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 wily, 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 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?”
"Ordinary intelligence is all that is required, and that is generally secured if he has passed the educational standard. The only thing I find objectionable in the new class of apprentices who emanate from the board schools is their lack of respect towards their superiors. In this way they present a very marked contrast to those we used to get in olden times."

"What do you pay apprentices?" we inquire.

"Well, that depends whether they are apprenticed to the general trade, or to a particular branch. If the former, they are less valuable to me, because they go from one branch to another, and, while they acquire a smattering of all, they do not gain perfection in any. Lads who are apprenticed to a particular branch, become thoroughly acquainted with it, and do better work. They therefore command a better wage. General apprentices get five shillings a week to begin with, with gradual increase to fourteen shillings during the term; the others get rather more. At first sight it may seem better that the apprentice should obtain a general idea of the various branches of the trade; the case making, forwarding, blocking, the cutting and trimming, etc., and when the apprentice intends to become a master bookbinder this is doubtless the right thing to do. But as a fact, the majority have no intention of the kind at the time of their apprenticeship, nor any immediate prospect of raising the capital, without which little or nothing can be accomplished. For these, therefore, I consider it more advantageous to learn one branch thoroughly. Having done that, they will stand a better chance of getting employment at good wages (which run from thirty-two shillings to forty-two shillings per week in London), and to that extent therefore, will be in the best position. It must be remembered by those who contemplate working as journeymen and nothing more, that they can only work at one branch at a time, and that, for such, a reputation as a finished and expert workman is what they must mainly depend upon. It is moreover found by experience that men of this kind invariably fall into one groove, and there are nowadays comparatively few men who possess the technical knowledge and dexterity necessary to enable them to execute the whole of the processes involved in the binding of a book. Such men would most likely be found in the provincial towns, where the local stationer undertakes printing and bookbinding for his customers."

"What class of men usually become master bookbinders?"

"A man may sometimes save money during his time as apprentice or journeyman, and begin work on his own account in a small way, enlarging his operations from time to time as means permit. Some men come into the trade because they have capital, even though they know nothing about the actual processes of bookbinding. I was myself one of these, and never served my apprenticeship to the binding."

"And what net profit would you look to make with such a start?"

"That is a question I find it difficult, if not impossible, to answer precisely. The truth is that, owing to the numerous contingencies and conditions to which I have already made reference, the profits vary enormously. One month I may be working overtime the whole month. Another I may be working half-time only; there is no steady flow of work such as there used to be; everything is by fits and starts. As with the work, so, of course, with the profits. But if I can make both ends meet I think myself fortunate nowadays. There is no such thing as getting an adequate return for capital and labour in our trade just now, that is, for the masters, and as I said at the beginning I repeat now—Don't advise your readers to go into it."