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VICTOR HUGO

HIS LIFE AND WORK

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'SHELLEY: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY,' 'POETS AND NOVELISTS,'
ETC.

WITH A PORTRAIT OF VICTOR HUGO.

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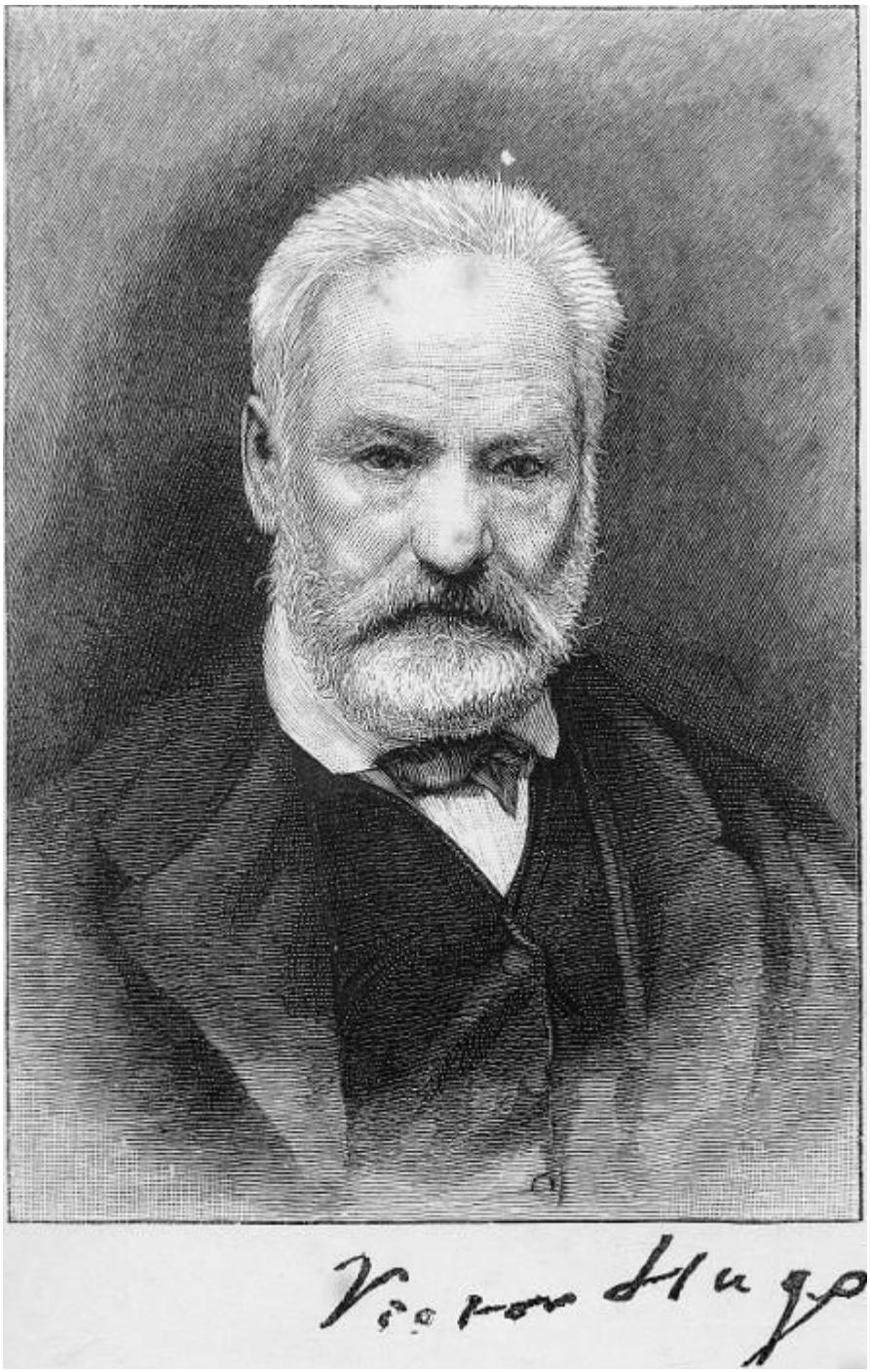

[Pg iii]

I INSCRIBE THIS VOLUME

TO

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE,

REJOICING THUS TO CONNECT

THE

GREAT BARD AND PROPHET OF FRANCE

WITH THE ENGLISH

SINGER OF A YOUNGER DAY,

WHO HAS DRUNK DEEPLY

OF

THE MASTER'S SPIRIT.

G. B. S.

[Pg v]

PRELIMINARY NOTE.

I began this study of Victor Hugo in December last, and arrangements were made for its early publication. The great poet has now passed away, and this melancholy event gives the biographical portion of the present volume a completeness not originally anticipated. Notwithstanding the multitude of criticisms which have appeared in our own and other languages upon Hugo's works, this is the only book which relates the full story of his life, and now traces to its close his literary career. More than twenty years have elapsed since the publication of Madame Hugo's memorials of the earlier portion of the poet's history, and since that time M. Barbou's work (excellently translated by Miss Frewer) is the only narrative of a biographical character which has appeared. The writings of various French and English critics, the two works I have named, and those valuable chroniclers, the journals of London and Paris, have been of considerable service to me in the preparation of the biography now offered to the public.

The writings of Victor Hugo are so varied and multifarious, and many of them are so well known to English[Pg vi] readers, that I have not deemed it necessary to subject them to a detailed analysis. At the same time, the reader unfamiliar with these powerful works will, I trust, be able to gather something of their purport and scope from the ensuing pages. As they have impressed all minds, moreover, by their striking

originality, I thought that it would not be without its value if, while venturing to record my own impressions, I gave at the same time a representation of critical contemporary opinion upon them. Finally, it has been my object to present to the reader, within reasonable compass, a complete survey of the life and work of the most celebrated Frenchman of the nineteenth century.

G. Barnett Smith.

Highgate, London, N.,
June 3rd, 1885.

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[Pg 1]

VICTOR HUGO:

HIS LIFE AND WORK.

CHAPTER I.EARLY YEARS.

The glory of France touched its zenith at the period when our narrative opens. Europe virtually lay at the feet of Napoleon, who had risen to a height of authority and power which might well have satisfied the most vaulting ambition. Nations whose records extended back into the ages of antiquity trembled before him; and only one people, that of this sea-girt isle of Britain, declined to bend the knee to the all-conquering First Consul. Yet the philosophic mind, reflecting that the stability of a nation or a throne must be measured by its growth, must surely have distrusted the permanence of a

grandeur and a greatness thus rapidly achieved. And speedily would such prevision have been[Pg 2] justified, for in little more than one brief decade the sun of Napoleon set as suddenly as it arose.

But while as yet the fame and the splendour of the conqueror were in their noonday, there was born at Besançon another child of genius, whose triumphs were to be won in a different and a nobler sphere. He was destined to touch, as with Ithuriel's spear, the sleeping spirit of French poesy, and to animate it with new life, vigour, and enthusiasm; he was to recall the divine muse from the drear region of classicism, and, by revivifying almost every branch of imaginative literature, he was himself to gain the triple crown of poet, romancist, and dramatist. And not alone for this was the child Victor Hugo to grow into manhood and venerable age. He was to become a great apostle of liberty, and as his life opened with the triumphs of the first Napoleon, so before its close he was destined to behold the last of that name pass away in the whirlwind, and France recover much of her prosperity and her power under the ægis of the Republic, of which the poet sang and for which he laboured.

The ancestry of Victor Hugo were not [Pg 3]undistinguished. Documents concerning them before the fifteenth century were lost in the pillage of Nancy, but since that time a clear genealogy is claimed. There was one Hugo, a soldier, who obtained in 1535 letters patent of nobility for himself and his descendants from Cardinal Jean de Lorraine, Archbishop of Rheims, which letters were subsequently confirmed by the Cardinal's brother, Antoine, Duke of Lorraine. The fifth descendant from this warrior-noble, Charles Hyacinthe Hugo, obtained new letters patent; and his grandson, Joseph Leopold Sigisbert, was the father of the poet. In the seventeenth century, a member of the Hugo family was known both in the Church and in literature, and became Abbé of Estival and Bishop of Ptolemais. Another who lived in the eighteenth century, Louis Antoine Hugo, was a member of the Convention, and was executed for moderatism. Thus in career, as in character, there was much variety in the Hugo family.

Sigisbert Hugo, who entered the army as a cadet in 1788, ultimately attained the rank of General under the First Empire. Although the hereditary title of Count was the appanage of this rank, he never took it up. While brave[Pg 4] and fearless in war, he is represented as being devotion and goodness personified, and humane to a fault. 'He set his children a fine example of duty, being ever their instructor in the paths of honour.' During a period of military service at Nantes, he became acquainted with Sophie Trébuchet, the daughter of a wealthy shipowner. An attachment soon sprang up between them, and they were married in Paris, Hugo having been summoned thither as reporter to the first council of war on the Seine.

Though the grandfather of Victor Hugo on the maternal side was engaged in commerce, he belonged to an old family, and one famous in La Vendée for its devotion to the Royalist cause. A cousin of Madame Hugo was the Count de Chassebœuf, better known as Volney, the author of *Les Ruines*; and another cousin was Count Cornet, who was very prominent in political matters both before and during the First Empire. Two sons were born to Major Hugo and his wife, and then they looked forward with hope to the birth of a daughter, whom it was decided to name Victorine. Another son, however, came instead, and one so weakly and diminutive that the accoucheur declared strongly[Pg 5] against his chances of life. The babe was taken to the mairie at Besançon, and registered as having been born on the 26th of February, 1802. He received the names of Victor Marie Hugo, and his godfather was Major Hugo's intimate friend, General Lahorie, chief of the staff to General Moreau. It has been pointed out that the word Hugo in old German was the equivalent of the Latin word *spiritus*, and this fact, combined with the Christian name of Victor, caused Dumas the elder to say that 'the name of Victor Hugo stands forth as the conquering spirit, the triumphant soul, the breath of victory.'

But for some time there could be little presage of triumph or victory in connection with Victor Hugo. Languid and ailing in body, he became unusually sad for a child of such tender years, and 'was sometimes discovered in a corner, weeping silently without any reason.' He afterwards described his untoward childhood in the opening lines of the *Feuilles d'Automne*. For some time the Hugo family accompanied its head in his military journeyings; but when Major Hugo was ultimately ordered to join the army of Italy, he settled his wife and their three young children in Paris, in the Rue de[Pg 6] Clichy. That the youngest scion of the house could not really have been as feeble and frail as he looked, and that he must have had the basis of a good, sound constitution, is proved by his long life; but we must not forget also in this regard the great care and assiduous attention lavished upon him by his mother. His career furnishes another illustration of the truth that while the most glorious promise sometimes sets in gloom and premature death, on the other hand genius also not infrequently advances from the wavering spark to a noble flame, and out of weakness is made strength.

Major (afterwards General) Hugo rendered conspicuous service in Italy by the capture of the notorious bandit chief, Fra Diavolo, and the pacification of Naples. For these acts he was made Colonel of Royal Corsica and Governor of Avellino. When not quite five years old Victor was taken by his mother, with his brothers, Abel and Eugène, to Avellino, and the journey to Italy is associated with his first observations of natural scenery. Though so young, his imagination was fired by all he saw, and the

impressions he formed were very distinct—so much so that in after life he would discuss[Pg 7] with Alexandre Dumas the aspects of the country through which he had travelled in his childhood.

In 1808 Colonel Hugo was sent to Madrid in the train of Joseph Bonaparte; but, as Spain was disturbed by war, he would not hazard the presence of his wife and children in that country. Madame Hugo accordingly went to Paris, and established herself at the house No. 12, in the Impasse des Feuillantines, where she now devoted herself to the education of her children. Late in life, Victor Hugo described the household in the Feuillantines. Near by there was an aged priest, who acted as tutor to the boys, teaching them a good deal of Latin, a smattering of Greek, and the barest outlines of history. In the gardens, and amid the ruins of an old convent in the grounds, the Hugo boys passed many happy days. 'Together in their work and in their play, rough-hewing their lives regardless of destiny, they passed their time as children of the spring, mindful only of their books, of the trees, and of the clouds, listening to the tumultuous chorus of the birds, but watched over incessantly by one sweet and loving smile.' 'Blessings on thee, O my[Pg 8] mother!' was the invocation of the poet in his later years.

Once the family received an accession in the person of General Lahorie, who had been connected with Moreau's conspiracy, and was condemned to death for contumacy. Madame Hugo, in her secluded dwelling, and in a little chapel buried amongst the foliage, gave him a secure shelter for eighteen months. Young Victor did not then know that the stranger in whom he took so deep an interest, and in whom he begat an equal interest, was his godfather. Lahorie took kindly to the boy, and frequently conversed with him, saying to him on one occasion with great impressiveness, 'Child, everything must yield to liberty!' The precautions of Lahorie and his friends were in the end of no avail. In 1811 he was arrested at the Feuillantines, tried and condemned by court-martial, and shot on the plain of Grenelle. Napoleon was implacable in his revenge; his wrath might sleep, but it was never allowed to die.

Another visitor to the Feuillantines was General Louis Hugo, uncle to the youths. With that strong poetic imagery which characterized[Pg 9] him, little Victor said that the entrance of his uncle into the salon 'had on us the effect of the Archangel Michael appearing on a beam of light.' The visitor came at the request of his brother to hasten the departure of the family for Spain. The boys Hugo were informed by their mother that they must learn Spanish, and just as they would have performed much more impossible feats under such a command, they acquired the language in the course of a few weeks.

In the spring of 1811, Madame Hugo and her children began their journey into Spain. At Bayonne they had to await a convoy for Madrid. Here the travellers paid several visits to the theatre, which made a deep impression upon Victor, yet one which, while more lasting perhaps, was not so deep as that made by the little daughter of a widow, who seems to have quite captivated the boy. He afterwards referred to this attachment as bearing the same relation to love that the light of dawn bears to the full blaze of day. But he never saw again the youthful *inamorata* who stirred 'the first cry of the awakening heart.'

The dilatory progress of the convoy to[Pg 10] Madrid, though irksome to Madame Hugo, was not so to her youngest son. He delighted in observing the features of the scenery and the towns through which they passed. With Ernani he was especially pleased, and subsequently gave to one of his dramas the name of this town. After a number of adventures, some of them of a trying character, the convoy entered Madrid, and Madame Hugo and her family were accommodated at the palace of Prince Masserano. Their rooms and all the appointments were very sumptuous, and there was a great display of Bohemian and Venetian glass and magnificent China vases. Concerning the latter, Victor Hugo said that he had 'never since met with any so remarkable.' Victor's eldest brother, Abel, was made a page to King Joseph, and it was intended that Victor himself should follow his example. Meanwhile Eugène and Victor were placed in the Seminary of Nobles, a proceeding which affected them deeply, and made them inexpressibly miserable after the happiness they had found in the Masserano Palace.

But great and dire events were impending in Napoleonic history. By the beginning of the year 1812 the position of French affairs generally[Pg 11] became so threatening that General Hugo decided to send his wife and the two younger children back to Paris. Not many months elapsed before his prescience was justified. Bonaparte's army was decimated by the inclement snows of Russia after the burning of Moscow, and the kings he had set up in the European capitals began to tremble for the stability of their thrones.

Madame Hugo and her two sons safely reached Paris after a tedious journey, and once more established themselves in the Feuillantines. The biographical work written by the poet's wife shows that Madame Hugo had liberal ideas on the subject of education: that where religion was in question she was averse to forcing any particular persuasion on her sons, or to interfere with their natural tendencies; neither did she wish to tax their intelligence any more than their consciences. In the matter of reading she was equally liberal: the boys were allowed the greatest freedom, and read Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and other authors; but the works of such writers paled in

comparison with Captain Cook's travels, which had a great fascination for the young students. Madame Hugo judged that[Pg 12] any errors her sons were likely to imbibe in their wide and catholic reading would be rendered innocuous by the influence of a good example and the purity of the home life. She restrained them by her authority, and, while attending to their mental and moral development, she did not neglect the physical. She desired them to grow up healthy and complete in mind and body alike.

The troubles in Spain thickened apace, and King Joseph left Madrid, being followed by General Hugo. The victory of the Allies at Vittoria practically settled the fate of Joseph Bonaparte and the Spanish crown. The King dismissed his retinue of officers and retired into private life, and General Hugo returned to Paris with his son Abel. Madame Hugo and the other children had moved into the Rue du Cherche-Midi. Having herself been an invader, it was now the turn of France to be invaded. General Hugo was no favourite with the Emperor (who had not forgotten the Moreau conspiracy), but when his country was in danger he could not remain inactive. So he volunteered, and went into the provinces, where he rendered conspicuous service. He long held Thionville, keeping the[Pg 13] Allies at bay, and refused to open the town until he received official despatches from his General-in-Chief announcing the cessation of hostilities. The restoration of the Bourbons followed, and, although this was hailed with great joy by Madame Hugo, it led to General Hugo being deprived of his command and removed from active employment, together with all the officers who had shared in the defence of Thionville.

Eugène and Victor Hugo now lost the liberty they had for some time enjoyed, and were sent to school, being placed in the Collége Cordier et Decotte, in the Rue Ste. Marguerite. At first the removal was especially bitter to Victor, as it separated him from Adèle Foucher, a young girl who had completely won his youthful heart. This love continued to grow from its inception in the Rue du Cherche-Midi till the time when Adèle became his devoted wife, and returned Victor Hugo's affection with an ardour equal to his own.

The Hugo boys were naturally the subject of a cross-fire in regard to politics. Their father was devoted to the Empire, and their mother was equally devoted to the Royalists. But as the influence of a mother always has priority in[Pg 14] regard to time, Victor Hugo was for a season enthusiastic about royalty. He could not, with his warm temperament and lively imagination, be half-hearted about anything. Nor need it surprise us that he yielded first to the influence of his mother as regarded the Bourbons, and then to that of his father as regarded the Bonapartes. In youth it is the imagination which is developed; the judgment is formed by slow stages. It would have surprised us more if Victor Hugo had not shown himself amenable to the potent

influences of his home training. His father and mother were of no ordinary type; they had both great latent force of nature and character, which deeply impressed itself upon their children. In estimating the career of Victor Hugo, then, with its later changes of opinion, the circumstances which surrounded his early years, and greatly assisted in moulding his character, must not be forgotten.

Early in 1815 Paris was electrified by the news that Napoleon had returned from Elba. For a brief period the magic of his name once more exercised a profound influence; and under this revival of Bonapartist prospects General Hugo was again despatched to take the command[Pg 15] of Thionville. He exhibited the same capacity and spirit as before, but all was of no avail. The crowning disaster of Waterloo extinguished the hopes of the Bonapartists, and Napoleon fell, 'like Lucifer, never to rise again.'

It is matter for regret that the differences between General and Madame Hugo on the subject of politics and dynasties led to a separation between them, though one that was mutually desired. Each felt too strongly on these subjects to give way, and thereby stultify his or her convictions. But political disagreements did not affect the deep interest of both parents in their children. The boys made great progress at school, and also attended courses of lectures in physics, philosophy, and mathematics at the Collége Louis-le-Grand. Their proficiency was especially marked in mathematics, and it obtained for both honourable mention in the examinations.

Poetry, however, even thus early, was the real mistress of Victor Hugo. His tentative efforts in this direction were as varied as they were numerous, and he has left an amusing record of his first wooings of the Muse. He alternated fights at the college (he and Eugène[Pg 16] were the kings of the school) with flights of the imagination. Nothing came amiss to him, whether ode, satire, epistle, lyric, tragedy, elegy, etc.; and he imitated Ossian and translated from Virgil, Horace, and Lucan at an age when others only just begin to acquire an appreciation and understanding of those authors. Nor were such writers as Martial and Ausonius unknown to him. Then from poetry he would turn to romances, fables, stories, epigrams, madrigals, logographs, acrostics, charades, enigmas, and impromptus; and he even wrote a comic opera.

In one of these youthful pieces he deprecated the exercise of the reader's satirical rage over the effusion; and certainly the chief impression which these initial attempts at composition leave upon the reader is not a critical one founded upon their manifest crudity and inconsequences of thought, but one of surprise at the exuberance of fancy and command of expression so soon and so singularly displayed. There was more than sufficient in them to the observant eye to foreshadow the genius which their author afterwards developed. Each of these poems was an effort of the imagination

after strength of wing. But of all those who perused these early[Pg 17] poetic efforts, Madame Hugo was probably the only one able to gauge the great promise of the writer. She could not but anticipate much from that genius which was just essaying to unfold itself in the sun. Yet even she could not fully foresee the magnificent, eagle-like flights of which these imaginings were but the first faint flutterings of the eaglet's wing.

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CHAPTER II.DAWNINGS OF GENIUS.

Victor Hugo was not quite thirteen when he wrote his first poetical essay, which had for its subject *Roland and Chivalry*. This was followed in the same year, 1815, by an intensely Royalist poem, and one breathing indignation against the Emperor, after the disaster of Waterloo. The poet had been thrown constantly into the midst of Royalist influences and surroundings; not only his mother, but General Lahorie and M. Foucher, her most intimate friends, were enemies of the Empire, and the youth consequently imbibed at the same time hatred of the Empire and love of the Bourbons.

His first tragedy, *Irtamène*, was written in honour of Louis XVIII., and though professedly dealing with Egyptian themes, it was really a defence of the French King. There is a usurper[Pg 19] in it, who meets with condign chastisement, and the play ends with the coronation of the legitimate monarch. 'Those who hate tyrants should love kings,' said the writer, to whom at that time the restoration of the Bourbons meant liberty. But these things must not be made too much of. The poet was at that nebulous stage when the fact of writing poetry was more to him than the subject-matter of his exercises. He read voluminously, but he had not as yet begun to separate, to weigh, and to discriminate.

A course of the *Théâtre de Voltaire* led him to begin a new tragedy, *Athéli; or, the Scandinavians*, all in dramatic order, with its five acts, and its due regard to narrative, scenery, etc. Before he had completed it, however, he turned to a comic opera, *A Quelque Chose Hasard est Bon*. Then he reverted to the drama, and wrote a play in three acts, with two interludes, entitled *Inez de Castro*. From the point of view of literary art, little is to be said of these things; but there are many scattered passages in them which reveal remarkable insight on the part of one so young. In the year 1817 he first sought publicity for his compositions, competing for[Pg 20] the poetical prize annually offered by the French Academy. The subject chosen was, *The Advantages of Study in every situation of Life*, and amongst the competitors were Lebrun, Delavigne,

Saintine, and Loyson, who all on this occasion made their poetical debut. The first prize was divided between Saintine and Lebrun, and Hugo received honourable mention; but when the poems came to be declaimed in public, the warmest applause followed that by Victor Hugo. The Academy judges were considerably puzzled by Master Hugo's exercise. In one place he wrote as though he had arrived at years of discretion and comparative maturity, and then demolished this idea by the lines—

'I, who have ever fled from courts and cities,

Scarce three short lustres have accomplished yet.'

The judges came to the conclusion that the young poet was playing with them, and in their report accordingly threw doubt upon his statement that he was only fifteen years old. The production of his birth certificate set this question at rest, and Victor's name now became prominent in the newspapers. M. Raynouard, the cultured Secretary of the Academy, finding[Pg 21] that the 'most potent, grave, and reverend signors' had not been deceived, expressed the great pleasure he had in making the youthful competitor's acquaintance. Other distinguished men followed suit, and Hugo was described as 'the sublime child,' either by Chateaubriand or Soumet. The evidence points to the latter having first made use of this phrase, but its origin matters little, for Chateaubriand fully adopted it, remarking that anyone might naturally have used the words, they expressed so decided a truth. Hugo was taken by a friend to see the author of *Atala*, and the impression made upon his mind by this man of genius found utterance in the exclamation, 'I would be Chateaubriand or nothing.'

In 1818 Victor's brother Eugène was awarded a prize at the floral games of Toulouse. The younger brother's ambition was touched, and in the following year he secured two prizes from the same Academy for his poems on *The Statue of Henry IV.*, and *The Virgins of Verdun*. The former poem gained the golden lily, and the latter the golden amaranth. It seems that just as the writer was about to set to work on the first-named poem, Madame Hugo was seized[Pg 22] with inflammation of the chest. She lamented that her son would be unable to complete his poem in time; but he set to work, wrote it in a single night, and it was despatched next morning in time to compete for the prize. The President of the Toulouse Academy admitted that it was an enigma for one so young to exhibit such remarkable talents in literature.

A poem, *Moses on the Nile*, gained him a third prize at Toulouse, and this constituted him Master of the Floral Games, so that at the age of eighteen he became a provincial academician. He was still Royalist in his opinions, and on the few occasions when he was in the company of his father, the latter did not attempt to change his views, feeling that it would be useless to attempt to set the arguments of a few hours against

a daily and hourly influence. But he had a true apprehension of his son's character, and on one occasion, when Victor had expressed himself warmly in favour of the Vendeans, General Hugo turned to General Lucotte, and said: 'Let us leave all to time. The child shares his mother's views; the man will have the opinions of his father.'

Victor Hugo was now the subject of [Pg 23]conflicting claims. There was the law, which he had chosen as a profession, with its demands upon him, and there was literature, which he loved too much to surrender; while at the same time love and politics also claimed their share in him. He determined to throw himself ardently into literature. Separated from the object of his youthful affections, he wrote his *Han d'Islande*, in which, while there are many crimes and horrors, there are also passages of tenderness, wherein he sought to embalm and reveal his feelings of love. His courage sustained him through many trials, but at last he was called upon to bear one that made a profound impression upon his heart. Madame Hugo, who was now living in the Rue Mézières, was seized with serious illness after working in her garden, which was her favourite occupation. For some time she struggled successfully with the disease, but it had obtained too firm a hold upon her, and she died suddenly on the 27th of June, 1821. On the evening of the funeral, Adèle Foucher, unconscious of what had occurred, was dancing at a party given in celebration of her birthday. Next morning Victor called upon her, and the lovers, mingling[Pg 24] their tears together, mutually renewed their old vows of attachment. Victor, to whom life had seemed without an object on the death of his mother, speedily found another after his betrothal to Adèle. Her parents no longer actively opposed the union, but stipulated for its postponement until Victor could provide a home.

In conjunction with several friends, Hugo had already founded the *Conservateur Littéraire*, to which he contributed articles on Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Moore, etc., and a number of political satires. He had a sum of seven hundred francs, upon which he subsisted for a year, and the method by which he did it will be found related in the experiences of Marius in *Les Misérables*. Translations from Lucan and Virgil, which appeared under the name of D'Auverney, and the Epistles from Aristides to Brutus on *Thou* and *You*, emanated from his pen. He also wrote a very noticeable article on Lamartine's *Méditations Poétiques*, which had just appeared. Then came the first instalment of his own *Odes et Ballades*, a work in which his genius began to attain a fuller freedom and a richer expression. The volume was received with very wide favour, and though, as M. Barbou has observed, it[Pg 25] presents many ideas that would find no approval now, the poet, nevertheless, declared that he could proudly and conscientiously place the work side by side with the democratical books and poems of his matured manhood. This, he said, he should be prepared to do, because

in 'the fierce strife against early prejudices imbibed with a mother's milk, and in the slow rough ascent from the false to the true, which to a certain extent makes up the substance of every man's life, and causes the development of his conscience to be the type of human progress in general; each step so taken represents some material sacrifice to moral advancement, some interest abandoned, some vanity eschewed, some worldly benefit renounced—nay, perhaps, some risk of home or even life incurred.' This justification may fairly be accepted, but from another aspect also these *Odes* are worthy of attention. They were the first noble efforts of the poet to emancipate French poetry from the trammels which had too long governed it, and which had rendered it almost dead, and effete alike in spirit and in form. At length imagination was to resume its rightful sway, and exhibit some return to its pristine vigour.

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The *Odes* not only brought the author friends like Émile Deschamps and Alfred de Vigny, but they were pecuniarily successful. The first edition yielded him a profit of seven hundred francs, and a second quickly followed. The attention of the King was called to the poems, and the interest his Majesty took in them, together with a romantic incident in connection with the Saumur plot, led to a pension of 1,000 francs being conferred upon the poet from the King's privy purse. He now thought he was entitled to press the question of his marriage. His father, who had married again, offered no opposition; the Fouchers also gave way, and bestowed the hand of their daughter Adèle upon the young and now successful poet. Victor Hugo had shortly before this made the acquaintance of the celebrated priest Lamennais, and it was from his hands that he received the certificate of confession required before he could get married. 'I trust with all my heart,' wrote the priest, 'that God will bless this happy union, which He appears Himself to have prepared by implanting in you a long and unchanged affection, and a mutual love as pure as it is sweet.'

The Saumur plot, to which I have referred,[Pg 27] took place in 1822, and amongst those implicated in it was a young man named Delon, who had been an intimate friend of Victor Hugo in his childhood. On hearing of Delon's danger, Hugo wrote to the conspirator's mother, offering an asylum for her son in his own house, and remarking that as the writer was well known for his devotion to the Bourbons, he would never be sought in such a retreat. This letter fell into the hands of the King, but instead of its prejudicing him against Victor Hugo, he generously said, 'That young man has a good heart as well as great genius; he is an honourable fellow; I shall take care he has the next pension that falls vacant.' This was the origin of the poet's pension, which was in nowise due to an expressed wish or desire on his own part.

Hans of Iceland, the first published romance of Victor Hugo, appeared anonymously in 1823. The work at once attracted attention by reason of its graphic power and the startling nature of its contrasts. It combines horror with tenderness, the deepest gloom with flashes of the purest light. The author himself had a great affection for it, on the personal ground already mentioned. But its chief features are of a[Pg 28] different order. In this northern romance, as one critic has observed, the youthful novelist has turned to great account the savage wilds, gloomy lakes, stormy seas, pathless caves, and ruined fortresses of Scandinavia. 'A being savage as the scenery around him—human in his birth, but more akin to the brute in his nature; diminutive, but with a giant's strength; whose pastime is assassination, who lives literally as well as metaphorically on blood—is the hero; and round this monster are grouped some of the strangest, ghastliest, and yet not wholly unnatural beings which it is possible for the imagination to conceive—Spiagudry, the keeper of the dead-house, or *morgue*, of Drontheim, and Orugex, the State executioner—while gentler forms, the noble and persecuted Schumacker, and the devoted and innocent Ethel, relieve the monotony of crime and horror.' M. Charles Nodier, one of the ablest of French contemporary critics, in a review of the work in the *Quotidienne*, remarked upon the fact that there were men of a certain organization, to whom glory and distinction were temptations, just as happiness and pleasure tempted other men. 'Precocious intellects and deep sensibility do not take the future[Pg 29] into consideration—they devour their future. The passions of a young and powerful mind know no to-morrow; they look to satiate their ambition and their hopes with the reputation and excitement of the present moment. *Han d'Islande* has been the result of this kind of combination, if indeed one can describe as a combination that which is only the thoughtless instinct of an original genius, who obeys, without being aware of it, an impulse at variance with his true interests, but whose fine and wide career may not improbably justify this promise of excellence, and may hereafter redeem all the anxiety he has caused by the excusable error he committed when he first launched himself upon the world.' M. Nodier then discussed with much freedom, and yet with almost as much fairness, the peculiar features of the romance, its close and painful search into the morbidities of life, its pictures of the scaffold and the *morgue*, etc., as well as its strong local colouring, its historical truth, its learning, its wit, and its vigorous and picturesque style.

The author and his critic became personally acquainted. The latter called upon Victor Hugo, who, after other changes of abode, had now[Pg 30] established himself in the Rue de Vaugirard. A second pension of 2,000 francs had been awarded him by the King; hence his migration into comparatively sumptuous quarters. Other literary

friendships besides that with M. Nodier were formed as the result of Victor Hugo's first romance.

At this period he wrote an ode on the *Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile*, and there were many indications that his early Royalist opinions were in process of abandonment. He visited his father at Blois, and the General was not slow to observe the changes taking place in his son's views. While he could not admire Napoleon personally, he began to do justice to those who had planted the French standard in all the capitals of Europe. But it seemed as though the King was resolved to retain him by favours, for there was now conferred upon him the coveted badge of the Legion of Honour. He attended the coronation of Charles X. at Rheims, and from thence went to pay a visit to Lamartine. A project was formed and a treaty signed with a publisher, by which M. Lamartine, Victor Hugo, M. Charles Nodier, and M. Taylor engaged to prepare a work detailing a poetical and picturesque trip to[Pg 31] Mont Blanc and the Valley of Chamouni. For four meditations Lamartine was to receive 2,000 francs, Hugo 2,000 for four odes, Taylor 2,000 for eight drawings, and Nodier 2,250 for all the text. The travellers set out, Hugo being accompanied by his wife and child. On reaching Geneva—after a temporary arrest of Hugo, some time before, on account of the delay of his passport in its journey from Paris—the visitors found the police regulations very annoying. Each hotel possessed a register, in which every traveller was bound to write his name, his age, his profession, the place from whence he came, and his object in travelling. M. Nodier was so exasperated that in reply to the last query he wrote, 'Come to upset your Government.' For a few moments the hotel-keeper was not unnaturally electrified. The travellers got their jaunt, but owing to the insolvency of the publisher with whom they had arranged, the literary scheme was never carried out.

In ascending the Alps to the Mer de Glace, Victor Hugo had a narrow escape. His guide, who was new to the business, took the wrong path, and landed the visitor upon a dangerous tongue of ice. From this he was rescued with[Pg 32] great difficulty, and for several moments, which seemed like hours, he was suspended over a terrible abyss. Victor Hugo wrote a description of the journey from Sallenches to Chamouni, which was translated by Madame Hugo, and published in her sketch of the poet.

Bug Jargal, the second romance by Victor Hugo, but the earliest in point of time, was published in 1826. It had been originally written for the *Conservateur Littéraire*; but after its appearance there, it was almost entirely remodelled and rewritten. It is a tale of the insurrection in St. Domingo. The essential improbability of such a character as Bug Jargal (by what means did the author get such an uncouth name?), a negro of the noblest moral and intellectual character, passionately in love with a white woman, has been unfavourably commented upon. The hero is represented as not only

tempering the wildest passion with the deepest respect, but he even sacrifices life itself at last in behalf of the woman of his love, and of her husband. It was objected that this was too violent a call upon the imagination, but knowledge of the negro character would tend to prove that such a devotion as Bug Jargal's is by no[Pg 33] means impossible. In any case, as the novelist is allowed great license, this objection cannot be regarded as fatal to the romance. Notwithstanding its alleged defects of plot, however, this story has many enthralling passages. No reader is likely to forget 'the scenes in the camp of the insurgent chief Biassou, or the death-struggle between Habihrah and d'Auverney on the brink of the cataract. The latter, in particular, is drawn with such intense force, that the reader seems almost to be a witness of the changing fortunes of the fight, and can hardly breathe freely till he comes to the close.' Whatever else these early romances demonstrated, or failed to demonstrate, they were at least inspired by enthusiasm, and tinged with aspirations of a noble order.

The genius of the author had drawn towards him the admiration, and very speedily the friendship, of such men as M. Méry, the journalist; M. Rabbe, author of the 'History of the Popes;' M. Achille Devéria and M. Louis Boulanger, the eminent artists; M. Sainte-Beuve, one of the most incisive of critics, and others whose names have since occupied considerable space in the roll of fame. Hugo was indefatigable in his literary[Pg 34] efforts. *La Revue Française*, a periodical which unfortunately had but a brief existence, bore testimony to this, as well as his poetical miscellany entitled *La Muse Française*. He also wrote a criticism upon Voltaire, which was afterwards reprinted in his *Mélanges de Littérature*; but this estimate did not reveal the breadth of view which the writer manifested in later years, when he passed an eloquent eulogium upon the philosopher of Ferney.

For a new edition of the *Odes* issued in 1826, and now separated from the *Ballades*, the author wrote an introduction in which he distinctly unfolded his principles of liberty in the realm of literature. He expressed his belief that 'in a literary production the bolder the conception the more irreproachable should be the execution;' and he added that liberty need not result in disorder. It was the first occasion on which the claims of what was called, for want of a better word, romanticism were formally promulgated by a writer eminent in that school. We shall shortly see how Victor Hugo translated these ideas into a concrete form in his works. Meantime, in February, 1827, an incident occurred which led to a stirring poem by Hugo,[Pg 35] and one which made him friends in a new quarter, while it lost them in an old one.

It appears that at a ball given by the Austrian Ambassador in Paris, the distinguished French marshals who attended were deliberately shorn of their legitimate titles. Thus, the Duke of Taranto was announced as Marshal Macdonald; the Duke of Dalmatia as

Marshal Soult; the Duke of Treviso as Marshal Mortier, and so on. The insult was studied and deliberate on the part of the Ambassador; 'Austria, humiliated by titles which recalled its defeats, publicly denied them. The marshals had been invited in order to show contempt for their victories, and the Empire was insulted in their persons. They immediately quitted the Embassy in a body.' Victor Hugo's blood was stirred by this incident, and, without counting the cost, he took his revenge. Throwing all the weight of his indignation into the *Ode à la Colonne*, he hurled that effusion at the enemies of France. He was now only anxious to show that he was a Frenchman first, and a Vendéan afterwards.

The Ode made a great sensation, but it had a wider effect than its author anticipated. The Opposition welcomed him as one of themselves,[Pg 36] for in celebrating the marshals had not the poet celebrated the Empire? The Royalists, on the other hand, seeing this bitter attack upon the Austrians, who were the most powerful friends of the Bourbons, naturally thought that Victor Hugo had abandoned the Royalist cause. Neither side could quite understand how such a burst of invective as that witnessed in the Ode might be due alone to the outraged feelings of a Frenchman, without being intended in the least to partake of the nature of a political manifesto. To these fierce partisans, party was everything; to Victor Hugo it was the nation that was everything. But his rupture with the Royalists is naturally enough traced to this period. He and they could never be the same again to each other. The poet passed now from his admiration of the Bourbons to an acknowledgment of the glory and prowess of the Empire, as at a later period he pressed still further forward, and hailed the fuller liberty of Republican France.

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CHAPTER III.VICTOR HUGO'S HUMANITARIANISM.

In 1829 Victor Hugo published anonymously his *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* ('The Last Day of a Convict'). It thrilled the heart of Paris by its vivid recitals. While having no pretensions to the character of a regular tale, it was, as a writer in the *Edinburgh Review* remarked, one of the most perfect things the author had as yet produced. It was the representation of one peculiar state of mind—that of a criminal faced by the certainty of his approaching death under the guillotine. Like Sterne, Hugo had taken a single captive, shut him up in his dungeon, and 'then looked through the twilight of the grated door, to take his picture.' The work is a chronicle of thoughts, a register of sensations; and it is amazing to see what variety and dramatic movement may be

imparted to a[Pg 38] monologue in which the scene shifts only from, the Bicètre to the Conciergerie, the Hôtel de Ville, and the Place de Grève.

Few descriptions could be found in literature to vie with that in which Victor Hugo places the criminal before us as he enters the court to receive his sentence on a lovely August morning. But all the incidents attending the trial, the condemnation, and the execution are depicted with graphic skill and powerful energy. No one knows better than Victor Hugo how to relieve unutterable gloom by some brilliant ray of human affection, and so upon this condemned prisoner he causes to break a temporary vision of youth and innocence. The intensity all through this piece is such as to give the reader a strange realization of the criminal, with his weight of guilt, and his terrible and conflicting emotions.

But the critic of the *Edinburgh* would have us believe that all this was merely due to a desire by Victor Hugo to exhibit his literary skill. He even calls it absurd to regard the sketch as a pleading against the punishment of death, and roundly denies that the author had any such esoteric purpose. Unfortunately for him, there is conclusive evidence to prove that Victor Hugo[Pg 39] had a deeper intent in this painful representation than a mere literary play upon the feelings. In a preface to the edition of 1832 he distinctly avows his purpose: 'It is the author's aim and design that posterity should recognise in his work *not* a mere special pleading for any one particular criminal, which is always easy and always transitory, but a general and permanent appeal in behalf of all the accused, alike of the present and of the future. Its great point is the right of humanity urged upon society.'

Moreover, there is another powerful argument to be considered. Ever since 1820 Victor Hugo had been deeply moved on the question of capital punishment, and resolved to labour for its abolition. It will be convenient here to review briefly his public utterances on the subject, both before and subsequent to the appearance of *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné*. We shall thereby be enabled to keep the literary and personal thread of our narrative intact. In the year above named Victor Hugo had seen Louvel, the murderer of the Duke of Berry, on his way to the scaffold. The culprit was a being for whom he had not the slightest sympathy; but his fate begat pity, and he began to reflect on the anomaly that[Pg 40] society should, in cold blood, commit the same act as that which it punished. From that time, observes Madame Hugo, he had an idea of writing a book against the guillotine. Two executions which he witnessed during the next few years strengthened his convictions, and led to the work we have already discussed. Subsequently he wrote *Claude Gueux*, founded upon the sad and miserable story of a man of that name. Gueux was condemned to death in 1832 for a crime to which the pangs of hunger had impelled him. The case was doubly painful

from the fact that the father of Claude, a very old man, had been sentenced to a punishment in the prison of Clairvaux, and the son, in order to bring help to him, committed an act whose consequences brought him within the walls of the same prison. Strenuous exertions were made by Hugo and others to save Gueux, but the Council of Ministers rejected the appeal. The man was executed, and a noble protest which Victor Hugo afterwards issued greatly moved the public conscience, and rendered society still more familiar with the writer's views.

In May, 1839, one Barbès was condemned to death for his share in the insurrection in the[Pg 41] Place Royale. Victor Hugo immediately sent this message of appeal to the King:

'By your guardian-angel fled away like a dove,

By your royal child, a sweet and frail reed,

Pardon yet once more, pardon in the name of the tomb!

Pardon in the name of the cradle!'

The King, against the advice of his Ministers, insisted on pardoning Barbès. More than twenty years afterwards the latter figured as a character in *Les Misérables*, and a correspondence, alike honourable to both, ensued between him and the author. Twice as a peer of France Victor Hugo was called upon to give verdicts in cases where capital punishment would follow conviction, and in both instances he voted in favour of perpetual imprisonment and against the death-penalty. When the question of capital punishment came before the Assembly in 1848, Victor Hugo ascended the tribune and made an impassioned speech, from which I take these extracts:

'What is the penalty of death? It is the especial and eternal mark of barbarism. Wherever the penalty is, death is common, barbarism dominates; wherever the penalty of death is rare, civilization reigns supreme. You have just acknowledged the principle that a man's private[Pg 42] dwelling should be inviolate; we ask you now to acknowledge a principle much higher and more sacred still—the inviolability of human life. The nineteenth century will abolish the penalty of death. You will not do away with it, perhaps, at once; but be assured, either you or your successors will abolish it. I vote for the abolition, pure, simple, and definitive, of the penalty of death.'

In March, 1849, Victor Hugo made an unsuccessful appeal in the case of Daix, condemned to death for the affair of Bréa; and in the following year the poet himself appeared as an advocate in the Court of Assize. He defended his eldest son, Charles Hugo, who had been summoned for protesting in his journal, *L'Évènement*, against the

execution, which had been accompanied by revolting circumstances. In the course of his eloquent pleadings, Victor Hugo said: 'The real culprit in this matter, if there is a culprit, is not my son. It is I myself. I, who, for a quarter of a century, have not ceased to battle against all forms of the irreparable penalty—I, who, during all this time, have never ceased to advocate the inviolability of human life.... Yes, I assert it, this remains[Pg 43] of barbarous penalties—this old and unintelligent law of retaliation—this law of blood for blood—I have battled against it all my life; and, so long as there remains one breath in my body, I will continue to battle against it with all my power as an author, and with all my acts and votes as a legislator. And I make this declaration'—(*the pleader here stretched out his arm towards the crucifix at the end of the hall above the tribunal*)—'before the Victim of the penalty of death, whose effigy is now before us, who is now looking down upon us, and who hears what I utter. I swear it, I say, before this sacred tree, on which, nearly two thousand years ago, and for the instruction of men to the latest generation, the laws, instituted by men, fastened with accursed nails the Divine Son of God!' In conclusion, the orator exclaimed, 'My son! thou wilt this day receive a great honour. Thou art judged worthy of fighting, perhaps of suffering, for the sacred cause of truth. From to-day thou enterest the just and true manly life of our time, the struggle for the true. Be proud, thou who art now admitted to the ranks of those who battle for the human and democratic idea! Thou art seated on the bench[Pg 44] where Béranger and Lamennais have sat.' Notwithstanding his father's defence, which powerfully moved the whole court, Charles Hugo was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

While living in exile in Jersey, in 1854, Victor Hugo made an appeal on behalf of a man who was to be hanged in Guernsey. One of his letters was addressed to the people of Guernsey, who petitioned, but in vain, for the life of the convict Tapner. Another was addressed to Lord Palmerston, who gave the usual orders for the execution; and probably no English Minister ever received, either before or since, a communication couched in such burning and passionate language. The writer was literally overwhelming in his indignant rhetoric.

For John Brown, of Harper's Ferry, the anti-slavery enthusiast, Victor Hugo put in a strong plea with the United States. He told that country that 'Brown's executioner would neither be the Attorney Hunter, nor the Judge Parker, nor the Governor Wyse, nor the State of Virginia; it would be, though one shudders to think it, and still more to say it, the great American Republic itself.... When we consider that this nation is the glory of the whole[Pg 45] earth; that, like France, England, and Germany, it is one of the organs of civilization, that it has even gone beyond Europe in certain sublime strokes of bold progress, that it is at the summit of the whole world, that it wears on its

brow the star of liberty, we are tempted to affirm that John Brown will not die; for we shrink back horrified at the idea of so great a crime being committed by so great a nation!' The writer predicted that 'the murder of Brown would make in the Union a rent, at first concealed, but which would end by splitting it asunder.' John Brown was executed, and Hugo's prediction was verified. The South did indeed discover that the spirit of Brown was 'marching on'; and the American Union was for a time convulsed to its centre, ostensibly on the ground of union, but practically on account of slavery. Brown, the martyr, was justified by the event, and slavery was abolished in the United States.

During the year 1861, a Belgian jury pronounced, on a single occasion only, nine sentences of death. Thereupon a writer, assuming the name of Victor Hugo, published some verses in the Belgian journals, imploring the King's pardon for the nine convicts. Hugo's attention[Pg 46] was drawn to the verses, when he replied that he was quite willing for his name to be used, or even abused, in so good a cause. As his *alter ego* had addressed the King, so he now addressed the nation. He called upon it to arrest this great sacrifice of life, and to abolish the scaffold. 'It would be a noble thing that a small people should give a lesson to the great, and by this fact alone should become greater than they. It would be a fine thing that, in the face of the abominable growth of darkness, in the presence of a growing barbarism, Belgium, taking the place of a great Power in civilization, should communicate to the human race by one act the full glare of light.' The sentence of seven of the condemned men was commuted, but the two remaining convicts were executed.

When the Republic of Geneva revised its constitution in 1862, the principal question remitted to the people was the abolition of the punishment of death. M. Bost, a Genevese author, appealed to Victor Hugo for his intervention in the discussion. The poet replied by a long and exhaustive communication, in which he reviewed the leading cases in various European countries where the scaffold had recently[Pg 47] been called into requisition, and he closed with this exordium: 'O people of Geneva, your city is situate on a lake in the Garden of Eden! you live in a blessed place! all that is most noble in creation surrounds you! the habitual contemplation of the beautiful reveals the truth and imposes duties on you! Your civilization ought to be in harmony with nature. Take counsel of all these merciful marvels. Believe in your sky so bright; and as goodness descends from the sky, abolish the scaffold. Be not ungrateful. Let it not be said that in gratitude, and, as it were, in exchange for this admirable corner of the earth, where God has shown to man the sacred splendour of the Alps, the Arve and the Rhone, the blue lake, and Mont Blanc in the glory of sunlight, man has offered to the Deity the spectacle of the guillotine.' The question

had already been decided by the retention of the scaffold when this letter reached Geneva, but Victor Hugo now addressed the people. His second letter had an immense effect, and secured the rejection of the constitution proposed by the Conservatives. It also brought over a great number of adherents to the cause of abolition, which ultimately triumphed.

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On many subsequent occasions, and notably in connection with Italy and Portugal, Victor Hugo wrote and strove for the abolition of capital punishment. In France his pressing personal appeals more than once availed to procure a commutation of the death-punishment. To his *Last Day of a Convict* was due the introduction of extenuating circumstances in the criminal laws of France, and he projected a work to be entitled *Le Dossier de la Peine de Mort*.

It is not my intention here, nor, indeed, is it necessary, to discuss the arguments which may be advanced for or against capital punishment. It has been simply my object to present Victor Hugo in a light which, while it may divide men in their judgments, will unite them in their sympathies. The cases I have cited will be more than sufficient to demonstrate that noble enthusiasm of humanity which forms so conspicuous a feature in Victor Hugo's character.

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CHAPTER IV.THE TRIUMPH OF ROMANTICISM.

The war between the two great schools of French poetry, the classic and the romantic, passed into an acute stage shortly before the publication of Victor Hugo's *Cromwell*. Romanticism meant more than was implied in the definition of Madame de Staël, viz., the transference to French literature of 'the poetry originating in the songs of the troubadours, the offspring of chivalry and Christianity.' Victor Hugo, and men of a kindred if not an equal genius, were engaged in a struggle for the very life and soul of poetry. Poetic genius in France was wrapped in the grave-clothes of classicism; it was a corpse that needed galvanizing into life; and it was practically Victor Hugo who rose and said, 'Loose her, and let her go.'

Goethe had already fought the battle of literary[Pg 50] freedom from old superstitions in Germany, and Byron had done the same in England. It was now the turn of France to feel the new gush of life, and to gather strength and lustre in the revival. As M. Asselineau has observed of the French romanticists, 'to their sincerity, their

detestation of tediousness, their sympathy with life and joy and freshness, as well as to their youthful audacity, that was not abashed either by ridicule or insult, belongs the honour of securing to the nineteenth century the triumph of liberty, invaluable for its preciousness in the world of art.' And in enumerating the leaders of the movement, he cites as the most prominent and influential, Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, Madame de Staël, Lamartine, Dumas, Alfred de Vigny, Balzac, George Sand, Théophile Gautier, Mérimée, Philarète Chasles, Alfred de Musset, and Jules Janin. Certainly the influence that developed the talents of such a galaxy of genius, so far from being despised, should be acclaimed as a force worthy of all admiration. It was one, in fact, that practically saved French literature from expiring of inanition.

But the romantics were fiercely assailed; so fiercely that Victor Hugo said, if they had been[Pg 51] thieves, murderers, and monsters of crime, they could not have been exposed to severer condemnation. Duvergier de Hauranne treated romanticism as a brain disease, and recommended a careful diagnosis of those suffering from it, in order to recover for them gradually their lost senses. But pleasantries such as these were not likely to affect a man in severe earnest. The literary revolutionaries of the Cénacle Club, whose leading spirit was Victor Hugo, laughed at the denunciations hurled against them, knowing that their opportunity had come. There was only one writer who, having put his hand to the plough, turned backward. This was Sainte-Beuve. The temper of his mind was critical, and after the first burst of enthusiasm with which he hailed the new school, and under whose influence he for a time joined it, had spent itself, he threw off his allegiance to the movement, and vowed that he had never really belonged to the reforming band.

Victor Hugo soon gave a pledge, though not in some respects a successful one, of the sincerity of his own convictions. M. Taylor, Commissaire Royal at the Comédie Française, and afterwards widely known in the world of art, asked the poet[Pg 52] on one occasion why he never wrote for the theatre. Hugo replied that he was thinking of doing so, and had already commenced a drama on the subject of Cromwell. 'A Cromwell of your writing should only be acted by Talma,' said Taylor; and he forthwith arranged a meeting between the famous tragedian and the dramatist. Talma was at that time greatly depressed, taking gloomy views of the stage, and asserting that his own career had been a failure—had never fulfilled its ends. No one knew what he might have been, he confided to Hugo, but now he expected to die without having really acted once. Nevertheless, from the genius of Hugo he did look for something original, and he had always longed to act Cromwell. In response, the author explained his intentions with regard to the proposed play, and also his views upon the drama generally. These views he afterwards enlarged upon in the preface to the play. He

asserted that there were three epochs in poetry, each corresponding to an era in society; and these were the ode, the epic, and the drama. 'Primitive ages are the lyric, ancient times the heroic, and modern times the dramatic. The ode sings of eternity, the epic records history, the drama [Pg 53]depicts life.... The characters of the ode are colossal—Adam, Cain, Noah; those of the epic are gigantic—Achilles, Atreus, Orestes; those of the drama are human—Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth. The ode contemplates the ideal; the epic, the sublime; the drama, the real. And, to sum up the whole, this poetical triad emanates from three fountain-heads—the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare.'

In *Cromwell*, urged Hugo, he intended to substitute a drama for a tragedy, a real man for an ideal personage, reality for conventionalism; the piece was to pass from the heroic to the positive; the style was to include all varieties, epic, lyric, satiric, grave, comic; and there were to be no verses for effect. The author repeated his first line, '*Demain, vingt-cinq juin, mil six cent cinquante-sept*,' which was certainly ludicrously matter-of-fact. Talma was delighted with the whole idea, and begged the poet to complete his work at once. Unfortunately the actor died soon afterwards, and the dramatist now went leisurely on with his play. While engaged upon the preface he saw some Shakespearean dramas performed in English at the Odéon, and the representations affected him deeply, and tinged his[Pg 54] dramatic views. At the close of 1827 *Cromwell* was published, and great indeed was the controversy to which it gave rise. The period dealt with was not what would be considered one of the most dramatic in the career of the Protector. It was that 'when his ambition made him eager to realize the benefits of the King's death,' when, having attained what any other man would have reckoned the summit of fortune, being not only master of England, but by his army, his navy, and his diplomacy, master of Europe too, he was urged onwards to fulfil the visions of his youth, and to make himself a king. Cromwell's final relinquishment of the kingly idea, with the preliminary stages which led up to his resolution, were delineated with subtle power and psychological skill.

But it was not the play so much as its preface—which the author put forward as the manifesto of himself and his literary friends—that stirred the gall of the critics. A writer in the *Gazette de France*, referring to Hugo's avowed aim to break 'all those threads of spiders' web with which the army of Liliput have undertaken to chain the drama whilst slumbering,' reminded him that in this liliputian army there were[Pg 55] some dwarfs to be found not so despicable after all; and amongst others stood out those men who had written for the stage from *Le Cid* down to *Cromwell*. 'But what would these men be worth in the eyes of him who calls Shakespeare the god of the Theatre? It is necessary to possess some strength to venture to attack giants; and when one

undertakes to dethrone writers whom whole generations have united in admiring, it would be advisable to fight them with weapons which, if not equal to theirs, are at least so constructed as to have some chance.' M. de Rémusat in *Le Globe* endeavoured to hold the scales of justice between the contending parties, while the famous Preface acted as a rallying-cry for the supporters of the new principles. M. Soumet, Hugo's old friend, wrote concerning the drama: 'It seems to me full of new and daring beauties; and although in your preface you spoke mercilessly of mosses and climbing ivy, I cannot do less than acknowledge your admirable talent, and I shall speak of your work—grand in the style of Michael Angelo—as I formerly spoke of your odes.'

About the time of the publication of *Cromwell*, Victor Hugo was severely visited in his domestic[Pg 56] relations. Madame Foucher, his wife's mother, and a woman of many and great virtues, passed away; and on the 28th of January, 1828, the poet's father died suddenly of apoplexy. The General and his second wife had been quite reconciled to Victor and his brothers, and the Government had once more recognised the title of the old soldier as General of Division. He was happy in the affection of his sons, his daughter-in-law, and Victor Hugo's two children—Léopoldine and Charles. On the evening of his death he had spent several happy hours with the poet, but in the night the apoplexy struck him with the rapidity of a shot, and he immediately expired. The incident, as may be imagined, profoundly affected the sensitive and impressionable spirit of Victor Hugo.

Some years before these events, Victor Hugo had, in conjunction with M. Soumet, written a play entitled *Amy Robsart*, founded upon Scott's *Kenilworth*. Not being able to agree as to the value of each other's contributions, the two authors separated, each bearing away his own dramatic goods. Hugo afterwards handed over his play to his brother-in-law, Paul Foucher, who produced the piece in his own name at the[Pg 57] Odéon. It was loudly hissed. There were passages in it that unmistakably bore the impress of Victor Hugo, and the latter chivalrously wrote to the newspapers to say that those parts which had been hissed were his own work. This acknowledgment drew a number of young men to the theatre, who were as loud in their applause as a large portion of the audience were in their condemnation. Altogether, matters became so lively that the Government interfered, and, to allay the tumult, interdicted the play.

In the Rue Notre-Dame des Champs there were some rare meetings of poets and wits, when Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset would recite poems composed during the day, and Mérimée and Sainte-Beuve would engage in arguments. M. Henri Beyle, M. Louis Boulanger, and M. Eugène Delacroix were also to be seen there; and once the venerable Benjamin Constant was a guest. When Béranger was condemned to three

months' imprisonment for one of his songs, Victor Hugo visited him in his cell. He found that the French Burns, though obnoxious to the authorities, was the idol of the populace. His cell was generally full of visitors, and he[Pg 58] was inundated with pâtés, game, fruit, and wine.

Another great stride in romanticism was made by the publication of Victor Hugo's *Orientales*, which appeared in 1828. These lyrical poems were full of energy and inspiration, and it was clear that the very antithesis of the classical style had now been reached. They enhanced the reputation of the writer, while they charmed all readers by their freshness, simplicity, and vigour.

In July, 1829, a brilliant company assembled at Hugo's house to listen to the reading of a new play by the poet, the famous *Marion de Lorme*, originally called *A Duel under Richelieu*. The writer, it was soon seen, had avoided the faults which marked the construction of *Cromwell*, and had produced a real drama, and one well adapted for stage representation. The company present at the reading included Balzac, Delacroix, Alfred de Musset, Mérimée, Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Vigny, Dumas, Deschamps, and Taylor. Dumas, with the generous frankness which always characterized him, afterwards wrote respecting the play: 'I listened with admiration the most intense, but yet an admiration that was tinged with [Pg 59]sadness, for I felt that I could never attain to such a powerful style. I congratulated Hugo very heartily, telling him that I, deficient in style as I was, had been quite overwhelmed by the magnificence of his.' But there was one point upon which Dumas, supported by Sainte-Beuve and Mérimée, pleaded, and pleaded successfully. Not feeling satisfied that Didier should meet his death without forgiving Marion, Hugo yielded to the pressure put upon him, and altered the drama accordingly. The news of a new play by Victor Hugo brought forward the managers at once, but it had already been promised to M. Taylor for the Théâtre Français. However, there was the ordeal of the censors yet to pass through, and fears were entertained as to the fourth act, in which Louis XIII. was described as a hunter, and represented as governed by a priest—points in which everybody would see a resemblance to Charles X. Permission to perform the play was refused. Victor Hugo appealed to the King, who removed from office the Minister of the Interior (M. de Martignac), the dramatist's chief enemy, and promised to read the offending act himself. Having done so, his Majesty declined to give his sanction to the[Pg 60] representation of the drama, but by way of a solatium granted the poet a fresh pension of 4,000 francs. Hugo was indignant, and at once wrote declining the pension, upon which the *Constitutionnel* remarked, 'Youth is less easily corrupted than the Ministers think.' With regard to the drama itself, it has been well remarked that 'had Marion, in spite of her heroism and her repentance, been adequately

chastised for her lapse from virtue, probably much of the sentimentality would have been avoided, which, although now exploded, at the time caused a great depravity of taste, and invested the "Dames aux Camellias" and the "Mimis" of Bohemian life with an interest that they did not deserve.'

Undismayed by what had occurred, Victor Hugo now devoted himself to the composition of another drama, and his *Hernani* was shortly in the hands of M. Taylor for production. The censors again interfered, and in the course of a very impertinent report, observed that the play was 'a tissue of extravagances, generally trivial, and often coarse, to which the author has failed to give anything of an elevated character. Yet while we animadvert upon its flagrant faults, we[Pg 61] are of opinion that not only is there no harm in sanctioning the representation of the piece, but that it would be inadvisable to curtail it by a single word. It will be for the benefit of the public to see to what extremes the human mind will go, when freed from all restraint.' These literary censors did, however, require the alteration or removal of certain passages in which the kingly state and dignity were handled with too much freedom; and they forbade the name of Jesus to be used throughout the piece.

The supporters of the classical drama strenuously exerted themselves to prevent the play from being produced, but in vain. Of course, this creation of a new style meant the decline of the old one. The play went into rehearsal, and the author had a passage of arms with Mademoiselle Mars, who took the part of Doña Sol. This lady, whose power had made her imperious, found her master in Hugo, and when threatened with the loss of her part, she consented to deliver a disputed phrase as written. The time for production came, and when the author was asked to name his systematic applauders, according to custom, he declined to do so, stating that there would be no systematic applause. The play[Pg 62] excited the liveliest curiosity. Benjamin Constant was amongst those who earnestly begged for seats, and M. Thiers wrote personally to the author for a box. The literary friends of Victor Hugo attended in great numbers, including Gautier, Borel, and Balzac. The theatre was crowded, and the feeling of all parties intense. As the play progressed from act to act, nevertheless, it gained in its hold upon the audience. When the fourth act closed, M. Maine, a publisher, sought out Victor Hugo, and offered him 6,000 francs for the play, but the matter, he said, must be decided at once. The author protested, remarking that the success of the piece might be less complete at the end. 'Ah, that's true, but it may be much greater,' replied the publisher. 'At the second act I thought of offering 2,000 francs; at the third act I got up to 4,000; I now at the fourth act offer 6,000; and after the fifth I am afraid I should have to offer 10,000.' Hugo laughingly concluded the bargain for 6,000 francs, and went with the eager publisher into a tobacco shop to sign

a roughly improvised agreement. The play concluded brilliantly, Mademoiselle Mars securing a great triumph in the last act. The whole house[Pg 63] applauded vociferously, and the triumph of romanticism was complete.

The literary war which ensued was very fierce. In the provinces, as in Paris, it divided the public into hostile camps, and so deep were the feelings which it excited that in Toulouse a duel was fought over the play, and one of the antagonists was killed. Armand Carrel was especially bitter in his assaults upon *Hernani*, but Hugo was more than consoled for this and other attacks by the following letter from Chateaubriand: 'I was present, sir, at the first representation of *Hernani*. You know how much I admire you. My vanity attaches itself to your lyre, and you know the reason. I am going—you are coming. I commend myself to the remembrance of your muse. A pious glory ought to pray for the dead.' As an amusing pendant to this, it may be mentioned in connection with the poet and *Hernani*, that a provincial Frenchman (in making his will) ordered the following inscription to be placed on his tombstone: 'Here lies one who believed in Victor Hugo.'

In spite of the attacks in the press, also of personal threats and of the deliberate and almost[Pg 64] unparalleled attempts to stifle the play in the theatre itself, *Hernani* held its own, and continued to be played with great pecuniary success until the enforced absence of Mademoiselle Mars, when it was withdrawn from the stage, and not acted again for some years. But the play had practically established the new drama. It was the herald of the renaissance, and for this reason must continue to occupy a conspicuous position whenever an attempt is made to estimate the dramatic work and influence of Victor Hugo.

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CHAPTER V.'NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS.'

There is a natural desire to know something of the personal aspect of men who have become great. What would the world give, for example, for a faithful account of the character, the appearance, the sayings, the habits of Shakespeare, written by a friend and a contemporary? In the case of Victor Hugo we fortunately have such a description from the pen of one of his most enthusiastic admirers, Théophile Gautier. The sketch represents the poet as he appeared at the time which we have now reached in his history, that is when he was about twenty-eight years of age.

Gautier was exceedingly nervous over his contemplated interview with Victor Hugo, and twice failed to summon up the necessary courage for the meeting. On the third

occasion he found[Pg 66] himself in the poet's study. All his prepared eloquence, we are told, at once vanished away; the long apostrophe of praise which he had spent whole evenings in composing came to nothing. He felt like Heine, who, when he was going to have an interview with Goethe, prepared an elaborate speech beforehand, but at the crucial moment could find nothing better to say to the author of *Faust* than that the plum-trees on the road between Jena and Weimar bore plums that were very nice when one was thirsty. But the Jupiter of German poetry was probably more flattered by his visitor's bewilderment than he would have been by the most glowing eulogium. Passing over Gautier's panegyrics, here is what he wrote concerning the person of Hugo: 'He was then twenty-eight years of age, and nothing about him was more striking than his forehead, that like a marble monument rose above his calm and earnest countenance: the beauty of that forehead was well-nigh superhuman; the deepest of thoughts might be written within, but it was capable of bearing the coronet of gold or the chaplet of laurel with all the dignity of a divinity or a Cæsar. This splendid brow was set in a frame of rich chestnut hair that was allowed to[Pg 67] grow to considerable length behind. His face was closely shaven, its peculiar paleness being relieved by the lustre of a pair of hazel eyes, keen as an eagle's. The curved lips betokened a firm determination, and when half opened in a smile, displayed a set of teeth of charming whiteness. His attire was neat and faultless, consisting of black frock-coat, grey trousers, and a small lay-down collar. Nothing in his appearance could ever have led anyone to suspect that this perfect gentleman was the leader of the rough-bearded, dishevelled set that was the terror of the smooth-faced *bourgeoisie*. Such was Victor Hugo. His image, as we saw it in that first interview, has never faded from our memory. It is a portrait that we cherish tenderly; its smiles, beaming with talent, continue with us, ever diffusing a clear and phosphorescent glory!'

In the year 1831 Victor Hugo published a work which, if he had written nothing else, would have given him a place amongst the immortal writers of France. This was his *Notre-Dame de Paris*, undertaken and produced under extraordinary circumstances. It was received with mixed favour by the critics, but at once made its way to the heart of the people. Any[Pg 68] number of hostile reviews would have been insufficient to check the progress of so singular and powerful a work. The author had made an engagement to write this book for a publisher named Gosselin, and the latter now claimed the execution of the contract. The work was originally to have been ready by the close of 1829, but in July, 1830, it was not yet begun, and a new contract was prepared, under which it was to be completed by the ensuing December. Political events greatly disturbed the progress of the romance, and a further difficulty was

created by the loss of manuscript notes which had taken two months to collect. In the removal of Hugo's books and manuscripts from the house in the Rue Jean Goujon to the Rue du Cherche-Midi, these valuable notes went astray. They were not recovered till some years afterwards, when they were incorporated in a later edition of the novel. A still further delay was granted by the publisher, in accordance with which the author was to complete the story by February, 1831, having just five months in which to accomplish the task.

Hugo set to work with marvellous energy, and some amusing details are given of the way[Pg 69] in which he laboured with his romance. 'He bought a bottle of ink, and a thick piece of grey worsted knitting which enveloped him from the neck to the heels; he locked up his clothes, in order not to be tempted to go out, and worked at his novel as if in a prison. He was very melancholy.' It appears that he never left the writing-table except to eat and to sleep, and occasionally to read over some chapters to his friends. The book was finished on the 14th of January, and as the writer concluded his last line and his last drop of ink at the same moment, he thought of changing the title of the novel, and calling it 'The Contents of a Bottle of Ink.' This title, which was not thus used, however, was subsequently adopted by Alphonse Karr.

On being asked by his publisher for some descriptive notes upon the work, which might be useful in advertising it, Victor Hugo wrote: 'It is a representation of Paris in the fifteenth century, and of the fifteenth century in its relations to Paris. Louis XI. appears in one chapter, and the King is associated with, or practically decides, the *dénouement*. The book has no historical pretensions, unless they be those of painting with some care and accuracy—but[Pg 70] entirely by sketches, and incidentally—the state of morals, creeds, laws, arts, and even civilization, in the fifteenth century. This is, however, not the most important part of the work. If it has a merit, it is in its being purely a work of imagination, caprice, and fancy.' Nevertheless, the author has underrated in certain respects the value of his own work. Powerful as it is from the imaginative point of view, it is no less remarkable for the way in which the writer has brought together a mass of historical and antiquarian lore. Its thoroughness and careful construction in regard to such details may be recommended to less accurate writers in the field of historical romance. Paris, with its myriad interests, is vividly represented by one to whom it had given up its past as well as its present. Whether we see life beneath the shadow of Notre-Dame, in the Cour des Miracles, the Place de Grève, the Palais de Justice, the Bastille or the Louvre, it is all the same—the master-hand has given life and vitality to all it has touched.

The gipsy girl Esmeralda, a fascinating creation, has been compared with the Fenella of Scott, the La Gitanilla of Cervantes, and the Mignon of Goethe. But she has a

character of[Pg 71] her own distinct from all of these. In her history the power of love is once more exemplified, and if round her centres the finest pathos of the work, so also is she its noblest gleam of light and grace and beauty. It has been said that love makes the learned archdeacon forget his studies, his clerical character, his reputation for sanctity, to court the favours of a volatile Bohemian. 'Love for this same Parisian Fenella softens the human savage Quasimodo, the dumb one-eyed bell-ringer of Notre-Dame, and transforms him into a delicate monster, a devoted humble worshipper of the Bohemian. While she, who is the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, the object of adoration to these singular lovers, is herself hopelessly attached in turn to a giddy-pated captain of the guard, who can afford to love no one but himself.' In his grand and startling effects, the writer has been compared with the painter Martin. There is an almost unparalleled breadth, which gives the work a Rembrandtish effect in all the chief scenes. The siege of the cathedral by the banded beggars and vagabonds of Paris in the night is one not readily effaced from the memory; and this is equally true of the terrible interview between the[Pg 72] infatuated monk and his victim in the filthy dungeons of the Palais de Justice; of the weird scene of the Fête de Fous in the Hall of the Palace; of the Alsatian picture of the examination and projected hanging of Gringoire among the thieves in the Cour des Miracles; of the execution of Esmeralda; and of the fearful fate of the impassioned monk.

The strange fatality attending upon mere passion is insisted on all through; it binds together in one miserable chain the priest who is prepared to sacrifice all that is sacred in duty for love, the heartless soldier, and the trusting maiden. As to the *dramatis personæ*, the *Athenæum*, observed, 'No character can be more intimately identified with the genius of Victor Hugo than the interesting, generous, and high-minded gipsy girl Esmeralda. The character of Phœbus de Chateaupers, the bold, reckless, gay, gallant, good-tempered, light-hearted, and faithless captain of gendarmerie, is also original, and wrought out with great skill. The Archdeacon Claude Frollo is a striking specimen of those churchmen of the fifteenth century who united the grossest superstition to the most consummate hypocrisy, and applied the influences[Pg 73] of religion to acts of the blackest perfidy. There are many historical characters in this work, and, among others, our old acquaintances in Quentin Durward, Louis XI., Olivier-le-Daim, and the squinting Provost, Tristan l'Hermite.' In eloquence, in vigour, in animation, and in all the masterly pageantry of a bygone age, this work will continue to hold a unique position amongst symbolical and historical romances.

Notre-Dame was assailed by the majority of the Parisian journals, but in the minority warmly in its favour were to be found some of the first writers of the age. Touching the

style of the work, Sainte-Beuve said, 'There is a magical facility and freedom in saying all that should be said; there is a striking keenness of observation, especially is there a profound knowledge of the populace, and a deep insight into man in his vanity, his emptiness, and his glory, whether he be mendicant, vagabond, *savant*, or sensualist. Moreover, there is an unexampled comprehension of form; an unrivalled expression of grace, material beauty, and greatness; and altogether a worthy presentment of an abiding and gigantic monument. Alike in the pretty prattlings of the nymph-like child, in the[Pg 74] cravings of the she-wolf mother, and in the surging passion, almost reaching to delirium, that rages in a man's brain, there is the moulding and wielding of everything just at the author's will.' Alfred de Musset, while unable to take in the scope of the work, acknowledged that it was colossal. Jules Janin remarked that 'of all the works of the author it is pre-eminently that in which his fire of genius, his inflexible calmness, and his indomitable will are most conspicuous. What accumulation of misfortunes is piled up in these mournful pages! What a gathering together there is of ruinous passion and bewildering incident! All the foulness as well as all the faith of the Middle Ages are kneaded together with a trowel of gold and of iron. At the sound of the poet's voice all that was in ruins has risen to its fullest height, reanimated by his breath.... Victor Hugo has followed his vocation as poet and architect, as writer of history and romance; his pen has been guided alike by ancient chronicle and by his own personal genius; he has made all the bells of the great city to clang out their notes; and he has made every heart of the population, except that of Louis XI., to beat with life![Pg 75] Such is the book; it is a brilliant page of our history, which cannot fail to be a crowning glory in the career of its author.' Finally, Eugène Sue wrote: 'If the useless admiration of a barbarian like myself had the power to express and interpret itself in a manner worthy of the book which has inspired it, I should tell you, sir, that you are a great spendthrift; that your critics resemble those poor people on the fifth story, who, whilst gazing on the prodigalities of the great nobleman, would say to each other, with anger in their hearts, "I could live during my whole life on the money spent in a single day."'

The publisher had some doubts of the pecuniary success of the novel, but these speedily disappeared, as edition after edition was called for. In the course of a year only, eight large editions had been disposed of, and the number of editions which have been issued since that time may be described as legion. From thinking, as he did originally, that he had made a bad bargain, M. Gosselin soon had reason to arrive at the conclusion that he had made a remarkably good one. Together with other publishers, he now pestered the author continually for more novels. Hugo[Pg 76] protested that he had none to give them; but wearied at length by their

importunities he furnished the titles of two stories he proposed to write, which were to be called the *Fils de la Bossue* and *La Quinquengrogne*. The latter name was the popular designation of one of the towers of Bourbon l'Aschembault, and in the novel the author intended to complete the account of his views concerning the art of the Middle Ages. Notre-Dame was the cathedral, La Quinquengrogne was to be the dungeon.

Victor Hugo wrote at this time his admirable descriptive work *Le Rhin*—a work full of learning, vivacity, and humour—but he never proceeded with the two projected novels. *Notre-Dame* remained for many years the only romance in which the author revealed his marvellous power of moulding human sympathies, of throwing into imaginative conceptions the very form and substance of being, and of realizing a dead-past age as though it were that of the actual and the living.

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CHAPTER VI.'MARION DE LORME' AND OTHER DRAMAS.

That despotic monarch, Charles X., having been driven from his throne by the Revolution of July, 1830, there naturally followed the removal of the interdict from the theatres. Victor Hugo was at once applied to by the Comédie Française for his drama of *Marion de Lorme*, which had been in enforced abeyance. But when the political reaction was an absolute certainty, the sensitive mind of Hugo shrank from a demonstrative triumph. It is true that he was now in the full tide of masculine judgment, and that his ideas of progress and liberty were crystallized and matured; but he could not forget his early opinions. Though crudely formed, and based upon sentiment and not upon reason, they had been genuine and disinterested, and his chief feeling at this later period was not one of hatred[Pg 78] of the King, but rather of rejoicing with the people.

However, after a year had elapsed from Charles's fall, there was no reason why a drama should be lost to the stage simply because it contained an historical presentment of Louis XIII. After declining many offers, the author resolved to give the play to M. Crosnier, for the theatre of the Porte St. Martin; and he also entered into an agreement to write yearly two works of importance for this theatre.
Dumas's *Antony* was being performed at the Porte St. Martin, but on the conclusion of its run *Marion de Lorme* was produced, with Madame Dorval in the part of Marion, and M. Bocage in that of Didier. Difficulties as usual were thrown in the way of the new play, but it eventually triumphed over them. The journals, nevertheless, were hostile,

the *Moniteur* especially so, affirming that the author had never yet conceived anything more meagre and commonplace, and more full of eccentricities, than this piece. One critic asserted that the character of Didier was taken from that of Antony, although Hugo's play had been written first. Those friends who formerly applauded Hugo and Dumas conjointly, now divided [Pg 79]themselves into two parties, one of which persistently assailed the writer of *Marion de Lorme*. From a variety of causes the play was only performed four nights on its first production, but the performances were afterwards resumed. It may be added that the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, whose judgment was better worth having than that of most of its contemporaries, remarked that Victor Hugo had never so truly shown himself a poet, nor attained to so high a range of vision, nor so wide a field of judgment, as in this piece.

A tragic incident which occurred not long after the representation of this play affected the poet deeply. Amongst the warmest of his band of admirers was M. Ernest de Saxe-Coburg, whose race and origin are indicated by his name. He and his mother lived in Paris, on a pension granted them by the Duke. Ernest was taken seriously ill, and the distracted parent rushed to the house of Victor Hugo, exclaiming, 'You alone can save him! Come at once!' But the unfortunate young man was already dead; and a painful scene took place in the chamber of death on the arrival of Victor Hugo and the mother. 'The unhappy woman, who had but this only child in the world to love, would not believe[Pg 80] that he was dead. He was but cold, she said; and she threw herself on his bed, encircling him in her arms in order to impart warmth to the corpse. She frantically kissed his marble face, which was already cold. Suddenly she felt within herself that it was all over; she raised herself, and haggard and wild as she was, though still beautiful, she exclaimed, "He is dead!" M. Victor Hugo spent the night by the side of the mother and the corpse.' It was the lot of Hugo to awaken by his genius many personal attachments and enthusiasms such as that felt for him by this ill-fated youth; and these attachments were invariably strengthened and deepened by subsequent friendship.

In 1832 the poet wrote his *Le Roi s'Amuse*. It has been charged against this play that it presents an unredeemed picture of vice and licentiousness. It has 'overstepped all bounds,' wrote one critic; 'history, reason, morality, artistic dignity, and refinement, are all trampled under foot. The whole piece is monstrous; history is set at nought, and the most noble characters are slandered and vilified. The play is entirely void of interest, and the horrible, the mean, and the immoral are all jumbled together[Pg 81] into a kind of chaos.' As we shall see, Victor Hugo traversed the whole of these and similar judgments. Baron Taylor secured the play for the Théâtre Français, Triboulet being assigned to M. Ligier, Saint-Vallier to M. Joanny, Blanche to Mademoiselle Anaïs,

and Francis I. to M. Perrier. A preliminary flourish occurred between Hugo and M. d'Argout, the Minister of Public Works, in whose department the theatres lay. The Minister first demanded the manuscript, then sent for the author, and finally wrote that the Monarchical principle in France must suffer from the author's attacks on Francis I., which would be taken as being levelled against Louis Philippe. The poet replied that the interests of history were to be consulted before those of royalty, but he denied that there was anything in the piece reflecting on Louis Philippe. The play was produced on the 22nd of November, and met with a very mixed reception, the hisses predominating. It was partly damned by the defects of the actors. When the curtain fell upon the last act, and it was felt that the play had failed, the leading performer said to the author, 'Shall I mention your name?' Hugo[Pg 82] answered haughtily, 'Sir, I have a rather higher opinion of my play now it is a failure.'

Next day the play was suspended, the reason given being that it was an offence against public morality. It appears that a number of devotees of the classical school had persuaded the Minister that a drama which had for its subject the assassination of a king was not to be tolerated on the very day after the existing monarch had himself escaped assassination; that the play was an apology for regicides, etc. Victor Hugo was not the man to be thus crushed without an effort to save his drama. In the first place he issued a manifesto to the public, briefly summarizing the plot of the piece, and denying that it was immoral. Then he entered a civil suit before the Board of Trade to compel the Théâtre Français to perform *Le Roi s'Amuse*, and likewise to compel the Government to sanction the performance. The trial opened in a densely crowded court, many celebrities being amongst the audience. They had been attracted by the announcement that the author would plead his own case. Hugo's speech was applauded by a band of very sympathetic listeners, and on its conclusion M. de Montalembert assured him that[Pg 83] he was as great an orator as he was a writer, and that if the doors of the theatre were closed against him, the tribune was still available. Judgment was given against the poet, and for the Minister. M. Paul Foucher, describing the scene on the night of the first performance of *Le Roi s'Amuse*, observed that while the whole theatre was in an uproar, and Hugo's name was drowned in the sea of roaring voices, 'the author's face exhibited no sign of despondency at the failure any more than it had shown passion or excitement during the struggle. His Olympian brow had withstood the tempest with the firmness of a rock, and after the curtain fell, he went to offer his thanks and encouragements to the actors and actresses, saying, "You are a little discomposed to-night; but you will find it different the day after to-morrow!" In spite of the hissing, he was sanguine about his play; nevertheless, it was not destined to be repeated.'

The poet's enemies now caused him considerable annoyance on the subject of his pension. He had ceased to receive the 1,000 francs granted him by Louis XVIII. out of his privy purse, but still received the 2,000 francs allowed him by the Home Minister. In reply[Pg 84] to the recriminations of the Ministerial journals, he wrote a letter to M. d'Argout, showing that this pension was clearly granted to him on literary grounds, quite apart from political opinions. But he had decided to accept it no longer, and thus stated his reasons: 'Now that the Government appears to regard what are called literary pensions as proceeding from itself, and not from the country, and as this kind of grant takes from an author's independence; now that this strange pretension of the Government serves as the basis to the somewhat shameful attacks of certain journals, the management of which is, unfortunately, though no doubt incorrectly, imagined to be in your hands; as it is also of importance to me to maintain my relations with the Government in a higher region than that in which this kind of warfare goes on—without discussing whether your pretensions relating to this indemnity have the smallest foundation, I hasten to inform you that I entirely relinquish it.' The Minister replied, taking the poet's view, that the pension was a debt due from the country, and stating that it should still be reserved for him; but Victor Hugo never took it up from this time forward.

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For a brief period managers held aloof from the dramatist, and when he wrote *Le Souper à Ferrare*, which title was afterwards changed to that of *Lucrèce Borgia*, no one was eager for it. But this attitude changed after his speech at the tribunal, and M. Harel, director of the Porte St. Martin, sought for and obtained the play. Admirable representatives were found for the chief parts, Frédérick Lemaître taking that of Grennaro, Delafosse that of Don Alphonse d'Esté, Mademoiselle Georges that of Lucretia, and Mademoiselle Juliette that of the Princess Negroni. Meyerbeer and Berlioz composed the music for the song which was sung at the supper given by the Princess Negroni. Only one person was allowed to be present at the final rehearsal, and that was Sainte-Beuve. The critic was playing a double part towards the dramatist, with whom he had been out of sympathy for some time past, and it is recorded that at the close of the rehearsal of *Lucrèce Borgia* he warmly congratulated the author upon his drama, and went away circulating reports everywhere that the piece was an utter absurdity! 'It was solely due to his treachery and infamous gossip that on the morning of the day on which the piece was to[Pg 86] be performed in the evening, several newspapers announced that they were in possession of the plot, and that the whole production was in the highest degree obscene, depicting orgies terrible and indecent beyond conception.'

Great interest, notwithstanding, was manifested in the play, and amongst those who implored the author for first-night seats was General Lafayette. The representation was a triumphant success, and for awhile nothing was talked about in Paris but the new play. The monetary success was equal to the literary and dramatic. The receipts for the first three performances amounted to 84,769 francs—a sum which no other work had equalled or approached during M. Harel's management. Referring to two of his most widely known dramas, Victor Hugo predicted that *Le Roi s'Amuse* would one day prove to be the principal political era, and *Lucrèce Borgia* the principal literary era of his life. He had purposely presented deformities in both, but he believed that by uniting monsters to humanity, one could not fail to excite interest and perhaps sympathy. 'Physical deformity, sanctified by paternal love, this is what you have in *Le Roi s'Amuse*; moral deformity,[Pg 87] purified by maternal love, this is what you find in *Lucrèce Borgia*.'

Hugo was fated to be the victim of misunderstanding with regard to almost all his dramas, and he found no exception in *Lucrèce Borgia*. From an attitude of delight and complacency, M. Harel, the director of the theatre, passed to one of studious neglect and insolence. He took off the play, and then demanded a new one, which he averred the poet had agreed to write for him. A quarrel ensued, and the manager challenged the dramatist to a duel. It would have taken place, but M. Harel thought better of the affair, and apologized, whereupon Hugo agreed to give him his next piece. M. Harel remarked upon the whole incident, 'You are probably the first author to whom a manager has said, "Your play or your life!"'

Marie Tudor, produced in November, 1833, was the next play by Victor Hugo. It was concerned with a queen, a favourite, and an executioner, a trio as common in history as upon the mimic stage. The dramatist had now two difficulties to contend with. In the first place, the partisans of Dumas sowed dissension between the two authors, and spread lying reports[Pg 88] respecting Hugo and his attitude towards Dumas; and in the second place, the writer's own friends grew alarmed at various reports which gained currency. 'I hear on all sides,' wrote one of them, 'that your play is more than ever a tissue of horrors—that your Mary is a bloodthirsty creature, that the executioner is perpetually on the stage, and several other reproaches all equally well founded.' Hugo remained calm and unmoved, though he was warned that the presence of the executioner on the stage had been given as the watchword to those who intended to hiss the play. The piece was produced in due course, and Mademoiselle Georges looked superbly and acted well. But the author's enemies kept up a persistent hissing, and there was a strong contest between those who formed a genuine judgment upon the play and greatly admired it, and those who were resolved upon its ruin. The first

night left the result dubious, but the piece continued to be played beyond the time generally regarded as constituting an average success. On its withdrawal, all the relations between the author and the Porte St. Martin naturally ceased, and the treaty with[Pg 89] M. Harel for a third drama was destroyed by mutual consent.

Hugo's dramatic work was now interrupted by the composition of his *L'Étude sur Mirabeau*, which may be taken as an apology for his advanced political and social views. He felt it necessary to review his past career, and to make known to the world the processes of education through which his mind had passed since his early days of Royalist fervour. This study, which appeared in his *Littérature et Philosophie Mêlées*, is a defence of conscience, and illustrates the power of growing convictions to emancipate the mind from prejudice and error, regarding the matter, of course, from the standpoint of the writer himself.

In 1835 the Théâtre Français applied to Victor Hugo for a new drama, and in response he gave to it his *Angelo*, one of his best pieces for construction and for rapid and vigorous effects. It was the author's intention in this drama, as he has himself stated, 'to depict two sad but contrasted characters—the woman in society, and the woman out of society; the one he has endeavoured to deliver from despotism, the other he has striven to defend from contempt;[Pg 90] he has shown the temptations resisted by the virtue of the one, and the tears shed over her guilt by the other; he has cast blame where blame is due, upon man in his strength and upon society in its absurdity; in contrariety to the two women, he has delineated two men—the husband and the lover, one a sovereign and one an outlaw, and, by various subordinate methods, has given a sort of summary of the relations, regular and irregular, in which a man can stand with a woman on the one hand, and with society in general on the other.' There is nothing more characteristic of the author's dramas than this exhibition of striking contrasts; and, indeed, in all his poetic work is to be traced this juxtaposition of the strongest lights and shades of which human life and human emotion are capable.

The two leading stars in *Angelo* were Mademoiselle Mars and Madame Dorval. Unfortunately, a serious feud arose in consequence of the former discovering that the part she had chosen was not the most forcible and picturesque; and it required all the strong will of Victor Hugo to bring the actress to reason. The two ladies had their partisans in the theatre when[Pg 91] the play came to be acted, but the representation passed over without mishap, and it was conceded that a fair success had been achieved.

Whatever might be Victor Hugo's defects as a dramatist, and however he might divide in opinion the theatre-going public of Paris upon the general claims of his plays, he

had certainly infused life into the dramatic literature of the time. He had attained a commanding position, and although his genius was marred by some eccentricities, it was also as unquestionably distinguished for its grand conceptions, its dramatic felicities, and its splendours of diction.

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CHAPTER VII.LAST DRAMATIC WRITINGS.

In some respects, no man of equal genius was ever so unfortunate as Victor Hugo in his relations with the stage. I refer, of course, to the earlier part of his career, for there came a time when the appreciation of him as a dramatist was as high and universal as was the admiration of his literary excellence. But during the long struggle between the old and the new drama there were always enemies ready to denounce and hiss whatsoever he produced; and had he given them a *Romeo and Juliet* or a *Hamlet*, the result would have been precisely the same.

We have seen the alternations of failure and success which attended the plays already passed in review; and the same mixed reception was awarded to those final efforts in connection with the drama which led him to adopt the resolution[Pg 93] to quit the stage for ever. An operatic venture into which the poet was drawn in 1836 resulted in the same ill-fortune which had marked more regular dramatic compositions. Meyerbeer and other celebrated musicians had begged Victor Hugo to make an opera of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, but he had steadfastly declined all such proposals. At length he yielded to friendship, and wrote the libretto of an opera called *La Esmeralda*, the music being composed by Mademoiselle Bertin, daughter of the conductor of the *Journal des Débats*. Curiously enough, the libretto ended with the word 'fatality,' and this represented the misfortune of the piece and its performers. Though boasting a singular array of talent in its production and representation, it was hissed. Mademoiselle Falcon, the leading singer, lost her voice; M. Nourrit, the tenor, subsequently went to Italy, and killed himself; the Duke of Orleans gave the name of *Esmeralda* to a valuable mare, which was killed at a steeplechase; and finally, a ship called the Esmeralda was lost in crossing from England to Ireland, and every soul on board perished.

A domestic grief visited the poet in the following year, when his brother Eugène died. For[Pg 94] some time before his death he had been insane, and towards the end his one favourite relative, Victor, even could not visit him, as the sight of his brother conjured up illusions which made him dangerously violent. Though of strong

constitution naturally, when the sufferer's mind gave way his physical health began to fail also, and he gradually wasted away until death released him in February, 1837. This was the brother who had been Victor Hugo's constant companion in early life, and the news of his death deeply agitated the survivor, keenly awakening the slumbering recollections of childhood.

Louis Philippe gave a grand fête at Versailles in the summer of 1837, on the occasion of the marriage of the Duke of Orleans. Victor Hugo, Dumas, Balzac, and other men of letters were invited, and were obliged to appear in fancy dress, the result being ludicrous in some cases, as in that of Balzac, who had on the dress of a marquis, which, it was jokingly said, fitted him as badly as the title itself would. Hugo was an object of special distinction by the Royal family. The King conversed with him, and the Duchess of Orleans paid him marked attention. There[Pg 95] were two people, she said, with whom she wished to become acquainted—M. Cousin and himself. She had often spoken of him to Monsieur de Goethe; she had read all his works, and knew his poems by heart. Her favourite book was the *Chants du Crépuscule*; and she added, 'I have visited *your* Notre-Dame.' Hugo was promoted to the rank of Officer of the Legion of Honour, and he received from the Duchess a painting by M. Saint-Evre representing Inez de Castro. It was a valuable work, and on the gilding of the frame was inscribed, '*Le Duc et la Duchesse d'Orléans à M. Victor Hugo, 27 Juin, 1837*.'

At this juncture the poet brought a second action before the Board of Trade, to compel the Comédie Française to fulfil its agreement with him by producing his plays. He also claimed compensation for past neglect. Hugo's advocate, M. Paillard de Villeneuve, in an effective speech, demonstrated the injustice of a theatre supported by the State becoming the monopoly of a clique; showed how the existing state of things pressed heavily upon such men of genius as his client; and asserted that not only had no pieces ever realized greater profits, but that actually at that moment, while they were prohibited in France,[Pg 96] they were drawing large and appreciative audiences in London, Vienna, Madrid, Moscow, and other important cities. Victor Hugo himself also spoke, complaining that the manager of the French theatre had deceived him, and that he wore two masks—one of which was intended to deceive authors, and the other to elude justice. The Board gave judgment in the poet's favour, sentencing the Comédie Française to pay 6,000 francs damages, and to perform *Hernani*, *Marion de Lorme*, and *Angelo* without delay. An appeal was entered against this judgment, and when it came on for hearing Hugo pleaded his cause in person, asserting that there was an organized effort to close the stage against the new and rising school of literature. The appeal was dismissed, and justice was at length done to the dramatist.

In conformity with the judgment, *Hernani* was first produced, and the play was brilliantly successful.

I must refer in this place to some of Victor Hugo's lyrical efforts. Not without reason has the volume entitled *Feuilles d'Automne* held a high place in the regard of his admirers. It is the poetry of the emotions expressed in such graceful lyric verse as has rarely been penned.[Pg 97] In these tender and exquisite poems, as M. Alfred Nettement observed, the poet's 'lay is of what he has seen, of what he has felt, of what he has loved: he sings of his wife, the ornament of his home; of his children, fascinating in their fair-haired beauty; of landscapes ever widening in their horizon; of trees under which he has enjoyed a grateful shade.' Nature and personal experiences—from the opening thoughts of the child to the greater aspirations of the man—are blended in beautiful harmony in these poems, which may be turned to again and again for their sweetness and melody. In 1835 appeared *Les Chants du Crépuscule*, which truly represent a kind of twilight of the soul. 'As compared with what had gone before, the book exhibits the same ideas; the poet is identically the same poet, but his brow is furrowed by deeper lines, and maturity is more stamped upon his years; he laments that he cannot comprehend the semi-darkness that is gathering around; his hope seems damped by hesitation; his love-songs die away in sighs of misgiving; and when he sees the people enveloped in doubt, he begins to be conscious of faltering too. But from all this temper of despondency he quickly rallies, and[Pg 98] returns to a bright assurance of a grand development of the human race.' The volume has tones of gentleness and also tones of lofty scorn. To the suffering and the unfortunate the poet was ever tender and pitiful; but to the mean, the base, and the vicious he was as a whip and a scourge. He always endeavoured to separate the worthy from the unworthy, and wherever the latter were to be found, whether in the ranks of friends or foes, they were never suffered to escape the lash of his indignation.

Another volume of poems, *Les Voix Intérieures*, was published in 1837. 'The poet in this production,' says one of his biographers, 'regards life under its threefold aspect, at home, abroad, and at work; he maintains that it is the mission of the poet not to suffer the past to become an illusion to blind him in the present, but to survey all things calmly, to be ever staunch yet kind, to be impartial, and equally free from petty wrath and petty vanity; in everything to be sincere and disinterested. Such was his ideal, and in accordance with it Victor Hugo spared no effort to improve the minds and morals of men in general, and by his poetry, as well as by his romances and his plays, he desired to [Pg 99]constitute himself the champion of amelioration.' This same desire for the elevation of the race ran through all his efforts—social, literary, and political. He may

have been mistaken in his means sometimes, never in the honesty and purity of his intent.

Returning to the stage, Victor Hugo had become so impressed with the idea that the French nation had a right to have a theatre in which the higher drama should be performed, that he was brought to consent to several interviews on the subject with M. Guizot. The latter admitted that there never was a more legitimate request; he agreed with the poet that a new style of art required a new style of theatre; that the Comédie Française, which was the seat of Tradition and Conservatism, was not the proper arena for original literature of the day; and that the Government would only be doing its duty in creating a theatre for those who had created a department of art. A scheme was perfected for a new theatre, and M. Anténor Joly was named as manager. No building but a very old one was to be had, however, and this—which was in a bad situation—was transformed into the Théâtre de la Renaissance. For this theatre[Pg 100] Hugo wrote his *Ruy Blas*, a drama which, as is well known, deals with the love of a queen for a valet who subsequently becomes a minister. The play was in five acts, and the leading character was sustained by Lemaître. The actor strongly approved the first three acts, but was more than dubious about the fourth and fifth. During the final rehearsals of this piece Victor Hugo had a marvellous escape of his life. Two of the actors happening to station themselves awkwardly, he got up in order to indicate their right positions. Scarcely had he left his chair when a great bar of iron fell upon it from an arch above, smashing it to atoms. The author would undoubtedly have been killed on the spot but for this momentary rising to correct the mistake of the actors.

The body of the theatre being incomplete when the play came to be produced, difficulties beset the representation. It was winter, and many of the audience were chilled by violent draughts. But the play soon warmed them into enthusiasm. In the fifth act, we are told by one who was present, Lemaître rivalled the greatest comedians, and success was more decided than ever. 'The way in which he tore off his livery,[Pg 101] drew the bolt, and struck his sword on the table, the way in which he said to Don Sallustre:

'"*Tenez*,

Pour un homme d'esprit, vraiment vous m'étonnez!"

—the way in which he came back to entreat the Queen's pardon, and finally drank off the poison—everything had so much greatness, truth, depth, and splendour, that the poet had the rare joy of seeing the ideal of which he had dreamt become a living soul.'

The play was successful with that part of the public which was unprejudiced, and the press generally was in its favour. But it appears that the theatre was wanted by the co-manager for comic opera, so the fourth act of Hugo's play was persistently hissed at every representation by interested persons. The *claqueurs* were detected and instantly recognised. *Ruy Blas* ran for fifty nights, the same programme of hissing being carried through to the end. The manuscript of the piece was sold to the manager of a publishing company, M. Delboye. The company also purchased the right of publication of the whole of the poet's works for eleven years, for which they agreed to pay 240,000 francs; and[Pg 102] the poet on his part agreed to add two unpublished volumes.

Victor Hugo produced no drama after this for several years; but in 1840 he issued his work *Les Rayons et les Ombres*, consisting of poems which had previously been read to his friends Lamartine, Deschamps, De Lacretelle, and others. Here again he sought expression for his ever-widening aspirations after human perfectibility. Once more in this work 'he claims the right of expressing his goodwill for all who labour, his aversion to all who oppress; his love for all who serve the good cause, and his pity for all who suffer in its behalf; he declares himself free to bow down to every misery, and to pay homage to all self-sacrifice.' In the poetical alternations and contrasts in this volume will be discovered a profound love and appreciation of Nature, as well as an undercurrent of affection for the human. The poet himself, looking back upon what he had accomplished, and forward towards what he hoped to do, at the transition period before he went into exile, asserted his thesis that 'a poet ought to have in him the worship of conscience, the worship of thought, and the worship of Nature; he should be like Juvenal,[Pg 103] who felt that day and night were perpetual witnesses within him; he should be like Dante, who defined the lost to be those who could no longer think; he should be like St. Augustine, who, heedless of any accusation of Pantheism, declared the sky to be an intelligent creation.' And it is under such inspiration that 'he has attempted to write the poem of humanity. He loves brightness and sunshine. The Bible has been his Book; Virgil and Dante have been his masters; he has laboured to reconcile truth and poetry, knowing that knowledge must precede thought, and thought must precede imagination, while knowledge, thought, and imagination combined are the secret of power.' It would be impossible for a poet with any vigour of imagination, and any perception of the soul of beauty in all things, to fail with these sublime ideals before him.

I now come to the last of Victor Hugo's writings for the stage, and in *Les Burgraves* we have in some respects the best of his dramatic works. It was written towards the close of 1842, and produced (like its predecessors) in the midst of difficulties in March,

1843, at the Comédie Française. At the time of its [Pg 104]production, the author's political opinions had arrived at a stage of compromise. Though he was a Republican in theory, he had no strong objection to such a monarchy as that of Louis Philippe, which was liberty itself compared with that which it overthrew. For a sovereign who refrained from tyranny, and was not inimical to progress, he had some sympathy, and he was willing to wait until the time became ripe for the advent of the Republic. Writing to M. Thiers, indeed, to beg for some amelioration in the lot of an imprisoned editor, he said of himself, 'I do not at the present time take any definite political part. I regard all parties as acting with impartiality, full of affection for France, and anxious for progress. I applaud sometimes those in power, sometimes the opposition, according as those in power or in opposition seem to me to act best for the country.'

The catholic spirit in which he looked upon public affairs was manifested in his study upon Mirabeau. Defining the position of the wise politician, he remarked that 'he must give credit to the moderate party for the way in which they smooth over transitions; to the extreme parties for the activity with which they advance the[Pg 105] circulation of ideas, which are the very life-blood of civilization; to lovers of the past for the care which they bestow on roots in which there is still life; to people zealous for the future, for their love of those beautiful flowers which will some day produce fine fruits; to mature men for their moderation, to young men for their patience; to those for what they do, to those for what they desire to do; to all the difficulty of everything.' So, some years later he stated that the aim he had in view was 'to agree with all parties in what is liberal and generous, but with none in what is illiberal and mischievous.' The form of government he regarded as a secondary affair; liberty and progress demanded the first and most urgent thought. Herein, of course, he differed from the professional politician, who has ever looked at great questions not from the poet's point of view, but from the immediately personal and practical. Many of his humanitarian ideas appeared Quixotic and chimerical to those who viewed politics as a matter of party, or as a means of personal triumph; while unjust and illiberal men were not also wanting in the ranks of the Republicans.

Then there were some who, like Armand[Pg 106] Carrel, were prepared to go with Victor Hugo in politics, but rejected his new literary ideas. They clung to the old form of the drama, and found a new star in Ponsard, the author of *Lucrèce*, a tragedy which had for its subject the expulsion of the Tarquins and the establishment of a Republic in Rome. So the Parisians were beguiled by the name of Ponsard, who found a great and useful ally in Rachel; and Hugo was contemned, in spite of such strictures as those of Thierry in *Le Messager*, who drew a comparison between the ostracism with

which his countrymen visited such brilliant writers as Hugo, and that of the Athenians, who punished people whose renown lasted too long.

It was at this juncture that *Les Burgraves* was produced, and even the genius of the writer himself added to the difficulties by which he was beset. He had conceived three stupendous characters, Job, Otbert, and Barbarossa; and although the actors who sustained these characters, MM. Beauvallet, Geffroy, and Ligier, were undoubtedly men of dramatic instinct and ability, neither they nor any other living tragedians could adequately set forth these epic creations. In the matter of this magnificent trilogy, the author[Pg 107] has been not inaptly compared with Æschylus. 'The first of Greek tragedians, Æschylus, after he had long stirred the emotions of the Athenians, was finally deserted by them; they preferred Sophocles to him, and full of dejection he went into exile, saying, 'I dedicate my works to Time;' and Time at last did him ample justice, though he did not live to enjoy his triumph. But in this, Hugo differed from the glorious Greek, for he lived to witness the repentance of the people.

Les Burgraves was ill received on the first night, but this was nothing compared with the opposition subsequently manifested. At every representation, sneers and hissing interrupted the progress of the piece; but the manager and the actors struggled on and played the drama for thirty nights. Some of the most influential journals joined themselves to the enemy, and the time was marked by the defection of Lamartine to the side of Ponsard. Théophile Gautier was one of the small band who boldly applauded Hugo's drama in the press. 'In our day,' he asserted, 'there is no one except M. Hugo who is capable of giving the epic tone to three great acts, or of maintaining their lyric swing. Every[Pg 108] moment seems to produce a magnificent verse that resounds like the stroke of an eagle's wing, and exalts us to the supremest height of lyric poetry. The play is diversified in tone, and displays a singular flexibility of rhythm, making its transitions from the tender to the terrible, from the smile to the tear, with a happy facility that no other author has attained.'

With the production of this play dates Victor Hugo's final abandonment of the stage. Strange fate this for a writer for whom Charles Nodier claimed the honour of being, after Rabelais and Molière, one of the most original geniuses that French literature ever saw. But the dramatist was disgusted with the literary hostility, the political insincerity, and the personal antipathy which abounded, and although he had a play, *Les Jumeaux*, which had never been produced, he resolved to give no more of his writings to the stage. He was repeatedly pressed in after years to depart from this resolution, but in vain. 'My decision is final,' he said on one occasion. 'Under no pretext shall any more of my plays appear on the stage during my life.'

The poet wrote several plays not for publication after this time, and one of them, *Torquemada*,[Pg 109] has been published. Others, named respectively *L'Épée*, *La Grand'mère*, and *Peut-être Frère de Gavoche*, will only appear posthumously. That there will be in them characters which will live, and that the plays themselves are such as to enhance the public view of Victor Hugo's dramatic talents, are points upon which we have explicit assurances from those who have had the privilege of listening to the pieces as read by the late venerable author himself.

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CHAPTER VIII.THE FRENCH ACADEMY.

A seat amongst the 'forty Immortals' is the high and honourable aim of every distinguished Frenchman. But the chequered history of the Academy since its formation by Richelieu two centuries and a half ago, furnishes another evidence of the truth that merit does not always secure its just reward. Again and again have men illustrious in letters been passed over, whilst those who had no claim upon the nation's regard have snatched fortuitous honours by unworthy means. Amongst those who knocked on more than one occasion at the doors of the French Academy in vain, was Victor Hugo. That such a man must be ultimately successful was beyond a doubt; but it says little for the Academy that it failed to recognise his claims[Pg 111] until its hostile attitude had become a scandal to literature.

As a kind of apology for, or defence of his career, in 1834 Hugo published his *Littérature et Philosophie Mêlées*. For those who could see nothing but tergiversation in the development of his views, as regarded from the Royalist standpoint of 1819 and the Revolutionary standpoint of 1834, these collected papers presented a series of progressive arguments well worthy of study. Nor was it merely from the personal point of view that the author issued this work; he believed that the gradual changes of thought which they revealed, all tending towards a fuller liberty in art, politics, and literature, were but typical of the states of mind through which a very large moiety of the young thinkers of his generation had passed. That he did not spare the crudities and defects which marked his own period of literary adolescence will be apparent from this passage, in which he frankly discusses his early compositions: 'There were historical sketches and miscellaneous essays, there were criticism and poetry; but the criticism was weak, the poetry weaker still; the verses were some of them light and frivolous, some of them[Pg 112] tragically grand; the declamations against regicides were as furious as they were honest; the men of 1793 were lampooned with epigrams of 1754, a species of satire now obsolete, but very

fashionable at the date at which they were published; next came visions of regeneration for the stage, and vows of loyalty to the State; every variety of style is represented; every branch of classical knowledge made subordinate to literary reform; finally, there are schemes of government and studies of tragedies, all conceived in college or at school.'

The time had now come in which he demanded a larger scope. His ideas had expanded, and while not abandoning the life contemplative, he desired to become in some way the man of action, and to mingle in the literary and political conflicts going forward around him. Taxed with forsaking the study of Nature, the poet replied that he still loved that holy mother, but in this century of adventure a man must be the servant of all. Reviewing his political position, he felt that he had more than paid his debt to the fallen monarchy, while he could at the same time conscientiously acknowledge Louis Philippe. The recollection of a pension was balanced by the[Pg 113] confiscation of a drama, observes Madame Hugo, and he was now his own master to follow out his convictions. In the adoption of a public career there were two courses nominally open to him. But with respect to one of these, that of entering the Chamber of Deputies, he was met by an obstacle which completely disbarred him. He was not a wealthy man, and by the electoral law of that day only wealthy men could become deputies. Moreover, if he could have secured by some means a nominal qualification, the electors looked askance upon literary men. They regarded them as more fitted for the quietude of the study than the bustling activity of the tribune. Lamartine was a deputy, it is true, but he was a rare exception.

Abandoning all idea of the Chamber of Deputies at that time, Victor Hugo next thought of the Chamber of Peers. But here again he was met by a practical difficulty. In the selection of peers the King could only choose men who had attained to certain dignities; and in Hugo's case election to the Academy was the only qualifying dignity that was open to him. To the Academy accordingly he appealed. The first vacancy occurred in 1836. But Victor Hugo had enemies,[Pg 114] and amongst these was Casimir Delavigne, who had considerable weight amongst the Forty. M. Barbou states that 'the poet of the imperial era was sickly and asthmatic, and he detested Victor Hugo simply for his robustness and power.' When Dumas canvassed Delavigne in the interest of his friend, the author of *Notre-Dame*, Delavigne replied with warmth that he would vote for Dumas with all his heart, but for Hugo never. The Academicians elected M. Dupaty, probably on the principle that his fame was of such a restricted character that it could not in the least detract from their own lustre. Commenting upon his defeat, Hugo said, 'I always thought the way to the Académie was across the Pont des Arts; I find that it is across the Pont Neuf.'

Three years later there was another vacancy, and Hugo canvassed the Academicians in turn. But the whole nature of his work was opposed in spirit to the exclusives of the Academy, and it is not to be wondered at, from this standpoint, that he failed to meet with a favourable appreciation. However brilliant a candidate might be, most of the members were unable to take a large and liberal view. Alexandre Duval[Pg 115] was especially bitter against Hugo, and when the poet was asked what he had done to offend him, he replied, 'I had written *Hernani*.' Though in a dying condition, Duval insisted upon being taken from his bed to vote against Hugo. M. Molé was elected. In 1840 a third vacancy occurred, and although Hugo was again a candidate, the Academicians elected M. Flourens.

At length, in 1841, on the occasion of his fourth candidature, Victor Hugo was successful. Amongst the distinguished men who voted for him were Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Villemain, Mignet, Cousin, and Thiers. In the list of those who opposed him were the names of only two men of real note, Delavigne and Scribe. One, M. Viennet, voted for Hugo, though the amusing anecdote is told concerning him that when the poet was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, he said he should like to claim 'the cross of a chevalier for everyone who had the courage to read right through any work of a romantic, and the cross of an officer for everyone who had the wit to understand it!' Amidst much that is paltry in the jealousies of literary men, it deserves to be stated to the honour of[Pg 116] Balzac that this eminent writer declined to become a candidate against Victor Hugo.

The new Academician, who was by no means universally congratulated upon his success, was received on the 3rd of June, 1841. According to custom he was called on to pronounce a eulogium upon his predecessor, M. Népomucène Lemercier. His oration began with a description of the splendour and power of Napoleon. Before his greatness, said the speaker, the whole universe bowed down, with the exception of six contemplative poets. 'Those poets were Ducis, Delille, Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, and Lemercier. But what did their resistance mean? Europe was dazzled, and lay, as it were, vanquished and absorbed in the glory of France. What did these six resentful spirits represent? Why, they represented for Europe the only thing in which Europe had failed—they represented independence; and they represented for France the only thing in which France was wanting—they represented liberty.' Alluding still more directly to M. Lemercier, Hugo related that he was on brotherly terms with Bonaparte the consul, but that when the consul became an emperor he was no longer his[Pg 117] friend. Finally, the orator declared with much eloquence that it was the mission of every author to diffuse civilization; and avowed that for his own part it had ever been his aim to devote his abilities to the development

of good fellowship, feeling it his duty to be unawed by the mob, but to respect the people; and although he could not always sympathize with every form of liberty which was advocated, he was yet ever ready to hold out the hand of encouragement to all who were languishing through want of air and space, and whose future seemed to promise only gloom and despair. To ameliorate the condition of the masses he would have every generous and thinking mind lay itself out by devising fresh schemes of improvement; and libraries, studies, and schools should be multiplied, as all tending to the advancement of the human race, and to the propagation of the love of law and liberty.

Victor Hugo's address was enthusiastically received by the bulk of the members of the Academy, and the press generally commented upon it in flattering terms. Times had changed since the poet had first called upon M. Royer-Collard to solicit his vote, when the latter [Pg 118]professed his entire ignorance of Victor Hugo's name, and the following conversation took place:

'I am the author of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Bug Jargal*, *Le Dernier Jour dun Condamné*, *Marion Delorme*, etc.'

'I never heard of any of them.'

'Will you do me the honour of accepting a copy of my works?'

'I never read new books.'

The later relations of Hugo with the Academy are of considerable interest. A generous forgetfulness of offence characterized him. When Casimir Delavigne died, and it fell upon Hugo to deliver the funeral oration over one who had been his enemy, he testified to the fine talents of Delavigne, and magnanimously exclaimed: 'Let all the petty jealousies that follow high renown, let all disputes of the conflicting schools, let all the turmoil of party feeling and literary rivalry be forgotten. Let them pass into the silence into which the departed poet has gone to take his long repose!' In January, 1845, Hugo had to reply to the speech of M. Saint Marc Girardin, and shortly afterwards—which was a much more difficult and delicate matter—to the opening[Pg 119] address of M. Sainte-Beuve. In the early stage of the poet's career, Sainte-Beuve, as we have seen, warmly hailed his advent, but he afterwards became his enemy, turning his back upon all his old literary beliefs. By way of covering his retreat, he advocated in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* a union between the classics and romanticists; and while he did justice to every other writer whom he named, he arrested his praise when he came to the name of Victor Hugo. He remarked that all signs of magnificent promise were forgotten, 'as soon as we think of his numerous

stubborn relapses, or consider the way in which he holds to theories which public opinion has already condemned. Sentiments of humanizing art, which might easily enough be praised, are utterly ignored, and M. Hugo clings with a steadfast persistence to his own peculiar style.' The public were naturally curious to know how Hugo would speak of one who had acted treacherously towards him, but with his usual high-minded courtesy, the speaker uttered not one word of a personal character against the man who had been so unjust towards himself.

The Academy had few members who were so[Pg 120] regular in attendance, or were so useful to that august body, as Victor Hugo. He brought into all his relations with it the same energy and conscientiousness which marked his course in connection with literature and the drama. His association with the Academy was virtually the first stage of a new departure in his career.

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CHAPTER IX.PERSONAL AND POLITICAL.

Amongst all Victor Hugo's contemporaries there was no greater admirer of the poet than Balzac. There mingled with his admiration a feeling which amounted almost to reverence; and probably the proudest moment in the novelist's life was that in which he received Hugo at the Jardies. Léon Grozlan tells us that he awaited his arrival with eagerness; indeed, so great was his anxiety that he could not remain for an instant in one place.

These distinguished men of letters were noticeable in their attire, which was certainly far from Solomon-like in its splendour. 'Balzac was picturesque in rags. His pantaloons, without braces, receded from his ample waistcoat *à la financière*; his shoes, trodden down, receded from his pantaloons; the knot of his cravat darted[Pg 122] its points close to his ear; his beard was in a state of four days' high vegetation. As to Victor Hugo, he wore a grey hat of a rather doubtful shade; a faded blue coat with gilt buttons, and a frayed black cravat, the whole set off by green spectacles of a shape and form to rejoice a rural bailiff.' During breakfast, in speaking of literature and the drama, Hugo incidentally mentioned his large profits as a dramatist. 'Balzac listened with the air of a martyr listening to an angel, while he heard Hugo recount the enormous sums which had accrued to him from his magnificent dramas. This *coup de soleil* was likely to excite Balzac's brain for a long time to come.' At that period the author of the *Comédie Humaine* was a personal authority on the bitterness of poverty. The talk proceeded to royalty, to the patronage of talent, and such like matters. Balzac

spoke eloquently upon the lustre which men of genius have shed upon their own times. 'The pen alone,' he said, 'can save kings and their reigns from oblivion. Without Virgil, Horace, Livy, Ovid, who would recognise Augustus in the midst of so many of his name?... Without Shakespeare the reign of Elizabeth would gradually disappear from the history of[Pg 123] England. Without Boileau, without Racine, without Corneille, without Pascal, without La Bruyère, without Molière, Louis XIV., reduced to his mistresses and his wigs, is but a crowned goat, like the sign of an inn. Without the pen, Philippe le Roi would leave behind him a name less known than that of Philippe the eating-house keeper of the Rue Montorgueil, or of Philippe the famous pilferer and juggler. Some day it will be said (at least, I hope so, for his Majesty's sake), "Once upon a time there lived a king called Louis Philippe, who, by the grace of Victor Hugo, Lamartine, etc."' French rulers were emphatically destined to live in the pages of Victor Hugo, but in the case of at least one sovereign it was to be by the immortality of contempt.

At the residence of Hugo in the Place Royale, whither he had moved on leaving the Rue Jean Goujon, there was a frequent visitor in the person of one Auguste Vacquerie. This young poetic enthusiast was born at Villequier, in La Seine Inférieure, in the year 1820. He was educated first at Rouen, but having an unconquerable longing to see and be near Victor Hugo, he went to complete his studies at the[Pg 124] Pension Favart, Paris, within a few doors of Hugo's house. In one of his poems he confessed that though he ardently sighed for Paris, that city meant to him Hugo and nothing beside—it was the shrine of the poet's fame. Like his friend Paul Meurice, he lived in the inspiration of Victor Hugo's name, and the two youths became constant and intimate visitors at the house in the Place Royale. Vacquerie fell seriously ill, and he was nursed with all the devotion of a mother by Madame Hugo. After his recovery, and in acknowledgment of the care bestowed on his son, M. Vacquerie, senior, invited Madame Hugo to occupy his château at Villequier during the summer vacation. The offer was gladly accepted, and Madame Hugo and her four children left Paris for Normandy on this pleasurable excursion. In the course of this visit, Auguste Vacquerie's brother Charles was introduced to Léopoldine Hugo, and these impressionable natures at once fell in love. An engagement of no long duration followed, for the young couple were married in the following spring of 1843. The wedded life of the poet's daughter was unfortunately as brief as it was happy and joyous. After a period of five[Pg 125] months only it came to a sad and tragic termination. The catastrophe with which it closed is thus described: 'The Vacquerie family property at Yillequier is on the banks of the Seine, which is tidal as far as Rouen; but the periodical rising of the water was a matter of no uneasiness to the family, who

were accustomed to make excursions almost daily from Villequier to Caudebec. One of these excursions was arranged for the 4th of September, when M. Charles Vacquerie, with his wife, his uncle, and cousin, started to make a trial trip in a large new boat. They all set out in high spirits upon what was quite an ordinary outing; but a sudden squall came on, and the boat capsized. Léopoldine had always been taught that in the event of being upset, the safest thing to do was to cling to the boat, and accordingly she now instinctively grasped its side amidst convulsions of alarm; her husband was a good swimmer, and, anxious to carry her off, did his utmost to make her relax her hold. But all his efforts were unavailing; in her agony she seemed to have embedded her finger-nails in the wood; his very attempt to break her fingers proved ineffectual. He was but a few yards from the[Pg 126] shore, but finding it was impossible to save her, he determined not to survive her, and, taking her into his embrace, sank with her in the stream. The two bodies were recovered a few hours afterwards.'

One can well understand the accession of melancholy which would come over the poet and his wife in consequence of such a disaster as this. Gloom fell upon the house in the Place Royale, but Victor Hugo found consolation in the affection of the partner of his youth, whose devotion had seemed thus far to increase with the lapse of years. Again and again she animated his lyre, and gave his verse much of its sweetest and noblest inspiration. She entered fully into his high aspirations, and received with grace and *bonhomie* visitors like Lamartine and Madame de Girardin, who came to exchange the courtesies of friendship and genius.

Victor Hugo was given to silent wanderings by night in the Champs Élysées and the vicinity, and he has stated that many of his finest thoughts occurred to him during these midnight walks. On one occasion this habit nearly proved of serious import to him, for as he was passing along near the Rue des Tournelles, wrapped in[Pg 127] meditation, he was attacked and knocked down by a band of pickpockets, and would in all probability have suffered severe injury had not some passers-by caused his assailants to take precipitate flight. The incident caused no modification in the poet's custom, for of physical or moral fear he had scant knowledge.

Notwithstanding his advanced political views in later life, Victor Hugo, as I have already had occasion to observe, moved forward towards a republic by gradual stages. He had no faith in the stability of a government which was merely the result of revolt, and in 1832, when there appeared considerable danger of insurrectionary bloodshed, he wrote: 'Some day we shall have a republic, and it will be a good one. But we must not gather in May the fruit which will only be ripe in August. We must learn to be patient, and the republic proclaimed by France will be the crown of our

hoary heads.' His political honesty impressed his contemporaries. Louis Blanc saw a noble unity in his political progressiveness; and another critic, M. Spuller, in eulogizing the three great French poets of the nineteenth century, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Hugo, observed that although they were all[Pg 128] born outside the pale of the Revolution, they proved to be the very men to help forward and to glorify the democracy, Hugo especially being a noble exponent of the new social truths.

There naturally came a time, therefore, when Hugo desired actual contact with political life. At first, as I have remarked, he formed the design of getting returned for the Chamber of Deputies, but this idea had to be abandoned. Then he was sent for by Louis Philippe. This monarch, though generally immovable on social and literary questions, and caring little for the conciliation of the democracy, was much impressed by the power he recognised in Victor Hugo. Stories are told of interviews, prolonged into the night, between the King and the poet. The result was that on the 13th of April, 1845, Hugo was created a peer—an event which was warmly applauded by the bulk of the people. In taking his seat in the Upper Chamber the new peer was by profession an independent Conservative, but there was in him already a large Republican leaven. His maiden speech was delivered in defence of artists and their copyright, and this was followed in March, 1846, by a vigorous address on Poland. As was the case[Pg 129] with many other literary men, Victor Hugo sympathized deeply with the Poles. He denounced the avowed policy of M. Guizot, that France could do nothing towards re-establishing the Polish nationality. 'He maintained that it was not a material but a moral intervention that was required, and that such intervention ought to be made in the name of European civilization, of which the French were the missionaries and the Poles the champions. He reminded his audience how Sobieski had been to Poland what Leonidas had been to Greece, and he claimed the gratitude and moral support of France for a people who had done their part in the noble defence of freedom.' But, apart from the fact that Poland had few friends, the ideas of freedom expounded by Hugo excited little sympathy in the breasts of the French aristocracy.

In 1847 the new peer showed his catholicity of spirit by supporting the petition of Prince Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte, praying that his family might be allowed to return to France. His chief arguments were: that the Chamber would evidence its strength by its generosity; that it was repugnant to his feelings for any Frenchman to be an exile or an outlaw; that[Pg 130] any pretender must be harmless in the midst of a nation where there was freedom of work and of thought; and that by mercifulness the Chamber would consolidate its power with the people. Louis Philippe was so impressed by these views that he allowed the Bonapartes to return.

That momentous revolutionary year, 1848, did not come upon Victor Hugo altogether as a surprise. That which astonished him was not the character, but the strength of the new movement. He had long before seen that the stability of any French Government would depend upon its attitude towards the people and the pressing social and political questions of the time. If a Government ignored, or attempted to crush the forces which were at work in society, then it was inevitably doomed to fall before them. He had indulged some hope that the Government of Louis Philippe would inaugurate an enlightened policy; but it failed to do this, while it perpetuated abuses which had long been obnoxious. That which the far-seeing predicted actually occurred; the monarchy was swept away. Hugo thought for a moment that a compromise might be effected by constituting the Duchess of Orleans regent; but he speedily saw[Pg 131] that the popular movement was against all Royalty and its forms, and he gave in his adhesion to the Republic. The Provisional Government having fixed the elections for the 23rd of April, Hugo was nominated as a candidate for Paris; but he was unsuccessful. Shortly afterwards, however, he was returned to the National Assembly, on the occasion of the supplementary elections rendered necessary in Paris. He took an independent part in the debates in the Assembly, voting now with the Right and now with the Left. His socialistic views found expression during the discussion upon the national factories, which had borne such lamentable results. 'Admitting the necessity which might seem to justify their establishment, he insisted that practically they had had a most disastrous influence upon business, and pointed out the serious danger which they threatened, not alone to the finances, but to the population of Paris. As a socialist, he addressed himself to socialists, and invoked them to labour in behalf of the perishing, but to labour without causing alarm to the world at large; he implored them to bestow upon the disendowed classes, as they were called, all the benefits of civilization,[Pg 132] to provide them with education, with the means of cheap living; and, in short, to put them in the way of accumulating wealth instead of multiplying misery.' From the point of view of the social reformer, his utterances were wise and conciliatory. During the sanguinary days of June he went from place to place, striving to avert bloodshed; and after the outbreak he was instrumental in saving the lives of several of the insurgents. He advocated mercy, and in the Assembly proposed that an entire amnesty should be proclaimed. A deputy rose and embraced him, and with this deputy, who was none other than Victor Schœlcher, a close friendship was formed. Hugo would have no part in the proceedings against Louis Blanc, and he declined to assent to the vote that Cavaignac deserved the gratitude of his country. He opposed the project of having but one Chamber, and it has been pointed out that the existence of a second Chamber would in all probability have saved France from the *Coup d'État*. From his place in the

Assembly he spoke strongly in favour of the liberty of the press and of the abolition of capital punishment. In April, 1848, he started the journal *L'Évènement*, which had[Pg 133] for its motto 'Intense hatred to anarchy, tender love for the people,' and which included amongst its contributors Charles Hugo, Paul Meurice, Auguste Vitu, Théophile Gautier, and Auguste Vacquerie. This journal, which supported the cause of the Revolution, was for a time, but a brief one only, successful.

In January, 1849, the Constituent Assembly was dissolved, and a Legislative Assembly summoned in its stead a few months afterwards. Hugo was elected one of the twenty-eight deputies for Paris, his name standing tenth on the list. He has left it on record in *Le Droit et la Loi* that this year formed an epoch in his life. He became at this time a thorough Republican. 'An inanimate body was lying on the ground; he was told that that lifeless thing was the Republic; he drew near and gazed, and lo! it was Liberty; he bent over it and raised it to his bosom. Before him might be ruin, insult, banishment, and scorn, but he took it unto him as a wife! From that moment there existed within his very soul the union between Liberty and the Republic.' The uncompromising attitude he now assumed seems to have alarmed some persons, who charged him with apostasy;[Pg 134] but they must have been superficial students of his career. The poet had long been drifting towards this end. With the advance in his political views there seems to have come an expansion in his eloquence; and the tribune witnessed many impassioned speeches from the deputy—speeches which moved his auditors to the utmost depths of emotion. When he defended Italy at the time the French entered Rome—and in doing so strongly attacked the abuses attendant upon ecclesiastical domination—he incurred the anger of his former friend Montalembert. Replying to the Comte he said: 'There was a time when he employed his noble talents better. He defended Poland as now I defend Italy. I was with him then; he is against me now. The explanation is not far to seek. He has gone over to the side of the oppressors: I have remained on the side of the oppressed.'

Presiding at the Peace Congress of Paris, held on the 21st of August, 1849, and addressing Richard Cobden and his fellow-delegates from various parts of the world, Hugo gave expression to his sanguine humanitarian sentiments. 'You have come,' he observed to these representatives of peace, 'to turn over, if it may be, the last and[Pg 135] most august page of the Gospel, the page that ordains peace amongst the children of the one Creator; and here in this city, which has rejoiced to proclaim fraternity to its own citizens, you have assembled to proclaim fraternity to all men.' The orator expressed his conviction that universal peace was attainable, and at the closing sitting of the Congress, held on the 24th, the anniversary of St. Bartholomew, he spoke in this impassioned strain: 'On this very day, 277 years ago, this city of Paris

was aroused in terror amidst the darkness of the night. The bell, known as the silver bell, chimed from the Palais de Justice, and a bloody deed, unprecedented in the annals of crime, was perpetrated; and now, on that self-same date, in that self-same city, God has brought together into one general concourse the representatives of that old antagonism, and has bidden them transform their sentiments into sentiments of love. The sad significance of this mournful anniversary is removed; each drop of blood is replaced by a ray of light. Well-nigh beneath the shadow of that tower whence tolled the fatal vespers of St. Bartholomew, not only Englishmen and Frenchmen, Germans and Italians, Europeans and Americans, but actually[Pg 136] Papists and Huguenots have been content to meet, happy, nay proud, to unite themselves together in an embrace alike honourable and indissoluble.' These words excited a strange fervour and enthusiasm in the audience, and amidst the waving of hats and handkerchiefs, and other demonstrations of applause, a Roman Catholic abbé and a Protestant pastor might have been seen embracing, overcome by the power of the orator's language.

During the debate on the new Education Bill, introduced by M. de Falloux in January, 1850, Victor Hugo adversely criticized the measure as placing too much power in the hands of the clergy. He announced that he should oppose any scheme which entrusted the education of youth to the clerical party, who were always seeking to fetter the human mind. Church and State must pursue independent courses. 'Your law,' he exclaimed, directly addressing the Minister, 'is a law with a mask. It says one thing, it does another. It may bear the aspect of liberty, but it means thraldom. It is practically confiscation under the name of a deed of gift. But it is all one with your usual policy. Every time that you forge a new chain you cry,[Pg 137] "See, here is freedom!"' During the same session Hugo appealed for mercy for the political criminals, and condemned the law of transportation, by which they were not only banished but liable to be shut up in citadels. His speech on this occasion created such a profound impression that it was afterwards printed and distributed throughout the country, and a medal was struck in honour of the orator.

Troublous times were again looming over France. The protestations of Louis Napoleon that he desired to rank as a patriot only, and not as a Bonaparte, had been accepted by Victor Hugo, Louis Blanc, and others, in good faith. In his prison at Ham, he had been visited by several staunch Republicans, who believed his asseverations that he had no other end in view than the welfare of France and the consolidation of her liberties. Indeed, when the exile returned to Paris he sought out Victor Hugo, and in the most frank and unambiguous language said to him, 'What would it be for me to be Napoleon over again? Why, it would not simply be an ambition, it would be a crime.

Why should you suppose me a fool? I am not a great man, and when the Republic is made I shall never[Pg 138] follow the steps of Napoleon. As for me, I am honest; and I shall follow in the way of Washington.' It never struck the poet that his visitor protested too much. Upright and sincere himself, he liked to believe in the integrity of others, and he little dreamt that Louis Napoleon, who had sworn fidelity to the Constitution, and again and again declared himself bound by his oath, would in a short time strangle the Republic with his own hands.

But, alas! it was not long before the poet and his friends were disillusioned, for, as Proudhon remarked, 'Citizen Bonaparte, who but yesterday was a mere speck in the fiery heavens, has become an ominous cloud, bearing storm and tempest in its bosom.' Hugo, seeing what was advancing, bore himself courageously, and from his place in the tribune never ceased to advocate the cause of freedom, while he bade the people repose securely in their own strength. The reactionary policy began with the curtailment of the liberty of the press, and culminated in the *Coup d'État* of the 2nd December, 1851. On that date the Legislative Assembly was dissolved; universal suffrage was established, and Paris was declared to be in a state of siege. Thiers,[Pg 139] Cavaignac, and others were arrested and sent to the Castle of Vincennes. About 180 members of the Assembly, with M. Berryer at their head, on endeavouring to meet, were also arrested, and Paris was occupied by troops. Sanguinary conflicts ensued between the people and the soldiery, but the troops were victorious. Napoleon put a pistol at the head of Paris, and ultimately, by means which will be condemned in history to all ages, the Empire was established.

Victor Hugo did all in his power for the maintenance of the rights of the people, but in vain. In the tribune he indignantly inveighed against the tyranny of Napoleon, and was in consequence placed at the head of the list of the proscribed. He supported the Committee of Resistance in their efforts to depose the Prince; but the people were paralyzed by the display of power, and he was obliged to fly from Paris. A sum of 25,000 francs was offered to anyone who would either kill or arrest him, and so great was the terror of the populace that no one could be found who would give the friend of freedom an asylum. At length he secured temporary shelter beneath the roof of a relation, remaining here until the 12th of December,[Pg 140] when he left Paris, completely disguised, by the Northern Railway Station. The expatriated poet reached Brussels in safety, but his sons and the rest of the staff of *L'Évènement* had been cast into prison. It was a momentous time for the friends of Victor Hugo, who were naturally anxious for his safety when so many of the friends of the Republic had been seized and incarcerated.

In his retreat the great patriot found himself confronted by a new task. He resolved to compile a history of the infamous events which had driven him into exile. 'His lashes should reach to the faces of Napoleon and his acolytes at the Tuileries; he became at once the Tacitus and Juvenal of his time, only his accents were mightier than theirs, because his indignation was greater and his wrath more just.' Napoleon had triumphed, but the scourge was soon to descend which should leave him exposed to the derision and contempt of the world to the end of time. The sword is powerful; but the pen, which is the stronger weapon, has always overtaken it, and adjusted the historical balance in the interests of humanity.