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~An Excerpt from

## ARMISTICE DAYS



Il Duce, one-time corporal, at the head of a group of Fascist leaders paying Armistice tribute to Italy's Unknown Soldier

**R**OME, 1935. Anno XIV. War again. A nation united, solemn in its resolution that whatever the world may think, it will carry through a conflict it considers just. Here is the feeling of war on every corner; olive drab troops in the streets, pictures of Il Duce in every shop window, stepping onto the balcony of the Chigi Palace, there, fist upraised, standing on a tank. This is war. The rosticceria at the end of the Corso where we buy our provisions is closed. On the shutters is a sign in handwriting reminding us that this is a meatless day. As we pass the café the terrace is filled with customers who grab at the newssellers going past with the latest edition of the *Popolo Romano*, turning to the casualty lists or the communiqué from the army.

"Nothing to report from the Eritrean and Somalia front." It has a familiar ring.

By eleven, the Piazza Venezia is already blocked with the Armistice Day crowd. Some have come from Turin and Milan and the cities of the North, some have traveled all night from Sicily and towns of the South, some have come afoot or by motor bus from the hill villages to the west; all are quiet, full of a kind of solemn apprehension for the future. As if to assuage this apprehension their leader now gives us a display of his might, something to hearten the most timid. An immense roar fills the space as a fleet of planes zooms overhead.

Not one fleet—ten, twenty, fifty fleets darken the blue sky. Through the bright Tuscan sunshine squadron after squadron races along in perfect military formation, so low they almost graze the roofs of the capital. Fresh from the factory, these planes are all painted a battleship grey. Under each wing is a round, dark hole through which death and desolation will soon be hurled down over the fields of Ethiopia. The vast crowd that is packed into the Piazza stands with upturned heads and ecstatic faces. The vromb-vromb-vrombing of the engines deafens their cheers, silences completely their

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exclamations of joy. Then the shadows pass, the roaring diminishes in vigor. "Quattro cento, quattro cento!" shouts the blackshirt behind us. Four hundred planes at once.

Then a roar as stupendous almost as the noise of the planes. Mussolini walks out before them and stands with uplifted arm on the steps of the Altar of the Fatherland. Instantly every arm goes up, every voice cries, "Duce . . . Duce . . . Duce . . ." He turns and mounts the steps. Beside him is the King, the Crown Prince, the Duke of Spoleto, behind them dozens of Fascist officials, their hats and uniforms making vivid splashes of color among the civilians of the diplomatic corps who bring up the rear.

Military orders ring out. The crowd stands frozen. Mussolini mounts the steps and kneels before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He places a wreath upon it, and remains bowed. Then he rises and descends the steps. The crowd presses forward cheering, army bands burst into music: "The Hymn of the Piave." This nation is united. This man is their leader. He can ask sacrifices of them, he can tell them to tighten their belts, and they will obey.

Now a group comes pushing through the Piazza down which a line has been cleared. Fascist organizations, bands playing, flags and banners flying. Then the army, column after column of foot-sloggers, bersaglieri, colonial troops, infantry of the line, artillery of every sort, light and heavy, mountain batteries and machine guns all drawn by cars, motorized detachments of different kinds, carrier-pigeon sections, observation balloons hauled by special trucks, motorized specialists that include men in complete anti-gas outfit from head to foot. Then, as the last soldier passes, as the last tank rumbles out of sight, the throng presses to the Palace, calling again their refrain.

"Duce, Duce, Duce. . . ."

Endless and eternal, they keep at it. Finally the wide French windows of the room on the balcony open. The effect is dramatic and perfectly staged. A slow drawing apart of the window by an unseen hand. The cries grow louder, more frenzied. There is a moment or two of pause. Then he steps before them, strong, confident, sure of himself and of all his people.

He wears the uniform of a Fascist corporal. On his black uniform is one medal. He leans with both hands outspread on the railing, looking down upon the cheering throng, turning his head from left to right, surveying each one. You understand why he has been able to conquer the minds and hearts of the race.

He stands a moment saying nothing. Then he starts to speak. There is silence more dramatic than the roar which greeted his appearance. He leans slightly forward. His face is tense.

"Blackshirts of all Italy. . . ."

The cheering breaks out again.