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Chatelaine

A Magazine for Canadian Women

May
1932



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Circulation Now More Than 150,000 Net Paid Each Issue

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Title: The House

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery (1874-1942)

Date first posted: Apr. 7, 2017

Date last updated: Apr. 7, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170422

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The House

L. M. Montgomery

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First published *The Chatelaine*, May 1932.

Built by the man she loved for another woman—and then left deserted, it became the pivot for a strange romance

West Graydon people referred to it, when they remembered or mentioned it at all, as “North Pines” or “the old Conley place;” but to Alix it was always “The House”—as if there were no other house in West Graydon or in the world . . . as, indeed, there wasn’t for Alix.

She could not remember the time when it had not held her imagination in thrall and dominated her life. She had loved it when she was a child, living with her sister Sadie and their Aunt Charlotte in the little house opposite it—a lean, bare, ugly little house, so different in everything from the place across the street. The House had been very beautiful then, in still more beautiful grounds, and Alix was a born worshipper of beauty, perhaps because there was so little in her life. The House, white and stately amid its dark pines and its roses, behind the high board fence which even then was beginning to be thought old-fashioned, symbolized something for her which she could never define. She only knew she loved it as she would never love any other place.

When she was ten years old, all West Graydon was talking of the way Thekla Darrow had used Bevis Conley. Alix knew all about it when nobody suspected she knew anything or cared. She knew Bevis Conley and liked him; had liked him ever since that night two years before when she had been lost on the East Graydon road coming home from Aunt Ella’s. She had been so confident that she could come home alone, and then the darkness seemed to fall so suddenly—and she didn’t know which road to take at the fork—and a cold autumn wind was blowing. She was wild with terror of the falling night and the eerie wind and the huge, dark, pathless world around her. And then Bevis had come, and he had not laughed at her. He had taken her cold little hand in his warm one and suddenly she felt safe and protected and at home. He had brought her into West Graydon and on the way he had talked to her as nobody ever had before, as if she were grown up. He had told her he was an architect.

“All men dream,” he said. “My dream is to build beautiful homes for love to dwell in. Houses to keep lovers from the biting cold and the fierce sun and the dark night and loneliness.”

The words always lingered in Alix’s memory. It must be a fascinating thing to build houses, to create beauty that would last for generations, beauty that would be shelter and protection and friendliness as well as beauty.

“When I grow up,” she said shyly, “will you build me a house to live in?”

“That I will,” Bevis had promised gravely.

In two years time he was building a house for Thekla Darrow. For he made such changes in the old place he had always lived in that it practically amounted to

building anew. Among the old pines, behind the old, vine-hung fence, with its padlocked gate, The House arose in its new loveliness. Alix watched it grow with secret delight. She knew it was for Thekla, but in a sense it was for her, too, because she loved it so. Sometimes she resented the fact that Thekla was to have it. She felt sure Thekla did not—could not—never would love it as she loved it.

Perhaps that was because she did not like Thekla—Thekla, who called everybody darling but who was always saying nasty things to other girls so subtly and sweetly that she made a fool of you if you resented them. Thekla, with her red-gold hair, her brilliant white skin, her crimson mouth, her wonderful green eyes. Thekla was very beautiful, and Bevis, everyone knew, was wild about her. Aunt Charlotte and Sadie talked enough about that. Nevertheless, Alix did not like her and did not like the idea of her coming to be mistress of The House—The House that was all ready for her from cellar to attic in a fashion that made West Graydon throw up its hands in horror over Bevis Conley's extravagance. To be sure, he was doing well in his profession. But could even his income stand such lavish expenditure?

Then, a month before the day that was to have made her Bevis Conley's bride Thekla Darrow married another man, a very rich man. And Bevis Conley had locked his house and padlocked his gate and gone to Vancouver. That was fifteen years ago and he had never come back. Nor, so far as anybody knew, had any human being crossed the doorstep of the house he had made ready for his faithless bride. But even West Graydon people did not know everything. Alix had her own secret.

She had been sorry for Bevis when Thekla played him such a trick. But she could not help the queer, sudden, all-embracing gladness which overwhelmed her. Thekla would never have The House. When Bevis left it and went away it seemed to Alix that it was wholly her own. Nobody else loved it.

She did not tell this to anyone. Alix never told things. Aunt Charlotte and Sadie, who was her elder by ten years, thought Alix such a queer, silent, brooding child. They could not make anything of her and left her to her dreams. When Aunt Charlotte became an invalid and Sadie married Bronson Marlitt, Alix went on living with them, waiting on Aunt Charlotte in the ugly little house. But her real home was across the street.

When she was fifteen she had a sudden idea. She wondered if that old key in Aunt Charlotte's bureau drawer would unlock the side door of The House. She deliberately took it and tried it. She slipped through a broken board in the fence,

down the lane, and found herself in the garden—the garden that had been so lovely and was lovely still, though grown unkempt and weedy. With a wildly beating heart Alix went past the plot of poet's narcissus on the lawn, and along an old mossy walk where the unpruned rose bushes caught at her dress, to the side door of The House, hidden from sight of anyone behind the thick pines. She had no feeling of wrongdoing. The House was hers because she loved it so. She was only entering into her own.

The key unlocked the door. Alix went in reverently, adoringly. She went all over the house. Its proportions were so right. Its rooms were so graceful. They were not just rooms, they were personalities. And filled with lovely things. But the dust lay thick over everything. The next time Alix came she brought a duster and dusted everything—the books in the library, the dishes in the cabinet, the procession of little ivory elephants on the mantel, the gleaming mirror on the living room wall which was meant to reflect Thekla's gorgeous loveliness and now gave back only Alix's pale, flowerlike little face and great grey eyes. She went about boldly. All her timidity and shyness vanished from her the moment she stepped over the sill. This house was hers. She had rights here.

Her whole life came to revolve around The House and the beautiful stolen hours she spent there. After dark she would open the doors and let the sweet, fresh air blow through it. She kept its vases filled with flowers. She kept the brass and irons and the silver candlesticks polished. It made her happy to do these homely services for her House. Everything she did for it was a sacrament. She loved to stand before the little round window at the curve of the stairs and watch through a gap in the pines that glimpse of a far blue mountain. She loved to sit in the library, with its arched, clematis-hung windows, reading the books or dreaming dreams. When she went into The House and shut the door she went into a different world where the pettinesses of daily existence in the ugly Marlitt house were as if they had never been. This was her home. Here only she lived.

She never felt alone or frightened in it. The House was too much her friend. It welcomed her when she came. It longed for her when she left. And there always seemed to be some hidden meaning about it which lured her on. She was sure she would discover it some day.

She went there by twilight—by moonlight. Its rooms were so piteously lovely by moonlight. They asked her for a hundred things she could not give. All she could give was love and she gave that in abundance.

She loved The House when she looked across at it in the early morning sunshine. She loved it on summer noons and winter twilights. She loved it in moonlight and in

rain and in falling snow. She loved it when the sunset flame kindled its western windows into a fleeting semblance of life and color. But best of all she loved it in the darkness of night when it loomed palely clear through the gloom and beckoned to her. It was all her own then.

She resented the fact that it did not have all that other houses had. If only its windows could be lighted up! When the lights sprang up at dusk in all the other houses along the street she resented the fact that her House had none. She hated the winter because of The House. Its heart ached with the cold then. If only fires could glow on its hearths and plumes of homely smoke drift from its chimneys! If it could only live!

Aunt Charlotte died when Alix was twenty, but she lived on with Sadie and her family. She might have gone elsewhere and earned her own living and been independent. But she found excuses for not going easily enough. Sadie, who was not strong and had four children, needed help. But her real reason was that she could not leave The House.

Once Carl Playter wanted her to marry him. She liked Carl—she even thought she might love him. It would be very nice to have a home of one's own—children. She almost decided to marry Carl. She even went to The House one night to bid it farewell. And she found she could not. The very thought was unbearable. Never to come here any more. Never to feel its welcome—to know that the dust was thick again on mirror and books and ivory elephants—to know she could have no more hours of dear, strange companionship in it. Alix laughed at herself. She told Carl she could not marry him. Sadie thought her a goose and told her she would die an old maid. Alix only smiled. They did not know.

It seemed that Sadie's prediction would come true. No more lovers came. Alix did not miss them. Year by year The House meant more to her. Year by year she knew it depended more upon her. If she went away for a visit she was homesick until she could return to it. Nobody else might be particularly glad to see her back, but The House would. Once she was back she feasted her eyes on it until she was sated. It was seldom now that she could go to it in daylight. Sadie's children were growing up and they had keen eyes. Only at night was it safe to slip over. Once she had dared to stay there all night and know what dawn was like in it. It hurt her. It looked so pathetic and deserted and unfriended in that chill grey light. Not even her love could warm it.

She had loved The House for fifteen years. For fifteen years it had been hers and hers only. All at once everything was changed, horribly changed. West Graydon was

full of rumors. Thekla was coming home. Thekla was a wealthy widow. Bevis Conley was coming home. Thekla and Bevis were going to be married after all. They were going to live at "North Pines." Well, well, quite a fitting end to an old romance, if Bevis could forgive the trick she had played on him. He had never cared for anyone else. The Conleys were like that.

Alix felt stunned. It was unthinkable. The House could not be taken from her so. It would be too cruel, too unjust. God could not let such a thing happen. She had loved it so long when others had deserted and neglected it. She had given it her youth and the love of husband and children that might have been hers. Surely it was not going to be taken from her now. She was sick with fear and agony.

Thekla came one day. She was as beautiful as ever. Looking but little older, a slender, sinuous creature, with a blood-red flower pinned at her girdle and on her arm the slender flame of a diamond bracelet that was worth as much as The House. Bought with dead Eric Malden's money!

Lovely, exotic, charming. Beside her, Alix realized how very insignificant and unimportant she was.

Thekla wanted to look over The House. She had got a key somewhere and she contrived to give the impression, without saying so, that she had a perfect right to look over The House. She wanted Sadie to go with her. But Sadie was away, so Alix must go. At first Alix almost refused. Then she went. She knew Thekla would go anyway and she must go with her, to protect The House from her as long as she could.

"Isn't it curious," said Thekla—Alix noticed that her voice was harder than it used to be—"I mean, coming to see a house that was made ready for me fifteen years ago? I suppose everything in it is frightfully out of date now. Fancy a jail fence like this around a house nowadays. Bevis always had an odd liking for a fence. He said it shut out the world. As if one should want to shut out the world! How out-at-elbows the place has got! The grounds so neglected . . . and so quaint and old-fashioned. But they could easily be modernized. The house itself is quite delightful . . . all it wants is a bit of remodelling here and there."

Alix, her heart bleeding drop by drop, looked at The House and saw it with Thekla's eyes. Yes, shabby and faded. The shingles on the roof were curling up. The verandah had sagged. The garden was a mass of festering weeds. But she hated Thekla for making her see it—Thekla who was going to modernize and tear up and rebuild and change and patch.

Alix had to see Thekla go into every room, laughing, exclaiming, jesting in her casual way. She paused before the tall mirror. Alix saw herself standing by Thekla

and could have laughed, only she knew she was never going to laugh again. As if she could rival that brilliant creature in the heart of The House! Thekla belonged there, amid those splendors. She, Alix, was only a faded little interloper.

“You know the old story about Bevis and me, I suppose,” Thekla was saying, her great eyes shimmering like green fires. “I did treat him shamefully. And I never cared for anybody else—really. But he was poor . . . he had spent everything he had on this house. And Eric was rich. Really, it would have been madness to refuse so much money, Alix. But there have been times . . . well, it’s all going to come right now. Bevis has never cared for anyone but me. I’m going to make it up to him. We’re both young yet. People don’t grow old as quickly as they used to, except in places like West Graydon. We’ll only live here in the summers, of course. Isn’t it odd there is no dust? I would have supposed it would be inch deep. But then it’s so far off the street. Most of this furniture will have to be scrapped; it’s hopelessly out of date. But that Tudor bedstead is quite priceless and that old wrought-iron lantern in the hall. The cabinet of Crown Derby, too. The library is good and this mirror is charming. That east bedroom looking out on the mountain would be lovely done over in rose and grey and the south one must be in taupe. A wall or two must be knocked out, of course.”

Alix found herself speaking out. She had to speak out. She locked her hands behind her back so that Thekla should not see them trembling.

“How can you talk of changing everything, Thekla?” she exclaimed passionately. “It was made ready for you. It has waited all these years for you. Nothing should be changed—nothing!”

Thekla’s desecrating laugh again echoed through the house. Her heavy eyelids, with the intriguing parallel crease in them that was considered so fascinating, flickered with amusement.

“Little sentimentalist,” she drawled. “You are like Bevis in that. He used to be abominably sentimental. It bored me. I’m sure he’s wiser now. What is the matter, Alix? Aren’t you well?”

“No—I—I think the air is too close here,” gasped Alix. She could bear no more. She must get away—at once—anywhere—out of the sight of Thekla—out of the sound of her voice. Otherwise she would strike her in the face. She knew she would. Standing there, insolent, unrepentant, claiming everything as hers by right, with her heart so cold that the red flower near it ought to die as a flower on a frosty drift. She had broken Bevis Conley’s heart. She had left his house desolate. And now she was going to come back and have everything. There was no justice anywhere in the world.

Alix fairly ran down the hall and out of the door, out of The House. For the first time she was glad to be out of The House. It was desecrated. It was no longer hers. There was nothing left for her in life—nothing. Where could she go? Where could she hide herself?

Bevis Conley was coming home. He was to arrive on Wednesday night. On Tuesday night Alix stole over to bid The House farewell. After that nothing mattered. Perhaps God would be kind—even if He were not just—and let her die when she had nothing to live for.

The House looked very beautiful in the moonlight that touched it here and there through the pines with silver fingers. The old doorstep was listening for her footfall. It still welcomed her; it was still hers. But after tonight it would be hers no longer. She would never come here again. She would go out and shut the door and never reopen it. She had finished with it and the past that was linked with it.

Alix stood in the garden, rich and dim in the moonlight, and looked about her despairingly. It should not be. Thekla ought not to have The House—she had never loved it. She could never have the soul of it—she could never understand it. And she would tear it up—change it.

Alix wrung her hands together with a bitter little cry.

“Oh, dear House, you won’t forget me utterly when I’m gone—all the hours we’ve spent together—how I’ve loved you! You’ll always remember me a little even when Thekla has you—even though I can never come back to you again, dear, dear House.”

“I’m sure it will,” said a voice from the shadows beside her.

Alix looked up with a gasp. Bevis was standing there. She knew him instantly. And with the knowledge came just that same dear sense of protection and understanding that had come that night so long ago on the lonely road. In the dim, friendly light he looked no older. She forgot that it was fifteen years since he had gone away. She had no sense of strangerhood, no sense of convention.

“Oh, Bevis,” she cried, “you won’t let Thekla change it much, will you? Not very much. It is so perfect as it is. Don’t let her change it, please.”

Bevis laughed.

“I don’t know what you mean, Alix. For it is Alix, I know; little grey-eyed Alix whom I found years ago in the twilight and never quite lost since. Nobody is going to change this house, least of all Thekla Malden.”

“But she said—she said—”

“I understand she has been talking a great deal of nonsense,” said Bevis coolly.

“I don’t think that I’d have chosen just this time to come home if I’d known she was to be here. But it doesn’t matter much. Eric Malden’s gay widow is nothing to me. Do you know why I came back, Alix? Or, rather, why I was drawn back almost against my will?”

“To see your house,” laughed Alix softly. That understood itself. Of course he loved it, just as she did. But she did not resent his love. He belonged there, too.

“No, not the house. I came because your eyes called me, Alix. Those great, grey, entreating eyes of yours have haunted me all these years, after my mad infatuation for Thekla had burned itself into ashes. I thought I would come back and find out if they were still asking for something, and if it were something I could give.”

“Oh!” Alix trembled. She put out her cold little hands, as she had put them out to him that evening so long ago. He enfolded them in his warm clasp.

“You seem to have been loving this house, Alix. You seem to have been coming here and caring for it. Why, I knew the house had been loved the minute I saw it.”

“Oh, I’ve loved it so,” whispered Alix.

“Then you must keep on loving it. It’s your house. I may have built its body but you’ve given it its soul. I wouldn’t presume to claim breathing space in it, unless you’ll let me. Will you give me a share in it, Alix?”

Alix wondered if anybody ever died of happiness. The House was hers—and Bevis’s. It belonged to them and they to it. It would live. They would give it life. It was putting its arms around them . . . enclosing . . . enveloping.

“I’ve been keeping its heart beating for you, Bevis,” she whispered.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The House* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]