

Letter 1.

P. O. D.
Ottawa Sept. 29 [1884]

Dear May

I received the volume of Tennyson,¹ for which, thanks beyond the power of words to express. Please write soon and tell me what you do and how the prospects are developing themselves.² I hope you are in good heart for work — it makes one so happy. There is such an inexpressibly delicious triumph in hav[ing] actually accomplished something which seems a manifest advance on the last undertaking. I have written three new poems — one of them a ballad with refrains like the “Little Handmaiden,”³ another (very comforting to myself) entitled “What do poets want with gold?”⁴ also have added much to Arnulph.⁵ I don’t like Arnulph. It is too much after the manner of an ancient Romance of Chivalry: I have been obliged to bring a good deal of fighting into it, a thing distasteful even to my imagination — the result is naturally much bombast. But I am determined to finish it, no matter what qualms of disgust I may have to endure.

Today I build bins in the cellar to contain vegetables⁶ – To-morrow, I dig potatoes — next day I do the same — on the day following store them away. While I was smoking and dreaming today I got upon the trace of an excellent plot for a work of fiction in prose. It is however not clear enough in my mind to be set forth here.

Thibault⁷ is growing more and more ominous and snakelike in her appearance. Mother and Bebe⁸ made an experiment on her yesterday. It was to find out how much she could eat. I have only one sheet of paper: I cannot communicate the results. The kitten has disappeared and Thibault quenches her sorrows not with liquor but with food. She has evidently set detectives upon kitten’s track, for I observe her, holding consultations with strange cats.

We are living upon pumpkin pies now — much to our satisfaction — on the other hand we are beginning to consider how we are to buy a stove for the coming winter — and that is not to our satisfaction. We hear from Belle that she is likely – nay almost certain — to be home with us in the Spring. I am glad of it — it must be a lonely place for a young girl to be⁹ — though it would hit my fancy very well.

I remain
Your sincerest friend
A. Lampman

¹ By 1884 several collections of poems by the British poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-92) were available.

² Lampman may be referring to work opportunities, possibly as a musician. In a letter to May on 28 February 1895, Annie Lampman refers approvingly to May’s decision to remain studying with a teacher named “Barton” and reminds her that she “promised a complimentary ticket for orchestra chairs when . . . [she] should come touring around here [Ottawa].”

³ “The Little Handmaiden,” dated 1 September 1884; *Among the Millet, and Other Poems* 61-63, *Poems* 52-54. The other poem is unidentified.

⁴ “What Do Poets Want with Gold?,” dated 24 September 1884; *Among the Millet, and Other Poems* 58-59, *Poems* 50-51.

⁵ At the end of the manuscript of “Arnulph” Lampman wrote “Begun Feby 1884, finished March 1885” (for this and further details of the poem’s composition, see Bentley, “Introduction” *Arnulph and White Margaret* xi, and for the poem itself 3-42).

⁶ In the fall of 1883 Lampman was joined in Ottawa by his family, which consisted of his father, the Reverend Archibald Lampman (1822-97), his mother, Susannah Charlotte (née Gesner) (1837-1912), and his three younger sisters, Sarah Isabelle (Belle) (1863-1946), Annie Margaret (1866-1952; see also Introduction), and Caroline Stewart (Babe, Bebe, Bébé) (1868-1952). Together they rented a small house at 144 Nicholas Street.

⁷ Presumably the Lampman’s cat.

⁸ See note 6, above.

⁹ According to a letter of 26 September 1884 to May, Belle, perhaps studying art, was in New York at this time.