

Chapter 3

Hard Times: Financial Losses and Death of Thomas Martineau

(1824-1826)

In *History of the Peace* Martineau described the feeling of prosperity that swept Britain in 1824 when cotton, iron, hardware and woolen manufacture flourished, and Romantic expansionism was in the air. Confidence in South American and other overseas enterprises as well as in railways, mines, glassworks, gas-oil works and so on led naive investors to risk all their capital. Joint-stock companies became the rage. At the same time, posing a direct threat to Thomas's business, there was

rampant smuggling on the south coast of England, when a fisherman's great boots were [sometimes] found to be stuffed with French lace, gloves or jewellery [and] the smugglers on the opposite shore were engaged . . . in introducing English woollens . . . past a series of custom-houses.

As a manufacturer's daughter, Martineau scorned strikers and the "tyranny" of labor organizers whose delaying tactics could cause black dye (used in producing bombazine, for example) to be spoiled, or they threatened

the weaver who was willing to work for a twelfth hour in a busy time [but who] was met in the dark, and told that he would be murdered if he worked for more than eleven hours.

In the spring of 1825, Martineau went on, "sagacious men of business began . . . to prophesy the evil to come," even though the banks continued to issue paper money and speculation did not lessen. When a few commercial houses started to fail, soon "one firm after another stopped payment."

Surely recalling her father, Martineau pictured the typical manufacturer of the time who "looked round on his overloaded shelves, and for every thousand pounds' worth of goods now reckoned five hundred." Thomas's tragedy was completed the following year, when "the dying man altered his will with a sigh, lessening his children's portions by one-half or two-thirds."¹

At Norwich, Martineau added, about 12,000 weavers [were] unemployed, and the whole city in a state of depression, the more harassing from its contrast with the activity and high hope of the preceding year.

In *The Rioters* (Martineau's first attempt at doctrinal fiction and inadvertently, at political economy) she portrayed out-of-work handloom weavers reacting violently to the new machinery they blamed for their economic woes.²

With uncharacteristic gloom, Martineau reported to James at college in December that Thomas had been ill from worry over business and was barely recovering. Overdrawn to the limit at the bank, he did not see how to go on, though so far facing only one bad debt of £300. Banks and manufactories were closing, no one knew why. Madge, acting "worse than ever," talked of "emigrating to America." Even Tagart had problems, but she and Rachel were trying to "improve" his foolish sister, Sarah. Tagart had confided to his co-pastor, Withers Dowson, that he could not afford his mother's reckless spending on dress for herself and Sarah and for keeping his ill brother. He planned to insure his life, advertised to give private classes and intended to write for the reviews. Unitarians in general were expressing discontent with the *Repository*, and Fox mooted buying and reorganizing it, for which £500 had been raised. She was writing stories for Houlston at £10 a time, "throwing aside the book" she had planned.³

In her autobiography, Martineau defended her father against charges of having speculated. Yet "his stock of manufactured goods was larger . . . than it would have been in a time of less enterprise," and by "the middle of the winter" of 1825-1826 he began to fear ruin. Heavy poor relief expenses at Norwich and the decline of the Spanish trade under "new arrangements with France" even worried James. Thomas's brother Philip Meadows and his nephew James Lee shared the "pronounced opinion" that Thomas was suffering from "incurable liver disease" (both failing to diagnose the common Norfolk ailment, "a prodigious gall-stone").⁴

Before Christmas, Thomas felt better after his second-brother, David, had come. He asked for an extension of repayment to his brothers in London of a £2,000 loan, due in February. David did not press him, and Thomas was cheered by an order for twenty pieces of

goods. Martineau felt “great joy” at a promised visit by Isabella Rankin, she told James. And she was “heartily enthused” over a story she had written about orphans who helped themselves, with a scene set in Madeira before the [fictional] father’s death. She was working also on her “large book,” not for the sake of literary reputation, but to express her strong convictions. Hume on necessity disappointed and confused her, however. Would James ask Helen Martineau, when he saw her at York at Christmas, to inquire about Sarah Tagart’s going as assistant in a school “to continue her personal improvement.”⁵

Through January and February 1826, Thomas’s condition worsened, and a surgeon at Norwich recommended he go to Cheltenham to take the mineral waters. Henry now calculated his father’s property at only £2,500. Thomas’s creditors, especially his fourth-eldest brother, John (a partner in Whitbread’s Brewery) and a Mr. Rand, were considerate. Bafflingly, friends and relatives owed *Thomas* money. At the same time, as “a means of enabling Uncle Robert R[ankin] to pay out [his] debt,” Ellen was invited to stay another year “free of charge,” at her Aunt Kentish’s school in Bristol.

Other sad events outside the family included Tagart’s brother’s decline, for which the Octagon congregation had donated £50 and increased his salary to £300 a year. Tagart, Martineau gossiped to James, had annoyed William Taylor by preaching James’s sermon, “To the poet all things are pure.” Tagart’s sister, Sarah, was being “rigged out in clothing &c., to go to Miss Spencer’s as assistant, after [a] premium paid by friends of the situation.” By February, *Madge’s* affairs were in the hands of trustees, “on behalf of his children,” and not able to be “further impaired by action on his part.”⁶

Late in February, Thomas and Elizabeth set out for Cheltenham, travelling slowly with stops at Stamford Hill (his brother John’s home), and at Bury. Elizabeth told Helen (not wasting space on apologies over their tiff) that she was acting as sole nurse and housekeeper and that Thomas was under the care of Dr. Coley--eminent in treating liver complaints. His treatment included external rubbing with mercury in the region of the liver and taking the waters. Though he had improved, they would probably be there for weeks. Robert, Sister Kentish, Mary Rankin (Elizabeth’s sister) and others had come to see them, their rooms being on High Street, near a “fashionable drive & promenade,” so they needn’t mix with “empty fashionists.” Cheltenham,

all built of stone, Elizabeth thought “beautiful.” And she thanked Helen for finding a place for Sarah Tagart, who she hoped would be more responsible than her mother--and for Helen’s donation to “a substantial plain wardrobe” and half Sarah’s premium. Asking about “good Mr Worthington,” Elizabeth sent regards to Helen’s family but apparently did not approve of Helen’s working at an infant school.⁷

From Magdalen Street, Martineau counseled James how to tell his parents on his twenty-first birthday, 21 April, about his engagement, while noting Elizabeth’s prejudice against the Higginsons. Of further tidbits, their father showed improvement, Uncle Peter’s bank would survive, “Tagart, delightful in the pulpit [was] sadly careless about expense” and allowed his mother “to keep a luxurious home.” Moreover, Madge’s vanity and his wife led him to act badly, while the distress in Norwich was terrible. Of good news, Rev. Wellbeloved had spoken generously of her *Devotional Exercises*.

Suddenly in May, Thomas’s symptoms worsened. His treatment was stopped, and Henry went to escort Thomas, Elizabeth and her sister Margaret back to Norwich. At St. Albans, Thomas suffered an attack and asked to talk to his brother John and to Henry about his affairs. Lissey hurried to Norwich from Newcastle, while James came from York to help care for their father. Recently, James had preached to congregations at Manchester, Derby and Bristol, taking overnight coaches or walking long distances. He cheered and surprised his father, who had always thought him sickly. Reluctantly, Thomas carried out the painful task of altering his will, Henry being given full responsibility for carrying on the business and paying off their debts.⁸

Martineau’s *Addresses; with Prayers and Original Hymns*, was just then going through the press. Though gratified by her father’s pleasure in “what I should one day be and do,” she felt unable to express her affection for him. For “the old habit of fear came upon me,” she later wrote, “more irresistibly than ever, on the assembling of the family.”

Thomas died on 21 June 1826, a little more than two years after the death of his eldest son. Though the Magdalen Street house and warehouse formed part of Thomas’s doomed assets, Elizabeth and her unmarried children were for now allowed to stay in their Norwich home.⁹

In several stories over the next few years (perhaps with wishful thinking), Martineau portrayed enterprising orphans. In *Principle and Practice; or, the Orphan Family* (1827), half-grown children lose their parents and then discipline themselves to achieve economic independence. A grim episode, the amputation of a young man's leg by a doctor friend (as in *The Crofton Boys* of 1841) replicates Martineau's masochistic childhood fantasies. A sister (like Martineau) surprises her siblings by publishing a book and leaves to study in London. Though contrived, the tale seems aimed at appealing to readers' domestic sensibilities through attractive characters. Long passages of dialogue and "letters" show Martineau practicing narrative techniques she would employ five years later in *Illustrations of Political Economy*.¹⁰

In still another early tale, *Five Years of Youth* (1831), partially based on the lives of Eliza and Sarah Flower (whom Martineau met through Fox), two motherless girls are brought up by their father. Charming domestic details came partly from Martineau's own childhood, but the story takes a new direction when father and daughters travel to France where the liberal-leaning father is arrested, one daughter going to care for him in prison.¹¹

Sequel to Principle and Practice (1831) treats the original orphaned family after two years have passed. The sisters conduct a school and the elder brother, who worked first in a merchant's warehouse, now owns a share in the business. Economic well being is still the characters' main goal, while overly pious behavior is frowned on. Martineau's happy experiences at Bristol obviously provided her with material, but a dark current intrudes in the story when the spoiled, younger brother takes an overdose of laudanum.¹²

Martineau's sense of powerlessness at the time of her father's death, acted out in tales like *Christmas-Day* and *The Friends*, differed from the self-command she pictured to Helen. Nor did she hesitate to challenge younger or weaker relations and friends--as in a letter to James's friend Francis Darbishire at the end of the college session in 1826. James and Francis were known to be "like two lovers." James had confessed his devotion to Helen Higginson to Francis, and the two shared a common dedication to becoming divines (after Thomas's death, James received a college bursary to finish his training at Manchester College). In April 1826, Francis wrote to Helen Martineau in his careful feminine hand, begging her help in getting James away

from York for a rest. To induce the college committee to give James a leave, Francis proposed a year at Göttingen, where they could study mineralogy, attend science lectures and perfect their German.

Though Francis's intentions were good, Martineau avowed to him, James's family knew his health better: James had successfully completed four college sessions and would return to York in September. Neither James nor her mother, she added to Francis, knew of their exchange of letters.¹³

(Catherine Turner supported Martineau concerning James's high qualities, but she and her mother *worried* about James's health and mental debility from over exertion. It would be better for James, Catherine suggested, if his friend Francis did not return to York this session, for they excited each other too much.¹⁴)

In August 1826, when Martineau next wrote to James she had received and tentatively accepted a proposal of marriage from John Hugh Worthington. He had come to stay at Norwich again in August and after experiencing "great agitation" whether he should declare himself, carried out an intention "which everyone but himself had read in his demeanor . . . in Manchester last year."¹⁵

¹ HP 2: 341-58; Martineau used her own experience from 1829, when the firm failed entirely: "The widow lady and her daughters, who had paid ready money all their lives, now found themselves without income for half a year together" (2: 358); the plot of *Berkeley the Banker*, Parts I and II (*Illustrations of Political Economy* [London: Charles Fox, 1833]), turned on the failure of a small town bank owing to others' fraud and the depositors' loss of confidence. Fortunes in the publishing and book trade were lost as well, the crash of November 1825 bringing down Sir Walter Scott along with his publisher Archibald Constable and his printers and publishers Alexander and James Ballantyne (see, for example, John Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott. A Critical Biography* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995]); Martineau noted Scott's "Letters of Malachi Malagrowth" (on keeping the small note currency of Scotland) in the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal* (HP 2: 362).

² HP 2: 369; *The Rioters; or, A Tale of Bad Times* (London; Wellington, Salop: Houlston and Son, 1827); a second early tale, also meant to teach the working of political economy, *The Turn-Out; or, Patience the Best Policy. By the Author of "Principle and Practice"* [see note 10] (London; Wellington, Salop; Houlston and Son, 1829), concerned "mill-hands" and mentioned a frame-knitter.

³ HM to JM, 16, 22 December 1825 and 12 January 1826, HM/FL 420-21, 421-23 and 423.

⁴ *Auto.* 1: 129 and Carpenter, *James Martineau* 47-48.

⁵ HM to JM, 16 and 22 December 1825 (see note 3); *Auto.* 1: 129; David Martineau had begun as a “scarlet-dyer” at Norwich and moved to London in 1797 to become a brewer and then a sugar-refiner; Martineau later deplored Isabella’s lack of energy or “advanced qualities;” a scene set in Madeira did not appear in any of Martineau early stories; Martineau’s book, *Addresses; with prayers and original hymns, for the use of families and schools. By a lady, authoress of “Devotional exercises, for the use of Young persons”* (London: Rowland, 1826), included careful explanations of Christian tenets, aimed mostly at children.

⁶ HM to JM, 12 January, 7, 13 and 20 February 1826, *HM/FL* 423, 423-24, 424-255 and 425.

⁷ Elizabeth Martineau to Helen Martineau, 24 March 1826, BANC [Box] 8: 39; Elizabeth Greenhow to Helen Martineau, 4 August 1827, BANC [Box 7] 73.

⁸ HM to JM, 7, 26 March, 28 April, 3, 23 and 29 May 1826, *HM/FL* 425-26, 426-27, 427, 427, 428-29, and 429.

⁹ See note 5; *Auto.* 1:130.

¹⁰ Martineau’s first two “eightpenny stories” for Houlston in 1827, *Christmas-Day; or, The Friends. A Tale* and *The Friends. A Continuation of “Christmas-Day,”* concern an orphaned girl who loses her sight but learns to be unselfish and useful (see *Auto.* 1: 134-35); another was *Principle and Practice; or, the Orphan Family. A Tale* (Wellington, Salop: Houlston, 1827).

¹¹ In 1825 Fox became first foreign secretary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association and in the same year the association bought the *Repository* (Fox assisted with its conduct until he became editor in 1832); see Richard Garnett, *The Life of William Johnson Fox, Public Teacher and Social Reformer* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910) 64-67; for Fox’s dangerous membership of the National Political Union, see HM to JM, 23 November 1831, *HM/FL* 457.

¹² *Sequel to Principle and Practice; or, The Orphan Family. A Tale* (London: Houlston, 1831; *Deerbrook* [London: Moxon 1839], Martineau’s full-length novel, also concerned two orphaned sisters).

¹³ HM to Francis Darbishire, 30 June 1826, *CL* 1: 36-38; Martineau’s annoyance at Francis’s asking the Martineaus to underwrite a year abroad for James at a time of financial straits may partly have been owing to fear that Francis would usurp her role as James’s guardian.

¹⁴ Catherine Turner to HM, 2 August 1826, BANC [Box 5] 75.

¹⁵ James may have known more about Worthington’s intentions that he admitted; through James, Worthington and Martineau had often exchanged “kind remembrances.”