

POSTSCRIPT TO "SAN MICHELE"

By F. FRASER BOND

FOUR or five years have gone by since the death of Axel Munthe at the royal palace in Stockholm. By now we would have heard had the manuscripts he left behind him held any hint that a companion volume to "The Story of San Michele" was on the way. As it happens he had this second story ready at hand to write, and he had the notion that one day he would get around to writing it. Like "San Michele" this sequel would have been autobiographical, and also it would have had to do with the fashioning of a house—his second home on Capri.

Visitors to the siren island learn with some surprise that although Axel Munthe created and loved his villa of San Michele, he had not chosen to live there for over thirty years. Built of shining marble as it was, and drenched for so many hours each day with dazzling Italian sunshine, the place proved too trying an abode for a writer plagued by failing eyesight. Dr. Munthe yearned for the shade which he could not find in this white-walled villa, nor in the almost perpendicular garden, which seemed all uphill like a Chinese print. This shade which he felt he must have found on the Western slope of Anacapri. There he created his second home from a massive ruin, half monastery, half fortress . . . the *Torre di Materita*.

He might possibly have called his sequel, "The Story of the Dark Tower." One can hardly imagine that two dwellings—both the creation of the same man—could be so totally unlike. San Michele shone white and pristine; the Dark Tower had about it the gloom of centuries. He had built San Michele in the main with blocks and pillars salvaged from the island's imperial past. The *Torre di Materita* was not classic, but medieval.

Distinct as they were, the two dwellings shared in common a certain museum-like quality. He had filled them with objets d'art . . . tapestries, tables, statues, candelabra, which with a collector's zest and an artist's discrimination he had assembled to contribute both to the atmosphere and the personality of his homes. He loved to talk about his treasures, and the book would have been full of them.

I got a hint that the sequel to "San Michele" was in Axel Munthe's mind on the first day I visited him. I can hear him now as he showed me around.

"I found here just this medieval wall and the ruins of this

great square tower . . . all that remained of a Carthusian monastery. Dante was alive when they started building here."

When I remarked that the building struck one as warlike rather than ecclesiastical, he broke in . . .

"True, true. It was so built as a tower of defence against the Saracens who terrorized the whole Mediterranean in the thirteenth century. I have been my own architect again, as you see. I found merely the four walls standing."

That they should stand was no surprise. They were six feet thick, and in that thickness he had burrowed stairways from the reception room, one stairway leading to a bedroom above and another to a large sitting room on the floor below. The dining room and domestic offices he had constructed as part of the cloister.

His setting down step by step of the transformation of this monkish stronghold into a comfortable if somewhat unusual home, would have given his readers the uncanny sense of actually sharing in the whole adventure. For Axel Munthe had in his writing, and markedly in his conversation, the knack of making one an accessory to the fact or to the fiction whichever it happened to be.

Part of this second story would no doubt have told how he had spent the royalties which rolled in from "San Michele." Much of this unexpected wealth went to purchase tracts of the Capri hillsides in order to protect the migrating birds which habitually used the island for rest and to obtain food on their mass flights. To the Italian peasant on Capri, a bird is something to be snared and popped into a pot. To Axel Munthe this Capresi practice of netting these resting migrants was nothing short of barbarous. This move on Munthe's part won such applause from international bird lovers that Mussolini, impressed by this world acclaim, had laws both promulgated and enforced to protect the birds resting on Capri. All this hardly added to Dr. Munthe's popularity with the Capri peasants who from time to time took petty revenge by doing away with one or other of his favorite pet dogs.

The book probably would have included too any number of stories of the friends who from time to time visited him in his shadowed retreat. He might have told of Henry James, who years ago urged him to dictate, and not write laboriously by hand. James told Dr. Munthe that if he kept at it steadily for a month, dictation would come easily. In fact he urged more than that, he urged the doctor to give up his profession of

medicine, and turn his whole attention to writing. Most certainly there would have been a story or two of Eleanora Duse. That lovely and already legendary lady had given him for safe-keeping the exclusive window in antique glass which the City of Florence had presented to her with its homage. Dr. Munthe brought it with him from San Michele to his Dark Tower.

"She told me," he said, "I am coming back here to die. But she never came back to Capri. She was to die in Pitts-
burgh."

There was a marble bust of Duse on the window sill, and as he spoke, he turned its face around, so that it looked out over a view that Duse had loved . . . over the Mediterranean toward the uplands of Sorrento rising through their purple mists.

Munthe took an almost naive delight in the success of "The Story of San Michele," particularly, in its success in the United States. What charmed him was the affection which readers wrote him they felt for the book. Yet the edition which brought him the greatest satisfaction was the one from which he received no financial return. This was the book's publication in Braille by the National Institute for the Blind of London.

During the time I knew Dr. Munthe he had very little eyesight but he was not blind. He could get around fairly well in surroundings familiar to him, and he spent considerable time each day walking in the pleasantly laid grounds of his villa. He could not read, but he could distinguish flowers, and perceive something of the changing colors on sea and landscape . . . and on Capri, the colors are always changing.

I asked him once what he missed most in his dimmed-out world. Was it not being able to read when he wanted and what he wanted? No. He had people there who could read to him.

What then?

"It is the stars, I miss," he said. "Yes. It is not seeing the stars. That is what I miss the most."

His sight however did get progressively worse, and the last time I saw him, he uncomplainingly referred to himself as the victim of this failing light.

He had left Capri to stay at the home of the late Queen of Sweden in Rome, the Villa Suiza. He had asked me to visit him there, and when I arrived I found Dr. Munthe propped up in bed with both hands pressing in on his right side as if holding something there in place. That is just what he was

doing, holding broken bones in place. He had fallen down a stone stair-case in the villa and had broken three of his four ribs.

And had he sent for a doctor?

No.

"Isn't it written," he asked . . . "Physician heal thyself?"

Fortunately, an operation later in Switzerland restored a considerable amount of vision to him, and he was then able to read "The Story of San Michele" for the first time in print.

To many, Axel Munthe remained an aloof person. Tall, upright, with his clipped naval beard, and dressing in tweed jacket, flannel trousers and Panama hat, he looked like nothing so much as a retired English admiral. I think he rather cultivated the type of "reserve" which would fit in with this character, cultivated it to ward off unwanted attention when the success of his book had made him a literary celebrity. This aloofness, both natural and acquired, coupled with his extraordinary close connection with the Swedish royal family threw around him the aura of a man of mystery.

To those of us who knew him chiefly through "The Story of San Michele," he will stay in the memory as a writer who had the knack of sharing experiences, excitements and enthusiasms with his readers. He had the knack too of taking an old anecdote, refurbishing it and sending it out into the world anew, but this time as his own.

"That fascinating liar," I have heard him called . . . "that fascinating liar." "Now really," people would say, "that old tale of his about the two coffins that got mixed up in the transit has been in the public domain for centuries."

But not as Munthe told it. When he had finished with a resurrected anecdote, he had in reality made it his own through his manner of telling it.

It is too bad that he never got around to writing "The Story of the Dark Tower." It might have given as much pleasure as "The Story of San Michele." It could hardly have given more.