

Letter 216
The Hague, 19 July 1882

Dear Theo,

This time I have to tell you something about a visit from Mr. Tersteeg. This morning he came here and saw Sien and the children. I could have wished that he had shown a kind face to a young little mother just out of childbed. But that was asking too much.

Dear Theo, he spoke to me in a way which you can perhaps imagine.

“What was the meaning of that woman and that child?”

“How could I think of living with a woman, and children into the bargain?”

“Wasn’t it just as ridiculous as driving my own four-in-hand all over town?”

To which I answered that this was certainly quite a different case.

“Had I gone mad? It was certainly the result of an unsound mind and temperament.”

I told him that I had just received the most reassuring information from persons more competent than he, namely the physicians at the hospital, as much about the condition of my body as about the power of my mind to stand exertion.

So he jumped from one thing to another, brought in my father and, just fancy, even my uncle at Prinsenhage!!!

He would do something about it. He would write.

Dear Theo, for the woman’s sake, for my own, I restrained myself, I kept my temper. I answered his, in my opinion, too indiscreet questions curtly and dryly, perhaps a little too mildly; but I preferred being too mild to losing my temper. By and by he calmed down a little. I asked him if it wouldn’t be ridiculous if the people at home received an indignant letter from him, and then soon after a kind request from me to come and visit me at my expense, so as to speak about the same matter. That was not without effect. At least he looked up and asked, “Did I intend to write myself?”

“Need you ask?” said I. “Of course I will, but you must admit that now is a very inopportune moment, as they are in the bustle of moving at home, ¹ and as the woman’s condition is such that the least emotion might bring about a prolapse of the womb which might be incurable. To cause her any anxiety, strain or nervousness now would be murder.”

Oh! then of course he would not write, but again he talked about my being just as foolish as a man who wanted to drown himself, and his wanting to save me from it. I said that I did not doubt his good intentions, and therefore I tried not to be angry at his words, though such a conversation was very disagreeable to me. And at last, because I showed that I definitely wanted to avoid further discussion, he went away.

I told him only that I had written you all about it. That calmed him somewhat.

I tried to draw his attention to the drawings, but he just looked around and said, “Oh! Those are the old ones.” There were some new ones, but he did not seem to notice them. Well, you know you have most of the new ones, and C. M. has some of them, etc. he was hasty in everything; he was sure of just one thing: I was a fool and everything I did was wrong.

I ask you, how is it possible to talk to anyone who acts like that, and what can be the use of it? It is just what I am afraid of, unsympathetic, domineering, indelicate and indiscreet meddling in my most intimate and private affairs. No man will stand for that. So though I did not lose my temper, I am very angry with Mr. Tersteeg, and will have nothing to do with him nor speak with him again as long as he is in that policeman-like mood. I am writing you about it at once.

You know, I will not hide from you that for Sien and for the little child and for myself it is desirable that such scenes do not occur again. Upsetting the woman is the same thing as dealing her a hard blow. I cannot repeat this often enough. After all, she is weak and very sensitive. A little thing may spoil her milk, and even cause far worse things, at least during the next six weeks.

I think he is capable of causing all kinds of miseries through his untimely interference. Can’t his causing trouble and worry at home and at Prinsenhage (and Prinsenhage has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with it) be stopped??? I am on good terms with Father and Mother now, and who knows but that he will spoil everything again? I shall write myself as soon as possible, but how confoundedly mean it is of Tersteeg to make so much trouble. And over whom? – a poor weak woman only a few weeks out of childbed. I think it mean, but he does not feel that way about it; with him it is always, always the same thing, money. It seems he knows and worships no other god. Personally, I feel that one must be good and kind to women, children and the weak; I have a sort of respect for them, I am moved by them.

Then he uttered one other abusive remark – I should make that woman unhappy, etc. I said he was not capable of judging this now, and I asked him not to repeat such a thing. Sien loves me and I love Sien; we

can and will live together on what I should otherwise have lived on alone – we will save and economize in all respects and as much as possible – you know well enough I have already told you this.

At least you know more about the matter than Tersteeg, but you know Sien too little to understand how much we love each other, and how well we get on together. I cannot repeat to you often enough, brother, how my whole future depends on it. For a man may recover once from disappointment and injury in love – and in his business and plans. But that must not happen too often. Now I have recovered or am recovering in body and soul, and so is Sien, but it might be fatal if we were knocked on the head again, so to speak. But there is an understanding between Sien and me; in the extreme case of their trying to force us, that is, if we cannot live here together, we will at least leave the country together. The chances of certain death are ten to one if one has no money and is not strong, but we would prefer that to being separated. So just think it over and try to prevent, if you possibly can, my being thwarted too much by Tersteeg or other persons. I myself am not yet so strong that I can defend myself the way I could at another time. By and by, very slowly, I must become absorbed in my work again, but I really cannot stand visits like the one this morning.

If Tersteeg and others had their own way, they would of course tear Sien and me apart. That is what they want, and they would not hesitate at violence. Our staying together depends entirely on the monthly allowance from you. For myself, I would refuse your allowance if you took Tersteeg's view. I will not leave Sien; I should be a broken man without her, and then I should also be ruined in my work and everything; then I should never get over it, and not wanting to be a nuisance or trouble to you any longer, I should say, Theo, I am a broken man, and everything is lost; it's no use your helping me any more. Living with the woman, I have good courage, and then I say, The money from you will make a good painter of me. With Sien I shall work with all my strength and energy, but without her I shall have to give up. So that's the way things are.

You have proved you understood me more and have treated me infinitely better than others did so often. I hope it will be the same this time.

In many respects there is real sympathy between you and me, and it seems to me, Theo, that all your trouble and all my trouble will not be in vain. You have always helped me. I have continued working, and now while I am recovering, I feel that new forces are developing. See, I think, what is between you and me is more serious than Tersteeg's anger, and cannot be spoiled by his or others' interference. But to keep order and peace we must try to stop this interference quietly. You must excuse my being rather upset by it. It was the first painful hour for Sien and me since our return from the hospital. But we shall not mind it any more if you still approve of us, and we shall not allow ourselves to be upset by it.

Write us soon, for I am anxiously awaiting a letter from you. I will not let my mind be filled with care and anxiety because my recovery depends on my remaining calm. Otherwise I am pretty well; the woman and the child are so good, so quiet and dear that one cannot fail to be cheered by it. But Sien seemed to wither when she heard Tersteeg talk, and so did I.

I saw the doctor again, and he gave me some medicine to hasten my recovery as much as possible. I am getting stronger and the fever is slowly going away.

Now, because of Tersteeg, I should like to send my letter to Father and Mother a little sooner, though I should have preferred to wait until later. As soon as you have sent the money, about the twentieth, I shall write home, but I would much rather have waited until they had moved and Sien had quite recovered. And even now I should much rather wait, but I am afraid Tersteeg will beat me to it. Sending Father the money for the journey is a proof of my good will, I think, and a little attention which I hope will make them understand that I appreciate them.

So write soon, and if this might bind us more firmly together, brother, and cause us to understand each other better and have more confidence in each other instead of being separated by Tersteeg's interference, or anyone else's, then I do not regret this morning's incident.

Whatever he is to others – and I am quite willing to believe that he is a better man at heart – to me he is unsupportable. If Tersteeg were to get his way, I should be unhappy and lost. I believe he would look on quite cold-bloodedly while Sien was drowning or some such thing, not lifting a finger, and say it was beneficial to civilized society.

As long as I drown at the same time, I don't care. But we felt distinctly enough that her life and my life are as one, when we met again in that hospital by the side of the baby's little cradle.

Hello, brother! what's all this? I should not give way to such things. It is healthier to continue calmly thinking about my work and getting better, and to go on quietly day by day.

There is love between her and me, and there are promises of mutual faithfulness between her and me.

This is a thing, Theo, people ought not to meddle with, for it is the most sacred thing in life.

Her wish and mine is that things will not take a dramatic turn; we are too full of a new zest for life, too full of a yearning for working and toiling not to do everything in our power to avoid extremes.

But if there were many people, particularly yourself, who felt the way Tersteeg does about us, things could not last; ultimately they could only turn out miserably.

If all remains quiet, we shall continue our struggle here by working, and though this may seem humdrum and commonplace, it is far from easy; one needs courage and energy to attack things vigorously and to persevere. We have got through the whole winter, and with God's help we shall be able to carry on for a bit. I say with God's help, because I am grateful to God, as well as to you, for the help I have received, and am still receiving, from you.

Tersteeg is an energetic man, but I hope he will not use his energy to persecute Sien and me or anything of the kind. Perhaps he will see for himself that he is not obliged to interfere and will keep quietly out of things. After all, he has no great liking for me, and as a matter of fact, he doesn't care one way or another, but he does it because he thinks that it will please Uncle Cent or Father and that he is rendering them a service.

He does not consider or spare my interests, my feelings, in the least. He comes into my house, he looks at the woman – who has her baby at her breast – with an expression in his eyes that makes her crumble, and without one kind word to her (a thing one does involuntarily to a young mother, even if one does not know her), says to me, “Is this your model or is she something else?” Look here, that is neither humane nor delicate.

I myself am not always polite to men, but in any case I should make allowances for a weak little woman. He says nothing about my drawings, about my studio, etc., but so much the more about my uncle at Prinsenhage, in whom I am not the least bit interested and with whom I have had no intercourse. And about Father – taking it for granted a priori that I am on bad terms with him, whereas things have been improving for quite a long time.

Enough of this – but, my dear fellow, write soon, for I assure you, a kind letter from you does me more good than my pills, etc.

As for my constitution – Tersteeg is not my physician and he does not understand my constitution in the least – when I want information on the subject, I shall go to my own doctor and ask for it, but I absolutely refuse to discuss it with him any more. But it is certain that there are few things more harmful either to the woman or to myself than visits like that one we just went through. Avoiding these is absolutely one of the first medical orders I shall have to carry out. Never has a doctor told me that there was something abnormal about me in the way and sense Tersteeg dared to tell me this morning. That I was not able to think or that my mind was deranged. No doctor has told me this, neither in the past nor in the present; certainly I have a nervous constitution, but there is definitely no real harm in that. So those were serious insults on Tersteeg's part, just as they were on Pa's, but even worse, when he wanted to send me to Gheel. I cannot take such things lying down. I am looking forward to discussing my indisposition further with you, what caused it, etc. if in his haste Tersteeg should blindly push on, he might cause a lot of mischief, of this I am certain. I repeat, I have no pretension to keeping up any social standing or to living easily; all the expenses needed for the woman are only what is necessary for her, and they must be met, not by receiving more but by our economizing. That economizing is no obstacle for us but a pleasure because of the love between us. The feeling of recovery thrills her, as I am thrilled by the urge to work again and to become absorbed in it. She is a very sweet little mother, so simple, so touching – if one only knows her. But there was an ugly expression of pain, or I do not know what, on her face when she heard Tersteeg talk to me and caught a few words. It may be that Tersteeg acted that way because he was taken by surprise – but I cannot think it right of him or quite excuse it.

Well, adieu, boy – I must tell you that when she is calm, Sien becomes at once a little mother, so quiet, so delicate, so touching, just like an etching or drawing or painting by Feyen-Perrin. I am longing to draw again with her posing for me. I long for her complete recovery and for mine, for peace and quiet, and especially for some sympathy from you. Sien sends you her regards, a handshake in thought and believe me,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. The Rev. Mr. Van Gogh had been called to the village of Nuenen, and the family was to go there in September.