

The Courtship of Marianne Hunt

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Marianne Kent was not highly intelligent, but she had undoubted attraction of the type that is probably at its best in adolescence. At thirteen, she was vivacious and pretty, with long black hair and dark flashing eyes. Her figure, which in later life would spread, was still graceful and appealing. She tried to make the best of herself. Her life was spent at home with her widowed mother, a former court milliner, and her younger brother and sister, and was rather dull until the late summer of 1802, when she and her mother acquired serious suitors.

The hand of Mrs. Kent was courted by a Mr. Rowland Hunter, a printer and bookseller of St. Paul's Churchyard, London. They were married in London about the end of the same year and continued to live in the Kent family home at Little Tichfield Street, Marylebone. Marianne's courtship was of much longer duration. To the Kent home, earlier in 1802, had come a young man named John Robertson: charming, spirited and kind and, as his friends said, full of "good qualities." There he had found a kindred soul in the younger daughter, Bessy, who was an avid writer and observer of nature. Robertson encouraged Bessy in her work, bringing her a magazine, *The Monthly Preceptor*, which at that time was publishing stories by young people. He was keen that she should try her luck as a contributor. Bessy, however, always shy and self-effacing, refused, claiming that she could not hope to be good enough. She pointed admiringly to one article in particular which she could never hope to emulate. Robertson promptly declared that he knew the author and would bring him to the house. It was in this way that Marianne's suitor first came to call. His name was James Henry Leigh Hunt.

Hunt was then seventeen years old, and a newly published poet, his first book of verses, *Juvenilia*, having appeared the previous year. He was ardent, idealistic and very naive; at an age, as he wrote later describing adolescence, when "faculties newly developed find another world; when new sympathies unite more closely with beings around

us; when senses more awakened and imagination on fire, impel us to seek the truest pleasure in the sweetest illusions." At seventeen he was obviously ripe to fall in love, even without the assistance of fortuitous circumstances. An attack of illness sealed the process. Too ill to return home one evening after a visit, he was put to bed by Mrs. Hunter, and next day examined by a doctor who diagnosed St. Anthony's fire, and prescribed a long and careful convalescence. Chief nurse, of course, was Marianne. To find himself cosseted in an affectionate household was exactly what he longed for, and soon Henry (as they called him) had adopted Mrs. Hunter as a second mother and was remembering, as he told Marianne, two mothers in his prayers. It was doubtless this mood that precipitated his serious step a few months later. He asked to be accepted as Marianne's future husband, a request to which both mother and daughter agreed.

What was it, one wonders, that attracted him so to Marianne? It was a question many people were to ask—seeing them so ill suited to one another—over the next fifty years. Few were able to summon up a satisfactory answer. She undoubtedly had physical attraction. The long dark hair and supple figure were calculated to attract a susceptible young man, and Hunt clearly was susceptible. In fact his friend Barron Field complained that Hunt was too physically demonstrative with Marianne. "He undertook to rate me in a very singular way," Hunt wrote to Marianne, "upon my putting my arm now and then round your waist and taking your hand: he said that these kind of things were never done in company at all genteel and were a great mark of vulgarity." Very annoyed, Hunt chose to disregard the reprimand.

Then Marianne's temperament, too, may at first have attracted him. Her nature was quite the opposite to his, being self-confident, even pert, unanxious, even careless, and given within the family circle to frequent tantrums. To someone shy and vulnerable these qualities no doubt seemed attractive and comforting. She prattled on unself-consciously and he was required to make little effort to get to know her. She for her part was undoubtedly flattered and pleased to have attracted so important a suitor; possibly even more so if she realized her sister, Bessy, also coveted him. Having little reserve, Marianne showed her pleasure in his attentions, and Hunt was both reassured and enchanted.

He was enchanted and she was happy. For the moment all went wonderfully. But after the first rapture, Hunt began to realize that Marianne was not quite perfect. This might not have mattered so much if Hunt had not had in his mind a firm—indeed an obsessive—picture of what a woman should be. It was a picture immediately

reminiscent of his mother. Mrs. Hunt was an intelligent woman, engrossed in religion, literature and politics. Many of her tastes and beliefs had been the genesis of Hunt's own. It was therefore not surprising that he should believe that a woman should display taste and hold educated opinions. This was not to say that a female should be aggressive: this he loathed. A gentle polished manner was as essential as the ability to converse intelligently, to have artistic interests and to write a competent and graceful letter. These he regarded as minimum requirements for his future wife—indeed more than requirements. They were more like urgent demands that issued from the emotional depths of his nature. For Hunt required not only a wife but a soul-mate: a kindred spirit with whom he could share his fears and longings and whose constantly reassuring love would banish the pit of isolation and despair that so often seemed to be yawning before him. This picture emerges from the letters he was to send to Marianne over the next seven years.¹

Marianne was, of course, very young—only just fourteen at the end of 1802—and there was no question of immediate marriage. Moreover, Hunt's income as a clerk in the War Office (a post procured for him by his father's application to influential acquaintances) was insufficient to support a married couple. And so he decided to wait, a waiting that would drag on until the summer of 1809. His letters to her during those years—so eloquent, revealing and informal—provide a ready barometer to the varying climate of their relationship. Carefully collected together earlier this century by Luther A. Brewer, they now reside in the Brewer—Leigh Hunt Collection of the University of Iowa Libraries. Their importance to students of Leigh Hunt is indeed great.

Marianne had not been educated, as Hunt soon realized. Nor did she appear to have the capacity to provide the sort of responses Hunt's nature demanded. However, she had two great virtues: she was young and she loved him. She could be educated. Not for a moment did it seem to enter his head that this was a dangerous course, that it might be morally or psychologically wrong, or that Marianne was just not capable of absorbing his instruction. He felt that he was doing her a precious service and that, if she truly loved him, she would wish to please him. As he put it in a letter to her on 29th July, 1806: "The wish to excel in the eyes of those we love is the first step towards excellence. . . . True regard may be defined to be a desire to make its object happy and to be rewarded by that object's

¹ All letters referred to in this article are in the Brewer—Leigh Hunt Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries. Their preservation is fortunate, for they reveal facets of Hunt's character which are usually ignored.

good opinion. . . ." He was often to express these sentiments during the progress of their courtship.

There were, however, difficulties in his plan. First there was Marianne's literary style. She could only just read and write. Her spelling was atrocious, her literary expression limited, her handwriting bad, and her capacity for putting blots on a page infinite. Presumably to inspire her, he began to take the greatest pains with his own letters to her, polishing his style, forming his distinctive spiky handwriting into a bold, careful copperplate, regardless of the emotion in the phrases he was expressing. This did not, however, have the desired effect: Marianne's literary skills failed to improve. And gradually, between the lines of his frequent letters to her, there began to emerge a picture of her own reactions. To begin with, she seemed to feel that Henry (as she called him) was making a great fuss about nothing—not surprising, perhaps, when one considers that few females of that period were educated. However, to humor her dear Henry, to whom it appeared to mean so much, she would try. If only it were not so difficult. She neglected to write prompt answers to his letters, she dropped blots on the papers, she misspelled vast numbers of words. And then he became so disappointed and angry—so easily upset altogether. There had been an incident at Little Tichfield Street in August, 1803, trivial in itself but symptomatic of his over-reaction. Marianne had been on the eve of leaving on a week's visit to Brighton with her mother, and Hunt had called to bid her goodbye. Busy, presumably with preparations, she had kept him waiting and had not come downstairs until a quarter to nine. His sulks had been out of all proportion even after she had apologized, and his self-righteousness quite objectionable.

"'Tis true," he wrote to her, "I stayed but a moment with you when you sent for me, and persisted in leaving the room even when you entreated me to stay; I did not so much as look at you; but it was because I knew, that if I trusted myself a single glance at the face I doated on, I should have folded you to my bosom, and begged that pardon which I thought I ought not to beg: for you must confess, that if you *did* leave me, when you came down, and for the reason you assigned, yet you might have come down before a *quarter to nine*."

Nor was his hypersensitivity to insult the only problem. He soon seemed to find it difficult to believe she loved him. He was in need of constant reassurances and proofs of her affection. If he did not receive these he again grew cross and sulky. A failure to perform the numerous intellectual tasks he set her, such as sketching, reading novels and making entries in a commonplace book, provoked more pettishness. He seemed to feel that she was deliberately trying to

flout him. "Beware, my dearest, dearest Marian,"² he wrote ominously on 23rd February, 1806, "how you slide into that negligent state of affection, which thinks it has nothing more to do to preserve the love of another than to profess every now and then an unaltering affection, without taking care to *alter* what might be *altered*. . . ." As well, he absolutely expected her to share with him all her thoughts and doings: "Everything," he told her, "that concerns you." It was all very well for him: he *had* thoughts and doings. Female days were not so eventful. It was all a great burden and a great pity, too, for at his best he could be tender, amusing and spontaneous.

About a year after their betrothal the first explosion came. The immediate cause is not known, but by February, 1804, Marianne had broken their engagement, and Hunt was distraught. "It is impossible for me to keep silent any longer," he told her; "my heart is wrapped up in you." He begged her to take him back. "I have indeed great hopes," he wrote, "though they are mingled and occasionally overpowered by great doubts:—dispel this cloud that hangs over me, and take once more to your bosom your again dear Henry, now no longer fretful and melancholy." Consulting her mother, to whom Hunt also wrote, Marianne took him back.

For a time all went well: Hunt had learned some caution. Marianne, too, had learned something of his enormous need of her and the subsequent power it gave her, power that her natural shrewdness would enable her to use with advantage over the following years. Meanwhile for Hunt an emotional crisis was looming. In November, 1805, his mother died. She had been living in a tiny cottage in Somerstown, a patient victim of rheumatism and a recurring liver complaint, and existed largely in a private world in which she rested on the sofa, watched the setting sun and dreamed of her dead children. To visit her was a harrowing experience and one Hunt later admitted he did not perform as often as he ought, despite their former closeness. After her death he fell into endless grief and guilt, and in the following months he began to show symptoms of illness. By February, 1806, he had embarked on what can only be interpreted as a nervous break-

² Marianne Hunt appears to have been born plain Mary Anne (as witnessed by her signature on a power of attorney, signed on 29th December, 1809, and now in the Brewer Collection). In common with many girls of her time (notably Mary Anne Evans), she seems to have combined her two names into the more interesting and fashionable "Marian." Throughout their courtship and in the early months of their marriage, Hunt addressed her as Marian. By 10th October, 1810, however, in a letter in the Brewer Collection, Hunt gives her name as Marianne, the form she retained for the rest of her life. One wonders if this change to a more ornate, poetic-style spelling is not in some way connected with his other attempts to transform her into a more ornate, poetic-style person.

down. His symptoms were emotional and physical. They began with palpitations which were so severe that he often had to sleep sitting up, and they caused him to go, as he confessed, in momentary expectation of heart failure. After a time these were followed by exhaustion, "throat stiflings," stomach disorders, rheumatism, and great anxiety and melancholy, all of which were to last with varying levels of intensity for about six more years. In looking back, he marvelled that he had survived.

To make matters worse, his cures for his illness were almost as devastating as the illness itself. Refusing to consult a doctor, he determined to treat himself. His treatment was self-denial, or perhaps more accurately, self-punishment. He stopped eating almost altogether—just a few vegetables a day—and became so weak and giddy that he could not walk along the street without holding on to the railings. Then he changed to an all-milk diet (the result was nausea), then to an all-meat regime, but in small proportions, and a daily glass of wine. With this last he found himself improving. He accompanied the dieting with icy baths through winter, and blistering hot plunges in summer, and the most vigorous exercise he could devise. He claimed to have cured his palpitations by horseback riding.

He was very frightened by his illness, and much of its burden fell on his family and friends and on Marianne. Under the stress of these years, his behavior reverted to an even more desperate version of their early courting days. The demanding, the reprimanding, the self-righteous indignation returned with intensity. Marianne was besieged with criticism. "*Always prefer scratching out to hasty blots and rescriptions,*" he lectured her on 22 July, 1807, heavily underlining his sentence, adding ". . . if neatness is not immediately to be obtained, carefullness always may." She had only to exert "patience." "If my expectations from you are impatient," he snapped a few months later, on 20th August, 1807, "they are not great. I wished you to write me careful, neat, unblotted letters . . . I thought last week, that you were neither in sufficient haste to answer me, nor very industrious to comply. . . ."

Nor was it only her blots that were under criticism. In previous letters to her, notably in one written on 30th August, 1806, he set out a catalogue of female virtues to which she must for his sake aspire, the chief of which he described as "*a spirit of mildness.*" Her "roughness" of manner, he complained, shamed him in a "most painful and indescribable way," to the extent that his love for her was lessening. Indeed it might eventually vanish entirely, "if you should *continue* that kind of behaviour." That her behavior might in some way be related to his constant correction of her he dimly comprehended.

but as always he quickly justified himself. "I assure you," he concluded, "that I should not hint at *instructing* you in any matters, did I not know that you would love me, if possible, the better for it. . . ."

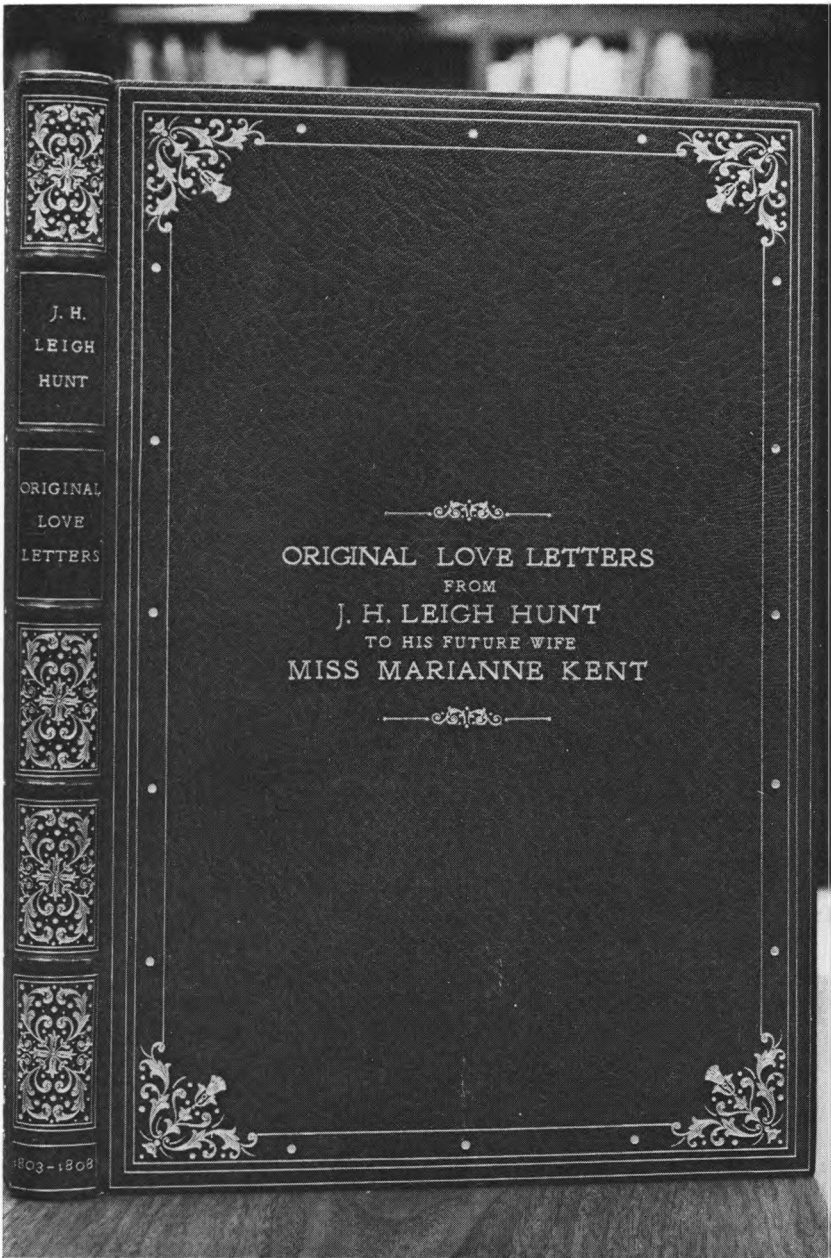
Poor Marianne! Sometimes she seems to have hit back, but mostly she endured, and made clumsy jokes to cheer them. She took to calling him Dr. Henry, but Hunt failed to see the humor of it, and replied that he had never written a prescription in his life and could not think why she should call him this—if it were an abbreviation of "dear," he would rather "the epithet written at full length." It was no wonder that, by 1808, Marianne's nerves were snapping too. In September she was ill with a "nervous" affliction. Hunt was thrown into a fever of over-reaction and advice. He blamed Mrs. Hunter for being negligent, and could hardly contain his advice and concern. Marianne must wrap up warmly, walk briskly, and not trust the autumn sunshine. Even now, though, her tasks must not be forgotten: her entries in her commonplace book must be kept up, and "pray write to me," he ordered, "everything you suffer." When this was not obeyed he was, however, remarkably forbearing, and supposed she was not well enough to hold a pen.

His thoughts were now much on their marriage. "I hope to God," he wrote to her on the eve of his twenty-fourth birthday on 18th October, 1808, "I shall never see another birthday without you, without my wife." Early in 1808 he had joined his brother, John, on his newspaper, the *Examiner*, and at last Hunt's financial prospects were approaching those adequate for marriage. It would be another nine months before the marriage would take place. Meanwhile his mind was filled with idyllic pictures of their future life, eagerly confided to his letters. "Dearest love, how happy we shall be," he wrote on 17th November, 1808, "when you are writing by my side, when you look up to my face with patience for my words, and when, if I happen to dictate a sentence that pleases your judgment or rather your heart, you bend forward on my neck and kiss me for it." His criticisms, however, were not entirely banished by the rosy prospects, and on 13th January, 1809, he was once more self-righteously lecturing poor Marianne: "Never imagine that my anger is occasioned by inconvenience: I have troubles and cares continually that, I hope, set me above the pettiest of all feeling. If I was chagrined on Tuesday night, it was because I thought there was a difference between what you said and what you felt, for I imagined that while you pretended to be angry at my going, you were really glad of it, *as you stopped in the room when I went up stairs and made not a single effort to prevent me.*"

Several dates for the marriage were suggested and rejected. Was Marianne having doubts? Then she became ill. In May she could

scarcely walk to the end of the street. While at Wycombe, recovering, she was bombarded by impatient letters. "I don't think," Hunt wrote plaintively, "that I can wait as long as I thought when you are so near to being mine." But wait he was forced to, for another month, the difficulty being that Marianne was still three months short of her twenty-first birthday, and the formalities of parental consent had to be completed. Finally, on 3rd July, 1809, they were married. Marianne's courtship was over.

As might have been predicted, they did not live happily ever after.



Among the handwritten letters in the Brewer–Leigh Hunt Collection is this group of a dozen original love letters from Hunt to Marianne Kent, his future wife. The letters have been placed in sunken mounts and bound with transcripts in a folio volume. The binding, of full blue levant morocco, is by Sangorski and Sutcliffe.