

**SO BIG**



By  
**EDNA FERBER**

122 Broadway, New York

**SYNOPSIS**

**CHAPTER I**—Introducing "The High Prairie" to the reader. The story is set in the high prairie country of Illinois, where the author has lived for many years. The story is a love story, but it is not a simple one. It is a story of the life of a young girl, Selma, who grows up in a prairie farmhouse, and of her love for a young man, Dirk, who comes to her from the city.

**CHAPTER II**—Selma is a girl of sixteen, and she is a very beautiful girl. She is the daughter of a prairie farmer, and she has a very good education. She is a very kind and generous girl, and she is very popular among her friends.

**CHAPTER III**—Selma is a very kind and generous girl, and she is very popular among her friends. She is a very beautiful girl, and she is the daughter of a prairie farmer.

**CHAPTER IV**—Selma is a very kind and generous girl, and she is very popular among her friends. She is a very beautiful girl, and she is the daughter of a prairie farmer.

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At eighteen it had been Midwest university for Dirk. High Prairie heard that Dirk DeJong was going away to college. A neighbor's son said, "Going to Wisconsin? Agricultural college there?"

"My god, no!" Dirk had answered. He said this to Selma, laughing. But she had not laughed.

"I'd like to take that course myself, if you must know. They say it's wonderful." She looked at him, suddenly. "Dirk, you wouldn't like to take it, would you? To go to Madison, I mean. Is that what you'd like?"

He stared. "Me? No! . . . Unless you want me to, mother. Then I would, gladly. I hate your working like this on the farm, while I go to school. It makes me feel kind of mean, having my mother working for me. The other fellows—"

"I'm doing the work I'm interested in, for the person I love best in the world. I'd be just—unhappy—without the farm. If the city creeps up on me here, as they predict it will, I don't know what I shall do."

"Just you wait till I'm successful. Then there'll be no more working for you."

"What do you mean by 'successful,' Selma?" She had not called him that in years. But now the old nickname came to her tongue perhaps because they were speaking of his future, his success. "What do you mean by 'successful,' Selma?"

"Rich. Lots of money."

"No, no, Dirk! No! That's not success. Rich—the thing Rich does—that's success."

"Oh, well, if you have money enough you can buy the things he makes, and have 'em. That's almost as good as it is."

Dirk connected his studies at Midwest university in the autumn of 1909. His first year was none too agreeable, as is usually the case in first years. He got on well, though. Before the end of the first semester he was popular. He had great natural charm of manner. The men liked him, and the girls, too. He rarely "cut" a class. He would have felt that this was unfair and dishonest to his mother. Some of his fellow students joked about this faithfulness to his classes. "Person would think you were an Uncle-Sam," they said.

The Uncle-Sams were made up, for the most part, of earnest and rather middle-aged students whose education was a delayed blessing. They usually were not enrolled for a full course, or were taking double work fearfully.

The professors found them a shade too eager, perhaps; too inquiring; demanding too much. They stayed after class and asked innumerable questions. They babbled with interrogation. They were prone to hold forth in the classroom. "Well, I have found it to be the case in my experience that—"

But the professor preferred to do the lecturing himself. If there was to be any experience related it should come from the teacher's platform, not the student's chair.

In his first year Dirk made the almost fatal mistake of being rather friendly with one of these Uncle-Sams—a female Uncle-Sam, a large, good-natured, plump girl, about thirty-eight, with a shiny skin which she never powdered and thick hair that exuded a disagreeable odor of oil. She was sympathetic and jolly, but her clothes were a fright. The Uncle-Sams would have told you, and no matter how cold the day there was always a half-smile of stain showing under her armpits. She had a really fine mind, quick, eager, balanced, almost judicial. She knew just which questions were valuable, which useless. Her name was Schwengauer—Mattie Schwengauer. Terrible!

She and Dirk got in the way of walking out of the classroom together, across the campus. She told him something of herself.

"Four people farmers!" Surprised, she looked at his well-cut clothes, his slim, strong, unmarked hands, his smart shoes and cap. "Why, so are mine. Iowa." She pronounced it long. "I lived on the farm all my life till I was twenty-seven. I always wanted to go away to school, but we never had the money and I couldn't come to town to such because I was the oldest, and Ma was sickly after Emma—that's the youngest—there are nine of us—was born. Ma was anxious I should go and Pa was willing, but it couldn't be. No fault of mine. One year the summer would be so hot, with no rain hardly from spring till fall, and the corn would just dry up on the stalks, like paper. The next year it would be so wet the seed would rot in the ground. Ma died when I was twenty-six, the little was all pretty well grown up by that time. Pa married again in a year. I came to Chicago about five years ago. . . . I've done all kinds of work. I guess, except digging in a coal mine. I'd have done that if I'd had it."

He told her all this ingeniously, simply. Dirk felt drawn toward her, sorry for her. She was a nature quick to sympathy.

She told her mother about her. Selma was deeply interested and asked, "Do you think she'd spend some Saturday and Sunday here with us on the farm? She could come with you on Friday and go back Sunday night if she wanted to. Or stay until Monday morning and go back with you. There's the spare room, all quiet and cool. She could do as she liked."

Mattie came one Friday night. It was the end of October, and Indian summer, the most beautiful time of the year on the Illinois prairie. About the countryside for miles was the look of homeliness, of plenty, of

prophecy fulfilled as when a beautiful and fertile woman having borne her children and found them good, now sits serene-eyed, gracious, ample-bosomed, satisfied.

Into the face of Mattie Schwengauer there came a certain glow. When she and Selma clasped hands Selma stared at her rather curiously, as though startled. Afterward she said to Dirk, aside: "But I thought you said she was ugly!"

"Well, she is, or—well, isn't she?" "Look at her!"

Mattie Schwengauer was talking to Meena Bras, the houseworker. She was standing with her hands on her ample hips her fine head thrown back, her eyes alight, her lips smiling so that you saw her strong square teeth. Something had amused Mattie. She laughed. It was the laugh of a young girl, care-free, relaxed, at ease.

For two days Mattie did as she pleased, which meant she helped pull vegetables in the garden, milk the cows, saddle the horses; rode them without a saddle in the pasture.

"It got so I hated to do all those things on the farm," she said, laughing a little shamefacedly. "I guess it was because I had to. But now it comes back to me and I enjoy it because it's natural to me, I suppose. Anyway, I'm having a grand time. Mrs. DeJong. The grandest time I ever had in my life." Her face was radiant and almost beautiful.

"If you want me to believe that," said Selma, "you'll come again."

But Mattie Schwengauer never did come again.

Early the next week one of the university students approached Dirk. He was a Junior, very influential in his class, and a member of the fraternity to which Dirk was practically pledged. A decidedly desirable frat.

"Say, look here, DeJong. I want to talk to you a minute. Uh, you've got to cut out that girl—Swinegour or whatever her name is—or it's all off with the fellows in the frat."

"What do you mean! Out! What's the matter with her?"

"Matter! She's Uncle-Sam, isn't she! And do you know what the story is? She told it herself as an economy list to a girl who was working her way through. She bathes with her union suit and white stockings on to save laundry soap. Scrubs 'em on her! 'S the God's truth."

Into Dirk's mind there flashed a picture of this large girl in her tight knitted union suit and her white stockings sitting in a tub half full of water and scrubbing them and herself simultaneously. A comic picture, and a revolting one. Pathetic, too, but he would not admit that.

"Imagine! The frat brother-to-be was saying, 'Well, we can't have a fellow who goes around with a girl like that. You got to cut her out, see! Completely. The fellows won't stand for it.'"

Dirk had a mental picture of himself striking a noble attitude and saying, "Won't stand for it, huh! She's worth more than the whole caboodle of you put together. And you can all go to—"

Instead he said, vaguely, "Oh, Well, Uh—"

Dirk changed his seat in the classroom, avoided Mattie's eyes, shot out of the door the minute class was over. One day he saw her coming toward him on the campus and he sensed that she intended to stop and speak to him—hide him laughingly, perhaps. He quickened his pace, swerved a little to one side, and as he passed lifted his cap and nodded, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Out of the tail of his eye he could see her standing a moment irresolutely in the path.

He got into the fraternity. The fellows liked him from the first. Selma said once or twice, "Why don't you bring that nice Mattie home with you again some time soon? Such a nice girl—woman, rather. A fine mind, too. She'll make something of herself. You'll see. Bring her next week, h'm?"

Dirk shuffled, coughed, looked away. "Oh, I dunno. Haven't seen her lately. Guess she's busy with another crowd, or something."

He tried not to think of what he had done, for he was honestly ashamed. Terribly ashamed. So he said to himself, "Oh, what of it!" and hid his shame.

A month later Selma again said, "I wish you'd invite Mattie for Thanksgiving dinner. Unless she's going home, which I doubt. We'll have turkey and pumpkin pie and all the rest of it. She'll love it."

"Mattie?" He had actually forgotten her name.

"Yes, of course. Isn't that right? Mattie Schwengauer?"

"Oh, her. Uh—well—I haven't been seeing her lately."

"Oh, Dirk, you haven't quarreled with that nice girl?"

He decided to have it out. "Listen, mother. There are a lot of different crowds at the U, see? And Mattie doesn't belong to any of 'em. You wouldn't understand, but it's like this. She—she's smart and jolly and everything, but she just doesn't belong. Being friends with a girl like that doesn't set you anywhere. Besides, she isn't a girl. She's a middle-aged woman, when you come to think of it."

"Doesn't get you anywhere?" Selma's tone was cool and even. Then as the boy's gaze did not meet hers, "Why, Dirk DeJong, Mattie Schwengauer is one of my reasons for sending you to a university. She's what I call part of a university education. Just talking to her is learning something valuable. I don't mean that you wouldn't naturally prefer pretty young girls of your own age to go around with; and all. It would be queer if you didn't. But this Mattie—why, she's life. Do you remember that story of when she washed dishes in the kosher restaurant over on Twelfth

street and the proprietor used to rent out dishes and cutlery for Irish and Italian neighborhood weddings where they had pork and goodness knows what all, and then use them next day in the restaurant, again for the kosher customers?"

Selma wrote Mattie, inviting her to the farm for Thanksgiving, and Mattie answered gratefully, declining. "I shall always remember you," she wrote in that letter, "with love."

**Chapter XI**

Throughout Dirk's Freshman year there were, for him, no heartening, informal, mellow talks before the wood-fire in the book-lined study of some professor whose wisdom was such a mixture of classic lore and modernism as to be an inspiration to his listeners. Midwest professors delivered their lectures in the classroom in the past ten or twenty years and as they would deliver them until death or a trustees' meeting should remove them. The younger professors and instructors in natty gray suits and brightly colored ties made a point of being unpedantic in the classroom and rather odorous. They posed as being one of the fellows; would dashingly use a bit of slang to create a laugh from the boys and an adoring titter from the girls. Dirk somehow preferred the pedants to these. When these had to give an informal talk to the men before some university event they would start by saying, "Now listen, fellows—". At the dances they were not above "rushing" the pretty coeds.

Two of Dirk's classes were conducted by women professors. They were well on toward middle age, or past it; dedicated women. Only their eyes were alive. Their clothes were of some indefinite dark stuff, brown or drab-gray; their hair lifeless; their hands long, bony, unvital. They had seen classes and classes and classes. A roomful of fresh young faces that appeared briefly only to be replaced by another roomful of fresh young faces like round white pencil marks manipulated momentarily on a slate, only to be sponged off to give way to other round white marks. Of the two women one—the elder—was occasionally likely to flare into sudden life; a flame in the ashes of a burned-out grate. She had humor and a certain caustic wit, qualities that had managed miraculously to survive even the deadly and numbing effects of thirty years in the classroom. A fine mind, and inelastically hampered by the restrictions of a conventional community and the soul of a congenial spinster.

Under the guidance of these Dirk chafed and grew restless. Miss Euphemia Hollingswood had a way of emphasizing every third or fifth syllable, bringing her voice down hard on it.

He found himself waiting for that emphasis and shrinking from it as from a sledge-hammer blow. It hurt his head.

Miss Lodge droned. She approached a word with a maddening up-uh-uh-uh in the up-uh-uh face of the up-uh-uh-uh geometrical situation of the up-uh-uh-uh.

He shifted restlessly in his chair, found his hands clenched into fists, and took refuge in watching the shadow cast by an oak branch outside the window on a patch of sunlight against the blackboard behind her.

During the early spring Dirk and Selma talked things over again, seated before their own fireplace in the High

Prarie farmhouse. Selma had had that fireplace built five years before and her love of it amounted to worship. She had it lighted always on winter evenings and in the spring when the nights were sharp. In Dirk's absence she would sit before it at night long after the rest of the weary household had gone to bed. High Prairie never knew how many guests Selma entertained there before her fire those winter evenings—old friends and new. So big was there, the plump earth-grimed baby who rolled and tumbled in the fields while his young mother wiped the sweat from her face to look at him with fond eyes. Dirk DeJong of ten years hence was there. Simeon Peake, dapper, soft-spoken, ironic, in his shiny boots and his hat always a little on one side. Pervus DeJong, a blue-shirted giant with strong tender hands and



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little fine golden hairs on the backs of their heads. In strange contrast to these was the patient, tireless figure of Maartje Pool standing in the doorway of Roelf's little shed, her arms tucked in her apron for warmth. "You make fun, huh?" she said, wistfully, "you and Roelf. You make fun." And Roelf, the dark vivid boy, misunderstood, Roelf, the genius. He was always one of the company.

Oh, Selma DeJong never was lonely on these winter evenings before her fire.

She and Dirk sat there one fine sharp evening in early April. It was Saturday. Of late Dirk had not always come to the farm for the week-end. Eugene and Paula Arnold had been home for the Easter holidays. Julie Arnold had invited Dirk to the gay parties at the Prairie avenue house. He had even spent two entire week-ends there. After the brocaded luxury of the Prairie avenue house his farm bedroom seemed almost startlingly stark and bare.

Selma frankly enjoyed Dirk's somewhat fragmentary accounts of these visits; extracted from them as much vicarious pleasure as he had had in the reality—more, probably.

"Now, tell me what you had to eat," she would say, sociably, like a child. "What did you have for dinner, for example? Was it grand? Julie tells me they have a butler now. Well! I can't wait till I hear Aug Hempel on the subject."

He would tell her of the grandeur of the Arnold menage. She would interrupt and exclaim: "Mayonnaise! On fruit! Oh, I don't believe I'd like that. You did! Well, I'll have it for you next week when you come home. I'll get the recipe from Julie."

He didn't think he'd be home next week. One of the fellows he'd met at the Arnolds' had invited him to their place out north, on the lake. He had a boat.

"That'll be lovely!" Selma exclaimed, after an almost unnoticeable moment of silence—silence with panic in it. "I'll try not to fuss and be worried like an old hen every minute of the time I think you're on the water. . . . Now, do go on, Sobig. First fruit with mayonnaise, h'm? What kind of soup?"

He was not a naturally talkative person. There was nothing surly about his silence. It was a taciturn streak inherited from his Dutch ancestry. This time, though, he was more yobbish than usual. "Paula . . ." came again and again into his conversation. "Paula . . ." Paula . . . and again . . . Paula." He did not seem conscious of the repetition, but Selma's quick ear caught it.

"I haven't seen her," Selma said, "since she went away to school the first year. She must be—let's see—she's a year older than you are. She's nineteen going on twenty. Last time I saw her I thought she was a dark scrawny little thing. Too bad she didn't inherit Julie's lovely gold coloring and good looks, instead of Eugene, who doesn't need 'em."

"She isn't!" said Dirk, hotly. "She's dark and slim and sort of—sh—sensuous"—Selma started visibly, and raised her hand quickly to her mouth to hide a smile—like Cleopatra. Her eyes are big and kind of slanting—not squinty I don't mean, but slanting up a little at the corners. Cut out, kind of, so that they look bigger than most people's."

"My eyes used to be considered rather fine," said Selma, mischievously; but he did not hear.

"She makes all the other girls look sort of blowsy." He was silent a moment. Selma was silent, too, and it was not a happy silence. Dirk spoke again, suddenly, as though continuing aloud a train of thought. "—all but her hands."

Selma made her voice sound natural, not sharply inquisitive. "What's the matter with her hands, Dirk?"

He pondered a moment, his brows knitted. At last, slowly, "Well, I don't know. They're brown, and awfully thin and sort of—grabby. I mean it makes me nervous to watch them. And when the rest of her is cool they're hot when you touch them."

He looked at his mother's hands that were busy with some sewing. The stuff on which she was working was a bit of satin ribbon; part of a hood intended to grace the head of Geertje Pool Vander Slide's second baby. She had difficulty in keeping her rough fingers from catching on the soft surface of the satin. Manual work, water, sun, and wind had tanned those hands, hardened them, enlarged the knuckles, spread them, roughened them. Yet how sure they were, and strong, and cool and reliable—and tender. Suddenly, looking at them, Dirk said, "Now your hands. I love your hands, Mother."

She put down her work hastily, yet quietly, so that the sudden rush of happy grateful tears in her eyes should not sully the pink satin ribbon. She was flushed, like a girl. "Do you, Sobig?" she said.

After a moment she took up her sewing again. Her face looked young, eager, fresh, like the face of the girl who had found cabbages so beautiful that night when she bounced along the rutty Halsted road with Klaas Pool, many years ago. It came into her face, that look, when she was happy, exhilarated, excited. That was why those who loved her and brought that look into her face thought her beautiful, while those who did not love her never saw the look and consequently considered her a plain woman.

There was another silence between the two. Then: "Mother, what would you think of my going east next fall, to take a course in architecture?"

"Would you like that, Dirk?"

"Yes, I think so—yes."

"Then I'd like it better than any-

thing in the world. I—it makes me happy just to think of it."

"It would—cost an awful lot."

"I'll manage. I'll manage. . . . What made you decide on architecture?"

"I don't know, exactly. The new buildings at the university—Gothic, you know—are such a contrast to the old. Then Paula and I were talking the other day. She hates their house on Prairie—terrible old lumpy gray stone pile, with the black of the I. C. train all over it. She wants her father to build north—an Italian villa or French chateau. Something of that sort. So many of her friends are moving to the North shore, away from these hideous South-side and North-side Chicago houses with their stoops and their bay windows, and their terrible turrets. Ugh!"

"Well, now, do you know," Selma remonstrated mildly, "I like 'em. I suppose I'm wrong, but to me they seem sort of natural and soft and unpretentious, like the clothes that old August Hempel wears, so square-cut and baggy. Those houses look dignified to me, and fitting. They may be ugly—probably are—but, anyway, they're not ridiculous. They have a certain rugged grandeur. They're Chicago. Those French and Italian ginkracky things they—they're incongruous. It's as if Abraham Lincoln were to appear suddenly in pink satin knee breeches and buckled shoes, and lace ruffles at his wrists."

Dirk could laugh at that picture. But he protested, too. "But there's no native architecture, so what's to be done? You wouldn't call those smoke-blackened old stone and brick piles with their iron fences and their conservatories and cupolas and gingerbread exactly native, would you?"

"No," Selma admitted, "but those Italian villas and French chateaux in north Chicago suburbs are a good deal like a lace evening gown in the Arizona desert. It wouldn't keep you cool in the daytime, and it wouldn't be warm enough at night. I suppose a native architecture is evolved from building for the local climate and the needs of the community, keeping beauty in mind as you go. We don't need turrets and towers any more than we need draw-bridges and moats. It's all right to keep them, I suppose, where they grew up, in a country where the feudal system meant that any day your next-door neighbor might take it into his head to call his gang around him and sneak up to steal your wife and tapestries and gold drinking cups."

Dirk was interested and amused. Talks with his mother were likely to affect him thus. "What's your idea of a real Chicago house, mother?"

Selma answered quickly, as if she had thought often about it; as if she would have liked just such a dwelling on the site of the old DeJong farmhouse in which they now were seated so comfortably. "Well, it would need big porches for the hot days and nights so's to catch the prevailing southwest winds from the prairies in the summer—a porch that would be swung clear around to the east, too—or a terrace or another porch east so that if the precious old lake breeze should come up just when you think you're dying of the heat, as it sometimes does, you could catch that, too. It ought to be built—the house, I mean—rather squarish and tight and solid against our cold winters and northeasters. Then sleeping porches, of course. There's a grand American institution for you! England may have its afternoon tea on the terrace, and Spain may have its patio, and France its courtyard, and Italy its pergola, vine-covered; but America's got the sleeping porch—the screened-in open-air sleeping porch, and I shouldn't wonder if the man who first thought of that would get precedence on Judgment day, over the men who invented the airplane, the talking machine, and the telephone. After all, he had nothing in mind but the health of the human race." After which grand period Selma grinned at Dirk, and Dirk grinned at Selma and the two giggled together there by the fireplace, companionably.

"Mother, you're simply wonderful!—only your native Chicago dwelling seems to be mostly porch."

Selma waved such carping criticism away with a careless hand. "Oh, well, any house that has enough porches, and two or three bathrooms and at least eight closets can be lived in comfortably, no matter what else it has or hasn't got."

Next day they were more serious. The eastern college and the architectural career seemed to be settled things. Selma was content, happy. Dirk was troubled about the expense. He spoke of it at breakfast next morning (Dirk's breakfast; his mother had had her hours before and now as he drank his coffee, was sitting with him a moment and glancing at the paper that had come in the rural mail delivery). She had been out in the fields oversewing the transplanting of young tomato seedlings from hothed to field.

"I've been thinking," he began, "the expense—"

"Pig!" he said. Selma said, calmly, "I've been wanting to put them in for three or four years. It's August Hempel's idea. Hogs, I should have said."

He echoed, "Hogs!" rather faintly. (Continued next week.)

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"It would—cost an awful lot."

"I'll manage. I'll manage. . . . What made you decide on architecture?"

"I don't know, exactly. The new buildings at the university—Gothic, you know—are such a contrast to the old. Then Paula and I were talking the other day. She hates their house on Prairie—terrible old lumpy gray stone pile, with the black of the I. C. train all over it. She wants her father to build north—an Italian villa or French chateau. Something of that sort. So many of her friends are moving to the North shore, away from these hideous South-side and North-side Chicago houses with their stoops and their bay windows, and their terrible turrets. Ugh!"

"Well, now, do you know," Selma remonstrated mildly, "I like 'em. I suppose I'm wrong, but to me they seem sort of natural and soft and unpretentious, like the clothes that old August Hempel wears, so square-cut and baggy. Those houses look dignified to me, and fitting. They may be ugly—probably are—but, anyway, they're not ridiculous. They have a certain rugged grandeur. They're Chicago. Those French and Italian ginkracky things they—they're incongruous. It's as if Abraham Lincoln were to appear suddenly in pink satin knee breeches and buckled shoes, and lace ruffles at his wrists."

Dirk could laugh at that picture. But he protested, too. "But there's no native architecture, so what's to be done? You wouldn't call those smoke-blackened old stone and brick piles with their iron fences and their conservatories and cupolas and gingerbread exactly native, would you?"

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