

Letter 217  
The Hague, 19 July 1882  
Wednesday

Dear Theo,

I cannot tell you how much I regret Tersteeg's untimely visit. It is why I am writing about a few things now, although I would rather have waited and talked them over with you. I have told you that I wanted to marry Sien, and as soon as possible. Mind, however, that I wish to talk this over with you personally before saying anything to Father. I can get along with you better; you feel things more justly than all the others put together, and when you say something, it is worth while. Even though we do not agree about some things, we can always meet each other halfway because we speak in sympathy and calmness.

I also believe that if no one else meddled, unasked, everything would come right in all respects. As soon as there is any question of marriage, however, people flare up quickly and noisily, and there is no arguing with them; you can hardly get a word in edgewise. So I shall no longer wait to write about what I would rather talk over.

About marrying, you said, Do not marry her, etc., and you thought Sien fooled me, etc.

I then answered you that I could not agree with you in that, etc.

But I did not want flatly to contradict you, because I believed, and still believe, that in time you would grow to like Sien if you knew her better; and then of course you would no longer think that she fooled me or any such thing. When this has been achieved, we can talk about marriage again, I thought. But you will also remember that I did not speak openly about it in my last letter.

Only I said this much at the time, there is a promise of marriage between her and me, and I do not want you to think of her as a mistress or as someone with whom I have a liaison without caring about the consequences.

Now I shall come back to it once more. That promise of marriage is twofold; first, a promise of civil marriage as soon as circumstances will permit, and second, a promise to help each other meanwhile, to support each other, to cherish each other, not letting ourselves be separated by anything. Now the civil marriage is probably the most important question to the family. Indeed, it is important to her and to me, but it is secondary to the real essence of the matter, the love and faith between us as it already exists and is growing daily.

I am ready to propose to you letting the whole question of civil marriage rest for an indefinite time and, for instance, postponing it until I earn 150 francs a month by selling my work, at which time your help will no longer be necessary. With you, but only with you, I will thus agree that for the time being I shall not enter into a civil marriage, not until my drawing has progressed so far that I am independent.

As I begin to earn, you will gradually send less every month; and when I finally do not need your money any longer, we can talk about civil marriage again. But until then it would be quite absurd, after what has happened all last winter and especially these last months, to try to separate or divide us. We are bound and knit together by a strong bond of mutual affection, and by the help we mutually give each other. For she is my partner in work, if I may call her so, and is infinitely more than an ordinary model because she poses so willingly and intelligently that I cannot praise her enough.

After all I have told you now, I hope you will look at things with more confidence. This winter you heard from Heyerdahl, for instance, better things about my work than what Tersteeg thinks about it. I now feel so much renewed animation for my work that I have high hopes of making some progress this autumn.

Perhaps about Christmas, when the year I have allowed myself is over, I will send you a number of small watercolours, of which the last little drawings, which already have some touches of brown and red and grey in them, were the beginning. And sometimes I feel a great longing to paint too, a very great longing and ambition. Especially now that the better light and the better studio involuntarily urge me on. The doctor forbids my working hard, as I still tire very easily; but this will gradually disappear, and then I shall set to work with full energy.

I want to reserve to myself the right of discussing with you in general the question of marriage, housekeeping expenses, etc., when you come here, particularly as I believe there are some points on which you are mistaken; but this will be in quite a friendly way, and it does not bear directly on the question of a legal marriage to Sien. As all this forces me to write at once, I only ask that the matter be allowed to rest until such time as I earn more by the direct sale of my work. When you come here, I shall certainly tell you the reason why I should have preferred to marry her without delay, but please do not consider this a further insistence on my part. No, to the extent I mentioned I am prepared to make concessions as far as I told you, of my own accord and of my own free will.

If people should speak to you about the affair, I think you might say that you and I are on sufficiently confidential terms to ensure your getting the necessary information from me, but that you do not think the matter need be discussed for the time being.

Such interviews like the one with Tersteeg have a more aggravating effect on the woman and myself than the rawest north wind; they must be avoided. The main thing is to get fully recovered, and to be fit to work regularly again.

I only hope now, Theo, that what I tell you about marrying will show you that I do not want to have my own way in everything, that I am willing to give in to your wishes as far as I can; but then let this prove to you that I deserve your confidence and your writing me about various things. I cannot get on with the others, but I can talk and settle things with you.

What I want is to save Sien's life and that of her two children. I do not want her to fall back into that terrible state of illness and misery in which I found her, and from which she is saved for the present. This I undertook, this I must continue. I do not want her ever to feel again that she is deserted and alone. I want her to feel and to know in every way that I feel tender love for her and affection for the children. And – whoever may disapprove of this – you will understand and not try to prevent it. I attribute her recovery to you, as I credit myself with only a small part. I have only been the means of bringing it about.

I repeat, I am sorry that I have not been able to tell you personally, and after you had made the acquaintance of the woman, what I have told you in this letter; then perhaps I might have added some more things to make you feel that I am not unreasonable. But even now I hope you will come before long and that at all events you will write soon.

Sien will soon be at her ease with you, and then you will not look down on her, and think of her the way Tersteeg did yesterday.

Be fully assured of her and my warmest affection, receive a handshake in thought and believe me,  
Yours sincerely, Vincent

What I should like to talk over with you once more is the condition in which I found her, and things about her past. The poor creature has had a very hard time of it. And yet there is still a vitality and delicacy of feeling in her which have not been quenched.

I repeat once more that I am longing so very much for your coming, apart from everything, because I so need sympathy and affection. I should like so much to walk with you once more, though the Rijswijk mill is no longer there. Enfin.