

Gaudissart II

by

Honore de Balzac

Translated by Clara Bell and others

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Dedication

To Madame la Princesse Cristina de Belgiojoso,
nee Trivulzio.

TO KNOW HOW TO SELL, to be able to sell, and to sell. People generally do not suspect how much of the stateliness of Paris is due to these three aspects of the same problem. The brilliant display of shops as rich as the salons of the noblesse before 1789; the splendors of cafes which eclipse, and easily eclipse, the Versailles of our day; the shop-window illusions,

new every morning, nightly destroyed; the grace and elegance of the young men that come in contact with fair customers; the piquant faces and costumes of young damsels, who cannot fail to attract the masculine customer; and (and this especially of late) the length, the vast spaces, the Babylonish luxury of galleries where shopkeepers acquire a monopoly of the trade in various articles by bringing them all together,—all this is as nothing. Everything, so far, has been done to appeal to a single sense, and that the most exacting and jaded human faculty, a faculty developed ever since the days of the Roman Empire, until, in our own times, thanks to the efforts of the most fastidious civilization the world has yet seen, its demands are grown limitless. That faculty resides in the “eyes of Paris.”

Those eyes require illuminations costing a hundred thousand francs, and many-colored glass palaces a couple of miles long and sixty feet high; they must have a fairyland at some fourteen theatres every night, and a succession of panoramas and exhibitions of the triumphs of art; for them a whole world of suffering and pain, and a universe of joy, must resolve through the boulevards or stray through the streets of

Paris; for them encyclopaedias of carnival frippery and a score of illustrated books are brought out every year, to say nothing of caricatures by the hundred, and vignettes, lithographs, and prints by the thousand. To please those eyes, fifteen thousand francs' worth of gas must blaze every night; and, to conclude, for their delectation the great city yearly spends several millions of francs in opening up views and planting trees. And even yet this is as nothing—it is only the material side of the question; in truth, a mere trifle compared with the expenditure of brain power on the shifts, worthy of Moliere, invented by some sixty thousand assistants and forty thousand damsels of the counter, who fasten upon the customer's purse, much as myriads of Seine whitebait fall upon a chance crust floating down the river.

Gaudissart in the mart is at least the equal of his illustrious namesake, now become the typical commercial traveler. Take him away from his shop and his line of business, he is like a collapsed balloon; only among his bales of merchandise do his faculties return, much as an actor is sublime only upon the boards. A French shopman is better educated than his fellows in other European countries; he can at need talk as-

phalt, Bal Mabille, polkas, literature, illustrated books, railways, politics, parliament, and revolution; transplant him, take away his stage, his yardstick, his artificial graces; he is foolish beyond belief; but on his own boards, on the tight-rope of the counter, as he displays a shawl with a speech at his tongue's end, and his eye on his customer, he puts the great Talleyrand into the shade; he is a match for a Monrose and a Moliere to boot. Talleyrand in his own house would have outwitted Gaudissart, but in the shop the parts would have been reversed.

An incident will illustrate the paradox.

Two charming duchesses were chatting with the above-mentioned great diplomatist. The ladies wished for a bracelet; they were waiting for the arrival of a man from a great Parisian jeweler. A Gaudissart accordingly appeared with three bracelets of marvelous workmanship. The great ladies hesitated. Choice is a mental lightning flash; hesitate—there is no more to be said, you are at fault. Inspiration in matters of taste will not come twice. At last, after about ten minutes the Prince was called in. He saw the two duchesses confronting doubt with its thousand facets, unable to decide between

the transcendent merits of two of the trinkets, for the third had been set aside at once. Without leaving his book, without a glance at the bracelets, the Prince looked at the jeweler's assistant.

"Which would you choose for your sweetheart?" asked he.

The young man indicated one of the pair.

"In that case, take the other, you will make two women happy," said the subtlest of modern diplomatists, "and make your sweetheart happy too, in my name."

The two fair ladies smiled, and the young shopman took his departure, delighted with the Prince's present and the implied compliment to his taste.

A woman alights from her splendid carriage before one of the expensive shops where shawls are sold in the Rue Vivienne. She is not alone; women almost always go in pairs on these expeditions; always make the round of half a score of shops before they make up their minds, and laugh together in the intervals over the little comedies played for their benefit. Let us see which of the two acts most in character—the fair customer or the seller, and which has the best of it in such miniature vaudevilles?

If you attempt to describe a sale, the central fact of Parisian trade, you are in duty bound, if you attempt to give the gist of the matter, to produce a type, and for this purpose a shawl or a chatelaine costing some three thousand francs is a more exacting purchase than a length of lawn or dress that costs three hundred. But know, oh foreign visitors from the Old World and the New (if ever this study of the physiology of the Invoice should be by you perused), that this selfsame comedy is played in haberdashers' shops over a barege at two francs or a printed muslin at four francs the yard.

And you, princess, or simple citizen's wife, whichever you may be, how should you distrust that good-looking, very young man, with those frank, innocent eyes, and a cheek like a peach covered with down? He is dressed almost as well as you—cousin, let us say. His tones are soft as the woollen stuffs which he spreads before you. There are three or four more of his like. One has dark eyes, a decided expression, and an imperial manner of saying, "This is what you wish"; another, that blue-eyed youth, diffident of manner and meek of speech, prompts the remark, "Poor boy! he was not born for business"; a third, with light auburn hair, and laughing

tawny eyes, has all the lively humor, and activity, and gaiety of the South; while the fourth, he of the tawny red hair and fan-shaped beard, is rough as a communist, with his portentous cravat, his sternness, his dignity, and curt speech.

These varieties of shopmen, corresponding to the principal types of feminine customers, are arms, as it were, directed by the head, a stout personage with a full-blown countenance, a partially bald forehead, and a chest measure befitting a Ministerialist deputy. Occasionally this person wears the ribbon of the Legion of Honor in recognition of the manner in which he supports the dignity of the French drapers' wand. From the comfortable curves of his figure you can see that he has a wife and family, a country house, and an account with the Bank of France. He descends like a *deux ex machina*, whenever a tangled problem demands a swift solution. The feminine purchasers are surrounded on all sides with urbanity, youth, pleasant manners, smiles, and jests; the most seeming-simple human products of civilization are here, all sorted in shades to suit all tastes.

Just one word as to the natural effects of architecture, optical science, and house decoration; one short, decisive, ter-

rible word, of history made on the spot. The work which contains this instructive page is sold at number 76 Rue de Richelieu, where above an elegant shop, all white and gold and crimson velvet, there is an entresol into which the light pours straight from the Rue de Menars, as into a painter's studio—clean, clear, even daylight. What idler in the streets has not beheld the Persian, that Asiatic potentate, ruffling it above the door at the corner of the Rue de la Bourse and the Rue de Richelieu, with a message to deliver *urbi et orbi*, "Here I reign more tranquilly than at Lahore"? Perhaps but for this immortal analytical study, archaeologists might begin to puzzle their heads about him five hundred years hence, and set about writing quartos with plates (like M. Quatremere's work on Olympian Jove) to prove that Napoleon was something of a Sofi in the East before he became "Emperor of the French." Well, the wealthy shop laid siege to the poor little entresol; and after a bombardment with banknotes, entered and took possession. The Human Comedy gave way before the comedy of cashmeres. The Persian sacrificed a diamond or two from his crown to buy that so necessary daylight; for a ray of sunlight shows the play of the colors, brings out the

charms of a shawl, and doubles its value; 'tis an irresistible light; literally, a golden ray. From this fact you may judge how far Paris shops are arranged with a view to effect.

But to return to the young assistants, to the beribboned man of forty whom the King of the French receives at his table, to the red-bearded head of the department with his autocrat's air. Week by week these meritis Gaudissarts are brought in contact with whims past counting; they know every vibration of the cashmere chord in the heart of woman. No one, be she lady or lorette, a young mother of a family, a respectable tradesman's wife, a woman of easy virtue, a duchess or a brazen-fronted ballet-dancer, an innocent young girl or a too innocent foreigner, can appear in the shop, but she is watched from the moment when she first lays her fingers upon the door-handle. Her measure is taken at a glance by seven or eight men that stand, in the windows, at the counter, by the door, in a corner, in the middle of the shop, meditating, to all appearance, on the joys of a bacchanalian Sunday holiday. As you look at them, you ask yourself involuntarily, "What can they be thinking about?" Well, in the space of one second, a woman's purse, wishes, intentions, and whims

are ransacked more thoroughly than a traveling carriage at a frontier in an hour and three-quarters. Nothing is lost on these intelligent rogues. As they stand, solemn as noble fathers on the stage, they take in all the details of a fair customer's dress; an invisible speck of mud on a little shoe, an antiquated hat-brim, soiled or ill-judged bonnet-strings, the fashion of the dress, the age of a pair of gloves. They can tell whether the gown was cut by the intelligent scissors of a Victorine IV.; they know a modish gewgaw or a trinket from Froment-Meurice. Nothing, in short, which can reveal a woman's quality, fortune, or character passes unremarked.

Tremble before them. Never was the Sanhedrim of Gaudissarts, with their chief at their head, known to make a mistake. And, moreover, they communicate their conclusions to one another with telegraphic speed, in a glance, a smile, the movement of a muscle, a twitch of the lip. If you watch them, you are reminded of the sudden outbreak of light along the Champs-Elysees at dusk; one gas-jet does not succeed another more swiftly than an idea flashes from one shopman's eyes to the next.

At once, if the lady is English, the dark, mysterious, por-

tentious Gaudissart advances like a romantic character out of one of Byron's poems.

If she is a city madam, the oldest is put forward. He brings out a hundred shawls in fifteen minutes; he turns her head with colors and patterns; every shawl that he shows her is like a circle described by a kite wheeling round a hapless rabbit, till at the end of half an hour, when her head is swimming and she is utterly incapable of making a decision for herself, the good lady, meeting with a flattering response to all her ideas, refers the question to the assistant, who promptly leaves her on the horns of a dilemma between two equally irresistible shawls.

"This, madame, is very becoming—apple-green, the color of the season; still, fashions change; while as for this other black-and-white shawl (an opportunity not to be missed), you will never see the end of it, and it will go with any dress."

This is the A B C of the trade.

"You would not believe how much eloquence is wanted in that beastly line," the head Gaudissart of this particular establishment remarked quite lately to two acquaintances (Duronceret and Bixiou) who had come trusting in his judg-

ment to buy a shawl. "Look here; you are artists and discreet, I can tell you about the governor's tricks, and of all the men I ever saw, he is the cleverest. I do not mean as a manufacturer, there M. Fritot is first; but as a salesman. He discovered the 'Selim shawl,' *an absolutely unsalable* article, yet we never bring it out but we sell it. We keep always a shawl worth five or six hundred francs in a cedar-wood box, perfectly plain outside, but lined with satin. It is one of the shawls that Selim sent to the Emperor Napoleon. It is our Imperial Guard; it is brought to the front whenever the day is almost lost; il se vend et ne meurt pas—it sells its life dearly time after time."

As he spoke, an Englishwoman stepped from her jobbed carriage and appeared in all the glory of that phlegmatic humor peculiar to Britain and to all its products which make believe they are alive. The apparition put you in mind of the Commandant's statue in Don Juan, it walked along, jerkily by fits and starts, in an awkward fashion invented in London, and cultivated in every family with patriotic care.

"An Englishwoman!" he continued for Bixiou's ear. "An Englishwoman is our Waterloo. There are women who slip

through our fingers like eels; we catch them on the staircase. There are lorettes who chaff us, we join in the laugh, we have a hold on them because we give credit. There are sphinx-like foreign ladies; we take a quantity of shawls to their houses, and arrive at an understanding by flattery; but an Englishwoman!—you might as well attack the bronze statue of Louis Quatorze! That sort of woman turns shopping into an occupation, an amusement. She quizzes us, forsooth!”

The romantic assistant came to the front.

“Does madame wish for real Indian shawls or French, something expensive or—”

“I will see.” (Je veraie.)

“How much would madame propose—”

“I will see.”

The shopman went in quest of shawls to spread upon the mantle-stand, giving his colleagues a significant glance. “What a bore!” he said plainly, with an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders.

“These are our best quality in Indian red, blue, and pale orange—all at ten thousand francs. Here are shawls at five thousand francs, and others at three.”

The Englishwoman took up her eyeglass and looked round the room with gloomy indifference; then she submitted the three stands to the same scrutiny, and made no sign.

“Have you any more?” (Havaivod’hote?) demanded she.

“Yes, madame. But perhaps madame has not quite decided to take a shawl?”

“Oh, quite decided” (trei-deycidai).

The young man went in search of cheaper wares. These he spread out solemnly as if they were things of price, saying by his manner, “Pay attention to all this magnificence!”

“These are much more expensive,” said he. “They have never been worn; they have come by courier direct from the manufacturers at Lahore.”

“Oh! I see,” said she; “they are much more like the thing I want.”

The shopman kept his countenance in spite of inward irritation, which communicated itself to Duronceret and Bixiou. The Englishwoman, cool as a cucumber, appeared to rejoice in her phlegmatic humor.

“What price?” she asked, indicating a sky-blue shawl covered with a pattern of birds nestling in pagodas.

“Seven thousand francs.”

She took it up, wrapped it about her shoulders, looked in the glass, and handed it back again.

“No, I do not like it at all.” (Je n’ame pouinte.)

A long quarter of an hour went by in trying on other shawls; to no purpose.

“This is all we have, madame,” said the assistant, glancing at the master as he spoke.

“Madame is fastidious, like all persons of taste,” said the head of the establishment, coming forward with that tradesman’s suavity in which pomposity is agreeably blended with subservience. The Englishwoman took up her eyeglass and scanned the manufacturer from head to foot, unwilling to understand that the man before her was eligible for Parliament and dined at the Tuileries.

“I have only one shawl left,” he continued, “but I never show it. It is not to everybody’s taste; it is quite out of the common. I was thinking of giving it to my wife. We have had it in stock since 1805; it belonged to the Empress Josephine.”

“Let me see it, monsieur.”

“Go for it,” said the master, turning to a shopman. “It is at my house.”

“I should be very much pleased to see it,” said the English lady.

This was a triumph. The splenetic dame was apparently on the point of going. She made as though she saw nothing but the shawls; but all the while she furtively watched the shopmen and the two customers, sheltering her eyes behind the rims of her eyeglasses.

“It cost sixty thousand francs in Turkey, madame.”

“Oh!” (hau!)

“It is one of seven shawls which Selim sent, before his fall, to the Emperor Napoleon. The Empress Josephine, a Creole, as you know, my lady, and very capricious in her tastes, exchanged this one for another brought by the Turkish ambassador, and purchased by my predecessor; but I have never seen the money back. Our ladies in France are not rich enough; it is not as it is in England. The shawl is worth seven thousand francs; and taking interest and compound interest altogether, it makes up fourteen or fifteen thousand by now—”

“How does it make up?” asked the Englishwoman.

“Here it is, madame.”

With precautions, which a custodian of the Dresden Grune Gewolbe might have admired, he took out an infinitesimal key and opened a square cedar-wood box. The Englishwoman was much impressed with its shape and plainness. From that box, lined with black satin, he drew a shawl worth about fifteen hundred francs, a black pattern on a golden-yellow ground, of which the startling color was only surpassed by the surprising efforts of the Indian imagination.

“Splendid,” said the lady, in a mixture of French and English, “it is really handsome. Just my ideal” (ideol) “of a shawl; it is very magnificent.” The rest was lost in a madonna’s pose assumed for the purpose of displaying a pair of frigid eyes which she believed to be very fine.

“It was a great favorite with the Emperor Napoleon; he took—”

“A great favorite,” repeated she with her English accent. Then she arranged the shawl about her shoulders and looked at herself in the glass. The proprietor took it to the light, gathered it up in his hands, smoothed it out, showed the

gloss on it, played on it as Liszt plays on the pianoforte keys.

“It is very fine; beautiful, sweet!” said the lady, as composedly as possible.

Duronceret, Bixiou, and the shopmen exchanged amused glances. “The shawl is sold,” they thought.

“Well, madame?” inquired the proprietor, as the Englishwoman appeared to be absorbed in meditations infinitely prolonged.

“Decidedly,” said she; “I would rather have a carriage” (une voteure).

All the assistants, listening with silent rapt attention, started as one man, as if an electric shock had gone through them.

“I have a very handsome one, madame,” said the proprietor with unshaken composure; “it belonged to a Russian princess, the Princess Narzicof; she left it with me in payment for goods received. If madame would like to see it, she would be astonished. It is new; it has not been in use altogether for ten days; there is not its like in Paris.”

The shopmen’s amazement was suppressed by profound admiration.

“I am quite willing.”

“If madame will keep the shawl,” suggested the proprietor, “she can try the effect in the carriage.” And he went for his hat and gloves.

“How will this end?” asked the head assistant, as he watched his employer offer an arm to the English lady and go down with her to the jobbed brougham.

By this time the thing had come to be as exciting as the last chapter of a novel for Duronceret and Bixiou, even without the additional interest attached to all contests, however trifling, between England and France.

Twenty minutes later the proprietor returned.

“Go to the Hotel Lawson (here is the card, ‘Mrs. Noswell’), and take an invoice that I will give you. There are six thousand francs to take.”

“How did you do it?” asked Duronceret, bowing before the king of invoices.

“Oh, I saw what she was, an eccentric woman that loves to be conspicuous. As soon as she saw that every one stared at her, she said, ‘Keep your carriage, monsieur, my mind is made up; I will take the shawl.’ While M. Bigorneau (indicating the romantic-looking assistant) was serving, I watched her

carefully; she kept one eye on you all the time to see what you thought of her; she was thinking more about you than of the shawls. Englishwomen are peculiar in their DISTASTE (for one cannot call it taste); they do not know what they want; they make up their minds to be guided by circumstances at the time, and not by their own choice. I saw the kind of woman at once, tired of her husband, tired of her brats, regretfully virtuous, craving excitement, always posing as a weeping willow”

These were his very words.

Which proves that in all other countries of the world a shopkeeper is a shopkeeper; while in France, and in Paris more particularly, he is a student from a College Royal, a well-read man with a taste for art, or angling, or the theatre, and consumed, it may be, with a desire to be M. Cunin-Gridaine’s successor, or a colonel of the National Guard, or a member of the General Council of the Seine, or a referee in the Commercial Court.

“M. Adolphe,” said the mistress of the establishment, addressing the slight fair-haired assistant, “go to the joiner and order another cedar-wood box.”

“And now,” remarked the shopman who had assisted Duronceret and Bixiou to choose a shawl for Mme. Schontz, “*now* we will go through our old stock to find another Selim shawl.”

Paris, November 1844.

Addendum

The following personages appear in other stories of the *Human Comedy*.

Bixiou, Jean-Jacques

The Purse

A Bachelor’s Establishment

The Government Clerks

Modeste Mignon

Scenes from a Courtesan’s Life

The Firm of Nucingen

The Muse of the Department

Cousin Betty

The Member for Arcis

Beatrix

A Man of Business

The Unconscious Humorists

Cousin Pons

Ronceret, Fabien-Felicien du (or Duronceret)

Jealousies of a Country Town
Beatrix

Talleyrand-Perigord, Charles-Maurice de
The Chouans
The Gondreville Mystery
The Thirteen
Letters of Two Brides

Victorine
Massimilla Doni
Lost Illusions
Letters of Two Brides

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