

This Fascisti Business



Benito Mussolini, World War corporal and present premier of Italy, photographed with his staff in the streets of Rome. Note the black shirts, the official uniform

By

Thomas Ryan

A **GREAT** electric star blazes forth in broad daylight over the main piazza of an Italian city. The electric lighting may very likely fail this evening, but that is no reason why lights should not burn today. For the Fascisti have willed that there shall be festival, and this is a day of Fascisti triumph.

Up the narrow Corso comes a blare of brass music. The air is "Giovanezza"—"Youth"—the Fascisti marching-song. It is as well known in Italy as "Madelon" was in France five years ago. It has a catchy, music-hall lilt.

Youth! Youth!
Springtime of beauty!

Those are the words. They are a little incomprehensible if, as Italians say, this was the song of the Arditi, the shock-troops of the Italian army. There are many Arditi among the Fascisti.

Black banners come into view.

"The gagliardi!" murmur the people along the sidewalks, and they make ready to lift their hats. It is wiser to do so. It is wise, too, to pause and smile dutifully at the skulls embroidered on the black flags. It is better still to raise a little cheer.

The column swings past, in good order. The men are coatless, and they wear black shirts, army-green breeches and tin hats. Their hair is long, after the style of Garibaldi. In their hands are loaded clubs and in their pockets revolvers. The police see the revolvers but say nothing.

If there are enough people to watch, the column breaks into a double-quick. And so it makes its way to the workmen's quarters.

The next day—but not from the papers—the café crowds learn that workmen were beaten, a co-operative store looted and a mutual aid premises burned.

It is taken for granted that certain scared persons were dragged to the Black Shirt headquarters. As they approached, they saw over the door the shield with the fasces—the bundle of axes and rods which symbolized the old Roman power to punish. The

Benito Mussolini

scared ones were still more scared, for to them the fasces have all the dread significance that the Lion's Head once had for the victims of the Venetian Ten.

Inside the building an army field-kitchen was smoking. Men were carrying in great sides of beef. Messengers darted past, bound for distant towns where comrades were on active service.

And here, in an inner room, knives were produced; the scared ones were prodded, and the alternative was set before them—three-quarters of a pint of castor oil, with a chaser of tepid water. They took it, and hurried away.

These are daily incidents in the life of every Italian town.

What are these Fascisti? Are they an Italian version of The American Legion or are they a Ku Klux Klan strong enough to come into the open? Their friends put it one way, their enemies the other.

The story should begin with the Armistice, and it calls to the mind of a reporter a series of pictures—dramatic, tragic, and ridiculous.

In what seems now the dim past—nearly four years ago—a city on the Adriatic sweltered under the blue heat of summer. In its streets were Allied troops, mostly Italian, and in its port were Allied warships, including one of our own destroyers. Loafing along the quays, whispering in cafes, was as disreputable a rabble as ever disgraced a seaport. The town was Fiume.

The rabble was largely imported from Italy, though it numbered some local hotheads. Every evening it held demonstrations, which, considering the heat, was imprudent. Every few days it was addressed by impassioned orators who quoted D'Annunzio's poems and coined such phrases as "Fiume or Death!" "Down with American Capitalism!" Among these orators was one who was known to us only as a newspaper editor, and whose paper frequently damned America, Britain and France for not giving Fiume to Italy.

He was Benito Mussolini, now the Italian premier.

It is doubtful if those orators meant all that they said. It was a very hot summer, and their purpose was obviously to create "incidents" in Fiume which might serve as arguments in Paris. They overshot their mark. French blood flowed in the streets of Fiume.

The rabble, which called itself *Giovani Italiani*, handed on its torch to the poet D'Annunzio, who in turn delivered it to the Fascisti. They held it up to new problems, but they have never ceased to focus it periodically on Fiume, Dalmatia and other lands which Italy covets.

The spirit which animates the Fascisti is not a new thing. It was the spirit of the Italian army in 1919, when

Benito Mussolini

it played for the east coast of the Adriatic and prepared for war with Yugoslavia. To grasp the continuity of the movement, you must see it through the eyes of a Fiuman. He makes no distinction between the old rabble, the Italian military, the opera-bouffe D'Annunzio and his present masters, the Fascisti. They all picked on the Fiuman. Men kicked and clubbed in the streets, police looking on with a smile, the election at the point of the bayonet—these things the Fiuman associates with all the Italian régimes.

And when he sees a Fascista saluting, in Roman style with uplifted right hand, or when he hears a Fascista say "Ave" or "Vale," the Fiuman remembers that four years ago the spellbinders talked of a new Roman empire.

"Whatever was Roman before we will make Italian," the officers used to remark modestly to their troops.

And the Fascisti to-day take Cæsar's legions for their model. Words familiar to the high-school boy—centurion, decurion, cohort, manipulum—occur in their orders. They have legions, not regiments. Their battle-cry is the one that the Romans used to shout—all in the same key, to make it carry—just as they hurled their javelins and got into the close-up business with short swords. This battle-cry comes at the end of the Fascista marching-song: "Eja alala!"

In 1919 Italy seemed cannoning into war with Yugoslavia. That was one of the grievances of the workers, who began to oppose the extreme nationalists. Not that the workmen cared about the ruin of Fiume, which Italian occupation had caused. Not that they shed any tears over Jugoslavs in Dalmatia deported in the dead of the night, or houses raided or women clubbed. They picked out the best grievance at hand.

When the Communists virtually ruled over Italy in 1920 and 1921, they set up a detestable tyranny. Railways could not carry troops. Officers were forbidden to wear arms, and men with war medals were spat on and beaten. The national flag was never seen. Tenants seized the estates, workmen the factories, and produced only what they pleased. In grappling with the Communist frenzy the Fascisti passed through an heroic stage.

A few Italians had never abandoned the dream of a Greater Italy, an empire which would embrace all outposts of the Italian race. Malta should be annexed from Great Britain; Nice, Savoy and Corsica might be taken from France some day, and Dalmatia from Yugoslavia. They didn't stop there. An Italian doge had once set his banner on Constantinople. There are plenty of Italians in Egypt. Djibouti, a French port in East Africa, would be useful to the Italian colony of Eritrea. And within easy distance of Sicily is the French protectorate of Tunisia, where

Benito Mussolini

Italians have migrated.

These Greater Italians patriotically mourned for the present state of their country. They realized that the slogan: "Mother Italy! Restore her at home and abroad!" would rally the decent citizens to their standard. These men were the same who had made Fiume a hell-on-earth and an unhealthy spot for Americans; but now they launched themselves on a nobler task—protecting their own firesides.

There have been, in the Fascista war, deeds of great sacrifice, lit by the Latin's sense of drama. At roll call, when the names of the dead were pronounced, the whole unit answered: "Here!" It took an Italian to think of that delicate token of loyalty to the dead. There is a legion called "the Most Desperate" which had embroidered on all its uniforms—and even on its hospital dressings—"I don't give a damn!" And fifteen thousand Fascisti of Piacenza have foresworn all jewels and other ornaments, which they have sold for the benefit of their country.

Such men take literally the dictum of D'Annunzio: "Other races are of human origin. The Italian is of divine."

What a power they are in the land may be judged by the fact that they exchange salutes with the army and navy. Their officers have the power to force their obedience and to punish "by acts of violence."

Don't let the Ku Klux call themselves Fascisti. Italy's problems were almost desperate. She hung over the abyss; and her people, blind to their obligations, permitted a government in its dotage to do nothing. The Fascisti ended all that. They employed some extreme methods—there were brutal murders for which no one was brought to trial, there were beatings and burnings—but they fought in the open.

They sing of youth, because the one hope of Italy is rejuvenation. She has a name for rising again. They pretend that they are Romans, because all Italians respect that name, and glory in their descent. The strutting of Mussolini was never like the bombast of D'Annunzio. There was some point to it.

Only the thing went too far. There was a brave fight for Donna Italia, and the Fascisti won. The Communist menace was scotched. In Milan, Turin and Trieste—the worst large towns—not a red flag could appear; not a Communist dared speak in public. It was a moment for amnesty and elections, for most of the workmen had been forced into Communism. But while at home the Fascisti feted their victory by further bloodletting, abroad they went to the pains of giving Jugoslavia a hint of danger to come.

Jugoslavia is populated by fighting men and their mothers and sisters. In America Jugoslavs become miners because they are built like excavators. They don't really love work, but, Lord! how they do hanker after a scrap. History has not been ungenerous to them in this respect.

Such are the people who for over four years have submitted to every form

Benito Mussolini

of insult from their bigger, richer and better equipped neighbor, Italy. When the Italians began seizing Yugoslav territory that was vital to Yugoslavia, many officers in the Yugoslav army tugged at the leash. "One Serb is good for ten Italians," they argued. But the government said, "No, we must negotiate," and negotiate they did. Thanks to Italy's trouble at home, Belgrade secured the Rapallo treaty and the pact of Santa Margherita, which, though they favored Italy somewhat, were more than Yugoslavia had expected. Then came the Fascista victory, and Fascista influence in Rome. The Italian parliament was no longer willing to ratify the pact. And meanwhile the Fascisti, like their comic forerunner, D'Annunzio, swooped down on Fiume, shelled it from an Italian warship and drove out the decentest government that it had had since the Armistice. The Fascisti speak of this treaty violation as the "Revolution of 1922."

So the movement that brought relief to Italy gave chains to Fiume and alarm to Yugoslavia. The Fascisti are still in the town, busily dosing its more public-spirited citizens with castor oil. Local physicians protested against this method of treatment; drug stores complained that they could not meet the demand. Meanwhile Hungary's erstwhile best port is without shipping. Yugoslavia will not let goods pass until Italy keeps her plighted word. The Fascisti will not let their opponents work on the docks, and as everyone is their opponent, and as the Fascisti don't swing a very mean crate themselves, no work is done.

On a wall overlooking the silent business street, like a grim commentary on the silence, somebody once painted "Fiume or Death!" Only the last word is visible today: "Death!" Fiume is dead and the Fascisti killed her.

Then came the coup which made Mussolini premier. It was burlesque, in that it was illegal but that no firm resistance was made. Imagine The American Legion marching on Washington. The Fascisti marched. Then they returned to their homes with black banners, seized all the public buildings and shouted, "Long Live the King!" Some troops lost their heads and fired, but mostly they handed over their carbines. The King saw the writing on the wall, and he yielded.

At first it looked as if all would be safe on the frontiers. The Fascisti who had mobilized there to watch Austria and Yugoslavia went home, and Belgrade papers spoke well—after government hints—of Mussolini. He seemed to justify their opinion of him by his new attitude toward Fiume. Some young Fascisti had raided across the border, seized a Yugoslav flag and burned it. Mussolini ordered another flag made and returned with apologies, and he even sent the youngsters to jail. When a handful of firebrand Arditi—some of D'Annunzio's—grabbed the Yugoslav club in Fiume, the government got them out by a clever trick. Mussolini was learning that while an editor might call for a "strong" policy abroad, the premier of the nation must walk with caution.

Benito Mussolini

But there were people behind Mussolini who did not want caution. They wanted Greater Italy, and they had hoisted Mussolini into the saddle for that purpose. So the sabre had to be clanked, and Yugoslavia, weary of patience, began to mobilize certain classes.

If the Fascisti had only stayed at home! But like Pussyfoot Johnson and all enthusiasts, they had no sooner seen their cause triumphant at home than they set out to spread the gospel to all people. They took it into Bavaria, just where they shouldn't have taken it. In Bavaria Communism was not a danger. Fascism was. Every energy of the Bavarians should have been bent to working their way through the winter without much coal or bread. But Fascism turned their attentions to Jew-baiting. Mussolini had never disgraced Fascism at home by anti-Semitism, but in Hungary, as well as Bavaria, that was the form that Fascism took.

There was a tactical reason for carrying Fascism to Hungary. That country is the enemy of Yugoslavia and her allies, Czecho-Slovakia and Rumania. Italy has coquetted for years with the Hungarians, and now she is drawing tighter the bond between the two countries, providing against the war which she foresees.

Then, too, the Fascisti are intriguing in Montenegro. They receive fugitives from that country who can be trusted to plot with their friends at home against Yugoslavia. And at Ancona there is a bureau whose business it is to watch the Jugoslavs in Dalmatia.

Even in Ireland the Fascisti are trying to organize branches. There they have met with a real check, for both sides claim to be the true government and neither will tolerate a third party.

There are signs that Italy herself is wearying of Fascism. Sardinia has virtually revolted against it, and elsewhere people are tiring of violence when the need for it seems past. Workmen of dubious character have been paid to march with the Black Shirts, to counterbalance the Communist workers. Jugoslavs in Trieste and Fiume claim that they have to pay tribute in order to stay and carry on business. And somewhere deep hidden in the Fascisti organism is a band called "Knights of Death," whose crimes the Fascio disavows.

In mediæval Italian cities history was a see-sawing—into power and out—of two hostile factions. Blood was spilled; neither side gained real advantage, and in the end Italy was ruined for hundreds of years. Will the modern Communists strike back some day? May not the war of Fascisti and Communists be like the wars of Guelfs and Ghibellines?

If there is any moral to draw—and morals are not safe when we write of our own times—it is that private citizens can not usurp the government's functions without weakening respect for all government. If the time comes when private citizens must act, they must lay down their arms as soon as order is restored. If they remain in arms and power, like the Pretorian Guards of Rome, they court their own ruin and ultimately that of their country.