The Good Clerk: He writeth a fair and swift hand, and is competently versed in the Four First Rules of Arithmetic, in the Rule of Three (which is sometimes called the Golden Rule) and in Practice. We mention these things, that we may leave no room for cavillers to say, that any thing essential hath been omitted in our definition; else, to speak the truth, these are but ordinary accomplishments, and such as every understrapper at a desk is commonly furnished with. The character we treat of soareth higher.

He is clean and neat in his person; not from a vain-glorious desire of setting himself forth to advantage in the eyes of the other sex (with which vanity too many of our young Sparks now-a-days are infected) but to do credit (as we say) to the office. For this reason he evermore taketh care that his desk or his books receive no soil; the which things he is commonly as solicitous to have fair and unblemished, as the owner of a fine horse is to have him appear in good keep.

He riseth early in the morning; not because early rising conduceth to health (though he doth not altogether despise that consideration) but chiefly to the intent that he may be first at the desk. There is his post, there he delighteth to be, unless when his meals, or necessity, calleth him away; which time he alway esteemeth as lost, and maketh as short as possible.

He is temperate in eating and drinking, that he may preserve a clear head and steady hand for his master’s service. He is also partly induced to this observation of the rules of temperance by his respect for religion and the laws of his country; which things (it may once for all be noted) do add special assistances to his actions, but do not and cannot furnish the main spring or motive thereto. His first ambition (as appeareth all along) is to be a good Clerk, his next a good Christian, a good Patriot, &c.

Correspondent to this, he keepeth himself honest, not for fear of the laws, but because he hath observed how unseemly an article it maketh in the Day Book, or Ledger, when a sum is set down lost or missing; it being his pride to make these books to agree, and to tally, the one side with the other, with a sort of architectural symmetry and correspondence.

He marrieth, or marrieth not, as best suiteth with his employer’s views. Some merchants do the rather desire to have married men in their Counting Houses, because they think the married state a pledge for their servants’ integrity, and an incitement to them to be industrious; and it was an observation of a late Lord Mayor of London, that the sons of Clerks do generally prove Clerks themselves, and that Merchants encouraging persons in their employ to marry, and to have families, was the best method of securing a breed of sober industrious young men attached to the mercantile interest. Be this as it may, such a character as we have been describing, will wait till
the pleasure of his employer is known on this point; and regulateth his desires by the
custom of the house or firm to which he belongeth.

He avoideth profane oaths and jesting, as so much time lost from his employ;
what spare time he hath for conversation, which in a Counting House such as we have
been supposing can be but small, he spendeth in putting seasonable questions to such
of his fellows (and sometimes respectfully to the master himself) who can give him
information respecting the price and quality of goods, the state of exchange, or the
latest improvements in book-keeping; thus making the motion of his lips, as well as of
his fingers, subservient to his master’s interest. Not that he refuseth a brisk saying, or
a cheerful sally of wit, when it comes unforced, is free of offence, and hath a
convenient brevity. For this reason he hath commonly some such phrase as this in his
mouth:

It’s a slovenly look
To blot your book.

Or,

Red ink for ornament, black for use,
The best of things are open to abuse.

So upon the eve of any great holyday, of which he keepeth one or two at least
every year, he will merrily say in the hearing of a confidential friend, but to none
other:

All work and no play
Makes Jack a dull boy.

Or,

A bow always bent must crack at last.

But then this must always be understood to be spoken confidentially, and, as we
say, under the rose.

Lastly, his dress is plain without singularity; with no other ornament than the
quill, which is the badge of his function, stuck under the dexter ear, and this rather for
convenience of having it at hand, when he hath been called away from his desk, and
expecteth to resume his seat there again shortly, than from any delight which he
taketh in foppery or ostentation. The colour of his clothes is generally noted to be
black rather than brown, brown rather than blue or green. His whole deportment is
staid, modest, and civil. His motto is Regularity.

This Character was sketched, in an interval of business, to divert some of the
melancholy hours of a Counting House. It is so little a creature of fancy, that it is
scarce any thing more than a recollection of some of those frugal and economical
maxims which, about the beginning of the last century (England’s meanest period),
were endeavoured to be inculcated and instilled into the breasts of the London
Apprentices,¹ by a class of instructors who might not inaptly be termed The Masters
of mean Morals. The astonishing narrowness and illiberality of the lessons contained in some of those books is inconceivable by those whose studies have not led them that way, and would almost induce one to subscribe to the hard-censure which Drayton has passed upon the mercantile spirit:

*The gripple merchant, born to be the curse
Of this brave Isle.*

I have now lying before me that curious book by Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*. The pompous detail, the studied analysis of every little mean art, every sneaking address, every trick and subterfuge (short of larceny) that is necessary to the tradesman’s occupation, with the hundreds of anecdotes, dialogues (in Defoe's liveliest manner) interspersed, all tending to the same amiable purpose, namely, the sacrificing of every honest emotion of the soul to what he calls the main chance, --if you read it in an ironical sense, and as a piece of covered satire, make it one of the most amusing books which Defoe ever writ, as much so as any of his best novels. It is difficult to say what his intention was in writing it. It is almost impossible to suppose him in earnest. Yet such is the bent of the book to narrow and to degrade the heart, that if such maxims were as catching and infectious as those of a licentious cast, which happily, is not the case, had I been living at that time, I certainly should have recommended to the Grand Jury of Middlesex, who presented the Fable of the Bees, to have presented this book of Defoe’s in preference, as of a far more vile and debasing tendency. I will give one specimen of his advice to the young Tradesman on the *Government of his Temper*. “The retail tradesman in especial, and even every tradesman in his station, must furnish himself with a competent stock of patience; I mean that sort of patience which is needful to bear with all sorts of impertinence, and the most provoking curiosity that it is impossible to imagine the buyers, even the worst of them, are or can be guilty of. *A tradesman behind his counter must have no flesh and blood about him, no passions, no resentment;* he must never be angry, no not so much as seem to be so, if a customer tumbles him five hundred pounds worth of goods, and scarce bids money for any thing; nay, though they really come to his shop with no intent to buy, as many do, only to see what is to be sold, and though he knows they cannot be better pleased, than they are, at some other shop where they intend to buy, ’tis all one, the tradesman must take it, he must place it to the account of his calling, that ’tis his business to be ill used and resent nothing; and so must answer as obligingly to those that give him an hour or two’s trouble and buy nothing, as he does to those who in half the time lay out ten or twenty pounds. The case is plain, and if some do give him trouble and do not buy, others make amends and do buy; and as for the trouble, ’tis the business of the shop.” Here follows a most admirable story of a mercer who, by his indefatigable meanness and more than Socratic patience under affronts, overcame and reconciled a lady, who upon the report of another lady that he had behaved saucily to some third lady, had determined to shun his shop, but by the over-persuasions of a fourth lady was induced to go to it; which she does, declaring before hand that she will buy nothing, but give him all the trouble she can. Her attack and his defence, her insolence and his persevering patience, are described in colours worthy of a Mandeville; but it is too long to recite. “The short inference from this long discourse (says he) is this, that here you see, and I could give you many examples like this, how and in what manner a shop-keeper is to behave himself in the way of his business; what impertinences, what taunts, flouts, and ridiculous things, he must bear in his trade, and must not shew the least return, or
the least signal of disgust: he must have no passions, no fire in his temper; he must be all soft and smooth; nay, if his real temper be naturally fiery and hot, he must shew none of it in his shop; he must be a perfect complete hypocrite if he will be a complete tradesman. It is true, natural tempers are not to be always counterfeited; the man cannot easily be a lamb in his shop, and a lion in himself; but let it be easy or hard, it must be done, and is done: there are men who have by custom and usage brought themselves to it, that nothing could be meeker and milder than they, when behind the counter, and yet nothing be more furious and raging in every other part of life; nay the provocations they have met with in their shops have so irritated their rage, that they would go up stairs from their shop, and fall into frenzies, and a kind of madness, and beat their heads against the wall, and perhaps mischief themselves, if not prevented, till the violence of it had gotten vent, and the passions abate and cool. I heard once of a shop-keeper that behaved himself thus to such an extreme, that when he was provoked by the impertinence of the customers, beyond what his temper could bear, he would go up stairs and beat his wife, kick his children about like dogs, and be as furious for two or three minutes, as a man chained down in Bedlam; and again, when that heat was over, would sit down and cry faster than the children he had abused; and after the fit, he would go down into the shop again, and be as humble, courteous, and as calm as any man whatever; so absolute a government of his passions had he in the shop and so little out of it; in the shop, a soul-less animal that would resent nothing; and in the family a madman: in the shop, meek like a lamb; but in the family, outrageous like a Lybian lion. The sum of the matter is, it is necessary for a tradesman to subject himself by all the ways possible to his business; his customers are to be his idols: so far as he may worship idols by allowance, he is to bow down to them, and worship them; at least he is not in any way to displease them, or shew any disgust or distaste whatsoever they may say or do; the bottom of all is, that he is intending to get money by them, and it is not for him that gets money to offer the least inconvenience to them by whom he gets it; he is to consider that, as Solomon says, the borrower is servant to the lender, so the seller is servant to the buyer.” ---What he says on the head of Pleasures and Recreations is not less amusing: “The tradesman’s pleasure should be in his business, his companions should be his books (he means his Ledger, Waste-book, &c.) and if he has a family, he makes his excursions up stairs and no further: none of my cautions aim at restraining a tradesman from diverting himself, as we call it, with his fireside, or keeping company with his wife and children.” ---Liberal allowance; nay, almost licentious and criminal indulgence! ---but it is time to dismiss this Philosopher of Meanness. More of this stuff would illiberalize the pages of the Reflector. Was the man in earnest, when he could bring such powers of description, and all the charms of natural eloquence, in commendation of the meanest, vilest, wretchedest degradations of the human character?---Or did he not rather laugh in his sleeve at the doctrines which he inculcated, and retorting upon the grave Citizens of London their own arts, palm upon them a sample of disguised Satire under the name of wholesome Instruction?

L.B.

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1 This term designated a larger class of young men than that to which it is now confined; it took in the articulated Clerks of Merchants and Bankers, the George Barnwells of the day.

2 As no qualification accompanies this maxim, it must be understood as the genuine sentiment of the Author!