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Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with an Introduction by Nancy Rohr

Charles Lanman

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With an Introduction by Nancy Rohr

If Anne Newport Royall was an attentive visitor to Huntsville, Charles Lanman was equally worldly and observant. His descriptions of the town and its citizens are insightful and complimentary.

Born in Monroe, Michigan, June 14, 1819, Lanman was sent back east at the age of ten to be educated. At 16 he worked for an East India mercantile house in New York City. While there he began exploring sites in the eastern part of the country that were not on the usual tourist path. His approaches were often unique; he was among the first to use the canoe as a recreational boat. To describe the sites he visited, Lanman painted sketches that were published in the United States and in England.

For a period of time he was an editor and publisher of newspapers in New York and the midwest. He continued exploring the countryside on foot, on horseback, and by canoe from the Bay of Fundy to the states on the Gulf of Mexico. His magazine articles about these trips were extremely popular, and were published successfully as books. In 1849 he became librarian to the War Department in Washington. A year later he became private secretary to Daniel Webster and published an anecdotal book about Webster. His next success came as he first published the well known Dictionary of the United States Congress, eventually taken over by the federal government.

Lanman continued to publish, taking time for exploring trips when he could. This multi-talented gentleman spent his last years in Georgetown, writing and painting. All together he published 32 volumes before his death on March 4, 1895.

Julia Pamela Pleasants, the poet that he quotes in this essay, was the daughter of James Jay Pleasants and Emily Julia Bibb Pleasants, a granddaughter of Thomas Bibb. Born in Huntsville in 1827, she was left an orphan when both parents died within a month of each other in 1849. With many beaux available, at the age of 27, she married David Creswell. They eventually moved to Shreveport, Louisiana. She published four volumes of poetry and two novels.

Huntsville

With the town of Huntsville, Ala., I am quite delighted, and do not wonder at its reputation. It occupies an elevated position, and is hemmed in with high hills, from the summit of which it presents an uncommonly picturesque appearance. The surrounding country is very fertile and highly cultivated, and the cotton interest has made it a place of considerable business. It claims a population of some twenty-five hundred souls, contains many handsome residences, with several neat churches, and is the seat of two institutions of learning, the Bascom Institute, and a Presbyterian College. It is supplied with the best of water by a mammoth spring which gushes from a rock in the centre of the town, and this, with the array of from one to two hundred saddle-horses which are daily collected around the county court-house square, ought to be mentioned as among the features of the place. But, on becoming acquainted with the people of Huntsville, (as it has been my privilege,) the stranger will find that they are the leading attraction. Owing to its pleasant and healthful location a large number of the more influential families of the South have congregated here; so that the society is all that could be expected from a happy union of intelligence, refinement, and wealth. Several of the fortunes which are enjoyed here were acquired in New Orleans; and, judging from

Lanman and Rohr: Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with a the intimate intercourse existing between that city and this inland village, it might almost be imagined that the latter was the country cousin of the former. To this condition of things, therefore, may be attributed the fact that knowledge of the world and expansive ideas in regard to life are more a matter of course in this somewhat isolated place than in other Southern towns of the same size. To give an idea of the wealth of Huntsville it is only necessary to state that the aggregate fortunes of twenty well-known families, are said to amount to six millions of dollars. Some of the private hot-houses and gardens in the place would delight the most fastidious of horticulturists, albeit the mercury has fallen sixty-one degrees in the last ten hours. The lover of art will be surprised to find here a private gallery of paintings and statuary which is said to have cost seventy-five thousand dollars, and contains some productions of decided merit, which is a remark that many private galleries in the country cannot bear.

On the score of hospitality, the people of Huntsville are unsurpassed by any of their neighbors, if indeed they do not excel very many of them. I would not make any unjust comparisons, but I must judge from personal experience. I entered Huntsville a stranger, and took lodgings at its best hotel, which was comfortable, but by no means luxurious. Its reputation was not good, however, and this circumstance, in spite of my earnest excuses, caused me to become the guest of one of the leading families of the town, under whose roof I have been made to feel perfectly at home, and where I have been treated more like an old friend than a stranger. This is the way they treat pilgrims in Alabama, and no wonder, therefore, that the interpretation of its beautiful name should be Here we rest; and now I remember, moreover, that Huntsville lies within the bend of that portion of the Tennessee river which caused it to receive the

name of Spoon river, thereby appropriately suggesting the idea that the good things of life are here most abundant. And thus much in a general way of this pleasant Southern town.

And now for a sable incident or two, which I think worth mentioning on account of the morals they inculcate. On Sunday last, in one of the leading churches of the town, and by an eloquent man, was preached a funeral sermon on the body of a negro child. There was a large attendance of rich planters and their wives, and much feeling was manifested by all present. The father of this child, though a slave, is an expert blacksmith, and earns annually one thousand dollars, three hundred of which are given to his master, while the remaining seven hundred are retained by the "down-trodden" victim for his own use and benefit. It would seem, therefore, that to hear the clanking of this man's chain the practical abolitionist would have to enter his workshop. I have also witnessed since my arrival here a public sale of slave property. The number of persons disposed of was some half-dozen; they belonged to the estate of a deceased planter, and were sold by his administrator for the benefit of his orphan children. The conditions of the sale were that no family-ties should be broken, and that deeds would be given only to those purchasers who would pledge themselves to be perfectly kind and humane. The prices ranged from one thousand to sixteen hundred dollars, and as much hilarity prevailed among the darkies when assembled in front of the courthouse as if they were about to enter upon a frolic; and I was forcibly impressed with the manner in which the more high-priced jeered those of the party who had only brought a thousand dollars, calling them "cheap thousand dollar niggers." The effect of the sale upon the orphan children, however, was sad in the extreme, and I heard one of them exclaim, a young lady, that she was altogether "the greatest sufferer there." The same roof had

Lanman and Rohr: Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with a sheltered them in other days, and I verily believe that if there had not been some legal impediment the orphans would have sacrificed their whole property before parting from their well-tried and devoted servants.

The vicinity of Huntsville, although rich in many more important things, is especially rich in odd characters, and one of my particular favorites of this genus is old John Evans, who must now make his bow to the public. He was born a vagabond, bred an overseer, and leads the life of a wayward and wandering hunter and fisherman. He is a middle-aged man, lank and brawny, amiable to the last degree, and a natural naturalist. It is said that he has made and been worth his fifty thousand dollars, but he sold himself to the Mephistopheles of Monongahela, and now lives in a log-cabin on the banks of the Tennessee, the poorest and most independent man in his county. He has been a close observer of the creatures with which he chiefly spends his time, and his conversations upon their habits are always interesting. I give you a few items that I remember. He had killed a rattlesnake measuring six feet in length, in whose stomach was found, nearly in a perfect state, a young fox; and he has seen a water moccasin snake seize a small fish and hold it above the surface of the water, as if conscious of the fact that this was the quickest way to deprive it of life; and he also asserted, what seemed to me incredible, that the eyes of the common buzzard, after being priced to blindness by a sharp knife, possessed the power of completely recovering themselves in the course of fifteen minutes, provided the head of the bird was placed under its wing during the time. In regard to this last assertion I proclaimed myself quite skeptical, and yet John EVans will declare upon oath that he tried the experiment on five different birds with complete success, and I may add that one of the most intelligent and honorable gentlemen in Huntsville testifies

to the truthfulness of Evans's strange story. From time immemorial old women have declared that down, under a buzzard's wing was good for sore eyes, and if the marvellous story cannot be traced to this medicinal one, then must we see in the latter a proof of the former. But as John Evans's explorations in natural history are usually more amusing than useful, so are his hunting expeditions more frequent than profitable. He objects not to trapping an occasional beaver for the sake of the novelty, or to killing a deer, a few turkeys, or a score of ducks for the market, but he is a far happier man when he is lying in wait for the varmints of the country, as he calls them, such as the fox and the coon, the hedge-hog and the skunk, the mink and the corn-stealing crow. And in more than the figurative sense is our vagabond hunter a marked man, for the first glance of his countenance never fails to convince the stranger that he carries a double-face, since the right side has been blackened with bruises and rendered almost fleshless by the continual kickings of his rusty old gun, which he declares shoots to perfection when about half filled with powder and shot. So industrious is he withal that he has been known to spend an entire day in wading a muddy pond for a few ducks, and devoting a whole night to revenging himself upon some unfortunate dog that may have chanced to annoy him on a quiet road when he is wont to travel. In spite of all this, however, he has a lazy look and a languid air; and yet the most unaccountable of all his eccentric and contradictory traits is an overweening passion for wild horses. He dotes upon them, spends all his spare cash for good specimens, and the more vicious they are the better, and whether drunk or sober he is a superior horseman. Indeed, so many have been his narrow escapes from being killed that he is known the country round as "the man who never lets go;" and the last two stories related of him, by way of proving his chief characteristic, are as follows: On one

Lanman and Rohr: Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with a occasion, while journeying to a neighboring town, he chanced to kill a rattlesnake, and, desiring to preserve its oil for the cure of rheumatism, he cut off the serpent's head and deposited the body for safe keeping under a bush until his return home. He was riding at the time a very wild but partially blind horse, and, when the moment arrived for picking up his plunder, he seized the snake in his left hand, and, holding it aloft, continued his journey. The horse became frightened, and with a loud snort started to run away. The tail of the snake occasionally touched his flank and increased his fear; he became unmanageable and flew like the wind, until the people of Huntsville were alarmed by the sudden appearance in their midst of the steed and rider, around whose head the snake was flapping at a terrible rate, and whose only exclamation was a grunt of defiance, while the reptile was perfectly secure in his convulsive grasp. On another occasion our friend John promised an acquaintance a mess of pickerel, (here erroneously called salmon,) and started upon a fishing expedition. He was successful, got drunk, and, mounting his horse, started for home. On his way thither he rolled from his saddle, caught his foot in a stirrup, and in this manner by the gentle and sagacious horse was dragged along the road, holding on like grim death to his string of fish, and muttering to himself "this is a devilish rough road, any how." As fortune would have it, the very man for whom the fish were intended happened to meet the fisherman in his unhappy plight, and rushing to his assistance asked him if he was hurt; whereupon John Evans exclaimed: "I told you so, Billy, by gum; I've caught the two biggest salmon you ever did see." Many a black bottle has our hero emptied since that time, and many times has he been thought a dying man; but he is still "holding on" to life, and is still pointed at as "the man who never lets go."

Since my arrival in Huntsville, about ten days ago, the rains have been unusually heavy, and the streams of the country are at present much higher than ever before known. All travelling by water as well as by land has been suspended, and the Tennessee river, which at Whitesburg (the port of Huntsville,) is usually half a mile wide, is at present nearly five miles in width, and a three-story house, standing on a high bank, where I took breakfast on my arrival, is only now discoverable by its chimneys. I revisited the place for the purpose of sketching it, and the man who drove me down descanted upon it as a "one-horse concern," which I found to be a sneering epithet indiscriminately applied here to a poor town, a small steamboat, or a mean man. At one of the only two cabins belonging to Whitesburg which were not submerged I witnessed a young and delicate white girl chopping up a huge log of wood, and was told that, as her father was seldom at home and her mother was sick, she was in the habit of doing all the wood-cutting for the family. This picture reminded me of the back settlements of New England, where were born some of the more notorious political declaimers against the slavery of the black race.

But of all the impressions made upon me during my visit here, the most agreeable by far was made by Miss Julia Pleasants, the young and accomplished poetess. She is as great a favorite in the entire South as she is in this her native town, and is destined to be wherever the thoughts of genius can be appreciated. She commenced her literary career by contributing an occasional poem to the Louisville Journal, whose distinguished editor, George D. Prentice, Esq., has done more by kindly words than any other man, to foster female talent and encourage the female writers of this country. Born and bred in the lap of luxury, it is a wonder that the intellect of Miss Pleasants should have been so well disciplined as its

Lanman and Rohr: Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with a fruits, in spite of their unripeness, would lead one to suppose it had been; but death having recently made her an orphan, and taken from her side a much loved sister, she has been schooled in the ways of Providence as well as of the world, and now, when she strikes the lyre, it responds chiefly in those tones which find a resting-place in her sorrowing heart. That she has written and published too much is, perhaps, a matter of course. Her numerous admirers have been gratified, undoubtedly, but she has not been benefited thereby, any more than was Mrs. Hemans by her poetic repetitions. Like Mrs. Hemans, however, Miss Pleasants is a thinker and a writer of a high order, and her mission upon earth cannot but be both beautiful and profitable. As she has not yet published a volume of her poems, it is hardly proper that I should view her with a "critic's eye;" but the carefully considered compliment that I would pay to her genius is abundantly fortified by a manuscript volume of her better productions, which it has been my privilege to read and to enjoy. The most ambitious and most faultless poem which she has yet written, is called "The Viewless Bride," and is a superb personification of the New Year. It is allied in spirit to Bryant's "Thanatopsis," quite as original in conception, and nearly as melodious and hymn-like a composition. And another poem, entitled "The Lost," written in memory of her parents, can hardly be read without tearful emotions. That I am permitted to append these two poems to this letter, is simply an evidence of my importunity and the lady's kindness.

The Viewless Bride.

Sad, sad and low the Old Year's dying sigh,
Steals up the cloudy ramparts of the sky;
And gaily to the midnight's silvery chime,
The fair Young Year trips through the wintry rime
The beautiful Young Year! all tears, all smiles,
Emerging from the future's shadowy aisles,
Her snowy garments flutter far and wide,

And vaporous mystery veils the Viewless Bride.
The night-winds warble as she wanders by;
The night-clouds flee the empyrean laguli,
And merry stars come, singing joyous rhyme,
To grace her bridal with primordial Time.
With time, that grand and high mysteriarch,
Who leads his rites through regions dim and dark,
And wins the vestal years, a lovely race,
To bloom and perish in his wild embrace.
And yet how bright and careless glistens now,
The cloudless radiance of the New Year's brow;
The gentlest twilight-fall not yet hath shed
Its dewy darkness on her youthful head;
Swift o'er the glacial sward she gaily flies,
And carols to the blue columnar skies.
She recks not of the cycles gone before,
That died like surges on a storm-beat shore,
But light and airy is her printless tread,
And joyous o'er the slumbers of the dead.

Ah! who can tell through what a wildering way--
Through what a wild her onward track shall stray?
How often will she view the night-stars pale,
And lordly forests totter to the gale,
The morning sky with weighty tempests bowed,
And tears descend from evening's lilac cloud;
What wrecks shall strew the stretching ocean sands,
When glory leads to strife the clashing bands;
What cities fall to rise not up again,
When earthquakes desolate the peopled plain.
Alas! it needs no prophet's trump to peal
The woes her future wanderings shall reveal;
We see her marching now--a victress chief,
In all the dark emblazonry of grief;
Around the bright Olympian sun she drags
A ruined star, and waves her flamy flags,
A Myriad fluttering pulses cease to beat,
And crimson heart-drops stain her snowy feet.
Far down the star-lit vistas of the sky
Her pean wild-like muffled thunders fly--
They fly, alas! the saddest, saddest song,
In all the chorus of the astral throng.

The fair Young Year! her dowry is the tears
That stricken mortals fling on silent biers;

Her bridal garlands are the sorrowing rue,
The funeral cypress and the tristful yew.
She cannot shun the woe her touch imparts,
For each fresh footstep crushes human hearts;
And still where'er she turns through boundless
space,

Death, death she finds the heir-loom of her race.
The bright New Year! What dark and fearful change
Her step will bring upon the mountain range--
Beside the silver stream--out on the sea,
And where the desert girds the lone palm-tree;
To many a tropic clime--where icebergs roll
In silent grandeur round the frigid pole--
Where lava-tongues fork through the crater's mouth,
And swift Siroccos sweep the lovely South--
Where iron battle leads his crested van--
Wherever roams the restless race of man.
Ah! yes, though now she carols but of glee,
To many a one her silvery song will be,
The honey-birds, that wiles with tuneful air,
The Eastern traveller to the wild beast's lair.

Such sorrows are, and oh! far more beside,
The pale attendants of the youthful bride;
And yet sometimes she circles, like the larks,
With music through the dawning grey and dark,
The fair young Year! pale trembling thing! She
brings

Some blessings dripping from her dewy wings;
Not altogether is she crowned with tears,
But here and there a sunshine streak appears.
And who could not forgive a double face,
When half is wreathed with smiles and gilt with
grace?

Aye! though she only boasts of terrene birth,
She'll make for some an Eden of this earth;
We see her now with angel wings unfurled.
In pitying guardage of a shipwrecked world.
She calls her children out by bright blue
streams,

And gives to truthful spirits pleasant dreams.
She loads with song the night-bird's silver tongue,
And nurtures tulips for the gay and young;
While round the good man's wrinkling brow she
weaves,

With tender hand, the snowy almond leaves.
She thrills with joy the artist's raptured soul,
When crimson twilights round the welkin roll;
And cheers the swain with thoughts of future ease,
When Autumn's fruitage bends the orchard trees.
To one she gives a proud and lustral name,
And circles genius with the wreath of fame,
Then where the bright hymeneal altar glows,
She crowns another with a blushing rose.
And some shall find a bright and shining hope,
That long had mocked the costliest telescope,
When they shall learn the joy of sins forgiven,
And tread the straight but starry path to Heaven.

The Lost.

How kind they are, to come in sleep,
When earth is robed in silence deep,
And soothe, with pressure soft and mild,
The weary temples of their child.

How good, to leave unswept the wires
Of gold, which grace their angel lyres;
And breathe such loving days divine,
Across a heart so sad as mine.

It is no dream, I see them now--
Above my couch they gently bow,
As oft in childhood's morn they came
When illness touched my tender frame.

They look not old, (their veins are rife
With gushings from the fount of life,)
But young, as when they joined their lot
In love, which death divided not.

Their locks are thrown, as if to hide
The scarce-seen wings on either side,
For fear I might not recognize
Such shining wanderers from the skies.

Lanman and Rohr: Lanam's View of huntsville in the 1850's by Charles Lanman with a
But memory never could forget
Those white-arched feet so firmly set,
Which seemed to childhood's wondering mien,
Fit only for a fairy queen.

'Tis she! beneath its dark-brown hair
No other brow could shine so fair,
And with the soul's pure radiance grace
That soft divinely Grecian face.

That chiseled head--that clear profile--
That living intellectual smile--
Those soft blue eyes, that voice, which stirs
My very soul--they all are hers.

"My child"--what tones of love profound,
(Earth hath not now so sweet a sound;)
"Let grief no more corrode thy breast,
And break thy sainted mother's rest.

"My stricken darling, mourn her not,
But be contented with thy lot;
Let all thy life be good and pure,
And teach thy spirit to endure."

And who is he, with visage bland
Who holds in his her slender hand?
A mien so free--a heart so true,
This clouded earth sure never knew.

He speaks, and to each tender tone,
My soul returns impassioned moan;
While shades of bright but fleeting years
Are mirrored darkly in my tears.

"My daughter"--oh! that thrilling word--
My heart is quivering like a bird
Through which, while breasting stormy skies,
The archer's gilded arrow flies.

"My daughter"--ah! a thick'ning flight
Of sighs break through the bars of night,
And all its flood of tear-drops roll
Upheaving from my billowy soul.

They stain the loving hands, which now
Would calm the aching of my brow,
While fast their heavenly features grow
O'ershadowed with terrestrial woe.

They cannot brook so sad a sight,
On wavering wings, they take their flight;
They seek again the Eternal Throne,
And I am left alone,--alone.

* * * * *

¹Lanman, Charles. Adventures in the WILDS OF
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1856) pp. 151-164.