

## THE PREFACE TO "LES MISÉRABLES."

BY R. T. HOUSE.

"HE being dead yet speaketh." Victor Hugo left this world in 1885, yet bulky volumes of his writings have appeared at intervals ever since, and are still coming. The latest addition to his posthumous works is the elaborate preface which was written to accompany his most considerable novel, *Les Misérables*, but which is now in print for the first time at the head of the new edition of that story issued from the Imprimerie Nationale of Paris.

Why did Victor Hugo write so profound and extended a preface—it fills more than a hundred and twenty pages—for a novel? And why, when it was written, did he not publish it with the story it was intended to introduce? An attempt to answer these questions involves some discussion of the circumstances under which the novel was written, and the author's aim in writing it.

*Les Misérables* was Hugo's life-work. There is evidence that the plan of the story was in his mind before 1830, and the enterprising young Belgian publisher Albert Lacroix published the last volume of the original ten-volume edition in 1862. Hugo thought his plan over well for years, collecting information on the penal laws and the life of convicts; and in 1845 he began writing. In 1848 came the Revolution, calling forth a mass of political literature that left the novelist no time or thought for Jean Valjean.

But in 1860, the exile drew out his manuscript of *Les Misérables* and re-read it. It was now that a fear seems to have come over him for the first time. (I translate from Gustave Simon, his literary executor.) "He did not wish the public to consider the actors in the drama as simple marionettes, whose strings he held and worked at will. The moral idea of his work was the thing of supreme importance to him; this idea seemed to him to outweigh all combinations, all artifices of narration, all inventions, all creations of the imagination. What authority would these characters have if

instead of representing ideas, they only incarnated heroes of romance?"

Jean Valjean, Fantine and Cosette were types of all mankind, with mankind's weaknesses and miseries. Their experiences confront the reader with the great problems of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. *Les Misérables* was to be a religious book, and its preface was most fittingly to be the author's profession of faith. So he set about investigating the history of religion. Volume after volume of biography was carefully studied, and the preface which its author somewhat clumsily termed "a quasi-record of my philosophy of religion," became an exhaustive treatise in two parts; the first intended to "establish (prove) God" and the second to "establish the soul." Victor Hugo never erred by setting his mark too low.

But now that his introduction was complete, it became necessary to revise the story in the spirit of its ambitious preface. This re-reading and revision occupied seven or eight months, and on December 6, 1861, the section of the story entitled "Fantine" was sent to the printer. But the preface did not accompany it.

The months passed, and no preface. Lacroix became impatient. At the very last moment, when the book was ready and delay was no longer possible, Victor Hugo hastily sent a preface of a dozen lines on to Brussels. The discarded philosophical preface is tagged with the suggestion: "The enclosed might very well be added to a volume of Memoirs dealing with my intellectual life,"—a volume which never appeared, as it was never written.

If we are to accept M. Simon's theory, Hugo came to the conclusion that so profound a philosophical dissertation was unsuitable as an entrance door to a romance—an idea which, one might think, could easily have occurred to him earlier. He had feared, and with good reason, that his purpose in writing the book might be misconstrued. He was accused, as he had expected, of anarchy and atheism. Barbey d'Aurevilly called him "a great materialist," and Lamartine bewailed his lack of ideals. But it is probable that adverse criticisms would have been as numerous and as unreasonable if the dissertation had appeared with the novel.

The following note is written along the margin of the manuscript containing the *Préface*:

"Before the reader undertakes this book, he should be warned. The book he holds in his hands is a religious book."

The first paragraphs of the treatise are a fuller statement of its character:

"The book you are about to read is a religious book.

"Religious? From what point of view? From a point of view which is ideal, but absolute; indefinite, but immovable.

"Allow us to explain this statement in the fewest words possible.

"The spiritual attitude of the author of a book affects the book and appears in its pages.

"Moreover, it is not inappropriate that a study of this character, which has humanity for its object, should be preceded by a sort of preliminary meditation in which the reader takes part.

"The author of this book believes that his personal liberty permits him to say that he is a stranger to all the religions actually prevailing, and that at the same time, while combating their abuses, while suspicious of their purely human part, which is as it were the wrong side of their divine part, he admits them all and respects them all.

"If it were to come about that their divine side were in the end to absorb and destroy their human side, he would do more than respect them; he would reverence them.

"These restrictions made, the author—and he declares it aloud on the threshold of this sad book—is of those who believe and pray."

And later on comes the sweeping key-statement:

"There is not on earth a thinking being in whom the spectacle of the universe does not operate a slow construction of Deity."

There follow several characteristic passages from the first part of the preface:

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Religion is only the shadow cast by the universe on the intelligence of man.

The form of the shadow varies according to the varying angle of human civilization, it varies according to the greater or less degree of rectitude in the souls that receive it; but whatever its appearance may be, this shadow is always identical with itself. It comes from the Whole. It is this identity that gives religions their common foundation.

With this shadow,—for the moral law never loses its analogy with the physical law, which is only its symbol,—with this shadow are mingled half lights and penumbrae. They are idolatries and superstitions.

The visible or latent grandeur of reality oppresses the human mind and engenders visions involving more or less of truth. These chimeras are the theogonies. If you wish to gain an idea of the

modifications which natural realities undergo in traversing the ignorant imagination of man, if you wish to appreciate the aberrations which this refraction may produce, one or two examples may suffice for the purpose:

The first marvel which stupefied men was the earth. They called it the Great Goddess, the Goddess with the Great Breasts (Eurusernon), Titeria, Ops, Tellus, Gea, Vesta, Cybele, Ceres, Demeter; and behind the cloud which filled the temples, at Thebes, where her priests wore the masks of beasts, at Delphos, where, according to Pausanias, the earth gave oracles before Apollo, in Achaia, near the River Crathis, at Sparta, in the strange sanctuary called Garepton, she is represented as straight and upright in a stone robe with flutings like a column, symbol of the terrestrial foundation, with a horse's head signifying patent force, a head-dress of serpents which signified the hidden powers, holding in her right hand a dolphin which symbolized the water and in her left hand a dove which represented the air.

And in this form, false or true, she was adored.

As for the sun of which we have spoken above, all cults, as we have said addressed themselves to him. Paganism saw in the sun a god and Christianity an archangel. Apollo is Michael. The radical *Hel-* is found in Michael, as in Helios. Typhon is Satan. One might say that Saint Michael destroys Typhon and that Apollo crushes Satan. The quiver of the Olympian One is full of lightning shafts, as the scabbard of the angel is filled with flame. The religions have taken this star and made of it a hero of Heaven.

The German Illuminism, represented by Swinden, locates Hell in the sun; it is there that Michael guards Lucifer. The angel-guardian of Hell, who shows the damned to Alberic, monk of Mount Cassin, is named Helos. Of the pagan god and the Christian angel, the Orient had first made a *genius*. Bhael, Baal, Bel, Belus, Belenus, is still Hel, is still Helios. The sun has become a sort of grandiose human figure. He is placed in a chariot and given four horses whom Homer calls Pyroeis, Eois, Aethon, Phlegon, that is to say, something like Redness-from-above, Light, Heat, Redness-from-below; and whom Fulgentius names Erythreus, Acteon, Lampas, Philogeus, which names mean nearly the Red, the Luminous, the Flaming, the Friend of Earth, or the Return to the Stable. Thus does the piecing together of mythologies proceed.

So Nature teaches man and at the same time leads him astray. These contagions of naturalism, let us insist, have not spared the sages. The universe contemplated becomes easily the universe vis-

ioned. Many a genius has swayed from its balance under the weight of this fixed idea: Nature. Plato sees the dance of the spheres; Pythagoras hears their music. As for Aristotle, he doubts. Pythagoras, creator of music, as he is qualified in the wood-work of the Cathedral of Ulm by the great Gothic builder George Seirlin, *Pythagoras musicae inventor*. Pythagoras assigns between the sun and the moon and between the sun and Saturn musical intervals of a fourth, and defines the tone of the moon, which is, he says, the highest in pitch, and the sound of Saturn, which he asserts is the lowest. Others venture to be more definite still. For them the heavens are a lyre and the solar system the musical scale; the sun gives *do*, Mars gives *re*, Jupiter *mi*, Saturn *fa*, the moon *sol*, Venus *la*, Mercury *si*; as you see, the gamut, starting with the sun, reaches Saturn by way of Mars and Jupiter, and returns by the moon, Mercury and Venus, to the sun. They hear all this; they affirm it. Who are these madmen? The name of the first is Nicomachus; the name of the second is Cicero.

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What leads the sages astray is sure to lead the mob astray as well, and even farther astray.

A host of phenomena, even terrestrial phenomena, even of those which we can, so to speak, touch with our hands, remain unexplained. This is the source of fetishes and idolatries.

Great souls yield only to the great Whole, and many of them would resist even here if they were not crushed by the mass of prodigies. These heroes of free thought are, I may say, vanquished by superior numbers. They yield to the convergence of sublimities. All Nature agrees with God; were the agreement not universal, such men would not bow. The feeble imagination of certain primitive peoples is not so exacting. The first local phenomenon they light on serves as a pretext for a dogma. Shall I give examples?

There are in Africa two winds: the Arabian samiel, and the harmattan from the coast of Guinea.

A whistling is heard, the travelers throw themselves to the earth, with their faces in the dust; the horses hide their heads between their legs; a sort of fire passes crackling through the air, whose breath is death; if the recently dead are touched, they are found decayed already, their flesh comes loose and falls off; it is not a wind that blew, it is a gangrene. This terrible something is called the samiel. As for the harmattan, it comes in a fog; everything grows indistinct, it is night; the leaves fall, the plants shrivel up,

man is tormented with thirst, his nose swells, his lips break, his eyes weep, his skin cracks off, and though the air is hot, he is frozen with cold; but here begins the mystery; the sick sit up and breathe; fevers, small-pox, dysenteries, stop short; inoculation becomes useless, plagues are extinguished, epidemics vanish, the whole country is cured. This wind which has passed is a wind of healing.

Naturally, the harmattan and the samiel have their priests; a religion is born of this Armus and Arimane of winds.

If it were necessary, one might find a scientific explanation of the singing rock of Druidism and the phonolith of Egypt. That one of the two statues of Memnon which breathes a sound at dawn, the colossus Tama, forty feet high, who regarded the East with his hands on his knees, can be explained, not by the automaton of the Jesuit Kircher, but by that Chinese column a hundred verges high, called *Misee*, that is, "the bell-sound stone," which is to be seen on a mountain near Tancham, and which, touched with the tip of the finger, roars like twenty drums. It would simply be a sort of stone very rich in metallic molecules crystallized in such a way that the least dilation or the least percussion makes it vibrate. We may consider in the same connection and consequently despoil of all mystery the various phonoliths of the Haute-Loire and the Puy-en-Velay, and that famous church built to the Virgin with sonorous stones of alternating black and white, and the stone door to the cave of the Free Judges of Baden, which when opening gave the sound of C flat.

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Other phenomena present themselves, more difficult to explain, and always accompanied by mythological appendices added by man. What was that echo, heard by Roger Bacon in the hills at the confluence of the Marne and the Seine, which changed *s* to *v* and which, when one called out "*Satan*," answered "*va t'en*" (go away)?

What is that Devil's Mountain, near the Cape, where at certain hours a great voice is heard and a great light appears? You are in Finland; this porch at the back of which you see a well, like a throat at the back of a mouth, is the Smellic grot. Throw in a dog, a sheep, any living animal, and you will hear something stupefying and hideous like the thousand cries of a hydra devouring its prey. Who is there, at the edge of the cavern, paralysed with terror? It is Olaüs Magnus. Hence a religion. We are in the Orcades; here, with its Æolian solfeggio, with its millions of columns like pipes, where a drop of water plays a symphony, it the grotto of Staffa, the colossal ocean organ. The Gaelic bards listen charmed.

and trembling. The grotto, like a thinking being, sings day and night. Hence a religion.'

A Hollander named Haafner traveled in 1783, alone and on foot, across the Island of Ceylon. He was a curious and thoughtful person. He had been told of the mysterious solitudes of the Island, and the extraordinary noises heard there. These noises were attested by the fishermen of the Mabebagonga River, a water-course full of rocks that impede navigation. A Mecklenburg German, named Wolf, who had lived for twenty years on the plains of Jafnapatam, affirmed that he had been wakened one night by a terrible thing currently called "the voice." His wife, wakened as he had been, had been frightened into an illness. One of their neighbors, a European like themselves, declared that he had heard the same noise. Haafner wished to verify the fact, if it was possible, and in any case to see these strange deserts of which the natives spoke only with lowered voices. When the rainy season was over, he penetrated the forests to the mountains. He went alone, as we have said. Several weeks passed, and Haafner pushed straight forward; nothing singular had happened; the thickets were like thickets anywhere else, and these rocks were not different from other rocks. One day, after the sun had set, Haafner was on a peak of the Bancol range, the moon had risen, night was approaching; a hole in the rock opened before him; these alcoves are precious at such hours and in such places. Haafner lay down in it. He was dropping off to sleep, when suddenly he heard near him the barking of a dog. A melancholy, powerful barking, the bark of a dog surely, but of a dog that must be as large as a lion. Haafner looked around. No dog; no lion. But the barking continued, and grew louder; it was still a bark, but it was becoming thunder; a dog that could howl like that must be two hundred feet tall. There was a silence, then the howling began again. This time it was accompanied by a mixture of inexpressible voices, now like a coughing, which seemed to come from all points of the horizon at once, near at hand, at a distance, from a tree, from a cloud, sometimes from the tops of the mountains, sometimes from the depths of the earth; mingled with this sound was a very distinct conversation of human voices, now talking in turn, now all speaking at once, now and then laughing hideously. Haafner, exasperated and brave, rushed out of his cave and looked all around him. Nothing. The moon lighted the deserted mountain peaks. This indescribable tumult came from a gigantic motionless earth. Who then made these noises? The mountains. Haafner was surrounded by mountains that barked, by

mountains that coughed, and by mountains that carried on dialogues, and now and then this mountain solitude burst out into laughter.

Another traveler, an Englishman named Burckhardt, explored the coast of the Red Sea in 1816. He was investigating the reports of Katsner concerning the incomprehensible sounds which are heard in the mountains near the Gulf of Haifan. He sought out that sepulchral Mount of Bells, the Ghebel-Nakus, so called from the Arabic *Elnakus*, bell-tower; a mount which covers, according to local tradition, a divinely punished monastery, from which, at certain hours, one can hear distinctly the ringing of the bells under the mass of the mountain.

As he walked through these solitudes, Burckhardt came to a very elevated peak named Onschomar. There, suddenly, in broad daylight, at a moment when no surprise was possible, he heard a tremendous intermittent bellowing, a clamor that could have been caused by no beats of this earth, a sort of stormy howling like the noise of brass and the noise of thunder. Six hundred feet above him an inaccessible peak stood out; the bellowing came from there. There was no sign of subterranean commotion; neither basalt nor lava. The noise was unexplainable. On a neighboring height there is a monastery; Burckhardt visited it and questioned the monks; they told him that they had heard the same sounds, five years before, at midday. The steward, who had grown old in the convent, remembered that he had been surprised and terrified by these unknown sounds at irregular periods, four or five times in the space of forty years. Now, what is Mount Onschomar? It is the highest peak of the Sinai group, and (strange light on the story of the Bible!) the hoarse bursts of the voice that this peak throws out on the solitude well into the nineteenth century, are the terrible summons that Moses heard.

A religion issued from Ceylon; the religion of Buddhism. A religion came from Sinai; the religion of Moses.

The academies attribute these prodigies to acoustic effects; the people are more inclined to believe in God.

They believe in Him crudely; but they believe in Him.

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Yes, fanaticism is infamous; yes, superstitions are hideous; yes, there is a leprous blight on the august face of truth; yes, Innocent III, Charles IX, Borgias, Pius V; yes, impotence and brutishness, the stake, the *quemadero* of Seville, the inquisition of Goa, the



Jews tracked to death, the Albigenses massacred, the Moors exterminated, the Protestants tortured, the strappado, the dragonnades, Bossuet applauding Louvois, Torquemada at Saragossa, and Cromwell also at Drogheda, and Calvin also at Geneva, darkness, darkness, darkness! yes, it makes me tremble with horror. Superstition is a sad malady. Will you cure it by the suppression, pure and simple, of religion? Try it. Very good. You have done it well. You have lacerated the Talmuds, destroyed the Gemaras, pulverized the Vedas, burned the Korans. Palpable reality reigns alone; mystery is driven out; there is no longer anything in society whose commencement and end are not visible. Are you delivered? Is the work complete? No. See that mother. She has lost her child. What is she doing now, the unhappy creature? She falls on her knees. Before you? No. Before whom, then? Before the Unknown. She is praying.

The mystery has seized you again.

Yes, more truly, it has never left you.

Religion is not the Church; it is the opening rose, the brightening dawn, the bird busy at building his nest. Religion is sacred, eternal Nature. Placard your social philosophy so that it may hide the sun! Your economic problems are among the glorious pre-occupations of the nineteenth century. I who speak have consecrated to their investigation, if not their solution, all my atomic strength, and I know few questions more serious and more noble; let us suppose them settled; behold the creation of material prosperity, a significant advance. Is that all? You give bread to the body; but the soul rises and says to you: "I am hungry too."

What have you to give the soul?

To be well dressed, well fed and well lodged, to live cheaply and well, to buy salmon at a sou a pound thanks to the well-stocked rivers, to eat white bread, to have a good fire to warm you and a good bed to sleep in, to owe all this honestly to your own labor, to send the rays of your prosperity out beyond you, to see the smile of your prettily-dressed wife, to see your healthy children growing up about you, never to lack anything, to prosper in what you do and by what you do, to drink well and eat well, all this is much, indeed; but if it is all it is nothing.

Let us go further.

Realize on this earth all the Edens, all the Elysiums, all the Atlantides, all the triumphs of matter, all the glorifications of enjoyment, all the Walhallas of the flesh, all the gardens of delight, Catholic, Hindoo and pagan; set the paradise of Mahomet in the

paradise of Anne of Austria; a naked houri in robes of batiste. What do you need? Four meals a day? Here they are. And you? As much champagne as you can drink? Hold your glass, and drink. Palaces of marble, gilded halls, parks full of swans and peacocks, symphonies, festival joys, who wishes them? What servants will you have? All the forces of Nature? Come, forces. Obey man. Steam drives his ships, the wind pushes his aerostats, the lightning carries his letters. Very well; and here is science to offer him a potent hygiene, to restore his stomach, to strengthen his vertebral column, to bring his longevity back to the normal; so that if Nature wills it, youth endures for seventy years, and a man is a century. Better and better. Let us drink and eat. Luxury, pleasure, ecstasy, drunkenness, felicity, health. And concord as well. Peace on earth, and universal fraternity.

One restriction only; my ego will die. The tomb is a door. The circle of eternity is a zero. I shall never see again the children who are my own body; I shall never see again the helpmeet who is my life. Away with you! Your Eden horrifies me. I tremble.

I have sold my soul to my flesh. No. I will have none of such a bargain. Nothing but the soul can satisfy the heart.

Ah! you offer me meat and annihilation. Ah! you have nothing for this flame alive within me, heating and lighting me, burning me, thinking, hoping, loving within me. Very well! then let me alone.

Your satisfied stomach fills me with horror.

I would rather have black bread and a blue sky.

Ah! let us take care. There are tombs, there are mounds where the grass grows above those we love, there are old men who die and go we know not whither, there are children who are born to us we know not whence, there are waves on the sea, there are breaths of wind in the trees; let us take care! Take care; this flower becomes a fruit, this butterfly flutters about with millions of plumes on its wings, this coal and this diamond are the same material, this planet turns, this woman weeps; there are matters we do not understand, I tell you! And do you know what the other world is, the unknown world? I know; it is the necessary world.

Let us combat fanaticism, let us unmask imposture, let us censure hypocrisy, let us stand up stubbornly against the ferocity of dogmas, let us crush all that looks askance and all that lies, let us stamp out idolatry; but let us respect prayer. Prayer is the outgrowth of Immensity.

"I have nothing to do with your science," says the weeping

mother; "I will not eat your bread, I care not for your comfort, I want my child!"

And she goes to Him who can give her back a soul. And as long as there are mothers it will be so. And as long as there are eyes open to the daylight, as long as there are breasts, as long as there are mouths waiting for the eternal kiss, as long as half-naked babies play before the doors, as long as lovers walk in the evening under the shady murmuring leaves, as long as men and women live, it will be so.

Oh human impotence, and what a sad problem, to suppress this evil without wounding the good! No, no, fight religions to your last breath, and I am with you, but respect religion. In any case, I promise you that you are wasting your effort. Close the parish church, if you will. Stop the lark's song, the fly's buzzing, the lion's roaring, the ass's braying, the oak's leafing, the salt's crystallizing, the water's flowing, the wind's blowing, the unknown fearful mass it repeats in the depths. You have torn in pieces this hideous book where so many monstrous things were mingled with a few bits of inspiration. Up there above our heads is a great blue book full of flame; in this book the zodiac is a sentence; now tear this book in pieces.

Although we have no wish to connect matters which have no relation, permit us here a remark which has its significance. The attack being made on God is like the attack being made on man. There is the same inconsistency and the same prejudice. The reactionary proceeds exactly like the skeptic. One treats the Revolution as the other treats the Creation. Refusal to see the whole; limiting of the premises; negation of the infinite in one case, of democracy in the other. Attempt to overthrow the ensemble by attacking the detail. What does this mean? Explain the contradiction for me. This is what disgusts me. '93. Marat. The second of September. Why the blood? Why this crime? Then, after the indignation, the mockery. This is ugly, this is grotesque, this is foul, etc. Success seems easy, but nothing results. Victory,—not at all. Neither the people nor God destroyed. One secure in their right, the other in His Heaven.

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Certain philosophers, some from excess of love, are obstinate in their doubt and reason thus:

"Explain evil to us, and we will believe. Tell us the reason for the tiger, the reason for the spider, the reason for the hemlock, the reason for Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius, the reason for

the 18th Brumaire, the reason for Lacenaire, the reason for war, the reason for night, the reason why life must be fed by death; tell us the reason for suffering and sin; and we will believe. A God who creates or who permits evil is incomprehensible. Evil exists; then God is not."

I admit that a God who creates or permits evil is incomprehensible.

Now let us have an understanding as to the relation between incomprehensibility and non-existence.

If it is sufficient for a thing to be incomprehensible in order that it be impossible, the negators are right.

But if the incomprehensible can exist, they are wrong.

Let us examine:

Infinity is scientifically demonstrable. Ask algebra.

Now what is infinity? It is the incomprehensible.

Then the incomprehensible can exist, since it does exist.

Raise your eyes to the starry Heaven, and see it. Take up a fly, and you touch it.

If the incomprehensible exists, what does the argument prove: God is incomprehensible; hence he cannot exist?

Nothing.

Evil, being merely incomprehensible, proves nothing against God.

Not to understand is no more reason for denying than for believing.

Knowledge of God is given to no one; a notion of God is given to all.

Each one has his drop of water; no one has the ocean.

If I could explain evil, I could explain God; if I could explain God, I should be God.

Put a blind man in the sunlight; he will not see the sun, but he will feel it.

"I am warm," he will say.

It is thus that we feel the absolute Being, without seeing. There is a warmth that comes from God.

The argument from evil, then, can not reasonably be invoked; it is part of the incomprehensible. When you explain the infinite to me, I can explain the incomprehensible to you.

Prove God, yes. Explain Him, no.