

# LES MISERABLES

RETOLD BY PAULINE FRANCIS

**READZONE**

## **READZONE BOOKS**

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# *Introduction*

*Les Misérables* was written by Victor Hugo, in 1862, when he was sixty years old.

The French word *misérable* means poor and wretched. Much of the story is set against the background of protests which broke out in Paris in the early 1830s, because many people were still living in poverty. This was in spite of the French Revolution of 1789, which was supposed to have solved these problems.

Victor Hugo tells the story of Jean Valjean, a poor young man who is sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving family. When he is freed after nineteen years, he takes the chance to start a new life; but his past always catches up with him. The novel is one of the longest ever published in Europe – well over a thousand pages! It has a complicated plot full of adventure, love, loss, letters, coincidences and bravery. This novel is unusual because it contains chapters of facts, as well as fiction.

*Les Misérables* was adapted for the French theatre in 1878. The first film of the book was made in America in 1905. It has since become a long-running musical all over the world. The latest film in English was made in 2012.

Victor Hugo died in 1885, at the age of 83. His body lay in state in Paris for many days and was seen by two million people, before it was removed to a private cemetery.

## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Convict*

In early October, 1815 – about an hour before sunset – a man travelling on foot entered the small town of Digne, in the south of France. This man was in his late forties. He was stocky, sunburned and shabbily dressed. His shorn hair was beginning to grow back and he had a long beard.

Who was this stranger? Nobody knew. He drank water from the fountain in the marketplace. Then he went to report to the town hall, as all strangers entering a town had to do. Fifteen minutes later, the man re-appeared and made his way to the best inn in the town.

‘I haven’t got a room,’ the innkeeper said.

The man replied calmly. ‘Put me in the stable.’

‘It’s full of horses,’ the innkeeper shouted. ‘Now get out.’

The stranger met with the same problem at every inn.

Night was falling. A cold wind was blowing from the Alps. Exhausted, he found a stone bench near the church and lay down. What did it matter? For nineteen years, he’d slept on a wooden plank.

An old woman, coming from the church, asked him what he was doing there.

‘I’ve knocked on every door of this town,’ he said, ‘and nobody will give me a bed for the night.’

The woman pointed to a small house next to the church. ‘Did you knock on that door?’ she asked.

‘No,’ the man told her.

‘Knock there,’ she replied kindly.