

CHAPTER - V

MR. NIGHTINGALE'S DIARY

Mr. Nightingale's Diary

Historical Background

"Mr. Nightingale's Diary was written by Dickens and Mark Lemon for the Guild of Literature and Art and was first performed at Devonshire House in May 1851 in the presence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert".¹ Dickens himself was an actor when the play was staged. In fact, the combined efforts of Dickens and Lemon made the play a hilarious comedy with a farcial bent. It is not that Dickens suddenly took part as an actor. Five years before the production of the play Dickens had written :

I tried to recollect, in coming here, whether I had ever been in any theatre in my life from which I had not brought away some pleasant association, however, poor the theatre, and I protest, out of my varied experience, I could not remember even one from which I had not brought some favourable impression,....²

1. Charles Dickens, Foreword. Collected Plays and Selected Poems. Ed. Shepherd Herne Richard. N. p. W.H. Allen & Co., 1882. 2

2. Emlyn Williams, "Dickens and the Theatre" in Charles Dickens 1812-1870. A centenary volume. Ed. **EMF** ~~Towson~~ London : Weidenfield and Nicolson 1969, 181-182.

We learn from Emlyn Williams that Dickens "turned to acting as another writer might have sought relaxation in fishing or gambling."³ Moreover, Dickens was such a good actor that his performance was practically "indistinguishable from a professional one."⁴ It may be interesting to recall in this connection that in 1845 Dickens had played a role in The Elder Brother of Beaumont and Fletcher. He also took part in Ben Jonson's Every Man in his humour. In 1848 he played the role of Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor. In 1850 he acted brilliantly in Bulwer Lytton's Not so Bad as we seem. So, in 1851 when he produced Mr. Nightingale's Diary and played many roles in it he was already a seasoned and successful actor. In this play we get a picture of the 'dramatic Dickens' in more sense than one.

3. Emlyn Williams, "Dickens and the Theatre in Charles Dickens 1812-1870 : A Centenary Volume. Ed. ~~E.M.E. Tomlinson~~. London : Weidenfield and Nicolson 1969. 181-182.

4. Ibid.

Story Outline :

The location of Mr. Nightingale's Diary is the water-lily Hotel at Malvern. The hotel is owned by Lithers. It is a favourite recluse for 'sick' persons undergoing treatment of coldwater cure at Malvern. The play begins with Gabblewig, a lawyer of the Middle Temple. He has come to the hotel as an unrequired lover. He loves Rosina Nightingale. Rosina's uncle has not approved of the match because he considers Gabblewig a worthless fellow, a man deficient in everything. But Gabblewig is surprised to learn that Rosina along with her uncle and maid is also expected to come to the same hotel in the same afternoon. The next soujourner is Slap. Slap is however disguised as Mr. Formiville. But they recognize each other as old acquaintances in their theatrical career. Gabblewig decided to use Formiville as a foil and to impress Nightingale how deserving a suitor he is. He plans to use his amateur dresses and make an effective use of the assistance of Lithers.

Next appears Mr. Nightingale with Rosina, his niece, and Susan, the maid. We find Rosina and Susan constantly helping Nightingale in writing his diary or to refer to it. Incidentally, when the diary accidentally drops Slap at once takes the advantage of it and reads its contents. All the time, however, he is overheard by Gabblewig until Nightingale recovers the diary.

Making himself comfortable in the hotel Slap orders for wine. Gabblewig disguised as a boots brings it in a tray, but he by way of praising Slap for different roles that he has played, actually consumes Slap's food and drink. Gabblewig also tries to extract from him some information about Mr Nightingale. It is learnt that Nightingale who passes for a confirmed bachelor had a wife who is now dead. Gabblewig after eliciting some information from slap persuades Susan to reveal the rest of the secret. He learns from Susan that after her death Mrs Nightingale was buried in the preshore churchyard where her uncle was the sexton. Gabblewig then asks Susan to procure the death certificate of Mrs Nightingale.

The rest of the play is a series of humorous situations in which slap tries to befool Nightingale and Gabblewig, with the help of Rosina, dupes Slap and frustrates all his plans. When Slap tries to convince Nightingale in the guise of a smug physician against water-cure and prescribes mustard and milk, Gabblewig and Rosina appear in disguise of an ailing couple Mr and Mrs Poulter who are dead against mustard and milk recommended by Slap. Gabblewig talks of a captain Blower who suffered after using that. Slap tries to warn Nightingale against hired humbugs who mislead the patients and induces Nightingale to buy a bottle of his concoction and drink a gulp. Immediately, Gabblewig and

Rosina appear as the invalid captain Blower and Mrs Trusty and show Nightingale how adversely affected they have been after using mustard and milk. As Slap's plans come to nothing he moves out of the scene, only to have recourse to more complex designs, with the assistance of Tip he appears with a charity boy. He introduces himself as an old acquaintance of Mrs Nightingale who, he says, is still alive and is prepared to let off Nightingale if he pays two hundred pounds to her (Maria's) brother who is ready to take charge of her. When Nightingale agrees, Slap reappears and introduces Tip as the son of Mrs Nightingale. Just before Nightingale's surrender, Gabblewig appears as an old woman and claims Tip as her own son and thus foils the manoeuvre of Slap. When challenged by Slap, Gabblewig vouches the death of Mrs Nightingale and then appears as the deaf sexton and produces the death certificate. The death certificate gives a profound relief to Nightingale who now experiences a sense of liberation. Gabblewig then appears in his real person and confesses all his doings. He has now proved that he is not good for nothing. On the contrary he is capable of rendering a really useful service. Nightingale is convinced of Gabblewig's capabilities and when Gabblewig expresses his desire to marry Rosia, Nightingale after some hesitation agrees. Gabblewig advises Nightingale to burn the diary and be happy. The diary, he suggests, has been a great psychological encumbrance, a dead weight on him all these years.

Tip :

Tip is a clever fellow though he looks dull and unimpressive. With a lot of burden he knocks at the door of Water Lily Hotel at Malvern. He is very obliging to Gabblewig. Intelligence and calculating brain distinguish Tip from common attendants or coolies. Everyone tries to use him as a tool. To Gabblewig he is a burden bearer. Slap uses him to befool Nightingale in order to manage Rosina. Sometimes he is looked upon as a charity boy. His charity boy image makes him a complete buffoon. When he is in disguise Tip is hugely jolly. He entertained us with his distorted pronunciation. For example, the aspirated pronunciation of orphan as 'horphan' evokes smiles in every heart.

As has been said at the beginning Tip is very clever though he has the appearance of a dullard. At first Slap employs him for befooling Nightingale, but when Tip finds Gabblewig outwitting Slap he turns his coat and surrenders to Gabblewig before his double-dealing gets exposed. Through Tip Dickens shows the miserable state of the poor who are easily made tools by the rich. Tip rightly says that men like him are deluded 'with a glass of rum - and - water; and the promise of a five-pound note' (168).

Gobblewig calls him his 'puppy'. The word 'puppy' provides a dramatic contrast to the description of Tip as 'tiger' in the Dramatis Personae. He faces Gabblewig dressed as an old woman. He embraces him first as 'master' and then his 'mother'. The most interesting part is the way he then reacts to Slap :

SLAP. are you mad? Am I mad ? Are we all mad ?
 (To Tip) Din't you tell me that whatever I
 said.

TIP. You said ? What is your voice to the
 voice of Natur ? (Embraces his master
 again (165).

Here we see the 'tiger' - and indeed it is Gabblewig's tiger alone.

Lithers

'Lithers' has been introduced as the 'Landlord of the Water-Lily' a hotel in Malvern. The most striking aspect of Lither's character is friendliness and approachability. He assures Gabblewig all sorts of co-operation "I'm entirely devoted to you, and ready to serve you in any way" (146).

Lithers who is so informal to Gabblewig is very formal to Slap. His managerial quality is evident in his dealings with his customers

LITHERS (arranging table and Chair). Wine coming, Sir, directly ! My young man has gone below for it. (Bell rings without). More company ! Mr. Ninghtingale, beyond a doubt ! (showing him in at door.) This way, Sir, if you please ! Your letter received, Sir, and your rooms prepared (149).

Lither's role is vital indirectly because it is in his hotel that the entire episode takes place and the problems get solved. As a character Lithers impresses us by his sense of gratitude. He acknowledges Gabblewig's kindness in paying out "that execution for me when I was in the green-grocery way, and used to wait at your parties in the Temple" (143).

Lithers is a great observer of human nature. At the very first encounter with Gabblewig he feels that 'something's wrong' with him.

Gabblewig

Gabblewig is the protagonist of the play Mr. Nightingale's Diary. He appears as soon as the curtain rises and leaves the stage when the curtain drops. He comes to the Hotel with a definite purpose. It so happens that the landlord is familiar to him. Initially Gabblewig is taken as a man of 'all words', not of acts. Only for this reason Nightingale is going to separate him from Rosina whom he loves sincerely.

At the beginning, he as a frustrated lover is slightly dejected. But as soon as Gabblewig comes to know that Slap has an intention to grab the property of Nightingale, he becomes alert and watchful. This reveals that Gabblewig is not really the man of words but of action. Slap intends to befool Nightingale in the guise of a doctor but Gabblewig foils his attempt by proving his prescription wrong. Again, when Slap uses Tip as a charity boy and tries to convince Nightingale that there was a son born just before their final separation, it is Gabblewig who in the guise of a woman frustrates the plan. Gabblewig in the guise of Sexton appears to produce all the relevant papers showing the confirmed burial of Mrs Nightingale. Thus, Gabblewig proves his worth and removes Slap from his way. He is thus not a worthless loafer but a man of shrewdness, cunning and ready wit.

Though he has an undoubted seriousness of purpose he is not without a sense of humour. Take for example the scene where Gabblewig appears as an old woman :

TIP (solemnly). I'm a horphan. (Goes up to GABBLEWIG).

what are you talking about, you old Bedlam ?

GABBLEWIG. Oh! (screaming and throwing her arms about his neck) - my 'ope-my pride-my son !

TIP (Struggling). Your son !

GABBLEWIG (aside to him). If you don't own me for your mother, you villain, on the spot, I'll break every bone in your skin, and have your skin prepared afterwards by the Bermondsey tanners.

TIP (aside). My master ! - My mother ! (they embrace) (165).

Earlier, Slap in the guise of a doctor prescribed Mustard and Milk for quick cure of Nightingale's disease. Again, Rosina and Gabblewig being disguised respectively as a complete invalid and an old nurse take the wind out of Slap's sails. The ensuing discourse is soaked in fun :

GABBLEWIG (starting up). Mustard and Milk !

ROSINA. Mustard and milk !

SLAP (aside). Is this Captain Blower ?

GABBLEWIG (to Nightingale). Are you, too, a victim ?

Have you swallowed any of that man - 'slaughtering compound? (160).

NIGHTINGALE (alarmed). Only a little, -- a very little.

GABBLEWIG. How do you feel ? Dimness of sight, -- feebleness of limbs ? (161).

Gabblewig is a man of strong personality who wants to prove his worth. In one of his conversations he says :

GABBLEWIG.

Me. My dear Mr. Nightingale, you did think

I could do nothing but talk. If you now think

I can act - a little - let me come out in a new character. (168).

In his character we find a symbolisation of the conflict between words and acts. He does everything quietly and intelligently. He is a very clever too. Take for example the situation where disguised as a boots he informs Slap that Mr Nightingale got a wife who died and was buried properly. Soon he meets Susan to ascertain the justness of his statement. He prays to Susan to collect the burial certificate. Whatever Gabblewig does is actually prompted by his love for Rosina. He starts as a very dejected fellow, but at the end succeeds in embracing Rosina. Thus he proves his worth as a man.

It has been alleged that Gabblewig is more a caricature than a character. Indeed, there is a great deal of farcical exaggeration which makes heavy demands on our imagination. Presumably, in writing the play Dickens had in mind the cast - himself as Gabblewig and Lemon as Slap. But should we forget that Dickens conceived the play as a farce where such exaggerations are not out of place but the very soul of the comic.

Slap

From Slap's self-introduction we know that he is Mr Formiville. He is an immature impostor. He is Gabblewig's rival in his attempts to hoodwink Nightingale. He has an eye on Nightingale's property. The way he gets Nightingale's diary is, in a word, improper. But after all, he is not a blackguard. His tricks serve as the staple of fun. Slap adopts various ways to be befool Nightingale. It is Slap who brings Christopher before Nightingale to prove that a son was born to him before the death of his wife. Slap may be taken as a representative of the rapidly progressing industrial civilization which made people money-minded. But the most striking element of Slap's character is his calm acceptance of the defeat of his plans at the hand of Gabblewig. The character of Slap develops in the course of the play. In his first appearance he is seen energetic and full of mettle. But when he leaves the stage, he looks pale and frustrated seeking consolation in the philosophical realization that failure is universal :

SLAP ... I am not the first man who has failed in a great endeavour. Napoleon had his Waterloo, — Slap has his Malvern. . (168).

Nightingale

Nightingale is an interesting character in the play. His obsession with diary is highly significant. It suggests that his mind is always in grip of the past. Gabblewig and Slap time and again confront Nightingale because while Slap wishes for his property, Gabblewig wants Rosina.

He is somewhat proud. He thinks that Gabblewig is a man of mere words not of deeds. He is a responsible guardian, for he is worried about Rosina's marriage with Gabblewig who, he thinks, is good-for-nothing. Nightingale knows the importance of money and it is his contempt that brings out the active man in Gabblewig. Nightingale has a very keen eyes glowing under the bright brows. It indicates his stern personality. A man of monumental patience, he pursues everything till the end. What bores all is his recurrent diary reading.

Another striking feature of his nature is mental steadiness. Repeatedly Slap and Gabblewig disturb him and resist him from taking any sort of decision, yet he never loses his patience. His 'wait-and-see' policy

finally helps explaining the truth behind those incidents going around him. As soon as he feels satisfied with Gabblewig's worth, he concedes :

NIGHTINGALE.

Will I ? Take her, Mr. Gabblewig. Stop, though.

Ought I to give away what has made me so
unhappy (168-69).

Though otherwise well-composed, Nightingale is occasionally peevish. On one occasion he takes Susan to task :

NIGHTINGALE.

Ill ! you are ill, if you only knew it.

If you were as intimate with your own interior as I am with mine, your hair would stand on end (151).

Nightingale is not only obsessed with own illness but he is convinced of Susan's illness as well. He is caught between two humbugs : Slap and Gabblewig.

Nightingale has very simple values and it is his simplicity which is exploited by Slap who extracts money from him. It is also on account of his simplicity that Gabblewig is able to win him over by removing his reservations against him. But his obsession, with the diary remains till the end when just before burning it he wishes to look at it once more. The secrecy that Nightingale maintains regarding his wife gives an opportunity to Gabblewig and Slap to twist it to their advantage. The episode is both ridiculous and fairly unconvincing. But

the audience would like to cultivate what is called 'a willing suspension of disbelief' for the sake of the entertainment that they would get in the bargain.

Rosina :

Rosina is a minor female character. She is weak and she gets easily intimidated by the sterner sex. When Lithers whispers to Rosina, she screams with excitement and when Gabblewig wants Susan to reveal the secret of Nightingale, she is hesitant. Nonetheless, Rosina, despite her feminine weakness, exhibits much agility and enthusiasm. She is carried off her feet by Lithers's whispering as she tells her uncle :

ROSINA.O uncle ! I felt as if — don't be frightened,
uncle, — as if something had touched me
here (with her hand upon her heart) so
unexpectedly, that I — don't be frightened,
uncle — that I almost dropped, uncle (150).

She is nimble spirited and has a extraordinary presence of mind. With confidence and ease she carries out the different tasks assigned by Gabblewig in befooling Slap. So though Rosina is not a major character in the play, she has an important role in smoothly resolving the complications of the action.

Susan :

What is obscure about Susan is her identity and purpose. Both Susan and Rosina accompany Nightingale. She is ever busy either with Nightingale or with Gabblewig.

The basic difference between Susan and Rosina lies in their attitude and approach. While Rosina is passive and submissive, Susan is assertive and firm. When Nightingale scolds Susan for her incapacity, Susan remarks :

SUSAN. Then I'm very glad of my ignorance, Sir, for I wish it to keep in Curt (151).

It is clear that Susan is a woman of strong personality. Susan informs Gobblewig of what Slap has told Tip. Behind the screen, she is a witness to the whole proceeding. Promptness is also another feature of her character. She is ever ready to help Gobblewig. Though very determined Susan is not without feminine softness. Her exclamation; -

SUSAN. -What a wicked world this is, to be sure !

Everybody seems trying to do the best they can for themselves . . (162).

points to the depth of her perception. Susan may not be the heroine yet she is the most important woman character in the play.

Humour :

Dickens has become a name for his inimitable humour. In this play, Slap and Nightingale are excellent studies of humourous characters. Nightingale is a typical humour character on account of his excessive obsessions with his imagined sickness and his past. The charity boy image of Tip makes him a complete buffoon and contributes its mite to the fun of the play. Gabblewig is also a humour character. Take for example the scene where Gabblewig appears in the guise of a Sexton and produces all the relevant papers to confirm the burial of Mrs. Nightingale. There are many humourous situations in the play. The most interesting is the way the disguises are made known to the audience while characters in the play are ignorant of these. The first time Gabblewig dresses up as the boots, he encounters Slap and then meets Susan :

GABBLEWIG. Don't you know me ? Mr. Gabble

SUSAN. Wig ! . Why, la, Sir, then you're the boot -

Jack ! Now I understand, of course

(154).

Consider the scene when Rosina and Gabblewig appear as Mr and Mrs Poulter :

GABBLEWIG (aside ROSINA). I have my cue, fellow

me directly. I'll bring you another glass,
Sir, in a quarter of an hour (157).

Dressed up as the invalid Blower Gabblewig first calls
out to Rosina :

GABBLEWIG (aside, calling). Rosina, quick,
your arm. (Aloud) I tell you, Mrs
Trusty, I can't walk any further (160)..

The play is action oriented and very often humour springs from
specific gestures. Consider the showing and shaking
of bottle in the following dialogue spoken by Slap :

SLAP. Think so ? - I know it. There are men base
enough to stand between you (shows bottle)
and perfect health (Shakes bottle) who
would persuade you .. (159).

Another example of gestural humour may be found in the
scene in which Rosina and Gabblewig keep on walking even
while talking in the guise of Mr and Mrs Poulter. Soon,
situational humour complements the gestural humour and
the scene is made funnier than before :

NIGHTINGALE. Well, Sir, if you really could
pull up for a few minutes, I should be
extremely obliged to you.

GABBLEWIG. Here we are, then, — don't keep us long. (Looks at watch, Rosina does the same).
Say a minute, chronometer time.

NIGHTANGALE. You must know I'm an invalid

GABBLEWIG. Five Seconds

NIGHTINGALE. Come down here to try the cold-water cure.

GABBLEWIG. Ten Seconds (158).

Dickens has also used verbal humour significantly. Consider how Gabblewig compares Mr. Nightingale to a bird. Gabblewig compares Mr Nightingale to a bird, to a Nightingale in all probability, but with a completely different connotation. When Lathers produces a letter from his pocket, Gabblewig at once recognizes the hand writing and comments :

GABBLEWIG.

The cramped hand of the obstinate old bird,
who might, could, and should have been —
and would n't be my father-in-law ! (145).

It is interesting to note how the metaphor of the same bird is used for two contrastive character by the same person who loves one and hates the other. Take also the allusion to the nightingale in Shakespeare :

GABBLEWIG. If the waters ... of Lethe, ...
drink ... to-morrow morning. Anything
to wash out the tormenting remembrance
of Rosina Nightingale (144-145).

LITHERS. Nightingale, Mr. Gabblewig ?

GABBLEWIG. Nightingale. As the Shakespeare
duet went, in the happy days of our
amateur plays :

The Nightingale alone,
She, poor bird, as all forlorn,
Lean'd her breast uptil a thorn (145).

The Critical Estimate of the Play :

Mr. Nightingale's Diary is an excellent farce which aims to "demonstrate the contiguity of the logical and the mad. "As a farce it explores a closed world where belief is suspended because nothing has a real cause. Action is self-generated once the groomed rules are accepted."¹ What is supremely important about the play is the way Dickens has exploited the potentials of this genre to demonstrate his acting talent. In this respect the contribution of Mark Lemon is also very significant. Without him Dickens the actor would have been less prominent as without Slap Gabblewig will be lame. Emlyn Williams writes about Dickens' "amazing ability of expression, bravura use of voice up and down the register, an actor to his finger tips ... in the farago Mr. Nightingale's Diary, in which he impersonated an ancient crone in quivering search for a lost child, a testy hypochondriac, a writer, senile grinning sexton, and two other parts; and actor in search of six characters, and finding them too, all in one play."²

-
1. Roger Flower, Ed. A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, 70.
 2. Emlyn Williams, "Dickens and the Theatre" in Charles Dickens 1812-1870. A Centenary Volume. Ed. E.M.F. Tomlin. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson 1969. 181-182.