

Letter 329
Drenthe, c. 27 September 1883

Dear Theo,

This morning the weather was better again, so I went out to paint. But it was impossible, I was missing four or five colours, and I came home so miserable. I am sorry to have risked myself so far without a sufficient supply. I know from experience how it ends when one undertakes such an expedition, without knowing whether one will get an answer to, or whether people will listen to, reasonable, rational demands. You remember, perhaps, how it was with me in the Borinage. Well, I am rather afraid it would be the same thing here all over again, and I must have some security before I risk myself further, otherwise I shall go back (Oh, you know, that's what I say, but I really want to stay). I did not see any good at the time, nor do I now, in reaching such a point of destitution, in literally having no roof over my head, in having to wander and wander forever like a tramp, without finding either rest or food or covering anywhere – besides, without any possibility of working.

See for yourself how far it is from Mons to Courrières on the map. I went that way on foot, from Valenciennes to Mons and back, with not quite two francs in my pocket – three days and three nights in the beginning of March, in wind and rain, without a roof over my head.

It is just these antecedents, brother, which I have not yet come to, of course – but should come to if I risked myself too far without security, if I did not put my affairs in reasonable order. I repeat, if I risked myself far into the country without anybody to back me up.

Before I begin – I do not distrust or suspect you, but it is just a measure of common sense – I repeat, before I begin (and I ask it because not very long ago you wrote me about being distressed yourself, and being afraid of troubles and calamities in the future) can you assure me that the usual remittance will not be lacking? And at the same time – though that may be sufficient, and I should not need more under certain circumstances – I tell you, the condition on which the usual money loan will be sufficient is that one is well equipped to begin with, and starts with a supply of certain things. I, who like to have the initiative because sometimes a proof of sincerity is needed, a fact proving that one does not deal in words but in actions – though I went as far as Drenthe, I shrink, not from taking the first step, but from taking the next one without being sure of my footing.

Experience forces me to demand a definite fixed arrangement. If you had gone through what I suffered during that expedition in the Borinage, you would have learned to do exactly what I do in my case – what I see so distinctly and clearly now – recognizing as old acquaintances all the circumstances and things with which I have had to deal.

The expeditions I should want to make are impossible and foolish if undertaken without supplies. They are very precarious without a surplus of ready money for unforeseen circumstances.

In short, one must not undertake them without the thorough conviction that one will be hampered everywhere and always by people who stand staring, but are unwilling to lend a helping hand. One must expect to be distrusted at every inn – like any poor peddler (for that is what they take one for). Often one has to pay the money for board and lodging in advance – as I have to do here – to get them to take one in for pity's sake. And so everything is prose, everything is calculation in regard to a plan for an excursion, which, after all, has poetry for its end. I never told you this as plainly as I do now, and if I do so now, I assure you it is not in the least because I distrust you, but because since I planned this journey, I have not spoken to you as seriously as I do now about the obstacles connected with the money you might have available or might be able to find for it. I must mention it now because, though in one of my last letters I told you that everything here was better than I expected – which is really the case – nevertheless in this inn I find drawbacks as to light, space, opportunity to work with a model, and therefore – though I can put up with it if need be, and will do so if it must be – I am thinking of pushing on farther into the country, notwithstanding the bad season, not doubting that wherever I go, I shall find at least just as good an opportunity to work as here, and I hope even more space, etc. I have been here about two weeks now, and I speak from experience when I tell you that in many, in almost all, respects my materials and outfit and supplies prove to be insufficient.

Hoogeveen itself is classed as a town on the map, where it is marked with a red dot, but in reality it isn't a (it doesn't even have a tower). So I cannot get anything in the way of drawing materials. If I go deeper into the country, I shall be even more handicapped – and I must be prepared for anything, or, I repeat, it would be sheer madness. I should not be in such a hurry if this season's advance did not spur me to the greatest speed. Remember that time is passing, and perhaps two weeks will have gone by again before I can get an answer from you.

Before the real winter comes (and it will be there at all too soon!! I really do not see how to manage), I should like to try to get some better quarters – even farther out on the heath. And also my state of mind, which is too gloomy – so that I feel an urgent need to go on working steadily, this being the very best remedy and distraction – forces me to insist on better equipment. And that would remain exactly the same, even if I stayed here.

I am bargaining for two lots of old tubes, which are just damaged a little on the outside, one from Leurs, the other from Furnée, who is that land surveyor's father; and in addition, I should need brushes, canvas, watercolours and Whatman paper.

If I told you it could wait, I should be lying, for it is absolutely necessary to have it at once.

If it cannot be, it cannot – but then I must stop working.

And I should not have grown so melancholy even now if my bad equipment had not handicapped me so much.

If I could find a measure of encouragement and what's strictly necessary, I think I could manage all right here. The country is very beautiful – today I saw a funeral in a barge, it was very fascinating – six women wrapped in coats in the boat, which the men pulled along the canal through the heath, the clergyman in a three-cornered hat and breeches, exactly like the figure by Meissonier, following on the other side. There are all kinds of curious things here.

You must not be angry with me for writing the way I do. I came here in too much of a hurry, and only now I feel what I lack, and that I acted rather rashly – but what else could I do? I feel inexpressibly melancholy without my work to distract me, as you will understand, and I must work and work hard, I must forget myself in my work, otherwise it will crush me. I repeat, I do not distrust you in the slightest, but my experience forbids me to undertake an excursion without knowing what I can count on. So speak absolutely openly, for my decision depends on it, and, at all events, I will suit my actions to the circumstances. With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

If I had known beforehand that I should have to separate from the woman after all, I should probably have separated six months ago – but even though I still have to smart for it, I am glad I was faithful to her too long rather than too short a time, and I did not want to act on my own responsibility before I had spoken to you personally. When you think of last year, do not forget that the reason for the expenses being too high was less our personal needs than the enormous prices in The Hague. If I had known everything – I could have economized 200 guilders on rent, even if I had taken this whole inn with garden and all, and lo! The whole deficit would have been made up out of one single item. Indeed, the woman is quite innocent of my deficit, and so am I, since it was impossible to act differently in The Hague – but if I had known it, I would have moved here much sooner. I reproach myself with this blunder, or rather this ignorance.

But last year was not entirely fruitless or useless – it was a year of hard work, and I look back on it calmly after all. As to my not having my hands as free as I should wish at present – in no case shall I have them free, even if assistance came; for by then a great part of the autumn will already have passed – and before winter I shall have finished only a portion of those studies which I had hoped to get done. As to the present difficulties, only patience will clear them up here – all the same, I should like to undertake another trip between now and Christmas. Let's make the most of our time, for loss of time is most expensive. In The Hague I have more than 70 painted studies – if I had made them here, they would have been more use to me.

I must tell you frankly that lately I have been sorry, and am still, that I paid off my debt with the money you sent. It is true I was in debt, but none of those I had recently paid were exactly pressing me for money then – though they did some time ago – and I might have put it off a little longer. I do not know whether one may not think of oneself first in order to keep one's plans and one's energy free, for I repeat, I shall not be able to paint the necessary studies before winter comes, and who will thank me for it?

I shall reproach myself with it, and be miserable about it. It's true that since your visit I have paid Leurs over 30 guilders. I might get credit if it were ordinary colours, but I am bargaining for old tubes, which I can get at 33 1/3% discount, but payment in cash. It is the same thing with Furnée, who is that land surveyor's father. I have his assurance that he trusts me, but the fact is that I generally used to pay him cash – and I see no reason to change it, as I should then seem to change my line of conduct, and it might influence our friendship; and what I wanted to buy from him is also a part of that same lot, about half of it, so it is again a question of cash. Then brushes, another paint box, a portfolio for studies, and other things –

if I pay cash for them, I get more favorable conditions, and shall have no further worries about it; and if I have no further worries, I can begin to settle with Rappard.