CHAPTER II

DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON

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> *I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. ... I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. ... Therefore my mind turned immediately towards the extreme cases, the social outcasts, tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. These were the lowest of the low, and these were the people with whom I wanted to get in contact.*[1]

Thus, in the autobiographical ninth chapter of The Road to Wigan Pier, Orwell explains his motives and relates how the overpowering guilt that resulted from his years as a policeman in Burma forced him to seek expiation among the down-and-out of Paris and London.

Obviously enough Down and Out in Paris and London comprises two distinct parts. The first deals with Orwell's time in Paris. It describes his experience of poverty and near starvation there and his subsequent jobs as a 'plongeur' or scullion first in the kitchens of a very large hotel and then in a fashionable and atmospheric "restaurant". The second part of the book deals with his continuing poverty upon his return to England and his experiences living among down and outs and tramps in and around London.

> *My story ends here. It is a fairly trivial story and I can only hope that it has been interesting in the same way as a travel diary is interesting. ... Here is the world that awaits you if you are penniless. Some days I want to explore that world more thoroughly. ... I should like to understand what really goes on in the souls of plongeur and tramps and Embankment sleepers. At present I do not feel that I have seen more than the fringe of poverty.*[2]

This is the confession that Orwell does at the end of the book, Down and Out in Paris and London. It itself speaks about the nature of the book and its structure inherent in it. Having a bird's eye view, if the minute survey of the book is done, one can easily perceive the Spatial Structure underlying the surface structure of the work.

Like a skilled reporter, documentary writer Orwell is shifting from one place to another, from one event to another, from one incident to another portraying the same imaginatively like an omniscent narrator. The description, though it is documentary in its nature, is not at all prosaic depiction; but imaginative representation which directly touches the hearts of the readers and takes them to the writer's world of hunger and poverty.

The portrayal of 'rue du Coq d'Or', its inhabitants and its total surrounding represents it as a representative Paris slum.

In such a dark, rickety warren of five storeys, cut up by wooden partitions into forty rooms of the Hotel des Trois Moineaux Orwell was residing. Its proprietor Madam F., its lodgers like the Rougiers, Henri and such like are eccentric types. That was Orwell's first contact with poverty.

There Orwell came into contact with Charlie who was always talking of love, his favourite subject. His description of his visit to the brothel shows his idea of love:

> *There is the true love, there is the only thing in the world worth striving for; there is the thing beside which all your arts and ideals, all your philosophies and creeds, all your fine words and high attitudes, are as pale and profitless as ashes. When one has experienced love - the true love - what is there in the world that seems more than a mere ghost of joy? ... Ah, the poverty, the disappointment of human joy! For in reality - what is the duration of the supreme moment of love. It is nothing, an instant, a second perhaps. A second of ecstasy and after that - dust, ashes, nothingness. ... All my savagery, my passion, were scattered like petals of a rose.*[3]

That was what Charlie's attitude towards love which he tried to seek in physical gratification. This attitude towards love is not the attitude of Charlie alone, but of all who wallow in hunger and poverty. They try to seek the mental solace - the joy of life in such physical gratification, without which they will be led to

neurotic state. The spiritual love has no meaning for them. It is like hunger-like food for them which nourishes their life.

Orwell's experience of poverty with forty-seven francs is typical one. In such a state he discovered the peculiar lowness of poverty. He had to sell his clothes, had to smuggle them out of hotel and had to take them to a second-hand shop in rue de la Montagne St. Genevieve. Still he had a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, of knowing that he was genuinely down and out.

The plot, thus, moves forward as the description proceeds further to portray the picture of hunger and poverty. When all his belongings - the remaining clothes, the suitcase, etc. were sold in the pawnshop, he was left only with the empty and hungry belly as his sole possession. He desired to get the help from his Russian friend named Boris, who was a captain in the Second Siberian Rifles but was working as waiter in Paris. But Boris himself was wallowing in hunger. Hence both Boris and Orwell experience the pangs of hunger and poverty together. Desperately both tried to get a job in the hotels.

His money was oozing out and he experienced the acute pains of hunger. Hence he writes about the psychological influence of poverty thus:

> *Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. ... Complete inertia is my chief memory of hunger.*[4]

The anecdote of secret Russian society which exploited the poors is also amusing, at the same time touching one.

At last Boris could manage to get the job as a writer in the Hotel X, near the Place de la Concorde. He could easily smuggle the food for the writer who ate in a newspaper on a public seat in Tuileries which were full of pretty girls. Boris could also manage to engage him as a plongeur in the hotel X.

As in society, so also in the hotel, he found an elaborate caste system. Highest of all came the manager, who could sack anybody . He worked like 'Patron' of the hotel himself, though patron never frequented the hotel. Next in hierarchy, below the manager came the Maitre d' hotel who only served a lord or someone of that kind. Then came the chef du personnel who did no manual work, but could sack the plongeurs. Then came cooks, waiters, the laundresses, the apprentice waiters and the last the plongeurs who was a slave of slave. The writer desired that the patron should treat him like dirt in the moments of hunger before which everything is meaningless.

What he found out in the pompous hotel was nothing but dirt. Describing the prevailing dirt in the Paris hotel he observes:

> *It is not a figure of speech, it is a mere statement of fact to say that a French cook will spit in the soup - that is, if he is not going to drink himself. He is artist, but his art is not cleanliness. To a certain extent*

> *he is even dirty because he is an artist, for food, to look smart, needs dirty treatment. When a steak, for instance, is brought up for the head cook's inspection, he does not handle it with a fork. He picks it up in his fingers and slaps it down, runs his thumb round the dish and licks it to taste the gravy, runs it round and looks again, then steps back and contemplates the piece of meat like an artist judging a picture, then presses it lovingly into place with his fat, pink fingers, every one of which he has licked a hundred times that morning. ... Roughly speaking, the more one pays for food, the more sweat and spittle one is obliged to eat with it ... Everywhere in the service quarters dirt festered as a secret vein of dirt, running through the great garish hotel like the intestines through a man's body.*[5]

The description of the dirt is picturesque, it is the surrealist's portrayal of dirt in which the down and outs have to live their life. This is the dirt upon which the pompousness of the rich is built upon.

Valenti - the waiter's experience of starvation - five days without food - without even a crust of bread - Jesus Christ! - is touching one. He was lying in bed getting weaker and weaker, and watching the bugs running about the ceiling. He prayed Sainte Eloise to give him food and promised her to burn a candle at her church. Paradoxically enough he was worshipping not to Sainte Elaise,

but to Suzanne May, the famous prostitute of the Empire ... When Valenti got the food from Maria, he did not stop to thank her.

> *I just seized the bread and sank my teeth in it. Have you noticed how bread tastes when you have been hungry for a long time? Cold, wet, doughy - like putty almost. Bit, Jesus Christ, how good it was! Ah for the wine, I sucked it all down in one draught, and it seemed to go straight into my veins and flow round my body like new blood. Ah. that made a difference!*[6]

The plongeur or the workers have not enough time to think about the happenings around them. Hence though there was a murder just beneath the writer's window, he or the other seullians had no time to think or feel anything about the murder. They were involved only in the web of hunger - work and food. They had not enough time to feel for such things like murder.

Charlie's experience of hunger who was living with a girl named Yvonne is amusing and touching. She was walking up and down the room with her hands on her belly, howling like a dog that she was dying of starvation. Both found out an intelligent plan to get the food and Yvonne was admitted to Government maternity hospital, telling falsely to the authorities that she was pregnant! She smuggled the food for Charlie. When both were walking the road, unexpectedly the nurse recognized Yvonne. However Charlie got rid of her telling the lie that Yvonne had given birth to twins,

hence her empty stomach. How funny and touching the striving for food it is!

The description of the work of the Auberge de Jehan Cottard is also interesting where the writer worked with Boris and Jules. Rarely, he could get the time to sleep, which affected his physic. He describes the condition of plongeur:

> *He is one of the slaves of the modern world. His work is servile and without art. Except by a lucky chance he has no escape from this life, save into prison. At this moment there are men with university degrees scrubbing dishes in Paris for ten to fifteen hours a day. ... If 'plongeurs' thought at all, they would long ago have formed a union and gone on strike for better treatment. But they do not think, because they have no leisure for it; their life has made slaves of them.*[7]

The plongeurs - the workers - have no time even to think for their betterment, such is their involvement with work - and food. He is compared with an Indian rickshaw puller, or a gharry pony. When they go too slowly the passenger calls them 'bhainchut'. They earned thirty or forty rupees a month, and coughed their lungs after a few years. The gharry pony got sixty per cent whip and forty per cent food. After a few years even the whip lost its virtue and the pony went to the knacker. It was only because the Orientals considered it a vulger to walk. It is in the same way that plongeur's work is essential for the enjoyment of the riches.

However, the writer feels that no one thinks about the poors - the plongeurs. The rich never side with poor, because -

> *Very few cultivated people have less than four hundred pounds a year, and naturally they side with the rich, because they imagine that any liberty conceded to the poor is a threat to their own liberty. ... But the trouble is that intelligent, cultivated people, the very people who might be expected to have liberal opinions, never do mix with the poor.*[8]

Such is the condition of the poor - who are neglected even by the so called intelligent elite, hence the poors have to wallow in the dirt, hunger and poverty. The story of Roucolle the miser is straight Balzac which in itself speaks the essence of the world of poverty and concludes the Paris section of the book.

The tone of the narrator throughout, despite the harrowing nature of his experiences, is one of predominant happiness and an engaging ability to describe people and incidents with the minimum of pretention and a perceptive eye for social nuances. The result is a book of extraordinary richness, a narrative which can be read, re-read and enjoyed in the same way that a novel is enjoyed and which will continue to be studied for its insight into poverty in two capital cities.

So great is Orwell's narrative power, so deceptively simple is his style, that it is all too easy to assume that Down and Out

is merely what it purports to be - that is, a straightforward factual account of occurrences that befell him in Paris and London over a period of four or five months. The book is in fact a literary re-creation, a description of events that occurred in Paris during the last three months of 1929 and in London between the winter of 1928 and the summer of 1931, but rearranged so as to achieve a consistent symmetrical and ordered narrative.

The opening chapters with their vivid description of life in the Rue du Cog d'Or, Paris are written with great intensity. The opening sequences form the backcloth to Orwell's first experiences of poverty. It is a noteworthy fact that at no stage in the book does the narrator explain who or what he is, and how he came to be in Paris in the situation he describes. There is no introduction, nor preliminary statement explaining the background to the book and the circumstances which led to the events described. Perhaps Orwell felt such an introduction would weaken the effectiveness of the narrative. He is simply 'I', the storyteller, an Englishman in Paris who has fallen in hard times because his money has been stolen.

Orwell's ability to write prose of crystal clarity, to produce vivid images in the simplest of English, to write in an apparently 'artless' style which conceals a literary technique of a high order, to make a telling point with a single memorable prose - are abundantly in evidence in these early chapters. The whole of the third chapter,

for example, which describes in detail the narrator's first contact with the world of poverty, and his reflections on having at last reached this state, could be regarded as a close study in the art of writing an essay as Orwell conceived it. The language is clear, direct, the writing so vigorous, that one cannot but admire Orwell for the sheer literary prowess.

The most memorable sequences among the Paris chapters are the descriptions of the life of a plongeur at a large hotel which is named the Hotel X (actually the Lofti). The account of life behind the scenes in the hotel possesses such energy and intrinsic interest that one returns to these chapters again and again for their abundant life and colour. (A) few workers have depicted the reality of scullion's life with such honesty and good humour, or with such an eye for telling detail.

The same can be said of many of the episodes in Down and Out, so intensely drawn that they are etched indelibly on the mind. For example, the scenes in the French pawnshop, the description of life in the cafeteria of the Hotel X, the account of the kitchen at the Auberge de Jehan Coffard, the description of the lodging-house on the Waterloo Road, the tramps guying the religious service are all picturesque in detail. Each is complete in itself, written with total candour and with a fascinating recall of detail.

In order for the narrator to have adventures in both Paris and London, Orwell had to have some device for transporting him

convincingly from France to England. He achieves this by the invention of a friend in London, 'B' who arranges to find a post for the narrator, caring for a congenital imbecile. 'B' pays his passage to England, but his experience of down and out life in London comes when he learns that his employers 'have gone abroad, patient and all', and is thus thrown upon his own resources for several weeks. This invention is perhaps a little contrived but it is skillfully handled (the actual moment of transition from fact to fiction occurs early in Chapter 24) and is embedded so firmly in other experiences that are clearly factual, that the reader passes over the transition unaware that Orwell has for moment departed from the truth.

Once in London the narrator plunges into series of encounters with poverty which are at once fascinating and repugnant. There is a curious difference between the Paris chapters and those set in London. A well-knit spatial structure of both the parts - Paris section and London section - has been built with tact. Parisian episodes are written with such enthusiasm and light-heartedness as to give the impression that Orwell was, on the whole, happy during his stay there. The London chapters, by contrast, are marked by a drabness and tedium which despite the liveliness of the writing, suffuses the final portion of the book with a grey quality. Whatever the reason for this contrast may be - still there is an unmistakable difference in tone between these two sections.

To be without money in England in 1930 was a dispiriting,

distressing situation and Orwell vividly conveys the hopelessness of it. In a series of starkly written chapters, the reader is introduced to the regions of penury - "the nether world": the lodging-house, the casual words, the shelter, the workhouse. Each episode is written with the clarity and animation of an engraving. What makes these chapters so unforgettable is that at each stage of his experience Orwell is not simply describing poverty in the abstract but is relating it to individual case-histories, those of himself and the characters he encounters in his wanderings - Paddy the Irish tramp, Bozo the pavement artist, Bill the moscher and so on. The boredom and monotony of the life of a tramp is conveyed with an intensity which is far more effective than a dry factual report.

The anecdote of the old-age pensioner and the Stevedores quarrel for food is touching one. The friendship with Paddy took the narrator to the stark realities of the casual wards then existing in London and elsewhere. The description of the throng of beggars praying God for a cup of tea and a bun is a scathing attack on the charity institutions. The beggars have no relation with religion and God but their sole concern is ~~the~~ food - ~~the~~ food is their God. The sleeping conditions, the bathing arrangements in the casual wards create nothing but animus against the authorities:

> *It appeared that in the morning only one tub of water was allowed for lot of us, and when I arrived twenty tramps had already washed their faces; I took one glance at the black scum floating on the water, and went unwashed.*[9]

The Salvation Army shelters were a lot comfortable than the casual wards and the common lodging houses.

Bozo, the screever, whom of all the tramps the narrator encountered in England, was admired most by him. He is the sparkling star on the horizons of the world of beggery, retaining his own entity. He was an intelligent tramp who avoided religious charities, spoke French, and had read some Zola's novels, all Shakespeare's plays, Gulliver's Travels, and a number of essays. He was free in his own mind and was a very exceptional man.

The description of the social position of beggars has a psychological insight.

> *They are a race apart - out-casts, like criminals and prostitutes, working men 'work', beggars do not 'work'; they are parasites, worthless in their very nature. ... Yet if one looks closely one sees that there is no essential difference between a beggar's livelihood and that of numberless respectable people. ... A beggar works by standing out of doors in all weathers and getting varicose veins, chronic bronchitis, etc.. It is a trade like any other; quite useless of course - but, then, many reputable trades are quite useless. ... Then the question arises, Why are beggars despised? - For they are despised universally, I believe it is for the simple reason that they fail to earn a decent living. ... Money has become the grand test of virtue. By this test beggars fail and for this they are despised.*[10]

The narrator probes into the social problem of beggary and sides with them. As in Paris Hotels, there was stratification among the workers, so one can also find the same stratification among the beggars - the most prosperous beggars are the street acrobats and street photographers, organ-grinders, screevers, people singing hymns or selling matches or envelopes - all are frankly beggars. The description of beggars is vivid and at the same time a moving one. They had to move from one casual ward to another by walking several miles; as if they were moving race apart from the existing one.

The portrayal of the characters such as Paddy, William and Fred who sang the touching song of 'Unhappy Bella' and such like is vivid. The existence of tramps as the narrator puts it, is the result and not the cause of their way of life. The three evils of tramps have been stated:

> *The first is the hunger which is the almost general fate of tramps. ... The second great evil of tramp's life is that he is entirely cut off from contact with women. ... The other great evil of a tramp's life is enforced idleness. ... Cut off from the whole race of women, a tramp feels himself degraded to the rank of a cripple or a lunatic. No humiliation could do more damage to a man's self-respect.*[11]

Such is the moving account and psychological analysis of the problem of beggary and of the tramps. The narrator also illustrates the

ways to change their filthy condition of life. He suggests the ways to improve the lodging conditions then prevailing in London. And then the narrator ends his account of the world of Down and Out by a clear understanding:

> *I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny ... nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant. This is a beginning.*[12]

One of Orwell's characteristics seems to be his tendency to make sweeping generalizations as if they were statements of fact: a tendency which is evident throughout his career. We learn, for example, that - "It is fear of a supposedly dangerous mob that makes nearly all intelligent people conservative in their opinions".[13]

This tendency to generalize seems to be inherent in his make-up and it is one of the qualities which gives to his writings such unusual directness and power. With his generalizations, he seems to possess the extraordinary ability to convey vivid word-pictures which remain long in the memory. The description of the way the hotel employee handles the food is amusing and at the same time picturesque:

> *Some large drops of sweat fall from his forehead on the toast. Why should he worry? Presently the toast falls among the filthy sawdust on the floor. Why trouble to make a new piece?*[14]

It is this quality of Down and Out, this rare combination of vivid writing and freshness of approach, which helps to ensure a readership for it even today, fifty-seven years after it was written. Above all, what is so impressive about the book is its extraordinary honesty. Orwell's gift of writing about aspects of life with a simplicity and directness compels attention. There is no attempt to gloss over unsavoury details or to conceal from the reader the bitter reality of poverty.

As to the form of the book (though it was not designed to be a novel), it closely resembles Dickens's 'Pickwick Papers'. Both have followed the 'picaresque' form. Here in Down and Out, there is an attempt on the part of the novelist to base the story on a search for certain values of life, which the narrator - the protagonist tries to achieve.

Throughout the work we can see the pieces from which the writer is building up the whole because each piece is highly polished and perfect little thing in itself. Anyone can see that Orwell has presented in this book 'endless picaresque stories'.

The tone is set at the very beginning of the book, with the description of life in Rue Du Cog D'Or quarter. It is exceptionally brisk for the opening of the book. The character who rules in this scene is Charlie. Then we pass on to another character Boris, and the scene changes. Boris and the narrator hand about the streets

daily for three consecutive weeks. Suddenly, the scene changes again when Boris gets the job in Hotel X, a very big Parisian hotel. After sometime he employs the narrator as the plongeur in the same hotel. This brings the first part - the Paris part - to its end. Now, the narrator is back in London. As his employers are going abroad, once again he becomes Down and Out and takes to slumming. Having practically no money with him, he exchanges his best clothes for rags and takes to the road again. The description he gives of this next step is like the beginning of another praresque story. At the end, he describes his visits to the dosshouse and the casual ward.

As we analyse the literary arrangement of the diverse scenes, we find a spatial pattern in the book, the narrator moving from one anecdote to another, from one character to another. At the sametime, as we analyse the literary arrangement of the different adventures, coming on the top of one another, we see Orwell's use of praresque method. Each adventure has been described with a flourish.

Within its own limits it remains a piece of finished writing, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Then the end leads to the beginning of a new adventure, and thus a link is established.

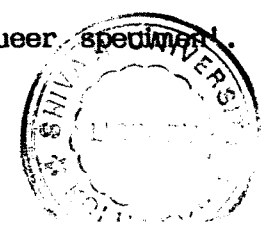
One can well have here a sense of a rhythmic continuity that flows smoothly. The writer very skillfully manipulates a series of stories within the main story which is the story of the down-

and-out narrator. The short stories told by Charlie are cases in point. They have been fitted into the narrative with such skill that they do not make space or pause in the narrative but quicken the narrative. One can easily perceive some unbroken thread which holds these stories/pieces of description together.

The second part of the book is inferior to the first part from the point of view of structure. In the former, the narrative could afford to recount the incidents with definite detachment. But this is no longer possible when he is faced with the scenes of misery in his own land. There he seems to be an aloof spectator, but in the first he becomes emotionally involved.

When we turn to the question of organization, we can easily notice that the apparently disjointed adventures get unified mainly because they happen to one and the same person. It is possible to get at a tangible basic theme, which is poverty. Orwell himself writes in plain words: "Poverty is what I am writing about". Naturally, as the slumming continues, he picks up many more contacts with poverty. Yet, at the centre of all these diverse experiences, we see the figure of down and out.

In this book Orwell has provided us with an admirable gallexy of portraits. The first character to be considered is the narrator himself. He is the central character of the story and is seen in almost every scene. He is by no means an uninvolved spectator - an omniscent narrator. The character of Boris is a 'queer specimen'.



Charlie, Paddy, Bazo and such like are delightful sketches. They are drawn from their originals in life. They had made an everlasting impression on Orwell to the extent that he wanted to know more and more of them.

Sant Singh Bal feels the description of poverty in Paris and London 'represents the poverty-stricken areas of human community in the whole world.'[15] Cecil Day Lewis also feels that: 'Orwell's book is a tour of the underworld, conducted without hysteria or prejudice'.[16] Obviously enough any one can agree with the opinions of Sant Singh Bal and Cecil Day Lewis that Down and Out portrays the poverty not only of Paris and London but of the whole world. It is a de-tour of the world of poverty and hunger.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. George Orwell: The Road to Wigan Pier pp. 129, 130, 131.
2. George Orwell: Down and Out in Paris and London, p. 189.
3. Ibid., pp. 13,14.
4. Ibid., p. 34.
5. Ibid., p. 71.
6. Ibid., p. 77.
7. Ibid., pp. 103, 104.
8. Ibid., p. 107.
9. Ibid., p. 131.

10 Ibid., 154, 155.

11 Ibid., pp. 180, 181.

12 Ibid., p. 189.

13 Ibid., p. 107.

14 Ibid., p. 72.

15 Sant Singh Bal: George Orwell: The Ethical Imagination, p. 85.

16 Cecil Day Lewis: Adelphi, February 1933, p. 382, edited in 'George Orwell: The Critical Heritage' by Jeffery Meyers, p. 42.