

In American Binderies.

A REPORTER, having had a chat with a master binder, has the following to say on work in the binderies:—

“Our girls earn on an average 6 dollars a week,” said the proprietor of a large bookbindery. “Some of them earn 22 dollars; the beginners earn 3 dollars; all of them work by piece. They can do any sort of work, and the finest books we have are sewed by them. They cover the pamphlets, but the bound books are done entirely by men. The stamping and such work is done by machinery. Our girls work ten hours a day, and sit down during the whole of that time, or at least the greater part of it. The girls who work on the ‘dry press’ are obliged to stand. The dry press is a machine for pressing the matter over night after it has been folded.”

“What sort of girls are they?” “Good, quiet-going girls, for the most part. The majority of them live at home. They are as neatly dressed as any girls you see from the shops.”

“Do you employ them steadily?”—“Well, some of them we do. Of course, when it is dull we let our girls go; but when we have a big job we advertise, and get a lot for the time being, or if we know of some good hands we send for them.”

Several other publishers said substantially the same thing.

“Some of the girls are very dull,” one of them remarked, “and have to be shown over and over how to do the simplest thing. They learn to do just one little thing, and seem to have no ambition to extend their knowledge. Fifteen years ago a bindery girl used to learn to sew, stitch, fold, and paste. Now she does only one of these several things, and is helpless when any of the other duties are required of her. It is partly stupidity, partly indifference, and partly shiftlessness. Of course you will not understand me to mean that that refers to any of our old experienced hands that we keep continually with us, but to those girls who cling to the skirts of the trade, as it were, and pick up jobs here and there. Perhaps you imagine they jump at a job. Not a bit of it, I assure you. They read your advertisement in the paper, come around and critically examine the sort of work you have in hand, and if they don’t like it they tell you so in graphic language. Their manners are very self-possessed, to put it mildly, and I think a candid person might even go so far as to call them cheeky. But then, too, there are some very sweet girls who go about taking the chance jobs, and who are very glad to take anything they can get and work hard at.”

The girls themselves were not reluctant to talk upon the subject. One of them, when asked how she liked the work, ran her hands through her shock of curly red hair, and protested that it was “awful!”

“What is awful about it?”—“Well, for one thing, the bronzing.”

“Is that a necessary and useful part of the work?”—“Any of us are likely to be given a job of bronzing at any time. We’re here to be generally useful, and if the boss says, ‘Bronze 50,000 covers for advertising pamphlets,’ why of course we bronze ’em.”

“But it is said most of you can do only one thing well.”—“What nonsense! Besides, any one could bronze. All it needs is a little care.”

“What hurt does it do?”—“Hurt enough! If you don’t wear a sponge over your mouth and nose, the bronze will get in the throat, and make terrible sores. A girl who

worked here once got ulcers in her throat from working in bronze, and was laid up four months."

"Does it make much difference to you what work you are engaged upon?"—"Oh my, yes! We make a great deal more at some kinds than we do at others. The finer the class of work, the less we make at it. Heavy, expensive paper is a great deal harder to fold than light paper, such as is used for railway guides. I guess railway guides are about the best paying work we have. We fold them, you know. Some of them have sixteen or twenty folds, and a girl has to be real smart to remember all the twists and turns, so as to make no mistake."

"So that is the best paying work?"—"Yes."

"How much can you make a week at it?"—"There is a girl over there that has worked six years in a bindery, and now and then she makes 9 dollars a week. But then she works through a greater part of the noon hour."

"Not many of the girls make that much, then?"—"Well, I should say not! There's one poor little girl here that never makes a cent over 2 dollars. She's such a slow little thing, and she can't remember from one time to another how to turn a fold or make a knot. You know we have an odd way of making a knot with our needle in the thread as we sew the sections. There's one good thing about the binding business. You see most of us can sit down all day long. They have long benches in almost every factory where we can sit."

"Do all houses pay the same for the same work?"—"No, indeed they don't. Some of the bosses are as mean as dirt. But, after we find it out, they don't get any but greenhorns to work for them. There is quite a difference in the prices the houses pay."

"Do you get steady work?"—"No, and that's the very worst thing about bindery work. One week a man will have 125 girls, and the next he won't have more than ten. I suppose it's all right. I don't see any way to fix it. But it seems wrong to me some way. The man's work is done, but what becomes of the girls? If they ain't living with their folks, they just have to run in debt for their board till they can get more work. It's pretty hard sometimes, I can tell you."

"What should you say was the average wages made by the girls?"—"Four dollars and fifty cents, and five dollars a week, by the ordinary workers."

"How much does the forewoman get?"—"We have no forelady; but where I worked last, the forelady got 10 dollars a week, and nothing to do but just look after us."

"Do you ever get cheated out of your pay?"—"Not in the large establishments. Now and then some little concern will fail."

"Do you get docked much in your wages?"—"Not much. Some of those mean bosses I told you of make you pay if you sew a section wrong, or fold badly enough to spoil anything of value, or paste a cover on upside down. But, after all, that's fair enough. There isn't much complaint to be made, on the whole."

"Do you make many friends among the girls; are they nice?"—"Some are and some aren't. That's pretty much the way girls are everywhere, I guess. Some are pretty 'brassy,' but others are just quiet girls who have to help along at home—that's the kind I am!"

And she ran her hands once more through her red curls and vanished, laughing as she went.