

Letter 263  
The Hague, 3 February 1883

Dear Theo,

I am again anxious for your letter; as it is already February 3 (and the postman for today has passed), I write you as a precaution. If you have written a few days later than usual, it's all right, but remembering what happened with that letter this winter, I'm telling you in case you wrote before the first.

Then you would perhaps do well to inquire.

I have noticed that the postman sometimes gives letters for the Schenkweg to people who live there, instead of delivering them himself. It is sometimes a big detour for the postman; I know it because now and then the man has asked me to deliver a few things for him – which I did, of course, but I couldn't help thinking of the letter that got lost. Well!

The weather has been very stormy here these days, especially last night. It will be very rough at sea.

How is your patient? From what you write, I see things that touch me deeply, that are really noble (for instance, that she paid the debts of the man who deceived her).

That not being "at home" of the Deputy reminded me of the name Punch gives to the secretary for home affairs (the "Home Secretary" is his title). Punch always calls this personage the "seldom-at-home" secretary. How many of those "seldom-at-home" people there are. And Dickens called the lot of them the "circumlocution office."

Many people are standing sighing before the door of those "how-not-to-do-it" institutions, and the sighs there are no less deep, perhaps, than they were on the old Bridge of Sighs.

I have been feeling very weak lately. I am afraid I have been overworking myself, and how miserable the "dregs" of the work are, that depression after overexertion. Life is then the colour of dishwater; it becomes something like an ash heap.

On such a day one would like to have the company of a friend. That sometimes clears up the leaden mist. On such days I am sometimes terribly worried about the future and am melancholy about my work, and feel quite helpless.

But it is dangerous to speak or think too much about it, so enough of it.

In spite of this, I have been working on a watercolour, another sketch of diggers, or rather, road menders, here on the Schenkweg; but it's rotten. I also drew a few figures with crayon which I think are better.

Not just with crayon, but the whole thing sponged, and the shadows softened, the lights intensified.

Maybe I have caught cold – at all events I must get rid of that depression before I can do anything properly.

I am reading *Ut mine Festungstid* [From the Time of my Detention in a Fortress] by Fritz Reuter; it is very witty. The Germans have their special humour, quite different from that of the English. Herkomer has painted among other things a peasant's carnival, something like Peasant Breughel, which has this humour very strongly.

Speaking of Herkomer, some time ago I read a kind of biography of him, though rather incomplete. But the following struck me.

For some time he lived and painted in an empty house, or one that wasn't finished perhaps, because he couldn't pay any rent.

Then he came to the Graphic and was relatively free of care. But even when employed there, he was still but little respected. So little that his first sketch of the "Last Muster at Chelsea Hospital" – a drawing which differs relatively little from the final composition, but has a certain rough aspect – was almost rejected.

Nobody in the Graphic administration approved of it except the manager (it would greatly astonish me if this manager were still on the job).

Through his efforts the sketch was published, and he asked Herkomer if he could do it for him again, more elaborately.

So this is the origin of a picture which has since gained the wonder and admiration of the best, in Paris as well as in London.

Now almost everybody would admire the first sketch, too.

The biography also tells that he is not a man who works easily; on the contrary, ever since the beginning he has had to struggle with a kind of awkwardness, and no picture is finished without severe mental effort.

I can hardly understand why, even now, many call him rough. I can hardly think of any work more profoundly sensitive than his.

When you come, I will show you the wood engravings of the almshouse for women; it is not so well known, but no less beautiful than that of the old men's. Something like the "Sewing Class at Katwijk" by Israëls.

Well, write soon, if you haven't done so already.

I am anxious to know how your patient is. My best wishes for her and for everything. Also, my congratulations on Father's birthday. I sent Father a drawing which I had done in line with his criticism of the first lithography of the old man. Not because I thought Father was exactly right, but I thought, Now I know how you would like to have it, I will try and make it that way for you. But I'm afraid I didn't succeed. Even though one tries hard, one doesn't always succeed in pleasing other people. Father didn't exactly write that he didn't like it, but it was between the lines. It may be that it wasn't good after all. Well, they will show it to you whenever you go there, but don't mention it to them. Adieu.

Yours sincerely, Vincent