

CHAPTER VII.

GUILDS OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

The Michigan legislature during its 1901 session was deluged with requests for the establishment of numerous commissions to examine applicants for mechanical occupations, and issue licenses without which it would be unlawful to work. Doubtless the next legislature will see the attempt repeated, and the suggestion has been made that here is the beginning, over again, of the guild systems that once were all powerful in Europe, and for several hundred years had an important bearing on the industrial conditions of the masses. Just how much there is in this idea can only be told by a close examination of these guilds, but the task would be a formidable one and perhaps after all not be worth the time occupied. Yet the history of this eventful period in the industrial world is worth at this time a swift review.

It was in Germany that the guilds first gained a foothold. It is probable that before the Gauls swept down upon the Roman empire and devastated its cities, mechanical trades as such were unknown in that country, perhaps, with the single exception of casting and forging. Everything was hand work, and the handy man, who was a part of the baron's estate, turned his hand to whatever was needed. Such things as spinning and weaving, however, fell to the women, which were as much a part of their household duties as baking and mending and attending to the other wants of the male portion of the community.

The wars by which the Germans broke the power of the Roman empire left the German rulers with a taste for civilization which the Roman slaves they had

captured helped to satisfy. With the widening of their vision their wants multiplied, and the feudal lords collected around them, on their estates, various skilled artisans who were practically slaves, their personal necessities being looked after by the lords in return for their skill. Some of these estates were very large—so large, indeed, that they partook of the characteristics of a village, and the occupations became differentiated, each family following some particular calling. Thus the trades came into existence, and after a time the families took it upon themselves to insist upon their right alone to follow some particular calling. The more skilled were in all probability given a larger liberty than the common laborers, and so masters and workers began to appear.

By reason of natural advantages some communities grew faster than others, and in the course of time, owing to modifying causes which it is impossible to fully describe in a short article, there arose a class of free mechanics, as well as free cities. To these cities the bondsmen often escaped from their lords, and, according to the customs of the times, if they succeeded in evading them for a year and a day became free men. These free cities played a very important part in the rise of the guilds. They became so strong as to be able to demand and obtain a greater share of freedom than other places under the more strict control of the lords, and here the artists first organized themselves into what later became known as guilds.

Along about the twelfth century in only a few free cities and in only a few callings were there any guilds. But in the next century they became more numerous, and spread to continental and English cities. In some places they grew very fast and were all powerful. In others, owing to different political environments, they were not so able to shape events to their own advantage. Yet in spite of what would appear at this time as almost insurmountable difficulties, there had been formed at the close of what is known as the middle

ages a combination of the guilds in all the German cities, giving them all like social and industrial aims, and in many ways shaping their political aspirations.

These guilds did much more than simply look after their trade interests. They were powerful enough to make conditions for their political and religious superiors, and they were often entrusted with the carrying out of city ordinances. They issued regulations for the conduct of their particular trades, and they kept a close watch on the number in each occupation, so that it became extremely difficult to either leave one trade or get into another.

As a rule the guilds were divided into masters, journeymen and apprentices. The master had taken the "third degree," it might be said, the journeymen and apprentices having little to say, they being generally members of their master's household. As it was impossible to be a master without first having been a journeyman and an apprentice, so it was impossible to follow a business without belonging to the guild. But the rules governing the masters were very strict. Each one had to show that he not only had the requisite skill, but was also of good moral character. As is usual in such associations, the qualifications were gradually raised, so that in time it was impossible for most men to comply with them, thus giving those already in the business a monopoly of it.

There were in the guilds many rules in the interests of the consumers. For the manufacture and sale of bad or inferior wares the punishments prescribed were very severe, and there were even guild inspectors, whose duty it was to visit the shops and watch the various processes of manufacture, so that the dishonest master had a hard road to travel and the slovenly workman was liable to both a fine and bodily punishment. Undue delay with the work was also punishable, and the guild police watched over the conduct of its members toward the public.

Naturally the tendency of the system was toward

monopoly, and the guild members—the masters—saw to it that their pay was in proportion to their social position, while the income of the skilled workers were kept down as near as could be to that of laborers. The regulations at first did not favor the holders of large capital. There were many things thrust into their rules that favored the man of moderate means, with his journeymen and apprentices, but the whole tendency was the stifling of competition with one another, and the holding of the market in the hands of the guild alone.

In spite of the regulations regarding capital, it became necessary to increase the amount needed successfully to supply the market, and the serfs, fleeing from masters into the cities, gave the masters a plentiful supply of cheap labor. Then was introduced the system of compelling an apprentice to wander from place to place, and to pick up all the new wrinkles in his trade, before he was admitted to the position of a journeyman. Thus, unless one had considerable property to start with, or was the son of a master, or had married into the master's family, it was almost impossible to be anything but a laborer. The conditions had changed, so that instead of a master being the synonym of skill and worth, it simply meant that he had plenty of capital.

In the earlier history of the guild it was a direct benefit to the journeyman. He had a chance of becoming a master, and was under the best instruction to be had. But as large capital began to be necessary, his interests and those of the masters became separated, and the journeymen began to form separate unions of their own. They were compelled to fight organization with organization. The journeymen still had a regard for the guilds—so much so that they resorted to strikes to gain positions on the directorates of these associations. Thus there flourished side by side the guilds and the unions, one the society of the employers, the other the association of the workers.

Between the government and the guilds the laborers for a while had a hard time of it, but there came crises when the workers would wrest some advantage from one party or the other, and there was developed in the course of time a body of laws that in some measure protected the workers from both guild masters and the government itself. The rate of wages was fixed by government officers, and the guilds were supervised by government officials. Yet while one system was in operation in one place, another system would be in operation in another. In England the guilds never became the power they were on the continent. Often trade conditions were more powerful than even the government or the guilds, so that wages, and apprentices, and the hours of labor were regulated by the demands of the times rather than by legal restrictions. Finally freedom became the rule rather than the exception, and in proportion as restrictions were removed both masters and employes were benefited by the change.

It seems to me the lesson to be drawn from the history of the guilds is that both employers and employes have more to gain from freedom than from restrictions. While it is possible to benefit some certain industry by fostering and protecting it, this is generally done at the expense of other industries, the workers in which must have harder conditions in order that the favorites may wax fat and grow rich. It is impossible to make a passable argument for the regulation and supervision of the professions, where mentality has so much to do with proficiency, and where the public is not always able to protect itself. But in the manual trades it is different, and it will be found in the long run that the licensing system is simply an additional expense on the backs of laborers, without any corresponding benefits. The Detroit Trades Council was wise in instructing its corresponding secretary to inform the Wayne county members of the legislature that it disapproved of the effort to create a commission to license painters.