

Dear brother,

I have received your letter, but think it is only an answer to my No. 1.

In No. 2 and No. 3 you will have found a 'talking-to' as my thanks for your advice. 'Take care not to build too many castles in the air before you are sure the work is not in vain.'

And since you have had that talking-to already, I shall not repeat it. Bien te fasse [much good it may do you], old boy!

It's lucky at any rate that you haven't been guilty of 'in the meantime' thinking, isn't that so?

No, neither you nor I are guilty of that sort of thinking. To the best of our belief, yours and mine, someone who lacks courage, or uses a won't-commit-myself approach, or doesn't dare stake his life with a smile, would be better off not even trying to win a real woman's heart. From the very beginning of this love I have felt that unless I threw myself into it sans arrière pensée [unreservedly], committing myself totally and with all my heart, utterly and for ever, I had absolutely no chance, and that even if I do throw myself into it in this way the chance is very slight. But what do I care if my chance is great or small?

I mean, should I, can I, take that into account when I am in love? No, no reckoning up, one loves because one loves.

Being in love – quelle chose [what a business]!

Imagine what a real woman would think if she found that someone was courting her with reservations; wouldn't she say something worse than 'never, no, never!?' Oh, Theo, don't let's talk about it, if you and I are in love then we are in love, voilà tout [that's all there is to it]. And we keep a clear head and do not becloud our mind, nor curb our feelings, nor douse the fire and the light, but simply say, 'Thank God, I am in love.'

Again, imagine what a real woman would think of a lover who came to her confident of success. I wouldn't give tuppence for his chances with someone like Kee Vos, and not for a hundred thousand guilders would I swap his chances for that 'no, never, ever'.

I sent you a few drawings because I thought you might find something of the look of Heike [a town near Etten in Noord-Brabant, also called St. Willebrord] about them. Now tell me, please, why don't they sell and how can I make them saleable? For I should like to earn some money now and then for the fare to go and look into that 'never, no, never.'

But be sure not to mention this plan of mine to the Most Reverend and Very Learned Mr. J. P. S. [Johannus Paulus Stricker, Uncle Stricker, the father of Kee]. For when I do arrive entirely unannounced, he might perhaps have no alternative but to turn a blind eye for the sake of peace.

Someone like the Most Reverend and Very Learned Mr. J. P. S. becomes quite a different person from what he was before once one falls in love with his daughter, at least as far as the one involved in the 'present case' is concerned. He becomes quite gigantic and assumes unheard of proportions! But that does not alter the fact that, as one who loves his daughter, one is more afraid of not going to him than of going to him, even though one knows that he is capable of doing terrible things in the circumstances.

Anyway, right now I can't help feeling 'I have a draughtsman's fist,' and I am very glad that I have such an implement, even though it is still unwieldy. The Ingres paper is really excellent.

And so you are popularly known as a lucky dog. For all the petites misères de la vie humaine.

And you are not sure whether you really are one or not? But why should you doubt it?

Now look, what I should like to know is this: what sort of petites misères do you have? I know some of them in part or in full, others I don't.

Do you also have petites misères to do with a lady from time to time? Of course you do, but I should like to hear what they are! Surely none of the never, no, never sort? Or perhaps, on the contrary, too many heavy-handed yeas and amens?

Well, your petites misères with the ladies interest me exceedingly. Especially because I think of your petites misères what I think of my own, namely, that in many cases we do not quite know how to take them, when, in fact, they contain hidden treasure provided we know how to find and take possession of it. The petites or grandes misères are riddles. Finding the solution is well worth the trouble.

A lucky dog who complains – without reason! And they call me 'the melancholy one', and I ask you to congratulate me on my 'never, no, never'! And I get very cross when people tell me that it is dangerous to put out to sea, observing that one might drown in it. I don't get cross because I think they are wrong to say that, but because they seem to forget 'that there is safety in the very heart of danger'.

So, you lucky dog: what is wrong with your luck? You were able to tell me with much piquancy what falling in love is like by your comparison with a strawberry. It was nicely put indeed, but to be in love in the teeth of a triple 'no, never, ever' as well as of a Most Reverend and Very Learned Mr. J. P. S. who makes inquiries about the means of existence in the 'present case', as His Reverence calls it, or rather, does not even make inquiries about them because he (being into the bargain a Philistine when it comes to art) thinks that they are nonexistent – to be in love like that, I say, is not quite like picking strawberries in the spring.

And that 'never, no, never' is not balmy as spring air but bitter, bitter, bitter as the biting frost of winter. 'This is no flattery,' Shakespeare would say [As You Like It]. However Samson said something else: 'Out of the strong came forth sweetness'. And the question is very much whether Samson was not much wiser than I am. Proudly he seized hold of a lion and overpowered him, but could we do the same? 'You *must* be able to,' Samson would have said, and rightly so.

Enough, the strawberry season has not yet arrived, I can indeed see the strawberry plants but they are frozen. Will spring arrive and thaw them out, and will they come into bloom, and then – then – who will pick them?

Still, that 'never, no, never' has taught me things I did not know: 1. It has brought home to me the enormity of my ignorance, and 2. Women have a world of their own, and much more. Also that there are such things as means of existence.

I should think it more considerate of people if they said (as the Constitution says: 'Tout homme est considéré innocent jusqu'à sa culpabilité soit prouvée [every man is considered innocent until proven guilty]) that it should be assumed that others have the means of existence until the contrary is proved. It could be said: this man exists – I see him, he speaks to me, a proof of his actual existence is even that he is not uninvolved in a certain case, e.g. 'the present case'. His existence being clear and obvious to me (since I am aware that the person in question is not a mere ghost, but is made of real live flesh and bones) I shall take it as axiomatic that he owes that existence to means he obtains in some way or other and for which he works. So I shall not suspect him of existing without any means of existence. However that is not the way people reason, least of all a certain person in question in Amsterdam. They have to see the means in order to believe in the existence of the person in question, but the existence of the person in question does not prove to them that he has means. Well, this being so, we are obliged to hold up a draughtsman's fist, though not to attack or even to threaten them with it. Then we must use that draughtsman's fist as best we can.

But the 'no never ever' riddle is still by no means solved in this way. Trying the direct opposite of certain pieces of advice can often prove practical and do one good. That is why it is in many cases so useful to ask for advice. But some pieces of advice can be used in their natural state and do not need to be turned inside out or upside-down. This latter kind is very rare and desirable, however, for it still has some special characteristics. The former kind thrives everywhere in profusion. The latter sort is expensive. The former costs nothing and is sometimes delivered unsolicited to one's home by the sackful. 'In the meantime!!!' Yours truly, Vincent

I close this letter with some advice of my own.

If ever you fall in love, do so without reservation, or rather, if you should fall in love simply give no thought to any reservation.

Moreover, when you do fall in love, you will not 'feel certain' of success beforehand. You will be 'un âme en peine' [a lost soul] and yet you will smile.

Whoever feels so 'sure of his ground' that he rashly imagines 'she is mine', even before he has waged the soul's battle of love, even before, I say, he has become suspended between life and death on the high seas, in the midst of storm and tempest – there is one who knows little of what a woman's heart is, and that will be bought home to him by a real woman in a very special way. When I was younger, one half of me once fancied that I was in love, and with the other half I really was. The result was many years of humiliation. Let me not have been humiliated in vain.

I speak as one 'Who has been down', from bitter experience, from learning the hard way.

Lucky dog! What's the matter? What aileth thee? Perhaps, after all, you have not been such a lucky dog so far, but I think you are well on the way to becoming one. That much I gather from the tone of your letters. It was just as if there is a small lump in your throat, in your voice. What kind of small lump is it? Could you not tell me for once, now that I have told you so much?

Theo, every girl's father has something called a key to the front door. A very terrible weapon, which can open and shut the aforesaid door as Peter and Paul open and close the gates of Heaven. Well, does that implement also fit the heart of the respective daughters in question? Can that be opened or shut with a key to the front door? I think not, God and love alone can open or close a woman's heart. Will hers open? Brother, will she ever let me in? Dieu le sait [God knows]. I cannot tell such things in advance. Father and Mother have promised not to oppose this if only I leave them out of the matter, as it were.