



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

VICTOR HUGO

*Les Misérables*

Volume One

# LES MISÉRABLES

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VOLUME I

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Victor Hugo

*The first part of a novel  
bound in two volumes*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Les Misérables* was published simultaneously in ten languages in 1862, having had a lengthy gestation, for it began as a novel entitled *Misères* which Hugo wrote between 1845 and 1848. He then set it aside, only finishing it between 1860 and 1862 as *Les Misérables*. The reason for the novel retaining its French title in English translation is that it is not directly translatable. It means not only the poor and wretched in Victor Hugo's context, but also those excluded from society, the under-class, and those in rebellion against it. For this reason, *Les Misérables* strikes a particular chord in our own age. It is a magisterial work played out on a vast canvas with many flagrant digressions from the central plot, the most famous being the lengthy description of the Battle of Waterloo. As with so much else in Hugo's work, this is almost certainly a result of his sojourn in Brussels in 1853 and his fascination with detail, topography and cartography. Other famous descriptions in the book include the flight of the central character, Valjean, through the Paris sewers, and the fighting at the barricades during the July Revolution. However, it is perhaps for the author's character portrayal THAT the book is best known: the absurdly criminalised victim Valjean, the unforgettable street urchin Gavroche, the almost Dickensian character of the rascal Thénardier, the implacable and ever-searching *agent de police* Javert, and the sad figure of the prostitute Fantine and her daughter Cosette. For all these reasons *Les Misérables* takes its place as a classic work of Western literature, but for those wishing to know what this massive book is about before commencing to read it, the best clue is found in the author's own brief preface, written at Hauteville House, Guernsey, on 1 January 1862. It is reproduced in this edition, and bears eloquent witness to the mind and beliefs of Victor Hugo.

*Victor-Marie Hugo (1802-85) is one of the greatest writers in the illustrious pantheon of French poets, playwrights and novelists. He was born at Besançon in eastern France, the third son of a major in Napoleon's army. Hugo père went on to become a general and was created a count. Despite the peripatetic nature*

of life in army families the young Victor-Marie received a good education in Italy, Spain, and Paris. His literary talent showed itself early on and he won a prize for a poem at school. In 1819 he co-founded the review – *Conservateur Littéraire* – which established him as a leading figure in the Romantic Movement in France.

Victor Hugo's output was prodigious, ranging from twenty volumes of poetry, ten plays and nine novels to a huge corpus of general writing on a wide variety of issues. His political creed was liberal and he was a firm believer in republicanism, universal suffrage and free education for all. Despite his republicanism, Hugo retained a personal friendship with Louis-Philippe, and honours were heaped upon him – Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur (1837), election to the Académie française (1841), and creation as a pair de France, equivalent to being made a member of the House of Lords in Britain (1845). Following the revolutions which shook France and much of continental Europe in 1848, Hugo became a member of the Constituent Assembly. However, he was a noted critic of the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon and he was forced into exile in Brussels, Jersey and, latterly, at Hauteville House in Guernsey where he remained with his wife (Adèle) and family, with his mistress (Juliette Drouet) nearby, for fourteen years. It was in Guernsey that he finished *Les Misérables* in 1862. Swinburne described Victor Hugo as 'the greatest writer born in the nineteenth century', while the frequently unsympathetic critic W. E. Henley opined that he was 'far and away the greatest artist in words that modern France has seen'.

Hugo returned to Paris from exile in Guernsey in 1870, again serving as a deputy, and later becoming a senator in the Third Republic. His funeral was an occasion of great pomp and ceremony, his body lying in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe prior to burial in the Panthéon.

## FURTHER READING

A. Maurois: *Biography of Victor Hugo* 1956

Also studies by E. M. Grant (1945), R. B. Grant (1968) and J. P. Houston (1974)

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilisation, 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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