CHAPTER - IV

THE LAMPLIGHTER

Historical Background :

The Lamplighter was written in 1838 when Dickens was actually very busy with Nicholas Nickleby. Three years later in 1841 Dickens had adapted the farce in the form of a narrative, in The Picnic Papers subsequently reprinted in Collected Papers (London : Chapman and Hall 1906, 183-196). It is interesting to compare the play with the story as the comparison would reveal the strength and the weakness of Dickens as a writer. Allardyce Nicoll, for one, holds that Dickens "could not find the true way of expressing himself dramatic wise. When he is permitted that opening into personal revelation which is narrative, he can do great things, when he is tied down to dialogue alone, his strength fails him."[1]

In the narrative the story of The Lamplighter is presented not directly but as part of a larger narrative. It is a story within a story. Dickens describes the Lamplighters' "House of call" and the chief of the tribe, described as the "cacique", narrates the story of Tom Grig to a band of Lamplighters. In fact, Tom Grig is

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1. Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1600-1900, London : Cambridge University Press, 1963, Vol. IV, 210.

introduced as a third person in the story "Tom Grig, gentleman ... was an ornament to us ... Tom's family gentlemen were all Lamplighters."[2]

Asked whether the ladies were also Lamplighters, the cacique makes a comment which reflects Dickens's attitude to women "They had talent enough for it, Sir and would have been, but for the prejudices of the society ... (they) attended to the house keeping generally. It's hard thing upon women, gentlemen, that they are limited to such a sphere of action as this : very hard."[3]

It is obvious that the opportunity in the narrative form for expression of personal feelings is completely missing in the dramatic form. For example, in the narrative when Tom is taken inside the house of Mr. Stargazer his condition is described in a way which is impossible to do in the play "Gentlemen, if Tom had n't been remarkable for his love of truth I think you would still have believed him when he said all this was like a dream."[4] In the fiction Tom is treated with good drink

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2. Collected Papers : London : Chapman and Hall, 1906, 184.

3. Ibid, 185.

4. Ibid, 188.

and dinner and his reaction to it reveals his social position. This is definitely an improvement upon the play which does not have this situation. Consider also how Tom describes the two young ladies in the narrative:

> I will not attempt a description of female beauty gentlemen, for everyone of us has a mode of his own that suits his own taste best.[5]

The narrative form has another advantage over the dramatic. The former can make use of dialogues but the latter cannot make use of narration. Dickens himself has made much use of dialogues in his novels. In A Tale of Two Cities for example, sometime dialogues occur for pages without a break.

But the play also has certain unique features not found in the story. Stargazer's quarrels with nature, the Lamplighter asking for his ladder and Betsy swooning in the arms of Mr Mooney all these are extraordinarily dramatic and hence unfit for fictionalisation.

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5. CP 188.

Story Outline

Tom Grig, the Lamplighter, appears on the stage with a ladder on his back, a lantern in his hand and a song on his lips. The song is offered to the night because only at night lamps are bright. He climbs on a lamppost and lights a lamp and just as he goes to light another Mr. Stargazer notices him from his window and calls him. The lamplighter hears him but as he would not like to be detained he tries to run off. Stargazer is a peculiar man. He stops the lamplighter because he believes that man whom he would meet at that precise moment must marry his niece. Stargazer takes him home promising to give him the philosopher's stone. He then takes the lamplighter into confidence and introduces him to the family members one by one. Meanwhile, Galileo, Mr. Stargazer's son, quite whimsically wants to marry Fanny. His father is indifferent to his sons choice. Galileo and Betsy are dead against Mr. Stargazer's choice of Tom as Fanny's husband. But Mr. Stargazer who is very determined takes him to the lumber room where he finds Mr. Mooney, a gifted man, according to Mr. Stargazer. But Mooney looks very abnormal. The lamplighter being unimpressed by Mooney makes some adverse comments which Mr. Stargazer does not like.

Bets y tries to falsify Mooney's prediction and check Galileo who must assault his rival. In the lumber room

Tom sees a skeleton which has been prepared by Mooney. He is told that his days are numbered and he should die shortly. But he outlives the fatal hour and the play ends happily with Mr. Stargazer realizing his mistake. On Emma's request Mr. Stargazer allows his daughter to select the husband of her own choice. For Betsy's reward there is a general suggestion that Tom would be a suitable match for her. More so because Mr. Stargazer has noticed an error in the earlier calculations and accordingly Tom should continue to live till his 82 years of age. But it is at this point of time that a servvant walks in to tell them that the people outside are calling the lamplighter to light the lamps. Tom, freed from all possible bonds of Mr. Stargazer's household, goes back to his routine work. After a temporary excursion into a world of dream, as it were, he returns to reality.

CHARACTERS

Tom Grig

Tom Grig, the lamplighter, is the key character in this one act farce.

A perfect combination of straight forwardness and light hearttedness, Tom Grig is a balanced character. There are occasions when he does become a victim of Mr Stargazer's astrological predictions but finally he realized his folly and comes out of the maze. He is the representative of the working class who works for other people's sake.

Tom sings twice in the play. The first song shows that he is a lonely but uncomplaining lamplighter. This song indicates that he is a dedicated workman. Small wonder that he is unwilling to waste time in conversation with Mr. Stargazer. He is unpretentious for he is never shy of saying that he is a lamplighter. He never resorts to double dealing with men. Mr. Stargazer is a stranger to him, yet the lamplighter accompanies him on his request.

He possesses a civil manner. He humbly protests against Mr. Stargazer's plan of marriage between the unequals. He knows well that the lamplighter will remain a lamplighter even when favoured by the stars: ... the stars have made a mistake — the comet has put em out! (118). Tom is very judicious and takes decision carefully without any haste. He is always calm

and quiet. There is a sharp distinction between Tom at the beginning and Tom at the end. At first he is a simple man ignorant of the traps of the world. But illusion shatters at the end as he bids farewell to the world of dreams. The character develops through three encounters with the star-dependent man, with Galileo and with reality. In the portrait of Tom Dickens has finely mingled dream with reality. He is poor and so the assurance of the philosopher's stone immediately tempts him. But when Mr. Stargazer informs him that his days are numbered his dreams are shattered and he returns to reality again. There is a mystery about Tom's parentage. Finally, Tom has a fine sense of humour and a gift for wit.

Mr. Stargazer :

Mr. Stargazer is more melodramatic than dramatic character. His main occupation is with the stars, specifically with the position of the stars.

Mr. Stargazer who is first seen beside the open window looks outside the window inquisitively to know from Tom, the lamplighter, the position of the comet.

He is astrologer in the true sense of the term. His utterances and actions are ridiculous as evident from the following speech :

MR. STARGAZER. You don't understand ... what's going to happen here. Six months ago I derived from this source the knowledge that, precisely as the clock struck five, on the afternoon of this very day, a stranger would present himself before my enraptured sight, — that stranger would be a man of illustrious and high descent, — that stranger would be the destined husband of my young and lovely nice (118).

Though Tom is a stranger he is informal with him because the latter too is superstitious like him. When it rains he does not believe it. Rather to disprove it he brings weather almanack. It suggests that his own superstitious ideas are more dear to him than fact. He loves and feels for his niece. But the way he introduces Tom to Fanny can hardly be supported. In a farce making fun is more important than realistic character portrayal. Mr. Stargazer is not a man of fixed principle. He is a wee bit humbug too. Consider the following remark :

MR. STARGAZER. Don't interrupt me. I am versed in the great sciences of astronomy and astrology (118).

He is unusually eccentric and ever in the world of planetary position and mysterious change of fortune.
He wonders that Tom who is destined to won the philopher's stone is a mere lamplighter :

MR. STARGAZER. Certainly. A man in whom the planets take especial interest, and who is about to have a share in the philosopher's stone, descend to lamplighting ! (119).

When it is actually rains against prediction he begins to quarrel with nature :

MR. STARGAZER. I don't acknowledge that it has any right rain, mind ! I protest against this (120).

This amusing remark reveals that Stargazer is a prisoner of his dogma.

Although he is odd, he is not a hypocrite. He ignores his responsibility towards his son. Naturally, Galileo almost at every step differs from him in opinion. There is a sharp conflict between father and son. The conflict brings out the arrogance of Mr. Stargazer. Mark also how he forces both Emma and Fanny to submit to his will.

The most amusing scene is the scene in which Mr. Stargazer appears in the sanctum sanctorum. He brings Tom with him. Here he meets Mooney. The way he introduces Mooney to Thom is a fine example of his sense of humour.

For example when he says "Nothing awakens him from these fits of meditation but an electric shock" (119). the audience bursts into laughter. He has a very soft corner for Mooney. He asks Tom not to show a 'disrespectful attitude to one of the greatest men that ever lived'(129). He shows typically Victorian conservatism in his unwillingness to listen to a girl. He would not listen either to Fanny or to Emma. Mr. Strangazer begins as an orthodox Victorian, but ends as a reasonable good mannered victorian.

In the story Mr. Stargazer is made the representative of the aristocratic society. The play also reveals his ridiculous stupidity not only in the manner in which he perceives hidden nobility in a lamplighter but also the way he quarrels with nature for violating his forecast. He is so obsessed with his findings that he refuses to accept reality when it contradicts his findings. The only compromise Mr. Stargazer makes in course of the play is when his dear Mooney threatens to leave the house and he asks Emma to choose a husband of her choice.

Betsy Martin :

Betsy Martin in this one-act farce is more dominating than the other three female characters. We see Betsy Martin only in the second scene at Mr. Stargazer's house. She is then chattering with the other members of the family. She is a friend, a guardian and a catalyst.

As a friend she is relaible. As a friend, she is sympathetic to her friend. She urges Emma to marry Mooney and exhibits her natural sympathy for Galileo. She also throws some light on Mr. Stargazer and Mooney with whom she is not happy. In fact, she helps us to study and understand other characters of the play. It is through interaction with her that other characters are revealed.

As she holds a soft corner for Galileo, she warns him against his misbehaviour with full command over him. Betsy on the whole impresses us as a woman with strength and stamina. She is not really interested in spoiling the relation of Fanny and Tom, as Mr. Stargazer thinks. As Fanny is not much interested in it, Betsy thinks of doing something positive for her. She works as a catalyst here. Betsy is of the dominating type. Her only aim is to press others to do according to her wish. Her jest and jokes amuse the audience. In fact, from the second scene onwards Betsy becomes the centre of attention. One interesting aspect of her character is her straightforwardness.

Throughout the play she never surrenders to anybody, rather compels others to accept her. She has a bold personality. She is witty too. Consider her remark that Mr. Mooney is "... always winking and blinking through telescopes ... and can't see a pretty face when it's under his very nose " (120). When Tom clarifies the cause behind tickling her hand, she quips "Then you ought to be more careful, Mr. Grig. That was a liberty, Sir" (126). Whatever she receives, she accepts only after judging it. When Emma, Galileo and Fanny press her to take Tom as her husband, she politely refuses but at the same time assures them that she can be friendly with Tom.

Her character is free from complexity and urban sophistication. Her pragmatism is best felt when she tells Galileo : "Nonsense, you can't afford to indulge in such expensive amusements as retaliation yet awhile. You must wait till you come into your property, Sir" (126). Frivolity and seriousness finely combine in her person. In the second scene when Betsy tries to prevent Tom going to the mysterious chamber, Tom wants to know the reason. She answers :

BETSY. (affecting to recover herself). No, no, Mr. Grig, it's nothing — it's ha! ha! ha! -

> don't mind me, don't mind me, but it certainly is very shocking; — no, — no, — I don't mean that. I mean funny, - yes. Ha! ha! ha! (127).

She knows her station in society and hence declines to marry Grig. "Let me see. I don't wish to have Mr. Grig to myself, you know. I don't want to be married" (125).

But this strong decision changes in course of the play. Just before the end of the play Tom receives Betsy. The change of decision points to Dickens's vast knowledge of the unpredictable complexity of human nature.

Betsy functions like a catalyst in the play. She helps Emma and Mooney to marry each other. Fanny gets Galileo only for Betsy. The way she convinces Mr. Stargazer about Galileo's claim on Fanny shows her tact and intelligence. The main reason behind Betsy's objection to marry Tom,is that Tom is only five thousand earner. This consideration of material gain in marriage, though mean, was not uncommon among the working class women in the Victorian era with whom marriage was a means for social upgradation.

Emma Stargazer :

Emma is the daughter of Mr. Stargazer. She appears on the stage only in the second scene. But it is only in the middle of the second scene that she opens her lips. It is interesting to note that about Emma nothing is told clearly in the stage direction of the second scene. Betsy first makes Emma known to us. She mentions her name in her speech, we are not even told how old Emma is. only we are given a hint that she is a marriagable girl.

Dickens says little about her. Other characters and certain incidents help to form an idea about her. From Betsy's comment it appears that the marriage of Emma is going to take place without the consent of her and it is her reactions which reveal her character.

First, Emma is seen with her father. She is seen with her fellows in the same scene. where her reaction against Galileo's idea of action is hard to overlook. Emma remains on the stage for a brief time. But within this brief time she makes her presence felt. Emma is not as prompt as Betsy. So, her reaction to Galileo's violent action is notable :

EMMA.(On the other side). No ! pray do not ; - it makes my blood run cold to hear you (123).

It is the appeal of a very meek and modest girl. Since she is not assertive, she has to surrender before any violent actions. Practically, she is a foil to Betsy who is forward and outspoken. Herdetestation of Mooney is revealed when she disagrees to take Mooney as her husband :

EMMA. It's actually worse than my being sacrificed to that odious and detestable Mr. Mooney (124).

Her dilemma becomes clear when she tells Betsy :

EMMA. You could not manage . the same time to get any young friend of yours to make something more than a friend of Mr. Mooney, could you, Betsy ? (125).

Emma's longing for freedom - to be unfettered in her words really projects the general wish. Her unsubmissiveness to her father's irrational demand creates conflict in her character. Had she completely obeyed her father, she would have become dull, unimpressive and uninteresting. Her opposition makes her real.

Emma herself is a mystery in the play. Why she objects to her alliance with Mooney remains unknown. The mystery is unrevealed.

Fanny Brown :

Fanny appears on the stage only in the second scene. She is the niece of Mr. Stargazer. In the very opening scene Mr. Stargazer himself speaks of the beauty of his niece :

MR. STARGAZER.

> Beautiful ! A graceful carriage, an exquisite shape, a sweet voice; a countenance beaming with animation and expression; the eye of a startled fawn (119).

In his description there is an exaggeration that amuses the audience. But it is clear that Fanny is a pretty girl. The description exhibits that she is quiet and calm.

It is interesting to note that the entire play centres on Fanny. Mr. Stagazer gives Tom the proposal of marriage with Fanny. Galileo is madly in love with Fanny and wishes to marry her at any cost. But Mr. Stargazer wants her to marry Tom.

Fanny's main activities on the stage began with Tom's appearance. She makes a lot of fun at his cost. All her comments are witty. When Mr. Stargazer introduces Tom,Fanny's reaction to that is remarkable. She makes a fun of it :

FANNY. What gentleman, uncle ? Do you mean that elastic person yonder who is bowing with so much perseverance ? (121).

Fanny is well-behaved and well versed in etiquette. when she comes to know that Tom is chosen as her husband she does not openly show disrespect to her uncle. She simply expresses her wonder :

FANNY. My husband, uncle ? Goodness gracious, Emma ! (122).

Fanny successfully tackles the embarassing situation. She knows well how to behave in an awakward situation and she is never in haste. She talks with Galileo very cordially. Her conflict feeling, love and sympathy all appear natural. At the same time Fanny is much conscious of her age. She cannot ignore the age she belongs to :

FANNY. You forget that, situated as we are, we could not be married, even if you were one-and-twenty ; - we have no money ! (123-124).

What she suggests is that they are the victims of a mercenary society which is inimical to human qualities : Love, affection and sympathy. As a lover, Fanny is very practical and reasonable. She always tries her best to make Galileo see what is what.

Fanny suffers much mentally. Her silent suffering makes her all the more charming. The truth is she loves Galileo. But the problem is that she has no money and her uncle will not let her marry Galileo. In such a miserable condition Fanny remains steady and confident. She has an extraordinary stamina of mind though the situation she is in is highly critical : "was such an atrocity ... heard of? I, left with no power to marry without his consent, and he almost possessing the power to force my inclinations" (124). What she intends to say is that she is the victim of circumstances. While Fanny is passive, Emma is vocal and wishes to gain everything forcefully.

Placed between Tom and Galileo, she remains the centre of interest. Fanny is the nucleus of some funny situations particularly during feigned love scenes. When she tells Mooney "... You are my first and only love. Oh ! speak to me" (134). we only feel the mockery of it. Fanny's mock-courtship——

FANNY. Oh! no, no, no (detaining him), Give me some encouragement. Not one kind word? not one look of love ? (134) — is never taken seriously by the audience. Through this trick Fanny befools Tom fulfils her love for Galileo. As a lover Fanny is sober and her love is devoid of violent passion.

Master Galileo Isaac Newton Flamstead Stargazer :

Master Galileo's role in the play is secondary. Even the courage that he evinces towards the end is also secondary to Mooney's anger. The fact that he caricatures his father behind his back and decides to attack Tom secretly is a testimoney to his lack of purpose and his cowardice. However towards the end when, on seeing Fanny's passion towards Mooney, he shows jealousy characteristic of a lover, his character becomes more realistic.

We meet him in the second scene. Fanny, Betsy, Emma and Galileo are in a mirthful mood. Friendly exchange goes on. Galileo appears on the stage with a fixed objective, that of marrying Fanny. Incidentally, Galileo was a great scientist who dared to tell the truth that earth revolves round the sun, not the sun round the earth as held by Ptolemy. The great scientist had to suffer inhumanly for his idea. The scientist Galileo had to fight his opponents and Dickens's Galileo has to fight against a self-opinionated father. His father in his opinion, is :

GALILEO... so much occupied in making observations on the sun round which the earth revolves, that he takes no notice of the son that revolves round him! (121).

Usually vexed by his father's obstinacy he occasionally shouts protestingly :

GALILEO.I won't stand it - I won't submit to it any longer. I will be married (121).

The way he reacts when Tom, the Lamplighter advances towards Fanny and kisses at the back of her head reveals the strength of his personality. We may laugh at his childish behaviour but we can never question his sincerity as a lover. He is witty and ever quick in his reply. When Emma reminds his about the need for money, he observes :

GALILEO.Oh, I am sure every Christian clergyman, under such afflicting circumstances, would marry us on credit (124).

Sometimes, his feelings are demonstrated through actions. That he is suspicious of Fanny is demonstrated through his stealthy entrance into the lumber room and endeavour to oterhear the conversation between Betsy and Fanny.

Mr. Mooney :

Mooney is undoutedly the most amusing character in the play. He is almost a clown.

Mooney, as the stage direction represents him, is an astrologer. From the conversation between Betsy and Emma we come to know that he is the prospective husband of Emma. But Emma cannot tolerate Mooney. Though Betsy thinks that Mooney is 'bad', Mr. Stargazer thinks that he is a kind and generous person. He is wholly dedicated to his astrological studies. As he tells Emma :

MOONEY. The little boy, ... has spoken wisdom. I have been led to the contemplation of womankind. I find their love is too violent for my staid habits. I would rather not venture upon the troubled waters of matrimony (135).

His character contributes to make fun and amusing scenes in the play. Mooney is an egoist. The recurrent use of 'I' in his speech fingers at his egoism. Mooney has a rare sense of humour. The audience bursts into laughter when he steals Tom's 'hat', and puts it upon his head. Again, when Stargazer tells him to unfold his hand for greeting, he raises his legs. The Victorians were by and large superstitious and they had faith in future-telling as Mooney has. Mooney is a fine creation of Dickens.

Humour :

Dickens's use of wit and humour in The Lamp-lighter deserves special attention. Humour here is never cynical but genial. Even the wit used is singularly free from sting. Mr. Stargazer is seen obsessed with stars. To him 'Sun' is important than 'son'. So, often it seems that Mr. Stargazer is more a clown than a serious character. Mr. Mooney is more a magician than an astrologer. For his funny activities the audience roll in laughter. When he steals Tom's hat and puts it upon his own head, audience bursts in a peal of laughter. Galileo's long name itself is a source of fun to all. Humour of situation is highly prominent in the play. Take one example. When it starts raining Mr. Stargazer quarrels with nature because according to the weather forecast it should be a dry day. Tom kisses Fanny under his hat. Betsy swoons in the arms of Mr. Mooney. The feigned love which takes place between Emma and Mr. Mooney is amusing too. Again, the bursting of the crucible also provides enough humour of situation. One can hardly forget the situation which arises out of Mr. Stargazer's appearance in the sanctum sanctorum. Betsy's stealthy entrance into the mysterious chamber and her hiding behind the skeleton tickle the audience beyond control.

There is no dearth of verbal humour in The Lamplighter. When Mr. Stargazer asks Tom whether he can distinguish anything of a tail of a comet, he says : Distinguish a tail ? I believe you-four tails ? (115).

The following exchange of words between Tom and Mr. Stargazer is a splendid example of verbal fun-making :

MR. STARGAZER. Don't interrupt me. I am versed in the great sciences of astronomy and astrology; in my house there I have every description of apparatus for observing the course and motion of the planets. I'm writing a work about them... I read what's going to happen in the stars.

TOM. Read what's going to happen in the stars ! Will anything particular happen in the stars in the course of next week, Now ?

Mr. STARGAZER. You don't understand me. I read in the stars what's going to happen here. Six months ago I derived from this source the knowledge that, precisely as the clock struck five, on the afternoon of this very day, a stranger would present himself before my enraptured sight, ... that stranger is yourself : I receive you with open arms !

TOM. Me! I...the husband of a young and lovely - Oh! it can't be, you know the stars have made a mistake - the comet has put'em out ! (118).

Critical Estimate of the Play

In this play Dickens focuses on several problems of each individual. He is an optimist. Naturally, every emerging problem ends with a happy note. Each problem has some peculiarity and magnitude. Sometimes his handling of jokes and jests appears too boring. The play has three distinct scenes, but they are finely tied up by the single thread of action - problem of choice in matrimony. Both Fanny and Emma has this problem of choice. The lamplighter is always at the focal point. The title of the play is therefore apt and apposite.

Technically, the play is not flawless. The stage direction is not adequate. Moreover the exist and entrances of the characters take place abruptly. The use of lengthy dialogues often jar on our aesthetic sense. Galileo appears melodramatic. Mooney seems to be not an actor but a clown on the stage. Mooney depends more on body language and gestures than on speeches.

Inspite of these Dickens has been able to retain our interest all through. The play like Ben Jonson's The Alchemist makes people conscious about social evils like the philosopher's stone. As a play wright Dickens is true to his moral duty. Undeniably, this play like Hard Times serves as a social critique and is a success.