

The Interrogation of Auguste Vaillant

Auguste Vaillant

December 11, 1893

Translator's note: On December 9, 1893 Auguste Vaillant threw a bomb from the spectator's gallery onto the floor of the Chamber of Deputies in protest against anti-anarchist laws passed by the deputies. No one was killed and the session was continued shortly after the explosion, but Vaillant was executed just the same in February 1894. Vaillant had been injured by the device, and was discovered to be the bombthrower while he was in the hospital. The following is a report of his interrogation that appeared in one of the main Parisian dailies.

It was exactly 9:00 a.m. when messieurs Lepine, police prefect, Roulier, *procureur* of the Republic, Clément, judicial commissioner; Meyer, investigating magistrate; and Fedée, police officer, went to the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital for the interrogation of Vaillant, alias Marchal.

The wounded man was lying on his bed, his cut face bearing a cloth band compressing the light wound on his nose. He didn't appear in the least perturbed by the magistrates' entrance into the small room where he was being held. He raised himself slightly on his elbow and stretched his neck in a movement of expectation and cheeky curiosity.

The investigating magistrate Meyer having asked him if his condition allowed him to bear a long interrogation Vaillant dryly responded: "Perfectly." His face then lit up with a strange, mocking, almost demonic smile.

"Until now," M. Meyer said to him, "you've had a strange attitude that seems to confirm the suspicions against you. The information gathered about you presents you as a man particularly devoted to anarchism."

"Indeed I am an anarchist and I am proud of it."

"What did you go to do at the Chamber yesterday?"

"I went there to do what pleased me. There were many others besides me."

"Why these two names, Marchal and Vaillant, which you gave in different places?"

"Because it pleased me to act that way. I have no explanations to give you."

“But you had a goal in seeking to hide your identity.”

“A goal? Not at all. My name is Vaillant in Choisy-le-Roi and Marchal in Paris. There are tons of people who have pseudonyms. What does that prove?”

“It proved you are a suspect.”

Vaillant interrupted the judge with a loud laugh.

“So I’m a suspect,” he shouted with his loud, metallic voice. “Suspected of what? Of having thrown the bomb in the Chamber of Deputies? That’s why you’ve come here to interrogate me, why you’re nosing around trying to get answers out of me. There’s no need to work so hard at this.”

And Vaillant added, shaking his head with an air of satisfaction and defiance:

“Well, I’m the one who did it. It’s unfortunate that it’s some sad buggers who are taking the rap. I’d have loved to make a fricassee of those deputy bastards.”

“What had the deputies ever done to you?”

“What did they do to me? To me personally, nothing. But they’re people it wouldn’t be such a bad thing to be rid of.”

“And you committed this odious act without thinking that you have a wife and children?”

“Oh my wife and children won’t be any worse off when they don’t have me than when they do.”

Vaillant then complacently provided the information that was asked of him about his past. He was born in Mezières December 29, 1861 and he worked at various professions. His last position was at the leather craft store of M. Petitpoint in Choisy-le-Roi.

The idea to throw the bomb at the chamber came to Vaillant after the rejection of the proposed amnesty bill. Well before this the anarchist had developed a plan to commit an attack in Paris “to frighten the bourgeois,” but this plan was still quite vague and he didn’t know who he’d attack. Auguste Vaillant left his home in Choisy-le-Roi on November 26, leaving in distress his mistress Marchal and a little girl named Sidonie, who he’d had with his legitimate spouse, currently in America. He went to Paris and moved in to 70 rue Daguerre in a hotel owned by Mme Picard. He arrived at this establishment, one of a low order, on November 27, his baggage consisting of only a valise in bad condition and a blackened wooden box with crude hinges and a primitive lock. For the sum of twenty-four francs per month, he rented room two, on the second floor on the street side.

The existence Vaillant led in this tiny room was extremely mysterious: he never received any guests but he often went out at night, often not returning. Nevertheless, he enjoyed a certain amount of consideration in the hotel, where he was registered under the name Marchal. As proof of identity he had provided the owner a marriage license in this name, which we know to be that of his mistress. The latter must have been or must be married. He inspired confidence by paying

a month in advance. But he never went out without taking his valise and only wanted his room done in his presence.

On the eve of the attack, that is Friday, Vaillant returned home at noon, laid down and then went out again at about 6:00. He asked Mme Picard for the address of a locksmith to repair his cloth bag, one of whose hinges he said was broken. The hotel keeper gave him the address of a locksmith on the rue Gassendi, who wasn't in when the anarchist went there.

After that no one saw Vaillant; he refused to say where he spent the night of Friday into Saturday in order "not to compromise a comrade."

The accused gave all this information with good grace, all the while smiling, mockingly affirming its scrupulous accuracy.

Nor did he hesitate to give a complete description of the murderous device that he made with his own hands. The examination of the metal debris found in the Chamber had led people to believe that the explosive was contained in a soldier's can or in a mess tin. It is Vaillant himself who said he used a worker's canteen, that is, a tin recipient fifteen centimeters high and oval in form. This utensil usually has a cap and a handle used for carrying it. In order for the bomb to take up as little room as possible in his pocket Vaillant removed the handle, one of the fasteners, as well as the cap. He obtained this object and one like it at the Bazaar of the Hotel de Ville.

The explosive used in the improvised bomb was made of chlorate powder and the projectiles, as we already know, were simple cobbler's nails. In the middle Vaillant had placed a glass ampoule filled with sulfuric acid whose extremity was formed by a cotton tampon. The device was of the type known as a reversal device. Once the canteen was turned upside down the acid ate away at the tampon and the contact of the acid with the powder charge caused the latter to be set alight.

It is believed that Vaillant used 750 grams of nails.

The anarchist admits that he himself manipulated the substances that made up the chlorate powder but he refuses to say how he obtained these products. Nor did he want to divulge the address of the nail merchant.

"How did you enter the Chamber," they then asked the anarchist.

"Easily. With a card given me by M. Argeliès, deputy from the Seine et Oise."

"And how did you throw your bomb?"

"I was seated in the second row of the spectators, against the barrier of the tribune reserved for members of the public with tickets. I had my bomb in the right hand pocket of my overcoat and I held myself perfectly still in order to avoid a shock that would have produced a premature explosion. I waited an hour for the favorable moment to throw my box and took advantage of the moment when the deputies' attention was concentrated on the tribune, where M. Mirman had just spoken. My intention was to throw my device so that it fell in the hemicycle at the foot of the tribune. But a lady sitting next to me prevented me from fully extending my arm and I wasn't able to throw the bomb as vigorously as I would have liked. The bomb exploded in the air and I was one of the first victims of the explosion."

"What did you do afterwards?"

“I sought to flee. I went downstairs, wiping the blood dripping from my nose with a handkerchief and I found the doors closed, which didn’t surprise me at all, since I’d heard the order given by M. Bizarelli.

“And afterwards?”

“Afterwards I went back up, crossing the rotunda. I walked through the corridors of the tribunes and then went to the urinals. Someone said to me, ‘You’re wounded, go get yourself taken care of at the infirmary.’ After my head was wrapped in a bandage the police grabbed me and took me to a superintendent. You know the rest.”

He was asked if he regretted his act and Vaillant responded: “I regret nothing at all, and if I was free I’d do it all over again. The people have been suffering for long enough. All methods are good to hasten their deliverance.”

And Vaillant added with a tone of profound conviction:

“I’m proud of the act I committed. If you think I had accomplices you’re wrong. I did all this on my own, and if my spontaneous confession gives me the right to a favor I ask you to bother no one because of me.”

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