

The Landscape Chamber

Sarah Orne Jewett

Table of Contents

<u>The Landscape Chamber</u>	1
<u>Sarah Orne Jewett</u>	1
<u>Section 1</u>	1
<u>Section 2</u>	4
<u>Section 3</u>	7

The Landscape Chamber

Sarah Orne Jewett

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [Section 1](#)
- [Section 2](#)
- [Section 3](#)

Section 1

I was tired of ordinary journeys, which involved either the loneliness and discomfort of fashionable hotels, or the responsibilities of a guest in busy houses. One is always doing the same things over and over; I now promised myself that I would go in search of new people and new scenes, until I was again ready to turn with delight to my familiar occupations. So I mounted my horse one morning, without any definite plan of my journey, and rode eastward, with a business-like haversack strapped behind the saddle. I only wished that the first day's well-known length of road had been already put behind me. One drawback to a woman's enjoyment of an excursion of this sort is the fact that when she is out of the saddle she is uncomfortably dressed. But I compromised matters as nearly as possible by wearing a short corduroy habit, light both in color and weight, and putting a linen blouse and belt into my pack, to replace the stiff habit-waist. The wallet on the saddle held a flat drinking-cup, a bit of chocolate, and a few hard biscuit, for provision against improbable famine. Autumn would be the best time for such a journey, if the evenings need not be so often spent in stuffy rooms, with kerosene lamps for company. This was early summer, and I had long days in which to amuse myself. For a book I took a much-beloved small copy of *The Sentimental Journey*.

After I left my own neighborhood I was looked at with curious eyes. I was now and then recognized with surprise, but oftener viewed with suspicion, as if I were a criminal escaping from justice. The keepers of the two country taverns at which I rested questioned me outright, until I gave a reassuring account of myself. Through the middle of the day I let the horse stand unsaddled in the shade, by the roadside, while I sat near, leaning against the broad trunk of a tree, and ate a bit of luncheon, or slept, or read my book, or strolled away up the shore of a brook or to the top of a hill. On the third or fourth day I left my faithful companion so long that he grew restless, and at last fearful, as petted horses will. The silence and strangeness of the place and my disappearance frightened him. When I returned, I found that the poor creature had twisted a forward shoe so badly that I could neither pull it off altogether, nor mount again. There was nothing to do but to lead him slowly to some farmhouse, where I could get assistance; so on went the saddle, and away we plodded together sadly along the dusty road. The horse looked at me with anxious eyes, and was made fretful by the difficulty of the projecting shoe. I should have provided myself with some pincers, he seemed to tell me; the foot was aching from the blows I had given it with a rough-edged stone in trying to draw the tenacious nails. It was all my fault, having left him in such a desolate place, fastened to a tree that grew against a creviced ledge of rock. We were both a little sulky at this mischance so early in the careless expedition.

The sea was near, and the salt-marshes penetrated deep into the country, like abandoned beds of rivers winding inland among the pine woods and upland pastures. The higher land separated these marshes, like a succession of

The Landscape Chamber

low promontories.

The sea was near, and the salt-marshes penetrated deep into the country, like abandoned beds of rivers winding inland among the pine woods and upland pastures. The higher land separated these marshes, like a succession of low promontories trending seaward, and the road climbed and crossed over from one low valley to another. There had been no houses for some distance behind us. I knew that there was a village with a good tavern a few miles ahead; so far, indeed, that I had planned to reach it at sundown. I began to feel very tired, and the horse tossed his head more and more impatiently, resenting my anxious, dragging hold upon the rein close at his mouth. There was nobody to be seen; the hills became steeper, the sunshaded strips of marshland seemed hotter, and I determined at last to wait until some traveler appeared who could give us assistance. Perhaps the blacksmith himself might be out adventuring that afternoon.

We halted by some pasture bars in the shade of an old cider-apple tree, and I threw the bridle over a leaning post in the unsteady fence; and there the horse and I waited, and looked at each other reproachfully. It was some time before I discovered a large rusty nail lying in the short grass, within reach of my hand. My pocket-knife was already broken, because I had tried to use it for a lever, and this was just what I needed. I quickly caught up the disabled hoof again, and with careful prying the tough nails loosed their hold at last, and the bent shoe dropped with a clink. The horse gave a whinny of evident relief, and seemed to respect me again, and I was ready to mount at once; in an instant life lost its depressing aspect. "Keep your feet out of clefts now!" I said joyfully, with a friendly stroke of the good creature's neck and tangled mane, and a moment afterward we were back in the stony road. Alas, the foot had been strained, and our long halt had only stiffened it. I was mounted on three feet, not four. Nothing was to be done but to go forward, step by step, to the far-away village, or to any friendly shelter this side of it.

The afternoon was waning: sometimes I rode, sometimes I walked; those three miles of marsh and hill seemed interminable. At last I saw the chimneys of a house; the horse raised his head high, and whinnied loud and long.

These chimneys were most reassuring; being high and square, they evidently belonged to a comfortable house of the last century, and my spirits rose again. The country was still abandoned by human beings. I had seen no one since noon, but the road was little used, and was undoubtedly no longer the main highway of that region. I wondered what impression I should make in such a migratory guise. The saddle and its well-stuffed haversack and my own dustiness amused me unexpectedly, and I understood for the first time that the rest and change of this solitary excursion had done me much good. I was no longer listless and uninterested, but ready for adventure of any sort. It had been a most sensible thing to go wandering alone through the country. But now the horse's ankle was swollen. I grew anxious again, and looked at the chimneys with relief. Presently I came in sight of the house.

It was disappointing, for the first view gave an impression of dreariness and neglect. The barn and straggling row of out-buildings were leaning this way and that, mossy and warped; the blinds of the once handsome house were broken; and everything gave evidence of unhindered decline from thrift and competence to poverty and ruin. A good colonial mansion, I thought, abandoned by its former owners, and tenanted now by some shiftless outcasts of society, who ask but meagre comfort, and are indifferent to the decencies of life. Full of uncertainty, I went along the approach to the barn, noticing, however, with surprise that the front yard had been carefully tended; there were some dark crimson roses in bloom, and broken lines of box which had been carefully clipped at no remote period. Nobody was in sight. I went to the side door, and gave a knock with my whip at arm's length, for the horse was eager to reach the uninviting, hungry-looking stable. Some time elapsed before my repeated summons were answered; then the door slowly opened, and a woman just this side of middle age stood before me, waiting to hear my errand. She had a pathetic look, as if she were forced by circumstances to deny all requests, however her own impulses might lead her toward generosity. I was instantly drawn toward her, in warm sympathy: the blooming garden was hers; she was very poor. I would plead my real fatigue, and ask for a night's lodging, and perhaps my holiday might also give her pleasure. But a curious hardness drew her face into forbidding angles, even as her sweet and womanly eyes watched me with surprised curiosity.

"I should be very sorry to take the horse any further to-day," said I, after stating my appealing case. "I will give you as little trouble as possible." At this moment the haggard face of an elderly man peered at me over her shoulder.

The Landscape Chamber

"We don't keep tavern, young lady," he announced in an unexpectedly musical, low voice, "but since your horse is" —

"I am ready to pay any price you ask," I interrupted impatiently; and he gave me an eager look, and then came to the outer step, ignoring both his daughter and me, as he touched the horse with real kindness. "'Tis a pretty creature!" he said admiringly, and at once stooped stiffly down to examine the lifted foot. I explained the accident in detail, grateful for such intelligent sympathy, while he stroked the lamed ankle.

"There's no damage done," he assured me presently, looking up with transient self-forgetfulness. "A common liniment will do; there's a bottle in the house, but 't will cost you something," and his face clouded again.

I turned to the daughter, who gave me a strange, appealing look. Her eyes begged me entreatingly, "Give him his own way;" her firm-set mouth signified her assent to the idea that I had no right to demand favors.

"Do what you think best," I said, "at your own price. I shall be very grateful to you;" and having come to this understanding, the father and I unbuckled the saddle-girths, while the daughter stood watching us. The old man led the limping horse across the green dooryard to a weather-beaten stable, talking to him in a low tone. The creature responded by unusual docility. I even saw him, though usually so suspicious and fretful with strangers, put his head close to his leader's shoulder with most affectionate impulse. I gathered up my belongings, — my needments, as somebody had called them, after Spenser's fashion, in the morning, — and entered the door.

Section 2

Along the by-ways and in the elder villages of New England stand many houses like this, from which life and vigor have long been ebbing, until all instincts of self-preservation seem to have departed. The commonplace, thrifty fears of increasing damage from cracks, or leaks, or falling plaster no longer give alarm; as age creeps through the human frame, pilfering the pleasures of enthusiasm and activity one by one, so it is with a decaying house. The old man's shrewd eyes alone seemed unrelated to his surroundings. What sorrow or misfortune had made him accept them? I wondered, as I stared about the once elegant room. Nothing new had been brought to it for years; the leather-bound books in the carved secretary might have belonged to his grandfather. The floor was carpetless and deeply worn; the faded paper on the walls and the very paint looked as old as he. The pinch of poverty could nowhere be much sharper than here, but the exquisite cleanness and order of the place made one ignore the thought of poverty in its common aspect, for all its offensive and repulsive qualities were absent. I sat down in a straight-backed mahogany chair, feeling much relieved, and not without gratitude for this unexpected episode. The hostess left me alone. I was glad enough to have the long day shortened a little, and to find myself in this lonely, mysterious house. I was pleased by the thought that the price of my food and lodging would be very welcome, and I grew more and more eager to know the history of my new friends. I have never been conscious of a more intense desire to make myself harmonious, or to win some degree of confidence. And when the silence of the old sitting-room grew tiresome I went out to the stable, whence my host had not returned, and was quite reconciled at finding that I was looked upon by him, at least, merely as an appendage to my four-footed companion.

The old man regarded me with indifference, and went on patiently rubbing the horse's foot. I was silent after having offered to take his place and being contemptuously refused. His clothes were curiously old and worn, patched bravely, and an embroidery of careful darns. The color of them was not unlike the dusty gray of long-neglected cobwebs. There was unusual delicacy and refinement in his hands and feet, and I was sure, from the first glance at my new friends and the first sound of their voices, that they had inherited gentle blood, though such an inheritance had evidently come through more than one generation to whom had been sternly denied any approach to luxury or social advantage. I have often noticed in country villages the descendants of those clergymen who once ruled New England sternly and well, and while they may be men and women of undeveloped minds, without authority and even of humble circumstances, they yet bear the mark of authority and dignified behavior, like silver and copper coins with a guinea stamp.

I was more and more oppressed by the haunting sense of poverty, for I saw proofs everywhere that the inhabitants of the old house made no practical protest against its slow decay. The woman's share of work was performed best, as one might see by their mended clothes; but the master's domain was hopelessly untended, not only as to the rickety buildings, but in the land itself, which was growing wild bushes at its own sweet will, except for a rough patch near the house, which had been dug and planted that year. Was this brooding, sad old man discouraged by life? Did he say to himself, "Let things be; they will last my time"? I found myself watching his face with intense interest, but I did not dare to ask questions, and only stood and watched him. The sad mouth of the man might have been a den from which stinging wild words could assail a curious stranger. I was afraid of what he might say to me, yet I longed to hear him speak.

The summer day was at its close. I moved a step forward, to get away from the level sunbeams which dazzled my eyes, and ventured to give some news about myself and the lonely journey that had hitherto brought me such pleasure. The listener looked up with sincere attention, which made me grow enthusiastic at once, and I described my various experiences, and especially the amusing comments which I had heard upon my mode of traveling about the country. It amazed me to think that I was within sixty miles of home and yet a foreigner. At last I asked a trivial question about some portion of the scenery, which was pleasantly answered. The old man's voice was singularly sweet and varied in tone, the exact reverse of a New Englander's voice of the usual rural quality. I was half startled at seeing my horse quickly turn his head to look at the speaker, as if with human curiosity equal to my own. I felt a thrill of vague apprehension. I was unwise enough for a moment to dread taking up my residence in this dilapidated mansion; a creeping horror, such as one feels at hearing footsteps behind one in a dark, strange

The Landscape Chamber

place, made me foolishly uneasy, as I stood looking off across the level country through the golden light of closing day, beyond the marshes and beyond the sand dunes to the sea. What had happened to this uncanny father and daughter, that they were contented to let the chances of life slip by untouched, while their ancestral dwelling gradually made itself ready to tumble about their ears?

I could see that the horse's foot was much better already, and I watched with great sympathy the way that the compassionate, patient fingers touched and soothed the bruised joint. But I saw no sign of any other horse in the stable, save a few stiffened, dusty bits of harness hung on a high peg in the wall; and as I looked at these, and renewed my wonder that such a person should have no horse of his own, especially at such a distance from any town, the old man spoke again.

"Look up at that bit of dry skin over the harnesses," said he. "That was the pretty ear of the best mare that ever trod these roads. She leaped the stableyard gate one day, caught her foot in a rope, and broke her neck. She was like those swallows one minute, and the next she was a heap of worthless flesh, a heavy thing to be dragged away and hidden in the earth." His voice failed him suddenly, poor old fellow; it told me that he had suffered cruel sorrows that made this loss of a pleasure almost unbearable. So far life had often brought me successes, and I had gained a habit of expecting my own enterprises to be lucky. I stood appalled before this glimpse of a defeated life and its long procession of griefs.

Presently the master of the place went into the house, and returned with a worn wooden trencher of bits of hard bread and some meal. The hungry creature in the stall whinnied eagerly, and nestled about, while our host ascended the broken stairway to the stable loft; and after waiting for some time, I heard the rustle of an armful of hay which came down into the crib. I looked that way, and was not surprised, when I noticed the faded, dusty dryness of it, to see my dainty beast sniff at it with disappointment, and look round at me inquiringly. The old man joined me, and I protested hastily against such treatment of my favorite.

"Cannot we get somebody to bring some better hay, and oats enough for a day or two, if you are unprovided?" I asked.

"The creature must not be overfed," he said grudgingly, with a new harsh tone. "You will heat the foot, and we must keep the beast quiet. Anything will serve to-night; to-morrow he can graze all day, and keep the foot moving gently; next day, he can be shod."

"But there is danger in giving him green grass," I suggested. "This is too rich pasturage about the house; surely you know enough of horses to have learned that. He will not be fit to ride, either. If I meant to give him a month of pasture, it would be another thing. No; send somebody for at least an armful of decent hay. I will go myself. Are there houses near?"

The old man had gone into the stall, and was feeding the hungry horse from the trencher. I was startled to see him snatch back two or three bits of the bread and put them into his pocket, as if, with all his fondness for the horse and a sincere desire to make him comfortable, he nevertheless grudged the food. I became convinced that the poor soul was a miser. He certainly played the character exactly, and yet there was an appealing look in his eyes, which, joined with the tones of his voice, made me sure that he fought against his tyrannous inclinations. I wondered irreverently if I should be killed that night, after the fashion of traditional tavern robberies, for the sake of what might be found in my pocket, and sauntered toward the house. It remained to be proved whether the daughter was the victim or the upholder of her father's traits.

I had the satisfaction of finding that the daughter was just arranging a table for supper. As I passed the wide-open door of a closet, I was tempted to look in by the faint ancient odor of plum cakes and Madeira wine which escaped; but I never saw a barer closet than that, or one that looked hungrier in spite of the lingering fragrance of hospitality. It gave me a strange feeling as if there were a still subtler link with the past, and some invisible presence would have me contrast the house's former opulence with its present meagreness. When we sat at table I was not surprised to find, on a cloth that was half covered with darns and patches, some pieces of superb old English silver and delicate china. The fare was less than frugal, but was nobly eked out with a dish of field strawberries, as if kind Nature had come to the rescue. Cream there was none, nor sugar, nor even tea or butter. I had an aching sense of the poverty of the family, and curiously questioned in my own mind how far they found it possible to live without money. There was some thin, crisp corn bread, which had been baked in the morning, or whenever there had last been a fire. It was very good. Perhaps my entertainers even gathered their own salt from the tide-pools, to flavor the native corn. Look where I would, I could see nothing for which money had been

The Landscape Chamber

lately spent; here was a thing to be wondered at in this lavish America, and I pushed back my chair at last, while I was still half hungry, from a dread that there would be nothing for breakfast unless I saved it then.

The father and daughter were very agreeable, I must confess; they talked with me about my journey now, and my plans, as if they were my personal friends, and the strange meal was full of pleasure, after all. What had brought a lady and gentleman to such a pass?

After supper the daughter disappeared for a time, busy with her household cares; a little later the father went out of the stable and across the fields, before I could call to him or offer my company. He walked with a light, quick step, like an Indian, as if he were used to taking journeys on foot. I found myself uncommonly tired; the half illness which had fettered me seemed to have returned, after the unusual anxiety and weariness of the afternoon, and I longed to go to bed and to sleep. I had been interested in much that my entertainers had said of the early history of that part of the country, and while we sat at the table I had begun to look forward to a later evening talk, but almost before daylight faded I was forced to go to bed.

My hostess led me through a handsome empty hall, of the wide and stately colonial type, to a comfortable upper room, furnished with a gloomy-looking curtained bedstead and heavy mahogany furniture of the best old fashion. It seemed as if the room had been long unused, and also as if the lower part of the house were in a much worse state of disrepair and threadbareness than this. But the two large windows stood open to the fading sky and sweet country air, and I bade my hostess good-night cheerfully. She lingered to see if I were comfortable; it was the first time I had been alone with her. "You can see that we are not used to entertaining company," she whispered, reddening with sensitiveness, and smiling apologetically. "Father has kept everybody away for so many years that I rarely have any one to speak to, or anything to do but to keep the poor old house clean. Father means to be kind but he" — and she turned away, much embarrassed by my questioning look — "he has a monomania; he inherits it from my grandfather. He fears want, yet seems to have no power to provide against it. We are poor, God knows, yet we have resources; or had them once," she added, sorrowfully. "It was the horse that made him willing to let you in. He loves horses, yet he has long denied himself even that useful pleasure."

"But surely he ought to be controlled," I urged. "You must have suffered."

"I know all that you are eager to say," she replied; "but I promised my dear mother to be patient with him. It will not be long now; he is very feeble. I have a horror that this habit of parsimony has rooted itself too deeply in my own life to be shaken off. You will hear mockery enough of us among the farmers."

"You surely have friends?"

"Only at a distance," said she, sadly. "I fear that they are no longer friends. I have you," she added, turning to me quickly, in a pathetic way that made me wish to put my arms about her. "I have been longing for a friendly face. Yes, it is very hard," and she drearily went out of the door, and left me alone with the dim light of the sky outside, the gloomy shadows of the room within. I tried to fancy some clue to the weird misery of this poverty-stricken household, as I lay down; but I fell asleep very soon, and slept all night, without even a dream.

Section 3

Daylight brought a new eagerness and a less anxious curiosity about my strange entertainers. I opened my eyes in broad sunlight. I was puzzled by the unfamiliar India-cotton hangings of the great bedstead; then I caught sight of my dusty habit and my riding-cap and whip, near by. I instantly resolved that even if I found my horse in the restored condition there was every reason to expect, I would make this house my headquarters for as long time as its owners would keep me, or I could content myself. I would try to show some sisterly affection to the fast-aging woman who was so enslaved by her father's delusions. I had come out in search of adventure; it would be a difficult task to match my present surroundings.

I listened for the sound of footsteps or voices from below, but it was still very early, and I looked about the long-untenanted room with deliberate interest and scrutiny. As I changed my position a little, I caught sight of a curious old painting on the large oval panel above the empty fireplace. The colors were dull, the drawing was quaintly conventional, and I recognized the subject, though not immediately. The artist had pleased himself by making a study of the old house itself, and later, as I dressed, I examined it in detail.

From the costume of the figures I saw that it must have been painted more than a hundred years before. In astonishing contrast to the present condition, it appeared like a satirical show of the house's possibilities. Servants held capering steeds for gay gentlemen to mount, and ladies walked together in fine attire down the garden alleys of the picture. Once a hospitable family had kept open house behind the row of elms, and once the follies of the world and the fashions of brilliant, luxurious life had belonged to this decayed and withering household. I wondered if the miserly old man, to whose strangely sweet and compelling voice I had listened the evening before, could bear to look at this picture, and acknowledge his unlikeness to his prosperous ancestors.

It was well for me that the keeping of hens is comparatively inexpensive, for I breakfasted comfortably, and was never so heartily rejoiced at the vicinity of a chicken-coop. My proposal to stay with my new friends for a few days met with no opposition from either host or hostess; and again, as I looked in their pinched and hopeless faces, I planned some secret excuses for making a feast of my own, or a happy holiday. The fields and hills of the old picture were still unchanged, but what ebb and flow of purpose, of comfort, of social condition, had enriched and impoverished the household!

"Where did she sleep?" asked the master of the house, suddenly, with a strange, suspicious glance at his daughter.

"In the landscape chamber," the pale woman said, without lifting her eyes to his, though she grew whiter and thinner as she spoke.

I looked at him instinctively to see his eyes blaze with anger, and expected a torrent of abuse, because he was manifestly so much displeased. Nothing was said, but with a feeling of uneasiness we left the table, and I went out to the kitchen with my new friend.

"There is no reason why I should not have put you into the landscape chamber," she told me instantly. "It is a fancy of my father's. I had aired that room thoroughly in the morning, but the front guest-chambers have been closed for some time."

"Who painted the strange old picture?" I asked. "Some member of the family?" But I was answered that it was the work of a Frenchman, who was captured in war-time, and paroled under the care of her great-grandfather.

"He must have had a gay visit," I suggested, "if he has left a faithful picture of the house as he saw it."

"The house used to be like that always," was the faint response, and the speaker hesitated, as if she considered whether we did right in discussing her family history; then she turned quickly away. "I believe we are under some miserable doom. Father will be sure to tell you so, at any rate," she added, with an effort at gayety. "He thinks that he fights against it, but I always say that he was cowardly, and accepted it," and she sighed wearily.

I looked at her with fresh surprise and conjecture. I forgot for the time this great, busy, prosaic world of which we were both a part, and I felt as if I had lost a score of years for each day's journey, and had gone backward into the past. New England holds many strange households within its borders, but there could not be another which approached this. The very air of the house oppressed me, and I strayed out into the beautiful wide fields, and found my spirits rising again at once. I turned at last to look back at the group of gray buildings in the great level

The Landscape Chamber

landscape. They were such a small excrescence upon the fruitful earth, those roofs which covered awful stagnation and hindrance of the processes of spiritual life and growth. What power could burst the bonds, and liberate the man and woman I had left, from a mysterious tyranny?

I was bareheaded, and the morning grew very hot. I went toward a group of oaks, to shelter myself in the shade, and found the ancient burying-place of the family. There were numerous graves, but none were marked except the oldest. There was a group of rude but stately stones, with fine inscriptions, yet curiously enough the latest of them bore a date soon after the beginning of the century; all the more recent graves were low and unmarked in any way. The family fortunes had waned long ago, perhaps; I might be wronging the present master of the house, though I remembered what had been said to me of some mysterious doom. I could not help thinking of my new acquaintances most intently, and was startled at the sound of footsteps. I saw the old man, muttering and bending his head until he could see nothing but the ground at his feet. He only picked up some dead branches that had fallen from the oaks, and went away toward the house again; always looking at the ground, as if he expected to find something. It came to my mind with greater distinctness that he was a miser, poor only by his own choice; and I indignantly resolved to urge the daughter to break her allegiance to him for a time, to claim her own and set herself free. But the miser had no cheerful sense of his hoards, no certainty of a munificence which was more to him than any use of it; there was a look upon his face as of a preying conscience within, a gnawing reptile of shame and guilt and evil memory. Had he sacrificed all sweet family life and natural ties to his craving for wealth? I watched the bent and hungry figure out of sight.

When I reached the house again, I went through the open door of the wide hall, and gained my landscape chamber without being seen by any one. I was tired and dizzy with the unusual heat, and, quickly drawing the close shutters, I threw myself on the bed to rest. All the light in the room came from the shaded hall; there was absolute silence, except some far-off country sounds of birds high in air or lowing cattle. The house itself was still as a tomb.

I went to sleep, but it was not sound sleep. I grew heavy and tired with my own weight. I heard soft footsteps coming up the stairs; some one stopped as if to listen outside the wide-open door; then the gray, shadowy figure of the old man stood just within, and his eyes peered about the room. I was behind the curtains; one had been unfastened, and hid me from his sight at first, but as he took one step forward he saw me, lying asleep. He bent over me, until I felt my hair stir with his breath, but I did not move. His presence was not frightful, strange to say; I felt as if I were only dreaming. I opened my eyes a little as he went away, apparently satisfied, to the closet door, and unlocked it, starting and looking at me anxiously as the key turned in the lock. Then he disappeared. I had a childish desire to shut him in and keep him prisoner, for reasons that were not clear to myself. Whether he only wished to satisfy himself that a concealed treasure was untouched I do not know, but presently he came out, and carefully locked the door again, and went away on tiptoe. I fancied that he lingered before the picture above the chimney-place, and wondered if his conscience pricked him as he acknowledged the contrast between past and present. Then he groaned softly, and went out. My heart began to beat very fast. I sprang up and tried to lock the door into the hall. My enthusiasm about spending a few days in this dismal place suddenly faded out, for I could not bear the thought that the weird old man was free to prowl about at his own sad will. But as I stood undecided in my doorway, a song sparrow perched on the sill of the wide hall window, and sang his heart away in a most cheerful strain. There was something so touching and appealing in the contrast that I felt a wistful clutch at my throat, while I smiled, as one does when tears are coming like April showers to one's eyes. Without thinking what I did, I went back into the room, threw open the shutters again, and stood before the dingy landscape. How the horses pranced up to the door, and how fine the ladies were in their hoop-petticoats and high feathers! I imagined that the picture had been a constant rebuke to the dwellers in the house through their wasting lives and failing fortunes. In every human heart, said I, there is such a picture of the ideal life, — the high possibilities and successes, the semblance of duties done and of spiritual achievements. It forever measures our incompleteness by its exact likeness to that completeness which we would not fight hard enough to win. But as I looked up at the panel, the old landscape became dim, and I knew that it was only because a cloud was hiding the sun; yet I was glad to leave the shadows of the room, and to hurry down the wide stairway.

I saw nothing of the daughter, though I searched for her, and even called her, through the house. When I reached the side door I found her father crossing the yard, and wondered if he would show any consciousness of our having so lately met. He stood still and waited for me, and my first impulse made me ask, "What did you want

The Landscape Chamber

just now? I was not asleep when you were in my room; you frightened me."

"Do not be afraid," he answered, with unexpected patience. "You must take us as you find us. It is a sad old house, but you need not be afraid; we are much more afraid of you!" and we both smiled amiably.

"But your daughter," said I; "I have been asking her to come away for a time, to visit me or take a journey. It would be much better for you both; and she needs a change and a little pleasuring. God does not mean that we shall make our lives utterly dismal." I was afraid, and did not dare to meet the old man's eyes after I had spoken so plainly.

He laughed coldly, and glanced at his mended coat-sleeve.

"What do you know about happiness? You are too young," said he. "At your age I thought I knew the world. What difference would it make if the old place here were like the gay ghost of it in our landscape chamber? The farmers would be jealous of our luxury; reverence and respect would be turned into idle curiosity. This quiet countryside would be disgraced by such a flaunting folly. No, we are very comfortable, my child and I; you must not try to disturb us," and he looked at me with a kind of piteous suspicion.

There was a large block of stone under one of the old elms, which had been placed there long ago for a mounting-block, and here we seated ourselves. As I looked at my companion, he seemed like a man unused to the broad light of day. I fancied that a prisoner, who had just ended many years of dungeon life, would wear exactly such a face. And yet it was such a lovely summer day of a joyful world, if he would only take or make it so. Alas, he matched the winter weather better. I could not bear to think of the old house in winter!

"Who is to blame?" said the old man suddenly, in a strange, eager tone which startled me, and made me shrink away from him. "We are in bondage. I am a generous-hearted man, yet I can never follow my own impulses. I longed to give what I had with a lavish hand, when I was younger, but some power restrained me. I have grown old while I tried to fight it down. We are all in prison while we are left in this world, — that is the truth; in prison for another man's sin." For the first time I understood that he was not altogether sane. "If there were an ancestor of mine, as I have been taught, who sold his soul for wealth, the awful price was this, that he lost the power of using it. He was greedy for gain, and now we cannot part with what we have, even for common comfort. His children and his children's children have suffered for his fault. He has lived in the hell of watching us from generation to generation; seeing our happiness spoiled, our power of usefulness wither away. Wherever he is, he knows that we are all misers because he was miserly, and stamped us with the mark of his own base spirit. He has watched his descendants shrivel up and disappear one by one, poor and ungenerous in God's world. We fight against the doom of it, but it wins at last. Thank God, there are only two of us left."

I had sprung to my feet, frightened by the old man's vehemence. I could not help saying that God meant us to be free and unconquered by any evil power; the gray, strange face looked blindly at me, and I could not speak again. This was the secret of the doom, then. I left the old man crying, while I hurried away to find the mistress of the desolate house, and appealed to her to let me send a companion for her father, who could properly care for him here, or persuade him to go away to some place where he would forget his misery among new interests and scenes. She herself must not be worn out by his malady of unreason.

But I only dashed my sympathy against the rock of her hopelessness. "I think we shall all disappear some night in a winter storm, and the world will be rid of us, — father and the house and I, all three," she said, with bitter dreariness, and turned to her work again.

Early that evening, I said good-by to my new friends, for the horse was sound, and not to be satisfied by such meagre stabling. Our host seemed sorry to let the creature go, and stood stroking him affectionately after I had mounted. "How the famous old breed holds its own!" he said wistfully. "I should like to have seen the ancestor who has stamped his likeness so unmistakably on all his descendants."

"But among human beings," I could not resist saying, "there is freedom, thank God! We can climb to our best possibilities, and outgrow our worst inheritance."

"No, no!" cried the old man bitterly. "You are young and fortunate. Forget us, if you can; we are of those who have no hope in a world of fate."

I looked back again and again, as I rode away. It was a house of shadows and strange moods, and I was glad when I had fairly left it behind me; yet I look forward to seeing it again. I well remember the old man's clutch at the money I offered him, and the kiss and the bunch of roses that the daughter gave to me. But late that evening I was not sorry to shut myself into my prosaic room at a village hotel, rather than try to sleep again behind the

The Landscape Chamber

faded figured curtains of the landscape chamber.