

Drenthe, c. 29 September – 2 November 1883

Dear brother,

I cannot count the grains in a sack of corn just by smelling it – I cannot look through the planks of the barn door – but sometimes I can see by the lumps whether it is a sack of potatoes or of corn, or, though the barn door be closed, I can tell when the pig is killed from the squealing.

Only in this way can I and will I judge the circumstances in which you find yourself just now, from the indications I have, however vague they may be, and it is not a prophecy I am making.

But now to the point! Just consider coolly whether you are not faced by what they call fatality on the battlefield. Just consider the faces of your friends, your sham friends and your enemies, just consider the *je ne sais quois* – just consider whether a certain void is not developing around you, so that you are losing your hold on things, or at any rate so that it is less easy for you to put through business deals. In short, consider whether this fatality is in your favour or decidedly against you.

Tell me this one thing, am I mistaken when I conclude from some symptoms that there is a question of one of those malignant crises which at times arise in large businesses in the big cities? Do things have a desperate aspect? Do you feel this cannot be redressed? Or do you feel redress is possible, and that therefore this crisis is no reason to change your position?

Unless you write me, “No, it is not so bad as that,” I personally think matters have a rather desperate aspect.

Think it over cool-headedly – I know you have your composure, your presence of mind, I know you try to analyze things, and for this reason I should like to know if you yourself see something which I fear is there.

You know, boy – as long as the position was tolerable – as long as business was possible, I have never dared to advise you openly, Give it up, especially out of respect for your position, which you kept, not for your own pleasure, but for the welfare of us all.

But your former duties, which, moreover, you have taken on yourself of your own free will, cease to be duties when business conditions become such that to continue would not only be a hopeless struggle, but at the same time would inevitably bring about your own ruin.

In short, there are limits, and my intuition tells me you have almost reached that point.

Look here – as regards now or never – making oneself scarce or disappearing, neither you nor I should ever do that, no more than commit suicide.

I too have my moments of deep melancholy, but I say again, both you and I ought to regard the idea of disappearing or making oneself scarce as becoming neither you nor me.

And notwithstanding all, one should take the risk of going on, even when one feels that it is impossible, of going on with the desperate feeling that it will end in disappearance-but on the other hand, in our consciences there is that “beware!!!”

Should I be mistaken – should my presentiment be at variance with the facts, about which I ask you the question, Have they a decidedly desperate aspect or not? – very well, then I am willing to believe your simple assurance, I expect things to come out right, or some such words, as soon as you write me that.

In the event of your being faced with a *fait accompli* in one of those venomous crises such as Paris and London produce – if this is so definitely to be expected that you feel it is a power that would crush you if they should try to force the worst to happen by resorting to a maneuver of opposition – well, under these circumstances leave the sinking ship, and concentrate your mind and energy, not on clinging to your present position, but on creating something wholly new. For a long time your duty has seemed too complicated to me; your duty ought to be something simple, and your present duty would grow more and more involved and doubtful, leaving the question of whether I think it is really and truly your duty out of it. By starting to paint, you will find a very clear duty and a very simple, straight path for your feet.

My idea is that going on in your present situation would prove to be not only more and more unbearable, but also less and less profitable. I do not say this only as far as Goupil & Co. is concerned, but also in general with regard to you as a dealer. I do not say that you and I will get rich together, but in any case we shall be able to preserve our aplomb and our balance, although – I cannot deny this – we shall have a very hard time of it during the first few years.

But I see not the unfavourable but the favourable fatality hovering over our painting enterprise, but you would crush not only yourself but me too, I am afraid, by carrying through something which in my opinion goes utterly against the grain. In the first place we shall not be able to assist each other, and we shall be too much cast upon ourselves, and in the second place we shall make each other waver by working in diametrically opposite directions, so that notwithstanding our friendship, at times we shall have to turn our backs on each other

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Well, my dear fellow, to me painting is too logical, too reasonable, too straightforward to allow me personally ever to change my course. Besides, you yourself helped me realize the idea of a handicraft, and I know that basically it is your idea too, so I think we ought to cooperate from now on.

My reason, my conscience, compel me to tell you what is partially your own view too; there is nothing to fall back on but a radical renewal.

I know that my words will be in strange contrast to those of others you might consult, who want to pass the matter off with, "It will come out all right," "The desired changes will occur." I do not wish to flatter you, all right, I do not flatter. As to rousing your courage, yes, I dare to, I dare rouse the very highest courage and serenity in you, but only as regards painting; and about Paris, I can only say this, Look well, and see if fate is not against you on that battlefield.

As far as I can see, going on in Paris, even if you were able to stick it out for many years, will not grant you peace, and there would not be so much opportunity for being as useful to others as if you were a painter.

I see that Paris will put you into what I would call a crooked position in regard to your own duty. Leaving your being useful to others out of it for the moment, seeing that I do not know if in the long run I myself should remain truly firm, because you are directing the simpler minds of others toward Paris, a thought which will disturb exactly these people because they might be intoxicated by it.

Understand clearly what I say: Until now everything has had its reason, but now the signs of the times suggest a change of direction, as I see it, in a way quite different from and far more decisive than anything in the past.

There is no question of slackening or giving in here; on the contrary, in this there is an attacking the calamity at the core: the same energetic principle as that of sowing superior plants in better soil.

The calamity leaves us our old courage and our old earnest energy. Let the world say venomously what it cannot refrain from saying; it will leave you and me cold. On the contrary, we are counting on the possibility of a hard life which will have a purpose other than earning as much money as possible.

Our purpose is in the first place self-reform by means of a handicraft and of intercourse with nature, believing as we do that this is our first duty in order to be honest with others and to be consistent – our aim is walking with God – the opposite of living in the midst of the doings of the big cities.

We shall not harm anybody by this.

Though some people may think it hypocritical to say so, our belief is that God will help those who help themselves, as long as they turn their energy and attention in this direction, and set to work to this end.

I see that Millet believed more and more firmly in "Something on High." He spoke of it in a way quite different than, for instance, Father does. He left it more vague, but for all that, I see more in Millet's vagueness than in what Father says. And I find that same quality of Millet's in Rembrandt, in Corot – in short, in the work of many, though I must not and cannot expatiate on this. The end of things need not be the power to explain them, but basing oneself effectively upon them.

In short, Theo, I have a vague but firm feeling that it is our first duty to fix the heart on high, and this feeling forces me to recommend to you, brother to brother, friend to friend, preparing yourself for a life based on simpler principles. Principles which I am unable to define for others, but which I feel; one can hardly imagine duty commanding one to do business in Paris; rather, it will induce one to retire from it.

Can you share these feelings to a certain extent? Think it over, deliberate on it; if you want time, search your heart, and take your time. All hesitation based on the objection "I am not an artist" seems reasonable to me only as long as you do not prevent yourself from becoming one. To what degree we are or are not artists, neither we ourselves nor others can definitely ascertain. However, the How-to-do-it system entails saying, I shall do my best to do it, without asking any such questions; on the other hand, it seems to me that it is the How-NOT-to-do-it system which says, "I know in advance I shall not be able to do it."

One is not sure of things all at once, one cannot foresee things except very vaguely, but there is something called conscience after all, a kind of compass by which one can distinguish between this direction and that – between North and South – between right and left – at least broadly speaking. Which means – notwithstanding fortuitous currents and certain deceptively inviting coasts – being able to say, This is not the right course for me after all. And look, earning money in Paris, even for others' sakes, would, considering your recent experiences, seem to me such a deceptive fata morgana: a coast that recedes more and more when you approach to make a landing there, at the same time causing you to be driven farther and farther off your course. I respect all hesitations and doubts, I respect your weighing all the pros and cons, I will not try to force an immediate decision upon you. But I only point out very, very seriously that in my opinion it is an incontrovertible fact that you are standing at a crossroads, and that you will have to look before you leap to the decision simply to continue in Paris. The signs of the times, not I, say: Wait a bit! What do you want? Do you choose Paris? All right, if you have made up your mind that it is to be so, then I should

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not want to interfere; but it will not be as easy as all that, and I am afraid you will be in for fatality. I am damned doubtful whether you will remain at peace with your lot.

I see everything except fatality against painting; for Paris I see everything except fatality!

Fatality, in which with an unutterable feeling I see God, Who is the White Ray of Light, and Who has the last word; what is not good through and through is not good at all, and will not last – He, in Whose eyes even the Black Ray will have no plausible meaning.

What is before you is something terrible, something “awful” – those things are so inexpressible that I can find no words for them; and if I were not your brother and your friend, who considers being silent ungrateful as well as inhuman, I should say nothing. But seeing that you say, First, inspire me with courage, and second, do not flatter me, I say now, Look, I see all these things here on the silent moor, where I feel God high above you and me. With a warm handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent