

Letter 281  
The Hague, 30 April 1883

Dear Theo,

On your birthday I want you to receive a little word from me too. May it be a happy year for you, and may you have success in your work, and I do hope, especially, that you may have in this year some satisfaction for what you did for your patient; may she recover and start a new life. Do you know it is almost a year since you were here? Yes – I long very much for your coming. It is the work of that whole year that I have to show you, about which we must speak in regard to the future.

Do you think it will be about the same time as last year that you will come? Well, as soon as anything is decided about your coming, let me know.

Some time ago you told me many things about these Swedish painters, Heyerdahl, Edelfelt.

This week I found a reproduction of a picture by Edelfelt: "A Prayer-Meeting on the Beach." There is something in it of Longfellow's poems; it is very beautiful. It shows a sentiment of which I am very fond, and which I think does more good in the world than the Italians and Spaniards with their "Arms Merchants of Cairo," of which I get so tired in the long run.

This week I have been working on the figure of a woman on the heath, who is gathering cuts of peat.

And a kneeling figure of a man [F 1027, JH 354].

One must know the structure of the figures so thoroughly, in order to get the expression, at least I cannot see it differently.

The Edelfelt is indeed beautiful in its expression, however the effect lies not only in the expression of the faces, but in the whole position of the figures.

Do you know who has claims to being the cleverest of all these Swedes?

It is perhaps a certain Wilhelm Leibl, [actually a German] an absolutely self-made man.

I have a reproduction of a picture with which he suddenly came out, I think it was at the exhibition in Vienna in '82. It represents three women in a pew, one seated figure of a young woman in a checkered dress (Tyrol), two kneeling old women in black, with kerchiefs round their heads. Its sentiment is beautiful and drawn like Memling or Quinten Matsys. That picture seems to have made a great sensation among the artists at the time, I do not know what became of Leibl since then. I found him very much like Thijs Mans. In England there was also a German of that kind, but less clever – Paul de Gassow, who reminds me a little of Oberlander, whose heads you certainly remember. Well, there still seem to be some good artists in Sweden.

I am longing again for your letter. As to what I wrote you about relations between women and their mothers, I can assure you, in my case nine-tenths of the difficulties I had with the woman originated directly or indirectly therein.

And yet those mothers are not exactly bad, though they act absolutely wrongly.

But they do not know what they are doing.

Women of about the age of fifty are often distrustful, and perhaps it is that very distrust and cunning that entangles them. If you care to hear them, I can tell you some particulars some day. I do not know whether all women become more serious in getting older, and then want to govern and correct their daughters, which they do in exactly the wrong way.

In some cases their system may have some *raison d'être*; but they ought not to fix as a principle and accept a priori that all men are deceivers and fools, for which reason women must cheat them and suppose they know everything better. If, by ill chance, the mother-system is applied to a man who is honest and of good faith, he is indeed badly off.

Well, the time has not yet come when reason, not only in the sense of raison, but also of *la conscience*, is respected by everyone; to contribute towards bringing about that time is a duty, and in judging characters one of the first things that humanity demands is to take into consideration the circumstances of contemporary society.

How beautiful Zola is – it is especially *L'Assommoir* which I often think of. Apropos, how far did you get in reading Balzac? I have quite finished *Les Misérables*. I know very well that Victor Hugo analyses in a different way than do Balzac and Zola, but he probes to the bottom of things just as well.

Do you know what I should prefer in the matter of relations between the woman and her mother – in my case where it has decidedly bad consequences – that the mother came to live with us entirely.

I proposed it this winter, when the mother was very hard up, and I said: If you are so much attached to each other, then come and live together, but I believe they, though worse off themselves, don't think our simple way of living good enough, one which I desire on principle and to which I am forced by circumstances.

Many people care more for the exterior than for the inward life of a family, thinking they act well in doing so. Society is full of that: people who strive to make a show instead of leading a true existence. I repeat: those people are not bad, but they are foolish.

However great the difference between the persons in question may be, keep an eye on the relations between your patient and her mother. Don't make the mistake of thinking that I suspect the mother of something definitely evil – no, but I should be surprised if she did not possess her share of the general foolishness.

And if your patient did not possess every woman's inclination to blunder in the choice of ones whom she wants to be led by.

A wife's mother is, in some cases, the representative of a meddling, slandering, aggravating family, and as such decidedly injurious and hostile, though she may not be so bad herself.

In my case, she would be much better off in my house than in the houses of other members of the family, where she is very often the victim of callous insolence and is incited to intrigues.

Did you ever think of this quality in your patient's mother? She may acquire it to a certain extent – therefore be on the qui vive. And with regard to such persons, it is possible that you yourself foresee also that they will prove not to have the same desirable ideas about reserve as you and your patient.

Towards your patient you have been absolutely honest and straightforward: that is the principal thing, which keeps the future clear, whatever it may be: but even if one has acted rightly, difficulties may arise. Well, in the year that begins for you today, I wish you very few of those – on the contrary may all good be your share. Well, write soon if you have not written already, which I hope will be the case. Adieu, boy, with a hearty handshake,

Yours, Vincent