

Letter 342
Drenthe, 26 November 1883

Dear Theo,

May I draw your attention to the fact that the post of Monday, November 26, has just gone by, without having brought your letter. As it still has to go to Hoogeveen and back, we have now arrived at a point where it almost amounts to my having failed to receive one remittance, for suppose the next mail brings your letter, I cannot get the money before November 28, late in the evening, or November 29 in the morning.

So it is, properly speaking, a deficit, for your next letter, which I should otherwise have expected about December 1st, probably won't arrive then. For since I have been here at New Amsterdam, the letters have been arriving later and later. If I had received a word of warning according to our arrangement, it would not rouse in me that feeling which I cannot help gradually getting now. That is to say that a certain insincerity is creeping into our relationship, which began by being sincere, by mutually understanding and respecting each other.

That this is a disappointment to me, and worries me considerably, even apart from the thoughts I cannot keep from rising within me, is not what weighs most heavily on my mind today.

Rather it is a vague uneasiness about you, though – perhaps just because – only yesterday I heard from home that they had had a good letter from you. So I should conclude from it that the crisis in question is suppressed, averted, stopped – well, whatever you like to call it. And so this would be a confirmation of your words to me: “I believe that for the present things will remain as they are.”

About which, however, I hinted that it only half pleased me, or rather that it alarmed me more than it reassured me about your future.

I only hope now that you will understand and not misunderstand me.

At this moment to I do not suspect you of insincerity – please keep this in mind as my starting point. So because I believe in you as an honest man, I consider you relatively safe at present in spite of difficulties, even in case of a catastrophe.

But now I approach the point where I am afraid you are in danger – are vulnerable. Suppose all impending dangers were averted, suppose everything were quieted down, then I want to remind you of the English saying: “Fear the storm but dread the calm treacherous enchanted ground.” Suppose you are carried along, gently and imperceptibly, by a current deviating from the straight course. Suppose what I will call – excuse the expression – the poison of the Parisian atmosphere – the Jesuitism of its vapours – slowly but surely penetrates your pores – imperceptibly to yourself – yet the result would be that after some years you would become aware of it yourself – I am driven from the right course, I have turned too insincere, I am too little myself. I have indulged too much in pursuing prosperity.

Brother! when you told me the other day, “I think in the matter of finance I am on the trail of a new conception” – what I thought of it was, in short, That's bad enough. I should not have thought so if you had written: In the matter of printing I am on the trail of something, or – I have discovered a number of energetic new artists, with whom I shall probably be able to do business, or something of the sort – in short, if you had discovered something in the field of work or art, I should have thought it excellent, but – the field of finance – pardon my saying it – it is too much in the air for my taste.

Well, boy, do you take offense at my not being quite easy in my mind on your account? And in the second place do you think I am confusing your concerns with my own, the latter being to a certain extent dependent on those of yours? Granted that my concerns are dependent on yours, yet it is not about this that my mind is uneasy at present – my uneasiness is about you and you alone – about you as a human being – as a man – as an upright, honest man. And my question remains: Won't you suffer a loss and decline – as a human being? And if I am forced to put this question, it is because Paris is Paris.

I do not say I am sure that I myself always have this mental energy, so I do not speak for myself but of another person out of the remote past. It is said that when he felt he was on enchanted ground and in an enchanted atmosphere, when he perceived that he was being unnerved, he resolutely left the island on a timber beam or a raft, and ventured on the high seas, thinking, the sea is less dangerous than this. And in my opinion this man was almighty wise.

This... you must excuse me from defining it, and just allow me to say that there are things which, as one ought to know, can gradually cast a spell of a man and make him change his course in a direction diametrically opposed to the course he took as long as he was honest.

My words may sound gloomy, very well. For myself, there are moments when my own prospects seem very dark to me – but as I already wrote you, I do not believe that my fate depends on what seems against

it. All kinds of things may be against me, but there may be one thing more powerful than what I see threatening me. I used the word fatality for lack of a better word – no one falls before his time – so as for me, I resign myself to fate, and act as if nothing were the matter.

As for you, I repeat, as long as I believe in your sincerity (and I do not believe the contrary yet), I also believe that you are safe in spite of happiness or unhappiness, were it solely in that conscious reality – which hovers over the appearance of things. But I couldn't help smiling at what they wrote from home about a "good" letter, with one single vague word, that's all I know about it, and that it seemed that matters had taken a more favourable turn again. I thought, Very well – if you people say that you are satisfied, then be satisfied – I did not think more of it, however, than that.

If that one sentence in that letter about you ended thus: "But next year we expect important occurrences to take place, and we hope that he (that means you) will not suffer a loss in consequence of them," it would seem to me that the occurrences in question will not influence you as a man, but that the problem will be far more, "What shall [*sic*] he do with it?" as the English say – what are the qualities of his character, his soul – in short a problem which, in my opinion, has not yet been solved, seeing that to a very large extent it will depend on your own thoughts and your own will.

But know this one thing, brother – that whatever choice you might make, or whatever decision you might or might not take, that whether you become better in my eyes, or worse, and also whether or not there will be more or less direct relations between us with respect to money or business, this will not be regarded by me as a reason for estrangement. Difference of opinion, difference in view of life, difference of principles, suppose they might show themselves later on – they haven't so far – are for me no reason to overlook the fact that we are brothers, and that we agree on many points. I just emphasize this to our mutual reassurance I hope. You are free, I am free, to act as it seems most reasonable to us, aren't we? And if one always takes this for granted, that one must not blame the other or become hostile, or spiteful, or throw obstacles in each other's way because of a possible difference of opinion – then, though there may come a time of greater coolness, things will, thank God, remain free from fanaticism or intrigue.

Which, alas, is not always the case with everyone. It is the same with the money, which I wrote about at the beginning of my letter. What I mean primarily is, never let that become a point of discord between us, and bear in mind that of course I don't blame you in the least for not having it, even when it sometimes causes me terrible difficulties.

As to the capital already invested in it by you and by me – for after all, I put my work into it, throw myself headlong into it – as to all these things – after all, I still cherish the hope that in the future it will redress itself – though, though – perhaps not only I, but you too on your part, have been mistaken in a few things, which, however, are not yet fatal or past remedy, and which I will not even mention now. Do not find in this letter nor in the preceding ones a distrust, a suspicion, or an insult; take it only as a warning concerning some Parisian things, which I want you to consider, not as if I were infallible, not as if I should insist on your agreeing with me – but because I believe I see certain symptoms which seem to me of an enigmatic and ominous nature.

And, yes – now it must be said – I do not even ask for a reply – I even beg you not to consider this a question but simply a statement, in order to make quite clear to you that within my general uneasiness there is another uneasiness. In short, the core of many matters is – this woman of yours, is she good? Is she honest? Is she modest, does she stand on common ground, or are there some little weeds of a somewhat dangerous craving for what I will call "greatness" among her wheat? I was thinking of Lady Macbeth. Macbeth was an honest man but...but he was enchanted, and when he and she awoke from the bewitchment, they were facing more and worse wickedness than they had intended. And Macbeth fell – he had a big fall.

If it is possible, reassure me – as for the calamities, I am not particularly afraid of them – in general one should be afraid of nothing except of deteriorating as a man. Now you know the most important thing I sometimes fear when I think of you.

Here you are, I am speaking harshly now, because I wanted to tell you unreservedly that I should be very grateful if I could be reassured about this.

I repeat, it is not in the least my intention to ask for particulars. But the fact remains that there are men who fall in this way. And there are also men who withdraw in time. If a woman is simply good, it is a blessing; but there is the danger that, if a woman should want to be glamorous in the eyes of the world, she might debase a man. Mentioning this disease is something different from saying that this is the case with you, isn't it? On the contrary, I ask you, say just one word and my mind will be perfectly easy, and I shall ask no more questions.

The woman I was with – a whore, already pock-marked, already withered and prematurely old, already a mother of two children – she is not a good woman, que soit, but here misfortune has reached the height of her being no longer capable of being a Lady Macbeth; and as to temptation, if in the past there were a really ugly wickedness in her, her very misfortune has much curtailed this power to do harm (supposing it had been present in her), and I very much doubt whether the temptation, even if it had been there before, could be effective now. So I am not saying what I say because I want to compare notes; the very fact that there is such a difference obviates the chance of there being anything Lady Macbeth-like in my relations with this woman. But you are confronted with a personality who has the power to charm, and this charm may be used fatally in the direction of worldly ambition.

As far as I am concerned, because the woman I was with is a thoroughly unhappy person, and so heavily burdened with a tainted past, two children, poverty, etc., etc., that, even if I found no good in her, I should not want to sever all ties, and I should not stop seeing her to please anybody, nor speaking to her nor writing to her, nor sending her a little money when I happen to have it. Let people think and say what they like about it, all right, I have long ceased to take it ill of them.

But look here, in your case there might exist the influence of a charm that has the power to benumb certain strings of the heart, the sense of right and wrong. Once more I repeat, I do not say this is the case, I repeat, I am not even asking if it is so; I only mean it as a hint, and having given this hint that there might be a possible danger, I leave it at that, and I will not pursue it even in thought. And also I think this solicitude on my part may be excused by you and not taken amiss if it should be unfounded, which I hope will be the case.

Did you receive my studies? Since then I have made a large painted one, and a large sketch of a drawbridge, and even a second painted one of it with another effect [F 1098, JH 425].

As soon as there is snow, I hope to use them to get the snow effect more accurately, that is to say, keeping the same lines and structure which I have found now. Well, I hope to hear from you soon.

What influence this or that occurrence, which is not even visible on the horizon yet, may have on you is a thing I think about extremely little, for, as you see, what I think about is yourself as a human being – about the “what shall he do with it?” – about your activity and energy too.

With a handshake, believe me,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

Yesterday I heard that Furnée had passed his final exam, and now he again has his hands free to go on with his painting.

Though it may not be my first preoccupation, yet I am far from indifferent to the reason for almost ten days' difference in the receipt of the money.