La Maison Gruel et Engelmann is one of the oldest and best binding establishments in Paris, having been founded in the year 1811 by M. Desforges, for whom M. Paul Gruel worked as journeyman; but, marrying Mademoiselle Desforges, he was taken into partnership by her father in 1825. Madam Gruel did not live long after the union and M. Gruel took to himself a second wife, Mademoiselle Mercier, who took an active part in the business, and by whom he had a son, Léon. After his death in 1846, the wife continued the business and increased it, especially in the higher class of bindings, till in 1849 she took the highest prize in the Paris Exposition. In 1850 she was re-married to M. G. Engelmann, one of the finest printers in Paris, who introduced lithography into France and invented chromo-lithography, and whose works are highly prized as some of the best specimens of French printing; indeed, Le Mémorial Diplomatique wonders greatly why he was not decorated with the Cross of the Legion of Honour. From 1850 the house went under the name of Gruel-Engelmann, and under their joint direction were produced many of the splendid art editions of Liturgies and Livres de Piété for which the house is especially famous, Madam Gruel having the direction of the binding department, in which she showed very great ability, for at the great exhibition of 1851 she took the gold medal for excellence of workmanship.

M. G. Engelmann died in 1875, and from that time Madam Engelmann associated with herself in the business her two sons, Léon Gruel and Edmond Engelmann, the eldest son by her second husband, the firm becoming M. M. Gruel et Engelmann; M. Gruel directing the binding department, while M. Engelmann was mainly busied with the artistic part of the printing, and over all the watchful business ability of the mother was exercised. Together they have produced many beautiful works, especially of a devotional character, with illuminated borders in mediaeval style, and bound under the personal supervision of M. Gruel, who has raised the binders’ art to a standard of perfection never before attained. Many of the best master binders of Paris owe their present position to the tuition they received as apprentices in this famous house, and the firm justly regard it an honour to have had such pupils.

The premises of the firm are situated in the Rue Saint Honoré 418, close to the Rue Royal, and upon entering the lofty and spacious salon, which is the sale-room and office, the English visitor is immediately struck with the artistic character of the apartment, the thick carpet on the polished oak floor, the grand old-fashioned fire-place with a mantel out of reach, and huge grotesque fire-dogs on each side, the marble busts of M.M. G. and E. Engelmann, the oil-paintings and rare etchings, and the great book-cases containing not only bindings by the firm, but also some fine specimens by other great master binders, the expensive collection of many years, some of which were conspicuous in the Paris Exposition of 1889.

M. Léon Gruel is a slight built man, full of animation, with a pleasant face and wonderfully bright dark eyes that light up with pleasure and pride as, showing the beautiful specimens of his art, he finds an interested and appreciative visitor who understands the technique of the work; and, beside him, his son, a young man almost as enthusiastic as his father in the craft and speaking English too, for M. Gruel has many English customers. Nothing could exceed the courtesy shown by both father and son in their desire to make our visit an enjoyable as well as an instructive one, and in few places could we find such a great variety of first-class bindings. Our greatest difficulty was to find words to express our delight at the treasures of art shown to us. The tooling was very rich and varied, and upon many of the covers the thick Russian gold was used, which has a great depth of colour and far excels the ordinary gold used for finishing.

The library is very extensive and contains almost every book upon binding that has been published, including, of course, The Bookbinder, for M. Gruel is a student and author as well as a workman, and has devoted many years of study to his craft. Besides many admirable articles contributed to various French journals he has written and published a very extensive and exhaustive work: “Manuel Historique et Bibliographique de l’Amateur de Reliure,” which treats of the various developments of the binder’s art from the earliest periods.

We have been in a great many workshops, but we never remember seeing such a paradise of cleanliness and order as may be found on the second and third floors belonging to the firm, nor were we prepared for such a thorough inspection of everything done there. All the work is done by old methods and in the very best manner; true, we saw a rolling-machine in the recess, looking as bright and free from dust as if it had just been polished up for show, but it is not often used, beating by hand being generally in vogue. Around the for warders might be seen small numbers of books tied up in boards: these had been put in the standing press, wrung down, and then the boards strongly tied so that the books might remain under the same pressure for an indefinite period, while the press was always available; thus great solidity is
acquired. In the leather room were some magnificent skins of the large-grained leant, which is so extensively used for crushed work in elegant bindings, in every variety of shade and colour. The whole staff, generally, consists of sixteen or seventeen hands, of whom four are finishers, one of whom speaks English well. They are nearly all old servants and first-class workmen, some having been in the house twenty-five lines of lettering on the side was thus covered, three narrow slips having been cut out just large enough for the lettering, which was being done with type set up in the French cases, the size of the letters used. No single letters are used, every lettering being worked with type.

No matter what style of work is required the firm will produce it, and it would puzzle one to mention any binder of repute who ever had a style of his own that M. Léon Gruel did not know of; but it is mainly the works of the great French masters which are reproduced, or which form the basis of the designs worked. Everything proceeds deliberately, under the personal supervision of M. Gruel, and the time consumed on some of the bindings is astonishing. No one sending a book there can expect to see it again for twelve months; but then prices for these artistic bindings run very high, and fortunately, M. Gruel's clients can afford to pay.

Besides the ordinary finished work known to the trade generally, M. Gruel has given much time and study to other processes of book decoration, and has brought to a wonderful stage of perfection an amplification of a fifteenth century style of work, which was known as "cuir bouilli." In olden times this soaked and punched leather work was thought a great deal of and at one time rivalled the goldsmith's art, but it had become almost a lost art when M. Gruel revived it. It is now known as "cuir ciselé et modelé." A specimen is given on next page. The book is a "De Immitatione Christi" published by the house in royal quarto, with illuminated designs taken from the manuscripts of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, and is bound in shoe leather, the outlines of the design being cut or engraved into the dry leather, and the ground-work punched down. Some of the smaller parts of the work are cut in by means of hollow steel cutting tools, but most of it is done with the graver. This incision allows of the groundwork being punched down without disturbing the design so that it appears in relief, and by the modelling of standing parts the effect gained is very fine. Some magnificent specimens were exhibited in the Paris Exposition, 1889, and attracted much attention.

Another class of work, which is even a greater novelty to binders generally, has been introduced by the firm for the purposes of book ornamentation. It is not the invention of a bookbinder, being the outcome of several years of study by M. Manuel Perier, who years. In the finishing shop the stock of tools were remarkably fine and are carefully covered up to preserve them from bruising and dust, though scarcely a speck of the latter was visible anywhere. Every book being finished was covered over with stout white paper, the only part exposed just that reverse corner or part being worked. Even a book with three
first conceived the idea by seeing the branding of some wine casks at Bordeaux. It is called “pyrogravure,” or fire engraving, and the especial feature in the results obtained is that designs may be burnt in on leather in any tone of colour desired almost down to black. The general arrangement of the apparatus employed is based on the surgical thermo-cauteriser of Dr. Paquelin, invented in 1875. A reservoir, about as high as an ordinary work bench, stands on the ground, charged with hydro-carbons, which are mixed with air in proportions under easy control and burned together, giving such temperatures as may be required. A flexible connecting wire passes from the heating chamber to the platinum burning pencil which is shaped like a tooth burner, but is not so thick. This wire is covered, and by an ingenious contrivance a current of cool air is kept up in the hollow holder of the pencil, making it cool to hold. The temperature of the burning pencil can be regulated and maintained at will, and while a low temperature produces light tones, the higher temperature will secure a colour almost black. The fine lines are produced by the point being held perpendicularly, while by the depression of the pencil thicker lines are secured and a very heavy broad line is produced by applying the side. The specimen we show was exhibited at the Exposition. The design is a copy of a very old wood engraving: in the centre is seated Saint Denis, the “martyr king” of France, and in the four corners the emblematic figures of the four evangelists; the whole is burnt in on a pale buff calf, on which the design looks more like an old print than what it really is. No blemish of excessive burning mars the excellence of the workmanship, which, of course, requires the skill of an artist, besides experience in the use of the instrument.

In all the work that the firm turns out there is the evidence of a thoroughness of purpose, and a consistency of detail, which, harmonizing with one another, tend to the perfection of first-class work that no miserable sub-division of labour, such as we too often find here, could produce. Each branch is under the minutest supervision of the master mind, which, recognising the end to be gained, directs all into a proper channel of usefulness.

That M. Gruel has fairly earned the enviable reputation he enjoys goes without saying, and he is as widely esteemed as he is known. What better position could a master-craftsman desire?