

Tales and Sketches.

JOB'S TROUBLES.

THEY were drawing near to their end, and we were heartily glad of it. Being women, our patience resembled that of Job's wife, rather than his own inexhaustible article; and we had been crooking our shoulders and stiffening our necks and blinding our eyes over that quilting-frame the whole afternoon, and another afternoon, besides. At length the end was at hand, and the last row of stars, shells, crosses, compasses, globes, leaves, and Heaven knows what other shapes of things, terrestrial and celestial, was being wrought with microscopic stitches, into the strip of crimson silk which formed the border to that paragon of patchwork, known to our grandmothers as a "Job's-troubles bedquilt"—on account, of course of the innumerable pieces of which it was composed. Precisely how many there were, in the specimen now under our hands I dare not trust my memory to state, but they seemed to rival in multitude not only the different varieties of trial to which its great namesake was subjected, but also the number of his flocks and his herds, to say nothing of his comforters or his children. At any rate, it was something quite marvellous; and, famous as Aquitank was for patchwork monstrosities, nothing like it had ever been seen in Virginia before.

That everybody had opportunity to acknowledge, for Cousin Maria Cliffbro knew and visited every family of note on the Eastern Shore. There were few days in the week when her high-shouldered gig, with her tall, rawboned horse, were not seen turning in at the gate of some one or other of the old-fashioned, hospitable, Eastern-Shore mansions; and in the foot of the gig was a unfailingly to be observed a brown wicker-basket, which contained, besides Cousin Maria's best cap, a day's-work supply, sacredly enveloped in a spotless napkin of Job's-troubles patches.

An exhaustless theme of inquiry and comment was furnished, even in its inchoate condition, by this *ne plus ultra* of bedquilts. Shut out from the great world, as we were, in Aquitank, with the ocean on one side of us and the Chesapeake on the other, with neither railroad nor telegraph nor printing-press within fifty miles of us, we had naturally not much to talk about but ourselves and our relations. (Everybody in Aquitank was related to everybody else; and never a "blasted furnier," not even the ubiquitous Paddy, had ever been known to set foot upon its aristocratic, English-peopled shores.)

In consequence, there was rather a dearth at times of material for conversation. When the results as to the ingathering of souls of the last "big meeting" at Chincoteague or Okkohamock had been discussed, triumphantly by the Dissenters, superciliously by the Episcopalians; when the last reported engagement between an Eyre and a Carr, a Nottingham and a Custis, had been turned and returned, and viewed in every possible light; when the unprecedented success of Aunt Sukey Kellam or Cousin Betsy Joyines, as to turkeys and goslings, had been duly marvelled over, and the latest new recipes for scolloping oysters and making sweet-potato puddings had been compared with those handed down by tradition, there was apt to come an awful pause in the conversation, although the very first instalment of the day's visitation was not yet over.

Then Job's troubles used to come nobly to the rescue, and triumphantly fill up the breach, to the infinite relief of hostess and guests. There was never a time when Cousin Maria could not make talk on that absorbing theme of her love and pride.

Was not each one of its nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine pieces a scrap of somebody's dress? and was there not a story belonging to every bit of brocade, every fragment of tabinet or of pongee contained therein? This piece of pearl-colored satin was a part of Evelyn Parramore's wedding-dress, and she was a grandmother now. The pink, the blue, the lilac, the amber, which formed a border round it, were samples of the bridesmaids' dresses; and the flowered damask squares which fitted in at the corners, were saved from the bridegroom's waistcoat. Ah, what a wedding that was, and how many others grew out of it.

This bit of brown sarcenet was from the dress in which Vienna Upshur ran off with Tom Nottingham; Cousin Maria stood under the oak-tree with her herself. That was in her wild young days; and that very day Dick Cliffbro proposed to her to do likewise. But there was no need of that; it was a very equal match, and everybody was willing; so here was her wedding-dress—this triangle of heavy dove-gray silk—and the black border round it was the mode with which she lightened her mourning ten years after his death!

It was not a very amiable resolution, perhaps, but I was too impatient and anxious about that time to be very amiable; and it was odd what a zest it gave to the supper to which we were presently summoned. Old Aunt Rinthy had distinguished herself. Never were waffles more goldenly tinged, never chickens more deliciously browned, nor the aroma of mocha more exquisitely preserved. As for Cousin Maria's Old Dominion cake and candied watermelon, they were as famous as her patchwork, and I addressed myself, with a hearty good-will, to each and all of these dainties.

"Seems to me you enjoy taking tea at Bayside, Kate Custis?" said Lottie Upshur, pointedly, as I helped myself for the third time to waffles. Before I could reply, Cousin Maria interposed briskly:

work of her hands. She was a tall, angular woman, with an immensely long chin, and wore a black "front," so low down upon her temples that only a small segment of forehead was visible. She looked what she was, one of the genuine old-fashioned Virginia "quality," but no one had ever called her handsome in my hearing. Now, in the flush of gratified pride and the softness of a much tenderer feeling, she affected me as though she had been beautiful, and I watched her with curiosity and sympathy.

"There's nothing like it in the country, is there, friends?" she said, smoothing it out complacently. "What do you all think?—What do you think, Cousin Katharine?"

It was one of the old lady's quaint ideas of politeness to address every relative, no matter how distant or how young, by the appropriate title; and of late she had been Cousining me to an extent and in a way that implied some very special meaning. So did her tone and manner in her sudden special address just now. I knew well enough what it was, and I answered saucily:

"Oh, it's very well for a bedquilt—such old-fashioned, exploded things! For my part, I never use any but white coverlets."

"Well, there's plenty of them, too," said Cousin Maria, still in a provokingly meaning tone, which made Sally and Betty and all the girls exchange glances, and set old Miss Peggy Hyslop, the seamstress, to nodding her wizened head, like one of the ridiculous images one sees in city shop-windows at Christmas-time. "There's a whole set in honey-comb that was spun and woven before my time, and is as good as ever now; and there's a daisy set and a diamond set, and the beautiful one in tuft-stitch that worked in Robert's name and the date of his birth. There's not the match of that in the county either, and she did it the last thing before she died, poor dear. The Lord's will be done!" Cousin Maria drew in her breath and looked pious for a moment, but the next instant her spirits re-asserted their elation.

"Well, well!" she said, briskly, "it is handsome, and there's no denying it, nor that whoever gets Robert and it with him will have a right to feel herself a proud and a happy woman. But this isn't giving you your supper, my dear. I told Arinthy to put herself up and do her best, and I must go and see how she's making out. I guess you'll be ready by the time we are."

She bustled out of the room as she spoke, not forgetting, however, to give me another meaning nod and smile. To cover this, I said, hastily:

"Come, girls, hurry! Don't you smell the waffles?" and bent assiduously over my work, but my thoughts were as busy as my fingers. What in the world was Cousin Maria trying to get up an affair between Bob Bayly and me for? Her one fault—an over-fondness for money—was notorious; and I had no access to ally to his broad lands, no negroes—God forbid!—to swell the number of his "hands." I was all right as to family, it was true. The Baylys, the Custises, the Cliffbros, were all from one stock, and had married and intermarried among each other, until it was almost impossible to trace the different threads of relationship. But then I had been sent North to school, and had come back with certain modified ideas, which had won for me the unenviable reputation of a traitress to the traditions of my family and my birth-place. It had been more than once intimated to me that I had forever ruined my market in Aquitank; and now, before I had been home six months, here was Cousin Maria Cliffbro trying her best, if not really to bring about an engagement between the heir of all her broad domains and myself, at least to create a public impression that such was already the state of affairs, although she knew well that a prior conviction as to the young gentleman's devotion to pretty Rose Marshall was tolerably well rooted in the Aquitank mind.

Now, why was this thus? I puzzled myself with asking Artemus-ly. Was the clever old lady in earnest when she said, as she had managed to let me hear of her saying, "that she esteemed sense and culture and independence in a woman before any possessions of person or pocket? Or was she only trying to use me as a weapon of defence against the lovely Rose, who had no possessions at all except her beautiful face?"

I could not quite solve the problem; but, being a little proud and perverse, as became a Custis, I made up my mind to take the game into my own hands; and, though I didn't care a dot for Bob Bayly, who was my fourth or fourteenth cousin, who had been my playmate in childhood, and had grown up a handsome, weak young man, it would yet be some diversion to measure strength with the whole of them, and, if a certain hitherto unmentioned and far-distant individual continued to be as provokingly blind and as tiresomely self-distrustful as hitherto, perhaps marry Rob at last off-hand, just for spite!

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"Of course she does—why shouldn't she? I hope you all do, as for that matter, but Bayside has always been like a second home to you—hasn't it, Cousin Katharine?"

Lottie lifted her eyebrows and drew in her mouth; she was Rose Marshall's particular enemy. As for me, I said nothing, but smiled a little grimly to myself at them all.

"The 19th—don't forget—and come early and stay late, all of you; my Robert won't have but one twenty-first birthday, and we must make a night of it!"

This was Cousin Maria's cheery good-by, as supper being ended, the gigs began to come up to the door one after the other, and the various members of the quilting-party prepared to disperse.

"Don't you go just yet, Cousin Katharine," she added, so that all should hear. "I expect Rob home every minute, and he will be so disappointed if he finds you gone; he counts upon driving you home!"

But I had had enough of the old lady by this time, and I said: "No, I am tired with sitting; the walk home by the bay-shore in the twilight will be just the refreshment I need; and so I broke away, and secured an hour of quiet, if not very happy thinking, as I slowly paced homeward over the sands, and watched the waves breaking softly at my feet, and the stars coming out, one by one, in the deep-blue sky.

Where was somebody, I thought, just then? Was somebody looking at those same bright stars and thinking of me? And why, oh, why, was somebody so provokingly modest, and timid, and everything else that was stupid? I asked these questions aloud and passionately of both star and wave, but they vouchsafed me no answer; and I went into the house cross-enough, and gave as satirical a description as I could of the quilting, the supper, and all that was connected with "my Robert's majority."

Well, it came on apace all the same, and the 16th arrived before I knew it. I went over to Bayside in the morning, at Cousin Maria's request, to help arrange flowers, and to give her one or two "new-fangled" hints as to the setting out of the supper. Not seeing Rob anywhere about, I asked where he was.

"Gone up the country, of course. thirty miles there and back; to 'bring his missy here!'" said Cousin Maria, in her nippingest tone. "I tell you what, Cousin Katharine, I simply can't abide the thought of his marrying that doll-faced baby. My Robert needs a woman to influence him, not a spoiled child to put him up to nonsense; and if you don't help me break off this match, I'll never forgive you. You can do it if you choose to try, I am sure of it; and, once I get the foolish boy clear of this entanglement, I'll look after things a little more sharply, see if I don't!"

Ah ha! That was to be my office, then, was it, to pull the chestnuts out of the fire, and that not for myself, but another, even though my fingers got singed meanwhile? I laughed again to myself, I am afraid even more grimly than before; but I did not refuse my services; I only invested them with a somewhat more personal purpose, and so went home to get a beauty- nap in the afternoon, and come fresh to the all-important business of tea!

It was in the days of "tilters," or hoops of enormous size. That is, their day was just going out, but the rural districts were not yet aware of the fact, and I knew that all Aquitank would appear in balloon-like proportions. I knew, too, that the weekly steambath had been besieged on its last landing by the fair applicants for its precious freight of finery ordered from Baltimore for the occasion, and I readily imagined that the fuss-and-featherly style which would prevail among the toilets. Now, my great card was to be as un-Aquitankish as possible in the present crisis. I chose, therefore, from my none too abundant wardrobe its very simplest costume—one in which I had appeared at my only fancy-ball as the Marguerite of Goethe.

It was a long robe of white cashmere, made perfectly plain, fitting closely to the form, and falling in soft, straight folds, pure and smooth as cream, to the floor. Not a puff, not a frill or flounce, broke the simple flow of the outline; only some fine old lace fell over the wrists, and softly shaded the bosom. A broad girdle of black velvet loosely encircled the hips, a narrower band the throat. It was in the days also of enormous "water-falls," which converted all the women into Barnums, double-headed monstrosities. I braided my yellow hair in two thick plaits which fell below the waist; and lo, my toilet was completed.

As I stood before the glass in my dormer-windowed bedroom, contemplating the effect, my sister Jane, a demure little woman, appeared at the door, arrayed in her best grey silk, the flounces duly spread out over a gigantic crinoline. She stood surveying me for some moments without approaching, and in a silence which was not pregnant with meaning.

Presently she spoke in her driest tone: "You are up to some game or other to-night, or you wouldn't be laying yourself out to be the talk of the county. Why didn't you wear your night-gown at once, and be done with it? I shall not go with you in that rig. I shall send the carriage back, and you can come alone. And don't sit near me, please, in the parlors. I never could stand staring."

With this she turned abruptly away and went below; and I laughed heartily, thoroughly well-pleased. A late *entre* would be all the more effective, but I had not ventured even to hope for it. In a minute or two I heard the carriage

drive off, and then, throwing a shawl around me, and gathering my long robe over my arm, I went down stairs and out into the garden to get some white chrysanthemums for a breast-knot.

It was a mild November night. In the starlight I saw the bushes weighted with flowers, and the flowers with dew; and all the air was full of their fresh, pungent aroma, so much more delicious than a perfume. I plucked a handful, smelled them, took them up-stairs, and put them in water; and then I sat down to wait. In waiting I fell to thinking, and from thinking, before I knew it, to crying as though my heart would break.

Oh, but this would never do! My eyes and my nose would be red, and I should be a failure instead of a success; and was he worth that—the faint heart?

I made a rush at the wash-basin, and, after giving full scope to the powers of cold water, I wrapped my shawl about me again, took my fan and gloves, and went down to the veranda to try the efficacy of fresh air. I paced there to and fro in the starlight until the carriage came back for me. When I got out of it at Bayside there was no trace of tears to be seen. Indeed, an involuntary smile came instead, and a very wicked one, too, as I entered the brilliantly-lighted parlors, and looked round in search of my hostess. Some kind of uproarious dance, much in vogue in Aquitank, where round dances were tabooed—"Monie Musk" or "Sir Roger de Coverley," or perhaps a "Virginia reel"—was just ended. Almost everybody had been partaking in it, and, as a consequence, had dropped at its conclusion, breathless, panting and crimson, into the chairs which were ranged stiffly in rows against the wall.

A regular Old-Dominion fire was blazing, roaring, upon the ample hearth, and the people seemed fairly blazing too. Oh, how comically red, and heated, and unromantic, even the prettiest girls looked like enormous cabbage-roses, with their huge ehignons and huger hoops; and with what amusing amazement they regarded me as I made my way among them, cool, fresh and fair, as one of my own chrysanthemums!

There was a fannily-sudden hush in the busy buzz of talk which had made the room like a hive of bees as I walked slowly up the centre, noiselessly, whitely, as a snow-shower falls; but when my back was fairly turned, and I had reached my hostess and was paying my *devoirs* to her, it began again, as suddenly as it had stopped, only this time it was a hiss instead of a buzz; and I knew well enough with what a sugared venom of smiling malice and sweet voiced spite I was being bespattered by my young lady-friends.

All the better for me. It was the first witness to the impression I had plotted to create, and the next followed with unexpected promptness. The elegant young host, whom with a rapid side-glance I had descried in a recessed window assiduously fanning his over-blooming Rose, gave me a glance as I approached, first of surprise, then of unqualified pleasure, and came forward to welcome me with much more alacrity than mere courtesy required.

"You are very affectingly late," he said, holding my hand longer than was necessary, and letting his eye, full of puzzled admiration, taking me in; as it were, from head to foot. "I should scold you for putting on airs, my lady cousin, if the airs you bring in with you were not so delightfully fresh and fragrant in the midst of our heat and dust."

I laughed, and shrugged my shoulders as I looked round the room full of our blooming damsels.

"My love is like a red, red rose," I hummed in an undertone, and the young gentleman grew a little redder himself, and cast a half-vexed glance at the window where his special Rose stood, fanning herself now, and watching us with a flushed and angry gaze.

"It is cool out in the hall," he said, hastily. "Won't you take a turn there with me, and let me refresh myself in your atmosphere?" Then, as I suffered him to lead me through the open door: "By Jove, Kate, what have you been doing to yourself to make you so unlike the rest? You look as straight and as slender and as white as a lily, and as fresh and sweet as one of those flowers there—I don't know what they are—on your breast."

"They are chrysanthemums, and they are not sweet; I hate flowers with a perfume, lilies and roses, and such things; mere sweetness cloys so! These are pungent, aromatic; won't you have one? It may serve to revive you after a surfeit."

I disengaged one of the spicy clusters from my bosom, and held it out to him with my witchingest smile.

He hesitated a moment.

"But I have a pony already, you see," he said, glancing down at his button-hole.

"Yes, a wilted rose. Roses are always the first flowers to fade, you know. Shall I fasten this in for you myself?"

Still he stood irresolute, his handsome, fickle face betraying the struggles of his inconstant fancy.

Presently he broke out passionately, in a tone half-bitter, half-eager:

"Kate, what do you mean? Why do you tempt me so? Do you wish to have things again as they were when we were boy and girl, when you drew me to your feet and spurned me from them a dozen times a week? Because I warn you I am a little too old for that sort of treatment now. Tell me now, and tell me true if I give up the rose, shall I have the chrysanthemum in exchange?"

dimly-lighted hall, but he had stopped in his earnestness at a door directly opposite the window where he had, rather abruptly, left Rose Marshall. She stood there still, still alone, and still watching us with a burning glance.

I knew she could see what I did, and I deliberately took the rose she had fondly put there, from her lover's breast, and flung it upon the floor. Then I fastened in its place a flower from my own bosom, and then, laying my hand in the arm which received it with a rapturous pressure, I turned again, and we resumed our promenade in the cool old hall.

"My glorious Kate!" my betrothed began, but just then Cousin Maria came swooping down on us like a raven, with her keen eyes, and her glossy, black attire.

Scylla avoided, she must look out for Charybdis.

"Ah, here you are, and together; that is right," she said, with a crooked smile. "But it is time for supper, my dears, and I want you to come in and lead the march. See! the music is beginning already."

So we marched in through the parlors, and headed the quickly-formed couples for the supper-room. After that there was little chance for my new lover to speak to me, although he took care to keep me supplied with all manner of eatables. But in his capacity of host, he had to be here, there, and everywhere, and I was quite content to be freed from his raptures, which were apt to be as short-lived as they were violent.

In a few moments the room was filled with the clatter of plates and spoons, the clink of cups and glasses, and the busy buzz of voices. My cousin, intent on hospitable duties, thought of nothing but feeding the people; and they of nothing but being fed. No one but myself perceived that Rose Marshall was missing from the entertainment; but I had known from the first that she was not in the room.

"Does your future daughter-in-law disdain your hospitality, or does she live on love alone?"

"Why! is she not here?" said the old lady, with a start, looking hastily round the room. "Where can she be? Trying to get up some sort of sensation, of course. Don't notice it, please; don't mention it to Robert; I'll find out soon, and tell you whatever it is."

I shrugged my shoulders and went on eating my oysters, and amusing myself with a young *Escalapius*, who was playing the gallant at my other side; but I saw my cousin when she presently slipped out of the room, and wondered a little what would be the result of her investigations.

Just as supper was ended, and the crowd began knotting and jostling, after the manner of crowds, back to the drawing-room, Cousin Maria plucked me by the sleeves and drew me into the hall.

"Did you ever know anything so presumptuous or so aggravating?" she asked, in a tone of suppressed wrath. "She has made believe to have a chill—got overheated—cooled off too suddenly—is subject to them—always followed by very violent fevers—is so sorry, but must trespass on my kindness for the night; didn't want to cast any shade over the gayety, and so came up alone to lie down."

All this was delivered in a sick-affecting drawl; then, with a sudden, angry change:

"And she has actually undressed and gone to bed, Cousin Katharine—the audacious little minx! Gone to bed in the room, and in the bed prepared for you, and under the 'Job's troubles quilt'—the artful, plotting, deceitful schemer! What do you think of that?"

I burst out laughing. I knew very well the absurd old wife's fable, religiously accredited in Aquitank, that the maid who slept first under a young man's "majority bedquilt" was sure to be his bride in the end; and it was fun to see these two pitted against each other in superstition and intrigue.

"But I am not going to stay here to-night, Cousin Maria," I said, as soon as I could speak for laughing. "Let the girl rest in peace; she deserves it for her cleverness."

"Her brass, you mean," said the old lady wrathfully. "But you are going to stay here, Cousin Katharine; you have got to. Cousin Jane has already gone home; she did not like to be so long away from the babies, and I told her I wanted you to stay. And mind! you are to sleep in that bed; indeed, I have no other—so many people from a distance have been asked to stay all night. So you'll have to put up with that missy's company—I'm sorry, but there's no help for it."

It seemed, indeed, that there was not, as the carriage was already at home; and, to tell the truth, I didn't mind much; I was just in the mode to see the play played out. I went back into the parlors, ecstatically Rob and horrified the Aquitankers by giving him as many waltzes and galops as he wanted; and at midnight watched my chance, in the bustle of departure, and slipped up to the room which had been so cunningly taken possession of by my rival.

There she was, sure enough, hidden away in the depths of the great four-poster, and half buried under the weight of "Job's troubles." She pretended to be asleep, and I took no notice; but, as I moved about the room, leisurely, disrobing myself, I was aware that she followed me with a furtive glance, and that her heart was wide awake with jealousy and hate.

Whatever had come over mine. I don't know. It was simply callous, and gave me no trouble whatever. I only smiled at the movement of repulsion with which she flung herself over to the edge of the bed; and, stretching myself out quite comfortably, went off cosily to sleep.