

CHAPTER VIII OF *LES MISERABLES* BY VICTOR HUGO

A MAN OVERBOARD!

WHAT MATTERS IT? THE VESSEL DOES NOT HALT. THE WIND BLOWS. THAT SOMBRE SHIP HAS A PATH WHICH IT IS FORCED TO PURSUE. IT PASSES ON.

THE MAN DISAPPEARS, THEN REAPPEARS; HE PLUNGES, HE RISES AGAIN TO THE SURFACE; HE CALLS, HE STRETCHES OUT HIS ARMS; HE IS NOT HEARD. THE VESSEL, TREMBLING UNDER THE HURRICANE, IS WHOLLY ABSORBED IN ITS OWN WORKINGS; THE PASSENGERS AND SAILORS DO NOT EVEN SEE THE DROWNING MAN; HIS MISERABLE HEAD IS BUT A SPECK AMID THE IMMENSITY OF THE WAVES. HE GIVES VENT TO DESPERATE CRIES FROM OUT OF THE DEPTHS. WHAT A SPECTRE IS THAT RETREATING SAIL! HE GAZES AND GAZES AT IT FRANTICALLY. IT RETREATS, IT GROWS DIM, IT DIMINISHES IN SIZE. HE WAS THERE BUT JUST NOW, HE WAS ONE OF THE CREW, HE WENT AND CAME ALONG THE DECK WITH THE REST, HE HAD HIS PART OF BREATH AND OF SUNLIGHT, HE WAS A LIVING MAN. NOW, WHAT HAS TAKEN PLACE? HE HAS SLIPPED, HE HAS FALLEN; ALL IS AT AN END.

HE IS IN THE TREMENDOUS SEA. UNDER FOOT HE HAS NOTHING BUT WHAT FLEES AND CRUMBLES. THE BILLOWS, TORN AND LASHED BY THE WIND, ENCOMPASS HIM HIDEOUSLY; THE TOSSINGS OF THE ABYSS BEAR HIM AWAY; ALL THE TONGUES OF WATER DASH OVER HIS HEAD; A POPULACE OF WAVES SPITS UPON HIM; CONFUSED OPENINGS HALF DEVOUR HIM; EVERY TIME THAT HE SINKS, HE CATCHES GLIMPSES OF PRECIPICES FILLED WITH NIGHT; FRIGHTFUL AND UNKNOWN VEGETATIONS SEIZE HIM, KNOT ABOUT HIS FEET, DRAW HIM TO THEM; HE IS CONSCIOUS THAT HE IS BECOMING AN ABYSS, THAT HE FORMS PART OF THE FOAM; THE WAVES TOSS HIM FROM ONE TO ANOTHER; HE DRINKS IN THE BITTERNESS; THE COWARDLY OCEAN ATTACKS HIM FURIOUSLY, TO DROWN HIM; THE ENORMITY PLAYS WITH HIS AGONY. IT SEEMS AS THOUGH ALL THAT WATER WERE HATE.

NEVERTHELESS, HE STRUGGLES.

HE TRIES TO DEFEND HIMSELF; HE TRIES TO SUSTAIN HIMSELF; HE MAKES AN EFFORT; HE SWIMS. HE, HIS PETTY STRENGTH ALL EXHAUSTED INSTANTLY, COMBATS THE INEXHAUSTIBLE.

WHERE, THEN, IS THE SHIP? YONDER. BARELY VISIBLE IN THE PALE SHADOWS OF THE HORIZON.

THE WIND BLOWS IN GUSTS; ALL THE FOAM OVERWHELMS HIM. HE RAISES HIS EYES AND BEHOLDS ONLY THE LIVIDNESS OF THE CLOUDS. HE WITNESSES, AMID HIS DEATH-PANGS, THE IMMENSE MADNESS OF THE SEA. HE IS TORTURED BY THIS MADNESS; HE HEARS NOISES STRANGE TO MAN, WHICH SEEM TO COME FROM BEYOND THE LIMITS OF THE EARTH, AND FROM ONE KNOWS NOT WHAT FRIGHTFUL REGION BEYOND.

THERE ARE BIRDS IN THE CLOUDS, JUST AS THERE ARE ANGELS ABOVE HUMAN DISTRESSES; BUT WHAT CAN THEY DO FOR HIM? THEY SING AND FLY AND FLOAT, AND HE, HE RATTLES IN THE DEATH AGONY.

HE FEELS HIMSELF BURIED IN THOSE TWO INFINITIES, THE OCEAN AND THE SKY, AT ONE AND THE SAME TIME: THE ONE IS A TOMB; THE OTHER IS A SHROUD.

NIGHT DESCENDS; HE HAS BEEN SWIMMING FOR HOURS; HIS STRENGTH IS EXHAUSTED; THAT SHIP, THAT DISTANT THING IN WHICH THERE WERE MEN, HAS VANISHED; HE IS ALONE IN THE FORMIDABLE TWILIGHT GULF; HE SINKS, HE STIFFENS HIMSELF, HE TWISTS HIMSELF; HE FEELS UNDER HIM THE MONSTROUS BILLOWS OF THE INVISIBLE; HE SHOUTS.

THERE ARE NO MORE MEN. WHERE IS GOD?

HE SHOUTS. HELP! HELP! HE STILL SHOUTS ON.

NOTHING ON THE HORIZON; NOTHING IN HEAVEN.

HE IMPLORES THE EXPANSE, THE WAVES, THE SEAWEED, THE REEF; THEY ARE DEAF. HE BESEECHES THE TEMPEST; THE IMPERTURBABLE TEMPEST OBEYS ONLY THE INFINITE.

AROUND HIM DARKNESS, FOG, SOLITUDE, THE STORMY AND NONSENTIENT TUMULT, THE UNDEFINED CURLING OF THOSE WILD WATERS. IN HIM HORROR AND FATIGUE. BENEATH HIM THE DEPTHS. NOT A POINT OF SUPPORT. HE THINKS OF THE GLOOMY ADVENTURES OF THE CORPSE IN THE LIMITLESS SHADOW. THE BOTTOMLESS COLD PARALYZES HIM. HIS HANDS CONTRACT CONVULSIVELY; THEY CLOSE, AND GRASP NOTHINGNESS. WINDS, CLOUDS, WHIRLWINDS, GUSTS, USELESS STARS! WHAT IS TO BE DONE? THE DESPERATE MAN GIVES UP; HE IS WEARY, HE CHOOSES THE ALTERNATIVE OF DEATH; HE RESISTS NOT; HE LETS HIMSELF GO; HE ABANDONS HIS GRIP; AND THEN HE TOSSES FOREVERMORE IN THE LUGUBRIOUS DREARY DEPTHS OF ENGULFMENT.

OH, IMPLACABLE MARCH OF HUMAN SOCIETIES! OH, LOSSES OF MEN AND OF SOULS ON THE WAY! OCEAN INTO WHICH FALLS ALL THAT THE LAW LETS SLIP! DISASTROUS ABSENCE OF HELP! OH, MORAL DEATH!

THE SEA IS THE INEXORABLE SOCIAL NIGHT INTO WHICH THE PENAL LAWS FLING THEIR CONDEMNED. THE SEA IS THE IMMENSITY OF WRETCHEDNESS.

THE SOUL, GOING DOWN STREAM IN THIS GULF, MAY BECOME A CORPSE. WHO SHALL RESUSCITATE IT?