from
The Hand-printed Book

PRINTING types are representations in reverse of letters of the alphabet, cast in relief on the ends of rectangular lead-alloy stalks about 24 mm. high. In a printing house of the hand-press period alphabets of type were kept in cases, wooden trays divided into many separate compartments with a supply of letters of the same sort in each compartment. The workman who assembled the type for a book, the compositor, set up his manuscript (or printed) copy on his case and picked up the letters he wanted one by one with his right hand. He set them up in a small tray called a composing-stick held in his left hand, and he separated each word with spaces, short pieces of blank type. Each line, as it was completed, was made to come to an even margin by the alteration of the amount of space between the words, a process known as justification. When the composing-stick, which could accommodate several lines of type, was full he transferred its contents on to another tray called a galley, large enough to hold a whole page of type; and when he had set enough for a page he tied it round with string and put it aside, and proceeded to set the next one.

Books were not printed leaf by leaf, but on large sheets of paper with a number of pages on each side, which were later folded and cut at the edges to make a group, or section, of leaves; books usually consisted of several such sections sewn together at the back. So the compositor set enough pages for a whole sheet, and arranged those that were to go on each side of it in a special order, and fixed them in a pair of iron frames (chases), one for each side; this process was known as imposition, and the two chases with their pages of type locked in and ready for printing were called formes.

Trial prints (proofs) of the formes were then made, and compared with the copy from which they had been set. Errors were marked on the proof by a corrector (and sometimes by the author as well) and the marked proofs were used by the compositor as a guide in correcting the type.

Next the formes were placed in turn on the printing press, the hand-powered machine which was used to press sheets of paper on to the inked surface of the type-pages. It consisted of a wooden frame; a screw which, worked by a handle, forced a flat impression surface (the platen) down towards the type; and a movable carriage upon which type and paper were run in under the platen for printing, and then out again so that the type could be re-inked and a fresh piece of paper inserted. It was normally worked by two pressmen. One fitted a sheet of paper into a frame hinged to the back of the carriage, folded it down on to the type, ran the carriage under
contents, etc. (The preliminaries were not included in the main signature series of new books because it was usual to print them last; reprints, however, sometimes began the main signature series at the beginning of the preliminaries.) The printer may identify himself, and record the place and date of printing, on the title-page by means of an imprint, or at the end of the book in a colophon.

Next the paper should be considered. It will be hand-made, rough-surfaced compared with modern book papers, and off-white in colour. If it is held up to the light it will show as watermarks a pattern of broad-spaced lines (chain lines) crossed by lines that are close together (wire lines), and some of the leaves may also contain a watermarked picture or legend. The edges of the leaves may have been trimmed smooth by the binder, or left rough (uncut); it may even be that they are still joined together at the folded edges (unopened).

Finally, the binding. Working from the inside outwards, there will probably be one or two leaves of blank paper at each end of the book, which are of a different colour or texture from the printed leaves; these are the endpapers, which were added by the binder. There may also be strips of printed waste, or even of vellum cut from manuscripts, used by the binder in securing the spine of the volume. Next come the boards, the stiff upper and lower covers that were made in early days of wood, then of pasteboard and finally of millboard, with a paper paste-down inside, and covered on the outside with leather or rough paper. Various skins were used for leather bindings—calf, goat, and sheep were the commonest—and the surface was often decorated with heated brass tools, either using gold leaf (gilt) or plain (blind). In bindings of the later hand-press period the title of the book was tooled on the spine, though an early book may also have the title written on the fore-edge in ink—a relic of the time when it was placed on the shelf the other way round.

Next we consider the making of the hand-printed book in detail; and begin with Gutenberg's central invention: printing type.