

SO BIG

(BY EDNA FERBER)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARK AGNEW



SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Introducing "So Big" (Dirk DeJong) in his infancy. And his mother, Selma DeJong, daughter of Simon Peake, gambler and gentleman of fortune. Her life, in young womanhood in Chicago in 1870, has been unconventional, somewhat seamy, but generally joyous. An ambitious, her husband is August Hempel, butcher. Simon is killed in a quarrel that is not his and Selma, nineteen years old and practically destitute, becomes a school-teacher.

CHAPTER II—Selma secures a position as teacher at the High Prairie school, in the outskirts of Chicago, living at the home of a truck farmer, Klas Pool. In Koof, twelve years old, son of Klas, Selma perceives a kindred spirit, a lover of beauty, like herself.

CHAPTER III—The monotonous life of a country school-teacher at that time is Selma's, brightened somewhat by the companionship of the sensitive, artistic boy Koof.

CHAPTER IV—Selma hears gossip concerning the affection of the "Widow Paarlberg," rich and good-looking, for Pervus DeJong, poor truck farmer, who is responsible to the widow's attractions. For a community "social" Selma prepares a lunch basket, but her list of simple proportions, which is "sensible" according to custom. The smallness of the lunch box excites derision, and in a series of run the bidding becomes spirited. DeJong finally secures it for \$10, a ridiculously high price. Over their lunch basket, which Selma and DeJong share together, the school-teacher arranges to instruct the good-natured farmer, whose education has been neglected.

CHAPTER V—Propinquity, in their positions of "teacher and pupil," and Selma's loneliness in her unconventional surroundings, lead to mutual affection. Pervus DeJong wins Selma's consent to be his wife.

CHAPTER VI—Selma becomes Mrs. DeJong, a "farmer's wife," with all the hardships unavoidable at that time. Dirk is born. Selma of Vermont stock, businesslike and shrewd, has plans for building up the farm, which are ridiculed by her husband. Maartje Pool, Klas's wife, dies, and after the requisite delay, interval Klas marries the "Widow Paarlberg." The boy Koof, sixteen years old now, leaves his home to make his way to France and study, his ambition being to be—

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 dogmatically and grinning the broadly complacent grin of the conquering jester. But he was, after all, a dull fellow, and there was in Selma 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, Selma 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 dashes 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 yeh clay. Hard clay soil."

Selma had the answer to that. "I know it. You've got to use the 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 Selma found surprisingly infuriating. "Well, well, well! School teacher is a farmer now, huh? I bet even Widow Paarlberg 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," Selma 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 Selma. "It isn't! The book says clay land 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 flooding gait. Pervus stared straight ahead down

the road between his horse's ears much as Klas Pool had done so maddeningly on Selma'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!" Selma beat her knee with an impatient 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 unprofitable; 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. Bath, 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. Selma waited while he tended the horse. It was scarcely dawn when the trading began. Selma, 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. Selma learned much that first year, and the second, but she said little. She kept the house in order—rough work, and unless—and she managed, untrusting, 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 Roel's faithful tending, the flower beds themselves, planted with such hopes, would have perished for lack of care.

Roel 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 Selma had actually rifled her precious little bank board—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 Selma. 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 Roel 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.

Selma 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 come 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 mastery 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. Selma 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-little prairie farmhouse with a husband who looked upon conversation as a convenience, not a pastime. She learned much that winter about the utter serfdom 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?

The two years following Dirk's birth were always somewhat vague in Selma'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 Selma'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. Selma 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.

Selma 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 Klas Pool farm and Josina had brought it to her. Seated on her kitchen steps in her calico dress she read it.

"Darling Selma—

"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 didn't 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—trying to pack, you may imagine—and there were your two letters addressed to me. She had never destroyed them. Poor mamma. . .

"Well, dear Selma, 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. . .

Selma, 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 queerly 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."

Selma, holding the letter in her hand, imagined.

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

Selma had regained health and vigor after two years of wretchedness. She felt steel-strong and even shapeful; 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 fields is 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 what 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 low throne to dig and burrow in the soil, black dirt. He even made as though to help his mother, pulling at the roots and things with tulle 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 Selma'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 obstetrician. 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. Selma, 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 Selma 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 Klas Pool's black trousers (he had been in the yard to see to the horse); quiet the loud wailing of Geertje and Josina; pass her gauged hand over Roel's wide-staring eyes, wipe the film of dust from the parlor table that had never known a speck during her regime.

"You can't run far enough," Maartje had said. "Except you stop living you can't run away from life."

Well, she had run far enough this time.

Roel was sixteen now, Geertje twelve, Josina eleven. What would this household do now, Selma wondered, without the woman who had been so faithful a slave to it? Who would keep the pigstalls—no longer giggling—in clean gingham and decent square-toed shoes? Who, when Klas broke out in rumbling Dutch wrath against what he termed Roel's "dumb" ways, would say, "Og, Pool, leave the boy alone once. He does nothing." Who would keep Klas himself in order; cook his meals, wash his clothes, iron his shirts, take a pride in the great ruddy childlike giant?

Klas answered these questions just nine months later by marrying the Widow Paarlberg. High Prairie was rocked with surprise. For months this marriage was the talk of the district. So gossable was High Prairie's curiosity that every scrap of news was swallowed at a gulp. When the word went round of Roel's flight from the farm, no one knew where, it served only as sauce to the great dish of gossip.

Selma had known. Pervus was away at the market when Roel had knocked at the farmhouse door one night at eight, had turned the knob and entered, as usual. But there was nothing of the usual about his appearance. He wore his best suit—his first suit of store clothes, bought at the time of his mother's funeral. It never had fitted him; now it was grotesquely small for him. He had shot up amazingly in the last eight or nine months. Yet there was nothing of the ridiculous about him as he stood there before her now, tall, lean, dark. He put down his cheap yellow suitcase.

"Well, Roel?"

"I am going away. I couldn't stay."

She nodded. "Where?"

"Away, Chicago maybe." He was terribly moved, so he made his tone casual. "They came home last night. I have got some books that belong to you." He made as though to open the suitcase.

"No, no! Keep them."

"Good-by."

"Good-by, Roel." She took the boy's dark head in her two hands and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him. He turned to go. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute." She had a few dollars—in quarters, dimes, half dollars—perhaps ten dollars in all—hidden away in a canister on the shelf. She reached for it. But when she came back with the box in her hand he was gone.

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The completion of the new Chicago Union Station marks a noteworthy accomplishment in the history of important engineering undertakings, from which travelers from all parts of the United States will derive pleasure and benefit.

The station is without doubt one of the finest and most efficiently designed railroad terminals in the world. It forms a vital link in the realization of the "Chicago City Beautiful Plan." Simplicity, accessibility and convenience for the traveling public are the essential virtues of the new terminal. Rest and recreation rooms, ticket offices, barber shop, dining rooms, stores of various kinds, and almost every convenience known to travelers, are to be found on the one level, no steps to climb.

The main station is a low monumental type of building with a row of massive columns of classic design along the entire east front. Once inside, the traveler finds himself in a gigantic waiting room more than 100 feet high and brilliantly lighted through skylights in the great arch ceiling. Colonnades enclose the room, the walls of which are patterned after the architecture of ancient Rome. Bordering this room are the ultra-complete passenger terminal facilities. An observation railway terminal design is a conference room accommodating 225 people, which is available, without charge, to patrons of the Union Station lines for conferences and other meetings.

To give some idea of the immensity of the new station, it may be stated that the main building covers an area of about three acres with a concrete covering about square feet. The entire terminal facilities cover more than 25 acres and will expedite the prompt and satisfactory handling of 20,000 passengers, 400 tons of baggage and 200 trains daily with room for future expansion. Fifteen acres of glass were used in the various coverings over the train sheds, which extend more than 1,200 feet beyond the main structure. A total of 27,000 tons of structural steel, 275,000 cubic feet of Indiana limestone and 20,000 cubic feet of granite were used in the station building and annexes. The foundation consists of 400 cylindrical concrete piers from four to ten feet in diameter, reaching to a depth of more than 60 feet below the level of the Chicago river.

Those who have had the privilege of inspecting the new station premises it is a marvel to behold construction and are urging their friends to see it on their next visit to Chicago.

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