
The Last of Her Line

Synopsis

Diane Reeve

The *Last of Her Line* is a novel based on the life of Weduwe Mevrouw le Fèvre de Montigny - Bisdome van Vliet. It is set against the backdrop of the industrialisation of the Netherlands and the consequent social and political change. It is underpinned by its author's fascination with the widow's story, her love of all things Dutch and her enjoyment of historical research.

On the 1 June 2023 the curator of a museum in Haastrecht opens a mysterious sealed packet believed to be the final element of the legacy of the museum's benefactor. Paulina Bisdome van Vliet died just days before her eighty-third birthday in 1923, childless and widow of more than forty years. Without heirs, she bequeathed her house and estates in South Holland to the people of Haastrecht instructing the trustees of what is now the museum that the house should be left exactly as it was on the day she died.

Only child of businessman and burgemeester, Marcellus, and his wealthy wife, Maria Elizabeth, Paulina lacks the beauty, grace and accomplishment that women of her social standing require in order to be marriageable in late 19th century Holland. What she has instead is a strong character and a talent for management. When she falls for naval lieutenant Johan Jacob le Fèvre de Montigny and determines to marry him there is little her family can do despite their mixed feelings about the match.

Following their marriage and honeymoon in the autumn of 1869, the couple set up house in fashionable Den Haag. Paulina continues with her life much as before albeit with Johan doing what she requires of him. But what does he get up to when not under instructions from his wife? Whatever it is, it comes to a stop when Paulina's grandmother and mother both die in 1871, leaving Marcellus alone and grieving.

He makes the bold decision to demolish the family's old, traditional house and build a grand, *fin-de-siècle* mansion in its place. No sooner is his marvellous new house completed (and Paulina and Johan enticed back to live in it) than Marcellus dies.

Paulina inherits all the family possessions, and takes hold of the reins of the public functions and duties which made the Bisdom van Vliets so very influential. Although excluded from public office because she is a woman, she uses Johan as an instrument of power where necessary. Not only does she play a major role in public and church administration, but she also determines the lives of countless families in the surrounding area, including her dependent tenants and employees. When, in 1881, Johan becomes seriously ill then dies, Paulina's life changes overnight as she loses the social place and administrative importance that were her due as wife of a burgemeester. As a widow, she uses her strength of character, social standing and wealth to reinvent herself as a major participant in the new era of social welfare.