"Nothing to Lose & *Everything* to Gain": Louis and Marie de Rosset's Intimate Friendship with Edward Bulwer Lytton

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A few months before the end of the American Civil War, Louis (1840–75) and Marie de Rosset (1844–70), a young couple from North Carolina, fled to Britain to escape the poverty and drabness of the wartime South. During the following five years, they pursued high status and wealth, their career as social climbers culminating in an intimate friendship with Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803–73). Lytton helped Louis in the latter's mostly unsuccessful attempts to gain and keep employment and Louis worked as Lytton's unofficial secretary and agent in the United States. Particularly interesting is the personal relationship between Lytton and Marie, who spent considerable time together and corresponded regularly and affectionately. Their relationship ended in 1870 with Marie's sudden death and Louis's return to America. This essay examines the previously hidden, peculiar friendship between Lytton and the de Rossets, by analysing their correspondence that has not been studied previously.[1]

The article informs historians, biographers, and literary scholars by giving an insight not only into Lytton's work on the books that would be his last, but also their inspiration. An epitome of Victorian culture, Edward Bulwer Lytton was widely known because of his extensive literary career and his sensational private life. Today less known than his contemporaries such as Dickens and Thackeray, Lytton was in his time an influential, productive writer whose literary experiments led to criticism by contemporaries and later scholars despite paving the way for different genres and styles. Scorned by literary scholars for many years after his death, interest in his life and work has been revived in the last decades (Campbell 129; Christensen 9; Mulvey-Roberts 115). Biographers and literary scholars will find Lytton's relationship with the de Rossets important in the light of the young couple's influence on Lytton's views on, for example, women, class, and character. During their relationship, Lytton was writing some of his most important novels, *The Coming Race*, *Kenelm Chillingly*, and *The Parisians*, which reflect modern ideas on social order and its rearrangement (Campbell 68). Famously one of the creators of the silver fork novel genre that ridiculed social climbers and hangers-on, Lytton was intrigued by the de Rossets' attempts in class mobility. Lacking the proper background, connections, and the understanding of social rules, the young couple was not as successful in social climbing and amassing wealth as they had hoped. Their attempt to mix with the elites and accumulate wealth was immortalised by Lytton as the

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[1] At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, there are c. 180 letters from Lytton to the de Rossets (spelled "DeRosset" until 1868), and at the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, six letters from Lytton to Marie and c. 40 letters from the de Rossets to Lytton. DeRosset Family Papers, #214, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [DFP]; Papers of the Bulwer-Lytton Family of Knebworth House, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Letters received, DE/K/C25/39 and DE/K/C25/40, and General letters sent, DE/K/C28/49, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies [HALS]. Most of Lytton's letters in the DFP collection are undated and not in chronological order. Some of them have later been numbered by an unknown person. A folder number and a letter number are given for undated letters. The essay uses the nickname and the spelling of the family name which each member of the DeRosset family preferred.

"pursuit of the almighty dollar" in *The Coming Race*, one of the first science fiction novels in English. He also drew on Marie's character and enthusiasm for theatre and music for *The Parisians*.

A chronological narrative, the article first introduces the de Rossets and the measures they took to attain social status. Secondly, it proceeds to outline their imbalanced relationship with Lytton, particularly exploring Louis's behaviour that Lytton found tedious. Thirdly, it gives an account of Lytton's affection for Marie and how he drew inspiration for his works from both her and her husband. Finally, it describes how the friendship ended in Marie's death and Lytton losing interest in the excessively grieving Louis.

Chasing Chimeras: Mingling with the Elite

A son of a mercantile family of Wilmington, North Carolina, Louis de Rosset served the Confederacy in the Ordinance and Quartermaster's Department during the American Civil War. In 1862, he married Marie Finley, a barely 18-year-old belle from Charleston, South Carolina; their only daughter, Gabrielle, was born in 1863. Louis, pushed by his clever and ambitious wife, dreamed big, instead of settling for plain family life like their parents and siblings.

Louis and Marie did not share the values of their sober, religious families. Louis's family looked askance at Marie because of her independent character and behaviour, passion for theatre and parties, many admirers even after her marriage, and insistence on calling herself Marie instead of her Christian name Maria. After Louis started to run the Federal blockade in the fall of 1863 to import vital goods and obtain profit for himself on the side, his mother, Eliza DeRosset, was scandalised by what she deemed Marie's insensitivity: "[C]onstant soirees of one sort or other engross all her time, she says she is anxious about Lou, but from her frolicking so constantly you would not suppose it" (to Lossie Myers, 13 November 1863). The climate of self-sacrifice and drudgery that was prevalent in the final months of the war did not appeal to the young couple.

Therefore, in September 1864 after another successful blockade running, Louis decided to stay in Bermuda, Marie and Gabrielle joining him some time later. Particularly because of the severe shortage of even staple goods in the South, Eliza DeRosset disapproved of Louis having "a house … furnished—piano, cook and every thing in readiness for his little wife—a horse and buggy to boot" (to Kate Meares, 30 September 1864). Armand DeRosset, Louis's father, also deemed Marie's expensive requests and his tendency to prefer "visionary plans" to serious work an alarming combination (17 July and 6 August 1865). Marie herself was jubilant, having escaped her husband's family, who would rather leave them in beggary than help Louis. "[Y]ou *have* fled from the pestilence", a friend congratulated her. " . . . What you write me about the troubles of the De Rosset [*sic*] family is very sad, and must, of course, cloud *your* sky" ("CHJ", 12 October 1864). In the summer of 1865, most likely thinking that the Old World would offer them more opportunities, they headed for Britain in search of fortune and fame.

First in Liverpool and then London, Louis and Marie's attempts to find him a well-paying job and establish themselves as members of high society were laborious and often thwarted, as the social status they had possessed in Wilmington had no bearing in Britain. Such factors as wealth, birth, family connections, education, and outward appearance played a part in the British understanding of class, as did sharing the same social customs, standards, and ideals. Although movement from one's "place" became easier to achieve during the latter part of the nineteenth century, at the time of the de Rossets' residence in Britain, the class system was less flexible. However, the class system was not fully static, which may have contributed to Louis and Marie's aspiration to upward mobility (S. Mitchell 17, 20, and 25; Steinbach 125–6; Loftus 194).

The southern middle class pursued the same values as its British counterpart, such as hard work, ambition, and responsibility. These ideals had, certainly, been instilled in Louis by his family, minor slaveowners engaged in business and medicine. They did not possess characteristics of elite membership, such as political power, land ownership, and a great amount of wealth (Wells 6–13). Nevertheless, established family contacts, marriage patterns, and social visiting could help one to define and maintain networks that "encompassed both the local elite and their more humble neighbors" (Mushal 67). Because of the social status they had in the provincial Wilmington and their mercantile background, the DeRossets were members of the southern middling class who were wealthier and more well-connected than others; they, in fact, considered themselves as the elite.

The social life of London was known for its selectivity and inhospitality, especially towards foreigners, that strongly contrasted with the social connections and networks to which the de Rossets were accustomed (Langford 229–31). The fact that he was relatively poor, an American, and a merchant's son, meant that the British did not see Louis as a gentleman in the true meaning of the word. British upper-middle-class men usually had a university training and a job that granted them a significant social status such as a doctor or a barrister (Steinbach 134; S. Mitchell 68). Nonetheless, even with his education at a Swiss school and experience gained working for his father's company, Louis struggled finding jobs other than as a junior clerk, and keeping them, despite the rapid increase of commercial occupations. Trying his hand at several jobs and partnerships, he also made other attempts to make a living such as importing plant seeds, selling champagne, and investing in a sheep washing company. Unfortunately, everything Louis embarked on was destined to fail because of, he explained, deceitful partners or companies that did not appreciate his work. Despite this, Louis thought that his background entitled him to a place among the elite.

Although they socialised with some other southerners residing in Britain, the de Rossets were more interested in the local social circles, into which they eagerly tried to amalgamate with the help of networking and genealogy. Dreaming of fashionable balls and soirées, they pushed themselves into society, playing the part of wealthy southern gentility. "Marie was dressed to kill", Louis wrote to his aunt after one social event, "& I had to incur the expense of three vests before being able to secure one quite the thing". Although such events were "very well & very pleasant . . . the expense of keeping in such society is beyond my means", he confessed (to Catherine Kennedy, 23 March 1866). It was not blending into polite society *per se* that was important; they were also looking for a better social position, pecuniary gain, and even a new identity. Marie's strategy was not only to become friends with aristocrats, but to be one. She now began spelling their last name "de Rosset" instead of "DeRosset", the form that Louis's family used, and pronouncing her husband's first name in the French manner as well. She was not, however, fabricating a family history, merely embellishing it.

The DeRossets, like many other families in the Carolinas, were descendants of French Huguenots. Louis's sister, Kate Meares, made the claim that they were "descended from a long line of noble ancestry". She even speculated about a family connection to French royalty, explaining that the documents proving it had been destroyed (Meares, 13, 19, 24–7, and 486). That the link was never verified did not discourage Marie, who adopted the crest of a French family called de Rosset, boasting a crown resembling the one of the duke-peers of France. Creating family coats of arms without any proof of authenticity was not uncommon for those Americans who glorified the European nobility. Like many other genealogy enthusiasts, Louis dreamed that their lineage would yield a large, prosperous estate that was only waiting for a descendant who could prove their legal

claim to it (Weil 99–111).[2] He also spent months trying to prove consanguinity between himself and the philosopher David Hume, as there was a family legend about his great-grandfather having been Hume's nephew who emigrated to America. As Hume's only surviving relative was a younger woman, Louis decided to write directly to her husband, whom he suspected of hiding the fact that the DeRossets were the rightful heirs of the estate. "Are you sure that the letters you refer to were from David Hume the Historian", the husband answered chilly, adding that no Hume nephew had ever set foot to the United States (W. N. Macdonald Hume, 14 March 1870). Louis's sister Kate, later a keen genealogist herself, incorrectly reasoned that their ancestor must have been Hume's illegitimate son and discouraged Louis from continuing his research (n. d. [late 1869]).[3]

Louis's persistent search for illustrious ancestors created hilarity even among his family. Louis, his mother Eliza wrote to Kate, "expects to be a Marquis or something of that sort ere long—at any rate he will leave no stone unturned" (21 January 1866). His brother Johnny teased Louis about his attempts at social climbing: "Looking up dead ancestry don't pay unless it can be discovered that they possess more than the 6 ft. of earth wh[ich] covers them" (20 November 1869). For his family, one's own efforts to distinguish oneself were a thousandfold more valuable than the "chimeras" that Louis seemed to be chasing. "We note particularly your growing intimacy with the Lords & Ladies", his brother Willie wrote. "That kind of Society with its necessary toadyism don't suit me … but I know Marie must be delighted" (20 June 1866). It was indeed the wife who, having high hopes "both with regard to [Louis's] future and [her] own ambitions", manoeuvred the de Rossets' social life (James Carlin to Marie de Rosset, 13 March 1867). Even if some Americans with connections, wealth, and a perfect command of etiquette were able to move in British high society (Tuffnell 62–3; Cooper ch. 1), it was troublesome for a penniless, obscure couple. Marie, disappointed at their difficulties, admitted that "the wisest plan" would be to be "content with that which we have". Still, she added, "I don't pretend to have reached that height of wisdom" (to W. Carson Finley, 7 November 1869). Despite their continuous and persistent attempts, there is little evidence of a close relationship with other elites than Edward Bulwer Lytton. Meeting him in 1866, the young couple got closer to achieving their goals.

American Haughtiness: Lytton and Louis de Rosset

In his sixties, Edward Bulwer Lytton was an MP, one-time Secretary of State for the Colonies, and a popular novelist. His contemporaries also knew him as a notorious ladies' man, who had had several mistresses from all social classes, numerous affairs with married women, illegitimate

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[2] Apparently, this coat of arms was adapted by Louis or Marie as it is not the original French de Rosset coat of arms. The DeRossets did not find a connection to royalty, but they were able to find a Huguenot ancestor who had fled from France to England in 1685 and immigrated to America around 1735.

[3] Without any evidence, Kate later claimed that their great-uncle, John Fullerton, had indeed been a nephew of David Hume. "That Uncle David held him in great regard and affection was abundantly shown by a constant correspondence with his 'beloved nephew' during his lifetime", she mused in a genealogical book she wrote, adding that unfortunately all the letters had been destroyed. See Meares, 64. The *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (vol. 2, D–G, 56) makes the same assumption, undoubtedly copied from her book. This practice was not limited to Americans, as many British Victorians, Lytton included, also reinvented their own family trees. Lytton had changed his name to Sir Bulwer George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton and falsely claimed that he could date his family tree back to the times of Henry VII (Mulvey-Roberts 119). Later, he made the credulous Louis believe that he could trace his family back to 82 BC. Louis de Rosset to Kate DeRosset (Meares, 9 January 1870).

children, and a failed marriage that was regularly in the public eye (L. Mitchell 49–50). Long separated from his strong-willed wife, Rosina, Lytton pursued lovers who would respond to his needs better. On the one hand, he wanted intellectual compatibility from a woman; on the other, innocence, femininity, and dependence. Perhaps of all the women in his life, Marie de Rosset best matched Lytton's impossible expectations. She knew how to handle the novelist who was attracted to childlike, innocent women in need of protection (L. Mitchell 23–4, 11). The beautiful, diminutive, and feminine Marie performed wifelike tasks, such as taking care of Lytton's health (he was a great hypochondriac), sewing him slippers, and arranging his papers. She was also a spirited woman with great aspirations and intellectual and artistic abilities.

The de Rossets mainly sought Lytton's company because of his aristocratic background. Louis's feverish, even anxious quest for recognition and reputation created confusion and amusement in Lytton, who attached great importance to gentlemanliness (Langford 318). Nonetheless, he must have found the de Rossets entertaining, because soon after the first meeting they were invited to spend time at Knebworth, Lytton's country residence in Hertfordshire. The novelist seemed "to have taken a great fancy to us", Louis boasted to his mother. "His magnificent baronial seat . . . was above my aspirations or expectations" (29 May 1866). Receiving an invitation to Knebworth was rare, as Lytton was considered a "social outsider", who did not "value acolytes or … pursue friendships" (L. Mitchell 5–6 and 91). Nonetheless, a friendship between the novelist and the de Rossets soon flourished. Considering the intensity of the friendship, it is surprising that scholars have not paid attention to it. Marie especially spent considerable time with Lytton, corresponding with him regularly and later almost daily.

Lytton's main attraction for the de Rossets was that they perceived him as a gateway to high society. "It is an exceedingly great honour he shows to us", Louis explained to his mother, very satisfied with attention from a baronet. In return, he said, they could "in our humble way contribute to his comfort and happiness, and relieve the monotony and solitude of his old age" (19 September 1869). Louis was particularly seeking assistance to promote his career, as his father was very reluctant to finance the lifestyle the young couple had adopted. Being in society, he complained to his mother, was "rather an expensive luxury & I can not afford it unless Pa can get his friends to send me plenty of business" (2 February 1866). His father, however, merely settled for giving Louis strict advice on practical business matters and self-control, to avoid being too "fiery and hasty" (Louis de Rosset to Eliza DeRosset, 6 March 1870). Occasionally Louis's touchiness and self-importance made him clash with business partners and acquaintances.

Despite his initial industriousness, Louis was not one for severe, serious work, if fortunes could be gained in a stroke of luck. In early 1867, after two years of living from hand to mouth, he realised that they would have to return home if his prospects would not ameliorate. He blamed his lack of success on the British, who "don't like rapid and go-ahead Americans" (de Rosset diary, 7 January 1867). Certainly, the American notion of a "self-made man", for some Britons, may have come across as common and even vulgar. Even though "outlandish" manners were all but expected of Americans, Louis's frenzied endeavours and his excessively ambitious behaviour were eminently problematic as they clearly differed from the British ideal of reserve and decorum (Cooper 46; Langford 125 and 161). Moreover, if Louis's sensitive physique did not endure hard work, being unemployed was making him discouraged and depressed. "This uncertainty, a succession of hopes and disappointments, are making me … anything but a pleasant companion. I think my whole nature is changed. I am quite nervous, petulant and at times deep down in the blues", he lamented to his mother (28 October 1869). Such behaviour was not approved of in the commercial world, as

entrepreneurialism was not only about earning money, but also having a strong work ethic, character, perseverance, and gentlemanliness (Steinbach 166–7; Tosh 122; Loftus 197–9).

Despite his parents' constant urging, Louis refused to go back home, shuddering at the thought of living in Wilmington and selling insurances like his brothers. He assured his mother that soon they would "see me in my own Castle surrounded with luxury and ease" (17 December 1869). Marie encouraged his dreams: "Keep a cheerful heart . . . Life is short, we've nothing to lose & *everything* to gain" (16 October 1868). Indeed, the ultimate reason for their staying, as Louis readily admitted, was the "high and most favorable social position which we have been so fortunate as to secure". Even very rich people "would give anything to have the entrée where we have", Louis bragged, alluding to their friendship with Lytton, through whom he was trying to establish new connections and create a job for himself (17 December 1869).

At first, Lytton was not keen to help Louis, stating that he had no knowledge of the commercial world (n. d. [c. July 1866]). "Of course I am no competent adviser", he wrote after hearing of Louis's latest craze, ". . . I can only give my opinion, for what it is worth, as a man of worldly experience & good sense" (n. d. [received 17 December 1869]). He was also vexed that despite asking for advice, Louis rarely took it, instead complaining and wallowing in self-pity. "I am in such great distress of mind that I hardly know what to do, and as my only refuge I turn to you to seek advice", Louis moaned to Lytton. "I have suffered more than anyone can imagine—my mind so perplexed and worried that I really can see no bottom of it" (11 April 1870). Lytton treated Louis as a sort of entertaining curiosity, observing his unfortunate demeanour in the face of hardships, which Lytton called his "American haughtiness". Whenever Louis was in trouble, Lytton advised him to remain passive and quiet, and to "try to dismiss the feeling of annoyance & go on as usual" (17 April 1869). A gentleman was expected to conceal his state of mind with self-control and impassivity instead of uncontrolled and open display of feeling (Langford 184 and 250; Dixon 4).

The de Rossets' pretension to elite membership was an interesting social experiment that Lytton, who had mocked such people in some of his earlier works, followed closely. The American South had established cultural contacts with Britain: not only did many southerners admire British history and culture; many Britons viewed the southern upper class in a more positive light than its northern counterpart. Some, Lytton included, also sided with the Confederacy during the American Civil War (Link; Bennett; Shain). A radical in his early parliamentary career who spoke against slavery in the House of Commons in 1838, Lytton was, however, more anti-US than pro-Confederate. He feared that the United States, if allowed to grow and develop unchecked, would be "a menace to the whole civilized world". It would be best if, as a result of the war, America would be divided into smaller countries. Democracy was disastrous to aristocracy, which to him was "essential to all elevation of social thought and all durability of free institutions" (Mitchell 171, 197; Shain 403). In all probability, the de Rossets' southern origin did not have any effect on Lytton, who did not consider them as his social equals.

Despite his private distaste for Louis's lack of self-restraint, Lytton suggested that Louis might be of personal help to him as a middleman for his business in the United States, where he was keen to obtain copyright for his works. For a while, Louis worked as a kind of unofficial (and unpaid) agent for Lytton, negotiating the copyright of Lytton's play *The Rightful Heir* (1868), its performances, and its American publication.[4] Lytton also helped Louis financially: when he wanted to enter a

[4] Later, Lytton promised Gabrielle de Rosset all the profits that the play would produce in the United States. Edward Bulwer Lytton to Louis de Rosset, n. d. [received 7 March 1870], folder 126, DFP. For Lytton's views of copyright matters, see Seville 55–72.

partnership in December 1869, he informed Lytton that he ought to be able to invest £1,000. "This would give me an opportunity of seeing the stuff I am made of", Louis explained (14 December 1869). Without the money, he warned, Marie and he would have to go back to America. When Lytton suggested that he might go without her, Louis responded that he was sure that Lytton would continue his "affection attention & care of her". Nonetheless, he continued, they had to consider "how uncharitable public opinion would be, and perhaps slander with her thousand tongues would cry false lies in both of our ears" (2 January 1870). The not-so-subtle twisting of Lytton's arm ended by him lending Louis £500 and imploring him to dispel all thoughts of returning to America.

Louis was, once again, overjoyed. Lytton had been, he praised, "so unprecedentedly kind, affectionate and generous … that I am quite overcome and could never sufficiently express my grateful emotions" (5 January 1870). He felt that he was obliged to offer Lytton his services as payment. Lytton accepted in resignation, but, suspecting that Louis would brag, said, "it will be better not to mention at present that you are my private sec[retary]", explaining that it "might create certain jealousies … which might be unpleasant". It was also, he added, fearing further loss of money, an "honorary & gratuitous office" (3 January 1870). Despite Lytton's scepticism, Louis's assistance turned out to be quite useful.

My dear Gy: Lytton and Marie de Rosset

Both Louis's urgent struggle and the beautiful and talented Marie, with whom Lytton was fascinated, even infatuated, inspired his literary work. Lytton wrote his last three novels, *The Coming Race* (published in 1871), *The Parisians* (1873), and *Kenelm Chillingly* (1873) during their relationship, completing the first and preparing the others. Taking his secretarial duties seriously, Louis helped with Lytton's literary work, running errands, finding facts, and transcribing the manuscript of *The Coming Race*. The de Rossets also influenced this novel, a tale of a young American man who accidentally wanders too far in a mine and discovers a subterranean master race, in other ways. Lytton discussed his work with Marie repeatedly and in depth; although the novels are only mentioned in the correspondence, those passages clearly refer to earlier face-to-face discussions. Worrying that *The Coming Race* would be dry, or even a complete failure, and complaining about his editor John Forster's objections (to the concept of Vril, for which the novel later became famous), Lytton kept her up to date as to his creative difficulties.

Marie was not only a sounding board for Lytton's oeuvre, but also a source of inspiration. In 1868, Marie reported Lytton having written a piece of poetry for her. More importantly, some female characters in his novels were in all probability based upon Marie. *The Coming Race* has been seen, among other interpretations, as a satire on the women's rights movement, and the much analysed female characters, the Gy-ei, as an allegory of Lytton's own catastrophic marriage and his response to a public debate that was taking place on woman's place in society (Seed 2020 382; Sinnema 8–25, 19–22; Seed 2005 xiii–liii, xxix–xxxii). Using the terms he had invented for the male and female beings, Lytton called himself an "undemonstrative An" and Marie "the more lively Gy" in his letters to her. Although the petite Marie did not physically resemble the tall and muscular character in the book, Lytton, who had noted that underneath Marie's ladylikeness resided a strong will, called her "obstinate as a Mule or a Gy" (n. d. [late 1869], no. 54). Further, Lytton's observations about the outlook of the Gy-ei on marriage may mirror Marie and Louis's relationship. Seed (2020) has noted that the strong Zee and other Vril-ya disempower the narrator and displace him "from a position of Victorian manhood" (386), which suggests that Lytton considered Louis having failed as a man and husband. Lytton's comments on the Gy-ei loyalty are also noteworthy: once having found their partner, they became "more amiable, complacent, docile mates, more sympathetic, more sinking their loftier capacities into the study of their husbands' comparatively frivolous tastes and whims" (267–

8). Lytton saw Marie as a victim of a premature, unfortunate marriage, in which her beauty and accomplishments were wasted, and urged her to seek other things that would bring her pleasure.

An opera enthusiast and a skilful piano player and composer, Marie's passion for music was thus finally met with support. Louis did not understand her talent, rather seeing it as a means to make money, whereas Lytton, being an artist himself, sympathised with Marie and supported her. He spurred her to practise regularly, adding: "I should like to know you have that relief" (n. d. [late 1869], no. 54). In all probability referring to her marriage as a restriction on her talent, he encouraged her: "You must have *that*. The occupation is necessary to you" (n. d. [c. March 1869], no. 14). Lytton was also inspired by her love of music. "I … am much stricken with your powerful & poetic image of harmony as so essential to the life of the musical artist. I think I shall rob it for Chilingly [*sic*]", he told her (n. d. [c. 1870], no. 24). There are indeed some passages in *Kenelm Chillingly* on music, but it was not in that book that he used Marie as a model for an artistic character: Isaura Cicogna, the female protagonist in *The Parisians*, is an actress and a singer who also strives to be a composer. Her talent and struggle to reconcile her "artistic temperament" with "the homely, domestic woman-side of her nature" (217) is a theme to which Lytton constantly returns. Although Isaura's passion transferred from music to writing, hers is a quest not only for harmony between herself and her subject, but also for a career that would help her reach "the higher ranks of the social world" (313). Lytton, who thought that artists should not marry, was troubled by Marie's struggle to balance her ambition with being a wife and a mother (L. Mitchell 43). He was very pleased when she passed the entrance exam for the Royal Academy of Music in March 1870, assuring her that he would cover the expenses of her training.

Louis fed the novelist's imagination in a different way. The protagonist of *The Coming Race* is an American whose ancestors, like Louis's great-grandfather, had migrated from England. His grandfather had been "not undistinguished in the war of Independence", which granted him "a high social position in the right of birth"—Lytton's mockery of the "American patent of nobility" (1). Much like Louis, the protagonist had been sent to Britain to work for a mercantile company in Liverpool. The description of a senator, "for whose vote in the Senate . . . [a company] had just paid 20,000 dollars" (45), was a reference to Louis's unfortunate trip to Texas, where he had failed to secure his then firm a business deal in similar circumstances. The passage that most brings Louis to mind is one of Lytton's famous ones: "[H]aving a taste for travel and adventure, I resigned, for a time, all pursuit of the almighty dollar, and became a desultory wanderer over the face of the earth" (2). If *The Coming Race* was Lytton's "attempt to teach Americans their proper, subordinate place", as Lillian Nayder has argued, it was also a subtle satire of one particular American and his haphazard quest for fame and fortune (214).[5]

The novelist observed Louis with amusement, pity, and even irony that the younger man did not detect. Louis's sheep washing business scheme caused Lytton to feign worry by sighing in a letter to Marie: "I … will only hope it may produce the golden fleece" (n. d. [December 1869], no. 55). When Louis fretted that he would lose his status as a gentleman, if involved in other business than a partnership, Lytton responded: "I don't think that you, as an American Southerner would lose caste by being a wine merchant … provided you did not attend to 'the shop'" (n. d. [early 1870], no. 40).

[5] For Louis de Rosset's Texas scheme, see de Rosset, Letter books.

Seemingly encouraging him, Lytton was also dismissing the American idea of a gentlemanly status: it could not be lost, as it had not existed in the first place. To guarantee Marie's well-being and for her to remain in Britain, Lytton lent Louis another £500. Louis was ecstatic with the opportunity to invest in yet another company. "I feel the prospects are very good", he mused to his mother, hoping that he could soon invite his family to "pass a winter at least in our English Mansion" (12 May 1870).

The friendship between Lytton and the de Rossets is understandable in the light of their characters and motives. Lytton demanded loyalty, admiration, and love, but was nonetheless convinced that they were impossible to gain because of others' envy. "Inevitably", his biographer writes, "he was driven to seek the company of those who, like him, found themselves on the margin" (L. Mitchell 107). Louis, a young, penniless American, was an ideal companion for him: Louis's grovelling flattered the novelist, while Lytton's attention boosted Louis's ego. Louis, blinded by Lytton's wealth and rank, did not comprehend that the older man was in fact ridiculed by many of his contemporaries because of his temperament and egotism (L. Mitchell 103–107). The quick-witted Marie, on the other hand, understood better how to take advantage of Lytton's sentimental notions, ideal of femininity, and a craving for affection, to advance the financial and social circumstances of herself and her husband. Soon after their first meeting, Marie had written Lytton what today would be called a fan letter:

> I remember well after being carried to a "world of dreams" by your soul-stirring writing I would resolve firmly, if ever I crossed the ocean where you were I would immediately seek your presence, throw myself at your feet and—I fancy I intended worshipping you (2 April 1866).

She had signed the letter as "an enthusiastic little woman who would scatter thornless roses in the paths of genius". Lytton saved this letter in an envelope marked "Mrs. de R's 1st letter".

As their relationship developed, Lytton's attachment to Marie became common knowledge and people sought access to him through her. When they were both in London, she visited him often—so often that her cousin noted that whenever Lytton was "'at home,' *Marie is not* 'at home'!!" (Margaret Murray, 9 May 1870). She travelled after him, "to be with him—at least near him" (to Eliza DeRosset, 16 March 1868), to Knebworth, Bath, and Torquay, sometimes with her family and sometimes only accompanied by her daughter. Lytton returned the favour by coming to London to be near her. When health reasons made him remain in the countryside, he sighed: "I could be contented … if I had you with me" (n. d. [c. 1870], no. 24). Lytton worried about Marie's well-being and "longed" for her advice on all matters.

Most of his letters were casual notes, but in them Lytton used language that was not usual for a male friend to address a married woman. He called her "darling" or "dearest" and told her that he longed to see her and thought of her "always". When they met after being separated for a while, Lytton was unable to eat his dinner, being so glad to touch Marie's "little 'paws' once more" (Marie de Rosset to Louis de Rosset, 20 November 1868). In February 1870, Lytton gave her a Valentine's Day card, inscribed with the words "No fame, no power, no golden store, my love from thee could call; No! here I vow, my own, that thou art dearer than them all". He hurried to explain that while the card was "wonderfully gallant", he supposed it was "pardonable" as he had asked Louis to obtain it (n. d. [February 1870]). Marie kept Lytton's letters in her trunk, which her husband was not allowed to open in her lifetime.

It did not go unnoticed how close Marie and Lytton were. Louis's family interpreted Lytton's interest as an elderly man's altruistic wish to help a young struggling couple and worried that they would be indebted to him. Louis, however, assured his mother that Lytton "seems to enjoy our society so much, and especially Marie, that it would be unkind of us to refuse him any attention" (19 September 1869). Marie, he explained, was also guiding Lytton in the matters of religion—disregarding the fact that she was not devout at all, and Lytton was far more interested in esoteric practices, mysticism, and mesmerism than Christianity (Franklin ch. 2). Marie left no surviving description of their relationship, while Lytton explained it by saying that they were "the best friends in the world" and what he felt for her was "a parental affection" (to Armand DeRosset Jr., 15 October 1868). Louis, for his part, remarked on their closeness a few times, although Lytton lightly dismissed these comments by saying that Marie had many other, younger admirers. Louis did not raise any objections, either out of desire to continue to socialise with Lytton or a conviction that the relationship was purely platonic. Although there is no direct evidence of a physical connection, it was nonetheless not unusual for Lytton to have affairs with married women, sometimes with the knowledge of their husbands.

Sometime in early 1870, the shaky balance of the peculiar friendship was disturbed. Lytton and Marie had an argument which caused him to feel "very much hurt & estranged". He warned Marie that he would "never long care for any person who demanded the subjugation of a life so manifold as mine & who would not place confidence in me". He continued: "[Y]ou must like me for what I am; faults & all. … don't make us both unhappy without cause" (n. d. [early 1870], no. 41). Whatever the disagreement was, they patched things up, for some time later Lytton only worried about her spirits. "You may be quite sure, dearest M, that I shall come as soon as I [simply?] can. … I hope that meanwhile you will not indulge thoughts of a mournful or distrustful character" (n. d. [early February 1870], no. 89). But illness kept him in Torquay, while she was in London suffering from pain and depression, which continued throughout the spring. Only in April could she finally travel to Knebworth for a visit that lifted her spirits. "I need not ask if you spent a happy time in the sweet country", her cousin observed. "Under y[ou]r circumstances it *could not* be otherwise" (Margaret Murray, 11 May 1870). It is not made clear whether she was referring to Marie's ambition to create and keep up social networks, domestic unhappiness, or a physical illness that was improved by her visit.

Sorely Afflicted: Grieving for Marie

The story of the de Rossets' unsuccessful social climb ends with an unexpected plot twist: soon after her return to London, Marie suddenly passed away from an unknown cause at the age of 26. In the evening of May 13th, a servant found her in her bed looking peculiar and having a faint pulse. As Louis held her hand, she died. Because of the suddenness of her death, an inquest was held. The verdict, "Death from an overdose of laudanum", was based on Louis's explanation that Marie must have accidentally taken too much opiate to relieve pain caused by a cut in her finger. This only accelerated the rumours about Marie's death, spread by the de Rossets' servants and other people who had been present. As suicide was a taboo in the Victorian era, the much-troubled Louis explained that the death must have been caused by a latent heart disease as there was no reason for Marie to have taken her own life. They had been, he told his parents, very happy because of his brightening business prospects and her budding musical career (19 May 1870).

Victorians were expected to "mourn well". Demonstrating deep grief in a proper, respectable manner was not only allowed but expected. This was done, for example, by embracing such mourning customs as elaborate funeral arrangements, costumes, and condolence letters (Pike et al.; Schor 231–2; Kete). Aware of these customary, tangible expressions of grief, Louis complained about his acquaintances who had not sent condolence letters and worried about not being able to

afford such funeral arrangements or a headstone he thought Marie ought to have. Once again, he could not control his emotionality, as the Victorian mourning customs demanded. Louis was inconsolable having lost his "darling Pet" or "child wife", as he had called Marie. He sought guidance from his family members, who, in the hope of finally convincing Louis to embrace God, advised him to search for consolation in religion. But Louis complained that prayers were to no avail and wallowed in the "painful pleasure" (to Edward Bulwer Lytton, 6 July 1870) of thinking of Marie. He claimed to be too grief-stricken to take care of Gabrielle, whom he sent away, and pleaded (in vain) with his sister, a widow with three children, to come to London to nurse him as he suffered from sleeplessness and "most terrific pains thro' my head … [and] no appetite or relish for any food" (to Eliza DeRosset, 16 June 1870). Were Marie alive, Louis lamented to Lytton, she would have comforted him, "but I am glad that she is not here to share with me the misery & mortification which gnaws away my very vitals" (22 June 1870). His discomfort was augmented by the fact that his new business partner had taken advantage of his absence and drawn cash using the name of the company.

Lytton found Louis's uncontrollable emotionality distasteful and tedious. Immediately after Marie's death, Louis had drawn odd comfort from the fact that Lytton grieved for her almost as excessively as he and had even claimed that he would erect a statue to Marie at Knebworth. Louis attributed Lytton's sadness to a "great religious change" which Marie must have caused in him. "I pity the poor man for he has no simple affectionate woman whom he can now talk to on all his affairs, and at the same have an improving influence over him", he wrote to his mother (30 May 1870), turning a blind eye to the fact that Marie had been a clever socialite who eschewed churchgoing and had such a profound understanding of music and literature that Lytton had sought her advice on his works. Another reason for Lytton's suffering may have been his feeling responsible for Marie's death. In what was probably his last letter to Marie, he had urged her to take "chloral or something of the kind to night" to relieve the pain in her finger (n. d. [13 May 1870]). By July, in any event, Lytton's mourning was over. He planned on throwing large parties, from which he was only prevented by his daughter-in-law's uncle's death. Upon receiving yet another melancholy note from Louis, he answered: "Cheer up" (n. d. [received 16 July 1870]). When Louis responded by confiding in Lytton that he would try to forget his sorrow by enlisting in the French army to fight in the Franco-Prussian war, Lytton shot the idea down as rash and wild (n. d. [received 20 July 1870]). Having helped Louis for years, most recently through his lawyer negotiating with Louis's deceitful business partner, Lytton's patience was wearing thin.

In autumn 1870, Louis returned to America and went to New York for job-hunting. Despite his family's insistence that he ought to be better by now, six months having elapsed since Marie's death, he described himself to Lytton as being "completely prostrate, in a general depression of loneliness" (7 December 1870). His father suggested that Louis's problems might be due only to "the disordered condition of your stomach", and maintained that if he only would not yield to low spirits, but rather be "cheerful & thankful for the blessings which a kind Providence confered [*sic*] upon you", everything would be well (19 November and 3 December 1870). Instead, he retreated into his grief, trying to establish contact with Marie via prayers. In his sleep, he dreamed about his own death, explaining to Lytton that "a more pleasant and agreeable sensation I have never experienced" (7 December 1870). His mental and physical condition was so severely affected that he was not able to hold on to any job. "Good God, how full of bitterness is my cup?" he continued. Lytton had hoped Louis would soon be employed and happy, but, instead, woeful letters flowed in from across the ocean to which he tried to respond patiently. "It has been a sad year for us both … You must wrench yourself from the past", he advised in one of his last letters to his young American friend (21 December 1870). Louis was not able to do so. His "own private thoughts &

sorrows" (to Edward Bulwer Lytton, 21 January 1871) were his constant companion for the rest of his life, turning everything he touched sour.

Lytton died in January 1873, probably from an inflammation or a stroke. In his will, he left £1,500 to Marie de Rosset. Lytton also left £500 to Louis de Rosset; most likely the sum that Louis had borrowed from him and had failed to pay back. One-hundred-and-thirty years later, Lytton's biographer, not knowing the story of the southern belle who had charmed the elderly lord, speculated that the unknown beneficiaries might have been Lytton's illegitimate children (L. Mitchell 233). Louis, in all probability, never received word on his inheritance. Having drifted from one unsuccessful job to another since his return from Britain, his last recorded job was as a shopkeeper in a dirty country store. He was so poor that he could not support Gabrielle, who was raised by her aunt and grandparents, nor provide a permanent home for his second wife whom he had married in 1872, and their two children. In July 1874, he described his life to Gabrielle by saying: "[S]ometimes I have the blues so badly that I almost cry" (21 July 1874). He passed away a year later at the age of 35. Marie de Rosset lies interred at Paddington Cemetery in London. Her imposing and expensive headstone was paid for by Edward Bulwer Lytton.

The story of Louis and Marie de Rosset enriches our knowledge of Edward Bulwer Lytton's life events, character, and the background of some of his works. It also shows that upward mobility in the inflexible British class system was challenging, if not impossible, for foreigners without the right connections, wealth, and sophistication. The de Rossets were not as successful in high society as they had envisioned: instead of reshaping their identity as members of the elite or fascinating cosmopolitans, they remained social climbers, whose ambition was notable enough to be satirised by Edward Bulwer Lytton.

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