COBDEN-SANDERSON AND THE DOVES BINDERY

The temptation that usually assails one in writing of a man for whom he has certain well-defined enthusiasms is that of forcing his readers into a too conscious allowance for the personal equation. But as a craft-worker speaking to fellow-craftsmen, I feel confident that Cobden-Sanderson’s is a name to conjure with, when one is striving to create fervor for the best craft ideals. From time to time, there rises up in the very heart of a movement an individual who reduces its abstract principles to their concrete form; realizing in his daily life those ideals that exceed the grasp of most idealists, and winning to the cause by his forceful example more adherents than all the precepts of the wisest could gain for it.

When Cobden-Sanderson changed his barrister’s wig and gown for the beret and blouse of the workman, he gave a very strong impetus to the craft movement that Morris had set going and, at the same time, definitely ranged himself on the side of labor and social democracy: a position at variance with both circumstance and training. But though his university career had been one of more than average distinction, and his social graces were such that he individualized his place in the complex world of London society, yet it is as master-craftsman that he wields an influence which has strengthened and broadened all craft development.

When it was suggested to me that a description of Cobden-Sanderson and his work, by one who had come into close touch with both, might be a helpful inspiration to craftsmen, I wrote, asking his permission to make such use of my experience. Mr. Sanderson’s reply was such a characteristic one, and expressed so concisely his idea of the true craftsman, that I count it
no breach of faith to reproduce it as a whole, but rather a
duty which I owe my fellow-workers to give them a fine
thought as an inspiration to finer effort:

Dear Miss Preston: I hardly know what to say to
your request to write about me. Such a proposal in-
volve so much, and the question is: What of me do you
propose to write about? I do not want to be written
about as mere copy to satisfy for an infinitesimal moment
of time the insatiable hunger of journalism, but this, I am
sure you do not propose. If, on the other hand, my work
can be made the opportunity of giving one little push in
the right direction, then why not? So use your own
discretion, and do your best for the cause, and remember
that the cause is not book-binding, nor a handicraft, nor
a pattern, nor getting a living, but that sound view of life
as a whole, which shall make all other sound things pos-
sible, and among the sound things, some that may be
beautiful. Book-binding is but the illustration.

Very truly yours,
T. J. Cobden-Sanderson.

The cause certainly has never
had a stronger or warmer adherent than this one who
writes so eloquently of it.

Mr. Sanderson joined the group
of men who were following Morris at a time when there
was inspiration in the very enthusiasm which that great
leader created. It is said that he chose book-binding as
his work rather to express his conviction that manual
labour dignified man's existence, than for any attraction
this special craft had for him, but those who feel the charm
of his binding count this choice to have been something
more than chance.

It is of Cobden-Sanderson, the
craftsman, that I wish to write, but the salient points of
his career may be of interest to readers who know little
or nothing of his personality. By birth, he belongs to
that upper middle class English life which has an inflexible standard of education and environment, and along this line, he had his early training. He went up to Cambridge for his university degree, where his intimates were rather the opposite of democratic, and after vacillating between the Church and Medicine, he finally entered the Middle Temple as a Barrister-at-Law, and was for years in Parliamentary practice. His social charm gave him much popularity, and his rich cultivation and ready wit gained him access to all that was best in artistic and literary London. Thus he drifted on until he had rounded forty, when his whole scheme of life changed. He married a beautiful and brilliant woman, whose name he hyphenated with his own in deference to her father’s will, and made a home for himself at Frognell, near Hampstead. Gradually both Mr. and Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson grew radical, and probably it needed just Morris’ influence to push them across that sharply drawn line which separates Socialism from other political creeds. At all events, some seventeen years ago, he suddenly gave up the practice of law and went into DeCoverly’s book-binding shop to learn that trade. He must have been an apt pupil, as his course was not of many months duration, and, on leaving, he set up his own workroom in his library at Frognell. Picturesqueness always appealing to him, he adopted the blue linen blouse of the French workmen and the white beret, as if to make the outer man conform as nearly as possible to his convictions.

Mrs. Sanderson sewed the books, and their two little children were brought to play in the workshop, in order that they might imbibe the new mode of living and become small Apostles of the Gospel of Labor as soon as possible. Here he was sought out by his friends, who numbered all that group of Pre-Raphaelites so precious in the annals of English art, and by a steadily increasing circle of admirers who found in his work a certain quality of charm that did not lie alto-
gether in the perfection of technique. It was at this time that the "Society of Arts and Crafts" was founded in London, and the name now so familiar that it seems to belong to all time, was a happy inspiration of Cobden-Sanderson. It pleases him greatly to dwell upon the number of gilds that have adopted the name, but I wonder how many of these clubs in the United States know that the man who first made the happy combination is still the honorable secretary of the society he christened.

Just at the time when the art of printing was revived by Morris in the founding of the Kelmscott Press, Cobden-Sanderson decided to express his social convictions and, at the same time, to widen his own sphere by establishing a model work-shop in which employer and employe should share alike the toil and the honor. So it was that the Doves Bindery was started, called the Doves, because it is neighbour on the river to the little public house of that name, which every 'Varsity man knows well in connection with the Oxford and Cambridge boat races; for all through the training, one sees recorded that such and such time was made between Hammersmith bridge and the Doves. It may have been from youthful appreciation that Mr. Sanderson chose that name, but it was the last word which caught the British eye and the British scent for what is the language of their kinsmen over the sea! Whence the word? Without authority, proper English authority;—without the sanction of usage; evidently an Americanism!

The bindery opened with a staff of three—a finisher, a forwarder and collator, and one apprentice, the latter now one of the most successful binders in London. In the ten years of its existence but two changes have been made in the personnel of the Doves: Mr. Cockerell finished his apprenticeship, and at the end of five years, set out on his own way, while a young girl was taken in to assist in sewing and mending, who is now the fourth on the regular staff. Pupils have come
and gone, but have always gone with a pang, for it is a unique and rare experience to make one of that little community.

The Upper Mall, Hammersmith, like many London roads, is respectable in spots and squalid in others; but it is picturesque all its length. The Doves Bindery stands just on the outskirts of respectability, in a shabby enough little slum, but within a stone’s throw of Kelmscott House,—the home of both George MacDonald and Morris—and River House, which, with its neighbor, formed a part of the palace of Katherine of Braganza. To the street the Bindery presents a rather unpleasing aspect, but when one enters the house and passes through it to the garden, everything changes. Picture a neat, well-kept English garden full of bloom and fragrance: a low stone wall on the river side, against which the water washes at high-tide; shade-trees that cast long, cool shadows in the afternoon, with all the windows opening upon this and the river beyond, and the lovely Surrey shore opposite. It is a very merry work-shop, with no foreman hovering about to watch the employes. Honor is the only guardian of his rights that Mr. Sanderson sets over the Doves,—the individual honour of each workman,—and a very good watch-dog he has found it; for although there is a no little talking in the course of the day, work goes on, and good work is turned out, whether he is late in coming or early, whether he is at home or on the Continent. The house has two large rooms on each floor, those below being occupied by the pupils and by the forwarder and finisher of the bindery; above, is Mr. Sanderson’s private room, where he works out his designs and settles all details of all branches of the work—and another room in which the sewing and collating are done; and all the time, there is the sound of singing and laughter, which are good witnesses to the spirit that pervades this model workshop. The hours at the Doves Bindery are those required by the Trades Union:
from half-past eight to one, from two until half-past six, with Saturday afternoons free the whole year round. At four, a tea-table is spread in the pupils’ room, where tea, bread and butter, and cake are served through the bounty of Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson, who often comes in to share the afternoon tea which her generosity supplies. Around this table every one gathers full of good cheer, and glad of the pause that lets him express it. Often the paper is read aloud,—the Daily Chronicle of course,—for every one is, or becomes a Radical in this environment, and the talk is of books, for the most part: the last sale, the Kelmscott prices,—always a source of wonder,—the new presses; indeed the Doves is a training school in bibliographica. When summer comes and the air grows fragrant with the sweetness of the hay, tea is served in the garden down at the river end, but long before this is possible, and with the first breath of spring, doors and windows are flung open to the garden and the sordid life of the other side in the Mall is forgotten. This is the life at the Doves Bindery. Listen to the ideals which sustain that life, as expressed in Mr. Sanderson’s own words: “It is not so much the form, as the spirit and conception of the workshop, as at present constituted, which I conceive to require amendment. A man may well be set to work by another, and many men and women may well co-operate in the production of a single work. The important thing is that there shall be a common and well understood notion of what the work is, or ought to be, and that there shall be a common and energetic desire to contribute to the completion of that work, each in due degree for the work’s sake and the workmanship, and even for the shop’s sake. And if in this field, I might suggest a practical reform, it would be the transformation of the work-shop from a place in which to earn a wage or to make a profit, into a place in which the greatest pleasure and the greatest honor in life are to be aimed at: pleasure in the intelligent work of the hand, and honor in the formation and main-
tenance of a great historic tradition.” This cheery side of labor is a pleasant thing with which to come in contact. It makes one more hopeful of the ultimate result of the present struggle, to see the confidence of the master meet with the ready response of good work for fair treatment. Mr. Sanderson doubtless has exceptional workmen, both for skill and intelligence, but they are workmen when all is said: apprentices first, then journeymen,—so the experiment is robbed of none of its success because of unusual material. Three times in the year are holidays—a fortnight at mid-summer, a week at Christmas, and another week at Easter, and, although the wage goes on as usual, a substantial sum, by way of personal recognition of faithful service, gives to each employe the means to go for an outing with his family, with no need to draw upon the Savings' Bank. Certainly if “Altruism is the best relation between self and others,” Cobden-Sanderson might be reckoned a first citizen of Altruria! The co-operative system has never been tried at the Doves Bindery,—doubtless for some very good reason,—but the scale of wage is such that the workmen have comfortable homes, and are able to keep their children at school a sufficient time to equip them with a good common school education, as a foundation for a trade. Hospitalities are frequently exchanged on both sides: pleasant little teas in the workmen’s homes returned in kind; excursions on the river; parties to the theatre when a good piece is playing; a thorough acquaintance with the children of each family, and an interest in each one individually;—these are the ties of human intercourse that give a different tone to the relation of capital to labor.

It is not strange that much booklore is learned in the Bindery, for only the rarest and best comes here for beautifying and protecting: first editions of great writers; stray volumes that are known only to the bibliophile; the books printed at the Kelmscott Press, and at others that have sprung up since Morris aroused public
interest in fine printing;—these are the books which are brought to the Doves, and, as the workman unconsciously glances here and there at the contents of the book he is binding, he adds to his knowledge of bibliographica a certain familiarity with the best literature. When I first went to the Bindery, the books then in work were rather distasteful to the staff, being a series of photogravures of great personages who had attended a fancy dress ball at a great house during the sixtieth Jubilee. This limited edition of fifty volumes then binding, appealed in no way to the workmen who scorned the whole enterprise, and their comment on that portion of the nobility with whom they were becoming so familiar, was as outspoken and spontaneous as that which one hears on the Mall when the Sovereign holds a Drawing-Room. This work, however, gave Mr. Sanderson a breathing-time at the moment when the Tri-Annual Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Society absorbed much of his time and thought. But it was, I feel sure, with a sigh of relief that he saw the last trace of aristocracy removed from Hammersmith.

That exhibition at the New Gallery,—the first since the death of Morris cast a gloom over the opening day of the exhibition of '96—was a signal triumph for the Doves Bindery. Every book offered for sale in Mr. Sanderson’s case was sold on the afternoon of the private view. And how proud we all were of this success, and how quick his executants were to discover in other cases the slightest imitation of the tools or patterns with which they were so familiar!

One of the lectures given at the New Gallery during this exhibition was by Mr. Sanderson, his subject being “Gilds.” It recalled to many in his audience a similar occasion, three years before, when, as a prelude to his lecture on “Art and Life,” he made reference to the great loss that had befallen the Society in the then recent death of its President. “When I think of him,” he said, “I seem to see a great light shed upon the
path in front of us, which waits only until we move, to move onward too,—still onward, and to keep its post fronting the darkness. And the great light shed from him is this: that in the work of his hands, aided, guided by the work of the brain into shapes of everlasting beauty and utility, man, not certainly this man or that,—for each must contribute in an infinite diversity of ways,—but man, as a whole, man, which is human society, organized to unity, shall find delight as of summer seas—waking to summer music, along the coasts of the world, under summer’s sun and moon, and the still shining stars of Heaven. Work, incessant work, with beauty as our everlasting aim, this is the William Morris, this the memory of him, this the light shining upon the darkness of the future, which we all and especially we, of the Society whose President he was, ought to cherish and to abide by forever. Work! and for our everlasting aim, Beauty!”

The relation between Morris and Cobden-Sanderson was one of close sympathy and friendship, one that antedated the ties of political creed and craft conviction. In the beginning, when the Doves Bindery was starting, and the Kelmscott Press in need of larger quarters, an upper portion of the former was occupied by Morris’ proofreaders. This brought Morris in and out many times a day, and with his marvelous interest in the detail of all craft-work, he made himself a familiar figure to the employees who have many remembrances of him as they knew him; and now it has fallen upon Mr. Sanderson to uphold the Morris tradition in the revival of printing, upon him and Morris’ well-beloved friend, Emory Walker. How well they do this is proven by the beauty of the work that issues from the Doves Press.

It was Mr. Walker who first interested Morris in fine printing, being himself a connoisseur in typography, and when, as one of Morris’ executors, he closed the Kelmscott Press and turned over
blocks and types to the British Museum, according to Morris' will, he conceived the idea of another Press, which, with a different scope, should again produce books representing the highest typographical achievement. With this high standard, he prevailed upon Mr. Sanderson to join him in the enterprise, and for months these two worked quietly and zealously; no announcement of the new Press being made until type was designed and cut, and all plans perfected for printing the first book.

The Doves Press is in Hammersmith Terrace, not a stone's throw from the houses of both its founders; the principles upon which it is conducted are the same as those of the Bindery, its near neighbor, and the same perfection of detail that distinguishes the workmanship of the Doves Bindery gives charm to the product of the Doves Press. The paper upon which the books are printed is of beautiful texture, thinner than the paper Morris used, but equally strong; the water-mark shows two doves with the initials C. S.—and E. W. beneath.

The type is Roman, and, so far, no effort has been made toward decoration or illustration. The charm of the books lies entirely in the beauty of the type and the perfection of spacing and placing upon the page; the impression made by the whole is one of pleasure in the beauty expressed by a perfect and dignified simplicity. The first book printed at the Doves Press was the "Life of Agricola," by Tacitus, and before it was printed, it was largely over-subscribed. Strangely coincident with this publication, is the fact that the first time Tacitus' Agricola was printed in England, the press that issued it was in Hammersmith Terrace. This, it is needless to say, was many years before the present enterprise. The appreciation of the Agricola was immediate;—indeed, there was no dissenting voice when approval was expressed by collectors; and this same estimate has been awarded to the books that have followed. This first issue
of the Doves Press was in January, 1901, and was at
once succeeded by a tract on "The Book Beautiful," by
Cobden-Sanderson. Since then, but one book has been
printed,—a lecture on William Morris by Mackail,—but
a great enterprise is on foot in the printing of the Bible, to
be in five parts, issued at intervals of a year, the size,
small folio. From time to time, during the great under-
taking, other books will be issued, the next one to be
"The Paradise Lost," which is eagerly anticipated by the
subscribers. Before the Tacitus, a specimen page was
printed by Mr. Walker and Mr. Sanderson,—an extract
from a lecture by Cobden-Sanderson,—and it is counted a
rare possession by the friends to whom it was presented.

Mr. Sanderson's ideas upon the
ideally beautiful book are clearly set forth in his tract
which closes with this concise summing up: "Finally, if
the Book Beautiful may be beautiful by virtue of its writ-
ing, or printing, or illustration, it may also be beautiful,
be even more beautiful, by the union of all to the produc-
tion of one composite whole: the consummate Book Beau-
tiful. Here the idea to be communicated by the book
comes first, as the thing of supreme importance. Then
comes in attendance upon it, striving for the love of the
idea to be itself beautiful, the written or printed page, the
decorated or decorative letters, the pictures set amidst the
text, and, finally, the binding, holding the whole in its
strong grip and for very love again, itself becoming beau-
tiful because in company with the idea. This is the
supreme Book Beautiful, or Ideal Book, a dream, a sym-
bol of the infinitely beautiful in which all things of beauty
rest, and into which all things of beauty do ultimately
merge."

This is the man and this his
work, and both, I take it, are a stimulus to whosoever is
striving to sweeten his portion of labor by ennobling it
with that high ideal: "Not for self only, but for the hon-
our and reputation of the craft." To accept as a sacred
legacy the best traditions of the past, of that mediaeval past when the gilds created and upheld a craft ideal that made artists of artisans; to hold one's self above the degradation of art and life that comes of self-advertisement and of unworthy work; to learn thoroughly one's craft, and to learn also that to excel is better than to succeed,—here is writ down the doctrine that Cobden-Sanderson preaches and puts in practice. And, as we, in America progress in our craft ideals, we shall raise our standard and fight loyally for this noble conception of handicraft development! And so upon that stately theme: "The life so short, the craft so long to learn," shall be heard a sweet and rhythmic variation,—"Work, incessant work, and Beauty for our everlasting aim."