Chapter 13
BENITO MUSSOLINI
Interviewed by Emil Ludwig
Talks with Mussolini, 1933

Sir Charles Petrie, the British diplomat, gave and interesting assessment of Mussolini, which echoes Ludwig's perception: ‘The impression which he used to make on me as I crossed the floor of that vast room in the Palazzo Venezia was not the dictator with forbidding manner and beetling brows, but the cultured man-of-the-world quite ready to indulge in the give-and-take of ordinary conversation. In particular, he had a winning smile which used to light up his face in a way reminiscent of that of de Valera and Neville Chamberlain. I never found that he made any attempt to "lay down the law", though whenever I spoke with him I was always conscious of his wide knowledge...Perhaps Mussolini's most marked characteristic, just as his eyes were his most physical one, was his extraordinary ability to dissociate in any question the important from the trivial. He went to the heart of a problem in a way that had the effect of clearing the brains of those with whom he was conversing, and of reducing apparently insuperable difficulties to their right proportions...If one were asked what was Mussolini's most prominent attribute, the answer must be his encyclopedic knowledge — knowledge of affairs, of books and, until his last years, of his own fellow-countrymen. At the height of his power he is reputed to have said that the difference between the Führer and himself was that whereas he was the first-class head of a second-rate nation, Hitler was the second-rate head of a first-class nation. Had Mussolinin kept this rather more prominently before him, many things might have been different.'

The conversations in this book ‘took place in the Palazzo di Venezia at Rome, being held almost daily for an hour at a time between March 23 and April 4, 1932, both dates inclusive'. The two men talked in Italian, Ludwig then wrote up each interview straight away in German, and Mussolini checked the German manuscript. ‘No secretary was present to take notes,' explained Ludwig, ‘no demand was made for the revision of a manuscript report; it was all a matter of personal confidence.'

‘You are perpetually hinting at the danger that may result from the lack of an opposition. This danger would be actual if we lived in quiet times. But to-day the opposition is embodied in the problems that have to be solved, in the moral and economic problems that perpetually press for solution. These suffice to prevent a ruler from going to sleep! Furthermore, I create an opposition within myself!'

‘I seem to be listening to Lord Byron,' said I.

‘I often read both Byron and Leopardi. Then, when I have had enough of human beings, I go for a voyage. If I could do whatever I liked, I should always be at sea. When that is impossible, I content myself with animals. Their mental life approximates to that of man, and yet they don't want to get anything out of him: horses, dogs, and my favourite the cat. Or else I watch wild animals. They embody the elemental forces of nature!'

This avowal seemed to me so misanthropical that I asked Mussolini whether he thought a ruler needed to be inspired rather with contempt for mankind than with kindly feelings.

‘On the contrary,' he said with emphasis. ‘One needs ninety-nine per cent of kindliness and only one per cent contempt.'

The statement, from him, surprised me, and to make sure that I was not misunderstanding him I asked him once more: ‘You really think, then, that your fellow human beings deserve sympathy rather than contempt?'

He regarded me with the inscrutable expression which is so common to him and said softly:

‘More sympathy, more compassion; much more compassion.'

This utterance reminded me that, when reading Mussolini's speeches, I had more than once been surprised by what seemed to me a parade of altruism. Why should he, the condottiere, refer with so much insistence to the interests of the community? I was led to ask him:

‘Again and again , in exceedingly well-turned phrases, you have declared an increase of your own personality to be your aim in

life, saying, "I want to make my existence a masterpiece," or, "I want to make my life dramatically effective." Sometimes you have quoted Nietzsch's motto, "Live dangerously!" How, then, can a man with so proud a nature write: "My chief aim is to promote the public interest"? Is there not a contradiction here?'

He was unmoved.

‘I see no contradiction,' he replied. ‘It is perfectly logical. The interest of the community is a dramatic affair. By serving it, threfore, I multiply my own life.'

I was taken aback and could find no effective repartee, but I quoted to him his own words: ‘"I have always had an altruistic outlook on life."'

‘Unquestionably,' said he. ‘No one can cut himself adrift from mankind. There you have something concrete – the humanity of the race from whose loins I sprang.'

‘The Latin race,' I interrupted ‘that includes the French.'

‘I have already declared, in the course of one of these conversations, that there is no such thing as a pure race! The belief that there is, is an illusion of the mind, a feeling. But does it exist any the less for that?'

‘If so,' said I, ‘a man could choose a race for himself.'

‘Certainly.'

‘Well, I have chosen the Mediterranean, and here I have a formidable ally in Nietzsche.'

The name aroused an association in his mind and, speaking in German, he quoted the proudest of Nietzsche's utterances: ‘Do I seem to strive for happiness? I strive on behalf of my work!'

I pointed out that this idea really derived from Goethe, and I asked him whether he shared Goethe's notion that character is moulded by the blows of fate.

He nodded assent: ‘It is to the crises I have had to pass through and to the difficulties I have had to surmount that I owe what I am. Because of that, one must always stake one's all.'

‘Therewith you run the risk of destroying yourself and your work by taking needless risks.'

‘Life has its price,' he answered confidently. ‘You cannot live without risk. This very day I went into battle once more.'

‘If you were consistent in that view, you would not seek to protect yourself,' I said.

‘I don't,' he rejoined.

‘What!' I exclaimed, ‘Do you not recognize that again and again some one of your enemies risks his own life in the hope of depriving you of yours?'

‘Oh, I understand what you are driving at. I know, too, the rumours that are current. It is said that I am watched over by a thousand policemen, and that every night I sleep in some new place. Yet in actual fact I sleep night after night in the Villa Torlonia, and I drive or ride whenever and whithersoever fancy seizes me. If I were to be continually thinking about my own safety, I should feel humiliated.

‘Tell me,' I said in conclusion, ‘what part does the desire for fame play in your life? Is not that desire the strongest motive for a ruler? Is not fame the only way of escaping death? Has not fame been your goal since you were a boy? Has not all your work

been animated by the desire for fame?

Mussolini was imperturbable.

‘Fame did not loom before me in boyhood,' he said; ‘and I do not agree with you that the desire for fame is the strongest of motives. In this respect you are right are right, that it is some consolation to feel that one will not wholly die. Never has my work been exclusively guided by the wish for fame. Immortality is the hallmark of fame.' He made a sweeping gesture towards a remote and uncontrollable future, and added:

‘But that comes – afterwards.'