Appendix 39: Victor Basch: opening of the Rennes court martial, August 1899

From the first days of July, the normally sleepy town of Rennes had taken on an unaccustomed aspect. Swarms of reporters from all over the world, men and women onlookers, pretentious men and women, and above all, the most passionate protagonists of the two causes at issue, not to mention a veritable army of policemen, had descended on the capital of Brittany. There was a heavy atmosphere of storm and feverishness. Everywhere, secret discussions were being held, camps were being formed, battle plans being sketched out....

It was in this feverish, anguished atmosphere that the court martial’s first session opened on 7 August... On the stage, in the front row, the court martial officials; in the second row their deputies and behind them a few privileged guests... At the sides, the journalists. At the back of the room, controlled by policemen, the general public...

Obstinately, passionately, their eyes were riveted on a little door on the right-hand side. That was where the man at the centre of the Agony was going to appear. None of us had ever seen him. But for more than a year and a half, we had lived with him, we had suffered with him. At the moment when we were going to see him, all his lamentable and prodigious agony was revived in our memories: the catastrophe befalling him in the midst of his happiness, the interrogation of Du Paty de Clam, the agony of the Cherche-Midi prison, the martyrdom of the degradation, the separation from his wife without being allowed to kiss her or shake her hand, and then the superhuman torture of five years on Devil’s Island, the physical, degrading pain added to the moral suffering, Lebon’s double shackles, the cowardly harassment of his subordinates, the heart-rending cry of innocence repeated tirelessly for five years. (Applause) Ah, we had despaired of ever catching sight of his face...

And after an agonising hour of waiting, he appeared to us. And it was Lazarus, indeed, Lazarus as Giotto depicts him in the sublime fresco of the Arena. Instead of the ghostly bandages, it was a uniform which floated around him, a uniform he did not seem to fill, which did not appear to be part of him, from which he was separated in fact by layers of cotton wool designed to mask his emaciation. He moved forward with a straight step, automatically, like a ghost. It seemed as if his limbs did not make up an organic whole and that each one was operating separately. His face was yellow and only streaked with red on his cheeks. He let himself sink slowly, heavily onto his chair. One had the feeling that this was no living being before us, but a man who had come back from the land from which one does not normally return. And this sensation intensified to the point of pain when he began to speak. No, it was not a human voice which emerged from that throat. It was a strangely husky, toneless voice, like that of a deaf mute, the voice of someone who had not spoken for five years and no longer knew how to speak...