

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Prisoner 24601

Jean Valjean is the protagonist in Victor Hugo's 1862 epic novel, *Les Misérables*. The story depicts Valjean's struggle to rebuild his life after serving a 19-year sentence for stealing a loaf of bread and attempting to escape. In the acclaimed Broadway musical adaptation, the antagonist, Inspector Javert, frequently refers to Valjean as "Prisoner 24601." The prison identification number, conspicuously tattooed across Valjean's chest, signifies his identity as a convict and its lifelong stigma.

The conflict between Valjean and Javert centers on the fundamental question of whether a person is capable of change. Valjean stole out of necessity, but he seeks to leave his criminal past behind and rebuild his life as an honorable businessman and adoptive father. He is relentlessly pursued by Javert, a staunch advocate for law and order who lacks empathy for criminals and sees any infraction as a firm indication of a person's irredeemable nature. To Javert, Valjean's past defines him.

Their antipathy is evident in the opening act: "[JAVERT] Bring me prisoner 24601 / Your time is up and your parole's begun / You know what that means. [VALJEAN] It means I'm free. [JAVERT] No! It means you get your yellow ticket-of-leave / You are a thief. [VALJEAN] I stole a loaf of bread. [JAVERT] You robbed a house. [VALJEAN] My sister's child was close to death / And we were starving. [JAVERT] You will starve again / Unless you learn the meaning of the law. . . . Do not forget me, 24601."

The two men are binary opposites—Love and the Law. Valjean's harsh punishment for a minor crime reflects the cruelty of the legal system toward the downtrodden in 19th-century France. Javert's unwavering pursuit of Valjean, on the other hand, reveals the institutionalized oppression within the justice system. Valjean symbolizes hope and humanity, while Javert represents a rigid adherence to the law without regard for mercy or forgiveness.

Through Valjean's character arc from sinner to saint, Hugo demonstrates that meaningful change is in fact possible, but there is a catch: it requires the impetus of a life-altering event. Valjean is "reborn" as an honest man after he is caught stealing silverware and Bishop Myriel shows him compassion. In contrast, Javert, unable to change by reconciling Valjean's moral transformation into a repentant and virtuous man, drowns himself in the Seine.

Valjean's experience has been mine as well. I had to endure the anguish of barely surviving my residency and the guilt of causing severe iatrogenesis before learning humility and changing my behavior. Each giant leap in my maturation required a profound experience. I repeatedly failed to listen to life's whispers, and it was only after a significant disturbance that was I able to change. Like Valjean, I found that the acknowledgment of my mistakes was accompanied by a spiritual resurrection.

Interestingly, Valjean's prison number in the novel was chosen because June 24, 1801 (24-6-01), was the supposed date of Hugo's conception—when his life began. The character of Valjean was inspired by the true story of Eugène-François Vidocq, a criminal who later became a detective and philanthropist. After multiple stints in prison, Vidocq reformed his life, following the death of a friend, to become an informant. He eventually founded the Bureau des Renseignements, the first criminal investigative agency.

Valjean's story teaches us that we have a remarkable capacity for change, though the path is rarely straightforward. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's line: "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future." My suggestion is to avoid holding on to negative opinions of colleagues, since everyone is susceptible to making poor decisions under stress. We are all like "Prisoner 24601," flawed and judged, carrying the scars of the past over our hearts as we work toward redemption.

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