

Letter 215
The Hague, 15-16 July 1882

Dear Theo,

Friday I was informed by the hospital at Leyden that Sien might come home Saturday; so I went there today, and we came home together, and now she is here at Schenkweg and so far all is well, both she and the baby. She has enough milk, and the baby is quiet.

How I wish you could have seen her today. I assure you her appearance has quite changed since last winter, it has been a complete transformation. If some of this is to my credit, and that through your help, of course much more is due to the professor who treated her. But what the professor has less to do with is the effect on her of the strong attachment between us two. A woman changes when she loves and is loved; when nobody cares for her, she loses her spirits and the charm is gone. Love draws out what is in her, and her development definitely depends on it. Nature must have its free course, must go its normal way; what a woman wants is to be with one man, and with him forever. This is not always possible, but any other way is against nature. So she now has quite another expression than last winter, and her eyes look different; her glance is calm and quiet, and there is an expression of happiness on her face, of peace and quiet, the more touching because she is of course still suffering. I wrote you once that the form of her head, the line of her profile, is exactly like that figure by Landelles, "L'Ange de la Passion," so it is far from ordinary; it is decidedly noble, but it does not always strike the eye at once. Today, however, it was exactly, exactly so. Before she left the hospital, the professor – who felt real sympathy for her, as he had known her before, and treated her with special care this time and examined her thoroughly at her request (because I had made her promise to ask this before she went) – took the trouble to speak with her at length and in detail about what she should and should not do to keep well.

1. Being with one man – seeing that everything in her constitution and temperament makes her fit for domestic life, and decidedly unfit for the sort of life misery had forced her to lead in the past.
2. That she should be out of doors as much as possible, and as soon as she has regained her strength, she should take many walks – inhale lots of fresh air.
3. As to food, he told her what she should have and what would be harmful.
4. She should often wash with cold water and alcohol, and take a hot bath once every week.
5. She ought to avoid emotions that make her nervous – for instance, anxiety, tension, disquiet.
6. She must not scrub floors or do other kinds of really hard work which would force her to keep her head down, like cleaning the passage, for instance, and particularly, should not lift heavy things.

In other words, substantially what he told her before – only now he explained it all to her in more detail. Everything indicates that he is really interested in her. Also, of course, he spoke to her about me at some length; he knows all about my indisposition, and told her I did quite right in going to the hospital, and he explained to her exactly how he thinks I got it. He returned to the question of whether her relation with me was permanent and whether I should ever desert her, not once but very often, and when she went on assuring him it was all right, he thought she was pulling his leg. But he ended by saying, If you have really got your man permanently, you have a big advantage. What he especially insisted on was that she should lead a regular and quiet life.

Passing water had improved a good deal, until some particularly cold and wet days influenced me more or less unfavorably. For a number of days the jet was vigorous again when passing water, and practically back to normal. Although right now this is no longer the case, yet I think it is a sign of improvement, and should the weather stay dry and fine, as it is today, things will improve even more quickly.

When she left, not only the nurse on her ward, but the head nurse herself came to say goodbye to her. I was present and thanked her, as I had three letters from her when Sien was not allowed to write. She stood talking with us for some time. Fortunately, it was quite warm fine weather and the journey came off all right. Sien's mother and her little girl had come to the Schenkweg and were waiting for us there. It was indeed a delightful homecoming, and Sien was in high spirits about everything, especially about the cradle, about the easy chair, about everything. But she was especially glad to see her little girl again; I had given her a pair of new boots for the occasion, and she looked very pretty.

Last May there was an accumulation of difficulties, her confinement, my illness, complicated by the question of how things would go and where she would live when she left the hospital. Light and relief have come in many ways. At times she still suffers much pain because of the operation with the forceps, and there are still other, more natural results of her confinement; there is great weakness, but one can see that there is a renewing and reviving in her – a recovery of her body and a recovery of her soul at the same time.

Now there is an atmosphere of “home,” of one’s own “hearth” here. I can understand Michelet’s saying, “La femme c’est une religion.”

She will probably feel pain and will have to be very careful for at least six weeks after her confinement. I believe that you will see, for instance, from the professor’s and the head nurse’s special attention to her that she is somebody for whom serious persons have sympathy; indeed, it is quite remarkable that they have given her that kind of care.

When I came into the maternity ward, where I saw several patients, it struck me that she was quite different from the others, though she is simple enough. But there is more spirit and sensitivity in her; one can see that suffering and hard times have refined her. I hope you will not have any scruples about making her acquaintance.

I was greatly amused by what Sien told about her conversations with the professor; it was really funny. He seems to be very jovial with his patients; for instance, he said, “By the way, do you like to drink a gin and bitters, and can you smoke a cigar?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“I only asked,” he said, “to tell you that you need not give them up.” But on the other hand, he vehemently forbade her to use vinegar, mustard and pepper. On days when, as often happens, she is more thirsty than hungry, she must take a gin and bitters as a medicine, to give her an appetite.

He has given her a list of nourishing foods, after consulting her as to what she could afford. I myself shall also follow his advice in these things. Meat is good for her, but once or twice a week is sufficient; it is not necessary every day.

Her first remedy, the most important medicine, was to have a home of her own, that is what he kept on insisting on. I was afraid perhaps that Sien would have to take expensive things, but the diet he prescribed is really the most economical one can imagine. So I really think we can manage on 150 fr. a month.

Besides, he told Sien that if the child should ever become ill during the next two years, she can always consult the professor at Leyden, and also get free medicine. “I not only want to help you through your confinement, my lass,” the professor said, “but I want you to become a strong, healthy woman again in a few years. You have a whole life ahead of you if you do as I tell you.” Well, he has talked with her and advised her about large things and small, as if he were her own father, so she came home much more bright and cheerful.

I am getting on well, though I still feel very weak, but I shall get over it in time. It is not surprising when you realize that for two months now I have had indigestion, poor appetite, fever, etc., which still troubles me a little.

I have also started drawing again, and though it gives me a headache and soon tires me, it will pass by and by, especially as I shall be able to begin at home with the woman and the child posing for me. It disappoints me to feel so weak still, but it is always that way after an illness such as mine.

The two drawings I did recently are both watercolours because I wanted to try it. However, it seems to me that even now I must work harder on actual drawing, which is the foundation of all the rest. But as you saw from the last one, I am beginning to wash in by degrees.

As soon as I am quite well again, I should like to do a clear watercolour on Harding, because this paper permits (more than the Whatman) putting in a solid black-and-white foundation before beginning to wash in, without spoiling the watercolour effect. But now I cannot work for a long enough stretch, which worries me a great deal; I am so anxious to set to work, especially in the open air. In the meantime, as things are, I am glad to be able to do at least a little.

I began this letter last night, and now I can tell you that we – that is, the woman, the two children and I – spent a night in the large attic. The bedroom looks a good deal like the hold of a ship because it is completely boarded, and I think it is very healthy. The cradle has to be carried downstairs during the day. Everything was all right, and if no difficulties arise from the outside, and I hope they will not, we at home will get along very well. As for me, I do not feel strange in the company of the woman and the children, but more in my element, and as if we had been together a long time. Using my hands to do things which Sien is too weak to do, for instance, making the beds or a thousand other things, is not unusual for me. I have often done things like that, either for myself or for sick people, etc.

And the old Dutch pictures and drawings prove clearly enough that those things do not stand in the way of painting and drawing. The mixture of studio and family life is no drawback, especially for a painter of the figure. I remember perfectly interiors of studios by Ostade – small pen drawings, probably of corners of his own house – which show clearly enough that Ostade’s studio looked very little like those studios where one finds Oriental weapons and vases and Persian rugs, etc.

Now, speaking more particularly about art, I sometimes have a great urge to start painting again. The studio is larger now, the light better; I have a good cupboard to keep my paints in, so they will not make too much dirt and mess. I have already started with watercolour. I depends on my getting well again; as soon as there is no danger of a relapse and I can go out and sit in the open air, I intend to start it all again, and put some energy into it.

I think, now that Sien and I live together and need not maintain two separate establishments, I shall be able to spend more of the 150 fr. a month on painting materials than I have up to now. Neither Sien nor I is afraid of having to manage with little, and we should not care to have more furniture or household things as long as I do not earn anything by selling drawings. For we would much rather wait to buy such things than to borrow more money now, even if we could get it.

As soon as she has quite recovered, Sien will begin posing seriously again, and I assure you her figure is good enough. That she poses well and is fit for it you can see for yourself from "Sorrow," for instance, and a few other drawings you have.

I have some more studies from the nude which you have not seen yet; I should like to go on with it as soon as she is able, for one learns much from it. Even if I could not continue working in the open air for some time for fear of a relapse (which I hope will not be the case), I shall at all events find subjects enough at home and shall not have to sit idle.

I had a fine letter from Father and Mother. Just think, they enclosed two coupons. They must not do that again, however, because I know they need it themselves; and I repeat, we can manage with the money from you, now that things have taken such a good turn as to Sien's condition and my recovery. So I would rather not receive money from Father and Mother. As I wrote you, I should like to send Father the money for the journey here as soon as I can spare it and when Sien is well again; and then when he is here, we can talk about everything.

What pleases me more than the coupons is that their attitude is the best I can possibly expect under the circumstances, so that I hope that when I speak to them about Sien they will not oppose it on principle, but will accept it with good will.

The other day I saw the exhibition of French art from the Mesdag, Post, etc., collections. There are many beautiful things by Dupré, Corot, Daubigny, Diaz, Courbet, Breton, Jacque, etc. What I particularly admired was the large sketch by Th. Rousseau from the Mesdag collection – a herd of cows in the Alps – and a landscape by Courbet – yellow, sandy hillocks covered here and there with fresh young grass and bordered by dark woods, which a few white birch trees stand out against; far in the distance little grey houses with red and blue slated roofs, and a narrow, light, delicate grey streak of sky above. But the horizon very high, so that the soil is the principal thing. And that fine streak of sky serves more as a contrast to make you feel the roughness of the masses of dark earth. I think this is the most beautiful thing of Courbet's I have ever seen.

The Duprés are superb, and there is a Daubigny which I could not get enough of – large thatched roofs against the slope of a hill. Also a small Corot, a pond and lisière de bois [edge of a wood], at four o'clock or thereabouts on a summer morning. One single little pink cloud shows that the sun will soon rise – a silence and a calm and a peace which are fascinating.

I am glad I have seen all this.

Now I am going to finish this letter; I hope you will write soon, and I especially hope that you will really come to Holland by August. I write you "between times," for as you can imagine, there is a lot to do. I let Sien putter around the house, but I must always be on the lookout to see what she is doing in order to be always on hand if by chance she wants help. For she is really weak still (she told me the professor had said "damned weak"), but it is good for her to find some distraction in keeping busy. Everything that cheers her and makes her happy is medicine for her. Neither is the baby absolutely out of danger – you know how the confinement went, that always influences the child somewhat – and little can be said about how things will go until six weeks have passed. Much depends on the mother's milk, of course. I hope it does not bore you to read all this. I wanted to write just a short note, and it has become a long letter. I am not yet out of cash, but if you could send something about the 20th, it would be welcome for getting through the last days of the month.

Adieu, with a hearty handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely, Vincent