

Letter 290  
The Hague, 3 June 1883

Dear Theo,

While I think of it, I must tell you once more that what you say about “like a meek dove” (a period like Correggio painted) is true, it does not last, and it is right that it does not last. It is also right that we see it and that we experience it and shall not forget it; but it does not last, because that poignant feeling (though I believe it remains deeply hidden in man) is changed into a more normal condition – so, for instance the woman here now looks much more like a mother hen fussing over her chickens. But a mother hen is a pretty animal for all that.

This morning I was in a charitable home, boy, to see a little old woman (with whom I had to arrange about posing), and thus far she has brought up two natural children of her daughter’s who is a so-called kept woman. Several things struck me: in the first place, the neglected appearance of the poor little creatures, though the grandmother does her best, and many are much worse off; and secondly, I was deeply touched by the devotion of that little grandmother, and it struck me that when an old woman puts her wrinkled hands to such a task, we men must not let ours be idle.

I saw the real mother, who just dropped in, wearing untidy clothes, with uncombed, unkempt hair. And, boy, I thought of the difference between the woman with whom I live as she is now and as I found her a year ago, and between the children here and there.

Oh, if only one keeps reality in mind, then it is as clear as daylight that it is a good thing to take care of what would otherwise wither and droop. And I personally think that no argument about the objections to or the impropriety of meddling can counter the reality of these things. And in my case, just because it fits in with my profession, many difficulties disappear, though from another side, the financial one, many difficulties do indeed arise, and will remain. But here also it sometimes happens that the poor are the poor man’s friend, and certainly it is a good thing that women and children learn thrift and that men learn to work hard.

But as for you, there are things which I foresee you will have to contend with, like everybody else – things of another nature, which occur in all men’s lives, for that matter. I mean, you should thoroughly prepare yourself for the fact that you will gradually discover quite different things in the woman whom you are taking care of – that is in her character. And speaking my mind unreservedly, I say you will be disappointed in her, and perhaps you will say to her, “How you have changed!” and she will say the same thing to you. And then I think it will mean a step in the right direction if – notwithstanding this “change” on both sides – neither of you is annoyed with the other, and you learn to put up with things on her part, and she learns to put up with things on your part – or, in other words, if there is a mutual overlooking of shortcomings. Look, this is a crisis nobody can escape, and it is a crisis which may cause some to become more firmly attached to each other, whereas on the other hand, it may cause others to become estranged by it, which is always a very deplorable thing to have happen once one has started. In short, sticking it out is not always an easy thing to do.

And here in my case, for instance, in those days I was very glad now and then that there were children for whose sake the path of duty was more clearly discernible. To the woman as well as to myself.

Look, man has no stauncher friend than his duty, and though at times it may be a rough and stern taskmaster, as long as one works in its service, one will not easily become a bankrupt.

And when I say I foresee you will have conflicts, perhaps more than the usual number of conflicts, I base this supposition on the fact that probably this woman may also be of a humbler station in life, as it’s called. And what Father says about this, for instance – you know his way of thinking sufficiently for me not to need to repeat it – is really true, at least in certain respects I admit it. Only there are certain cases, like yours, in which the important thing is to save a life – look, in such cases Father himself would not know what to do, or rather, I actually believe that in his heart too “je vote pour la vie” would carry the day. Ah! you know, once in a while when I am in doubt, I ask myself, Would you be a judge passing a death sentence? And every time I find only one answer: No, once and for all, I am for abolishing death sentences, legal or otherwise, ostracism and other peines capitales. We are called on to preserve life, to respect life; that is our duty, and we can always justify it – even if the world puts us in the wrong and things do not turn out to our advantage.

So you see, old fellow, this letter is meant to tell you that you not only have my sympathy if things turn out well, but also in case they turn out badly.

And as for me, you must not infer from this letter that things turned out badly in my case, for I have much to be thankful for; but notwithstanding this, petites misères of various kinds have befallen me, and the

“precariousness” of such situations is so clear to me that, seeing it is only the beginning for you, I wanted to tell you once and for all that in my opinion it is right to try to save the life of such an unknown woman, even if one does not know beforehand how this woman will turn out later, nor what she will prove to be. And in no event shall I be among those who say, “You never should have let yourself in for it,” for it stands to reason that this will be the general opinion if it should happen that things do not turn out well. Further, this letter is meant to tell you that I think it desirable that there be a child, for you will see that most people consider this a difficulty, which I do not see, just the reverse. And I assure you, I expect everything can be arranged so that you will not be compromised in the eyes of the world; but suppose things came to such a pass that you had to choose between compromising yourself and deserting her – in that case I should approve of you if you said, I vote for life, and when it is a case of saving a human life, I scorn a compromise. This is if the worst comes to the worst, but as long as you are able to live in peace with everybody without harming her – do so. Well, it is not superfluous to say so, taking into account that Father, for instance, said to me at the time, “There is something immoral in a liaison with a woman of a lower station in life” (which I do not think true, as I do not see any connection between the station in life and morality: the station in life concerns the world, morality concerns God), and further, “Do not sacrifice your position to a woman,” which I do not think applies when a human life is at stake.

But Father himself is not such a die-hard, and often he is quite reasonable.

As to the possibility of certain persons turning against you because of the woman, I do not think you will regret going in for a permanent relationship, in which I differ radically from those who as a matter of principle only enter into relationships “without consequences.”

One finds great inner calm in a permanent relationship, and I think it in harmony with nature; whereas one transgresses the eternal moral laws as soon as one tries to shirk the consequences of a relationship with a woman. My opinion is that a man who regulates his life in harmony with the eternal laws of nature as well as of morality contributes his share toward the reform and progress and amelioration of things which have become disorientated in present-day society. Therefore, do not doubt the reasonableness of your act; you cannot be too calm and imperturbable in the face of people's cynical remarks. A permanent relationship often is a source of rejuvenation of vigor and enterprise. One may lose protection, but one gains energy and keeps on one's feet, after all.

But do you know what is a danger, which I realize now more than I used to?

With reference to your ideas about things, you are concerned not only with yourself, but also with the views of the woman you are with. And just when you are firm and unshakable in the face of outward influences, it may happen that in certain respects the woman will let herself be disconcerted by the opposition of certain people. And will start opposing you in the same way as the people I mentioned, and will say, It won't do, it's impossible – and that, at a time when you are already victorious, so to speak. Well, the woman may change a great deal in consequence of the shocks she has had to undergo and may stand by you; she may turn out a success or a failure according to the way she reacts to things, she may improve or deteriorate in character by rowing against the stream.

And retrogression is part of the female character.

But as there are qualities in your woman which indicate that there is something intellectual about her, and as she is not without culture, I think that for this reason she doubly deserves your confidence.

If it should be that her intellectual development is coupled with contentedness, and she is modest in her demands, I do not think the above-mentioned things are to be feared. And being equal to a period of rowing against the stream, she can only gain energy. Therefore be of good heart.

And with regard to my finances, know it well that whatever you can spare is as absolutely necessary to me as the air I breathe, and that my productivity depends on it, but I don't think you need be afraid of taking any steps toward recommending my work, for it will not be a failure; I think I can assure you we will find friends for it. And for my part, in order to lighten the burden for you, though apart from that I assure you I did not like it at all, I wrote to C. M., and I want to ask you: could you perhaps write a little word to Tersteeg, telling him that I am working on those large drawings? Look here, boy, if Mauve gave a helping hand now, for instance, perhaps, perhaps they might be turned into paintings. I think the studies and compositions are worked out enough to serve as a foundation for a painted picture. If I had the means, I would not care to sell these at all, and I should keep my work together till it formed a good whole.

And know that I long terribly for your coming. I think you will see, brother, that your faithful help and your sacrifices for me have borne some fruit, and will bear even more. But I am greatly in need of money for the expenses. And even if we don't sell these, I think they might become the means of finding new connections, and perhaps of re-establishing relations with C. M. or Tersteeg or Mauve.

Adieu, boy, a warm handshake,  
Yours sincerely, Vincent

[Written on a loose leaf] I should think it all the more desirable if you could send me something extra because, instead of doing less, I should like to do more during the days between now and your arrival. I hope I shall be able to push things forward a little more, because I am now getting results with lithographic crayon, and turn out things that are better and more vigorous than the former drawings. Only a few more pulls, and I think they may be able and willing to use me for some illustration work or other. For although this may seem of little account, I am fitted by nature for such a position, and I feel the inclination and the energy for it.

And also, I should like so very much to wash on Torchon again, probably before your arrival too. For you must not suppose that I have dismissed the idea of doing watercolours or painting. I am most firmly resolved to do it, only drawing is the root of everything, and the time spent on it is really wholly profitable. One cannot help drawing "pictures of the future" in one's mind. One does this even if one is convinced one cannot predict anything with certainty and sufficient accuracy. But what you write today may have a great influence on my future. Who knows if it might not end in our being drawn together even more closely. Well, at all events your coming here has become doubly important to me on account of this, and I want to try to give myself a few more pulls in the right direction; help me do it if you can.

If at some time or other you should get more of a home life, I think we should understand each other even better, and I have the impression we should mean even more to each other.

I understand it is probable that you are going to have many cares, and if I can do anything to produce better work, I shall exert myself doubly.

At times a blessing may rest on love, though the world seems to think one ought to doubt this. But the blessing is rooted in the fact that if one works with love in one's heart, one can do more than otherwise, and is afraid of fewer things. And consequently one has more serenity. In short, one learns to persevere. And, my dear fellow, however all this may be – whether socially speaking it will be to your advantage or not – I believe that after all you can only gain by it. Therefore a blessing on everything you do, and be assured of my heartfelt wish that the woman you are taking care of may recover and be saved.

Yes, it certainly is inspiring work – saving a life from drowning in a sea of misery! It may well be that it is a great happiness for you as well as for her. For then hidden forces of energy and vitality will develop.

Once more, thanks for your letter and the remittance. And if you can, write again soon.