

Dear Theo,

Your letter and its enclosure came and I paid the landlord straight away. Since there is a mortgage on the house, the rent is collected by someone else who turned the people downstairs out last month and gave them short shrift. What you say about dividing the month into 3, so that I would get the money on the 1st, 10th and 20<sup>th</sup>, is extremely welcome news. That will make things much easier for me.

I need not tell you what a relief your letter was.

Did you receive the drawing, “The Fish Drying Barn”? I am busy doing a few more of them, so that you will have 2 or 3 done in the same way. C. M. has also got some done like this but I haven’t heard from him yet.

I want to tell you something about what you seem to be afraid of, namely the possibility that the family may want to take steps to place me under legal guardianship. If you really think “a few witnesses (and even then false ones) are all that would be needed to testify that you cannot manage your financial affairs and that would be enough to entitle Father to deprive you of your civil rights and place you under guardianship,” if, I say, you really think that this sort of thing is so easy to do these days, then I take the liberty of questioning it.

The legal procedure of guardianship, which has been disgracefully abused so often in order to get rid of individuals considered “troublesome” or “unpleasant” (mauvais coucheur [awkward customer]), can no longer be applied quite so easily these days. And the law gives the accused the right to appeal and many another remedy.

But you might say: a clever lawyer can twist the law, etc., etc. Que soit, I tell you that it isn’t quite so quick and easy to place somebody under guardianship nowadays...I know of a case in which even the Jesuits failed to have a guardianship order placed on someone they wanted out of the way, for the simple reason that the man said, “I am positively the last person for whom a guardianship order is even slightly appropriate,” and refused to give in.

Again, there was the case of someone who, placed under supervision somewhere against his will so that he couldn’t go where he chose, warned the person under whose supervision he had been placed that he had no right to deprive him of his liberty and that he would have to let him go ... warned him a few times coolly and quite calmly, but was rebuffed. Then bashed his guardian’s brains in with a poker and stood there quite calmly and gave himself up. The case was investigated and the result was a complete acquittal, since in certain extreme cases there exists a “right of self-defence,” and when the murder question came up the original case was re-examined and it turned out that the accused was not someone who merited guardianship.

In short, it is far from easy nowadays to place under guardianship someone who protests in a calm, manly and open manner. I really do not believe that the family would do anything like that ... but, you may say, they already tried to do it on the Gheel occasion. Alas, yes, Father is capable of doing it, but I must tell you that if he dares to try anything of the sort again, I shall resist him for all I’m worth. He had best think twice before he starts attacking me, but once again, I doubt they would dare do such a thing. If they do have the will and the temerity, I am not going to say, “Oh, please don’t do that,” but on the contrary will have no hesitation in letting them get on with it so that they incur public disgrace and are saddled with the costs of the case.

Let me tell you, I know of a case where a noble and very rich family tried to place somebody under guardianship and enlisted the services of lawyers and Jesuits – and yet failed with the person in question – although there were two complaints raised against him, in the first place his incompetence in financial affairs and in the second place his being of unsound mind. He protested and the judge let the family know unofficially that they would do well to drop the case. The family had to give up even before the legal proceedings actually started.

Now I would just like to add this – since you are aware that I would always protest against anything of the kind, if at some time or other they should try to take advantage of my being ill or indisposed, by, for instance, “taking action against me,” you will know that it is without my consent. In the event of my being ill, I hope you would object if anyone tried to profit from my helplessness. When my health is good I can take care of myself and am afraid of nothing of that sort. And I simply cannot imagine anyone really taking such a step – but should you ever hear that such moves are afoot, please let me know.

I don't mean if they are talking about it or saying something about it, of course, I take no notice of tittle-tattle, but I do take notice when it is translated into action. If they should do something, then I hope you will warn me. I know the law on guardianship, and I do not believe they can do anything to me. Once before in my life, though many years ago, I received a letter written in the same vein as your last one. And that was from H. G. T., whom I had consulted about something, and I have regretted ever since that I broached the matter with him. I well remember that I was seized by a kind of panic at the time and that I was frightened of my family. Now, some 10 or 12 years later, I have learned to think differently of my obligations towards and relations with my family.

Father keeps going on about the "respect and obedience" I am supposed to owe him. I shall not claim that a child does not owe his parents respect and obedience, all I want is to point out that Father has taken undue advantage of it more than once, for instance by immediately labelling as disrespectful any difference of opinion one may have with him. It would be a pretty kettle of fish if I ordered my life the way Father would like me to. My drawing would most certainly come to an end, for I should be unable to do any more. I might be able to come to terms with Father's way of thinking and talk things over with him if he acquired some understanding of art, but that will never happen. Clergymen often introduce "things of beauty" into a sermon, but it's dismal stuff and dreadfully stodgy.

Now I am glad that you have given me your frank opinion of Sien, namely that she tricked me and that I allowed myself be taken in, and I can understand why you should think that, because such things do happen. However, I remember once when a girl did try something like that, I shut the door in her face so hard that I rather doubt I am likely to be taken in by such sharp practices.

The way matters stand with Sien is that I am genuinely attached to her and she to me – that she is my loyal helpmate, who goes everywhere with me – and who is becoming more indispensable to me by the day. I feel less passion for her than I did for Kee Vos last year. But the kind of love I have for Sien is the only one I am still capable of after the disappointment of that first passion. She and I are two unhappy people who keep each other company and share a burden, and that is precisely why unhappiness is making way for happiness, and the unbearable is becoming bearable.

Her mother is a little old woman just like the ones Frère paints.

Now you will understand that, given that I remain faithful to her, I should set little store by the formality of marriage were it not that the family does. Father, for one, and I know this for certain, attaches great importance to it, and although he won't approve of my marrying her, he would consider it even worse if I lived with her without being married. His advice would be to leave her, and he would give that advice in this form: wait, which is cold comfort and quite inappropriate. That is typical of Father...he puts things off that are urgent and pressing, and this can be absolutely infuriating. So Father had best keep his "waiting" to himself, for if he came out with it, I should not be able to contain myself.

I am a man of 30 with wrinkles on my forehead and lines on my face that make me look 40 and my hands are full of furrows – yet when Father looks at me through his spectacles he sees me as a little boy (1½ years ago Father wrote to me, "You are in your first youth"). And that is said with the tuppence-worth of profundity I have heard so often before.

Do you know what I think Father and Uncle Stricker are like? Like 'Les deux augures' by Gêrôme. But I am a "mauvais coucheur" – que soit.

Now you will say, Vincent, you had far better lose yourself in perspective and the Fish Drying Sheds. And then I shall say, you are quite right, brother, and that is why I am getting down to work on the two drawings that go with that first one, and which you will soon be receiving as proof that I like nothing better than losing myself in nature and drawing and not losing myself in such things as being placed under guardianship which seem to me utterly ridiculous. Regards, with my heartfelt thanks for your loyal help,  
Ever yours, Vincent

I kept this letter back because I wanted to send you the small drawings at the same time, but they still need more work. One is finished, though, namely another fish drying shed [F 946a, JH 151]. Sien and I have been camping in the dunes from morning till night for days on end, like real Bohemians. We took bread along and a small bag of coffee and fetched hot water from a hot-water-&-coals woman in Scheveningen. That hot-water-&-coals woman and her surroundings are marvellous, charming beyond words, I've called at her little shop as early as 5 o'clock in the morning when the street-sweepers go there for their coffee. My dear fellow, that would really be something to draw!!! Just getting the people I want to pose would cost a pretty penny, but I've a good mind to do it.

Write to me when you get a chance, particularly what you think of these last three drawings. And also if it is really your view that I ought to be more afraid than I am of being placed under guardianship, to my mind an impossible eventuality. Because I should not remain indifferent if steps were actually being taken, that goes without saying. Having to go to Etten would be most inconvenient for me right now, in the first place because I'm so busy, and 2<sup>nd</sup> because the trip would cost more than I feel I can afford and I would sooner spend it on Sien.

I think it a delightful prospect that you are coming, I am longing to know what impression Sien will make on you. There is nothing special about her, she is just an ordinary woman of the people who has something of the sublime for me. Whoever loves a plain, ordinary person and has endeared himself to her is happy – despite the dark side of life. Had she not needed help last winter then the bond between her and me would not have been forged in the circumstances, that is after my disappointment and spurned love. As it was, however, it was precisely the feeling of being able to do something useful après tout [after all], despite that disappointment, that brought me to myself again and revived me. Not that I went out looking for it, but I found it, and now there is a warm affection between her and me and it would be quite wrong to give that up.

I might easily have grown disenchanted and sceptical if I had not met Sien – but she and my work now keep me going. And I should like to add this: because Sien has taken to all the toil and moil of a painter's life and is so willing to pose, I think I shall become a better artist with her than if I had ended up with Kee Vos. For though Sien is not as graceful, and her manners are perhaps, or rather certainly, quite different, she is so full of goodwill and dévouement [devotion] that I am moved by it.

Heyerdahl has seen Sorrow now, but I should be glad if a draughtsman, for instance Henri Pille, could have a look at the last three drawings. I'm sure H. Pille no longer remembers me – though I have been in his company and know that he is someone who can behave very oddly at times – and I don't know whether he would say anything. But all I should want to know is whether the drawings make any impression on him and if they appeal to him. I say this in case you run into Henri Pille from time to time, for it would have to be as if by chance that you let him see them.

I must also repeat that I am getting on very well with my collection of woodcuts, which I regard as belonging to you, with me holding a life-interest in them. I now have a good thousand sheets of English (mainly Swains), American and French. And Rappard, for instance, who is also collecting them these days, was greatly taken with them. So that is something which belongs to you though you haven't seen it yet. I only regret that I was unable to buy Doré's London recently, for which the Jew asked 7.50 guilders, which I couldn't afford. And also a Boetzel Album. Anyway, when you come here, you shall have a look at them and, I hope, like them, and perhaps through them become acquainted with some artists of whom you knew little or nothing until now.

Vincent