Signet Classics

VICTOR HUGO

Les Misérables

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FANTINE

Book One

AN UPRIGHT MAN

I

MONSIEUR MYRIEL

In 1815 Monsieur Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel was Bishop of Digne. He was then about seventy-five and had presided over the diocese of Digne since 1806.

Although it in no way concerns our story, it might be worthwhile, if only for the sake of accuracy, to mention the rumors and gossip about him that were making the rounds when he first came to the diocese. Whether true or false, what is said about men often has as much influence on their lives, and particularly on their destinies, as what they do.

M. Myriel was the son of a judge of the Superior Court of Aix, with the rank acquired by many in the legal profession. It was said that his father, expecting him to inherit his position, had arranged a marriage for the son at the early age of eighteen or twenty, following the custom among these privileged families. Despite his marriage, Charles Myriel had attracted a great deal of attention. Handsome, though not very tall, he was elegant, graceful, and witty. His early years had been devoted to worldly pleasures. With the Revolution, events moved quickly. Hunted down, decimated, or forced into

exile, these families were soon dispersed. At the first outbreak of the Revolution, M. Charles Myriel emigrated to Italy. After a protracted illness his wife ultimately died there of a lung disease. They had no children. What happened next to M. Myriel? The collapse of the old French society, the downfall of his own family, the tragic scenes of 1793, still more terrifying perhaps to the exiles who witnessed them from afar, magnified by horror—did these inspire him with thoughts of renunciation and solitude? In the midst of the flirtations and diversions that consumed his life at that time was he suddenly overcome by one of those mysterious, inner blows that sometimes strike the heart of the man who could not be shaken by public disasters of his life and fortune? Who could say? We do know that when he returned from Italy he was a priest.

In 1804, M. Myriel was curé of Brignolles. He was already an old man and living in deep seclusion.

About the time of Napoleon's coronation, some trifling business of his parish—no one remembers precisely what it was—took him to Paris. Among other influential people, he went to see Cardinal Fesch on behalf of his parishioners. One day—when the emperor had come to call on his uncle the cardinal—our worthy priest happened to be waiting as his Majesty went by. Noticing that the old man looked at him with a certain curiosity, Napoleon turned around and said brusquely, "Who is this good man looking at me?"

"Sire," replied M. Myriel, "you are looking at a good man, and I at a great one. May we both be the better for it."

That evening the emperor asked the cardinal the priest's name. Still later, M. Myriel was totally surprised to learn he had been appointed Bishop of Digne.

Beyond this, who could tell how much truth there was in the stories concerning M. Myriel's early years? Few families had known the Myriels before the Revolution.

M. Myriel had to submit to the fate of every newcomer in a small town, where many tongues talk but few heads think. Although he was bishop (in fact, because he was), he had to submit. But after all, the gossip linked with his name was only gossip: rumor, talk, words, less than words—*palabres*, as they say in the lively language of the South.

Be that as it may, after nine years of residence as

bishop of Digne, all these tales, which are initially engrossing to small towns and petty people, were entirely forgotten. Nobody would have dared to speak of them or even remember them.

When M. Myriel came to Digne he was accompanied by an old unmarried lady, Mademoiselle Baptistine, his sister, ten years younger than himself.

Their only servant was a woman about the same age as Mademoiselle Baptistine, Madame Magloire, who, already the servant of the priest, now took the double title of Mademoiselle's maid and the Bishop's housekeeper.

Tall and thin, Mademoiselle Baptistine was a pale and gentle person. She was the incarnation of the word "respectable," whereas to be "venerable," a woman should also be a mother. She had never been pretty; her whole life, which had been a succession of pious works, had finally cloaked her in a kind of transparent whiteness, and in growing old she had acquired the beauty of goodness. What had been thinness in her youth was in her maturity a transparency, and this ethereal quality permitted glimmers of the angel within. She was more of a spirit than a virgin mortal. Her form seemed made of shadows, scarcely enough body to convey the thought of sex—a little substance containing a spark—large eyes, always downcast, a pretext for a soul to remain on earth.

Madame Magloire was a little old woman, white-haired, plump, bustling, always out of breath, because of her constant activity and also her asthma.

On his arrival, M. Myriel was installed in his bishop's palace with the honors prescribed by the imperial decrees, which rank the bishop right below the field marshal. The mayor and the presiding judge called on him first, and he, for his part, paid like honor to the general and the prefect.

The installation complete, the town waited to see its new bishop at work.

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Les Misérables

Introducing one of the most famous characters in literature, Jean Valjean—the noble peasant imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread—*Les Misérables* (1862) ranks among the greatest novels of all time. In it Victor Hugo takes readers deep into the Parisian underworld, immerses them in a battle between good and evil, and carries them onto the barricades during the uprising of 1832 with a breathtaking realism that is unsurpassed in modern prose. Within his dramatic story are themes that capture the intellect and the emotions: crime and punishment, the relentless persecution of Valjean by Inspector Javert, the desperation of the prostitute Fantine, the amorality of the rogue Thénardier and the universal desire to escape the prisons of our own minds.

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