

[Reprinted from *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* (leading Amsterdam newspaper) of December 2, 1910]

PERSONAL MEMORIES OF VINCENT VAN GOGH DURING HIS STAY AT AMSTERDAM

by Dr. M. B. Mendes da Costa

It was probably in the year 1877 or thereabouts that the Reverend Mr. J. P. Stricker, a preacher universally respected in Amsterdam, asked me whether I was willing to give lessons in Latin and Greek to his cousin Vincent, son of the Reverend Mr. T. van Gogh, clergyman at Etten and De Hoeven, to prepare him for his matriculation. I was warned that I would not be dealing with any ordinary boy, and was apprised of his ways, so different from ordinary human behavior. However, this did not discourage me in the least, particularly as the Reverend Mr. Stricker spoke with much love of Vincent himself as well as of his parents.

Our first meeting, of so much importance to the relationship between master and pupil, was very pleasant indeed. The seemingly reticent young man – our ages differed but little, for I was twenty-six then, and he was undoubtedly over twenty – immediately felt at home, and notwithstanding his lank reddish hair and his many freckles, his appearance was far from unattractive to me. In passing, let me say that it is not very clear to me why his sister speaks of his “more or less rough exterior”; it is possible that, since the time when I knew him, because of his untidiness and his growing a beard, his outward appearance lost something of its charming quaintness; but most decidedly it can never have been rough, neither his nervous hands, nor his countenance, which might have been considered homely, but which expressed so much and hid so much more.

I succeeded in winning his confidence and friendship very soon, which was so essential in this case; and as his studies were prompted by the best of intentions, we made comparatively good progress in the beginning – I was soon able to let him translate an easy Latin author. Needless to say, he, who was so fanatically devout in those days, at once started using this little bit of Latin knowledge to read Thomas a Kempis in the original.

So far everything went well, including mathematics, which he had begun studying with another master in the meantime; but after a short time the Greek verbs became too much for him. However I might set about it, whatever trick I might invent to enliven the lessons, it was no use. “Mendes,” he would say – we did not mister each other any more – “Mendes, do you seriously believe that such horrors are indispensable to a man who wants to do what I want to do: give peace to poor creatures and reconcile them to their existence here on earth?” And I, who as his master naturally could not agree, but who felt in my heart of hearts that he – mind, I say *he*, Vincent van Gogh! – was quite right, I put up the most formidable defense I was capable of; but it was no use. “John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is of much more use to me, and Thomas a Kempis and a translation of the Bible; and I don’t want anything more.” I really do not know how many times he told me this, nor how many times I went to the Reverend Mr. Stricker to discuss the matter, after which it was decided again and again that Vincent ought to have another try.

But before long the trouble would start afresh, and then he would come to me in the morning with an announcement I knew so well, “Mendes, last night I used the cudgel again,” or, “Mendes, last night I got myself locked out again.” It should be observed that this was some sort of self-chastisement resorted to whenever he thought he had neglected a duty. In fact, during those days he lived in his uncle’s house, Rear Admiral J. van Gogh, director and commander of the naval base at Amsterdam; the house was a big building inside the naval dockyard. Well, whenever Vincent felt that his thoughts had strayed further than they should have, he took a cudgel to bed with him and belabored his back with it; and whenever he was convinced he had forfeited the privilege of passing the night in his bed, he slunk out of the house unobserved at night, and then, when he came back and found the door double-locked, was forced to go and lie on the floor of a little wooden shed, without bed or blanket. He preferred to do this in winter, so that the punishment, which I am disposed to think arose from mental masochism, might be more severe.

He knew quite well that I was displeased by such announcements on his part, and therefore, to appease me as much as possible, he would, either before his confession or the day after, go to the park which was then the Oosterbegraafplaats [East Cemetery], his favorite walk, in the early morning, and pick some snowdrops for me there, preferably from under the snow. At the time I was living in Jonas Daniel Meyer Square and had my study on the third floor. In my mind’s eye I can still see him come stepping across the square from the Nieuwe Herengracht Bridge, without an overcoat as additional self-chastisement; his books under his right arm, pressed firmly against his body, and his left hand clasping the bunch of snowdrops to his breast; his head thrust forward a little to the right, and on his face, because of the way his mouth drooped at the corners, a pervading expression of indescribable sadness and despair. And when he had come upstairs, there would sound again that singular, profoundly melancholy, deep voice: “Don’t be mad at me, Mendes; I have brought you some little flowers again because you are so good to me.”

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

As far as I can see, to be angry under such circumstances would have been impossible for anybody, not just for me, who had soon discovered that in those days he was consumed by a desire to help the unfortunate. I had noticed it even in my own home, for not only did he show great interest in my deaf and dumb brother, but at the same time he always spoke kindly to and about an aunt of ours whom we had taken in, an impecunious, slightly deformed woman who was slow-witted, and spoke with difficulty, thus provoking the mockery of many people. This aunt tried to make herself useful by “minding the bell,” and as soon as she saw Vincent approach, she would run as quickly as her short old legs would carry her to the street door in order to welcome him with a “*Good morning Mister Van Gort.*”¹

“Mendes,” Vincent used to say, “however much that aunt of yours may mutilate my name, she is a good soul, and I like her very much.”

As I was not so very busy in those days, he often stayed talking for a while after the lesson, and naturally we often discussed his former profession, the art dealing business. He had kept quite a number of the prints which he had collected in those days, little lithographs after paintings, etc. He brought them to show me repeatedly, but they were always completely spoiled: the white borders were literally covered with quotations from Thomas a Kempis and the Bible, more or less connected with the subject, which he had scrawled all over them. Once he made me a present of *De Imitatione Christi*, without any intention of converting me, only to acquaint me with the deep humanity of it.

In no way could I guess in those days – no more than anyone else, himself included – that in the depths of his soul lay dormant the future visionary of colour.

I remember only the following incident. Proud of the fact that I could do it with the money I had earned myself, I had exchanged my Smyrna carpet, at least fifty years old and nearly threadbare, which had covered the floor of my room, for a very modest but brightly coloured cowhair one. “Mendes!” Vincent said when he saw it, “I hadn’t expected this of you! Do you really think this finer than those old faded colours which had so much in them?” And Mendes was ashamed of himself, for he felt that this queer boy was right.

Our intercourse lasted for less than a year. By then I had come to the conclusion that he would never be able to pass the required examination; so what Mrs. Du Quesne tells us, namely that he had mastered Latin and Greek within a few months, is incorrect, as well as the statement that Vincent stopped at the very moment he was to start on his academic course proper. No, at least a year before he could have reached this point, even with the utmost exertion on his part, I advised his uncle, wholly in conformity with Vincent’s own wishes, to let him stop. And so it happened.

After our cordial leave-taking before he went to the Borinage, I never saw him again. From there one letter from him to me, and an answer from me to him, and...after that, nothing...

Amsterdam, 30 November 1910

1. The Dutch word *gort* means “barley groats”.