

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Victor Hugo
Les Misérables

Read by **Bill Homewood**

CLASSIC
FICTION



NA410512D

1	Prologue	1:11
2	Monseigneur Bienvenu	3:46
3	Jean Valjean	12:38
4	Temptation and transformation	8:12
5	Four young Parisians arrange a 'farce'	10:12
6	The Sergeant of Waterloo – the Thénardier hostelry	7:07
7	Père Madeleine becomes Monsieur le Maire	6:23
8	Inspector Javert	26:23
9	On the field of the Battle of Waterloo	8:56
10	Back in the galleys	5:21
11	Cosette in rags	13:51
12	On the run	10:55
13	The Convent of Le Petit-Picpus	3:38
14	M. Marius	9:37
15	The Abaissé	7:41
16	First love	10:31
17	Éponine, his neighbour's daughter	6:40
18	Éponine, his neighbour's daughter (cont.)	17:50
19	The house in the Rue Plumet	3:56
20	A declaration	5:42

21	Little Gavroche	9:17
22	Éponine, the go-between and protector	8:47
23	The barricade at the Passage du Saumon	7:18
24	Javert again	6:45
25	The heroism of Père Mabeuf	8:17
26	Letters	6:49
27	The cannon makes its appearance	4:50
28	The cannon makes its appearance (cont.)	4:26
29	The climax at the barricade	5:13
30	A great city is the most mighty of dung-makers	12:08
31	Javert makes a decision	5:54
32	Marius receives permission	4:28
33	The wedding	8:40
34	Jean Valjean arrives for a visit	3:16
35	A bitter tear	5:49
36	Nothing evokes a memory like an odour	11:52
37	A night behind which is day	9:29
38	The grass covers and the rain effaces	2:16

Total time: 5:05:25

Victor Hugo

Les Misérables

The recent film and stage dramatisations of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables* have made these Victor Hugo's best-known works. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Hugo is at pains to develop his story within a historical context, but the story is more important than the history. In *Les Misérables*, however, Hugo uses the device of fiction to explore the turmoil which followed the French Revolution (1789-1799).

This was a bloody time in France; the King and Queen (Marie Antoinette) were executed, the revolutionary leader Robespierre became a dictator, purging his rivals in 'The Reign of Terror' before going to the guillotine himself in 1794. Soon after, Napoléon Bonaparte's *coup d'état* polarised French politics, and, from the dawn of the nineteenth century, French society was split between Royalists and Bonapartists. *Les Misérables* is set in this period.

In the central character of Jean Valjean, Hugo has written a hero for all time – a man who, redeeming himself for a petty crime of theft, rises to almost superhuman

heights of courage, patience and endurance, and exemplary displays of compassion and forgiveness. The magnificence of Jean Valjean shames those around him, but his personal agonies and doubts bring to mind the struggles of many biblical heroes and prophets, from Job to Jesus Christ. Hugo reminds us of the messianic qualities of Jean Valjean many times in the book 'Cosette walked along gravely, with her large eyes wide open... From time to time, she looked up at the good man. She felt as though she were walking beside God.'

Jean Valjean's goodness throws into obvious contrast the brutal evil of the Thénardiens, who are almost comical in their grasping dishonesty 'The duty of the innkeeper,' expounds Thénardier at one point, 'is to make the traveller pay for everything – even for the fleas which his dog eats!'

More subtle is the portrayal of Javert, the implacable, duty-bound Police Inspector, whose sworn mission is to expose Jean Valjean, who has become a pillar of society, as an ex-convict. Javert is frightening.

A puritanical thinker, with the clinical morality and narrow-mindedness of all fundamentalists, he represents the law at its least flexible. Even his looks are diabolical '...his laugh was rare and terrible – his thin lips parted and revealed not only his teeth, but his gums; and around his nose there formed a flattened and savage fold, as on the muzzle of a wild beast.'; but interestingly Hugo is at pains that we should understand Javert. We learn that Javert's father was a galley-slave like Jean Valjean, that Javert is self-made and has risen from poverty to a position of respect through dedication and hard work, and in the end we are surprised at the honour of his actions. *Les Misérables* would be much less of a book were Javert not so richly and even sympathetically drawn.

In the character and story of young Marius, the Royalist law student turned Revolutionary, Hugo drew on his own experiences as a young man in Paris, when at one time he survived a whole year on only 700 francs, living in a tiny attic in the rue du Dragon. He must have known dandies such as the urbane Tholomyès 'Tholomyès was an old-style mature student – he was rich; he had an income of four thousand francs!', and while Hugo may

never have begged for bread like the wretched *gamins* in the book, he may well have watched with envy more prosperous students who 'gambled for macaroons at the roulette establishment of the Pont de Sèvres, picked bouquets at Pateaux, bought reed-pipes at Neuilly, ate apple tarts everywhere, and were perfectly happy'. Tholomyès, having sowed his wild oats, leaves Paris in pursuit of a comfortable provincial life, leaving behind a broken-hearted lover (Fantine) and a child. This one act of selfishness leads to a steady flow, and ultimately a cascade, of tragic events.

In the stories of the unlucky Fantine, her daughter Cosette and the brave young Éponine Thénardier, we encounter some of the most heart-rending scenes in the book, and even Jean Valjean's compassion barely makes up for the miseries they endure; though, Hugo reminds us several times, 'God knows where the soul lies'.

Many authors have written stories of tragic mishap and coincidence, but often these tell us no more than that life can be very cruel. In this great novel, blending his exceptional qualities as a storyteller – the historical research of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, the remorselessness of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and the

allegorical style of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* – Victor Hugo goes much further: he reminds us not only how bad and unjust life can be to people, but also how good and just people can be to each other.

Victor Hugo was born in 1802, straight into controversy. His father was a soldier, but was suspected by Napoléon Bonaparte of disloyalty, and demoted. As a small child, Victor travelled with his father's troop to Italy and Spain, where his father, his career rescued to a degree, became Governor of Madrid. When the situation in Spain became unstable, Victor was sent back to Paris, where he was raised by his imperious mother, a fervent Royalist who hated her husband. Absorbing his mother's attitudes, Victor became a complicated young man. His genius for poetry attracted attention, but when his mother died in 1821, he refused to accept money from his father and lived in poverty in Paris. Memories of this period certainly provided a backdrop to *Les Misérables*. On his marriage to Adèle Foucher in 1822, he was reconciled with his father, though his brother Eugène, who was also in love with Adèle, went mad during the ceremony and was committed to an asylum.

At first Hugo was an unquestioning Royalist, but as time went by he developed a sympathy for the artistic revolutionaries – the 'Romantic Movement'. In *Les Misérables* the characters of Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Prouvaire and the others at the barricade are drawn with admiration. Hugo saw his own work as revolutionary, and his passionate plays, poetry and novels show his vision for the future of France.

In 1843 his beloved daughter Léopoldine was drowned in the Seine – a tragedy which affected him profoundly, and perhaps has resonances in the fate of Javert. His marriage was unhappy, and after the revolution of 1848 he became disenchanted with his country. An unsuccessful foray into politics led to his exile in the Channel Islands in 1851, where he lived with his mistress, the former courtesan Juliette Drouet. On the establishment of the Republic, he returned to Paris in 1870.

His sense of his own importance to posterity has been criticised as a conceit, but there is no denying his significance as a literary and political figure of his time – or his popularity. On his eightieth birthday, six hundred thousand Parisians saluted him. His play *Hernani* was one of the great successes of the century – the central role played most

famously by Sarah Bernhardt, to whom Hugo, moved to tears by her performance, sent a silver teardrop which she wore round her neck to her death.

Madame Drouet stayed with him until her death in 1883; she had been his lover for more than fifty years. Victor Hugo died

in 1885. At his own request he was placed in a pauper's coffin, though his body lay in state under the Arc de Triomphe for one night before being buried magnificently at the Panthéon.

Notes by Bill Homewood

Cover picture: Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward (detail),
by Sir Luke Fildes (1844-1927). Royal Holloway & Bedford New College, Surrey/
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Music programming by Nicolas Soames

Victor Hugo Les Misérables

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Les Misérables is set in Paris after the French Revolution. In the sewers and backstreets we encounter 'the wolf-like tread of crime', and an assassination for a few sous is all in a day's work. We weep with the unlucky and heartbroken Fantine, and we exult with the heroic revolutionaries of the barricades; but above all we thrill to the steadfast courage and nobility of soul of ex-convict Jean Valjean, always in danger from the relentless pursuit of the diabolical Inspector Javert.



Bill Homewood has worked extensively for television and on stage in the West End, major theatres and the RSC. He has also directed theatre on both sides of the Atlantic, and his various writing credits include *Theatrical Letters*, published by Marginalia. His other recordings for Naxos AudioBooks include *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers* and *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

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