

# Anna's Love Letters

L.M. MONTGOMERY

"Are you going to answer Gilbert's letter tonight, Anna?" asked Alma Williams, standing in the pantry doorway, tall, fair and gray-eyed, with the sunset light coming down over the dark firs, through the window behind her and making a primrose nimbus around her shapely head.

Anna, dark, vivid and slender, was perched on the edge of the table, idly swinging her slippered foot at the cat's head. She smiled wickedly at Alma before replying.

"I am not going to answer it tonight or any other night," she said, twisting her full, red lips in a way that Alma had learned to dread. Mischief was ripening in Anna's brain when that twist was out.

"What do you mean?" asked Alma anxiously.

"Just what I say, dear," responded Anna, with deceptive meekness. "Poor Gilbert is gone, and I don't intend to bother my head about him any longer. He was amusing while he lasted; but of what use is a beau two thousand miles away, Alma?"

Alma was patient — outwardly. It was never of any avail to show impatience with Anna.

"Anna, you are talking foolishly. Of course you are going to answer his letter. You are as good as engaged to him. Wasn't that practically understood when he left?"

"No, no, dear," and Anna shook her sleek, black head with the air of explaining matters to an obtuse child. "I was the only one who understood. Gil *mis*understood. He thought that I would really wait for him until he should have made enough money to come home and pay off the mortgage. I let him think so, because I hated to hurt his little feelings. But now it's off with the old love and on with a new one for me."

"Anna, you cannot be in earnest!" exclaimed Alma.

But she was afraid that Anna was in earnest. Anna had a wretched habit of being in earnest when she said flippant things.

"You don't mean that you are not going to write to Gilbert at all — after all you promised?"

Anna placed her elbows daintily on the top of the rocking chair, dropped her pointed chin in her hands and looked at Alma with black demure eyes.

"I — do — mean — just — that," she said slowly. "I never mean to marry Gilbert Murray. This is final, Alma, and you need not scold or coax, because it would be a waste of breath. Gilbert is safely out of the way, and now I am going to have a good time with a few other

delightful men creatures in Exeter.”

Anna nodded decisively, flashed a smile at Alma, picked up her cat and went out. At the door she turned and looked back with the big, black cat snuggled under her chin.

“If you think Gilbert will feel very badly over his letter not being answered, you might answer it yourself, Alma,” she said teasingly. “There it is — ” she took the letter from the pocket of her ruffled apron and threw it on a chair. “You may read it if you want to; it isn’t really a love letter. I told Gilbert he wasn’t to write silly letters. Come pussy, I’m going to get ready for prayer meeting. We’ve got a nice, new, young, good-looking minister in Exeter, pussy; and that makes prayer meeting *very* interesting.”

Anna shut the door, her departing laugh rippling mockingly through the dusk. Alma picked up Gilbert Murray’s letter and went to her room. She wanted to cry, since she could not shake Anna. Even if she could have shook her, it would only have made her more perverse. Anna was in earnest; Alma knew that, even while she hoped and believed that it was but the earnestness of a freak that would pass in time. Anna had had one like it a year ago, when she had cast Gilbert off for three months, driving him distracted by flirting with Charlie Moore. Then she had suddenly repented and taken him back. Alma thought that this whim would run its course likewise and leave a repentant Anna. But, meanwhile, everything might be spoiled. Gilbert might not prove forgiving a second time.

Alma would have given much if she could only have induced Anna to answer Gilbert’s letter; but coaxing Anna to do anything was a very sure and effective way of preventing her from doing it.

Alma and Anna had lived alone at the old Williams homestead ever since their mother’s death four years before. Exeter matrons thought this hardly proper, since Alma, in spite of her grave ways, was only twenty-four. The farm was rented, so that Alma’s only responsibilities were the post office which she kept, and that harum-scarum beauty of an Anna.

The Murray homestead adjoined theirs. Gilbert Murray had grown up with Alma; they had been friends ever since she could remember. Alma loved Gilbert with a love which she herself believed to be purely sisterly, and which nobody else doubted could be, since she had been at pains to make a match — Exeter matrons’ phrasing — between Gil and Anna, and was manifestly delighted when Gilbert obligingly fell in love with the latter.

There was a small mortgage on the Murray place which Mr. Murray senior had not been able to pay off. Gilbert determined to get rid of it, and his thoughts turned to the West. His father was an active, hale old man, quite capable of managing the farm in Gilbert’s absence. Alexander MacNair had gone to the West two years previously and got work on a new railroad. He wrote to Gilbert to come too, promising him

plenty of work and good pay. Gilbert went; but before going he had asked Anna to marry him.

It was the first proposal Anna had ever had, and she managed it quite cleverly from her standpoint. She told Gilbert that he must wait until he came home again before settling that; meanwhile, they would be *very* good friends — emphasized with a blush — and that he might write to her. She kissed him good-bye, and Gilbert, honest fellow, was quite satisfied. When an Exeter girl had allowed so much to be inferred, it was understood to be equivalent to an engagement. Gilbert had never discerned that Anna was not like the other Exeter girls, but was a law unto herself.

Alma sat down by her window and looked out over the lane where the slim, wild cherry trees were bronzing under the autumn frosts. Her lips were very firmly set. Something must be done. But what?

Alma's heart was set on this marriage for two reasons. Firstly, if Anna married Gilbert she would be near her all her life. She could not bear the thought that some day Anna might leave her and go far away to live. In the second and largest place, she desired the marriage because Gilbert did. She had always been desirous, even in the old, childish play-days, that Gilbert should get just exactly what he wanted. She had always taken a keen, strange delight in furthering his wishes. Anna's falseness would surely break his heart, and Alma winced at the thought of his pain.

There was one thing she could do. Anna's tormenting suggestion had fallen on fertile soil. Alma balanced pros and cons, admitting the risk. But she would have taken a ten-fold larger risk in the hope of holding secure Anna's place in Gilbert's affections until Anna herself should come to her senses.

When it grew quite dark and Anna had gone liting down the lane on her way to prayer meeting, Alma lighted her lamp, read Gilbert's letter — and answered it. Her handwriting was much like Anna's. She signed the letter "A. Williams," and there was nothing in it that might not have been written by her to Gilbert; but she knew that Gilbert would believe Anna had written it, and she intended him so to believe. Alma never did a thing half-way when she did it at all. At first she wrote rather constrainedly, but, reflecting that in any case Anna would have written a merely friendly letter, she allowed her thoughts to run freely, and the resulting epistle was an excellent one of its kind. Alma had the gift of expression and more brains than Exeter people had ever imagined she possessed. When Gilbert read that letter a fortnight later he was surprised to find that Anna was so clever. He had always, with a secret regret, thought her much inferior to Alma in this respect; but that delightful letter, witty, wise, fanciful, was the letter of a clever woman.

When a year had passed Alma was still writing to Gilbert the letters signed "A. Williams." She had ceased to fear being found out, and

she took a strange pleasure in the correspondence for its own sake. At first she had been quakingly afraid of discovery. When she smuggled the letters addressed in Gilbert's handwriting to Miss Anna Williams out of the letter packet and hid them from Anna's eyes, she felt as guilty as if she were breaking all the laws of the land at once. To be sure, she knew that she would have to confess to Anna some day, when the latter repented and began to wish she had written Gilbert, but that was a very different thing from premature disclosure.

But Anna had as yet given no sign of such repentance, although Alma looked for it anxiously. Anna was having the time of her life. She was the acknowledged beauty of five settlements, and she went forward on her career of conquest quite undisturbed by the jealousies and heart-burnings she provoked on every side.

One moonlight night she went for a sleighdrive with Charlie Moore of East Exeter — and returned to tell Anna that they were married!

"I knew you would make a fuss, Alma, because you don't like Charlie; so we just took matters into our own hands. It was so much more romantic, too. I'd always said I'd never be married in any of your dull, commonplace ways. You might as well forgive me and be nice right off, Alma, because you'd have to do it, anyway, in time. Well, you do look surprised!"

Alma accepted the situation with an apathy that amazed Anna. The truth was that Alma was stunned by a thought that had come to her even while Anna was speaking.

"Gilbert will find out about the letters now, and despise me."

Nothing else, not even the fact that Anna had married shiftless Charlie Moore, seemed worth while considering beside this. The fear and shame of it haunted her like a nightmare; she shrank every morning from the thought of all the mail that was coming that day, fearing that there would be an angry, puzzled letter from Gilbert. He must certainly soon hear of Anna's marriage; he would see it in the home paper; other correspondents in Exeter would write him of it. Alma grew sick at heart thinking of the complications in front of her.

When Gilbert's letter came she left it for a whole day before she could summon courage to open it. But it was a harmless epistle, after all; he had not yet heard of Anna's marriage. Alma had at first no thought of answering it, yet her fingers ached to do so. Now that Anna was gone, her loneliness was unbearable. She realized how much Gilbert's letters had meant to her, even when written to another woman. She could bear her life well enough, she thought, if she only had his letters to look forward to.

No more letters came from Gilbert for six weeks. Then came one, alarmed at Anna's silence, anxiously asking the reason for it. Gilbert had heard no word of the marriage. He was working in a remote district where newspapers seldom penetrated. He had no other correspondent in Exeter now except his mother, and she, not knowing that he supposed

himself engaged to Anna, had forgotten to mention it.

Alma answered that letter. She told herself recklessly that she would keep on writing to him until he found out. She would lose his friendship, anyhow, when that occurred, but, meanwhile, she would have the letters a little longer. She could not learn to live without them until she had to.

The correspondence slipped back into its old groove. The harassed look which Alma's face had worn, and which Exeter people had attributed to worry over Anna, disappeared. She did not even feel lonely and reproached herself for lack of proper feeling in missing Anna so little. Besides, to her horror and dismay, she detected in herself a strange undercurrent of relief at the thought that Gilbert could never marry Anna now! She could not understand it. Had not that marriage been her dearest wish for years? Why, then, should she feel this strange gladness at the impossibility of its fulfilment? Altogether, Alma feared that her condition of mind and morals must be sadly askew. Perhaps, she thought mournfully, this perversion of proper feeling was her punishment for the deception she had practiced. She had deliberately done evil that good might come, and now the very imaginations of her heart were tainted by that evil. Alma cried herself to sleep many a night in her repentance; but she kept on writing to Gilbert, for all that.

The winter passed, and the spring and summer waned, and Alma's outward life flowed as smoothly as the currents of the seasons, broken only by vivid eruptions from Anna, who came over often from East Exeter, glorying in her young matronhood, "to cheer Alma up." Alma, so said Exeter people, was becoming unsociable and old maidish. She lost her liking for company, and seldom went anywhere among her neighbors. Her once frequent visits across the yard to chat with old Mrs. Murray became few and far between. She could not bear to hear the old lady talking about Gilbert; and she was afraid that some day she would be told that he was coming home. Gilbert's home-coming was the nightmare dread that darkened poor Alma's whole horizon.

One October day, two years after Gilbert's departure, Alma, standing at her window in the reflected glow of a red maple outside, looked down the lane and saw him striding up it! She had had no warning of his coming. His last letter, dated three weeks back, had not hinted at it. Yet there he was — and with him Alma's Nemesis.

She was very calm. Now that the worst had come, she felt quite strong to meet it. She would tell Gilbert the truth, and he would go away in anger, and never forgive her; but she deserved it. As she went downstairs, the only thing that really worried her was the thought of the pain Gilbert would suffer when she told him of Anna's faithlessness. She had seen his face as he passed under her window, and it was the face of a blithe man who had not heard any evil tidings. It was left to her to tell him; surely, she thought apathetically, that was punishment enough for what she had done.

With her hand on the door-knob, she paused to wonder what she should say when he asked her why she had not told him of Anna's marriage when it occurred — why she had still continued the deception when it had no longer an end to serve. Well, she would tell him the truth — that it was because she could not bear the thought of giving up writing to him. It was a humiliating thing to confess, but that did not matter — nothing mattered now. She opened the door.

Gilbert was standing on the big round door-stone under the red maple — a tall, handsome young fellow with a bronzed face and laughing eyes. His exile had improved him. Alma found time and ability to reflect that she had never known Gilbert was so fine-looking.

He put his arm around her and kissed her cheek in his frank delight at seeing her again. Alma coldly asked him in. Her face was still as pale as when she came downstairs, but a curious little spot of fiery red blossomed out where Gilbert's lips had touched it.

Gilbert followed her into the sitting-room, and looked about eagerly.

"When did you come home?" she said slowly. "I did not know you were expected."

"Got homesick, and just came! I wanted to surprise you all," he answered, laughing. "I arrived only a few minutes ago. Just took time to hug my mother, and here I am. Where's Anna?"

The pent-up retribution of two years descended on Alma's head in the last question of Gilbert's. But she did not flinch. She stood straight before him, tall and fair and pale, with the red maple light streaming in through the open door behind her, staining her light house dress and mellowing the golden sheen of her hair. Gilbert reflected that Alma Williams was really a very handsome girl. These two years had improved her. What splendid big gray eyes she had! He had always wished that Anna's eyes had not been quite so black.

"Anna is not here," said Alma. "She is married."

"Married!"

Gilbert sat down suddenly on a chair and looked at Anna in bewilderment.

"She has been married for a year," said Alma steadily. "She married Charlie Moore of East Exeter, and has been living there ever since."

"Then," said Gilbert, laying hold of the one solid fact that loomed out of the mist of his confused understanding, "why did she keep on writing letters to me after she was married?"

"She never wrote to you at all. It was I that wrote the letters."

Gilbert looked at Alma doubtfully. Was she crazy? There was something odd about her, now that he noticed, as she stood rigidly there, with that queer red spot on her face, a strange fire in her eyes, and that weird reflection from the maple enveloping her like an immaterial flame.

"I don't understand," he said helplessly.

Still standing there, Alma told the whole story, giving full explana-

tions, but no excuses. She told it clearly and simply, for she had often pictured this scene to herself and thought out what she must say. Her memory worked automatically, and her tongue obeyed it promptly. To herself she seemed like a machine, talking mechanically, while her soul stood on one side and listened.

When she had finished there was a silence lasting perhaps ten seconds. To Alma it seemed like hours. Would Gilbert overwhelm her with angry reproaches, or would he simply rise up and leave her in unutterable contempt? It was the most tragic moment of her life, and her whole personality was strung up to meet it and withstand it.

"Well, they were good letters, anyhow," said Gilbert, finally; "interesting letters," he added, as if by way of a meditative afterthought.

It was so anti-climacteric that Alma broke into an hysterical giggle, cut short by a sob. She dropped into a chair by the table and flung her hands over her face, laughing and sobbing softly to herself. Gilbert rose and walked to the door where he stood with his back to her until she regained her self-control. Then he turned and looked down at her quizzically.

Alma's hands lay limply in her lap, and her eyes were cast down, with tears glistening on the long fair lashes. She felt his gaze on her.

"Can you ever forgive me, Gilbert?" she said humbly.

"I don't know that there is much to forgive," he answered. "I have some explanations to make, too, and, since we're at it, we might as well get them all over and have done with them. Two years ago, I did honestly think I was in love with Anna — at least when I was round where she was. She had a taking way with her. But, somehow, even then, when I wasn't with her she seemed to kind of grow dim and not count for so awful much after all. I used to wish she was more like you — quieter, you know, and not so sparkling. When I parted from her that last night before I went West, I did feel very bad, and she seemed very dear to me; but it was six weeks from that before her — your — letter came, and in that time she seemed to have faded out of my thoughts. Honestly, I wasn't thinking much about her at all. Then came the letter — and it was a splendid one, too. I had never thought that Anna could write a letter like that, and I was as pleased as Punch about it. The letters kept coming, and I kept on looking for them more and more all the time. I fell in love all over again — with the writer of those letters. I thought it was Anna, but since you wrote the letters, it must have been with you Alma. I thought it was because she was growing more womanly that she could write such letters. That was why I came home. I wanted to get acquainted all over again, before she grew beyond me altogether — I wanted to find the real Anna the letters showed me. I — I — didn't expect this. But I don't care if Anna is married, so long as the girl who wrote those letters isn't. It's you I love, Alma."

He bent down and put his arm about her, laying his cheek against hers. The little red spot where his kiss had fallen was not quite drown-

ed out in the color that rushed over her face.

"If you'll marry me, Alma, I'll forgive you," he said.

A little smile escaped from the duress of Alma's lips and twitched her dimples.

"I'm willing to do anything that will win your forgiveness, Gilbert," she said meekly.

## *Editor's Note*

*"Anna's Love Letters" has not been reprinted since Montgomery first published it in the National Magazine in January 1908. Besides being representative of her work in the short story, it contains a nice autobiographical touch. According to Lucy Maud Montgomery: "The Island's Lady of Stories" (a booklet put out in 1963 by the Women's Institute in Springfield, P.E.I., and still available at Montgomery's birthplace in Clifton's Corners), Montgomery herself remarked that only because she ran the post office, and therefore could have her rejected manuscripts returned unbeknownst to the village, was she able to have courage enough to persevere in her writing. Alma, the heroine of this story, is not pursuing a career in writing, but running the village post office does allow her to write in a way that matters.*

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