SO BIG

By EDNA FERBER

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WNU Service.

WORK, WORK!

SYNOPSIS. — Introducing "So Big" (Dirk DeJong) in his infancy. And his mother, Selina DeJong, daughter of Simeon Peake, gambler and gentleman of fortune. Her life, to young womanhood in Chicago in 1888, has been unconventional, somewhat seamy, but generally enjoyable. At school her chum is Julie Hempel, daughter of August Hempel, butcher. Simeon is killed in a quarrel that is not his own, and Selina, nineteen years old and practically destitute, secures a position as teacher at the High Prairie school, in the outskirts of Chicago, living at the home of a truck farmer, Klaas Pool. In Roelf, twelve years old, son of Klaas, Selina perceives a kindred spirit, a lover of beauty, like herself. Selina hears gossip concerning the affection of the "Widow Paarlenberg," rich and good-looking, for Pervus DeJong, poor truck farmer, who is insensible to the widow's attractions. For a community "sociable" Selina prepares a lunch box, dainty, but not of ample proportions, which is to be "auctioned," according to custom. The smallness of the box excites derision and Selina is heartbroken. But the bidding becomes spirited, DeJong finally securing it for $10, a ridiculously high price. Over their lunch basket, which Selina and DeJong share together, the school-teacher arranges to instruct the farmer, whose education has been neglected. Propinquity leads to mutual affection. Selina becomes Mrs. DeJong, a "farmer's wife," with all the hardships unavoidable at that time. Dirk is born.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

—8—

Pervus drove into the Chicago market every other day. During July and August he sometimes did not have his clothes off for a week. Together he and Jan Steen would load the wagon with the day's garnering. At four he would start on the tedious trip into town. The historic old Haymarket on West Randolph street had become the stand for market gardeners for miles around Chicago. Here they stationed their wagons in preparation for the next day's selling. The early comer got the advantageous stand. There was no regular allotment of space. Pervus tried to reach the Haymarket by nine at night. Often bad roads made a detour necessary and he was late. That usually meant bad business next day. The men, for the most part, slept on their wagons, curled up on the wagon seat or stretched out on the sacks. Their horses were stabled and fed in near-by sheds, with more actual comfort than the men themselves. One could get a room for twenty-five cents in one of the ramshackle rooming houses that faced the street. But the rooms were small, stuffy, none too clean; the beds little more comfortable than the wagons. Besides, twenty-five cents! You got twenty-five cents for half a barrel of tomatoes. You got twenty-five cents for a sack of potatoes. Onions brought seventy-five cents a sack. Cabbages went a hundred heads for two dollars, and they were five-pound heads. If you drove home with ten dollars in your pocket it represented a profit of exactly zero. The sum must go above that. No; one did not pay out twenty-five cents for the mere privilege of sleeping in a bed.

One June day, a month or more after their marriage, Selina drove into Chicago with Pervus, an incongruous little figure in her bride's finery perched on the seat of the vegetable wagon piled high with early garden stuff. It was, in a way, their wedding trip, for Selina had not been away from the farm since her marriage.

As they jogged along now she revealed magnificent plans that had been forming in her imagination during the past four weeks. It had not taken her four weeks—or days—to discover that this great broad-shouldered man she had married was a kindly creature, tender and good, but lacking any vestige of initiative, of spirit. She marveled, sometimes, at the memory of his boldness in bidding for her lunch box that evening of the raffle. It seemed incredible now, though he frequently referred to it, wagging his head doggishly and grinning the broadly complacent grin of the conquering male. But he was, after all, a dull fellow, and there was in Selina a dash of fire, of wholesome wickedness, of adventure, that he never quite understood. For her flashes of flame he had a mingled feeling of uneasiness and pride.

In the manner of all young brides, Selina started bravely out to make her husband over. He was handsome, strong, gentle; slow, conservative, morose. She would make him keen, daring, successful, buoyant. Now, bumping down the Halsted road, she sketched some of her plans in large dashing strokes.

"Pervus, we must paint the house in October, before the frost sets in, and after the summer work is over. Then that west sixteen. We'll drain it."

"Yeh, drain," Pervus muttered. "It's clay land. Drain and you have got yet clay. Hard clay soil."

Selina had the answer to that. "I know it. You've got to use tile drainage. And—wait a minute—humus. I know what humus is. It's decayed vegetables. There's always a pile by the side of the barn; and you've been using it on the quick land. All the west sixteen isn't clay. Part of it's muckland. All it needs is draining and manure. With potash, too, and phosphoric acid."

Pervus laughed a great hearty laugh that Selina found surprisingly infuriating. "Well, well, well! School teacher is a farmer now, huh? I bet even Widow Paarlenberg don't know as much as my little farmer about"—he exploded again—"about this, now, potash and—what kind of acid? Tell me, little Lina, from where did you learn all this about truck farming?"

"Out of a book," Selina said, almost snappishly. "I sent to Chicago for it."

"A book! A book!" He slapped his knee. "A vegetable farmer out of a book."

"Why not! The man who wrote it knows more about vegetable farming than anybody in all High Prairie. He knows about new ways. You're running the farm just the way your father ran it."

"What was good enough for my father is good enough for me."

"It isn't!" cried Selina, "It isn't! The book says clay loam is all right for cabbages, peas, and beans. It tells you how. It tells you how!" She was like a frantic little fly darting and pricking him on to accelerate the stolid sluggishness of his slow plodding gait.

Pervus stared straight ahead down the road between his horse's ears much as Klaas Pool had done so maddeningly on Selina's first ride on the Halsted road. "Fine talk. Fine talk."

"It isn't talk. It's plans. You've got to plan."

"Fine talk. Fine talk."

"Oh!" Selina beat her knee with an impotent fist.

It was the nearest they had ever come to quarreling. It would seem that Pervus had the best of the argument, for when two years had passed the west sixteen was still a boggy clay mass, and unprolific; and the old house stared out shabby and paintless, at the dense willows by the roadside.

They slept that night in one of the twenty-five-cent rooming houses. Rather, Pervus slept. The woman lay awake, wept a little, perhaps. But in the morning Pervus might have noted (if he had been a man given to noting) that the fine jaw-line was set as determinedly as ever with an angle that spelled inevitably paint, drainage, humus, potash, phosphoric acid, and a horse team.

She rose before four with Pervus, glad to be out of the stuffy little room with its spotted and scaly green wall paper, its rickety bed and chair. They had a cup of coffee and a slice of bread in the eating house on the first floor. Selina waited while he tended the horse. It was scarcely dawn when the trading began. Selina, watching it from the wagon seat, thought that this was a ridiculously haphazard and perilous method of distributing the food for whose fruition Pervus had toiled with aching back and tired arms. But she said nothing.

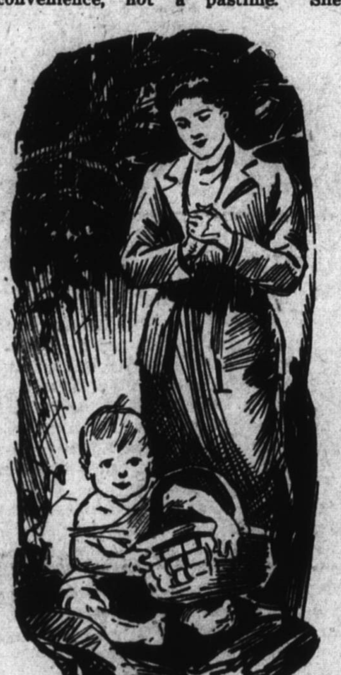
She kept, perforce, to the house that first year, and the second. Pervus declared that his woman should never work in the fields as did many of the High Prairie wives and daughters. Selina learned much that first year, and the second, but she said little. She kept the house in order—rough work, and endless—and she managed, miraculously, to keep herself looking fresh and neat. She understood now Maartje Pool's drab garments, harassed face, heavily swift feet, never at rest. The idea of flowers in bowls was abandoned by July. Had it not been for Roelf's faithful tending, the flower beds themselves, planted with such hopes, would have perished for lack of care.

Roelf came often to the house. He found there a tranquillity and peace never known in the Pool place, with its hubbub and clatter. In order to make her house attractive Selina had actually rifled her precious little bank hoard—the four hundred and ninety-seven dollars left her by her father. She still had one of the clear white diamonds. She kept it sewed in the hem of an old flannel petticoat.

The can of white paint and the brush actually did materialize. For weeks it was dangerous to sit, lean, or tread upon any paintable thing in the DeJong farmhouse without eliciting a cry of warning from Selina. She would actually have tried her hand at the outside of the house with a quart can and a three-inch brush if Pervus hadn't intervened. She hemmed dimity curtains, made slip-covers for the hideous parlor sofa and the ugliest of the chairs. Subscribed for a magazine called House and Garden. Together she and Roelf used to pore over this fascinating periodical. If High Prairie had ever overheard one of these conversations between the farm woman who would always be a girl and the farm boy who had never been quite a child, it would have raised palms high in an "Og heden!" of horror. But High Prairie never heard, and wouldn't have understood if it had.

Selina was up daily at four. Dressing was a swift and mechanical covering of the body. Breakfast must be ready for Pervus and Jan when they came in from the barn. The house to clean, the chickens to tend, sewing, washing, ironing, cooking. She contrived ways of minimizing her steps, of lightening her labor. And she saw clearly how the little farm was mismanaged through lack of foresight, imagination, and—she faced it squarely—through stupidity. She was fond of this great, kindly, blundering, stubborn boy who was her husband. But she saw him with amazing clearness through the mists of her love. There was something prophetic about the way she began to absorb knowledge of the farm work, of vegetable culture, of marketing. Listening, seeing, she learned about soil, planting, weather, selling. The daily talk of the house and fields was of nothing else. About this little twenty-five-acre garden patch there was nothing of the majesty of the Iowa, Illinois and Kansas grain farms, with their endless billows of wheat and corn, rye, alfalfa and barley rolling away to the horizon. Everything was done in diminutive here. Selina sensed that every inch of soil should have been made to yield to the utmost. Yet there lay the west sixteen, useless during most of the year; reliable never. And there was no money to drain it or enrich it; no ready cash for the purchase of profitable neighboring acreage. She did not know the term intensive farming, but this was what she meant.

During that winter she was often hideously lonely. She never got over her hunger for companionship. Here she was, a gregarious and fun-loving creature, buried in a snow-bound Illinois prairie farmhouse with a husband who looked upon conversation as a convenience, not a pastime. She learned much that winter about the utter sordidness of farm life. She rarely saw the Pools; she rarely saw any one outside her own little household. The front room—the parlor—was usually bitterly cold, but sometimes she used to slip in there, a shawl over her shoulders, and sit at the frosty window to watch for a wagon to go by, or a chance pedestrian up the road. She did not pity herself, nor regret her step. She felt, physically, pretty well for a child-bearing woman; and Pervus was tender, kindly, sympathetic, if not always understanding. She struggled gallantly to keep up the small decencies of existence. She loved the glow of Pervus' eyes when she appeared with a bright ribbon, a fresh collar, though he said nothing and perhaps she only fancied that he noticed. Once or twice she had walked the mile and a half of slippery road to the Pools', and had sat in Maartje's warm bright bustling kitchen for comfort. Where was adventure now? And where was life? And where the love of chance bred in her by her father?



She Would Take Dirk With Her Into the Fields, Placing Him on a Heap of Empty Sacks in the Shade.

The two years following Dirk's birth were always somewhat vague in Selina's mind, like a dream in which horror and happiness are inextricably blended. The boy was a plump, hardy infant. He had his father's blond exterior, his mother's brunette vivacity. At two he was a child of average intelligence, sturdy physique and marked good humor. He almost never cried.

He was just twelve months old when Selina's second child—a girl—was born dead. Twice during those two years Pervus fell victim to his so-called rheumatic attacks following the early spring planting when he was often forced to stand in water up to his ankles. He suffered intensely and during his illness was as tractable as a goaded bull. Selina understood why half of High Prairie was bent and twisted with rheumatism—why the little Dutch Reformed church on Sunday mornings resembled a shrine to which sick and crippled pilgrims creep.

Selina had been married almost three years when there came to her a letter from Julie Hempel, now married. The letter had been sent to the Klaas Pool farm and Jozina had brought it to her. Seated on her kitchen steps in her calico dress she read it.

"Darling Selina:—

"I thought it was so queer that you didn't answer my letter, and now I know that you must have thought it queer that I did not answer yours. I found your letter to me, written long ago, when I was going over mother's things last week. It was the letter you must have written when I was in Kansas City. Mother had never given it to me.

"Mamma died three weeks ago. Last week I was going over her things—a trying task, you may imagine—and there were your two letters addressed to me. She had never destroyed them. Poor mamma . . .

"Well, dear Selina, I suppose you don't even know that I am married. I married Michael Arnold of Kansas City. The Arnolds were in the packing business there, you know. Michael has gone into business with pa here in Chicago and I suppose you have heard of pa's success. Just all of a sudden he began to make a great deal of money after he left the butcher business and went into the yards—the stock yards, you know. Poor mamma was so happy these last few years, and had everything that was beautiful. I have two children—Eugene and Pauline.

"I am getting to be quite a society person. You would laugh to see me. I am on the ladies' entertainment committee of the World's fair. We are supposed to entertain all the visiting big bugs—that is the lady bugs. There! How is that for a joke?

"I suppose you know about the Infanta Eulalie. Of Spain, you know. And what she did about the Potter Palmer ball. . . ."

Selina, the letter in her work-stained hand, looked up and across the fields and away to where the prairie met the sky and closed in on her; her world. The Infanta Eulalie of Spain. . . . She went back to the letter.

"Well, she came to Chicago for the fair and Mrs. Potter Palmer was to give a huge reception and ball for her. Mrs. P. is head of the whole committee, you know, and I must say she looks queenly with her white hair so beautifully dressed and her diamond dog-collar and her black velvet and all. Well, at the very last minute the Infanta refused to attend the ball because she had just heard that Mrs. P. was an innkeeper's wife. Imagine! The Palmer house, of course."

Selina, holding the letter in her hand, imagined.

It was in the third year of Selina's marriage that she first went into the fields to work. Pervus had protested miserably, though the vegetables were spoiling in the ground.

Selina had regained health and vigor after two years of wretchedness. She felt steel-strong and even hopeful again, sure sign of physical well-being. Long before now she had realized that this time must inevitably come. So she answered briskly, "Nonsense, Pervus. Working in the field's no harder than washing or ironing or scrubbing or standing over a hot stove in August. Women's work! Housework's the hardest work in the world. That's why men won't do it."

She would often take the boy Dirk with her into the fields, placing him on a heap of empty sacks in the shade. He invariably crawled off this lowly throne to dig and burrow in the warm, black dirt. He even made as though to help his mother, pulling at the rooted things with futile fingers, and sitting back with a bump when a shallow root did unexpectedly yield to his tugging.

"Look! He's a farmer already," Pervus would say.

So two years went—three years—four. In the fourth year of Selina's marriage she suffered the loss of her one woman friend in High Prairie. Maartje Pool died in childbirth, as was so often the case in this region where a Gampish midwife acted as obstretrician. The child, too, had not lived. Death had not been kind to Maartje Pool. It had brought neither peace nor youth to her face, as it often does. Selina, looking down at the strangely still figure that had been so active, so bustling, realized that for the first time in the years she had known her she was seeing Maartje Pool at rest. It seemed incredible that she could lie there, the infant in her arms, while the house was filled with people and there were chairs to be handed, space to be cleared, food to be cooked and served. Sitting there with the other High Prairie women Selina had a hideous feeling that Maartje would suddenly rise up and take things in charge; rub and scratch with capable fingers the spatters of dried mud on Klaas Pool's black trousers (he had been in the yard to see to the horses); quiet the loud wailing of Geertje and Jozina; pass her gnarled hand over Roelf's wide-staring eyes, wipe the film of dust from the parlor table that had never known a speck during her regime.

Will Selina's energy and ideas transform the farm? Or will she succumb to environment?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Kittenish

"Those firemen must be a frivolous set," commented Mrs. Dumpling.

"Why?" asked her overworked half.

"I read in the paper that after the blaze was under control, firemen played all night on the ruins. Why didn't they go to bed like sensible folks instead of romping around like cats?"

If the mustache is coming back, why doesn't it come back courageously instead of a hair at a time?

Not Long

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