

Letter 288
The Hague, 3 June 1883

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and thanks for the enclosure. Today is Sunday, and I have been working furiously this week, and now today I am sitting down quietly to write you somewhat more extensively than I have been able to of late, because there were so many things to distract me. And I particularly want to write to you because I see from your letter that things are not going so well with you, and I want to write somewhat more cordially than usual.

If in my own case – considering my small income – Father and Mother should raise objections to my marrying on account of my having no money, I could approve of it to a certain extent, at least understand why they talked this way and gave in. But, Theo, now that in your case – knowing that you have a permanent position and a good salary (nota bene, considerably more than their own) – they raise the same objection, I can only say that I think it unutterably pretentious and downright ungodly. In point of fact, clergymen are among the most unbelieving people in society and dry materialists. Perhaps not right in the pulpit, but in private matters. From a moral point of view one might be allowed to object to a marriage if real want of bread in its literal sense were to be expected; but as I see it, such an objection utterly loses its moral justification as soon as there is no question of actual want of bread. And it would be ridiculous to predict want of bread in your case.

Suppose somebody like old Mr. Goupil should raise monetary objections – from his point of view as a rich merchant, one could not expect anything else.

But coming from Father and Mother, who ought to be humble and contented with simple things, I think their speaking that way very wicked, and I feel something like shame at their behaviour.

I wish we only strove for peace in our homes, and stinted ourselves rather than strain after a high position. And used our energy to increase our spiritual refinement and humaneness, but were contented with the most simple things as a matter of principle.

So I regret it, and it grieves me; again, I am horribly disappointed at Father and Mother saying such a thing. I should be willing to do anything to undo this.

I should like to be proud of Father, because he is truly a poor village preacher in the pure sense of the Gospel, but I think it so rotten that Father stoops to such considerations as something not being in keeping with “the dignity of his calling.”

My opinion is that one might expect Father to co-operate as soon as the question of saving a woman arises. It would be right to be on her side, because she is poor and deserted.

By not doing so, Father commits an enormous error: it is inhuman for anyone to do such a thing; doubly so, however, if he is a servant of the Gospel.

Thwarting the interests of such a woman, preventing her rescue, is monstrous.

Oh, I know very well that nearly all clergymen would use the same language as Father – and for this reason I reckon the whole lot of them among the most ungodly men in our society.

You and I also sometimes do things which are perhaps sinful; but for all that, we are not merciless, and we feel pity, and for the very reason that we do not consider ourselves perfect and know how things can happen, we do not revile fallen or frail women as the clergymen do, as if they themselves were the only ones at fault. And now this woman of yours is, moreover, a decent woman of a middle-class family, and I really think Father’s error serious.

Suppose there were objections – my opinion is that Father, because he is a shepherd, ought to urge you on to help her and put up with difficulties for the sake of her preservation. One ought to find comfort from people like Father when society does not give comfort – but not they! – they are even worse than ordinary people.

It is horrible that Father assumes this attitude.

When Father was here, he spoke disapprovingly of my being with the woman, and then I told him I did not refuse to marry her.

Then Father evaded the point, and started talking in generalities.

He did not want to tell me I ought to desert her on the spot, but he regretted that I had relations with her.

For the rest, I talked but little with Father about the matter, seeing that I do not exactly consider him the person to be concerned in it. You have done your duty by informing Father and Mother of the affair, but now that they talk the way they do, I am of the opinion that they have given you the right to exclude them from certain confidences and to consult them less than you would if they were more reasonable. Their error is that they are not humble and humane enough in this case.

Now you write that business is less flourishing. This is rotten enough. But the position has always been precarious, and may be expected to remain so as long as you live. Let us keep up our courage, and try to find energy and serenity.

I can tell you that my first composition, of which I sent you a sketch, is almost finished. First I made the drawing in charcoal, then worked it over with brush and printer's ink. So there is some pith in it, and I think when you look at it for the second time, you will find more in it than you did at first.

Besides, since I sent you this sketch I made a second drawing, of a similar subject.

Do you remember that once you described (last year) an accident in a stone quarry in the Butte Montmartre where you saw a group of workmen, one of whom had been badly hurt in the quarry? Well, this is a similar case, but simply the group of men at work.

I was with Van der Weele in Dekker's Dune, where we saw that sand pit; and since then I have gone there regularly and had a model every day, and now the second drawing is also done.

It represents men with wheelbarrows and men who are digging [F 1029, JH 366].

I shall try to make a sketch of it too, but it is a complicated composition and can hardly be judged from a sketch, any more than the other one can.

The figures have been drawn after painstaking studies

I should like very much to have these reproduced

The first one is on grey paper, the other, on yellow.

I long very much, Theo to have you in the studio again, for there are so many studies, and now you can see what I was aiming at when I made the studies, and they may furnish the raw material for many more things.

I have had a frame made, or rather a passe-partout of ordinary wood, and have given it a walnut colour with a black inner strip; that shuts off the drawing very well, and it is pleasant working in the frame.

I have made arrangements for other larger compositions, and I have again stretchers for two new ones ready; I should also like to do the tree felling in the wood, and the refuse dump with the dustmen, and the potato digging in the dunes.

It was a good thing that I went to see Rappard, for his sympathy has cheered me where I hadn't enough self-confidence. But when you see these drawings, Theo, and the studies, you will understand that this year I have had as much care and trouble as a man can bear. It is devilishly difficult to hammer out a figure. And indeed, it is the same as with iron – one works on a model, and goes on working, at first with no result; but at last it mellows, and one finds the figure, like the iron, becomes malleable when it is hot, and then one must go on working on it. So I had a model continually for these two drawings, and worked on them early and late.

I am sorry to hear from you that business is rather slack; if circumstances become more difficult, let us redouble our energy. I will be doubly intent on my drawings, but for the present do be doubly intent on sending the money. To me it means models, studio, bread; cutting it down would be something like choking or drowning me. I mean, I can do as little without it now as I can do without air. I had these two drawings in my heart for a long time, but I did not have the money to carry them out; and now, thanks to Rappard's money, they have got form. The creative power cannot be repressed, one must give vent to what one feels.

Do you know what I often think? I should like to get into contact with the Graphic or London News in England. Now that I am getting on with it, I should like so much to continue a few large compositions suitable for illustration.

Boughton and Abbey together are making drawings called "Picturesque Holland" for Harper's in New York (agent for the Graphic too). I saw those illustrations at Rappard's (very thoroughly done, small though they are and undoubtedly made after larger drawings). Now I say to myself, If the Graphic and Harper's send their draughtsmen to Holland, perhaps they would not be unwilling to take on a draughtsman from Holland if he can produce some good work and not too expensively.

I should prefer being put on regular monthly wages to selling a drawing now and then at a relatively high price. And I should like to make a contract for a series of compositions, for instance, following up these two drawings I am working on now, or those I am going to do. I should think it advisable to go to London myself with studies and drawings and to visit the managers of the various establishments or, better still, the artists Herkomer, Green, Boughton (but some of them are in America at present) or others, if they are in London. And there, better than anywhere else, I should be able to get information about the different processes. Perhaps Rappard would come with me, and take drawings with him too. Such a thing, more or less modified, ought to be done, I think.

Personally I could undertake to do one large drawing for a double-page engraving for illustration every month, and I will also apply myself to the other sizes, whole page and half page.

I know perfectly well that reproductions can be made large or small, but a double page is more suitable for things done in a broad style; the smaller ones may be drawn in a different way, for instance, with pen and pencil.

Now, I don't think it's every day that the managers of magazines find somebody who considers making illustrations his specialty.

From the little sketch which I made after the large drawing just now, in a quarter of an hour, and which I enclose herewith, you will see that I don't mind making the size larger or smaller if necessary; when I know that a certain size is wanted, I can make it.

But for my own study, I prefer the large size, so that I can study hands, feet, head in greater detail. Don't you think that a number of drawings of tree felling, etc., might be done in the same style in which I just did "Peat Cutters" and "Sand Diggers" – and in that way would be interesting enough to serve as illustrations? But I repeat, the money from you is absolutely indispensable to me as long as I have not found employment. Out of what I received from you today, I have to pay exactly as much as I received: I have still to pay three models who have posed several times. I have to pay the carpenter, to pay the rent, to pay the baker and the grocer and also the shoemaker, and I have to lay in some provisions. Then I have in front of me two blank sheets for new compositions, and must set to work on them. I shall again have to take a model every day, and struggle hard till I have got it down. *Quand bien même* I'll get started, but you will understand that in a few days I shall be absolutely penniless, and then those terrible eight long days of not being able to do anything but wait, wait for the tenth of the month.

Oh, boy, if we could only find somebody who would buy the drawings. The work is an absolute necessity for me. I can't put it off, I don't care for anything but the work; that is to say, the pleasure in something else ceases at once and I become melancholy when I can't go on with my work. Then I feel like a weaver who sees that his threads are tangled, and the pattern he had on the loom is gone to hell, and all his thought and exertion is lost.

Try to arrange it so that we can go on with energy. I am going to ask permission to work in the old people's asylum. I have already made many studies of old men, but I must have the women too, and I must also draw the surroundings on the spot. Well, you also have to provide for the woman, so I suppose you know well enough that in this respect my life is not easy either, with two children into the bargain.

I think it is so urgent that you see the studies and the large drawings, especially with the financial side in mind. You might take the same steps in Paris that I would take in London with regard to illustrations if you could show a few large drawings. But in that case I think it would be best not to begin before we were almost sure of their being readily accepted.

These large compositions cause many expenses if one wants to treat them conscientiously. For, boy, it must all be done with the model; even if one uses studies, one must still retouch them again, using the model. If I could take even more models, I should be able to make them much, much better. So, boy, if you think I could manage without your help for once, I assure you I need it more than ever, but I show you our chance of success if we persevere. I have already bought several things with Rappard's money – sketching blocks, etc. – and everything you send is invested in drawings, and I think you will like those I am making now better than the first ones. So let us keep up our courage and energy.

A great drawback for many things I should like to make on the beach is that I have no Scheveningen woman's dress. You understand, I could make a composition of Scheveningen figures such as the enclosed little sketch. But when I draw a figure out-of-doors, it is of course too superficial. It must be taken up again and finished with a model, and one needs the costumes.

That expenditure, if I could afford it, would enable me to start two or three drawings I have in mind. But how can I do it? I repeat, within three days all the money I have now will be gone, I have to spend almost everything. For these two drawings I also needed a number of frocks, trousers, sou'wester, etc. A model does not always wear a good, picturesque frock; by changing it, it becomes more characteristic and arresting. When you come, you must see how elaborate the studies of the figures for the first plane of the sketch are. I made them out-of-doors on a sand heap in a florist's garden.

In the beginning of your letter you write that you are glad there was no cause for anxiety about the woman. Well, it is true there is no direct reason for it, that is to say that in this respect too I try to preserve my serenity and good courage. But there are worries enough, heavy cares even, and difficulties are not wanting. I began trying to save the woman, notwithstanding the difficulties, and up to the present I have

gone through with it, but in the future everything will not be couleur de rose either. Well, we must work as hard as we can.

Theo, do you know what the difficulties I had with the woman were when I wrote you last? – her family tried to draw her away from me; I have had nothing to do with any of them except the mother, because I did not trust them. The more I tried to analyze the history of that family, the more I was strengthened in that opinion. Now, just because I kept out of their way, they plot against me, and so a treacherous attack occurred. I told the woman my opinion of their intentions, and said she had to choose between her family and me, but that I did not want to have anything to do with any of them, primarily because I thought that relations with her family would lead her back to her former bad life. The family proposed that she, with her mother, should keep house for a brother of hers who divorced his wife and is rather an infamous scoundrel. The reason why the family advised her to leave me was that I earned too little, and I was not good to her, and did it only for the posing, but would certainly leave her in the lurch. Nota bene, she has hardly been able to pose the whole year because of the baby. Well, you can judge for yourself just how far these suspicions of me have any foundations. But all these things were secretly discussed behind my back, and at last the woman told me. I said to her, “Do just as you like, but I shall never leave you unless you turn back to your former life.”

The worst is, Theo, that if we are hard up now and then, they try to upset the woman in that way, and that rascal of a brother, for instance, tries to drive her back to her former life. Well, I can only say of her that I should think it sensible and loyal of her if she broke off all relations with her family. I myself dissuade her from going there, but if she wants to, I let her go. And the temptation to show off her baby, for instance, often drives her back to her family. And that influence is fatal, and makes a greater impression upon her because it comes from her family, who upset her by saying, He will certainly leave you someday. So they try to make her leave me.

Adieu, boy, let us work and keep our head clear, and try to act rightly! You know how it is with my money; if you can help me, do so.

Vincent

[Sketch “Sand Diggers in Dekkersduin” F 1028, JH 367 was enclosed with letter]