

Letter 576
Arles, 3 February 1889

My dear Theo,

I should have preferred to reply at once to your kind letter containing the 100 francs, but since at that precise moment I was very tired and the doctor had given me strict instructions to go out for walks and make no mental exertion, I haven't written to you until today.

As far as work is concerned, this month hasn't been bad on the whole, and as the work takes my mind off things, or rather keeps me in order, I don't deprive myself of it.

I have done "La Berceuse" three times, and seeing that Mme. Roulin was the model and I only the painter, I let her choose between the three, her and her husband, on condition, however, that I could do a duplicate for myself of the one she chose, which I am working on at present.

You ask if I have read La Mireille by Mistral – I am like you, I can only read the extracts that have been translated. But what about you, have you heard it yet, for perhaps you know that Gounod has set it to music. At least I think so. I don't know the music, of course, and even if I did go to hear it, I should be watching the musicians rather than listening.

But I can tell you this, that the local dialect spoken here sounds so musical in the mouths of the Arlésiennes that I actually pick up snatches of it every now and then.

Perhaps there is an attempt at a medley of local colour in "La Berceuse." It's badly painted, and in a sense cheap chromos are infinitely better done, but even so...

Here, the so-called worthy town of Arles is such a peculiar sort of place that it is with good reason our friend Gauguin calls it the filthiest spot in the South. Now, if Rivet saw the population, he'd certainly have some bad moments, and repeat over and over again, "You're in a sorry state, the lot of you," just as he says of us. Still, once you've had the local disease, you'll never catch it again.

Which is just to let you know that as far as I am concerned, I have no illusions about myself. Things are going very, very well, and I'll do everything the doctor says, but...

When I came out of hospital with good old Roulin, I fancied there'd been nothing wrong with me, it was only afterwards I felt I'd been ill. Well, that's only to be expected, I have moments when I am twisted with enthusiasm or madness or prophecy, like a Greek oracle on his tripod. I display great presence of mind then in my words, and speak like the Arlésiennes, but in spite of all that, my spirits are very low. Especially when my physical strength returns. But I've already told Rey that at the first sign of a serious symptom I would come back and submit myself to the alienists in Aix, or to himself.

What else except pain and suffering can we expect if we are not well, you and I?

Our ambition has been dashed so low. So let us work very calmly, look after ourselves as best we can, and not exhaust ourselves in futile attempts at mutual generosity. You do your duty and I will do mine, and as far as that's concerned, we've both already paid for it – and not just in words – and at the end of the road we may quietly come together again. But when I am in a delirium and everything I love so much is in turmoil, then I don't mistake that for reality, and I don't play the false prophet.

Indeed, illness or death holds no terror for me, but happily for us, ambition is not compatible with the callings we follow. There are so many people in all classes of society, from the highest to the lowest, who believe that, anyway.

But why are you thinking about your marriage contract and the possibility of dying just now? Wouldn't it be better simply to make love to your woman instead? After all, that's normal practice in the North, and it's not for me to say that practices in the North are no good.

It'll all come all right in the end, believe me.

But I, without a penny to my name, I still say that when it comes down to it, money is one kind of currency and painting is another. And I am even ready to send you a consignment along the lines mentioned in previous letters. And it will get better. If my strength returns.

So, if Gauguin, who is completely infatuated with my sunflowers, takes these two pictures, I should just like him to give your fiancée or you a couple of pictures of his, not second-rate ones but better than that. And should he take a copy of "La Berceuse," then all the more reason for him to give a good one in return. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to complete the series I spoke to you about, which should be fit to go on show in that same little display window we have gazed at so often.

In this case, the value of the pictures does not come into it, and I don't claim to be an expert. It remains a fact, however, that I may be entitled to attach as much importance to my social position as you do to yours as a loyal employee. And let me just say this: I think as much of brotherly integrity when it comes to

Boussod's money as you do. It has never played us false. And we have sweated far too much doing good work to get annoyed at being called thieves or incompetents.

Anyway, I won't keep on about it.

As for the Indépendants, it seems to me that six pictures are too many by half. To my mind, The "Harvest" [F 412, JH 1440] and the "White Orchard" [F 403, JH 1378] are enough, with the "Provençale Girl" [F 431, JH 1519] or the "Sower" [F 422, JH 1470] if you like. But I really don't care. The only thing I really want to do some day is to give you a more comforting impression of this painting business of ours with a collection of about 30 more serious studies. In any case that will prove to our real friends like Gauguin, Guillaumin, Bernard, etc., that we are producing something.

As for the little yellow house, when I paid my rent the landlord's agent was very kind and behaved like an Arlésien, treating me as an equal.

So I told him that I had no need of a lease, nor of a written assurance of preference, and that in the event of my being ill payment would only be made by friendly arrangement.

People here have their hearts in the right place and the spoken word is more binding than the written word. So I shall keep the house on for the time being, as I need to feel that this is my home if I am to regain my mental health.

Now about your moving from the Rue Lepic to the Rue Rodier, I can't offer any opinion, as I haven't seen it, but the main thing is that you too will be lurching at home with your wife. By staying in Montmartre you would all the sooner get decorated and be a Minister of Arts, but as you are not too keen on that, it is better to have the peace of one's own home, so I think you are quite right.

I am a little like that too. I always tell the people here who ask after my health that I shall begin by dying in their midst, and that then my malady will be dead.

This doesn't mean I shall not have long spells of respite, but once you are ill in earnest, you know quite well that you cannot contract the same illness twice, you are well or you are ill, just as you are young or old. Like you, I will do what the doctor tells me as much as I can, and I consider that as part of my work and the duty I have to fulfil.

I must tell you this, that the neighbours, etc., are particularly kind to me, as everyone here is suffering either from fever, or hallucinations, or madness, we understand each other like members of the same family. Yesterday I went to see the girl to whom I had gone when I was off my head. They told me that there's nothing surprising about things like that in this part of the world. She'd been upset and had fainted but had regained her composure. And indeed, they spoke well of her.

But it won't do for us to think that I am completely sane. The people from round here who are ill like me have told me there will always be times when you take leave of your senses.

So I don't ask you to tell people that there is nothing wrong with me, or that there never will be. It is just that the explanation of all this is probably not Ricord's but Raspail's¹. Though I have not yet had the fevers of the region, I might still catch them. But they already know a thing or two about all that here at the hospital, and as long as you have no false shame and say frankly how you feel, you cannot go wrong. I am bringing this letter to a close for this evening with a good handshake in my thoughts,

Ever yours, Vincent

1. Philippe Ricord, French surgeon specializing in syphilis; François Raspail, French chemist and politician who asserted that disease is caused by parasites.