

L. M. MONTGOMERY AS A LETTER-WRITER

E. WEBER

TEN years ago it was my privilege to introduce L. M. Montgomery to an audience of her readers. In opening her address, she said that she and I had exchanged literary letters for thirty years, though we had never met until the year before, and that, of her many literary correspondents of old, a friend in England and I were the only ones still on her list. This was news to me. And why we two? Were we bolder to strain her good nature, or more patient to decipher her long letters? I hardly dared think we wrote *better* letters. I never found out. In any case, she could easily have squelched us with silence. Of the other survivor I am sorry to know nothing, but as for me, the exchange has been richly in my favor, aside from the honor of it. Surely a famous author needs no obscure schoolmaster.

My respects to L. M. Montgomery's memory are herewith to take form in a few confessions, in which the aim is to show her excellence in the lost and lovely art of letter-writing. As her books are so charming, what may her letters be like? What did she write about, and how? Yes, you are right: her epistolary style carried her personality to her distant friends, for in her case decidedly the style was the man.

Scribbling a bit for second-rate periodicals in my young days, I noticed now and again a "yarnlet" or a snippet of poetry by one L. M. Montgomery, whom by a funny freak I fancied a whiskered sage, "goodly in girth", one whose thinking and rhyming powers were being liberated into appealing utterance. Trying to do something similar, I was wishing to get in touch with him, but hesitated to write to one of the publishers for his address; "I'd never hear from him anyway."

One day a letter came from a fellow-scribbler in Philadelphia, a stranger, who fancied some little thing of mine in a periodical. In answering I mentioned L. M. Montgomery, whoever he was, as one of my new discoveries in current literature. A reply soon came from Philadelphia with the Montgomery address, urging me to write to my new Canadian writer-friend—"You'll hear from this kindred spirit."

I wrote. In due time a letter came from Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, signed Lucy Maude Montgomery! It was a

shattering jolt. By instant alchemy the whiskers vanished, and the goodly girth assumed fashionplate length and lankness, but there was now an intellectual nose and a "mild and magnificent eye".

The twentieth century had just seen daylight, and for forty years, up to her illness many months ago, this revised L. M. Montgomery answered my letters with epistles I call classics.

My correspondent's image was changed a second time—how agreeably!—when some years later I saw her picture in a magazine. The lankness shrank into a short and less bony figure; the eye was still magnificent, but now it was the *brow* that was intellectual.

The early Cavendish letters, unlike the later ones, came in ordinary envelopes with single postage. They contained chatty accounts of their writer's activities in the simple life of her Island, her love of cats and flowers and woods and lonely seashore walks at dusk, but mainly of her literary doings: lyric bits in humble monthlies, young people's weeklies, and later, in the *Sunday School Times* of Philadelphia. Many a "faith trip" some of them made before they found asylum in printer's ink. There was constant exploring for new markets, and during her year in Halifax there were sallies for news stories for the *Halifax Echo*. These letters told of ways and means and little helps in the art of writing, gave nerving thoughts on the pain of rejections, and recommended bee-like assiduity in gathering material. They reported how courteous some editors were, and how heartless others; which publications paid on acceptance (only they seldom accepted), and which ones kept your manuscript "on the ticklish balance of suspense" till you were sure they'd print it; then when it was out of season, returned it with those polite regrets in stereotyped print. Such were the chronicles of that dawn time.

Even so, there was hardly ever a letter that had no triumph over the Powers of Rejection to tell of. A triumph was a cheque for five, three, and even two dollars.

In a few more years the lengthening Montgomery letters told of more frequent acceptances with better pay. Montgomery poems were now seen in such classic print as the *Youth's Companion*; Montgomery stories occasionally got into the better magazines, Canadian and American. Whenever, in the remoteness of my homestead near the foothills of the Rockies, I did not have access to the publication containing a sample of my friend's work, she would send me a copy, either of the periodical or of the piece in her own hand. Of course I would report my

impressions, hardly ever finding any faults worth showing off my acumen, but it was a delight to dwell on the merits. If it was a poem, what fine fresh fancies, and how her rhymes and metres sang around her similes and metaphors! L. M. Montgomery had a lovely lyric knack.

When one of her letters announced she was writing a book, "Great Scott and Caesar's Ghost!" my thoughts exclaimed. "A book! What shall I do now?" I was afraid to read on, lest I might learn she could now get along without my letters. A book! Why, that made an author of her, and authors have no time for the common herd.

No, it made no difference; she retained me.

Still, I had misgivings about the future: some day her completed book would make her famous. I wished her no harm, ye gods! but when she wrote that her manuscript of *Anne of Green Gables* had been rejected five times, the foundation of my hopes seemed to contain more cement. A few months later a letter announced that *Anne* was sold to one of the major American publishers. Even to me that was a thriller. Such an achievement made common drudges of the Empire Builders. But would I survive? "Oh well, perhaps the book won't be a big success," my evil angel comforted in a timid whisper. But *Anne* crashed the gates to the big sellers, outstripped some of them, in fact: spilled over into England, France, Poland, Spain and Finland! Read in five languages, she wore "the million halo". All this I quizzed from her modest creator. Some years later she told me her book was printed in a language one wouldn't guess—braille.

And still it made no difference in my mail: eighteen to thirty largepad loosely-written pages of personal news and views. I never felt I was quite entitled to such expansive, fraternizing responses, happy as I was to get them.

More *Anne* books came along: *Anne of Avonlea*, *Anne of Ingleside*, *Anne of the Islands*, *Anne's House of Dreams*, *Anne of Windy Poplars*; also the Emily books and the Pat books, *Mari-gold*, *Kilmeny*, *The Story Girl*, *The Tangled Web*, *Rainbow Valley* and several others. After the first dozen were out, I felt middling safe, for not even then was there the least deadness in the letters, never a perfunctory line.

If my Montgomery missives have in late years become annuals, they have been requiring indemnifying double fare on the long envelopes. For intimacy, for conversational effect, for stimulating play of thought, one long epistle is surely worth a walletful of hasty notes. The day of long letters has gone with

the horse and buggy, but the author of the *Anne's* and the *Emily* has preserved the liberal epistolary ways of the Queen Anners and the Victorians.

L. M. Montgomery always told me what book she was getting ready next for her world, and whenever she had one published she sent me an autographed copy. A letter announced she had for months been on an adult novel. A Montgomery story that wasn't a girls' novel! What might that be like? The next letter said it was nearly done. Curiosity became suspense. Six months later along it came, in Hodder and Stoughton format: *The Blue Castle*, autographed by the author.

It was avidly read. My wife always read out Montgomery stories to me. We had got to Valancey's marriage proposal to to Barney, when, laying the book down to laugh, she caught sight of the flopping leaves, and with an excited voice bade me "Look here!" There on a front page I read:

To Mr. Ephraim Weber, M.A.,
Who understands the architecture of Blue Castles.

What! We both scrutinized and made sure. So the new kind of Montgomery fiction was dedicated to me! What for? What had I done, or been? And how could I be said to understand the architecture of Blue Castles when I hardly knew what they were? It demanded a reperusal of the volume with interpretative intent, as well as an enquiry in my next letter. The Oracle answered:

You, like most people of the House of Joseph, understand "how fair the realms imagination opens to the view".

It was long ago that our letters quit talking shop, for I practically neglected my writing. But there was plenty we exchanged about literature, standard and current, religion and the churches, education and the schools, the changing moral standard (only "it isn't changing," said my friend), the new rising generation (only "it isn't new," she declared), the warless world ("not *this* one ever", she countered).

In talking on serious topics, people seldom give each other time to finish their speeches; but when one party is at Cavendish, P.E.I., the other at Didsbury, Alberta, four-fifths of the continent between, it is not so hard to keep from interrupting. Another advantage of conversing by letter is that we have time to think out better speeches. Once I gave a wee disquisition on the moral constitution of the universe, culminating with this: "We are not

punished *for* our sins, but *by* them." The reply had a wee disquisition on the nature of the Bible, culminating with this: "I do not believe the Bible is inspired *by* God, but *with* God." So we exchanged wisdom and epigram, perhaps not so original as we then thought; but so we kept our intellectual souls in clover when the local pickings were scant at either end.

After thirty years of this paper conversing, we met. We almost called for pen and ink! The face-to-face way wasn't the same thing.

What is the source of charm in letters of friendship? Is it that the absence of the physical person stimulates the creation of the friend's ideal personality? And anyway, as absence makes the heart grow fonder, the suspense of anticipating letters almost makes golden texts of half the sentences.

II.

But I have not quite shown why I prize the Montgomery letters. Let us see more closely what they contain, and how they read.

My saying I liked tall flowers that sway in the wind brought this:

I like every kind. But I like best the flowers I coax into bloom myself, be they tall or small, white or rosy. It seems as if I were taking a hand in creation—giving life to those unsightly bulbs that hide such rainbow possibilities in their cores. Isn't it strange how such ugly things can give birth to such beauty—the old mystery of good, like the white lily, springing out of the muck and mire of evil? Is it possible that evil is necessary to the blossoming of good, just as the dirty clay and foul smelling fertilizers are necessary to the unfolding of those blossoms? There's a theological problem for you!

Here is the poet, stripped of rhyme and metre, though not of fancy's lovely vocabulary, gripping fast the concrete form and fact, then seeing its universal relation.

The letters have many bits of curious, cultured reading. Try this:

A short time ago, a British magazine ran an interesting series of letters on the idea: If you met the ghost of some famous person, and asked him or her *one* question, what would that question be?

A great many questions were asked, none of which appear in my list below. Half of the writers wished they could meet Shakespeare and ask him if he really did write his plays. Well, there's one question I would like to ask Shakespeare, but 'tis not about his plays. I feel absolutely sure he did write them, and the so-

called difficulties stump me not a whit. You can't measure a demi-god with a yardstick.

No, if I met Shakespere's shade I would ask him, "Why did you leave your wife your second-best bed?" Controversies have raged over this. I should really like to know.

Suppose one met St. Paul and asked him, "What was you thorn in the flesh?"

Or Pilate's wife: "What did you dream of the Nazarene?"

Queen Elizabeth: "Were you, or were you not, secretly married to Robert Dudley?"

Mary Queen of Scots: "Did you know about Darnley's murder?"

Dickens: "Was Edwin Drood really murdered or not?"

Homer: "Was there only one or half a dozen of you?"

Mona Lisa: "What are you smiling at like that?"

Abraham: "Just why did you leave Ur?"

Vashti: "Were you ever sorry you didn't obey Ahasuerus?"

Judas Iscariot: "Why did you really betray Him?"

Yes, I think one could have an interesting time among the ghosts. Can you add any more to the list?

I found it no easy list to extend after St. Paul, Mona Lisa and Iscariot had been taken, though it was fun to try. There are many ghost questions that come to mind, but not many classical cases so specifically puzzling. One would feel like asking any ghost what it feels like to die, but that's too general. I managed to add:

Beethoven: "How did you create those symphonies with a stone-deaf ear?"

Brutus: "Were you never sorry you stabbed Caesar?"

Hamlet: "Which of all the theories about you is right?"

Bishops Ridley and Latimer: "Is it true that in getting burned to death, the nerves are soon seared to insensibility, then easy dying?"

Lucy Gray: "What became of you when you got to the middle of the bridge?"

The reply:

As for questioning ghosts, your question for Ridley and Latimer *would* be interesting. I have read that a hot fire paralyzes the nerves at once, and thereafter no pain is felt. This must be true if the stories of triumphant hymn-singing at the stake are reliable. It was the slow fire that was dreadful. I have read that both Ridley and Latimer had little bags of powder hung from their necks to kill them quickly by explosion.

I, too, want to know what happened to Lucy Gray. The awful intriguing mystery of that phrase, "And further there were none," haunted me all through childhood.

I offered the answer I once got from an extra bright pupil: "Lucy evaporated." The next reply told how Lucy's evaporation tickled this Lucy's risibles.

The poetic descriptions that give the Montgomery stories such freshness and cheery imagery make the letters delightful too. A reviewer in the *New York Tribune*, in lingering appreciation, gets at the secret:

Miss Montgomery at moments has power to recapture and impart the sense of wonder, to present familiar objects in a kind of dawn light as if they were shining new and marvellous.

But just as the describing pen, even though a Carlyle's, must leave it to the camera to bring out the personality behind a face, so the description of an author's style is "without form and void" until we read it. And it takes her *Island* to liberate L. M. Montgomery's flow of fancies, personifying playfulness, and vital vocabulary.

In a letter I had tried to convey the atmosphere and some immensity of the Canadian prairie, which we were beginning to shred into virgin furrows. Here is the response, October, 1907:

Though raining now, it was fine this afternoon—oh so fine—sunny and mild as a day in June. I hied me to the woods, away back to the sun-washed alleys carpeted with fallen gold and glades where the moss is green and vivid yet. The woods are getting ready to sleep—they are not yet asleep, but are disrobing. There are all kinds of little bed-time conferences and whisperings and good-nights. I can more nearly expect to come face to face with a dryad at this time of the year than any other. They are lurking in every tree trunk. A dozen times I wheeled sharply around, convinced that if I could only turn quick enough I could catch one peeping after me. Oh, keep your great, vast prairies, where never a wood-nymph could hide. I am content with my bosky lanes and the purple, peopled shadows under my firs.

Even so, the sea, to this daughter of the *Island*, has a mightier spell than the woods. It haunts her, as her line of poetry says, "With a voice of gramarye evermore." Or her letter:

Three evenings ago I went to the shore. We had had a wild storm of wind and rain the day before, but this evening was clear, cold, with an air of marvellous purity. The sunset was lovely beyond words. I drank its beauty in as I walked down the old shore lane, and my soul was filled with a nameless exhilaration. I seemed borne on the wings of an ecstasy into the seventh heaven.

The shore was clean washed after the storm, and not a wind stirred, but there was a silver surf on, dashing on the sands in a splendid white turmoil. Oh! the glory of that far gaze across the

tossing waters, which were the only restless thing in all that vast stillness and peace. It was a moment worth living through weeks of storm and stress for.

There is a great *solitude* about such a shore. The woods are never solitary—they are full of whispering, beckoning, friendly life, but the sea is a mighty soul forever moaning of some unsharable sorrow that shuts itself up into itself for all eternity. You can never pierce into its great mystery—you can only wonder, awed and spellbound, on the outer fringe of it. The woods call you with a hundred voices, but the sea has only one—a mighty voice that drowns your soul with its majestic music. The woods are human, but the sea is of the company of the archangels.

Then this daughter of nature, versed in literature, quotes an oracle of Emerson into living meaning:

The gods talk in the breath of the wold,
 They talk in the shaken pine,
 And they fill the long reach of the old seashore
 With a dialogue divine.
 And the poet who overhears
 Some random word they say
 Is the fated man of men
 Whom the ages must obey.

I shall never hear that random word; my ear is not attuned to its lofty thunder. But I can always *listen*, and haply by times I shall catch the faint, far-off echoes of it, and even that will flood my soul with its supernal joy.

"But I can always listen"—strikingly like Wordsworth listening to the distant waves: "Listen! The Mighty Being is awake."

I had been wanting to describe to this poetic observer of nature the various aspects of the Rocky Mountains seventy to a hundred miles west, as seen from my homestead in various weathers and times of day: the cracked white enamel of their sunward side the morning after a snowfall; the purple gloom of the shady side with a rosy sunset behind them; also as seen from a height among them: the constant shift of sublime scenery from different points and elevations; the thrill of gazing down thousands of feet into valleys with toy townlets strung along a looping, silvery river-ribbon; the jumbled chaos of mountain tops seen through waving curtains of rain at moments glorified by sunbeams—all this with enough detail to make it vivid, for she had never seen the Rockies. But that Indian Summer letter of 1907 discouraged me: I felt unable to match her depth.

Of personal anecdotes these letters have plenty. One prob-

lem of famous writers is to keep their mail manageable. But again it takes the author to tell it:

A girl in Australia—may jackals sit on her grandmother's grave—wrote me last fall, and I answered her letter. She published my letter and address in an Australian magazine, something she should not have done without my consent. In mid-winter the deluge began. The first wave was eighty-five letters in one day. The local postmaster wanted to know if I were having a wedding anniversary! This continued until May, when they began to dribble off. I have ceased to count them, but there must have been a thousand. My publishers say, "Oh, answer them, if only by a line. . . ." But fancy the work! Do you wonder my poor real correspondents are left out in the cold?

A young fellow in Detroit sent a tidy missive with this address:

Miss Anne Shirley
 Care of Miss Martha Cuthbert
 Avonlea
 Prince Edward Island
 Canada
 Ontario

Those who know *Anne of Green Gables* and a bit of Canadian geography will be as amused, as L. M. M. was. A post office clerk had written across the envelope, "Try Miss Montgomery, Cavendish." Her getting it implies that her Marilla and her Anne enjoyed no mean fame.

Here's a set of gems from my Montgomery letters:

Poetic awe of a night scene:

Then *the* storm came up, and for half an hour we sat there spell-bound, gazing on such a sight as we had never dreamed—the great Canadian Falls (Niagara) lying under the ghostly, shimmering, blue-white gleam of almost constant lightning, while athwart the mist tore zig-zags of living flame, as if some god were amusing himself by hurling thunderbolts into the abyss. No, I shall never see the like of that again. But I have seen it once.

Expecting that her publishers would want "that detestable Anne" written through high-school in a second volume, then through college in a third:

I'm Anne's slave already. The idea makes me sick. I feel like the magician in the eastern story who became the slave of the jinn he had himself conjured out of a bottle.

A weird personal experience:

Mammoth Cave must be terribly full of ghosts. Everyone who goes through it must leave something of himself in it, a little bit of his soul, his personality, and always wants to go back and find it. But does he ever go? I fancy very few people ever revisit Mammoth Cave. It mightn't be safe. *Suppose it kept too much of you?*

How free-verse writers, averse to old forms, strain to be original:

But isn't a beautiful echo more beautiful than the shriek of an automobile?

The characterlessness of the "good mixers":

The only people I ever knew that were worth while were cats who walked by themselves and never pretended to be Maltese if they were tortoise shell.

Immortality of roses:

Henry Ward Beecher said, "Flowers are the sweetest things God ever made and forgot to put souls into." But I believe He didn't forget. I believe they *have* souls. I have known roses that I expect to meet in Heaven.

Playful allusion:

After gardening intensely, and cleaning house ferociously for six weeks, I am taking a breathing spell and intend to put off Martha and put on Mary.

Prevention of profanity:

I never put more than two kinds of flowers together in a bouquet. More would swear at each other.

Kindred spirits:

I wonder if the spirits of all the pussy folk I have loved will meet me with purrs of gladness at the pearly gates.

L. M. Montgomery prefers the warm individuality of the human hand to the cold Roman universality of the typewriter. In the forty years of this literary exchange she never typed me a letter. A typed letter from her would have been the high handshake. No, the handwriting of the well-seasoned correspondent is no matter for an encroaching machine to profane, even when,

as in this case, the writing is hard to read; for slow reading allows fond lingering on the lines.

What, then, in sum and substance, are the merits of these letters? Their style is so facile and natural that you forget it isn't conversation. There is open sincerity, clear conviction, free familiarity and a playful originality of fancy, with freshness of diction; live subject matter, personal and general, made still more interesting by genial comment; poetic feeling that brings melody and rhythm into the sentences; stimulating thought, strengthened or adorned with bits from lore and legend; and a courteous patience that brought ample replies to my more commonplace news and less adventurous lay experience.

And what were her last words to me?—"We've had a good friendship in our own way," she wrote, explaining that a "hypo" enabled her to hold a pen for a few moments.

This correspondence has made me fonder of the great letters of the masters: Samuel Johnson, Shelley, Cowper, Horace Walpole, Goethe, Lincoln, Carlyle and his wife Jane, for a few; and I still intend to nibble at Madame de Sevigné.