

Chapter 4

New Challenges: Harriet's Marriage Proposal and Elizabeth's Quarrels with Helen, Tom's Widow

(1826-1827)

Despite her intellectually-freighted reading and authorship, at twenty-four Martineau remained under the emotional sway of Elizabeth. She and her two unmarried sisters were expected to share both domestic duties and emotional burdens like grieving for their brother and father. Without Elizabeth's approval, they did not travel or take major decisions, the shocking downturn in their fortunes in 1826 failing to change their adolescent-like dependency. Martineau claimed in her autobiography that only when the remnant of their income from the family business virtually disappeared, was she allowed to give up middle-class propriety to try to earn a living by her pen.

Worthington, James's bosom friend, had meanwhile offered her a role as helpmate. On the day following Worthington's proposal, Martineau wrote unreservedly to James that she longed to accept but had misgivings about herself and about Worthington's health. At Manchester, Worthington had been "out of health, depressed and unequal to the effective discharge of his duties." Martineau failed to mention romantic feelings (at least in James's recorded versions of her letters), perhaps feeling stunned at the sexual implications of her new status. Helen Martineau, on the other hand, warmly seconded Worthington's suit, while Worthington himself recovered his self-possession and preached feelingly to a large congregation at the Octagon three days later. "That young man is all spirit; he lifts one up, one knows not where," commented a friend.

Before James could respond, Martineau seemed to beg him to help her come to a decision:

If he proves strong in body and mind, if for six months he can perform his arduous duties with credit and honour, will you with pleasure see me place my hopes of happiness on him?

(James may have been partly taken aback at this new stage in his sister's life. He and Worthington had lived in adjacent rooms for two years "on terms of the most confidential friendship," and he felt his sister did not fit his friend's stated ideal of a wife. James was in Derby in mid-August, preaching school sermons and no doubt seeing Helen Higginson. His own future would be affected by the family's financial straits, though Henry now sent him the £20 he asked for and generously offered to send his boat, the *Shamrock*, wherever he liked.)

From Emily Taylor's father's home in Buckenham, Martineau sent James "warmest gratitude" for a letter that "set her mind entirely at ease." She was applying herself "in good earnest to meet the duties which probably await[ed] her," and Rachel and Henry were sympathetic. Helen's visit had been delightful, without little jealousies, and she had been considerate of Elizabeth. Worthington would return via Derby to Manchester.¹

Word of Martineau's engagement did not surprise some of her friends, but the news brought a flurry of excited communications: "I know not where I could more readily sympathize than in the happiness which now beams around Harriet and Mr. Worthington," wrote Helen Higginson's younger sister Emily (romantically involved with James's friend Francis Darbshire). The result of the Norwich visit was "what we always thought it must be," she confided to Helen. Emily had heard of Worthington's impassioned preaching, after he was accepted, and believed in James's "perfect approbation & sympathy" with the match.²

For the Martineau household, however, all was not well. By early September, Helen was behaving ill to Elizabeth and was cross to everybody, Martineau reported heatedly to James. Tagart had been "obtrusive" at Magdalen Street and was once "shown the door." Tagart, it seemed, had "not been deterred by 10 years difference of age" to offer marriage to Helen, which she intended to accept. Tagart was "worldly," Helen "heartless and 'mad,'" Martineau scolded. When she and Elizabeth tried to reason with her, Helen answered that she had made a mistake in marrying Tom, having been "warned against any connection with [the Martineau] family." Now she insisted on a written apology from Elizabeth, "as the condition of any future intercourse."

In addition to troubles with Helen, Elizabeth was fretting over Rachel, who at twenty-six was "prone to slight bleedings." To remove Rachel from Norwich over the winter, Elizabeth

planned to take her to stay at Hastings on the south coast with the family servant Hannah. Times were bad, but mourning for the Duke of York would help business, Martineau added pragmatically to James. In spite of emotional distractions, her second book was ready for publication on 5 November. She had begun another “series,” but could not work until her mother left. Elizabeth, meanwhile, was cheerful because Worthington was doing well.³

“You were the first person who put me upon writing ‘Address’ for Schools,” Martineau effused to James Aspinall Turner (nephew of Rev. William Turner), “and you are therefore the first to whom I beg to present a volume.” She hoped she had “not been presumptuous” in attempting to supply an existing want which no one else seemed inclined to do.⁴

In her autobiography, Martineau described her brief engagement as “my own special trial,” pointing to a “mischief . . . caused by ill-offices” that had discouraged Worthington before the loss of the family money made her accessible as the wife of a “poor” clergyman. Then “anxious and unhappy,” she had been afraid to rebuff Worthington even while feeling unequal to the task of taking “charge of his happiness.”⁵ Two years younger than Martineau, Worthington had been supported through past bouts of ill health by his doting mother. Martineau’s conflict of emotions seemed to stem from neurotic fears about her body and possibly worry over Worthington’s weak masculinity. Tortured by stomach ailments, she later exclaimed: “I was ill, --I was deaf, --I was in an entangled state of mind between conflicting duties and some lower considerations.”

In later letters, Martineau recorded strong, probably homoerotic feelings for women like her mesmerist Frances (Mrs. Montague) Wynyard and Maria Weston Chapman. While Elizabeth and James may have been won by Worthington’s charm and modesty, Martineau seemed more attracted by the promise of self-realization away from the family. Yet just as she was growing happy and overcoming her fears (as summarized in her autobiography), Worthington “became suddenly insane; and after months of illness of body and mind, he died.”⁶

The first news of Worthington’s sudden seizure “with [an] illness which seems to have plunged at once into delirium” reached Norwich at the end of November. For one day, Martineau was violently ill. On that day, she told James, she accepted her “appointed position

on earth," while Worthington would wait for her in heaven. Worthington's was now "another existence, whose conscious experience [had no relation to] that of her beloved."⁷

At Manchester, Helen Martineau took on a new role as comforter and informant. On the following Saturday, Martineau admitted that the first shock had been "dreadful." Elizabeth was away with Rachel, but Henry had gone for Aunt Lee to come to stay the first night. Since then she had been at Aunt Lee's home, but would soon return

as I do not like Henry's house to be longer solitary. I assure you I am comfortable & hopeful: but I cannot think of myself when so many are suffering in a much greater degree. His poor mother is my chief care; & next to her all who are *witnesses*.

For Worthington she couldn't grieve; their "first object in loving each other" had been their "mutual improvement" and their "highest desire, to fit ourselves & each other for heaven." The night before the attack, Worthington had written, fully clear in his mind and certain he could make her happy. Elizabeth--to whom she had sent a copy of the letter--would feel Worthington's death even more than herself, she assured Helen.

Worthington was being cared for in his rooms at Manchester, and Helen had invited Martineau to come to stay with her--but that was "not to be thought of." An illness "of a common kind" would have brought her at once, but she dreaded even James's going to see Worthington, she said. Henry, meanwhile, had been "dreadfully shocked; but calm & considerate as ever." Although declaring that Worthington had already passed out of her life, Martineau responded eagerly to Helen's daily bulletins and pondered his doctor's "feeling of delicacy" in not writing to her. *She* had made up her mind to "something worse than death from the first moment," for Worthington's "frame" could probably not stand "so fearful a shock" as the delirium. Having believed in his "renovated powers" and "new confidence in himself," she now felt that "to lose him at once would be the least trial of all."⁸

James later explained Worthington's malady as "a succession of carbuncles" with "attendant delirium," rather than "brain fever," as it was otherwise described. Contradictory accounts of her fiancé's condition reached Martineau--hopeful ones from his mother, alarming ones from Helen and John Gooch Robberds (Unitarian minister at Cross-street chapel in Manchester). Worthington's "mental aberration" was not "constitutional," Martineau assured

James. If marriage was precluded, she was ready for “alternative prospects,” and she wrote to Worthington’s mother offering to read to him—an offer peremptorily stopped by Elizabeth.⁹

Returning to Norwich, Elizabeth began her own long letters to Helen. On 17 December, she reported “dear Harriet . . . calm, & pretty well in health,” but varying accounts of Worthington’s state a trial. Rachel was staying in a house fronting the sea, where Dr. Batty--father-in-law of Philip Martineau, John’s son--called every two days.

In January, Martineau still claimed “hopes and fears” for Worthington’s recovery. She thanked Helen and Worthington’s mother and sister for their letters but seemed troubled by conflicting pressures. Though having “no expectation whatever” he could listen to a letter from her that week; she would “send a short one by Sunday’s post” that did not openly declare her feelings.¹⁰

Worthington’s mother had Elizabeth’s sympathy but her *disapproval* for weak optimism concerning her son, *she* having borne numerous trials over the past two years. At the end of January, Elizabeth told Helen that neither she nor Harriet would go to Manchester. Worthington was “surrounded by his family & other kind attendants” and no further assistance was wanted. Moreover, no real betrothal had taken place. Now Emily Taylor was coming to stay with Harriet, who “goes on with all her usual occupations [even though] she flags a little.” How did Helen like “Principle & Practice?” Another of her books, *The Rioters*, was “in the hands of the Printer,” and Elizabeth liked it better than any of her other stories.¹¹

In March, Worthington was moved to Leicester to be cared for by his family, but his “mental disorder” reportedly persisted after “the bodily malady” had been relieved. Conflicting reports of Worthington’s distraught family, when Martineau continued to refuse to see him, intensified his drama. Elizabeth reported to Helen that her daughter’s “final determination” had been made “& communicated to the parties at Leicester & the affair brought to an end.” Elizabeth thought her daughter

very anxious, & thoughtful, ever since the receipt of J.H.Ws short letter, & I saw
she watched with anxiety the arrival of the next, which his mother said was in
hand--but it never came, & we concluded the reason was that he was not able,
whether from want of mental or bodily power.

Worthington's "poor mother" was catching at "every gleam of hope," dreading "to be convinced of the actual state of one so dear to her Poor woman my heart aches for her," Elizabeth added lugubriously. As to Harriet, now "that her mind is made up," Elizabeth hoped she would "return to her usual occupations."

Worthington's drama, however, was not over. From Leicester two weeks later, Helen heard that the "invalid" was better, having walked round the garden and paddock and taken tea in the parlor; Elizabeth's last letter, however, had given "considerable pain." *Martineau's* letters had been his greatest delight, but he was "*deeply* wounded by the hasty and unkind manner" in which the decision for her to stay at home had been made. Albina Worthington was convinced that Martineau failed to have the same attachment as her brother's, or "she could not so *very soon* [have felt] better in health and happiness." Three weeks later Albina reported that her brother was "regaining health and strength" more rapidly than they had reason to expect. They had not opened Martineau's last letter--which she had asked them not to show him--but could not now return her letters, which were "safely locked up at Manchester" with the key in Leicester.¹²

In April, Martineau thanked Helen for telling her what she wanted to know about Worthington. Staying with Robert and Jane at Dudley, Martineau was playing the organ, walking with Jane "about the Castle grounds" and teaching baby Susan to speak. Helen had sent "Jervon's book" and Aunt Kentish would lend her "Elton's," both challenging, while her solitary walks of "6 or 8 miles" helped her writing. What did Helen think of "James's partnership with Dr. Carpenter?" Helen must not go on buying "copies of every thing" Martineau wrote, she begged. She had "plans innumerable" and was now busy correcting *The Rioters* and *Principle and Practice* for new editions. To James, Martineau repeated that she wanted her letters to Worthington containing confidential matter about others to be *returned*.

Elizabeth, still writing to Helen in May, reported that Rachel was with her cousin at Dr. Batty's country place. Harriet was at Dudley and had not mentioned Worthington, for,

I never encourage any writing upon that subject, & I hope too that she does not allow herself to talk upon it. Occupation, exercise & cheerful society will return her mind to peace & enable her to continue her useful employments.

Elizabeth looked forward to the end of June, “when Harriet & James & Ellen will come home, & the Miss Higginsons with them.” At Newcastle, the Greenhows had moved into their new house with stone front, “Number 1, Eldon Square,” specially fitted up for the doctor’s patients. Lissey herself had miscarried the past week, Elizabeth added almost casually.¹³

While Martineau was making a round of visits to Nottingham and Derby, though not to Worthington at Leicester, James congratulated himself that his sister had found “the greatest comfort in the letters she has from My Helen.” He should not go to Derby (Helen’s home), Martineau urged, but proceed directly to Norwich to discuss family matters with their mother and Henry before she and the Higginson sisters came. She wanted her letters to Worthington containing confidential matter about others to be *returned*, she repeated to James.¹⁴

In May and June, the *Monthly Repository* published two of Martineau’s poems. In the highly wrought “Peace and Hope and Rest” a personified Mourning seeks relief and God is likened to an eagle that can bear a spirit to heaven. The second, a sonnet, embraced Wordsworth’s poetic tenet that childhood is a time of directly knowing God, proclaiming “The echoes of thy voice are heard afar, / O Happiness!”¹⁵

Worthington died, aged twenty-three, on 4 July 1827. Perhaps to distance herself from the unhappy affair, Martineau explained in her autobiography how unsuitable she was for marriage and scoffed at Worthington’s family’s claim that she had stayed away because “engaged to another.” Elizabeth meanwhile continued to oppose Helen’s plans to marry Tagart, while Lissey assured Helen that *she* had never spoken against her conduct.¹⁶

¹ HM to JM, 18, 22 and 30 August 1826, *HM/FL* 429-30, 430 and 430-31; “The Early Days of Harriet Martineau” (see chap. 3, note 5); Buckenham lies between Norwich and Yarmouth.

² Emily Higginson to Helen Martineau, 11 September 1826, BANC [Box 7] 78.

³ HM to JM, 4, 27 September, 27 October and 4 November 1826, *HM/FL* 431, 431-32, 432-33 and 433-34 (the Duke of York was ill but died only in 1827).

⁴ HM to James Aspinall Turner, 7 November 1826, *CL* 1: 39; in *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 Hunter, 1826), Martineau looked resolutely at life after death.

⁵ *Auto.* 1: 130; Martineau’s biographers have sometimes read ‘ill-offices’ as referring to James, but James denied the accusation in “The Early Days of Harriet Martineau.”

⁶ Cf. Webb, 49; Martineau was also attracted to handsome and/or cerebral men; *Auto.* 1: 130-31.

⁷ HM to JM, 2 and 11 December 1826, *HM/FL* 434-35 and 435.

⁸ HM to Helen Martineau, 2 and 7 December 1826, *CL* 1: 39-41 and 41-44.

⁹ "The Early Days of Harriet Martineau"; HM to JM, 11 and 23 December 1826, *HM/FL* 435 and 436.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Martineau to Helen Martineau, 17 Dec. 1826, [id missing]; HM to Helen Martineau, 12 January 1827, *CL* 1: 44-46 (Martineau later insisted her letters to Worthington be returned because they were private).

¹¹ Elizabeth Martineau to Helen Martineau, 30 January 1827, BANC [Box 8] 46; for *Principle and Practice*, see chap. 3, note 11; for *The Rioters*, see chap. 3, note 2.

¹² Elizabeth Martineau to Helen Martineau, 16 March 1827, BANC [Box] 8: 47; Albina Worthington to Helen Martineau, 31 March [letter torn] and 21 April 1827, BANC [Box 9] 82 and 83.

¹³ HM to Helen Martineau, 9 April 1827, *CL* 1: 46-48 (Susan was to accompany Martineau on her Irish journey in 1852); William Jevons, *Systematic Morality, or A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Human Duty, on the Grounds of Natural Religion* (London: Rowland Hunter, 1827); Charles A. Elton, *Second Thoughts on the Person of Christ, on Human Sin, and on the Atonement* [on secession from the Unitarian Communion to the Church of England] (Bristol: J. M. Glutche, 1827); for James's taking over Carpenter's school, see chap. 5; *The Rioters* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1842); *Principle and Practice* (London: Houlston, 1827); Elizabeth Martineau to Helen Martineau, 16 March and 9 May 1827, BANC [Box 8] 47 and 48.

¹⁴ HM to JM, 14 May and 15 June 1827, *HM/FL* 436-37, 437.

¹⁵ *MR* I [second series] (May and June 1827): 331 and 401 (over the next four years, Martineau signed her poems and twelve additional contributions to the *Repository* "V", possibly for "Vigilius"--a signature used by William Turner's father).

¹⁶ *Christian Reformer* 13 (August 1827): 372-73; *MR* 10 (October 1827): 759-62; *Auto.* 1: 131 (Martineau's claim seemed to underline her painful feelings about sexual intimacy, exacerbated by Elizabeth's failure of kindness towards Worthington and his family); Albina Worthington was to call on Martineau at Chiswell Street, London, when they came to a "clear understanding [taking] a load . . . off our minds" (HM to Elizabeth Martineau, 22 January 1830, *CL* 1: 62-63); Lissey claimed she had learned of Helen's engagement shortly after the "unhappiness produced at Norwich last summer by the commencement of this affair" and sent Helen her good wishes but regret that "the manner of conducting [it] has been the means of estranging you from the family of your husband" (Elizabeth Greenhow to Helen Martineau, 4 August 1827, BANC [Box 7] 73).