



Les Misérables

An Overview

A HomeschoolRadioShows Listening Guide
by Cindy Horton

Introduction

This set of listening guides is meant to be used in conjunction with the seven part radio dramatization of *Les Misérables*, written and directed by Orson Welles for the Mutual Network in 1937. Welles' production of *Les Misérables* aired on seven Friday evenings beginning July 23, 1937, and continuing to the first week of September. Orson Welles played the role of Jean Valjean and also read the narrative sections of the program. The narration was drawn directly from the text of Victor Hugo's novel.

The radio version is condensed to contain the most significant elements of the novel's plot. Many minor characters are not mentioned, and some details are changed slightly to better fit this abridged version.

An Overview of *Les Misérables*

Les Misérables, written by Victor Hugo and published in 1862, is a literary classic that has been read and enjoyed by countless people all over the world since its publication. Originally written in French, it has been translated into numerous languages. Hugo himself once said that "it is meant for everyone. It addresses England as well as Spain,

Italy as well as France, Germany as well as Ireland, the republics that harbour slaves as well as empires that have serfs.”

The title, *Les Misérables*, has been translated at different times as *The Wretched*, *The Poor Ones*, *The Wretched Poor*, *The Miserable Ones*, and *The Victims*. The central theme revolves around the dividing lines between social classes of the time and the suffering endured by the poor. Hunger, homelessness, pain, and fear seem commonplace among these lower classes.

Spanning 20 years, the stories of Jean Valjean, Inspector Javert, Fantine, and Cosette are told in an epic style. The novel, unabridged editions of which contain more than 1,200 pages, is divided into five volumes titled *Fantine*, *Cosette*, *Marius*, *St. Denis*, and *Jean Valjean*. Each volume is then divided into books and chapters, some of which are only a page long.

About the Author: Victor Hugo

Author Victor Marie Hugo was born February 26, 1802, in Besançon, France, to General Joseph Leopold Hugo and Sophie Trébuchet. Because of his father's position in the French army, the Hugo family traveled around France and to Italy and Spain. After each distant assignment was complete, they invariably returned to Paris where Victor's mother oversaw her sons' education.

At age 17, Hugo won a national poetry contest and began studying at the Pension Cordier and the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Through he graduated from a Parisian law school, Hugo's interests focused more on writing poetry and plays. He also translated works by the Roman poet Virgil from Latin into French.

A year after his mother died in 1821, Hugo married Adèle Foucher and the two went on to have five children, three boys and two girls. The oldest boy died as an infant in 1823.

In France, Hugo is best known for his poetic verses and plays, but in other parts of the world, he is famous for his novels. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, known in French as *Notre-Dame de Paris*, was published 31 years before *Les Misérables*. Both have become literary classics and remain as popular and beloved today as they were during Hugo's lifetime.

Religiously, Hugo was influenced in his youth by his mother's dedicated Catholic beliefs, but as he grew older he became a “non-practicing” Catholic. Later, his feelings turned against the clergy, the Pope, and the authority of the Church in general. His feelings only deepened when the Pope placed *Les Misérables* on a list of banned books.

In 1872, a census taker asked Hugo if he was Catholic, and Hugo responded, “No. A freethinker.” Though he had become disenchanted with the Catholic Church and its teachings, Hugo continued to believe in God and is quoted as saying, “Religions pass away, but God remains.”

Hugo's role in politics centered on his support of a Republican form of government. He received a position as *pair de France* in the Higher Chamber and, after the Second Republic was formed following the 1848 Revolution, Hugo was elected to the Legislative Assembly and the Constitutional Assembly.

In 1851, Napoleon III established an anti-parliamentary constitution which led Hugo to publicly declare him a traitor to France. Hugo and his family left France at this time and settled on the island of Guernsey where they lived in exile for 19 years. Here, Hugo wrote and published political pamphlets criticizing Napoleon III. He also wrote *Les Misérables* and three collections of poetry while on Guernsey.

After Napoleon's fall from power, Hugo returned to France in 1870. He received almost hero status from the French people and was soon elected to the National Assembly and later to the Senate. In honor of Hugo's 79th birthday in 1881, the city of Paris held a celebration that spanned several days. One of the largest parades ever held in France passed by Hugo's home, taking six hours for all of the parade's marchers to complete the route.

On May 22, 1885, Victor Hugo died at age 83. Between two and three million people walked in his funeral procession from Paris to the Arc de Triomphe to his place of burial at the Panthéon.

For more information about Victor Hugo, see these websites:

<http://www.bookrags.com/eb/hugo-victor-eb/>

http://www.hugo-online.org/victor_hugo_biography.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Hugo

Quotes from Victor Hugo

- What a grand thing, to be loved! What a grander thing still, to love!
- People do not lack strength; they lack will.
- A man is not idle because he is absorbed in thought. There is a visible labor, and there is an invisible labor.
- An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.
- Emergencies have always been necessary to progress. It was darkness which produced the lamp. It was fog that produced the compass. It was hunger that drove us to exploration. And it took a depression to teach us the real value of a job.
- The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved -- loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.
- He who every morning plans the transaction of the day and follows out that plan, carries a thread that will guide him through the maze of the most busy life. But where no plan is laid, where the disposal of time is surrendered merely to the chance of incidence, chaos will soon reign.
- Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.
- To reform a man, you must begin with his grandmother.
- Short as life is, we make it still shorter by the careless waste of time.

The History Behind the Story

Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* spans a 20 year period and includes elements from numerous events that occurred in France during the years 1815 to 1835. Jean Valjean's first trial and imprisonment in the galleys took place in 1796, 19 years before the beginning of the novel. His term of imprisonment coincides almost exactly with the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Napoleon's Rise and Fall

After the French Revolution, France endured a time called the Reign of Terror, led by a man named Maximilien Robespierre. In 1796, Napoleon engaged in a series of battles and was hailed as a hero in Paris by the end of 1797. After he successfully conquered both Alexandria and Cairo in Egypt, Napoleon was crowned First Consul of the post-Revolution government in France. He crowned himself Emperor in 1804 and undertook a number of military campaigns to expand the French empire.

On June 18, 1815, just four months before Jean Valjean's release from the galley, Napoleon's forces lost the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium. This brought Napoleon's empire to an end and the restoration of Louis XVIII as King of France. Napoleon was exiled to the island of Saint Helena on October 16, 1815.

Society in France

France at the time of *Les Misérables* was still largely made up of peasants. Seventy-five percent of all Frenchmen made their living by farming during the first decades of the nineteenth century. French society was divided into distinct social classes—the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the working poor.

Victor Hugo encountered an amazing example of the hard line between these classes in 1829 when he witnessed a poor man being arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. As the man waited on the street, a beautiful carriage parked in front of him. Inside, a wealthy woman dressed in velvet played with a child who was wearing expensive furs and embroidered clothing. Though the accused criminal stared at the woman, she never noticed him at all. Hugo wrote of this event, “The moment he became aware of her existence, while she remained unaware of his, a catastrophe was inevitable.”

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Paris was famous for its *salons*, places where either the aristocracy or bourgeoisie met to discuss political and social issues of the day. Often run by women, these *salons* provided intellectual stimulation that the lower classes never experienced.

The bourgeoisie were upper middle class people who used their wealth to help them attain the privileges of the aristocracy. Often idle with no profession, these people spent their days strolling in gardens and visiting restaurants, theaters, and the opera.

For the most part, the bourgeoisie believed that all members of the poor working class were lazy and immoral. These poor commonly became beggars and criminals because of their desperate situations of hunger, homelessness, and hopelessness.

The Industrial Revolution enabled many working poor to obtain jobs in factories like the jet factory that Monsieur Madeleine owned in Montrouil-sur-Mer. To some extent, this improved the financial situation of many individuals, yet high costs of things like lamp oil prevented most working poor from rising far above their former circumstances.

The necessity of working made it difficult for mothers to properly care for their children. In some cases, as in Fantine's situation, this led a mother to abandon her child. In Paris, up to 50 percent of babies born to unwed mothers were abandoned at hospices. Infants were placed with wet nurses paid by the government, while older abandoned children went to live with foster families.

France's Revolution of 1830

In 1830, the July Revolution took place in France. King Charles X, who had become king in 1824 upon Louis XVIII's death, was overthrown and his cousin Louis-Philippe crowned in his place. The new reign was characterized as a liberal constitutional monarchy, the goal of which was stated by Louis-Philippe I in 1831: "We will attempt to remain in the just middle, in an equal distance from the excesses of popular power and the abuses of royal power."

The June rebellion, in which both Marius Pontmercy and Jean Valjean of *Les Misérables* took part, occurred in the year 1832. In the months and years prior, crop failures led to food shortages and increased costs. These economic and physical hardships led many working class people to feel discontent with the current political leaders in France.

In the spring of 1832, cholera spread across Europe and killed large numbers of people. Over 18,000 people died in Paris with the poorest neighborhoods being hit the hardest. Popular General Lamarque died of cholera on June 2, and Republican supporters decided to use his state funeral as an opportunity for insurrection.

A group called The Rights of Man Society organized and directed the rebellion. Aided by German, Italian, and Polish refugees, the Republicans surrounded General Lamarque's funeral platform and declared a new republic. They built barricades in the streets of eastern Paris with the help of working class men and young boys and managed

to hold control of this area for a single night.

The French National Guard surrounded the Republicans and brought an end to the insurrection at the Battle of Saint-Merry Cloister. Louis-Philippe I remained King of France until his abdication during the Revolution of 1848.

19th Century France – A Visual Resource

<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/wettlaufer/index.html>

Napoleonic Guide <http://www.napoleonguide.com/>

Charles X of France <http://www.nndb.com/people/833/000093554/>

Louis-Philippe I of France <http://www.nndb.com/people/928/000092652/>

Story Summary

The epic tale of *Les Misérables* introduces a large number of characters and follows their lives through 20 years of hardship and happiness. The main protagonist, Jean Valjean, takes on four different false names in a lifelong struggle to avoid capture by the police. His status as a criminal began in 1796 when he stole a single loaf of bread to feed his starving sister and her seven children.

Sentenced to five years in the galley for burglary, Jean Valjean tries to escape four separate times but manages only to add an additional 14 years to his sentence. Upon his release in 1815, Valjean has changed from a simple-minded pruner into a hardened and angry ex-convict.

In the town of Digne, Valjean meets the bishop, M. Myriel who has dedicated his life to helping and encouraging the poor and destitute. He offers Valjean kindness, a meal, and a real bed. Though he is overwhelmed by M. Myriel's compassion, his criminal tendencies win out and he steals the bishop's six silver plates.

The bishop 'redeems' Valjean from the police by telling them that he *gave* the plates to Valjean and meant to give him six silver candlesticks as well. In the countryside outside Digne, Valjean takes a coin from a small boy, again the result of evil habits he learned in the galley. Because of this second offense of “highway robbery,” Valjean has become a wanted man. If sentenced again, he will spend the rest of his life in the galley.

Valjean then experiences true remorse and an inner transformation. He is now determined to live a benevolent and honest life. He sells the silver plates and travels to the town of Montreuil-sur-Mer where he uses the money to purchase a factory. Here, he calls himself M. Madeleine and no one ever questions his past.

A local police inspector named Javert, who spent time as a guard on the prison ship Toulon, becomes suspicious of M. Madeleine. Though he is certain he's seen the face of Madeleine before, he cannot remember where.

Back in Paris, a young woman named Fantine finds herself abandoned by the father of her young daughter. She leaves Paris to avoid disgrace and leaves her daughter, Cosette, with innkeepers known as the Thénardiens in the town of Montfermeil. She goes on to live in Montreuil-sur-Mer where she works at Madeleine's factory, though she does not meet M. Madeleine at this time.

Unbeknownst to Fantine, the Thénardiens physically abuse and neglect little Cosette, and the increasing amounts of money they demand from Fantine are never used for Cosette's benefit. After losing her job at the factory, Fantine resorts to ever more desperate means of earning the money the Thénardiens require from her.

One winter night, a man speaks cruelly to Fantine and puts snow down the back of her dress. She attacks him and is arrested by Javert who says she must spend six months in prison. M. Madeleine, who is now the town's mayor, intervenes and forces Javert to let Fantine go free. He befriends her, helps pay her debts, and promises to help her get Cosette back. Because she is sick with a disease, he takes her to a hospital where nuns care for her.

This incident with Fantine, along with other events, have confirmed Javert's suspicion that Mayor Madeleine is actually Jean Valjean, the fugitive convict. When he informs the police in Paris of this fact, however, they respond that he must be mistaken because they have Jean Valjean in custody.

Another poor pruner has been caught stealing and, because he shares Valjean's age and height, the police are convinced this man is Jean Valjean. Javert goes to Mayor Madeleine and tells him the story while requesting dismissal for his grave mistake about Madeleine's identity.

Madeleine, with much inner turmoil, goes to the pruner's trial and confesses himself as the real Jean Valjean. The magistrates do not arrest him immediately, and he travels back to Montreuil-sur-Mer to see Fantine. While he visits her, Javert arrives to arrest him, and, overcome by the unfolding events, Fantine dies.

Sentenced to life in the galley, Valjean is taken back to Toulon. On the ship, a sailor nearly falls from the rigging but Valjean saves his life. A crowd at the harbor demand the hero's release, but Valjean takes this opportunity to fall overboard and, thus, fake his own death.

Valjean travels to Montfermeil where he buries the 500,000 francs that he withdrew from the bank before Javert arrested him. He finds Fantine's daughter Cosette in the dark woods at night drawing water from a spring. He goes with her back to the inn where all is lively with Christmas Eve festivities. Here, Valjean observes the Thénardiens' abuse of Cosette as well as the lavish treatment they bestow upon their own daughters, Éponine and Azelma.

On Christmas Day, Valjean pays the Thénardiens to allow him to take Cosette. The two go to Paris where they are discovered by Javert a short time later. They escape once again and settle into a happy life at the Petit-Picpus Convent. Valjean works as a gardener alongside Fauchelevent, a man from Montreuil-sur-Mer who knew Mayor Madeleine, and Cosette attends the convent school.

In Volume III, a young student named Marius Pontmercy becomes involved in the revolutionary group known as Friends of the ABC. Another ABC member is a poor youth called Gavroche, the oldest son of M. and Mme Thénardier. Years before, at the Battle of Waterloo, M. Thénardier accidentally saved the life of Colonel Pontmercy, Marius' father, while looting corpses. Not knowing that M. Thénardier was actually a robber, Marius feels a deep gratitude to him.

The Thénardiens at this time have taken an assumed name, Jondrette, and are living in poverty in Paris after losing their inn at Monfermeil. The Thénardiens and Marius live next door to one another at Gorbeau House. Having left the convent after Fauchelevent's death, Valjean, now using the name M. Leblanc, and Cosette are living nearby.

Marius and Cosette meet and fall in love. Éponine Thénardier is also in love with Marius and, while visiting him to ask for money, tries to impress him by reading from a book. After sending Éponine away, Marius peaks into the Thénardier apartment through a crack in the wall. He sees a philanthropist and his daughter arrive and immediately recognizes the young lady as Cosette. M. and Mme Thénardier also recognize Cosette and the man with her, though they feign ignorance during the meeting.

Later the Thénardiens plan to exact revenge upon Valjean and Cosette with the help of a criminal gang known as the Patron-Minette. Marius overhears their evil plan and reports the impending crime to Inspector Javert. Though M. Thénardier and the Patron-Minette members attack Valjean, he manages to escape. Javert arrives and arrests most of the Patron-Minette members, M. and Mme Thénardier, and their two daughters Éponine and Azelma.

Later, Marius finds Cosette's address and meets with her once again. Gavroche meanwhile helps M. Thénardier and two others escape from prison, and they plan

together to attack Valjean in his house. Éponine uses threats to stop them. Inside the house, Cosette tells Marius that she and Valjean are moving to England.

Marius asks his grandfather for permission to marry Cosette, but he refuses. Marius returns to Cosette's house and finds it completely abandoned. Saddened and hurt, he goes to where the Friends of the ABC have constructed a barricade in the Parisian streets. The revolutionaries have taken Javert prisoner and tied him to a pole. Gavroche and Éponine are also at the barricade, but Éponine is shot and killed by a French soldier.

When Jean Valjean learns that Marius is fighting at the barricade, he dresses in a French National Guard uniform and goes to the barricade as well. After Valjean's arrival, Gavroche goes to retrieve more ammunition but is also killed by a soldier. Though Valjean is not certain yet if he wants to help Marius, he saves Javert from being shot by the revolutionaries. Javert is shocked that Valjean would spare his life but vows that he will hunt Valjean down and see him brought to justice.

Valjean finds a badly wounded and unconscious Marius and carries him out of the barricade through the sewer tunnels below the streets. Javert catches him at the exit but agrees to help him return Marius to his family. Torn by the compassion and mercy he witnesses in Valjean, Javert lets him go free. He is distraught and agitated over these events and the way Valjean does not fit the criminal profile he has always imagined. Unable to cope, he commits suicide by jumping into the River Seine.

After his recovery, Marius and Cosette are married in February of 1833. M. Thénardier sees Valjean in the wedding party and renews his determination to make Valjean suffer. After the wedding, Valjean reveals his past as a convict to Marius whose entire opinion changes with this revelation. He becomes convinced that Valjean is immoral and a bad influence so he discourages Cosette from spending time with her 'father.'

The separation from Cosette leads Valjean into despair. His depression affects his health and eventually causes him to fall ill.

M. Thénardier forms a plan to blackmail Valjean and meets with Marius to reveal his idea. He tells Marius all that he knows of Valjean's history, including the fact that it was Valjean who saved the unconscious Marius from dying in the barricade. Marius once again changes his opinion of Jean Valjean, now realizing that his time as a convict does not lessen all of the good Valjean has done for Cosette and for Marius.

Marius pays M. Thénardier to leave Paris, and he and his daughter Azelma emigrate to America where M. Thénardier joins the slave trade. Going to Cosette, Marius tells her that Valjean saved his life in the barricade. They then go to Valjean's house to find him in his final moments of life.

As they share their love together, Valjean tells Cosette about her past and reveals her mother's name for the first time. Happy and at peace for once, Jean Valjean passes away.

The radio production of *Les Misérables* by Orson Welles

The radio performance of *Les Misérables* was written and directed by Orson Welles for the Mutual Network, part of the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS) which produced radio programs from 1934 to 1999. Famous productions by MBS included *The Lone Ranger* and *The Adventures of Superman*. News reporter Larry King's first broadcasts aired on MBS.

Welles' production of *Les Misérables* aired on seven Friday evenings beginning July 23, 1937, and continuing to the first week of September. Orson Welles played the role of Jean Valjean and also read the narrative sections of the program. The narration was drawn directly from the text of Victor Hugo's novel.

The radio version is condensed to contain the most significant elements of the novel's plot. Many minor characters are not mentioned, and some details are changed slightly to better fit this abridged version.

Mercury Theater of the Air

In 1937, Orson Welles and John Houseman founded The Mercury Theater. Their theatrical troupe produced both live stage productions as well as radio productions beginning in 1938. Along with the theater's founders, actors of The Mercury Theater included Vincent Price, Agnes Moorehead, Martin Gabel, and Bernard Herrmann.

Beginning with a production of *Dracula* on July 11, 1938, Mercury Theater of the Air produced live radio shows of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Treasure Island*, and other stories from classic literature. Their most famous production aired on October 30, 1938, when the troupe presented H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.

Several of The Mercury Theater of the Air performers later acted with Orson Welles in well-known films like *Citizen Kane*.

This guide is Copyright 2009, HomeschoolRadioShows.com, all rights reserved. This PDF file may not be altered, re-distributed or reproduced in any way except for your own personal use. If you have obtained a copy of this file anywhere other than HomeschoolRadioShows.com, it is an unauthorized copy. For more information or to report any unauthorized distribution of this file, please contact us at homeschoolradioshows@gmail.com