



Chapter 11 My Autobiography

Foreward
By Richard Washburn Child



It is far from my purpose to elaborate the material in this book, to interpret it, or to add to it.

With much of the drama it contains I, being Ambassador of the United States at the time, was intimately familiar; much of the extraordinary personality disclosed here was an open book to me long ago because I knew well the man who now, at last, has written characteristically, directly and simply of that self for which I have a deep affection.

For his autobiography I am responsible. Lives of Mussolini written by others have interest of sorts.

"But nothing can take the place of a book which you will write yourself," I said to him.

"Write myself?" He leaned across his desk and repeated my phrase in amazement.

He is the busiest single individual in the world. He appeared hurt as if a friend had failed to understand.

"Yes," I said and showed him a series of headings I had written on a few sheets of paper.

"All right," he said in English. "I will."

It was quite like him. He decides quickly and completely.

There is no understudy of Mussolini. There is no man, woman, or child who stands anywhere in the inner orbit of his personality. No one. The only possible exception is his daughter Edda. All the tales of his alliances, his obligations, his ties, his predilections are arrant nonsense. There are none - no ties, no predilections, no alliances, no obligations unpaid.

Financially? Lying voices said that he had been personally financed and backed by the industrialists of Italy. This is ridiculous to those who know. His salary is almost nothing. His own family - wife, children, are poor.

Politically? Whom could he owe? He has made and can unmake them all. He is free to test every officeholder in the whole of Italy by the yardstick of service and fitness. Beyond that I know not one political debt that he owes. He has tried to pay those of the past; I believe that the cynicism in him is based upon the failure of some who have been rewarded to live up to the trust put in them.

"But I take the responsibility for all," he says. He says it publicly with jaws firm; it privately with eyes somewhat saddened.

He takes responsibility for everything - for discipline, for censorship, for measures which, were less rigor required, would appear repressive and cruel. "Mine!" says he, and stands or falls on that. It is an admirable courage. I could, if I wished, quote instance after instance of this acceptance - sometimes when he is not to blame - of the whole responsibility of the machine.

"Mine!" says he.

He is a Spartan too. Perhaps we need them in the world today; especially that type whose first interest is the development of the power and the happiness of a race.

He is a mystic to himself.

CHAPTER I



Looking back, I cannot see my childhood as being either praiseworthy or as being more than normal in every direction. I remember that near the house where I was born, with its stone wall with moss green in the crevices, there was a small brook and farther on a little river. Neither had much water in it, but in autumn and other seasons when there were unexpected heavy rains they swelled in fury and their torrents were joyous challenges to me. Vaguely I sensed in all this the rhythm of natural progress - a peep into a world of eternal wonder, of flux and change. I was passionately fond of young life; I wished to protect it then as I do now.

CHAPTER II

I began with young eyes to see that the tiny world about me was feeling uneasiness under the pinch of necessity. A deep and secret grudge was darkening the hearts of the common people. A country gentry of mediocrity in economic usefulness and of limited intellectual contribution were hanging upon the multitudes a weight of unjustified privileges. These were sad, dark years not only in my own province but for other parts of Italy. I must have the marks upon my memory of the resentful and furtive protests of those who came to talk with my father, some with bitterness of facts, some with a newly devised hope for some reform.

In politics I never gained a penny, I detest those who live like parasites, sucking away at the edges of social struggles. I hate men who grow rich in politics.

I knew hunger - stark hunger - in those days. But I never bent myself to ask for loans and I never tried to inspire the pity of those around me, nor of my own political companions. I reduced my needs to a minimum and that minimum - and sometimes less - I received from home.

CHAPTER III

Those years before the World War were filled by political twists and turns. Italian life was not easy. Difficulties were many for the people. The conquest of Tripolitania had exacted its toll of lives and money in a measure far beyond our expectation. Our lack of political understanding brought at least one riot a week. During one ministry of Giolitti I remember thirty-three. They had their harvest of killed and wounded and of corroding bitterness of heart. Riots and upheavals among day laborers, among the peasants in the valley of the Po, riots in the south - even separatist movements in our islands. And in the meantime, above all this atrophy of normal life, there went on the tournament and joust of political parties struggling for power.

I have read the Italian authors, old and new - thinkers, politicians, artists. I have always been attracted by the study of our Renaissance in all its aspects.

These studies have occupied the most serene hours of my day. I am desperately Italian. I believe in the function of Latinity. I came to these conclusions after and through a critical study of the German, Anglo-Saxon and Slavonic history and that of the world; nor have I for obvious reasons neglected the history of the other continents.

The American people, by their sure and active creative lines of life, have touched, and touch my sensibility. For I am a man of government and of party. I endlessly admire those who make out of creative work a law of life, those who win with the ability of their genius and not with the intrigue of their eloquence. I am for those who seek to make technic perfect in order to dominate the elements and give to men more sure footings for the future.

I do not respect - I even hate - those men that leech a tenth of the riches produced by others.

CHAPTER IV

It is nonsense to believe that war came unheralded and as a new experience.

The real truth of the matter was that an intense spirit of war was all over Europe - in the air - and everybody breathed it. It was the imponderable; we were at the dawn of a new tragic period of the history of mankind. The beginning of that hard historic event, the World War, was at hand. The gigantic development drew in peoples and continents. It compelled tens of millions of men to live in



the trenches, to fight inch by inch for years over the bloody theatre of tragic conflict. Millions of dead and wounded, victories and defeats, complex interests - moral and immoral - spirit of resentment and hate, bonds of friendship and disillusionment's - all that chaotic and passionate world which lived and made the Great War was part of a cyclic ensemble which is difficult to grasp, to define, to circumscribe in mere autobiographic memoirs like these.

All of these currents I had to watch as the young editor of the Avanti.

I felt lighter, fresher. I was free! I was better prepared to fight my battles than when I was bound by the dogmas of any political organization. But I understood that I could not use with efficient strength my convictions if I was without that modern weapon, capable of all possibilities, ready to arm and to help, good for offense and defense - the newspaper.

I needed a daily paper. I hungered for one. I gathered together a few of my political friends who had followed me in the last hard struggle and we had a war council.

Almost at once I was, to my great relief, dispatched to the thick of the fighting on the high Alps. For a few months I underwent the hardest trials of my life in mountain trenches. We still had nothing to soften our hardships in the trenches or in the barracks. We were simply stumbling along. Short of everything - carrying on - muddling through! What we suffered the first months - cold, rain, mud, hunger! They did not succeed in dampening in the slightest degree my enthusiasm and my conviction as to the necessity and the inevitableness of war. They did not change the direction of one hair of my head, one thought in it.

One of our own grenades burst in our trench among the twenty of us soldiers. We were covered with dirt and smoke and torn by metal. Four died. Various others were fatally wounded. I was rushed to the hospital of Ronchi, a few miles from the enemy trenches. My wounds were serious. Flesh was torn, bones were broken. I faced atrocious pain; my suffering was indescribable. I underwent practically all my operations without the aid of an anaesthetic. I had twenty-seven operations in one month; all except two were without anesthetics.

This is the awful toll that Italy paid in the Great War - 652,000 dead, 450,000 mutilated, 1,000,000 wounded. There is not in our country one single family which during the forty-one months of the war had not placed in the holocaust, on the altar of the country, a part of itself. I know everyday, ten years later, that the mutilated, the wounded, the widows and orphans of war form a vast proportion of our population, inspiring the respect and homage of the multitude.

CHAPTER V

The flames of war flickered and went out. But the years 1919 and 1920 that immediately followed the end of the war seemed to me the darkest and most painful periods of Italian life. Dark thunderclouds hung above our unity. The progress of Italy's unification was threatened. I watched the gathering storm.

Everything was discussed again. We Italians opened the box of political problems and took apart the social clockwork. We pawed over everything from the crown to parliament, from the army to our colonies, from capitalistic property to the communistic soviet proposal for the federation of the regions of Italy, from schools to the papacy. The lovely structure of concord and harmony that we combatants and the wounded had dreamed that we would build after the luminous victory of October, 1918, was falling to pieces. The leaves were falling from our tree of idealism.

And thus one day, a few months after the Armistice, I saw at Milan a fact more disquieting and more important than I thought possible. I saw a Socialist procession, with an endless number of red flags, with thirty bands, with ensigns cursing the war. I saw a river in the street made of women, children, Russians, Germans, and Austrians, flowing through the town upward and downward from the popular quarters to those of the centre points of the town, at the amphitheater of the Arena. They had numerous meetings. They clamored for amnesty for the deserters! They demanded the division of the land!

Not a single force, interventista or any other, set foot in the street to stop the irresponsibles. The beloved tricolor flag of Italy was taken as a mark. It was hastily taken off balconies!

What a grave moment! An action of a handful of us on the public square was not sufficient; there were so many different fronts



where one had to fight. We who were to defend Italy from within had to create one more unbreakable unity of strength, a common denominator of all the old pro-war partisans and loyalists, of all those who felt, like myself, desperately Italian. Then it was that I decided, after days and nights of reflection, to make a call through the medium of my newspaper for a full stop in the stumbling career toward chaos.

And on the twenty-third of March, 1919, I laid down the fundamental basis, at Milan, of the Italian fasci di combattimento - the fighting Fascist program.

The first meeting of the Italian battle Fascists took place on the Piazza S. Sepolero in Milan. It was a hall offered to us by the Milan Association of Merchants and Shopkeepers. The permission was granted after a long discussion among the managers of the association. Common sense prevailed in the end, a guaranty was given that no noise or disorder would occur. On that condition we got what we wanted.

CHAPTER VIII

I wanted to show that the problem of the relations between the State and the Church in Italy was not to be considered insoluble, and to explain how necessary it was to create, after a calm and impartial objective examination, an atmosphere of understanding, in order to give to the Italian people a basis for a life of harmony between religious faith and civil life.

Let us not forget that the Masons of Italy have always represented a distortion, not only in political life, but in spiritual concepts. All the strength of Masonry was directed against the papal policies, but this struggle represented no real and profound ideal. The secret society from a practical point of view rested on an association of mutual adulation, of reciprocal aid, of pernicious nepotism and favoritism. To become powerful and to consummate its underhanded dealings, Masonry made use of the weaknesses of the Liberal governments that succeeded each other in Italy after 1870 to extend its machinations in the bureaucracy, in the magistracy, in the field of education, and also in the army, so that it would dominate the vital ganglions of the whole nation. Its secret character throughout the twentieth century, its mysterious meetings, abhorrent to our beautiful communities with their sunlight and their love of truth, gave to the sect the character of corruption, a crooked concept of life, without programme, without soul, without moral value.

CHAPTER X

Certainly I know that I took the direction of the government when the central power of the state was sinking to the bottom. We had a financial situation that Peano of the Liberal party has summarized with an astounding figure: six billions of deficit! Individually the people fed on expedients. Progressive inflation and the printing presses gave to everybody the old illusion of prosperity. It created an unstable delusion of well-being; it excited a fictitious game of interests. All this had to be expiated when faced by the severe Fascist financial policy.

Abroad our political reputation had diminished progressively. We were judged as a nation without order and discipline, unable either to prosper or produce. The chronic infection of disorder had withdrawn from us the sympathies of countries better equipped than we were. Worse yet, it had increased the haughtiness and the contempt of many of our enemies.

Our Italian form of political Masonry, which at first had seemed to have adjusted itself to the new conditions, submitting to the advent of Fascism to power, now began a stupid and deceitful warfare against me and against Fascism. In a meeting of the Grand Council I proclaimed the impossibility for Fascisti of membership at the same time in Masonry. As a leader of the ranks of socialism I had already pursued the same anti-Masonic policy. We must not forget that this shady institution with its secret nature has always had in Italy a character typical of the briber and the blackmailer. It has nothing of protection, humanitarianism, benevolence.

CHAPTER XII

A subject that is always interesting and is often misunderstood both by Italians and foreigners is that of the relations between the State and Church in Italy.



Anti-Church forces even went so far as to ban every Catholic symbol and even Christian doctrine from the schools. It was necessary that ideas should be clarified. This troubled atmosphere, so infested by misunderstandings and superficialities, has been relieved by Fascism. I did not deceive myself as to the seriousness of the crisis which is always opening between the State and Church; I had not fooled myself into thinking that I would be able to cure a dissension which involves the highest interests and principles, but I had made a deep study of those lines of set directions and inflexible temperaments which, if softened, were destined to make the principles of religious faith, religious observance, and respect for the forms of worship bloom again, independent of political controversies. They are in fact, the essential factors of the moral and civic development of a country which is renewing itself.

I have seen the religious spirit bloom again; churches once more are crowded, the ministers of God are themselves invested with new respect. Fascism has done and is doing its duty.

CHAPTER XIII

I ask nothing for myself, nor for mine; no material goods, no honors, no testimonials, no resolutions of approval which presume to consecrate me to History. My objective is simple: I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions. I want to accelerate her evolution toward the highest forms of national co-operation; I want to make a greater prosperity forever possible for the whole people. I want to create a political organization to express, to guarantee, and to safeguard our development. I am tireless in my wish to see newly born and newly reborn Italians. With all my strength, with all my energies, without pause, without interruption, I want to bring to them their fullest opportunities. I have trust in young people. Their spiritual and material life is guided by attentive, quick minds and by ardent hearts. I do not reject advice even from opponents whenever they are honest. I cover with my contempt dishonest and lying opponents, slanderers, deniers of the country and everyone who drowns every sense of dignity, every sentiment of national and human solidarity in the filthy cesspool of low grudges. Defeated ones who cluck to the wind, survivors of a building which has toppled forever, accomplices in the ruins and shame into which the country was to have been dragged, sometimes do not even have the dignity of silence.

Therefore, going over what I have already done I know that Fascism, being a creation of the Italian race, has met and will meet historical necessities, and so, unconquerable, is destined to make an indelible impression on the twentieth century of history.