

Laeken, [a suburb of Brussels] November 15, 1878

Dear Theo,

On the evening of the day we spent together, which passed only too quickly for me, I want to write to you again. It was a great joy for me to see you again and to talk with you, and it is a blessing that such a day, that passes in a moment, and such a joy that is of so short duration, stays in our memory and will never be forgotten. When we had taken leave I walked back, not along the shortest way but along the towpath. Here are workshops of all kinds that look picturesque, especially in the evening with the lights, and to us who are also labourers and workmen, each in his sphere and in the work to which he is called, they speak in their own way, if we only listen to them, for they say: Work while it is day, the night cometh when no man can work.

It was just the moment when the street cleaners came home with their carts with the old white horses. A long row of these carts were standing at the so-called Ferme des Boues, at the beginning of the tow-path. Some of these old white horses resemble a certain old aquatint engraving, which you perhaps know, an engraving that has no great art value, it is true, but which struck me, and made a deep impression upon me. I mean the last from that series of prints called "The Life of a Horse." It represents an old white horse, lean and emaciated, and tired to death by a long life of heavy labour, of too much and too hard work. The poor animal is standing on a spot utterly lonely and desolate, a plain scantily covered with withered dry grass, and here and there a gnarled old tree broken and bent by the storm. On the ground lies a skull, and at a distance in the background a bleached skeleton of a horse, lying near a hut where lives a man who skins horses. Over the whole is a stormy sky, it is a cold, bleak day, gloomy and dark weather.

It is a sad and very melancholy scene, which must strike everyone who knows and feels that we also have to pass one day through the valley of the shadow of death, and "que la fin de la vie humaine, ce sont des larmes ou des cheveux blancs." [the end of human life is tears or white hairs.] What lies beyond this is a great mystery that only God knows, but He has revealed absolutely through His word that there is a resurrection of the dead.

The poor horse, the old faithful servant, is standing there patiently and meekly, yet bravely and unflinchingly; like the old guard who said, "la garde meurt mais elle ne se rend pas," [the guard dies, but never surrenders] it awaits its last hour. Involuntarily I was reminded of that engraving, when I saw tonight those horses of the ash carts.

As to the drivers themselves with their filthy dirty clothes, they seemed sunk and rooted still deeper in poverty than that long row or rather group of paupers, that Master de Groux has drawn in his "Bench of the Poor." It always strikes me, and it is very peculiar, that when we see the image of indescribable and unutterable desolation – of loneliness, of poverty and misery, the end of all things, or their extreme, then rises in our mind the thought of God. At least this is the case with me and does not Father also say: "There is no place where I like better to speak than in a churchyard, for there we are all on equal ground; not only that, there we always realize it." I am glad that we had time to see the museum together and especially the work of de Groux and Leys, and so many other interesting pictures, like that landscape of Cooseman's for instance. I am very pleased with the two prints you gave me, but you ought to have accepted from me that small etching, "The Three Mills." Now you have paid it all yourself, and not allowed me to pay half as I wished to do. But you must keep it for your collection, for it is remarkable, even though the reproduction is not so very good. In my ignorance, I should ascribe it rather to Peasant Breughel than to Velvet Breughel.

I enclose the little hasty sketch, "Au Charbonnage." I should like to begin making rough sketches from some of the many things that I meet on my way, but as it would probably keep me from my real work, it is better not to begin. As soon as I came home I began a sermon about the "barren fig tree," Luke xiii 6-9.

That little drawing "Au Charbonnage" is nothing specially remarkable, but the reason I made it is that one sees here so many people that work in the coal mines, and they are rather a characteristic kind of people. This little house stands not far from the road; it is a small inn attached to the big coal shed, and the workmen come there to eat their bread and drink their glass of beer during the lunch hour.

When I was in England I applied for a position as Evangelist among the miners in the coal mines, but they turned me down, stating that I had to be at least twenty-five years old. You know how one of the roots or foundations, not only of the Gospel, but of the whole Bible is, "Light that rises in the darkness," from darkness to light. Well, who will need this most, who will be open to it? Experience has taught that those who walk in the darkness, in the centre of the earth, like the miners in the black coal mines for instance, are very much impressed by the words of the Gospel, and believe it too. Now there is in the south of Belgium, in Hainault, in the neighbourhood of Mons, up to the French frontiers, aye, even far across it, a district called the Borinage, that has a special population of labourers who work in the numerous coal mines. In a little handbook of geography I found the following about them: "The Borins (inhabitants of the Borinage, situated west of Mons) find their work exclusively in the coal mines. These mines are an imposing sight, 300 metres underground, into which daily descend groups of working men, worthy of our respect and our sympathies. The miner is a special Borinage type, for him daylight does not exist, and except on Sunday he never sees the sunshine. He works

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laboriously by a lamp whose light is pale and dim, in a narrow tunnel, his body bent double and sometimes he is obliged to crawl along; he works to extract from the bowels of the earth that mineral substance of which we know the great utility; he works in the midst of thousands of ever-recurring dangers; but the Belgium miner has a happy disposition, he is used to that kind of life, and when he descends the shaft, carrying on his hat a little lamp that is destined to guide him in the darkness, he trusts himself to God, Who sees his labour and Who protects him, his wife and his children.”

So the Borinage is situated south of Lessines, where one finds the stone quarries.

I should very much like to go there as an Evangelist. The three months' trial demanded of me by the Rev. de Jong and the Rev. Pietersen is almost over. St. Paul was three years in Arabia before he began to preach, and before he started on his great missionary journeys and his real work among the heathen. If I could work quietly for about three years in such a district, always learning and observing, then I should not come back from there without having something to say that was really worth hearing. I say so in all humility and yet with confidence. If God wills, and if He spares my life, I would be ready about my thirtieth year, starting out with a peculiar training and experience, being able to master my work better, and riper for it than now.

I write you this again although we have already spoken about it many a time.

There are already in the Borinage many little Protestant communities and certainly schools also. I wish I could get a position there as Evangelist in the way we spoke about, preaching the Gospel to the poor, that means those who need it most and for whom it is so well suited, and then during the week devoting myself to teaching.

You have certainly visited St. Gilles? I too made a trip there, in the direction of the Ancienne Barrière. Where the road to Mont St. Jean begins there is another hill, the Alseberg. To the right is the cemetery of St. Gilles, full of cedars and evergreen, from where one has a view over the whole city.

Proceeding further one arrives at Forest. The neighbourhood is very picturesque there, on the slope of the hills are old houses, like those huts in the dunes that Bosboom has sometimes painted. One sees all kinds of field labour performed there, the sowing of corn, the digging of potatoes, the washing of turnips, and everything is picturesque, even the gathering of wood, and it looks much like Montmartre. There are old houses covered with evergreen or vines, and pretty little inns; among the houses I noticed one was that of a mustard manufacturer, a certain Verkisten, his place was just like a picture by Thijs Mans for instance. Here and there are places where stone is found, so they have small quarries, through which hollowed out roads pass, with deeply cut wagon ruts, where one sees the little white horses with red tassels, and the drivers with blue blouses; shepherds are to be found there too, and women in black with white caps, that remind one of those of de Groux. There are some places here, thank God one finds them everywhere, where one feels more at home than anywhere else, where one gets a peculiar pristine feeling like that of homesickness, in which bitter melancholy plays some part; but yet its stimulation strengthens and cheers the mind, and gives us, we do not know how or why, new strength and ardour for our work. That day I walked on past Forest and took a side path leading to a little old ivy-grown church. I saw many linden trees there, still more interwoven, and more Gothic so to say, than those we saw in the Park, and at the side of the hollowed road that leads to the churchyard there were twisted and gnarled stumps and tree roots, fantastical like those Albert Dürer etched in “Ritter, Tod and Teufel.”

Have you ever seen a picture or rather a photograph of Carlo Dolci's work “The Garden of Olives”? There is something Rembrandt-esque in it; I saw it the other day. I suppose you know that large rough etching on the same theme after Rembrandt, it is the pendant of that other, “The Bible Reading,” with those two women and a cradle? Since you told me that you had seen the picture by Father Corot on that same subject, I remembered it again; I saw it at the exhibition of his works shortly after his death and it deeply appealed to me.

How rich art is, if one can only remember what one has seen, one is never empty of thoughts or truly lonely, never alone.

A Dieu, Theo, I heartily shake hands with you in thought. Have a good time, have success in your work, and meet many good things on your road, such as stay in our memory and enrich us, though apparently we possess little. When you see Mauve greet him for me and believe me,

Your loving brother, Vincent

I kept this letter for a few days; the 15th of November is passed, so the three months have elapsed. I spoke with the Rev. de Jong and Master Bokma, they tell me that I cannot attend the school on the same conditions as they allow to the native Flemish pupils; I can follow the lessons free of charge if necessary – but this is the only privilege, – so in order to stay here longer I ought to have more financial means than I have at my disposal, for they are nil. So I shall perhaps soon try that plan involving the Borinage. Once I am in the country I shall not soon go back to a large city.

It would not be easy to live without the Faith in Him and the old confidence in Him; without it one would lose one's courage.