



THE BISHOP'S CANDLESTICKS

based on the story by Victor Hugo

A HomeschoolRadioShows Listening Guide
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Summary

Victor Hugo's **The Bishop's Candlesticks** dramatizes a pivotal episode in his epic novel, *Les Misérables* (1862).

The story begins in nineteenth century France. Jean ValJean has spent 19 years in the galley for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's children. Five years for burglary, and 14 years for attempting to escape. With a yellow passport that marked his criminal past, Jean roamed from town to town looking for work, only to have doors shut in his face. We hear in this story the rumors as the gossip grows in Digne that labels Jean a thief, then a madman and finally blossoms into a murderer.

The Bishop of Digne, however, has no lock on his door. He is warned by his friends that he should secure his door against Jean, but the bishop says, "This is not my house, but the house of the Lord..." When Jean comes looking for a handout, the Bishop greets him and welcomes him into his home. Jean is taken aback. He distrusts everyone because of their cruel treatment of him. Both the Bishop's friends, the professor and his housekeeper, advise the Bishop not to offer his home to Jean. They both agree that a bag of food would be kindness enough. However, the Bishop offers Jean not only a seat at his table, but a good night's rest in his own room.

After they eat together, the Bishop shows Jean to his room. Upon arriving back in the kitchen, his housekeeper asks what she should do with the silver plates she had just washed. He tells her to put them in their normal place. She is afraid of their visitor and does not put them back in the cupboard, in the Bishop's room. The professor sits the Bishop down and encourages him to wake Jean up, give him a little bag of food and let him go on his way. After rebuking

the professor, the Bishop goes to his room to sleep. Still distrustful of Jean, the professor takes his own \$5,000 francs and hides them.

Laying awake in his bed, the Bishop wonders if he can help Jean overcome his distrust of humanity. He ponders over the fact that Jean could attack him as he lies in his bed. The Bishop sums his thoughts up with, "One does what he must and has faith."

Just a few feet away, in the other bed, lays Jean who is pondering the motives of the Bishop. He starts thinking of the silver plates that the Bishop had placed in the cupboard and he checks to see if the elderly Bishop is asleep. As Jean stands over the bishop's bed, he raises his stick to murder him and make off with the silver. Jean's arms won't move and obey him. He surmises that he can spare the Bishop and take the silver.

The next morning, the Bishop greets the housekeeper and the professor as normal. After the housekeeper asks about their guest, the Bishop informs them both that Jean has taken the silver and left. The police show up with Jean and the silver in tow.

The Bishop says that he should have written a note for Jean explaining to all that he had given the silver to him. After the police leave, the Bishop tells Jean to take the silver and use the money to become an honest man. Jean cries, thanks him and departs. The Bishop explains to his friend, the professor, that he had not lied about giving the silver to Jean. He had, in his heart, already given it to him.

In the final scene, the professor cannot find the newspaper he has hidden his \$5,000 francs in. He accuses Jean of taking it and tells the Bishop they must call the police to come again quickly. Wisely, the Bishop calls the housekeeper and inquires with her, only to discover she had burned the newspaper when she was cleaning the Professor's room. Taught a lesson worth far more than \$5,000 francs, the professor realizes that the bishop had given his silver and had the hope of redeeming a man's soul, but all he was left with was a pile of ash.

Victor Hugo 1802-1885

Most beloved French poet and author, Victor Hugo is the author of *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and *Les Misérables* among literary works. Hugo's religious beliefs and political view can be seen in his writings.

Victor Hugo's life took many twists and turns. He was born to an atheist father and Roman Catholic mother. Because Victor's father was a high-ranking General in Napoleon's army, the family lived comfortably, but living the military life resulted in many moves. His father and mother separated; and Victor, along with his siblings, lived with their mother. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, General Hugo's property was confiscated and the family went from riches to rags. When his mother died, the family split and Victor was on his own. While in poverty, he managed to survive. By the time he was twenty years old, the tables began to turn for Victor Hugo. His writings gained popularity, his income increased, and he was married.

Hugo's spiritual life was very unstable. Although his mother brought Victor up in the ways of the Catholic Church, he turned from it in his adult life. He saw what he viewed as indifference on the part of those in leadership of the church toward those being oppressed by the monarchy. Hugo went from practicing Catholicism to dabbling in spiritualism. Then he

declared himself a Freethinker and Deist. Despite this confused spiritual life, he still believed in prayer and the power thereof. He is quoted as saying, "Religions pass away, but God remains."

Politics was a love of Hugo's. He enjoyed success in 1848 when he was elected to the Constitutional Assembly and Legislative Assembly. Although an explosive character is often what it takes for a person to speak out against wrongs, it can be dangerous for the body with the voice. When Napoleon III seized power in 1851, Victor called him a traitor of France. In fear for his life, and forced into exile, Hugo stayed away from France for nineteen or twenty years. He only returned in 1870 when Napoleon III fell from power. In 1876[,] he was elected to the National Assembly and Senate, but accomplished little this time around.

The life of Victor Hugo was revered by many. In 1881, with official guides wearing cornflowers, a parade was held in honor of this beloved author and statesman. Just over four years later, on the 22 of May 1885, the nation mourned his death. Love, for Hugo and his many writing and political endeavors, was shown when more than two million people attended his funeral.

Factoids and Interesting Tidbits....

Victor Hugo was born on February 26, 1802 in Besancon, France.

His works "Notre-Dame de Paris" (Hunchback of Notre Dame) and Les Miserables are among his best read novels.

What we heard today, "The Bishop's Candlesticks", is actually an adaptation from the main plot in Les Miserables.

When Hugo died in Paris on the 23 of May, 1885, his state funeral was attended by nearly two million people. It took ten thousand police control the crowds.

Hugo has been acclaimed the most important French Romantic writer of the 19th Century.

For more research on Victor Hugo's life and novels....

<http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/96feb/hugo.html>

http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Victor_Hugo/

http://www.online-literature.com/victor_hugo/

<http://www.online-literature.com/elbert-hubbard/little-journeys/9/>

History that had an influence upon Victory Hugo and *Les Miserables*...

Political and civil unrest made France and much of Europe ripe for revolution. With the Elite claiming power and only one percent of the population having the right to vote due to property requirements, many were unsettled. By 1845, economic depression was in full bloom while

starvation was a reality. Ensuing rebellions kept authorities on their feet.

In 1848, activists began to hold fund-raising banquets due to political gatherings being outlawed. When the banquets were outlawed, the citizens revolted. One thing led to another and in February Paris became barricaded with omnibuses and trees. The palace became a target.

All of the turmoil ended up birthing the Second Republic, which focused on changing voting requirements and providing jobs. This resulted in a huge increase in voters and employment. However, most of the wealthy left, and with them, credit.

In an attempt to provide social services to the unemployed of the cities, the government of the Second Republic began to tax landowners. This generally included farmers and peasants. Feeling the taxes unfair since they would get no benefit from them, they simply ignored them. Eventually, the working class would be ignored and the Second Republic fallen.

In December of 1851, Napoleon III dismantled the National Assembly and seized full power, thence birthing the next political phase, the Second Empire.

These events and more can be seen in Hugo's works.

Discussion Questions...

What did Jean's yellow passport signify to the others who seen it?

Do you think it was right of the town's folk to assume the worse of Jean Valjean's character because he served time in prison?

How do you think gossip affected Jean Valjean?

How would you feel if others said things of you that were not true?

Why was Jean Valjean so demanding of the bishop by insisting that he be given food instead of asking nicely?

Why did the housekeeper hide the silver?

Do you think the bishop was wise in his treatment of Jean Valjean?

Why did the bishop tell the police that the silver was not stolen, and then give Jean Valjean the candlesticks?

When you heard that the professor's \$5,000 francs were missing, did you suspect Jean Valjean?

What did the Professor mean when he said that all he had for his 5000 Frank was a heap of ashes?

What can we learn from "The Bishop and the Candlestick"?

The story "The Bishop's Candlesticks" reminds me very much of another story found in Matthew 10:25-37. While the people of Digne would not help Jean, the Bishop took compassion on him. He seen Jean as a brother and a fellow human being. Did you notice how the gossip of the town made Jean out to be more evil each time it was repeated? First he was a thief, then a madman and then a murderer. The townspeople did not know Jean personally, they only knew he had a yellow passport. They knew nothing of his past, but they speculated and spread rumors through the town of Digne. Fear grew in the hearts of the townspeople. The rumors, harsh words and rejection that Jean received made him only more bitter and dejected. (Ps 130: 3, Pr. 12: 22, Job 27:4)

When we talk badly or spread untruths, we are not only gossiping, but we are bearing false witness against our neighbors (*Exodus 20). Many people love to indulge in juicy bits of gossip, but all that can come of it is hurt. Would you gossip about yourself? The Bible says, "Love your neighbor as yourself". (see Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:37-40)

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