

## TO ANY HOUSEHOLDER.

Some general instinct has remained with men, so that the consensus of nations has been in favour of light colours—light tones, rather, of whatever colours—for the outward colouring of towns; with some lamentable exceptions. As a rule it has been accident, and not design, that has darkened the exterior of modern houses; we have in London the darkest walls that ever rebuffed the sun. It is the water-colour of the rain, with soot in her colour-box, and no fresco of man's preparation, that has arrayed them so. The washing of the exterior of St. Paul's would have been a better enterprise than the applications we know of within. But, short of this supreme degree of darkness, London had some time ago the unlucky inspiration to paint its houses, all about the West, in oil-colour of dark red. It was the complaint of the silk-stockinged century that the pedestrian must needs fare ill in town, for the same mud made black splashes on the white stockings, and white splashes on the black. In like manner the London climate that painted the light stone black, made the dark red (a most intolerable colour) a shade or two lighter with dust in time; after which some of the painted houses were reloaded with the red, and the owners of others had misgivings, and went back to the sticky white of custom.

The sticky white is bad enough, but it is witness to the general acknowledgment of the prohibition of dark colour, whether on our luckless walls of paint, or on the flattered, fortunate plaster of the south that softly lodges the warming day, and has its colour broken by the weather as an artist chooses to let a tint be effaced or an outline lapse. There is no surer distinction between an old Italian coloured house and a new than this : the new is dark and the old is pale. True, the new is coloured ill as well as darkly, and the old coloured finely (always warmly with variants of rose and yellow) as well as lightly ; but the deep tone and the high are difference enough. The new man choses chocolate-colour and dark blue ; blue is his preference, and his blue jars with the sky.

The ancient man so used his beautiful distemper that it always looked not merely like a colour, but like a white coloured. The old under-white enlivens the thin and careless colour, somewhat like the soft flame of a lamp by day within a coloured paper. Moreover, the painter did his large and slight work on a simple wall, and not on the detail of cornice or portal. His colour took no account of the architectural forms ; it was arbitrary, a decoration that neither followed nor contradicted the builder's design, but stood independent thereof, merely taking the limit of the wall as the boundary of the painting. Here again all the right guidance has forsaken the man of to-day, who takes the mouldings of his house one by one, and gives them separate colours.

Needless to say, the original colour of the stone is better

even than this happy plaster, when there is real colour in stone, greyish, greenish, yellowish, the natural metallic stain. It is all light in tone; nothing darker, I suppose, than the brown of the stone that built the Florentine palaces, and all else lighter. The quarry yields light colours in all countries, colours as pale as dust, but brighter in their paleness, with the greater keenness and freshness of the rock. But the nobler old stone has a kind of life in its colour, as though you could see some little way into it, as into a fruit or a child's flesh. Such is the old marble, but not the new.

We may suppose that it was because they had new marble and not old, as we understand old age for marble, that the Greeks were obliged to colour their temples. It is with something like dismay that we look where Ruskin points, at "temples whose azure and purple once flamed above the Grecian promontories." Were they azure indeed? It seems impossible to set any blue against a sky. Nay, the sky forbids blue walls. Be they dark or light, they must either repeat the celestial blue, or vary from it with an almost sickening effect. Who has not seen a blue Italian sky, blue as it is at midsummer right down to the horizon, at odds with a great blue house, either a little greener or a little more violet than itself? Blue is a colour that cannot bear such risks. And "purple" sounds dark, as though Greece might have had to endure a distress of colour such as that which comes of the thin dark slates of purple where-with our suburbs are roofed. If one could be justified, by any trace of colour in any chink, in believing that transparent

yellow and red, lighted by the marble, glowed upon those seaward heights and capes towards the sunrise, and that the noble stone was not quenched by azure and purple paint! Why then there would not be this discomfort in our thoughts of Grecian colour. Of some among the boldly and delicately-tinted old palaces of the Genoese coast you can hardly tell, at the hour of sunset, whether their rose is their own or the light's.

To the Londoner eye of Charles Dickens there seems to have been something gaily incongruous in a fortress house with walls centuries old, and barred with ancient iron across the lower windows, yet thus softly coloured; he expressed the cheerful liberal ignorance in which he travelled by calling one such palace a pink gaol; but this old faint scarlet is a strong colour as well as a soft; and above all it is warm. A cold colour, and no other, suggests meanness, insecurity, and indignity. Colour the battering walls of Monte Cassino, now warm with the hue of their stone, a harsh blue, and their visible power is gone; whereas no daubing with orange or rose, however it might disfigure them, would make them seem to fail. But a dark colour of any kind, whether hot or cold, would make them visibly lose their profound hold on their rock, and their long, searching, and ancient union with their mountain.

This is what the householder should be persuaded to consider—the harshness and weakness of the dark colour, the harmony and strength of that which is rather a white warmly

coloured. Any householder is master of a landscape, and the view is at his mercy. Everything may be set out of order by the hard colour and the paper thinness of his slate roof. See the dull country that the Channel divides, half of it on the Dover heights, and half on those of the Pas de Calais. It is all one dull country. It has not the beauty of downs, nor of pasture; it has neither trees nor a beautiful bareness; it has no dignity in the outlines of the hills; but the French side has the beauty of roofs, and the English side makes the very sunshine unsightly with towns and villages covered with slate. All the French roofs are light in their tone, silver greys, greenish greys in the towns, a pure high scarlet in the solitary farms. This kind of French tile retrieves all the poor landscape of patchwork fields, green and dull in their unshadowed noons. The red is strong, simple, and abrupt, a vermilion filled with yellow.

It is true that old village tiles are fine, although they be dark, but only on condition that the cottages they roof should be whitewashed or of a cheerful brick. There is brick and brick, and all the very light colours are good. Light rosy bricks and very small, long in shape, seem the most charming, and these are rare. Next come the coarse but admirable light yellow-red. But any man who builds a house of dark bricks inclining to purple and pointed with slate colour, would have done better to erect something in stucco with pillars and a portico. All kinds of red villas continue to crowd upon our sight, and it is to be feared that many a purchaser is afraid

that he shall be reproached with the crudity or the brightness of his house, and so makes the lamentable choice of dark bricks. But there is nothing more unreasonable than this perpetual complaint of the newness of new houses. Let the owner of a new house have the courage of his date. Let him be persuaded that a new house ought to look new, that the Middle Ages in their day looked as new and tight as a box of well-made toys, that he is bound to pay the debt of his own time, and that the light of the sky asks for recognition, for signals and conspicuous replies from the dwellings of men.

Let the mere white-washer, too, whose work is generally beneficent, and who has received undeserved reproaches for a long time now, let him beware of chilling his pail with blue tinges. The coastguard huts on the Cornish coast would be the better if their common touch of blue were forbidden them.

All this advice is, I know well, inexpert, and backed by no learning. But it is urged with care and with comparison of countries by one who, in search of roofs and intent upon colours, has, in the remarkable words of Walt Whitman, "journeyed considerable."

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