

## II Rosa Overbeek (1)

Kees had long felt that he was really *more* than the other boys in his class. That he was actually degrading himself a bit by joining them in playing games.

And then a new child came into the class: Rosa Overbeek. She had been at a posh institute and had learnt about pronouns and worse things.

Kees noticed that this Rosa kept an eye on him from her first day onwards. She didn't mix with the other girls. Well, understandably not. And she must be wondering, Kees thought, why *he* still *did* rub shoulders with the boys. He, too, would do this no more. He would go his own way as a reclusive sage.

At night, in bed, he thought very deeply about this. Rosa Overbeek and him, two superior minds, elevated high above all the others. Something like that it had to be. Only, it was a bit difficult to put this into effect for him. It was an easy enough job to become a real drear, one that nobody wanted to have anything to do with, but *that* was not how Rosa Overbeek was. Had she wanted to, she could at a single stroke have become the chieftain of the girls, so to speak. But she didn't want to. And yet she had a kind of grandeur, and that kind of grandeur he, too, wanted to have.

But what a tough job this would be! There was, in the first place, his clothing. He had miserable clothes, that kept going to pieces. And you see, it wasn't young gentlemen's clothing either. He could feel that, for example, on Mondays, when he went to school in a stiffly ironed blouse. It wasn't refined. Young gentlemen, the likes of which she must have been used to at the institute, had these suits of thin material, that gave when you bent down. That was the kind of suit he needed.

And then there was his hair. That was the barber's fault, the miserable barber, who laughed when he asked for a quiff and always gave him a crew cut, because his mother never wanted to give him more than five cents. And what kind of trouble would it have been?

There was one bright spot: he had a good looking tie. Indeed, a somewhat dignified tie, made of stuff that never wrinkled. True, it had a little hole in it, but you could make that disappear in the knot. And that tie was the starting point for his fantasies when he lay in bed. If, to go with that tie, he'd have only a flat collar, then already his blouse would look more refined. And then he'd arrive at school with this profound gaze. 'Are you still playing?' the boys would modestly ask. He was deep in thought and said: 'Eh?' And the boys would slink off to start their game.

He walked calmly on and encountered Rosa Overbeek. She would then think: 'Oh, there's this boy who contrasts so with the others. How has he got to be at this school where he doesn't belong? What will he be when he grows up?' He made as if he didn't notice her, and yawned involuntarily in passing. And she thought:

'He doesn't feel at home among these children, just as I do not.'

Later she'd be famous. A singer probably, and he a flute player. Some flute players could play in such a way as to bring tears to your eyes. Then they'd meet again. Or perhaps, again, he was a captain. Then he'd have a sailor's walk, and shake hands with her with his callous grasp. In any case his name would be in the paper one day, and then a footman would come to

tell him that there was a lady who wished to see him... The lady had heard about him, and was now so exceedingly curious; if he'd only tell her if he was the Kees who, as a boy, had been at such-and-so school. And he, in a strange voice, would say: 'Yes, Rosa Overbeek, that Kees am I.' She started for a moment. And then they'd tell each other the story of their lives.

One Tuesday morning Kees was in front of the school very early. There were as yet few children about, from his class not a single boy. A few girls, yes, but not Rosa Overbeek. A pity, thought Kees, and he felt if his pretty tie sat well, with the hole out of sight. He looked around a couple of times. If she were approaching in the distance he would certainly happen to be heading that way. Didn't she always come from the direction of Westermarkt? Very composedly he set out in that direction, and bravely and decidedly he told himself:

'I'll just go and head for her.'

But at Leliegracht he was almost run down by four boys from his class.

'Why dash, where are *you* going?' one of them asked.

Kees turned around without answering and walked back with them. Good thing he hadn't progressed any further than he had, for then they would surely have noticed something!

He sat down on the steps near the school, stroked his forehead, said 'Dear me' and yawned. She still wasn't coming.

The boys started playing leap-frog. 'Don't feel like it,' said Kees, and he remained sitting on the steps.

'Come on, you drear!' the boys called.

'Oh, go to blazes,' Kees said, and yawned again.

The others let him be and went on playing.

Then Rosa Overbeek passed, with her satchel. Not one of the other girls had a satchel!

She looked at him and Kees blushed. It was very sticky.

'Come on now, drear, come and play!' one of the boys shouted.

'Fraid you got to give a back again?'

'Get lost!' Kees called. 'What if I've got a headache?' And he followed Rosa Overbeek with his glance.

But suddenly he imagined that the others might have noticed. He got up and stretched himself.

Once more he looked in the direction of Rosa. Then he grinned and said:

'Seems this girl of Overbeek pretty well stinks with conceit.' And he gave the boy who stood stooped a push and said:

'All right, I'll give a back. May make me head pass.'

So there he stood; and again and again he felt the hands of the boys heavily on his bent back. And meanwhile he had a nice opportunity, past his elbow, to watch Rosa Overbeek go...

Two girls from their class approached her, and the three of them walked on with arms locked. Well, she did that also to arouse no suspicion of course. They walked... where would they turn around? Ha, there: they turned. They were coming his way again.

The boys kept jumping. The last one never forgot to say 'foot,' and then Kees had to go and stand one foot further on. He had just stood up for that when the girls passed them. 'Well, go on, give a back again now!' one boy impatiently ordered him. Kees clearly saw Rosa Overbeek smile, and he felt he had to uphold his honour as a boy.

'I won't be ordered about by you,' he said, remaining defiantly upright. But then all at once he felt that that miserable tie had come loose. He dared not feel with his hand, but the hole must have become visible. So *that* was why she had smiled, half pityingly. Yes, he had clearly seen that... And submissively he stooped again and let the boys jump over him until the school opened. Meanwhile he lugged the tie a bit, and made sure the hole was invisible again. When the school was in he had picked up courage again. Rosa walked past him, and *they looked each other in the eye*. 'Bakels!' one of the boys hollered. 'Hullo,' he called back, echoing down the corridor. He turned back and gratifyingly passed Rosa Overbeek *again*, and *again* they gave each other a glance. But he walked straight on to the boy who had called him and began a conversation with him, a very lively one, to forestall any suspicion. He'd be just as clever as Rosa, mind you.

*To be continued (April 9th)*