Is She His Wife? – by Charles Dickens (1837)

Foreword

Charles Dickens and Catherine Hogarth had been married on the 2nd of April, 1836, and had spent a one-week honeymoon at the cottage of a Mrs. Nash, in Chalk, near Gravesend. Dickens was still working as a Parliamentary reporter, and he could only take a short time away from work, while the Houses were in Easter recess.

Ten months later, the couple was to return to the same cottage, this time for an entire month (Feb 1837). Things had changed. Two days before the marriage, the first number of Pickwick Papers had appeared, and in the time intervening, Dickens had quit his day job as a reporter, and had become one of the most popular writers in London. He was so busy, in fact, that when he went on this second honeymoon, he had to take some work along him, finish it off the first night (Sat 4 Feb), and send it back to London by priority mail.

What was this work? The actor J.P. Harley had wanted another play from Dickens, to follow the success of The Strange Gentleman. Dickens wrote Harley: “I have by me a little piece in one act called ‘Cross Purposes’, which I wrote long before I was Boz. It would admit of the introduction of any Music; and if you think there is anything in it, it is at your service.” (Pilgrim 1:226). Dickens had first used the name “Boz” for part two of “The Boarding-House” (Aug 1834), so, if he was being literal, the play was over two years old.

In Pickwick Papers, and in Nicholas Nickleby, several not-too-relevant short stories are dropped into the novels, and it’s sometimes thought that these were older pieces pulled in to help with deadline problems. The case of “Cross Purposes”, presented below as Is She His Wife?, is the only time we know for certain that Dickens pulled such old material “out of the trunk”, and used work from the days before his success, to help meet the sudden demand for his writing. Such a practice would help to explain Dickens’s phenomenal burst of productivity and activity at this time.

The storyline of Is She His Wife? involves a couple, married six months, with the husband restless, snappish, and bored from staying in the country, and both of the pair unhappy. Given the circumstances under which the play was revised, the

storyline must, inevitably, raise eyebrows. But the piece is not autobiographical. The bulk of it had been written long before the Dickens marriage, and the revisions made in the honeymoon cottage, done for Harley, must have served to create or modify the role of his character, Felix Tapkins. The piece is too good-natured and frivolous to reflect any marital discord.

Charles and Caroline probably returned from Chalk in time to see the premiere of the short play. Is She His Wife? opened on Monday, March 6th, 1837; by April 25th it was on its nineteenth performance. It appeared on and off through the end of the season (31 May). A thirty-minute farce like this serves mainly as an extra attraction to supplement longer and more substantial dramas; we would not expect it to draw much in the way of crowds or attention. The name of Boz did not appear on the playbills until one week after the farce premiered, and without knowing that Dickens was involved, few papers bothered to review such a short slight piece. The Sunday Times called it “a trifle, but a pleasant one, containing sufficient incident to interest the audience while it lasts”. The Morning Chronicle, Dickens's old employer, wrote: “The few meagre incidents had not even the merit of novelty to recommend them, and the dialogue was singularly pointless with the exception of a few puns of venerable antiquity….It was well received, but whether the audience of another night will be so indulgent, is doubtful” (both quoted in Dexter). Wife has been revived, as a lunch-time pub production in London (1971), and by the Broadstairs Dickens Players (1975?), the latter winning local awards.

Is She His Wife? is Dickens's most risqué work. It features such racy material as extra-marital flirting, flippant jokes about adultery, and even a woman displaying her shapely ankle. The Times wrote that: “The plot bordered on the dangerous, but it was so dexterously and delicately managed that its success was decided. We have rarely seen Harley to such advantage” (quoted in Dexter, 254). Like all plays at this time, it was registered with the Lord Chamberlain for licensing, as required by law; but nothing was censored. Similarly, no deletions are indicated in the published copy. The Village Coquettes had undergone “choppings and changings” (Pilgrim 1:246), in its passages about seduction, gambling, and subversion; but Is She His Wife? appears to have escaped unscathed.

In the past, Is She His Wife? has sometimes been of more interest to book collectors than to playgoers. A version of the comedy was published about the time of its

production, but only one copy was ever known to exist—perhaps some kind of print test. The single copy was in the possession of James Ripley Osgood, one of Dickens's American publishers, when it was lost in a fire in Boston (1879). Luckily it had already been reprinted (1872?, 1877); these are among the rarest of Dickens early editions.

We are fortunate that the text of this play has survived. It would have been a shame to lose it. Deliberately loud and hammy, Is She His Wife? is a marvellous opportunity for actors to act daft, overact, and chew up the carpet. It follows the conventions of many theatre farces of the time, and strings together a series of contrived coincidences and implausible misunderstandings. Audiences liked and expected such things. Like all three of the St. James's Theatre plays, the best part is the "low comic" character—in this case, Felix Tapkins, a good example of one of Dickens's eternal optimists. To Boz's new fans, Felix Tapkins in Wife, and Martin Stokes in Coquettes—both played by Harley—would have seemed like the most "Dickensian" characters in those plays.

Just a few annotations should be noted, and then we can let anxious readers proceed to Dickens. "Humane man-traps" are mentioned; these were intended to be just what they sound like; groundskeepers would sometimes set these out to prevent poaching. The Felix Tapkins character makes his entrance singing "A hunting we will go"; this is the second verse of the song from Henry Fielding's ballad opera, "Don Quixote"; another case of Dickens alluding to two of his favourites, Cervantes and Fielding. Readers can understand the rest by themselves, with some application, so put all distractions aside, turn off your cell phones, and let the curtain rise.

IS SHE HIS WIFE?

OR, SOMETHING SINGULAR!

A COMIC BURLETTA

IN ONE ACT

[by Charles Dickens – 1837]

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

AT ST. JAMES'S THEATRE, MARCH 6, 1837

ALFRED LOVETOWN, ESQ.
MR. FORESTER.

MR. PETER LIMBURY
MR. GARDNER.

FELIX TAPKINS, ESQ. (formerly of the India House, Leadenhall Street, and Prospect Place, Poplar; but now of the Rustic Lodge, near Reading)
MR. HARLEY.

JOHN (servant to Lovetown)
[name not given]

MRS. LOVETOWN
MISS ALLISON.

MRS. PETER LIMBURY
MADAME SALA.

IS SHE HIS WIFE?

OR, SOMETHING SINGULAR!

SCENE I.—A Room opening into a Garden. A Table laid for Breakfast; Chairs, etc. MR. and MRS. LOVETOWN, C., discovered at Breakfast, R. H. The former in a dressing-gown and slippers, reading a newspaper. A Screen on one side.

LOVETOWN (L. H. of table, yawning). Another cup of tea, my dear,—O Lord!

MRS. LOVETOWN (R. H. of table). I wish, Alfred, you would endeavour to assume a more cheerful appearance in your wife's society. If you are perpetually yawning and complaining of ennui a few months after marriage, what am I to suppose you'll become in a few years? It really is very odd of you.

LOVETOWN. Not at all odd, my dear, not the least in the world; it would be a great deal more odd if I were not. The fact is, my love, I'm tired of the country; green fields, and blooming hedges, and feathered songsters, are fine things to talk about and read about and write about; but I candidly confess that I prefer paved streets, area railings and dustman's bells, after all.

MRS. LOVETOWN. How often have you told me that, blessed with my love, you could live contented and happy in a desert?

LOVETOWN (reading). 'Artful impostor!'

MRS. LOVETOWN. Have you not over and over again said that fortune and personal attractions were secondary considerations with you? That you loved me for those virtues which, while they gave additional lustre to public life, would adorn and sweeten retirement?

LOVETOWN (reading). 'Soothing syrup!'

MRS. LOVETOWN. You complain of the tedious sameness of a country life. Was it not you yourself who first proposed our residing permanently in the country? Did you not say that I should then have an ample sphere in which to exercise those charitable

feelings which I have so often evinced, by selling at those benevolent fancy fairs?

LOVETOWN (reading). 'Humane man-traps!'

MRS. LOVETOWN. He pays no attention to me,—Alfred dear,—

LOVETOWN (stamping his foot). Yes, my life.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Have you heard what I have just been saying, dear?

LOVETOWN. Yes, love.

MRS. LOVETOWN. And what can you say in reply?

LOVETOWN. Why, really, my dear, you've said it so often before in the course of the last six weeks, that I think it quite unnecessary to say anything more about it. (Reads.) 'The learned judge delivered a brief but impressive summary of the unhappy man's trial.'

MRS. LOVETOWN (aside). I could bear anything but this neglect. He evidently does not care for me.

LOVETOWN (aside). I could put up with anything rather than these constant altercations and little petty quarrels. I repeat, my dear, that I am very dull in this out-of-the-way villa—confoundedly dull, horridly dull.

MRS. LOVETOWN. And I repeat that if you took any pleasure in your wife's society, or felt for her as you once professed to feel, you would have no cause to make such a complaint.

LOVETOWN. If I did not know you to be one of the sweetest creatures in existence, my dear, I should be strongly disposed to say that you were a very close imitation of an aggravating female.

MRS. LOVETOWN. That's very curious, my dear, for I declare that if I hadn't known you to be such an exquisite, good-tempered, attentive husband, I should have mistaken you for a very great brute.

LOVETOWN. My dear, you're offensive.

MRS. LOVETOWN. My love, you're intolerable. (They turn their chairs back to back.)

MR. FELIX TAPKINS sings without.

'The wife around her husband throws

Her arms to make him stay;

"My dear, it rains, it hails, it blows,

And you cannot hunt to-day."

But a hunting we will go,

And a hunting we will go,—wo—wo—wo!

And a hunting we will go.'

MRS. LOVETOWN. There's that dear, good-natured creature, Mr. Tapkins,—do you ever hear him complain of the tediousness of a country life? Light-hearted creature,—his lively disposition and rich flow of spirits are wonderful, even to me. (Rising.)

LOVETOWN. They need not be matter of astonishment to anybody, my dear,—he's a bachelor.

MR. FELIX TAPKINS appears at window, L. H.

TAPKINS. Ha, ha! How are you both?—Here's a morning! Bless my heart alive, what a morning! I've been gardening ever since five o'clock, and the flowers have been actually growing before my very eyes. The London Pride is sweeping everything before it, and the stalks are half as high again as they were yesterday. They're all run up like so many tailors' bills, after that heavy dew of last night broke down half my rosebuds with the weight of its own moisture,—something like a dew that!—reg'lar doo, eh?—come, that's not so bad for a before-dinner one.

LOVETOWN. Ah, you happy dog, Felix!

TAPKINS. Happy! of course I am,—Felix by name, Felix by nature,—what the deuce should I be unhappy for, or anybody be unhappy for? What's the use of it, that's the point.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Have you finished your improvements yet, Mr. Tapkins?

TAPKINS. At Rustic Lodge? (She nods assent.) Bless your heart and soul! you never saw such a place,—cardboard chimneys, Grecian balconies,—Gothic parapets, thatched roof.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Indeed!

TAPKINS. Lord bless you, yes,—green verandah, with ivy twining round the pillars.

MRS. LOVETOWN. How very rural!

TAPKINS. Rural, my dear Mrs. Lovetown! delightful! The French windows, too! Such an improvement!

MRS. LOVETOWN. I should think they were!

TAPKINS. Yes, I should think they were. Why, on a fine summer's evening the frogs hop

off the grass-plot into the very sitting-room.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Dear me!

TAPKINS. Bless you, yes! Something like the country,—quite a little Eden. Why, when I'm smoking under the verandah, after a shower of rain, the black beetles fall into my brandy-and-water.

MR. and MRS. LOVETOWN. No!—Ha! ha! ha!

TAPKINS. Yes. And I take 'em out again with the teaspoon, and lay bets with myself which of them will run away the quickest. Ha! ha! ha! (They all laugh.) Then the stable, too. Why, in Rustic Lodge the stables are close to the dining-room window.

LOVETOWN. No!

TAPKINS. Yes. The horse can't cough but I hear him. There's compactness. Nothing like the cottage style of architecture for comfort, my boy. By the bye, I have left the new horse at your garden-gate this moment.

MRS. LOVETOWN. The new horse!

TAPKINS. The new horse! Splendid fellow,—such action! Puts out its feet like a rocking-horse, and carries its tail like a hat-peg. Come and see him.

LOVETOWN (laughing). I can't deny you anything.

TAPKINS. No, that's what they all say, especially the—eh! (Nodding and winking.)

LOVETOWN. Ha! ha! ha!

MRS. LOVETOWN. Ha! ha! ha! I'm afraid you're a very bad man, Mr. Tapkins; I'm afraid you're a shocking man, Mr. Tapkins.

TAPKINS. Think so? No, I don't know,—not worse than other people similarly situated. Bachelors, my dear Mrs. Lovetown, bachelors—eh! old fellow? (Winking to

LOVETOWN.)

LOVETOWN. Certainly, certainly.

TAPKINS. We know—eh? (They all laugh.) By the bye, talking of bachelors puts me in mind of Rustic Lodge, and talking of Rustic Lodge puts me in mind of what I came here for. You must come and see me this afternoon. Little Peter Limbury and his wife are coming.

MRS. LOVETOWN. I detest that man.

LOVETOWN. The wife is supportable, my dear.

TAPKINS. To be sure, so she is. You'll come, and that's enough. Now come and see the horse.

LOVETOWN. Give me three minutes to put on my coat and boots, and I'll join you. I won't be three minutes.

[Exit LOVETOWN, R. H.

TAPKINS. Look sharp, look sharp!—Mrs. Lovetown, will you excuse me one moment? (Crosses to L.; calling off.) Jim,—these fellows never know how to manage horses,—walk him gently up and down,—throw the stirrups over the saddle to show the people that his master's coming, and if anybody asks what that fine animal's pedigree is, and who he belongs to, say he's the property of Mr. Felix Tapkins of Rustic Lodge, near Reading, and that he's the celebrated horse who ought to have won the Newmarket Cup last year, only he didn't.

[Exit TAPKINS.

MRS. LOVETOWN. My mind is made up,—I can bear Alfred's coldness and insensibility no longer, and come what may I will endeavour to remove it. From the knowledge I have of his disposition I am convinced that the only mode of doing so will be by rousing his jealousy and wounding his vanity. This thoughtless creature will be a very good instrument for my scheme. He plumes himself on his gallantry, has no very small share

of vanity, and is easily led. I see him crossing the garden. (She brings a chair hastily forward and sits R. H.)

Enter FELIX TAPKINS, L. H. window.

TAPKINS (singing). 'My dear, it rains, it hails, it blows,—'

MRS. LOVETOWN (tragically). Would that I had never beheld him!

TAPKINS (aside). Hallo! She's talking about her husband. I knew by their manner there had been a quarrel, when I came in this morning.

MRS. LOVETOWN. So fascinating, and yet so insensible to the tenderest of passions as not to see how devotedly I love him.

TAPKINS (aside). I thought so.

MRS. LOVETOWN. That he should still remain unmarried is to me extraordinary.

TAPKINS. Um!

MRS. LOVETOWN. He ought to have married long since.

TAPKINS (aside). Eh! Why, they aren't married!—'ought to have married long since.'—I rather think he ought.

MRS. LOVETOWN. And, though I am the wife of another,—

TAPKINS (aside). Wife of another!

MRS. LOVETOWN. Still, I grieve to say that I cannot be blind to his extraordinary merits.

TAPKINS. Why, he's run away with somebody else's wife! The villain!—I must let her know I'm in the room, or there's no telling what I may hear next. (Coughs.)

MRS. LOVETOWN (starting up in affected confusion). Mr. Tapkins! (They sit.) Bring your chair nearer. I fear, Mr. Tapkins, that I have been unconsciously giving utterance to what was passing in my mind. I trust you have not overheard my confession of the weakness of my heart.

TAPKINS. No—no—not more than a word or two.

MRS. LOVETOWN. That agitated manner convinces me that you have heard more than you are willing to confess. Then why—why should I seek to conceal from you—that though I esteem my husband, I—I—love—another?

TAPKINS. I heard you mention that little circumstance.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Oh! (Sighs.)

TAPKINS (aside). What the deuce is she Oh-ing at? She looks at me as if I were Lovetown himself.

MRS. LOVETOWN (putting her hand on his shoulder with a languishing air). Does my selection meet with your approbation?

TAPKINS (slowly). It doesn't.

MRS. LOVETOWN. No!

TAPKINS. Decidedly not. (Aside.) I'll cut that Lovetown out, and offer myself. Hem! Mrs. Lovetown.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Yes, Mr. Tapkins.

TAPKINS. I know an individual—

MRS. LOVETOWN. Ah! an individual!

TAPKINS. An individual,—I may, perhaps, venture to say an estimable individual,—who for the last three months has been constantly in your society, who never yet had courage to disclose his passion, but who burns to throw himself at your feet. Oh! (Aside.) I'll try an Oh or two now,—Oh! (Sighs.) That's a capital Oh!

MRS. LOVETOWN (aside). He must have misunderstood me before, for he is evidently speaking of himself. Is the gentleman you speak of handsome, Mr. Tapkins?

TAPKINS. He is generally considered remarkably so.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Is he tall?

TAPKINS. About the height of the Apollo Belvidere.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Is he stout?

TAPKINS. Of nearly the same dimensions as the gentleman I have just named.

MRS. LOVETOWN. His figure is—

TAPKINS. Quite a model.

MRS. LOVETOWN. And he is—

TAPKINS. Myself. (Throws himself on his knees and seizes her hand.)

Enter LOVETOWN, R. H.

Tapkins immediately pretends to be diligently looking
for something on the floor.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Pray don't trouble yourself. I'll find it. Dear me! how could I lose it?

LOVETOWN. What have you lost, love? I should almost imagine that you had lost yourself, and that our friend Mr. Tapkins here had just found you.

TAPKINS (aside). Ah! you always will have your joke,—funny dog! funny dog! Bless your heart and soul, there's that immortal horse standing outside all this time! He'll catch his death of cold! Come and see him at once,—come—come.

LOVETOWN. No. I can't see him to-day. I had forgotten. I've letters to write,—business to transact,—I'm engaged.

TAPKINS (to MRS. LOVETOWN). Oh! if he's engaged, you know, we'd better not interrupt him.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Oh! certainly! Not by any means.

TAPKINS (taking her arm). Good-bye, old fellow.

LOVETOWN (seating himself at table). Oh!—good-bye.

TAPKINS (going). Take care of yourself. I'll take care of Mrs. L.

[Exit TAPKINS and MRS. LOVETOWN, C.

LOVETOWN. What the deuce does that fellow mean by laying such emphasis on Mrs. L.? What's my wife to him, or he to my wife? Very extraordinary! I can hardly believe that even if he had the treachery to make any advances, she would encourage such a preposterous intrigue. (Walks to and fro.) She spoke in his praise at breakfast-time, though,—and they have gone away together to see that confounded horse. But stop, I must keep a sharp eye upon them this afternoon, without appearing to do so. I would not appear unnecessarily suspicious for the world. Dissembling in such a case, though, is difficult—very difficult.

Enter a Servant, L. H.

SERVANT. Mr. and Mrs. Peter Limbury.

LOVETOWN. Desire them to walk in.

[Exit Servant, L. H.

A lucky visit! it furnishes me with a hint. This Mrs. Limbury is a vain, conceited woman, ready to receive the attentions of anybody who feigns admiration for her, partly to gratify herself, and partly to annoy the jealous little husband whom she keeps under such strict control. If I pay particular attention to her, I shall lull my wife and that scoundrel Tapkins into a false security, and have better opportunities of observation. They are here.

Enter MR. and MRS. LIMBURY, L. H.

LOVETOWN. My dear Mrs. Limbury. (Crosses to C.)

LIMBURY. Eh?

LOVETOWN (not regarding him). How charming—how delightful— how divine you look to-day.

LIMBURY (aside). Dear Mrs. Limbury,—charming,—divine and beautiful look to-day! They are smiling at each other,—he squeezes her hand. I see how it is. I always thought he paid her too much attention.

LOVETOWN. Sit down,—sit down.

(LOVETOWN places the chairs so as to sit between them, which

LIMBURY in vain endeavours to prevent.)

MRS. LIMBURY. Peter and I called as we passed in our little pony-chaise, to inquire whether we should have the pleasure of seeing you at Tapkins's this afternoon.

LOVETOWN. Is it possible you can ask such a question? Do you think I could stay away?

MRS. LIMBURY. Dear Mr. Lovetown! (Aside.) How polite,—he's quite struck with me.

LIMBURY (aside). Wretched miscreant! a regular assignation before my very face.

LOVETOWN (to MRS. LIMBURY). Do you know I entertained some apprehensions—some dreadful fears—that you might not be there.

LIMBURY. Fears that we mightn't be there? Of course we shall be there.

MRS. LIMBURY. Now don't talk, Peter.

LOVETOWN. I thought it just possible, you know, that you might not be agreeable—

MRS. LIMBURY. O, Peter is always agreeable to anything that is agreeable to me. Aren't you, Peter?

LIMBURY. Yes, dearest. (Aside.) Agreeable to anything that's agreeable to her! O Lor'!

MRS. LIMBURY. By the bye, Mr. Lovetown, how do you like this bonnet?

LOVETOWN. O, beautiful!

LIMBURY (aside). I must change the subject. Do you know, Mr. Lovetown, I have often thought, and it has frequently occurred to me—when—

MRS. LIMBURY. Now don't talk, Peter. (To LOVETOWN.) The colour is so bright, is it not?

LOVETOWN. It might appear so elsewhere, but the brightness of those eyes casts it quite into shade.

MRS. LIMBURY. I know you are a connoisseur in ladies' dresses; how do you like those shoes?

LIMBURY (aside). Her shoes! What will she ask his opinion of next?

LOVETOWN. O, like the bonnet, you deprive them of their fair chance of admiration. That small and elegant foot engrosses all the attention which the shoes might otherwise attract. That taper ankle, too—

LIMBURY (aside). Her taper ankle! My bosom swells with the rage of an ogre. Mr. Lovetown,—I—

MRS. LIMBURY. Now, pray do not talk so, Limbury. You've put Mr. Lovetown out as it is.

LIMBURY (aside). Put him out! I wish I could put him out, Mrs. Limbury. I must.

Enter SERVANT, hastily.

SERVANT. I beg your pardon, sir, but the bay pony has got his hind leg over the traces,

and he's kicking the chaise to pieces!

LIMBURY. Kicking the new chaise to pieces!

LOVETOWN. Kicking the new chaise to pieces! The bay pony! Limbury, my dear fellow, fly to the spot! (Pushing him out.)

LIMBURY. But, Mr. Lovetown, I—

MRS. LIMBURY. Oh! he'll kick somebody's brains out, if Peter don't go to him.

LIMBURY. But perhaps he'll kick my brains out if I do go to him.

LOVETOWN. Never mind, don't lose an instant,—not a moment. (Pushes him out, both talking together.)

[Exit LIMBURY.

(Aside.) Now for it,—here's my wife. Dearest Mrs. Limbury—(Kneels by her chair, and seizes her hand.)

Enter MRS. LOVETOWN, C.

MRS. LOVETOWN (aside). Can I believe my eyes? (Retires behind the screen.)

MRS. LIMBURY. Mr. Lovetown!

LOVETOWN. Nay. Allow me in one hurried interview, which I have sought in vain for weeks,—for months,—to say how devotedly, how ardently I love you. Suffer me to retain this hand in mine. Give me one ray of hope.

MRS. LIMBURY. Rise, I entreat you,—we shall be discovered.

LOVETOWN. Nay, I will not rise till you promise me that you will take an opportunity of detaching yourself from the rest of the company and meeting me alone in Tapkins's grounds this evening. I shall have no eyes, no ears for any one but yourself.

MRS. LIMBURY. Well,—well,—I will—I do—

LOVETOWN. Then I am blest indeed!

MRS. LIMBURY. I am so agitated. If Peter or Mrs. Lovetown—were to find me thus—I should betray all. I'll teach my husband to be jealous! (Crosses to L. H.) Let us walk round the garden.

LOVETOWN. With pleasure,—take my arm. Divine creature! (Aside.) I'm sure she is behind the screen. I saw her peeking. Come.

[Exit LOVETOWN and MRS. LIMBURY, L. H.

MRS. LOVETOWN (coming forward). Faithless man! His coldness and neglect are now too well explained. O Alfred! Alfred! how little did I think when I married you, six short months since, that I should be exposed to so much wretchedness! I begin to tremble at my own imprudence, and the situation in which it may place me; but it is now too late to recede. I must be firm. This day will either bring my project to the explanation I so much desire, or convince me of what I too much fear,—my husband's aversion. Can this woman's husband suspect their intimacy? If so, he may be able to prevent this assignation taking place. I will seek him instantly. If I can but meet him at once, he may prevent her going at all.

[Exit MRS. LOVETOWN, R. H.

Enter TAPKINS, L. H. window.

TAPKINS. This, certainly, is a most extraordinary affair. Not her partiality for me—that's natural enough,—but the confession I overheard about her marriage to another. I have been thinking that, after such a discovery, it would be highly improper to allow Limbury and his wife to meet her without warning him of the fact. The best way will be to make him acquainted with the real state of the case. Then he must see the propriety of not bringing his wife to my house to-night. Ah! here he is. I'll make the awful disclosure at once, and petrify him.

Enter LIMBURY, L. H. window.

LIMBURY. That damned little bay pony is as bad as my wife. There's no curbing either of them; and as soon as I have got the traces of the one all right, I lose all traces of the other.

TAPKINS (R.). Peter!

LIMBURY (L.). Ah! Tapkins!

TAPKINS. Hush! Hush! (Looking cautiously round.) If you have a moment to spare, I've got something of great importance to communicate.

LIMBURY. Something of great importance, Mr. Tapkins! (Aside.) What can he mean? Can it relate to Mrs. Limbury? The thought is dreadful. You horrify me!

TAPKINS. You'll be more horrified presently. What I am about to tell you concerns yourself and your honour very materially; and I beg you to understand that I communicate it—in the strictest confidence.

LIMBURY. Myself and my honour! I shall dissolve into nothing with horrible anticipations!

TAPKINS (in a low tone). Have you ever observed anything remarkable about

Lovetown's manner?

LIMBURY. Anything remarkable?

TAPKINS. Ay,—anything very odd, and rather unpleasant?

LIMBURY. Decidedly! No longer than half an hour ago,—in this very room, I observed something in his manner particularly odd and exceedingly unpleasant.

TAPKINS. To your feelings as a husband?

LIMBURY. Yes, my friend, yes, yes;—you know it all, I see!

TAPKINS. What! Do you know it?

LIMBURY. I'm afraid I do; but go on—go on.

TAPKINS (aside). How the deuce can he know anything about it? Well, this oddness arises from the peculiar nature of his connexion with— You look very pale.

LIMBURY. No, no,—go on,—'connexion with—'

TAPKINS. A certain lady,—you know whom I mean.

LIMBURY. I do, I do! (Aside.) Disgrace and confusion! I'll kill her with a look! I'll wither her with scornful indignation! Mrs. Limbury!—viper!

TAPKINS (whispering with caution). They—aren't—married.

LIMBURY. They aren't married! Who aren't?

TAPKINS. Those two, to be sure!

LIMBURY. Those two! What two?

TAPKINS. Why, them. And the worst of it is she's—she's married to somebody else.

LIMBURY. Well, of course I know that.

TAPKINS. You know it?

LIMBURY. Of course I do. Why, how you talk! Isn't she my wife?

TAPKINS. Your wife! Wretched bigamist! Mrs. Lovetown your wife?

LIMBURY. Mrs. Lovetown! What! Have you been talking of Mrs. Lovetown all this time? My dear friend! (Embraces him.) The revulsion of feeling is almost insupportable. I thought you were talking about Mrs. Limbury.

TAPKINS. No!

LIMBURY. Yes. Ha! ha! But I say, what a dreadful fellow this is—another man's wife! Gad, I think he wants to run away with every man's wife he sees. And Mrs. Lovetown, too—horrid!

TAPKINS. Shocking!

LIMBURY. I say, I oughtn't to allow Mrs. Limbury to associate with her, ought I?

TAPKINS. Precisely my idea. You had better induce your wife to stay away from my house to-night.

LIMBURY. I'm afraid I can't do that.

TAPKINS. What, has she any particular objection to staying away?

LIMBURY. She has a very strange inclination to go, and 'tis much the same; however, I'll make the best arrangement I can!

TAPKINS. Well, so be it. Of course I shall see you?

LIMBURY. Of course.

TAPKINS. Mind the secret,—close—close—you know, as a Cabinet Minister answering a question.

LIMBURY. You may rely upon me.

[Exit LIMBURY, L. H., TAPKINS, R. H.

SCENE II.—A Conservatory on one side. A Summer-house on the other.

Enter LOVETOWN at L. H.

LOVETOWN. So far so good. My wife has not dropped the slightest hint of having overheard the conversation between me and Mrs. Limbury; but she cannot conceal the impression it has made upon her mind, or the jealousy it has evidently excited in her breast. This is just as I wished. I made Mr. Peter Limbury's amiable helpmate promise to meet me here. I know that refuge for destitute reptiles (pointing to summer-house) is Tapkins's favorite haunt, and if he has any assignation with my wife I have no doubt he will lead her to this place. A woman's coming down the walk. Mrs. Limbury, I suppose,—no, my wife, by all that's actionable. I must conceal myself here, even at the risk of a shower of black beetles, or a marching regiment of frogs. (Goes into conservatory, L. H.)

Enter MRS. LOVETOWN from top, L. H.

MRS. LOVETOWN. I cannot have been mistaken. I am certain I saw Alfred here; he

must have secreted himself somewhere to avoid me. Can his assignation with Mrs. Limbury have been discovered? Mr. Limbury's behaviour to me just now was strange in the extreme; and after a variety of incoherent expressions he begged me to meet him here, on a subject, as he said, of great delicacy and importance to myself. Alas! I fear that my husband's neglect and unkindness are but too well known. The injured little man approaches. I summon all my fortitude to bear the disclosure.

Enter MR. LIMBURY at top, L. H.

LIMBURY (aside). Now as I could not prevail on Mrs. Limbury to stay away, the only distressing alternative I have is to inform Mrs. Lovetown that I know her history, and to put it to her good feeling whether she hadn't better go.

LOVETOWN (peeping). Limbury! what the deuce can that little wretch want here?

LIMBURY. I took the liberty, Mrs. Lovetown, of begging you to meet me in this retired spot, because the esteem I still entertain for you, and my regard for your feelings, induce me to prefer a private to a public disclosure.

LOVETOWN (peeping). 'Public disclosure!' what on earth is he talking about? I wish he'd speak a little louder.

MRS. LOVETOWN. I am sensible of your kindness, Mr. Limbury, and believe me most grateful for it. I am fully prepared to hear what you have to say.

LIMBURY. It is hardly necessary for me, I presume, to say, Mrs. Lovetown, that I have accidentally discovered the whole secret.

MRS. LOVETOWN. The whole secret, sir?

LOVETOWN (peeping). Whole secret! What secret?

LIMBURY. The whole secret, ma'am, of this disgraceful—I must call it disgraceful—and most abominable intrigue.

MRS. LOVETOWN (aside). My worst fears are realised,—my husband's neglect is occasioned by his love for another.

LOVETOWN (peeping). Abominable intrigue! My first suspicions are too well founded. He reproaches my wife with her infidelity, and she cannot deny it,—that villain Tapkins!

MRS. LOVETOWN (weeping). Cruel—cruel—Alfred!

LIMBURY. You may well call him cruel, unfortunate woman. His usage of you is indefensible, unmanly, scandalous.

MRS. LOVETOWN. It is. It is, indeed.

LIMBURY. It's very painful for me to express myself in such plain terms, Mrs. Lovetown; but allow me to say, as delicately as possible, that you should not endeavour to appear in society under such unusual and distressing circumstances.

MRS. LOVETOWN. Not appear in society! Why should I quit it?

LOVETOWN (peeping). Shameful woman!

LIMBURY. Is it possible you can ask such a question?

MRS. LOVETOWN. What should I do? Where can I go?

LIMBURY. Gain permission to return once again to your husband's roof.

MRS. LOVETOWN. My husband's roof?

LIMBURY. Yes, the roof of your husband, your wretched, unfortunate husband!

MRS. LOVETOWN. Never!

LIMBURY (aside). She's thoroughly hardened, steeped in vice beyond redemption. Mrs. Lovetown, as you reject my well-intentioned advice in this extraordinary manner, I am reduced to the painful necessity of expressing my hope that you will,—now pray don't think me unkind,—that you will never attempt to meet Mrs. Limbury more.

MRS. LOVETOWN. What! Can you suppose I am so utterly dead to every sense of feeling and propriety as to meet that person,—the destroyer of my peace and happiness,—the wretch who has ruined my hopes and blighted my prospects for ever? Ask your own heart, sir,—appeal to your own feelings. You are naturally indignant at her conduct. You would hold no further communication with her. Can you suppose, then, I would deign to do so? The mere supposition is an insult!

[Exit MRS. LOVETOWN hastily at top, L. H.

LIMBURY. What can all this mean? I am lost in a maze of astonishment, petrified at the boldness with which she braves it out. Eh! it's breaking upon me by degrees. I see it. What did she say? 'Destroyer of peace and happiness,—person—ruined hopes and blighted prospects—her.' I see it all. That atrocious Lovetown, that Don Juan multiplied by twenty, that unprecedented libertine, has seduced Mrs. Limbury from her allegiance to her lawful lord and master. He first of all runs away with the wife of another man, and he is no sooner tired of her, than he runs away with another wife of another man. I thirst for his destruction. I—(LOVETOWN rushes from the conservatory and embraces LIMBURY, who disengages himself.) Murderer of domestic happiness! behold hold your victim!

LOVETOWN. Alas! you speak but too truly. (Covering his face with his hands.) I am the victim.

LIMBURY. I speak but too truly!—He avows his own criminality. I shall throttle him. I know I shall. I feel it.

Enter MRS. LIMBURY at back, L. H.

MRS. LIMBURY (aside). My husband here! (Goes into conservatory.)

Enter TAPKINS at back, L. H.

TAPKINS (aside). Not here, and her husband with Limbury. I'll reconnoitre. (Goes into summer-house, R. H.)

LIMBURY. Lovetown, have you the boldness to look an honest man in the face?

LOVETOWN. O, spare me! I feel the situation in which I am placed acutely, deeply. Feel for me when I say that from that conservatory I overheard the greater part of what passed between you and Mrs. Lovetown.

LIMBURY. You did?

LOVETOWN. Need I say how highly I approve both of the language you used, and the advice you gave her?

LIMBURY. What! you want to get rid of her, do you?

LOVETOWN. Can you doubt it?

TAPKINS (peeping). Hallo! he wants to get rid of her. Queer!

LOVETOWN. Situated as I am, you know, I have no other resource, after what has passed. I must part from her.

MRS. LIMBURY (peeping). What can he mean?

LIMBURY (aside). I should certainly throttle him, were it not that the coolness with

which he refers to the dreadful event paralyses me. Mr. Lovetown, look at me! Sir, consider the feelings of an indignant husband, sir!

LOVETOWN. Oh, I thank you for those words. Those strong expressions prove the unaffected interest you take in the matter.

LIMBURY. Unaffected interest! I shall go raving mad with passion and fury! Villain! Monster! To embrace the opportunity afforded him of being on a footing of friendship.

LOVETOWN. To take a mean advantage of his being a single man.

LIMBURY. To tamper with the sacred engagements of a married woman.

LOVETOWN. To place a married man in a disgraceful and humiliating situation.

LIMBURY. Scoundrel! Do you mock me to my face?

LOVETOWN. Mock you. What d' ye mean? Who the devil are you talking about?

LIMBURY. Talking about—you!

LOVETOWN. Me!

LIMBURY. Designing miscreant! Of whom do you speak?

LOVETOWN. Of whom should I speak but that scoundrel Tapkins?

TAPKINS (coming forward, R.). Me! What the devil do you mean by that?

LOVETOWN. Ha! (Rushing at him, is held back by LIMBURY.)

LIMBURY (to TAPKINS). Avoid him. Get out of his sight. He's raving mad with conscious villainy.

TAPKINS. What are you all playing at I spy I over my two acres of infant hay for?

LOVETOWN (to TAPKINS). How dare you tamper with the affections of Mrs. Lovetown?

TAPKINS. O, is that all? Ha! ha! (Crosses to C.)

LOVETOWN. All!

TAPKINS. Come, come, none of your nonsense.

LOVETOWN. Nonsense! Designate the best feelings of our nature nonsense!

TAPKINS. Pooh! pooh! Here, I know all about it.

LOVETOWN (angrily). And so do I, sir! And so do I.

TAPKINS. Of course you do. And you've managed very well to keep it quiet so long. But you're a deep fellow, by Jove! you're a deep fellow!

LOVETOWN. Now, mind! I restrain myself sufficiently to ask you once again before I knock you down, by what right dare you tamper with the affections of Mrs. Lovetown?

TAPKINS. Right! O, if you come to strict right, you know, nobody has a right but her husband.

LOVETOWN. And who is her husband? Who is her husband?

TAPKINS. Ah! to be sure, that's the question. Nobody that I know. I hope—poor fellow—

LOVETOWN. I'll bear these insults no longer! (Rushes towards TAPKINS. LIMBURY interposes. LOVETOWN crosses to R. H. A scream is heard from the conservatory—a pause.)

TAPKINS. Something singular among the plants! (He goes into the conservatory and returns with MRS. LIMBURY.) A flower that wouldn't come out of its own accord. I was obliged to force it. Tolerably full blown now, at all events.

LIMBURY. My wife! Traitoress! (Crosses to L. H.) Fly from my presence! Quit my sight!

Return to the conservatory with that demon in a frock-coat!

Enter MRS. LOVETOWN at top, L. H. and comes down C.

TAPKINS. Hallo! Somebody else!

LOVETOWN (aside). My wife here!

MRS. LOVETOWN (to LIMBURY). I owe you some return for the commiseration you expressed just now for my wretched situation. The best, the only one I can make you is, to entreat you to refrain from committing any rash act, however excited you may be, and to control the feelings of an injured husband.

TAPKINS. Injured husband! Decidedly singular!

LOVETOWN. The allusion of that lady I confess my utter inability to understand. Mr. Limbury, to you an explanation is due, and I make it more cheerfully, as my abstaining from doing so might involve the character of your wife. Stung by the attentions which I found Mrs. Lovetown had received from a scoundrel present,—

TAPKINS (aside). That's me.

LOVETOWN. I—partly to obtain opportunities of watching her closely, under an assumed mask of levity and carelessness, and partly in the hope of awaking once again any dormant feelings of affection that might still slumber in her breast, affected a passion for your wife which I never felt, and to which she never really responded. The second part of my project, I regret to say, has failed. The first has succeeded but too well.

LIMBURY. Can I believe my ears? But how came Mrs. Peter Limbury to receive those attentions?

MRS. LIMBURY. Why, not because I liked them, of course, but to assist Mr. Lovetown in his project, and to teach you the misery of those jealous fears. Come here, you stupid little jealous, insinuating darling. (They retire up L. H., she coaxing him.)

TAPKINS (aside). It strikes me very forcibly that I have made a slight mistake here, which is something particularly singular. (Turns up R. H.)

MRS. LOVETOWN. Alfred, hear me! I am as innocent as yourself. Your fancied neglect and coldness hurt my weak vanity, and roused some foolish feelings of angry pride. In a moment of irritation I resorted to some such retaliation as you have yourself described. That I did so from motives as guiltless as your own I call Heaven to witness. That I repent my fault I solemnly assure you.

LOVETOWN. Is this possible?

TAPKINS. Very possible indeed! Believe your wife's assurance and my corroboration. Here, give and take is all fair, you know. Give me your hand and take your wife's. Here, Mr. and Mrs. L. (To LIMBURY.) Double L,—I call them. (To LOVETOWN.) Small italic and Roman capital. (To MR. and MRS. LIMBURY, who come forward.) Here, it's all arranged. The key to the whole matter is that I've been mistaken, which is something singular. If I have made another mistake in calculating on your kind and lenient reception of our last half-hour's misunderstanding (to the audience), I shall have done something more singular still. Do you forbid me committing any more mistakes, or may I announce my intention of doing something singular again?

Afterword

Felix Tapkins's closing address to the audience simply asks whether or not the crowd approved of the performance. Theatre managers would continue or terminate a play's run, based on such applause or hisses.

We must end now on an unhappy note. The most noted performance of Is She His Wife?—the evening of 6 May, 1837—is known for the saddest of reasons, and for one of the great tragedies in Dickens's life. The story of how Dickens lost his beloved sister-in-law is well known to all Dickensians. Henry Burnett, an actor at the St. James's Theatre, and Dickens's future brother-in-law, played in another piece that same evening. Many years later, he remembered seeing Dickens and his family in the audience: "As to Mary Hogarth, I can see her sweet face looking over the Box upon the Stage of the St. James's Theatre as it appeared the night she died…Dickens had a box on the night and with him were his Father, Mother, Wife and Mary Hogarth. My future Wife [Fanny Dickens] was nervous and could not go. There was some excitement, of course, for the House was very full. Mary was to sleep at her sister's house in Doughty Street. On her way back she fell ill—was carried in from the coach, and it was not long before her head was gently laid back on the pillow—a very spirit of sweetness—in her last sleep. The shadow from her grave darkened the sensitive life of Dickens for a long time, for he had the warmest brotherly love for her unaffected simplicity and the sweetness of her character and her beauty." (Carlton, 71). Mary died in Dickens's arms the following afternoon (7 May 1837). She was only seventeen. When Dickens returned to the St. James Theatre, later the same year (12 Dec 1837), he asked for different seating: "let us have either a pit or proscenium box on the same side as that in which we used to sit; but not a box on the same tier, or opposite. Old recollections make us shun our old haunts, or the sight of them." (Pilgrim 1:343).

Dickens was never to write another play for the St. James Theatre. His first novel Pickwick was already a roaring hit, and was to be one of the most popular novels of the century. But his plays had met with only limited success, and even that was due in part to the fame of Harley and of Pickwick. Coquettes had been a critical failure and a disappointment. Dickens took the natural route and pursued the novels. There exists one further letter from Dickens on the subject, in which he offers to write a two-act piece for the St. James—for one-hundred and fifty pounds. It was five times what he had received for The Strange Gentleman (Pilgrim 1:254). Nothing came of it. Dickens had become too popular and too expensive an author to continue as a playwright.

THE END.