

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Some Say; Neighbours in Cyrus



Laura Richards

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Some Say. NEIGHBOURS IN CYRUS

Part I

"And some say, she expects to get him married to Rose Ellen before the year's out!"

"I want to know if she does!"

"Her sister married a minister, and her father was a deacon, so mebbe she thinks she's got a master-key to the Kingdom. But I don't feel so sure of her gettin' this minister for Rose Ellen. Some say he's so wropped up in his garden truck that he don't know a gal from a gooseberry bush. He! he!"

The shrill cackle was answered by a slow, unctuous chuckle, as of a fat and wheezy person; then a door was closed, and silence fell.

The minister looked up apprehensively; his fair face was flushed, and his mild, blue eyes looked troubled. He gazed at the broad back of his landlady, as she stood dusting, with minute care, the china ornaments on the mantelpiece; but her back gave no sign. He coughed once or twice; he said, "Mrs. Mellen!" tentatively, first low, then in his ordinary voice, but there was no reply. Was Mrs. Mellen deaf? he had not noticed it before. He pondered distressfully for a few moments; then dropped his eyes, and the book swallowed him again. Yet the sting remained, for when presently the figure at the mantelpiece turned round, he looked up hastily, and flushed again as he met his hostess' gaze, calm and untroubled as a summer pool.

"There, sir!" said Mrs. Mellen, cheerfully. "I guess that's done to suit. Is there anything more I can do for you before I go?"

The minister's mind hovered between two perplexities; a glance at the book before him decided their relative importance.

"Have you ever noticed, Mrs. Mellen, whether woodcocks are more apt to fly on moonshiny nights, as White assures us?"

"Woodbox?" said Mrs. Mellen. "Why, yes, sir, it's handy by; and when there's no moon, the lantern always hangs in the porch. But I'll see that Si Jones keeps it full up, after this."

Decidedly, the good woman was deaf, and she had not heard. Could those harpies be right? If any such idea as they suggested were actually in his hostess' mind, he must go away, for his work must not be interfered with, and he must not encourage hopes, – the minister blushed again, and glanced around to see if any one could see him.

But he was so comfortable here, and Miss Mellen was so intelligent, so helpful; and this seemed the ideal spot on which to compile his New England "Selborne."

He sighed, and thought of the woodcock again. Why should the bird prefer a moonshiny night? Was it likely that the creature had any appreciation of the beauties of nature? Shakespeare uses the woodcock as a simile of folly, to express a person without brains. Ha!

The door opened, and Rose Ellen came in, her eyes shining with pleasure, her hands full of gold and green.

"I've found the 'Squarrosa,' Mr. Lindsay!" she announced. "See, this is it, surely!"

The minister rose, and inspected the flowers delightedly. "This is it, surely!" he repeated. "Stem stout, hairy above; leaves large, oblong, or the lower spatulate-oval, and tapering into a marginal petiole, serrate veiny; heads numerous; seeds obtuse or acute; disk-flowers, 16 x 24. This is, indeed, a treasure, for Gray calls it 'rare in New England.' I congratulate you, Miss Mellen."

"Late, sir?" said Mrs. Mellen, calmly. "Oh, no, 'tisn't hardly five o'clock yet. Still, 'tis time for me to be thinkin' of gettin' supper."

"Don't you want I should make some biscuit for supper, mother?" asked Rose Ellen, coming out of her rapt contemplation of the goldenrod that Gray condescended to call rare, he to whom all things were common.

Her mother made no answer.

"Don't you want I should make a pan of biscuit?" Rose Ellen repeated. Still there was no reply, and the girl turned to look at her mother in some alarm.

"Why, mother, what is the matter? why don't you answer me?"

"Your mother's deafness," the minister put in, hurriedly, "seems suddenly increased: probably a cold, –"

"Was you speakin' to me, Rose Ellen?" said Mrs. Mellen.

"Why, yes!" said the girl, in distress.

"Why, mother, how did you get this cold? you seemed all right when I went out."

"Gettin' old!" cried Mrs. Mellen. "'Tis nothin' of the sort, Rose Ellen! I've took a cold, I shouldn't wonder. I went out without my shawl just for a minute. I expect 'twas careless, but there! life is too short to be thinkin' all the time about the flesh, 'specially when there's as much of it as I have. I've ben expectin' I should grow hard of hearin', though, these two years past. The Bowlers do, you know, Rose Ellen, 'long about middle life. There was your Uncle Lihu. I can hear him snort now, sittin' in his chair, like a pig for all the world, and with no idea he was makin' a sound."

"But it's come on so sudden!" cried Rose Ellen, in distress.

"That's Bowler!" said her mother. "Bowler for all the world! They take things suddin, whether it's hoarsin' up, or breakin' out, or what it is. There! you've heard me tell how my Aunt Phœbe 'Lizabeth come out with spots all over her face, when she was standin' up to be married. Chicken-pox it was, and they never knew where she got it; but my grand'ther said 'twas pure Bowler, wherever it come from."

She gazed placidly at her daughter's troubled face; then, patting her with her broad hand, pushed her gently out of the room before her.

"Mr. Lindsay's heard enough of my bein' hard of hearin', I expect," she said, cheerfully, as they passed into the kitchen.

"Don't you fret, Rose Ellen! You won't have to get a fog-horn yet awhile. I don't know but it would be a good plan for you to mix up a mess o' biscuit, if you felt to: Mr. Lindsay likes your biscuit real well, I heard him say so."

"That's what I was going to do," said Rose Ellen, still depressed. "I wish't you'd see the doctor, mother. I don't believe but he could help your hearing, if you take it before it's got settled on you."

"Well, I won't, certain!" said Mrs. Mellen. "The idea, strong and well as I be! Bowler blood's comin' out, that's all; and the only wonder is it hasn't come out before."

All that day, and the next, the minister did not seem like himself. He was no more absent-minded than usual, perhaps, – that could hardly be. But he was grave and troubled, and the usual happy laugh did not come when Rose Ellen checked him gently as he was about to put pepper into his tea. Several times he seemed about to speak: his eye dwelt anxiously on the cream-jug, in which he seemed to be seeking inspiration; but each time his heart failed him, and he relapsed with a sigh into his melancholy reverie.

Rose Ellen was silent, too, and the burden of the talk fell on her mother. At supper on the second day, midway between the ham and the griddle-cakes, Mrs. Mellen announced:

"Rose Ellen, I expect you'd better go down to Tupham to-morrow, and stay a spell with your grandm'ther. She seems to be right poorly, and I expect it'd be a comfort to her to have you with her. I guess you'd better get ready to-night, and Calvin Parks can take you up as he goes along."

Rose Ellen and the minister both looked up with a start, and both flushed, and both opened wide eyes of astonishment.

"Why, mother!" said the girl. "I can't go away and leave you now, with this cold on you."

Her mother did not hear her, so Rose Ellen repeated the words in a clear, high-pitched voice, with a note of anxiety which brought a momentary shade to Mrs. Mellen's smooth brow. The next moment, however, the brow cleared again.

"I guess you'd better go!" she said again. "It'd be a pity if Mr. Lindsay and I couldn't get along for a month or six weeks; and I wrote mother yesterday that you would be up along to-morrow, so she'll be looking for you. I don't like to have mother disappointed of a thing at her age, it gives her the palpitations."

"You – wrote – that I was coming!" repeated Rose Ellen. "And you never told me you was writing, mother? I – I should have liked to have known before you wrote."

"Coat?" said Mrs. Mellen. "Oh, your coat'll do well enough, Rose Ellen. Why, you've only just had it bound new, and new buttons put on. I should take my figured muslin, if I was you, and have Miss Turner look at it and see how you could do it over: she has good ideas, sometimes, and it'd be a little different from what the girls here was doin', maybe. Anyway, I'd take it, and your light sack, too. 'Twon't do no harm to have 'em gone over a little."

Rose Ellen looked ready to cry, but she kept the tears back resolutely.

"I – don't – want to leave you, with this deafness coming on!" she shouted, her usually soft voice ringing like a bugle across the tea-table.

"There! there! don't you grow foolish," her mother replied, with absolute calm.

"Why, I can hear ye as well as ever, when you raise your voice a mite, like that. I should admire to know why you should stay at home on my account. I suppose I know my way about the house, if I be losin' my hearing just a dite. It isn't going to spoil my cooking, that I can see; and I guess Mr. Lindsay won't make no opposition to your going, for any difference it'll make to him."

Mr. Lindsay, thus appealed to, stammered, and blushed up to his eyes, and stammered again; but finally managed to say, with more or less distinctness, that of course whatever was agreeable to Mrs. and Miss Mellen was agreeable to him, and that he begged not to be considered in any way in the formation of their plans.

"That's just what I was thinking!" said his hostess. "A man don't want no botheration of plans. So that's settled, Rose Ellen."

Rose Ellen knew it was settled. She was a girl of character and resolution, but she had never resisted her mother's will, nor had any one else, so far as she knew. She cried a good deal over her packing, and dropped a tear on her silk waist, the pride of her heart, and was surprised to find that she did not care. "There's no one there to care whether I look nice or not!" she said aloud; and then blushed furiously, and looked around the room, fearfully, to be sure that she was alone.

Early next morning the crack of a whip was heard, and Calvin Parks's voice, shouting cheerfully for his passenger. The minister, razor in hand, peeped between his shutters, and saw Rose Ellen come from the house, wiping her eyes, and looking back, with anxious eyes. A wave of feeling swept through him, and he felt, for the moment, that he hated Mrs. Mellen. He had never hated any one before in his innocent life; while he was pondering on this new and awful sensation, the pale, pretty face had sunk back in the depths of the old red-lined stage, the whip cracked, and Calvin drove away with his prey.

Mrs. Mellen came out on the steps, and looked after the stage. Then, with a movement singularly swift for so stout a person, she made a few paces down the walk, and, turning, looked up at the windows of the houses on either side of her own. In both houses a figure was leaning from a window, thrown half out over the sill, in an attitude of eager inquiry. At sight of Mrs. Mellen they dodged back, and only a slight waving of curtains betrayed their presence. The good woman folded her arms deliberately, and stood for five minutes, absorbed in the distant landscape; then she turned, and went slowly back to the house.

"There!" she said, as she closed the door behind her. "That'll keep 'em occupied for one while!" and there was infinite content in her tone.

Mr. Lindsay, coming in to breakfast, found his hostess beaming behind the teakettle, placid and cheerful as usual. He still hated her, and found difficulty in replying with alacrity to her remarks on the beauty of the morning.

"I expect you and me'll have a right cozy time together!" she announced. "You no need to put yourself out to talk to me, 'cause I reelly don't seem to be hearing very good; and I won't talk to you, save and except when you feel inclined. I know an elder does love to have a quiet house about him. My sister married a minister, and my father was a deacon himself, so I'm accustomed to the ways of the ministry."

Mr. Lindsay stirred his tea, gloomily. The words recalled to his mind those which had so disturbed him a day or two ago, just when all this queer business of the deafness had come on. He remembered the spiteful tones of the two neighbours, and recalled how the words had hissed in his ears. He had thought of going away himself, lest he should encourage false hopes in the breast of his gentle young friend – or her mother; surely Rose Ellen, – as he said the name to himself, he felt his ears growing pink, and knew that he had not said the name before, even to himself; straightway said it again, to prove the absurdity of something, he was not sure what, and felt his throat dry and hot. Now Rose Ellen herself was gone, and for an indefinite time. She had not gone willingly, of that he was sure; but it was equally evident that her mother had no such thoughts as those two haridans had suggested. He glanced up furtively, to meet a broad, beaming glance, and the question whether he felt feverish any.

"You seem to flush up easy!" said Mrs. Mellen. "I should be careful, if I was you, Mr. Lindsay, and not go messing round ponds and such at this season of the year. It's just this time we commonly look for sickness rising in the air."

Mr. Lindsay stirred his tea again, and sighed. His mind seemed singularly distracted; and that, too, when the most precious moments of the year were passing. He must put all other matters out of his head, and think only of his great work.

Had the Blackburnian Warbler been seen in this neighbourhood, as he had been told? He could hardly believe in such good fortune. The shy, mistrustful bird, hunting the thickest foliage of the tallest forest trees, – how should his landlady's daughter have seen it when she was seeking for ferns? yet her description had been exactly that of the books: "Upper parts nearly uniform black, with a whitish scapular stripe and a large white patch in the middle of the wing coverts; an oblong patch – " but she had not been positive about the head. No, but she *was* positive as to the bright orange-red on chin, throat, and forepart of the breast, and the three white tail-feathers. Ah! why was she gone? why was she not here to show him the way, as she promised, to the place where she had seen the rare visitor? He might possibly have found the nest, that rare nest which Samuels never saw, which only Audubon had described: "composed externally of different textures, and lined with silky fibres and thin, delicate strips of bark, over which lies a thick bed of feathers and horsehair."

It should be found in a small fork of a tree, should it? five or six feet from the ground, near a brook? well, he might still search, the next time he went out; meanwhile, there were the ferns to analyze, and that curious moss to determine, if might be. "But mosses are almost hopeless!" he said aloud, with an appealing glance across the table, where he was wont to look for sympathy and encouragement.

"Soap dish?" said Mrs. Mellen, with alacrity.

"Well, I don't wonder you ask, Mr. Lindsay. Why, I found it full of frogs' eggs this very morning, and I hove 'em away and scalt it out. It's drying in the sun this minute, and I'll bring it right up to your room directly."

She beamed on him, and left the room. Mr. Lindsay groaned; looked about him for help, but found none, and retired, groaning, to his study.

Part II

The minister had had a delightful but exhausting afternoon. He had gone to look for the nest of a marsh-hen, which he had some reason to think might be in a certain swamp, about five miles from the village. He did not find the nest, but he found plenty of other things: his pockets bulged with mosses and roots, his hat was wound with a curious vine that might possibly be *Clematis Verticillaris*, and both hands were filled with specimens of every conceivable kind. Incidentally the mosquitoes and black flies had found him: his face was purple, and, like that of the lady at the Brick Lane Branch tea-party, "swellin' wisibly;" and blood was trickling down his well-shaped nose from a bramble-scratch. He had fallen down once or twice in the bog, with results to his clothes; and altogether he presented a singular figure to the view of his parishioners as he strode hastily through the street. Heads were thrust out of windows, staid eyes rolled in horror, but the minister saw nothing. He was tired, and absorbed in his new possessions. It was good to sit down in his study, and spread his treasures out on the broad table, and gloat over them. A clump of damp moss rested quietly on his new sermon, "The Slough of Despond," but he took no note. He was looking for a place to put this curious little lizard in, and after anxious thought selected the gilt celluloid box, lined with pink satin, which the Mission Circle had given him on Christmas for his collars and cuffs. He felt, vaguely, that it was not the right place for the lizard, but there seemed to be nothing else in reach, – except the flutter-work pen-box, and Rose Ellen had made that for him. Ah! if Rose Ellen were here now, how much she could help him! it was so much easier for two to analyze than one. He at the microscope, and Rose Ellen corroborating, correcting from the textbook, – it was a perfect arrangement.

The minister sighed heavily. Mrs. Mellen brought in his tea, for it was Wednesday evening, and he preferred an early cup of tea, and a modest supper after the meeting. Food distracted his mind, he was apt to say, from thought, a statement which his landlady treated with indulgent contempt, as she had never known him to remark the difference between "riz" bread and the soda article.

She set the cup down before him, and he promptly dipped a fern root into it; then started back with a cry of dismay.

"Well indeed, sir!" said Mrs. Mellen, "I should think so, truly! What did you do that for, and spoil your tea?"

"The – tea – a – that is, it is of no consequence about the tea!" said Mr. Lindsay, hastily.

"I fear I have injured the root. I thought it was water. Dear! dear! Miss Mellen was in the habit of bringing me a glass of water when I brought plants home."

Mrs. Mellen said nothing, but brought the water, and a fresh cup of tea; but Mr. Lindsay had fallen into the depths of the moss, and took no notice of either.

She left the room, but presently returned, knitting in hand, and stood, unnoticed, in the doorway, glancing from time to time at the minister. He certainly was "a sight to behold," as she said to herself. She may have thought other things beside, but her face gave no sign. Presently the bell began to ring for Wednesday evening meeting. Mrs. Mellen glanced again at the minister, but he heard nothing. The botany was open before him, and he was muttering strange words that sounded like witch-talk.

"Stamens six, hypogenous! anthers introrse! capsule cartilaginous, loculicidally three-valved, scurfy-leaved epiphytic!" What did it all mean? A slow flush crept over the woman's broad, placid face; her eyelids quivered, her eye roamed restlessly about the room. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and breathed heavily, as if in distress; and still her eyes came back to the slender figure in the great chair, bent in absorbed interest over the table.

Ding! dong! ding! the notes came dropping through the air, clear and resonant. Even a deaf person might hear them, perhaps. Mrs. Mellen was evidently struggling with herself. Once she opened her lips as if to speak; once she stepped forward with outstretched hand, as if to shake the man into wakefulness and attention; but she did not speak, and her hand dropped again; and presently the bell stopped, and Sophronia Mellen went away to her sitting-room, hanging her head.

Half an hour later there was knocking at the door, and the sound of many voices, anxious voices, pitched high and loud, on account of Mrs. Mellen's deafness.

"How's Mr. Lindsay? When was he took sick? Have ye had the doctor?"

"Do you think it's ketchin', Mis' Mellen? Think of all the young children in this parish, if anythin' should get the rounds! My! it's awful!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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