



SO BIG (BY EDNA FERBER)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARK AGNEW

(Continued) Chapter X

If those vague characteristics called (variously) magnetism, manner, grace, distinction, attractiveness, fascination, go to make up that nebulous quality known as charm; and if the possessor of that quality is accounted fortunate in his equipment for that which the class-day orators style the battle of life, then Dirk DeJong was a lucky lad and life lay promisingly before him.

It was during those carefree years of Dirk's boyhood between nine and fifteen that Selma changed the DeJong acres from a worn-out and down-at-heel truck farm whose scant products brought a second-rate price in a second-rate market to a prosperous and blooming vegetable garden whose output was sought a year in advance by the South Water street commission merchants.

These six or seven years of relentless labor had been no showy success with Selma posing grandly as the New Woman in Business. No, it had been a painful, grubbing, heart-breaking process as in any project that depends on the actual soil for its realization.

It is doubtful that she ever could have succeeded without the money borrowed from August Hempel; without his shrewd counsel. She told him this, sometimes. "Easier, easier, yes. But you would have found a way, Selma. Some way. Julie, no. But you, yes. You are like that. Me, too. Say, plenty fellows that was butchers with in twenty years ago over on North Clark street are butchers yet, cutting off a steak or a chop."

Dirk had his tasks on the farm. Selma saw to that. But they were not heavy. By the time he returned from school the rough work of the day was over. His food was always hot, appetizing, plentiful. The house was neat, comfortable. Selma had installed a bathroom—one of the two bathrooms in High Prairie. The neighborhood was still rocking with the shock of this when it was informed by Jan that Selma and Dirk ate with candles lighted on the supper table. High Prairie slapped its thigh and howled with mirth.

"Cabbages is beautiful," said old Klaus Pool when he heard this. "Cabbages is beautiful I betcha." Selma, during the years of the boy's adolescence, had never urged him to a decision about his future. That, she decided, would come. As the farm prospered and the pressure of necessity lifted she tried, in various ingenious ways, to extract from him some unconscious sign of definite preference for this calling, that profession.

Until Dirk was sixteen she had been content to let him develop as naturally as possible, and to absorb impressions unconsciously from the traps she so glibly left about him. There was a shed which he was free to use as a workshop, fitted up with all sorts of tools. He did not use it much, after the first few weeks. He was pleasantly and mildly interested in all things; held by none. Selma had thought of

Roelf when they were fitting up the workshop. The Pools had heard from Roelf just once since his flight from the farm. A letter had come from France. Selma had never heard from him. But one day years later she had come running to Dirk with an illustrated magazine in her hand.

"Look!" she cried, and pointed to a picture. He had rarely seen her so excited, so stirred. The illustration showed a photographic reproduction of a piece of sculpture—a woman's figure. It was called The Seine. A figure sinuous, snake-like, graceful, revolting, beautiful, terrible. The face alluring, insatiable, generous, treacherous, all at once. It was the Seine that fed the fertile valley land; the Seine that claimed a thousand bloated lifeless floating things; the red-eyed hag of 1793; the dimpling coquette of 1850. Beneath the illustration a line or two—Roelf Pool. . . . Salon. . . . American. . . . future. . . .

"It's Roelf!" Selma had cried. "Roelf, Little Roelf Pool!" Tears in her eyes. Dirk had been politely interested. But then he had never known him, really. He had heard his mother speak of him, but—

At seventeen Dirk and Selma talked of the year to come. He was going to



At Eighteen It Had Been Midwest University for Dirk.

a university. But to what university? And what did he want to study? We'll, hard to say. Kind of a general course, wasn't there?

"Oh," Selma had said. "Yes. General. Or course, if a person wanted to be an architect, why, I suppose Cornell would be the place. Or Harvard for law. Or Boston Tech for engineering, or—"

Oh, yes, if a fellow wanted any of those things. Good idea, though, to take a kind of general course until you found out exactly what you wanted to do. Languages and literature and that kind of thing.

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 course there?"

"My gosh, no!" Dirk had answered. He told 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 off to school. It makes me feel kind of rotten, 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 lost—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,' Sobig?" 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,' Sobig?"

"Rich. Lots of money." "No, no, Dirk! No! That's not success. Roelf—the thing Roelf 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 isn't it?"

Dirk commenced 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

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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 bounteousness, of plenty, of prophecy fulfilled as when a beautiful and fertile woman having borne her children and found them good, now

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girls, too. He rarely "cut" a class. He would have felt that this was unfair and disloyal to his mother. Some of his fellow students joked about this faithfulness to his classes. "Person would think you were an Unclassified," they said.

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

The professors found them a shade too eager, perhaps; too inquiring; demanding too much. They stayed after class and asked innumerable questions. They bristled 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 Unclassified—a female Unclassified, a large, good-humored, 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 Unclassified would have told you, and no matter how cold the day there was always a half-moon of stain showing under her armpits. She had a really fine mind, quick, eager, balanced, almost judicial. She knew just which references were valuable, which useless. Her name was 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.

"Your 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 lowly. "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 earn 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 theirs. 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 kids were 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 to."

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

He told his mother about her. Selma was deeply interested and stirred. "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 till Monday morning and go back with

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. Un—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 get 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, she said, "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 as they had been delivering them 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 overdid it. 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 them. 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; desiccated women. Only their

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