

WITNESS LAVAL

A day in the trial of Marshal Petain. Ex-premier Daladier was an early arrival and the court, crowded as usual to suffocation point, heard a long and hectic harangue from Paul Reynaud. Prime Minister of France at the time of the capitulation in 1940, Reynaud dug deep into the dirty linen bag of Vichy politics. Star witness for the prosecution, Reynaud accused Petain of selling out to the Germans and of preventing further resistance by the French Army. But the highlight of the days mud-slinging came with the arrival of Pierre Laval, for once not wearing his dirty white tie. Prize trickster of French politics, and a one-time lawyer, Laval soon showed that he knew how to handle a French court. Nobody else could get a word in through the flood of whitewash with which Laval was busily covering himself. The old man of Vichy, whose hearing isn't what it was, took a bit more notice than he did in the first days of the trial.

Portrait of a man pretending he's been misunderstood.

Laval dominated the proceedings for over five hours and got in a lot of advance publicity for the defence at his own forthcoming trial. He wouldn't say a nything against Petain, but the old man didn't seem to think much of his new defender.

When Laval congratulated the Public prosecutor for his work against the Germans the court took a break for laughter. The most slippery of all the Vichy fish is now on the hook - it remains to be seen whether he will succeed in wriggling off it.