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History of a Pleasure Seeker

Written by Richard Mason

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History of a Pleasure Seeker



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The Gilded Curve

Amsterdam, 1907

The adventures of adolescence had taught Piet Barol that he was extremely attractive to most women and to many men. He was old enough to be pragmatic about this advantage, young enough to be immodest, and experienced enough to suspect that it might be decisive in this, as in other instances.

As he stepped from the Leiden train into the whirling hustle of the Central Station, several passers-by turned discreetly to look at him. He had an open face with amused blue eyes, a confident nose and thick black hair that curled around his ears. He was not much above middling height but he was muscular and well fashioned, with enormous gentle hands that made people wonder how it felt to be caressed by them.

In one of these hands on this cold February morning was an envelope too large for the pockets of his English suit. It contained a copy of his degree certificate and a letter of recommendation from a professor who owed his father a favour. As he crossed the traffic on the Prins Hendrikkade, Piet reaffirmed the decision he had made immediately on receiving Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts' invitation to interview: that he would knock at the front door of the house, like an equal, and not at the servants' entrance.

The family lived on the grandest stretch of the grandest canal in Amsterdam. Piet knew from the newspapers that Maarten Vermeulen-Sickerts dispensed bread to the slum-

dwellers and had been instrumental in bringing clean drinking water to the city's poorest districts. He knew he owned the country's most lavish hotel and a number of similar establishments across Europe. His daughters Constance and Louisa were familiar to Piet, too, as was their leadership of the 'smart young set' and the fact they were thought to alarm their mother, Jacobina. Taken together, the family had a reputation for being colourful and modern and very rich: three qualities Piet felt sure would ease the tedium of teaching a spoiled little boy.

He sauntered down the Blauwbergwal and crossed on to the Herengracht canal. On both sides of the water, houses built for the magnates of the seventeenth century surveyed the world with the serenity that comes from surviving the upheavals of three hundred years unscathed. They were tall but slender, with none of the grandiloquence of the rich men's houses his mother had shown him in Paris; and yet the fact that they *were* rich men's houses was indisputable, and subtly advertised by the profusion of their windows.

Piet turned left, and in his head he was walking away from Leiden, from Herman Barol's dark little house on the Pieterskerkhof and the life of the university clerk that went with it. For four years Piet had been assisting his father in sanctioning undergraduates who had omitted to pay their library fines, or cheated in their exams, or been caught in the company of women of ill repute. From these young men he had learned to affect the nonchalant swagger of the rich, but he had no intention of chasing them up for ever.

He put a freshly laundered handkerchief over his mouth and inhaled deeply. The canal stank with a virulence for which life in the comparative simplicity of a country town had not prepared him. Within the odour's complex depths lurked cheese rinds, rotting shoes, rats' urine, human defecations, oil, tar, and a consignment of industrial chemicals

that had leaked from a ship in the harbour. The combined effect was choking, but the people who passed him paid no attention to it. He was sure that he, too, would get used to it in time. He continued more briskly. As the house numbers increased, so did the emphasis of the architecture's whispered message: that people of wealth and distinction lived here. The narrower dwellings, two or three windows across, that dominated the earlier stretches of the canal grew rarer. As he crossed the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat, they all but disappeared. Soon the narrowest house was four windows wide. Which one was theirs? He looked at his watch. He was still twenty minutes early. To avoid being seen, he crossed the canal and continued his walk up the far side.

The appearance of a house with six windows on its ground floor signalled a further elevation of status and the beginning of the Gilded Curve. He felt a pricking of panic. He had not always been a diligent student and there was little sincerity in the recommendation his professor had given him, a fact that would reveal itself to a sensitive reader. Piet was far cleverer than many who had more to show for their cleverness, but this was hardly an argument he could advance. He did speak perfect French – his mother Nina had been a Parisienne – and his English and German were adequate; but his piano playing was only competent, and the advertisement had stressed Egbert Vermeulen-Sickerts' musical genius and the desirability of a tutor who could match and extend it.

He sat down on a wrought-iron bench between two trees and collected himself. He did not have the best credentials but was wise enough to understand – even at twenty-four – that symbols on paper are not the only grounds on which people make up their minds. A tutor, after all, was more than a servant. The successful candidate would dine with the family, not wait on them; and though the Vermeulen-Sickerts had not specified this requirement, he was sure that people

so *à la mode* would prize amusing conversation. This he was very good at making, having learned the arts of charm at his mother's knee.

He took out Jacobina's letter and began to sketch on the back of the envelope the austere, imposing façade of a house opposite him. When he had captured the tricky perspective of water and bricks, he felt calmer and more optimistic. He stood up and walked on; and as the canal curved again he saw the house at number 605.

The possibility that he might soon sleep in one of the rooms on its upper storeys made Piet Barol shiver beneath his cashmere coat with its velvet collar, bought second-hand from a well-off student with urgent debts. The house was five windows wide and five storeys high, with hundreds of panes of glass that glittered with reflections of canal and sky. The front door was on the first floor, achieved by a handsome double staircase of grey stone; and the façade of small rectangular bricks was relieved of sternness by pretty white stucco scrolls. Despite its size there was nothing showy about it, nothing over-ornamented or insecure.

Piet approved wholeheartedly.

He was crossing the bridge towards it when a man in his late twenties emerged from the servants' entrance beneath the staircase. He was not well dressed and his suit, which had been bought in slimmer days, was too obviously 'Sunday best'. He looked a little like a young man who had pursued Piet doggedly the summer before: dark and slouched, with a drooping chin and an oily nose. Piet had not let that chap have his way, and he did not intend to let this one prevail either. As his competitor made off in the direction of the station, Piet saw he was slightly out of breath by the time he had gone a hundred yards. The spectacle cheered him.

He straightened his tie. As he prepared to mount the steps to the front door, the servants' door opened and a woman

with a severe chin said: ‘Mr Barol? We are expecting you. If you’d be so good as to step inside.’



The stink of the canals vanished at once and was replaced by the sweetness of an apple cake browning to perfection, which underscored the scents of polish and clean hair and the fragrance of a large bucket of orange roses that stood on a table by the butler’s pantry. ‘I am Mrs de Leeuw, the housekeeper. Please follow me.’ The lady led him into a large kitchen devoted to quiet, choreographed efficiency. An enormous ice box stood in one corner, its oak door lined with white glass and held open by a handsome blond fellow of about Piet’s age, to facilitate the entry of a polished jelly mould. ‘Careful, Hilde!’ Piet’s guide spoke without tenderness. ‘May I take your coat, Mr Barol? Mr Blok will show you upstairs.’

Mr Blok now appeared at the door in a dark tailcoat: a waxy man in his late fifties with a scrupulously shaven chin. Something in his glance suggested an awareness of Piet’s charms – which Piet thought problematic, since he felt no answering inclination. On the rare occasions Piet Barol went with men, he preferred them athletic and close to his own age. The butler was neither. ‘This way, Mr Barol,’ he said.

Mr Blok left the room and went up a narrow staircase to the entrance hall. Piet did not wish to appear provincial, and his face gave no sign of the impression the entrance hall made. Panels with quotations from the Romantic painters surmounted a wainscot of marble shot with pink and grey. On a half-moon table was a silver bowl filled with visiting cards. Mr Blok turned right beneath a gilt lantern and led Piet towards an open door at the head of the passage, through which tall French windows were visible.

As he passed the dining room Piet glimpsed olive-green and gold wallpaper and a table set for five – a family dinner, which meant that Constance and Louisa would be dining in. He knew from the newspapers that they did so rarely and read this, quite correctly, as a sign of their interest in their brother's new tutor.

He longed to meet them and be their friend.

The staircase to the upper floors was carpeted in soft red wool and overlooked by a trio of statues beneath a glass dome. Mr Blok led Piet past it and ushered him into the room with the French windows, which was nothing but a tiny octagon, constructed of glass and stone and furnished with two sofas of extreme rigidity. It told him plainly that the splendours of the drawing room were reserved for men better and grander than he; and because Piet Barol had a strong sense of his innate value, he took exception to this judgement and resolved to conquer the person in whose gift the freedom of the house lay.



The butler retreated. Piet placed the envelope containing his references on a table so slender it barely bore this burden, and settled to wait. Above him, a chandelier of five gilt griffins observed him disdainfully, as if each of its winged lions could see into his soul and disapproved of what they found there. Mrs Vermeulen-Sickerts' first name conjured images of hairy patriarchs and he hoped she wouldn't be too ugly. It was harder to flirt with an ugly woman.

He was pleasantly surprised when a light step sounded on the tiles and Jacobina appeared. Although approaching forty-six, the legacy of an athletic youth was evident in her neat waist and quick, fashionable movements. She was wearing a day dress of apple-green wool with a high lace collar and a

small train: an impractical garment in many respects, but Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts had no pressing need to be practical. ‘Good afternoon, Mr Barol.’ She extended a hand and shook his firmly. ‘Please don’t get up.’ But Piet was already standing, and he smiled shyly as Jacobina sank on to one of the sofas and said: ‘Do excuse the uncomfortable furniture. My husband is very fond of Louis Quinze and the fabric is too delicate to have the seats resprung. Would you drink some tea with me?’

‘Gladly.’

Jacobina ordered refreshments on an extravagantly ornamental telephone. ‘And now, may I see your references?’

It was as well to get these out of the way at the beginning. As Piet handed them to her, his eye caught Jacobina’s and he understood that he had made a favourable first impression. Indeed Piet’s smell, which was the smell of a gentleman, and his clothes, which were a gentleman’s clothes, reassured Jacobina in ways of which she was not at all conscious. She glanced at the pages in her hand, saw that Piet had the university degree the position required, and said, ‘Tell me about your family. Your father is a clerk in the university at Leiden, I believe?’

‘He is, ma’am.’ Herman Barol had a respectable position in the administration of Holland’s oldest university. Piet conveyed this without mentioning that such posts are generally held by petty autocrats unable to achieve influence elsewhere.

‘And your mother?’

‘She died when I was seventeen. She was a singing teacher.’

‘I’m so sorry. Do you sing?’

‘I do, ma’am.’

‘Excellent. So does my husband.’

It was, in fact, thanks to his mother the singing teacher that Piet was able to read in Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts

the subtle traces of an interest that was not wholly professional, long before she became aware of it herself. Since her son could walk, Nina Barol had spoken to Piet as though he were a cultivated and delightful intimate of her own age. She had discussed the personal situations of her students with a candour that would have horrified them and later, as a boy accompanist, Piet had had ample opportunity to look for evidence of what his mother had told him. He was now unusually sensitive to indications of private emotion. As he answered Jacobina's questions, he absorbed a wealth of detail about the woman who might be persuaded to change his life. She had a strong sense of propriety, that was clear. But it did not seem to be stronger in her than in other respectable women Piet knew, who had happily abandoned it for him. 'And what of Master Egbert?' he said.

Tea was brought in and Jacobina poured. 'My son is extremely intelligent, but sometimes intelligence of that sort can be a burden. He has always had a vivid imagination. Indeed, I have encouraged it. But perhaps I have been overly lenient with him. My husband believes he needs sterner treatment, though I am looking for a tutor who can combine authority with gentleness.'

Jacobina had made this speech to each of the sixteen people she had so far interviewed; but as she spoke the word *gentleness* to Piet Barol her eyes flicked to his hands, as if they were the perfect expression of what she sought. 'Egbert completes his schoolwork very well. He speaks English and German and French and dedicates himself to the practice of his music with commendable discipline. Indeed, he has long outgrown any music teacher I have been able to find. But . . .'

'He is shy, perhaps?'

'Not unusually so, Mr Barol. If you met him you would

not think anything amiss. The problem is ... He will not leave the house.'

'Will not?'

'Perhaps cannot. We have had to obtain a special permit to educate him at home. He last went into the garden a year and a half ago, but has refused absolutely to go into the street since he was eight years old. We tried to coax him at first and then to force him; but I am afraid the tantrums were so affecting I put a stop to my husband's efforts. Perhaps that was wrong, but it is very hard for a mother to see her child so afraid and do nothing.'

'Of course.'

'So there you have it. We need a tutor who is capable of ... of finding Egbert, wherever he has lost himself, and bringing him back to us.'

It was the fourth time that day, and the twelfth that week, that Jacobina had been obliged to debase herself before a stranger with this frank rendition of her maternal failings. It was not an experience she enjoyed. But Piet's expression was one of such thoughtful concern, and contrasted so well with the embarrassment of the other candidates, that she was inspired to further revelation. 'I cosseted him too much when he was little, Mr Barol. I should have made him be braver, but I did not and now he lacks the courage even to venture on to the steps outside. Have you experience of difficult children?'

Piet had no experience of any children whatsoever. 'Life in a university town acquaints one with many brilliant eccentrics,' he said judiciously.

Jacobina smiled, to disguise the fact that she might also have burst into tears. She loved each of her children fiercely, but Egbert most fiercely of all because he had greatest need of her. She took a sip of tea. 'It is essential that any tutor is able to communicate with him musically. He is devoted to music.'

‘I was *répétiteur* for my mother and her students from the time I was nine.’

‘Excellent. Perhaps you would play for me now?’

‘With pleasure.’

Jacobina rose. ‘Let me take you to the schoolroom. Egbert’s sisters, my daughters Constance and Louisa, have banished him to the house next door. Fortunately it belongs to my aunt, who now spends most of the year at Baden-Baden. We have had a door specially constructed so that Egbert needn’t use the street. I suppose it was the wrong thing to do, but he can be . . . obsessive, at times, about his playing, and Louisa in particular has a sensitive ear. In my aunt’s drawing room he can make as much noise as he likes without disturbing anyone.’ She led Piet into the dining room and he saw that on one side of the fireplace the shape of a door was cleverly hidden in the wallpaper. Jacobina opened it to reveal an entrance hall tiled in white and black and rather smaller than the one at Herengracht 605.

He held it for her as she passed through.



Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts had taken many men to her aunt’s house to hear them play the heavy Bösendorfer that was Egbert’s closest confidant. She had taken them alone and never felt at all awkward; but when the secret door clicked behind the handsome Piet Barol she felt suddenly that she was doing something improper. She crossed the hall and opened the drawing-room door. ‘Egbert’s in bed today. He catches colds easily – that’s why we keep it so hot in here.’ It was, indeed, very hot. Heavy gilt radiators burbled beneath windows hung with midnight-blue velvet. ‘Do remove your jacket if you’re too warm.’

Piet did so and sat at the piano, wondering what he should

play. He was no virtuoso, and the possibility that an oily-nosed overachiever would snatch this chance from him made his stomach clench. He opened the instrument, waiting for inspiration, and the memory that came to him was of his mother telling him that the only key for love is E flat major. He glanced at Jacobina. She did not look like a woman whose sensual appetites were well catered for, and the room was certainly the temperature for tenderness.

What would she permit?

The idea of finding out reignited old temptations, for this was not the first flirtation Piet Barol had conducted from a piano stool. He hesitated, weighing the dangers. But already the adrenalin of risk was pumping through him and would not be disobeyed. Mrs Vermeulen-Sickerts wanted a tutor with authority and gentleness. He should play her something slow and sentimental and not too difficult, preferably in E flat major. But what? Jacobina moved past the piano and turned to face him, just as his mother's students had done. As she passed he caught her scent – of rosewater and musk and hand-laundered undergarments – and it came to him that the second nocturne of Chopin fulfilled all his criteria.

Nina Barol's edition marked this piece *espressivo dolce* – to be played sweetly and expressively – and Piet began to play it softly from memory, at a slow andante. The piano was first rate and recently tuned, and it lent his performance a finesse he did not often achieve on his mother's upright.

He was correct: it was many years since anyone had touched Mrs Vermeulen-Sickerts with the aim of giving her pleasure. Jacobina had almost ceased to mourn this sad fact, but in the presence of such a beautiful young man it struck her forcefully. She stepped closer, to see him better. Piet's face was manly but graceful, with succulent red lips that prompted thoughts of her husband's dry little kisses.

Jacobina looked away.

Piet tripped in a run of semiquavers but the piano forgave him and hid all trace of the jarring note in folds of rich harmony. As he played he sensed the atmosphere responding to the music's enchantments. Indeed Jacobina's nostalgia for the lost opportunities of her youth increased with every note. Watching Piet, she was not unaware of the muscles of his shoulders nor of the way his perfectly laundered shirt clung to his back as he leaned over the keys. It was a long time since she had heard any music but her son's relentless exercises, and the gentleness with which Piet's huge fingers elicited these hushed sounds from the piano was bewitching.

It was a secret she no longer shared with anyone, but Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts was very different from the woman her family and closest friends thought they knew. In her deepest self she was more like Louisa than Constance and had spent her girlhood imagining a life not at all like the one she now enjoyed. A change in her breathing made Piet's pulse quicken. He looked up, caught her watching him, and held her gaze until she looked away. He was used to enlivening the lessons of Nina Barol's prettiest pupils in this fashion and since his seventeenth birthday had grown steadily bolder – though he had never yet employed his stratagems on a lady of rank, or in a situation so laden with potential disaster.



Piet played the last bars of the nocturne very delicately and the piano's ringing made the air between them tingle. He did not silence it by lifting his foot from the pedal. When Jacobina said, 'Play me something more modern, Mr Barol,' he was ready for her. His choice was the entr'acte to the third act of *Carmen*, also in E flat major, which had been useful in similar situations before. Its pure, beguiling melody

rose from the embers of the nocturne and the rumbling arpeggios of the bass line showed his hands to advantage. As he played, he thought of the smugglers who appear on stage at its close, whispering that fortune awaits if only they will tread carefully. This was exactly how he felt as he drenched his quarry in sweet, permissive magic.

Jacobina Vermeulen-Sickerts' social position protected her from the lascivious stares of men. The possibility that she had encountered one now left her flustered, but not disagreeably so. She looked away, deciding that she had been mistaken; but when her eyes flicked again to Piet Barol's she found that his were ready to meet them, and this was joltingly erotic. Jacobina rode twice a week but otherwise took very little exercise. She had recently begun to worry that this showed, and to feel rather let down by her once sylph-like body. To receive an admiring glance from a young man was exhilarating.

She stared out of the window as Piet finished playing.

'What a touch, Mr Barol.' She spoke the compliment to the street outside and when she turned to face Piet he was smiling at her, and did not stop.

Piet Barol's smile often got him what he wanted. On this occasion it was full of charming hopefulness, and under its influence Jacobina made a decision. 'You are welcome to take your meals with us, or dine out as you wish. You will find us an easy-going family. My daughters delight everyone they meet. And Egbert ...' But she left this sentence unfinished. 'Mrs de Leeuw will show you to your room.'

'I will give of my best, Mevrouw.'

'I am sure my husband will wish to see you before dinner. I'll have some shirts and socks of his sent up. We can arrange for your bags to come tomorrow.'

'Thank you, Mrs Vermeulen-Sickerts.'

'Je vous en prie.'



Naomi de Leeuw did not approve of tutors as a breed, nor of their ill-defined place in the household hierarchy – neither servant nor guest. One or two of Piet’s predecessors had used this blurred distinction to their advantage and she had no intention of allowing this cocky young man to do the same.

‘You will share the attic floor and a bathroom with Mr Blok and Mr Loubat,’ she said stiffly as she led him to his room. ‘I thank you not to visit the basement, where the maids’ rooms are, after five p.m. We have high standards of cleanliness. You are permitted to take two baths a week and will have shaving water every day. Shirts are to be worn three times at a maximum. Hilde Wilken will do your laundry.’ She opened a door and ushered Piet into a small, comfortably furnished bedroom with a window that looked over the garden. ‘There is no smoking in the house, and no drinking unless you are offered refreshment by a member of the family. The bathroom is two doors along. You are required to attend church on Sunday mornings, but may spend Sunday afternoons at your leisure. Do you have any questions, Mr Barol?’

‘I don’t think so, Mrs de Leeuw.’

‘Very well. I do hope you’ll be comfortable here.’



When she had gone, Piet sat on his bed and loosened his tie. He was half alarmed by the suddenness of the change he had wrought in his fortunes. Gone at a stroke was the tiny alcove, separated by a curtain from his father’s room, in which he had slept since leaving his cradle. Gone was the outside toilet, the rusting plumbing, the vile university food to which he

and Herman had become accustomed since his mother's death. The ambitions he had nursed so privately – of travel and comfort and elegance; of escaping for ever the straitened gentility of his youth – were plausible now, seized from the realm of fantasy by his own determination to act on his instincts. To have a room of his own at last! To be able to bathe without laying a fire and boiling the water; to shit without shivering in the little wooden hut beside the back door! He started to laugh as the nervous energy of the afternoon drained from him. He felt light and triumphant, capable of anything.

There was a knock at the door. It was Didier Loubat, the footman, with a pile of shirts and collars and a little box of studs. He was taller than Piet and blond, with a strong jaw and sharp sea-green eyes. 'The old man wants to see you in forty-five minutes. His office is at the front of the house, on the first floor. D'you want me to come and get you, or will you find it on your own?'

'I'll find it.'

'Good man. The whole family's gathering to vet you at dinner. *Bonne chance*.' Didier's friendliness was a relief after Mrs De Leeuw's chilly formality. 'My room's next door if you need anything, and the bathroom's down the hall. A little tip: don't let Blok see you in a towel. He's a terrible old lecher.'

'I thought he might be.'

Didier grinned. 'You need your wits about you in this house, but you'll get used to it. There's a towel in the cupboard.'

The towel in the cupboard was of vast size and fresh-smelling fluffiness. Piet took it with him to the bathroom, which was tiled in white porcelain and deliciously clean. In the corner was an eight-foot bath, and when he turned the tap the suddenness with which boiling water gushed

from it took Piet by surprise and scalded his hand. The fact that such quantities of hot water could be obtained so effortlessly was miraculous to him. He filled the tub very full and undressed and got in, and stretched back at full length, baptising himself in his new life. He would cable to his father tomorrow; but Herman had never shown much concern for his whereabouts and Piet doubted that his absence tonight would alarm him. He lay in the hot water, feeling very pleased with himself, but as it cooled so did his triumph, and the complexities of his new situation stole in and replaced it.

Piet had sufficient experience of female unpredictability to know the risks of forming a liaison with his new employer's wife. As he washed, he decided that he would never again allude to the unspoken communications of the afternoon. Emigration to America and the making of a considerable fortune were the next stages of his plan. He would take no chances until he had saved the money to fund them. He submerged himself again and it came to him that his efforts with Mrs Vermeulen-Sickerts had left him in a powerful negotiating position with regard to her husband. The salary advertised was sixty guilders a month. It was clear from the establishment at Herengracht 605 that the man who owned it could afford considerably more. Piet got out of the bath and began to dry himself. Unless he was very much mistaken, Jacobina would make sure he was employed whatever the salary. His experience of wealthy undergraduates had shown him that many rich men prefer to pay more, rather than less, on the grounds that quality is closely correlated to expense.

He dressed slowly and carefully, and by the time he was finished he had decided to add a further challenge to the many he had risen to that day.

He had decided to ask for more.