

THE HOUSEKEEPER



MARCH
1907

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Paul, Shy Man

L. M. Montgomery

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Adapted with considerable changes, into Chapter XXV of *The Golden Road*, under the title *The Love Story of the Awkward Man*.



Paul Marshall lived alone at his old homestead beyond the brook. He had lived there alone since his mother died; he had been twenty then and he was close upon forty now, although he did not look it, so unwrinkled was his high white forehead, so clear and lustrous his large, dark-blue eyes, free from silver threads his thick, long brown hair. But neither could it be said that he looked young; he had never at any time looked young with common youth; there had always been something in his appearance that stamped him as different from the ordinary run of men and, apart from his shyness, built up an intangible, invisible barrier between him and his kind. He had lived all his life in Netherby; and all the Netherby people really knew about or of him—although they thought they knew everything—was that he was painfully, abnormally shy. He never went anywhere except to church; he never took part in Netherby's simple social life; even with men he was distant and uncomfortable; as for women, he never spoke to or looked at them; if one spoke to him, even if she were a matronly old mother in Israel, he was at once in an agony of painful blushes. He had no friends in the sense of companions; to all outward appearance his life was solitary and devoid of any human interest.

He had no housekeeper; but his old house, furnished as it had been in his mother's lifetime, was cleanly and daintily kept. The quaint rooms were as free from dust and disorder as a woman could have had them. This was known, because Paul occasionally had old Mrs. Quigley to come in and scrub for him. He always sent his hired man—who lived in his own house down the road—for her, and on the morning she was expected he betook himself to the woods and fields, returning only at nightfall. During his absence Mrs. Quigley was frankly wont to explore the house from cellar to attic and her report of its condition was always the same—"neat as wax." To be sure, there was one room which was always locked against her—the west gable, looking out on the garden and the hill of pointed firs beyond. But Mrs. Quigley knew that in the lifetime of Paul's mother the room had been unfurnished. She supposed it still remained so and felt no especial curiosity concerning it, although she always tried the door.

Paul Marshall had a small farm, well-cultivated; he had a large garden where he worked most of his leisure moments in summer; it was supposed that he read a great deal, since the postmistress declared that he was always getting books and magazines by mail. He seemed well contented with his existence and people let him alone, since that was the greatest kindness they could do him. It was un-supposable

that he would ever marry; nobody ever had supposed it.

“Paul Marshall never so much as *thought* about a woman,” Netherby oracles declared. Oracles, however, are not always to be trusted.

One day—it was in the spring before Alice Reid came to Netherby—Mrs. Quigley went away from the Marshall place with a very curious story which she diligently spread far and wide wherever her labors took her. It made a good deal of talk, but people, although they listened eagerly enough and wondered and questioned, were rather incredulous about it. They thought Mrs. Quigley must be drawing considerably upon her imagination; there were not lacking those who declared that she had invented the whole account, since her reputation for strict veracity was not wholly unquestioned.

Mrs. Quigley’s story was this:—

She had gone to the Marshall place to scrub the kitchen and cut potato sets for the spring planting. Before going home in the evening she had made her usual peregrination of the house; as usual had tried the door of the west gable, expecting to find it locked, likewise as usual. It was not locked. The door yielded to her hand and, opening it, Mrs. Quigley stepped into the west gable room.

If she had found herself in a veritable Bluebeard’s chamber, with beautiful wives hanging by the hair of their heads all around the walls, she could hardly have felt more astonished. Instead of the bare walls and collection of odds and ends she had expected to see she found herself in a finely furnished room. Mrs. Quigley had never seen its like in a country farmhouse. It seemed to be a combination of bedroom and sittingroom. The floor was covered with a velvety moss green carpet and several fine rugs. Delicate lace curtains hung before the small, square, broad-silled windows. The walls were adorned with pictures in much finer taste than Mrs. Quigley was fitted to appreciate. In one corner was a little white bed, in another a white dressing table with an oval swinging mirror. There was a low bookcase between the windows filled with choicely bound books. Beside it stood a little table with a very dainty feminine work basket on it. By the basket Mrs. Quigley’s all-seeing eye took instant note of a pair of tiny scissors and a silver thimble. A wicker rocker, comfortable with silk cushions, was near it. Above the bookcase a woman’s picture hung—a water color, if Mrs. Quigley had but known it—representing a pale, very sweet face, with large dark eyes and a wistful expression, under loose masses of black, lustrous hair. Just beneath the picture on the top shelf of the bookcase was a vase full of fresh white and yellow daffodils. Another vaseful stood on the table beside the basket.

All this was amazing enough. But what completely puzzled Mrs. Quigley was the fact that a woman’s dress was hanging over a chair before the mirror—a pale blue

silken affair, such as Paul Marshall's hard-working, economical mother had certainly never possessed. And on the floor beside it were two little high-heeled, white satin slippers!

Good Mrs. Quigley did not leave the room until she had thoroughly explored it, even to shaking out the blue dress and discovering it to be a tea-gown—wrapper she called it. But she found nothing to throw any light on the mystery. The fact that the simple name "Alice" was written on the fly-leaves of all the books only deepened it, for it was a name unknown in the Marshall family. In this puzzled state she was obliged to depart, nor did she ever find the door unlocked again; and, discovering that people thought she was romancing when she talked about the mysterious west gable at the Marshall place, she indignantly held her peace concerning the whole affair.

But Mrs. Quigley had told no more than the simple truth. Paul Marshall, under all his shyness and aloofness, possessed a nature full of delicate romance and poesy, which, denied expression in the common ways of life, bloomed out in the realm of fancy and imagination. Left alone, just when the boy's nature was deepening into the man's, he turned to this ideal kingdom for all the real world could never give him. Love—a strange, almost mystical love—played its part here for him. He shadowed forth to himself the vision of a woman, loving and beloved; he cherished it until it became as real to him as his own personality; he gave this dream woman the name he liked best—Alice. In fancy he walked and talked with her, spoke words of love to her and heard words of love in return. When he came from work at the close of the day she met him at his threshold in the twilight—a strange, fair, starry shape—with welcome on her lips and in her eyes.

One day, when he was in a near-by town on business he had been struck by a picture in the window of an art store. It was strangely like the woman of his dream love. He went in, awkward and embarrassed, and bought it. When he took it home he did not know where to put it. It was out of place among the dim old engravings of bewigged portraits and conventional landscapes on the walls of his homestead. As he pondered the matter in his garden that evening he had an inspiration. The sunset, flaming on the windows of the west gable, kindled them into burning rose. Amid the splendor he fancied Alice's fair face peeping archly down at him from the room. The inspiration came then. It should be her room; he would fit it up for her as became her; and her picture should hang there.

He was all summer carrying out his plan. Nobody must know or suspect, so he must go slowly and secretly. One by



*SHE GAVE A LITTLE CHOKING CRY THAT
BETRAYED HER PRESENCE.*

one the furnishings were purchased and brought home under cover of darkness. He arranged them with his own hands. He bought the books he thought she would like best and wrote her name in them; he got the little feminine knickknacks of basket and thimble. Finally he saw at a big department store a pale blue tea-gown and the white slippers. He always fancied her as dressed in blue. He bought them and took them home to her room. Thereafter it was sacred to her; he always knocked on its door before he entered; he kept it sweet with fresh flowers; he sat there in the purple summer twilights and talked aloud to her or read his favorite books to her. In his fancy she sat opposite him in her rocker, clad in the trailing blue gown, with her head leaning on one slender white hand.

But Netherby people knew nothing of this—would have thought him tinged with mild lunacy if they had known. To them, he was just the shy, simple farmer he appeared. They never knew or guessed at the real Paul.

In the July after Mrs. Quigley's discoveries in the west gable, Alice Reid came to teach in the Netherby school. She was a stranger and Netherby gossip soon found out that she was alone in the world. The children worshipped her but the grown people thought she was a little too distant and reserved for a school

teacher. They had been used to merry, jolly girls who had joined eagerly in the social life of the district. Alice Reid held herself somewhat aloof from it—not disdainfully nor offensively, but rather as one to whom these things were of small importance. She was very fond of books and solitary rambles; she was not at all shy but she was as sensitive as a flower; and after a time Netherby people were content to live their own life and no longer resented her unlikeness to themselves.

Previously the Netherby teachers had boarded with Robert Campbell's, near the school. Mrs. Campbell having died, a change became necessary; so it chanced that Alice Reid went to board with the Armstrongs who lived beyond the Marshall farm around the hill of the pointed firs. By the main road it was a mile to the school; but down the fir hill, across the bridge over the brook formed of a single mossy log, by Paul Marshall's garden, and out through his lane was only half a mile. This was the way Alice Reid took; and the first day she went by, Paul Marshall was working in his garden.

He was on his knees before a bush gloried over with pale pink roses; he had knelt to stir the mellow earth about its roots but he remained to worship the beauty of the opening buds.

It was a still summer morning; the world was rosy with young bloom; a little wind blew down from the firs and lost itself willingly among the delights of the garden. The sky was high and blue and cloudless. The clover fields below were still wet with dew. Birds were singing along the valley of the brook. Paul Marshall's heart was filled to overflowing with a realization of the wonderful loveliness all around him; the feeling of his soul had the sacredness of a prayer. At this moment he looked up and saw Alice Reid.

She was standing outside of the garden fence, under the tremulous shade of a silver maple, looking, not at him for she was unaware of his presence, but at the flowers in the garden with all her delight in them outblossoming freely in her face. For a moment Paul Marshall believed that his dream love had taken visible shape and incarnation. She was like—so like; not in feature, perhaps, but in coloring and grace—the grace of a slender, lissome form and the coloring of cloudy hair and wistful dark eyes and curving red mouth; and more than all, in expression, in the subtle revelation of personality exhaling from her like an atmosphere. It was as if his own had come to him at last and his whole soul suddenly leaped out to meet and welcome her.

Then her eyes fell upon him and the spell was broken. Paul remained kneeling mutely there, shy man once more, crimson with blushes, a strange, almost pitiful creature in his abject confusion. A little smile flickered about the delicate corners of

her mouth but she turned and walked swiftly away down the lane.

Paul looked after her with a new, painful sense of loss and loneliness. It had been agony to feel her conscious eyes upon him but he remembered now that there had been a strange sweetness in it, too. It was still greater pain to watch her going from him.

He knew she must be the new teacher but he did not even know her name. She had been dressed in blue, too, a pale, dainty blue; but that was of course; he had known she must wear it; and he was sure her name must be Alice. When, later on, he discovered that it was, he felt no surprise.

He carried some roses up to the west gable and put them under the picture. But the charm had gone out of the tribute; and, looking at the picture, he thought how scant was the justice it did her. Her face was so much sweeter, her eyes so much softer, her hair so much more lustrous. The soul of his love had gone from the picture and from the room and from his dress. When he tried to think of the Alice he had loved he saw, not the shadowy spirit occupant of the west gable, but the young girl who had stood under the silver maple. He did not then realize what this meant; had he realized it he would have suffered bitterly; as it was, he felt only a vague discomfort—a curious sense of loss and gain commingled.

He saw her again that afternoon on her way home from school. She did not pause by the garden but walked swiftly past. Thereafter, every morning and evening for a week he watched unseen to see her pass his home. Once a little child was with her, clinging to her hand—the Armstrong “baby” who had gone to school for a day out of love for the teacher. No child had ever before had any part in the shy man’s dream life. But that night in the twilight the vision of the rocking chair was a girl in a blue print dress with a little golden-haired shape at her knee—a shape that lisped and prattled and called her “mother.” And both of them were his.

It was the next day that he failed for the first time to put flowers in the west gable. Instead, he cut white roses lavishly and added to them a spray of yellow honeysuckle. Then, looking furtively about him as if he were committing a crime, he crept down to the brook and laid the flowers at the root of a beech which sprang up at the end of the fallen log. She must pass that way; her feet would crush them if she failed to see them. Then he hurried back, half repenting, half exultant.

In the evening when he stole down again to the bridge the flowers were gone. Thereafter he put some in the same place every day.

When Alice Reid had seen the roses on the bridge she had known at once who had put them there and divined that they were for her. She lifted them tenderly in much surprise and pleasure. She had heard all about Paul Marshall and his shyness;

but before she had heard about him she had seen him among his flowers for a fleeting moment, unconscious and unafraid, and had liked him. She thought his face and his dark blue eyes beautiful; she even liked the long brown hair that Netherby people laughed at. That he was quite different from other people she understood at once but she thought the difference was in his favor. Perhaps her sensitive nature at once divined and responded to the beauty in his. At least, in her eyes Paul Marshall was never a ridiculous figure.

When she heard the story of the west gable, which most people disbelieved, she believed it, although she did not understand it. It invested the shy man with interest and romance. She felt that there was a mystery which she would have liked, out of no impertinent curiosity, to solve; she believed that it contained the key to his character.

She carried his roses home and put them in her room; the honeysuckle she fastened on her breast and its elusive perfume attended her wherever she went.

Thereafter every day she found flowers on the bridge—roses or lilies, clove pinks or pansies, carnations or geraniums. The flowers were always sweet and fragrant—never anything scentless or flaunting. She wished to see Paul to thank him, unaware that he watched her daily from the screen of shrubbery in his garden; but it was six weeks before she found the opportunity. One Saturday afternoon she passed, when he, not expecting her, was leaning on his garden fence with a book in his hand. She stopped under the maple.

“Mr. Marshall,” she said softly, “I want to thank you for your flowers.”

Paul, startled, wished that he might sink through the ground. His anguish of embarrassment made her smile a little. He could not speak so she went on gently, “It has been so good of you. They have given me so much pleasure—I wish you could know how much.”

“It was nothing—nothing,” stammered Paul. His book had fallen to the ground at her feet and she picked it up and held it out to him.

“So you like Ruskin,” she said. “I do too. But I haven’t read this.”

“If you—would care—to read it—you may have it,” Paul contrived to say.

She carried the book away with her. He did not again hide when she passed and when she brought the book back they talked about it a little over the fence. He lent her others and received some from her in return; they fell into the habit of discussing them. Paul did not find it hard to talk to her now; it seemed as if he were talking to his dream Alice and it came strangely natural to him. He did not talk volubly but Alice thought what he did say was worth while. His words lingered in her memory and made music. She always found his flowers at the bridge and she always wore

some of them but she did not know if he noticed this or not.

The summer waned and the autumn flamed itself out in gold and crimson. When the winter came there were no more flowers and it was too cold to linger under the leafless maple. But one afternoon Paul walked shyly with her from his gate to the bridge. After that he always walked down with her. She would have missed him much if he had failed; yet it did not occur to her that she was learning to love him. She would have laughed with girlish scorn at the idea. She liked him very much; she thought his nature beautiful in its simplicity and transparency. In spite of his shyness she felt more delightfully at home in his society than in that of any other person she had ever met. But she never thought of love. Like other girls she had her dreams of a possible Prince Charming, young, handsome and debonair. It never occurred to her that he might be found in the shy, dreamy recluse of the garden below the hill of the pointed firs.

When spring came there was a fresh day of breeze and blue, when the world awakened and laughed in the sunshine. Alice Reid, coming down through the firs, with the wind blowing her little dark love-locks tricksily about under her wide blue hat, found the first May flowers of the year, pink and white stars of sweetness, amid their russet leaves, laid for her in a fragrant heap at the root of the old beech. She lifted them and buried her face in them, draining their perfume as from a cup brimmed over with incense.

She hoped Paul would be in his garden since she wished to ask him for a book necessary in her school work that day. When she reached it she saw him sitting on an old stone bench at the further side. His back was towards her and he was partially screened by a copse of budding lilac trees.

Alice, blushing slightly, unlatched the garden gate and went down the path. She had never been in the garden before and she found her heart beating in a strange fashion.

He did not hear her footsteps and she was close behind him when she heard his voice and realized that he was talking aloud to himself, in a low dreamy tone. As the meaning of his words fell on her ear she started and grew crimson. She could not move or speak; as one in a dream she stood and listened to the shy man's reverie, guiltless of any thought of eavesdropping.

"How much I love you, Alice," Paul Marshall was saying, unafraid, with no shyness in tone or manner. "I wonder what you would say if you knew. You would laugh at me—sweet as you are, you would laugh in mockery. I can never tell you. I can only dream of telling you. In my dream you are standing here by me, dear. I can see you very plainly, my sweet lady. So tall and gracious, with your dark hair and

your drooping eyes. I can dream that I tell you my love, that—sweetest, maddest dream of all—you love me in return. Everything is possible in dreams, you know, dear. My dreams are all I have so I go far with them, even to thinking you are my wife. I dream how I shall fix up my dull old house for you. One room will need nothing more—it is your room, dear, and has been ready for you a long time—long before that day I saw you under the maple. Your books and your flowers and your picture are there, dear,—only the picture is not half lovely enough. But the other rooms of the house must be made to bloom out freshly for you. What a delight it is thus to dream of what I should do for you! Then I would bring you home, dear, and lead you through my garden and into my house as its mistress. I would see you standing beside me in the old mirror at the end of the hall—a bride, in your pale blue dress, with a blush on your face. I would lead you through all the rooms made ready for your coming and then to your own. I would see you sitting in your own chair and all my dreams would find rich fulfillment in that royal moment. Oh, Alice, we would have a beautiful life together! It's sweet to make believe about it. You will sing to me in the twilights and we will gather flowers together in spring days. When I come home from work, tired, you will put your arms about me and lay your head on my shoulder. I will stroke it—so—that bonny, glossy head of yours. Alice, my Alice—all mine in my dreams—never to be mine in real life—how I love you!”

The Alice behind him could hear no more. She gave a little choking cry that betrayed her presence. Paul Marshall sprang up and gazed upon her. He saw her standing there, under the fine misty shadows of spring, pale with feeling, wide-eyed, trembling.

For a moment shyness wrung him. Then a sudden strange fierce anger surged over him and banished every trace of it. He felt outraged and hurt to the death; he felt as if he had been cheated out of something incalculably precious, as if sacrilege had been done to his most holy sanctuary of emotion. White, tense with his anger, he looked at her and spoke.

“How dare you! You have spied on me—you have crept in and listened! How dare you! Do you know what you have done, girl? You have destroyed all that made life worth while to me. My dream is dead. It could not live when it was betrayed. It was all I had. Oh, laugh at me—mock me! I know that I am ridiculous. What of it? It never could have hurt you! Why must you creep in like this to hear me and put me to shame?—Oh, I love you—I will say it, laugh as you will. Is it such a strange thing that I should have a heart like other men? This will make sport for you! I, who love you better than my life, better than any other man in the world can love you, will be a jest to you all your life. And yet I think I could hate you—you have destroyed my

dream—you have done me deadly wrong!”

“Paul! Paul!” cried Alice, finding her voice. His anger hurt her with a pain she could not endure. It was unbearable that Paul should be angry with her. In that moment she realized that she loved him; that the words he had spoken when unconscious of her presence were the sweetest she had ever heard or ever could hear. Nothing mattered at all, save that he loved her and was angry with her.

“Don’t say such dreadful things,” she stammered. “I did not mean to listen. I could not help it. I shall never laugh at you—oh, Paul, I’m *glad* you love me. And I’m glad I chanced to overhear you since you would never have had the courage to tell me otherwise. Glad—glad—do you understand, Paul!”

“Is it possible?” he said wonderingly. “Alice—I’m so much older than you—and they call me strange and unlike other people—”

“You *are* unlike other people,” she said, looking at him finely and bravely, “and that is why I love you. I know now that I must have loved you ever since I saw you.”

“I loved you long before I saw you,” said Paul. “You came to me as the fulfillment of my dream.”

He came close to her and drew her into his arms, tenderly and reverently, all his shyness and awkwardness swallowed up in the grace of his great happiness. In the old garden he kissed her lips and Alice entered into her own.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Paul, Shy Man* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]