child as “the Sublime Proletarian, son of the God of Love.” By 1922, in *l'en dehors*, he stated: “Baby Jesus, you are only the symbol of resignation.”

This context is certainly of interest, as we can, in effect, attribute both the voice of Jesus and that of Bonnet in Damiani’s tale to different phases in Armand’s career. But the work is obviously at least as important as a commentary on the debate over anarchist illegalism, in which the “tragic bandits” and their fate was a central concern.

The French text is lovely and that has allowed my translation to remain much truer to the particular turns of phrase in the original than is often possible. I hope it will be as pleasant to read as it was to translate.

— SHAWN P. WILBUR
DECEMBER 24, 2021.

Jesus and Bonnot: A Christmas Tale

The gray car is stopped alongside a ditch, at the edge of the woods (which of its nerves has tensed? — which of its arteries has clogged, refusing the vital rush to its heart?) and under the car a young man crawls, thrashes, swears.

On the road, his footsteps silent on the carpet of yellowed leaves (for we are in autumn, the sad autumn of all things!) He approaches.

He is a blond vagabond, his long hair unkempt, his beard parted at the chin.

He is not handsome. He is not strong.

And the wind could bend his thin frame, sweep into the distance his strange physiognomy, which seems to have escaped from some old, worm-eaten picture; one of those ancient paintings on a background of bitumen, from which figures of wax stand out.

But his mouth is one of those that the sinners kiss, biting, and his eyes, blue and brilliant, seem to look within, into the soul, (beyond the coarse reality of the forms) offering a look of love to all those who possess a conscience that feels suffering.

He approaches, stoops and asks in a very soft voice (to the man who sweats, strains and blasphemes):

— Why do you labor so, my brother?

The one hailed, surprised and anxious, emerges from beneath the automobile, behind a wheel, his face covered in grease: (a face that energy has certainly sculpted in bold strokes) and in the shadow of his massive fist emerges the barrel of a revolver.

His hard gaze scrutinizes and searches; then there is a volley of laughter, joyous and ironic.

– Why do I exhaust myself? In order not to live the life, vagabond, that drags you along the backroads of the world.

And he again takes his place under the vehicle, while the other, with the tranquil patience of someone accustomed to hopes too vast, sits himself down on the trunk of a cut tree.

And he looks off into the distance... so far off...

The grating of a gear that turns, short and precise metallic blows, a chain that unwinds and, behold! here is the man, who finally emerges from the machine, leaps to his feet and shakes himself.

– What! Are you still there? Do you imagine that I will drive you, in fourth gear, to the next village where the good sisters, at noon, distribute some bowls of hot water?

– You are mistaken, brother. I do not like mad rambles. Marching with a calm step, one arrives, in the end, just the same.

– Certainly, you arrive just the same, if you don't die of hunger en route; you arrive just the same, but worn out, muddy, completely exhausted; and once at the end, you perceive that others have gone before you and carried off all that there was to carry.

An example that concerns me: today, a breakdown was enough to make me miss a fine strike...

– A useless strike.

– Do you think so?... And I will have to wait a month for the occasion to present itself again, if it ever does present itself.

– And if it does, what do you expect from it?

– A good packet of those numbered notes with which we obtain all that we want in a world where everything is for sale.

– You are gluttonous and bitter.

– I am what they wanted me to be.

– Suppose that the bearer of the package, perhaps an old man, stubbornly refuses to give it up; if he cries out, if he fights?

– So much the worse for him. War is war and, generally, it is the soldier who falls before the chief. When all is said and done, he too is guilty.

– He serves; he has a duty to fulfill; he is faithful to it.

– But it is the fidelity of the servants that makes the masters strong. I am as disgusted with one as with the other. To the devil with the servants.

– But don't you wish to dominate yourself?

– I want to live and enjoy.

– Work!

– I have worked for so many years. I worked, as a child, when others still played. And for what result?

– You have lived peacefully; you are worried. Do you not sense around you the scent of a snare?

– Lived peacefully? But I was hungry for everything: for knowledge, for bread, for joy, for love...

It was the easy life for the idlers with full coffers, those who went satisfied while I broke my back to work the iron.

They lived — those whose fun I now disturb — they were carried toward pleasure, toward all the brightness, toward all the feasts.

Everything was possible for them; everything was refused to me.

I pointed it out to those who were consumed with me, forced by poverty to bend beneath the same degrading yoke:

— Comrades, I said to them, the world is unjust, men are unjust, God is unjust.

— You blasphemed.

— I have the proof. Why is there only fatigue and privations for us, why idleness and abundance for the others?

But my companions in labor — and that factory was a prison-pit where men were stuck in and from which beasts came out — shrugged their shoulders.

“What would you have us do? As long as the world has been the world, it has been thus...

Always thus?

“Always. And the yoke has been made harsher, heavier, each time that we have tried to shake it off. So resign yourself, for it is destiny.

“Someone has written: the one who works passes life in poverty and sadness, while the one who makes them work enjoys... it is best to adapt oneself.

“After all, if capital is a usurer who is never satisfied, it is still thanks to them that we live.”

The unpaid labor is a fortune for others. They steal from us.

— “Certainly, you are right, but the world is... a world of robbers.”

Of robbers? Then I will be a robber; I am tired of being robbed.

“Fool! Those robbers have the law on their side. They are the ones who make it.

“Their robbery is legal. It is called ‘moving capital.’”

But how has that begun?

“What does it matter? And who knows? Sometimes, an ancestor has stolen for them...”

“Besides, you will only live by little thefts, petty pilfering.”

Not at all. I would stretch my claws toward those of their coffers that are heaped the highest.

“They are well defended.”

Weapon in hand, I will force my way.

“You will come out safe and sound once, twice... Then, they will give chase, a whole pack against one.

“You would have their running dogs on your heels.

Pursued, armed, the wild boar turns and charges.

“But he dies!”

No doubt, but not alone; and after having lived his life in liberty; in the end, the lamb dies just the same, slaughtered. Adapting does not save it.

“If you do not die, once you have amassed enough booty, you will transform yourself into a good rentier.

“And with stolen money, whether you like it or not, you will also exploit our sweat.

Ah! no, never that.

“Then why will you steal?”

Why... in order to enjoy my life, to live it in its fullness.

To avenge myself, and to punish, But also in order to aid...

This is my dream... the dream of my nights of insomnia... my suffering has planted it in my brain.

Listen: An illegal bandit, I will deliver to the legal bandits — with an unbridled delight — a fine and terrible battle...

And that is why I am on this road.

The vagabond shook his head and smiled.

An old messmate of thieves and prostitutes, he felt extreme indulgence for “outlaws,” which had always scandalized the Pharisees.

— And that battle, how will you wage it?

— Eh! Like all battles!

Hectic days, days of implacable combat; nights of debauchery, in the company of ten, twenty beggars — then, in the morning, the return to struggle.

Days of the chase, when I am the hunter or the hunted.

Days of jubilation to celebrate the hard-won victory.

Then, again, body to body, the revolver shots... the bloody splashes.

Flights through the woods, across the rooftops... bundles of bank notes.

But I also have my hours of pleasure, the beautiful women, the fine meals and a bed that does not bruise the limbs:

I thumb my nose at the law; I am the reason the masters sleep poorly; I weary their finest bloodhounds.

— And that is all?

— It is enough for me... until I fill myself to the point of drunkenness.

— And the legal bandits...?

— They utter loud cries and arm themselves.

— And your former companions in sorrow?

— The idiots, they call me crazy!

— You are.

— Ah! if someone else had said it to me; but you are just a human wreck; a loser who has given up the struggle. Don't smile. Your rags protest against your smiles.

The mad one, my friend, is the one who lets himself die of hunger while preparing the feast for others. I take where there is too much.

— You will finish badly and too soon.

— Perhaps, but I will have lived.

— A moment.

— Better than nothing.

— And injustice will dominate the world just as much as before.

— If that suits the world, what can I do? It is not my fault!

— Work seriously to eliminate the iniquity in the world.

— Isn't that what I do? Don't I bring terror where injustice accumulates its dividends of pleasure for the profit of a handful of the privileged?

— You do nothing that leaves a deep trace; your path leads to the abyss.

— Why do all those who suffer lack the audacity wanted to follow my example?

– And if they dared? Think of the ferocious reprisals... at the number of those who would fall.

– Then add those dead from useless wars, add those that poverty reaps every day... those who, worn out by tuberculosis and privations, will be carried off by the autumn winds...

I spare you the suicides of the starving and I do not count all those ground up by the machines or swallowed up by the mines.

– And then, when everything has been burned, destroyed, will there not result an even greater, vaster misery?

– Then?... we could see, for example, a return to labor for the profit of all.

– Then... the wheel will begin to turn: with man returned to his bestial life, it would still be the strongest and the cleverest who will reorganize life for their own profit.

Your destruction will take place blindly; it is insanity. It does not purify, but stupifies. The way is elsewhere...

– Would that be, barefoot traveler, the one that you walk?

– Indeed.

– The road at the end of which there is a bowl of soup to beg for, the residue of all the surplus?

– The road at the end of which there is peace for all. Look closely at my face...

– That's all I've done since you arrived.

– Well, don't you recall where you have encountered me before?

– It does seem to me... Ah, and yet! As a little boy, in a church in the country (in one of those damp, cold churches, where the candlesticks are of wood and the ornaments of paper; where God humbles himself in order to preach by example to the indigent.) I saw a statue of badly painted plaster, covered with dust and grime, that looked like you.

– That was me!

– You!?... You want to make me burst out laughing. When you think that some deny that chronic depravation causes hallucinations! You, Jesus? The one who, according to my grandmother (when she could not give me a cake, she told me a tale) was nailed to a cross to save all men?

– Himself!

– And you would also die for me?

– Also and especially for you.

– Let's consider a moment... since you have saved no one, not even yourself, don't you regret today the uselessness of your sacrifice?

– I regret nothing and I would once again climb Calvary.

– *And then?*

--

– Jesus – it was he – lowered his head.

For that *and then?* in the long, sleepless nights of his conscience (in the desert that thought makes around us, even as we wander in the midst of a crowd) had distressed, had tortured him so much and so often...

But he pulled himself together. He shook his head as if he wanted to free himself from an incubus and in his fine voice he retorted:

– Satan, why do you tempt me?

Believe me. The sacrifice will have its return and it will reap the harvest that the blood has fertilized, even in the stoniest soils.

– When will that be?
– Oh, have no fear. The day will come.
– Will come, when?... A day will come! But my life is for today.
– Life is eternal and we will live again in those who come after us.
– Nothing but tales. We live and we die. When, then, between the cradle and the grave, is there joy for only a few and sorrow for the rest?

Jesus remained pensive for a moment.

In another period, he would have spoken of the glory that awaits the elect at the side of the Father; of the kingdom of Heaven, closed to the pleasure-seekers and open to the humble and the poor in spirit.

But – divinity of flesh and bone, snatched from the Olympus of dreams, a man constrained to live the life of a man – he had long been agitated by private, gnawing rebellions against this Father who knew all things, who willed all things, and who, being capable of anything, yet permitted being and things to mutually torture one another, solely as a distraction from his eternal ennui.

Had not the destiny of man been fixed from the first hours? Why the lie of salvation, if Good and Evil were to face each other uselessly, as was foretold, in space and in time?

He, however – Jesus – he had never renounced his personal dream of peace and love.

He raised his head; his eyes blazed and a strange fascination now emanated from his whole person.

Standing, arms open and head held high, he spoke:

– Brother, reach deep within yourself, descend into the depths of your soul.

In a corner, the deepest part, there is a treasure that is worth all others.

Why do you strive to be what you are not?

Hatred moves you and makes you a desperado; but love is in you. It is in all men, without doubt.

The appetites deny it; the passions stifle it; but its little flame burns without fretting about that.

Stir it with the breath of your will and it will develop into a purifying flame.

I do not say: adapt to evil and suffer it. But you want to oppose violence with violence. That is tit for tat, not liberation.

The house of peace cannot be built with blood-soaked bricks.

– The evil will crush you if you do not rein it in.

– We must cut down evil by refusing to execute or serve it. Which, believe me, demands a greater heroism than any other act, for it presents no glory in compensation but the private satisfaction of not letting ourselves be carried away by the whirlwinds of violence and crime.

– Fine words.

– It is enough to speak to men as brothers whose minds have been soiled by error.

It is enough to appeal to their humanity.

The tranquility of all presupposes a state of peace; there will be no peace as long as there is no justice.

My friend, be just to yourself and to your neighbor.

Do not judge. Persuade. Abandon the oppressors to themselves if you do not want to be oppressed.

– Fine words.

– That must be followed by facts, that is to say by “good works” — works consistent with the thought that animates them.

– And have you been preaching that gospel a long time?

– Nearly two thousand years and others had preached it before my appearance...

– And how many have listened to you?

– Very few... Too few, alas!

– So you see that your preaching is sterile.

– That is not because of the terrain; it is because workers of good will are lacking. Do you want to be one of them?

– No. You ask me to renounce the little that I can still win—and for an uncertain compensation. A compensation that does not remove a single wrinkle, that does not spare you a single blow. You are dead for nothing and you pursue your calling uselessly. If I solve nothing, at least I avenge myself.

You only create resigned beings who await a miracle.

– And that is your error. The miracle does not come to pass simultaneously. It is necessary to construct it, day by day.

– And who will construct it? Those tormented by misery, those who, disarmed in the face of all vexations, must submit or revolt, even if rebellion is suicide.

– Let them unite their miseries; let their passive resistance impose it! But it is necessary to address others as well. Wherever there are men of good will.

– Let them demonstrate, and not by adding words to words... But the hours pass. You have time on your side. I do not know what awaits me tonight or tomorrow. I am leaving. Here is the money...

– I do not want it.

– You will give it to the first hungry person you encounter.

– Money corrupts. The redemption must be accomplished by the word that illuminates.

– I am on my way... However, I would like to help you. Why don't you come with me? If no one stops me, I have enough resources to spend a month discussing.

You will be able to feed yourself, and then we will go together to fight injustice.

– Why not abandon your automobile? — Why not cast your banknotes to the wind? When you do not feel their weight, will you not feel different? Then, pure in spirit, we will go wherever there is suffering, bearing words of hope.

– They will send us to hell...

– We will climb the stairs of the house of the rich to rebuke them for their faults...

– The porter will call the cops...

– I see that you are obstinate!

– I am determined.

– Farewell, brother; I am on my way; others will listen to me.

– I will follow mine as well and, before I fall, you will hear people speak of me.

The two men shook hands.

Bonnot, despite himself, felt sad.

The eyes of Jesus were wet.

...The auto sputtered, then, thrust forward by its powerful motor, started up.

On the dusty road leading to far-off cities, Jesus again took up his painful march, surely toward a new Calvary.

On the same road, but in an opposite direction, straight toward the biggest of cities, where each night the Epulons of Mammon celebrate their feasts, while, through dark alleys, wanders Lazarus, like a rabid dog, whipped by foul weather, beaten by hunger — on the same route, with a mad speed, raced the gray automobile, toward the struggle without mercy of the illegal bandit against legal bandits.

Then, both disappeared.

The one ended, as he had foreseen, tracked to his own refuge, firing his last cartridge.

The other preaching love and passive resistance to evil — which experienced a recrudescence thanks to the warlike frenzy — was trampled and slaughtered by nationalist fanaticism.

And, over the world, injustice continues to orbit as before...

Worse than before.....

Ah! If, instead of each following his own path, these two men had joined and aided one another!

If, on another road, one, the exhausted wanderer, had corrected the desperate violence of the other, offering him a greater purpose than the fugitive and uncertain “joy of living” of the solitary rebel.¹

If the other had supported the preaching of faith — which only moves mountains when aided by strength — with the virile arms that knock down obstacles.

Perhaps... today... who knows...?

But they will both return to the world. And they may again take up their march.

And on their next encounter, perhaps they will come to an understanding and join forces...

And they will walk together, combining all their heroism, along the other path...

With all the violence and with all the goodness.

Destroying and sowing at the same time.

Gigi DAMIANI.

¹ It goes without saying that these conclusions are only those of the author. (E. Armand)

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