1
La cavallina matta

When Edda Mussolini was a girl, leading a band of small children across the wastelands behind Milan's tall apartment blocks, she was known as '*la cavallina matta*', the mad little horse. Wilful, bold, contemptuous of authority, the name stayed with her. Even in the years when Fascism was servile to the Mussolini family, when to speak of any of its members disparagingly was to invite police investigation, and Edda herself had become an awkward, capricious young woman, Italians repeated it to themselves, quietly. As they saw it, Edda was never tamed, and her restless, strident nature made her feared. But they did not forget her. 'I never felt liked,' she said, towards the end of her life. 'I had no ability to please. I lacked constancy in all things.'

Though Edda was born, on 1 September 1910, in Forlì, a small town in Emilia Romagna, the nearby village of Predappio was the true birthplace of the Mussolinis, 'our Galilee,' as Fascist historians would later say, 'because it was there that began our new history.' Both her parents were born in Predappio: Mussolini in 1883, thirteen years after Rome became the capital of the newly united Italy, and Rachele Guidi in 1890. Emilia Romagna, one of the poorer regions, was a land of labourers and share-croppers beholden to the Vatican and distant feudal landowners. Its villages, in the foothills of the Romagnole Apennines, were reached by narrow, rocky tracks, lined with poplars. The local Sangiovese wine, produced in hundreds of small vineyards along the valleys, was too strong and too acidic to travel. It was a grey, empty landscape, with crumbling medieval fortresses perched on crops of rocks, and cypresses, which gave it a look of Tuscany, but poorer, harsher, its colours paler. Between the fields of maize ran the River Rabbi, fast

flowing in winter, a series of little pools in summer, where the village children played. Few of them could read or write.

Emilia Romagna had given its men to Garibaldi's cause, and even after unification they were litigious, conspiratorial, impatient for reform and anti-clerical - '*mangiapreti sovversivi*', subversive eaters of priests. Almost every family had a father or husband who had spent time in prison, protective custody or under house arrest. Superstition was fed by village witches. Rome lay far to the south, a place of incompetence and alien rule. When the harvests failed, people starved. By the year of Edda's birth, many hundreds of thousands of Romagnoli had emigrated to France and Austria, or further afield, to America, and sad little families could be seen trudging down the roads and through the villages on their way to the coast.

Edda's grandfather, Alessandro, was the local blacksmith, a hard man with a long face and a thick moustache, who in later life drank heavily. He was almost entirely self-taught, with a burning passion for international anarchism, and his pugnacious and brawling ways had taken him on several occasions to prison, while his own father Luigi had served time in a papal jail, when Emilia Romagna was still part of the Papal states. As Mussolini would later say, having served several prison sentences himself, he came

Rosa and Alessandro

from impeccable rebellious stock, and every self-respecting revolutionary needed to have been to jail. In time, Alessandro became a councillor and deputy mayor; he also formed a village band, with wind instruments.

Edda's grandmother, Rosa Maltoni, was a teacher, a thrifty, pious woman with a square face and deep-set eyes, but determined enough as a girl to force her parents to send her, the only one of their six daughters, to school. In 1877, having qualified as an elementary school teacher, she was posted to Predappio's sister village, Dovia, where the schoolroom, in a dilapidated but handsome palazzo, was so dark that it was hard to read a book. A small vineyard yielded a few grapes and there were three fig trees. Dinner was often nothing more than soup, wild radishes and bread. Rosa's mother gathered wild greens and boiled them with a few drops of oil.

Rosa with Mussolini as a baby

Rosa gave birth to Mussolini in 1883; then came Arnaldo in 1885, a pale, timorous boy who took after his mother, and Edvige, born in 1888. In the rooms above the schoolhouse, the boys shared an iron bed. They spoke to each other in dialect as the Italian national language, born with unification, was still unfamiliar to most Romagnoli, and they walked to school barefoot, carrying their shoes. Sitting on the steps of the foundry on summer

evenings, Alessandro read Marx and Bakunin to his sons. In a hole in the cellar, he had buried a large red revolutionary flag. All three children had the same square faces, strong jaws and heavy eyebrows.

Moody, obstinate and averse to any kind of discipline, Mussolini grew a little wilder every year, confrontational with other children, sneering with teachers. He never cried. When he was nine, his father despaired and took him to a Church-run school in Faenza, hoping that it might subdue him. Mussolini felt humiliated and hated it all: the sermons, the rules, the monks, the rich boys who ate better food at separate tables in the refectory. Teachers noted that he liked to make the other boys afraid of him.

At the beginning of his second year, he was expelled for stabbing a boy with a penknife, having first been shut up in the dark with the dogs and told that his soul was as black as coal. But the Salesian fathers took him back to finish the year: what had become clear to them was that for all his surliness and disobedience, Mussolini was an unusually clever boy with a prodigious memory. From here, he moved to the College Giosuè Carducci in Forlimpopoli. He seemed, so his contemporaries later claimed, to thrive on drama, violent spectacles, epic sagas. He played the cornet and cultivated a small moustache. In January 1901, Verdi, the last great hero of the *Risorgimento*, died, and it was telling that it was Mussolini who was invited to deliver a memorial speech to the college: he was discovering oratory, the power to dazzle an audience, using rhythmic cadences, unexpected metaphors and a passionate delivery, and he took the occasion to attack Italy's governing class. At eighteen – a dishevelled, unshaven, violent young man, not very tall, with piercing black eyes, a pale face and a floppy black cravat – he left school with a teaching diploma but few friends. On the blackboard he had allegedly written: 'The most noble calling of man is to be a leader.'

His first posting, as a substitute teacher, was to Pieve di Saliceto, 100 kilometres from Predappio. He was too self-obsessed, too distracted and too prone to lose his temper to be a good teacher and he liked neither the children nor the noise they made. At the end of the year, his post was not renewed, but that may have been in part because of an affair with the wife of an absent soldier. Sex, first encountered with a prostitute when he was sixteen, obsessed him;

he liked it quick and casual, a conquest without demands. He raided Edvige's pocket money to pay for it.

In 1902, borrowing a little money from his mother, he decided to try his luck in Switzerland, where he wandered, aimless and often hungry, taking jobs here and there as a waiter, a builder, an errand boy and a butcher's assistant. One day he almost strangled an English tourist when trying to snatch her picnic. He began to explore the art of propaganda, and wrote fiery articles, finding that journalism suited his exhortatory style. At one Socialist conference he met Angelica Balabanoff, the daughter of a rich Ukrainian landowner, five years his senior, who spoke six languages and was friends with many of Europe's revolutionary leaders.

Almost all émigrés were poor and eccentrically dressed, but what struck Balabanoff about Mussolini was how dirty and obviously starving he was, his black hair thinning, his eyes heavily shadowed. She thought that once he had learnt more, he would surely lose his overwhelming ego. She liked him, for all his boastful, blasphemous bravado, and recommended him for the post of secretary to a Socialist organisation in Trento and editor of its paper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore*. In the stormy, rivalrous world of European left-wing politics, where every faction had its own clique, Mussolini's brand of heated radicalism found many listeners. He liked to think of himself as '*vivere pericolosamente*', living dangerously.

Mussolini had dodged military service in Italy. He was now considered a deserter and was sentenced in absentia to a year in prison. But when, in 1904, King Victor Emanuel declared an amnesty in honour of his new son Umberto, Mussolini was able to return home. He reported voluntarily to the military and was serving with the 10th Bersaglieri regiment in Verona – with surprising docility and *esprit de corps* – when his mother Rosa fell ill with what was probably typhus. She seemed to be recovering, but then pneumonia set in and she died. His mother's death upset Mussolini profoundly; for the rest of his life he would refer to it as the saddest of his days.

Vociferous against both the monarchy and the Church, Mussolini brawled and railed his way through the next few years, moving between Italy and Switzerland, writing, teaching, calling for war between the classes, supporting strikes, writing angry articles for small papers. Violence, he announced, was 'useful, fruitful and

decisive'; the Vatican 'a cadaver' and a 'gang of robbers'; and the political leaders in Rome 'asses, liars, microbes'. The authorities kept a close eye on him, and, when he went too far, put him in jail. He was permanently crumpled, his clothes threadbare, his language abusive, and in his spare time he read Nietzsche and Sorel, played the violin and wrote short stories. He seldom left home without a knife.

Mussolini was proving an excellent journalist. His style was spare, his tone angry, his imagination wild, and he had a talent for concision and analysis. Nor was he without irony and humour. He returned to Forlì, where Alessandro, having been forced to give up the rooms above the schoolhouse in Predappio after Rosa's death, was now running Il Bersagliere, an inn near the railway station. His new companion was Anna Guidi, a widow left destitute with five daughters by her husband's early death. The youngest of these was fifteen-year-old Rachele. Like Rosa, Rachele had fought hard to get an education and had eventually been allowed to attend Rosa's school. Family lore has it that on one of the occasions when Mussolini had taken his mother's place in the schoolroom, he had noticed the very blonde little girl, with her almost turquoise eyes and delicate hands, who kept asking questions. He had seen her again during a visit home from Switzerland, been drawn to her pale ringlets and pretty, bold looks, and had asked her to wait for him: he would return, he said, to marry her.

Rachele waited. The courtship was brief, an importunate suitor was seen off, and, in the face of considerable disapproval from her family, Mussolini carried Rachele off to Forlì. One of the many stories that have attached themselves to the family myth is that Mussolini, impatient with her parents' reluctance, produced a revolver and threatened to kill them all unless they let Rachele go. She was already pregnant. There was no talk of marriage. In the heavily Catholic, moralistic Italy of the early 1900s, it was a bold move on her part. '*Il matto*', the mad man, as the locals called him, had no income and very few prospects. The couple took with them four sheets, four plates and six knives, spoons and forks, and walked the five kilometres to Forlì in silence, through driving rain. Later, Rachele said that she had been afraid only of the storm and the snakes.

It was January 1910. Mussolini and Rachele's first home, two scarcely furnished rooms in the shabby Palazzo Merenda looking out over a dark courtyard, was reached by steep stairs. It was also full of fleas. They found fruit boxes to use as a table and chairs. Since Mussolini tended to cut himself, Rachele shaved him. He had just found a job as secretary to Forlì's Socialist Party and editor of their paper, *La Lotta di Classe*. Calling himself '*il vero eretico*', the true heretic, he wrote many of the articles himself, on freemasonry, the Vatican, political assassination, anything that caught his eye, while also editing, correcting proofs and laying out the pages. He was ruthless with his red pencil. His own articles combined revolutionary fervour and Socialist politics, and though many dismissed him as a mere political agitator, he was read and listened to. At meetings, he stirred audiences with his hotchpotch of Hegel, Sorel and the Bolsheviks, fusing seemingly unconnected theories into electrifying diatribes, inviting their chanted replies. His voice veered between raucous and warm, bullying and cajoling, playing with his listeners, offering them something to believe in. In his scruffy Bohemian clothes, talking very rapidly, he was impossible to ignore.

Seven and a half months after their arrival in Forlì, on 1 September 1910, Edda was born. Mussolini had already decided that she would be a girl and the name Edda may have come from the fashionable *Hedda Gabler*. On her birth certificate, her father's name was given as Mussolini, but her mother's remained blank since they were not married. Mussolini's first act, the family later boasted, was to spend half his salary on a handsome wooden cradle. The baby had clearly inherited her father's genes: she was quick and demanding and her father was proud of his lively daughter, taking her everywhere with him: to the office, to bars, to his interminable political meetings. Edda's birth seemed to unleash a burst of frenetic energy in him. For her part, Rachele, never given to physical affection, found her daughter difficult. Edda was too restless, too fearless; once she learnt to walk there was no peace. When at night the baby refused to sleep, Mussolini played his violin to her, loudly and erratically. After himself, Edda was the person in the family who counted most. 'Within me,' he noted, 'I recognise no one superior to myself.'

Alessandro's health had been failing. He had a stroke, became

paralysed and died aged fifty-six. He had almost nothing material to leave his children, but as Mussolini wrote later, 'of spiritual possessions, he left us treasure: ideas'. Rachele's mother Anna, 'soft as a sweet cake', came to live in the two rooms in Forlì. Mussolini was often drunk when he came home late. After Rachele threatened to leave him, taking Edda with her, he promised to stop; and in this he largely kept his word. He slept very little. After the cafés closed for the night, he sat crouched at the kitchen table, writing by the light of a candle. They were often short of food. In later years, when his fortunes changed, he would speak of Edda as '*la figlia della povertà*', the daughter of poverty.

In late September 1911, when Edda was just over a year old, Giovanni Giolitti's government, without any formal declaration of war, dispatched troops to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica – which later became Libya – ostensibly to protect Italian interests, but in reality to replace Turkey as the occupier. There were protests all over Italy, some of them violent. Among those demonstrating was a young republican called Pietro Nenni, and during an attack on a train carrying troops to the coast, Mussolini and Nenni were arrested together and charged with inciting rebellion.

At their trial on 18 November, the two men were given heavy fines and sentenced to a year in prison, later reduced on appeal to five and a half months. They spent their days companionably, playing cards and discussing politics. Mussolini studied German. He missed his daughter and his violin. He had borrowed money to give to Rachele, but it was confiscated and life at home in the Palazzo Merenda was bleak. To provide for the family, Mussolini was writing articles for the Socialist *La Lotta di Classe*. It was said later that Edda, just walking, was coached by her mother to hug and cling on to her father, while he slipped the folded pages of his columns into the pocket of her apron to be smuggled out of the prison. Rachele developed excema, and Mussolini advised her to shave her head.

By 1912, the Liberal Giolitti had been in power for the best part of the last twenty years, at the head of coalitions which sought to preserve the existing social order and isolate the extremes of both left and right. The Italian Socialist Party, which had hitherto refrained from opposing Giolitti, was now splintering into three sections: the revolutionaries or maximalists, who favoured militant action; the reformists, who called for universal suffrage and

an overhaul of parliament; and the syndicalists, who wanted radical change to the economy. Mussolini's instincts lay firmly with the revolutionaries. Emerging from prison on 12 March 1912 as something of a local hero, and given a banquet by Forlì's Socialists, he attended the 13th National Congress of the Socialist Party, held in Reggio Emilia in the early summer. From the platform, he railed against parliamentary democracy and demanded the expulsion from the party of the soft and accommodating reformists. Italy's parliamentarians, he declared, were slothful, corrupt, insincere charlatans, an opinion which resonated strongly with the discontent of the times. The reformists were successfully ousted and departed to form a new, more moderate wing. Mussolini, with a heavy beard and threadbare coat, was now regarded as a coming star, a 'transcendent intellectual'.

The new revolutionary executive of the Socialist Party had voted to sack Claudio Treves, the reformist editor of the party's prestigious paper, *Avanti*. After some hesitation, they invited Mussolini to take his place. It meant moving to Milan. Mussolini went on ahead, leaving Rachele and Edda to follow.

On taking over *Avanti*, Mussolini had insisted that Angelica Balabanoff join the paper as his assistant. Whether or not they were lovers, she taught him a great deal; in his more generous moments, Mussolini would say that she had been his 'true political teacher' and that she continued to steer his thoughts. One cold and windy day in February 1913, Rachele appeared unannounced in the office with Edda in her arms. They were soaking wet and shivering. Rachele's hair had not yet fully grown back and she looked like a bedraggled child. Balabanoff later described the sudden arrival of this 'very humble-looking woman' with an 'undernourished, poorly dressed little girl', in clothes so wet they looked transparent. Mussolini insisted that they return to Forlì, but Rachele, whose will behind the soft blonde hair was also of iron, refused. They found a flat on the fourth floor of 19 Via Castel Morrone, near the railway lines, sharing it with her mother Anna. Balabanoff lived in the same street, at number 9.

The flat had a lavatory, but no bath. Mussolini seldom washed and Rachele went to the public baths, taking Edda with her and trying to wash out the nits in her hair. Their building, dark and

crumbling, had three immense stone staircases and a series of courtyards in which Edda played. There were very few toys. The eccentrics and misfits who occupied the dingy flats included a young woman preparing to become a nun and an impoverished count. A small boy, very taken by the bold Edda, set up a pulley with a basket between their neighbouring flats in which he sent her presents.

Mussolini, Rachele and Edda

Edda was becoming increasingly wild and unruly, and Rachele chased her round the flat with a broom, delivering slaps. To keep the peace, Mussolini took the little girl to his office, where she played on the floor under the desk, and where he began to teach her letters, written in chalk on the tiles. With Rachele so much in the background, rumours circulated that Edda was in fact Balabanoff's daughter, born when Mussolini was still living in Switzerland. When the story reached Rachele and she repeated it to Mussolini, his reply was scathing. Balabanoff, he said, did indeed have a 'generous and noble soul'; but should he ever find himself on a desert island with just her and an ape for company, 'I would choose the ape'. Balabanoff was a mesmerising speaker, strong and warm, but she had a long body, short legs and a slight

hunchback. One of her rivals noted waspishly that she had 'very little familiarity with water'.

Mussolini had discovered that, along with his political charisma, his grubby forcefulness was very attractive to women. Not long after arriving in Milan, he had been introduced to Leda Rafanelli, wife of a Zionist Socialist, an Arabist and novelist of some fame. Rafanelli had a salon and preached free love. They met on Tuesday afternoons to read Nietzsche together and exchanged infatuated, overwrought letters, in one of which he told her: 'I need to be someone, do you understand me? . . . I need to rise high.' Later, Rafanelli would write him into one of her novels, as a handsome though rather brutal lover, with an insatiable craving for admiration.

A more lastingly important woman in his life was Margherita Sarfatti, who came from a rich Venetian Jewish family and was married, with two sons, to a lawyer. Already somewhat matronly in appearance, she had a round face, abundant auburn hair and striking grey-green eyes. She was elegant, worldly and dressed expensively; she was also highly cultured and very clever and Mussolini liked clever women. Sarfatti, too, had a salon, and after initial hesitation over his rudeness and uncouth appearance, she began to introduce him to the luminaries who gathered in her house in the fashionable Corso Vittorio. Like her, the guests were soon intrigued; most noted Mussolini's extraordinarily piercing eyes and unsmiling stare.

Rachele was never invited to these gatherings. But she was taking pleasure in her relative new prosperity; she now employed a maid and could send Edda to school in shoes. Mussolini had bought a bowler hat and took to frequenting the cafés in Milan's Galleria, where journalists and artists held court. Sometimes Edda went with him. Milan, home to many literary and cultural journals and to crusading left-wing writers and editors, had prided itself since unification on its reformist, politically enquiring spirit.

Edda was now three and had started violin lessons. When she played she looked exactly like her father, pursing her lips, jutting out her jaw, her cheeks prominent in her strong face. Sometimes they played together. To win her often absent father's attention, she found ways to challenge him. When one day she refused to take some medicine, he slapped her and she slapped him back. What she would remember later was the day when he realised that she

was terrified of frogs. Mussolini went to the marshes, got hold of a frog and put it into her hands insisting that she keep it there. No one, he told her, and especially no Mussolini, was allowed to indulge in fear. And nor was she permitted to cry.

What Edda would also remember were the duels. How real they were, how potentially lethal, is impossible to know, for they too occupy a place in the family lore. Mussolini was said to have a special shirt, with a single sleeve, that of his duelling arm cut away. Sometimes he came home with wounds from a gun or a sword, none of them very serious. He fought his predecessor on *Avanti*, Claudio Treves, calling him a 'nauseating' rabbit and a 'little old woman', and returned from that duel with his head covered in blood and a piece of his ear torn away. His style was not to parry and thrust, but rather to make spectacular, impulsive lunges. Fought surreptitiously in Milan's parks, in clearings and cemeteries, none of the duels ended with a death. Coming home victorious, he asked Rachele to make spaghetti instead of the usual tagliatelle. Spaghetti, for Edda, became the food of duels. Rachele, who hoarded Mussolini's possessions, insisted on keeping his bloody shirts and even the pieces of shot from his wounds.

Political discord throughout Italy was taking the form of strikes, demonstrations and brawls in the streets. Writing most of *Avanti* himself, Mussolini breathed revolutionary fire into the Socialist movement and increased the paper's circulation at an impressive rate. The name 'Duce' had been murmured before, perhaps with irony. Now it began to stick. At the Socialists' congress in Ancona in April 1914, Mussolini's irrepressible energy strengthened his political position. Disaffected Italians were looking for a leader.

Then, on 28 June, Archduke Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo. Austria declared war on Serbia, which had ties to Russia, Britain and France. Italy's position was complicated. An ally of Austria for the past thirty-two years and with Germany a member of the Triple Alliance, it also had links of friendship with France and Britain. However, Austria held the '*terre irredente*' of the Italian-speaking city of Trento and the partly Italian city of Trieste, with their large ethnic Italian population, and their recovery was regarded by many as the unfinished business of the *Risorgimento*. Courted by both sides, Italy, for the moment, chose neutrality, a

decision passionately endorsed by Mussolini and the Socialists, along with the King, most of the army, much of Parliament, and the new Pope Benedict XV, who refused to sanction this war as 'just'.

Not everyone shared their views. Nationalists and futurists were strident in their calls for action, along with a number of intellectuals who hoped that war would sweep away a governing class many now saw as dysfunctional and bring in its wake a fairer and healthier Italy. Listening to them, Mussolini's views began to change. He began signing his articles '*L'homme qui cherche*', the man who seeks. By September he was starting to refer to neutrality as backward-looking and feeble. Did Italy, he asked, really want to remain 'an inert spectator of this huge drama'? Within pacifist Socialist circles there was fury at his rejection of the party line. There were more duels; the adulation soon turned into hatred. Ousted from *Avanti*, Mussolini chafed for an outlet for his new-found militarism and found it when backers helped him set up a new paper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, in which he agitated fiercely for war and social revolution. Neutrality, he told his sister Edvige, 'will make us all die of hunger and shame'. When he went to visit newspaper vendors to see how the paper was selling, he took Edda with him. 'Every new creation, every step forward,' he told a rally, 'is marked by blood.' He now kept a revolver in his desk and employed two bodyguards. Around this time, Rachele paid a visit to their home in Predappio, and she was hounded out of the village as the wife of a traitor to socialism.

Mussolini's switch had already alienated Balabanoff, who remained deeply opposed to war and contemptuous of his 'infamous' betrayal of neutrality. Years later, she wrote that without her, he would have remained 'an insignificant *arriviste* . . . a Sunday socialist'; and that he had become nothing but a cowardly, hypocritical, vulgar, devious braggart and a Judas. Edda was not sorry to see her go. She had hated the way that in the office Balabanoff kept stroking her tenderly and whispering, '*Che bella bambina, che bella bambina*.'

By now Mussolini had found a new mistress. Ida Irene Dalser was Austro-Hungarian, with a dimpled chin and thick glossy hair, and by 1914 she was running an 'Oriental salon of Hygiene and Beauty' in Milan. She was also somewhat unstable. She had met Mussolini briefly while they were both in Trento, but she now came

to the offices of *Il Popolo d'Italia* to place an advertisement for her business. They became lovers. In the tumultuous disarray of his life, Mussolini found her calm and orderly. When he needed more money for *Il Popolo*, Ida sold her flat and her beauty salon and gave him the proceeds. But the relationship soon started to sour and Ida took to turning up in his office and making scenes. He found the money to install her in a small flat. She called herself Signora Mussolini.

As Rachele described it later, one day when Mussolini was away in Genoa trying to raise money for his campaign there was a knock at the door. Outside was 'an ugly signora, much older than me, lean and cadaverous and making flamboyant gestures'. The visitor refused to give her name but, prowling around the room, began to question Rachele about her husband. Turning to Edda, she asked whether her father loved her mother. On Mussolini's return, Rachele asked him who the woman was. An Austrian, he told her, a hysteric, with whom he had had a brief affair while in Trento, and who was now persecuting him. Edda was becoming accustomed to the jealous rows; but she was also learning the lesson that great men could not be expected to be faithful.

Bit by bit, many of the Italians who had initially supported neutrality were turning towards intervention. From balconies and in crowded city squares, the poet, pamphleteer, novelist and strutting chaser of women and awards Gabriele D'Annunzio preached war, the 'beauty of triumphant Italy' and the grandeur of *la patria,* the Italian homeland. War was the future, a necessary evil to awaken the somnolent and disorderly Italians. In April 1915, Italy had been promised not only Trieste and the Trentino, but also South Tyrol, part of Dalmatia, a bit of Albania and islands in the east Adriatic in return for joining the Allies, and had signed a secret treaty in London. In return, Italy declared war on Austria, even if in parliament the interventionists remained in the minority. There had been ample time to observe the carnage already caused by machine guns, and Italy's leaders knew perfectly well that the country lacked guns and good officers; but these thoughts were put aside.

In September 1914, Mussolini left his family to join the Bersaglieri on the front line at Monte Nero, by now thirty-two and a little old for war. 'It is for this,' he wrote in one of his first articles sent home to *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 'that we are fighting today in Europe: a war that is at the same time a great revolution.'

2

A country ungoverned and ungovernable

Mussolini had been an unexpectedly diligent soldier back in 1905. He now asked to be considered for officer training but, unlike his brother Arnaldo, was turned down, on account of his unpredictable political views. Instead, he was offered a place at regimental headquarters, producing the Bersagliere war diary, but this he refused, saying – more family lore – that he was there not to write but to fight. He wrote his own diary, in his lively, discursive style, and sent it back to Milan to be published in *Il Popolo*. 'I live for tomorrow,' he wrote. 'I live for after tomorrow. The struggles that will come with the end of the war will be magnificent.'

The Italian army had confidently expected to defeat the Austrians in the valley of the Isonzo in Friuli, after which it intended to press ahead and take Trieste. But the war was not turning out as D'Annunzio had predicted – glorious and heroic – nor, as the futurist F. T. Marinetti preached, 'the world's only hygiene', but rather messy and murderous, the front line advancing and retreating, leaving in its wake piles of corpses. Eleven battles were fought on the Isonzo, the elderly and inflexible General Cadorna sending waves of men to be mown down by machine guns. By late November 1915, 110,000 Italian men were dead. Rats, fleas, hunger and the cold tormented the survivors.

When the first air raids sounded in Milan, Rachele, Edda and Anna took shelter in the basement. One day, two policemen knocked on the door. There had been a fire in a small hotel not far away and a Signora Mussolini was believed to have caused it. By the time Rachele had established that the culprit was Ida Dalser, and that she had just given birth to a boy she called Benito Albino, she decided to act. Typhus was spreading through the army at

Isonzo and Mussolini, who had caught it, had been sent to a hospital at Cividale del Friuli. Taking Edda with her, Rachele set out across the plains, past military convoys and lines of wounded men.

At three o'clock on a November afternoon, in a little side room off the ward and in the presence of the local mayor and witnesses, Mussolini and Rachele were married. The groom's eyes were yellow from the typhus and he was able only to whisper. He had not shaved for several days and wore a woolly beret. For a moment, enjoying her advantage, Rachele held back her '*Si*'. The ceremony lasted five minutes. A nun produced a slice of panettone and a glass of wine. Edda, at four and a half, was now legitimate; she also had an illegitimate half-brother, Benito Albino. As Rachele said, the marriage might never have taken place at all had it not been for '*quella maniaca*'.

Mussolini was back at the front by Christmas Day, reporting piteously that all he had to eat was five chestnuts. 'Snow, cold, infinite boredom,' he wrote. 'Order, counterorder, disorder.' Then he was given leave and returned to Milan. Ida was still pursuing him and, backed into a corner, he set her up in a room in the Hotel Gran Bretagna and, before a notary, acknowledged Benito Albino as his son. By the time he returned to the front, to the ice and cold of the mountains at Carnia, Rachele herself was pregnant. On 16 March 1916, Mussolini was promoted to corporal. His letters to Edda, full of pressed flowers and leaves, were more those of a lover than a father. Rachele used them to teach the little girl to improve her reading.

To provide nourishment for Rachele when the baby came, Anna had acquired a cockerel. They fattened it up in the courtyard and Edda grew fond of the bird, stroking it, feeding it, taking it for walks with a string tied to its leg. One day she was kept away from the flat. When she was allowed back in, the cockerel had vanished. In its place was a baby, a boy called Vittorio. The silence around certain family events was a significant feature of Mussolini family life. Later, Edda would write about the confusion she felt and her acute rage at the loss of her pet.

Almost a year later, in February 1917, Mussolini was behind the lines in the rocky valley of the Caruso when the barrels of a mortar overheated and exploded. Five men standing near him were killed, and the explosion shattered Mussolini's thigh and left his body

riddled with shrapnel. He was put on to a stretcher and taken to a field hospital. One of his first visitors was Sarfatti who described his '42 wounds . . . like St Sebastian's arrows'. With the help of a friend, Rachele got hold of a Red Cross uniform and infiltrated herself into the hospital. By chance she was there when Ida appeared, carrying Benito Albino. Seeing her rival Ida began to shout, crying that Mussolini had seduced and abandoned her and that *she* was his real wife. While the soldiers in the nearby beds looked on and laughed, Rachele lost her temper and leapt at Ida, pulling her hair and pummelling her until Mussolini, powerless under his bandages, called for the orderlies to come and separate the two women. Ida fled.

In April, Mussolini was transferred to a hospital in Milan for a series of operations. For a while it looked as if his leg would have to be amputated. He lay in bed, studying Russian and English, boasting of his stoicism in the face of intolerable pain. He was discharged in August on crutches and spent a few days with Edda and Rachele on Lago Maggiore, fishing. When he returned to his desk at *Il Popolo d'Italia*, having been decorated with a bronze medal, Ida turned up outside with their son, shouting up at the windows: 'Wretch, pig, assassin, traitor.' She had cards printed in the name of Signora Mussolini. The police became involved and Ida was exiled from Milan as a threat to the Mussolinis and a danger to public order, and sent to Casette in the south, where she was interned as an 'enemy subject'. No longer his 'little Ida', she was out of Mussolini's life, at least for a while.

Edda, enraged by the attention paid to her brother Vittorio, had become even wilder and more irascible, terrorising the other small children in the building. When gypsies set up camp on the nearby wasteland, she was enchanted by their gold rings, many-coloured dresses and stories of life on the road, and begged them, as she wrote later, to take her with them. They refused, telling her she should stay with her parents. One day, having exasperated Rachele beyond endurance, her mother suggested that she go to live with the gypsies. Since she now had permission, the little girl hurried off to the camp only to find her new friends gone. Too proud and stubborn to go home – qualities she said were later her salvation – she hung around the empty wasteland long after dark, until rescued by her grandmother.

Edda was constantly covered in cuts and bruises and her minor acts of disobedience were becoming more spiteful. One day, seeing her grandmother nursing Vittorio on her lap, she suddenly pulled Anna's chair from under her, tipping her on to the floor. Her grandmother beat her. Rachele, hearing the noise, beat her again. Many years later, Edda would say to Vittorio, referring to the difference in their ages: 'You were lucky. You were saved six years of beatings.'

A photograph of Edda taken at this time shows a surly, sturdy child with a helmet of thick hair and rage in her eyes, sitting on a bench, her feet dangling. The fact that she had become a little despot delighted her father. He indulged her capriciousness and would have kept her at home to teach her himself, had Rachele not insisted on her going to school. Remembering this time, Edda would later say: 'I was barefoot, wild and hungry . . . a miserable child.'

The 12th Battle of the Isonzo at Caporetto, between 24 October and 7 November 1917, when the Austrian and German troops were armed with gas and flame-throwers, had resulted in the collapse of the Italian forces. Some three hundred thousand men had been killed or wounded in the last two years; many thousands of others had deserted or been taken prisoner. One of the dead was Margherita Sarfatti's eldest son, Roberto. By the time the war ended in 1918, Italy was a country of widows and orphans. The Italian army had been among the worst led and worst equipped, front-line soldiers were abandoned by their officers, and at one point reduced to cutting through barbed wire with garden secateurs. The government refused to send food parcels to those taken prisoner, on the grounds that it would only encourage others to surrender. Most of the fighting men had been stoical, but when they faltered their punishments were barbaric. Caporetto became a symbol for all that had been rotten at the heart of Italy's war.

The working men who now returned were angry, conscious of their sacrificed comrades, and they had seen what violence could achieve. They wanted a reward for all that they had suffered. Many of the Socialists among them had opposed the war in the first place. Promised jobs, land and better conditions in the factories by parliament, they received nothing, while those who had stayed behind and not gone to war had acquired skills and prospered. Back at home, living in a country they no longer felt a part of,

these veterans talked of betrayal and dreamt of action. A sense of exclusion and a desire for some kind of justice, feeding on envy and resentment, spread across Italy, and it became a perfect breeding ground for the strikes that started in Umbria, Emilio Romagna, Tuscany and Lombardy. In the north, workers occupied the factories; in the south they took the land. Trains and trams were halted; bakers, nurses, electricians, teachers and printers went on strike. Production plummeted, inflation rose and there were shortages. The value of the lira fell to one quarter of what it was worth in 1914. Any increase in wages was quickly eaten up by surging costs.

The returning soldiers were not alone in feeling betrayed. The middle classes, those who had given their men as officers, felt squeezed by the '*pescecani*', the sharks who had grown rich on war production, by the government which had allowed them to do so, and by the 'Bolsheviks', the agitators arising from below. In April 1919, fights broke out between striking Socialists and nationalists in Milan; the offices of *Avanti* were set on fire and four people died. A bomb went off in a theatre, killing and injuring many more. The government, fearing that any response might set off a Socialist revolution, did nothing. Eight-year-old Edda, who was often with Mussolini, witnessed many street fights; sometimes she helped patch up the casualties.

In Mussolini's absence, sales of *Il Popolo d'Italia* had fallen, and he now launched a drive for money and investors. He was at a low ebb, despised by many Socialists, ignored by the right, distrusted by the moderates. In the pages of his paper he warned that the returning men would want more than empty promises. He spoke of a '*trincerocrazia*', a higher aristocracy of the trenches, a clan of men forged on the field of battle who would create a new Italy. To deny these men recognition for their sacrifices, he said, would be to invite the social fabric of Italy to 'splinter into smithereens'.

In April 1918, Rachele gave birth to a second son, Bruno. Mussolini, away at the time trying to raise money in Genoa, had instructed her to delay the birth until he got home, and when he arrived to find a new baby in the crib he scolded her. For a day or so, he tried to make himself useful, but Rachele soon chased him away from the kitchen, complaining of his extravagance and the mess he made. In the summer, they moved into a larger, more

comfortable flat in Via Foro Bonaparte, not far from the Castello Sforzesco; it had a proper sitting room and long corridors down which Edda held sliding competitions with the local children. Arnaldo, Mussolini's brother and now his right-hand man at *Il Popolo d'Italia,* found a flat nearby. The returning soldiers brought the Spanish influenza with them and, while still breastfeeding Bruno, Rachele fell ill. Bruno developed diphtheria, then bronchial pneumonia and nearly died. He was a pretty baby, but had become scrawny and fragile, with an enormous head.

What Mussolini had understood, but which many politicians in Rome had failed to, was that once peace came, Italy would be profoundly split between those who had fought in the war and those who had not. Tellingly, he changed the subtitle of *Il Popolo d'Italia* from 'socialist daily' to 'daily of combatants and producers'. The moment had come to step on to the political stage. On 23 March 1919, before a group of followers, many of them Arditi, the veteran shock troops, carrying daggers and staves and wearing black shirts under their military jackets, he launched a new movement, the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento, in Milan's Piazza San Sepolcro. He had planned to stage the rally in a theatre, but since the turnout was so low he held it in a meeting room instead.

The men, plus a few women, who came included futurists and nationalists, disaffected pre-war socialists, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists, and their numbers would later be greatly inflated by all those who wished they had been 'Fascists of the first hour'. Somewhat fuzzy in its goals, which ranged from a radical overhaul of Parliament to the confiscation of the property accumulated by war profiteers, the Fasci were to be not a party but a movement, an 'anti-party', free of the corruption and inertia of Roman politics. Mussolini pronounced the word '*Fascisti*' as '*fassisti*', the Romagnolo way.

Italy, as one of the victors of the war, expected the territorial gains it had been promised in the secret treaty of London in 1915. At Versailles in June 1919, the Italians found that the American President Woodrow Wilson did not intend to honour much of the treaty. The whole Dalmatian coast went to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, while Italy received Trentino, Venezia Giulia, Istria, Trieste and several islands along the eastern Adriatic, but was denied expanded colonies. It was, in D'Annunzio's much