

An Evening at Home

By Michael Moorcock

Of course she had not changed. She was still my angel. Only Mussolini gave off that almost supernatural wave of animal magnetism. My eyes as full as my heart, I bowed, embracing her hand, kissing it. "My dear Mrs Cornelius."

"You orlways was a smarmy bugger, Ivan?" She was amiable as ever. "Still, I must admit it's good ter see a familiar face. Got yerself somefink official an' steady, I see, workin' fer th' corporation. I don't blame yer. I'm done for in ther talkies it's me accent, so I took up with ther Baron over there," she indicated a stooped shadow in a wig, "'oo was good enough ter 'elp me back on me feet, but I'm thinkin' of goin' inter cabaret, maybe in Berlin. It's orl wide open fer English artistes, I'm told. 'Ave yer met -- " She turned to address the enormous beaming German, who was clearly enraptured by her, an infatuated zeppelin.

"'Ermann, is it?"

He bowed, clicked his heels and shook hands again. He did not recollect me. I supposed we all looked the same to him in our black uniforms. Although not quite as tall as he seemed from his photographs, Herman Goering was considerably wider. He spoke now in confident, but not very good English.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, professor. We have heard much of your achievements in Germany."

To my discomfort I was beginning to realise that I had attracted the attention of various governments' secret services. The newspaper pictures had done exactly what Mussolini had said they would do -- whet the curiosity of the other powers and put them off balance. Slipping easily into German I made small talk with the man. He was grateful and commented on the excellence of my vocabulary. I told him that I had worked with Germans in the Ukraine, during the Civil War, when we were all trying to get rid of the Reds. This interested him. He had assumed I was an American, he said. "Naturalised," I told him, "but before then I had direct experience of the Bolshevik terror."

"You're bein' borin' boys," chided Mrs Cornelius, smiling up at the bulky emissary, who was there, I would learn, directly on Hitler's orders. As Mussolini had done, Goering's job was to attempt a rapprochement between the Nazis and the Pope. It was as well I did not know this at the time or I would have spoken my mind. One of the worst things Mussolini and Hitler did was to reach accomodation with the Catholics who did as much to sabotage their efforts as they helped. "You tol' me, 'Ermann, you woz lookin' fer a party ter go ter afterwards."

The man was well-bred and immediately dropped the subject of politics, saying only to me: "We must talk again. We have a great respect for the scientific tradition in Germany."

Jokingly, I said there were a few too many Jews running the scientific establishments there for my taste. He hesitated at this, doubtless because he was here on a diplomatic mission, then laughed heartily. "Very good!" He said. "Very good, professor! I think you and I will get on well. You must come and see us in Germany once the Nazi experiment is thoroughly under way. Great things are happening. The Duce's inspiration, Adolf Hitler's genius and German know-how will transform the country and, in time, the entire world."

Although his expression was usually fixed in a jovial smile, he seemed unable to relax. Mrs Cornelius nudged him. "What does it take ter make a kraut let his hair down?" she asked me, winking. Again he was hugely apologetic. He was here on official business and clearly found it difficult to move from one mode to the other. "Wot abart this party, then?" She dropped her voice. "Yore just the chap, Ivan. 'Erman wants ter know if there's anywhere they do the 'okey-cokey rahnd 'ere," and she put a finger to her perfect nose.

I was confused by all these turns of events and pulled my card from my inside pocket, scribbling an address on the blank side. It was where I hoped to meet Mandy Butter later. "I might be there myself," I said. "Mention my name." I winked back. At which point, to my absolute horror, a figure in a uniform which would have seemed garish on the stage of the Vienna Comic Opera, taller than Captain Goering by almost a head but threatening to rival him in corpulence, moving with what I can only describe as a kind of monumental mince, cracked its jackboots together, offered the Fascist salute and regarded me through rheumy, affectionate eyes which failed to hide the signs of a thousand disappointments. He uttered a wide, ghastly grin. "Good evening, Herr Captain," he said to Goering, whose expression of distaste was undisguised, "Maxim, dear. Did I hear somebody talk about a party?"

Mrs Cornelius betrayed us then. She was a far more generous soul than I, but she did not know the newcomer. I think, too, she did not wish to travel alone in a taxi with Goering. "I'm sure we're orl welcome," she said. "Yore wiv the German party, too, aren't yer? We'll go tergevver!"

In spite of the horrible embarrassment at meeting Seryozha again, and in such unexpected circumstances, I was curious as to how he had managed to come back to Italy after only a few months -- and as part of the unofficial German delegation! When Mrs Cornelius led Captain Goering off to meet an old friend who, she said, was with the British Embassy in Rome, I was left with my slobbering ex-dancer who, of course, wanted to open his heart to me there and then. His boyfriend had sent him here, he said, to keep an eye on things. "Eric's a really top-ranking Nazi, you know. A bit of a brute, really, but he has his points. Well, they're all totally rivalrous, darling. It's worse than the ballet! Nobody trusts anybody else and Eric's afraid what he calls the 'eggheads' are going behind his back. He wanted to come to this thing, but they wouldn't let him. They let him send me instead. I'm his aide. I'm his eyes and ears, he said. They had to agree to let me come. It's at his expense, anyway. He even had this uniform made for me. He's the one I met in Bolivia. It's all secret, of course. I hear you're doing well in the government now. There are no private jobs worth having any more, are there? It's the Crash."

At that moment, Ferucci, who had no love for me, but knew that I was a particular protégé of the Duce, came over to murmur that our chief would like to see me as soon as I could slip away. This was unusual, but I made it my business to drop Seryozha, telling him I would see him later at the party.

I got to the Duce's side as soon as possible. It was clear he was making ready to leave. He was shaking hands with Vich, the elegant Spanish military attache, and seemed on excellent terms. He still refused to smile in public, but there was a hint of a curve to his firm, ruthless mouth and when he saw me he was clearly pleased. He did not want me to meet the Spaniard, however. He almost pushed him away as he came to talk to me. He was in a particularly good mood. I think the admiration of the German contingent was far greater than he had realised. He had a confident, ebullient manner which was not always present these days. "Professor," he said "we have some urgent business to discuss."

I was mystified. He took me by the arm, as was his way, and began to lead me

back towards the private room, divided from the main hall by a velvet curtain. Here all the guards were squadristi and sprang to attention when we entered. I was particularly proud to be treated in this way and I knew that many of the other Ministers there that night would have been envious. This was a public confirmation of my status. Here was exotic food as well as drink. It was where the Duce took his special guests, either to honour them or to speak with them privately. "That was Colonel Vich," he said. "He has been authorised to approach us concerning our project." The Duce explained that the Spanish had seen the sensational reports in the papers of our Land Leviathan. I think their own Secret Service had also done some research. Clearly they had had no luck in stealing our plans and so they had approached the Duce directly, to ask if these machines were in production and if it was possible to buy a number for their own uses in North Africa. "This is good news! It will help finance our own production.

"I, of course, told him we could not possibly discuss such things. I did not even admit that we had a 'secret weapon'. Have you said anything tonight?"

"You have sworn me to secrecy, my Duce," I said. "It is enough." Mussolini accepted this and approved of my loyalty. However, he argued, if we could convince them to give one hundred percent backing to our project, without their knowing it, we should be able to begin all the sooner. We need to show them a couple of small plans, a simple picture or two. "Have you something -- a little something to whet their appetites?"

Still rather baffled by this change of attitude, I was silent when he asked me to send him round he needed later. Then we could talk about it thing in the morning.

I was in fact breathless with astonishment. Until now only the Duce and myself had been privy to a dream to renew Italy through my inventions. Now there was talk of Spanish involvement. The Duce himself had sworn me to secrecy, yet for reasons of his own he was now prepared to admit that we were building a war ziggurat. I understood that his lightning mind would sometimes understand situations and make long-ranging decisions, rather as a first-rate chess-player sees a whole range of moves open up for him, and had learned to trust him, as we all did, but it was impossible for me to guess the reason for this sudden change of policy. I hoped he would eventually illuminate me.

Meanwhile, I stammered something about not having the keys to my document chest. He gestured expansively. He would drive me round to my house in his own car. There I could pick up my keys, he would take me to the Ministry, I could find the plans and his chauffeur could take them on directly to the Spanish Consulate. This was typical of Mussolini's decisions at that time. He was in a hurry to put all this in hand instantly. That was his nature. Moreover, I received the impression he had a further liason that night, which was why he did not wish to delegate. The Duce liked to get things done immediately or not at all.

I stammered something. He accepted this as my acquiescence. He clapped me on the shoulder and, sensing my confusion, promised we would not sell out Italy for a handful of Spanish doubloons. Certain specifications could be held back and only a cruder version of the giant tank made for them. He was thinking of naming it after me. Imagine what this would mean! Hundreds of Peters' Land Leviathans guarding the frontiers of the free world against the combined Red and Yellow threat! My name would be permanently added to the glorious language of war.

Of course, I was all for a speedier move towards full production of my machines, but I had come to think of the entire project as something shared

only between myself and my leader. It was still difficult to readjust to this new development.

"And, of course, there will be material benefits," said Mussolini. "Part of the Spanish money should rightfully go to you."

I did not work for money, I reminded him. I had no more interest in it than did he. We visionaries had a common cause.

This was the closest I ever came to rebuking my Chief and he accepted it.

Together we left the hall by the special exit. The Duce's car was waiting, its engine running. As we passed the main entrance of the Villa, I saw a man and a woman leaving. I did not recognise the woman but I was surprised I had not seen the man at the reception. Now I had a notion who Mrs Cornelius had referred to earlier. It was the tall, slender Englishman, not in uniform on this occasion, who had once been romantically involved with Mrs Cornelius and whom I knew as Major Nye. I was beginning to realise I had attended a reception far more important than I had originally assumed. Several crucial conversations had taken place that night. Several political decisions were made which would, ultimately, change the face of Europe forever.

The chauffeur beside him, Mussolini himself had taken the wheel. I was by now used to his wild, extravagant driving. Tonight, he seemed determined to shake off the fleet of secret service cars which immediately began to follow us and indeed he was successful with most of them. It was a game he liked to entertain himself with sometimes in those days, though gradually all these pleasures were denied him. He hardly picked up the violin now, whereas, like Sherlock Holmes, he had once played it every single evening for his own solace and to allow his mind to range over all his many problems.

At first he knew exactly where he was going. "Professor, I was thinking about your house. You need a bigger one. That place is far too cramped for you. It was never intended to be lived in."

Although he had never spoken of it before, I remembered that this was where he had once met and made love to the woman who, in my case, preferred to satisfy her lusts on the leather furniture at the Villa Valentino. I was still uneasy about the situation, even though Margherita had not been invited tonight, in spite of her attempting to be my escorte. I had learned enough not to take unexpected guests to state receptions. It could prove embarrassing for all. It was becoming obvious, in fact, that my association with La Scarfatti had made me more enemies than friends. She was not liked by the old Fascists and her influence over the Chief was thought to be excessive. I was still surprised, however, that she had not been invited, since Hermann Goering was one of her personal friends and usually Mussolini liked to pepper his receptions with such contacts. It had been clear from her recent mood that things were not going her way. I believe Ferucci was a sworn enemy. Some old affair between them, I guessed.

In spite of the little house being only half a mile from the reception, it took us over an hour to get there. So obsessed had Mussolini become with outrunning his own guards that he was thoroughly lost. He did not have a native's knowledge of Rome and her maze of streets. Eventually, he told me, most of the old, mediaeval mess would be torn down and replaced with monumental modern buildings in the new Fascist style. He would show me the model that had been built a year or two ago. Some of the building plans had been put back, because of problems with land ownership and so on, but the new understanding with the Vatican City was going to help that situation. He would leave a Rome behind him which would make the Rome of ancient times seem only a

prefiguring for the glories to come.

He laughed at his own audacity and sometimes, as now, it seemed there were at least two Mussolinis -- one was the boyish, self--mocking idealist who had come out of poverty in the poorest region of Italy to save his people -- the other was the sophisticated modern politician, forced through historical realities to take hard, painful decisions on behalf of his people. But few visionaries make good politicians and few good politicians have much in the way of original vision. That is the unextinguishable irony of the world. When visionaries are allowed to dominate daily politics, their talents are wasted, their decisions are a disaster. Yet occasionally there springs a man of vision who also has the intelligence and will to overcome such a discrepancy and Mussolini, of course, was just such a man. Nothing which happened between us subsequently has ever given me cause to change that view.

Unfortunately, such giants also attract pygmies, who elevate themselves by association, and it is these pygmies, scarcely noticed by anyone, who eventually drag the giants down. Only Franco took the example of his colleagues and, like a good army officer, selected the best men for the work he had in Spain, bringing his country a stability it had not known for centuries. He had a much better background. Though both Mussolini and Hitler had both served in the trenches with distinction, they had never been considered officer material. Blood will out, as they say.

My Chief tugged suddenly on the wheel of the huge car, making the tyres squeal and judder. Arnaldo the chauffeur uttered a kind of gulping scream. The whole vast chassis swung in an arc as Mussolini applied the brake.

With the engine still running he grinned, panting, at me. I was still recovering from the experience and had not noticed, until the Chief pointed it out, that we had arrived at my house. I asked the Duce if he would care to come in and rest but he refused. I think there were memories he did not wish to revive at that time. He said he would wait in the car and smoke a cigarette. He asked me if I had a match.

The evening had been a confusing one for me and I planned to help myself to a quick sniff of cocaine (of which the Duce rather prudishly disapproved) and be able to continue in better mood. As I walked along the little crazy-paving path, I thought I saw two figures through the window. I opened the door and went in quietly. There was a man standing with his back to me. Slowly he was turning one of the pictures I had placed facing the wall. He adjusted it and stepped away from it. I saw that several other pictures had been turned, all of a similar style. I did not demand to know what the man was doing because I thought I recognised the set of his shoulder.

When however I coughed and he looked back rather wanly to see who it was I did not immediately recognise his face. One of the eyes was closed shut, badly bruised. The nose had been broken. The mouth was split and scabbed and most of the front teeth were missing. I felt sick. The single large brown eye regarded me with the expression of a dying horse. I knew it was Fiorello.

"The pictures," he said. "They're mine. Don't you like them?"

I would not have hurt his feelings for worlds. This was the man who had done most to help me reach my present eminence. "I love them," I said, "I was afraid the sun would get to them. I know nothing of oils. My God, Fiorello, were you in a crash?"

"You might say that." With a sigh he flung himself into an armchair, wincing. "A fall from grace, maybe. I'm not the golden boy I was a few short weeks ago, Max, as you probably know."

All I knew was that his plane had been found but that he had been missing. I told him this. I said how worried I had been.

I was half-crazy with distraction, aware the whole time that the Duce himself was waiting in the car. I could not find my office keys. As I went towards the bedroom to look for them, Mandy came out. She seemed surprised to see me. "Oh, Max," she said. "I'm not sure you want to get involved in this."

"Involved?" I still had my momentum. I was still searching for my keys. "I'm delighted that Fiorello is safe. I have something to do that will take less than an hour and then I will be back."

"Fiorello isn't safe," she said. "At least, not that safe."

"I can't find my keys," I said. "Have you seen them?"

She suggested I look in the box on my dressing table. Sometimes I put them there.

"What do you mean?" I asked. There they were, in the box! I snatched them up. "Not safe? He's here, with us!"

"I wasn't sure how you'd take it," she said.

"Take what? Listen, my darling, I have a car waiting. It is very important that I leave immediately. Take what?"

"Fiorello's on the run," she said. "He was caught coming back from Switzerland. He never made it to his plane. They kidnapped him. Beat him up. One of them was De Vecchi, the Education Minister!"

I agreed it was terrible, but was glad he was safe now. When I turned to leave, Fiorello was standing in the doorway, his lopsided, hideous face looking like something you would find in a charnal house, scarcely human at all. "I don't expect you to help," he said. "I was trying to get Laura to safety. She's all right now. She's in Austria I'm sure." He shrugged and glanced away. "Bloody commy."

"You helped a communist?" I asked disbelievingly. Suddenly the enormity of the situation struck me. My legs lost their power to hold me. I sat down on the couch. Outside, with his motor running, was the supreme Fascist. Inside, a supreme traitor to Fascism. Should they meet, I would be irredeemably compromised. But there was nothing I could do, save dash back out to the car and hope Mandy had solved the problem by the time I returned. I began to give up any idea of going on to the private party.

"He'll be gone when you get back," Mandy promised.

I willed strength into my legs, staggered to the door and reached for the handle. As I did so a key turned in the lock and it began to open. My legs threatened to fold at the knees again and I fell back, expecting to see my Duce himself.

But it was Margherita Sarfatti, an affectionate Fury in yellow and black silk. "Darling, I couldn't wait to see you! I've been longing for you. You must tell me everything that happened tonight."

I tried to speak, but no words came. I attempted to shove my way past her, but she pushed me back into the room, pausing with a look of almost comic outrage when she saw that there were others standing there.

Slowly she absorbed the scene. She looked from me to Mandy to Fiorello. Her breathing seemed to grow more rapid, almost an animal snorting, as if a dragon fired up its venom. And then she screamed.

"There's nothing between us, honestly," said Mandy. "I think maybe we all need a drink and a sit down."

I was close to screaming myself. Had the Duce seen Margherita come in? If so, would he draw any particular conclusions? It was, after all, her house. Mussolini would come to investigate and find me harbouring a traitor while keeping a liason with his mistress.

"I really do have to leave," I said.

"How long has all this been going on?" Margherita wished to know. "Now I realise the depths of treachery you've plumbed! I helped you all! I gave you everything! My own blood I would have given you! And this is my repayment? I am nothing, eh? I don't even get an invitation to the little boys' parties any more. This will not be forgotten. Both of you I nurtured as a mother -- as a lioness her cubs. I taught you everything. I even made you characters in my book. I protected you. Both of you would be in prison if it were not for me. Yet, behind my back, you plot and scheme. Well, the Duce shall know of this!"

It was what, I will admit, I most feared at that moment.

As I tried to frame a reply which would buy me the time I needed, I heard a tap on the door. This was certain to be the Duce.

Not one of the million explanations which entered my head had the slightest ring of truth. I sighed and prepared myself for the inevitable.

But it was not Mussolini. A jolly gust of laughter announced the arrival of Hermann Goering, Mrs Cornelius and an extremely drunken Seryozha who was scarcely able to stand but stood between the other two with a look of depraved sentimentality on his face worthy of Kominski or one of the other great clowns of the old Kiev circus. "Why!" exclaimed the smiling German. "You're already ahead of us! The taxi driver was right, after all. I hope you haven't sniffed up all the 'snow', ha, ha, ha!"

I stood there open-mouthed. The vast captain waved my own card under my nose. A taxi-driver had read the wrong side.

"Ain't yer goin' ter let us in, Ive?" suggested Mrs Cornelius a little peevishly. "It's bleedin' freezin' art 'ere.'".

I stepped back.

Mrs Cornelius led the way into the little house. "'Ow sweet!"

Fiorella's ruined face expressed the comic distress of a Commedia horse. Mandy folded her arms in disapproval.

Goering flung himself in one of our comfortable armchairs. "Is all the fun

over? Who has the happy-powder?" His thickly-accented English was indecipherable to everyone but me. They ignored him. Mrs Cornelius handed her coat to Fiorello. "Gawd! What 'appened ter you? Somebody beat yer up?" Gracefully De Bazzanno took her coat and handed it to Mandy Butter who had by now recovered at least a patina of conventional hospitality. "Can I get you all a drink?" she wanted to know. "Camparis? Manhattans?"

"Fuck your Campari Manhattans," said Margherita Sarfatti, hurling herself onto the sofa. "Hello, Hermann, mein liebschen. How was the party?"

Mandy grasped at the only fact which had at last emerged for her. She looked steadily at me and said in a small voice as she poured the drinks. "Do I understand that you and Margherita have been having an affair?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Judas," said La Sarfatti absently. She was smiling at Goering and helping herself to a bar of chocolate which had been lying on the table. "Did you get that Lautrec I recommended?"

"Oh, Margherita! I am still a poor man, you know!" He asked again after the niece. I had begun to realise this creature was something of an addict. I felt sympathy for him, of course, but I have always said that if the drug begins to use you, that is when you should stop the drug. I was to learn later that his favourite drugs were narcotics, like morphine, which have a debilitating effect on the character as well as creating addiction. I have always warned young people off such drugs. The narcotics are a danger to society, robbing men and women of all will. Stimulants, however, like cocaine, have a completely different effect, creating dynamism and positive progress in society -- unless a narcotics user decides to use them. Then a very strange result occurs. Herman Goering, whom I last saw at Nurenberg, was a living example of that result. Fifteen years earlier, however, he was still not the slave to his addiction that he became. Ultimately, of course, Hitler had to renounce him.

I was still trying to reach the door. I had decided to say nothing further but to make my escape now, while attempting to redeem myself later. From outside, I heard an impatient toot.

Fiorello came up to me. "Max, I don't plan to involve you. But you can't realise what's going on. They beat me up -- squadristi thugs. I escaped. They were planning to kill me. They said so. De Vecchi's their boss. He really hates me. I don't think Mussolini understands. You know how much I admire him. If you could put in a word, perhaps, we could clear all this up. He doesn't mind as long as the communists are out of the country. I was simply getting rid of another one." His attempt to smile at me was unfortunate. I murmured that there was little I could do. I had no power and little real influence. I was a scientist, after all. Not one of the political people. I was sure if he threw himself on the Duce's mercy everything could be sorted out.

The horn sounded for the second time. The Duce would be furious by now. He had been impatient to begin with.

I thought of suggesting to Fiorello that he go personally and ask the Duce for clemency, since it seemed a convenient moment. By now Mandy had stopped pouring drinks and was placing tall red glasses into uncomprehending hands. "Do you mean to say," she continued firmly, settling herself on the couch between Goering and La Scarfatti, "that you and Max have been doing something behind my back?"

"And who is Max?" asked Goering agreeably.

Seryozha had found the gramophone and was winding it up. "What marvellous records," he said. "You can't find these in Berlin." He put on Home on the Range. I think it was Gene Autry's earliest recording. As the first bars began to play, Seryozha threw up discretely behind a chair. Goering smiled apologetically to his hostess. "He is not German," he explained. He leaned forward and whispered something to her. Mandy got up and went in to the bedroom.

The horn sounded for the third time. The beating of my heart suggested to me I could probably not live much longer.

Mandy came back in to the room with our cocaine and the apparatus for taking it.

It occurred to me to ask Fiorello if he knew the best way of getting into Switzerland.

Mandy, stone-faced, began to chop out a line of coke for everyone. As Seryozha fell to the floor, his face striking the carpet with a peculiar soft crunch, she incorporated his line into her own.

Fiorello was still beside me. I had begun to tell him that our leader was outside in the car and might be growing impatient when I felt pressure on the door handle. My first thought was to hang on to it, hold it tight and resist any further intrusions. My second was to begin weeping.

My third, as the door opened to admit a glowering Benito Mussolini, was to fall against the wall with a groan.

"That's awfully good of you," said Captain Goering, in his best English, "I can't tell you how much I've been in need," and bending forward over the marble table he put the little silver tube to his nose he inhaled his lines in a single bovine snort. He seemed to expand to twice his size, threatening to burst the walls of the room. He sat back in the couch. "I love my wife," he said. "I love her with all my soul."

Mussolini regarded the scene in disgusted silence.

"Caro!" cried Margherita Sarfatti, rising like a blustering pheasant from cover. "Caro mio! Thank God you are here!"

I looked for Fiorello. He had disappeared.

Where Fiorello had been standing a moment ago, there was Mussolini, hands on hips, a look of irritable disapproval on his features, his back pointedly to the others. He spoke quietly. "Are you ready?"

I saw my keys on the table, next to the line of coke Mandy had cut for me.

"Sorry if I'm breaking anything up," I said casually. "I was looking for my keys. Ah, there they are! Sorry I have to go. It was nice to meet your friends, Mandy."

Save for Goering, the others were all staring at the Duce. Ignoring the uncrowned Queen of Italy, Mussolini turned once to stare thoughtfully at an obliviously happy Captain Goering before leading the way back to the car in silence. I heard Margherita's wounded shriek behind us, but she did not come out.

We got into the car. The Duce shook his head. "What's Margherita doing with that Hun? I've been trying to keep them apart all week. Did you invite them?"

"Certainly not," I said. "My guess is that, thinking I would be away, she arranged to see him there. But who knows. She's a strange one. Maybe she can seduce him. He seems besotted with his wife. He says Mrs Cornelius reminds him of her. Surely Signora Sarfatti wouldn't attempt --"

"You don't know the half of it," said the Duce. "You want to be careful of her." An expression passed across his face which, in a lesser human being, I would have taken for terror.

As we drove towards the Ministry, Mussolini began to lecture me on the dangers of having anything to do with Germans. "They want to gobble us all up. And as for these Nazis -- it is a corruption of everything I have ever said or worked for! A mish-mash. That Goering is a degenerate. You saw for yourself. They're all vicious boy-buggering dopers and masochists. Everyone knows what they're like. They admit it openly. That bugger Rohm makes no secret of it. He's published his love letters to his catamites. They give our Fascism a bad name by associating themselves with us. Believe me, Max, Germany can never be anything but an enemy of Italy."

If only he had heeded his own judgement. But he was too good-natured, too trusting. And in the end he was abandoned by all, to swing upside down in a Milanese meat-market, one carcass amongst dozens. It is a tragedy which will be told over and over again down the ages, just as Julius Caesar and Caligula are told.

Mussolini's death was symbolic of the entire twentieth century.

And we wonder why our young people no longer understand their history!

This time the Duce came with me as I went to my office and found the plans we needed -- simplified drawings which would give nothing away.

He was extremely pleased with the idea of involving Spanish capital. (I think he had probably been worrying over fiscal matters recently. He was after all in charge of every aspect of the nation's running. While others slept soundly, Il Duce was up, pacing his lonely corridors, taking Alka Seltzer for his ulcers and going over the affairs of the day.) I had the distinct impression that my Land Leviathan was moving a little closer to reality. By the time I had gone into my office, found the appropriate plans and brought them out, he seemed in an ebullient mood again. I saluted and watched him drive away.

It was with a feeling of depression that I saw one of the secret service cars come out of the shadows to pick me up.

Reluctantly I got into the car. I could still not be sure if the Duce had absorbed the scene at my house or whether he would start to think about it later. I was certain, however, that Mandy Butter was in no doubt about what had been going on. It was with some misgivings that I anticipated returning home.

I doubted if my lady friend would bring a worldly, European attitude to the situation.