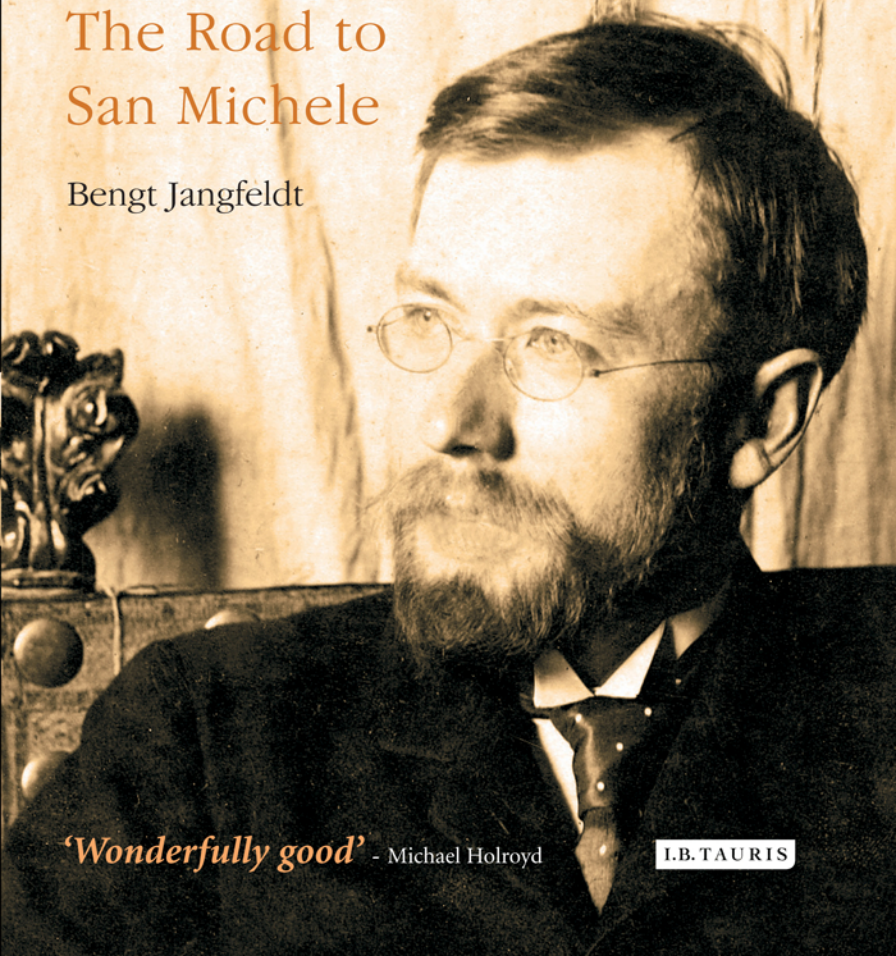


# AXEL MUNTHE

The Road to  
San Michele

Bengt Jangfeldt



*'Wonderfully good'* - Michael Holroyd

I.B. TAURIS



*Axel Munthe*





BENGT JANGFELDT



*AXEL MUNTHE*  
*The Road to San Michele*



I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2008 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and Canada  
distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St Martin's Press  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Copyright © 2008 Bengt Jangfeldt  
Translated by Harry Watson

The right of Bengt Jangfeldt to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 84511 720 7

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd, [www.jcs-publishing.co.uk](http://www.jcs-publishing.co.uk)  
Printed in the Czech Republic by FINIDR, s.r.o.



TO ADAM AND KATRIONA MUNTHER,  
FOR THEIR GENEROSITY AND UNCONDITIONAL TRUST





# CONTENTS



|                       |    |
|-----------------------|----|
| List of Illustrations | ix |
|-----------------------|----|

## THE DREAM 1857–1889

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Empewow of Sina             | 3  |
| Doctor Munthe               | 15 |
| Letters from Naples         | 27 |
| Avenue de Villiers          | 41 |
| The Misses from Medstugan   | 55 |
| The Soul of the Mountains   | 63 |
| Arabia                      | 77 |
| A Semblance of Married Life | 85 |
| Exile on Capri              | 99 |

## VICTORIA 1889–1930

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Piazza di Spagna         | 119 |
| The Crown Princess       | 135 |
| The Dream of San Michele | 151 |
| A Demonic Talent         | 165 |
| Tiberio                  | 179 |
| Hilda                    | 197 |
| The Queen                | 209 |
| Red Cross & Iron Cross   | 223 |
| Peace and War            | 235 |
| Villa Svezia             | 249 |
| The Story of San Michele | 261 |

## DEATH 1930–1949

|                      |     |
|----------------------|-----|
| The Bestseller       | 283 |
| The Missing Chapters | 305 |
| The Doctor and Death | 317 |

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| The War               | 329 |
| Nostalgia             | 341 |
| Post Mortem           | 353 |
| <br>                  |     |
| Acknowledgements      | 357 |
| Abbreviations         | 359 |
| Unpublished Sources   | 361 |
| Selected Bibliography | 369 |
| Index                 | 373 |
| Picture Credits       | 383 |

# ILLUSTRATIONS



- 1–2 Axel's parents, Fredrik and Aurora Munthe
- 3 Axel and his brother Arnold
- 4 Axel's sister Anna
- 5 A very young Axel Munthe c. 1876
- 6 Marina Grande, Capri's harbour, 1876
- 7 Georg Sibbern in 1878
- 8 Sigrid von Mecklenburg, Axel's great love
- 9 'Assistants', by Hugo Birger, 1887
- 10–11 Edith Balfour ('Miss DD') and Maude Valérie White
- 12 Axel on Capri, around 1888–89
- 13–14 Axel's servant girls
- 15 The Spanish Steps in Rome
- 16 Lord Dufferin, photographed by Munthe
- 17 Princess Marie Louise of Baden sailing with Munthe
- 18 Villa San Michele, the chapel and the Sorrento peninsula, 1903
- 19 Crown princess Victoria in a gondola
- 20 The study with the head of the Medusa
- 21 The sculpture gallery, 1901
- 22 The pergola, 1903
- 23 Torre di Materita
- 24 Prince Max of Baden and Axel
- 25 Munthe with his and Victoria's dogs at the Barbarossa fortress
- 26 Hilda Pennington Mellor
- 27 Munthe in the uniform of the British Red Cross
- 28 Peter and Malcolm Munthe
- 29 King Gustaf V and Munthe at Solliden in 1931
- 30 Hermann Goering visiting Munthe
- 31 Greta Garbo's visit to Capri
- 32 Axel Munthe and his publisher Jock Murray
- 33 Axel Munthe with his son Malcolm and grandson Adam, 1946





*The Dream*  
1857–1889





# EMPEWOW OF SINA



I have to be dolled up like a bride here, from morning till night, and I'm never allowed any freedom!

*Axel Munthe*

**I**N MARCH 1930 Queen Victoria of Sweden lay dying in the Villa Svezia in Rome. A young Swedish journalist tried to gain access to the house, but the footman stopped him and directed him to the queen's doctor, who happened to be passing. The doctor ticked off this journalist who dared to come and disturb the terminally ill queen. But when the reporter opened his mouth to say a few words in his own defence, a smile spread over the doctor's face. The journalist spoke the same dialect as the doctor, who promised to get in touch if there was any change in the queen's condition. Shortly afterwards the journalist received a phone call at his boarding house: 'I promised to phone. Queen Victoria is dead. You're getting the news before the legation.'

The doctor's name was Axel Munthe, a 72-year-old Swede with an astonishing career behind him and an equally remarkable future before him.

Axel Munthe belonged to a family who had fled Flanders in the mid-sixteenth century to escape the Spanish Duke of Alba's bloody rule. The family's first representative in Scandinavia appeared in Sweden during the final years of the sixteenth century. Axel's grandfather Ludvig Munthe, born in 1770, and his grandmother Elisabeth Catharina, a clergyman's daughter, had ten children, five of whom survived into adulthood. Axel's father, Fredrik, was born in 1816 at a country freehold in the vicinity of the town of Vimmerby. This is the soil in which Axel Munthe was rooted: Småland in southern Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century, or, to be more exact, the trading town of Vimmerby, a churchgoing and strongly religious environment, which would leave deep traces in Axel's character and philosophical system.

Fredrik Munthe lost his father when he was 6. His mother was short of money, and to earn an extra crust Fredrik took it upon himself to light the school fire in the mornings. This meant being up very early, he later told his children, and when he had to pass the churchyard in the winter darkness he was so frightened that he ran for all he was worth.

In 1832, when he was barely 15 years old, Fredrik was taken on as an apprentice in a pharmacy in the county town of Linköping, where he slept in a partitioned-off area under the counter along with the other apprentices. Although conditions for study were far from ideal, it was only two years later that Fredrik Munthe took his initial pharmacy examination, and in 1840 he took his pharmacy degree under the aegis of the famous chemist Jacob Berzelius. Fredrik had actually wanted to study medicine, but his mother could not afford to support him. His restlessly wandering existence continued even after he had taken his degree, but 10 years later, in 1850, he had made enough money to afford his own chemist's shop in the coastal village of Döderhultsvik, later renamed Oscarshamn after King Oscar I.

In 1853 Munthe married Aurora Ugarph, the daughter of an attorney. They were not youngsters; he was 37 years old, she was 34. The wedding night appears to have been passed in the prescribed way, as nine months later to the day, a daughter, Anna, was born to them. A year and a half later, their first son Arnold arrived, and on 31 October 1857 Axel Martin Fredrik, the hero of this tale, made his appearance. In 1860 the family moved to Vimmerby, where Fredrik bought the chemist's shop in the town; the circle was closed, Fredrik Munthe was back in his childhood town.

## VIMMERBY

Vimmerby in the 1860s was a small town with about 1,800 inhabitants, and Fredrik Munthe soon attained a leading role in society. In 1861 he obtained the monopoly to practise as a chemist there, and two years later he was one of twenty men elected to the town's first council. As far as we can judge, Fredrik Munthe was a good chemist. Axel remembered with pride, 'Father was far more than the usual pill-pusher in Vimmerby', he had 'considerable knowledge of chemistry and knew more than was needed to become a professor, and [. . .] he had read as much medicine as any doctor you like [. . .] and also occupied himself a great deal with medical studies – for himself.'

A good deal of reading was done in the Munthes' home, both of secular and religious literature. On Sundays Fredrik Munthe read sermons and sang hymns to his family. And when theatrical performances for charity were given, the Munthe family simply had to take part, 'since they acted

so well'. Fredrik Munthe had a pronounced musical side – as a performer as well as a listener. He is also said to have been an excellent storyteller. Aurora also sang, but her repertoire was more staid and largely consisted of hymns and spiritual songs. This musicality was inherited by Anna and Axel, who both took singing and piano lessons.

The Munthe children received their early education in Vimmerby's schools. Anna went to a girls' school, but needlework, ironing, mangling, scouring, cleaning, and so on, were things she detested, so instead she was allowed to devote herself to drawing, an interest that she would later come to practise on a professional basis.

The boys Arnold and Axel were sent to the grammar school, where Axel began in the autumn term of 1866, with a special dispensation for his young age. He showed more application than Arnold but did best in the same subjects: his marks for mathematics oscillated between acceptable and unacceptable but in history and geography and Swedish he earned good marks, like his brother. During his first years at school, there were no traces of the rich and versatile talent that Axel would later demonstrate.

## A FAIR-HAIRED, CHUBBY LITTLE CHAP

Axel's cousins Sofia and Fredrik Lund, who were neighbours of the Munthe family in Vimmerby, remember him as a 'fair-haired, chubby little chap' with 'a flaxen fringe and clear eyes full of wonder, which noticed everything that was going on around him and had something to say about it too'. On being asked what he was going to be when he grew up, Axel answered: 'Pweest and pweecher' or 'Empewow of Sina' – he spoke with a pronounced lisp until his teenage years. The dream of becoming emperor gradually dwindled to the more modest ambition of being a drummer.

Axel was an 'interesting object of study', not least because of his 'changeable moods' and his 'ever-changing whims'. With his sparkling good humour and his 'hilarious witticisms' he was a constant source of fun. He collected 'bones and skulls, stuffed birds and was on intimate terms with every horse, dog, ram and other tame four-footed creature'. His concern encompassed not only pets but also less domesticated species such as snakes, lizards and beetles, which 'were collected, dead or alive, in forest or field, taken home and looked after in not always very suitable places, where they sometimes came into conflict with his father's pronounced sense of tidiness'.

Axel was particularly delighted with 'ugly beasts of every kind'. Fredrik Lund remembers that his 'four- or multi-legged, flying or crawling favourites' were either 'uncommonly ugly or even displayed abnormalities

that other people would have found repulsive, but which seemed to attract his particular attention’.

During a forest walk Axel found a parched animal skull. This aroused great admiration among the other boys and gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his rather bizarre sense of humour. His cousins included an engaged couple who liked to sit billing and cooing in the moonlight, and Axel had long been planning to ambush them. On the same day that the skull was found, the couple were sitting by an open window in the salon having a cuddle. As the moonlight streamed in, a wild Indian war-cry arose from the other small boys in the garden below – they had been initiated into the plan of attack on swearing the most hair-raising oath of silence – at the same time as Axel poked a long pole, with the skull on the end, in through the window and let it dangle between the lovers’ own heads. His delight at the broken spell knew no limits, but was dampened when his parents and cousins heard of the prank and took him to task for it.

Axel, as we can see, had considerable talents as a young rascal. But he was also a child of great integrity with a strong need to mark out his territory. He hated ‘any kind of compulsion’, Sofia remembers, even as regards his clothes. On one occasion they were due to visit the vicar. When his mother insisted on a more ‘gentlemanly dress’, he cried out, with tragic gestures: ‘I have to be dolled up like a bride here, from morning till night, and I’m never allowed any freedom!’

Axel’s protest should not come as a surprise. Despite his father’s musical talents, the atmosphere at home was strictly religious and no doubt quite stifling. Their acquaintances were mostly drawn from clerical families, and social life consisted mainly of innumerable coffee mornings and dinners. On at least one occasion Axel’s longing for freedom led to a genuine attempt to run away. In the summer of 1865 the family were staying at a spa outside Vimmerby. Every day was characterised by unchanging routines. The boys decided to run away back home to Vimmerby and hoped their aunt would put them up. But their father caught up with the fugitives before they got away and drove them back to the spa.

Protests about clothes and attempts to run away were part of a young person’s perfectly normal struggle for freedom and independence, but in Axel’s case it also involved something different and deeper: a strong feeling of existential captivity that he would – unsuccessfully – try all his life to overcome.

Fredrik Munthe had had his eyes trained on Stockholm for many years, most of all because he wanted to give the boys a good education. The decision to move, however, was only taken after he discovered that they were not doing too well at school. As Vimmerby could not offer any

instruction beyond the fourth class, the question of moving house was in any case an urgent one.

In October 1868 the Munthe family moved to Stockholm.

## STOCKHOLM

The capital city that the Munthe family landed in was seventy times larger than Vimmerby, but still had only 130,000 inhabitants. Stockholm was a very small town compared to London, for example, where the population was over 3,500,000; it was a combination of a small town with a lingering flavour of the eighteenth century and a nascent large city with broad esplanades opening into a new century.

During this period of transition from the old to the new, grand townhouses and hovels stood side by side, and the tenants represented the various layers of society. The building in which the Munthes lived housed a motley crew of inhabitants: master mechanics and journeymen builders, washerwomen, seamen, gas-workers, cleaners, seamstresses, caretakers, stock-makers, journeymen carpenters, and so on.

Anna and Axel had plenty of opportunities to cultivate their musical talents, thanks to the Stockholm branch of the family, with whom they now had closer contact. Beateberg, the family manor outside Stockholm, was for several decades a meeting place for many of the most prominent musicians of the age, with the world-renowned singer Jenny Lind a frequent guest. In his later years, Axel Munthe reminisced in joyful tones about his childhood visits to Beateberg, where he found rich stimuli for his three main interests in life: music, sailing and animals.

In the autumn of 1868 Axel and Arnold began their studies at the Stockholm Lyceum, a private grammar school highly regarded for its humane teaching methods. Here, the cane was used far less than in the state-run educational institutions. According to a pupil who attended the school a few years before Axel, August Strindberg, it was 'a sanctuary [. . .] where human worth was assigned even to the unconfirmed, where it was not a crime to be poorly gifted, where teachers were not the deadly enemies of the young, where the headteacher was not a royal executioner, but a patriarch'. Axel's reports from his first term at school have not survived, but in the spring term of 1869 he was fourth out of eleven pupils, a good position in the upper half of the class.

The first year in Stockholm was over. Arnold had repeated both the second and third classes, and his parents now saw fit to take him out of school. He loved the sea, and in the summer of 1869 he was allowed to undertake a trial voyage to see if he was up to seafaring. While Arnold was at sea,

Axel spent his summer at a little village called Malma, studying Latin and mathematics, and hunting and stuffing birds. But he longed for his home; a letter to his parents signed 'your obedient son from henceforth' suggests that the summer school had been some kind of punishment. Worthy of note is Axel's unsentimental attitude to hunting birds, an amusement he devoted himself to wholeheartedly, and he kept tame birds in a cage at home. In later years he would not only regret this practice but thoroughly revise his views.

Whatever Axel thought of the punishment detail in Malma, it seems to have had the desired effect, as during the autumn of 1869 he moved from fourth place to top of the class. His marks were the best he received during the whole of his school career. The autumn also brought major changes for Arnold. His trial voyage had passed off successfully, and in September he started his studies at naval college.

## THE WHITE BEAR

Whether it was economic necessity or boredom that made Fredrik Munthe resume his profession again is unclear, but in February 1870 he took over the White Bear Pharmacy at Nybrogatan, in a new and fashionable part of Stockholm. Socially, the move was a definite step up for the Munthe family. Only a few doors down from the Munthes, for example, lived the justice minister Baron Louis de Geer.

When, in the autumn of 1871, Axel started his first year at grammar school, it was at Stockholm's 'gymnasium' – the high school. He was only 13 years old and would celebrate his fourteenth birthday that October. As we have seen, Axel had been allowed to start school in Vimmerby at a younger age than the norm, and he was considerably younger than his classmates at the gymnasium, who were between 15 and 16. This is something one has to keep in mind when assessing his rather lacklustre school career.

After a decent performance at the end of his second year, in the spring term of 1873 the graph of his school marks pointed steeply downwards. The end of the autumn term of 1873 saw him finish with the lowest possible marks in all subjects. The situation was alarming, and at the start of 1874 Fredrik Munthe was warned that his son might have to repeat the year. With this prospect looming, Axel promised that if his father gave him 200 kronor he would try to finish high school by the summer, skipping one year of study. Fredrik took the promise seriously and gave his son the required sum, which Axel spent on private lessons. During the spring he studied so intensively that in June 1874 he was able to finish high school as a private student.

Axel completed high school one year early, in three years instead of four, and he was only 16, two years younger than the average student. His marks were not exceptional, but if school was no success story for Axel it was not lack of talent but lack of motivation that was the problem. When he wanted to, he could quickly and easily acquire the knowledge he needed. There are many indications that the institution of school in itself, with its hierarchy and regularity, provoked his instinctive disgust. There is, however, a pattern in his school career and his attitude to the different school subjects. He obtained good marks in Christianity and science, as well as in philosophy, a subject that he only studied for his high school certificate. These were interests that would persist throughout his life. Science was the basis of his future profession and philosophical and religious questions would always occupy his thoughts. Axel's interest in science was also bolstered by his father's occupation.

## UPPSALA

In the autumn of 1874 Axel enrolled in the faculty of arts and sciences at Uppsala University with a view to taking a 'medico-philosophical' (pre-medical) degree. This course, which was intended to prepare the student for further medical studies, consisted of four subjects: zoology, botany, chemistry and physics.

While Axel was in Uppsala, major changes occurred within the family in Stockholm. In 1875 Munthe senior disposed of the White Bear. He must have got a good price for the chemist's shop, as later in the year he began dealing in real estate. Fredrik Munthe was thus by now a prosperous man who could afford a decent wedding for Anna, who in June 1875 married Reinhold Norstedt, an artistically gifted person, as talented a singer as he was a painter. In Anna Munthe he met a soulmate, someone just as talented as himself and just as unsure of her artistic identity.

At the beginning of July Axel travelled with his parents to a bathing spa on the south-western coast of Sweden. His cousin Ludvig recalled that uncle Fredrik and Axel kept to themselves most of the time – to 'look after themselves', for 'both of them were poorly'. This is an interesting piece of information, as it is the first indication that Axel's health was not all it should have been. Equally interesting is another glimpse of Axel that Ludvig gives in his memoirs. Among the visitors to the baths were a Mr and Mrs Robertson with their two daughters. The elder was very good-looking but not particularly gifted; the younger, by contrast, was 'ugly and wore a pince-nez, but she was intelligent and quick-witted, so that she attracted a lot of attention from cousin Axel'. Axel was drawn to whatever

was odd and distinctive. Another of Axel's cousins, Fredrik Lund, noted a similar tendency during his years in Uppsala too:

The same predilection for abnormalities and more or less unfortunate cases that he manifested during his childhood animal studies also soon emerged in his choice of companions. Many were the attempts he made to wrench distorted existences into order in one way or another, but I hardly remember a single instance where he succeeded. Nor was this perhaps his ultimate motive. He was drawn to these human curiosities – most of them the butts of his friends' practical jokes and pranks – more from natural, spontaneous fellow-feeling and, above all, an instinctive feel for psychological analysis, than from any hope of being able to set them on the right track.

Student life in Uppsala in the 1870s was admittedly unruly, with celebrations that often degenerated into orgies of drinking. Little is known about Axel's student days, but Fredrik Lund commented that Axel attracted attention with his speeches. According to cousin Fredrik, they gave evidence of his 'mastery of form' but also of his ability to 'call forth out of a momentary mood the best and finest that existed in the depths of young people's sentiments'. When reports of Axel's oratorical achievements reached his parents they were as surprised as they had been by his school-leaving certificate. Axel was 'soon in demand', Fredrik Lund explained:

A large component of this was an unusually agreeable sociability, sensible without pretensions to dazzle, naïve and often quick witted, but most of all he gained popularity within his circle of friends through the absolutely uncalculated practical communism which he constantly practised. His purse, like his heart, stood open for every needy friend, and his good offices were wasted on not always worthy objects.

The portrait may be idealised, but one conclusion can nevertheless be drawn: that Axel must have undergone a metamorphosis since he had left home. Freed from the dominant figure of his father and from his mother's admonitions, he blossomed and revealed sides of his personality that had remained hidden until now.

One example of the tensions between Axel and his father is the dispute about the dog that Axel was so keen to have but which his father refused him. During a visit to Uppsala, Fredrik Munthe reported in a letter to his wife that Axel nagged 'night and day' about 'that blessed dog'. Considering all the coach travel between Uppsala and Stockholm, Axel's father thought that a dog would only be a nuisance: 'I have promised that when he has

taken his degree he can have a dog, for God's sake, but he wants it now, and this is causing a great deal of bother.'

In June 1876 Axel's sister Anna gave birth to a daughter at the Norstedt family's mansion of Lunda. Axel and his parents travelled there in order to be godparents at the christening. The other godparents included Baron Axel von Mecklenburg and his wife Sigrid, with whom Axel now became acquainted; the meeting with the latter would prove to have unexpected and far-reaching consequences for Axel's private life.

Axel passed his pre-med. examinations on 15 September 1876, with mediocre marks. The following day he telegraphed his parents to tell them he had passed his exams, and three days later his brother-in-law Reinhold noted in his diary: 'Axel came up a.m. Had a handsome Lapland puppy with him which he calls Rick, and which he has just got for himself since he passed his degree.' Not many hours had passed after Axel's exam before he acquired the 'blessed dog' that his father had promised him!

Axel planned to undertake further studies in the medical faculty, but he was not well. After his degree examinations he moved back to Stockholm, where he stayed with his parents. He saw quite a lot of Anna and Reinhold. On 30 September Reinhold noted in his diary: 'We spent some time with my parents-in-law p.m. Axel was poorly, he had coughed up blood and is worried about his chest.' And the following day: 'Axel coughed up blood again yesterday evening, but less than before.'

At this time everyone knew what this meant: possible tuberculosis. The situation was serious and something had to be done; it was decided that Axel should spend the coming winter in a milder climate. On 30 October Reinhold noted in his diary: 'Anna at my in-laws between 7 and 8 in the morning to say goodbye to Axel. I went with them to the station to meet the morning express, where I took my leave of him.'

Here begins the story of Axel Munthe, a weak-chested young man who on the 30 October 1876 – the day before his nineteenth birthday – boarded the morning express train at Stockholm's Central Station to set out on his journey to the south.

The journey back would take sixty-seven years.

## A RUIN STRUCK BY AN EARTHQUAKE

What was Axel thinking when he left Stockholm and Sweden behind him? How did he regard his childhood, his parents? As a source-book, *The Story of San Michele* is a quagmire, but as far as the depiction of his father is concerned there is good cause to take the author seriously, especially as this is backed up by other material. In the chapter 'Lapland', Axel, in a

dream, asks a goblin to tell him about his father, as he remembers so little about him: 'Your father was a strange man,' the goblin explains, 'sombre and silent. He was kind to all the poor and to all animals, but seemed often hard to those around him.'

Axel often got a thrashing, but he was 'a difficult child'. He obeyed nobody and seemed not to care about his father, his mother, his sister or brother or anyone else for that matter. The only person he was fond of was his nurse Lena. 'Most of your troubles', the goblin continued, 'had to do with your animals':

Your room was full of all sorts of animals, you even slept with them in your bed. Don't you remember how mercilessly you were flogged for lying on eggs? Every bird's egg you could get hold of you used to try to hatch out in your bed. Of course a small child cannot keep awake, every morning your bed was all in a mess with smashed eggs and every morning you were flogged for it but nothing helped. Don't you remember the evening your parents came home late from a house-party and found your sister in her nightgown sitting on the table under an umbrella screaming with terror? All your animals had escaped from your room, a bat had caught her claw in your sister's hair, all your snakes, toads and rats were crawling about on the floor and in your own bed they found a whole litter of mice. Your father gave you a tremendous thrashing, you flew at him and bit your own father in the hand. The next day you stole out of the house at daybreak after breaking into the pantry in the night to fill your knapsack with what eatables you could lay hands on, and smashing your sister's money-box and stealing all her savings – you never had any savings of your own. The whole day and the whole night all the servants were hunting for you in vain. At last your father who had galloped off to the village to speak to the police found you fast asleep in the snow by the roadside, your dog had barked as he rode past. I overheard your father's hunter telling the other horses in the stable how your father lifted you up in the saddle without saying a word and rode home with you and locked you up in a dark room on bread and water for two days and nights. On the third day you were taken to your father's room, he asked you why you had stolen out of the house. You said you were misunderstood by everybody in the house and wanted to emigrate to America.

Then there follows a distressing account that testifies to a total lack of understanding between parents and child:

But the worst of all happened during your summer holidays when the housemaid found a human skull under your bed, a skull with a tuft of red hair still hanging onto the back of the head. The whole house was in commotion. Your mother fainted and your father gave you the severest thrashing you had ever had so far and you were again locked up in a

dark room on water and bread. It was discovered that the night before you had ridden on your pony to the village churchyard, had broken into the charnel house and stolen the skull from a heap of bones deposited in the cellar. The parson who had been the headmaster of a boys' school told your father that it was an unheard-of thing that a boy of ten should have committed such an atrocious sin against God and man. Your mother, who was a very pious woman, never got over it. She seemed almost afraid of you, and she was not the only one. She said she could not understand that she could have given birth to such a monster. Your father said that surely you had not been begotten by him but by the devil himself.

'But is all this really true what you have told me about my childhood?' Axel asks the goblin, and exclaims: 'I must have been a strange child!'

Although this account contains obvious elements of fiction, everything points to the fact that the dark description of his father and his own childhood reflected actual conditions. In a conversation with a woman friend as early as 1887, he complained that his home had been 'a ruin struck by an earthquake'.

We can only guess what kind of an 'earthquake' Axel was referring to, but there is no reason to believe that the choice of words was just an empty rhetorical figure. He wrote in a letter that his father cast 'a shadow' over the whole of his childhood and youth as a result of his 'despondency' and his 'love for solitude'. Axel added, he had 'nothing to do with his mother, and it was all the worse for me'.

Fredrik Munthe had a rich and complex personality. On the one hand he was a 'great humorist with a keen eye for the changing times', who enjoyed making music and singing. On the other hand he was an enterprising, practical handyman who at the drop of a hat would change the lock on the hall door, mend leaking windows, speculate in property, and much more besides. Photographs of him convey the impression of a man of decision, an impression that is borne out by those who knew him. 'From having been, in his young days, decidedly lively, and, as a not uncommon consequence of this, occasionally impetuous, in later years his mood seemed somewhat irascible.'

Given that this assessment comes from a nephew, it should be regarded rather as a euphemism. Fredrik Munthe was a self-made man, and saw this as a virtue. He was also relatively advanced in years – 41 years old – when Axel was born, and his health was poor. He suffered from a hernia and a kidney ailment that he tried to treat with repeated visits to health spas. This undoubtedly added to his intolerance, not least as regards his youngest son's dreamy and imaginative disposition.

Axel, in his turn, was an over-sensitive child who felt himself to be strange and odd, and his father to be unreasonably strict. His father reacted

as one might have expected to Axel's attempts to break free – with verbal and physical abuse. Although Axel's deeply pious mother is described as 'a humorous personality', she was also a woman 'of a prosaic disposition' who failed to understand her creative son. In the give and take of married life she was undoubtedly the weaker party and had little to set against her harsh and domineering husband. The result was that Axel took refuge in his own world. He recalled later that as a boy he had been 'uncommunicative, odd and not well liked'. A common factor in all his interests – music, sailing, nature and animals – is that they all made possible a flight into a world where he was not dependent on others.

When, in adult life, Axel wished to describe people in his immediate surroundings in a positive way, he always did this with exactly the same phrase: 'They are so kind to me' – which suggests that 'kindness' was in rather short supply in his childhood home. This sensitivity to signs of goodwill no doubt originated in his father's strictness and lack of understanding for his talent. One result of this was Axel's lifelong endeavour to be seen and acknowledged.

Despite the differences between father and son there were also traits – both positive and negative – which they shared, and which in Axel's case would be accentuated with the passing years: on the one side humour, musicality and a lively temperament; on the other, restlessness, nervousness, volatility and impetuosity, melancholy and insomnia. When Axel says to the goblin that he has no peace, that he cannot stay anywhere, cannot forget and cannot sleep, the latter replies: 'That is just like your father. How often have I watched him wandering up and down in his room the whole night!'

# DOCTOR MUNTHE



Are you mad? You owe me nothing!

*Axel Munthe to Ville Vallgren*

**A**XEL LEFT SWEDEN just in time for the spa season, which began on 1 November. The destination was Menton by the French–Italian border, a popular health resort for tubercular north Europeans. During his stay there Axel became acquainted with Amadée Courty, a gynaecology professor who took him under his wing. Courty was director of the surgical clinic at the Hôtel-Dieu Saint-Eloi in Montpellier and editor of the journal *Annales de Gynécologie*. He persuaded Axel to enrol in the medical faculty at Montpellier, one of the oldest and best in France, with origins in the twelfth century; Rabelais, among others, had studied there. Like Menton, Montpellier had a favourable climate.

Axel was extremely reticent about his years of study in Montpellier. When in 1883 his cousin Ludvig asked him for information to be included in his history of the family, Axel dictated the details to him: ‘I earnestly beg you that, as far as my professors at Montpellier are concerned, you write only “Studied physiology under Prof. Rouget (now Claude Bernard’s successor in Paris), surgery under Prof. Dubrueil and gynaecology under Prof. Courty.” Not a word more! *S’il vous plaît.*’ One has to ask oneself why Axel was so concerned to present his studies in exactly these words. Did he have something to hide? Was he involved in a dispute with someone? It is not improbable. As we shall see, Axel’s relations with his medical colleagues were often filled with conflict.

However little we know about Axel’s first time abroad, one thing is certain: some time before the New Year of 1877 he visited Capri for the first time. Why, and in what circumstances, is unknown, but in a letter of December 1888 he stated that his first visit to the island had taken place twelve years earlier. There is a picture of Axel taken in a photographer’s studio in Naples, perhaps during his first stay in those parts: a young boy in pince-nez and a slouch hat. It is as if he had wanted to immortalise the moment – his first encounter with the Bay of Naples.

The Mediterranean culture was no doubt a revelation to Axel, unexpected and shocking – as for most northerners when they are first confronted with the south. The last hundred years had seen a veritable cult of Italy emerge in northern Europe, thanks to Goethe's *Italian Journey* and *Roman Elegies* and travelogues like Ferdinand Gregorovius's *Wanderjahre in Italien*. In Axel's case the first acquaintance would ripen into a love affair that he celebrated from his first published line to his last.

Axel's first period of study at Montpellier was over by the beginning of June 1877, when he travelled home to Sweden for the summer. He was said to be looking 'pretty healthy' – as opposed to his father, who after Axel's departure for France had been afflicted by stomach cancer, and in addition was ill with rheumatic fever during the winter. Axel remained in Sweden during the first part of September, but on the 17th Reinhold and Anna received an ominous message from her parents: 'Axel returning to Montpellier. Has not been feeling well.' The illness still had its claws in him.

On 6 November Fredrik Munthe died. There is no evidence that Axel was told in time to get to Stockholm for the funeral on the 14th. His father was 61 at the time of his death, but judging from photographs he was prematurely aged. He left a considerable fortune, corresponding to about 4.5 million kronor in today's money (£330,000). His widow remained in undisturbed possession of the estate, but Axel borrowed money from it to finance his stay abroad and his studies.

## SWEDISH PRUSSIANS

Axel's stay in France coincided with the great migration of Swedish artists to Paris in the 1870s. The young painters were stifled by the stale atmosphere in Sweden, where artistic life was dominated by historical painting and a generally conservative academic taste. They made their way abroad, to the leading contemporary art centres of Düsseldorf and – above all – Paris. It was in France that landscape painting developed, it was there that the battle over the new art was taking place. By 1878 no fewer than thirty-one Swedish artists were earning their living in Paris, among them painters who were later to become famous, like Carl Larsson and Ernst Josephson. That same year, Reinhold and Anna joined the Paris Swedes. Reinhold studied painting and also taught himself etching. Anna took lessons in painting too. Now the singer Reinhold Norstedt and his wife Anna became painters in earnest.

Less than a decade had passed since the Franco-Prussian War and Paris was still scarred by the conflict. The Tuileries and the Hôtel-de-Ville lay

in ruins and a widespread hatred of the Germans pervaded the country. To a French ear the Scandinavian languages sounded suspiciously like German, and Scandinavians were careful not to say *ja* or other words with a Germanic tinge. *Prussiens* – Prussians – was a term of abuse that was often hurled at them nevertheless, a fact that Axel would later enshrine in literary terms in ‘The Giant’, one of the most hilarious chapters in *The Story of San Michele*, where drunken Swedes are thrown out of a pub, accused of being ‘German savages’.

Most of the artists lived in Montmartre, where they also had their favourite haunts. The Café de l’Ermitage was situated on Boulevard de Clichy, and on the other side of the boulevard, on the corner with Rue des Martyrs, was the Restaurant des Lilas – usually known as ‘The Corner’. This was where they took their meals and played cards and billiards, and it also served as their postal address.

Axel soon won himself a place in the gang through the agency of Reinhold and Anna and their contacts, but also thanks to his own social skills, not least his singing and music-making. The Finnish sculptor Ville Vallgren remembered Axel’s tuneful voice: ‘When he sat down at the piano [. . .] and sang Swedish and Italian melodies in his attractive light baritone, women and men alike had tears in their eyes.’ His constant companion was Puck, a Great Dane which he had obtained during his very first months in France.

On 17 June 1879 Anna and Reinhold travelled to Sweden for the summer, and two months later Axel was in Stockholm himself. On 14 August Reinhold wrote in his diary: ‘Heard in a letter from mother-in-law that Axel had arrived and that he has completed his studies and is a fully-fledged doctor.’

It is an astounding piece of news – Axel was a ‘fully-fledged doctor’ after only five terms’ study at Montpellier! He had certainly shown proof of his learning capacity on a previous occasion, when he had swotted for his school-leaving certificate in a few months – but a medical degree, after five terms? If the information is correct, it is yet another confirmation of the exceptional powers of study that Axel could mobilise at will. Considering that his studies were carried out in a foreign language, his achievement must be regarded as remarkable.

In October Axel was back at Montpellier. From there he reported that he seemed about to get more work at the Hôtel-Dieu than he could ever have dreamed of, but that he was quite content with that. Professor Dubrueil, ‘who was to have the grey monster’ (Puck, the dog), had left, and the responsibility had devolved onto a 12-year-old patient.

The comment about Professor Dubrueil and Puck is remarkable. If the famous professor looked after Axel’s dog – and Axel allowed him to do so

– then there must have been a strong relationship of trust between them. Probably Dubrueil, like so many other people, had been captivated by Axel’s charm and talent. As we shall see, there were several elderly gentlemen of good position in society who were charmed by Axel and who by their support and encouragement would come to play an important role in his career. One does not need to be a professional psychologist to see here a father–son relationship at work that replaced the original one.

Axel could not take Puck with him to work, but during his long wanderings in Italy the dog was always by his side. Fredrik Lund recounts an episode that must have taken place sometime before 1880 (when it is referred to for the first time). During a stay in Taormina Axel and Puck went out one day to look for the robber chieftain Leone and his gang:

He did not find the robbers, but they found him and, despite Puck’s protests, they took him off to their hiding-place up in the mountains. Luckily the gang had just had a brush with the militia and had many wounded men among them, besides which their grim leader, Leone, had been taken prisoner. Munthe’s medical knowledge came in useful here – he plastered arms and legs, extracted bullets, sewed up gashes and became a close friend of the Gunelli brothers, Leone’s adjutants, whom he declared to be complete gentlemen who at least understood the art of living, even if their education in good manners had not stretched so far as the art of allowing others to live.

Things may not have happened in quite this way, but that is not the important thing. The most interesting feature of this ‘Munthe tale’ is that it is so early. It shows that the desire for adventure that was so typical of Axel was already fully developed during his years of study in France – and that he was already famous for this.

## I AM NOT HERE TO SING YOUR PRAISES!

On 10 April 1880 Aurora Munthe departed this life, having just celebrated her sixty-first birthday. Axel was not notified of his mother’s death until two weeks later, but it is uncertain whether he would have gone to Stockholm even if he had been told in time; when word reached him he was wholly taken up with work on his doctoral thesis. After passing his preliminary degree in Montpellier, Axel completed his studies in Paris in the spring of 1880. He lived in a student lodging in the Hôtel de l’Avenir on Rue Madame, not far from the École de Médecine on Boulevard Saint-Germain. During the day he practised in the wards and at night he smoked copious amounts of cigarettes, reading Charcot’s *Maladies*, Troussaux’s *Clinique de l’Hôtel Dieu* and other text books.

Mornings in the wards of La Salpêtrière and Hôtel-Dieu and La Pitié, going from bed to bed to read chapters in the book of human suffering, written with blood and tears. Afternoons in the dissecting rooms and amphitheatres of L'École de Médecine or the laboratories of the Institut Pasteur, watching in the microscope with wondrous eyes the mystery of the unseen world, the infinitely small beings, arbiters of the life and death of man. Nights of vigil in the Hôtel de l'Avenir, precious nights of toil to master the hard facts, the classical signs of disorder and disease collected and sifted by observers from all lands, so necessary and so insufficient for the making of a doctor. Work! Work! Work!

The account comes from *The Story of San Michele*; no documentation from his period of study in Paris has been preserved.

On 2 August 1880 Axel defended his doctoral thesis. It was on a gynaecological topic: *Prophylaxie et traitement des hémorragies post-partum* – ‘On bleeding from the womb after childbirth’, in Axel’s own translation. The chairman of the degree-awarding panel was Professor Depaul of the Paris maternity clinic; by his side sat Charles Richet, professor of physiology, author, inventor and later Nobel prize-winner for medicine, and Professor Jean Martin Charcot, nerve specialist at the Salpêtrière.

On the title page of the thesis it is clearly stated that the author was born in Sweden on 31 October 1857, a piece of information that was in no way accidental. It was an era marked by patriotic sentiments, and the disputation began with a nationalistically tinged attack on Axel, which his cousin Ludvig Munthe preserved for posterity:

The president launched into a bitter critique of the respondent and his thesis, a critique which characteristically enough was mostly concerned with the fact that ‘when the author had sought the honour of being created a doctor in the famous faculty in Paris, he nevertheless seems to have despised the medical authorities in France, some of whom wrote in the field of gynaecology, and some of whom were even present here. Instead, he had cited Germans, like Spiegelberg and Scanzoni!’ [. . .] [The young respondent] answered that if he had suspected that politics would constitute an important part of these scientific proceedings, then he would certainly not have omitted to include in his thesis on a branch of the art of obstetrics a declaration of political allegiance. Moreover, he would not shirk such a task even now, if such a declaration might contribute to deciding the correct method of handling the medical procedure in question. If the aforesaid authorities from Germany, whom he maintained were the most eminent living at the present time, were so unknown in this circle, that was something that he could only deplore, but this did not give him the right – nor did it imply any duty – to ignore them and, at the cost of the truth, praise only the French scholars whose importance, by the

way, he would be the first to respectfully acknowledge. [. . .] However, the panel moved on at last from this type of comment to a more meticulous scrutiny of the work itself, which in the end, like its author's defence, received the most unstinting acknowledgement.

Axel's other cousin, Fredrik Lund, adds that 'the respondent [. . .] was so annoyed that, forgetting all academic decorum, he climbed straight up to the podium and began his reply with a declaration which was from an objective viewpoint totally justified but in form rather blunt: "*Messieurs, je ne suis pas ici pour chanter vos éloges!*" (Gentlemen, I am not here to sing your praises!)'.

One of Axel Munthe's defining characteristics was his tendency, in all kinds of situations, to speak his mind. It was a basic character trait that won him respect and friendship, but also gained him bitter enemies. In reality, Axel's obstinacy did not confine itself to citing German authorities: he also maintained that French methods of delivering babies were out-of-date and recommended instead a method named after the Leipzig professor of obstetrics, Credé – this had been put into practice in Germany, Austria, Britain and the Scandinavian countries, and had been proven to lead to fewer haemorrhages.

'I was the youngest Doctor in France when I defended my thesis,' he wrote several years later to his cousin Ludvig, 'which the old boys threw in my face as if it made my reckless behaviour during my disputation all the more shocking in their eyes.' The thesis was Axel's first published work. Although it was a publication with scientific pretensions, he found it difficult to keep his refractory ego in check. When he talks in the foreword about the danger that haemorrhages in childbirth pose for the mother, it is not so much the researcher's voice we hear as that of the daredevil doctor – and author:

Within the art of medicine there are hardly any instances which demand a greater combination of dexterity, cold-bloodedness and energy. It is not like in surgical interventions, where one can stand beside the patient calmly investigating his state of health, anticipate different eventualities, consider the complications which may occur and prepare oneself to combat them. In the case of a haemorrhage in childbirth one is suddenly faced with a life-threatening danger. Here, it is first and foremost a question of acting quickly if one wishes to succeed. One knows very well that the slightest hesitation, the slightest doubt, can lead to the woman's death. One also knows that one is usually the only person answerable. For our art is powerful in those cases we are discussing. The results achieved do not belong to those doubtful outcomes which our science so abounds in, and which an honourable person will wish to have nothing to do with.

Here, even the most sceptical of doctors still knows that his art is the art of curing, and that there really are cases where he has the right to say to himself: I have saved a life.

Axel's boldness and fighting spirit reflect the general development within medical science during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s and 1880s great medical breakthroughs were being made. In the same year that Axel defended his thesis, Louis Pasteur began his studies on rabies, and five years later a vaccine was tried out for the first time on a human being. The first successful operation on a gastric ulcer was performed in 1881; the first operation to remove a gallstone was carried out the following year; the first operation on an appendix in 1886; and the first electrocardiogram was in 1887. Cures for consumption and cholera were on the way. It was an epoch redolent of optimism and belief in progress.

Axel had already run through the greater part of his inheritance from his father, and his thesis had been printed with the help of money sent from Stockholm. But there was still some money left, and a week after Axel had defended his thesis he wrote to the notary in Stockholm to ask for the last of it. He needed to buy surgical instruments. The letter had the desired effect and Axel was allowed to draw out 1,002 kronor, which supposedly was the whole remaining amount due to him.

In the letter to the notary, who was an old friend of the family, Axel informed him that he had an offer to accompany one of the leading families in Paris to Italy, 'perhaps to Egypt', as their private physician. 'If things turn serious in the Orient,' he added, 'I'll apply to the Red Cross as a field-surgeon and will in that case travel down there from Italy, and then at all events I can't arrive completely empty-handed.'

What Axel did not mention was that he had become acquainted with a Swedish girl, Ultima Hornberg, born in 1861, the daughter of a chemist. She and Axel seem to have met in the summer of 1880, when Ultima was studying art in Paris. His secretiveness is not surprising. Why should he disclose his dealings with the opposite sex to an old codger in Stockholm, especially as he was asking for money? However, his silence about the relationship with Ultima is symptomatic, and part of a pattern that became clearer still with time. In his letters, Axel hardly ever names the women who surround him. In this particular case it might be thought rather remarkable, however, as three months later he and Ultima would become husband and wife.

In the run-up to the wedding Axel travelled to Naples with the French family and spent the autumn on Capri. In November he returned to Paris, where he celebrated his stag night with his artist friends. At the theatre and dance hall Elysée Mont Martre they misbehaved loudly in Swedish to

such an extent that they were shown the door, suspected of being Germans. Axel had two gold watches on him, his own and another that he was going to give to his bride. The whole company ended up in jail, with Axel under suspicion of being a pickpocket. They were set free, however, presumably after the intervention of the Swedish legation.\*

The wedding took place in Stockholm on 24 November 1880. The guests consisted mainly of the bridegroom's artist friends, including, among others, Carl Larsson. Axel's speech of thanks was by all accounts an object lesson in eloquence. Among other things he described how, as a child, he had believed that all married couples had the same date of birth, as his own parents always celebrated their birthday together (in actual fact his mother was born on 16 March and his father on the 17th). He had therefore often brooded over how he was going to meet a girl who, like himself, was born on the last day of October.

After the wedding Axel and Puck returned to Capri, this time with Ultima. But it was not a honeymoon. It was instead Axel's health problems that necessitated the stay in southern climes.

In March 1881 Axel travelled over to Ischia to lend his assistance in the aftermath of the earthquake that had devastated Capri's neighbouring island. In the spring a typhus epidemic broke out on Capri; Axel worked as a volunteer doctor but fell victim to the fever himself. 'Axel fell ill last week with typhoid fever,' Ultima wrote on 7 April in a letter to Axel's cousin Ludvig in Stockholm. 'He is certainly on the road to recovery now, but is still frail and will be so for a long time yet.'

It was during this first lengthy stay on Capri that Axel laid the groundwork of his popularity with the people of the island, who with the passing of the years would come to look on him as something of a saint. By 1881 the population was 4,848, of whom 2,827 lived in the island's lower town, Capri, and 2,021 in the upper town, Anacapri. There was no health-care to speak of, and only three doctors on the whole island. Axel's efforts were accordingly very welcome, particularly as he did not charge his patients.

When his artist friend Carl Skånberg visited Italy that same winter in an attempt to cure his asthma, he bumped into Axel: 'I met Munthe on my last day in Naples,' he reported to their mutual friend, the artist Johan Ericson. 'He pretended not to notice me, told me a bunch of anecdotes and was actually quite refreshing. He'll go far in future – devil take the fellow, he'll definitely wear an Italian ribbon one day.'

---

\* In *The Story of San Michele* – the chapter entitled 'The Giant' – this story is transferred to Ville Vallgren's wedding in 1882, which is logical, given that Axel portrays himself in the book as unmarried.

Skånberg was right. Axel's contributions were noted in official circles, and in 1882 he was appointed a Knight of the Italian Order of the Crown.

## HIS EXCELLENCY GEORG SIBBERN

In the summer of 1881 the Munthe family – Axel, Puck and Ultima – settled in Paris for good. Their first home was at 5 rue de Thann by the fashionable Parc Monceau, in the midst of the new middle-class Paris that was emerging from Baron Haussmann's city plan. The building was only two years old, and the apartment a large one. The choice of address indicates that Axel was aiming high. Certainly he was a French doctor, but he had only lived for short periods in the French capital and his circle of acquaintances consisted mainly of Swedes and other Scandinavians. Now that he planned to make his living as a doctor, he had to expand his clientele, and the choice of address was an important ingredient in this endeavour. His initial capital came in the form of a promissory note from Arnold for 2,000 kronor, around £7,500 in today's money. As already mentioned, Axel had already run through his inheritance.

Sometime around the New Year, Axel wrote a letter to his Norwegian relative, Bredo von Munthe af Morgenstjerne, whom he had met several years earlier in Rome. Axel's main purpose with the letter was to ask a favour. Bredo's maternal uncle Georg Sibbern was none other than Sweden–Norway's ambassador to Paris and someone whom Axel was keen to meet. Georg Sibbern (1816–1901) was one of Norway's leading statesmen and diplomats. His postings included St Petersburg, Copenhagen, London, Washington and Constantinople before he became premier of Norway in 1858; his last post was as minister in Paris from 1878. He was married to an Englishwoman, Maria Soane, paternal granddaughter of one of England's leading architects, Sir John Soane.

Axel was received by Sibbern and one month later he came in his professional capacity to check His Excellency's heart; after this his visits became more and more frequent. The Sibberns seem to have fallen for Axel's charm, and the elderly diplomatic couple – aged 65 and 66 respectively – and the young doctor and his wife – he 24, she 21 – soon began to meet on a social basis. From March onwards Axel visited the Sibberns several times a week.

The relationship between Sibbern and Axel had clear parallels to that between father and son, and Axel himself explained that the ministerial couple treated him as if he had been 'their own son'. 'They are', Axel wrote, 'so kind' to himself and Ultima; Sibbern is 'a man of honour from head to toe and his wife is one of the kindest people I have ever seen – my wife

is often invited out to drive with her and she is so extraordinarily kind towards my child-wife’.

From the very beginning of their acquaintance Sibbern and Axel had long discussions about the latter’s ‘occupation as a physician’. Axel saw the doctor’s job as a calling and found it difficult to accept payment for his services. When Mrs Sibbern wanted to give him a fee of 1,000 francs (approximately £2000 in today’s money) he refused to accept it, but Sibbern tried to persuade him that he needed something to live on, like everybody else. Until this point Axel seems to have subsisted mainly on inherited money and bills of exchange. After much hesitation Axel decided to accept the money.

Sibbern had for several years been in the habit of spending a few weeks in the summer at the spa of Bad Schwalbach, near Wiesbaden, and as early as this first summer of their friendship, Axel accompanied him there as his personal physician. Life in the spa was strictly regulated. Every morning one took the same stroll, drank the prescribed number of glasses of Weinbrunnen and Stahlbrunnen, took one’s bath, ate one’s meals and drank one’s coffee at set hours of the day. Axel and Sibbern were together during all the waking hours.

## THE ARTISTS’ DOCTOR

Even though Axel assiduously cultivated Sibbern and other diplomats, this reflected only one side of his character and identity. Now that he was permanently resident in Paris, he also started seeing a lot more of the Swedish artists, who were ‘as proud as could be of their fellow-countryman who had taken his doctor’s degree in the French medical faculty’. All of them were in Paris to further their careers, and here was one who had enjoyed unprecedented success! Axel was a frequent visitor in these circles, both in Paris and in the painters’ colony of Barbizon in the Fontainebleau forest, where he and Ultima used to go at the weekends. Ville Vallgren left the following portrait of him from this period: ‘Doctor Munthe was a tall, slender, stately man with moustaches and a short goatee. He wore blue-tinted spectacles as he suffered from weak eyes. The most distinctive thing about him was his sympathetic manner. Wherever he went, one felt a sympathetic warmth radiate from his noble personality. So it was no wonder that he made so many friends.’

Another, painterly, portrait was signed by Ernst Josephson, whom Munthe treated for syphilis. According to Axel, it was painted in 1881 or 1882 while he was staying in Barbizon. Its value resides not least in the fact that Axel, throughout his life, harboured a strong distaste for

being portrayed, either on canvas or on photographic paper. Apart from Josephson's painting there are only a few photographs of him that can be dated to this period. In Josephson's picture we see a pale-faced young man with sensitive features. One lens of his spectacles is frosted. His right eye had been damaged by a severe bout of scarlet fever in childhood, and his sight was adversely affected.

The artists' high regard for Axel depended in turn not only on his social skills but also on the fact that, like his Swedish colleague in the medical profession in Paris, Dr Gustaf Norström, he refused to accept payment for his services. 'If any of us artists were ill we always went to Munthe,' remembered Ville Vallgren. 'Not only would he never take any money from us; he would stuff 20 francs into our pockets. If it happened later that we artist-slaves came up with the idea of paying him, he would say: "Are you mad? You owe me nothing!"' A similar story is told by Carl Larsson.



# LETTERS FROM NAPLES



Better to be Don Quixote than Hamlet! Better to be the self-sacrificing fool who battles against the sails of the windmills than the inert doubter who lives off his own melancholy.

*Queen Elizabeth of Romania to Princess Stéphanie*

**T**HE YEAR 1884 began with Axel being appointed a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur: a symbolic prelude to a year that would bring a significant change in his life, the year in which he would gain yet another identity – that of an author. But before this, another important event took place. In the summer of 1884 Georg Sibbern retired, left his post as Swedish–Norwegian minister in Paris and settled in Stockholm. He was accompanied to Stockholm by Ultima and Axel, who was caring for the increasingly frail Mrs Sibbern.

On 3 August 1884 Axel went to Lunda. He travelled alone, Ultima remaining in Stockholm with the Sibberns. The manor house of Lunda had been in the Norstedt family's possession since the beginning of the nineteenth century and now belonged to Axel's brother-in-law Reinhold. The Norstedt family's musical talents made Lunda a centre of social life in the area. The guests included Sigrid von Aken and her husband, Baron Axel von Mecklenburg from the nearby estate of Högsjö.

Sigrid von Mecklenburg had been born in 1852 and was twelve years younger than her husband, a chamberlain who was 'quite fat' and 'an exceptionally jovial character', but only ten years older than her children's tutor, the young writer Tor Hedberg, who was afflicted by unhappy – and unrequited – feelings of love for her.

The baroness's coolness towards the inhibited and charmless Tor Hedberg was not because she saved her feelings for the baron – the marriage was not a happy one. The person who had captured her heart was Axel Munthe, who seems already to have fallen in love with her on the first occasions when he stayed at Lunda and Högsjö, when he was 20 and she was 25. They saw each other again during his repeated summer stays – but it is only now, in August 1884, that their romance stands out.

In a letter to his parents, Hedberg described Sigrid as ‘a bit haughty at first but that disappeared on closer inspection, and she now appears to be very amiable. As regards her outward appearance, I can tell you that she is very sweet and pretty.’ What struck Hedberg as ‘haughtiness’ might very well have been an expression of other facets of Sigrid von Mecklenburg, who was said to be ‘rather taciturn and reserved’, ‘religious and serious, with a rather gloomy temperament’. After a few weeks, however, Hedberg’s impression of the baroness was wholly positive, he called her ‘a very amiable and loveable woman’ and claimed to be very fond of her.

Apparently, Axel had married Ultima in the hope that he could thereby forget his feelings for Sigrid, but this had not worked. After little more than a week with his sister and brother-in-law at Lunda Axel went on to Högsjö where he stayed for two weeks. The number of letters and telegrams that were exchanged between Axel and Sibbern during his absence from Stockholm demonstrates that Axel’s feelings for Sigrid were as strong as ever. The untenable nature of his relationship with Ultima was remorselessly exposed, and he underwent a severe emotional crisis. The care that the Sibberns lavished on Ultima during Axel’s absence also bears witness to the problems in her marriage.

On 26 August Axel returned to Stockholm, but after only three weeks he was back at Högsjö. Before this second visit Sibbern noted in his diary that Axel was in ‘a troubled mood’ and that he and his wife were ‘worried [. . .] about Dr Munthe’.

Axel left Högsjö on 29 September, but carried Sigrid von Mecklenburg with him in his heart; their paths would cross again. His next stop was Paris.

## CHOLERA ASIATICA

During his stay in Sweden Axel could read almost daily reports in the biggest Stockholm newspaper, *Stockholms Dagblad*, about the cholera epidemic that had broken out in southern Europe and had cost thousands of lives.

The epidemic variant of cholera, an infectious disease with its roots in India, is called *cholera asiatica*. Despite several epidemics during the eighteenth century, it was not until 1817 that the disease spread beyond its area of origin. A few years later it reached Astrakhan, on the Caspian Sea. The next epidemic, in 1831, affected most countries in Europe. During the next few decades Europe was hit time and time again. In the 1870s it seemed that cholera had been pushed back into its original homeland, but in June 1884 it emerged that cholera had again reached Europe.

The infection is spread via drinking-water, food and clothes soiled by excrement. Therefore it is easily passed on by people on the move. The disease has a speedy course that consists of a high fever, violent fits of vomiting and diarrhoea, which dehydrate the sufferer; death often ensues after only a few hours. Cholera was a deeply undemocratic illness; it thrived best in unhealthy slums and undernourished stomachs. In better-nourished people, the virus was destroyed by the stomach juices.

The cause of the contagion itself, *vibrio cholerae*, the 'cholera bacillus', was discovered in 1883 by the German physician Robert Koch (who the previous year had established that the cause of tuberculosis lay in the tubercle bacillus, a discovery that won him the 1905 Nobel Prize for medicine). It was in the course of a study trip to Egypt that he came across the cholera bacterium, yet he could not prove scientifically that *vibrio cholerae* was the cause of the illness and not just something that arose in its wake. This uncertainty led to strongly divergent views on methods of treatment, not to mention that in any case many French doctors refused to accept a German scientist's discovery. Mutual animosity and rivalry were still strong after the war of 1870–71. This time, in the summer of 1884, the epidemic was believed to have been carried to Toulon by a French warship, from where it soon spread to Marseilles. The first cases in the north Italian town of La Spezia were reported at the end of July.

When Axel opened his *Stockholms Dagblad* on 1 September he would have read, under the heading 'Cholera', that the epidemic had claimed its first victims in Naples: three people had fallen ill and two had died. Two days later, the daily toll of sick and dead in Naples was 122 and sixty-nine respectively, which accounted for more than half of all the cases in the whole of Italy. Naples was the epicentre of the cholera. Panic spread quickly among the illiterate and superstitious population, along with rumours – for instance, that doctors were being paid for each dead cholera patient and that they would receive a pension when the total reached 1,000. There were violent incidents and frequent outrages of various kinds.

On 8 September, barely a week after the first verified cases, the daily totals of sick and dead were 653 and 310 respectively; the following day it was 750 and 446, the day after that 966 and 474 – eighty per cent of all the cases in Italy! King Umberto defied his advisers and visited the newly established cholera hospitals and the most afflicted areas. The cholera now reached its peak and the masses were gripped by 'a frantic fear and despair'. According to the 18 September edition of the newspaper, they had an 'inborn antipathy towards medical care and the ordinances of the modern state', which evoked 'a wild ferment, a general madness which turned against doctors and police, against all authority'.