

JESSICA HAYMAN
STEVEN LAWLEY

THE GIRL WITH THE FLAXEN HAIR

and other stories



The right of Jessica Hayman and Steven Lawley to be identified as the Authors of the Work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

© Jessica Hayman and Steven Lawley 2022

Published by
Jelly Bean Books
Mackintosh House
136 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 1DJ
www.candyjarbooks.co.uk

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted at any time or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the copyright holder. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

Excerpt

The Hills of Anacapri

Comme un feu couvant

A woman is sitting in a train compartment. A man in late middle age enters. He is wearing dark glasses and is followed by a younger man who directs him by the elbow to his seat.

‘Good morning, madam,’ says the young man. ‘My father here is travelling to Stockholm. He’s blind and normally I would accompany him, but I need to stay in Hallsberg for business. Would you be able to help him if he needs anything on the journey? How far are you going?’

‘Yes, I’d be happy to help,’ she replies. ‘Luckily I’m also going to Stockholm, so I can stay with him all the way.’

‘That’s very kind of you. Someone will be at the station to meet him, but I’m worried about his

eye-drops. They are in an ampule inside this container and must be administered in about an hour's time, otherwise his eyes will become very painful.'

'I can put them in myself,' says the father.

'Yes, but you might need help opening the container,' says his son. He turns to the woman. 'I'd be very grateful if you could open it for him if necessary.'

'Yes, I'd be glad to. Just leave it on the table between us and I'll open it in an hour or so.'

'Many thanks, that's a great relief.'

The young man says goodbye and leaves the train, which then pulls out of the station. The father nods off, while the woman reads.

After about forty-five minutes the man wakes up. 'Let me introduce myself,' he says. 'My name is Axel Munthe and I am a doctor.'

'You are an author as well, aren't you? Didn't you write *The Story of San Michele*?'

'Oh yes,' he says. 'Do you know it?'

'Yes, I read it a few years ago.'

He waits expectantly.

'I was rather interested in your housekeeper, Mamsell Agata, actually,' she continues.

'Oh, really? How surprising.'

'You obviously loathed her.'

'Yes, dreadful woman, she terrorised everyone.'

'She must have had quite a time keeping the house clean, with all those animals running around.'

'I suppose so, but as you will know from the book, she scrubbed everything so much that she ruined half the furniture. Bloody woman was always clearing up.'

'Wasn't it her job to clear up?'

'Yes, it was, but not to clear up like that. It drove me mad. And she made me feel as if I didn't have the right to be in my own home. That time when I got mixed up in a fight and got my clothes in a mess, you would have thought I'd committed some terrible crime. All I did was hand her the stuff to clean and mend.'

'You liked her cooking, though, didn't you? The way she made coffee, especially. I think you said 'Nobody makes coffee like Mamsell Agata', or something like that.'

'Yes, the coffee and the cooking were good, but

they hardly made up for all the other stuff. She used to listen behind the door of my consulting room whenever I had any female patients. And she stank to high heaven. It was terrible.'

'It must have been pure torture for you. I imagine that smell must still linger in your mind.'

'Yes, it does. I've never smelt it before or since, except, as I said in the book, in a tomb in the Valley of the Kings which was full of bats.'

They sit in silence for a while.

'How strange,' she says. 'I would have thought you'd recognise me by the smell, in that case, even though you can't see. I certainly recognise you. I am the person you used to call Mamsell Agata. The one you said was like a mongoose.'

He coughs. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, of course I'm sure.'

'Oh.' He shifts uncomfortably. 'Well, maybe I did exaggerate a bit but everyone knew that; all the reviews said I was exaggerating.'

'Yes, they did, didn't they? In fact, some said that you told quite a few lies. Perhaps that smell was one of those lies.'

'Yes, well, poetic licence and all that.'

‘Naturally. You didn’t lie about my listening at the door when you had consultations with female patients, though, did you? And I’m pretty sure you knew why I did it.’

‘No,’ he bridles. ‘Why on earth should I know?’

‘Well, you must remember Rosalie, that housemaid you adored.’

‘Oh yes, I remember her very well.’

‘Do you think she enjoyed your night-time visits to her bedroom?’

‘Nobody has ever complained about me in that department,’ he says with a smile.

‘The fact that you were thirty years older than her, you didn’t think that mattered, then? Or the fact that you paid her wages? Or that you were often drunk? You thought all those things just made you more attractive, I suppose.’

‘You know as well as I do that women like an older man. And, to quote myself (and this bit was true): women like to obey. She always seemed very happy to me.’

‘She begged me to try and prevent you from doing the same to any of the young ladies who came to consult you. She naively thought that those

upper-class women wouldn't be able to cope with it as well as we servants had learned to do. And after what your brother did to me before passing me over to you, I was as keen to protect them as she was.'

'You had no right to do that. Anyway, I wasn't interested in women like that, they were far too insipid and strait-laced. Life's too short to be tip-toeing on eggshells round some prissy woman.'

'That's funny, you were quite happy to marry two upper-class women, both of whom were about twenty years younger than you, I seem to remember.' She pauses. 'Anyway, if you'd known what Rosalie and I were doing, you might have preferred the insipid ones,' she continues.

'I *knew* you were robbing me,' he explodes. 'I could never prove it. I can't believe that Rosalie was in on it too.'

'We weren't, actually. Do you remember that sarcophagus that you brought back from Egypt?'

'Yes. You ruined it with all your scrubbing. I said so in the book.'

'I thought we'd agreed that your book was full of lies. I don't remember scrubbing it at all. But I do remember that the inside really did stink; it was

infused with the chemicals that the ancient Egyptians used to embalm their mummies. And I am not as stupid and ignorant as you seem to think. I knew that one of the substances they used to use was methanol.'

'So what?'

'Not such a good doctor, are you? Methanol can cause blindness if it's ingested. Those lovely cups of coffee which I made for you and which Rosalie served to you: each cup contained a little scraping from the inside of the sarcophagus. We never knew if it would work but fantasising about its possible future effects kept us going through the worst times. And, sitting here now, I can tell you that cold revenge is better than any hot dinner I ever cooked for you.'

He begins to look worried.

'Are you serious? You made me go blind? How could you do such a monstrous thing? I don't believe you.'

'Oh yes, I'm absolutely serious. We really did. And I have spent an enjoyable forty-five minutes considering what to do next.'

He looks panicky.

‘Please, you must let me have those eye drops. If I don’t get them in the next twenty minutes I will be in excruciating pain for hours. You haven’t thrown them away have you?’

‘No, I haven’t. Of course that was the first thing I thought of doing but I had plenty of time to come up with something more enjoyable. For me, I mean.’

‘What have you done?’

‘Before I tell you, you should know that I will be getting off at the next stop, which we’re just approaching. Since you never bothered to learn my real name and told so many lies about what I look like, nobody will be able to track me down. I have hidden your eye drops somewhere on this train and I will leave you hoping that someone might be able to find them for you in time. I don’t even care if they do. As Rosalie and I learned, hope is the worst feeling in the world.’

The train begins to slow down.

‘Goodbye, Mr Munthe. As you say, life’s too short to...’ The end of the sentence is swallowed up by the whistle of the train.

Historical note

Axel Munthe (1857 - 1949) was born in Sweden and moved to Capri in 1887, where he built the Villa San Michele at the top of the Phoenician Steps in Anacapri. The villa is now a museum, containing the relics and artworks collected by Munthe, including a three thousand-year-old sphinx. Munthe went partially blind in later life but his sight was restored by an operation.

The *Story of San Michele* is a somewhat fanciful memoir of his time there and was very successful on its publication in 1929. All elements of the story which refer to the book come from chapter thirteen, entitled *Mamsell Agata*. Everything else is invented. At least, there is no evidence that it happened.