

Letter 173
The Hague, 26 January 1882
Schenkweg 138, Thursday

Dear Theo,

I received your letter with the enclosed 100 fr., and thank you very much for both. What I had already feared when I wrote you last has really happened, meaning that I have not been well, and have been in bed for almost three days with fever and nervousness, now and then accompanied by headache and toothache. It is a miserable condition and is caused by overexertion. Mauve has again been to see me, and once more we agreed to keep up courage through all.

But I am so angry with myself now because I cannot do what I should like to do, and at such a moment one feels as if one were lying bound hand and foot at the bottom of a deep, dark well, utterly helpless. Now I have recovered enough so that I got up again last night and rummaged around, straightening things. When the model came of her own accord this morning, though I only half expected her, I put her into the right pose with Mauve's help and tried to draw a little; but I could not do it, and I felt miserable and weak the whole evening. But if I rest a few more days, it will be over, and I need not be afraid of its coming back soon if I am careful.

I am very sorry to hear that you don't feel well either. When I was in Brussels last winter, I also took a bath at the bathing establishment as often as I could, two or three times a week; and as it did me a lot of good, I will do it here too. No doubt if you keep it up for some time, it will help you a great deal, because it keeps the blood circulating well and the pores of the skin open; that way the skin can fulfill its function – otherwise it would shrivel up, especially in winter.

And I tell you frankly that in my opinion one must not hesitate to go to a prostitute occasionally if there is one you can trust and feel something for, as there really are many. For one who has a strenuous life it is necessary, absolutely necessary, in order to keep sane and well. One must not exaggerate such things and fall into excesses, but nature has fixed laws which it is fatal to struggle against. Well, you yourself know all you have to know on that subject. It would be well for you, it would be well for me, if we were married – but what can we do?

I'm sending you a little drawing, but you must not conclude that they are all like that; this has been washed in quickly and thinly, but this does not always succeed with the larger ones, indeed, it seldom does. It will perhaps show you that it is not a hopeless business and that I have learned the knack of making them.

The last time Mauve was here, he asked me again if I needed money. I was then able to say I did not want it, but you see, in case of need, he would be willing to do something. And so though there will be some difficulties now and then, I hope we can manage to struggle through. Especially if Mr. Tersteeg would be so kind as to give me some credit in case you're unable to send me money, and when it is absolutely necessary.

You speak of fair promises – with me it is more or less the same. Mauve says it will be all right; but for all that, the watercolours I make are not quite saleable. Now I have some hope myself, and I will work hard on them, but it is often hopeless enough, for when I try to work them up, they become too heavy. It's exasperating, for it's no small difficulty. And experiments with watercolours are rather expensive – paper, paint, brushes, model, and time, and whatnot.

But even so, I think the most economical way is to keep going without losing time.

For this bad time must be lived through.

I must try to forget some things I taught myself, and learn to look at things in quite a different way.

It takes a lot of effort before one has a steady eye for the proportion of things.

It is not always easy for me to get on with Mauve or vice versa, because I think we are equally nervous; and it costs him a real effort to show me things, and no less for me to understand them and try to put them into practice.

But I think we are both beginning to understand each other better and the feeling is becoming somewhat deeper than superficial sympathy. He is very busy with his large picture, which was at one time intended for the Salon; it is a splendid thing. And he is also busy with a winter landscape. And some fine drawings. I think he gives each picture and each drawing some small part of his life. A times he is tired to death, and recently he said, "I do not seem to get any stronger"; and whoever had seen him at that moment would not soon forget the expression on his face.

When my drawings become heavy, thick, muddy, black and dull, Mauve comforts me by saying, "If your work were transparent now, it would only possess a certain chic, and it would probably become heavy later on. Now you are pegging away at it and it becomes heavy, but later it will go quickly and become light." I

have no objections if this is true. And you can see it now from the little one I am sending: it was started and finished in a quarter of an hour, but only after I had made a larger one which had become too heavy. And just because I had worked so hard on that large one, when the model accidentally resumed the pose, I was able to sketch this little one on a bit of paper that was left from a sheet of Whatman. This model is a beautiful girl – she is the model for Artz and many others – but she wants 1.50 guilders a day, and that is too expensive for me just now. So I try to manage with my little old woman.

I think the success or failure of a drawing also depends greatly on the mood and the condition of the painter. Therefore I try to do what I can to keep cheerful and clear-headed. But sometimes, like now, a heavy depression comes over me, and then it's hell.

The only thing to do then is to go on with the work; for Mauve and Israëls and so many others who are examples to the rest of us know how to profit from every mood.

Well, I have some hope that as soon as I am quite well again, things will go better than they are now. If I have to rest awhile, I shall, but probably it will soon be over. In general, I do not feel so strong as a few years ago; then I never had to stay in bed a day, but now there is always something the matter with me, although nothing serious.

Well, my youth is gone – not my love of life or my energy, but I mean the time when one feels so lighthearted and carefree. I really say, So much the better, now there are much better things, after all. Keep heart, boy, I think it rather mean and cheap of Messrs. Goupil & Co. to refuse you when you wanted to draw some money. You certainly don't deserve such stinginess, for you have pulled many of their chestnuts out of the fire, and do not spare yourself. So you deserve to be treated with some consideration. A handshake in thought, I hope soon to have better news to tell you than I have had lately, but you must forgive me, I feel rotten. Adieu.

Yours sincerely, Vincent