



SO BIG
[BY EDNA FERBER]
ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CLARK AGNEW

(Continued)
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 1881, 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.

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

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, oyl-cooks, 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, frowzy, 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 grifty 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 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 cutted a convenient pigtail by way of emphasis. A wall 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, pigtailed, 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 is—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. Book—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 hand 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.

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 bed-clothes 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 it's warm here by the stove." Peering down the perforations in the floor-hole through which the par-

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lor chimney swalloed 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 stilted 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.

Selina had seen herself, dignified, yet gentle, instructing a roomful of Dutch cherubs in the simpler elements of learning. But it is difficult to be dignified and gracious when you are suffering from chilblains. Selina fell victim to this sordid discomfort, as did every child in the room. She sat at the battered pine desk or moved about, a little ice-wool shawl around her shoulders when the wind was wrong and the stove balky. Her white little face seemed whiter in contrast with the black folds of this somber garment. Her slim hands were rough and chapped. The oldest child in the room was thirteen, the youngest four and a half.

Early in the winter Selina had had the unfortunate idea of opening the ice-locked windows at intervals and giving the children five minutes of exercise while the fresh cold air cleared brains and room at once. Arms waved wildly, heads wobbled.

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She Would Read Aloud to Him While He Carved.

short legs worked vigorously. At the end of the week twenty High Prairie parents sent protests by note or word of mouth. Jan and Cornelius, Katrina and Aggie went to school to learn reading and writing and numbers, not to stand with open windows in the winter.

On the Pool farm the winter work had set in. Klaas drove into Chicago with winter vegetables only once a week now. He and Jakob and Roelf were storing potatoes and cabbages underground; repairing fences; preparing frames for the early spring planting; sorting seedlings. It had been Roelf who had taught Selina to build the schoolhouse fire. He had gone with her on that first morning, had started the fire, filled the water pail, initiated her in the rites of corn-cobs, kerosene, and dampers. A shy, dark, silent boy. She set out deliberately to woo him to friendship.

"Roelf, I have a book called 'Ivanhoe.' Would you like to read it?"

"Well, I don't get much time."

"You wouldn't have to hurry. Right there in the house. And there's another called 'The Three Musketeers.'"

He was trying not to appear pleased; to appear stolid and Dutch, like the people from whom he had sprung. Some Dutch sailor ancestor, Selina thought, or fisherman, must have touched at an Italian port or Spanish and brought back a wife whose eyes and skin and feeling for beauty had skipped layer on layer of placid Netherlands to crop out now in this wistful sensitive boy.

Selina had spoken to Pool about a shelf for her books and her photographs. He had put up a rough bit of board, very crude and ugly, but it had served. She had come home one snowy afternoon to find this shelf gone and in its place a smooth and polished one, with brackets intricately carved. Roelf had cut, planed, polished, and carved it in many hours of work in the cold little shed off the kitchen. He had there a workshop of sorts, fitted with such tools and implements as he could devise. He did man's work on the farm, yet often at night Selina could faintly hear the rasp of his hand saw after she had gone to bed. This sort of thing was looked upon by Klaas Pool as foolishness. Roelf's real work in the shed was the making and mending of coldframes and hotheds for the early spring plants. Whenever possible Roelf neglected this dull work for some fancy of his own. To this Klaas Pool objected as being "dumb."

"Roelf, stop that foolishness, get your ma once some wood. Carving on that box again instead of finishing them coldframes. Some day, by golly, I show you. I break every stick . . . dumb as a Groningen . . ."

Roelf did not sulk. He seemed not to mind, particularly, but he came back to the carved box as soon as chance presented itself. He was reading her books with such hunger as to cause her to wonder if her stock would last him the winter. Sometimes, after supper, when he was hammering and sawing away in the little shed Selina would snatch Maartje's old shawl off the hook, and swathed in this against draughty chinks, she would read aloud to him while he carved, or talk to him above the noise of his tools. Selina was a gay and volatile person. She loved to make this boy laugh. His dark face would flash into almost dazzling animation. Sometimes Maartje, hearing their young laughter, would come to the shed door and stand there a moment, hugging her arms in her rolled apron and smiling at them, uncomprehending but companionable.

"You make fun, h'm?"

"Come in, Mrs. Pool. Sit down on

Selina was not asked to stay to dinner. She was not asked to sit down. When she left the house her great fine eyes seemed larger and more deep-set than ever, and her jaw-line was set hard against the invasion of tears. Suddenly she hated this Chicago that wanted none of her; that brushed past her, bumping her elbow and offering no apology; that clanged, and sizzled, and whistled, and roared in her ears

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