

# The New York Times

## Book Review

SUNDAY, JULY 22, 1923

### THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

*Latest Heir of the Caesars Has Conquered  
Because His Countrymen Understand Arrogance*

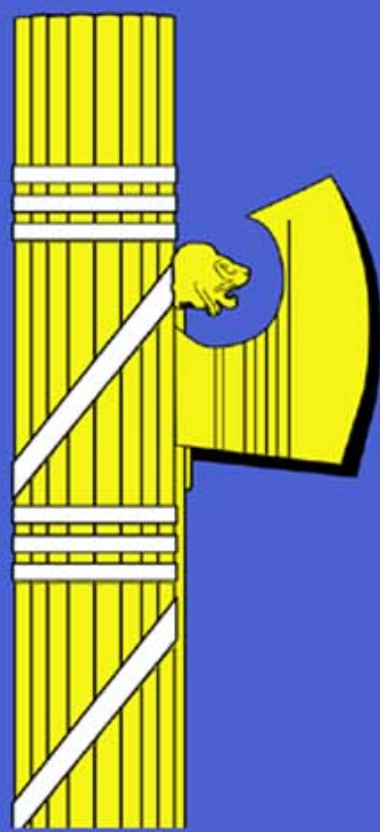


By ANNE O'HARE McCORMICK

ROME.

**A**T the moment when dyspeptic Europe ceases to struggle with the digestion of more unbaked democracy than any continent was ever called upon to swallow before, when England recalls the Tories and France remobilizes the chauvinists, when Prime Ministers of a German republic begin to invoke the empire, when Turkey stands pat, when Albania clamors for a Scottish King, when all the new republics are dying of liberty and professional politicians resume everywhere a business of which amateurs are sick and tired, Mussolini the Autocrat mounts the tribune of the Caesars and creates one of those exciting diversions which sometimes change the course of history.

He shouts aloud all the dark and stabbing doubts of democracy that secretly assail those who have tried it. He plays up a hearty and unsanctified nationalism against the pale virtue of co-operation which the enlightened have been trying to cultivate as a super-national grace. He dares to call a Legislature in public what all men call it in private. He arrives at the hour of the sharpest decline in the stock of the liberals and uses language about popular government that relieves the pent



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## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

feeling of its best friends. He finds Italy self-governed to a deadlock, in a literal paralysis of democracy, and sets the machinery going by turning out the tinkers and running the whole works himself.

His presence at the head of an enlightened State is therefore in itself a challenge. Is he a symptom of the disease of politics that infects civilization, or is he a remedy? Is he autocrat, liberator or merely demagogue? How far is he going, and where? After eight months of practically unlimited authority what has his Government accomplished? Enough to prove one-man power to be less dangerous than the powerlessness of many men, to show that a general-manager form of control may be applied to a nation as well as to a town? Is he, in a word, as right as he is popular in proceeding on the assumption that people really desire government more than they desire a voice in government?

These are questions that are drawing to Rome reporters and observers from the ends of the earth. Political reviewers, journalists, politicians, bankers, business prospectors, reformers, flock here to make their varying deductions from what they see of Italy under the Facista regime. They gave it six months last October when the Black Shirt army made its sensational raid on Rome and seized the Government from a panicky Parliament and an eagerly acquiescent King. Now that it has stood that test they begin to suspect that there is something more in it than a scene in Italian grand opera, and inquirers arrive to satisfy what is apparently a universal curiosity in regard to its achievements and its intentions. They gather in the official and unofficial ante-rooms where one waits, sometimes vainly and always long, for different brands of ill-prepared information. They study the budget figures as presented in the recent statement of Minister of Finance de Stefani, perhaps the ablest member of Mussolini's rather too-personal Cabinet. They interview the President of the Council if they can catch him between his almost daily dashes to various points of the political battlefield. They talk to the officials who are primed for such inquiries, an industrial magnate or two, the handy head waiter, who speaks all languages. If their week's tour of inspection allows them to see anything they are not shown, or are not looking for, they take a glance around the country. Seldom by any chance have they the time of the words or the curiosity to talk to the people.

Yet in Italy even more than in most countries there is no use trying to study Fascismo and its chances of success without some understanding of the Italians. I had not been in the country a week before discovering that what Americans find most difficult to swallow in Mussolini and his movement is what the Italians gulp down with the greatest gusto. They love his swash-buckling and blaguer. They delight in his impudence to a Parliament which they all despise. They are enraptured when he reminds the recalcitrant that it is only by his forbearance that they exist; when he threatens his enemies with an army held in leash only by his good pleasure. Boasts



## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

of force feed their love of power and their disdain of weakness.

Like Barrie's "Tommy," with whom they have no sentiments and many tastes in common, they adore a masterful man. They have always flourished under a strong hand, whether Caesar's or Hildebrand's, Cavour's or Crispi's. That is because they are not a people like ourselves or the English or the Germans, loving order and regulation and government for their own sake, however weak their Ministers. Experience has taught them to distrust all government and instinct makes them resent the intrusions of authority. They have never been united except by force or by disaster, and they follow a leader as long as he leads, and no longer.

Mussolini is secure while he shows no fear. When his critics accuse him of unconstitutionality they only recommend him the more to a highly civilized but naturally lawless people. The youth, the bravura, the political intrepidity which the old politicians call inexperience, are the strength of the Facisti. Look at the great portraits that strut among the meek Madonnas and suffering saints of all Italian galleries—Caesars, condottieri, courtiers, Cardinals—and learn how these people understand arrogance.

Only last week a friend bitterly disillusioned with a Government that had promised the millennium and only increased his taxes came to me after a speech of Mussolini's in the Senate completely re-established in enthusiasm. "Magnificent!" he exclaimed. "He said that he made explanations but that he owed none. He declared that with sacrifice and solidarity in two years he would make over Italy. He snapped his fingers at all the barking canaille. He says he may be shot, but it does not matter if he is hit going forward instead of going back. At least a man can respect himself in following such a leader!"

Whatever Mussolini does not know, and there are said to be many things not dreamed of in his philosophy, he knows his own people. He knew when to turn on the drama, and I believe he will also know when to shut it off. No citizen of a strictly limited democracy like ours can imagine the relief of being ruled by a good, strong, forthright autocrat after the absolute, unbridled, impossibly logical form of self-government suffered in Italy. The people were already yearning for a



dictatorship when Mussolini appointed himself a dictator. So far from a usurpation of authority against the popular will, his march on Rome was like an answer to prayer. The professional politicians had had their chance. They had all failed. Even the Fascisti could do nothing in the Chamber. They were a small group in a helplessly divided body—thirty-two members out of



## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

535. Mussolini only made himself receiver for a Government in bankruptcy.

It must be remembered that in that crisis, when the Government acknowledged its incapacity to function, when anarchy was held down only by Mussolini's army, the Fascisti could have done anything they chose with the country. Everybody admits that the Government was to be had for the taking. Mussolini could as easily have led to power the Socialists or the Communists as his battalions of fighting nationalists and patriots. He had under absolute control the best young manhood of Italy, an armed force of half a million unpaid volunteers, mobilized by his magnetism, dedicated and disciplined to his will.

Wherever he led they would have followed. There are many who think that he could have overthrown the monarchy as easily as he re-established it. Two-thirds of the army was already Fascist. There might have been a republic, even without civil war. Anything might have happened; all that did happen was that Victor Emmanuel hastened to make the Fascisti constitutional by inviting them to form a Government, the bankrupt Parliament conferred all its powers upon the Fascista leader for a year, and both King and Prime Minister were heartily cheered by the people for their resourcefulness in making the realities so different while leaving all the names the same.

That very night the Fascista forces were out of Rome. They marched to the Capitol and dispersed as soberly and exaltedly as they came. Many were country youths on their first visit to the metropolis; they were tired, dusty and dry after long marches over hard roads. Yet with all the cafés open there was not a case of drunkenness; there was not the slightest disorder and not a murmur against the unwelcome order to return at once to their homes. They showed themselves and departed, but they got what they came for and thus saved their country as thoroughly, and more neatly, than if any one had had the poor judgment to oppose them.

The leaders of Italian constitutional liberalism, who are more anxious than the best American journalist scenting a story to find out just how far Mussolini is going, declare now that the Government was about to assert itself and the Parliamentary confusion was on the eve of clearing when he made his parade of revolution. They complain because he embarked and proceeded upon his unknown course without any guidance from political experts. They forget that he had watched the experts being expert for two years from his seat on the Right of the Chamber of Deputies; and the restraint he exhibited once he had precipitated the crisis they could not avert was hardly more remarkable than their instant docility to his demands.

They submitted to the most contemptuous lambasting any Parliament has ever received from the responsible head of a Government.



## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

Certainly nothing but the lack of any alternative could have induced them to endow their castigator with absolute powers. He continues to abuse the Parliament, but so far he has not abused the mandate he forced from them. He talks about upholding the traditional "jus murmurandi," a right as old as Roman law, but all criticism angers him and he will not have a word of contradiction in his own ranks. He does not suffer any opposition patiently, and though he cannot expel his political opponents, he does not placate or reassure the worried constitutionalists when he reminds them that except for his intervention there would be no Constitution to save. He is secure in the fact that, by whatever coercion of circumstances he arrived where he is, he is there by appointment of the King and consent of the Parliament, so that if he is a dictator he is so by all the constitutional authority there is.

Two-thirds of his grant of power has now expired and many of the observers who come to find out what he has done with it, to estimate how one-man rule works in a modern State, are inclined to be disappointed that he has not created the safe heaven the Conservatives hoped for or the despotic hell the Radicals predicted. I have heard more than one trained interpreter of events assert that the Fascista Government has been advertised for a great deal more than it is worth. It has done few of the things that look impressive in a report. But it has performed one miracle. And because miracles are rare in a world without magic, that wonder, I think, should be celebrated above all its failures and achievements.

The miracle is a miracle of conversion. Here at last is a Government that has transformed a people. If that sounds too strong, I can only say that it is the only term that does justice to the first impression made on one who left Italy two years ago and comes back today. Then it was a land visibly running down, with a kind of hand-to-mouth administration, so that one never knew today where tomorrow's Government was coming from. There was no assurance that anything was going to work—railroads, telegraphs, trams, posts, power plants, bakeries, any kind of public or private service. One tried a water faucet skeptically; one bet on the chances of getting a train. Life was a daily gamble, sporting enough for the traveler but pretty desperate for the native. The people were all either idle and rebellious or idle and dissipated. The war had left them bitter and poor; subsequent events had made them lose pride in their country and respect for their Government. Everywhere was slackness, despondency, recklessness.

One left confusion and fear, and under confusion and fear, apathy and discouragement. One returned to a country cheerful, industrious, interested and orderly. All the railroads were running and running on time. There was not even the threat or shadow of a strike. There has not been a single strike in any part of Italy since the Fascisti came into



## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

Italy since the Fascisti came into power. The streets were clean, the roads were being mended, the enlivening sounds of construction were heard everywhere. Workers were singing at their work. It was like a land recovered from a blight.

Was this Mussolini's revolution? I asked myself, contrasting the friendly dispatch of the customs inspection at Naples with my last hideous experience at the same port. "We have a Government now!" boasted a Neapolitan, and when I remarked on the transformation to the first Roman I met, he assured me that I would be more amazed the more I saw. "It is hard for a stranger to understand," he said, "but Mussolini has actually changed the minds and spirit of the people. He has dramatized work and sacrifice and national pride and made them popular. Go out to the San Lorenzo quarter, where a few months ago a man was shot for flying the Italian flag. Now they are all patriots there, all working, contented, shouting for Mussolini. I don't know what happened to all the revolutionists."

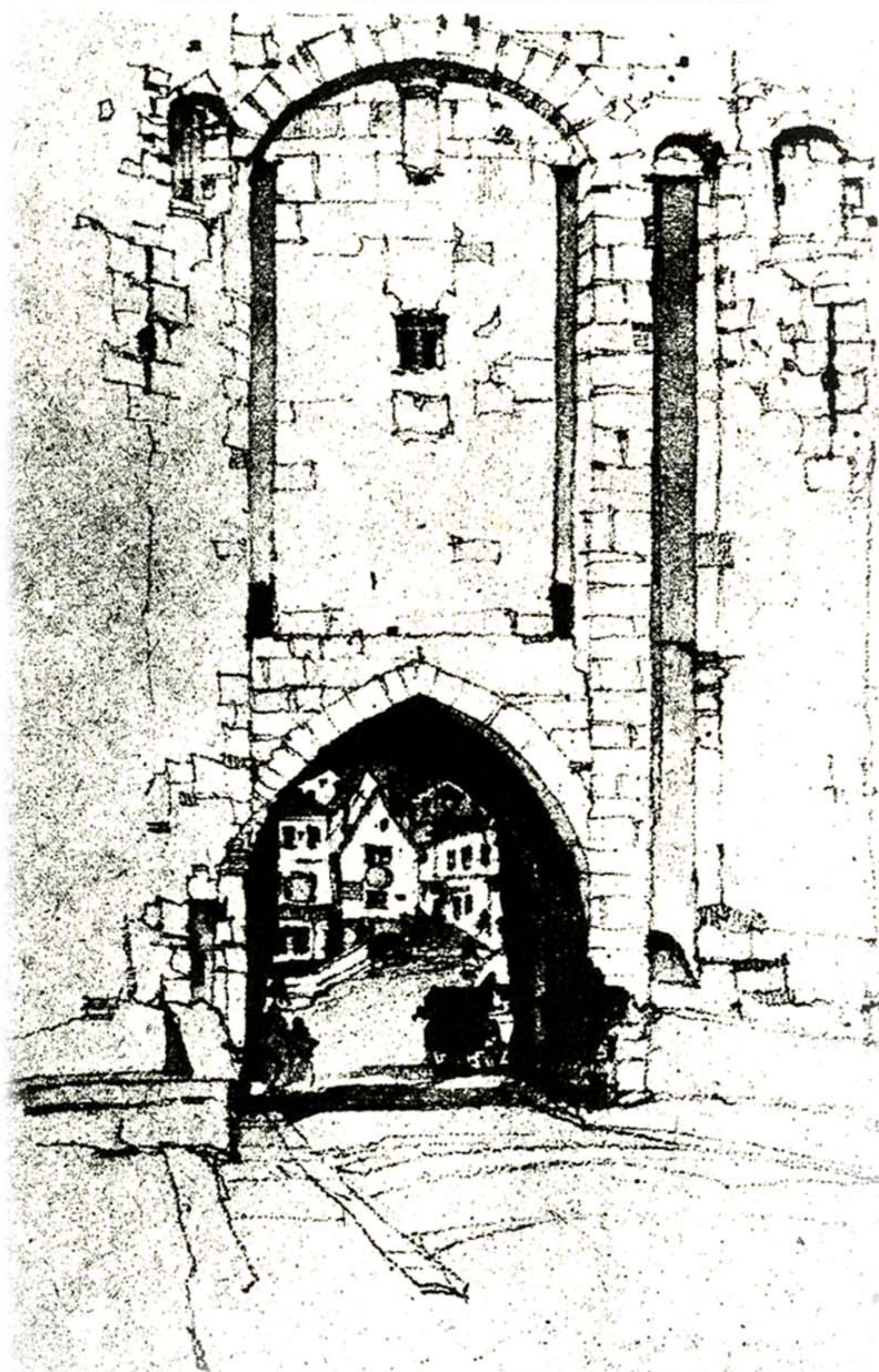
It was too much to believe that eight months of the hated Fascista rule had effected the wholesale and happy conversion of the Communists. I had too recent recollections of their terrorizing the country and reducing the Government to a state of panic. But it was not long before I, also, began to wonder whence they had disappeared. For months the Italian Bolshevik has given no sign of his existence. There is not an echo of the old disorder. He cannot be dead; he cannot be among the singing laborers. A year ago the labor unions of Italy took their orders from Socialist headquarters; they labored only by way of pastime. Now they are apparently as Fascista as the Government. The only excitement the country enjoys nowadays is an occasional skirmish among the Fascisti themselves.

I sought out one of the still-existent Socialist headquarters for an explanation of the mystery. It was the quietest retreat I found in Rome, deserted except for the voluble and agreeable executive. He admitted that his comrades were dispersed, for the moment shorn of their thunder, infected by nationalism, and that some had basely surrendered to the bourgeoisie.

"Are you as free as ever to organize, to hold meetings, to make propanganda?" I asked, and when he answered with a qualified affirmative, I inquired if it was true, then, as I had heard in America, that the Government had instituted a virtual censorship of the press and public opinion.

"Hardly that," he replied. "We publish our papers just the same as ever. The Government has a strong press, which specializes in daily advertisement and adulation of Mussolini and keeps the people stuffed with all his promises, like the reform of the budget and the proposed electoral iniquity. Mussolini punishes all his own people who open their mouths against him. There have been local examples of suppression of newspapers for criticising the Fascisti, the most notable example being the powerful *Corriere della*





Through the Porte Guillaume Chartres—May 22.

*Drawn by Samuel Chamberlain.*

Sera, which was suspended for a day in Milan. But there has been no general censorship. The Italians would never stand for it. And Mussolini won't go so far now as when he was making war on us. He is too anxious to stay in power. As for us," he shrugged, "well, we are out; we have been outraged and persecuted and weakened. But of course we will come back. Mussolini has the people hypnotized, but he has been given so much rope that he is sure to hang himself in the end."

The Fascisti have done things which the political reviewer finds more interesting than these trifles. They have ferreted out the tax dodgers and forced 400,000 citizens to pay income taxes who never paid before. They have simplified and reclassified taxation. They have made a valiant attempt to deal with the bureaucracy that stifles all European States. Several Government departments have been closed, the personnel of others reduced and various administrative economies have been effected. The number of State employes actually discharged, however, is much less than was promised. There is a limit to the number of enemies the most fearless leader can indulge in!

The new budget proposes to reduce the national deficit to one and a quarter milliards of lire, about four milliards less than it is today. Committees are working on educational reforms, on a reform of the electoral system, on new provisions for the constant emigration which the few natural resources of the country and the rapidly growing population make necessary. But these are mostly in the future—great schemes which all Governments dream about in their youth and few ever grow old enough to realize. The project for electoral reform is interesting enough to be considered in another article. It will bring to an issue the fight Mussolini must have with the



THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI constitutionalists and measure the strength of the growing opposition to his policies. As outlined, it is a novelty, never tried before in any country, and it will probably never be tried again even in this if it succeeds in its purpose of putting the Fascisti into power for the next four years.

Not even if all the proposed budgets balance, and if Mussolini works out a formula of economic salvation for his country, a problem he has not even tackled, his greatest reform will still be the one he has already accomplished. He may in time find experts to create industries and outlets for trade; the creation of a national spirit and the restoration of order and confidence in Government will remain his personal triumph. Always remembering that Italy is full of Italians and not of Americans or French or Germans, it is nothing less than amazing to watch the whole country trying to be like him. By working fourteen hours a day, by living hard and taking hard exercise, by talking always of courage, strength, law, discipline, he has inspired among Italians a cult of the strenuous life such as Roosevelt once popularized in America.

He calls himself "the trustee of the youth of Italy," and he makes the young men, the ex-soldiers, university students, schoolboys, farmers' sons, feel for the first time that the country is theirs, and that it is their job to work for it and their responsibility to see that it is well ruled. Discipline, the least favored of all virtues among his countrymen, is the favorite word of their leader. Not even a Church supposed to specialize in discipline has been very successful in imposing it on its Italian adherents. In other countries Catholics are orderly and well organized; in the centre of Christendom, if a foreigner can judge by observation, they seem to take the liberty of worshipping God in the manner they please. The discipline of the Fascisti, now the national militia, is therefore no mean achievement. It is true that in this army Mussolini wields a despotic power. He is called and is the "Duce"—leader whose word is law, who brooks no insubordination and expels his best friends for a whisper of contradiction or a gesture of disloyalty.

He includes the Church in his policy of restoring what he calls the "hierarchies," of bolstering up authority wherever he finds it. The first and not the least astonishing thing he did as Prime Minister was to take the King and all his Ministers to mass at the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, the basilica carved out of the Baths of Diocletian by Michelangelo.

"Mussolini was the first to make a Christian out of the Unknown Soldier," smiled a great Roman Cardinal, whom I asked how the ex-editor of *Avanti* was doing as an apostle of religion. "Until he ordered his Ministers to their knees to pray for the soul of the dead warrior, it had been in Italy a pagan cult, like the ancient worship of the god of war. I don't know how much is religion and how much is statesmanship," the Cardinal added, "but



## THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI

it is a popular novelty here to have a government which refers with respect to the Vatican, raises the image of Christ in the schools, and acknowledges what is, after all, the religion of Italy.' "

The new Government cultivates the spectacular. One of the reasons for its popularity among a people smarting under a sense of being undervalued in the world is that it gives them at last a leader who is a headliner, so to speak, able to command public attention and keep Italy on the front page. And Mussolini concentrates most of his efforts on healing the wounded amour propre and building up the morale of the nation. He makes politics a kind of noble show and keeps enlivened and interested the audience, so bored by his predecessors. During the last few weeks, scenting that he is at the beginning of the second and most perilous phase of his regnancy, the phase of criticism, disappointment, reaction from the high mood,



he has made triumphal excursions to all parts of the country.

He is far less arrogant in addressing the people than he is to the politicians and to the various financial, journalistic and Masonic rings that used to rule the country. He is wise enough to know that the chiefs of the old order will always be his enemies, and that it is among the people that he must find his friends. And nothing is more surprising in a skeptical race than the popular belief in this peasant who preaches aristocracy and this ex-Socialist who defends hierarchies. He started out with a following of the adventurous young of the middle class.

Now the middle class does not shout for him so unanimously as in the beginning. They find that Fascismo is not a property defense league; it makes property pay. The workers are reassured by the same discovery. I suspect that a good many of the lost Socialists may be found among the Fascisti. On the other hand, there have been desertions as well as expulsions from the ranks of the Fascisti. The material out of which revolutions are made is not so good for making reforms. Mussolini is said to have confided to a friend that he will have to disgust 30 per cent. of his followers in order to go on with what he has to do now.

In the United States we have a democracy, which means that the majority of the people, acting on motives which often have nothing to do with government, freely elect officers who do not give them what



THE SWASHBUCKLING MUSSOLINI  
they want. And in Italy a strong minority has elected itself and is giving the country the kind of government the majority want but did not know how to get. In other words, the will of the majority seems to be better satisfied in Italy at this moment than in the United States. The Italians certainly enjoy a personal liberty and freedom from regulation beyond even our conception of liberty.

I suppose peoples as well as Presidents and Prime Ministers can be opportunists, and that the dictatorship of Mussolini, prevailing by the will of his people, may be classified as a democratic expedient. He is a reaction against nothing but inaction, and proves no more than that when a leader appears the people will follow. They will chafe after a while under his heavy pose of inflexibility; they will tire of the fascinating spectacle of watching him do everything himself. Perhaps, having performed one miracle, in that day he will have other incantations to work other wonders. It is not easy to say where he is going, but it takes no prophet to predict that two elemental and powerful popular appetites, the hunger for leadership and curiosity as to what happens next, will carry him at least beyond his year of trial.

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