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The Marshal and Friend

Neither the prosecution nor the defense wanted Henri Philippe Pétain's oily accomplice to testify in the trial of the old marshal. Both sides feared his slanderous tongue and his slimy skill for wriggling out of blame. But on the insistence of the aggressive jury, Pierre Laval, the chief architect of France's disaster, was taken from Fresnes to Paris two days after his return to the country and whisked through an underground passage into the packed courtroom of the Paris Palais de Justice.

'He Let Me': Slowly, almost hesitantly at first, then with his old brazen confidence, Laval began his two-day "deposition"—"really a part of my own trial," he said accurately. For the first time in the Pétain trial, the courtroom was united in loathing for a witness. The jury, press, and public jeered when he shouted: "I am not a Nazi! I am not a Fascist! I love France!" The courtroom chorus rose when he declaimed: "I respect human life."

But stubbornly, with self-righteous indignation, he insisted on his patriotism and his republicanism, and defended his devious maneuvers as Vichy chief of government with the alibi now standard at the Pétain trial: Collaboration was France's only means of survival; he and the marshal were prisoners of the Germans. Laval had taken no oath before entering the witness stand; he spoke with assurance, alternately incriminating and defending Pétain. The marshal, he said, had nothing to do with France's unpreparedness for war, was a powerless administrator at Vichy, and had ordered French troops in North Africa to aid the invading Allies in 1942. But, he added, when "I broadcast to the French people that I hoped for a German victory . . . that broadcast was approved by the marshal."

The Admiral's Kind Word: The old marshal, who dozed during much of the testimony, denied he had approved the words spoken by the man he once described as a "dung heap." He still refused to testify. He ignored, with real or pretended deafness, violent courtroom altercations, though when he could stand the boredom no longer he cut short a long-winded military lecture by a defense witness with the remark: "That's enough on tactics." In the second week of his trial, though testimony shifted from the prosecution to the defense, it was still a bitter, muddy rehash of the tragedy of defeat and occupation.

Fleet Admiral Leahy, former Ambassador to Vichy, stated in a letter to the marshal that "I had then, as I have now, the conviction that your principal concern was the welfare and protection of the helpless people of France." Gen. Maxime Weygand, commander-in-chief of the French armies in 1940 and now himself a prisoner, declaimed that the

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French Cabinet and not Pétain first suggested an armistice in 1940.

Engulfed by conflicting testimony and fast-expanding blame for France's defeat, André Mornet, the High Court prosecutor, abruptly dropped the first, and what had been considered the more important of his two charges against Pétain. He would not attempt, he announced, to prove that Pétain had conspired against the security of the state, but only that he was guilty of treason (intelligence with the enemy).

Justice Is Bewildered: Rapidly, the Pétain trial was turning from drama to a near-farcical spectacle of bewildered French justice. Its jurors (twelve representing French resistance groups and twelve members of Parliament who opposed Pétain) reflected popular contempt by reading newspapers in court, working crossword puzzles, or sleeping. Newspapers of both the Right and Left attacked the court for permitting dubious, irrelevant testimony which beclouded the main issue. The Communist *Humanité* said scornfully that the trial, instead of dealing with Pétain, "has too often resembled parliamentary discussions."