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Men and Women of To-day.

MUSSOLINI.

By A. G. G.

"We have tamed Parliamentarism," said Mussolini to the fifth Fascist Congress on Monday night. In that phrase he summed up his policy and stated the issue that confronts not Italy only but Europe. Dictatorship or Democracy, the black shirt or the ballot paper, the authority of force or the authority of reason, the will of a despot or the consent of a people—these are the alternatives that have emerged from the war. We thought the choice had been settled for ever. We thought that Parliamentarism, which had been our greatest contribution to the solution of the problem of human government, was established beyond all risk of challenge. But the war that shook the Kings from their thrones made the Parliaments rock too. Four years of bloodshed had created the habit of violence, and the loss of faith in ourselves had awakened the demand for a hero. The world was in the mood for super-men, those strong, silent, grim fellows whose gospel is a word and a blow, and whose blow fosters as they say in Lancashire.



SIGNOR MUSSOLINI.

And it cannot be denied that Benito Mussolini fills the part magnificently. He is incomparably the finest actor on the world's stage. He sees life as a terrific film drama, played before a gaping mob of rather childlike people who want someone to worship, someone to follow, someone to obey. And he sees himself as the hero of the drama, sublimely self-sufficient and all-powerful, despising the mob, dominating it by his own volcanic energy, thrilling it with the emotions of the stage. Nature equipped him for the role of the super-man with extraordinary completeness, and consummate art has supplied any deficiencies of nature. Poor Mr. Laszlo, who went to paint him, has put on record the tremendous nature of the experience. "When he speaks to you you feel that an electric current is running through your veins." One can almost hear the chatter of the artist's teeth in his head as he prepares to commit this fearsome presence to the canvas.

The Actor.

It is a presence reminiscent, of course, of Napoleon; and Mussolini is not the man to forget that. Every trick of the actor is employed to emphasise the reminder. The dark, piercing eyes set under the straight black eyebrows glare at you with a terrible, implacable scrutiny, the thick, sensual lips are thrust out with a sense of suppressed passion; the formidable chin is pushed forward to add to the effect of a merciless resolution. He comes on to the platform with the pomp of a Roman conqueror returning from a triumphant campaign against the Parthians or the Gauls. The trumpeters herald his approach. He enters with the famous chin thrust out, his face stern and unsmiling, his hand plunged in Napoleon fashion, in his shirt front, his air that of a god absorbed in god-like contemplation. No vulgar shouting or hand-clapping desecrates the terrific moment. The Fascisti rise and salute him in silence, with outstretched arm according to the old Roman fashion. He receives the salutation as the Sphinx might receive a bouquet. Or see him at a public reception—such as that of the International Chambers of Commerce. Around the walls of the brilliantly lit hall are the refreshment tables. In the centre of the hall the visitors from many nations are gathered awaiting the coming of the Dictator. Presently the door opens and Mussolini is seen advancing into the hall. His head is half turned, his face is fixed in a mask-like indifference to the scene, from his raised right hand a flower droops to his nostrils. Around him as he advances a group of Fascisti, each also holding a flower, to the nostrils, revolve in measured step like satellites round a sun. No word is uttered. Twice the great

ship and no Mussolini tyranny to-day. But the moderates hesitated, while the extremists seized the metallurgical plants, prepared to occupy the banks, and brought the whole structure of Italian life to the brink of catastrophe. In this crisis all the moderating influences in the State were paralysed, and Parliamentary government and the Liberal idea were crushed between the clash of the revolutionary and reactionary forces. The latter had their focus in Benito Mussolini at Milan, who had begun life as a passionate advocate of Socialism and internationalism, whose activities had got him into trouble which led him to take refuge in Switzerland and Austria, where he worked as a labourer, begged for

his bread, got into prison for this, that and the other, and finally had to leave as an undesirable alien. He returned to Italy and started "Class Warfare," becoming later the editor of the Italian "Forward." He denounced patriotism. "The proletariat must no more shed its blood for the Moloch of patriotism," he said. He savagely attacked the Socialist deputies who had congratulated the King of Italy on his escape from an attempted assassination. "Why this hysterical sensitiveness to the fate of crowned heads?" he asked. "There are peoples who have sent their kings on permanent holiday if they have not taken the further precaution of sending them to the guillotine. Such peoples are in the van of progress."

The Convert.

That was the Mussolini of a dozen years ago. But when the war came, a new Mussolini appeared, who fulminated so violently against neutrality in the "Avanti" that his Socialist colleagues summoned him to defend himself. He marched into their midst, hands in pockets, with unconcealed contempt, was refused a hearing and then, lifting a glass amid the uproar, crashed it on the table, cutting his hand. Then, lifting the bleeding limb above him, he commanded silence, got it, and, with his blood dripping on the floor, launched his bolts at his comrades. "You hate me," he cried, "because the masses love me and will always love me. You hound me out of the party now because you are jealous; but a time will come when I, in turn, at the head of the masses, will drive you from the country."

With that characteristic touch of melodrama, he burned his Socialistic boats and started on his career as the patriot leader, the enemy of internationalism, the heroic Italian. He founded a newspaper, fought in the war as a corporal in the Bersaglieri, and when peace came and the domestic convulsion followed became the idol of the Fascisti, and while still under forty the dictator of Italy and the most powerful personal ruler in Europe. There had been no such sudden leap to power since the young artillery officer of Ajaccio rode Europe like a whirlwind just a century and a quarter ago.

It cannot be fairly denied that up to this point his action had been defensible and beneficial to the interests of the country. The machine of government had almost ceased to function, and the social fabric was crumbling visibly to ruin. Only some such drastic surgical operation as this could underpin the system, check the rush into the abyss and restore the equilibrium of things. All the evidence goes to show that the immediate effect was good. It stopped the rot, restored confidence, enabled the activities of life to go on, gave the nation a breathing space. As an episode it was magnificent; as a policy, it was as intolerable as any other tyranny.

If Mussolini had been a great man of the Cavour tradition he would have used his coup d'état to tide the country over its time of



nostrils, revolve in measured step like satellites round a sun. No word is uttered. Twice the great luminary with his attendant planets promenades round the room, the head still half turned, the face still fixed in a monumental glare. Then the luminary stops and the planets cease to revolve. Flunkeys rush forward with champagne. The Dictator tosses off a glass—two glasses. His revolving suite obediently follow his example. Then the function over, the planetary motion is resumed, the door is flung open and the Dictator disappears from the sight of his astonished guests.

I have dwelt upon these trifles because unless we realise that Mussolini is a very great master of stage-craft we shall miss the clue to the most astonishing performance that has been played on the European stage since Napoleon trod the boards. I do not suggest that Mussolini is as absurd as his own tomfoolery. In the privacy of his chamber, no doubt, he laughs at it as heartily as his European guests laughed at it. He would say that the Latins love these things and that when you set out to be a hero you must dress the part, look the part and play the part. If he, the blacksmith's son of Forlì in Romagna, is not a legendary being endowed with attributes that place him outside the common terms of humanity, he is nothing but an ordinary politician who has to argue with his foes and bargain for his place.

And as Mussolini hates arguing about anything or bargaining with anybody, he has made himself into a popular legend of the superman who must be obeyed, whose very ink-pot is a skull and crossbones, whose paper-weight is a dagger, whose eyes send "an electric current running through your veins," whose pets are lion cubs that would eat anybody less heroic and who goes into the lion cage at the Zoological Gardens in Rome and plays with the formidable "Italia" as if it were a kitten, while the other lions circulate round him as if willing to wound and yet afraid to strike so visibly anointed a head.

#### His Fiery Youth.

But it would be absurd to suppose that he has accomplished the greatest coup de théâtre of our time simply by the arts of the theatre. He was, of course, the creature of events. In a very real sense it was Lenin in Russia who made Mussolini dictator at Rome. Nowhere did the ideas which Lenin had brought to power in Russia germinate more menacingly than in Italy. In 1919, immediately after the war, a Leninist experiment seemed imminent there. The main responsibility for the emergence of Fascism must be borne by the Socialists, and the lesson of that startling episode needs to be remembered here. If the more moderate leaders of the Socialists, Turati, Ercvès, Modigliani and the rest had broken with the "humble disciples of Lenin," there would have been no Mussolini dictator.

used his coup d'état as a means of over its time of peril and, having reached smooth water, to re-establish the authority of Parliament and the reign of constitutionalism. But the terrific egotism of the man forbade such a sacrifice of self. It takes a very great man in such circumstances to resist the temptation to play Napoleon, and Mussolini is not a very great man, but a very great actor. Italy had become his by right of conquest and his principles being of the sort that adjusted themselves to his personal interests, he proceeded to establish his dictatorship on the black shirt basis.

#### The Dictator.

The King, humiliated, ignored, reduced to a puppet of the palace, was allowed to remain as a harmless symbol of Mussolini's Roman triumph. Parliament, no longer freely elected, but the creation of Mussolini's own decrees, was left as a mere registrar of the dictator, that could be summoned at a word from the potentate of the Palazzo Chigi to ratify any monstrous invasion of the public liberties. The Press was put in chains, the Civil Service has been converted into an instrument of the despotism. The whole power in the State has passed from Parliament to an armed minority who cudgel and purge with castor oil anyone suspected of activities hostile to the dictator. Rossi, the former secretary of Mussolini and himself accused of complicity in the Matteotti murder, has published a statement in which he charges Mussolini with issuing orders for the cudgelling of public men like Amendola, Misuri and Forni, with decreeing the destruction of Catholic clubs and the "purging and cudgelling" of subscribers to the "Avanti!"—the journal he edited in his Socialist days—and with even darker crimes.

There has been no such experiment in reaction, no such attempt to rule a nation by the bludgeons of a faction in the modern history of Europe. Russia is no parallel for Russia, which has never known Parliamentary rule, passed from one despotism to another, while in Italy representative government has vanished before mob violence. It is this experiment in dictatorship, to which our own reactionary Press take off their foolish hats in daily adoration. "Give us a Mussolini," is the prayer of the Rothermeres. And the humble disciples of Lenin are doing their best from the other extreme to crush Parliament between the upper and the nether millstones of revolution and reaction. But Mussolinism is not a weed that would survive long on our soil. It will probably not survive long on Italian soil. Napoleon had a fifteen years' run in the dictatorship of Europe. But few of us would give so long a tenure to the brilliant actor who dwells with his lion cubs in the Palazzo Chigi.

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