

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE ILLUSTRIOUS
GAUDISSERT

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CHAPTER I

The commercial traveller, a personage unknown to antiquity, is one of the striking figures created by the manners and customs of our present epoch. May he not, in some conceivable order of things, be destined to mark for coming philosophers the great transition which welds a period of material enterprise to the period of intellectual strength? Our century will bind the realm of isolated power, abounding as it does in creative genius, to the realm of universal but levelling might; equalizing all products, spreading them broadcast among the masses, and being itself controlled by the principle of unity, – the final expression of all societies. Do we not find the dead level of barbarism succeeding the saturnalia of popular thought and the last struggles of those civilizations which accumulated the treasures of the world in one direction?

The commercial traveller! Is he not to the realm of ideas what our stage-coaches are to men and things? He is their vehicle; he sets them going, carries them along, rubs them up with one another. He takes from the luminous centre a handful of light, and scatters it broadcast among the drowsy populations of the

duller regions. This human pyrotechnic is a scholar without learning, a juggler hoaxed by himself, an unbelieving priest of mysteries and dogmas, which he expounds all the better for his want of faith. Curious being! He has seen everything, known everything, and is up in all the ways of the world. Soaked in the vices of Paris, he affects to be the fellow-well-met of the provinces. He is the link which connects the village with the capital; though essentially he is neither Parisian nor provincial, – he is a traveller. He sees nothing to the core: men and places he knows by their names; as for things, he looks merely at their surface, and he has his own little tape-line with which to measure them. His glance shoots over all things and penetrates none. He occupies himself with a great deal, yet nothing occupies him.

Jester and jolly fellow, he keeps on good terms with all political opinions, and is patriotic to the bottom of his soul. A capital mimic, he knows how to put on, turn and turn about, the smiles of persuasion, satisfaction, and good-nature, or drop them for the normal expression of his natural man. He is compelled to be an observer of a certain sort in the interests of his trade. He must probe men with a glance and guess their habits, wants, and above all their solvency. To economize time he must come to quick decisions as to his chances of success, – a practice that makes him more or less a man of judgment; on the strength of which he sets up as a judge of theatres, and discourses about those of Paris and the provinces.

He knows all the good and bad haunts in France, “de actu

et visu.” He can pilot you, on occasion, to vice or virtue with equal assurance. Blest with the eloquence of a hot-water spigot turned on at will, he can check or let run, without floundering, the collection of phrases which he keeps on tap, and which produce upon his victims the effect of a moral shower-bath. Loquacious as a cricket, he smokes, drinks, wears a profusion of trinkets, overawes the common people, passes for a lord in the villages, and never permits himself to be “stumped,” – a slang expression all his own. He knows how to slap his pockets at the right time, and make his money jingle if he thinks the servants of the second-class houses which he wants to enter (always eminently suspicious) are likely to take him for a thief. Activity is not the least surprising quality of this human machine. Not the hawk swooping upon its prey, not the stag doubling before the huntsman and the hounds, nor the hounds themselves catching scent of the game, can be compared with him for the rapidity of his dart when he spies a “commission,” for the agility with which he trips up a rival and gets ahead of him, for the keenness of his scent as he noses a customer and discovers the sport where he can get off his wares.

How many great qualities must such a man possess! You will find in all countries many such diplomats of low degree; consummate negotiators arguing in the interests of calico, jewels, frippery, wines; and often displaying more true diplomacy than ambassadors themselves, who, for the most part, know only the forms of it. No one in France can doubt the powers of the

commercial traveller; that intrepid soul who dares all, and boldly brings the genius of civilization and the modern inventions of Paris into a struggle with the plain commonsense of remote villages, and the ignorant and boorish treadmill of provincial ways. Can we ever forget the skilful manoeuvres by which he worms himself into the minds of the populace, bringing a volume of words to bear upon the refractory, reminding us of the indefatigable worker in marbles whose file eats slowly into a block of porphyry? Would you seek to know the utmost power of language, or the strongest pressure that a phrase can bring to bear against rebellious lucre, against the miserly proprietor squatting in the recesses of his country lair? – listen to one of these great ambassadors of Parisian industry as he revolves and works and sucks like an intelligent piston of the steam-engine called Speculation.

“Monsieur,” said a wise political economist, the director-cashier-manager and secretary-general of a celebrated fire-insurance company, “out of every five hundred thousand francs of policies to be renewed in the provinces, not more than fifty thousand are paid up voluntarily. The other four hundred and fifty thousand are got in by the activity of our agents, who go about among those who are in arrears and worry them with stories of horrible incendiaries until they are driven to sign the new policies. Thus you see that eloquence, the labial flux, is nine tenths of the ways and means of our business.”

To talk, to make people listen to you, – that is seduction in

itself. A nation that has two Chambers, a woman who lends both ears, are soon lost. Eve and her serpent are the everlasting myth of an hourly fact which began, and may end, with the world itself.

“A conversation of two hours ought to capture your man,” said a retired lawyer.

Let us walk round the commercial traveller, and look at him well. Don't forget his overcoat, olive green, nor his cloak with its morocco collar, nor the striped blue cotton shirt. In this queer figure – so original that we cannot rub it out – how many divers personalities we come across! In the first place, what an acrobat, what a circus, what a battery, all in one, is the man himself, his vocation, and his tongue! Intrepid mariner, he plunges in, armed with a few phrases, to catch five or six thousand francs in the frozen seas, in the domain of the red Indians who inhabit the interior of France. The provincial fish will not rise to harpoons and torches; it can only be taken with seines and nets and gentlest persuasions. The traveller's business is to extract the gold in country caches by a purely intellectual operation, and to extract it pleasantly and without pain. Can you think without a shudder of the flood of phrases which, day by day, renewed each dawn, leaps in cascades the length and breadth of sunny France?

You know the species; let us now take a look at the individual.

There lives in Paris an incomparable commercial traveller, the paragon of his race, a man who possesses in the highest degree all the qualifications necessary to the nature of his success. His speech is vitriol and likewise glue, – glue to catch and entangle his

victim and make him sticky and easy to grip; vitriol to dissolve hard heads, close fists, and closer calculations. His line was once the *hat*; but his talents and the art with which he snared the wariest provincial had brought him such commercial celebrity that all vendors of the “article Paris”¹ paid court to him, and humbly begged that he would deign to take their commissions.

Thus, when he returned to Paris in the intervals of his triumphant progress through France, he lived a life of perpetual festivity in the shape of weddings and suppers. When he was in the provinces, the correspondents in the smaller towns made much of him; in Paris, the great houses feted and caressed him. Welcomed, flattered, and fed wherever he went, it came to pass that to breakfast or to dine alone was a novelty, an event. He lived the life of a sovereign, or, better still, of a journalist; in fact, he was the perambulating “feuilleton” of Parisian commerce.

His name was Gaudissart; and his renown, his vogue, the flatteries showered upon him, were such as to win for him the surname of Illustrious. Wherever the fellow went, – behind a counter or before a bar, into a salon or to the top of a stage-coach, up to a garret or to dine with a banker, – every one said, the moment they saw him, “Ah! here comes the illustrious Gaudissart!”² No name was ever so in keeping with the style, the

¹ “Article Paris” means anything – especially articles of wearing apparel – which originates or is made in Paris. The name is supposed to give to the thing a special value in the provinces.

² “Se gaudir,” to enjoy, to make fun. “Gaudriole,” gay discourse, rather free. – Littré.

manners, the countenance, the voice, the language, of any man. All things smiled upon our traveller, and the traveller smiled back in return. “*Similia similibus*,” – he believed in homoeopathy. Puns, horse-laugh, monkish face, skin of a friar, true Rabelaisian exterior, clothing, body, mind, and features, all pulled together to put a devil-may-care jollity into every inch of his person. Free-handed and easy-going, he might be recognized at once as the favorite of grisettes, the man who jumps lightly to the top of a stage-coach, gives a hand to the timid lady who fears to step down, jokes with the postillion about his neckerchief and contrives to sell him a cap, smiles at the maid and catches her round the waist or by the heart; gurgles at dinner like a bottle of wine and pretends to draw the cork by sounding a filip on his distended cheek; plays a tune with his knife on the champagne glasses without breaking them, and says to the company, “Let me see you do *that*”; chaffs the timid traveller, contradicts the knowing one, lords it over a dinner-table and manages to get the titbits for himself. A strong fellow, nevertheless, he can throw aside all this nonsense and mean business when he flings away the stump of his cigar and says, with a glance at some town, “I’ll go and see what those people have got in their stomachs.”

When buckled down to his work he became the slyest and cleverest of diplomats. All things to all men, he knew how to accost a banker like a capitalist, a magistrate like a functionary, a royalist with pious and monarchical sentiments, a bourgeois as one of themselves. In short, wherever he was he was just what he

ought to be; he left Gaudissart at the door when he went in, and picked him up when he came out.

Until 1830 the illustrious Gaudissart was faithful to the article Paris. In his close relation to the caprices of humanity, the varied paths of commerce had enabled him to observe the windings of the heart of man. He had learned the secret of persuasive eloquence, the knack of loosening the tightest purse-strings, the art of rousing desire in the souls of husbands, wives, children, and servants; and what is more, he knew how to satisfy it. No one had greater faculty than he for inveigling a merchant by the charms of a bargain, and disappearing at the instant when desire had reached its crisis. Full of gratitude to the hat-making trade, he always declared that it was his efforts in behalf of the exterior of the human head which had enabled him to understand its interior: he had capped and crowned so many people, he was always flinging himself at their heads, etc. His jokes about hats and heads were irrepressible, though perhaps not dazzling.

Nevertheless, after August and October, 1830, he abandoned the hat trade and the article Paris, and tore himself from things mechanical and visible to mount into the higher spheres of Parisian speculation. "He forsook," to use his own words, "matter for mind; manufactured products for the infinitely purer elaborations of human intelligence." This requires some explanation.

The general upset of 1830 brought to birth, as everybody knows, a number of old ideas which clever speculators tried to

pass off in new bodies. After 1830 ideas became property. A writer, too wise to publish his writings, once remarked that “more ideas are stolen than pocket-handkerchiefs.” Perhaps in course of time we may have an Exchange for thought; in fact, even now ideas, good or bad, have their consols, are bought up, imported, exported, sold, and quoted like stocks. If ideas are not on hand ready for sale, speculators try to pass off words in their stead, and actually live upon them as a bird lives on the seeds of his millet. Pray do not laugh; a word is worth quite as much as an idea in a land where the ticket on a sack is of more importance than the contents. Have we not seen libraries working off the word “picturesque” when literature would have cut the throat of the word “fantastic”? Fiscal genius has guessed the proper tax on intellect; it has accurately estimated the profits of advertising; it has registered a prospectus of the quantity and exact value of the property, weighing its thought at the intellectual Stamp Office in the Rue de la Paix.

Having become an article of commerce, intellect and all its products must naturally obey the laws which bind other manufacturing interests. Thus it often happens that ideas, conceived in their cups by certain apparently idle Parisians, – who nevertheless fight many a moral battle over their champagne and their pheasants, – are handed down at their birth from the brain to the commercial travellers who are employed to spread them discreetly, “urbi et orbi,” through Paris and the provinces, seasoned with the fried pork of advertisement and

prospectus, by means of which they catch in their rat-trap the departmental rodent commonly called subscriber, sometimes stockholder, occasionally corresponding member or patron, but invariably fool.

“I am a fool!” many a poor country proprietor has said when, caught by the prospect of being the first to launch a new idea, he finds that he has, in point of fact, launched his thousand or twelve hundred francs into a gulf.

“Subscribers are fools who never can be brought to understand that to go ahead in the intellectual world they must start with more money than they need for the tour of Europe,” say the speculators.

Consequently there is endless warfare between the recalcitrant public which refuses to pay the Parisian imposts and the tax-gatherer who, living by his receipt of custom, lards the public with new ideas, turns it on the spit of lively projects, roasts it with prospectuses (basting all the while with flattery), and finally gobbles it up with some toothsome sauce in which it is caught and intoxicated like a fly with a black-lead. Moreover, since 1830 what honors and emoluments have been scattered throughout France to stimulate the zeal and self-love of the “progressive and intelligent masses”! Titles, medals, diplomas, a sort of legion of honor invented for the army of martyrs, have followed each other with marvellous rapidity. Speculators in the manufactured products of the intellect have developed a spice, a ginger, all their own. From this have come premiums, forestalled dividends,

and that conscription of noted names which is levied without the knowledge of the unfortunate writers who bear them, and who thus find themselves actual co-operators in more enterprises than there are days in the year; for the law, we may remark, takes no account of the theft of a patronymic. Worse than all is the rape of ideas which these caterers for the public mind, like the slave-merchants of Asia, tear from the paternal brain before they are well matured, and drag half-clothed before the eyes of their blockhead of a sultan, their Shahabaham, their terrible public, which, if they don't amuse it, will cut off their heads by curtailing the ingots and emptying their pockets.

This madness of our epoch reacted upon the illustrious Gaudissart, and here follows the history of how it happened. A life-insurance company having been told of his irresistible eloquence offered him an unheard-of commission, which he graciously accepted. The bargain concluded and the treaty signed, our traveller was put in training, or we might say weaned, by the secretary-general of the enterprise, who freed his mind of its swaddling-clothes, showed him the dark holes of the business, taught him its dialect, took the mechanism apart bit by bit, dissected for his instruction the particular public he was expected to gull, crammed him with phrases, fed him with impromptu replies, provisioned him with unanswerable arguments, and, so to speak, sharpened the file of the tongue which was about to operate upon the life of France.

The puppet amply rewarded the pains bestowed upon him.

The heads of the company boasted of the illustrious Gaudissart, showed him such attention and proclaimed the great talents of this perambulating prospectus so loudly in the sphere of exalted banking and commercial diplomacy, that the financial managers of two newspapers (celebrated at that time but since defunct) were seized with the idea of employing him to get subscribers. The proprietors of the "Globe," an organ of Saint-Simonism, and the "Movement," a republican journal, each invited the illustrious Gaudissart to a conference, and proposed to give him ten francs a head for every subscriber, provided he brought in a thousand, but only five francs if he got no more than five hundred. The cause of political journalism not interfering with the pre-accepted cause of life insurance, the bargain was struck; although Gaudissart demanded an indemnity from the Saint-Simonians for the eight days he was forced to spend in studying the doctrines of their apostle, asserting that a prodigious effort of memory and intellect was necessary to get to the bottom of that "article" and to reason upon it suitably. He asked nothing, however, from the republicans. In the first place, he inclined in republican ideas, – the only ones, according to Gaudissardian philosophy, which could bring about a rational equality. Besides which he had already dipped into the conspiracies of the French "carbonari"; he had been arrested, and released for want of proof; and finally, as he called the newspaper proprietors to observe, he had lately grown a mustache, and needed only a hat of certain shape and a pair of spurs to represent, with due propriety, the

Republic.

CHAPTER II

For one whole week this commanding genius went every morning to be Saint-Simonized at the office of the "Globe," and every afternoon he betook himself to the life-insurance company, where he learned the intricacies of financial diplomacy. His aptitude and his memory were prodigious; so that he was able to start on his peregrinations by the 15th of April, the date at which he usually opened the spring campaign. Two large commercial houses, alarmed at the decline of business, implored the ambitious Gaudissart not to desert the article Paris, and seduced him, it was said, with large offers, to take their commissions once more. The king of travellers was amenable to the claims of his old friends, enforced as they were by the enormous premiums offered to him.

"Listen, my little Jenny," he said in a hackney-coach to a pretty florist.

All truly great men delight in allowing themselves to be tyrannized over by a feeble being, and Gaudissart had found his tyrant in Jenny. He was bringing her home at eleven o'clock from the Gymnase, whither he had taken her, in full dress, to a proscenium box on the first tier.

"On my return, Jenny, I shall refurnish your room in superior style. That big Matilda, who pesters you with comparisons and her real India shawls imported by the suite of the Russian

ambassador, and her silver plate and her Russian prince, – who to my mind is nothing but a humbug, – won't have a word to say *then*

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