

Dear Theo,

It is already relatively late, almost twelve o'clock, but I want to write to you before the day is over. In the first place, it is so long since I wrote you – but, my dear fellow, what shall I write? I am up to my ears in work here, so that the days pass without my having time to think of or keep up an interest in many things that used to attract me. What prompts me to write is that I heard from home that you have had an offer to go to Paris for six weeks. If you go there, you will pass the Borinage. I wanted you to consider spending a day, or more if possible, here. I should so much like to have you know this country, too, because it has so many peculiarities for one who knows how to look at things attentively. To one who had never seen a village by the sea, would it not be interesting to see Scheveningen or Katwijk, or any other such village? Well, there is no sea here, but the character of everything is interesting and worthy of notice. So if you feel inclined and have an opportunity, stay here, but do write beforehand when you are coming and where, at which station I shall find you, and on what train.

I shall give this letter to Mother when she comes, for in all probability I shall meet her when she comes back from Paris. [Their mother had been called to Paris; on his way to the South, Uncle Vincent had fallen dangerously ill there] I am looking forward to seeing her. Happily for Uncle, the danger seems past for the present.

The news of Frans Soek's death touched me deeply; if you know any particulars, I should like to hear them. Poor fellow, his life was not easy, for he had many struggles.

A few days ago we had a very heavy thunderstorm at about eleven o'clock in the evening. Quite near our house there is a spot from which one can see, far below, a large part of the Borinage, with the chimneys, the mounds of coal, the little miners' cottages, the scurrying little black figures by day, like ants in a nest; and farther on, dark pine woods with little white cottages silhouetted against them, a few church spires a way off, an old mill, etc. Generally there is a kind of haze hanging over it all, or a fantastic chiaroscuro effect formed by the shadows of the clouds, reminding one of pictures by Rembrandt or Michel or Ruysdael.

But during that thunderstorm in the pitch-dark night the flashes of lightning made a curious effect: now and then everything became visible for a moment. Near by the large, gloomy buildings of the Marcasse mine stood alone, isolated in the open field, that night conjuring up the huge bulk of Noah's Ark as it must have looked in the terrible pouring rain and the darkness of the Flood, illuminated by a flash of lightning. Tonight in a Bible class I described a shipwreck, still under the influence of that thunderstorm.

I often read in Uncle Tom's Cabin these days. There is still so much slavery in the world, and in this remarkably wonderful book that important question is treated with so much wisdom, so much love, and such zeal and interest in the true welfare of the poor oppressed that one comes back to it again and again, always finding something new. I still can find no better definition of the word art than this, "L'art c'est l'homme ajouté à la nature" [art is man added to nature] – nature, reality, truth, but with a significance, a conception, a character, which the artist brings out in it, and to which he gives expression, "qu'il dégage," which he disentangles, sets free and interprets. A picture by Mauve or Mans or Israëls says more, and says it more clearly, than nature herself. It is the same with books, and in Uncle Tom's Cabin especially, the artist has put things in a new light; in this book, though it is becoming an old book already – that is, written years ago – all things have become new. The sentiment in it is so fine, so elaborate, so masterly. It is written with so much love, so much seriousness, so faithfully. It is humble and simple, but at the same time so truly sublime, so noble and refined.

Recently I read a book about the English coal district, but it did not give many particulars. Enclosed is a wood engraving for your collection.

The other day I made the acquaintance of somebody who has been a foreman over the miners for many years. Of humble origin, he is a self-made man. Now he has a lung disease, serious enough, and can no longer stand the terribly fatiguing work down in the mine. It is very interesting to hear him speak about all those things relating to the mines. He has always remained a friend of the miner (unlike so many others who have also got on, but more for the sake of money than real distinction, and prompted by less noble and very often mean motives). He has the heart of a labourer – faithful and honest and brave – but he is far superior to most of them in intellectual development. More than once during a strike he has been the only person with any influence on the miners. They would listen to nobody, they would follow nobody's advice but his; and he alone was obeyed in the critical moment. When I met him for the first time, I thought of the etching by Meissonier which we know so well, "The Reader." One of the Denis boys is about to become engaged to his daughter, that is why he visits the house here now and then, though rarely, and so I made his acquaintance. Since then I visited him a few times. Have you ever read Legouvé, *Les Pères et les Enfants*? It is a remarkable book. I found it at his house and read it with interest.

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A few days ago I received a letter from the Reverend Mr. Jones of Isleworth in which he writes about building little wooden churches here in the Borinage. Is that practicable, is it desirable? He is ready to work for that end, that is, for the erection of the first of such little buildings. He even speaks of coming here in the autumn to talk it over; I certainly hope it happens. If you have time, write me a line, and if you can, stop here when you go to Paris. At all events let me know, if possible, on what train you will be passing the station nearest to Wasmes, for then I will try to be there. Blessings on your work, believe me always,

Your loving brother, Vincent