

Dear Sir

By Nick Cross

Dear Sir,

You are a terrible writer. I regret to break this news to you so early in our correspondence, but I, Lady Iphigenia Albany, am nothing if not direct. As the internationally famous author of thirty-seven bestselling romance novels, I hardly have time to beat around the bush. In fact, as we speak, my hero and heroine are racing towards the edge of Devil's Dyke, their horses driven quite mad by a most ingenious poison.

While I appreciate your desire for patronage, I must take issue with your choice of subject matter. Your manuscript fairly overflows with monochrome characters, dysfunctional couples reduced to venting their mutual dissatisfaction in greasy fast food establishments. The exterior scenes offer no respite, as rough men smoke away their lives at bus stops, all the while painted with a persistent grey drizzle. This is the sort of distasteful tableau which I might glimpse through the darkened windows of my Bentley while shuttling between book launches. Is there a market for this sort of material? I must confess I find it surprising that such people might be able to read at all.

As I trudge listlessly through your prose, my shoes caked with mediocrity, my mind inexorably wanders back to my own work. Suddenly, there are fireworks, sparks thrown up by the grind of fragile metal axles, the spume that froths from a crazed horse's mouth. The Honourable Percy Gascoyne-Cecil squares his noble Jaw and plants a delicate kiss upon the cheek of his beloved, the Countess Sophie de Blois. Her alabaster skin barely has time to flush before Percy is swinging from the carriage door. With gymnastic prowess, he twists and vaults until he is atop the front perch. The coachman – a man of lesser breeding such as yourself – is gibbering, driven half mad by fear. Percy grabs the bucking reins with one gloved hand and raises the other, slapping the inferior wretch soundly across the face.

As I sit at my desk in The Towers (my ancestral home), it is clear that I must provide exactly the same treatment, a hearty slap to rouse your muse from her drab suburban prison. If you persist in your supposedly "social-realist" vein, I fear that the most you can

aspire to is writing for some dreadful soap opera such as *Westenders* or *Coronation Farm*, dolling out tales of proletariat misery in half-hour instalments.

Observe with me now, the effortless power of dialogue, as The Honourable Percy remonstrates with the carriage driver:

*“Control yourself! Have you been at the moonshine, man?”*

*“No M’Lud. I swear I don’t know what got into me.”*

*“It will be the point of my sword if you do not act quickly.”*

Compare this snippet of sparkling wit with an excerpt from your own canon:

*“You want some tea?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“What’s that?”*

*“Another rejection letter.”*

*“Two sugars?”*

*“Yeah.”*

I can feel the blood congealing in the reader’s veins as they struggle to process such awful banality. Thank mercy then, that the dashing Percy Gascoyne-Cecil has no time for such thoughts, as he swings beneath the jolting rig, slashing at the horses’ tethers with his rapier. Above him, Countess Sophie sits ramrod straight in the shuddering carriage, never forgetting her superior breeding and deportment for one second.

Hanging upside down, Percy can see the edge of the gorge approaching, azure sky flooding upwards in his vision. Sophie stares ahead at that same blue expanse, suffused with the courage of the truly noble. She prepares to meet her Lord with quiet composure, mounting those golden steps to the pearly gates in a floor-length satin dress. Percy is not so willing to accept defeat - he slashes the restraints at the last possible second, freeing the maddened horses to plummet over the edge to oblivion.

This tumbling, sinking feeling is one that I became all too familiar with while reading your manuscript. Although your protagonist is a writer, you take no opportunity to insert her prose into the narrative, a device that I am convinced would leaven your work immensely. Consider it something of a palate cleanser, for I fear the reader will find the present story has a taste more akin to the bottom of an ashtray. Indeed, had I not sprinkled this letter with piquant morsels of my own work, it might swiftly have degenerated into mean-spirited diatribe. And that would never do.

A carriage sans horses, but still hopelessly out of control. One wheel hits a rock and splinters, disintegrating like your fanciful narrative. The carriage tips and slides, beautiful polished wood grating and scraping on the rough chalk, a cacophony of nails-down-the-blackboard noise. With a jolt, the upturned vehicle comes to a halt on the edge of the precipice, held back by a solitary English oak tree. The Honourable Percy rolls clear, a few feet shy of the drop. He hears shouting and sees a figure trapped beneath the rig.

*“Sophie! My darling Sophie!”*

He runs to her aid, oblivious to the stabs of pain from his manly ankle.

*“Percy ...”*

Her legs are hidden by the bulk of the carriage, underskirts quite ruined by the crash.

*“Lay still, my sweet. I will raise this off you even if I must tear it apart, plank by plank.”*

He begins to heave at the fallen vehicle, his wounded ankle throbbing in a most distracting fashion.

*“No Percy, you must save him first.”*

She points towards the edge and Percy sees the coachman’s predicament for the first time. The man is hanging six feet over the edge, suspended by two leather straps which are still attached to the carriage.

*“Help him, Percy!”*

*“But you are worth two of him, my darling. Why, he probably poisoned those horses himself.”*

*“You must do this for me. He is my brother.”*

And with this, the young beauty swoons away.

What cruel twist of fate is this? Percy hopes beyond hope that the servant might prove to be of noble birth, that he is on some adventure amongst the lower classes. Alas, as our hero draws near, he hears the brother swear and curse from the end of a dangling cable and he knows the truth beyond any doubt. Sophie – his radiant Countess Sophie de Blois – is a sham.

At this point, I find a curious synchronicity between our narratives. Mine is a dashing tale of a lowly-born maiden who impersonates a countess, yours a drab account of an unsuccessful writer who fabricates an upper-class identity to offload her mediocre prose. From my lofty vantage point (both physically and metaphorically) here at The Towers, I

can see the attraction that a well-bred lifestyle might command for those who skulk further down the social ladder. Yet, in a tuppenny-ha'penny twist, you deny your surly readers even this fantasy, boldly claiming that your story is "based on true events." I wonder openly at your motives. Is this a brazen attempt at blackmail? Or, do you seek to force my creative hand, leading to the incorporation of an equally lurid reversal at the close of my own work? If so, I must remind you that I am not a porcine mammal. You will find no twist in my tail.

Yours sincerely,

Lady Iphigenia Albany.

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