

Amice Rappard,

Thanks for your letter, which I received this morning. I'm glad to see that you took all that I told you in such a good-natured way. Later when I find an opportunity to tell you more particulars to explain the circumstances more clearly, I hope you will not have to change your opinion that I have acted honestly and in good faith. I have to do with a woman who had one foot in the grave when I met her, and whose mind and nervous system were also upset and unbalanced – whose only chance of staying alive was what that professor at Leyden had prescribed: a regular home life. And even then it will take years before she is entirely normal again. As to her past life, I believe that you condemn “fallen women” no more than I do. Frank Hol once expressed it this way – in a drawing which as far as I know has not yet been reproduced – he called the drawing “Her Poverty but Not Her Will Consents.” Amice, at this very moment I can think of no fewer than four women in this town (mine included) who have either fallen, or have been deceived and deserted, and have illegitimate children, and their fate is so melancholy that it is difficult to think of, especially as three of them have hardly a chance of getting out of their misery – that is, in theory they do, but not in practice, as I see it. And I feel obliged to add that I do not consider my relation with the woman in question as something of a passing nature. My words about a past disappointment are based on something I won't speak about – at least not now. And yet I think it right to tell you this much. Suppose a man experiences a disappointment through a cruel injury to his love, a disappointment so deep that he is calmly desperate and desolate – such a condition is possible, for there is something like the white heat of steel or iron. Feeling that he has been disappointed irrevocably and absolutely, and carrying within himself the consciousness of it as a deadly, at least an incurable, wound, and yet going about his ordinary affairs with an unruffled countenance... would it be inexplicable to you that a man in this condition should feel a singular sympathy, involuntary and unintentional, for somebody he meets who is deeply unhappy, oh, perhaps unhappy beyond redress? And that, notwithstanding this, that sympathy or love or tie should be and remain strong? When Love is dead, is it impossible for Charity to be alive and awake still? And now allow me to start talking about the wood engravings. The daily work is something that does not change, and it is less dangerous to be absorbed in it than to stare into the unfathomable. I have found another beautiful Jacque, “Woodcutters” – unfortunately covered with colours from a child's paintbox – but I have washed most of it off. It is a very lovely sheet. Two Daumiers: “Those who have seen a drama meeting those who have seen a vaudeville” – “Lovers of Pictures.” Two females (one with a child), sitting and chatting, by Oberländer, and by the same, two old men who seem to be discussing abstruse official business. Both of them uncommonly typical. Fine Edmond Morins, especially the “Chestnut Trees in the Champs Elysées,” a “Race” and a “Wine Harvest.” John Lewis Brown's “Hunters in the Wood.” “The Fall of the Leaf” by G. Doré – a very old Doré, roughly done but excellent in sentiment. “Gypsies” by Valerio; Renouard's “Beggars on New Year's Day.” These are some of the new sheets I have. I am glad you have taken Harper's Christmas Papers; perhaps this publication is also too good to last. How beautiful Abbey's “Winter Girl” and “Dutch Patrol” are. Judging from these, you can imagine how excellent his big sheet “Christmas in Old Virginia” is. Swain has engraved it in such a way that it has remained exactly like the pen-and-ink drawing – “it does not look cut at all”<sup>1</sup> – as little as Caldecott's “Brighton Promenade,” which I think you have. I know Harper's magazine from some old issues in my possession; I am considering subscribing for this year, but perhaps there will be a chance of getting it secondhand by the end of the year. Do you know that I am carrying on a correspondence just at present about the way such sheets – those in the Christmas Papers, for instance – are done? I have samples of the paper and also some information about the varying forces of Black and White and the way they can be produced. The paper is very curious; sometimes the grain has a sort of ground colour, which is already like a grey haze – it is especially suitable, for snow effects, for instance. There is also paper with hatchings. I am still keeping a beautiful sheet by Dagnan for you, “Jardin des Tuileries,” and one by Montbard, “Arab Beggars,” and certainly some smaller ones besides the duplicates from the Graphic. Before your illness you wrote me that you had a duplicate of Heilbuth's “Two Ladies in a Boat.” This is the one that is missing from my collection, although I have other large Heilbuths, so I wish to remind you of it. I don't remember whether I wrote you about the Caldecott illustrations for Washington Irving's Sketch Book – “Old Christmas” and “Bracebridge Hall.” Two sixpenny books, published by Macmillan & Co., London – in each of them a hundred little drawings by Caldecott, but sometimes they are so beautiful that they remind you of Menzel. I should like to know sometime what the theme of De Groux's “Winter in Brussels” is.

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Have I written you about Lhermitte? He seems to be the Master of Black and White drawing; they say of him, "He is the Millet and Jules Breton of Black and White." In a "general survey" there is mention, among other things, of women saying their prayers on the Brittany cliffs, a "Banc des Pauvres," and an "Old Market."

Although in consequence of having taken the woman and her two children into my house I have had some unpleasant experiences – some of them very nasty indeed – still the encounter has given me a certain calm and serenity. And I worked hard this winter. I had some very striking models.

At the moment I am not working so very hard, for after working – especially on heads – for some months practically without rest or interruption, I have been feeling a kind of weakness or exhaustion which I find I can't overcome. The same thing happened to my eyes, so that even simply looking at things bothered me. But I have walked a good deal in the country these last days, and my eyes are normal again.<sup>2</sup>

I think I have at least 150 drawings that you have not seen yet.

The changes in my household, instead of causing me to work less, have caused me to work more; I worked even with a sort of fury, but a quiet fury, if you will allow me to use the expression. I also started reading again, which I had neglected for some time.

I think you will be delighted with the baby – those who abandon a woman when she is pregnant know not what they do – such a baby can be said to bring a rayon d'en haut – a ray from heaven – into the house. As for the woman herself, do you remember what Gavarni said? – "Il y a une creature, insupportable, bête, méchante, c'est la jeune fille; il y a une creature sublime et dévouée c'est cette fille devenue mère." [A young girl is an unbearable, stupid, vicious creature: a sublime and devoted creature is that same girl as a mother.] I don't think these words are meant to stigmatize all young women or girls absolutely – of course not – but they are meant to show that something vain in a woman before she has become a mother is replaced by something sublime later on, when she is working hard for her children.

I saw a little figure by Paterson in the Graphic, an illustration for Hugo's Quatre-vingt-treize<sup>3</sup> called "Dolorosa." It struck me because it resembles the woman at the time I found her. In the same book there is a scene of a proud, hard-hearted man who is suddenly softened by seeing two children in danger – he forgets his own danger and saves the children, even though he is selfish by nature. One never finds an exact likeness of oneself in a book – but one occasionally finds things taken from nature in general which are in one's own heart in a vague and indeterminate way.

I find much that is true in Dickens's The Haunted Man. Do you know it? Neither in Quatre-vingt-treize nor in The Haunted Man do I find my own self – everything is different, occasionally even quite the opposite – but much that has gone on in my mind is reawakened when I read such books.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. Vincent wrote this in English.
2. See letter 266 to Theo, after February 8, 1883
3. The original title is '93, that is, 1793, the year of the Reign of Terror in France.