

Letter 321
The Hague, 7 or 8 September 1883

Dear Theo,

My things are packed, and I can leave here as soon as I have the money. It is best to act as quickly as possible, for one cannot work in such a moving time, and I shall not feel at ease till I am settled somewhere in the country.

So if you can send some money about the tenth, I hope to be able to start – if not at once for Drenthe, I shall go and stay in a nearby village for a few days.

I hope it will turn out as you suppose – and, in fact, more or less as I do too – that it will bring about a change for the better in the woman.

But I'm afraid that it won't, and that she will fall back into the old ways. Judging from my intimate knowledge of her, I say she is too weak, especially in mind and will power, to continue on the right road. When I spoke to you about it during your visit, I had already resolved to make a decision, but I thought there were two ways, and the choice of how depended more on her than on me.

If she had really wanted to struggle on with me in such a way that it had been more than mere words, but an avoidance of those faults that have made things unbearable, I believe – however many cares we might have had, however poor we might have been – it would have been a better fate for her than what she may now expect. But I have come to think of her as something of a sphinx, incapable of saying Yes or No. And if you should ask me what I think she will do, and how she will go on, I can only answer: "Certainly not as straight as she might have."

These last days I have seen clearly that her going out to look for a job was only make-believe, and that she is probably waiting till I am gone before beginning something they do not mention to me. That much more reason for me to start at once, for otherwise it would end in her delaying on purpose. And that's another trick of the mother's.

This plan is again a corruption of what they started a few days ago; it will almost certainly lead to nothing but wretchedness. But I should be crazy to help them as long as they are not straightforward with me, shouldn't I? So I intend to start abruptly, and to let a few weeks pass. Then I will write them and see how things are.

I too am beginning to believe that I must go away to make them realise the gravity of the situation. But such an experiment is dangerous, for they can spoil a great deal even in a short time.

Why, oh why, is the woman so foolish?

She is entirely what Musset has called "un enfant de siècle" – and I can't help thinking of the ruin of Musset himself when I think of her future. In Musset there was something noble and idealistic; well, in her too there is a "je ne sais quoi," though she certainly is no artist.

If only she was one a little. She has her children, and if these become more her chief interest than they are now, there will be some steadiness in her; but even that is not what it ought to be, though her mother love, imperfect as it is, is in my eyes the best trait in her character.

I am sorely troubled by the thought that after I have gone away she will regret a number of things and want to do better and then be in need of me. In that case I shall be willing to help, but not unless I can instill in her what you told me the woman you met expressed thus, "Tu m'as trouvée bien en bas, il faut que je remonte." [You have found me very low down, it is necessary that I rise.] But instead of it is necessary that I rise, she may say, The abyss attracts me.

I once heard there had been an affair between Musset and George Sand. George was resolute, positive, and hard working; Musset was lâche, indifferent and even neglected his work. It came to a crisis and a break between those two characters. After that, a desperate effort by Musset, and remorse, but not before he had sunk even more deeply into the mud; and in the meantime George Sand had arranged her affairs, was quite absorbed in a new work, and said, "It is too late, it cannot be helped now."

These things bring so much agony of the soul, and make hearts shrivel up with pain – more than anybody suspects.

Theo, my mind will not be easy about her when I go; on the contrary, I am anxious, because I know that she will wake up only when it is too late, and will have an ardent desire for something simpler and purer only when the moment to attain it has past.

When I see that sphynxlike quality in her, I know of old what it means, in her as well as in others, and that is a bad sign.

And that melancholy staring into the abyss is just as fatal, and the way to avoid that is to work hard.

And, Theo, now – she drops her hands into her lap too often already – melancholy, if it is to be conquered, must be conquered by hard work, and he who does not feel that is undone forever, and goes straight to the dogs. I have told her so, often enough. At times she took it a little to heart.

But now, you see, she is very near the abyss.

It shall not be my hand that pushes her over the edge, but I cannot keep standing by forever, to draw her back.

A human being must have enough common sense to exert himself when others help him and warn him. I know there are cases in which melancholy seems to prevent it, but later on he quietly does what he should do, and recovers in the end. If only she is like this, all is well, and she will be all right. Nothing is more effective than the presence of a friend during the period of recovery from melancholy. To have one at such a time means a lot, even though the friend be poor. Well, she will always find one in me, and though the fact is that she used to be and still is very malicious at times, nevertheless it will be so.

She will stand in need of help, and so...I shall be ready to help, even after I am gone, provided I see some willingness and energy. Those people (in her family) who have tried to estrange her from me did something that might well be as wicked as murdering her and her children, only they did it out of obduracy and stupidity; if it weren't for them, she would have made better progress.

Try to let me have the money about the tenth, at least enough so that I can leave here, for that would be wise.

But don't let it get you into trouble yourself. I will act according to circumstances and will let you know at once what I have done. If it is not enough for Drenthe, I shall go to Loosduinen for a few days and wait there. I have found even more beautiful things in Loosduinen, old farmyards – and in the evening there are some splendid effects there. I might send my things ahead or leave them in the luggage room.

But now is just the moment to give up the house, and as soon as your letter arrives, I shall leave here; it will be a hint for the woman to put her shoulder to the wheel. I will place a few more advertisements, but they have done nothing but dawdle these last two days, and I'm afraid they have changed their plans entirely.

Adieu, Theo, I wish things were fixed already, for days like these are hard and of little profit.

I wish you good luck and prosperity. Believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I hope you have not fallen ill, I had the same thing some time ago, but it has disappeared again. Perhaps eggs are the best thing to restore the stomach, at least if weakness is the cause.