

SO BIG

BY EDNA FERBER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARK AGNEW



(Continued)

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 captaincy); 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," Selina 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. I'd 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.

Selina had thought about her own place in this war welter. 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 Selina. "Purify! It never has yet."

It was understood, by Selina 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 rear 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 Selina, in triumph, she said, "Yes, but there isn't much fun in it, is there? This selling

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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 is the theatrical way in which life speeds in America.

Selina 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 not 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 wreaked their vengeance on her floating of them. Her skin was tanned, weather-beaten; her hair rough and dry. Her eyes, in that frame, startled 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 Selina 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, Selina. Dirk and Paula are together too much. People are talking."

"Talking?" The smile faded from Selina'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

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 hair. "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 had played when he was a child. "How big is my son! How big?" She was smiling, but her eyes were somber.

"So big!" answered Dirk, and mean-



"So Big!" Answered Dirk.

ured a very tiny space between thumb and forefinger. "So big."

She faced him, sitting up very straight in bed, the little wool shawl hunched about her shoulders. "Dirk, are you ever going back to architecture? The war is history. It's now or never with you. Pretty soon it will be too late. Are you ever going back to architecture? To your profession?"

A clean amputation. "No, Mother."

She gave an actual gasp, as though icy water had been thrown full in her face. She looked suddenly old, tired. Her shoulders sagged. He stood in the doorway, braced for her reproaches. But when she spoke it was to reproach herself. "Then I'm a failure."

"Oh, what nonsense, Mother. I'm happy. You can't live somebody else's life. You used to tell me, when I was a kid, I remember, that life wasn't just an adventure, to be taken as it came, with the hope that something glorious was always hidden just around the corner. You said you had lived that way and it hadn't worked. You said—"

She interrupted him with a little cry. "I know I did. I know I did." Suddenly she raised a warning finger. Her eyes were luminous, prophetic. "Dirk, you can't desert her like that. 'Desert who?' He was startled.

"Beauty! Self-expression. What! Ever you want to call it. You wait! She'll turn on you some day. Some day you'll want her, and she won't be there."

Inwardly he had been resentful of this bedside conversation with his mother. She made little of him, he thought, while outsiders appreciated his success. He had said, "So big," measuring a tiny space between thumb and forefinger in answer to her half-playful question; but he had not honestly meant it. He thought her ridiculously old-fashioned now in her viewpoint, and certainly unreasonable. But he would not quarrel with her.

"You wait, too, Mother," he said now, smiling. "Some day your wretched son will be a real success. Wait till the millions roll in. Then we'll see."

She lay down, turned her back deliberately upon him, pulled the covers up about her.

"Shall I turn out your light, Mother, and open the windows?"

"Meena'll do it. She always does. Just call her. . . Good night."

He knew that he had come to be a rather big man in his world. Influence had helped. He knew that, too. But he shut his mind to much of Paula's maneuvering and wire-pulling—refused to acknowledge that her lean, dark, eager fingers had manipulated the mechanism that ordered his career. Paula herself was wise enough to know that to hold him she must not let him feel indebted to her. She knew that the debtor hates his creditor. She lay awake at night planning for him, scheming for his advancement, then suggested these schemes to him so deftly as to make him think he himself had devised them. She had even realized of late that their growing intimacy might handicap him if openly

commented on. But now she must see him daily, or speak to him. Her telephone was a private wire leading only to her own bedroom. She called him the first thing in the morning; the last thing at night.

Her voice, when she spoke to him, was an organ transformed; low, vibrant, with a timbre in its tone that would have made it unrecognizable to an outsider. Her words were commonplace enough, but pregnant and meaningful for her.

"What did you do today? Did you have a good day? . . . Why didn't you call me? . . . Did you follow up that suggestion you made about Kennedy? I think it's a wonderful idea, don't you? You're a wonderful man, Dirk; did you know that? . . . I miss you. . . Do you? . . . When? . . . Why not lunch? . . . Oh, not if you have a business appointment. . . How about five o'clock? . . . No, not there. . . Oh, I don't know. It's so public. . . Yes. . . Good-by. . . Good-night. . . Good-night."

They began to meet rather furtively, in out-of-the-way places. They would lunch in department store restaurants where none of their friends ever came. They spent off afternoon hours in the dim, close atmosphere of the motion-picture palaces, sitting in the back row, seeing nothing of the film, talking in eager whispers that failed to annoy the scattered devotees in the middle of the house. When they drove it was on obscure streets.

Paula had grown very beautiful, her world thought. There was about her the aura, the glow, the roseate exhalation that surrounds the woman in love.

Frequently she irritated Dirk. At such times he grew quieter than ever; more reserved. As he involuntarily withdrew she advanced. Sometimes he thought he hated her—her hot, eager hands, her glowing, asking eyes, her thin, red mouth, her sorrow, heart-shaped, exquisite face, her perfumed clothing, her air of ownership. That was it! Her possessiveness. Sometimes Dirk wondered what Theodore Storm thought and knew behind that impassive flabby white mask of his.

Dirk met plenty of other girls. Paula was clever enough to see to that. She asked them to share her box at the opera. She had them at her dinners. She affected great indifference to their effect on him. She suffered when he talked to one of them.

"Dirk, why don't you take out that nice Farnham girl?"

"Is she nice?"

"Well, isn't she? You were talking to her long enough at the Kirks' dance. What were you talking about?"

"Books."

"Oh, Books. She's awfully nice and intelligent, isn't she? A lovely girl." She was suddenly happy.

The Farnham girl was a nice girl. She was the kind of girl one should fall in love with and doesn't. The Farnham girl was one of many well-bred Chicago girls of her day and class. Fine, honest, clear-headed, frank, capable, good-looking in an indefinite and unarresting sort of way. Hair-colored hair, good teeth, good enough eyes, clear skin, sensible me-

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