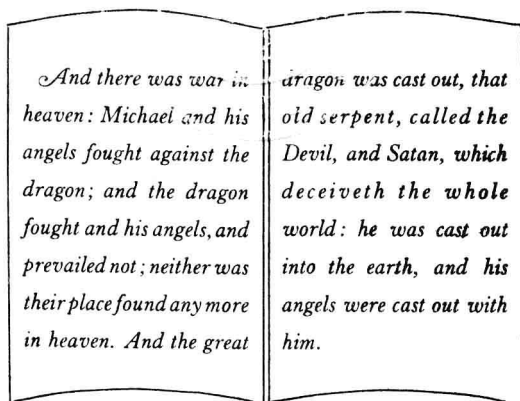


# THE STORY OF SAN MICHELE

BY  
AXEL MUNTHE

WITH  
*NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR  
FOR THE AMERICAN EDITION*



THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

NEW YORK  
E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

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# THE STORY OF SAN MICHELE

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**TO MY OLD FRIEND  
SIR ESME HOWARD**

## NEW PREFACE FOR THE AMERICAN EDITION

REVIEWERS of this book seem to have found considerable difficulty in attempting to classify "The Story of San Michele," and I do not wonder. Some have described the book as an Autobiography, others have called it "The Memoirs of a Doctor." As far as I can understand, it is neither the one nor the other. Surely it could not have taken me five hundred pages to write down the story of my life, even had I not left out its saddest and most eventful chapters. All I can say is that I never meant to write a book about myself; it was, on the contrary, my constant pre-occupation the whole time to try to shake off this vague personality. If, anyhow, this book has turned out to be an Autobiography, I begin to believe that, judging from the sale of it, the simplest way to write a book about oneself consists in trying as hard as one can to think of somebody else. All a man has to do is to sit still in a chair by himself, and look back upon his life with his blind eye. Better still would be to lie down in the grass and not to think at all, only to listen. Soon the distant roar of the world dies away, and the forests and fields begin to sing with clear bird voices, friendly animals come up to tell him their joys and sorrows in sounds and words that he can understand, and when all is silent even the life-

less things around him begin to whisper in their sleep.

To call this book "The Memoirs of a Doctor," as some reviewers have done, seems to me even less appropriate. Its boisterous simplicity, its unblushing frankness, its very lucidity fit ill with such a pompous subtitle. Surely a medical man, like every other human being, has the right to laugh at himself now and then to keep up his spirits, maybe even to laugh at his colleagues if he is willing to stand the risk. But he has no right to laugh at his patients. To shed tears with them is even worse, a whimpering doctor is a bad doctor. An old physician should besides think twice before sitting down in his armchair to write his memoirs. Better keep to himself what he has seen of Life and Death. Better write no memoirs at all and leave the dead in peace and the living to their illusions.

Somebody has called "The Story of San Michele" a story of Death. Maybe it is so, for Death is seldom out of my thoughts, "*non nasce in me pensier che non vi sia dentro scolpita la Morte*," wrote Michelangelo to Vasari. I have been wrestling so long with my grim colleague; always defeated I have seen him slay one by one all those I have tried to save. I have had a few of them in mind in this book as I saw them live, as I saw them suffer, as I saw them lie down to die. It was all that I could do for them. They were all humble people, no marble crosses stand on their graves, many of them were already forgotten long before they died. They are all right now. Old Maria Porta Lettere, who climbed the 777 Phoenician

steps for thirty years on her naked feet with my letters, is now carrying the post in Heaven, where dear old Pacciale sits smoking his pipe of peace, still looking out over the infinite sea as he used to do from the pergola of San Michele, and where my friend Archangelo Fusco, the street-sweeper in Quartier Montparnasse, is still sweeping the stardust from the golden floor. Down the stately peristyle of lapislazuli columns struts briskly little Monsieur Alphonse, the doyen of the Little Sisters of the Poor, in the Pittsburg millionaire's brand new frockcoat, solemnly raising his beloved top hat to every saint he meets, as he used to do to all my friends when he drove down the Corso in my victoria. John, the blue-eyed little boy who never smiled, is now playing lustily with lots of other happy children in the old nursery of the Bambino. He has learnt to smile at last. The whole room is full of flowers, singing birds are flying in and out through the open windows, now and then the Madonna looks in to see that the children have all they want. John's mother, who nursed him so tenderly in Avenue des Villiers, is still down here. I saw her the other day. Poor Flopette, the harlot, looks ten years younger than when I saw her in the night-café on the boulevard; very tidy and neat in her white dress, she is now second housemaid to Mary Magdalen.

In a humble corner of the Elysian Fields is the cemetery of the dogs. All my dead friends are there, their bodies are still where I laid them down under the cypresses by the old Tower, but their faithful

hearts have been taken up here. Kind St. Rocco, the little patron-saint of all dogs, is the custodian of the cemetery, and good old Miss Hall is a frequent visitor there. Even the rascal Billy, the drunkard Baboon, who set fire to Il Canonico Don Giacinto's coffin, has been admitted on trial to the last row of graves in the monkey cemetery some way off, after a close scrutiny from St. Peter, who noticed he smelled of whisky and mistook him at first for a human being. Don Giacinto himself, the richest priest in Capri, who had never given a penny to the poor, is still roasting in his coffin, and the ex-butcher of Anacapri, who blinded the quails with a red hot needle, has had his own eyes stung out by the Devil in person in a fit of professional jealousy.

One reviewer has discovered that "there is enough material in 'The Story of San Michele' to furnish writers of short sensational stories with plots for the rest of their lives." They are quite welcome to this material for what it is worth. I have no further use for it. Having concentrated my literary efforts during a lifetime on writing prescriptions, I am not likely to try my hand on short sensational stories so late in the day. Would that I had thought of it before, or I should not be where I am to-day! Surely it must be a more comfortable job to sit in an armchair and write short sensational stories than to toil through life to collect the material for them, to describe diseases and Death than to fight them, to concoct sinister plots than to be knocked down by them without warning! But why do not these professionals collect



their material themselves? They seldom do. Novel writers, who insist on taking their readers to the slums, seldom go there themselves. Specialists on disease and Death can seldom be persuaded to come with you to the hospital where they have just finished off their heroine. Poets and philosophers, who in sonorous verse and prose hail Death as the Deliverer, often grow pale at the very mention of the name of their best friend. It is an old story. Leopardi, the greatest poet of modern Italy, who longed for Death in exquisite rhymes ever since he was a boy, was the first to fly in abject terror from cholera-stricken Naples. Even the great Montaigne, whose calm meditations on Death are enough to make him immortal, bolted like a rabbit when the peste broke out in Bordeaux. Sulky old Schopenhauer, the greatest philosopher of modern times, who had made the negation of life the very keystone of his teaching, used to cut short all conversation about Death. The bloodiest war novels were written, I believe, by peaceful citizens well out of the range of the long distance German guns. Authors who delight in making their readers assist at scenes of sexual orgies are generally very indifferent actors in such scenes. Personally, I only know of one exception to this rule, Guy de Maupassant, and I saw him die of it.

I am aware that some of the scenes in this book are laid on the ill-defined borderland between the real and the unreal, the dangerous No Man's Land between fact and fancy where so many writers of memoirs have come to grief and where Goethe him-

self was apt to lose his bearings in his "Dichtung und Wahrheit." I have tried my best by means of a few well-known technical tricks to make at least some of these episodes pass off as "short sensational stories." After all, it is only a question of form. It will be a great relief to me if I have succeeded. I do not ask for better than not to be believed. It is bad enough and sad enough anyhow. God knows I have a good deal to answer for as it is. I shall also take it as a compliment, for the greatest writer of short sensational stories I know is Life. But is Life always true?

Life is the same as it always was, unruffled by events, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of man, mute and incomprehensible as the sphinx. But the stage on which the everlasting tragedy is enacted changes constantly to avoid monotony. The world we lived in yesterday is not the same world as we live in to-day; inexorably it moves on through the infinite towards its doom, and so do we. "No man bathes twice in the same river," said Heroclitus. Some of us crawl on our knees, some ride on horseback or in motor-cars, others fly past the carrier-pigeon in aeroplanes. There is no need for hurry; we are all sure to reach the journey's end.

No, the world I lived in when I was young is not the same world that I live in to-day; at least, it does not seem so to me. Nor do I think it will seem so to those who read this book of rambles in search of adventure in the past. There are no more brigands with a record of eight homicides to offer you to sleep

on their mattresses in tumble-down Messina. No more granite sphinxes are crouching under the ruins of Nero's villa in Calabria. The maddened rats in the cholera slums of Naples, who frightened me to death, have long ago retreated in safety to their Roman sewers. You can drive up to Anacapri in a motor-car, and to the top of the Jungfrau in a train, and climb the Matterhorn with rope-ladders. Up in Lapland no pack of hungry wolves, their eyes blazing in the dark like burning coals, is likely to gallop behind your sledge across the frozen lake. The gallant old bear, who barred my way in the lonely Suvla gorge, has long ago departed to the Happy Hunting Fields. The foaming torrent I swam across with Ristin, the Lap-girl, is spanned by a railway-bridge. The last stronghold of the terrible Stalo, the Troll, has been pierced by a tunnel. The Little People I heard patter about under the floor of the Lap tent, no more bring food to the sleeping bears in their winter quarters; that is why there are so few bears in Sweden to-day. You are welcome to laugh incredulously at these busy Little People as much as you like at your own risk and peril. But I refuse to believe that any reader of this book will have the effrontery to deny that it was a real goblin I saw sitting on the table in Forsstugan and pull cautiously at my watch-chain. Of course it was a real goblin. Who could it otherwise have been? I tell you, I saw him distinctly with both my eyes when I sat up in my bed just as the tallow candle was flickering out. I am told, to my surprise, that there are people who have never seen a goblin. One cannot

help feeling sorry for such people. I am sure there must be something wrong with their eyesight. Old Uncle Lars Anders in Forsstugan, six feet six in his sheepskin-coat and wooden shoes, is dead long ago, and so is dear old Mother Kerstin, his wife. But the little goblin I saw sitting cross-legged on the table in the attic over the cow-stall is alive. It is only we who die.

ST. JAMES'S CLUB,  
July, 1930.

AXEL MUNTHE.

## PREFACE

I HAD rushed over to London from France to see about my naturalization, it looked as if my country was going to be dragged into the war by the side of Germany. Henry James was to be one of my sponsors, he had just been naturalized himself, "*Civis Britannicus sum*," he said in his deep voice. He knew that I had tried to do my bit and that I had failed because I had become too helpless myself to be of any help to others. He knew the fate that awaited me. He laid his hand on my shoulder and asked me what I was going to do with myself? I told him I was about to leave France for good to hide like a deserter in my old tower. It was the only place I was fit for. As he wished me good-bye he reminded me how years ago when he was staying with me at San Michele he had encouraged me to write a book about my island home, which he had called the most beautiful place in the world. Why not write the Story of San Michele now if it came to the worst and my courage began to flag? Who could write about San Michele better than I who had built it with my own hands? Who could describe better than I all these priceless fragments of marbles strewn over the garden where the villa of Tiberius once stood? And the sombre old Emperor himself whose weary foot had trod the very mosaic

floor I had brought to light under the vines, what a fascinating study for a man like me who was so interested in psychology! There was nothing like writing a book for a man who wanted to get away from his own misery, nothing like writing a book for a man who could not sleep.

These were his last words, I never saw my friend again.

I returned to my useless solitude in the old tower, humiliated and despondent. While everybody else was offering his life to his country, I spent my days wandering up and down in the dark tower, restless like a caged animal, while the never-ending tidings of suffering and woe were read to me. Now and then of an evening when the relentless light of the day had ceased to torture my eyes, I used to wander up to San Michele in search of news. The flag of the British Red Cross was flying over San Michele where brave and disabled men were nursed back to health by the same sun that had driven me away from my beloved home. Alas for the news! How long was the waiting for those who could do nothing but wait!

But how many of us dare to confess what so many have felt, that the burden of their own grief seemed easier to bear while all men and women around us were in mourning, that the wound in their own flanks seemed almost to heal while the blood was flowing from so many other wounds? Who dared to grumble over his own fate while the fate of the world was at stake? Who dared to whimper over his own pain while

all these mutilated men were lying on their stretchers silent with set teeth?

At last the storm abated. All was silent as before in the old tower, I was alone with my fear.

Man was built to carry his own cross, that is why he was given his strong shoulders. A man can stand a lot as long as he can stand himself. He can live without hope, without friends, without books, even without music, as long as he can listen to his own thoughts and to the singing of a bird outside his window and to the far-away voice of the sea. I was told at St. Dunstan's that he can even live without light, but those who told me so were heroes. But a man cannot live without sleep. When I ceased to sleep I began to write this book, all milder remedies having failed. It has been a great success so far as I am concerned. Over and over again I have blessed Henry James for his advice. I have been sleeping much better of late. It has even been a pleasure to me to write this book, I no longer wonder why so many people are taking to writing books in our days. Unfortunately I have been writing the Story of San Michele under peculiar difficulties. I was interrupted at the very beginning by an unexpected visitor who sat down opposite to me at the writing table and began to talk about himself and his own affairs in the most erratic manner, as if all this nonsense could interest anybody but himself. There was something very irritating and un-English in the way he kept on relating his various adventures where he always seemed to turn out to have been the hero—too much Ego in your Cosmos,

young man, thought I. He seemed to think he knew everything, antique art, architecture, psychology, Death and Hereafter. Medicine seemed to be his special hobby, he said he was a nerve specialist and boasted of being a pupil of Charcot's as they all do. God help his patients, I said to myself. As he mentioned the name of the master of the Salpêtrière I fancied for a moment that I had seen him before, long, long ago, but I soon dismissed the thought as absurd, for he looked so young and boisterous, and I felt so old and weary. His unceasing swagger, his very youth began to get on my nerves, and to make matters worse it soon dawned upon me that this young gentleman was making mild fun of me the whole time, as young people are apt to do with old people. He even tried to make me believe that it was he and not I who had built San Michele! He said he loved the place and was going to live there for ever. At last I told him to leave me alone and let me go on with my Story of San Michele and my description of my precious marble fragments from the villa of Tiberius.

"Poor old man," said the young fellow with his patronizing smile, "you are talking through your hat! I fear you cannot even read your own handwriting! It is not about San Michele and your precious marble fragments from the villa of Tiberius you have been writing the whole time, it is only some fragments of clay from your own broken life that you have brought to light."

TORRE DI MATERITA.

1928.



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