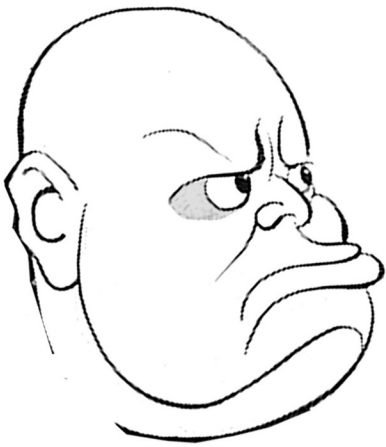
Liberty
MAY 7, 1938

"I Want Only Peace! I Am Not a Dictator!" Says Mussolini



BY FULTON OURSLER

Why should America recognize the Fascist conquest of Ethiopia?—Here are some striking statements given by Il Duce to the Editor of Liberty

A FEW weeks ago I was fortunate enough to have a private talk with Benito Mussolini. Some of the statements he has permitted me to publish here, especially his expressed desire for increased friendship with the United States; his faith in the possibility of general European peace; and the reasons why he believes we should recognize his conquest of Ethiopia.

The interview took place at six thirty in the evening of February 28. That was a fateful time in current history. Europe was on the threshold of the surprise overthrow of Austria. Yet no one seemed to dream what was to come. On that February night the diplomacy of Mussolini, so it seemed, had outsmarted the world. First he had joined forces with Hitler; the faces of the two dictators had been turned this way and that to scare the democracies. This accord accomplished, Mussolini had next begun to dicker with Great Britain, and to such effect that already Anthony Eden had been dropped out of the kitchen window. Now Neville Chamberlain was in full control of foreign affairs; no more talk was heard of the League of Nations; Great Britain was ready for direct conversations about colonies and recognition of conquered territories.

A relieved world sighed; everybody was saying that at last statesmen of the democracies were facing their problems "realistically."

"You will find Il Duce in high spirits," I was told by my conductor. "You really don't know how fortunate you are to get in to see him. With the exception of former Ambassador Fletcher—and the chief of the government could hardly refuse to see *him*—Mussolini hasn't received an American for a long time. Not since that Roy Howard affair—you remember Howard got him to propose that Mr. Roosevelt take the world leadership for peace. But your President did not respond. Perhaps he felt the plan should have come through diplomatic channels. Even so, Mussolini could not understand the lack of interest that was shown. Since then he has had many other reasons to be grieved at you Americans. You are lucky to get to see him at all—and very lucky that he is in such high spirits."

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At six o'clock in the evening a car called for me at the Albergo Palazzo and Ambasciatori. As we drove through the dusk, I felt the spell of fallen grandeur, of ancient empire, persisting in the ghostly columns of ruined forums along our route. A glittering contrast to all the broken fragments of the past smote my eyes as the car turned into the Piazza di Venézia. Here our car halted for traffic at the superb crossroads of the modern city—a wide square in which are concentrated the heart and mind and soul of Rome, 1938. Overpowering in its white height and mass, the familiar monument of Victor Emmanuel II dominated the square, a colossal structure in white columns and gilded groups, fountains and lights. I looked beyond the giant figures of Thought and Action, Sacrifice and Right, the Triumph of Work and the Triumph of Patriotism. High overhead were warriors in chariots charging to victory.

From the lighted pile of white and gold I turned my eyes across the square to the Palace of Venice, home of Mussolini, master of Italy. Significant that the leader chose the last fortified palace built in the Holy City. I could clearly see the jagged teeth of the Guelph battlements. This palace home of the former blacksmith Mussolini was almost five hundred years old. And what a five hundred years! How patient its old walls must feel toward mortal ambitions and the dreams of power. From that high balcony yonder Mussolini appeared before mobs of his people and harangued them into frenzies of patriotic devotion. "Duce! Duce!" they intoned in a hundred thousand soft Italian voices. Across this square his own voice had often sounded, to echo around the world—urging his people to be strong for war, to tighten their belts, not to be starved out by the sanctions of their enemies; urging them to kill Ethiopians, and telling them categorically that democracy—the democracy in which I believe, the one patriotic ideal that I feel is worth dying for—that democracy, Mussolini had told them, was dead.

As our car passed under an archway and into a courtyard we were greeted by uniformed guards with imposing hats. A gentleman in morning coat with tails severely requested a letter I carried from the Italian State Department. This done, the tension was relaxed; the guards fell back, I got a glimpse into a courtyard laid out with formal gardens whose flowers had sweetened the nostrils of popes dead now for hundreds of years.

But I was drawn back from the past to the open door of a modern elevator. I entered this alone. The doors were shut and the machine rose; I was going up to see Il Duce. The upstairs doors flew open, and I stepped into a high-ceilinged and well guarded room. Following a thoughtful conductor, I traversed room after room—museum apartments of glass cases with treasures of the ages; on the walls, rare pictures of the Venetian masters; damask hangings at the doors. We came at last to a waiting room. Other callers were before us in this room; men waiting in strangely arrested postures, as if they dared not move again lest they miss an expected signal. While we waited, I chatted with a charming gentleman, the Ambassador from Brazil.

Presently an inner door was opened. All conversation in the waiting room came to an end. Every one listened in a nervous hush. A placid gentleman in morning coat came in and called my name. The time had come.

I was led through another room. At each door stood two Fascist troopers who clicked their heels—a German innovation just adopted by the Italian army—and raised their hands in the salute of the Black Shirts. The last door opened, and I walked into the office of the chief of the government.

We have all read about that famous room; its size is legendary. The whole world knows of its exceeding length and height and how there is in it but one article of furniture—the great man's desk at the far end. Many have told how they felt like microbes as they crossed the dreary expanse in a long silence, a psychologically terrifying journey. Well, the room *was* very large and the desk did seem far away, but there was no journey; Mussolini came pleasantly forward with long strides and good-humored grin; we shook hands in the middle of the room.

Mussolini's appearance—as I watched him walking down the long room to greet me—was not at all what I had expected. I had thought that he would be either in the somber frock coat of the statesman or the brilliant uniform of the empire's military leader. Nothing of the kind. Mussolini was just in from a ride on horseback. He was wearing black boots and shining silver spurs, short, baggy gray riding breeches, a turtle-neck sweater—of the kind once popular in Hollywood—and a trig-waisted blue coat with military decorations where they belonged, over his heart. He was considerably shorter than I; he was chunkily and powerfully built; completely bald; heavier around the neck than he should be, and swarthily tanned. Only one performer, to my knowledge, could even palely impersonate him on the screen or stage, and that man, Charles Laughton.

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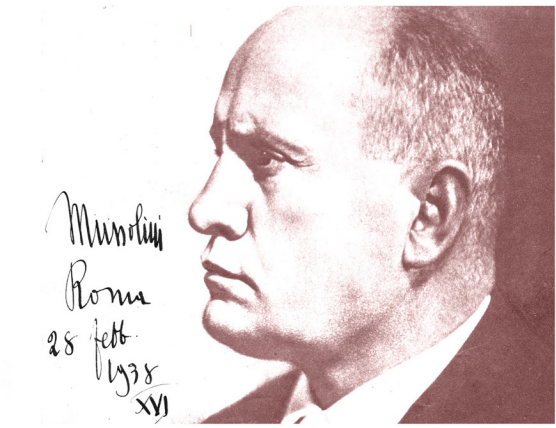
Above all, I noticed his eyes. They were the most expressive, changing, and important eyes that I had ever seen. They were Mussolini, those eyes. More than Roosevelt's smile is Roosevelt, or Hitler's mustache and bangs are Hitler, these large, dark-brown, roving, dancing, humorous, and stormy eyes are Mussolini, and all the rest of him seems out of focus when you look at them. They are the eyes not only of a great intelligence but of one possessing the immense emotional sophistication of an actor. Mussolini is an actor above everything else. By gesture, bodily posture, and above all by the kaleidoscopic changes of his eyes, he says what he has to say before he says it.

I know many fine actors, but Mussolini, in my brief interview with him, exhibited a refinement of technique which any of them might have envied. I felt that in his cradle Mussolini must have given a good performance; on his deathbed he will not miss a trick.

When he shook hands—he has immense, competent hands, smooth, well kept, and with strength enough to strangle a bull—his grip was mild and brisk. His smile was one of elation. My informant had been right: Mussolini *was* in high spirits tonight. And why shouldn't he have been—then? Undoubtedly he felt that in the poker game of European politics he had started by bluffing with a poor pair and on the draw had got three aces.



In the beginning of our talk we spoke English. Only toward the close did Mussolini fall back on his French. He spoke English slowly but with discrimination.

My conductor told him that I was a friend of Italy and wanted to help, if I could, in improving Italian-American relations. Mussolini half turned away, then suddenly swung around as if he were going to pounce on me. His eyes opened wide and he demanded in a furious tone:

"How many times have you been in Italy?"

"Five times," I answered.

"Five times? Very well, then you are a friend of Italy."

"How is President Roosevelt?" was his next question.

I told him that when I had last seen the President he was in excellent health and spirits, and I went on to explain how the President had allowed Liberty to publish three articles from the introductions to his state papers. Hands on hips, Mussolini leaned back, lifted his jaw, lowered his eyes, and asked portentously:

"What were those articles about?"

"The first dealt with general policies of his administration—the New Deal."

His eyes turned sidewise and he shook his enormous head and smiled.

"The New Deal?"

"Yes."

He leaned forward, palms resting on the desk; he brought up his head slowly and said with a satyr's smile:

"I think the New Deal is dead."

"Dead, Your Excellency?"

"Yes. Dead."

"There are many in the United States who would like to agree with you," I admitted, "but I am afraid that many others would disagree with you. They would say that the New Deal is still going forward strongly, although it has been checked in its course at times, checked most of all by experience."

Again a deepening of that skeptical smile that seemed to express ineffably superior information. "Can there be a *new* New Deal?" he teased.

His whole manner seemed to tell me that his foreign policy, so far as the United States was concerned, was founded on his conviction that the New Deal was dead.

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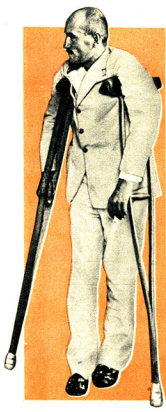
I told of the political disagreements in the United States, but he showed plainly by smiles, sighs, and bold glances that he knew all about it. Suddenly Mussolini folded his arms, brought his chin down on his chest, and looked at me with wrathful eyes.

I must confess that I felt like a culprit. His face was tense. His next question exploded like a bombshell.

"Why is it," cried Mussolini, "that the people of the United States are so against Fascism? What is the matter with them? Why is the whole press so bitter against Fascism? Can you answer me that?"

Before I went to the Palace I had been warned that Mussolini deeply resented the treatment that his son had received on his recent visit to the United States and that this topic was not to be discussed. So I could not tell the father that he should not allow his son to write books glorifying war—even though this incident had been malignly magnified and misrepresented in the United States. But I did tell him:

"The people of the United States do not understand you. They find it hard to understand you."



"A wasted, emaciated man on crutches—Mussolini in '18."

He grinned at that and remarked that it was not a new experience for him to be misunderstood.

I told him that there was nothing but friendship in the thoughts of Americans toward Italians. I felt it was much more natural for the Americans and Italians to be friends than the Germans and Italians, for example. He said he admired the strength, the vitality of the Germans. So did I. But I also admired the Italian culture much more; I wished I could help Americans and Italians to understand better, under the present nervous circumstances.

"What is it they do not understand?" asked Mussolini.

"For one thing, aggression."

"Aggression?"

"Yes. You will not forget that we have not recognized your conquest of Ethiopia. Americans do not understand you about that."

His eyebrows were bunched dangerously. "Ethiopia?"

"Yes."

He agreed that the international situation would be much improved if the United States government would acknowledge the empire created by the conquest of Ethiopia. Why was this not done?

I asked him why it should be done.

"What," I insisted, "is the best possible Italian case for American recognition of Ethiopia? The critics of Italian aggression have had their say—and, above all, the Communists and the radicals. They have had a vast influence on the public opinion of my country. There have been only the feeblest arguments in your behalf. I have yet to read one convincing argument why the United States should recognize the conquest of Ethiopia. Therefore, Your Excellency, this is for me—and perhaps for you—an opportunity. I would like to get the best case for Ethiopian recognition directly from the fountainhead. You are the fountainhead. Better than any one else you are able to tell the American people, through Liberty, why we should recognize what you have done. Will you personally, here and now, give me the case?"

I expected an immediate answer, even if an immediate refusal, but it did not come. Instead Mussolini leaned gravely forward, hands again flat on the desk, eyes looking downward. He brooded solemnly above a monumental inkstand carved like a fountain. Then his glances roved from side to side as if he were looking for something he had lost. He turned to my conductor and asked that my remarks be repeated in French. Then for a long time he looked down thoughtfully at a floor strewn with papers he had passed on and then thrown over his shoulder.

Meanwhile I was considering whether I should explain to him about the reciprocal trade agreements made by Secretary Hull in South America and the various treaties by which the government of the United States is pledged not to recognize territory acquired through aggression. Still Mussolini thought, in what was becoming to me a painful silence. Suddenly he asked in a low tense voice:

"Can it be changed?"

I replied that a good case might change it; I repeated there had never been a good case presented. I reminded him how for years the United States had refused to recognize the technical existence of the

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Soviet government. I told him how, in the face of considerable criticism, Liberty had published in 1932 an article by Leon Trotsky telling why he felt the United States should recognize Russia. In spite of great popular sentiment against Bolshevism—a sentiment even stronger today—recognition of Russia came within a year. The fairness of the American people, I assured him, would insure an unbiased hearing of whatever he had to say to Americans about why they should recognize the Ethiopian empire.

"And you are willing to help in that?"

I felt that I was. I did not believe we, as a people, could condone aggression. But there was no reason why we should not recognize a fact that was as plain as the nose on the face of the world. I have never felt very proud of the self-righteous attitude Americans are at times inclined to assume in attempting to pose as moral censors on the world. Like the Pharisees in the New Testament, we have been known to stand on the street corners of the earth and pray aloud: "We thank God that we are not as other nations are." My fear has sometimes been that such a course would isolate us, leave us friendless among the powerful nations of the earth, and throw us into the arms of Soviet Russia. But none of this seemed to Mussolini to figure in the situation.

"Do you really think," he asked, "that there is a Communist danger in the United States?"

I told him that I did not; they were noisy but few.

"*Bolsheviki de salon*," he laughed. "That agrees with my information. America will never go Communist. The American likes his own way of life too much. He likes to have the things he owns. No, there is no danger of Communism in the United States."

"But perhaps," I argued, "being highly articulate, this minority is still able to influence public opinion already opposed to your Ethiopian situation."

"Then I will tell you why the United States should recognize the Ethiopian empire," said Mussolini. "The answer is that we did it for civilization. We did it for the same reason that you yourselves fought the Civil War and for the same reason that you had to conquer the American Indian."

A dozen questions leaped to my mind. The parallel of our American Civil War was certainly obscure, and it was difficult to think of Haile Selassie and Sitting Bull in the same breath. But I was not here to argue or protest too much, but to get at the truth as nearly as I could. Was there a better case for Ethiopia than we had heard?

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you would tell some of your plans for developing Ethiopia."

"Our plans for Ethiopia? Willingly. First, medicine. A great man once said that the greatest excuse for colonization is medicine. We are improving the condition of the people in every way. The people themselves are tranquil now. They are pleased with the new order of government that we have instituted and the improvements that we are putting under way."

"Could you tell me about some of those improvements?"

"I am delighted to tell you about those improvements. First, as I said, a vigorous campaign to improve the health of the people. We have declared war on tuberculosis, on cancer, on syphilis, and already we are winning that war."

There was a look of simple pleasure in Mussolini's eyes as he told of these things. No question that he was proud to tell of them. In Africa he was repeating as a successful system, in part at least, what he had done in Italy itself. At great personal sacrifice Mussolini made himself into an ardent and persistent sportsman in order to inspire the Italian people to be strong. He forced himself to be constantly seen in public in airplanes, riding horses dangerously, skiing, participating in all manly exercises. To save Italy he had set up those three famous commissions on cancer, tuberculosis, and malaria, commissions which greatly improved the vital statistics of his country. Mussolini had made Italy clean. Now he meant to do the same thing for Ethiopia. As he talked of this, he dropped all his showmanship for one second and spoke with naïve, boyish pride.

"Any other improvements?" I prodded.

"Many more. Roads, for example. We shall build more and more roads through Ethiopia, open up the country, make it thrive. We are building hospitals and sending good doctors there, and nurses. And we are opening up schools."

"You are going to educate the Ethiopians?" I asked, not without surprise. I knew of great colonial undertakings where the natives, millions of them, were not allowed to learn anything, not to read, not to write, nor even to learn a skilled trade. Mussolini smiled confidently.

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"Yes," he said, "that is the way we Italians are going to develop Ethiopia. We know the British colonization methods, but we think our way is better. We are going to educate the people. Not too much, you understand—a little reading, a little writing, and above all an education for their work that will make them more effective, make them happier and more civilized. That is the case America should consider when it thinks of Ethiopia."

I saw that he would say no more about that, so my next question was:

"Do you think there will be peace or war in Europe?"

He smiled enigmatically. There was no question that Mussolini felt certain tonight that he was master of the European situation. I may not quote him on these matters; but there is no reason why I should not give my impressions of what he felt. I know he believed that with the exit of Anthony Eden from the international stage the way to peace was open. From the Italian point of view, it all came at the right moment. The Spanish rebels had captured Teruel. General Franco could carry on alone. Italian troops could therefore be recalled from Spain, and Mussolini was eager to get them home. A few aviators might be left behind, but fifty thousand or more Italian soldiers—the guess at figures is mine alone—could be withdrawn.

That withdrawal would be something England would appreciate. Now, with Neville Chamberlain in power, Great Britain was willing to face what everybody was calling "the realities of the situation." I know, too, Mussolini felt that nothing in the world should be allowed to interfere with the success of the projected Anglo-Italian diplomatic conversations. But "nothing in the world" is a large phrase. Did Mussolini know then that Hitler meant to march into Austria? One can only speculate. Certainly Mussolini felt that a new axis of England and Italy must be made effective as a counterbalance against that other axis he had perfected so adroitly.

Did Hitler fear that new axis, and so march? One can only speculate. At least, I know the sincerity with which Mussolini felt he was facing the "realities" of his own situation that night, and I know, too, the profound desire the man professed for general European peace. I believed in his sincerity as to that. Emil Ludwig once told me that he considered Mussolini an adventurer greatly enjoying the part he was playing and having no real love for Italy. The biographer contrasted this view of Mussolini with Hitler, whom he considered a sincere fanatic and therefore the more dangerous.

I do not agree with Ludwig's estimate, in spite of his much larger opportunities for observation. No sensible man who heard Mussolini as I heard him that night could question the sincerity with which Mussolini that night desired peace. Above all things he wanted that peace for the welfare of the Italian people.

ITALY was not, as people believed, a warlike nation bent on conquest. We hear of the great Italian army, but we seldom hear of the great civic improvements that have been made in the country. The work of the Balilla, the organization for the training of youth, has been given a distorted emphasis in the United States. We have been told too much about the military training of the boys. That is only one part of the picture. The cultural and physical training of Italian youth is an inspiring story. So is the work of the Dopolavoro, which is enriching the lives of millions of citizens. I knew of much of this and could agree. That morning I had visited the imposing Forum Mussolini, a great athletic project on the outskirts of Rome, a series of stadia not as yet completed, a noble effort to raise the physical standard of a people.

That great military machine which Mussolini has created is one of his problems—how to absorb those men back into civil life. That was what he wanted to do. Great armies would not have to be kept in service. Once the Ethiopian question had been settled with England and other countries, and once France had stabilized herself, disarmament could come. But when the time did come to talk of disarmament, the real difficulty would come with submarines and airplanes.

Mussolini spoke not of the glory but of the horror of war. This gave me the opportunity to tell him of an American friend who had a picture of Mussolini hanging in her library. It was not a conventional photograph of Il Duce. Instead, it was a picture of a wounded soldier, a wasted, emaciated man on crutches—Benito Mussolini in 1918.

"Why does your friend have that picture of me on the wall?" he demanded.

"Because it gives her courage," I told him. "When she feels blue, she looks at that picture. You seem to be ready for the grave, and she recalls what you made of your life after that illness. She does not approve of dictators, but nevertheless your picture gives her courage—courage to carry on. Perhaps if you were to carry on for peace. Your Excellency, with that same spirit of determination, you could bring peace to the world."

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Mussolini came toward me solemnly and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"You were right in what you said. Your people do not understand me. I wish that they could know that I do want peace."

"I would be glad to tell them that you said so."

"You would be doing a service to me and to Italy if you would tell them that. Tell them they cannot, from a long distance off, understand the full nature of our problems. Tell them I am not a dictator. Tell them I want peace—only peace."

His voice was deep, his eyes were bright and candid and, I felt, true. He meant what he said in that moment. I kept telling myself so as I walked out into the Roman night.

FULTON OURSLER born in Baltimore 1893-1952 (pen-name Anthony Abbot) Reporter and music critic on Baltimore American 1910-16. Began writing short stories and novels. Editor of Liberty Magazine 1931-42. A senior editor of Readers Digest since 1944. Member of Authors League and of Society for Psychic Research, and others. Published 7 detective novels under his pen-name and has written 6 plays for NY production. Since 1947 is author of the weekly radio-play The Greatest Story Ever Told, a dramatization of the Bible.

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