

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 Simeon Peake, gambler and gentleman of fortune. Her life, to young womanhood in Chicago in 1888, had been uneventful, 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 Selma, a few 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, Klaas Pool. In Roelof, twelve years old, son of Klaas, 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 Roelof.

CHAPTER IV—Selma hears gossip concerning the affection of the "Widow Paarlberg," rich and good-looking, for Pervus DeJong, poor truck farmer, who is inseparable to the widow's attractions. For a community "sociable" Selma prepares a lunch basket, dainty but not of ample proportions, which is "auctioned" according to custom. The "smallness" of the lunch box excites derision, and in a sense of fun the bidding becomes spirited. DeJong finally securing 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 VI

is shy of it. Still, he could not withstand her long. Together they dug and planted flower beds in Pervus' dingy front yard. It was too late for tulips now. Pervus had brought her some seeds from town. They ranged all the way from poppies to asters; from purple iris to morning glories. The last named were to form the back-porch vine, of course, because they grew quickly. Selma, city-bred, was ignorant of varieties, but insisted she wanted an old-fashioned garden—marigolds, pinks, mignonette, phlox, she and Roelof dug, spaded, planted. Her trousseau was of the scantiest. Pervus' household was already equipped with such linens as they would need. The question of a wedding gown troubled her until Maartje suggested that she be married in the old Dutch wedding dress that lay in the bride's chest in Selma's bedroom.

"A real Dutch bride," Maartje said. "Your man will think that is fine." Pervus was delighted. Selma basked in his love like a kitten in the sun. She was, after all, a very lonely little bride with only two photographs on the shelf in her bedroom to give her courage and counsel. The old Dutch wedding gown was many inches too large for her. The skirt-band overlapped her slim waist; her slender little bosom did not fill out the generous width of the bodice; but the effect of the whole was amazingly quiet as well as pathetic.

They were married at the Pools'. Klaas and Maartje had insisted on furnishing the wedding supper—ham, chickens, sausages, cakes, pickles, beer. The Reverend Dekker married them, and all through the ceremony Selma chided herself because she could not keep her mind on his words in the fascination of watching his short, stubby beard as it wagged with every motion of his jaw. Pervus looked stiff, solemn and uncomfortable in his wedding blacks—not at all the handsome giant of the everyday corduroys and blue shirt. In the midst of the ceremony Selma had her moment of panic when she actually saw herself running shrieking from this company, this man, this house, down the road, on, on toward—toward what? The feeling was so strong that she was surprised to find herself still standing there in the Dutch wedding gown answering "I do" in the proper place.

After the wedding they went straight to DeJong's house. In May the vegetable farmer cannot neglect his garden even for a day. The house had been made ready for them. Throughout the supper Selma had had thoughts which were so foolish and detached as almost to alarm her. "Now I am married. I am Mrs. Pervus DeJong. That's a pretty name. It would look quite distinguished on a calling card, very spidery and fine: "MRS. PERVUS DE JONG At Home Fridays."

She recalled this later, grimly, when she was Mrs. Pervus DeJong, at home not only Fridays, but Saturdays, Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. They drove down the road to De Jong's place. Selma thought, "Now I am driving home with my husband. I feel his shoulder against mine. I wish he would talk. I wish he would say something. Still, I am not frightened." Pervus' market wagon was standing in the yard, shafts down. He should have gone to market today; would certainly have to go tomorrow, starting early in the afternoon so as to get a good stand in the Haymarket. By the light of his lantern the wagon seemed to Selma to be a symbol. She had often seen it before, but now that it was to be a part of her life—this the DeJong market wagon and she Mrs. DeJong—she saw clearly what a crazy, disreputable and poverty-proclaiming old vehicle it was, in contrast with the neat strong wagon in Klaas Pool's yard, smart with green paint and red lettering that announced, "Klaas Pool, Garden Produce." With the two sleek farm horses the turnout looked as prosperous and comfortable as Klaas himself.

her own little bedroom at the Pools', no longer hers, must be deliciously cool and still with the breeze fanning fresh from the west. Pervus was putting the horse into the barn. The bedroom was off the sitting room. The window was shut. This last year had taught Selma to prepare the night before for next morning's rising, so as to lose the least possible time. She did this now, unconsciously. She brushed her hair, laid out tomorrow's garments, put on her high-necked, long-sleeved nightgown and got into this strange bed. She heard Pervus DeJong shut the kitchen door; the latch clicked, the lock turned. Heavy quick footsteps across the bare kitchen floor. This man was coming into her room. "You can't run far enough," Maartje Pool had said. "Except you stop living you can't run away from life." Next morning it was dark when he awakened her at four. She started up with a little cry and sat up, straining her ears, her eyes. "Is that you, father?" She was little Selma Peake again, and Simeon Peake had come in, gay, debonair, from a night's gaming. Pervus DeJong was already padding about the room in stocking feet. "What—what time is it? What's the matter, father? Why are you up? Haven't you gone to bed. . . ." Then she remembered. Pervus DeJong laughed and came toward her. "Get up, little lazy bones. It's after four. All yesterday's work I've got to do, and all today's. Breakfast, little Lin, breakfast. You are a farmer's wife now."

Dirk DeJong was born in the bedroom of the sitting room on the nineteenth day of March, of a bewildered, somewhat resentful, but deeply interested mother; and a proud, foolish, and valiant father, whose air of achievement, considering the really slight part he had played in the long, tedious, and racking business, was disproportionate. The name Dirk had sounded to Selma like something tall, straight, and slim. Pervus had chosen it. It had been his grandfather's name. Sometimes, during those months, Selma would look back on her first winter in High Prairie—that winter of the icy bedroom, the chill black drum, the schoolhouse fire, the chilblains, the Pool pork—and it seemed a lovely dream; a time of ease, of freedom, of carelessness happiness. Pervus DeJong loved his pretty young wife, and she him. But young love thrives on color, warmth, beauty. It becomes prosaic and inarticulate when forced to begin its day at four in the morning by reaching blindly, dazedly, for limp and obscure garments dangling from bedpost or chair, and to end that day at nine, numb and sodden with weariness, after seventeen hours of physical labor. It was a wet summer. Pervus' choice tomato plants, so carefully set out in the hope of a dry season, became draggled gray specks in a waste of mire. Of fruit the field bore one tomato the size of a marble. For the rest, the crops were moderately successful on the DeJong place. But the work necessary to make this so was heartbreaking. Selma had known, during her winter at the Pools', that Klaas, Roelof, and old Jakob worked early and late, but her months there had encompassed what is really the truck farmer's leisure period. She had arrived in November. She had married in May. From May until October it was necessary to tend the fields with a concentration amounting to fury. Selma had never dreamed that human beings toiled like that for sustenance. Toil was a thing she had never encountered until coming to High Prairie. Now she saw her husband wrenching a living out of the earth by sheer muscle, sweat, and pain. During June, July, August, and September the good black prairie soil for miles around was teeming, a hotbed of plenty. There was born in Selma at this time a feeling for the land that she was never to lose. Perhaps the child within her had something to do with this. She was aware of a feeling of kinship with the earth; an illusion of splendor, of fulfillment. As cabbages had been cabbages, and no more, to Klaas Pool, so, to Pervus, these carrots, beets, onions, turnips, and radishes were just so much produce, to be planted, teded, gathered, marketed. But to Selma, during that summer, they became a vital part in the vast mechanism of a living world. Pervus, earth, sun, rain, all elemental forces that labored to produce the food for millions of humans. She thought of Chicago's children. If they had red cheeks, clear eyes, nimble brains it



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child so when it comes you should have clothes for it. It's better I feed them to the live stock." Pervus drove into the Chicago market every other day. During July and August he sometimes did not have his clothes off for a week. Together he and Jan Steen would load the wagon with the day's garnering. At four he would start on the tedious trip into town. The historic old Haymarket on West Randolph street had become the stand for market gardeners for miles around Chicago. Here they stationed their wagons in preparation for the next day's selling. The early comer got the advantageous stand. There was no regular allotment of space. Pervus tried to reach the Haymarket by nine at night. Often bad roads made a detour necessary and he was late. That usually meant bad business next day. The men, for the most part, slept on their wagons, curled up on the wagon seat or stretched out on the sacks. Their horses were stabled and fed in nearby sheds, with more actual comfort than the men themselves. One could get a room for twenty-five cents in one of the ramshackle rooming houses that faced the street. But the rooms were small, stuffy, none too clean; the beds little more comfortable than the wagons. Besides, twenty-five cents! You got twenty-five cents for half a barrel of tomatoes. You got twenty-five cents for a sack of potatoes. Onions brought seventy-five cents a sack. Cabbages went a hundred cents for two dollars, and they were five-pound heads. If you drove home with ten dollars in your pocket it represented a profit of exactly zero. The sum must go above that. No; one did not pay out twenty-five cents for the mere privilege of sleeping in a bed. One June day, a month or more after their marriage, Selma drove into Chicago with Pervus, an incongruous little figure in her bride's finery perched on the seat of the vegetable wagon piled high with early garden stuff. It was, in a way, their wedding trip, for Selma had not been away from the farm since her marriage. 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 marvelled, 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 doggishly and grinning the broadly complacent grin of the conquering male. 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, brilliant. Now, bumping down the Halsted road, she sketched some of her plans in large dashing 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." "Yeah, drain. Drain and you have got yet clay. Hard clay soil." Selma had the answer to that. "I know it. You've got to use tile 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."

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 endless—and she managed, miraculously, 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 Roelof's faithful tending, the flower (Continued on page 6)

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