

# Mr. Les Misérables

## FULL SYNOPSIS

### Prologue

A chain gang is working in the scorching sun in Toulon, France, in 1815. Javert enters to tell one of the prisoners, Jean Valjean, that his parole is about to begin. Valjean has been in prison for five years for stealing a loaf of bread — and for 14 more years for attempting to escape. Javert reminds him that he will always be marked as a thief by the yellow ticket of leave that he must carry with him. Valjean explains that he only stole the loaf of bread because his sister's child was near death and his family was starving. Javert warns that he intends to keep his eye on Valjean in the future, waiting for him to break the law again.

Valjean expresses his joy at being free. Although he will never forgive his jailers or forget the wrong done to him, he plans to start a new life. However, he quickly learns that because he is branded as a thief, he cannot make a living or find a place to stay. He discovers that to a paroled man, the outside world is little more than another kind of jail. He sees the law as having cursed his life.

In the town of Digne, a saintly Bishop allows Valjean to stay in his house overnight. The bitter Valjean steals some silver from the Bishop and is questioned by constables. Valjean lies and says the Bishop gave him the silver. The Bishop not only backs up his lie, but he also gives him two silver candlesticks as well, asking that he use the silver to become an honest man. Valjean is overwhelmed by the Bishop's kindness. He realizes the Bishop has given him a chance to reclaim his soul. He decides to tear up his yellow ticket of leave and begin a new life with a new identity.

### Act One

In the town of Montreuil Sur Mer, Jean Valjean runs a factory using his new identity of M. Madeleine. It is eight years later. A group of poor workers at the factory expresses their despair with their barren, impoverished lives. They gossip about the foreman and one of the female workers, Fantine, who has resisted his advances. They grab a letter away from Fantine and learn that she has a child living with innkeepers in another town. She struggles to get her letter back. Valjean appears, now Mayor of Montreuil Sur Mer as well as the owner of the factory, but allows his foreman to handle the matter. The women insist that Fantine be fired because of her loose morals. Although she explains that she is the sole supporter of her child because her lover abandoned her, the foreman fires Fantine. She reflects on how different the world seemed when she first fell in love, before life killed her dreams.

Fantine wanders to the red light district, where she finds herself among sailors and prostitutes. She sells her necklace and her hair, and then she becomes a prostitute to earn money for her daughter. When she refuses to entertain a street idler, Bamatabois, he is so enraged that he lies to Javert, claiming she attacked him. The Mayor (Valjean) comes to Fantine's aid and learns that she is only in her present circumstance because he turned his back on her at his factory.

When Valjean realizes that she and her daughter are innocent victims, he demands that Javert release her. Suddenly, an old man, Fauchelevent, is pinned down by a runaway cart, and The Mayor (Valjean) saves him by lifting the cart. Javert says that he has seen that kind of strength only once before, in a prisoner at Toulon. However, he knows that the Mayor cannot be the individual he is describing because Javert has recently re-arrested that man for a minor crime. In fact, he says Jean Valjean's trial is about to take place.

The real Valjean realises that he will not be able to live with himself if he does not confess his identity and spare the falsely identified man. He appears at the trial of the accused man and confesses his real identity in front of Javert.

Fantine is taken ill and lies delirious in the hospital. Valjean escapes Javert to come to her bedside. He promises he will protect her daughter, Cosette. Fantine dies, believing that he will keep his promise. As

Valjean sits grieving beside her, Javert appears. Valjean begs Javert to allow him to find Cosette and leave her in safety before he is jailed. Javert refuses to trust him. Valjean breaks a chair and threatens Javert with it. Javert speaks of his own history, saying he has risen from a past in the gutter and now lives only for the law. Invoking his promise to Fantine, Valjean overcomes Javert and escapes.

Young Cosette is sweeping and scrubbing at the Thénardiens' inn. She sings of a castle on a cloud where she could lead a life filled with love and free of tears. Her reverie is interrupted by the evil Mme. Thénardier who scolds her, saying that the money her mother sends doesn't pay for her keep. She praises her own daughter, Eponine, and sends Cosette out to the well in the woods for water. Cosette begs not to be sent into the woods in the dark but is ordered to go by Mme. Thénardier.

Tavern guests arrive and settle down for a night of drinking, exchanging tales of the reprehensible ways in which Thénardier made his money in the past. Thénardier tells them that as the "master of the house" he lives by the rule that everything has a price. Mme. Thénardier joins him in this self-mocking assessment of their corrupt lifestyle.

As they finish, Jean Valjean appears with the trembling Cosette. He has found her in the woods and tells the Thénardiens that he has come to take her away. The Thénardiens extract a settlement from him for what they claim are Fantine's debts. Valjean promises Cosette there will be castles in her future.

The scene shifts to the streets of Paris in 1832. Beggars are crying out for help. Gavroche, a young boy, is among them. A group of students led by Enjolras enters and accuse the nation's leaders of ignoring the poor. Gavroche warns that everyone must now watch out for the Thénardier gang. Thénardier has moved his operations to Paris and is preying on the poor in cooperation with underworld figures Brujon, Babet, Claquesous, and Montparnasse. He has enlisted his daughter, Eponine, now a young woman, into his illicit activities. Eponine is in love with Marius, one of Enjolras's student friends. However, Marius does not return her affection. Jean Valjean and Cosette appear. Thénardier's thugs try to rob them. Marius sees Cosette for the first time and falls in love with her. Valjean is recognized by Thénardier. Javert appears to intercede; Valjean flees. Thénardier shares the news of Valjean's identity with Javert. In the absence of a victim, Javert has to let Thénardier go. Javert declares his determination to catch the fugitive Valjean. He will never rest until he does. He leaves, and Gavroche announces that he, not the inspector, really runs the town.

Eponine realises that the girl with Jean Valjean was Cosette. Seeing Cosette in the beautiful clothes that Valjean has provided for her, Eponine stares at herself with disgust. Marius begs her to help him find Cosette again. Although she is filled with jealousy, Eponine agrees.

The students are meeting at the ABC Cafe to plan an insurrection. Marius comes in, unable to think about anything but Cosette. Enjolras says they must decide whether or not they are willing to die for their beliefs. Gavroche announces the death of General Lamarque, a popular military leader. Enjolras says Lamarque's death will kindle the flame of revolution. The people will be ready to follow the students in their insurrection "when tomorrow comes."

In her home on Rue Plumet, Cosette has a sense that love is very close to her now. Jean Valjean worries about her loneliness because of the fugitive life they must lead. Cosette still does not know why they must always be on the run. Valjean leaves; Eponine brings Marius to Cosette. As he expresses his love for Cosette, Eponine waits outside. She sees her father and his henchmen surrounding the house. It is their intention to rob Valjean. Eponine fears that Marius will think she set him up to be robbed and screams to warn him. Thénardier and his gang run away, and Marius realises that Eponine has saved him. He tells Cosette that his friend has brought them together and also warned them of this danger. Valjean appears, and Cosette lies, saying she screamed because she saw shadows on the wall. Valjean thinks it was Javert and says they must run away to Calais and then cross the sea.

Lost in their individual thoughts, everyone reflects on the future. Valjean sees himself as being trapped on an endless road, Cosette and Marius feel their newfound love slipping away, and Eponine mourns her unrequited feelings for Marius. Enjolras appears to enlist Marius for the insurrection. Marius decides to join his friends, since Cosette will now be lost to him forever. Javert predicts that the revolution will be stopped at once by the authorities. Thénardier agrees that the students are destined to lose. The students sing of their glorious day to come. Everyone prepares for this fateful "one day more."

## Act Two

The students are planning to build their barricade, assessing the strength of their adversaries and hoping that the people will support them. Eponine appears; Marius tries to send her away, fearing for her life. She says his concern shows he does care about her. He asks her to take a message to Cosette.

She gives the letter to Jean Valjean at the house on Rue Plumet. Valjean reads the letter and learns of Marius's feelings for Cosette. In the letter, Marius says goodbye to Cosette in case he dies in battle.

Eponine expresses her feelings of loneliness. She has now alienated her father by protecting Marius and has nowhere to turn. She has nothing but her dreams of a love that can never be returned because she loves Marius "only on my own."

Back at the barricade, the students are told by the army to give up their guns or die. Javert pretends to be on the students' side and encourages them to surrender. However, Gavroche reveals Javert's identity, and the students tie up Javert, planning to shoot him as a traitor after the battle. Eponine returns, much to Marius's dismay. She tells him she has delivered the letter to Valjean. He realises that she has been wounded trying to return to him with this message. Marius holds her tightly as she dies in his arms. She sings that the "rain can't hurt me now"; he replies, "I will stay with you till you are sleeping and rain will make the flowers grow." Eponine is first on the rebel side to die in battle.

Jean Valjean appears and says he has come to aid the students. They say that another man who offered to join them has proven to be a traitor and point to Javert. Valjean is given a gun, and as the battle begins, he shoots and kills a sniper. Having proven his fidelity to the students' cause, he asks if he can dispense with the spy Javert himself. Enjolras agrees and turns Javert over to Valjean.

Once Javert is in his custody, Valjean releases him. Javert says Valjean is being foolish; so long as they are both alive, he will continue to pursue Valjean. Valjean replies that he doesn't blame Javert for trying to do what he believes is his duty and allows him to escape. The students rest and reflect on their friendship and days gone by. Marius says that he doesn't care if he dies; life without Cosette will be meaningless. Realising the depth of Marius's devotion to Cosette, Valjean prays for his safety in battle. He offers to die instead and begs God to "bring him home."

Marius says that people are afraid to come to the rebels' aid. The students need the bullets that lie in the street. Marius volunteers to pick them up, but Valjean insists that he will go instead. Little Gavroche is quicker than either of them and scrambles up the barricade. He is instantly killed. The voice on the megaphone again warns the students that since the people of Paris sleep in their beds instead of coming to their aid, they have no chance of winning. The students refuse to surrender, and the army mounts a fierce attack. Only Marius and Valjean survive. Valjean carries the wounded Marius down a manhole into a sewer. Javert returns and searches for Valjean's body. Not finding him among the dead, he concludes that he must have escaped into the sewer.

In the sewers beneath Paris, Thénardier appears with a body over his shoulders. He strips the dead of their valuables and dumps the bodies in the mud of the sewers. Valjean and Marius have collapsed in the sewer, and Thénardier starts to rob them. Then he recognises Valjean and runs away. Javert finds Valjean. Valjean asks Javert to allow him to take Marius to safety. Then he will return and surrender to Javert. This time, Javert agrees to Valjean's request and says he will be waiting. Javert waits, desperately confused. His enemy has spared his life. He says he cannot live in the debt of a thief. He will spit Valjean's pity back in his face because the law cannot be mocked. He realises that his own life has no meaning because Valjean has indeed proven that a man can be redeemed and should be forgiven. Doubt destroys Javert, whose world is held together by the force of rigid rules. Valjean has killed him by granting his life. Javert jumps to his death.

The women of Paris mourn the dead students, saying that nothing has changed as the result of their deaths. Marius sings a song of mourning for his dead companions. He begs their forgiveness for the fact that he survived.

At the hospital where he is recovering, Marius tells Cosette that he still doesn't know who saved him at the barricade. They plan to marry; Marius invites Valjean to live with them. Valjean confesses his past to Marius, explaining that Cosette knows nothing about his real identity. He says he must keep running.

Marius agrees never to tell Cosette the truth about her adoptive father's past.

On Cosette's wedding day, the Thénardiens try to sell Marius the truth about Cosette's father in exchange for cash. As a result, Marius learns that Jean Valjean is the man who carried him through the sewers to safety. He strikes Thénardier and throws money at him. The Thénardiens celebrate that in spite of everything, they have survived.

Valjean is alone in a room, dying. He is having visions of Fantine. Marius and Cosette burst into his room. Marius tells Cosette that he now knows her father is the one who saved his life. Valjean tells her the truth about her mother. His vision of Fantine is joined by a vision of Eponine. As he dies, Valjean and his visions remind Cosette of the everlasting power of love telling her that "to love another person is to see the face of God."

The entire company sings of "the music of a people who are climbing to the light . For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise."