Bound by
JOHN RAMAGE,
LONDON.

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WALKING up Ludgate-hill one day, we were wondering whom we should get for our next portrait, when we remembered that hard by in Creed-lane there was a binder who certainly deserved a place in our gallery, and whom we had well-nigh forgotten—for which we crave forgiveness—so we sought out Mr. Ramage, and asked him for a few particulars concerning his business.

JOHN RAMAGE was born in London on the 20th of February, 1836, and was apprenticed to Mr. John Wright, of Noel-street, Oxford-street, in 1851, where he remained until the term of his indenture expired in 1856, when, desirous of improving himself in his craft, he paid a visit to Paris, and was fortunate enough to obtain an engagement with Lortic, whose splendid bindings have earned for him such an enviable reputation. There, during the next three years, young Ramage paid assiduous attention to his study of the finest branches of the trade, and admits himself deeply indebted to M. Lortic for his instruction in the use of the finely-cut tools for which his atelier is famous, and for much of that refinement of taste which comes of good tuition aided by a residence amongst the all-pervading art influences of the French capital. But his sphere of training was not confined to Paris; M. Lortic was in the habit of taking periodical journeys to the larger towns in the French provinces for the purpose of purchasing rare books or fine bindings, and as Mr. Ramage generally accompanied him, the pupil picked up a great deal of the master’s knowledge of books and their values which can never be gained in the workshop, but is essential for the bookseller, as well as having the opportunity of studying the various styles of the great binders, as M. Lortic had the entrée not only into public libraries but to many a rich private collection. The three years thus passed away in profitable and pleasant alternations of workshop life and interesting travel, until, at the latter end of 1860, Mr. Ramage left his tutor and went to Edinburgh, where he purchased the business of the late Mr. Banks, on the North Bridge, and commenced for himself. There another three years passed away, during which time he found that a great deal of his work was being sent to him from London, and to London it had to be returned; so that in 1863 he determined to take up a position in the metropolis, as being the place best suited for his trade, and he removed to Wells-street, Jermyn-street.

Here he was able to largely increase his business, and he then started buying books inquires, binding them, and selling them to booksellers both in town and in the country, which so entirely altered the whole character of the business that it necessitated another removal in 1870 to larger premises in Warwick-lane, which was nearer to the centre of the wholesale publishing trade. In 1884, the buildings in Warwick-lane had to be pulled down for the widening of the street, and a fresh home was sought in Warwick-square, where he stayed till 1891, when he migrated to his present business place at Nos. 4 and 5 Creed-lane.

Mr. Ramage is principally engaged in binding fine books or rare editions, and his experiences in ministering to the varied tastes of book collectors are certainly amusing. There seem to be no harder people to please, for the fads of book collectors are innumerable, and should any one of their pet ideas not receive that full consideration which they deem it deserves, woe betide the unlucky binder. We were shown some small-octavo volumes which had squares quite an inch deep, simply in order to bring the back up to the same size as some other volumes upon the same subject, and to make a neat array on the library shelves. Now we can quite understand the objection
to reducing the larger volumes, but this idea of lengthening the boards of smaller books for the sake of uniformity, and burying the books, is a caprice which has no useful purpose and spoils the appearance of the bound book. The jealousy with which margins are regarded is justifiable, for the untouched edge shows the original size of the book, and it is particularly over the margins that most fuss is made, so that Mr. Ramage has adopted a little device which prevents him being charged with cutting off too much. With the uncut edge of course there is no difficulty, but some people want the edges cut just sufficient to make them smooth, and then the fun begins. In one case he had a book sent back to him as worthless, because it had been cut down too much. "What did you do?" we asked. "Well, you see, I always make a practice of saving the shavings of any cut book if it is a fine edition or rare work, and make a little parcel of them, which is duly labelled and kept. On this occasion I simply sent the gentleman the thin shavings taken off, and I heard no more complaint. You cannot give a man more indisputable proof of the extent of the cut than that, and I have found the practice very useful. Mr. Blades has kindly denominated the binder one of the enemies of books, the fact is the binder is often blamed when no blame is due, but unless you save the shavings you have no proof; so I save the shavings. "That entails a lot of trouble, does it not?" "Yes, but it gives greater satisfaction, and I rarely hear any complaint now. The trouble is nothing but for the fact that prices are cut so fine that there is little encouragement for the careful binder to exercise all the care he might upon his work. The washing, mending, and mounting take up a tremendous lot of time that seems to be highly charged for, as few can know the worth other than binders." Mr. Ramage then showed us a small book of Dibdin's that had been Grangerised into nine bulky volumes; the sheets had been washed and mended, as also were many of the plates that had been inserted, and the whole work had been guarded with cambic. "That is a specimen of the work we constantly have to do; and although many complain at the price, few are fairly good judges of what is required and the time it consumes, and are therefore very hard to please."

Mr. Ramage thinks the public generally know nothing of bookbinding; they begrudge the price asked for a good substantial binding, but will rush at books but little cheaper in paste-grain padded, and other similar styles having a nice outer appearance and pleasant feel, but which drop to pieces after a few months of wear. He aims at the better class work, but he has to cater for the requirements of the public, as besides his binding business he travels all over the country, and has a large bookselling trade. He exhibited specimens of his work in London in 1862, where he obtained honourable mention, and again in Paris in 1867, when he received a medal. While in town he personally supervises the binding, and takes a great interest in it, and many of the designs he produces are his own, as many of the tools are from his own drawings. The specimens we saw were characterised by that solidity, and yet flexibility, that betokens thorough workmanship and a just appreciation of the points of a good book. Unfortunately, Mr. Ramage had no fine specimens of special class work on hand, but those we have chosen will illustrate the ordinary run of his full bindings.

Writing in later life to his scientific friend, Mr. de la Rive, the great Faraday (1791–1867) rehearsed the story of his humble origin. He was one of ten children whose father was a hardworking English blacksmith. At the age of thirteen Michael was apprenticed to a stationer and bookbinder named Riebau, whose shop was for many years in Blandford-street, London. "With him," says the electrician, "I remained until my majority, and during the chief part of the time bound books. Now it was in those very books, in the hours after my usual daily work, that I found the beginning of my philosophy. There were two that especially helped me, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, from which I gained my first ideas of electricity, and the 'Conversations on Chemistry,' by Mrs. Marcet." One evening, a third of a century after that apprenticeship had ended, and when Faraday had achieved an international reputation, he took Professor Tyndall by the arm as they were leaving the Royal Institution, and said: "Come, Tyndall, I will show you something that will interest you." They walked northward and at length reached Blandford-street, when Faraday, pausing a moment before a stationer's shop, went in. "On entering the shop," says the professor, "his usual animation seemed doubled; he looked rapidly at everything it contained. To the left was a door, through which he looked down into a small room, with a window in front facing the street. Drawing me toward him he said eagerly: 'Look there, Tyndall, that was my working place. I bound books in that little nook.'"

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