

Letter 198  
The Hague, 14 May 1882

My dear Theo,

Having received your letter of 13 May, which must have crossed a letter of mine to you, I find it necessary to explain a few things to you without delay.

A great deal of what I read in your letter I certainly appreciate very much, for instance, 'One must be narrow-minded or hypocritical to set one class without question above another.'

The world, however, does not reason like that and never sees or respects man's 'humanity' but only the greater or lesser value of the money or goods he carries with him so long as he is on this side of the grave. The world takes no account at all of what happens beyond the grave. That is why the world goes no further than its feet will take it.

For my part, however, I feel sympathy or antipathy for men just as men, and their circumstances leave me relatively indifferent.

Yet even I take some note (and were my own circumstances to allow me, I should make even further concessions) when you say, 'There are many who maintain a certain social standing in order to avoid attention from others and lest people meddle too much in their affairs.' Very often, indeed, I let things pass, thinking, I'm not going to do or say this or that in case I give offence to somebody or other.

But when it comes to important, serious matters one must act, not in accordance with l'opinion publique, not according to one's own passions, but following the ABC which is the basis of all morality: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' Act in a way you can justify before God. Do the right thing and act loyally.

Now, when it comes to Christien, this is my reasoning: how should I like it if someone first helped me and then left me in the lurch? Wouldn't I think...someone who behaves like that would have done better to have left me alone. If he doesn't finish what he started – he really has deceived me.

The father of X<sup>tien</sup>'s [Christien's] child argued in the exact spirit of your letter, Theo, but in my opinion quite wrongly. He was very kind to her, but did not marry her, even when he had made her pregnant, for the sake, he said, of his position and his family, etc. X<sup>tien</sup> was young at the time and had met her after her father's death, didn't know then what she knows now, and when the man died there she was alone with her child – forsaken, without a penny. A contrecoeur [reluctantly] went on the streets, became ill, was taken to hospital, in all sorts of trouble...

That man's behaviour made him guilty before God, although in the eyes of the world he had kept up his position, 'had paid her off.' But at the moment when he faced death, do you imagine he felt no regret and remorse???

Now, in this world, the characters of people like him come up against characters like, say, mine. I care as little for the world as the aforesaid person cared for what is right. The semblance of doing right was enough for him. As for me, I wouldn't give you tuppence for the world's opinion. What comes first and foremost with me is this: I will not deceive or forsake a woman. If a woman refuses to have anything to do with me, like Kee Vos, I don't try to force her, no matter how strong my passion. I turn away with desolation in my heart the moment my own 'she and no other' is met by her 'certainly not him.'

I will not force and I will not forsake. And I, too, protest when I myself am forced or forsaken.

If I were married to a woman and I realized that that woman was carrying on with another, I wouldn't stand for any nonsense, but even then I wouldn't forsake her before I had tried everything possible to bring her back. So you see what I think of marriage and that I take it seriously.

Now as you know, when I met X<sup>tien</sup> she was pregnant, ill, left out in the cold. I was alone, and had just had the experience in Amsterdam I wrote to you about. I started it – though not immediately with marriage in mind. However, when I got to know her better, it became obvious to me that if I wanted to help her I must set about it more seriously.

Then I spoke to her frankly and said, I think about this and that, in such and such a way, I see your position and mine in such and such a way. I am poor – but I am no seducer. Will you be able to put up with me? Otherwise there isn't any point in going on.

At which she said, I want to be with you, no matter how poor you are.

And that is how it all came about. And before very long now she will be going to Leyden and I should like to marry her without any fuss straight after that. Because otherwise there will be something false about her position and mine, which I most decidedly wish to avoid.

I shall be like a workman with a trade in which she is my assistant. My drawings are in your hands and for the first year at least my bread and hers will depend on you and on all those who are willing to help me,

because you can see that I am doing my best and that I have the gift of drawing, and I believe of painting as well, which little by little will become more evident.

Now, Theo, I do not think I am disgracing my family by what I have done – and I wish my family would come to terms with it. Otherwise we will remain in opposite camps and I will have to declare: I will not forsake a woman to whom I am attached by a bond of mutual aid and respect in order to oblige anybody. I have come to terms with her past and she has come to terms with my past. If my family disowned me for seducing a woman and I had actually done it, then I should feel like a blackguard, but if I were to be opposed because I remained loyal to a woman to whom I had pledged my troth, I should despise my family. Not everyone is suited to be a painter's wife – she is willing, she learns something every day. I understand peculiarities in her character that have repelled others. But H. G. T. would probably think of her what he thinks of me, and say, 'She has a disagreeable nature and there is something unattractive about her,' and there the matter would rest.

But it goes without saying that I have enough knowledge of the world and of human nature to ask for nothing more than that people should not oppose my marriage – and I hope that I will not be wanting for my daily bread as long as I can show that I am doing my best and straining every nerve to become a good painter, or perhaps merely a draughtsman. I shall not be visiting my family or anything of the sort, however, either by myself or with her, but shall remain in the walk of life to which my work has allotted me. And then nobody can take offence, unless 'men of iniquity should deliberately try to find a stumbling block,' which I trust will not be the case.

However, you will find me most obliging in everything I am able to do without being disloyal to Christien. I should very much like to have your advice on, for instance, where I should live, and the like. If there is some objection to my remaining in The Hague, then I owe The Hague no loyalty. And I can find somewhere to work wherever you think fit, be it a village or a town. The figures and the landscape that come my way will no doubt always be interesting enough for me to do my best, so you are welcome to speak your mind freely on the subject. But it goes without saying that there must be no question of putting me under guardianship, I made my feelings concerning that perfectly clear during the Gheel affair: that sort of thing would be quite hors de saison [inopportune].

But as far as being loyal or disloyal to Christien is concerned, my feeling is: 'I must not break a promise of marriage.'

Had Kee Vos been willing to listen to me last summer in Amsterdam, she might not have been so quick to send me packing and then things would have been quite different. At the time, however, as you know, although I followed her all the way, although I pursued her as far as Amsterdam, all my attempts to speak to her or to establish anything with a certainty – anything I could rely on, that is – proved futile.

Now the very pace of life is driving and urging me on, as well as the work, and the new things that crop up and which I must tackle with a will if I want to hold my own in the bitter struggle. Taking things lying down is what I did in years gone by, taking action and being alert is what I do now, having found my work and my vocation.

So I consider your letter in the main quite mistaken, but perhaps that is because you haven't thought things through, and I credit you with being better than that particular letter this morning suggests.

You mention something that happened to you. I think I am able to recall something about it very faintly in the dim and distant past. If I remember rightly, you were acquainted with a girl from a lower class and ... were fond of her and sl... with her. Now I don't know who the person was, but I do know that you consulted Father about it and also spoke to me about it. And that Father then made you promise something about getting married, I don't know exactly what – but perhaps it was that while you remained a minor you would not do it without his consent. (The rest – what happened to the woman – I don't know.) Since you were a minor, Father had every right to step between the two of you and I can understand why he did it. Now the difference between your case and mine is that in the first place you and she were considerably younger than X<sup>tien</sup> and I, and secondly, your future and mine are different, that is, I for my part ply a humble trade and you hold a position which of necessity requires you to keep up a certain style.

This is all clear enough, it seems to me, and also that being a minor you were right to obey, while I for my part, being of age, am at liberty to say to Father: this is a matter in which you cannot and must not press me.

Now, you say that what has happened between X<sup>tien</sup> and me does not mean I have to marry her. This is what X<sup>tien</sup> and I think about it: we both want a very domesticated life, close together, need each other every day for our work and like to be together every day. We want there to be nothing false in our position and consider marriage the only radical means of stopping the world talking and of seeing to it that we are not ...

reproached with an illicit relationship. If we do not get married, they could indeed say that something or other is wrong – if we do get married we shall be very poor and give up any social pretenses, but our action will be right and honourable. You will understand this, I think.

But if you should now say, ‘Vincent, you’re going to have a dreadful time and terrible worries,’ then what I shall reply is, yes. Brother, I’m well aware of that, you are right, but, my dear fellow, what I would find even worse would be the feeling deep down inside of: ‘You have treacherously abandoned that woman whom you met in the winter, pregnant and sick, and have thrown her back on to the cruel cobblestones once more.’ That is not going to be said about me, and you will realize by now that it isn’t ‘obstinacy’ on my part or ‘wantonly having it my own way,’ but that I must stand by X<sup>tien</sup>, that I have pledged her my troth and that I shall keep my pledge.

Once again, if my staying in The Hague should bother anyone, please say so frankly, I am only too happy to yield on all matters concerning a home or the like. I need a studio, a living room and a bedroom, and though I am not indifferent as to whether that will be in The Hague or elsewhere, I shall be happy to show willing. However it must all be discussed quite differently from, for example, the way Father did on the Gheel occasion. That was scandalous.

Should it be possible for me to have, say, 50 frs. a month this year (although my work still isn’t saleable yet, it is the foundation on which I shall be able to build later on) – then I shall get down to business with a will and in good heart, because I shall at least know then that I shan’t be lacking the barest necessities I require for my work – my daily bread, a home, drawing materials – I shall be able to work then.

Were I to be told for certain that you are withdrawing your support, I should be rendered powerless. With the best will in the world my hand would become paralysed – everything would indeed be dreadful then, yes, everything would be terrible. What satisfaction would that give you or anyone else? I should become downhearted and it would go hard with Christien and the child. You may think it’s going too far to suppose you capable of doing anything like that, but ‘such things can happen.’ If this dreadful fate has to befall me – so be it. Though it hangs over my head, I can say nothing other than: I have pledged X<sup>tien</sup> my troth and she has pledged me hers, and we do not have it in us to break this pledge.

And yet – confound it – what’s happening? – and what sort of times do we live in? – wake up, Theo! Don’t let them confuse you or sway you with their Jesuitisms. Do I deserve being left in the lurch by you because I have helped a pregnant woman and will not send her back on to the streets? Is that a capital offence???

Goodbye, my dear fellow, but before you strike at me and chop off my head, and X<sup>tien</sup> ‘s and the child’s as well – sleep on it once more. But again, if it has to be, then in God’s name ‘off with my head,’ though preferably not, I still need it for drawing.

Ever yours, Vincent

P. S. X<sup>tien</sup> and the child won’t be able to pose headless either.