

LES MISERABLES VICTOR HUGO



THE GREAT FRENCH NOVEL
THAT OPENED NEW HORIZONS
OF LITERATURE IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

ABRIDGED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JAMES K. ROBINSON
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Les Misérables

by Victor Hugo

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
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ABRIDGED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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Les Misérables

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Introduction

THE AUTHOR of *Les Misérables*, Victor-Marie Hugo, born in 1802, was at the age of thirty already a recognized master of the arts of poetry, drama and fiction. A political figure as well, he was banished to the Channel Island of Guernsey for opposing Louis Napoleon's coup of 1851. During his twenty-year exile he wrote a number of novels, the most notable being *Les Misérables*, published in 1862. After his death in Paris in 1885 he lay in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe and was buried in the Pantheon among France's greatest men.

Les Misérables, Hugo's best and most famous novel, is essentially the story of Jean Valjean and those who profoundly influenced him. The novel opens on Jean just after he has been released from the galleys, to which he had been sent nineteen years before for trying to steal a loaf of bread to feed his sister and her starving children. His yellow passport, signifying him as an ex-convict, closes all doors to him except that of the Bishop of D—— who, by his Christian charity and faith in Jean's best nature, starts him on a new career as a good man. As M. Madeleine, Jean becomes a thriving manufacturer and mayor of M—— sur M——, though he is under the suspicion of a tenacious police inspector, Javert. Jean's public career ends suddenly when he is forced by conscience to expose himself to prevent the conviction of an innocent man for a crime which Jean had committed.

The remaining four parts of the novel show us Jean Valjean in Paris, whither he fled after escaping from the galleys. In a succession of houses and under a number of assumed names, Jean brings up a little girl, Cosette, in fulfilment of his promise to her dying mother, Fantine. In Paris Jean is again hounded by Javert, whom he once eludes after a thrilling manhunt, another time after an ambush. Meanwhile, Cosette becomes a beautiful young lady wooed secretly by the youthful idealist, Marius. Faced with the loss of the one person he loves, Jean nevertheless rescues the gravely-wounded Marius from a revolutionary barricade, carries him to safety through the terrifying sewers of Paris, and insures his marriage to Cosette. Not until he is on his deathbed does Jean Valjean feel the unrestrained love of Cosette and Marius and release from his painful past.

This summary may suggest that the novel is sheer melodrama, a sensational adventure story about a man who triumphs over the evil in himself and in others. It is much more than that. It is a great humanitarian novel which shows how a man can be redeemed by accepting suffering, by doing the duty his conscience directs him to, by sacrificing himself lovingly.

It is a novel about a real, recognizable world, the France of the post-Napoleonic age. It accurately reflects the inhumane treatment of convicts and ex-convicts, the violent political upheavals of the times, the character of Paris. The chief characters had actual models. The bishop of D—— was patterned on Monsignore Miolles of Digne, who helped a real criminal as Jean Valjean was helped. The Baron Pontmercy resembled General Hugo, the author's father. Young Marius Pontmercy, the political idealist, recalled young Victor Hugo, and his courtship of Cosette was like Hugo's of Adèle Foucher, who became Madame Hugo.

From the moment of its publication *Les Misérables*

created a great stir. Among French readers its sales were so great that Hugo was guaranteed a good income for life. In America it was a favorite of Civil War soldiers. Though some critics, especially English critics, attacked the book for its sensationalism, indecency and hollowness, others defended it memorably. The Frenchman, Gautier, impressed with the novel's vigor, said it was "no handiwork of man but a phenomenon of natural forces." Among English admirers, Tennyson, recalling the account of Jean's death, called Hugo "lord of human tears." George Meredith considered *Les Misérables* the "masterwork of fiction of this century," and Walter Pater classed it with such other great works of art as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Holy Bible.

A century after its triumphant publication *Les Misérables* may not take us by storm, but it can hardly fail to move us with its convincing characterizations, its vivid presentation of nineteenth-century problems, beliefs and events, its animating human sympathy, its moving treatment of the struggle for existence and the supernatural power of love. It is hard to think of a novel which has more memorable characters: the Bishop, Jean Valjean, Javert, Cosette, Marius. Jean Valjean, at least, belongs in that gallery of unforgettable fictional characters beside Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Melville's *Captain Ahab*, Dickens' *Abel Magwitch*. Hugo's characters reveal themselves in adventures which, if hair-raising, are nevertheless appropriate. *Les Misérables* successfully conveys important moral ideas through an exciting story.

The abridgement of *Les Misérables* which follows is inevitably different from the complete novel. What is chiefly lost is the novel of ideas, the novel which treats a number of the central problems and interests of nineteenth-century France. What remains is a novel of character and action seen in much clearer outline. Even when the novel

was first published discerning critics noted that for all the novel's power it was diffuse and wordy. They saw that too much philosophizing slowed down the movement of the narrative and that digressions of various sorts were often so lengthy that the narrative thread was sometimes lost. Digressions on the glass industry, on the Picpus Convent, on money, on Paris slang, on revolutionary thought, on the use of sewage as fertilizer have little to do with the central action. Accounts of the Battle of Waterloo and the Insurrection of 1832 are interesting, even brilliant, but they are only remotely relevant.

It has therefore been desirable and possible to abridge the novel, to dispense with numerous lengthy digressions and to eliminate many a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph. By means of such cutting there emerges more clearly the moving, heroic life of a simple and good man.

JAMES K. ROBINSON

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Author's Preface

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine, with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.

Hauteville House, 1862.

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Paul Baumer enlisted with his classmates in the German army of World War I. Youthful, enthusiastic, they become soldiers. Despite what they have learned, they collapse under the first of many bombardments in the trenches. And as the horrible war plods on year after year, Paul vows to fight against the principles of hate that pit young men of the same generation but different uniforms against each other—if only he can come out of the war alive.

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