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Phases of religion in Les Miserables

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Phases of Religion in 'Les Miserables.'

A present day writer of a well-known line of fiction was lately heard to say, 'Les Miserables is the greatest book ever written.' This remark was deliberate. The speaker had read the work many times, and with the sympathy of a fellow-workman of the same craft, had admired the masterly way in which the author, Victor Hugo, makes the various characteristics of his times live and speak and act in the persons of his characters. It is the purpose of this paper to present a study in this great book. Certain of these characters are religious, and it is from among these that we make our selection for the present study.

First in the plan of the book is M. Myriel, the world famous Bishop of D--. He is pre-eminently religious. Let us call the essential feature of his religion the kindness and self-sacrifice of love. This will be illustrated as we proceed.

1. The Bishop's interest in others was so great that apparently he had much difficulty in persuading himself to hold on to any more of this world's goods than was necessary to keep soul and body together. Three days after he had assumed the duties of his office in D--. he visited the miserable little five or six-roomed

hospital alongside the episcopal palace. The hospital contained twenty-six patients, whereas his own househould consisted of himself, his sister and a servant. The Bishop's eye took in the situation at once, and in his heart he felt that there ought to be a readjustment. So on the next day he proposed to the Director of the hospital to change houses, believing that the small family ought to occupy the small house and the large family the large house. He did not say that he loved the unfortunates, nor did he intimate that it was because he was aman of deep and broad sympathies. He did not say that this was a great sacrifice, and that he made it after having a mighty struggle with himself. He did not say that he was conscious that he might many times regret his generous offer of a palace for a meanly furnished cottage. He simply looked the two situations over, made the change, and, so far as we know, never regretted it. It was not the gift of a generous impulse, but that of a strongly benevolent nature, made so perhaps by the loss of fortune and name, but more by the power of the love of Christ. His salary of fifteen thousand francs, and his allowance for carriage hire, three thousand francs, were dispensed in the same liberal spirit as that with which he gave up his palace. He reserved only enough to enable him and his household to live in the most rigidly economical manner. His food was somewhat scanty and very plain, and his clothing he sometimes wore until it was ragged and old.

According to the author, this is the theory of the relation of money to the priesthood which the Bishop of D--. undoubtedly held: 'Among churchmen, beyond their rights and ceremonies, luxury is a crime. It seems to disclose habits which are not truly charitable. A wealthy priest is a contradiction. He ought to keep himself near the poor. But who can be in contact continually, by night as well as day with all distresses, all misfortunes, all privations, without taking upon himself a little of that holy poverty, like the dust of a journey? Can you imagine a man near a fire who does not feel warm? Can you imagine a laborer working constantly at a furnace who has not a hair burned nor a nail blackened, nor a drop of sweat, nor a speck of ashes upon his face? The first proof of charity in a priest, and especially in a Bishop, is poverty.'

2. In the pastoral labors of 'Monsieur Bienvenu,' as the common people called him, are seen beautiful instances of his self-sacrifice in another form. Within the bounds of his diocese he had to visit thirty-two curacies, forty-one vicarages, and two hundred and eighty-five sub-curacies. He was conscientious to the last degree in his efforts to get round to every point, and give a Bishop's care to every flock, whether great or small. He was a true shepherd.

His preaching also was extraordinary in this, that he gave up the glory which comes from the reputation of eloquence. He did not strive for effect. 'He preached less than he talked.' He taught by examples, familiar or near at hand; and, 'In default of examples, he would invent parables, going straight to his object, with few phrases and many images, which was the very eloquence of Jesus Christ, convincing and persuasive.' His heart and his manner were lenient towards the erring. His life, it may fairly be assumed, was a reflection of the following doctrine which he taught concerning sin: 'Man has a body which is at once his burden and his temptation. He drags it along and yields to it. He ought to watch over it, to keep it in bonds; to repress it, and only to obey it at the last extremity. It may be wrong to obey even then, but if so, the fault is venial. It is a fall, but a fall upon the knees, which may end in prayer. To be a saint is the exception; to be upright is the rule. Err, falter, sin, but be upright. To commit the least possible sin is the law for man. To live without sin is the dream of an angel. Everything terrestrial is subject to sin. Sin is a gravitation.'

Taking as a basis of judgment what we now know of M. Myriel, we would not expect him to take advantage of the one or two liberal features of this creed concerning sin. The drift and purpose of his soul was upward; and never was it shown to be more so than when in a home where death had lately come. 'He would sit silent for long hours by the side of a man who had lost the wife whom he loved, or a mother who had lost her child. As he knew the time for silence, he knew also the time for speech. He did not seek to drown grief in oblivion, but to exalt and dignify it by hope. He would say, 'Be careful of the way in which you think of the dead. Think not of what might have been.' Look steadfastly, and you shall see the living glory of your well-beloved dead in the depths of heaven.' He believed that faith is healthful. He sought to transform the grief which looks down into the grave by showing it the grief which looks up to the stars.'

3. To do what we have already narrated concerning M. Myriel requires a thorough consecration, a self-sacrifice indeed; but not less, surely, rather more of this noble quality, is required to exhibit the sturdiness with which he dared public sentiment and possible physical injury. He had no fear of danger. He trusted in God and went forward. On one of his rounds he proposed to pass through a region infested by a band of robbers. The mayor of the village tried to dissuade him, then offered an armed guard. He would listen to no dissuasion. He went and returned alone, and without the slightest injury; and upon his return he uttered these significant words: 'Have no fear of robbers or murderers. Such dangers are without and are petty. We should fear ourselves. Prejudices are the real robbers; vices the real murderers. The great dangers are within us. What matters it what threatens our heads or our purses? Let us think only of what threatens our souls.'

Near the village of D--. a man condemned to the guillotine for murder was to be executed on the morrow. The cure of the parish had refused to go and minister to him, calling him a 'mountebank,' and disclaiming any obligation to look after him. The Bishop heard of it and went instead; and, after a whole day's prayer and counsel and encouragement from the Bishop, the poor despairing criminal was literally lifted up out of an horrible darkness into the sunlight of the Lord. And the next day, attended by M. Myriel, he ascended the scaffold with a face radiant with hope; and as the bloody knife descended he passed unto his reward, hearing the Bishop say, 'Whom his brethren put away, he findeth the Father.' The people shared the feelings of the cure, and were indifferent, or dubbed the criminal a 'mountebank.' The Bishop braved their opinions and came to the rescue of a man who was needy above all men around him at that hour. This is the courage of consecration.

Somewhat in contrast to the above incident is the experience of the good Bishop with an aged Conventionist, living near the village of D-- . The feelings of the people were strongly against the Conventionist. He had been hounded and persecuted by the people; and, to avoid the sight or hearing of their displeasure, he had lived the last years of his life in a hermitage. The Bishop, in spite of himself, had shared the aversion of the people; but he could not rid himself of the feeling that he ought to make his neighbor a pastoral visit. One day the hermit was reported sick. Then the Bishop started. It was love undoubtedly, in the last analysis, that prompted the Bishop to this service; but most of the motives that were in sight were the commonplace motives of duty. His political bias and political philosophy he carried with him, and in addition considerable more spirit than we had fancied remained in him whose life was so God-loving and so man-loving. Still we understand even this, when we hear the author say, that 'Monseigneur Bienvenu had been formerly, according to the accounts of his youth and even If his early manhood, a passionate, perhaps a violent man.' A little of his former severity arose on this occasion; but it subsided before the conference was over. For the first time perhaps in his life the Bishop had met, in a way to appreciate, one of those original and daring men who had stood in the midst of the great French Revolution. He conversed, 'tis true, but for the most part he listened; and as he listened to the strong and radical thoughts of the hated hermit, beheld his magnificent spirit, and observed his peaceful death, his own spirit was melted and his own life was broadened. And we are told that 'He went home deeply absorbed in thought, and spent the whole night in prayer,' and 'From that moment he redoubled his tenderness and brotherly love for the weak and the suffering.'

The Bishop's sense of duty had carried him unexpectedly into surroundings conducive to spiritual growth and profit. Some of the people sneered; but he was silent. He was willing to brave a public sentiment, which, though apparently justified, he knew in the light of heaven was really without justification. He came to realize that combatting a man's opinions is one thing, but ostracising him as if he were a beast, is quite another. Out of all he was made to know that all men without exception were his brothers. In this his better nature had conquered, but it was not the same kind of victory won elsewhere. It was a kind of defeat turned into victory.

The same spirit of fearlessness was manifested in his own home. The doors to his own apartments- outer doors- were never locked,- the bolts were even taken off. The women wished it otherwise; and were careful always to lock the doors to their apartments upstairs, but he had his way in spite of their protests. When therefore the rough stranger who turns out to be the hero of this story came, he was admitted to the house without a question, though he declared that he had just been freed from the galleys, and showed his yellow passport in proof of the fact. In addition he was given a supper and a good bed as readily as if he had been an honored relative come from far to pay his friends a visit. In the morning when the stranger and the silver plates were missing he (the Bishop) took the matter coolly, observing that the silver belonged rightly not to himself but to the poor; and when the ex-convict was forcibly brought back the same forenoon by the gendarmes the Bishop made the shrewdest and kindest turn imaginable to save the criminal from the galleys, and to save his soul from death. In the most cordial manner he addressed the ex-convict and inquired why he had not taken the silver candlesticks, as he had given them to him also. This completely outwitted the gendarmes, and astonished the criminal beyond measure. When the soldiers were away, the Bishop approached the stranger and said, 'Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.' He waited a moment while his hearer in deepest confusion and with whirling sensations tried to recollect when he had made that promise. The Bishop then continued, 'Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.' Surely no more beautiful illustration was ever found of loving desire for a soul's salvation, or of wiser effort to save it, His insight into the situation and his sure and rapid movement to secure the result seems little less than divine inspiration.

4. The life of this remarkable character as noticed thus far may perhaps rightly be called religion in activity. But if we inquire concerning his spiritual life, the drift of his soul when alone, we shall see that here is the groundwork for all the superstructure of religious activity. He was a man of prayer, who felt that, 'One can no more pray too much than love too much.' And through this channel came the spiritual power by which he had insight into God's Word and his infinite works. Into the Word he went for practical truth,- food for his own soul and food for others. He

thought out no systems, and followed no abstruse theories. However, he was widely learned and no mean polemic in the presence of enemies of his religion. Into the heavens above and the earth beneath he looked for food for contemplation. After his always very busy day, and before he went to sleep, he would go into his little garden, if the weather permitted, to 'meditate in presence of the great spectacle of the starry firmament.' This seemed a 'rite' to him, and necessary to prepare him for the night's rest. He communed with nature. In the moments of his deepest absorption he 'could not perhaps have told what was passing in his own mind; he felt something depart from him, and something descend upon him; mysterious interchanges of the depths of the soul with the depths of the universe.'

Faces sometimes, perhaps always, show something of the character of the inner life. Let us therefore look into the face of the man whom the author has been describing before we close this brief account of the Bishop of D --. 'At the first view, and to one who saw him for the first time, he was nothing more than a good man. But if one spent a few hours with him and saw him in a thoughtful mood little by little the good man became transfigured, and became ineffably imposing; his large and serious forehead, rendered noble by his white hair, became noble also by meditation. Majesty was developed from this goodnass, yet the radiance of goodness remained; and one felt something of the emotion that he would experience in seeing a smiling angel slowly spread his wings without ceasing to smile. You felt that you had before you one of those strong, tried and indulgent souls where the thought is so great that it cannot be other than gentle.'

A few defects appear in the life of the good man whom the author has called the Bishop of D--, but only a few. The effort was not made to sketch an absolutely perfect character; but the lines have been so drawn that few, if any, men that have ever lived could fill out the sketch here presented. Not uplifted by money, or position, or power; not turned away by the multitude of calls from the vital work of saving the souls of the people; not driven from God by the coming of blindness in the last years of his life; he was a fine example of the work of grace. The people who saw him most may have discovered a few defects, and heaven doubtless knew his imperfections, but to one man the gray-haired Bishop stood forth in memory and imagination as a man without a fault,- a faithful copy of the Man of Gallilee.

From the free liberty breathing spirit-led life of the Bishop we now turn to a species of religious life fostered under the galling yoke of the Roman Catholic convent. The persons we refer to as living this life are called the Bernardines of the Perpetual Adoration. They are subject to rules of which the following are cited: 'They abstain from meat the year round, fast during Lent and many other days peculiar to them, rise out of their first sleep at one o'clock in the morning to read their breviary and chant matins until three, sleep in coarse woolen sheets in all seasons, and upon straw, use no baths, never light any fire, scourge themselves every Friday, observe the rule of silence, speak to one another only at recreations, which are very short, and wear hair-cloth chemises for six months, from the 14th of Sept., the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, until Easter.'

Admission into this order is a long and tedious process. A postulancy of at least two years is required, often four; a novitiate of four years. Then the final vows can be pronounced. No widows are admitted. 'The members of the order subject themselves in their cells to many unknown self-mortifications of which they must never speak.'

'The day on which a novice makes her profession she is dressed in her finest attire, with her head decked with white roses, and her hair glossy and curled; then she prostrates herself; a great black veil is spread over her, and the office for the dead is chanted. The nuns then divide into two files, one file passes near her, saying in plaintive accents: Our sister is dead, and the other file responds in ringing tones: Living in Jesus Christ.'

Their devotion consists in part of 'performing the reparation.' This is twelve consecutive hours of prayer for all sins which are committed upon earth. 'The sister who performs this act remains on her knees upon the stone before the holy sacrament, her hands clasped and a rope around her neck. When fatigue becomes insupportable, she prostrates herself, her face against the marble and her arms crossed; this is all her relief. In this attitude she prays for all the guilty in the universe.'

'Moreover, there is always a nun on her knees before the holy sacrament. They remain for an hour. They are relieved like soldiers standing sentry. This is the Perpetual Adoration.'

These nuns are not allowed to brush their teeth, no matter how yellow they may become; nor are they allowed to own or cherish anything, whatever. When they meet one another, one says, 'Praise and adoration to the most holy sacrament of the altar.' The other replies: 'Forever.' Their vow to give up the world is re-inforced by the castle-like character of the convent, and by the high walls around the garden, belonging thereto. How the world without moves they know not. They care not. A nun can speak to no one from the outside except in the locutory, a peculiar speaking place in which the persons speaking are separated from each other by heavy iron bars and dark wooden shutters. 'When a nun is called to the locutory, be it even the prioress, she drops her veil in such a way as to show nothing but her mouth. The prioress alone can communicate with strangers. The others can see only their immediate family, and that very rarely.'

When the immense number of their religious duties are considered,- their masses, vespers, feast days, chapel attendance, confessions, prostrations, penances, scourgings, etc., etc., it is little wonder that 'these nuns are not joyous, rosy and cheerful, as are often the daughters of other orders; or that they are pale and serious, and now and then one becomes insane.'

Jean Valjean, having escaped the police, became assistant gardener to the convent of Petit Rue Picpus. He had leisure to make a comparison of the hardships which were endured in the galleys and those which were endured in this convent. He had experienced the former; he saw the latter. In the galleys the criminals 'rose at dawn and toiled until night. Scarcely allowed to sleep, they lay on camp beds, and were permitted to have mattresses but two inches thick, in halls which were warmed only during the most inclement months. They were attired in hideous red sacks, and had given to them, as a favor, a pair of canvas pantaloons in the heat of midsummer, and a square of woolen stuff to throw over their shoulders during the bitterest frosts of winter. They had no wine to drink, no meat for food excepting when sent upon 'extra hard work.' They lived without names, distinguished solely by numbers, and reduced, as it were, to ciphers, lowering their eyes, lowering their voices, with their hair cropped close, under the rod, and plunged in shame.' On the other hand, he thought of the inmates of the convent: 'Here are beings also who live with their hair cut close, their eyes bent down, their voices hushed, not in shame indeed, but amid the scoffs of the world;

not with their backs bruised by the gaoler's staff, but with their shoulders lacerated by self-inflicted penance. Their names, too, had perished from among men, and they now existed under austere designations alone. They never ate meat and never drank wine. They often remained until evening without food. They were attired not in red sacks, but in black habits of woolen, heavy in summer, light in winter, unable to increase or diminish them, without even the privilege, according to the season, of substituting a linen dress or a woolen cloak; and then, for six months in the year, they wore underclothing of serge which fevered them. They dwelt not in dormitories, warmed only in the bitterest frosts of winter, but in cells where fire was never kindled. They slept not on mattresses two inches thick, but upon straw. Moreover, they were not even allowed to sleep, for every night, after a day of labor, they were, when whelmed beneath the weight of the first sleep, at the moment when they were just beginning to slumber, and with difficulty to collect a little warmth, required to waken, rise and assemble for prayers in an icy-cold and gloomy chapel, with their knees on the stone pavement.'

The criminals suffered for the expiation of their own crimes. This Jean Valjean well understood. But 'why,' he asked himself, 'do these blameless, spotless creatures suffer?' The conclusion he reached, through the voice which seemed to speak to his conscience, was that which has always lived around the convent: 'They suffer in expiation of the sins of others.'

To live with such rigid exactness to cloister rules, to pray at such length, and to meditate so continually upon holy things, would seem to make mortals pure enough to be angels. But no; when it becomes necessary for the glory of the convent, for the miracle-working power of the convent, to retain the body of a deceased 'mother' under the altar,- a thing forbidden by the laws of the government- it is apparently consistent with all this intense religiousness, to act a lie in the presence of the government representatives. This they do, not without the assignment of reasons, such as this: 'The world is nothing before the cross.' Then the great monastic influence of St. Bernard, and the great monastic order of St. Benedict are contrasted with the Health Commission and Commissary of Police in such a manner as to make it seem that God is subordinated to these departments of government; and that it is perfectly in accord with righteousness to trick the government and allow a casket, which does not contain the body of a deceased nun, to be carried to the cemetery while the nun is 'resting in peace' beneath the sacred altar.

The author, in summing up his estimate of the convent, considers it from two standpoints. First, from the standpoint of liberty and modern civilization. These are his words: 'Assuming that we are in the nineteenth century, we are opposed, as a general proposition, and in every nation, in Asia as well as in Europe, in Judea as well as in Turkey, to ascetic seclusion in monasteries. He who says 'convent' says 'marsh.' Their putrescence is apparent, their stagnation is baleful, their fermentation fevers and infects the nations, and their increase becomes an Egyptian plague.'

The second standpoint is that of the religious life. Concerning this feature the author says 'The convent held up to the truth and examined impartially and fully, has unquestionably a certain majesty. For ourselves, we, who do not believe what these women believe, never could look without a species of tender and religious awe, a kind of pity full of envy upon those humble yet august souls who are waiting between the world closed to them and heaven not yet opened.'

Whatever may be said for or against the convent, it is becoming more and more apparent to the people of this time that the religious community and the religious life, which would meet the Master's commendation, must mingle with the people, like the Master- not be shut up in the cloister- and carry to the world the sympathy of a warm heart and the kind words and loving deeds of a consecrated life.

Jean Valjean is the greatest character of 'Les Miserables,' and one of the greatest ever set forth in a work of fiction. This man's religion will afford opportunity for a very interesting study.

He was born into an humble family in northern France, and in his youth was bereaved of both father and mother. A sister took him into her home. After a time her husband died; then Jean Valjean was the supporter of the family,- a sister and seven children.

It was winter. The children were hungry; and Jean Valjean's love and sympathy were roused in their behalf. He stole a loaf of bread, for which he was sentenced to the galleys for five years. It was nineteen years before he was really set free.

Nothing is known of his religious training in his native town. We learn that there was a church there, but whether he ever attended it or had any connection with it, is not said. When he entered the galleys he was ignorant, had a tender heart, and was susceptible to kindness. When he came out he had some education, his heart was hard, his visage severe, and hatred against God and society had settled down into his very soul. He went out into the world to avenge himself upon society; and every step he made he found society taking an attitude towards him that tended to call out his spirit of vengeance.

With this condition of heart he entered the home of the Bishop of D--. He talked, he ate, he slept. He waked at two in the morning, pondered something for awhile, and then with weapon in hand drew up to the bedside of the Bishop. His awful passion to do injury ended only in theft; and then he escaped as a wild beast. We have already narrated the words of the Bishop to him when he was brought back. Again he went away; but the commotion which ended in the change of after years was raging in his bosom. He could not forget the'gentle words of the old man, 'you have promised me to become an honest man. I am purchasing your soul, I withdraw it from the spirit of perversity, and I give it to God Almighty.' This came back to him incessantly.'

The day was one of terrible unrest. His meditation was almost delirium. His theft of a forty sous piece from a little boy was the last struggle of thereign of impulse deep seated in his nature. The act was involuntary; and when he became conscious of it he did everything to find the possessor of the money and restore it, but failed. When the night thickened he was alone on the plain, exhausted and weeping, and in a life and death struggle with a great question which he felt must now be settled:- 'If he should not be the best of men, he would be the worst; that he must now, so to speak, mount higher than the Bishop, or fall lower than the galley slave; that if he would become good, he must become an angel; that if he would remain wicked, he must become a monster.' This was the turning point in his life. He wept bitterly and continued to weep- these were the first tears for nineteen long years- and in the light of his conscience he kept continually contrasting the good Bishop and his own sinful self............... At three o'clock the following morning the stage driver who 'passed through the Bishop's street saw a man in the attitude of prayer kneeling upon the pavement in the shadow before the door of Monseigneur Bienvenu.'

This was the turbulent beginning of Jean Valjean's religious life. It is not yet well defined; but is manifestly an adoration of God as seen in the man who had been the Good Samaritan to him.

A few years have passed by and Jean Valjean is now Father Madeleine. He is living in a village, and has become a great and successful manufacturer, His religious life may now be viewed in three phases. First, he observes the forms of the church to a certain extent; for he goes regularly to hear mass every Sunday. Second, his life is full of good works. The increase of his business is made to enrich the whole community before he allows himself to become wealthy. By the time he has gained six hundred thousand francs for himself he has spent a million for the city and the poor. 'Whoever was needy could go to this great manufactory and be sure of finding work and wages. Father Madeleine required the men to be willing, the women to be of good morals, and all to be honest.' Ten additional beds were put into the hospital, a new school-house was built, and teachers paid a good salary; and a refuge for infirm laborers was erected and endowed. Madeleine did it. 'He did a multitude of good deeds as secretly as bad ones are done.' But that which, above other things, made him appear the angel of mercy, was the rescue from the police Inspector Javert of a poor 'girl of the town,' who had just scratched and battered a 'blooded' young fellow who threw snow down her back. Turned out of the factory through the whisperings of some old women, and without Madeleine's knowledge, she was driven step after step until she forsook her former modest life for one of public shame, in order to support herself and pay for the keeping of her child. At the beginning of the contest, between Madeleine the Mayor and Javert the Inspector, for her release she hated the former intensely, and felt friendly towards the latter. At the close her feelings had undergone a thorough revulsion. He whom she had counted an enemy was now luminously shown to be her friend; not alone in securing her release, but in providing for her necessities. Jean Valjean had now, at least in spirit, become the Bishop; and in this poor lost creature before him he saw a picture of himself as he first stood in the presence of his earthly savior. Love and kindness had again wrought the change of a human life. As for Fantine, the befriended woman, the shock of arrest and the joy of rescue were too much for her already shattered constitution. A violent fever set in at once, and later, dangerous symptoms developed into fatal lung trouble. She was in the hospital, cared for by the sister-nurses, and visited regularly by Father Madeleine. His money provided her with everything necessary, and at an opportune time he was planning to bring home her child to her. The joy and gratitude which beamed in the face of this unfortunate and suffering woman were to her benefactor an inestimably great reward. Ministering to the poor and the needy, in his conception, was ministering to the Lord Jesus.

A third phase of Father Madeleine's religion is seen in the workings of his remarkable conscience. A crisis came when it was a question to him whether he ought any longer to conceal his name and his identity. Another man, charged with being the Jean Valjean of former infamous reputation, was about to be sent to the galleys for life on a trifling charge. The excessive penalty was due, not to the gravity of the offense, but to the supposition that he was Jean Valjean an ex-convict. Should Madeleine interrupt the course of the law? this was the question in which centered the mental struggle that took place. All the claims on both sides were marshalled before his conscience during a night and a day of agony. Decision fell first upon one side and then upon the other. Finally, the mist cleared away in so much that the troubled soul of Jean Valjean saw the way of duty. It was this: If he chose to avow his name and reveal his identity it would be the death-stroke of his happiness; if, on the other hand, he chose to conceal all, it would be the death-stroke of his virtue. 'He could only enter into sanctity in the sight of God, by returning into infamy in the eyes of men!' With many strange feelings of irresolution and providential hindrance he reached the place of trial and acted upon the basis of the above decision. He avowed his name and identity and incurred the results, 'He had given himself up that another might not be condemned in his place.' Realizing the divinity of his act the multitudes fell back to make way before him as he left the hall of justice. His soul had triumphed. In this wonderful act, without however seeking to do so, he had risen above any act ever done by the Bishop. He reached upward towards the self-sacrifice of the Man crucified between two thieves on the hill of Calvary.

A second time he was sentenced to the galleys but now for life. He escaped, wandered widely, and finally came to Paris. His first thought was to rescue from abuse and hunger, from overwork, exposure and rags, Cosette, the little daughter of the woman whom he had befriended before his arrest. It was a promise he had made to the dead mother; but it was not less a necessity to his own soul. The last nine months had told seriously upon him; and he needed some life that would be an anchor to him to hold him to the way of virtue. 'He had seen the wickedness of men and the misery of society under new but incomplete aspects. The lot of woman was summed up in Fantine; public authority was personified in Javert. He had been sent back to the galleys this time for doing good. New waves of bitterness had overwhelmed him; disgust and weariness had once more resumed their sway. The recollection of the Bishop, even, was perhaps almost eclipsed, though sure to reappear afterwards luminous and triumphant; yet in fact this blessed remembrance was growing feebler. Who knows that Jean Valjean was not on the point of becoming discouraged and falling back to evil ways? Love came, and he again grew strong. Alas! he was not less feeble than Cosette. He protected her and she gave strength to him. Thanks to him, she could walk upright in life; thanks to her, he could persist in virtuous deeds.'

Secure for a time Jean Valjean is pursued again by the police. In making good his escape at a crisis he dropped down inside the walls that enclosed the garden of a convent. He became assistant gardener, and studied the religious life of the community. Here again he received help, necessary help. 'The convent contributed, like Cosette, to confirm and complete in Jean Valjean the work of the Bishop. It cannot be denied that one of virtue's phases ends in pride. Therein is a bridge built by the Evil One. Jean Valjean was perhaps without knowing it, near that very phase of virtue, and that very bridge when Providence flung him into the convent of the Petit-Picpus. So long as he compared himself only with the Bishop, he found himself unworthy and remained humble; but, for sometime past, he had been comparing himself with the rest of men, and pride was springing up in him. Who knows? He might have finished by going back to hate. The convent stopped him on this descent.' When he saw these humble gentle souls, who suffered in the convent worse than he had suffered in the galleys, who bowed down beneath affliction and labor in order to show that loftiest of all virtues,- 'innocence forgiving men their sins, and expiating them in their stead,' he was greatly moved, and as he meditated on these things, 'his pride vanished. He reverted again and again to himself; he felt his own pitiful unworthiness, and often wept.'

He was getting into the current that swept him back to the 'injunctions of the Bishop;' and gratitude towards God was springing up as he remembered that at the two crises of his life he had been taken into two houses of God- the Bishop's home and the convent.

'Had it not been for the first he should have fallen back into crime; and had it not been for the second, into punishment.'

But ought he to remain in this last retreat, and grow in grace and ripen for heaven? If so, Cosette must be a nun; and this by no choice of her own. Conscience again got in its work. He sacrificed himself for the little creature who was already sweeping the whole range of his affections, and for whose interests he felt the solicitude of a wise and indulgent father.

To live outside of the convent walls and to go to and fro in the great city meant a continual possibility of discovery and re-arrest. But Jean Valjean risked it. He went to church regularly, frequented the public places, and blessed the poor with his gifts wherever he went. Because of his poor clothing he was called the 'Beggar who gives alms.' Through his benevolent disposition he was drawn into a den of robbers on one occasion, and came near losing his life. Only the unflinching courage and nerve and dexterity of a convict saved him. He learned the lesson, however, which every benevolent person is liable to learn: He who comes to bless others must expect sometimes to be cursed by those who have been the recipients of his gifts. But he ceased not to give. It was one of his ways of worshipping God. It was a vent to the noble impulses that were growing more and more in his soul.

But other tests of the genuineness of his piety were awaiting him. His life was wrapped up in the life of the now sweet and beautiful girl who passed everywhere as his daughter. Suddenly as a flash of lightning the revelation came to him that Cosette was in love with another than himself. Into his heart had been poured the love of father and mother, and of every other possible human relation. He had never loved anybody besides- his life had been barren on the love side- and he fancied that no one would ever dare to rival him in Cosette's affections. But the unexpected had happened. He was absolutely sure of it; and it pierced his heart like an arrow. What was the name of the young man? Marius Pont mercy, at that moment engaged in insurrection against the government. As mad in love with Cosette as she was with him. These facts reached Jean Valjean in a few hours after the knowledge of Cosette's love affair had struck him as a bolt from the skies. Again he meditated; again his conscience worked; and again he yielded. But in the midst of this struggle there arose some of the old hatred of the galleys for the man who now proposed, as he thought, to take from him the child who had been his care and his joy, yea, even his very salvation for a number of years. But he yielded. In spite of every revulsion of his nature, in spite of his hatred, in spite of irreparable loss to himself, he proposed to consummate the happiness of these two young people, if it cost him his life. No one consequently knew why he was in the barricade, why he was among the insurgents. Without doing personal injury to anybody he helped the insurgents;

but in the crisis when the barricade was taken he helped but one man-marius. By a superhuman effort, for miles through the sewers of the great City of Paris, Jean Valjean carried the wounded and almost lifeless body of this young man to a place of safety. Marius was taken to his old home to recover; and Jean Valjean escaped arrest because of an act of unmeasured kindness which he had that day done to the police officer, who for years had been a kind of nemesis upon his track to drag him back into the galleys.

The betrothal took place, and Jean Valjean took pleasure in it, for it was the work of his own hands. Yet, as the author says, it was like taking pleasure in a sword bearing one's own brand, while that very sword is being drawn out at one's bosom reeking with his own heart's blood.

Next morning after the rich and sumptuous wedding there came from the lips of Jean Valjean to the young bridegroom a revelation of all the more repulsive features of the life of him whom Cosette had always called her father. But why should Jean Valjean do this when by simply concealing his name and identity he could have a happy and commodious home the rest of his days? He did it to escape the possible result both to himself and to the young people if some persons should some day expose his life to them, creating consternation like the bursting of a bomb-shell. His course was the honest one, though in time it meant virtual separation between himself and the object of his affections.

At this point began his decline. In giving up Cosette he had given up his life. A few brief months increased Jean Valjean's age a quarter of a century. He now has the form and look of a man eighty years of age, while in reality he is but fifty-six. But now he is dying, dying alone in his own house, and Cosette and Marius know nothing of it. However, at the same moment Marius, who as yet knew little except what he had heard the morning after the wedding, is discovering the real identity of Jean Valjean. In an hour in the heart of Marius a wonderful transformation has taken place. The man whom he had loathed even in his thought now becomes the one whom he ought to spend his whole life in honoring and serving, rather than in cursing; one whose reputed relation to him is an unspeakable blessing rather than an unspeakable disgrace. Jean Valjean is not Cosette's father, but he is ~~her~~ Marius' savior.

They hasten to his bedside- these two children. 'Tis the first visit since the marriage. He is dying, and they soon come to know the sorrowful truth. But as he speaks the grandeur of his spirit and the nobleness of his life are borne in upon their souls. They bend over him and minister to him till amid their sobs and tears he takes his everlasting flight, triumphing in the grace of Christ. A life on earth, full of rigor and tragedy, at its close beholds the opening gates of paradise and enters in.

Two things remain to be said by way of retrospect and comparison concerning the religious life of Jean Valjean. First, he did not always tell the truth. After his conversion he was never known to do a personal injury to anybody, physical or otherwise; but he would get into a corner now and then when he resorted to lying in order to make his escape. Yet it must be said that in desiring to escape he never sought his own comfort alone, but his thought ranged out beyond himself in his purpose to bless others. But does this benevolent purpose justify untruth? What did Jean Valjean think? What had been his education concerning the matter? Had not the Bishop acted, and even spoken an untruth concerning the silverware? Had not the holy nuns of the convent acted a lie before the representatives of the government? Did the purpose however lofty in either case warrant prevarication? The Bishop and the nuns both evidently believed that the end sanctified the means, and that the offense, if offense it might be called, would be passed over in heaven as venial. Jean Valjean was an apt scholar, and most certainly fell in with the belief of his holy instructors. The evident purpose of the author is to teach the very highest form of this long disputed assertion: That a lie is sometimes justifiable.

Second, in spirit and manner Jean Valjean's life was an effort to copy the life of the Bishop. But the estimate of the two men in the eyes of the community were so thoroughly opposite that for Jean Valjean to succeed at all from his low level would be infinitely more to his credit than for the Bishop to succeed. The Bishop was never called upon to make such utter sacrifice as his disciple made;

nor could he know, in his position, the rayless night into which an ex-convict plunged himself when he stole out into the light for conscience sake to make himself a sin-offering for the sake of another. We see now what Jean Valjean meant in meditating that first eventful night after the Bishop's exhortation. He was deciding whether he would 'mount higher than the Bishop or sink lower than the galley slave.' He did the former, and,in spite of his faults,we are inclined to adopt the comparison of a student of these two characters who says: 'While the life and character of the Bishop were almost angelic, those of Jean Valjean were almost divine.'

~~D. C. Ayers~~

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Graduation Thesis of C. C. Elson

"Phases of Religion in Les Miserables" – Class of 1895

Romans and Galatians,

Prof Sheldon