

INK
By Tobsha Learner

It is an old story, an allegory of power if you like, of the tragedy that happens when two men overreach themselves, or the terror that fills a creator when he realises his creation has become more gifted than himself. It is one that even I, the most successful writer of my times, knows well, for we must all, eventually, give way to the young. And this story involves a very young writer, a passionate individual with the gifts of both beauty and rhetoric – blazing in his ambition. The now infamous D’Arcy Hammer. Perhaps you have heard of him?

D’Arcy Hammer put down his pen and slumped over his writing desk. It was a temporary submission, a nod to the gargantuan nature of the enterprise that the ambitious thirty-two year old had begun six years ago, when time seemed infinite and his future a mirage full of extraordinary possibilities. Now it was 1843, a hundred years after his subject – Joseph Banks – was born, and the biography D’Arcy had laboured over lay annotated in sections before him. By his feverish calculations he was only weeks away from delivering to his publisher, which meant they would have his opus to display in bookshop windows before Christmas.

‘And God knows, I need the money,’ D’Arcy spoke out loud, addressing the bust of the botanist he’d placed in one corner of the large study in the faint hope that by writing under the gaze of Sir Joseph he might gain his posthumous approval. When D’Arcy Hammer had been a mere twenty-one- year-old student in his last year at Oxford, under the tutorship of his then mentor the eminent biographer Horace Tuttle, he had garnered an international literary reputation for a slim biographical volume charting the scandalous and sexually ambiguous life of the eighteenth-century Lord Hervey, himself, like D’Arcy, a one-time scholar of Westminster School.

The reviews had been generous and the dapper young biographer had become a regular attraction on the lecture circuit where he courted both infamy and an adoring (mainly female) public. But his success had come at a price. Horace

Tuttle, a man he both intensely admired and sought to emulate, had grown to resent his protégé's easy acclaim and began an insidious campaign to undermine the young man's reputation. The two men fell out and overnight mentor became nemesis. However, the acrimony hadn't stopped D'Arcy from falling in love with Horace Tuttle's young niece, Clementine Jane Murray, the daughter of an influential aristocrat.

But over time the royalties and fame of his first book had evaporated. D'Arcy needed this new biography to be successful – hugely successful. He'd finally got engaged to the seemingly unobtainable Clementine and he knew it would fall upon him to keep her in the manner in which she had always lived. Then there was the unavoidable issue of his own father – Lord Hammer, a successful shipping entrepreneur and member of the House of

Lords. Unfortunately the aristocrat regarded his son's literary ambitions as a folly bordering on social suicide. An understandable attitude I, as a working author, can only condone, after all so few of us are commercially successful, and certainly, in my case, I was compelled by the dire circumstances of my family to make money from my art, whereas at least D'Arcy had had a choice.

Lord Hammer, an esteemed and august gentleman, had agreed to provide D'Arcy with a monthly stipend on the proviso that it should be regarded as a loan with a ceiling of five thousand pounds, a ceiling, at the telling of this story, that would be reached on the fourth of next month after which D'Arcy would be penniless.

The young biographer was near despair – he had thought he'd timed the writing of the biography to the very minute but he had run into debt months before. It was imperative he deliver the manuscript before his father's stipulated date in order to receive his publishing advance and stave off his creditors – of which there were now many. Despite all these irritating challenges he was confident of success. Defeatism and humility had never been part of D'Arcy Hammer's emotional repartee and as he glanced over at the neat piles of chapters – each containing episodes of vivid adventure and professional intrigue as well as

graphic descriptions of Joseph Banks's libertine and rather salacious philosophies – D'Arcy had never felt surer of commercial potential. He even imagined it could be a subject for serialisation in a newspaper – a little like my own literary forays that were proving so successful.

He lit a cigar and walked to the window. The elegant townhouse belonged to his aunt – an unmarried gentlewoman who doted upon her nephew. Luckily for him she was only in London for the season; the rest of the year she joined Lord Hammer, her brother, on his country estate in Shrewsbury, leaving D'Arcy to run the house to his liking. The Georgian mansion was situated in Mayfair, just off St James's Square, and D'Arcy's rooms (a study, bedroom and small sitting room) were situated on the second storey. When his aunt was not in situ, the staff was reduced to one old butler and his wife, the housekeeper. The solitude and arrangement suited the young biographer perfectly. It enabled him to entertain in some style that was still affordable, and the infrequency with which the butler and his wife actually climbed the stairs to his rooms allowed him the peace and isolation required to write.

D'Arcy pulled open a window. The park in the centre of the square was luxuriant with foliage and flowers in full blossom. Lilac trees, their boughs heavy with white and purple blossom, were scattered between the flowering pink chestnut trees. Luckily the wind was blowing towards the Thames and the obnoxious ever-present odour of sewage did not undercut the scent of the lilac caught up in the breeze. It was early summer and already it promised to be an unseasonably hot month. D'Arcy exhaled a feathery plume of cigar smoke into the air where it hung suspended for a moment before drifting down towards the street. For once it felt wonderful to be both young and literary, and now that the completion of the manuscript was within sight – powerful. Sinking into the sweet reverie that comes with intellectual achievement, D'Arcy gazed down at the lilac trees, his mind drawn back to the last paragraph he'd written – a depiction of a particularly beautiful Polynesian beach Joseph Banks had described in his journals.

D’Arcy’s initial attraction to the botanist was one of empathy, an imagined understanding between the biographer and his subject that, given half a chance, and the bottomless economic resources Joseph Banks had had at his disposal, plus the added advantage of being orphaned before he was twenty-two, D’Arcy himself might have lived such a life. The liberal nature of Banks’s early years was a source of admiration for D’Arcy, particularly the open way he’d lived with his mistress despite society’s disapproval. Such actions, D’Arcy had decided, depicted a man of both great courage and intense intellectual curiosity with little to no regard for how others thought of him – if only he himself had the courage to live in such a manner! These were the characteristics that had drawn D’Arcy to the gentleman explorer. And then there was Joseph Banks’s account of his first visit to Polynesia, an account that portrayed the country as a utopia filled with uninhibited beautiful natives – both men and women. The diaries had fascinated D’Arcy and he had drawn liberally upon them for his biography, imagining his own portrait of the great man to be a source of simultaneous condemnation, secret envy and great curiosity to his own Victorian peers. The biography promised to be one of those irresistibly titillating books, condemned by the critics, bought openly by men and secretly by women. It would be a commercial success.

The ringing of church bells from nearby disturbed his meditations. D’Arcy pulled out his large gold fob watch – it was already two in the afternoon. He was then interrupted by a knock on the door. It was John Henries, the butler, a tall stooped man in his late sixties with the lingering dignity of a once-handsome man. He stood politely just outside the study, accustomed as he was to the biographer’s explosive nature when writing.

‘Sir, there is a young man outside, an employee of your publishers, I believe. He informs me that you are to visit them immediately, on an urgent matter,’ he announced in a quavering baritone.

‘Did the young man describe the nature of the matter?’ ‘No sir, he only reported it to be most urgent.’ D’Arcy’s imagination spun wildly as he contemplated the

myriad of requests, demands and dismissals that might be the reason behind such a summoning. But, as I explained before, our young biographer was both a narcissist and an optimist, and finally he concluded it was merely one of those fortuitous moments of synchronicity – he had almost completed his book and with whom else but his publisher to share the good news?

‘Excellent. I have to see them anyhow. I shall be down momentarily.’

The offices of Bingham and Crosby Esquire might have been considered the rooms of an affluent and successful publishing house twenty years earlier – which indeed they were – but now they had the appearance of a fading courtesan ravaged by age and bad judgement in her choice of patron. True, the waiting parlour had both a well-stuffed French sofa covered in red velvet with two matching chairs in the Georgian style, but the velvet was worn to a thin sheen and the gold trimming frayed. And, for the first time, D’Arcy noticed that the secretary, whom he remembered as a young eager student of literature given to monologues expounding the literary virtues of whomever his employers had just published, was no longer young, no longer eager and indeed now exuded a positively sullen air. In fact,

D’Arcy realised as he waited, perched uncomfortably on one of the threadbare chairs, it must have been years since he’d last visited the publishers.

‘Mr Crosby will now see you, Mr Hammer,’ the secretary announced in a lugubrious tone before opening the door. Mr Crosby, a bewhiskered gentleman imbued with an elegance that had always reminded D’Arcy of a Renaissance statesman, sat behind his desk. An air of grim determination hovered about his person. His assistant, the younger Clarence Dingle, leapt up to shake D’Arcy’s hand while Crosby stayed noticeably seated.

‘Wonderful to see you, truly, and we are so excited ...’ Dingle’s words spilled out like a cascade of flat piano notes – his enthusiasm seemed utterly perfunctory and mechanical, D’Arcy observed. The biographer, now a little nervous, flicked his jacket tails clear and sat down in a lone chair standing in the centre of the room.

'Dingle, cease your inane mumblings! You're not fooling anyone, least of all Hammer here, who's a very sharp young puppy!' the elder publisher barked from his leather-backed throne. Startled, the assistant sat down abruptly.

Mr Crosby leant forward, his halitosis drifting towards D'Arcy like a bad omen.

The young biographer steeled himself. 'The truth is, Mr Hammer, we have called you here to discuss the import of a very grave rumour ...'

'A very grave rumour indeed,' Dingle echoed for emphasis.

D'Arcy's face tightened in anticipation. This was not the reception he had expected. What had gone wrong? He had informed them that the manuscript would be in by the end of the month, and Crosby had replied, conveying the company's enthusiasm, by telegram. 'A grave rumour?' he queried, a break in his voice betraying his agitation. Crosby's hand crept across the marble-topped desk, his fingers curling around a paperweight that appeared to be a skull carved out of quartz crystal.

'It has been suggested that an associate of yours, the eminent Horace Tuttle, is also working on the definitive biography of the botanist Joseph Banks.'

Shocked, D'Arcy inhaled sharply. The animosity between Tuttle and himself was well known, but Tuttle was older by a good fifteen years and excelled in literary reputation by three more critically acclaimed biographies. If there were to be a rival biography by Tuttle, he would have the upper hand. The idea was unthinkable.

'That simply isn't possible. Tuttle has been wrestling with Lord Nelson for the past two years.'

'In that case Lord Nelson must have won,' Crosby replied cryptically, then reached into a large snuffbox and, after laying out two large rust-coloured pinches of tobacco upon the crook of his thumb, snorted them both up vigorously, staining his nostrils a dark red. He looked like a melancholic dragon, D'Arcy couldn't help noting. It was a distracting sight. Crosby coughed then continued:

'No, I'm afraid I have it on good authority that Tuttle has lodged the notion with Doubleday and Sons, and has promised a manuscript by next Easter. Heard it

from the dog's mouth myself, in the gentlemen's cloakroom at The Garrick. Naturally this is of great concern to both myself and Bingham ...'

For a moment D'Arcy thought he'd misheard. As far as he knew, Bingham, Crosby's business partner, had been dead for at least five years. The elderly publisher's expression suddenly changed as he shifted his gaze beyond D'Arcy's shoulder. Unable to contain his curiosity D'Arcy swung around. A portrait of the esteemed but deceased Mr Bingham – in life, a man far more affable than Crosby – hung on the wall directly behind him. D'Arcy had the distinct impression that the shining jovial face in the portrait had suddenly winked at him. Dingle coughed politely and Crosby was immediately drawn back into the moment. '... and calls for a review of your own proposal and publishing timetable,' Crosby concluded gruffly. D'Arcy sank back into his chair, his fiscal strategies sunk. How could he afford to marry Clementine now? And how on earth would he be able to both pay off his creditors and avoid being pushed into his father's shipping business if his next book was a publishing disaster? But more than anything, how had Tuttle arrived at the idea of the very same biography as his own? D'Arcy's own venture was a well-kept secret between himself and the publisher. And even if Tuttle had heard of the project, it could only have been spite or perversity that inspired his rival to undertake the very same subject so late in the development of D'Arcy's own manuscript. But there was something else that filled him with a nauseating disquiet. Had his fiancée, who was an intelligent but frivolous young woman far younger than him, accidentally blurted out the topic of his labours to her uncle? Or even worse, had she unwittingly shown his rival some of his pages? The young author's imagination swirled up into paranoia – if this was true, it was even more of a horrible betrayal. Either way he had to save his biography and his own reputation.

'This is just ugly coincidence,' D'Arcy exclaimed more passionately than he'd intended. 'Besides, my manuscript is merely days away from completion. We will beat him to the shelves, I promise you!'

In the silence that followed, Crosby, in lieu of an answer, solemnly packed a pipe

while D’Arcy fidgeted anxiously, convinced he was facing a verdict that would either make or condemn the rest of his literary career. Finally the tension was broken by Dingle striking a match dramatically. The assistant leant solemnly forward to light the pipe for his employer. Then, like Vesuvius, after exhaling a large plume of white smoke Crosby rumbled, ‘Bingham and Crosby are not only men of the letter but also of our word. We will still publish, and we will publish ahead of Tuttle and Doubleday. However, you must guarantee that your biography will contain some new and hopefully salacious insights into Banks’s early, morally dubious forays that will create enough hysteria amongst the scandalmongers and newspaper gentlemen to sell the godforsaken book!’ He swung around to the portrait of his deceased partner: ‘Forgive me, Bingham, but if we are to survive and become a “modern” publishing house, then we must surrender to the bestial demands of the Gods of Commerce,’ he said before wiping his brow with a large purple silk handkerchief as if he had himself been sullied by such a declaration.

D’Arcy stared at him aghast. ‘But every such event and proclivity is already embedded in the manuscript, sir!’

‘Then find something else!’ Crosby thumped the desk for emphasis, one precariously balanced manuscript falling with a bang to the floor. No one dared to pick it up. Softening, the publisher turned back to D’Arcy. ‘My dear young man, research is the portal, but imagination the messenger,’ he concluded with an air of pompous sagacity – an impenetrable remark that left the young biographer even more perplexed.

Crosby rose with a dramatic scraping of his chair against the floor then balanced his portly front against the edge of the desk. He had, D’Arcy noticed, become considerably plumper since last time D’Arcy had seen him. The publisher was again staring reverently at his deceased partner’s portrait as if he were engaged in some kind of preternatural communication. ‘And Mr Bingham tells me to tell you he expects the delivery of the completed and ... enhanced ... manuscript by the end of this month. Thank you, young Hammer, that will be all.’

The young biographer walked straight to his fiancée's townhouse. As he marched down Great Marlborough Street an intense fury began to build from the soles of his fashionable buttoned boots to the crown of his high top hat. Had Clementine betrayed him? Could she have been so foolish as to reveal to her uncle the subject of his secret dedication? He had to discover the truth. All the previous trust, the confessed intimacies of his ambition whispered to the young girl, seemed cheapened. As he examined the nature of their courtship – her passive yet delightfully innocent amazement at his passionate enthusiasm for the eighteenth-century botanist and his exotic adventures – D'Arcy could not envisage that Clementine would be capable of such disloyalty. As I have said, D'Arcy was young and still in the naive throes of the kind of egotism we all fall victim to at the beginning of our careers, and to D'Arcy's great disservice, Clementine had convinced him of his own genius. Any man would have fallen in love.

At twenty, Clementine was twelve years younger than him and utterly without guile, or at least he had thought so up until then. D'Arcy had been smitten the first time he'd laid eyes upon her – at her uncle's table seven years earlier when she was a mere thirteen years old and he a cynical twenty-five year old – the year in which he later fell out with Horace Tuttle. At the time he was in the middle of a protracted love affair with a married woman (who shall remain nameless on these pages at least, but suffice to say that the woman specialised in the seduction of gullible writers and I am shamed to confess that I was one amongst many). An erotically charged relationship involving complicated liaisons in obscure and extremely dangerous places (she was rather good), the love affair had exhausted D'Arcy both emotionally and existentially. Three tortured years later he encountered Clementine at her coming-out ball. Then sixteen, she seemed to embody all the virtues his older lover did not: virginal, uncomplicated and delightfully candid. At the time D'Arcy had despaired of the possibility of marriage, having come to the conclusion that he was now too jaded to experience the emotion of love. However, he broke off his affair with the married

woman and took to pursuing the young girl, a pursuit further fired by her uncle's objections. A year later they were engaged.

Clementine's innocence had swept through his life like a scented breeze over a barren landscape, a metaphor he clung to as strongly as his cologne-infused handkerchief, now pressed to his face as he turned into the dense and pungent chaos that was Soho. The daily sewage-laden miasma of the Thames was now blowing in from the south, and in the unusually hot summer the stench in this densely populated borough was particularly disgusting.

Despite living in the comparative luxury of spacious, green and quiet Mayfair, D'Arcy was constantly drawn to the vibrancy of Soho, the bustling narrow streets with their tailors, leather-curing factories, coffee houses and inns as well as the once-grand mansions of Golden Square, now reduced to cheap housing in which whole families often lived in one room. But there was a warmth and rhythm to the place that the promenades of Mayfair lacked – a borough controlled and austere in its wealth. This seething mass of striving humanity was exotic to D'Arcy. And as a member of the titled classes, he could afford to indulge in its corrupt pleasures and, most importantly, get out when he wanted.

Indeed there was one particular prostitute he was fond of visiting who lived on Golden Square – a practical Irish wench who had scraped together the flimsy trappings of respectability. It was to here that D'Arcy, after a spiritually uplifting but frustrating evening with his fiancée, would often return, if only to enact upon the lady's rented body fantasies he knew he would never be able to execute upon Clementine's slender, lily-white frame. And it was at this very harlot's window that D'Arcy now found himself staring, his feet having guided him there by pure instinct. 'No, I shall resist,' he told himself, knowing that taking out his anger or frustration upon the prostitute would be counterproductive and, knowing her rates and his purse, economically disastrous.

'I really will confront Clementine. As suspicious as I am, I'm sure there is a completely innocent explanation – pure coincidence, for example.' It was an argument that failed to convince even himself.

Nevertheless he glanced wistfully back up at the window – the ironically named Prudence O'Malley was a comely girl with an earthy sensuality matched by an earthy laugh. She was also very good at the amusing but erotic scenarios D'Arcy found entertaining. In short, despite the heat of the afternoon, it would have been a very pleasant distraction from the young biographer's current troubles. The memory of their last encounter, during which D'Arcy had donned a leather saddle at her command so that she could ride him and whip him, made him harden. He waited until his tumescence had lessened into some semblance of decency then walked on – ah, the glorious dictatorship of a young body, I remember it well!