

***LAURA ELIZABETH  
HOWE RICHARDS***



***GEOFFREY  
STRONG***

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**Laura Elizabeth Howe Richards**

**Geoffrey Strong**

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Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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# CHAPTER I.

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### THE TEMPLE OF VESTA

"That's a pleasant looking house," said the young doctor. "What's the matter with my getting taken in there?"

The old doctor checked his horse, and looked at the house with a smile.

"Nothing in the world," he said, "except the small fact that they wouldn't take you."

"Why not?" asked the young man, vivaciously. "Too rich? too proud? too young? too old? what's the matter with them?"

The old doctor laughed outright this time. "You young firebrand!" he said. "Do you think you are going to take this village by storm? That house is the Temple of Vesta. It is inhabited by the Vestal Virgins, who tend the sacred fire, and do other things beside. You might as well ask to be taken into the meeting-house to board."

"This is more attractive than the meetinghouse," said the young doctor.

"This is one of the most attractive houses I ever saw."

He looked at it earnestly, and as they drove along the elm-shaded street, he turned in his seat to look at it again.

It certainly was an attractive house. Its front of bright clean red brick was perhaps too near the street; but the garden, whose tall lilac and syringa bushes waved over the top of the high wall, must, he thought, run back some way, and from the west windows there must be a glorious sea-view.

The house looked both genteel and benevolent. The white stone steps and window-sills and the white fan over the door gave a certain effect of clean linen that was singularly pleasing. The young doctor, unlike Doctor Johnson, had a passion for clean linen. The knocker, too, was of the graceful long oval shape he liked, and burnished to the last point of perfection, and the shining windows were so placed as to give an air of cheerful interrogation to the whole.

"I like that house!" said the young doctor again. "Tell me about the people!"

Again the old doctor laughed. "I tell you they are the Vestal Virgins!" he repeated. "There are two of them, Miss Phoebe and Miss Vesta Blyth. Miss Phoebe is as good as gold, but something of a man-hater. She doesn't think much of the sex in general, but she is a good friend of mine, and she'll be good to you for my sake. Miss Vesta"—the young doctor, who was observant, noted a slight change in his hearty voice—"Vesta Blyth is a saint."

"What kind of saint? invalid? bedridden? blind?"

"No, no, no! saints don't all have to be bedridden. Vesta is a—you might call her Saint Placidia. Her life has been

shadowed. She was once engaged—to a very worthy young man—thirty years ago. The day before the wedding he was drowned; sailboat capsized in a squall, just in the bay here. Since then she keeps a light burning in the back hall, looking over the water. That's why I call the house the Temple of Vesta."

"Day and night?"

"No, no! lights it at sunset every evening regularly. Sun dips, Vesta lights her lamp. Pretty? I think so."

"Affecting, certainly!" said the young doctor. "And she has mourned her lover ever since?"

The old doctor gave him a quaint look. "People don't mourn thirty years," he said, "unless their minds are diseased. Women mourn longer than men, of course, but ten years would be a long limit, even for a woman. Memory, of course, may last as long as life—sacred and tender memory,"—his voice dropped a little, and he passed his hand across his forehead,— "but not mourning. Vesta is a little pensive, a little silent; more habit than anything else now. A sweet woman; the sweetest—"

The old doctor seemed to forget his companion, and flicked the old brown horse pensively, as they jogged along, saying no more.

The young doctor waited a little before he put his next question.

"The two ladies live alone always?"

"Yes—no!" said the old doctor, coming out of his reverie. "There's Diploma Crotty, help, tyrant, governor-in-chief of the kitchen. Now and then she thinks they'd better have a visitor, and tells them so; but not very often, it upsets her

kitchen. But here we are at the parsonage, and I'll take you in."

The young doctor made his visit at the parsonage dutifully and carefully. He meant to make a good impression wherever he went. It was no such easy matter to take the place of the old doctor, who, after a lifetime of faithful and loving work, had been ordered off for a year's rest and travel; but the young doctor had plenty of courage, and meant to do his best. He answered evasively the inquiry of the minister's wife as to where he meant to board; and though he noted down carefully the addresses she gave him of nice motherly women who would keep his things in order, and have an eye to him in case he should be ailing, he did not intend to trouble these good ladies if he could help himself.

"I want to live in that brick house!" he said to himself. "I'll have a try for it, anyhow. The old ladies can't be insulted by my telling them they have the best house in the village."

After dinner he went for a walk, and strolled along the pleasant shady street. There were many good houses, for Elmerton was an old village. Vessels had come into her harbour in bygone days, and substantial merchant captains had built the comfortable, roomy mansions which stretched their ample fronts under the drooping elms, while their back windows looked out over the sea, breaking at the very foot of their garden walls. But there was no house that compared, in the young doctor's mind, with the Temple of Vesta. He was walking slowly past it, admiring the delicate tracery on the white window-sills, when the door opened, and a lady came out. The young doctor observed her as she

came down the steps; it was his habit to observe everything. The lady was past sixty, tall and erect, and walked stiffly.

"Rheumatic!" said the young doctor, and ran over in his mind certain remedies which he had found effective in rheumatism.

She was dressed in sober gray silk, made in the fashion of thirty years before, and carried an ancient parasol with a deep silk fringe. As she reached the sidewalk she dropped her handkerchief. Standing still a moment, she regarded it with grave displeasure, then tried to take it up on the point of her parasol. In an instant the young doctor had crossed the street, picked up the handkerchief, and offered it to her with a bow and a pleasant smile.

"I thank you, sir!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth. "You are extremely obliging."

"Don't mention it, please!" said the young doctor. "It was a pleasure.

Have I the honour of speaking to Miss Blyth? I am Doctor Strong. Doctor

Stedman may have spoken to you of me."

"He has indeed done so!" said Miss Phoebe; and she held out her silk-gloved hand with dignified cordiality. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir. I shall hope to have the pleasure of welcoming you at my house at an early date."

"Thank you! I shall be most happy. May I walk along with you, as we seem to be going the same way? I have been admiring your house so very much, Miss Blyth. It is the finest specimen of its kind I have ever seen. How fine that tracery is over the windows; and how seldom you see a fan

so graceful as that! Should you object to my making a sketch of it some day? I'm very much interested in Colonial houses."

A faint red crept into Miss Phoebe's cheek; it was one of her dreams to have an oil-painting of her house. The young doctor had found a joint in her harness.

"I should be indeed pleased—" she began; and, being slightly fluttered, she dropped her handkerchief again, and again the young doctor picked it up and handed it to her.

"I am distressed!" said Miss Phoebe. "I am—somewhat hampered by rheumatism, Doctor Strong. It is not uncommon in persons of middle age."

"No, indeed! My mother—I mean my aunt—younger sister of my mother's—used to suffer terribly with rheumatism. I was fortunate enough to be able to relieve her a good deal. If you would like to try the prescription, Miss Blyth, it is entirely at your service. Not professionally, please understand, not professionally; a mere neighbourly attention. I hope we shall be neighbours. Don't mention it, please don't, because I shall be so glad, you know. Besides—you have a little look of my—aunt; she has very regular features."

Miss Phoebe thanked him with a rather tremulous dignity; he was a most courteous and attractive young man, but so impetuous, that she felt a disturbance of her cool blood. It was singular, though, how little dear Doctor Stedman had been able to do for her rheumatism, for as many years as he had been attending her. Perhaps newer methods—it must be confessed that Doctor Stedman was growing old.

"Where do you intend to lodge, Doctor Strong?" she asked, by way of changing the subject gracefully.

The young doctor did not know, was quite at a loss.

"There is only one house that I want to lodge in!" he said, and his bold face had grown suddenly timid, like a schoolboy's. "That is, of course there are plenty of good houses in the village, Miss Blyth, excellent houses, and excellent people in them, I have no doubt; but—well, there is only one house for me. You know what house I mean, Miss Blyth, because you know how one can feel about a really fine house. The moment I saw it I said, 'That is the house for me!' But Doctor Stedman said there was no possible chance of my getting taken in there."

"I really do not know how Doctor Stedman should speak with authority on the subject!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

Young doctor! young doctor! is this the way you are going to comport yourself in the village of Elmerton? If so, there will be flutterings indeed in the dove-cotes. Before night the whole village knew that the young doctor was going to board with the Blyth girls!

## CHAPTER II.

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## THE YOUNG DOCTOR

"And he certainly is a remarkable young man!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

"Is he not, Sister Vesta?"

Miss Vesta came out of her reverie; not with a start,—she never started,—but with the quiet awakening, like that of a baby in the morning, that was peculiar to her.

"Yes! oh, yes!" she said. "I consider him so. I think his coming providential."

"How so?" asked the visitor. There was a slight acidity in her tone, for Mrs. Weight was one of the motherly persons mentioned by the minister's wife, and had looked forward to caring for the young doctor herself. With her four children, all croupy, it would have been convenient to have a physician in the house, and as the wife of the senior deacon, what could be more proper?

"I must say he doesn't look remarkable," she added; "but the light-complected seldom do, to my mind."

"It is years," said Miss Vesta, "since Sister Phoebe has suffered so little with her rheumatism. Doctor Strong understands her constitution as no one else ever has done, not even dear Doctor Stedman. Sister Phoebe can stoop