

Cloth-binding as a Trade.

IN the course of a series of articles entitled: "What shall we do with our boys?" a contemporary published a year or two ago the following interview with a publisher's bookbinder. The master bookbinder is introduced as a wiry, iron-grey, busy and careworn-looking man, of middle height and age, who, having been informed of the object of the interview, says:

"I must tell you at once that I should advise no one to go in for this trade. It is by no means good enough. Even for a master now, the competition is so tremendous in every direction that it is really a difficult matter to meet it, and make anything by it. If I could get now anything like the prices that were charged twenty-five years ago, I should make my fortune instead of having to toil and struggle to make a bare living. The compulsory education of the masses has enormously increased the call for cheap books. Consequently, the number of the bookbinding fraternity has been very largely swelled—too much so, in fact. The development of the business by steam machinery, coupled with competition, has tended considerably to cheapen the binding. We are constantly putting our hands into our pockets to buy a new machine of one kind or another, and no sooner do we get one than some improvement is introduced, which either renders necessary a new machine or an expensive alteration or addition to the old one. Only the other day I was served in that way. Of course I must have the newest machines, or I cannot hope to compete with my fellows and retain a profit. As it is, whenever a new machine comes out there are always a number of binders ready to under-quote on the strength of the greater economy they believe they will secure by its use. Beyond the causes to which I have alluded lies the very serious fact that, while prices have been going down, wages have been going up. In this way: when first I came into the business the men were accustomed to work sixty hours a week. Now, however, they only work fifty-four at the same rate of wages. Any overtime they may have to work (and they are quite willing to work overtime) is paid for. It happens, therefore, that a man who under the old scale of pay would have worked sixty hours for, say thirty-five shillings, would now, for the same length of time, require thirty-five shillings and an additional payment for six hours' overtime."

"From what classes," we inquire, "is the bookbinding trade principally recruited?"

"The lower middle-class supply the bookbinders. Small retail tradesmen, such as green-grocers, chandlers, bootmakers, and so on, send their boys to us to be apprenticed. The journeymen bookbinders who are working for us, also frequently get us to take on their sons in the same way. My practice is to take a lad for two or three months on trial, and if at the end of that time he evinces a tractable disposition, and we like each other, I apprentice him for seven years, dating back the indenture to the date when he first came. The Factory Acts contain certain provisions in regard to the apprenticeship of lads. Thus the certificate of the master of his school that he has passed the fourth standard of education, if he be under fourteen years of age, must precede the employment of the boy."

"Do you require payment of a premium with apprentices?"

"No, it is seldom paid. But I take apprentices from one or two charities, who pay me ten pounds with them."

"Do you look for any particular qualifications, natural or educational, with your apprentices?"