

## HARRIET MARTINEAU DREAMS OF DANCING

Shelagh Stephenson

IMPIE:

Mr Turnbull said his wife had begun to disagree with almost everything he said, which he didn't like, and suspected was a sign of madness. They say she'd also written a play, which put the tin lid on it, apparently. Mr Turnbull said a woman writing a play is like a cat trying to knit, and also the theatre is fit only for prostitutes. And the vicar said apart from Shakespeare ... But anyway, 'Women can never write plays, because they lack the rhetorical voice.' What did he mean?

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Mr Turnbull goes to church now with his housekeeper, Abigail, who has a sly look about her, and wears poor Mrs Turnbull's bonnet and also her garnet earrings. I thought Mr Piggott, being the sort of man he was, may have me taken away too. so I pretended to obey him. but every time he went out, i got back up the ladder and carried on with my painting

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When I'd finished, he looked up and said, 'Why on earth d'you have to go and ruin a perfectly good ceiling? I've invited friends round to play cards this evening, and now we'll have to go out drinking, because when they see your handiwork they'll laugh themselves sick.' I said I don't care if they do laugh, and he said, 'That's not the point, you stupid woman, I care.' So I said, besides they won't laugh because that ceiling is a work of art, and he tried to kick me and missed, and kicked the wall instead. I think he hurt his foot, because he was limping slightly when he stormed out of the house. He slammed the door so hard the doorknocker came off. Then later my mother came round and said firstly, 'What happened to your doorknocker?' And secondly, 'How are you finding married life.' I said I'm finding it very unpleasant, and she said, 'Oh, you get used to that.' Which i thought was unhelpful. But luckily, very shortly afterwards, Mr Piggott encountered Mr Charlton's pig, and i was let off the hook. Everyone was very kind, and very sorry for me, and said, 'Oh, Impie, life is a vale of tears,' and I said yes, isn't it? We gave him a modest send-off, because it turns out he wasn't a very popular man. We had some sherry and a slice of seed cake and then I went home and got back to painting my annunciation. So really, it all turned out for the best. All I had to do was endure those ten days, eight hours and forty-seven minutes. My mother said, 'Oh well, Impie, at least you can say you're a widow, which is a very respectable thing. Many women would give their eye teeth to be a widow, think of that. At least you're not a spinster, which is the worst of all possible worlds.' Are you a widow, Mrs Martineau?