

Aldino Felicani

Aldino Felicani was born in 1891 in a country town near Florence and was eventually trained as a printer at the Modern School, in Bologna. There, collaborating on the radical newspapers that were composed in the shop, he absorbed those libertarian ideas that shaped and guided his entire life.

In 1914, he faced jail on political charges and fled Italy for America, settling first in Cleveland, where he founded two newspapers, then moving to New York and finally, in 1918, accepting employment at *La Notizia*, a new Italian-language daily in Boston. From that time on, Boston was his home.

In 1919, Felicani was making plans for a paper with some of his Massachusetts friends. One of them was an itinerant labourer and fish peddler from Plymouth - Bartolomeo Vanzetti. When in April of that year two New York anarchists, Salsedo and Elia, were arrested by the Justice Department (this was the era of the Palmer raids), Vanzetti was sent to that city to investigate. On the second of May, he called a meeting in Boston to discuss what little he had learned. The next day, Salsedo's body was found on the street below the Justice Department offices, where it had fallen from the fourteenth floor. In Massachusetts, the anarchists decided to take precautions. On the fifth of May, Sacco and Vanzetti, while spreading the alarm, were arrested in Brockton on a murder charge. Well prepared both by experience and by temperament, Felicani the next day leaped to the task of founding the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee. He was given whatever space he needed in the columns of *La Notizia* to publicize the arrests and to make appeals for a defense fund. The paper also allowed Felicani to use its address, and for six to eight months, No. 32 Battery Street, in the North End, became the defense headquarters.

Before the close of 1920, Felicani was publishing a small newspaper in Italian, *L'Agitazione* (*The Agitation*), which for five years was the defense committee's official organ. It was devoted entirely to Sacco-Vanzetti news and for a period appeared every two weeks.

In addition to founding the defense and acting as its chief publicist and treasurer, Felicani made another unique contribution to the Sacco-Vanzetti cause. It was he who was called upon constantly to put himself in the middle between his own element, a group of intransigent Italian anarchists and revolutionists, and a battery of increasingly conservative lawyers. Making adjustments, seeking delicate balances, Felicani was yet watchful always to remain true to his own and to Sacco and Vanzetti's anarchist idealism. Seeing a way between those militant labour groups who were convinced, often to the point of bombast, that only the proletariat could save Sacco and Vanzetti, and the liberal intellectuals who believed in the judicial process and in such well-placed men as the Governor of Massachusetts and the president of Harvard, was no easy course.

Felicani was young and by nature headstrong, fiery, and sure. But he had his own good sense to guide him, and he also had good sense about the people around him. More, he never lost the faith and trust of Sacco and Vanzetti themselves. And so in the hardest of times, when legal proceedings were at a standstill, when funds were practically nonexistent, when pressures from the variety of bitterly conflicting elements threatened to undo all the good work of many years, Felicani stood firm and often, by sheer will alone, held together the defense. And by so doing, he held together for all time the integrity of the two anarchists who were executed.

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In the Shadow of the Chair **by Aldino Felicani**

Sacco and Vanzetti were to die on the tenth of August, 1927. As spokesman for their families and for the defense committee, and as their closest friend, I was to break the news to them in the Charlestown death house. My visit for this purpose occurred on the fourth of August. Thirteen days previously, Governor Alvan T. Fuller, before giving his decision, went to see the men in Cherry Hill, the death house antechamber.

From Vanzetti and Sacco I learned what had taken place when the Governor visited them. Sacco refused to shake Fuller's hand. To Sacco it was the war of classes - Fuller the ruling class and he the ruled. Sacco was a man who acknowledged cold fact, who faced inescapable realities. He had nothing to ask of Fuller - he wanted no favour - and refused to talk.

But Vanzetti, the more sociable of the two, sat down with the Governor. He went over the whole case from the moment of the arrest to the discussion of the last motion. Vanzetti related the story of his life of work and suffering. He pointed out the false testimony of Carlos Goodridge, who had taken the stand while under indictment for larceny, and of Lola Andrews, a prostitute - both of whom later recanted. The Governor chatted sympathetically with Vanzetti for more than an hour. The press treated the meeting as an extraordinary event.

On the morning after Fuller's visit, when I went to see Vanzetti he told me excitedly: 'Fuller came to see us yesterday. We had a long conversation. He was very cordial and friendly. He sat down and talked to me like a brother, smiling and joking. That man will never send us to the chair.' Vanzetti was cheerful, overjoyed.

'I don't know,' was my reply. I tried to warn Vanzetti, to destroy his optimism, for everything indicated that the worst was coming. I did not want him to delude himself, to think he was in paradise when actually he was in hell.

You may imagine how I felt on that fourth of August. I had to inform my closest friends that they were to die in a few days. One cannot find words, sentences, to convey a message of that kind. Emotion suffocated me, perhaps more than it did them. From time time during the seven years, we had to face situations which enraged the two men even more than usual. They would then call for action, more action, and the more violent the better. I had tried to hold them down. Remembering those moments, I felt a sense of guilt. Here we were near the end. Only a few days separated us from the greatest miscarriage of justice of the century. Two innocent men were going to die in the electric chair because of their open profession of anarchism. My heart was in turmoil, my brain feverish. I finally related to them that they were going to die.

Vanzetti took it very hard. He looked at me for some minutes with his eyes growing larger and larger, as if losing his mind. He would not believe it. The illusory effect of the Governor's visit kept him from realizing that this was the end.

Sacco was not surprised at all. He accepted the outcome as part of the revolutionist's struggle against the ruling class. He had only one regret - not being on the outside to express his feelings with action. Sacco accepted the closing of the fight, and of his life, as a logical conclusion of his activity in serving the struggle against capitalist oppression. Nevertheless they were both stunned and speechless. I conveyed then the idea that this was the time to send out a strong

message to our friends in every corner of the earth. My frame of mind in that moment was for vengeance. I felt that no action was too violent to protest this crime. And I actually suggested the statements which each of them drafted. Vanzetti, in a large, faltering hand, wrote:

August 4, 1927

From the death house

Governor Alvan T. Fuller is a murderer as Thayer, Katzmann, the State perjurers and all the other[s]. He s[h]ake hand[s] with me like a brother, make me believe he was honestly interested and that he had not sent the three carbarn-boy[s] to have no excuse to save us.

Now, ignoring and denia all the proofs of our innocence and insult us and murder us. We are innocent.

This is the war of plutocracy against liberty, against the people. Avenge our blood. We die for anarch[h]y. Long life anarch[h]y.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Mr William G. Thompson, chief counsel for the defense, had accompanied me to the death house. He remained conversing with Mr Hogsett, the assistant warden, in the room that housed the electric chair. I had gone inside to the narrow room with the three cells. As Nick and Barto were writing, I spoke to Madeiros, who was in the third cell. I had never seen him before but felt the urge to say something to him. He also was going to die in the chair. Madeiros said to me: 'Too bad for them. Me, I'm a criminal anyhow; I have a long record. But them - it's a shame for them.' Even he, a habitual killer, could not conceal concern and sympathy for the two men he knew were innocent and had to face death.

Finally I had the two messages. Mr Hogsett was still talking to Mr Thompson and saw me with the papers in my hand. I gave them to him to read.

Mr Hogsett blue-pencilled three words in the statement by Vanzetti: 'Avenge our blood.' The assistant warden asked me, 'What do you intend to do with these?' 'Nothing much,' I assured him. But I knew what I was going to do with them. I was just waiting to get outside to give the two statements to the press. Mr Hogsett may have suspected my intention, for he made me promise, in the presence of Mr Thompson, not to publish the messages. I did not hesitate to promise. Immediately back at committee headquarters I showed the statements to waiting newspaper men. They were hungry to publish those last words, the intimate feelings of the two men who were going to die. The next day the papers were filled with facsimiles and editorial comment.

All during the previous month, whenever I saw Nick and Barto, I had been admitted without counsel. Guards would open the door and lead me to the prisoners. After publication of those two messages, however, I found them very angry with me at the jail. So angry that they actually locked me in a room.

'What's this?'

'You broke your word,' was the answer. 'You promised not to publish those statements and you did. This is breaking the rules. You will not be permitted to see the prisoners any more.'

I called Mr Thompson. He too was furious with me for breaking my promise. I could not help it. I had meant to publish those last words all the time. It was I who suggested them. It was my

hope that those messages would prompt people to action - any action. But from that moment on I was barred from the death house and never again saw my friends alive.

All legal assistance by this time had been narrowed down to technicalities. On the sixth of August a motion was filed for revocation of sentence. Also that day a petition was filed for a writ of error. On the eighth of August both the motion and the petition were denied. On the tenth, a petition for writ of habeas corpus was denied by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes of the United States Supreme Court and by Justice George W. Anderson of the United States District Court. There was no other door for Mr Thompson to try. In desperation he resigned, leaving Arthur D. Hill in charge of defense. Assisting Mr Hill were Herbert Ehrmann and a young Italian lawyer from Pittsburgh, Michael Angelo Musmanno. The Governor, in order to create an impression of fairness, accorded the lawyers additional time for making further appeals to high courts. Then at forty-five minutes before midnight on the tenth of August, he granted a twelve-day reprieve.

Vanzetti had talked to me about having his sister Luigia visit him before he died. Now the time of Miss Vanzetti's arrival was near. It was up to me to make preparations for her first meeting with her brother in jail. I went to see William A. Hendry, who was chief warden at the Charlestown prison and who had always been cordial and sympathetic.

'It's unfortunate that I broke the rules,' I said to Mr Hendry, 'but you understand these things. We are all human. We all have emotions. I am very sorry I can't see them again. Now, I have one favour to ask you.'

'What is it?'

'When Miss Vanzetti comes - Vanzetti's sister - please open the door of the cell. Let them embrace as human beings. Don't allow any barrier between them.'

'That is against the rule,' he said. 'I can't do anything about it. It is simply against the rule.'

'Now put yourself in their position,' I said. 'Vanzetti hasn't seen his sister for twenty or twenty-five years. She has come 4,000 miles to see him die. Please allow them to meet as human beings.'

'It is against the law. I can't do anything about it.'

But he did. He made me no promise, but when Miss Vanzetti reached the death cell on her first visit, he opened the door and let them be together without bars between.

Preparations for Luigia Vanzetti's had begun months before. Vanzetti wanted to see his sister and he wanted me to arrange her trip. She lived in Italy with her father and sister in the town of Villafalletto, near Cuneo.

It was difficult to refuse Vanzetti anything. This time, however, I was against the idea and tried to dissuade him. I said, 'You have no right to ask another human being to come and see you die in the electric chair.' But Vanzetti was of a different opinion. Finally, through some other member of the committee, he arranged for his sister to come. Fortunately for me, I had nothing to do with it. I did not want that visit on my conscience.

A few days later, Vanzetti said, 'You were right about my sister. The more I think about it, the more I realize how wrong I was. I do not want her to come. Cancel the trip.'

But Miss Vanzetti had already left Italy. The newspapers were full of the details of her journey.

She was already in Paris, where tens of thousands of workers received her, demonstrating in the streets with banners. Photographs were already published in the American press. It was too late to stop the trip.

Vanzetti had told me that his sister was very religious, a Roman Catholic. Of course, I had to promise him that I would go to New York to meet her at the boat. Together with Rosa Sacco, Jessica Henderson - an anti- vivisectionist leader and strong Sacco-Vanzetti sympathizer, who took us in her car - and Mrs Henderson's young daughter, we went to meet Luigia Vanzetti.

The dock was crowded; people were everywhere. Several hundred New Yorkers were waiting anxiously to greet Vanzetti's sister. A whole army of newspaper men was also on hand, looking for interviews, hoping for a statement. Luigia Vanzetti finally appeared - a pathetic person, tired, discouraged, bewildered, and lost. She was a true expression of grief. The first impression she made on us was that of an intelligent, reserved person, predominated by fear. The flash guns of the photographers were going full speed. Rosa Sacco and Luigia Vanzetti were surrounded. Common people, women - old and young - brought flowers and presents and kisses and warmth to the young wife and sister who would soon be cut off from members of their family by the cruelty of the law and the insanity of men.

When we reached the streets the newspaper headlines read: SACCO-VANZETTI TO DIE MONDAY NIGHT. Luigia Vanzetti did not understand a word of English. The gigantic headlines of the New York papers, however, did not require interpretation. Most of them had pictures covering the front pages. A sense of tragedy was everywhere. It was possible to see it, not only on those headline pages but on the faces of simple working people.

That was Friday. Only three days left. A situation of this type does not help one's ability to concentrate and to think straight. Nor is there need to say that we, and the people who followed our group, were full of emotions. I was anxious to rush back to Boston for last-minute contact. It was necessary to keep posted our closest friends in this country and throughout the world. We did not know what else to do. The only hope left was to arouse people to acts of desperation and protest.

After a brief rest in a New York hotel, we rushed Luigia Vanzetti to the radio station dedicated to Eugene Debs, where she delivered a few words to the people of America. It was a brief message of salutation and of appeal. Ironically we were accompanied about the city, as is customary on the occasions of the visits of important people, by what was then known as the bomb squad - a part of the police force.

Luigia Vanzetti was lost in the tragedy. As one could expect, she understood very little of what had happened to her brother. Her mind was predominated by religious beliefs. To her the whole affair was a nightmare. In her statement to the press she said she hoped that her brother would return to the faith of his childhood - before he left home and became an atheist and a radical.

So it was up to me to prepare her for the end. On the way from New York to Boston I did my best to make her understand. It was not an easy job, as one can judge. I mentioned what had happened immediately after World War I. To simplify the picture, I told her how Sacco and Vanzetti had escaped to Mexico in order not to participate in the war. In a chronological sequence I related how nationalistic elements had resorted to violent outbursts against the more active labour organizations which opposed the war. I told her how union headquarters were destroyed, how labour organizers were killed by mobs. I told her of the mass arrests of people everywhere in the United States during the so-called Palmer hysteria. Because it was something similar to what happened in Italy during the first years of Fascist terror, she began to see the light.

But Luigia Vanzetti was na ve, ingenuous. She thought that by coming to this country and pleading with certain pillars of the Church she could disarm the law. She was not alone in this way of thinking. Other people thought that the intervention of the Vatican would stop the hangman. Few of them realized that the authority of the state would not kneel to any other power.

When we got back to Boston it was Saturday morning. After a few hours' rest we went to the jail. We had to think what to do now that Luigia was here. I thought that the proper and logical thing to do was to take her to see William Cardinal O'Connell, who was then a powerful man in the Church in Boston.

On Sunday afternoon Mrs Anderson, Mrs Sacco, Miss Vanzetti and I went to Cardinal O'Connell's home. We had not made an appointment. I stayed in the car because I had nothing to say. Rosa Sacco stayed with me. Miss Vanzetti and Mrs Anderson went in. The Cardinal was able to speak Italian and Miss Vanzetti expressed herself in Italian very well. The visit lasted for some time. As can be imagined, Luigia used all the fervor and intelligence she could command to reach the heart of the prelate. The press considered this visit not only a nice gesture but an important one. I knew that it would not amount to anything. But it made Miss Vanzetti happy because she felt it was part of her mission and a contribution in the effort to save her brother. The papers said later that Luigia's meeting with the Cardinal was very moving.

At defense committee headquarters Mary Donovan, Gardner Jackson, Joe Moro, and others did not have a free moment. Writers, speakers, students, friends arrived every minute from far and near. They all wanted to be of some help. Protest meetings were organized all over the city. Where it was not possible to secure public halls, private halls were used, such as churches and union headquarters. I really can't describe the commotion during those few days before the execution. We had messengers from Western Union and Postal Telegraph all the time. Messages came from every corner of the earth. We had wires from South Africa, Russia, South America, England, Germany, France, Spain. They poured in from labour organizations, liberal groups, political parties, religious associations. Also the most prominent people in public life in every country of the world sent messages, asking for words or reassurance and hope. We heard from Maurice Thorez, who was one of the biggest lawyers in France, a radical and later leader of the French Communist Party. Anatole France, Madame Severine, Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell, Harold Laski, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Fritz Kreisler, Maximilian Harden, Albert Einstein, Madame Curie, Marquis Guy de Lasteye (grandson of Lafayette), all sent words of sympathy and protest. We even had a message from Albert Dreyfus: 'If I can be of any help, I'll come.' He had been through hell himself, knew what it was like and wanted to assist in some way. They were all messages written with the burning feelings which consumed everyone: 'If we can help, let us know.'

The remembrance of that tremendous wave of human passion will live for ever. For those involved in the fight to prevent this tragedy, it made life significant indeed. We were really caught in a trap and there was nothing we could do about it. But people were wonderful.

Now the death house was the only reality. On Monday night, the twenty-second of August, Sacco and Vanzetti would die in the electric chair. There were few things left for us to do. The committee offices at 256 Hanover Street were a madhouse. It was a gathering of men and women with deep emotional feelings - resentment, sadness, despair. People coming and going continuously. Telegrams were piling up. The world was waiting with anxiety for news. The telephone constantly rang. There were calls from all over America - from Pittsburgh and San Francisco, from New York and Chicago, from Detroit and Washington. In one day alone we spent \$860 for telegrams in order to keep people posted. We desperately urged our friends to do whatever they could. We asked for action. Action was our only hope for snatching our friends from the hands

of the hangman. All legal hope was exhausted. In the large industrial centres of America workers laid down their tools - clothing workers in Rochester and Indianapolis, dock workers in Philadelphia, miners in Scranton, cigar makers in Tampa - proclaiming a general strike. Individuals resorted to acts of desperation and terror.

In the turmoil of the closing tragedy we also had to fulfill certain legal obligations. The bodies of persons who die in the electric chair must be claimed in advance by representatives of their family. This was my responsibility.

At about six o'clock on that last evening, the twenty-second of August, Gardner Jackson and his sister Dr Edith Jackson accompanied me to the jail. The whole city was an armed camp. Citizens going about their affairs were stopped and questioned. Those who protested were arrested all over the city. No one was permitted within sight of the prison walls. As the news of world protest increased, fear increased in the men who pretended to administer the law. Machine guns were placed along the prison walls. Later, powerful lights were to search over roofs and in the dark corners of yards and streets. It seemed the whole city was in the grip of death. Armed horsemen were stationed along the approaches to the prison. Outside the jail's main gate was a cordon of mounted troupers. They appeared cold and erect and perfect, on their beautiful animals. They were armed, ready for any emergency. Along the streets were other horses and riders. Those were probably the same horses used on previous Sundays to break the meetings we called on Boston Common to voice our protests.

My heart was beating fast. The trip from committee headquarters to the jail was made in silence. One of those times when there is no need for words. Our emotions dominated everything. The silence was broken by the echoing hoofbeats of the horses on the wooden bridge facing the jail. In the long silence of the journey one saw the tremendous contrast: in every city of the world the multitudes clamoured and thundered, 'Save Sacco and Vanzetti!' while in Charlestown the only preoccupation was the preparation for the killing of the two dreamers of the brotherhood of man.

We reached the jail. The atmosphere that prevailed was suspense and fear. The large windows around the prison walls were lighted. Inmates appeared to be watching in the shadows. There was a depressing silence all around. The restlessness of the prisoners was evident. Everyone, at the entrance, in the lobby, in the office, was busy with the details of the execution.

Jackson and his sister waited in the car. I entered the office. The warden, Mr Hendry, was there. He was drunk. I asked him what the procedure was and he gave me the papers to sign.

It was in such a manner that I claimed the bodies of my friends, who were then still alive.

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