

Dear brother,

This morning I received your letter; in many respects the contents do not surprise me. It does surprise me a little that you should credit me with the slightest insight into business, as I am considered a dreamer in that respect, as you know, and I could not suppose that you thought differently about it. I think your idea of changing your situation is a very rational one. In the first place, one is not obliged to wait for the moment when the employers will arrive at a better insight; and in the second place, if one considered oneself obliged to do so, one might go on waiting forever and ever, and a young employee might doubt whether, when that moment came, he would not be too tired to redress things; how much more would this be the case with the old "pochards pleins" themselves. The latter will have lost their wits entirely by then; and decadence being decadence, a deserved ruin of a business will follow, the fatal consequence of certain mistakes. I don't mean to say it is if it happens through thoughtlessness, but if it happens through that odious, wanton, capricious, reckless way of outliving one's fame, and through supposing that everything is only a question of money, and that anything is allowed; it may succeed many a time, but the end is a breakdown, and such a managing director is the only man who gets off safely for the moment.

Well – it's the old, old story – but of course all those departments, officious as well as official, all that bookkeeping, it's all nonsense, and that's not the way to do business. Doing business is surely also action, a measure of personal insight and energy. That does not count now – that is handicapped – thence your complaint, There are not enough pictures.

Suffit, in my opinion the house of G. & Co. is going in for gambling now, and who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind. I – who was with them for six years – though I was one of the lowest employees – even now after at least ten years, I still feel that part of my heart is in it. I think it very, very sad. In Uncle Vincent's time they started with a few employees who were not treated nearly so arrogantly and as if they were machines. Then there was real cooperation, then one could be in it with all one's heart. Since then the number of employees has increased, but has consisted less and less of persons who really put their hearts into the business and whose knowledge is sound. I myself witnessed some curious instances of this. In the meantime the gentlemen became more and more haughty, and I am of the opinion that now they are absolutely blind to reality. And if I may express my thoughts frankly, I believe that the best thing that could happen to them would be that their business go to the dogs. In their disenchantment, although they would be too old to redress things, it might be possible for them to be redressed themselves as human beings.

I note with pleasure that you don't mention the gentlemen personally; that is right – indeed, I didn't expect anything else from you. But for the rest, for you yourself it is indeed curiously difficult. Your heart is in it, and you are more faithful to them than any of the others. I think you would rather stay on if possible, even in case another situation were more advantageous, because the house is what it is. All that is counted for nothing, at least it seems so; though for instance old Mr. Goupil felt a certain affection for you, he would probably say nothing about it, because they themselves keep silent, and let things accumulate quietly.

Now from your letter I see that the situation in which you are placed at the moment is pretty well untenable. Perhaps it would be a good thing if, for instance, you went to see old Mr. Goupil privately, and told him that you had kept silent as long as you could, but that now you cannot wait any longer, so that you feel obliged to ask what the gentlemen really want, because if it goes on like this, you will no longer be a party to it. Something like this – for which you will hardly find an opportunity – there will hardly be a question of that – I realize that – but something to the effect that you might accept an equally good situation, not nearly so well-paid at first and still to be created, instead of your present one – which, as I see it, might act as an eye opener. I do not think that anything of the sort would lead to results or to an amelioration of things, but, whatever might happen, old Mr. Goupil would trust you, and there is the possibility that in any case you might still be of service to him.

But I must not lose myself in situations which I can only estimate quite in general, and now speak about what you say further about a project of your own. Under the circumstances – always taking the necessity of a change for granted – excellent – a modern business, in which energy might achieve something – where one is not hampered by so much routine and so complicated an administration that everything, absolutely everything is paralyzed by it. You tell me there is capital: there is (and this means more than capital) a good apparatus for reproductions – and if in addition the directors of this concern are people who mean well, and who intend to sell good things, quand même to seek their success in honesty, then, as I said, it is excellent. But Wisselingh at Collier's collided too violently with his employer's character (although he never told me or anybody else so, but I have drawn this conclusion independently, which tallies with Wisselingh's saying, "I wasted my time at Collier's"). And I am disposed to think

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that the latter's character is the kind that will talk grandly rather than act grandly, so I say: Are those people at the head of the other concern willing?

The being able is rather more the result of these two items than people are ready to admit in most cases. After all, one should know one's own mind.

Now I come to what you write about myself.

Of course I should very much like to spend some time in Paris, because I think I should find there that intercourse with artists which I shall need someday or other.

Is that possible? It would be if it did not get you into too much trouble. I should like it well enough.

I should love to talk with you about what you wrote, but what would be the use? It is better to lend a helping hand when there is a chance. "N'importe comment."

For I think that it would greatly help me in my work if I had an opportunity to see more of printing, for instance. I have had some years' practice in painting now, so I stick to that. But if I could get some work in a printer's office or something, that would be a help rather than a hindrance – but I should have to learn all that. I think, however, I should be able to draw reproductions myself, for instance. And I am willing to try my hand at anything of that kind, especially if a living may be earned in that way over there. Indeed, I believe that the time will come when I will not have to earn a living in any other way than by painting; but be sure that I shall not have the slightest objection to going to Paris, whenever you think it would be useful or necessary for some reason or other.

My advising you in business matters would hardly be the thing. I have been out of it too long, but if I came into it again, we would be of the same opinion in a great many things. And I do know I have seen what I have seen, and in matters of reproduction or publication I daresay I know what is good. And I am willing to lend a helping hand as to carrying things out, no matter in what way.

But I need not tell you that here on this beautiful moor I haven't the slightest longing for Paris, and I wouldn't think about it at all if it hadn't been for your letter. And I simply say this, If it must be, all right, I shall go to Paris; if it must be, all right, I shall stay on the moors.

I shall find things to paint everywhere. It is splendid here, and I think I learn to paint somewhat better while painting. And my heart is in it, I need not tell you that.

Besides, I believe that knowing a handicraft is the most solid profession after all, one reason more for me to stick to it.

But if it might happen for some reason or other-on account of its being more convenient to you, or because of urgent necessity – that we should be together in Paris – I dare predict that I shall tell you, start drawing, and I would give you a few hints in the beginning.

I know how much I still have to learn myself, yet I begin to see light, and in some way or other, by practice or by learning from others what can be of use to me, I will stick to my painting with all my heart. And if it might be that you came to a point where you saw light, well, so much the better.

You say your heart is in the art business, all right, but even more in art itself, I believe.

Well, boy, write soon again – if you kept silent about it now, I should imagine all kinds of worries. So if something is the matter, write that; if nothing is the matter, write that; but don't keep it all to yourself, for that's not worth while.

Oh, I have had a letter from the poor woman; she was glad that I wrote her, but she is worried about the children, and she goes out working as a charwoman. She is obliged to live with her mother. Poor things.

But we must keep courage notwithstanding everything.

I enclose a few scratches from here. The country is so beautiful that I cannot describe it. As soon as I can paint a little better – then! You can arrange things for me exactly as you think best, I shall learn here, and I should learn out there, too, I think

However things may go, I don't suppose it will make you more unhappy, and perhaps you have already put up with things too long. The best thing would be, if it turned out so, that you were more appreciated by your directors, and that they left you more liberty to do business as you think best. But I should be surprised if things took this turn seeing that Uncle Vincent himself was not treated very fairly when he left.

But leaving that out of it, it seems to me that the whole art business is rotten – to tell you the truth, I doubt if the present enormous prices, even for masterpieces, will last. A "je ne sais quoi" has passed over it which has chilled everything – and enthusiasm has been put to flight. Is this of great influence on the artists? Not at all, for generally the greatest of them personally profited but little from those enormous prices, except in their last period, when they were already famous, and they – Millet and others, particularly Corot – would not have painted less, or less beautifully, without that enormous rise. And whatever may be said of art business, for the present it will remain so that he who can make a thing worth seeing will always find certain persons interested in it, who will make it

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possible for him to earn a living.

I would rather have 150 francs a month as a painter than 1500 francs a month in another position, even as an art dealer.

I think one feels more a man among other men as a painter, than in a life which is founded on speculation, and in which one has to heed conventions. I wonder how it will all turn out, but it is all the same to me, one way or another. And as to you, I don't consider it would be such bad luck if the consequences were that you became a painter in your thirtieth year. I should consider it great good fortune. One's real life begins at thirty, in fact, that is to say, its most active part.

Friends and family may consider you old, or I don't know what, but you can feel a renewal of energy for all that. But then it is necessary to reflect well, and to have a will, and to be wide-awake. But in that period, a change is really necessary; one must wipe out the whole thing and start anew. Just as one does when a boy – but more maturely. Tom, Dick and Harry, who drowse away in the same old way, think this foolish, and say they don't see any good in it; all right, leave Tom, Dick and Harry alone, as long as they don't attack you; they are as little awake as a somnambulist. For oneself one must not doubt that it is the way of nature, and that one works against nature only by not changing. There is an old saying, They have ears but they hear not, they have eyes but they see not, they have a heart but feel not; their heart is hardened, and they have closed their ears and eyes because they do not want to hear and do not want to see. I think that in any case you and I are honest enough so that we need not be afraid to open our eyes and look at things as they are and as they occur. That little old saying means so much, expresses it all so exactly, that I cannot help thinking of it again and again.

This is people gathering peat eating together behind a mound of peat, with a little fire in the foreground.

This painting was of peat loaders, but I fear the scratches are absolutely indecipherable.

Here are a couple of evening effects; I am still working on that weed burner, which is better than before in a painted study [F020, JH 417], so that it renders more strongly the immensity of the plain and the gathering twilight, the fire with a bit of smoke being the only spot of light. I went again and again to look at it in the evening, and I found this cottage on a muddy evening after the rain; seen on the spot, it is splendid.

I repeat, I think that there are things for me to learn in Paris as well as here on the moor; in the city, I should have an opportunity to learn from other people and to see what they are doing, and that is worth something; but working here, I think I can make progress even without seeing other painters. And for my own pleasure I would much rather stay here. But if a change in your position made it desirable for me to go to you, perhaps to earn something in the same business, it is all right, and I haven't the slightest objection.

Be sure to write me about all these things, which of course I shall not mention to anybody else. If my affairs might change somewhat for the better, if I could count on C. M.'s buying my studies for instance, then the best thing for me would be to stay here, as it is cheaper here; and after I had made some more progress, and if you decided to become a painter, it would be an excellent place for study here – excellent.

Has C. M. been to see you already? Once more, keep good courage, I will try to do the same; and if you ever decide to become a painter, do so with inner cheerfulness and all possible optimism. Then, taking a broad view of things, you would have to consider the time between now and your thirtieth year as a rather hard experimental time; but at the end of it you would find all things renewed, and a rich future before you. Think of what you told me when those Swedish painters were in Paris; one must have pluck, the more so because one sees how shaky and tottering everything is. "Efforts de perdu, que soit" [efforts of lost souls, so be it] – but they are our duty in the times which we live in, and very often one has to choose between that and dreaming one's life away.

Well, boy, good luck, write again soon, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent