

Letter 375
Nuenen, 2nd half September 1884

Dear Theo,

You are perfectly right in asking me why I haven't answered you yet. I certainly did receive your letter with the enclosed 150 francs.

I began writing to you, especially to thank you for evidently having understood my letter, and then to say that I only count on 100 francs, though I can hardly manage on it as long as I do not sell, but nevertheless if it is 150 francs, there are 50 francs more than I counted on, as our first arrangement for The Hague was only for 100 francs, and if we are only partly good friends, I should not want to accept more.

I could not finish that letter, however, and since then I have wanted to write you, but simply couldn't.

Something terrible has happened, Theo, which hardly anybody here knows, or suspects, or may ever know, so for heaven's sake keep it to yourself. To tell you everything, I should have to write a book – I can't do it. Margot Begemann took poison in a moment of despair after she had had a discussion with her family and they slandered her and me; she became so upset that she did it (in a moment of decided mania, I think).

Theo, I had already consulted with a doctor once about certain symptoms of hers; three days before I had secretly warned her brother that I was afraid she would get brain fever, and that I was sorry to state that, in my eyes, the Begemann family acted extremely imprudently in speaking to her the way they did. This had no effect, at least no other than that they told me to wait two years, which I decidedly refused to do, saying that if there was a question of marriage, it had to be very soon or not at all.

Well, Theo, you have read Mme. Bovary – do you remember the first Mme. Bovary who died in a nervous attack? Here it was something like that, but complicated by her having taken poison.

When we were quietly walking together, she had often said, "I wish I could die now" – I had never paid any attention to it.

One morning, however, she slipped to the ground. At first I thought it was just a weakness. But it got worse and worse. Spasms, she lost her power of speech, and mumbled all kinds of things that were only half-intelligible. She collapsed completely with many jerks and convulsions, and so on. It was different from an epileptic fit, though there was a great similarity, and suddenly I grew suspicious, and said, "Did you happen to swallow something?" She screamed "Yes!" Well, then I took matters in hand – she insisted on my swearing that I should never tell anybody – I said, "That's all right, I'll swear anything you like, but only on condition that you throw that stuff up immediately – so put your finger down your throat until you vomit, or else I'll call the others." Well, you understand the rest.

That vomiting succeeded only partially, so I went to her brother Louis and told him what the matter was, and got her an emetic, and I went immediately to Eindhoven, to Dr. Van der Loo.

It was strychnine she took, but the dose must have been too small, or perhaps she took chloroform or laudanum with it as a narcotic, which would be very counter-poison against strychnine. But in short, she took the counter-poison which the doctor prescribed in time. She was at once sent off to a doctor in Utrecht, and is said to have gone abroad. I think it probable that she will get entirely well again, but I am afraid a long period of nervous suffering will follow – in what form – more or less serious – that is the question. But she is well taken care of now. You will understand how low I have felt since this accident. It was such a terrible fright, my boy, we were alone in the fields when it happened. But fortunately the poison has at least lost its effect by now.

But for heaven's sake, what should we think of that standing and of that religion which the respectable people believe in – oh, they are perfectly absurd, making society a kind of lunatic asylum, a perfectly topsy-turvy world – oh, that mysticism! You will understand how everything, everything passed through my mind these last few days, and how absorbed I was in this sad story.

Now that she has tried this and failed, I think it has given her such a fright that she will not readily try it a second time; the failure of a suicide is the best remedy against a future suicide. But if she gets brain fever or nervous fever, then...

But she has been doing rather well these first days; I am just afraid of bad consequences. Theo, my boy, I am so upset by it.

Goodbye, write soon, for I speak to nobody here,
Adieu, Vincent

Do you remember that first Mme. Bovary?