SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—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, becomes a school-teacher.

The horses clopped down the heavy country road. Now and again the bulk beside Selina was agitated silently, as before. And from between the golden fuzz of stubble beard she would hear, "Cabbages! Cabbages is—" But she did not feel offended. She could not have been offended at anything today. For in spite of her recent tragedy, her nineteen years, her loneliness, the terrifying thought of this new home to which she was going, among strangers, she was conscious of a warm thrill of elation, of excitement—of adventure! That was it. "The whole thing's just a grand adventure," Simeon Peake had said. Selina gave a little bounce of anticipation. She was doing a revolutionary and daring thing; a thing that the Vermont and now, fortunately, inaccessible Peakes would have regarded with horror. For equipment she had youth, curiosity, a steel-strong frame; one brown lady's-cloth, one wine-red cashmere; four hundred and ninety-seven dollars; and a gay, adventurous spirit that was never to die, though it led her into curious places and she often found, at the end, only a trackless waste from which she had to retrace her steps, painfully. But always, to her, red and green cabbages were to be jade and Burgundy, chrysoprase and porphyry. Life has no weapon against a woman like that.

Klaas Pool was a school director. She was to live at his house. Perhaps she should not have said that about the cabbages. So now she drew herself up primly and tried to appear the school teacher, and succeeded in looking as severe as a white pansy.

"Ahem!" (a cough, clearly that). "You have three children, haven't you, Mr. Pool? They'll all be my pupils?"

Klaas Pool ruminated on this. He concentrated so that a slight frown marred the serenity of his brow. In this double question of hers, an attempt to give the conversation a dignified turn, she had apparently created some difficulty for her host. He was trying to shake his head two ways at the same time. This gave it a rotary motion. Selina saw, with amazement, that he was attempting to nod negation and confirmation at once.

"You mean you haven't—or they're not?—or—?"

"I have got three children. All will not be your pupils." There was something final, unshakable in his delivery of this.

"Dear me! Why not? Which ones won't. Do tell me which ones will and which ones won't."

"Geertje goes to school. Jozina goes to school. Roelf works by the farm."

"How old is Roelf?" She was being school teacherly again.

"Roelf is twelve."

"Twelve! And no longer at school! But why not?"

"Roelf he works by the farm."

"Doesn't Roelf like school?"

"But sure."

"Don't you think he ought to go to school?"

"But sure."

Having begun, she could not go back. "Doesn't your wife want Roelf to go to school any more?"

"Maartje? But sure."

She gathered herself together; hurled herself behind the next question. "Then why doesn't he go to school, for pity's sake?"

Klaas Pool's pale blue eyes were fixed on the spot between the horse's ears. His face was serene, placid, patient.

"Roelf he works by the farm."

Selina subsided, beaten.

Dusk was coming on. The lake mist came drifting across the prairie and hung, a pearly haze, over the frost-nipped stubble and the leafless trees. It caught the last light in the sky and held it, giving to fields, trees, black earth, to the man seated stolidly beside the girl, and to the face of the girl herself an opalescent glow very wonderful to see. Selina, seeing it, opened her lips to exclaim again; and then, remembering, closed them. She had learned her first lesson in High Prairie.

The Klaas Pools lived in a typical High Prairie house. They had passed a score like it in the dusk. These sturdy Holland-Americans had built here in Illinois after the pattern of the squat houses that dot the lowlands about Amsterdam, Haarlem and Rotterdam. A row of pollards stood stiffly by the roadside. Yard and dwelling had a geometrical neatness like that of a toy house in a set of playthings.

Peering down over the high wheel Selina waited for Klaas Pool to assist her in alighting. He seemed to have no such thought. Having jumped down,

Selina Stood Looking About Her in the Dim Light, a Very Small Figure in a Very Large World.

he was throwing empty crates and boxes out of the back of the wagon. So Selina, gathering her shawls and cloak about her, clambered down the side of the wheel and stood looking about her in the dim light, a very small figure in a very large world. Klaas Pool had opened the barn door. Now he returned and slapped one of the horses smartly on the flank. The team trotted obediently off to the barn. He picked up her little hide-bound trunk. She took her satchel. The yard was quite dark now. As Klaas Pool opened the kitchen door the red mouth that was the open draught in the kitchen stove grinned a toothy welcome at them.

A woman stood over the stove, a fork in her hand. The kitchen was clean, but disorderly, with the disorder that comes of pressure of work. There was a not unpleasant smell of cooking. Selina sniffed it hungrily. The woman turned to face them. Selina stared.

This, she thought, must be some other—an old woman—his mother, perhaps. But: "Maartje, here is school teacher," said Klaas Pool. Selina put out her hand to meet the other woman's hand, rough, hard, calloused. Her own, touching it, was like satin against a pine board. Maartje smiled, and you saw her broken discolored teeth. She pushed back the sparse hair from her high forehead, fumbled a little, shyly, at the collar of her clean blue calico dress.

"Pleased to meet you," Maartje said, primly. "Make you welcome." Then, as Pool stamped out to the yard, slamming the door behind him, "Pool he could have come with you by the front way, too. Lay off your things." Selina began to remove the wrappings that swathed her—the muffler, the shawl, the cloak. Now she stood, a slim, incongruously elegant little figure in that kitchen. The brown lady's cloth was very tight and basqued above, very flounced and bustled below. "My, how you are young!" cried Maartje. She moved nearer, as if impelled, and fingered the stuff of Selina's gown. And as she did this Selina suddenly saw that she, too, was young. The bad teeth, the thin hair, the careless dress, the littered kitchen, the harassed frown—above all these, standing out clearly, appeared the look of a girl.

"Why, I do believe she's not more than twenty-eight!" Selina said to herself in a kind of panic. "I do believe she's not more than twenty-eight."

She had been aware of the two pigtailed heads appearing and vanishing in the doorway of the next room. Evidently her hostess was distressed because the school teacher's formal entrance had not been made by way of parlor instead of kitchen. She followed Maartje Pool into the front room. Behind the stove, tittering, were two yellow-haired little girls, Geertje and Jozina, of course. Selina went over to them, smiling. "Which is Geertje?" she asked. "And which Jozina." But at this the titters became squeals. They retired behind the round black bulwark of the wood-burner, overcome.

Selina's quick glance encompassed the room. In the window were a few hardy plants in pots on a green-painted wooden rack. There was a sofa with a wrinkled calico cover; three rocking chairs; some stark crayons of incredibly hard-featured Dutch ancients on the wall. It was all neat, stiff, unlovely. But Selina had known too many years of boarding-house ugliness to be offended at this.

Maartje had lighted a small glass-bowled lamp. A steep, uncarpeted stairway, enclosed, led off the sitting room. Up this Maartje Pool, talking, led the way to Selina's bedroom. Selina was to learn that the farm woman, often inarticulate through lack of companionship, becomes a torrent of talk when opportunity presents itself.

A narrow, dim, close-smelling hallway, uncarpeted. At the end of it a door opening into the room that was to be Selina's. As its chill struck her to the marrow three objects caught her eyes. The bed, a huge and not unhandsome walnut mausoleum, reared its somber height almost to the room's top. The mattress of straw and cornhusks was unworthy of this edifice, but over it Mrs. Pool had mercifully placed a feather bed, stitched and quilted, so that Selina lay soft and warm through the winter. Along one wall stood a low chest so richly brown as to appear black. The front panel of this was curiously carved. Selina stooped before it and for the second time that day said: "How beautiful!" then looked quickly round at Maartje Pool as though fearful of finding her laughing as Klaas Pool had laughed. But Mrs. Pool's face reflected the glow in her own. She came over to Selina and stooped with her over the chest, holding the lamp so that its yellow flame lighted up the scrolls and tendrils of the carved surface. With one discolored forefinger she traced the bold flourishes on the panel. "See? How it makes out letters?"

Selina peered closer. "Why, sure enough! This first one's an S!"

Maartje was kneeling before the chest now. "Sure an S. For Sophia. It is a Holland bride's chest. And here is K. And here is big D. It makes Sophia Kroon DeVries. It is anyways two hundred years. My mother she gave it to me when I was married, and her mother she gave it to her when she was married, and her mother gave it to her when she was married, and her—"

"I should think so!" exclaimed Selina, rather meaninglessly; but stemming the torrent. "What's in it? Anything? There ought to be bride's clothes in it, yellow with age."

"It is!" cried Maartje Pool and gave a little bounce that imperiled the lamp.

"No!" The two on their knees sat smiling at each other, wide-eyed, like schoolgirls.

"Here—wait." Maartje Pool thrust the lamp into Selina's hand, raised the lid of the chest, dived expertly into its depths amidst a great rustling of old newspapers and emerged, red-faced with a Dutch basque and voluminous skirt of silk; an age-yellow cap whose wings, stiff with embroidery, stood out grandly on either side; a pair of wooden shoes, stained terra-cotta like the sails of the Vollendam fishing boats, and carved from toe to heel in a delicate and intricate pattern. A bridal gown, a bridal cap, bridal shoes.

"Well!" said Selina, with the feeling of a little girl in a rich attic on a rainy day. She clasped her hands. "May I dress up in it sometime?"

Maartje Pool, folding the garments hastily, looked shocked and horrified. "Never must anybody dress up in a bride's dress, only to get married. It brings bad luck." Then, as Selina stroked the stiff silken folds of the skirt with a slim and caressing forefinger: "So you get married to a High Prairie Dutchman I let you wear it." At this absurdity they both laughed again. Selina thought that this school-teaching-venture was starting out very well. She would have such things to tell her father—then she remembered. She shivered a little as she stood up now. There surged over her a great wave of longing for her father—for the theater treats, for his humorous philosophical drawl, for the Chicago streets, and the ugly Chicago houses; for Julie; for Miss Fister's school; for anything and any one that was accustomed, known, and therefore dear. She had a horrible premonition that she was going to cry, began to blink very fast, turned a little blindly in the dim light and caught sight of the room's third arresting object. A blue-black cylinder of tin sheeting, like a stove and yet unlike. It was polished like the length of pipe in the sitting-room below. Indeed, it was evidently a giant flower of this stem.

"What's that?" demanded Selina, pointing.

Maartje Pool, depositing the lamp on the little wash-stand preparatory to leaving, smiled pridefully. "Drum."

"Drum?"

"For heat your room." Selina touched it. It was icy. "When there is fire," Mrs. Pool added, hastily. Selina was to learn that its heating powers were mythical. Even when the stove in the sitting room was blazing away with a cheerful roar none of the glow communicated itself to the drum. It remained as coolly indifferent to the blasts breathed upon it as a girl hotly besieged by an unwelcome lover.

"Maartje!" roared a voice from belowstairs. The voice of the hungry male. There was wafted up, too, a faint smell of scorching. Then came sounds of a bumping and thumping along the narrow stairway.

"Og heden!" cried Maartje, in a panic, her hands high in air. She was off.

Left alone in her room Selina unlocked her trunk and took from it two photographs—one of a mild-looking man with his hat a little on one side, the other of a woman who might have been a twenty-five-year-old Selina, minus the courageous jaw-line. Looking about for a fitting place on which to stand these leather-framed treasures she considered the top of the chill drum, humorously, then actually placed them there, for lack of a better refuge, from which vantage point they regarded her with politely interested eyes. Perhaps they would put up a shelf for her. That would serve for her little stock of books and for the pictures as well. She was enjoying that little flush of exhilaration that comes to a woman, unpacking. She took out her neat pile of warm woolen underwear, her stout shoes. She shook out the crushed folds of the wine-colored cashmere. Now, if ever, she should have regretted its purchase. But she didn't. No one, she reflected, as she spread it rosily on the bed, possessing wine-colored cashmere could be altogether downcast.

From below stairs came the hiss of frying. Selina washed in the chill water of the basin, took down her hair and coiled it again before the swimmy little mirror over the wash-stand. She adjusted the stitched white bands of the severe collar and patted the cuffs of the brown lady's-cloth. The tight basque was fastened with buttons from throat to waist. Her fine long head rose above this trying base with such grace and dignity as to render the stiff garment beautiful. It was a day of appalling bunchiness and equally appalling tightness in dress; of panniers, galloons, plastrons, revers, bustles, all manner of lumpy bedevilment. That Selina could appear in this disfiguring garment a creature still graceful, slim, and pliant was a sheer triumph of spirit over matter.

She blew out the light now and descended the steep wooden stairway to the unlighted parlor. The door between parlor and kitchen was closed. Selina sniffed sensitively. There was pork for supper. She was to learn that there was always pork for supper.

She hesitated a moment there in the darkness. Then she opened the kitchen door. There swam out at her a haze of smoke, from which emerged round blue eyes, guttural talk, the smell of frying grease, of stable, of loam, and of woolen wash freshly brought in from the line. With an inrush of cold air that sent the blue haze into swirls the outer kitchen door opened. A boy, his arm piled high with stove-wood entered; a dark, handsome sullen boy who stared at Selina over the armload of wood. Selina stared back at him. There sprang to life between the boy of twelve and the woman of nineteen an electric current of feeling.

"Roelf," thought Selina; and even took a step toward him, inexplicably drawn.

"Hurry then with that wood there!" fretted Maartje at the stove. The boy flung the armful into the box, brushed his sleeve and coat-front mechanically, still looking at Selina.

Klaas Pool, already at table, thumped with his knife. "Sit down, teacher." Selina hesitated, looked at Maartje. Maartje was holding a frying pan aloft in one hand while with the other she thrust and poked a fresh stick of wood into the open-lidded stove. The two pigtails seated themselves at the table, set with its red-checked cloth and bone-handled cutlery. Roelf flung his cap on a wall-hook and sat down. Only Selina and Maartje remained standing. "Sit down! Sit down!" Klaas Pool said again, jovially. "Well, how is cabbages?" He chuckled and winked. A duet of titters from the pigtails. Maartje at the stove smiled; but a trifle grimly, one might have thought, watching her. Evidently Klaas had not hugged his joke in secret. Only the boy Roelf remained unsmiling. Even Selina, feeling the red mounting to her cheeks, smiled a little, nervously, and sat down with some suddenness.

Maartje Pool now thumped down on the table a great bowl of potatoes fried in grease; a platter of ham. There was bread cut in chunks. The coffee was rye, toasted in the oven, ground, and taken without sugar or cream. Of this food there was plenty. It made Mrs. Tebbitt's Monday night meal seem ambrosial. Selina's visions of chickens, oly-koeks, wild ducks, crusty crullers, and pumpkin pies vanished, never to return. She had been very hungry, but now, as she talked, nodded, smiled, she cut her food into infinitesimal bites, did not chew them so well, and despised herself for being dainty.

"Well," she thought, "it's going to be different enough, that's certain. . . . This is a vegetable farm, and they don't eat vegetables. I wonder why. . . . What a pity that she lets herself look like that, just because she's a farm woman. Her hair screwed into that knob, her skin rough and neglected. That hideous dress. Shapeless. She's not bad looking, either. A red spot on either cheek, now; and her eyes so blue. A little like those women in the Dutch pictures father took me to see in—where?—where?—New York, years ago?—yes. But that woman's face was placid. This one's strained. Why need she look like that, frowsy, horrid, old! . . . The boy is, somehow, foreign-looking — Italian. Queer. . . . They talk a good deal like some German neighbors we had in Milwaukee. They twist sentences. Literal translations from the Dutch, I suppose."

Jakob Hoogendunk, Pool's hired hand, was talking. Supper over, the men sat relaxed, pipe in mouth. Maartje was clearing the supper things, with Geertje and Jozina making a great pretense at helping. If they giggled like that in school, Selina thought, she would, in time, go mad, and knock their pigtailed heads together.

Roelf, at the table, sat poring over a book, one slim hand, chapped and gritty with rough work, outspread on the cloth. Selina noticed, without knowing she noticed, that the fingers were long, slim, and the broken nails thin and fine.

Selina wanted, suddenly, to be alone in her room—in the room that but an hour before had been a strange and terrifying chamber with its towering bed, its chill drum, its ghostly bride's chest. Now it had become a refuge, snug, safe, infinitely desirable. She turned to Mrs. Pool. "I—I think I'll go up to my room. I'm very tired. The ride, I suppose. I'm not used . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Sure," said Maartje, briskly. She had finished the supper dishes and was busy with a huge bowl, flour, a baking board. "Sure go up. I got my bread to set yet and what all."

"If I could have some hot water—"

"Roelf! Stop once that reading and show school teacher where is hot water. Geertje! Jozina! Never in my world did I see such." She cuffed a convenient pigtail by way of emphasis. A wail arose.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. Don't bother." Selina was in a sort of panic now. She wanted to be out of the room. But the boy Roelf, with quiet swiftness, had taken a battered tin pail from its hook on the wall, had lifted an iron slab at the back of the kitchen stove. A mist of steam arose. He dipped the pail into the tiny reservoir thus revealed. Then, as Selina made as though to take it, he walked past her. She heard him ascending the wooden stairway. She wanted to be after him. But first she must know the name of the book over which he had been poring. But between her and the book outspread on the table were Pool, Hoogendunk, dog, pigtails, Maartje. She pointed with a determined forefinger. "What's that book Roelf was reading?"

Maartje thumped a great ball of dough on the baking board. Her arms were white with flour. She kneaded and pummeled expertly. "Woorden boek."

Well. That meant nothing. Woorden boek. Woorden b— Dimly the meaning of the Dutch words began to come to her. But it couldn't be. She brushed past the men in the tipped-back chairs, stepped over the collie, reached across the table. Woorden—word. Boek—book. Word book. "He's reading the dictionary!" Selina said, aloud. "He's reading the dictionary!" She had the horrible feeling that she was going to laugh and cry at once; hysteria.

Selina flung a good-night over her shoulder and made for the stairway. He should have all her books. She would send to Chicago for books. She would spend her thirty dollars a month buying books for him. He had been reading the dictionary!

Roelf had placed the pail of hot water on the little wash-stand and had lighted the glass lamp. He was intent on replacing the glass chimney within the four prongs that held it firm. Downstairs, in the crowded kitchen, he had seemed quite the man. Now, in the yellow lamplight, his profile sharply outlined, she saw that he was just a small boy with tousled hair. About his cheeks, his mouth, his chin, one could even see the last faint traces of soft infantile roundness.

"He's just a little boy," thought Selina, with a quick pang. He was about to pass her now, without glancing at her, his head down. She put out her hand; touched his shoulder. He looked up at her, his face startlingly alive, his eyes blazing. It came to Selina that until now she had not heard him speak. Her hand pressed the thin stuff of his coat sleeve.

"Cabbages — fields of cabbages — what you said—they are beautiful," he stammered. He was terribly in earnest. Before she could reply he was out of the room, clattering down the stairs.

Selina stood, blinking a little.

The glow that warmed her now endured while she splashed about in the inadequate basin; took down the dark

"Fields of Cabbages—What You Said—They Are Beautiful," He Stammered.

soft masses of her hair; put on the voluminous long-sleeved, high-necked nightgown. Just before she blew out the lamp her last glimpse was of the black drum stationed like a patient eunuch in the corner; and she could smile at that; even giggle a little, what with weariness, excitement and a general feeling of being awake in a dream. But once in the vast bed she lay there utterly lost in the waves of terror and loneliness that envelop one at night in a strange house amongst strange people. She listened to the noises that came from downstairs; voices gruff, unaccustomed; shrill, high. These ceased and gave place to others less accustomed to her city-bred ears; a dog's bark and an answering one; a far-off train whistle; the dull thud of hoofs stamping on the barn floor; the wind in the bare tree branches outside the window.

Her watch—a gift from Simeon Peake on her eighteenth birthday—with the gold case all beautifully engraved with a likeness of a gate, and a church, and a waterfall and a bird, linked together with spirals and flourishes of the most graceful description, was ticking away companionably under her pillow. She felt for it, took it out and held it in her palm, under her cheek, for comfort.

She knew she would not sleep that night. She knew she would not sleep—

She awoke to a clear, cold November dawn; children's voices; the neighing of horses; a great sizzling and hissing, and scent of frying bacon; a clucking and squawking in the barnyard. It was six o'clock. Selina's first day as a school teacher. In a little more than two hours she would be facing a whole roomful of round-eyed Geertjes and Jozinas and Roelfs. The bedroom was cruelly cold. As she threw the bedclothes aside Selina decided that it took an appalling amount of courage—this life that Simeon Peake had called a great adventure.

Chapter III

Every morning throughout November it was the same. At six o'clock: "Miss Peake! Oh, Miss Peake!"

"I'm up!" Selina would call in what she meant to be a gay voice, through chattering teeth.

"You better come down and dress where is warm here by the stove."

Peering down the perforations in the floor-hole through which the parlor chimney swelled so proudly into the drum, Selina could vaguely descry Mrs. Pool stationed just below, her gaze upturned.

That first morning, on hearing this invitation, Selina had been rocked between horror and mirth. "I'm not cold, really. I'm almost dressed. I'll be down directly."

Maartje Pool must have sensed some of the shock in the girl's voice; or, perhaps, even some of the laughter. "Pool and Jakob are long out already cutting. Here back of the stove you can dress warm."

Shivering and tempted though she was, Selina had set her will against it. "I won't go down," she said to herself, shaking with the cold. "I won't come down to dressing behind the kitchen stove like a—like a peasant in one of those dreadful Russian novels. . . . That sounds stuck up and horrid. . . . The Pools are good and kind and decent. . . . But I won't come down to huddling behind the stove with a bundle of underwear in my arms. Oh, dear, this corset's like a casing of ice.

"But I won't dress behind the kitchen stove!" declared Selina, glaring meanwhile at that hollow pretense, the drum. She even stuck her tongue out at it (only nineteen, remember!).

When she thought back, years later, on that period of her High Prairie experience, stoves seemed to figure with absurd prominence in her memory. That might well be. A stove changed the whole course of her life.

From the first, the schoolhouse stove was her bete noir. Out of the welter of that first year it stood, huge and menacing, a black tyrant. The High Prairie schoolhouse in which Selina taught was a little more than a mile up the road beyond the Pool farm. She came to know that road in all its moods—ice-locked, drifted with snow, wallowing in mud. School began at half-past eight. After her first week Selina had the mathematics of her early morning reduced to the least common denominator. Up at six. A plunge into the frigid garments; breakfast of bread, cheese, sometimes bacon, always rye coffee without cream or sugar. On with the cloak, muffler, hood, mittens, galoshes. The lunch box in bad weather. Up the road to the schoolhouse, battling the prairie wind that whipped the tears into the eyes, plowing the drifts, slipping on the hard ruts and icy ridges in dry weather. Excellent at nineteen. As she flew down the road in sun or rain, in wind or snow, her mind's eye was fixed on the stove. The schoolhouse reached, her numbed fingers wrestled with the rusty lock. The door opened, there smote her the schoolroom smell—a mingling of dead ashes, kerosene, unwashed bodies, dust, mice, chalk, stove-wood, lunch crumbs, mold, slate that has been washed with saliva. Into this Selina rushed, untying her muffler as she entered. In the little vestibule there was a box piled with chunks of stove-wood and another heaped with dried corn-cobs. Alongside this a can of kerosene. The cobs served as kindling. A dozen or more of these you soaked with kerosene and stuffed into the maw of the rusty iron pot-bellied stove. A match. Up flared the corn-cobs. Now was the moment for a small stick of wood; another to keep it company. Shut the door. Draughts. Dampers. Smoke. Suspense. A blaze, then a crackle. The wood has caught. In with a chunk now. A wait. Another chunk. Slam the door. The schoolhouse fire is started for the day. As the room thawed gradually Selina removed layers of outer garments. By the time the children arrived the room was livable.

(Continued next week)

Uneven Scales of Justice

Man believes himself always greater than he is, and is esteemed less than he is worth.—Goethe.

More Wisdom

The supply of honesty is too large for any one man to corner.—Boston Transcript.