The Peat

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

This novel is a labor of love, deeply rooted in the history and landscape of my home country, the Netherlands. *The Peat* is my personal interpretation of the mystery surrounding the Yde Girl, whose story has remained unknown for more than two thousand years.

The story begins in Drenthe in 1897, before taking you far back in time to the Iron Age, where the main story unfolds.

The original Dutch manuscript was translated into American English with the assistance of ChatGPT and subsequently reviewed and refined by the author to preserve the story, atmosphere, and emotions of the original.

I hope you enjoy this journey into the distant past as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you for opening this book and for giving an independent author the opportunity to share his story with you.

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THE PEAT

Prologue

Drenthe, May 12, 1897

Two men and a horse-drawn wagon struggled along a muddy cart track. It was only May, but the sun was doing its best to turn the day into summer. They were already grateful that it wasn't raining. A day as beautiful as this one, with the sun smiling down from the sky, was a gift. They had known plenty of days when the rain had poured without mercy—days when making their way through this wilderness had been a hard and exhausting task. Whenever it rained in this peatland, the paths quickly became impassable. There was barely any way through, and the cart tracks turned into a treacherous mess of mud where wheels slipped and men struggled to keep their footing.

The red sun was already sinking low in the sky. It would not be long before daylight gave way to darkness. Before that happened, they wanted to be away from here and back on firmer ground. They had spent the entire day cutting peat. At the front of the wagon stood a wooden chest; the rest of the cart was piled high with peat turves. On top lay a sack containing the tools they used for cutting peat. Hendrik walked beside the horse, holding the reins. Willem trudged along behind them. The cart track led past willows and stands of alder, past shallow pools surrounded by dense vegetation. Every now and then, the wheels sank into the mud. The horse would pull with all its strength, but could not get the wagon moving. Willem would then push against the back of the cart with all his might until the wagon finally broke free of the wet, sucking mire.

Then the track made a sharp turn to the left. On the right lay a shallow peat pool. On the left stood a dense thicket of brambles, their thorns sharp as glass. The path between the pool and the brambles was narrow and terribly waterlogged. Hendrik urged the horse to go faster.

He wanted to get past the place quickly, hoping that if they kept moving, the cart would not have a chance to sink. But he urged the animal on so forcefully that the horse became frightened and suddenly lunged forward. "Whoa, whoa, easy," he said in a soothing voice, hoping to calm the animal down.

Just beyond the brambles, where the path made an almost right-angled turn to the left, things went wrong. The wagon came too close to the pool, and on one side two wheels sank all the way to their axles into the mud. The wagon came to an abrupt halt. The jolt and the steep angle sent several peat turves from the top of the load sliding into the water. The burlap sack of tools lying on top went with them. "Damn..." Hendrik muttered angrily. He quickly swallowed the rest of his words. After all, one was not supposed to take the Lord's name in vain. "What now?" he called. Willem took off his cap and scratched his bald head. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, then did it again, this time with long, firm strokes of his palm, as if he could somehow smooth away the deep wrinkles in his skin.

"There's nothing else for it," he said to Hendrik, who was staring into the murky water of the pool.

Hendrik tore his eyes away from the water, which was still rippling from the load that had fallen into it. He looked at Willem. "What do you mean, there's nothing else for it?"

"We'll have to go into the water and fish out the tools. We can't afford to buy new ones," Willem replied firmly. He ran his hand over his head, as though trying to smooth hair that wasn't there. With one hand he tugged at the back of his gray checked cap and with the other adjusted the brim, then settled it back onto his head. Hendrik took off his faded black hat and ran his fingers through his graying blond curls before putting the hat back on. "Yes, but I don't feel like sinking into the mud and drowning," he said to Willem.

Willem walked over to the wagon, opened the wooden chest—which, fortunately, had remained upright—and took out a rope. He tied one end around his waist and handed the other end to Hendrik.

"I'm going into the water to look. I won't have to go very far. It can't be more than six or seven feet from the bank. If I sink or fall and start to go under, pull me out with the rope. All right?"

Hendrik looked at him helplessly. He said nothing and nodded.

Willem carefully made his way into the water, one step at a time, pushing through the vegetation along the bank. He slogged through the reeds and felt water seep into his shoes. He could feel himself sinking into the mud. With every step it became harder. Each time he had to use all his strength to pull his foot free from the sucking muck. Bubbles rose to the surface. The foul, stale smell of the bog drifted up from the water. At last, he reached approximately the spot where the sack had fallen into the pool. The water was up to his knees. He bent cautiously forward and pushed aside some peat turves floating on the surface. Then he plunged both arms into the water and began feeling his way through the mud.

Suddenly he straightened up. "My God, this water is cold," he said in a trembling voice.

"It has to be down there. Can you keep going?" Hendrik called. "I have to," Willem replied proudly. He bent forward again and continued searching, rooting through the mud. He could feel his feet slowly sinking deeper. He straightened his body, struggled to lift one leg free, and took a step forward. Then he plunged his arms back into the water and continued feeling around in the mud.

"Feel anything yet?" Hendrik asked curiously.

"No, not yet," Willem answered irritably.

"I think you need to move a little to the right," Hendrik said, pointing. "There!"

Willem reached to the right and felt around in the mud with his hand. "Yes!" he cried excitedly. "Yes, I think I've got the sack!" He pulled, and the sack moved. He grabbed it with both hands and pulled with all his strength. As he did, he sank into the mud until the water reached his shoulders. "Pull!" he shouted desperately to Hendrik. Hendrik braced himself, dug his heels into the ground, and pulled with all his might. Willem rose from the water again, the sack clutched tightly in his hands. He felt one of his legs being sucked deeper into the mud and grabbed at it, afraid his shoe might come off.

Fortunately, it stayed on. Slowly, his leg came free and he took a step backward. Then he freed the other leg. It, too, came up only with great difficulty. The sack came with him, heavy as if the weight of the whole world were attached to it. Despite the cold water, Willem was burning with effort.

At last, he reached the bank. Hendrik grabbed the sack and pulled with all his strength. Together they dragged it onto the shore. But it was not their sack of tools.

The object was blue-black, not yellow like their burlap sack. They looked at each other in confusion. "This isn't our tool sack," Willem said. "This isn't burlap. It looks more like leather! And look at that strange tuft of red flax attached to it!" The two men stared at the strange object they had pulled from the water. Willem picked it up and tugged at it, then let it go. "It almost looks like a doll," he said in astonishment. He grabbed it and turned it over.

Both men took several steps backward. The doll had a horribly twisted face.

And it wasn't a doll at all.

Now it was unmistakably clear. It was a human being. A corpse.

Both men stood trembling, and Willem's shaking was not caused by the cold alone. Horrified, they remained where they were, staring at the body. "What is that?" Hendrik asked hesitantly, even though he already knew the answer. "A corpse," Willem said.

Hendrik nodded. "What do we do with it? Throw it back?" Willem did not answer. He didn't know. Throw it back? Could they really do that? It was a human being, after all. For a while they stood there in silence, staring at their discovery. Both were deeply shaken by what they had found. Hendrik finally broke the silence.

"Who do you think it was? Do you think it's been lying here for a long time?"

"Yes. How am I supposed to know? Judging by the looks of it, it's been here a while. Maybe years. Maybe centuries. I've heard of bodies being found in the peat that were hundreds of years old." "I think he was murdered," Willem said, pointing at the cord around the neck.

Hendrik stepped closer and examined it carefully.

"Yes. That looks like a flat cord. It's wrapped around the neck three times. And look—it's been pulled tight with a knot!" The two men shuddered.

"The tools!" Willem suddenly exclaimed. "Yes, of course. We still have to find those!" Hendrik replied, as though waking from a terrible dream. "Well, I suppose I'd better go back into the water. I'm already

soaked, and I've still got the rope around me. So I'll do it. Will you hold the rope again?" Hendrik nodded and took hold of the rope.

After some time spent searching and rooting around in the mud, Willem suddenly cried out in delighted surprise. "I've got something! This has to be our sack!"

"Just as long as it isn't another corpse!" Hendrik said, a cold shiver running down his spine. Willem did not answer. He pulled on the sack and sank deeper into the mud. Hendrik pulled on the rope. After a great deal of struggling, they finally dragged the sack onto the bank. They breathed a sigh of relief.

It was their sack of tools. "Throw the sack onto the wagon," Hendrik said.

They placed the sack on top of the peat turves. Then they looked at the turves floating in the pool. "What are we going to do about those?" Willem asked, pointing at the floating peat. "Well, you know they're completely soaked now, and most of them are already starting to fall apart. I think we'd be better off not wasting our time and just getting the wagon moving again," Hendrik replied. Willem nodded in agreement. Hendrik took hold of the reins and urged the horse forward.

Willem pushed against the back of the wagon with all his strength. Hendrik pulled from the front. The horse snorted. Its hooves sank into the mud. Then, at last, the wagon began to move. They pulled and pushed even harder, and the wagon finally broke free. They cheered and slapped each other on the shoulders. Then they looked at one another and turned their eyes toward the corpse, which still lay in the grass.

"What are we going to do with it?" Hendrik asked.

"Well, you know, we'll load it onto the wagon and take it with us. Tomorrow we'll go to the constable with it." Willem nodded.

They picked up the corpse and swung it onto the wagon, laying it on top of the peat turves beside the sack of tools. Hendrik took hold of the reins, and Willem returned to his place behind the wagon, ready to push whenever the horse could no longer manage on its own.

After struggling along for some time, they eventually reached a sandy road and climbed up onto the driver's bench.

"I keep wondering who that could have been," Willem said, breaking the silence as he pointed over his shoulder. Hendrik shrugged. "We'll probably never know."

The men fell silent again, each lost in his own thoughts. The sun had already set, and darkness was falling. They were tired and hungry. Willem shivered and his teeth chattered, but he was glad they had managed to save the tools. In the distance, they could see the lights of the village of Yde.

They would put the wagon in the barn for the night and see what tomorrow brought. They wondered what the constable would say and what he would do with the body. Yet one thought kept haunting them: Who was the person lying there on the back of the wagon?

Chapter 1

By the Pool

Drenthe, 50 B.C.

Lidewei had set out early that morning. She had gone to pick blackberries. The sun was still low in the sky, casting a hazy red glow through the thin mist that lay over the marshy landscape. She made her way along a narrow, muddy track bordered on both sides by stands of alder and willow. It was hardly a real path at all, more a winding strip of trampled grass. In some places, where the ground was especially wet, a walkway made of thin tree trunks had been laid down, supported by stakes driven into the soft, waterlogged earth. In this way, an entire network of paths ran through the marsh.

It was a dangerous place. Anyone who strayed from the paths had to be extremely careful. There were deep holes filled with sucking mud, overgrown with grass and sphagnum moss. If you weren't paying attention, you could walk straight onto one and suddenly sink without warning. Once that happened, it was difficult to get out, and most often you sank deeper, facing certain death. Fortunately, Lidewei knew her way through this wilderness well. She never strayed from the paths, fully aware of the danger.

The songs and cheerful calls of the many birds, together with the croaking of frogs, made her happy and brought a smile to her face. With every step, her long, blond, wavy hair swayed as though it wanted to dance along with her zest for life. She was as fresh and bright as a young wild cornflower, still untouched.

When she reached her favorite place for picking, beside a small pool, she picked the first blackberries of the day. She ate the first few as soon as she picked them, enjoying their wonderfully fresh, sweet-and-sour flavor. They were a real delicacy. Then she began filling her bucket, which was made of oxhide. Suddenly she stopped picking. Had she heard something? No, she thought. It was probably nothing. A rabbit, perhaps. Still, she remained alert. Perhaps there was a wild animal nearby—a wolf or a bear?

What was that? There it was again: a rustling among the bushes. Now she felt her heart beating faster. She stopped picking, crouched down, and listened intently. Bent low, she moved backward into the bushes and sat there without making a sound. Something was moving in the bushes on the other side. She peered through the leaves and twigs.

Was she seeing correctly? Was it a man? A man with a blond beard and long, wavy, fiery-red hair stood concealed in the bushes on the other side. She knew him. A cold shiver crept from the back of her neck down her spine. It was Kai, the village chief's eldest son. He had tried to court her several times, but she was disgusted by him.

He whistled through his teeth three times. Then, mockingly, he called out, "Lidewei! Lidewei! Where are you? I know you're here. Come on out!"

He stepped out from among the bushes and walked onto the small patch of grass beside the peat pool. Behind him came a short, dark-haired, stocky man. She knew him too. He was Kai's sneaky best friend. His name was Poppe, son of Jaarke, the village's finest hunter. She looked around, searching for a way to escape without being noticed. But there was no way out. She was trapped in a thicket of willows surrounded by brambles. The brambles were thick and their thorns were razor-sharp.

The two men slowly approached, Kai in front. They stopped just short of the willow thicket. Lidewei held her breath. Slowly, Kai reached his hand through the willow branches and pushed them aside. He looked straight into her face.

"Aha. See? I knew you were hiding here," he said triumphantly. "Come to Kai, and I'll give you a little kiss." She clenched her fists and her eyes widened. Anger filled her entire body, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She trembled from head to foot. More than anything, she wanted to get away. But where could she go? So she stepped confidently out of the bushes and faced the two men.

"What do you want from me?" she demanded loudly.

"Nothing," Kai said. "Just having a friendly little chat with you. You know I like you very much, don't you?" The disgusting self-confidence and arrogance oozed from his exaggeratedly friendly voice.

"Well, I don't like you at all," she said.