

Letter 112
Amsterdam, 30 October 1877

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your last letter, which I enjoyed very much. Yes, boy, that etching after Jules Goupil is splendid, and with all that is linked to it, it makes a good and beautiful whole, which is a good thing to treasure in one's heart. I almost envy your having read Carlyle's French Revolution; I have read a little of it, but not all – I found fragments of it in a book by Taine.

I am busy making an excerpt from Motley, including "The Conquest of Den Briel," and the siege of Haarlem, Alkmaar and Leyden; I also drew a map of it, thus making a whole of the two.

I keep my work together, to help me to pass the examinations; I consult Mendes in everything and arrange my studies according to what he has done, for I should like to do it in the same way. The history of the Eighty Years' War is magnificent! Whoever should make such a good fight in his life, would do well. In truth, life is a battle, it is necessary to defend and protect ourselves, and we must plan and calculate with a cheerful and brave spirit in order to make progress.

As we get older, it becomes more and more difficult, and it may rightly be said:

Does the road go uphill all the way?

"Yes, to the very end."

And will the journey take all day long?

"Yes, from morn till night, my friend."

But the inmost strength of the heart is developed by fighting the difficulties. On grandit dans la tempête [one grows in the storm], if only we always strive after keeping the heart – out of which all that goes forth into life is good and simple and rich – in God, so that we may have a clear conscience before God and man. Even as we look at others, so we in turn are watched by the many eyes belonging to that conscience – God's greatest gift and the proof that His eye is upon us, but is the shade of our right hand, and when He delivers us from evil, then that light enters the darkness of life and of the world. And if we feel, as it were, that there is an eye looking down upon us, it would be well for us to lift up our eyes at times, as if to see the Invisible.

I know the history of Frederick the Great, illustrated by Menzel; it is a good acquisition. Go on with your collection; I also know that wood engraving after Jacque, "The Sheepfold." Don't forget to bring these things with you when you come home for Christmas.

I bought from a Jew a lithograph after L. Steffens; you once showed me the picture – an old and a young clergyman talking together in a garden – it is a good lithograph. The scene reminded me of a picture by Jacquand – I think it is called "The New Vicar" – it has the same sentiment; it also reminded me of "The Novice" by G. Doré.

Old son, the study of Latin and Greek is arduous; nevertheless, it still makes me happy, I have finally dived into studies of which I have always dreamt. I cannot sit up so late in the night any more – Uncle has strictly forbidden it. Still, the legend under the etching by Rembrandt continues to haunt me: "In medio noctis vim suam lux exterit" [the light shines better in the middle the night]. All night, I leave the gas light on low, and often it comes to me to contemplate this poor light in medio noctis, while planning my work for the next day and thinking of the best means to study.

I hope to light the fire early in the morning this winter, the winter mornings have something peculiar about them, Frère painted it in his picture of the workman, "Un Tonnelier" [a cooper]; the etching is hanging in your room, I think.

Remplis mon âme d'une sainte amertume qui te soit agréable, et je passerai humblement toutes les années de ma vie dans ton service, dans l'amertume de mon âme [fill my soul with a holy bitterness as it may please Thee, and I shall spend all the years of my life in Thy service, in the bitterness of my soul; immediately after this, written in English], "yea, even in Thy service, O man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." This certainly is a good prayer, and I thought of it when in simplicity I said to you that it is a good thing in this world to soak oneself in coffee. Man is full of needs, and requires strength and reinvigorating in order to be able to work. What cannot be cured must be endured, and one must use the weapons within one's reach and the means at one's disposal to make the most of one's powers and gain advantage. (You see by the handwriting that it was getting dark; now the lamp is burning.)

One afternoon at Uncle Stricker's, I ate hotchpotch, and on this occasion it occurred to me to make an excerpt from Motley; I'll show it to you at Christmas. Because I have such a frightful number of stone thresholds and church floors and stone stoops of houses under my eyes and feet, I hit on the idea of making those maps of rocky Scotland and colouring them (red and green). I thought of those pickles which Uncle is

so fond of and which I have learned to like too. The soul of man is singularly strange, and I think it is excellent to have one – like a map of England, made with loving devotion – and to have in it as much as possible of the love which is holy in all things and believes in all things and hopes all things and suffers all things, and never perishes. This love is the light of the world, the true life which is the light of man. Surely knowledge of languages is a precious possession, and I am anxious to grasp something of it too.

When one eats a crust of black rye bread, it is well to think of the words, “Tunc justi fulgebunt ut sol in regnum Patris sui” [then the righteous shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father], or, too, when one often has muddy boots or wet black clothes. May all of us someday enter the kingdom which is not of this world, where they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, where the sun shall no longer be the light of day, and the moon shall no longer shine to be a brightness, but where the Lord will be a light eternal, and God our glory, where the sun shall no more go down; and the light of the moon shall not wane, for the Lord shall be there as an eternal light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended, and God shall wipe away all tears [see Is. 60:19-20]. And thus we can be leavened with the leaven of “sorrowful yet always rejoicing,” being what we are by the Grace of God, and carrying in the secrecy of our hearts the words, “I never despair,” because we have faith in God. And then “set your face as a flint” is a good precept in many circumstances, and also “as a pillar of iron or as an old oak tree.” It is a good thing to be fond of thorns, like the thorn hedges around English country churches, or of the roses in a churchyard – they are so beautiful these days – yea, if we could make ourselves a crown of the thorns of life, wearing it before men and so that God may see us wearing it, we should do well.

Maybe you know the wood engravings by Swain; he is a very clever man, his studio is in such a pleasant part of London, not far from that part of the Strand where the offices of the illustrated papers (The London News, Graphic, etc.) are, nor from Bookseller’s Row, which is full of all kinds of bookstores and shops where one sees everything – from etchings by Rembrandt to the Household Edition of Dickens and the Chandos Classics. Everything there has a greenish tone, especially during foggy weather in autumn or the dark days before Christmas; it reminds one of Ephesus as it is described so remarkably and simply in the Acts. (The bookshops in Paris are very interesting, too, including those in the Faubourg St. Germain.)

Oh, boy, I shall be too glad for words if I can pass my examination; if I can overcome the difficulties, it will be in all simplicity of heart but also in prayer to God, for I often pray fervently to Him for the wisdom I need. And then that He may once grant that I write and preach many sermons – the more, the better – resembling our father’s, and finish a work in my life, with every day bringing some improvement.

I spent Monday evening at Uncle Cor’s, and saw Aunt and the whole family; all send you their kindest regards. Uncle showed me that book, L’Oeuvre Gravé de Ch. Aubigny.

From there I went to Uncle Stricker’s and had a long talk with him and Aunt, for Mendes had been to see them a few days ago (one must not talk too lightly about genius, even though one believes there is more of it in the world than many suppose, but Mendes certainly is a very remarkable person, and I am and will remain grateful for my contact with him). I am glad to say he did not make an unfavourable report about me, but Uncle asked me if I did not find it very difficult, and I acknowledged that I did indeed, and that I tried my best, in every possible way, to remain strong and keep myself alert in all possible ways. He told me not to lose heart.

But now that terrible algebra and mathematics still remain; well we must see – after Christmas I must have lessons in those also, it is necessary. Besides, I cling to the church for aid and to the bookshops; I invent some errand to go there whenever possible. Today I was at Schalekamp’s and at Brinkman’s in the Hartestraat (that shop of Schalekamp’s is very interesting), and I bought a few Teacher’s Society maps – there are about a hundred of them at a penny apiece, including the Netherlands in every different historical period. So often, in the past too, a visit to a bookshop has cheered me and reminded me that there are good things in the world.

The picture by Israël’s which you describe must have been very beautiful; I can imagine it well from your vivid description. I saw a small picture by him at Uncle Cor’s, also a very fine one by Mauve – a shepherd with a flock of sheep crossing the dunes.

I had a nice, cheerful letter from home; I was glad to hear that things are somewhat better at Prinsenhage. How I look forward to Christmas; bring as many things as you can with you, it will be good for us all. Take your time about sending the tobacco, I have some left; it is a good and necessary help in studying.

I wrote a long letter to Harry Gladwell, who left today; I sent your regards, too.

When you have a chance, don’t forget Michelet, you know, and J. Breton; but you know what it’s for, and that there is no hurry and Christmas will be soon enough. Now I must set to work, this sheet is almost covered. Have a good time, and write me soon. Uncle sends you his greetings, also Uncle and Aunt

Stricker. Give my compliments to the Roos family, also to Mauve and his wife and to Tersteeg and Van Stockum – how is Carolien?

A blessing on all you undertake, keep courage and good cheer during these autumn days, and may Christmas come soon and you and I be together again before we know it. À Dieu, a handshake in thought and believe me,

Your loving brother, Vincent

Saw two photographs of pictures by Gabriel von Max, the raising of Jairus's daughter and a nun in a convent garden; the former was particularly fine.

[Written in the margin] I also have an abridged edition of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and am working all day, every day, so I shall get something done, too.

Do you know an engraving after Landseer, "The Highlander" it is called, I think – a highlander in a snowstorm at the top of a mountain, with an eagle he has shot in his hand?