Sans Souci, Ont.,
August 3, 1953

Dear Tom:

Living here on a granite island surrounded by Georgian Bay water and waves, green pines tilted east by the prevailing wind, white gulls and occasional loons drifting or flying overhead, and an unceasing consciousness of weather, I am as near to the atmosphere and setting of the four books I have been reading as I could be in central Canada. Their perpetual sound of waves on our outer shore from the broad expanse expanse of the Open to the west, gentle or rising to rollers even in this July weather, provides a natural background to We Keep a Light, Desired Haven, The Old Man and the Sea, and The Nymph and the Lamp. In our outside location, we are as close to living on the sea as anyone on the Great Lakes except the lighthouse keeper on the Western Islands sixteen miles out whose beacone we see blinking every night. For two nights last week his light was out, an event unprecedented in my experience of forty years summering on Georgian Bay. The first night was foggy, but quiet, and the Keeper of the light and fog-horn further south on Hope Island seemed to me clearly aware of the failure of the next beacon to his north for his foghorn kept sounding oftener than usual in a manner which my memory of a visit to his place led me to realise could only be done by manual rather than automatic operation. A freighter passing north seemed to be keeping in touch with him by regular responses on its own horn until it was far past the missing Western light. When the Western light failed to show the following night, I could imagine the feverish activity of the Keeper and his wife, or perhaps the tragedy that had occurred making it impossible for either to tend the light, and the concern and agitated messages that must be passing up and down the coast in official circles, resulting doubtless in as rapid a visit by a government boat to the Western Islands as could be arranged. The third night the light shone again as usual, but I still wondered what was the story behind it all.

Located on the oldest rocks in the world on the Lurentian Shield in an area where millions of years of wind and weather have long since discouraged the settling of any more than pockets of soil and any more vegetation than tough pines, cedars, cottonwoods and the strong small wild cherries and bushes and tuft grasses, we find the feel of smooth rock and boulders under our feet and the sight of other islands half a mile distant on one side and the Georgian Bay meeting the horizon on the other, so natural that the more settled summer resorts on inside channels or lakes give us an immediate sensation of impending clostraphobia should we remain there long. If a sail-boat not intending to call on us, sails within a hundred feet of our island necessitating the rapid donning of a bathing-suit we experience a sense of outrageous infringement of our privacy.

Arriving here as I did on July 8 in as near a state of complete nervous and physical exhaustion as I ever hope to know, the absence of anything or any person remotely connected with my city work and worries, provided a great and blessed relief. On top of the Convention several other personal and family problems elected to blow up inopportunely so that while the news that our Convention made a profit of $989.96—a quite unprecedented situation which will help the CAA debt situation considerably—brought much satisfaction, my chief and more selfish problem was getting back my usual health and energy by the beginning of September. With what seems to me now a mere Branch presidency to look after next season, I must get back to my own work which suffered a black-out under the Convention attack. I finished a radio play last week but that is a slight achievement.

But I did not sit down to write you a dull letter about myself, but to tell you how very greatly I appreciated your coming to the Convention and bringing Edith, at what must have been great expense and trouble. Your mere presence added more to the stature of the Convention than that of any one else.

The way you fell in so obligingly with my somewhat brash act in putting you on the program with Monsarrat without consulting you, leaves me with one of the happiest memories I have of the whole show. The expert and delightful way in which you conducted your discussion added even more. When I remember all the devious manoeuvring I had to do to get Monsarrat so that he phoned me the Thursday before the Convention, from Ottawa, to say that he would agree to take part, and how thoroughly I knew that the success or failure of that item on the program depended entirely on Tom Raddall whom I could not consult until he arrived—well, I remember well the wonderful sense of relief and confidence I felt that Sunday night when you agreed. Yours was my pet item, the choicest spot on the program, and the only item still uncertain right up to the last. No one else would do but you. I had to have a writer of equal stature to Monsarrat, not only from the point of view of program balance, but also for the effect on Monsarrat. Obviously it had to be you, and you were wonderful!

At the time, and I confess this with shame, I knew your stature as a writer only from the many opinions of others which I had heard or read. Now, I have a more personal reason for that opinion. I have read six books in the past four weeks, five of them Canadian. Not only is the greatest of these The Nymph and the Lamp, but the greatest I have read for many years if ever, with the possible exception in almost equal place of The Cruel Sea. But Monsarrat shows a lack, at least in that one book, which you do not. His women characters, with the exception of one, are consistently, and unnecessarily petty, selfish and valueless. Your minor women characters were not differentiated from the men by weakness. They were people like their men, living in and reacting to the conditions where they found themselves. Unlike Monsarrat, therefore, you did not need to set your chief woman character on a sort of pedestal of unique and delectable femininity. The cliche that enjoyment of a book depends on reader identification is like many cliches quite true. But I do not define the term as meaning he or she is just like me, but rather he or she is recognizable to me as a person I can understand. Your Isabel was so real to me, she even gave several shocks. To put it bluntly, I found myself saying aloud to no one—My God, Tom knows how to write! He's got her exactly!...As though she were real, you observe.

first August 4, 1953

Don was here for a week-end, his ~~visit~~ visit in the midst of completing his story of Sudbury. We ran him up to town—Parry Sound—yesterday afternoon for the train north to Sudbury and will call for him next Saturday for another three days here on his way back to Toronto. His history of Canada since Confederation, called Nation of the North and bound to cause considerable controversy, is ~~xxx~~ due out in October. He hopes to finish Sudbury early this fall too.

Strong east wind, rain, and rapidly falling barometer, with choppy waves straight into our small harbor. Although off-shore with a mere 3/4 mile for waves to form, an easterly is far more annoying than the strong west blow with enormous rollers from the Open which will probably follow.

To continue...Matthew Carney is a great character about whom I had only one critical question. It may seem a bit fussy even to think of it. But I find it difficult to believe that a man of 46 who had led an entirely sexless life by choice and inclination, could suddenly turn into an expert and entirely adequate lover without inhibition, hesitancy, or even the blunderings of the inexperienced! That Skane should perform as skilled operator is quite logical with his background,

and I thoroughly approved when you depicted Isabel's affair with Skane without any of the usual suggestion that one or other or both of them were showed up as despicable rather than quite natural human beings. When Skane came to claim Isabel afterwards, I was at first rather disappointed when he apparently had to be shown as possessing some of the traditional characteristics of the cad after all. But then I realised that you were depicting Skane in each instance, as he then appeared to Isabel, which made sense.

The working out of the plot all leading up to Matthew's blindness was so masterly that I have nothing to say but the greatest admiration. The setting of Marina and the pervading dominating character of the sea left me with a picture I shall never forget.

All in all it is a great book, Tom, and I am looking forward to your next with urgency and happy anticipation.

I stay here till Labor day with my two youngest children—Donat Julien LeBourdais, aged 9, called after the first LeBourdais on record in Canada who was married at L'Islet, Quebec in 1728, his sons Julien being also recorded there as married in 1756; and Eleanor Connick LeBourdais, aged 7, called after Don's Irish mother, whose father was a doctor in Gaspe in the 1860's and 70's. I have with me a 15 year old girl, daughter of a geologist now working in Gaspe, but who was brought up in South Africa and arrived in Canada three months ago. Don returns for a mere week or so at the end of August. My oldest daughter Isa is 24, married for five years, and just produced her second child in Lillehammer, Norway where she is living with her husband, a radar and electronics engineer on loan to NATO by RCA Victor of New York. My oldest son Eric is 21 and after several ventures here and there in recent years is now working with great enthusiasm and to our great satisfaction great success as reporter on the Galt Evening Reporter in south western Ontario. Don has a daughter three years younger than I married to a professional guiter player in London, England. Both our sons in law are named George!

All of which mescellaneous information may not interest you but I jot it down anyway. When the whole family got together a few years ago the generations were so mixed up it was ridiculous, but fun. Don's daugher and husband are my age; my two are another age group; Isa's children and Don's and my two young ones are like one continuous family. Anyone walking in all of us might well wonder who was married to whom, and which children were whose!

It was a great pleasure to meet Edith. I hope we may meet again before too long, when affairs will not press so hard as to make opportunities for relaxed and friendly conversation so few. But I must say again, that your presence at our Toronto Convention was a high light for me and indeed for the whole event.

By the way, our huge surplus was due to: publishers' book display fees; the unprecedented number of registration fees, not only members but guests from publishing, magazine, and radio offices and interested persons; the $500 donation I secured from the province by working a top political contact; and the fact that Art Child's office staff, and I worked for nothing. The University regarded us as their guests, and paid Hart House charges for use of meeting rooms as well as donating morning and afternoon coffee. All of which took months of careful preparation I assure you, but the results were worth it. I used no stenographic help in writing my 200 odd letters, being determined to keep costs down, though I confess when I saw the size of the surplus, I reflected that I need not have been so scrupulous. However, the money is a boon to National, and is comfortable to think about.

Greetings to you both. May we see you soon again!

Donald LeBourdais

Isabel LeBourdais
Sans Souci, Ont.

August 12th, 1953

Dear Isabel,

Your island in Georgian Bay sounds attractive, a good place to recover from the labors and headaches of that strenuous convention, and at that distance a good place to contemplate the true success of what you wrought. For it was a first-rate job, and nobody but you could have put it over with the same blend of energy and finesse. I confess I was extremely dubious when the Monsarrat debate was laid in my lap, for I'd never met the man and I knew that his oddities included a certain waspishness in matters of opinion that might prove embarrassing all round.

However it turned out well. Some people didn't like him -- too much self-opinion and so on -- but I found him a good enough fellow at heart in the several conversations I had with him in Toronto, and I think I understood him. He seemed to me a completely honest man, basically shy, a little unsure of himself, a little overwhelmed by the suddenness of his own success after years of struggle, and (this is important) a man still tortured by his own impressions of the war at sea. The abrupt, erratic, assertive manner seemed to me something like a shield thrown out as a guard for all this.

Our difference of opinion over working method was fundamental, of course. I didn't elaborate my side of it, for I felt that the main thing was to get Monsarrat to talk. However I still hold that the rigid plotting of a novel before writing is too mechanical, too unlike life itself, to ring true; and his own flat statement that he never lets a character develop of his own or her own accord with the unfolding of the tale was in fact a confession of his own limitations as a writer. The truth is that Monsarrat's books are histories rather than novels, for they deal with actual men and actual incidents, assembled and blended skilfully to form a whole. When you write history you need no plot. Even your timing is set forth exactly by the calendar. (I enclose a cutting from the Times Literary Supplement, which chimes with my own notions on the subject.) I hold with Maugham when he says that every story has a certain natural curve from start to finish, and the novelist's task is to find that curve and follow it to the end. That can only come from his own intuition as he goes along, as I see it, and that is the way I write.

I read your comments on The Nymph and The Lamp with deep interest and appreciation. But I'm a little surprised at your question about Carney's capacities as a lover. The point is

that he had not "led an entirely sexless life by choice and inclination". As he pointed out to Isabel in one of their first conversations, he had always been drawn to women, he admired the way they talked, the way they moved, everything about them. But as I pointed out in the first (no, the second) chapter of the book, he had recoiled from the kind of women who came within his reach about the ports, and he was too shy, too awkward and too poor to make any headway with the virtuous women who were his ideal. So after a time he gravitated to the lonely places where his longing could be sublimated in sheer space. I have met more than one such man, and I felt sorry for them.

When Carney met Isabel, and she threw herself into his arms, a woman as lonely as himself, moreover a "nice" woman of the kind he'd dreamed about all that time, can you doubt that Isabel found him shy, awkward, blundering -- but passionate -- as I wrote? Observe that Skane and Carney had both fled from women to the life on Marina, Skane because he was satiated and fed up with the lot, Carney because he preferred the lonely corner of hell to the longings of Tantalus. After two years on Marina Skane's reaction was that of Carney, a passion suppressed but rebellious for all that, the reaction of all healthy male flesh in that environment. Therefor when Isabel came into their lives the physical result was the same, for them and for her. Hunger is the best sauce in more things than cooking, and in Carney's case the hunger had been longer and was the keener because it could be satisfied only by the realisation of an ideal.

Skane was a good fellow, of course. He had suffered a bitter experience and the mark was deep. He hadn't Carney's strength of character but he was no weakling and no villain. When Skane realised that Isabel's pity for Carney might mean the end of his own chances he gave way to a burst of selfishness -- the selfishness of any passionate man where a woman is concerned. In that he was quite human; and it was human in a man blinded mentally by passion and selfishness to base his appeal on a human selfishness in the woman. Isabel had no selfishness. Or had she? Read again Captain O'Dell's soliloquy at the book's end. That was the question I left with the reader.

Edith joins me in all the best to you and Don.

Sincerely,