It is a great distinction for Miss Ferber to be known as "the female O. Henry," because there probably never was a greater writer of short stories in America than O. Henry. When the world was shocked by his untimely death, it became a favorite subject of discussion in reading and publishing circles as to the author worthy to fill his place. The whole list of male writers was reviewed without settling with any degree of unanimity upon one big enough in a literary way to wear the O. Henry mantle. Someone suggested that the list of women be tried, and immediately the name of Edna Ferber sprang into many minds. Hundreds of critics, editors and other authorities agreed that she came nearer representing the O. Henry type of genius than any other American writer.

Edna Ferber.

This Wisconsin woman, still young, is an educational product of the public schools and of newspaper offices. She was born in Kalamazoo and was a reporter on the Appleton (Wis.) Daily Crescent at seventeen. She must have had an unusually capable city editor, because she learned first of all to be a good reporter. Writing ability she had naturally, but all stories show more than anything else the keen observer and reporter. Her fertility of ideas is amazing and, like O. Henry, she can take a simple incident and weave a fascinating tale around it.

She extended her newspaper experience on the Milwaukee Journal and the Chicago Tribune and then decided to write for the magazines. Her industry seems to be indefatigable. At one time she was writing short stories for practically every important magazine in the United States. Her output during the past ten or twelve years indicates about a story a day, and all good ones, too; stories which the editors were glad to get and pay good money for. And during this remarkably prolific period she found time to write eight or ten novels.

Knowing ones among the critics of novels have been saying for several years, "Watch Edna Ferber." Her novel, "Cheerful—By Request," attracted wide attention. "The Girls" was hailed as a genuine achievement. There was a continued forward movement in "Gigolo" and "Half Portions." In 1924 came "So Big," which has been greeted with superlative praise on all sides. That it developed into about the most successful novel of the year occasioned no surprise among those who had been devoted followers of "the female O. Henry."

Chapter I

Until he was almost ten the name stuck to him. He had literally to fight his way free of it. From So Big (of fond and infantile derivation) it had been condensed into Sobig. And Sobig DeJong, in all its consonantal disharmony, he had remained until he was a ten-year-old schoolboy in that incredibly Dutch district southwest of Chicago known first as New Holland and later as High Prairie. At ten, by dint of fists, teeth, copper-toed boots, and temper, Dirk DeJong.

The nickname had sprung up from the early and idiotic question invariably put to babies and answered by them, with infinite patience, through the years of their infancy.

Selina DeJong, darting expertly about her kitchen, from washtub to baking board, from stove to table, or, if at work in the fields of the truck farm, straightening the numbed back for a moment's respite from the close-set rows of carrots, turnips, spinach, or beets over which she was laboring, would wipe the sweat beads from nose and forehead with a quick duck of her head in the crook of her bent arm. Those great fine dark eyes of hers would regard the child perched impermanently on a little heap of empty potato sacks, one of which comprised his costume. Selina DeJong had little time for the expression of affection. The work was always hot at her heels. You saw a young woman in a blue calico dress, faded and earth-grimed. Between her eyes was a driven look as of one who walks always a little ahead of herself in her haste. Her dark abundant hair was skewered into a utilitarian knob from which soft loops and strands were constantly escaping, to be pushed back by that same harried ducking gesture of head and bent arm. Her hands, for such use, were usually too crusted and inground with the soil into which she was delving. You saw a child of perhaps two years, dirt-streaked, sunburned, and generally otherwise defaced by those bumps, bites, scratches, and contusions that are the common lot of the farm child of a mother-harried by work. Yet, in that moment, as the woman looked at the child there in the warm moist spring of the Illinois prairie land, or in the cluttered kitchen of the farmhouse, there quivered and vibrated between them and all about them an aura, a glow, that imparted to them and their surroundings a mystery, a beauty, a radiance.

"How big is baby?" Selina would demand, senselessly. "How big is my man?"

The child would momentarily cease to poke plump fingers into the rich black loam. He would smile a gummy though slightly weary smile and stretch wide his arms. She, too, would open her tired arms wide, wide. Then they would say in a duet, his mouth a puckered pink petal, hers quivering with tenderness and a certain amusement, "So-o-o big!" with the voice soaring on the prolonged vowel and dropping suddenly with the second word. Part of the game. She would run to him, and swoop down upon him, and bury her flushed face in the warm moist crannies of his neck, and nuzzle as though to devour him. "So big!"

But of course he wasn't. He wasn't as big as that. In fact, he never became as big as the wide-stretched arms of her love and imagination would have had him. You would have thought she should have been satisfied when, in later years, he was the Dirk DeJong whose name you saw (engraved) at the top of heavy cream linen paper, so rich and thick and stiff as to have the effect of being starched and ironed by some costly American business process; whose clothes were made by Peter Peel, the English tailor; whose motor car ran on a French chassis; whose wants were served by a Japanese houseman; whose life, in short, was that of a successful citizen of the republic. But she wasn't. Not only was she dissatisfied; she was at once remorseful and belligerent, as though she, Selina DeJong, the vegetable peddler, had been partly to blame for this success of his, and partly cheated by it.

When Selina DeJong had been Selina Peake she had lived in Chicago with her father. They had lived in many other cities as well. In Denver during the rampant '80s. In New York when Selina was twelve. In Milwaukee briefly. There was even a San Francisco interlude which was always a little sketchy in Selina's mind and which had ended in a departure so hurried as to bewilder even Selina who had learned to accept sudden comings and abrupt goings without question. "Business," her father always said. "Little deal." She never knew until the day of his death how literally the word deal was applicable to his business transactions. Simeon Peake, traveling the country with his little daughter, was a gambler by profession, temperament, and natural talents. When in luck they lived royally, stopping at the best hotels, eating strange, succulent sea-viands, going to the play, driving in hired rigs (always with two horses. If Simeon Peake had not enough money for a two-horse equipage he walked). When fortune hid her face they lived in boarding houses, ate boarding-house meals, wore the clothes bought when fortune's breath was balmy. During all this time Selina attended schools, good, bad, private, public, with surprising regularity considering her nomadic existence. She had a beautiful time. Except for three years, to recall which was to her like entering a musty dry room on leaving a warm and glowing one, her life was free, interesting, varied. She made decisions usually developing upon the adult mind. She selected clothes. She ruled her father. She knew from which hotel lobbies he must be ejected when he had had a drink too many. She knew the look of the professional gambler of the day. The wide slouch hat, the flowing mustache, the glittering eye, the too-bright boots, the flashy raiment, all were allowing in Simeon Peake's make-up. True, he did sport a singularly fine white diamond pin in his shirt front; and his hat he wore just a little on one side. But then, these both were in the male mode and quite commonly seen. For the rest he seemed a mild and rather mum, slim, a trifle difficult, speaking seldom and then with a New England drawl by which he had come honestly enough, Vermont Peake that he was.

Chicago was his meat. It was bustling, prosperous. He gloried in good luck and bad, but he managed somehow to see to it that there was always the money to pay for the Fister schooling. Selina was happy. She knew only such young people—girls—as she met at Miss Fister's school.

Her chum was Julie Hempel, daughter of August Hempel, the Clark street butcher. You probably know some Hempel steak, if you're lucky; and cut Hempel bacon and Hempel hams cured in the hickory fire in Chicago (the distance from butcher of 1885 to packer of 1925 was only a five-year leap).

Being so much alone developed in her a gift for the make-believe. In a comfortable, well-dressed way she was a sort of mixture of Dick Metcalfe's Mysterious and Sarah Crewe. Even in her childhood she extracted from life the double enjoyment that comes usually only to the creative mind. "Now I'm doing this. Now I'm doing that," she told herself while she was doing it. Looking on while she participated. Perhaps her theatre-going had something to do with this. At an age when most little girls were not only unlicensed but practically unseen, she occupied a grown-up seat at the play, her eyes fixed, with the dark ecstatic eyes, glowing in a sort of luminous pallor as she sat proudly next her father.

In this way Selina, half hidden in the depths of an orchestra seat, cringed in ecstatic anticipation when the curtain ascended on the grotesque room of Harvey's minority. She witnessed that startling innovation, a love-talk play, called "Hazel Kirke." She saw Fannie Davenport in "Fedora." Sometimes even took her to a performance of that shocking and delightful form of new entertainment, the Extravaganza.

"The thing I like about plays and books is that anything can happen. Anything! You never know," Selina said.

"So different from life," Simeon Peake assured her. "Don't we often the things that happen to you if you just relax and take them as they come."

Curiously enough, Simeon Peake still did, not through ignorance, but deliberately and with reason. In his way and day he was a very modern father. "I want you to see all kinds," he would say to her. "I want you to realize that this whole thing is just a grand adventure. A fine show. The trick is to play in it and look at it at the same time."

"What whole thing?"

"Living. All mixed up. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living. Remember, no matter what happens, good or bad, it's just so much"—he used the gambler's term, unconsciously—"just so much velvet."

But Selina, somehow understood. "You mean that anything's better than being bored and just sitting."

"Well—yes. There are only two kinds of people in the world that really count. One kind's wheat and the other kind's mustard."

"Fanny Davenport's an emerald," said Selina, quickly, and rather surprised to find herself saying it.

"Yes. That's it."

"And—and Julie Hempel's father—he's wheat."

"By golly, Sole!" stumped Simeon Peake. "You're a shrewd little cuss!"

Julie Hempel and Selina Peake both finished graduates of Miss Fister's school, were of an age—thirteen. Selina, on this September day, had been spending the afternoon with Julie, and now, adjusting her hat preparatory to leaving, she slipped her hands over her ears to shut out the sounds of Julie's importunings that she stay to supper. Certainly the prospect of the usual Sunday evening meal in Mrs. Fabrick's boarding house did not present sufficient excuse for Selina's refusal. Indeed, the Hempel supper as stretched dish for dish by the urgent Julie brought little greedy groans from Selina.

"It's prairie chickens—three of them—that a farmer west of town brought Father. Mother fixes them with stuffing, and there's currant jell. Creamed onions and baked tomatoes. And for dessert, apple roll."

Selina snapped the elastic holding her high-crowned hat under her chignon of hair in the back. She uttered a final and quavering groan. "On Monday nights we have cold mutton and cabbage at Mrs. Tebbitt's. This is Monday."

"Well then, silly, why not stay?"

"Father comes home at six. If I'm not there he's disappointed."

Julie, plump, blonde, placid, forsook her soft white banishments and tried steel against the steel of Selina's decision.

"He leaves you right after supper. And you're alone every night until twelve and after."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," Selina said stiffly. "If I'm not there he's disappointed. And that terrible Mrs. Tebbitt makes eyes at him. He hates it there."

"Then I don't see why you stay. I never could see. You've been there four months now, and I think it's horrid and stuffy, and oilcloth on the stairs."

"Father has had some temporary business setbacks."

Julie, loud though defeated, kissed her friend goodby.

Selina walked quickly the short distance from the Hempel house to Tebbitt's, on Dearborn avenue. Up in her second-floor room she took off her hat and called to her father, but he had not yet come in. She was glad of that. She had been fearful of being late. She regarded her hat with some distaste, decided to rip off the faded spring roses, did rip a stitch or two, only to discover that the hat material was more faded than the roses, and that the uncovered surface showed up a dark splotch like a wall-spot when a picture, long hung, is removed. So she got a needle and prepared to tack the offending rose in its accustomed place.

Perched on the arm of a chair near the window, taking quick deft stitches, she heard a sound she had never heard before, and yet, hearing it, recognized it by one of those pangs, centuries old, called woman's instinct. Thud—shuffle

Thud—Shuffle—Thud—Shuffle—Up the Narrow Stairway.

—thud shuffle—up the narrow stairway, along the passage. She stood up, the needle poised in her hand. The hat fell to the floor. Her eyes were wide, fixed. Her lips slightly parted. The listening look. She knew.

She knew even before she heard the hoarse man's voice saying, "Lift 'er up there a little on the corner, now. Easy—e-e-easy." And Mrs. Tebbitt's high shrill clamor: "You can't bring it in there! You hadn't ought to bring it in here like this!"

Selina's suspended breath came back. She was panting now. She had flung open the door. A fist still burden partially covered with an overcoat carelessly flung over the face. The feet, in their square-toed boots, wobbled listlessly. Selina noticed how shiny the boots were. He was always very finicking about such things.

Simeon Peake had been shot in Jeff Hankins' place at five in the afternoon. The irony of it was that the bullet had not been intended for him at all. Its derelict course had been due to feminine aim. Shot by one of those over-dramatic ladies who, armed with horse-whip or pistol in hardy defense of their honor, spangled Chicago's dull '80s with their doings. It had been meant for a well-known newspaper publisher usually mentioned in papers other than his own) as a bon vivant. The lady's leaden remonstrance was to have been proof of the fact that he had been more vivacious than bon.

It was, perhaps, because of this that the matter was pretty well hushed up. The publisher's paper—which was Chicago's foremost—scarcely mentioned the incident and purposely misspelled the name. The lady, thinking her task accomplished, had taken truer aim with her second bullet, and had saved herself the trouble of trial by human jury.

Simeon Peake left his daughter Selina a legacy of two fine clear blue-white diamonds (he had had the gambler's love of them) and the sum of four hundred and ninety-seven dollars in cash. Just how he had managed to have a sum like this put by was a mystery. The envelope containing it had evidently once held a larger sum. It had been sealed, and then slit. On the outside was written, in Simeon Peake's fine, almost feminine hand: "For my little daughter Selina Peake in case anything should happen to me." It bore a date seven years old. What the original sum had been no one ever knew.

To Selina fell the choice of earning her own living or of returning to the Vermont village and becoming a withered and sapless dried apple, with black fuzz and mold at her heart, like her aunts, the Misses Sarah and Abbie Peake. She did not hesitate.

"But what kind of work?" Julie Hempel demanded. "What kind of work can you do?" Women—that is, the Selina Peakes—did not work.

"I—well, I can teach."

"Teach what?"

"The things I learned at Miss Fister's."

"You have to do something first—go to Normal, or teach in the country, don't you?—before you can teach in the public schools. They're mostly old. Twenty-five or even thirty—or more!" with nineteen's incapacity to imagine an age beyond thirty.

"Then I'll just teach a country school. I'm good at arithmetic. You know that." Julie should have known it, having had all her Fister sums solved by Selina. "Country schools are just arithmetic and grammar and geography."

"You! Teaching a country school!"

She looked at Selina.

She saw a misleadingly delicate face, the skull small and exquisitely formed. The cheek bones rather high—or perhaps they looked so because of the fact that the eyes, dark, soft and luminous, were unusually deep-set in their sockets. The face, instead of narrowing to a soft curve at the chin, developed unexpected strength in the jaw line. That line, fine, steel-strong, sharp and clear, was of the stuff of which pioneer women are made. Julie, inexperienced in the art of reading the human physiognomy, did not decipher the meaning of it. Selina's hair was thick, long and fine, so that she piled it easily in the loops, coils and knots that fashion demanded. Her nose, slightly pinched at the nostrils, was exquisite. When she laughed it had the trick of wrinkling just a little across the narrow bridge; very engaging, and mischievous. She was thought a rather plain little thing, which she wasn't. But the eyes were what you marked and remembered. Perhaps it was this velvety softness of the eyes that caused one to overlook the firmness of the lower face. When the next ten years had done their worst to her, and Julie had suddenly come upon her stepping agilely out of a truck gardener's wagon on Prairie avenue, a tanned, weather-beaten, toil-worn woman, her abundant hair skewered into a knob and held by a long gray hairpin, her full calico skirt grimed with the mud of the wagon wheel, a pair of men's old side-boots on her slim feet, a grotesquely battered old felt hat (her husband's) on her head, her arms full of ears of sweet corn, and carrots, and radishes, and bunches of beets, a woman with bad teeth, flat breasts, a sagging pocket in his capacious skirt—even then Julie, staring, had known her by her eyes. And she had run to her in her silk suit and her fine silk shirtwaist and her hat with the plume and had cried, "Oh, Selina! My dear! My dear!"—with a sob of horror and pity—"My dear!" And had taken Selina, carrots, beets, corn and radishes, in her arms. The vegetables lay scattered all about them on the sidewalk in front of Julie Hempel Arnold's great stone house on Prairie avenue. But strangely enough it had been Selina who had done the comforting, patting Julie's, silken shoulder and saying, over and over, "There, there! It's all right, Julie. It's all right. Don't cry. What's there to cry for! Sh! . . . It's all right."

Chapter II

Selina had thought herself lucky to get the Dutch school at High Prairie, ten miles outside Chicago. Thirty dollars a month! She was to board at the house of Klaas Pool, the truck farmer. It was August Hempel who had brought it all about; or Julie, urging him. This was in September. High Prairie school did not open until the first week in November. In that region of truck farms every boy and girl over six was busy in the fields throughout the early autumn. Two years of this and Selina would be qualified for a city grade. August Hempel indicated that he could arrange that, too, when the time came. Selina thought this shrewd red-faced butcher a wonderful man, indeed. Which he was.

At forty-seven, single-handed, he was to establish the famous Hempel Packing company. At fifty he was the power in the yards, and there were Hempel branches in Kansas City, Omaha, Denver. At sixty you saw the name of Hempel plastered over packing sheds, factories, and canning plants all the way from Honolulu to Portland. You read:

"Don't Say Ham: Say Hempel's."

Hempel products ranged incredibly from pork to pineapple; from grease to grape-juice. Something of his character may be gleaned from the fact that farmers who had known the butcher at forty still addressed this millionaire, at sixty, as Aug. At sixty-five he took up golf and beat his son-in-law, Michael Arnold, at it. A magnificent old pirate, sailing the perilous commercial seas of the American '90s before commissions, investigations, and inquisitive senate insisted on applying whitewash to the black flag of trade.

Selina went about her preparations in a singularly clear-headed fashion, considering her youth and inexperience. She sold one of the blue-white diamonds, and kept one. She placed her inheritance of four hundred and ninety-seven dollars, complete, in the bank. She bought stout, sensible boots, two dresses, one a brown lady's-cloth which she made herself, finished with white collars and cuffs, very neat (the cuffs to be protected by black sateen sleevelets, of course, while teaching); and a wine-red cashmere (mad, but she couldn't resist it) for best.

She eagerly learned what she could of this region once known as New Holland. Its people were all truck gardeners, and as Dutch as the Netherlands from which they or their fathers had come. Many of them had come from the town of Schoorl, or near it. Others from the lowlands outside Amsterdam. Selina pictured it another Sleepy Hollow, a replica of the quaint settlement in Washington Irving's delightful tale. Picturing mellow golden corn fields; crusty crullers, crumbling oly-kooks, toothsome wild ducks, sides of smoked beef, pumpkin pies; country dances, apple-cheeked farmer girls, she felt sorry for poor Julie staying on in the dull gray commonplaceness of Chicago.

The last week in October found her on the way to High Prairie, seated beside Klaas Pool in the two-horse wagon with which he brought his garden stuff to the Chicago market. Mile after mile of cabbage fields, jade-green against the earth. Mile after mile of red cabbage, a rich plummy Burgundy veined with black. Between these, heaps of corn were piled-up sunshine. Against the horizon an occasional patch of woods showed the last russet and bronze of oak and maple. These things Selina saw with her beauty-loving eye, and she clasped her hands in their black cotton gloves.

"Oh, Mr. Pool!", she cried. "Mr. Pool! How beautiful it is here!"

Klaas Pool, driving his team of horses down the muddy Halsted road, was looking straight ahead, his eyes fastened seemingly on an invisible spot, between the off-horse's ears. His as not the kind of brain that acts quickly, nor was his body's mechanism the sort that quickly responds to that brain's message. His eyes were china-blue in a round red face that was covered with a stubble of stiff golden hair. His round moon of a head was set low and solidly between his great shoulders, so that as he began to turn it now, slowly, you marveled at the process and waited fearfully to hear a creak. He was turning his head toward Selina, but keeping his gaze on the spot between his horse's ears. Evidently the head and the eyes revolved by quite distinct processes. Now he faced Selina almost directly. His pale blue eyes showed incomprehension.

"Beautiful?", he echoed, in puzzled interrogation. "What is beautiful?"

Selina's slim arms flashed out from the swathings of cloak, shawl, and muffler and were flung wide in a gesture that embraced the landscape on which the late afternoon sun was casting a glow peculiar to that lake region, all rose and golden and mist-shimmering.

"This! The—the cabbages."

A slow-dawning film of fun crept over the blue of Klaas Pool's stare. This film spread almost imperceptibly so that it fluted his broad nostrils, met and widened his full lips, reached and agitated his massive shoulders, tickled the round belly, so that all Klaas Pool, from his eyes to his waist, was rippling and shaking with slow, solemn, heavy Dutch mirth.

"Cabbages is beautiful!" his round pop eyes staring at her in a fixity of glee. "Cabbages is beautiful!" His silent laughter now rose and became audible in a rich throaty chortle. It was plain that laughter, with Klaas Pool, was not a thing to be lightly dismissed, once raised. "Cabbages—" he choked a little, and spluttered, overcome.

Selina laughed, too, even while she protested his laughter. "But they are!" she insisted. "They are beautiful. Like jade and Burgundy. No, like—uh—like—what's that in—like chrysoprase and porphyry. All those fields of cabbages and the corn and the beet-tops together look like Persian patches."

Which was, certainly, no way for a new school teacher to talk to a Holland truck gardener driving his team along the dirt road on his way to High Prairie. But then, Selina remember, had read Byron at seventeen.

Klaas Pool knew nothing of chrysoprase and porphyry. Nor of Byron. Nor, for that matter, of jade and Burgundy. But he did know cabbages, both green and red. He knew cabbage from seed to sauerkraut; he knew and grew varieties from the sturdy Flat Dutch to the early Wakefield. But that they were beautiful; that they looked like jewels; that they lay like Persian patches, had never entered his head, and rightly. What has the head of a cabbage, or for that matter, of a robust, soil-stained, toiling Dutch truck farmer to do with nonsense like chrysoprase, with jade, with Burgundy, with Persian patterns!

(Continued next week)

She Read Absorbedly Books Found in Boarding House Parlors.

Bachelor's Joy

"This may seem peculiar," said a bachelor, "but I haven't a single key among my possessions. I live in a hotel, I have no car, the lock on my suitcase is broken, the janitor opens the office where I work, and, in fact, I have no occasion, during an entire day, to use a key of any description. And when I see some married man who is in business struggling to pick out the right key to fit some of his many holdings, I feel lucky. I really believe my bachelority is compensated in the fact that I don't have to go about carrying several pounds of keys."