Ken
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p. 64

STEEL RING AROUND MUSSOLINI

Chiefs of German and Italian secret police have little cause to smile

One thousand men are charged with the personal responsibility of seeing that Il Duce doesn't meet with an untimely death. Their frenzied precautions make him the best protected of all contemporary dictators—a protection which is sorely needed. Sixteen years after the victorious March on Rome a special tribunal dealing with the "enemies of fascism" is still working along at exceptionally high pressure.

"I believe that the act of a brave bomb-thrower is more useful for the purposes of humanity than all the orders of the day and all the chattering that 200 carcasses of red cardinals can make in Rome . . ."—Benito Mussolini in an article, published in Il Popolo d'Italia, 1918.

BETWEEN the hours of eight and nine every morning, the trolley cars in Rome's fashionable Via Nomentana may not stop for passengers. Gossiping signoras, lazy lazzaronis, busy passers-by are ordered back into their houses by plain clothes policemen. Motorcars are rerouted and kept away from the broad thoroughfare. By 8 a.m. the usually busy Via Nomentana is empty and deserted. At 8:30, with uncanny regularity, the roar of the supercharged engine of a powerful motorcar breaks the ghastly silence of the deserted boulevard. A blue Alfa Romeo runs through the emptied street with daring speed. It is driven by a man sitting alone, bending over the steering wheel in the manner of a racing ace. Every morning at about half-past eight Signor Mussolini dashes into his office in the palatial Palazzo Venezia through the Via Nomentana which is cleared for his speedy passage.

When I arrived in Rome, I looked for a room in one of the houses of the Via Nomentana, Il Duce's neighborhood. I picked the houses which overlook the pines and acacias of the Villa Torlonia—Il Duce's luxurious

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town house, but found only guards posted in the doorways. With ruthless haste these Carabinieri and detectives advised me to get out of the district if I did not wish to be looked upon as a suspicious character. All these houses surrounding the marble magnificence of the Villa Torlonia were purchased by the State when Mussolini made the palace of the Princes Torlonia his town residence some ten years ago. All tenants were forced to move from what used to be Rome's most exclusive and expensive apartment houses. Now only dust-covered windows gaze at the Duce's residence, so that no one can see what goes on behind the high walls of the Villa Torlonia—and above all no one can throw an unpleasant souvenir into the garden just when Il Duce is having his usual morning stroll under the pines and acacias. A group of monkeys are the only living things tolerated by the secret police near Mussolini's sanctuary.

The wide grates of the Villa Torlonia are always closed. They are only opened to admit Il Duce's racing car. Beyond the walls, more than 200 Carabinieri are on permanent duty—a human barrier standing shoulder to shoulder, re-enforcing the safety of the whitewashed walls. The men are heavily armed, with bayonets fixed on their rifles; as a special precaution they carry hand grenades.

In the garden, scores of detectives are on duty day and night. At regular intervals they search all the bushes and hidden corners for anyone who might have escaped the vigilance of the Carabinieri. In the house itself a company of Mussolini's personal bodyguard is garrisoned.

I applied for a permit to visit the gardens; but the chief of the private police force laughed at me. But I was determined to see Il Duce leave his house and race to his desk: so I planted myself at one of the temporarily suspended streetcar stops in front of the main entrance to the Villa Torlonia shortly before the Duce was about to leave. I had stood there for only a few seconds when a young man, wearing a shabby brown suit and a misused white shirt without collar or tie, approached me and asked for my papers. He looked too neglected to be a detective, so I, too insisted upon seeing his credentials. He was a detective all right. He scrutinized my papers, then asked me point blank if I were carrying arms.

"You ought to know," he said, "that nobody is permitted to wait at this stop between the hours of eight and nine! What is your purpose in idling here?"

"I want to see Il Duce," I confessed. This was too much for him.

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IL DUCE

He took me to the police station around the corner, on the Via Elena Regina where I had to empty all my pockets, and again show my passport and all my other papers before they released me. When I returned to the Via Nomentana, the streetcars were running again, and everything had returned to normal. Il Duce had left.

Two weeks later I left Rome for Pisa to visit another Italian sight not mentioned in official guide books. Some five miles outside of Pisa, in a place called San Rossore, the King of Italy has a private farm where camels are used to do the work of tractors and the usual bullock. Two hundred pet camels in addition to the collecting of ancient coins are the unusual hobby of the King. The camels were my objective.

One mile from San Rossore my car was stopped by two Italian detectives posted along the road. Again I had to show my papers, but this time I had an additional one: a permit to visit the beasts from the King's estate agent.

The men were not satisfied. "Don't you know," one of them asked me, "that Il Duce is in San Rossore?"

By George, I did not know it. Anyway, the Duce hardly interested me this time; all I wanted was to see the camels.

"The camels, eh?" the man asked incredulously. "You can't see the camels now!" They took me back to Pisa, to police headquarters, and questioned me for hours before they decided that I could not see the camels while Il Duce was relaxing in San Rossore.

On summer Saturdays Il Duce goes to Ostia for a swim in the Tuscan Sea. While his car is on the road, "ordinary mortals" must find another route. In Ostia a private bathing place has been set aside for him on the royal estate of Castel Porziano. No onlookers are permitted. The Duce's bodyguard take no chances. They are especially alert here since Il Duce wears nothing but a black bathing suit. Ordinarily, he wears a steel vest (some people say he even wears it under his pajamas), but under a bathing suit this would be uncomfortable.

Several attempts on Il Duce's life necessitated these precautionary measures. The first attempt took place in 1924, the last in October, 1937.

Since the first one, when an unknown assassin threw a bomb at his automobile, not a year has passed without at least one attempt. In 1925 a Miss Gibson, an English girl, tried to kill him, and actually did wound his face. Italian propaganda made

The busiest year for the Italian

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Via Nomentana is deserted every morning between eight and nine. Trolley cars are stopped and automobiles rerouted to accommodate a lone, speeding Alfa Romeo. This is to insure Il Duce's arrival at his office—intact.

assassins was 1933-34 when seven plots were frustrated by the agents of the O.V.R.A. These plots had been suspected for years and the guard around Mussolini had been tightened. The would-be assassins were forced to invent ingenious means to get at him.

When he addresses his people, he stands on an impregnable height of the balcony on the Palazzo Venezia, or on pedestals erected so high that no bombs can reach him and he is out of range of the best pistol shots.

Yet one attempt was made while he was delivering a speech from his balcony near the sky. The Piazza Venezia is surrounded by gas lanterns, one of which stands beneath the famous balcony. On the eves of Mussolini's public appearances, his bodyguard usually searches the Piazza for hidden bombs and concealed assassins. A "brainwave" of one of his bodyguards extended this search to the gas lanterns, and in the one under the balcony they found an infernal machine, timed for the very minute when Signor Mussolini was scheduled to step out. The man who placed the bomb was never located.

The last and the most mysterious attempt on Mussolini's life was made in October of 1937. It is not at all certain that it was really an attempt at assassination since the only available evidence was never completely convincing. The official Italian Stefani News Agency simply reported in a short paragraph that a military plane flying low over Rome had some apparatus trouble and dropped one of its bombs. It caused little damage, and no loss of life. As soon as I saw this report in the London office of my paper I telephoned a friend in Rome and asked for further details. He was conspicuously taciturn yet confirmed my suspicion: the bomb had fallen on the Via Nomentana. Suspecting something like a scoop, I pursued this promising trail and actually did find out that the bomb was released over the Villa Torlonia and had fallen on one of the houses which was occupied by the secret police.

Was it really an accident? Or was it the desperate effort of someone in

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Villa Torlonia, Mussolini's town house, is a veritable fortress. The only living thing tolerated in the vicinity by the army of secret police is a group of monkeys. Residents of all surrounding houses long ago were forced to move.

the air force to bomb the Duce from the only place not guarded by Carabinieri and detectives? Anyway, after this incident the Italian Air Ministry issued orders prohibiting planes from flying over the Villa Torlonia.

The head of Mussolini's police is Senator Arturo Bocchini, 58-year-old lieutenant of Il Duce, and one of his greatest admirers. In 1918 already he belonged to the inner circle of the Fascisti in Milan. Immediately after the March on Rome he was made prefect of Brescia, Bologna and Geneva, and later brought to Rome and made Chief of Police. He is the commander-in-chief of the famous Blackshirt Musketeers, composed of 300 of the most reliable fascist militiamen. At the same time he is the invisible head of the dreaded O.V.R.A. —Italy's secret police which also has a special section assigned to the personal protection of Il Duce. Altogether there are more than 1,000 men assigned to protect Mussolini, while only 300 men guard the entire royal family. The O.V.R.A.'s activities are not confined to Italy. It has special agents in foreign countries: in France, in Jugoslavia and in the United States, whose task it is to watch anti-fascists.

But Arturo Bocchini is actually only second in command. The real head of the bodyguard is Signor Mussolini himself, extremely interested in his own safety. He who 20 years ago considered bomb-throwing very useful and sanctioned it against political foes before coming into power, is today hysterical with fear that he might become the victim of a "brave bomb-thrower." In his terror-stricken imagination he constantly fights hidden assassins, and it is this panicky fright that has made him the head of his own bodyguard.

One of the duties of the O.V.R.A. is to keep Mussolini's movements secret. To this end, misleading items are published in the newspapers, reporting Il Duce to be anywhere but where he actually is. The public is made to believe that these inspection tours are the result of sudden impulses, born in the heat of the very moment when the idea struck Mussolini's restless brain.

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IL DUCE

His ever-present steel vest notwithstanding, Mussolini only addresses his people from the impregnable height of this balcony on the Palazzo Venezia, safely out of range of bombs and revolvers—a well-founded precaution.

As a matter of fact, all his visits are carefully planned weeks before—but only at the last moment are even his personal secretary and his bodyguard informed of the schedule.

It is the usual practice to send special agents to these places the day before Il Duce makes his visit. The agents interview the men in charge of the institutions and make them personally responsible for Il Duce's safety. Unreliable and suspicious characters are arrested on trumped-up charges sufficient to hold them in custody for a few days. To divert attention, several places are inspected at the same time.

For his travels Il Duce prefers a plane, chiefly because he likes speed and is a sincere aviation enthusiast. However, on very special occasions like State Visits, he travels by train. His Special is equipped with the latest devices to secure the safety of its distinguished passenger. It is not as luxurious as that of his King, which is considered the most magnificent on rails, but it is much safer.

This private train of five coaches was presented to Il Duce by the Italian State Railways in 1932, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Marcia su Roma. It is dark green, with no lettering or signs on the cars. Its outward appearance is not unusual. But when this traveling Palazzo Venezia was built, Mussolini's secret police were consulted and the plans were altered according to the suggestions made by the engineers of the secret militia. In building the train special steel was used. Not only is the body of the coaches built of solid steel, but even the Venetian blinds on the windows. When the train is en route these are lowered and the traveling Duce is sealed from the outer world behind solid steel walls. The steps, unlike those on other European railroad cars, are removable and as soon as Il Duce boards his train they are lifted so that no one can jump on when it is in motion. Mussolini's private compartments are connected by telephone

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with the compartments of his secretaries and his bodyguard; and the train is in wireless telephonic communication with all stations through which reports are received from agents posted along the route.

Preceding this traveling fortress is a "suicide engine," searching for bombs which might have been placed between the rails and to make certain that the rails have not been tampered with. The tender of the suicide engine is laden with secret service men who keep an eye on the adjoining terrain. Just as the road to Ostia, the route of the special train is virtually stripped of onlookers, sometimes over a distance of several hundred miles.

A "Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State" was set up shortly after Mussolini entered Rome on October 28, 1922. He promised to abolish this political court as soon as the country would calm down to normal life. Sixteen years after this promise the Tribunal, presided over by General Trungali Casanova, is busier than ever. Although its sentences are not made public, it is well known that it disposes of eight political opponents as a daily average, and Sunday sittings are not uncommon. Those convicted are sent to one of Italy's various prison settlements in the Mediterranean for from one to 25 years. Recently, so many Italians have been sentenced for sympathy with the Spanish Loyalists that the convict settlements reached their saturation points, and two new concentration camps, made after the German pattern, were established in Italy: one at Pietragella, near Potenza, the other at Genano, near Rome.

In Anno XVI of the Marcia su Roma altogether 8,000 years in sentences were imposed on Mussolini's Italian opponents.

This tremendous opposition is why Il Duce has to wear a steel vest and travel in a train of armor.

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