



Plantin the Binder.



WE have received from M. Léon Gruel a reprint of an article contributed by him to the *Journal Général de l'Imprimerie et de la Librairie*, now issued in royal octavo, and have read its contents with much pleasure. It is entitled "Notice sur Christophe Plantin, Relieur à Anvers (1514-1590)," and we take the liberty of quoting freely from it, and telling its story in its own interesting way.

M. Gruel says that among the librarians and printers of days gone by some there were who cultivated as a speciality the trade of a binder, and it is evident that nearly all of them had in their workshops some modest workmen who were content to remain unknown; to these was given the binding of the books sold or produced. Plantin was one of the number who himself excelled in good binding and, above all, in gold tooling, and had the passion of a practical man in love with his art. Both Plantin and his colleagues were proud enough of their work to sign their bindings as they signed their editions, using stamps of copper similar to those used for printing, but the mark was placed inside the board.

"Christophe Plantin was born at Saint-Avertin, near Tours, in 1514. His first trade was that of a binder, which he learned at Caen in the workshop of Robert or Robinet Macé, the second of that name. This Robert Macé was father of Robinet Macé, printer, of Rouen in 1498; he exercised the trade of binding at the same time as that of printing from 1522 till 1551. One of his books is in brown calf stamped with a cold block—it consists of a collection of dissertations on medicine, an octavo volume printed in Venice 1507; in the centre of a square three line frame is the Virgin crowned by an angel, kneeling before the Eternal Father; at the bottom of the design is the name R. Macé, and surrounding it is a religious inscription such as the binders of the fifteenth century were wont to use, having placed themselves under the protection of some Saint, or the Virgin; that upon the binding of Robert Macé is 'TOTA PULCRA ES AMICA MEA ET MACULA NON EST IN TE.'

"How was it that Christophe Plantin, born and brought up in France, went and established himself among strangers, continuing at first his trade as a binder, and founding one of the most important and remarkable printing houses of the sixteenth century? We have not found any document which gives us the reason, for the authentic fragments concerning this binder-printer before his installation at Antwerp, those which ought to have given some light upon the subject, as well as upon his *début* in the trade of printing, that is to say between the years 1549-1555, are extremely rare. The records preserved at the Plantin Museum, Antwerp, which, after those dates, are full of details and well kept, are very poor in information concerning the period which interests us most, that is when Plantin was a binder.

"It is to M. Max Rooses, the obliging conservator of the Musée Plantin-Moretus, that I am indebted for the principal part of these notes. He told us in his work on 'Christophe Plantin, printer, of Antwerp' (Antwerp, 1882), that Plantin lived in the outskirts of Lombards. The proof is taken from a letter by Jean Leclerc with the following address:—'To Christophe Plantain, binder of books, who lives in the street Lombarte-west, close to the Cammestrate, at Antwerp.'

"He bound, in 1552, the records of the accounts of the town; the sums of money paid to him for this work have been reproduced in precise detail. We can see here also that his first workman's name was Robert Van Loo. The archives of Antwerp contain a copy of the contract under which, in 1553, Corneille Van Loo, living at Goyek, near Brussels, confided his son Robert to Plantin, as an apprentice for a period of eight years.

"Plantin next added to the binding and gilding, the trade of a morocco leather dresser. Here is a quotation from a letter by Jean Moretus his son-in-law and successor, who was for thirty-two years also his devoted fellow-workman: 'When Christophe Plantin arrived in Antwerp in 1549, he occupied himself first with the binding of books and the making of boxes and little coffers, which he covered with leather, gilded, and laid over with pieces of different coloured leathers, with remarkable talent; in this latter work, as well as in his bindings, there has not been his equal in Antwerp, nor in the Low Countries.'

"Christophe Plantin was constrained to abandon the trade of a binder because of the strain caused by bending his back, which tried him too much, through having received a wound one dark night when he had to deliver a little coffer ordered by Gabriel de Cayas, secretary to King Philippe II. of Spain. He was attacked by mistake, in a street that led to the Pont de Meir, by some masked drunken men, who took him for a guitar player by whom they had been insulted, and he received a sword thrust that for a long time endangered his life. That is the reason he took up typography. The history of his wound is given by Plantin himself in the preface to the first and second parts of 'Dialogues for Young Children.'

"There exists at the Plantin Museum only one specimen of binding bearing the mark of this celebrated artist, and the matrix in copper is preserved among the wooden type used for printing. It is a 12mo, 'Le Livre de l'Institution Chretienne, etc.' (Antwerp, the Golden Unicorn, in the street of the Chamber, 1557), bound in calf with blind lines, the corners of the frame terminating with a flourish in gold of the Aldine character, such as we find upon bindings executed at that time by a great many librarians and printer-binders. This mark, whereon the principal motive is a compass tracing part of a circle, is accompanied by the device 'Labore et Constantia,' and the whole is enclosed in a graceful oval ornament."

M. Gruel's work is accompanied by two illustrations and a number of quotations relative to Plantin's transactions as a binder, and we must heartily thank him for his research into the past of this binder-printer's life.