ON THE BINDING OF BOOKS

WITH the coming of the new century has come also a revival in the work of the artist-artisan: a Renascence of handicraft in all its various branches; a reaction from over production; a protest against cheap and time-saving labor, when such labor means products of which each part is inferior and the whole of no enduring value.

Foremost among the crafts in which art and manual skill are joined, we find book-binding springing into a new life of active interest. The bindings of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fashioned as they were by men whose labor was one of love, act as a standard of perfection toward which the binders of to-day, working under less happy conditions, are tending.

There is, however, one noticeable feature in the work of the present time which is worthy of consideration. It is the independence of thought; the originality of ideas in the decorations of the book, shown by the breaking away from the influence of historic ornament, and the working out, by the masters of design, of their own individual tastes and conceptions. The tools used for these designs are no longer exact copies of the old, but are cut after patterns drawn, either to decorate harmoniously some special book, or suggested by various forms in nature. Therefore, we have a certain freshness, a spontaneity in the ornamentations of the twentieth century books which promises as well for the art of the future, as the perfection of technical skill does for the craft that is to be.

Three years ago, one of the greatest binders of the present time, Mr. Cobden-Sanderson, said: "Women ought to do the best work in book-binding, for they possess all the essential qualifications of
success: patience for detail, lightness of touch, and dextrous fingers.” To one who has carefully followed the advance of women’s work in this direction, during the past few years, the truth of his words must show as an indisputable fact.

So widespread is the interest in this subject that the following brief outline of the processes which make up this exacting, but delightful craft, may, in a measure, satisfy the demand for more detailed information concerning it.

Hand book-binding does not require an unusual amount of physical strength. As long as the books to be bound are not of a size and weight too extreme for a woman to handle, there is nothing in any of the processes beyond the strength of the average worker. The exactness of detail demanded is sometimes a strain on the untrained, unskilled worker; but when once the lesson of accuracy is learned, each process fits into the next almost without an effort.

Beginning with a book already bound, the first thing to do in the rebinding of it is to take it apart; viz: To remove the covers, to cut the thread which binds the sections together, and carefully take off the glue which adheres to the backs of the leaves. The holes made in the sheets by the previous sawing and sewing must be mended with thin pieces of split paper pasted over them and rubbed down. In this way the patch becomes almost a part of the leaf and is scarcely discernible.

The sheets—once more in a solid condition—are refolded, so that the margins are even, and, were it possible to see through the book as a whole, the printing would show as a compact block of words, with perfectly matched margins fulfilling the requirements of right proportion which are: that the top is wider than the back, the front still wider, and the bottom the widest of all. Most books, however, are so wretchedly printed that this end is impossible to obtain, and the irregular
marginal spacing remains to vex the eye of a true lover of well-made books.

The public demand for artistic printing has, however, brought about a wonderful advance in all the details belonging to fine book-making. The influence of William Morris and the Kelmscott Press,—and later, the ideally printed and arranged books sent out from the Doves Press by Mr. Cobden-Sanderson and Mr. Emery Walker, have so worked upon the dead level of bad printing that the result has been one of the highest artistic excellence from many private presses over the world, and soon the binder, whose high aim is to aid in the production of "the ideal book," will find, close at hand, volumes which show the solution of the problem of making beautiful and legible the printed book.

Returning to the sheets, now mended and refolded, we find that new end papers are required. These are cut from paper chosen to match as nearly as possible the color and texture of the paper of the book. Then the sections are "knocked up," so that the tops and backs are even, and the book is put between boards and under heavy pressure over night, when it is ready to be "marked up for sewing."

The back of the book is first measured off into five parts called "panels," so that the bottom panel is larger than the top one, and each part is divided by a penciled line drawn across the back of the book. Through the top and bottom panels—a little more than half way above and below the middle of each, is sawn the kettle-stitch, about one-sixteenth of an inch in depth.

Flexible sewing, which enables the book to open easily, is done with silk on the ordinary sewing frame, of which an illustration is given in this article. The cords which are spaced to match exactly the penciled lines on the back of the book, are drawn taut on the frame, and the sections, one at a time, are laid by
them. The needle is first put through the kettle-stitch at the top from the outside in, then comes down through the lower side of the first cord, around which the silk is wound once, and the needle put back through the same hole again, coming out by the next cord below. When the bottom of the book is reached, another section is placed on top of the one just finished, and the sewing is continued back to the top again. It is necessary to make sure that each section is firmly fastened to the one below it; so, as the ends of the book are reached in turn, a knot is tied in the silk and sunk into the kettle-stitch, when it shows no projection beyond the even surface of the back. When all the sections have been sewed, the cords are cut, leaving them from three to four inches in length, and the book is taken from the frame.

The English hand-made mill board, used for the covers of books, is of the finest quality, firm and solid. Two pieces of this are cut approximating in size that of the book, and are “lined up” with one piece of paper on the outside, and two on the inside; the double thickness being used to counteract the drawing of the leather when the book is covered.

The book is now put into a hand-press, and a thin layer of glue is spread over the back and rubbed thoroughly in between the sections. When the glue is somewhat dry, backing-boards made of hard wood and beveled on one side to a sharp angle, are placed against the sides of the book, about one-sixteenth of an inch below the back, and the book is put into the press so that the tops of the boards are perfectly even. The back is then hammered down over the edges of the boards, making a sharp joint into which the mill-board covers will fit easily.

Great care must be taken in this process, as the perfection of a book depends largely upon the perfection of its back: the roundness of its curve or its even squareness. A wise binder will leave the choice
between the two, in a great measure, to the book itself, which will fall easily into the shape which most naturally belongs to it.

The next few processes may be passed over with brief mention. "Squaring the boards" is to cut them with the plough, and press to the exact dimensions required by the size of the book, so that they shall project beyond the top, bottom and foreedges sufficiently far to protect the book. The back edges of the boards are filed down to a bevel, so that the joints may lie smoothly over them, and the cords or "slips," as they are called, on which the book was sewed, are frayed out thin and soft. These slips, thoroughly wet with paste, are laced through two sets of holes, made about a quarter of an inch from the back edges of the boards. The ends which come out on the outside are cut off short, and the holes pounded flat both inside and out, thus making it impossible for the cords to slip.

The book is now in boards, and the glue which has served its purpose by holding the book in shape while it was backed, must now be removed, and the top, bottom and foredge cut so that a smooth surface is obtained, upon which the gilder may work at his craft, which is one entirely apart from that of the binder.

When the edges of a book are to be "rough gilt," the margins are not cut, and the sheets are sent to the gilder before they are sewed. He "knocks" them up even, and gilds each edge in turn, and the book, when sewed, has the rough, uneven look which is much in favor.

Wide margins are a delight to the book-lover's educated eye, and to cut one "down to the quick" is to commit the unpardonable sin. Perhaps no process among the many of which book-binding is made up, is more difficult than cutting the foreedge. To get the right curve and make it alike at top and bottom; to take off exactly the same amount of margin from both
sides, and not too much: in a word, to cut a perfect foredge, 
is a difficult task, and it requires a true eye, a steady hand, 
and much experience.

When the book is returned 
from the gilders, it is ready for the little bands which 
finish the tops and bottoms of well-made books. These 
are called “head bands” and are woven of silk over nar-
row pieces of parchment, held in place by the three or four 
stitches put through the back of the book, coming out be-
low the kettle-stitch, then up over the parchment. When 
the last stitch is taken, the ends of the silk are brought 
through on the back, frayed out soft, and pasted down. 
Over the top panel is glued a piece of hand-made paper, 
which keeps the headband firm and prevents the silk 
threads from showing under the leather. This process is 
known as “setting the headbands.”

The book must now be made 
ready for its leather cover, which has been previously cut 
about half an inch wider than the book on all sides, and 
the extra half inch pared down comparatively thin, 
although the leather should always be left as thick as is 
consistent with its proper application. The portion that 
covers the back of the book is also pared, but not so thin 
as the margins, and the leather is then ready for use.

After the bands on the back of 
the book have been straightened, so that they are at an 
equal distance one from the other, they are “nipped up” 
sharply with the band nippers, the back of the book is 
pressed down on the leather which has been thoroughly 
pasted, and the sides brought up to cover the sides of the 
boards.

It is essential that the leather be 
stretched as tightly as possible over the book, and, for this 
purpose, the book is placed on its foredges, and, with the 
thick of the hands, the cover is pressed down—away from 
the back, and the superfluous fullness which comes from the 
stretching is worked carefully over the edges of the boards.
At the top and bottom of the book the pared leather edge is folded down in under the back, leaving somewhat more than one-sixteenth of an inch to project beyond the headbands. This is worked into a flat cap which covers the headbands and protects them.

The book is now in leather, and, after a final “nipping up” of the bands on the back, and a judicious use of the band stick which leaves them sharp and square, the unnecessary amount of leather on the inside corners of the boards is trimmed off, one edge laid flat over another, and the book is put away, under a light weight, to dry.

We have now completed all the processes which make up the “forwarding” of a book. From the first, when the book is taken apart, until the time when it rests in its leather cover, it remains in the hands of the forwarder, to whom is due, in a far greater measure than is generally accorded, praise for the fine manual and technical skill, without which the “finisher” or decorator, would be unable to work to any advantage. A volume, well forwarded, without any ornamentation whatever, is a delight to the true book-lover, while poor forwarding will render the best finishing useless and valueless.

After “opening up” the covers of the book, the inside corners are mitred and worked down smooth and flat, and the leather which has been folded over the edges of the boards is cut to make an even margin on all the sides.

If levant morocco has been the leather used in covering the book, this is now “crushed,” which is done by putting each cover, one at a time and thoroughly moistened, between the crushing plates and under great pressure, where they are left for a few minutes, and when taken out, the leather shows a smooth and somewhat glossy surface, under which the fine tracery
of the grain is plainly visible. A leather with the grain crushed out of it loses much of its durability and attractiveness.

The book is now in the hands of the finishers, and is ready for its decoration, which will be done either in gold-tooling or "blind," the latter consisting of a design tooled on the leather without the use of gold.

The pattern is first worked out on a piece of hand-made paper the size of the book, with the tools selected for this purpose. They are blackened in a candle and their impression made on the paper where the design is finished as perfectly as possible in every detail. This is then pasted lightly on the side of the book, and the entire design pressed into the leather with the same tools heated, after which the paper is removed and the design gone over once more, in order to make it clear and distinct. The leather is then sponged with vinegar and water, and the design thoroughly penciled with glaze. A piece of cotton wool, into which has been rubbed palm oil, or grease of some kind, is passed over the design. When the glaze is dry, and with another piece of cotton wool, the gold leaf is lifted from the cushion upon which it lies, and is pressed over and into the pattern. Once more the design is gone over with the hot tools, and the loose gold rubbed off with a bit of soft rubber, leaving the design pressed into the leather, clear and brilliant.

This is the method of tooling in gold. Whether it is a success or not depends upon many conditions, and only years of practice, which give one a true eye and a sure touch, and experiences of every kind by which one learns to know one's tools and how to deal with all emergencies, can make a finisher worthy of the name: one whose work will be the final touch of completion to a book perfectly printed and forwarded.

There remains now but one more process before the book is finished. This is the
pasting back of the end papers, by which the fly leaves, folded back over the covers and cut to match perfectly the leather margins around the edges, are pasted down; making an attractive lining to the inside of the boards and hiding the rather unfinished look of the joints.

Here then, is our hand-bound book, the making of which has been described in a somewhat detailed fashion, though many important items which play a large part in the work, have been omitted. The love of a beautiful book is a thing apart from the love of literature and reading, and although there is an unregenerate public who care as much for what a book contains as they do for its covers, yet even this public must own that there is an indefinable charm in a perfect binding; one in which the visible and tangible beauties are supplemented by honest workmanship and honest material. And when to the charm of this perfected whole is added the joy of building up and completing each part of it, small wonder is it that the binder falls a victim to the fascinations of his craft and forgets to read the words of wisdom for which his hands have fashioned a fitting covering that will live in through the centuries.