Mussolini

On an afternoon in May 1913 in the salon of the People's Theatre in Milan, was to take place a committee meeting of great importance. Some tables had been placed on the stage for the journalists: and as I arrived late, I found that all the places had been occupied. But who knew those journalists? My representations as to the necessity to give a free place to the representative of a big paper not only procured me a chair and half a metre of table, but proved to me that at that moment all the provincial papers had duly sent their representatives.

I had hardly settled down when a young man dressed in blue jumped up from the plates and came to squeeze himself in beside me.

Undoubtedly you too will be a journalist?

Yes: I am the manager of the Avanti!

Mussolini: how many times I had heard him spoken of.
I shook hands with him and looked at him, as I had indeed the will and the need to see him. But I had imagined him in my own way: old with a grizzled beard, almost bald headed, glasses on a hooked nose.

And I was certain that Mussolini would be like that.

Instead - a young man slight and almost suble, huge shining eyes, strong jaw, immense brow: young, young: thirty years old.

Of the phases of that turbulent meeting I gather very little; my attention was fixed on that figure beside me which from time to time trembled.

I remember Turati spoke, and Angelica Balabanoff, Chiesa spoke and Zocchi. The crowd was immense and immensely excited.

The speeches began on a calm note. In a hour the auditorium seemed
transformed; quiet, reasonable, peaceful, renouncing - All very well; no processions, no demonstrations, one does not go to the Gallery.

But there was that youth jumping from his chair: a hurricane of applause. He spoke little: His phrases were incisive and shakes and disturbs. More than his words his gestures; more than the gestures the blinding of his eyes accompanying every invective, every menace, every invitation to resistance. Five minutes of Mussolini served to bury half a dozen speeches; the crowd is delirious, the crowd is going to the square.

That day I felt all the fascination of this singular temperament; and from that day in him - in his great energy - in his unlimited force of will - I have always believed.

Approaching him then without being a socialist, as I have in these last weeks approached him without being a Fascist, I felt all his spiritual power. Good, honest, fighter: his life was of as much value to him as his poor pocket book. The labouring lasses: there was his one love. And of this immense crowd unknown and suffering he had become the triumphant servant, the slave who dominated.

Mussolini at the socialist assembly: he was the core.

Mussolini in committees: he was the all-powerful.

Mussolini at congresses: he was the idol who triumphed.

Thus we can understand his tremendous suffering, that sad October evening, in 1914, when - after five months from the triumph obtained at the congress of Ancona - he was forced to leave for ever the paper which he had known how to raise; thus we explain the anguish of his generous and profoundly socialist heart - if socialism signifies love of the poor, but above all love of our
earth - when he was crushed by the party which he had raised on the altars of faith and enthusiasm which had been erected by his hands.

I said to him that evening: "Do not go in; the crowd is enraged, I have heard serious proposals murmured. Do not enter."

"I will enter". And when he pronounced those words his eyes were half closed and the fire which flashed below the lowered lids was livelier and more terrifying.

He entered. The crowd had adored him for years. In all the socialist assemblies I was accustomed to take his words as an unappealable sentence, that it was the mass which hung on his brain, his gesture, his look. What sadness that night; they were the same souls who had turned against him: the same voices that has acclaimed him, now cursed the traitor; the same hands which had applauded him now were stretched out threateningly. And he passed, pale, agitated, in his brown overcoat, his hat jammed down, wide open eyes full of life.

He voiced his socialist credo: he smashed the glass which stood near him in an excess of anguished wrath: he faced the duty of the crowd. Then he said: "You drive me out of the party, but you can never drive me out of your blood. I am in you if in you is socialism."

Many eyes were moist; but the sentence had now been passed. He went out for ever.

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For ever from the party. But his heart was not detached from the masses. Among the masses and for the masses he was born. His viaticum in infancy and early youth had been a pure and human service to an idea which was created in his heart and in his heart
remained through so many sufferings, so many disillusion and so few hopes. That throb is even now his finest virtue.

Young, he could not become the clerk of the Municipality of Predappio because he was too "restless". The ideas of the ardent Benito made the quiet managers of the Commune turn up their noses—And Benito's father did not worry about the refusal. On that broad brow, in those eyes full of pride and light, in that dry voice, in those phrases which were worth more than a command, he had foreseen the miracle of the days to come.

"There, there my son: there is no room for you here. Go out into the world. Any way with Predappio or without it, you will be the Crisci of tomorrow". I thought of this fatherly farewell full of affectionate pride and serene certainty, the night on which I accompanied Mussolini in his triumphal journey which ended at the Viminale. And, listening to his calm but sometimes feeling words, I remembered the scene described to me by one of his most intimate friends on receipt of the telegram by which the King entrusted to him the task of forming a new cabinet.

"A pens a e mi babb"—I am thinking of my father—he said; and pressed to his breast his sobbing friend.

Looking at him then, it seemed to me that I read in his eyes again his emotion. His father, had he been there with us would have said: "The old men of Predappio did well; today Benito would only be a secretary of the Commune. I told him that another fate awaited him!"
That journey was truly a great triumph. As far as Borgobaro Mussolini showed himself to the crowd which waited for him in the little stations under torrential rain. Then he attempted to rest; but at each stop there was a fresh scene of fanaticism. In the silence of the night the protests of the crowd were heard: "We have been here for hours, wet through; at least see him!" The guard in the end consented that a small commission should get onto the train for a moment; then fresh discussions for the choice of the fortunate representatives. Finally the door opened, and, one after the other, timidly, two heads peeped in. They were always peasants or workmen. They advanced on tip toe; and when Mussolini put his head out one heard an exclamation which came from the depths of their hearts:
"There he is; there he is." Mussolini's hand was seized and kissed. Then the commission descended, moved, and the waiting crowd were told:
"It is he, as we had imagined: he is going to take Rome!"

Forty-eight hours before I was in his office of the "Popolo d'Italia". The fascist mobilisation was about to commence just at the moment when I begged the Duce to keep me always well informed of events to avoid sending abroad damaging news for the country's fate. He said to me:

"Quite right: very well. You can pass freely, but I must furnish you with a special safeconduct because, at dawn, the "Popolo d'Italia" will be guarded by the Black Shirts."

I had the safeconduct.

The next day the action was in full development. I followed Mussolini all Saturday 29th October. At 5 o'clock I was in his
study when he was called to the telephone from Rome. They communicated to him that the King wished to consult him.

"I will come to Rome" he replied "when I have an official charge to form a Cabinet."

And he interrupted the communication.

Before this man I trembled; and a doubt almost overcome me. I thought he did not know how to value fully, at that moment, all the gravity of the situation.

I looked fixedly at him: he was calm.

"There - he said - my Ministry will be this."

Then opening his eyes very wide added: But it must be this: if not I will make it all Fascist: from the president to the last of the ushers.

That he was certain of himself and of his people he convinced me at Civitavecchia, at Santa Marinella, at Rome.

That evening I found him before his paper. He always had on the grey waterproof and soft had drawn down over his brows. In those few hours had taken place the attempt to launch the Salandrina boat. He seemed gloomily.

"What do you say, Honourable, of his diversion?"

"Precious time which they are wasting: I have put on the veto.

That night I made a dash into Switzerland to telegraph to America, England, France that, in spite of the news of the state of seige unwisely spread abroad, the Italian crisis was about to be peacefully resolved. Mussolini, I foretold, would form his cabinet by Sunday 30th.

Abroad they believed that the state of seige was fully
working since, from mid-day on Saturday, telegraphic communication with abroad had been interrupted.

Returning from Switzerland I found the confirmation of my telegrams. Mussolini was to leave a couple of hours later for Rome. I rushed home, repacked my bag, returned to the station. When the cries of applause of the crowd reached me from the street, I jumped onto the coach which had been reserved for him. I waited for his arrival hanging out of the train windows. The platform was crowded. All around there was an atmosphere of nervousness. Here he comes: he is coming slowly, alone, in his grey overcoat, hands thrust into his pockets, the collar turned up, his hat jammed down.

He is pale, paler than ever. The crowd broke into an enthusiastic ovation. A shower of flowers covered the Duce who advances slowly, calmly. Having reached the steps of the coach he stops and looks around. The light of his eyes glows through the half closed lids: his eyes cannot remain wide open. The master must hold in check his emotion which would gush forth as it might gush from a happy and grateful child.

He sees me in the corridor of the train. He stops and looks fixedly at me. Then says: "In the most tragic moments of my life, you have always been at my side: come this time too!"

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The true Mussolini? It is not the one the crowd knows. Under the glittering eye, under the straight mask, energetic, and strong willed; behind that imperative gesture and, sometimes terrifying, within that voice dry and sometimes metallic: there is another Mussolini.
There is a large and generous heart, a good face, a soft eye, a warm and tender voice. "What did your wife say?" I asked him whilst the applause which marked the departure died away in the distance.

He started and looked at me gently:

"She did not say anything: she said good bye to me in silence. At the last moment she murmured to me "Come back soon".

His wife: She lives in him and looks to him as to a God. She has followed him proudly and happily through all his turbulent life: and she has always adored him in a mystic silence.

"And the children:"

"The two boys nothing; of the eldest (who is twelve years old) I asked "Would you like to come to school in Rome?" And she replied frankly "I am not keen: you come back!"

The soul of this fighting and inflexible man is of surprising simplicity. He is as strong in the will to conquer as he is weak before the pain of others.

As soon as the war was over there appeared, one day at his house a brave soldier, one of the many obscure on a unknown to all save to him.

"Listen Professor, forgive me and be patient with me: I have not a penny and am in rage. Have you not an old suit?

Mussolini looked sadly at that visitor and said at once: "Yes, there is a suit. Wait."

Alas, of his suits there were but two in the house; and he in the fear of not being able to see on that embittered face a ray of joy was about to take off his jacket and give it to him. That day Mussolini's wardrobe was empty.

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It has been said that Mussolini is not a socialist, but an individualist. This definition may be true too. But his individualism is synonomous with altruism: it is — above all — synonomous with patriotism. In him there are all the psychological elements for the better consolidation of a follower of Mazzini. Love of his own land, devotion to the cause of the humble, infinite tenderness for his family, passion for music. Fascism was for him only a transitory phenomenon: it would and should more properly have been called "Mussolinism".

It was his indomitable will to seize power, not for himself, but for the nation; it was the intimate conviction that the old, shaking floor would have given way to the first decisive blow of the new force. Today when his altruistic dream has come true it is our duty — particularly of those who profess love of the humble classes — to no longer see in this man the exponent of irregular force which determined the extra-legal blow. The fascism of the Sunday struggle is finished: it will finish. Now we must talk of "Mussolinism" since in Mussolini every hope must be fixed. Think of the sagacity of Italy had the attempt failed! Above all, one reflects as to the necessity to believe in the loyal intentions of this man who will wear out all his energies — not for himself, but for the Nation.

Trust and calm waiting: the future will give to all the right to recriminate and condemn, but the present imposes on all the duty of discipline and sincere and spontaneous collaboration. The fascists of yesterday understood his plans. No more internal struggles. "It was necessary to win — said the Dice — and they won."

Now to each his own place, then I shall be inexorably in
my place for all and against all."

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After following him in the journey which conducted him to power, I wished to see him in power. If as far as Civitavecchia I got the impression that only Mussolini could have awakened such fascination amongst the immense bodies of real workers, from Civitavecchia to the Quirinale I was persuaded that his rise to power was now become fatal. Immense troops of young men had taken from their wardrobes their war uniforms and had collected, disciplined and ready for anything. There were thousands of them and they were there formed up with the appearance of those who are conscious of a high duty to be accomplished, of a supreme cause to be served. Mussolini passed amongst all that youth who had never seen him, like a true leader. The fascination which he exercised from a distance was now a lively, real, palpitating fascination. Thousands of eyes were fixed on him on his pale face; thousands of hearts trembled and exulted at his few, concise, proud words. He found an army: an army created by his will, formed by his hands, launched by his energy.

At Rome an enthusiastic crowd awaited him with enthusiasm and fascinated. His joy was to be able to pass from the train to the Quirinale. And he presented himself to the King as we had seen him during those two days of passion in Milan.

Twentyfour hours later Mussolini was at the Viminale. He entered his office for the first time as though he had left it the night before after long habit. I have said to myself: "Look at the 'Popolo d'Italia'. There is a soul which animates the whole government: and it is his. And that will, all feel and hope, will
set the country back on the road to salvation.

Mussolini the man of the masses, is always himself. His heart cannot have changed: in his soul remains the soul of the humble. He needs to restore and when he has restored the fatal parenthesis will be closed. His great power, his boundless will, his "individualism" will never be sufficient to arm his hands to strangle the generous sentiments which were the symbol and the one ambition of his whole life.

Giulio Barella.

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