

THE CRYING EVIL.

WHAT is the matter with the printing trade? Why is it that the time, industry and application expended in this line of business do not produce for those engaged in it financial results equally as profitable as these same factors do in other well established trades? That they do not is obvious. That they will not is certain, unless present conditions shall become radically changed.

There are two reasons for this: 1. Lack of intelligence and prudence in applying the elementary principles of business, especially in estimating the cost of production. For this ignorance the individual printer is absolutely responsible. 2. The uncalled for expansion of printing plants and the facility with which printers' supplies can be obtained in order to carry on a printing business by those having no financial standing. Printers are more than partly to blame for this second reason, because the remedy to stop it is in their own hands, if they only had the will and energy to apply it.

The ease with which presses may be obtained has brought into the ranks of master printers men who have neither business instincts nor training, and who have no more conception of the cost of production than they have of the binomial theorem. These men do not realize that before a profit is made a man must earn interest on his capital invested, set aside a sum equivalent to the yearly impairment of the value of his plant, pay the insurance on the same, as well as its operating expenses, and in addition draw a salary for his own services as manager commensurate with what such services would be worth in any first-class establishment. What remains after these items have been charged off is profit.

If we analyze the prices at which work is now done, it will be found that in the majority of cases they do not pay the cost of production, and it will be noted that it is not alone among the comparatively recent accessions to the ranks of master printers that this cost is under-estimated, but also among the older and more experienced members. Hence one of the reasons why printers do not reap the same harvest of wealth as business men of other trades is their failure to apply correctly the cardinal principles of trade. If this were the only evil afflicting the trade it could be easily remedied; but there is another and greater, which is the source of nearly all of the ills which now torment the printing community.

As a consequence of the facilities with which presses may be obtained—manufacturers putting them in on four and five years' time, secured by mortgage and notes payable monthly in amounts of \$25 or \$50—we see on all sides printing plants standing idle, others in a state of partial activity, a few working to their full capacity, and all around us printing concerns tumbling to the ground, their plant finding its way into the hands of the second-hand dealer at prices not one-tenth of its cost. Notwithstanding this state of affairs, press manufacturers seem to have no other end in view than to multiply pressrooms ad infinitum, for we find them setting up plants wheresoever and for whomsoever they can upon the flimsiest evidence that the business and financial resources of the purchaser warrant it; so that to day the press manufacturers of the United States, with only one exception, are practically competing with their customers—not openly, but under the firm name of every concern to which they sell presses on long time and easy payments, for which they discount paper, whose pay-roll and other expenses they meet when the exigency requires it. There is only one

term which expresses the morality of this policy. It is dishonesty. So long as it is permitted to continue it will remain a disturbing and destructive factor in the prosperity of the printing trade, and master printers will never be other than hewers of wood and drawers of water for those who furnish them with printers' supplies.

The conditions for profitable and healthy production are that capital, labor and raw material shall be in a state of equilibrium. When there is an excess of capital and deficiency of raw material, which is the same thing as saying that there is more machinery than there is work for it to do, we have the very worst possible consequences which can flow from a rupture of this equilibrium; and because this exact condition of affairs obtains among printers, the scramble for orders is so great that customers practically fix their own terms both as to price and time. The orders are given out as a favor. It is not a commercial transaction in the open market. Prompt payment is not insisted upon; it is not policy. The customer can go elsewhere and get all of the time he wants. His cheap work, payable with a four months' note, which in a majority of cases needs renewal either in part or in whole, and has often to be charged up to profit and loss, finds ready takers with printers falling over each other in their eagerness for the privilege of doing it. Presses, type, rollers, ink and other necessities can be had so readily for the asking, payment for them never being pressed to the point of a sheriff's levy, that these same printers will put in new outfits for the production of publications or other work which they get by cutting rates below the margin of living profit. Nor will they ask whether the customer has paid his former printer in full before placing his job elsewhere.

What is the remedy for this state of affairs—a condition of things which is the wonder and contempt of business men in other callings? The arch-violator in the printing trade of the ethics which should govern a dealer in this relations with his customer is the press manufacturer. It is he who must be throttled before any real improvement can take place. It is useless to try moral suasion with him. He will solemnly affirm that he never sells his presses on terms other than 25 per cent. down and the balance in three years at the longest, although at that very moment he is fitting up on five years' time a plant for your foreman or other employee, whose only capital is a few hundred dollars, inexperience and expectations.

The only remedy for this state of affair is a combination of the intelligent and solvent master printers with the ink man, type founder, roller maker and others with whom printers deal, with the end in view that credit shall be cut off the moment a man is unable to meet his obligations, unless he can show that his business has been conducted on business principles. If ink dealers and others would not furnish supplies unless promptly paid for, concerns starting with no capital except mortgaged presses and a month's rent paid would soon close up, instead of being left to operate as a disturbing and destructive element to the prosperity of the trade. There would soon be an end to the press question. A fair field and no favor would be the rule. The survival of the fittest would follow. Trade would be conducted on the basis that the rigid performance of contracts and the fulfillment of obligations are the only foundation of successful business.

With the printing business on this basis master printers would cease to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, and would soon become peers in wealth of their more fortunate brethren in other trades.—J. M. in American Bookmaker.