

Letter 191
The Hague, late April 1882

Dear Theo,

I want to explain somewhat more clearly my answer to your line, "Tersteeg has been almost like an older brother to us, try to stay friends with him." My answer was that he might be that to you, but for years I personally have seen only his unfriendly and harsh side.

In all those years, between the time when I left, or got my dismissal from Goupil and the time when I began to draw (which I acknowledge was a mistake not to have done at once), in those years when I was abroad without friends or help, suffering great misery (so that in London I often had to sleep in the open air, and did so three nights in succession in the Borinage), did he ever give me a piece of bread? Did he ever encourage me, he who knew me of old, did he ever lend me a helping hand when I almost broke down? I think not. Did he ever help me in any way? No, except when he lent me the Bargues after I had literally implored him four times.

When I sent him my first drawings, he sent me a paintbox but not a cent of money. I readily believe those first drawings were not worth any money; but, you see, a man like Tersteeg might have argued, "I know him of old, and I will help him get on," and he might have known I needed it so badly in order to live. When I wrote him from Brussels, "Wouldn't it be possible for me to work in The Hague awhile and have some intercourse with painters?" he tried to put me off, and wrote, "Oh no, certainly not, you have lost your rights"; I had better give lessons in English and French; of one thing he was sure, I was no artist. Or I had better try to get copying work from Smeeton and Tilly, though the latter was not exactly in my neighbourhood, and besides, in Brussels several lithographers had refused me this; there was no work, business was slow, was the answer.

When I showed him drawings again last summer, he said: "I hadn't expected this." But he didn't help me, and didn't take back what he had said before. When I came to The Hague after all, without asking his advice, he tried to cut me out; I hear he laughed at my becoming a painter.

I perceived that Mauve thought me a greenhorn, and Mauve was quite astonished to find me a different person from what he had heard. I did not ask Mauve for money, but of his own accord Mauve said, You need money, I will help you earn money, you may be sure that now your hard years are over and the sun is rising for you – you have worked hard and honestly deserve it. And the first thing Mauve did was help me get settled. And then all this changed – Mauve's sympathy, which was like water to a parched plant to me, ran dry.

Because Tersteeg poisoned Mauve's ear by saying, "Be careful, you can't trust him with money. Let him go, don't help him any longer; as a dealer I see no good coming of it" – or at least something like this. And when I said to him, Tersteeg, take it easy with that slander of yours, he looked astonished, he hadn't said a thing; he pretended I had only imagined it. Until one fine day he threatened me, "Mauve and I will see to it that you don't receive any more money from Theo." Then I no longer doubted, but realized he was betraying me. Because I knew what Mauve had told me about the money I get from you – that it would be very good for me to receive it for at least another year.

When you forsake somebody in the winter and then try to take his bread away from him, is that forcing a person or not?

It is not considerate, not delicate, it is not good manners, it is not humane. And what am I? – only a man who has difficult, trying work to do, for which he needs quiet and peace and some sympathy; otherwise the work is impossible.

Theo, think these things over and write me soon. Though I felt terribly grieved at Mauve's neglecting me, I have struggled through this winter as best I could. But can you wonder that it was a shock to me, and that it sometimes seems as if my heart would break?

The likes of Tersteeg "laugh" at that; but you are my brother, and I hope you will not laugh.

I still have more to tell you about my plans for the future, how I intend to carry on my work. But first you must come here, and so I won't write about it now, as I hope it will not be so very long before you come. You have seen the two drawings I sent you. These were not made by accident; I can produce such work regularly, and it improves as I go on. So it is not unreasonable for me to insist upon its being arranged so that I no longer need be afraid that what is strictly necessary will be taken from me, nor always feel as if it were the bread of charity.

Bread, clothes, rent, models, and drawing materials are strictly necessary. And the way I arrange it, this is not so very much, and I can make drawings in return if people will only take them. I have no desire to become rich, but of course I can't do without those necessary things. A workman is worthy of his hire.

I wish it might be arranged so I could receive the money weekly, because it is so hard to reckon a month in advance.

If Tersteeg takes back the worst of what he has said, I will assume he said it unintentionally, and then all will be forgiven and forgotten. If he persists, I won't consider him a friend, but an enemy who begrudges me the very light of my eyes.

Do not be angry with me, Theo, for troubling you with this. But this is the way things have been all winter long, and what have I done to deserve all this trouble? All the anxiety and worry cannot but make me nervous and flurried in speech and manner. When Mauve imitated me, saying, "This is the sort of face you make," "This is the way you speak," I answered, My dear friend, if you had spent rainy nights in the streets of London or cold nights in the Borinage – hungry, homeless, feverish – you would also have such ugly lines in your face and perhaps a husky voice too.

Adieu, Theo, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

It was impossible to make the views of the city for C. M. because of all the rain and wind, so I didn't receive the money for them. Therefore, as I have to pay the rent on the first of May, if you could send something about that time, it would be very welcome.