

OUR PRINTED TREASURES

BY VICTOR MORIN

"THEN you are one of those cranks who will pay \$25 for the possession of some little shabby, raggy, dirty-looking pamphlet hardly as large as my hand?"

Such was the appreciation of an intimate friend, to whom I was showing with pride my printed treasures!

"I am a worse fool than that, I replied; for I would be delighted to pay even a larger sum if you could procure me the "*Mandement*" issued by Monseigneur de Pontbriand, in 1759, and consisting of a single printed leaf."

"Your wife has my sympathy."

"Very kind of you. By the way, how much did you pay for that small, shiny, glassy ornament pinned on your scarf?"

"This, sir, is a genuine white diamond; it cost me \$200."

"It is hardly as large as the tip of my little finger's nail! You could have bought a good-sized decanter stopper for ten cents."

"What constitutes the value of diamonds, sir, is their scarcity; if they were so plentiful as to be dumped about, nobody would care for them."

"That is exactly what constitutes the value of my books, with this difference: that I do not boast of their possession to the extent of pinning them to my neckties. I love their old wrinkled faces too much to expose them in that way, and they return that love by telling me the sweet tales of the past, as good, old 'Uncle Landreville' used to tell us."

"Take, for instance, this little manuscript of the XVth century; it is

a 'Book of Hours,' written in Latin, and think of the enormous length of time that the Benedictine monk who scribbled it must have spent in painting these beautiful initial letters, whose gold is so well preserved; take a magnifying glass and examine these scrolls, flowers, and miniatures painted in different colours that adorn the text and the margins, and pretend, if you dare, that it is not marvellous."

And thus our evening began.

Let us take a specimen of early printing; it is dated MCCCCLXXII., as you may see at the end of the volume, that is to say, eighteen years only after the first known printed publication bearing a date. I apologise for not showing you a copy of Gutenberg's Bible, the first book known to have been printed with movable types, but as there are only eight copies on vellum and twenty-two on paper existing in the entire world, and the last sale of a copy yielded \$50,000 at the sale of the Hoe library in New York last April, I hope you will readily excuse me.* If you are well acquainted with Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan he might let you see his, but I doubt very much that you can borrow it, for it is a well-known fact that "a book lent is a book lost."

We call these books *incunabula*, from a Latin word meaning "cradle," as they were printed in the infancy of the printing art, and this generic term applies to all books published before the year 1500. All *incunabula* are rare and fetch big prices whenever

* Mr. Hoe had purchased this copy at the Asburnham sale in 1892 for \$20,000, and it is claimed that it had been stolen from the University of Mainz in 1793; two leaves thereof have been replaced by facsimile.