

Letter 201  
The Hague, 2 – 3 June 1882

Dear Theo,

What I feel obliged to tell you once more is this. You know very well that up to this very day there has been nothing in my life of a criminal nature, and that I am in full possession of my civil rights as a Netherlander. Further, that I shall take good care to avoid all things prohibited by the laws of this country, but consequently that I shall not suffer myself to be molested or to be put under guardianship or anything of the sort. I know quite well that in our family very ugly things have been said about me repeatedly and in various ways, although I do not know the source from which they originated. But I very much doubt whether those who said them would have the courage to swear to them before a judge or something like that. I do not know if you have the Dutch constitution and the other laws in your possession. Personally, I have consulted them repeatedly on questions in which I myself was concerned when I was in doubt whether this or that was legally justified. And not just the Dutch laws; at times I even took the trouble to compare the Dutch regulations with the French or English constitutions. It wasn't just recently necessary for me to look up the law; I had to in the past, when I was studying some points in history.

Therefore I can tell you in all tranquillity that I am waiting for things to take their course; I only hope that nothing of the sort will happen and that, on the contrary, the family will prove disposed to arrange things reasonably and peacefully, should the necessity arise.

I must tell you, Theo, that sometimes I perceived that Father, for instance, does not always take the trouble to look things up, or that he bases and maintains a judgement on such shaky premises and such superficial impressions, information or gossip that it doesn't cut any ice. Besides one should not consider a clause separately, without relation to other laws, but rather relate it to the modifications and clarifications of the pertinent clauses which appear with it.

When the law says, for instance, "A child owes respect to its parents," which is the introduction to the law on paternal rights, it is not enough to fly into a rage and say, "You don't show enough respect for your parents" – one ought to think it over and try to find out if there really is something illegal in the child's behaviour before one starts shouting about the law.

But this is what happens so often in our family – there is some gossip, it is inflated, it is exaggerated to the limit; and then they form an opinion or a resolution about someone, sometimes wholly without the particular person's knowledge or without having talked it over with him, only taking notice of impressions, hearsay, communications (the devil take them, particularly the last!). Our venerable Uncle Cent also has a way of gathering "information" which I consider anything but fair. As for me, when I saw such things happen at home, I told Father often enough, You will find no blessing in it.

Just think, Theo, how different things might have been at home, for instance, if Father could have been less distrustful of me, a bit less suspicious; if, instead of considering me a person who could only do wrong, he had shown more patience and good will in order to understand my real intentions – in which he has always been sorely mistaken. In the first place, he would have felt less grief on my account, and would have been easier in his mind about me; and in the second place, he would have spared me much sorrow. For it is a great sorrow to think, This is worse than having no home at all, no father, no mother, no relations – and I have often thought so, as I do now.

But one thing is certain, it is wrong to act and leave the person concerned out of things; I do not even believe in a family council taking resolutions about a person unless the accused, or rather the person over whom the family council was gathered, is present. But what is a family council? In most cases nothing more than an intrigue, and occasionally a vindication of family pride – *beaucoup de bruit pour peu de besogne* [much ado about nothing].

But often something is decided upon which proves that the persons who were present did not take the law into account, and the resolution would not cut any ice if it were actually laid before a judge.

If I really were bad or vicious or a mischief-maker or a low schemer or an incompetent, I should really be afraid. However, being what I am, I firmly believe I need not be afraid of anything the family or some members of the family may attempt to do.

It is my sincere wish that nothing will be attempted, not because I am afraid of anything, but because I prefer peace to bickering.

I do wish you knew Sien, but you are so far away, and it is impossible for me to describe a person in such a way that you would know her well just from that description. However, I can try.

Do you remember our old nurse a Zundert, Leen Veerman? If my memory does not deceive me, Sien is that kind of person. Her type of profile resembles "L'Ange de la Passion" by Landelle, you know the one I

mean, a kneeling figure; the print is published by Goupil. But of course she is not exactly like this, I say it only to give you an idea of the lines of her face. She is slightly pock-marked, so she is no longer beautiful, but the lines of her figure are simple and not ungraceful.

What I appreciate in her is that she is not coquettish with me, goes her way quietly, is thrifty, is quite willing to adapt herself to the circumstances and to learn, so that she will be able to help me with my work in a thousand ways. And she is useful to me just because she is no longer handsome, no longer young, no longer coquettish, no longer foolish. Her health has been very bad, and last winter she was very weak. Now, by eating simple food, by walking in the open air a lot, and by taking baths, she has become much healthier and stronger. But pregnancy is a difficult time. However, her speech is ugly and she often says things and uses expressions which, for instance, our sister Willemien, who has been brought up differently, would never use. But this is something that I don't mind in the least. I would rather have her speak coarsely and be good than be refined in speech and heartless. But that is just it – she has a good heart, has endurance, patience and good will, puts herself out to help me. She comes every week to clean the studio to save the money I should have to pay a cleaning woman. Well, we shall be poor at times, but as long as she has enough to eat, she is not sickly in the sense of having some ailment, but she has suffered a great deal, for instance, she had smallpox and later throat trouble. But there is no reason why she cannot live long and get quite well again.

I must put a question to you confidentially. Do you think Father is afraid that I shall ask him for money on this occasion? I certainly wouldn't. Father has often told me that my education, etc., has cost more than that of the others, therefore in case of my marriage I would not ask Father for anything, not even for an old cup and saucer. Sien and I have what's strictly necessary. The only thing we cannot do without, as long as I do not sell my work, is the 150 fr. from you, for rent, bread, shoes, drawing materials – in short, for daily expenses.

I ask nothing, not even an old cup and saucer. I ask but one single thing: to let me love and care for my poor, weak, ill-used little wife as well as my poverty permits, without their trying to separate, worry or hurt us.

Nobody cared for her or wanted her, she was alone and forsaken like a worthless rag, and I have taken her up and have given her all the love, all the tenderness, all the care that was in me; she has felt this and she has revived, or rather, she is reviving.

You know the old fable or parable: There was a poor man in a town who had but one single little ewe lamb which he had bought and fed, and it had been raised in his house – it ate his bread and drank from his cup and slept in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. There was also a rich man in that town who possessed many herds of sheep and oxen, but he took that one ewe lamb from the poor man and killed it. You see, if Tersteeg, for instance, could do what he liked, he would separate Sien from me, force her back into her former damned life which she has always hated – and why?

Know it well, the life of the woman, of the children, of me, depends on that little thread of 150 fr. a month until my work begins to sell. If that little thread breaks before that time, then “morituri te salutant.” It is the least we can manage on, and only with the greatest economy at that. But we are happy this way because love binds us so closely.

Whether Father and Mother take it quietly or not will three-fourths depend on what you tell them. If you oppose me, then the trouble starts. If you say something like, Keep calm, don't meddle, or if you try to reassure them in some way, they will keep quiet. You need not compromise yourself, however, or take any responsibility. In no way, for that responsibility rests with me, but if you remain to me what you have been until now, you can reassure them in two ways as to the financial side. First, that I have your monthly allowance for the necessary expenses, secondly, that I shall not ask anything from them, not a penny, not even an old cup and saucer. Finally, that I already have what's strictly necessary – furniture, bedding, child's clothes, cradle, etc.

Well, brother, I hope all “dramatic” scenes will be avoided, and that we may all keep calm; that is what I hope and strive for.