

# A Day Out Of The Ordinary

*by John Maneschi*

*John Maneschi was born in Milan, Italy, in 1932, the son of an Italian father and an Australian mother. He was brought up in Italy until the age of sixteen when the family moved to Australia, the first of many moves. He attended high school and university in Melbourne, where he graduated as an electrical engineer in 1955. He worked in England for some years, there meeting up with an Australian girlfriend from university days. They were married in Milan in 1958, then moved to the United States for fifteen years, where their three children were born. They*

*then lived in Belgium for three years, before returning to Australia, first to Canberra, then to Sydney. He retired in 1988 and he and his wife built a house at Batemans Bay, on the NSW South Coast. He maintains close links with both his Italian and Australian relatives. He is a member of the Italian Institute of Culture and of Co.As.It. in Sydney, and of the Amici d'Italia association in Batemans Bay. His childhood wartime memories, under the title of "Giovinezza", have just been published by the Ginninderra Press (ACT).*

It was not going to be an ordinary day.

First of all, we had been sent home early from school, at noon, as if it had been a Saturday. But it wasn't a Saturday, it was a Monday.

"Boys, this is an important day in the history of the Fatherland. There will be a speech by *il Duce* from Rome on the radio this afternoon, you are all to go home", came the voice of *il Rettore*, the school principal, over loudspeakers mounted on the wall in each classroom. I was delighted. It was getting close

to the end of the school year, summer days were already upon us and many of us were pining for the long summer break to start. Was *il Duce* going to cancel the rest of the school year, some wondered. Could he? Could HE? He who could do so many wonderful things, who so loved us, his *Balillas*, who worked indefatigably for us, we were told, even when we were asleep. Yes, perhaps He could pull this one off, too.

I was eight years old, and was attending third grade of *la scuola elementare* (primary school) at the Istituto Leone XIII in Milan. It was one of the well-thought- of private schools in Milan for boys, run by the Jesuits. It combined strong religious values with a commitment to high scholastic achievement. My father attached great importance to the latter and to the grades I got at school. Endowed with keen intelligence, he himself had excelled at school and gained his *maturità* (higher school certificate) with flying colours at the age of sixteen. He was held in awe by his parents, humble country folk from the village of Terrarossa in northwestern Tuscany. He was their first born, and they had christened him Egidio Goffredo Ulisse, (Aegidius Godfrey Ulysses). A saint, a crusader, and a hero of the *Odyssey*.



He was only ever known as Egidio, though he brought out his other two names occasionally when he was in a jocular mood, especially at parties. He claimed that we were descended from Etruscan stock – maybe through the Ulysses connection – ‘Italian’ being in his view far too generic a label. Like the Etruscans he had a certain mysterious side. At seventeen years of age he served as a junior official in the Italian army during the First World War.

After the war he graduated as an electrical engineer from the University of Pisa and obtained a scholarship to get early work experience in the United States. He lived in Chicago for a few years, there learning English and, as he put it, ‘the American way of doing things’. In 1928 he was working for an American company in Paris and there met Lorna Pitt, a Melbourne girl, at that time studying at the Sorbonne. She had come to Europe with her mother, sister and brother in the ‘Grand Tour’ tradition which Australians had inherited from the English; all of them were keen and well-informed travellers and had spent over a year seeing the sights.

My parents’ marriage was a courageous, at times difficult, bridging of two different cultures. Mass Italian migration to Australia had not yet started, so Australia was still terra incognita to most Italians. My mother’s Italian in-laws found some of her ways strange, beginning with the fact that she spoke no

Italian and did not eat pasta. And some of my mother's relatives were under the influence of the Italian stereotype in Australia at the time, an equivocal mixture of artist, singer, Latin lover, organ-grinder and local 'fruit and veg' man. Such prejudiced views were to put a strain, at times, on their adventurous marriage. At first my parents lived in Paris and London and then moved to Milan a couple of years before I was born.

My father had by then become the factory manager of the Italian subsidiary of an American company which made telephone equipment. He had a strong work ethic and would at times take me to the factory on a Saturday – the two-day weekend was yet to be invented – so I might get a feel for what engineers did for a living. My school work was of paramount importance to him. He would spur me on, test and coach me in various subjects. His forte was mathematics and science, though he was also helpful to me in Italian composition, history, geography – everything except Latin: he had never studied it and was reluctant to meddle with the unfamiliar. He had an inventive mind which he could turn to storytelling.



Early on Sunday mornings my brother Andrea, four years junior than me, and I would sneak into the parental bed and my father would invent, in serial form, adventure stories about fantastic characters, stories which used to hold us spellbound. The following Sunday we would be back:

"Dedi, tell us what happened to the three brothers."

"Which three brothers?", he would reply, feigning ignorance.

"You know, Bione, Cione and Baciccione!"

"Ah that's right, boys, now where had we got to?"

After a brief reminder, he would put down the newspaper and continue the never-ending saga of the three brothers with such unlikely names.

His hobby was watercolour painting and he taught me the basic skills along with a love of painting. He remains in my mind an authoritarian figure and, as I learnt in later life, highly secretive. He was reserved and undemonstrative, a closed book on many subjects.

He used to quiz me when he arrived home from the office.

"What did you get for arithmetic today, Noni?"

"Oh... 6 out of 10."

"Noni, you have to work harder. We'll go through some exercises after dinner tonight."



My Australian mother was a wonderfully loving parent. She spent more time with me and my young brother than our father did – those being the days when we had a live-in maid – and nurtured the development of other aspects of our education: the English language, our Australian family background, nursery rhymes, friends, music. She loved classical music and would play a Beethoven symphony from her record collection. It was the era of 78 rpm records and I became adept at changing the needles on the gramophone. In her youth she had learnt to play the piano and had a good singing voice. played the organ and her father sang.

My father had given her a Pleyel baby grand piano as a birthday present. It fitted in a corner of our living room. Both Andrea and I had inherited her love for music and soon I was taking piano lessons. She and my father spoke English to each other at home, so I grew up understanding the language, though I was reluctant to try and speak it. If they wanted to speak privately to each other within my hearing, they switched to French, the language of their courtship.

My father was a short barrel-chested man, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He had bushy eyebrows that stood up when he first woke in the morning, until he settled them down again. "Your father has beautiful hands", my mother told me, "and feet. He is a good dancer."

She also was short, they were well matched when they danced, she said. From the family photo album I could see there had been partying and dancing in their Paris days. My third-grade teacher, *signora* Marelli, had recently set us a school competition on the subject of "*La mia mamma* [my mother]". She had made it clear that she expected us to include feelings of filial devotion and respect, so I had started the essay with: "My mother labours hard from morn until night looking after me and my little brother. Every time I see her she seems to be working". More than a trifle misleading, as it ignored the hard labour of our maid Elisa, but *signora* Marelli let it pass

as these were appropriate feelings. I continued by describing her brown hair and her eyes "blue like pieces of sky". No problem here either. But then I went on: "*Mia mamma è bassa e un po' grassa* [my mother is short and a bit fat]", which didn't sit at all well with *signora* Marelli's expectations of filial respect. She crossed out the sentence in my exercise book with her red pencil – I still have the evidence – and substituted "*di media statura e rotondetta*" [of average stature and somewhat rotund]".

My mother laughed at the correction, much preferring my straightforward description. In later years she told me of the delight of her in-laws when they first met her: "*Bella grassa!*" they had cried out. She had started learning Italian and took their greeting to mean "Nice and graceful". But when they started pinching her arms, my father had to disenchant her and admit to her that they were joyously admiring her fleshiness, which for them augured well for healthy *bambini*.

She spun a cocoon of affection and caring that we found comforting, though she also was keen on her son doing well at school.

"Who came first this month?"

"Bellini again, mother."

"Who came second?"

"Petrella again."

It rankled that her son would at best come fifth or sixth... from the bottom of the class of 20-odd boys. She came away despondent from parent-teacher interviews.



"Johnny, I talked to your teacher, *signora* Marelli. She says you are distracted, you do not pay attention... 'with his head in the clouds' ...that's what she said".

*Signora* Marelli was a small middle-aged woman with a pale face and grey curly hair cut short. She wore a shiny grey smock. I didn't like her, and sensed the dislike was mutual. She had it in for me, I was sure.

"Wake up, Maneschi, what did I just say? You didn't hear me, hey, that's because you were fooling around with Bernasconi instead of paying attention."

Bernasconi was my *compagno di banco* [school desk companion].

He was a big, untidy boy, whose fingers were perpetually ink-stained. It was still the era of inkwells, pen and nibs. Ink stains on fingers could only be removed by persistent scraping with la *pietra pomice* [pumice stone], which tended to rub off the skin and leave our hands raw and red. What a business! Bernasconi distinguished himself by being *l'ultimo della classe*, i.e. the

generally uncontested holder of the last place in the monthly ranking of the class.

Mother managed to persuade signora Marelli to move me away from Bernasconi, and closer to the two prodigies, Bellini and Petrella. That meant closer to the front, as the two shared the top desk, in the middle of the front row.

"My boy might also be able to see the blackboard better if he sits closer to the front," said mother to the *signora*. Much to mother's chagrin, I had been diagnosed with defective vision the previous year and had to wear glasses.

"Hey, here comes *el quattrec* [four eyes, in Lombard dialect], hey *quattrec*, how many fingers?" my school mates teased me.

My mother fondly hoped that by being moved closer to Bellini and Petrella my school performance might improve. "Try to work like they do", she encouraged me.

Giuseppe Bellini was a handsome boy, with a noble high brow, an aristocratic mien and pronounced his 'R's in the French way, which the other boys thought affected. His hair was always beautifully combed, his forelock neatly held in a hair clip. His black smock was impeccable, his collar as white as snow, his fingers never ink-stained. The black smock, intended to keep stains off our clothes, formed part of the Istituto Leone XIII's uniform for boys up to the fourth grade. Also pompoms, a couple of balls of cotton tied around our starched collars, blue for second grade, red for third, and yellow for fourth.

Bellini and Petrella always sat up straight in their desk. They had beautiful *calligrafia* [handwriting], which was often shown to the class as examples to emulate. At the end of the month the names would be read out:

"Bellini first, Petrella, second! Again!" The two would bestow admiring looks on each other and demurely bow their heads over their workbooks, busily engaged in accumulating further points for the next month. There was no rivalry between them, Petrella being satisfied to play second fiddle to his idol, Giuseppe.

School ended at four o'clock on weekdays and at noon on Saturdays. The boys would be picked up by their mothers or by the maids. This provided an opportunity for my mother to get to know other mothers and she befriended *signora* Bellini. Besides having boys at the same school, *signora* Bellini's husband was an engineer working for my father. Mother reported at home that, according to *signora* Bellini, their son was a kind of demigod, able to achieve effortlessly whatever he attempted. Though christened Giuseppe, his mother called him 'Bepi'. My mother misheard: "She talks adoringly of her baby. My baby this, my baby that. Johnny, you didn't tell me that Bellini is called 'Baby' at home."

"And how is Baby Bellini doing this week?" she would ask, with a malicious wink at my father.

We were invited to Baby Bellini's house one day, after school. The mothers sat in the living room, sipping afternoon tea, which the Bellini maid had

prepared in deference to my mother's 'English ways'. Baby took me to his room, showed me his telescope, his books, his various educational toys, his completed school assignments.

"What shall we play," he said, "do you play draughts?"

I say I did, We played and I lost.

"What card games do you know, do you know *briscola*?"

"Sure," I said. We played, and again I lost.

"O.K., now, let's do something else, let's wrestle. We shall call our mothers to watch us. Come on, help me move the table. Oh, and take off those glasses, they might get damaged."

Soon I found myself on the floor, my face ground into the thick pile carpet, Baby Bellini on the top of me yelling "Give up, give up!" Out of one eye I could see my mother's shoes and the elegant ones of *signora* Bellini.

"He is quite wonderful my Bepi," I could hear *signora* Bellini saying to my mother, "he is so strong and can be so aggressive. And gets such good grades at school."

But Baby also had excellent manners and did not gloat over his scholastic or sporting prowess. He helped me straighten myself up and saluted us courteously: "I'll see you at school tomorrow. Don't forget we have a geometry test."

Years later Baby went on to become an electrical engineer and was employed for a short time by my father's firm. On one of my visits there he escorted me around the factory floor with his customary courtesy and spoke knowledgeably on many technical subjects. He gave me a learned dissertation on the pros and cons of *viti destrorse versus viti sinistrorse* [clockwise vs. anticlockwise screw threads]. These obscure technical terms gave him plenty of scope to flourish his French 'R's. it was like listening to a textbook. "how boring!" said my father.

On that out-of-the-ordinary day we had just started the dictation period as il *Rettore's* announcement had come. I had carefully written the heading, as we had been taught to do, in my exercise book: *Milano, 10 June 1940 - XVIII E.F.*

The Roman numerals meant that we were in the eighteenth year of the Fascist Era, Fascism having been born in 1922 with the March on Rome, when Benito Mussolini had abolished democratic institutions and proclaimed himself *il Duce* [the leader]. Christian era and Fascist era now went hand in hand. He had ruled Italy for eighteen years and we, the schoolboys born under the Regime, were his loyal *Balillas*.

The *Balilla* program was mandatory in all Italian schools. 'Balilla' had been the nickname of an eighteenth century street urchin from Portoria, a suburb of Genoa, who had ignited a revolt against the occupying Austrian militia. His inspiring story was told in our school reader. The Austrians were transporting a cannon through the streets of Genoa when it became bogged in mud. People round about were ordered to come and help. From a nearby vantage point some boys, Balilla amongst them, were watching. In reply to the Austrians' request, Balilla picked up a stone and flung it at them. His

example was soon followed by others, forcing the Austrians to flee. All of us knew the words of the patriotic song commemorating the event:

*Fischia il sasso, il nome squilla*

*Del ragazzo di Portoria,*

*E l'intrepido Balilla*

*Sta gigante nella storia...*

The stone hisses, the name resounds

Of the boy from Portoria

And the undaunted Balilla

Remains a giant in history...



He was made into a suitable model figure for patriotic youth. Associations like the Boy Scouts were dissolved at the start of Fascism and replaced by *Balilla* paramilitary squadrons. Uniforms were worn and military drill was compulsory every Saturday afternoon in Italian schools. There was some choice of 'corps', however, and Istituto Leone XIII's *Balillas* were of the Navy persuasion.

We all dressed up as *marinaretti* [little sailors] and attended our weekly *adunate* [parades] in the school courtyard. Why we should be sailors in landlocked Milan, with no sea or ship in sight, remains a mystery. Mother, always with an eye on the household budget, decided to send me to the first parade dressed in my First Communion sailor suit. Guffaws greeted me when I boarded the school bus:

"Hey, look at what *il quattrec* is wearing. He thinks he is going for his First Communion! That's the wrong uniform, *quattrec*, look at the neckerchief, it's the wrong colour, has three narrow stripes instead of two wide ones, you are missing the two stars, etc. etc.", called out all those charitable souls from the back of the bus.

So, of course the right uniform had to be bought in time for the next parade.



To show we were *Balillas* we wore the regulation Fascist steel medallion, with the helmeted head of *il Duce*, chin jutting forward as was his wont. The head was surrounded by one of the Regime's favourite slogans: *Crede - Obbedire - Combattere* [To believe, to obey, to fight] and the letters G.I.L., which stood for *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* [Italian Lictorial Youth]. The name fascism was derived from the Latin *fascis* [*fasci* in Italian], which were bundles of rods strapped together, with an axe head protruding from them.

They were carried in ceremonial procession by the *lictors*, who assisted the magistrates of ancient Rome and symbolised imperial authority. The *fasci* became the emblem of Fascism. I drew many a *fascio* in my exercise books, colouring the rods brown, the axe head blue, strapped by a tricolour sash.

*Balillas* formed one of the groups within Mussolini's Lictorial youth movement. During first and second grade boys were *Figli della Lupa* [sons of the she-wolf], but this program was not mandatory and the Istituto opted not to have it. The *Figli della Lupa* owed their name to the legend of Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of ancient Rome, who had been suckled by a she-wolf. After the age of fourteen *Balillas* became *Avanguardisti* [Vanguard troops] and wore the Fascist uniform, black shirt and black fez. The fez was the Fascist adaptation of the Arab headgear that Italian troops had encountered in Libya and Abyssinia. It sported a black pompom attached by a string to the back, that could be jauntily tossed around. Alas, as *marinaretti* we were not entitled to a fez, just a sailor's hat. There were similar groups for girls, the *Giovani e Piccole Italiane*.

During the *adunata* we would be addressed by *il Rettore*, incongruous in the flowing robes of his religious habit amongst Fascists in uniform. He stood on a podium overlooking the courtyard, surrounded by Fascist officials in knee-high boots, black shirts, black fez and plenty of shiny insignia. They would inform us of the heroic deeds of our troops in Abyssinia. From them I learned that England, dubbed *la perfida Albione* [perfidious Albion], had tried to starve Italy by imposing sanctions after the Abyssinian war.

"Never forget, boys, that we owe it to *il Duce* that Italy is today strong and free, that she has her Empire, her place in the sun. It was *il Duce* who brought order out of anarchy, who fought the Bolsheviks, who drained the marshes, built roads, schools, hospitals. France and England tried to prevent us from bringing the light of civilization to the black races, but they were wrong! *Mussolini ha sempre ragione* [Mussolini is always right]!" The last was

one of the slogans from the Fascist repertory, many of which peppered our school reader and were painted on walls of houses throughout the country. The older boys, *Avanguardisti*, would display their marching prowess. They carried the *moschetto* [rifle]. I couldn't wait to grow up so I also would be allowed to carry a *moschetto*. The Fascist militia drummed into us their vision of academic future awaiting us:

*Libro e moschetto,  
Balilla perfetto*

Book and rifle,  
[make] the perfect *balilla*

At one fateful *adunata*, however, I changed my mind. During one of the manoeuvres a boy dropped his *moschetto*. It fell to the ground with a loud clang. The parade came to a halt. The head Fascist descended from the podium in a seething fury, his pompom swinging wildly from side to side. He faced the unfortunate one and proceeded to bawl him out within everyone's hearing:

"What is the meaning of this? Do you call yourself an *Avanguardista*? Shame on you, you have shamed your uniform, your school! *Il Duce* doesn't want people like you in his *Avanguardisti*! Fall out, away with you! Away, away from the Istituto Leone XIII!" I saw the poor boy shuffle out of the courtyard, his *Balilla perfetto* self-image in tatters. I doubt whether the threatened expulsion was actually carried out as it was only the *Rettore* who could order expulsions. There would have been some behind-the-scenes accommodation, but I felt acutely the unfairness of such public humiliation.

The *adunate* ended with our singing the Italian national anthem *Fratelli d'Italia* [Brothers of Italy] and *Giovinezza*, Mussolini's hymn to youth. *Giovinezza* had a stirring tune and words that inspired us. We all loved singing it. It was all about us, his youth. We were all marching enthusiastically into Italy's Fascist future. We were told that some unpatriotic Italians derided the hymn. For punishment they were made to drink castor oil. The hymn ended with a rousing acclamation to *il Duce*:

*E per Benito Mussolini,  
Eja eja alalà!*

These words had always been mysterious for me. Bernasconi, my desk companion, told me they were some sort of primordial African war cry that had crept into the Fascist repertory after the Abyssinian war. I have since found out that they are instead attributed to Gabriele d'Annunzio, the

soldier-poet of Fascism, who supposedly coined them as a grandiose, would-be imperial Roman, equivalent of "hip, hip, hurrah!"

In later years I learnt that there had been well-known and respected Italians who had objected to Fascism and to *Giovinazza*. Being forced to drink castor oil was only the lowest step of the punishment scale. There was exile, detention on a remote island, and there had been mysterious murders. One of the more prominent opponents of the Regime had been Arturo Toscanini, the chief conductor and musical director of La Scala theatre in Milan, a world-class musician and an obstinate character. When requested by the Regime to have his orchestra play *Giovinazza* before opera performances, he refused steadfastly, reportedly saying: "La Scala artists are not vaudeville singers and they will not sing that piece of buffoonery!" He was hounded by Fascist militia, and in 1931 roughed up in Bologna prior to a performance. He went into voluntary exile to the United States, vowing not to set foot in Italy until Fascism had been overthrown. His musical career flourished in the United States, where he became chief conductor of the New York Philharmonic and the NBC Symphony orchestras. He did not return to Italy until after the end of the Second World War.

How our military school parade fitted in with the spiritual values of a dedicated religious order like the Jesuits might be hard to fathom. Ever since the annexation of Rome to united Italy under Victor Emmanuel II in 1870, the Popes had cut themselves off from the new nation and remained in isolation in the Vatican. In 1929, we learnt in our school readers, *il Duce* had brought about *il Concordato*, the agreement recognizing the rights both of the Vatican and of Fascist Italy. A settlement of sorts had been reached: each party, State and Church, tolerated the other's presence in the schools. The Istituto Leone XIII did the minimum that was required. The two regimes came together at morning prayer.

On each classroom's wall above the teacher's podium hung the Crucifix, flanked on one side by the portrait of our King, Victor Emmanuel III, and on the other by that of a helmeted Benito Mussolini, *il Duce*. Morning prayer opened with the Lord's Prayer, followed by a prayer to the Virgin Mary and, for good measure, one to the Blessed Trinity. At the end of these, *signora Marelli* would intone:

"*Saluto al Re!*" [Salute the King!]

"*Viva il Re!*" [Long live the king!], we would respond.

"*Saluto al Duce!*" [Salute the leader!]

"*A noi!*" was our reply, literally meaning 'To us!', another contribution to the Fascist repertory which had been given fame by Gabriele d'Annunzio. We learned from our school reader that in a fit of patriotic fervour the soldier-poet had, with the aid of a small band of men, daringly invaded the city of Fiume (now Rijeka) on the Istrian peninsula of Yugoslavia, and declared it to be Italian territory. He was welcomed jubilantly by the Italian-speaking population. The city fell without a struggle, it was reported. From the balcony overlooking the main *piazza*, d'Annunzio had called out:

"To whom Fiume?"

"*A noi!*" was the crowd's enthusiastic reply.

"To whom the victory?"

"*A noi!*" the people roared.

The Roman salute had to be given whenever external dignitaries, militia or civilians, visited the classroom. As the classroom door opened and the visitor was shown in, accompanied by *il Rettore*, Baby Bellini stood up, yelling in military tones: "*At-tenti!*" [Attention!].

We had to drop whatever we were doing and spring to our feet, raising our right arm, palm open facing the front, the elbow slightly bent. This was the true *Saluto Romano*, how the ancient Romans greeted each other, we were told, not to be confused with Nazi Germany's poor imitation. It was illustrated in our history book by the picture of the statue of Caesar Augustus, his right arm outstretched. Later on, probably in deference to the school furniture, our response was modified and only Baby Bellini stood up. The rest of us were required to stretch both our hands in front of us, as if to grab an oar. On such occasions one of us might be asked to recite the *Balilla's* prayer from our school reader, this honour generally falling to Baby Bellini or to Petrella:

*Lord, bless and protect always my Italy in her Roman Church, her leaders, mothers, warriors, workers and her golden harvests.*

*Bless her Sovereign, her Princes, our Duce in the great labours which he undertakes, and since you have bestowed Him to Italy, grant Him long life and grant that all should be worthy of Him, who knows no true rest until He is amongst us children and bestows His luminous smile upon us.*

*Bless my family, my school, my teachers, my uniform, which is my honour and my promise. Grant me this grace, to give to the Fatherland my strength, my soul and, should it be required, my life.*

Life was tranquil for us as our parents shielded us from the more unpleasant aspects of life in Fascist Italy. Even though not an advocate of Fascism, my father wore the party's badge with the letters P.N.F. [*Partito Nazionale Fascista*] in his lapel. The acronym, I found out years later, was also whispered sarcastically amongst many bread-winners to stand for *Per Necessità Familiare* [because of family necessity], i.e. belonging to the P.N.F. was a requirement to hold down a professional job. At home, with us children, our parents studiously ignored Fascist indoctrination and chose to reinforce in us higher, more permanent values. This left us politically at the mercy of the school propaganda. To this day I look and marvel at the bombastic way the Fascist message was inculcated through my fifth grade reader, which I still own. Reading it one gets the distinct impression that Fascism was the natural culmination of twenty centuries of Italian history, starting from ancient Rome, and had been divinely ordained.

Upon arriving home at lunch time on that out-of-the-ordinary day, we found everyone in the building in a high state of excitement. Giovanni the *portinaio* [caretaker] had been around to all apartments and said he had been instructed by the *carabinieri* [police] that the national flags should be displayed that afternoon. By law all dwellings had to have a flag, to be hung

outside the window, or on the balcony. This was indeed going to be a special day, as normally the flags were only displayed on Armistice Day and national holidays. However there had been a spate of special flag days in the last few years of Fascism: there had been the Victory over Abyssinia Day, the Gold to the Fatherland Day, the Proclamation of the Empire Day, the Annexation of Albania Day. So what was this one going to be about?

"And be sure to turn on your radio for *il Duce's* speech at three o'clock," added the *portinaio*.

Putting out our flag was a source of embarrassment to me. The regulation Italian flag was the green, white and red tricolour arranged in vertical stripes, the green being closest to the flag pole. In the middle of the white stripe was the coat of arms of our royal family, the House of Savoy, surmounted by a coronet. Our own flag, unfortunately, was not a regulation flag. My father had bought a huge tricolour banner to turn the length of the terrace and be seen from the street. The stripes ran horizontally, alas, and there was no Savoy coat of arms. Putting it out was a major undertaking, requiring the combined efforts of my father, my mother, Elisa our maid and myself. There were a number of bows to be knotted around the cages containing the flower boxes and we had to be careful not to let the flag out of our hands, as the wind would grab it and billow it out like a huge sail. It was finally put up.

"But, Dedi, our flag is wrong. The stripes should be vertical; where is the Savoy emblem?"

"Don't worry, Noni. They are our national colours. They have been our colours since Napoleon."

"What happens if the *carabinieri* see we have the wrong flag?"

"They won't, son, they have other things to attend to."

They never did and I had to admit our flag did look grand from the street, dominating from the top of the building all the other minute regulation flags hanging from the lower windows.

We were going to listen to *il Duce's* speech on our brand new radio which occupied pride of place in the living room. For the occasion my father had invited some of his colleagues from the firm, including the managing director, signor Biffi, whose wife was American and a good friend of my mother. It was a hot sultry day and we had all the windows open. Mother asked Elisa to go down to the corner bar and buy bottles of cold beer for the men. This was another thing out of the ordinary, as I could not remember my parents ever drinking beer. As three o'clock approached, an eerie silence descended upon the city. The trams had stopped, there were few people in the street, many had gone into bars or cafes where they could listen to a radio.

"It's about time," said my father. The radio crackled as he tried to tune it for best reception. We could hear what sounded like the sea.

"It's the people in Piazza Venezia."

We could hear a band playing the *Marcia Reale* and *Giovinezza*. *Il Duce* was going to come out from his palace in Rome and speak from the famous balcony overlooking the square. I had never been to Rome, but had a picture

of him at that balcony in my school reader. Now the sound of the sea got louder and we could hear the people calling out, below the balcony.

Finally, the raucous voice sputtered forth the angry staccato sentences that were the hallmark of his speeches:



"Combatants of land, sea and air!"  
"Black shirts of the revolution and of the legions!"  
"Men and women of Italy, of the Empire and of the Kingdom of Albania!"  
"Listen!"  
I could hear the crowd clamouring at a higher pitch.  
"The hour marked by destiny has struck in the skies of the country!"  
"It is the hour of irrevocable decisions!"  
Shouts of acclamation.  
"The declaration of war has already been delivered to the ambassadors of Great Britain and France!"

Now they were chanting: "*GUER-RA, GUER-RA...*[war, war]"

"We are entering the field against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West that at all times have obstructed the march, and threatened the very existence, of the Italian people..."

The voice was overrun by the crackling static, but we could hear the frenzied crowd:

"*DU-CE, DU-CE, DU-CE, DU-CE...*"

"...the ignoble siege by fifty-two nations... our conscience is clear... static... static... static..."

"...we need to break the chains that suffocate us in our own sea... we need free access to the Ocean... this gigantic struggle... the die is cast... our German allies, their magnificent armies... we will march with our friends to the end... static... static... static..."

"To whom the victory?"

"*A noi!*" we heard the crowd roar.

The speech lasted a good forty minutes. The static was getting worse but the message was clear: we were at war, against England, therefore against Australia, my mother's country. The afternoon continued sultry and hot, now we could hear the first trams moving again down in the street. The men in the living room were grave. No one spoke.

Suddenly my mother stood up and rushed out of the room, sobbing. My father followed her:

“Lor, it’s all right, it’s all right...”



But Mother’s sobs got louder and I followed my parents out of the room. For the first time I had witnessed a crisis in my family and was terribly upset.

The only room in our apartment that could be locked was the bathroom. Mother went in and locked the door. My father, on the outside, knocked: “Lor, please, it’s all right... open up...”

The door opened to let him in, but then it was firmly locked again. I felt bereft, standing outside the bathroom door. I could hear the voices inside, the sobs of my mother, and my father’s reassuring baritone, “It’s going to be all right, it’s going to be all right...”

It had been a day out of the ordinary.

The colour picture of Balillas marching with Italian standard and the photograph of Mussolini on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia are sourced from the fifth grade reader: Luigi Rinaldi (author) and Bepi Fabiano (illustrator) *Il libro della Quinta Classe*, Mondadori, 1941.