

THE LARGEST STORE IN THE WORLD

The largest store in the world! And what a store it is; one where almost any thing can be bought. Many of our readers, remarks a London paper, have no doubt seen it, as it is one of the sights of Paris. The Bon Marche (cheap market) is indeed a wonderful place, but, like many other marvelous things, it had a very humble beginning.

Probably few people, at all events, know the origin of the colossal ramification of the business which was started more than half a century ago by a some time village peddler and his present wife.

Aristide Boucicaut was an itinerant vendor of linen at the various fetes in the department of Saone-et-Loire. He came to the Verjux fete from year to year, and in time became acquainted with the family of Marguerite Guerin; fell in love with her, and, being a steady young fellow of good character, gained her father's permission to marry her.

For many months after marriage they travelled about together "with the cart" scarcely doing more than meet expenses, but content to be able to pay their way from day to day.

However, they were French, and possessed the national aptitude for economizing in various little ways; and thus, by putting by a sou here and a sou there, they saved sufficient at last to take them and their one child—a boy—to Paris.

In a few more years they had saved enough to buy a small shop at the corner of the Rue du Bac and Rue du Sevres. This was the humble commencement of the now world renowned Bon Marche.

Madame Boucicaut assisted her husband—keeping the books and giving change. They were the fortunate originators of "fixed prices," till then an almost unknown thing in Paris, where the price asked generally varied according to the possible length of the customer's purse. Like most people who have succeeded, they had a hard struggle at first to hold their own; but courage, tact and a desire to please won their way, and their customers increased rapidly. Soon they were enabled to take "the next shop," and M. Boucicaut encouraged his assistants (of whom he now had several) to invest their money in the business, giving them interest for it at 6 per cent. This, of course, gave each one of them a personal solicitude in the success of the undertaking. Slowly but surely the Bon Marche engulfed the neighboring shops, until it had spread over the whole block and rose to the height of five stories. Its area of trading, too, had extended, marvelously, and now included China, Japan, India and America.

Now almost everything can be purchased beneath the span of its immense roof, from a needle to a carriage. Attention and courtesy are still the keynote of the business, and rich and poor alike, the peasant buying a six-sou handkerchief, and the comtesse buying a 500-franc robe, are treated with like civility. "We cannot despise the sous," said Madame Boucicaut, one day, "for our Bon Marche has been built up with them."

What a little army of employees there is! Three thousand four hundred strong, and each one treated as though a member of one vast family. For the first few minutes

after entering this gigantic emporium all seems confusion, though in reality all is most perfect order. Each of the army of salespeople has his or her particular station—at the glove or ribbon counter, the carpet or toy department—and this post is not left save under most exceptional circumstances. From floor to ceiling this enormous shop is crowded with everything that the ingenuity of man has contrived and the longings of the human heart can crave.

There is less "bustle" noticeable when one has found one's eyes than in many a far smaller shop. It is as if we were in the presence of a huge piece of business machinery, which does its work almost silently, and inevitably—no other word so well expresses the feeling aroused in one as the last. Great care has always been taken of the employees who become aged and infirm in the service of the house. In 1887 a sum of no less than five million francs was set aside by Madame Boucicaut to form a foundation of a superannuation fund.

At the top of the Bon Marche are the kitchens and dining-rooms, in which the whole staff of assistants have their meals free of expense. There is also a private hospital for the use and comfort of employees, and a doctor who comes each day to investigate cases of illness. All who are anxious to improve themselves mentally can learn music and languages from teachers specially engaged for the purpose by the control. The result of this wise generosity is the possession by the Bon Marche of one of the finest brass bands in Paris, and the ability of many of the employees to converse in three, four, five, and even six foreign languages. This makes the Bon Marche one of the most popular shops in Paris for foreigners.

There is a fine gymnasium and fencing room, where recreation may be indulged in; a games-room, reading-room, and indeed every facility is afforded for the recreation and amusement of the employees when work is done. No less than a hundred and thirty of the young women formerly lodged in Madame Boucicaut's own house, opposite; each having her little separate room, with a polished walnut floor, dainty white bed, and pretty curtains.

At M. Boucicaut's death half of the business was divided in shares among the various employees, and a large sum was devoted to establish pensions for those who had served in the business for twelve years and upwards.

M. Boucicaut died in 1878, leaving his wife the head of the Bon Marche, worth 20,000,000 francs, the money received daily varying from 75,000 to 200,000 francs. When Madame Boucicaut died, she was worth 60,000,000 francs (about \$11,250,000), and, as she had no near relatives, a very large portion of this vast sum—earned by business ability and tact—was left to the charities of Paris. To the poor of each of the twenty arrondissements was left a sum amounting to several thousands of dollars. Her pictures have found a fit home in the galleries of the Louvre and Luxembourg; and her linen and silverware were given to a house of education for poor girls. Enough still remained for the building of a fine hospital in Paris.

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