

# SO BIG



By EDNA FERBER

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## 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, to young womanhood in Chicago in 1888, has been un-conventional, somewhat seamy, but generally enjoyable. At school her chum is Julie Hempel, daughter of August Hempel, butcher. Simon is killed in a quarrel that is not his own and Selma, nineteen years old and practically destitute, becomes a school-teacher.

**CHAPTER II**—Selma secures a position as teacher at the Erie public school, in the outskirts of Chicago, living at the home of a truck farmer, Elias Peck. In 1897, twenty years old, son of Elias, Selma perceives a kind 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, Roel.

**CHAPTER IV**—Selma bears a rosy concern for the affection of the "widow" Peck, rich and good-looking, for Ferus DeJong, poor truck farmer, who is insensible to the widow's attractions. For a community school Selma prepares a lunch basket, dainty, but not of ample proportions, which is rejected, according to custom, by the plainness of the lunch box excites derision, and in a sense of fun the bidding becomes spirited. DeJong finally securing it for \$15, 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 un congenial surroundings, lead to mutual affection. Ferus 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. Marjorie Peck, Elias' wife, dies after she has secured a divorce. Selma marries the widow Peakenberg. The boy, Roel, sixteen years old, comes from his home, to make his way to France and study, his ambition being to be-

**CHAPTER VII**—Dirk is eight years old when his father dies. Selma, with the necessity of making a living for her boy and herself, rises to the occasion, and with Dirk takes a truck load of vegetables to the Chicago market. A woman selling in the market places is an innovation frowned upon.

**CHAPTER VIII**—As a dispenser of the vegetables from her truck, Selma, a fat failure, buyers being shy of dealing with her. To a commission dealer she sells her stock. On the way home she peddles from door to door, with indifferent success. A policeman demands her license. She has none, and during the ensuing altercation Selma's girlhood chum, Julie Hempel, now Julie Arnold, recognizes her.

**CHAPTER IX**—August Hempel, risen to prominence and wealth in the business world, arranges to assist Selma in making the farm something more of a paying proposition. Selma, gratefully accepts his help, for Dirk's sake.

**CHAPTER X**—Selma achieves the success with the farm which she knew was possible, her financial troubles ending. At eighteen Dirk enters Middle west university.

**CHAPTER XI**—Dirk goes to Cornell university, intending to make architecture his life work, and on graduation enters the office of a firm of Chicago architects. Paula Arnold, daughter of Julie, enters his life. He would marry her but she has a craving for wealth and takes Theodore Storm, millionaire, for her husband. The world war begins.

Paula smiled up at him, patted the leather seat beside her with one hand that was absurdly thick-fingered in its far-lined glove.

"It's cold driving. Button up tight. Where'll we stop for your bag?"

He climbed into the seat beside her. Her manipulation of the wheel was witchcraft. The roadster slid in and out of traffic like a fluid thing, an enamel stream, silent as a swift current in a river. When his house was reached, "I'm coming up," she said. "I suppose you haven't any tea?"

"Gosh, no! What do you think I am! A young man in an English novel?"

"Now, don't be provincial and Chicagoish, Dirk." They climbed the three flights of stairs. She looked about. Her glance was not disapproving. "This isn't so bad. Who did it? She did! Very nice. But of course you ought to have your own smart little apartment, with a Jap to do you up. To do that for you, for example?"

"Yes," grimly. He was packing his bag—not throwing; clothes into it, but folding them deftly, neatly, as the son of a wise mother packs. "My salary'd just about keep him in white linen house-coats."

"I'm going to send you some thing for your room, Dirk."

"For God's sake don't!"

"Why not?"

"Two kinds of women in the world. I learned that at college. Those who send men things for their rooms and those that don't."

"You're very rude."

"You asked me. There! I'm all wet." He snapped the lock of his bag. "I'm sorry I can't give you anything. I haven't a thing. Not even a glass of wine and a—what is it they say in books—oh, yes—a biscuit."

In the doorway again Paula maintained a fierce and steady speed for

the remainder of the drive.

"We call the place Stormwood," Paula told him. "And nobody outside the Bear family knows how fitting that is. Don't scowl. I'm not going to tell you my marital woes. And don't you say I asked for it. . . . How's the job?"

"Rotten."

"You don't like it? The work?"

"I like it well enough, only—well, you see we leave the university architectural course thinking we're all going to be Stanford Whites or Cass Gilberts, tossing off a Woolworth building and making ourselves famous overnight. I've spent all yesterday and today planning a drygoods box that's going up on the corner of Milwaukee avenue and Ashland, west."

"And ten years from now?"

"Ten years from now maybe they'll let me do the plans for the drygoods box all alone."

"Why don't you drop it?"

He was startled. "Drop it! How do you mean?"

"Chuck it. Do something that will bring you quick results. This isn't an age of waiting. Suppose, twenty years from now, you do plan a grand Gothic office building to grace this new and glorified Michigan boulevard they're always shouting about! You'll be a middle-aged man living in a middle-class house in a middle-class suburb with a middle-class wife."

"Maybe," slightly nettled.

They turned in at the gates of Stormwood. A final turn of the drive, an avenue of trees. A house, massive, pillared, porticoed. The door opened as they drew up at the entrance. A maid in cap and apron stood in the doorway. A man appeared at the side of the car, coming seemingly from nowhere, greeted Paula civilly and drove the car off. The glow of an open fire in the hall welcomed them. "He'll bring up your bag," said Paula.

"How're the babies, Anna? Has Mr. Storm got here?"

"He telephoned, Mrs. Storm. He says he won't be out till late—maybe ten or after. Anyway, you're not to wait dinner."

Paula, from being the limp, expert, fearless driver of the high-powered roadster was now suddenly very much the mistress of the house, quietly observant, giving an order with a lift of the eyebrow or a nod of the head. Would Dirk like to go to his room at once? Dinner at seven-thirty. He needn't dress. Just as he liked. Everything was very informal here. They roughed it. (Dirk had counted thirteen servants by noon next day and hadn't been near the kitchen.)

He decided to bathe and change into dinner clothes and was glad of this when he found Paula in black satin before the fire in the great beamed room she had called the library. Dirk thought she looked very beautiful in that diaphanous stuff, with the pearls. Her heart-shaped face, with its large eyes that shined a little at the corners; her long, slim throat; her dark hair piled high and away from her little ears. He decided not to mention it.

Dirk told himself that Paula had known her husband would not be home until ten and had deliberately planned a tete-a-tete meal. He would not, therefore, confess himself a little nettled when Paula said, "I've asked the Emerys in for dinner; and we'll have a game of bridge afterward." Phil Emery, you know, the Third. He used to have it on his visiting card, like royalty.

The Emerys were drygoods; had been drygoods for sixty years; were accounted Chicago aristocracy; preferred England; rode to hounds in pink coats along Chicago's prin and started suburban prairies. They had a vast estate on the lake near Stormwood. They arrived a trifle late. Dirk had seen pictures of old Phillip Emery ("Phillip the First," he thought, with an inward grin) and decided, looking at the rather anemic third edition, that the stock was running a little thin. The dinner was delicious but surprisingly simple; little more than Selma would have given him, Dirk thought, had he come home to the farm this week-end. The talk was desultory and rather dull. And this chap had millions, Dirk said to himself. Millions. No scratching in an architect's office for this lad.

At bridge after dinner Phillip the Third proved to be sufficiently the son of his father to win from Dirk more money than he could conveniently afford to lose.

Theodore Storm came in at ten and stood watching them. When the guests had left the three sat before the fire. "Something to drink?" Storm asked Dirk. Dirk refused but Storm mixed another. The whisky brought no flush to his large white impulsive face. He talked almost not at all. Dirk, naturally silent, was loquacious by comparison. But while there was nothing heavy, unvital about Dirk's silence, this man's was oppressive, irritating. His great white face gave the effect of bleached bloodless bulk. "I don't see how she stands him," Dirk thought. Husband and wife seemed to be on terms of polite friendliness. Storm excused himself and took himself off with a word about being tired, and seeing them in the morning.

After he had gone: "He likes you," said Paula.

"Important," said Dirk. "If true."

"But it is important. He can help you a lot."

"Help me how? I don't want—"

"But I do, I want you to be successful. I want you to be. You can be. You're got it written all over you. In the way you stand, and talk, and don't talk. In the way you look at people. In something in the way you carry yourself. It's what they call force, I suppose. Anyway, you've

got it."

"Has your husband got it?"

"Theodore! No! That is—"

"There you are. I've got the force, but he's got the money."

"You can have both." She was leaning forward. Her eyes were bright, enormous. Her hands—those thin dark hot hands—were twisted in her lap. He looked at her quietly. Suddenly there were tears in her eyes. "Don't look at me that way, Dirk." She huddled back in her chair, limp. She looked a little haggard and older, somehow. "My marriage is a mess, of course. You can see that."

"You knew it would be, didn't you?"

"No. Yes. Oh, I don't know. Anyway, what's the difference, now? I'm not trying to be what they call an influence in your life. I'm just fond of you—you know that—and I want you to be great and successful. It's maternal, I suppose."

"I should think two babies would satisfy that urge."

"Oh, I can't get excited about two pink healthy lumps of babies. I love them and all that, but all they need is to have a bottle stuffed into their mouths at proper intervals and to be bathed, and dressed and aired and slept. It's a mechanical routine and about as exciting as a treadmill."

"Just what do you want me to do, Paula?"

She was eager again, vitally concerned in him. "It's all so ridiculous. All these men whose incomes are thirty—forty—sixty—a hundred thousand a year usually haven't any qualities, really, that the five-thousand-a-year man hasn't. Somebody has to get the fifty-thousand-dollar salaries—some advertising man, or bond salesman or—why, look at Phil Emery! He probably couldn't sell a yard of pink ribbon to a schoolgirl if he had to. Look at Theodore! He just sits and blinks and says nothing. But when the time comes he doubles up his fat white fist and mumbles, 'Ten million, or 'Fifteen million, and that settles it.'"

Dirk laughed to alide his own little mounting sensation of excitement. "It isn't quite as simple as that, I imagine. There's more to it than meets the eye."

"There isn't! I tell you I know the whole crowd of them. I've been brought up with this moneyed pack all my life, haven't I? Pork packers and wheat grabbers and peddlers of gas and electric light and dry goods. Grandfather's the only one of the crowd that I respect. He has stayed the same. They can't fool him. He knows he just happened to go into wholesale beef and pork when whole-salt beef and pork was a new game in Chicago. Now look at him!"

"Still, you will admit there's something in knowing when," he argued.

Paula stood up. "If you don't know I'll tell you. Now is when. I've got Grandfather and Dad and Theodore to work with. You can go on being an architect if you want to. It's a fine enough profession. But unless you're a genius where'll it get you? Go it with them, and Dirk, in five years—"

"What!" They were both standing facing each other, she tense, eager; he relaxed but stimulated.

"Try it and see what will you! Will you, Dirk?"

"I don't know, Paula. I should say

service. A little note from Paula: "Would you like to take walk at about half-past nine? Stroll down to the stables. I want to show you my new horse."

The distance from the house to the stables was actually quite a brisk little walk in itself. Paula, in riding clothes, was waiting for him.

She greeted him. "I've been out two hours. Had my ride. You ride, don't you?"

"I used to ride the old nags, bare-back, on the farm."

"You'll have to learn. Then I'll have some one to ride with me. Theodore never rides. He never takes any sort of exercise. Sits in that great fat car of his."

They went into the coach house, a great airy white-washed place with glittering harness and spurs and bridles like jewels in glass cases. It gave Dirk a little hopeless feeling. He had never before seen anything like it.

Paula laughed up at him, her dark face upturned to his.

Something had annoyed him, she saw. Would he wait while she changed to walking things? Or perhaps he'd rather drive in the roadster. They walked up to the house together. He wished that she would not consult his wishes so anxiously. It made him sulky, impatient.

She put a hand on his arm. "Dirk, are you annoyed at me for what I said last night?"

"No."

"What did you think when you went to your room last night? Tell me. What did you think?"

"I thought. . . . She's bored with her husband and she's trying to vamp me. I'll have to be careful."

Paula laughed delightedly. "That's nice and frank. . . . What else?"

"I thought my coat didn't fit very well and I wished I could afford to have Peel make my next one."

"You can," said Paula.

## Chapter XIII

As it turned out, Dirk was spared the necessity of worrying about the fit of his next dinner coat for the following year and a half. His coat, during that period, was a neat olive drab as was that of some millions of young men of his age, or thereabouts. Most of that time he spent at Fort Sheridan, first as an officer in training, then as an officer training others to be officers. He was excellent at this job. Influence put him there and kept him there even after he began to chafe at the restraint.

In the last six months of it (though he did not, of course, know that it was to be the last six months) Dirk tried desperately to get to France. He was suddenly sick of the neat job at home; of the dinners; of the smug routine; of the olive-drab motor car that whisked him wherever he wanted to go (he had a captivacy; of making them "snap into it"; of Paula; of his mother, even. Two months before the war's close he succeeded in getting over; but Paris was his headquarters.

Between Dirk and his mother the first rift had appeared.

"If I were a man," Selma said, "I'd make up my mind straight about this war and then I'd do one of two things. I'd go into it the way Jan Snip goes at forking the manure pile—a dirty job that's got to be cleaned up; or I'd refuse to do it altogether if I didn't believe in it as a job for me. If I fight, or I'd be a conscientious objector. There's nothing in between for any one who isn't old or crippled, or sick."

Paula was aghast when she heard this. So was Julie whose wallings had been loud when Eugene had gone into the air service. He was in France now, thoroughly happy. "Do you mean," demanded Paula, "that you actually want Dirk to go over there and be wounded or killed?"

"No. If Dirk were killed my life would stop. I'd go on living, I suppose, but my life would have stopped."

They all were doing some share in the work to be done.

Selma had thought about her own place in this war-reiter. She had wanted to do canteen work in France but had decided against this as being selfish. "The thing for me to do," she said, "is to go on raising vegetables and hogs as fast as I can." She supplied countless households with free food while their men were gone. She herself worked like a man, taking the place of the able-bodied helper who had been employed on her farm.

Paula was lovely in her Red Cross uniform. She persuaded Dirk to go into the Liberty bond selling drive and he was unexpectedly effective in his quiet, serious way; most convincing and undeniably thrilling to look at in uniform. Paula's little air of possession had grown until now it enveloped him. She wasn't playing now; was deeply and terribly in love with him.

When, in 1918, Dirk took off his uniform he went into the bond department of the Great Lakes Trust company in which Theodore Storm had a large interest. He said that the war had disillusioned him.

"What did you think war was going to do?" said Selma. "Purify! It never has yet."

It was understood, by Selma at least, that Dirk's abandoning of his profession was a temporary thing. Quick as she usually was to arrive at conclusions, she did not realize until too late that this son of hers had definitely deserted building for bonds; that the only structures he would wear were her own castles in Spain. His first two months as a bond salesman netted him more than a year's salary at his old post at Hollis & Sprague's. When he told this to Selma, in tri-

umph, she said, "Yes, but there isn't much fun in it, is there? This selling things on paper? Now architecture, that must be thrilling. Putting a building down on paper—little marks here, straight lines—there, figures, calculations, blueprints, measurements—and then, suddenly one day, the actual building itself. Steel and stone and brick, with engines throbbing inside it like a heart, and people flowing in and out. Part of a city. A piece of actual beauty conceived by you! Oh, Dirk!" To see her face then, must have given him a pang, it was so alive, so eager.

He found excuses for himself. "Selling bonds that make that building possible isn't so dull, either."

But she waved that aside almost contemptuously. "What nonsense, Dirk. It's like selling seats at the box office of a theater for the play inside."

Dirk had made many new friends in the last year and a half. More than that, he had acquired a new manner; an air of quiet authority, of assurance. The profession of architecture was put definitely behind him. He did not say to Selma that he had put the other work from him. But after six months in his new position he knew that he would never go back.

From the start he was a success. Within one year he was so successful that you could hardly distinguish him from a hundred other successful young Chicago business and professional men whose clothes were made at Peel's; who lunched at the Noon club on the roof of the First National bank where Chicago's millionaires ate corned-beef hash whenever that plebeian dish appeared on the bill of fare. He had had a little thrill out of his first meal at this club whose membership was made up of the "big men" of the city's financial circle. Now he could even feel a little flicker of contempt for them. He had known old Aug Hempel, of course, for years, as well as Michael Arnold, and later, Phillip Emery, Theodore Storm, and others. But he had expected these men to be different.

They were not at all the American Big Business Man of the comic papers and of fiction—that yellow, nervous, dyspeptic creature who lurches off milk and pie. They were divided into two definite types. The older men of between fifty and sixty were great high-colored fellows of full habit. Their faces were impassive, their eyes shrewd, hard. Their talk was colloquial and frequently illiterate. They often said "was" for "were." "Was you going to see Baldwin about that South American stuff or is he going to ship it through without?" Most of them had known little of play in their youth and now they played ponderously and a little sadly and yet eagerly as does one to whom the gift of leisure had come too late. They ruined their valises and livers with strong cigars, thinking cigarette smoking undignified and pipes common. Only a few were so rich, so assured as to smoke cheap light panatellas. Old Aug Hempel was one of these. Dirk noticed that when he made one of his rare visits to the Noon club his entrance was met with a little stir, a deference. He was nearing seventy now; was still straight, strong, zealous of life; a magnificent old buccaneer among the pet-

Her crew. He had been the direct and brutal method—swish! swash! and his enemies walked the plank. The younger men eyed him with a certain amusement and respect.

These younger men whose ages ranged from twenty-eight to forty-five were disciples of the new system in business. They were graduates of universities. They had known luxury all their lives. They were the sons or grandsons of those bearded, rugged, and rather terrible old boys who, in 1895 or 1840, had come out of County Limerick or County Kilkenny or out of Scotland or the Rhineland to mold this new country in their strong hairy hands.

Dirk listened to the talk of the Noon club, looking about him carefully, appraisingly. The president of an advertising firm lurching with a banker; a bond salesman talking to a rare book collector; a packer seated at a small table with Horatio Craft, the sculptor.

Two years and Dirk had learned to "grab the Century" in order to save an hour or so of time between Chicago and New York. Peel said it was a pleasure to fit a coat to his broad, flat tapering back, and trousers to his strong sturdy legs. His color, inherited from his red-cheeked Dutch ancestors brought up in the fresh sea-laden air of the Holland flats, was fine and clear. Sometimes Selma, in pure sensual delight, passed her gnarled, work-worn hand over his shoulders and down his fine, strong, straight back. He had been abroad twice. He learned to call it "running over to Europe for a few days." It had all come about in a scant two years, as in the theatrical way in which life speeds in America.

Selma was a little bewildered now at this new Dirk whose life was so full without her. Sometimes she did not see him for two weeks, or three. He sent her gifts which she smoothed and touched delightedly and put away; fine soft silken things, hand-made—which she could get wear. The habit of years was too strong upon her. Though she had always been a woman of dainty habits and fastidious tastes the grind of her early married life had left its indelible mark. Sun and wind and rain and the cold and heat of the open prairie had weakened their vengeance on her flouting of them. Her skin was tanned, weather-beaten; her hair rough and dry. Her eyes, in that frame, started you by their unexpectedness, they were so calm, so serene, yet so alive. They were the beautiful eyes of a wise young girl in the face of a middle-aged woman. Life was still so fresh to her. There was about

her something arresting, something compelling. You felt it.

"I don't see how you do it!" Julie Arnold complained one day as Selma was paying her one of her rare visits in town. "Your eyes are as bright as a baby's and mine look like dead oysters." They were up in Julie's dressing room in the new house on the north side—the new house that was now the old house.

Julie was massaging. Her eyes had an absent look. Suddenly: "Listen, Selma. Dirk and Paula are together too much. People are talking."

"Talking?" The smile faded from Selma's face.

"Goodness knows I'm not strait-laced. You can't be in this day and age. If I had ever thought I'd live to see the time when— Well, since the war of course anything's all right, seems. But Paula has no sense. Everybody knows she's insane about Dirk. That's all right for Dirk, but how about Paula! She won't go anywhere unless he's invited. They're together all the time, everywhere. I asked her if she was going to divorce Storm and she said no, she hadn't enough money of her own and Dirk wasn't earning enough. His salary's thousands, but she's used to millions. Well!"

"They were boy and girl together," Selma interrupted, feebly.

"They're not any more. Don't be silly, Selma. You're not as young as that."

No, she was not as young as that. When Dirk next paid one of his rare visits to the farm she called him into her bedroom—the cool, dim shabby bedroom with the old black walrus bed in which she had lain as Ferus DeJong's bride more than thirty years ago. She looked somehow grisly in the dim light, her great soft eyes gazing up at him.

"Dirk, sit down here at the side of my bed the way you used to."

"I'm dead tired, Mother. Twenty-seven holes of golf before I came out."

"I know. You ache all over—a nice kind of ache. I used to feel like that when I'd worked in the fields all day, pulling vegetables, or planting." He was silent. She caught his hand. "You didn't like that. My saying that. I'm sorry. I didn't say it to make you feel bad, dear."

"I know you didn't, Mother."

"Dirk, do you know what that woman who writes the society news in the Sunday Tribune called you today?"

"No. What? I never read it."

"She said you were one of the jeunesse doree."

Dirk grinned. "Gosh!"

"I remember enough of my French at Miss Flester's school to know that that means gilded youth."

"Me! That's good! I'm not even spangled."

"Dirk!" her voice was low, vibrant. "Dirk, I don't want you to be a gilded youth. I don't care how thick the gilding. Dirk, that isn't what I worked in the sun and cold for. I'm not reproaching you; I don't mind the work. Forgive me for even mentioning it. But, Dirk, I don't want my son to be known as one of the jeunesse doree. No! Not my son."

"Now, listen, Mother. That's fool-



"I Used to Ride the Old Nags, Bare-back, on the Farm."



"So Big!" Answered Dirk.

ish. If you're going to talk like that. Like a mother in a melodrama whose son's gone wrong. . . . I work like a dog. You know that. You get the wrong angle on things, stuck out here on this little farm."

She sat up in bed, looking down at the thin end of her braid as she twined it round and round her finger. "Dirk, do you know sometimes I actually think that if you stayed here on the farm—"

"Good G—d, Mother! What for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Time to dream. Time to—no, I suppose that isn't true any more. I suppose the day is past when the genius came from the farm. Machinery has cut into his dreams. Patent binders, plows, reapers—he's a mechanic. He hasn't time to dream. Well."

She lay back, looked up at him. "Dirk, why don't you marry?"

"Why—there's no one I want to marry."

"No one who's free, you mean?"

He stood up. "I mean no one." He stooped and kissed her lightly. Her arms went round him close. Her hand with the thick gold wedding band on it pressed his head to her hard. "So big!" He was a baby again.

"You haven't called me that in years." He was laughing.

She reverted to the old game they