

A CHILL IN THE AIR

An Italian War Diary 1939–1940

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OCTOBER 7TH

The “peace offensive” has reached its climax. Yesterday I listened to Hitler’s speech: the quiet beginning, the hysterical paroxysm of anger during the abuse of Poland, the actor’s sob in the throat at the end, describing the horrors of war, following upon peace proposals that cannot be accepted because – apart from everything else – they would not lead to peace.

The first comments of the Italian press are favourable. Hitler's speech is given in full under the headlines, "Hitler reaffirms the German people's will to peace", and the leading article of one important paper begins: "The Führer's has really been a great speech, not only for its convincing clarity but for the sense of deep humanity by which his words are inspired," and concludes with an admonition to the democracies not to allow the few days which will be granted them for "a return to reality" to pass in vain. Private opinion fluctuates, most people intensely disliking the tone of Hitler's speech, but many maintaining that his proposals could and should be considered.

OCTOBER 12TH

Meanwhile an unpleasant feature of the last few weeks – a consequence of the outspoken discontent and false rumours in September – has been a recrudescence of bullying, by the more zealous members of the militia. Yesterday in Florence I found every shop window plastered with little notices, pasted there in the night: *Il Duce ha sempre ragione*;^{*} *Il Duce sa tutto, vede tutto, – e ricorda*

* The Duce is always right.

tutto.* More directly menacing were other notices in which the *squadristi* declared themselves to be as young, as vigilant, and as ruthless as ever: “The truncheon is not put away for good. Let those who have a bad conscience remember this!” These threats have already, in a considerable number of cases, been carried out. Nor is this the only result of local zeal. The president of a provincial corporation told me that a few days ago he received official instructions saying: “It is inconceivable that a good Fascist should wear the badge of the *Azione Cattolica*. If other forms of persuasion fail, there is always the truncheon.” The OVRA too is said to have been very active again, especially in the pursuit of Communists and Masons. In fact the Bogey-Man is with us again – (wearing the face, to Fascists, of a Communist, a Mason or a Jew; to Catholics, of Hitler or Stalin; to Liberals, of a member of the Gestapo or OVRA). And the chief Bogey-Man, Himmler, arrived in Milan yesterday.

OCTOBER 22ND

Yesterday, coming up to Florence in the train, an absurd but characteristic conversation. Having put

* The Duce knows everything, sees everything, and remembers everything.

my papers on an unoccupied seat beside me, I moved them as an officer came into the carriage, and in so doing dropped one of them. He bent down to pick it up, and saw its title: *L'Osservatore Romano*. (This is the Vatican paper, whose subscriptions have gone up to four times their original number in the last few weeks, owing to the fact that it is the only paper that prints full and impartial foreign news, although with a strong Catholic bias.) As he gave it back to me he said (using the *voi* which is now declared correct by the régime, instead of the “effeminate” and “foreign” *lei*), “*Ve lo rendo, sebbene sia nemico di questo giornale.*”^{*} I thanked him, without answering his comment. He was a Colonial officer, carefully modelled on Balbo – the same pointed beard and swaggering, hearty manner. After a minute he leaned across to me. “*Scusate, Signora*, but why do you read this paper?” – “Out of curiosity,” I replied, “like other papers.” The officer pursed his lips. “But it contains poison – a very subtle poison.” An elderly man, sitting in the corner, had put down his paper and was following the conversation with interest. He wore the Fascist badge, but had an intelligent, kindly face. “Sometimes,” he now helpfully intervened, with a smile, “a small drop of poison may

^{*} I'll give it back, although I'm an enemy of this paper.

act as an inoculation!" But the officer would have none of it. "I dare say. But at this moment, when the whole nation should be *un blocco solo*,* such influences are dangerous – very dangerous, *signora*." And with a last disapproving glance, he went out of the carriage.

I glanced at my other companion, and met his eye; we both shrugged slightly. "He's a *Consigliere Nazionale*," he remarked. Then, reassuringly and paternally, "I shouldn't pay too much attention to what he said." I did not answer, and began to read my book. When I looked up again, my companion had moved a little nearer. "I read it, too," he remarked in a lower voice, jerking his head towards the offending paper, "but in private. If I may offer you some advice, Signora, read it at home!" I nodded. Then I could not resist saying "*C'era di peggio!*"† and, lifting the innocuous *Nazione*, which lay on top of my other papers, showed him the title of the *Daily Telegraph*. He drew back sharply, and returned to his corner seat. There was a long silence; I folded up my papers. Then suddenly, from his corner, my companion spoke again – and in quite a different voice. "A great deal of that poison is needed," he said grimly. I felt very much tempted to reply, but (stories of *agents provocateurs*

* One single block.

† There was something worse!

returning to my mind) did not; he felt, no doubt, equally uncertain of me. And so, with alternate glances of mutual suspicion and sympathy, but still in silence, we finished our journey.