

VALJEAN

A Play in One Act

Adapted by Jeffrey M. Watts

From an episode in
Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*

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Valjean

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DEDICATION

To Dr. Gerald Lachance, partner in drama.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Valjean is based on the first pages of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean has been imprisoned nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. After being released from prison, Valjean finds it impossible to fit into society and find a place in the world. The kindness of a bishop, however, gives him new direction and restores his faith in human compassion.

VALJEAN

(AT RISE: A cathedral bell strikes six.)

NARRATOR: So long as there exists in this world we call civilized, a system where men and women, even after they have paid the penalty of the law and exploited their offenses in full, are hounded and persecuted wherever they go – there will be a need for this story to be told: For ten years in the late eighteenth century France had been at war with itself. The rich fought for land and power while the poor battled for bread and dignity. And though land changed hands and power shifted, the poor remained hungry and downtrodden. This is the story of one of the poor. His name: Valjean.

JUDGE: Jean Valjean, remember, in this court of law you are guilty until you prove yourself innocent. You are accused of stealing a loaf of bread. What say ye to this matter?

VALJEAN: *(Back to the audience. Pleading.)* But your honor, there was no work, no money. I took a loaf of bread, only one loaf. Not for myself. My sister is a widow with seven children. I had to feed them. I wouldn't have taken the bread except to care for them.

JUDGE: You are sentenced to five years in prison.

VALJEAN: For a loaf of bread?

JUDGE: Bailiff, take him away. *(Strikes the gavel.)*

VALJEAN: But my sister and her children, what is to become of them?

JUDGE: That is not our concern. Next case.

(Lights dim.)

NARRATOR: Valjean labored in the following years to pay his debt to society. And like so many others who were forced to leave families behind, he attempted escape to find and to care for the ones he loved. But each time he was caught, and his sentence increased.

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NARRATOR: *(Cont'd.)* Valjean served nineteen years before he was freed from the cage that had held him so long. On a dismal day in October of 1815, Jean Valjean set forth to wander his country looking for a place to appease his hunger and to lay his head.

(A cathedral bell strikes seven.)

(VALJEAN, hardened and ragged, enters with a small sack slung over his shoulder which contains all of his worldly possessions. He sits at the small table DR. He opens his purse to count his money. After a moment the HOST carrying a kettle of soup, moves toward him. Valjean quickly hides his purse inside his tunic.)

VALJEAN: I would like something to eat and some lodging.

HOST: *(Eyeing him suspiciously as VALJEAN lifts his head.)* I cannot receive you.

VALJEAN: *(Pulls out a leather purse.)* I have money.

HOST: I'm sorry, I cannot receive you.

VALJEAN: Why? Are you afraid I will not pay you, or do you want me to pay in advance? I have money, I tell you.

HOST: It's not that.

VALJEAN: What, then?

HOST: You have money –

VALJEAN: Yes.

HOST: But I have no room.

VALJEAN: *(Quietly.)* Well, put me in the stable.

HOST: I cannot.

VALJEAN: Why?

HOST: ... Because the horses take all the room.

VALJEAN: Well, then, a corner in the garret, a truss of straw: we will see about that after dinner.

HOST: *(Soberly, firmly.)* I cannot give you any dinner.

VALJEAN: *(Realizing he's not being welcomed in yet another place, stands.)* But I am dying with hunger. I have walked since sunrise; I will pay. I want something to eat.

HOST: I have nothing.

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VALJEAN: *(Laughs.)* Nothing! *(Points to the kettle of soup.)* And all that?

HOST: All that is engaged.

VALJEAN: *(Sits again.)* I am at an inn. I am hungry, and I shall stay.

HOST: *(Bends down. Coldly in his ear.)* Go away. *(VALJEAN does not move.)* Shall I tell you your name? Your name is Jean Valjean; now shall I tell you who you are? You're a thief. *(VALJEAN lowers his head.)* It is my custom to be polite to all: so I shall simply say – GO.

VALJEAN: *(Rising. Speaks to himself.)* Where am I to go?

(HOST exits as lights dim. A cathedral bell strikes eight.)

NARRATOR: A hammer and chisel broke the iron chains that bound Valjean for nineteen years. But the invisible chain that held him was not as easily broken. Valjean paid the price for stealing bread. But now he must pay the price for a greater crime: his name. Valjean is a splinter from the impoverished mass of humanity that populates every city, village and countryside. A man of the lower class who, despite how hard he labored, was not allowed to raise himself out of the dungheap from which he sprang.

(Lights come up CS. VALJEAN moves to the table CS. Timidly sits. The HOSTESS enters. His face is obscured from her.)

HOSTESS: What do you want?

VALJEAN: I want supper and then a bed.

HOSTESS: You have money to pay for it?

VALJEAN: *(Takes out purse and raises his head.)* Yes, I have plenty.

HOSTESS: *(Recognizes him.)* You! You are not welcome here. You'll have to clear out of here.

VALJEAN: I'll pay in advance.

HOSTESS: We don't take your kind here.

VALJEAN: You know who I am then?

HOSTESS: Yes.

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VALJEAN: They sent me out of the other inn.

HOSTESS: And I turn you out of this one.

VALJEAN: Where would you have me go?

HOSTESS: I don't care. But you'll not stay here. Go!

VALJEAN: Go.

(Rises and moves away as HOSTESS exits.)

VALJEAN: Where am I to go? Where is there a place for me? For nineteen years my country gave me a wooden pallet and a sore back. Now, I'm not permitted to share a bed with a horse. For nineteen years my country gave me a crust of bread and stale water, and sickness from that. Now, food is refused me even with my coins upon the table. Where is compassion? Where is kinship? Where is home? You don't belong anymore Jean Valjean, neither in prison nor the world. *(Raises fist toward heaven.)* Then why did you let me live? Have I not suffered enough for love of my family? For following Your command? Why, God, have you forsaken me?

(HE waits for a moment for an answer. Then drops his hand in exhaustion. He pulls his cloak around him then moves DR. He puts his sack at the head of the bench as a pillow then lies down. A cathedral bell strikes nine. After a moment MADAME RATIGNOLLE, a mysterious elderly woman, enters from church.)

MME. RATIGNOLLE: *(Taking notice of VALJEAN.)* What are you doing there, my friend?

VALJEAN: *(Harshly.)* Can't you see, my good woman, I am going to sleep.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: *(Undaunted by his tone.)* Upon the bench?

VALJEAN: For nineteen years I have had a wooden mattress, tonight I have a stone one.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: You have been a soldier, then?

VALJEAN: *(Carefully.)* Yes, my good woman, a soldier.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: Why don't you go to the inn?

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VALJEAN: Because I have no money.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: (*Rummages through purse.*) Of course they will not take you if you have no money. (*Taking out coins.*) Alas, I have only four sous in my purse.

VALJEAN: For your kindness, I will take them.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: (*Generously handing them over.*) You cannot find lodging for so little in an inn. But have you tried? You cannot pass the night so. You must be cold and hungry. They should give you lodging for charity.

VALJEAN: I have knocked at every door.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: And at every door?

VALJEAN: Everybody has driven me away.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: You have knocked at every door?

VALJEAN: Yes.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: Have you knocked at that one there? (*Indicates the BISHOP'S door.*)

VALJEAN: No.

MME. RATIGNOLLE: Then, knock there.

(*They freeze as lights dim on DR and come up on the BISHOP'S house.*)

MME. MAGLOIRE: (*A bustling middle-aged housekeeper enters through door DL, carrying a marketing basket.*) The only house in the village without a lock. I've always said that it would be a regrettable omission. And look what's happened. Of course, I knew it would happen, eventually. I have always said that it would happen and I was right. How burdensome to have such an intuitive spirit.

BAPTISTINE: (*A pretty young woman quietly arranging flowers.*) What are you talking about, Madame Magloire?

MME. MAGLOIRE: How many years have I told the Bishop that he should have a lock on this door? (*Doesn't give time for an answer.*) As long as I've worked for him, that's how long. But does he listen? No, never once. Well, now tonight, perhaps he'll listen.

BAPTISTINE: What has happened that makes you so certain that he will change his mind?

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