

The Hague, c. 11 April 1883

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosed 50 fr., which were as welcome as ever, the former as well as the latter. I read with interest what you wrote about your patient. The change in circumstances brought about by her recovery has a more or less critical side, because probably, and you expect it yourself, it will raise opposition in some minds – but let's hope it won't. How strange it is that it must be so. We ourselves see such a thing as very simple and natural – something logical – and then we are more or less astonished because others cannot find in themselves the motives which make us act as we do. And one would almost conclude that some people have cauterized certain sensitive nerves within themselves – especially those which, combined, are called conscience. Well, I pity them – in my opinion they travel through life without a compass. One might suppose that the love for humanity which is the foundation of everything should be in every human being. But some pretend that there are better foundations. I'm not very curious to know them; since the old one has proved to be the right one for so many ages, it is sufficient for me. Don't you like this little poem – it is from *Les Misérables*:

Si César m'avait donné  
La gloire et la guerre,  
Et qu'il me fallût quitter  
L'amour de ma mère,  
Je dirais au grand César:  
Reprends ton sceptre et ton char,  
J'aime mieux ma mère, o hé,  
J'aime mieux ma mère.

[If Caesar had given me/ glory and war,/ and if I had to leave/ the love of my mother,/ I should say to great Caesar:/ take back your sceptre and your triumphal car,/ I love my mother more.]

In the context in which it appeared in the book (it is a student's song of the time of the Revolution of '30), the "love for my mother" stands for the love for the republic, or rather love for humanity, in other words, simply universal brotherhood.

It is my opinion that no matter how good and noble a woman may be by nature, if she has no means and is not protected by her own family, in the present society she is in great, immediate danger of being drowned in the pool of prostitution. What is more natural than protecting such a woman, and, if it can be done in no other way, if circumstances lead to it, if il faut y mettre sa peau – marrying her?

At least I think one must, on principle, continue that protection until she is definitely safe, and shield her with one's own breast, as it were. Even without real love?

Perhaps so – then maybe it is a marriage de raison, but not in the sense of a marriage for selfish reasons. And further, your particular case is different from the more commonplace ones like mine, for instance, because the person in question possesses a special charm and, as I see it, sympathy of feeling; as a consequence, the possibility of an inner struggle about the problem you mention would also have emerged, even if the meeting had taken place under quite different and less dramatic circumstances.

You will find my thoughts on the question, "How far may one go in helping an unfortunate woman?" in what I have said. The answer is, Indefinitely. However, granting that in love the first and principal thing is to be faithful, I remind you of your own saying, "Marriage (that is, civil marriage) is such a queer thing." This saying of yours describes it exactly, and on that point I declare I do not know which is better or worse, to reject it or not. It is what they call puzzling, it puzzles me, too, and I wish one could leave it alone altogether. I think the saying is true, "If one marries, one doesn't marry only the woman herself, but the whole family in the bargain" – which is sometimes awkward and miserable enough when they are a bad lot. But now about the drawings.

I have again done a few with printer's ink, and this week I made some experiments in mixing that printer's ink with white. I found out that it can be mixed in two ways – that is, with the white from the tubes of oil paint and, probably even better, with the ordinary powdered zinc white which can be obtained at any drugstore; it must be diluted with turpentine, which doesn't soak into this paper or cause spots on the back like oil does, because it dries quickly and disappears.

One gets much stronger effects working with printer's ink than with ordinary ink.

How beautiful Jules Dupré's work is. In Goupil's show window I saw a small marine which you are sure to know. I went to look at it nearly every evening. But you are perhaps somewhat blasé about Dupré and similar works of art, which one sees so much more in Paris than here; you do not know what a beautiful impression it makes here, where one sees so very little of it.

I am reading the last part of *Les Misérables*; the figure of Fantine, a prostitute, made a deep impression on me – oh, I know just as well as everybody else that one will not find an exact Fantine in reality, but this character of Hugo's is true – as, indeed, are all his characters, being the essence of what one sees in reality. It is the type – of which one only meets individuals.

If you meet, one of these days, an engraver like, for instance, Girardet or Eichens, who make aquatints, you would do me a great favour if you just asked him how the drawings which serve as a guide for the engraving are usually made. Perhaps they will answer, with printer's ink; if this is right, what do they dilute the printer's ink with, how do they use it?

It seems to me that if you spoke to some engraver casually about it, and repeated what he said to me, I might find something in it which would shed light on some questions, even though it contained no direct information about how the printer's ink is diluted so that one can work with it in different ways on paper. There certainly is some kind of printer's ink other than the one I am using right now, and gradually I shall find out many things for myself. When one works with printer's ink and turpentine, as I do now, the drawings get effects like those in aquatint engravings. At one time I saw drawings, for instance, by Mottramb, the English engraver who has engraved Boughton's pictures, and I wish I knew what materials he worked with.

Of course I'm in no hurry for this information, only when you hear something about different drawing techniques, be sure to tell me.

I remember Soek's wife and her mother [acquaintances of Vincent and Theo in Paris, with whom Theo's patient went to live] quite well (if she still lives with her), and used to visit their house; and I think them two sympathetic persons who remind me of those of my own household, so much so that I often think of them as if they were of the same family. They are just like figures done by Souvestre, for instance, or of Ed. Frère. One sees them in Paris often, in fact, one finds them everywhere. Such persons always remind me of the women figures in the Gospel, perhaps because their expression is something like, for instance, the figure in Delaroche's *Vendredi Saint*, or in Landelle, "Bien heureux ceux qui pleurent" [blessed are they that mourn]. I know quite well that their conception is not perfect – there are other aspects even better than Delaroche's, and deeper than his, for instance, those of Lhermitte and Herkomer.

Well, I see these too, but I can readily understand that in the days of Souvestre, Delaroche, Frère, Landelle, etc., this tendency became popular, though compared with Millet and others it isn't quite correct and true. Is Anker still alive? I often think of his work; it is so serious and the sentiment is so delicate. He is a real good old Brion type.

Boy, how I sometimes long to have you in the studio once more. I sincerely hope you will get the money back from Hendrik. As for me, I had to pay so much all at once that very little is left. Well, write as soon as you can, about the twentieth. Adieu, with a handshake,

Yours, Vincent