

Mussolini, Hope of Youth, Italy's 'Man of Tomorrow'

by Alice Rohe

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Hard Work His Creed

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Scholar and Editor, Self-Taught, Is Premier at Thirty-Eight

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Once a Socialist Leader

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Spectre of a Bolshevik Government Led Him to Organize Fascisti and Upset Cabinet

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Everything is possible in Italy. The speaker was Benito Mussolini, the new Italian Premier; the place was Rome; the time—just the other day. Since then his words have become reality. He has been swept into the seats of the mighty on that overpowering wave of Fascismo. Just as Fascism is a political phenomenon without parallel in history, so is Mussolini a leader without political precedent. He is the political phenomenon of modern Italy, risen like a flame from the ashes of her cumbersome, confusing, parasite-covered bureaucratic régime.

To interview Benito Mussolini not only was to interview Italy's "Man of the Hour," but Italy's "Man of Tomorrow." He is that person, to the lack of whom Italy has long attributed her political misfortunes—a strong man.

Mussolini has brought into the Italian situation that which it has lacked, and his achievements are proof of what discipline and organization, guided by an indomitable will, personal fearlessness, powerful intellect, profound learning, straight thinking, direct action can do.

The things that he foretold in our first meetings, when the Fascisti practically forced the July ministerial crisis during the fiasco of the general strike, gloatingly holding aloft the broken spine of Bolshevism, and what he said in the months following, have come to pass without a comma changed in his program.

It took me less than two minutes to discover why Fascismo had been able to blaze a trail to the seats of government, while the wise ones were still saying: "Oh, the Fascisti served their purpose when they saved Italy from Bolshevism. They have no significance now."

In addition to an iron will, a genius for organization and uncompromising discipline, Mussolini has a contempt for futile conversation. Actions, not words, is his motto.

We sat talking, this dark, smooth-shaven man of 38 and myself, in the parlor of his Rome hotel. I noticed as he waited—rather critically, I thought—for me to launch my questions, that his eyes were almost as contradictory as his mouth. They were piercing, commanding, blazing eyes, but they also were brooding and

melancholy eyes. Mussolini's mouth is strong, determined, domineering, uncompromising. The lips are neither thin nor thick, but the upper lip is so curved as to accentuate an unmistakable sensuousness. His teeth are white and even. His nose is large, well formed, suggestive of power. His head, upon which the short black hair is thinning on top, is of that dominating, aggressive, powerful type one associates with old Roman leaders.

When I asked him a question he had a concise reply, sometimes condensed to one word. He is a man who counts his words and whose words count. In place of the streams of oratory so often associated with leaders he utters one word. But in response to that one word the youth of Italy rises! Surely the power of a single word never has been so demonstrated in oratory-loving Italy.

His terseness and directness was sometimes disconcerting to one accustomed to the old Italian method of wordy evasion.

A Man of Brevity.

"What would be your very first step as head of the Government?" I asked.

He answered in one word: "Discipline."

"And then?" I queried.

"Discipline for every one—that is a good beginning," he replied.

"What steps would you take to place Italy on a firm economic basis? How would you silence the voice of unrest, for instance, over the exchange?"

"Work!"

Surely there was a challenge to new national effort in that word.

"Production!" he continued. "That is the cornerstone upon which I would build government."

"And your foreign policy?" I asked.

"Equilibrium and conciliation."

"We Americans are disliked here in Italy because of the exchange," I commented. "How do you feel about us?"

"The question of exchange will have to adjust itself after we have put into effect our program of production," he said. "As an Italian I naturally am more interested in countries where we have colonies than in the United States. The immigration problem today is the important issue with the United States. But even emigration difficulties with us might be solved through proper colonial programs. Italy is a fecund country. It is overpopulated, but I believe we should have a government capable of solving some of our own problems. International whining get a country nowhere. One must develop from within."

To a person who has lived long in Italy the utterances of Mussolini were significant. He seemed to put his finger on the weakest spots with a clarifying touch. Just the two words, "discipline" and "work," spoken tersely and unemotionally, expressed volumes of understanding.

"Your organization of labor has been your greatest accomplishment, hasn't it I inquired. At that time the network of "sindicales," the organizations of every calling, even farm workers, which had been going on silently and surely in all corners of Italy, had not yet been fully estimated by the dormant powers.

Mussolini's face has a somewhat cynical expression until he smiles. Then it is illuminated with that rare spirit without which no man can have broad understanding—a sense of humor.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

I explained what to him seemed a most unfeminine habit that I had talked to everybody who would answer me in first, second or third class railroad carriages, preferably the last, concerning political conditions in Italy. A phenomenon I had discovered in many out-of-the-way places which did not exist three years ago was the acute interest in politics shown by every young man over 15.

“I consider Fascismo responsible,” I commented, “and what most impressed me was the range the social ladder included in Fascismo.”

“Yes, our generation of labor is our strength, because in that we have a great constructive force,” he agreed. “Nothing can be of use in Italy today that is not aggressively constructive.”

“And in every part of Italy where I have traveled,” I interpolated, “wherever I have heard laments about ‘Provera Italia’ and the weak government, I also have heard the insistent whisper, ‘Oh, we have a strong man—if only Mussolini gets into power!’”

“But,” protested Mussolini, and I thought not so very convincingly, “I am too young to be head of the Government. Italy”—and his teeth flashed in a smile—“loves old men.” And that was such a short time ago. But perhaps Mussolini has aged in these last few weeks.

Youth Against Age.

“After all, Fascismo is really the protest of youth,” I suggested: “a protest of youth against the doddering old inefficiency, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” replied Mussolini.

“Yet you say you are too young.”

“I do not seek power for myself,” he answered. “I am working for Italy. Italy’s hope lies in her youth. Stop and think just what Fascismo means and who the Fascisti are. They are the flower of Italian youth, the young intellectuals, the young students, the splendid young men released from the war, the young workers. Why, our enrollment reaches to youths of fifteen. Think what that means in creating a national spirit, enrolling all of these fine young men to save Italy!”

I recalled one of the mottoes flung high on the Rome Fascisti headquarters—“Italia è una religione” (Italy is a religion), and I could not help but see Mussolini in the light of a political Messiah—a super-Nationalist.

“Have you ever seen a more striking spectacle,” he demanded, “than these splendid young men in their black shirts marching toward national unity? You see, what Italy needs is not only a political conscience but a national conscience.”

“As a former leader of the Socialist Party, have not some of your old beliefs clung to your new organization? For instance, in your labor organizations and your mode of procedure? Have you not used means you decry, theoretically?”

“One is forced to use the most expedient methods when danger threatens,” replied Mussolini. “So far as socialism forming a substructure of Fascismo—you are wrong.”

“On the other hand,” I argued, “your organization is so completely military, that you have swung around the circle to the very point where you broke with the Socialist Party to fight militarism.”

Again Mussolini smiled. His drawling voice, reminiscent of our own South, seemed out of keeping with his words.

“Yes, the Fascisti are organized in a perfect military system,” he admitted. “It is necessary. But as soon as socialism ceases to be Bolshevism we are ready to put down our arms. While Italy is in danger we must remain a military organization. You know perfectly well that twenty organized men can control a thousand unorganized, unarmed men. At the first sign of safety we demobilize.”

The sign of safety evidently has come with Mussolini at the head of the Government.

In discussing the various political elements I referred to Don Storzo, the priest leader of the Popolari or Clerical Party, and distinctly unfriendly to the Fascisti.

“Priests,” said Mussolini succinctly, “should only say mass; they should not mix in profane affairs—like politics.”

“I was surprised,” I commented, “to find so many Contadini enrolled in Fascismo, as I had been given to understand that they were almost solidly Popolari.”

“Yes, and where did you discover that for yourself?” he inquired with interest.

“Only the other day,” I replied, “in darkest Etruria. In a trip to a remote and ancient Etruscan site I found all the peasants on a huge estate organized Fascisti!”

“Mussolini’s black eyes gleamed.

“Yes, and—” he asked.

“And before that—why, even bending over the ancient bronze tablets at Gubbia, I had Fascismo whispered in my ear by a learned young nobleman. That was last May, and he said that if the Government did not behave the Fascisti had a revolution all prepared.”

Nation of Contradictions.

“A revolution,” mused Mussolini, “not in the Russian sense of the word. That would not be possible in Italy—but a peaceful revolution, well—we are an overspirited people. We make war one day and are kissing our enemies the next. We are young and we are old. We have unbroken centuries of history and traditions, and yet we are a very young nation. Yes—everything is possible in Italy.

“You understand Fascismo,” said Mussolini, with a question in his assertion.

“How could I help it?” I replied “My masseur beats it into my head, my waiter serves it with my food, the electrician enlightens me with it when he turns on the current, the newsdealer hands it in with my baggage. I’ve felt it in the air ever since I crossed the frontier last May.”

“Strange you felt it,” he began, and stopped.

Perhaps, I fancied, he wanted to add, “and here they didn’t even have an ear to the ground.”

“With your super-nationalist program,” I ventured, “do you think Fascismo, imperialistic and military, will prove of ultimate good for Italy, internationally?”

“Italy today has a more urgent need in getting a solid national foundation. To be internationally respected we must be nationally strong.”

“And you would begin by killing the beaucroatic incubus?”

“Yes, and I would organize a rigid productive régime.”

“And even though you are too young to be head of the Government,” I said pointedly, “what would be your ideal form of government—a republic—or—”

“I am loyal to the monarchy and to the House of Savoy,” he answered. “And remember, Fascismo is neither revolutionary nor reactionary, but it is against a demagogic State.”

Looking at Mussolini, I saw him as the real leader of Italy, and his story came to mind. This man of iron, who, despite almost fatal wounds received in the war, shows no trace of physical weakness, had a most extraordinary background for the Premiership of Italy.

Mussolini was born in Romagna in 1884. “You must not forget that my father was an ironmonger,” he informed me when talking of his past.

Mussolini is one of the most cultured men in Italy, but he gleaned his knowledge at no age-dried fonts of learning. In his early years he began an intellectual vagabondage which has given him an international erudition. He knows many languages, having worked at jobs of all sorts to finance himself while he studied the literature of other lands in their native tongues. From his intellectual vagabondage he would often return to his home in Romagna, where, shut off from the world, he would give himself over to veritable debauches of study. At times he taught French, and always he wrote. His short stories are bitter and cynical, the fruit of his wanderings.

Many-Sides Personality.

Journalism was his real work. Finally he left home and books to become Secretary of Labor as well as editor of *Avvenire* at Trent. Later he was made editor of *Cesaro Battisti's Popolo*. Still later he edited *The Struggle of the Classes* in his native Romagna, where he began his campaign to revise Socialism and to destroy republican bourgeoisie. To him at that time Socialism meant the supremacy of the proletariat masses, and Socialism was his religion.

The separation of Mussolini from Socialism, of which he had become leader and editor of its journal *Avanti*, was one of the outstanding incidents in the effect of the war upon internationalism.

When the German Socialists disavowed internationalism for the defense of the Fatherland, Mussolini urged the Italian Socialists to enter the war against German militarism. His insistence caused his dismissal from the party. Then he found *Il Popolo d'Italia*, pouring all his journalistic ardor into it, urging Italy to enter the war. Being a man of action rather than words he was among the first to fly to the colors. He went as a bersagliere, this man of learning. The explosion of a bomb terminated his services at the front.

Then he founded Fascismo, which has taken its name from *fascio*, meaning a bundle or a group. It, in turn, was derived from the Latin *fascis*, referring to the bundle of rods carried by the old Roman lictors. The term was used by groups of soldiers, mostly *Arditi*, who formed themselves into *fasci* of ex-combatants after the war.

“As a political party, Fascismo is only a year old, but its spirit is much older than that,” said Mussolini, who was proud of its early demonstration at Fiume and in crushing Bolshevism. “But we are not adequately represented politically. The need of electoral reforms—the absolute, crying necessity of general elections so that the Fascisti shall have proper representation, is one of the problems that can no longer be evaded.”

What really fascinated me most about this man of powerful personality and now Italy's Premier, was the heights and depths of culture he revealed. A man who can discuss the various periods of Etruscan frescoes with the same understanding as he can political economy, who can thrill at the wistful melancholy of a Chopin Nocturne as he can at the “Eja, Eja, Eja, A La Là” cry of the Fascisti: who can balance the satiric humor of an Aristophanes against that of a Pirandello, surely is a man who understands much of life.

There was one question I had intended putting to Mussolini, but which was answered without any solicitation on my part.

“Do you know,” said Mussolini suddenly, fixing me with a curious gaze, in the midst of a political discussion, “really you are a most intelligent person. You understand politics. It's remarkable—remarkable.”

“I'm sure I don't see anything remarkable about it,” I replied; “I've lived in Italy five years. Why shouldn't I understand the political situation?”

“Oh—but you are a woman!”

From the wreckage of my plan to question him about feminism, my outraged soul arose to protest.

“And do you think that the mind of a woman, given the same opportunity for development, the same education, doesn't function as well as that of a man?” I demanded.

“Certainly not—it’s impossible,” he replied, still regarding me as though I were a strange bug seen for the first time under a microscope—“impossible.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry you said that,” I cried.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because up to this moment I thought you the most intelligent man I had ever met.”

He laughed good-naturedly, but with that fine superiority with which the Latin male regards woman.

And so I am certain that although there may be vivandieres in the Fascisti army, the immediate plans of Premier Benito Mussolini are not disturbed by the consideration of woman as a political factor.