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(On Valentia Island, County Kerry, Ireland, in 1852)

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“A few years ago, people who knew nothing of slate but as a material to roof houses with and do sums upon, were charmed to find it could be made to serve for so large a thing as a billiard-table. For billiard-tables there is nothing like slate, so perfectly level and smooth as it is. Then, fishmongers found there was nothing like slate for their slab (till they are rich enough to afford marble); and farmers’ wives discovered the same thing in regard to their dairies. Plumbers then began to declare that there was nothing like slate for cisterns and sinks; and builders, noticing this, tried slate for the pavement of wash-houses, pantries, and kitchens, and for cottage floors; and they have long declared that there is nothing like it; it is so clean, and dries so quickly. If so, thought the ornamental gardener, it must be the very thing for garden chairs, summer-houses, sun-dials, and tables in arbors; and it *is* the very thing. The stone mason was equally pleased with it for gravestones. ‘Then,’ said the builder again, when perplexed with complaints of a damp wall in an exposed situation, ‘why should not a wall be slated as well as a roof, if it wants it as much?’ So he tried; and in mountain districts, where one end of a house is exposed to beating rains, we see that end as scaly as fish – slated like its own roof. Thus it is with the small houses erected for business at the great slate quarry in Valencia, near Killarney, in Ireland; and the steps leading up to them are of slate; and the paths before the doors are paved with slate. We look upon the steam-engine; and we observe that the fittings of the engine-house are all of slate, so that no dust can lodge, and no damp can either.

“It is the quarry that we care most to see; and up to it we go, under the guidance of the over-looker, as soon as he has measured a block of slate with the marked rod he carries in his hand. He is a Welshman – from Bangor – the only person among the hundred and twenty about the works who is not Irish. Is it really so? We ask, when we are in the quarry. There is nobody there – not one man or boy among all those groups – who can properly be called ragged. Many have holes in their clothes; but all have clothes – real garments, instead of flapping tatters, hung on, nobody knows how. Another thing. These people are working steadily and gravely. If spoken to, they answer calmly, and with an air of independence – without vociferation, cant, flattery, or any kind of passion. Yet these people are all Irish; and they speak as they do because they *are* independent. They have good work; and they do their work well. They earn good wages; and they feel independent. These are the people who, in famine time, formed a middle class between the few proprietors in the island and the many paupers. The receivers of relief were two thousand two hundred. The proprietors and their families were two hundred. These work-people and their families were the remaining six hundred. They look like people who could hold their ground in a season of stress. This quarry was their anchorage.

“What a noble place it is! We climb till we find ourselves standing on the upper tramway, or the verge of a precipice of slate, with a rough wall of slate behind us – of all shades of gray, from white to black, contrasting well with the orange line of the iron mould caused by the drip from the roof upon the tramway; but the ceiling is the most prodigious thing about the place. It is, in sober truth, in its massiveness, grayness, smoothness, and vastness, somewhat like the granite roof in the great chamber of the great Pyramid. It takes away one’s breath and something of the same crushing feeling. And then, look at the groups clustered or half hidden in this enormous cavern. How small every one looks – the men with the borers and mallets, making holes for the

blasting; the men with the wedges and mallets, splitting off great blocks; some on shelves high up over head; some in cupboards far within; some in dark crevices in the mighty walls! Knock, knock, knock, go the mallets, with an echo following each knock – far, near incessant; and the echo of the drip heard through all – an echo for every splash.

“What are they doing below – those two men with the chain and hooks, that they can scarcely shift? They are fixing the hooks in crevices under that horizontal mass of slate. It rises, and as it rises they shift the hooks further into the cracks, till the block breaks off. When the hooks are in the middle of its weight it rises steadily – why and how? Look at that wagon on that tramway in the air overhead, the wagon way supported on those enormous beams, which are themselves upheld by clamps fixed in the slate walls of the cavern. On each side of that airy truck there is a stage, and in each stage is a man working a windlass, which turns a cog wheel, by which the truck is moved forward or backward. The chains and hooks which are raising the block hang down from this machinery; and as the men in the air work their cog wheel, the men on the ground stand away from under the block, and see it moved and deposited on the truck which is to convey it to the saw mill. That truck is on the tramway below, and a horse draws it to the saw mill, where the block will be raised again by more airy machinery, and placed in the right position for the saws. It weighs only about three tons. A single horse can draw a weight of five tons. The largest size is fifteen tons.

“We go down to the saw-mills – down, among, and round, hillocks of refuse. The noise in the mill is so horrid – in kind as well as degree – that we can not stay: but a glance is enough. The engine works the great saws, which here do not split the blocks, but square them, and smooth their sides and ends. The rest is done at the works below – at the port. The grating and rasping can be better conceived than described or endured. Above the blocks are suspended a sort of funnel, from which sand and water drip, in aid of the sawing process. We see this, glance at the curious picture of gray blocks – perpendicular saws, apparently moving up and down by their own will – and superintending men – and thinking how good a spectacle it would be, but for the tremendous noise, hasten away.

“On the road down hill is one of the broad-wheeled trucks, laden with an enormous block. We wonder how we shall pass it. We do so, by favor or a recess in the road, and jog on. On the left opens a charming narrow lane, overhung with ash and birch, gay with gorse, and bristling with brambles. We jump off our car, dismiss it, plunge down the lane, waste a vast deal of time in feasting on blackberries – the dessert to our biscuit-lunch – and at last sit down on some stones to say how good Valencia blackberries are, and how gaudy a Valencia lane is with rose and heather; and then we talk over, and fix in our memories what we have seen; and finally emerge from the bottom of the lane, explore the dairy and old house of the Knight of Kerry, and proceed on our way to the works at the port, heedless of how the time slips away while we gaze at the lighthouse, and the opposite shore, and far away over Dingle Bay, to the faint blue Dingle mountains. We do, however, at length reach the gate of the works.

“We miss the terrible noise of which we had been warned, and which had made itself heard in our inn. The works are, in fact, stopped for the repair of the machinery; and as they will not be going again while we are in Valencia, we can only look round and see what we can. We see on every hand noble slabs of slate, many feet long and broad, and from half-an-inch to three inches in thickness. Scores of them are standing on edge, leaning against each other, as if they could be lifted up, and carried away like sheets of pasteboard. By picking up a bit that has been cut off,

one finds the difference. It is very heavy; and this, I suppose, is the impediment to its adoption for many domestic purposes for which it is otherwise remarkably fit. One boy was at work on a great piece that we could make nothing of without explanation. It had large round holes cut out, as if with a monstrous cheese-taster, the slab being an inch thick; and the boy was cutting out pieces of what was left between the circles. It was for the ridge of a house; and in a moment we saw that the pattern was like that of many barge-boards of ornamented cottages. We found that the carving, turning, and ornamental manufacture of slate articles does not proceed far in Valencia, as the London houses do not like rivalry in that part of the business; but in the abode of the proprietor we saw, in an amusing way, what might be done by any one who has a mind to furnish his house with slate.

“On entering the garden door, we found, as might be expected, a pavement of slate, smooth and close-fitted, leading up to the house. The borders of the parterres were of upright slates; and there was a little grave-stone in the grass – in memory, doubtless, of some domestic pet – of the same material. The narrow paths between the vegetable beds were paved with slate, and reasonably, considering how wet the climate is, and how quickly slate dries. The sun dial and garden seats followed of course. Entering the house, we found, not only the pavement of the hall, but its lower panels of slate; and this reminded us of the excellence of granaries and barns which are flagged instead of boarded, and having a skirting-board of slate, which keeps out rats and mice altogether, supposing the door to be in good order. The saving in grain soon pays the difference between such a material and wood, which rats always can and do gnaw through, sooner or later.

“In the hall were an umbrella and hat stand, a slab, and a standard-lamp, all of slate. The weight is a favorable quality in the first and last of these articles; but, great as is the advantage of the lamp not being liable to be upset, the color of slate is too dark. Dark lamp-stands absorb too much light. In the dining-room was a very handsome round table of slate – variegated somewhat like marble, and delightfully clean-looking, smooth, and level. Its weight makes it all but immovable; and this may be an objection; but there is no doubt of its beauty – with its moulded rim, its well-turned stem, and finished pedestal. At the Knight of Kerry’s house we had seen a carved mantle-piece, with fluted pillars of slate; and here we saw other mantle-pieces, variously carved. The fenders were delightful; smoothly turned slopes, which invited the feet to rest and be warmed; simple, effectual, and so neat as to be really pretty. There was nothing that we liked so well as the fenders – unless it was the paper-weights, simply ornamented; or the book-shelves, perfectly plain, with their rounded edges, and their evident capacity to bear any weight. No folios, however ancient – no atlases, however magnificent, can bend a shelf of slate; and I very much doubt whether the spider can fasten her thread to its surface. No insect can penetrate it; and this indicates the value of slate furniture in India, and in the tropical Colonies, where ants hollow out every thing wooden, from the foundation of a house to its roof-tree. Hearth-stones of slate were a matter of course in this house; and we wished they had been so in some others, where there has been repeated danger of fire from sparks or hot ashes falling between the joints of the stones composing the hearth. Then, there were a music-stand, a what-not, a sofa-table – and probably many more articles in the bedrooms, kitchen, and offices, which we did not see.

It seems to us that we have heard so much of new applications of slate, within two or three years, as to show that the world is awakening to a sense of its uses; but such a display as this was a curious novelty. I believe it is only recently that it has been discovered how well this material bears turning and carving, and how fit it, therefore, is to be used in masses where solidity is

required, together with a capacity for ornament. If its use become as extensive as there is reason to suppose, the effect upon many a secluded mountain population will be great. In Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Wales, very important social changes must take place, in whole districts through an increased demand for slate – better wrought out of the mountain than at present. As for Valencia, not only is its slate far finer, and more skillfully obtained, than any we have seen elsewhere; but the workmen are a body of light to the region they inhabit. They marry, when they can, English girls, or girls who have the English training in household ways. Their dwellings are already superior to those of their neighbors; and, if the works increase, through an increased demand, so as to become the absorbing interest of Valencia, the island may become a school of social progress to the whole west of Ireland, where such a school is sorely needed.”

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Photographs and history of Valentia Island, County Kerry, Ireland, is available in the “Valentia Island” section of Wikipedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentia_Island