

# SO BIG

[BY EDNA FERBER]

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(Continued)

She was gone. Miss Ethelinda Quinn et al., in the outer office, appraised the costume of Miss Dallas O'Mara from her made-to-order footgear to her made-in-France millinery and achieved a lightning mental reconstruction of their own costumes. Dirk DeJong in the inner office realized that he had ordered a fifteen-hundred-dollar drawing, sight unseen, and that Paula was going to ask questions about it.

"Make a note, Miss Rawlings, to call Miss O'Mara's studio on Thursday." In the next few days he learned that a surprising lot of people knew a surprisingly good deal about this Dallas O'Mara. She hailed from Texas, hence the name. She was twenty-eight—twenty-five—thirty-two—thirty-six. She was beautiful. She was ugly. She was an orphan. She had worked her way through art school. She had no sense of the value of money. Two years ago she had achieved sudden success with her drawings. Her ambition was to work in oils. She tottered like a galley-slave; played like a child; had twenty beaux and no lover; her friends, men and women, were legion and wandered in and out of her studio as though it were a public thoroughfare. She supported an assortment of unlovely brothers and spineless sisters in Texas and points West.

Dirk had made the appointment with her for Thursday at three. Paula said she'd go with him, and went. She dressed for Dallas O'Mara and the result was undeniably enchanting. Dallas sometimes did a crayon portrait, or even attempted one in oils. It was considered something of an achievement to be asked to pose for her. Paula's hat had been chosen in deference to hat, hair and profile, and her pearls with an eye to all four. The whole defied competition on the part of Miss Dallas O'Mara.

Miss Dallas O'Mara, in her studio, was perched on a high stool before an easel with a large tray of assorted crayons at her side. She looked a sight and didn't care at all. She greeted Dirk and Paula with a cheerful friendliness and went right on working. A model, very smartly gowned, was sitting for her.



"Hello!" said Dallas O'Mara. "This is it. Do you think you're going to like it?"

"Oh," said Dirk. "Is that it?" It was merely the beginning of a drawing of the smartly gowned model. "Oh, that's it, is it?" Fifteen hundred dollars!

"I hope you didn't think it was going to be a picture of a woman buying beads." She went on working. She had on a faded all-enveloping smock, over which French ink, rubber cement, pencil marks, crayon dust and wash were so impartially distributed that the whole blended and mixed in a rich mellow haze like the Chicago atmosphere itself. The collar of a white silk blouse, not especially clean, showed above this. On her feet were soft kid bedroom slippers, scuffed, with pompons on them. Her dull gold hair was carelessly rolled into that great loose knot at the back. Across one cheek was a swipe of black.

"Well," thought Dirk, "she looks a sight." Dallas O'Mara waved a friendly hand toward some chairs on which were piled hats, odd garments, Bristol board and (on the broad arm of one) a piece of yellow cake. "Sit down." She called to the girl who had opened the door to them: "Gilda, will you dump some of those things. This is Mrs. Storm, Mr. DeJong—Gilda Hanan." Her secretary, Dirk later learned.

The place was disorderly, comfortable, shabby. A battered grand piano stood in one corner. A great skylight formed half the ceiling and sloped down at the north end of the room. A man and a girl sat talking earnestly on the couch in another corner. A swarthy foreign-looking chap, vaguely familiar to Dirk, was playing softly at the piano. The telephone rang. Miss Hanan took the message, transmitted it to Dallas O'Mara, received the answer, repeated it.

Perched atop the stool, one slippered foot screwed in a rung, Dallas worked concentratedly, calmly, earnestly. There was something splendid, something impressive, something magnificent about her absorption, her indifference to appearance, her unawareness of outsiders, her concentration on the work before her. Her nose was shiny. Dirk hadn't seen a girl with a shiny nose in years.

"How can you work with all this crowd around?" "Oh," said Dallas in that deep, restful, leisurely voice of hers, "there are always between twenty and thirty"—she slipped a quick scarlet line on the board, rubbed it out at once—"thousand people in and out of here every hour, just about. I like it."

"Gosh!" he thought, "she's—I don't know—she's—" "Shall we go?" said Paula. He had forgotten all about her. "Yes. Yes, I'm ready if you are."

Outside, "Do you think you're going to like the picture?" Paula asked. They stepped into her car. "Sure." "Attractive, isn't she?" "Think so?"

So he was going to be on his guard, was he? Paula threw in the clutch viciously, jerked the lever into second speed. "Her neck was dirty." "Crayon dust," said Dirk. "Not necessarily," replied Paula. Dirk turned sideways to look at her. It was as though he saw her for the first time. She looked brittle, hard, artificial—small, somehow. Not in physique but in personality.

The picture was finished and delivered within ten days. In that time Dirk went twice to the studio in Ontario street. Dallas did not seem to mind. Neither did she appear particularly interested. She was working hard both times. Once she looked as he had seen her on his first visit. The second time she had on a fresh crisp smock of faded yellow that was glorious with her hair; and high-heeled beige kid slippers, very smart. She was like a little girl who has just been freshly scrubbed and dressed in a clean pinafore, Dirk thought.

He thought a good deal about Dallas O'Mara. He found himself talking about her in what he assumed to be a careless, offhand manner. He liked to talk about her. He told his mother of her. He could let himself go with Selma, and he must have taken advantage of this for she looked at him intently and said: "I'd like to meet her. I've never met a girl like that."

rible when he sang them. There was about this lean, hollow-chested, somber-eyed comedian a poignant pathos, a gorgeous sense of rhythm—a something unnameable that bound you to him, made you love him. In the theater he came out to the edge of the runway and took the audience in his arms. He talked like a bootblack and sang like an angel. Dallas at the piano, he leaning over it, were doing "blues." The two were rapt, ecstatic. I got the blues—I said the blues—I got the blues or that—the something-or-other—blue—hoo-boos. They scarcely noticed Dirk. Dallas had nodded when he came in, and had gone on playing. Colson sang the cheaply sentimental ballad as though it were the folksong of a tragic race. His arms were extended, his face rapt. As Dallas played the tears stood in her eyes. When they had finished, "Isn't it a terrible song?" she said. "I'm crazy about it. Bert's going to try it out tonight."

"Who—uh—wrote it?" asked Dirk politely. Dallas began to play again. "H'm! Oh, I did." They were off onto more. It was practically impossible to get a minute with her alone. That irritated him. People were always drifting in and out of the studio—quiet, important, startling people; little, dejected, shabby people. An impeccable girl art student, red-haired and wistful, that Dallas was taking in until the girl got some money from home—a

head waiter knew him. "Good evening, Mr. DeJong." Dirk was secretly gratified. Then, with a shock, he realized that the head waiter was grinning at Dallas and Dallas was grinning at the head waiter. "Hello, Andre," said Dallas. "Good evening, Miss O'Mara." The text of his greeting was correct and befitting the head waiter at the Blackstone. But his voice was lyric and his eyes glowed. His manner of seating her at a table was an enthronement.

At the look in Dirk's eyes, "I met him in the army," Dallas explained. "When I was in France. He's a grand lad." "Were you in—what did you do in France?" "Oh, odd jobs." Her dinner gown was very smart,

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pearl-hung grand-opera singer who was condescending to the Chicago opera for a fortnight. They paid no attention to Dirk. Yet there was nothing rude about their indifference. They simply were more interested in what they were doing. He left telling himself that he wouldn't go there again. Hanging around a studio. But next day he was back.

"Look here, Miss O'Mara." He had got her alone for a second. "Look here, will you come out to dinner with me some time? And the theater?" "Love to." "When?" He was actually trembling.

"Tonight." He had an important engagement. He cast it out of his life. "Tonight! That's grand. Where do you want to dine? The Casino? The smartest club in Chicago, a little pink stucco Italian box of a place on the Lake Shore drive. He was rather proud of being in a position to take her there as his guest.

"Oh, no, I hate those arty little places. I like dining in a hotel full of all sorts of people." Dining in a club means you're surrounded by people who're pretty much alike. Their membership in the club means they're there because they are all interested in golf, or because they're university graduates, or belong to the same political party, or write, or paint, or have incomes of over fifty thousand a year, or something. I like 'em mixed up, higgledy-piggledy. A dining-room full of gamblers and insurance agents, and actors, merchants, thieves, bootleggers, lawyers, kept ladies, wives, spies, traveling men, millionaires—everything. That's what I call dining out. Unless one is dining at a friend's house, of course." A rarely long speech for her.

"Perhaps," eagerly, "you'll dine at my little apartment some time. Just four or six of us, or even—" "Perhaps." "Would you like the Drake tonight?" "It looks too much like a Roman bath. The pillars scare me. Let's go to the Blackstone." They went to the Blackstone.

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but the pink ribbon strap of an undergarment showed unthinkingly at one side—her silk brassiere, probably. Paula would have—but then, a thing like that was impossible in Paula's perfection of toilette. He loved the way the gown cut sharply away at the shoulder to show her firm white arms. It was dull gold, the color of her hair. This was one Dallas. There were a dozen—a hundred. Yet she was always the same. You never knew whether you were going to meet the gainful of the ruffled smock and the smudged face or the beauty of the little fur jacket. Sometimes Dirk thought she looked like the splendid goddesses you saw in paintings—the kind with high, pointed breasts and gracious, gentle pose—holding out a horn of plenty. There was about her something genuine and earthy and elemental. He noticed that her nails were short and not well cared for—not glittering and pointed and cruelly sharp and horribly vermilion, like Paula's. That pleased him, too, somehow.

"Some oysters?" he suggested. "They are perfectly safe here. Or fruit cocktail? Then breast of guinea hen under glass and an artichoke."

She looked a little worried. "If you suppose you take that. Me, I'd like a steak and some potatoes au gratin and a salad with Russian—" "That's fine!" He was delighted. He doubted that order and they consumed it with devastating thoroughness. She ate rolls. She ate butter. She made no remarks about the food except to say, once, that it was good and that she had forgotten to eat French butter in a year.

Usually, when you dined in a restaurant with a woman she said, "Oh, I'd love to eat some of those crisp little rolls!" You said, "Why not?" Invariably the answer to this was, "I haven't! Goodness! A half pound at least. I haven't eaten a roll with butter in a year."

Again you said, "Why not?" "Afraid I'll get fat." Automatically, "You! Nonsense!"

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"You're just right." He was bored with these women who talked about their weight, figure, lines. He thought it in bad taste. Paula was always rigidly refraining from this or that. It made him uncomfortable to sit at the table facing her; eating his thorough meal while she nibbled fragile curls of Melba toast, a lettuce leaf, and half a sugarless grapefruit. It lessened his enjoyment of his own oysters, steak, coffee. He thought that she always eyed his food a little avidly, for all her expressed indifference to it. She was looking a little haggard, too.

"The theater's next door," he said. "Just a step. We don't have to leave here until after eight." "That's nice." She had her cigarette with her coffee in a mellow, sensuous atmosphere of enjoyment. He was talking about himself a good deal. He felt relaxed, at ease, happy.

"You know I'm an architect—at least, I was one. Perhaps that's why I like to hang around your shop so. I get sort of homesick for the pencils and the drawing board—the whole thing." "Why did you give it up, then?" "Nothing in it."

"How do you mean—nothing in it?" "No money. After the war nobody was building. Oh, I suppose if I'd hung on—" "And then you became a banker, huh? Well, there ought to be money enough in a bank."

He was a little nettled. "I wasn't a banker—at first. I was a bond salesman." Her brows met in a little frown. "I'd rather," Dallas said, slowly, "plan one back door of a building that's going to help make this town beautiful and significant than sell all the bonds that ever floated a—whatever it is that bonds are supposed to float."

He defended himself. "I felt that way, too. But you see, my mother had given me my education, really. She worked for it. I couldn't go dabbling along, earning just enough to keep me. I wanted to give her things. I wanted—" "Did she want those things? Did she want you to give up architecture and go into bonds?"

"Well—she—I don't know that she exactly—" He was too decent—still too much the son of Selma DeJong—to be able to lie about that. "You said you were going to let me meet her."

"Would you let me bring her in? Or perhaps you'd even—would you drive out to the farm with me some day. She'd like that so much."

"So would I." He leaned toward her, suddenly. "Listen, Dallas. What do you think of me, anyway?" He wanted to know. He couldn't stand not knowing any longer. "I think you're a nice young man." That was terrible. "But I don't want you to think I'm a nice young man. I want you to like me—a lot. Tell me, what haven't I got that you think I ought to have? Why do you put me off so many times? I never feel that I'm really near you. What is it I lack?" He was abject.

"And then what?" "Then they seem to feel better and we become great friends." "But don't you ever fall in love with them?" "Pretty d—d sure of herself. 'Don't you ever fall in love with them?'" "I almost always do," said Dallas. He plunged. "I could give you a lot of things you haven't got, purple or no purple."

"I'm going to France in April, Paris." "What do you mean! Paris. What for?" "Study. I want to do portraits. Oils." He was terrified. "Can't you do them here?"

"Oh, no. Not what I need. I have been studying here. I've been taking life-work three nights a week at the Art Institute, just to keep my hand in." "So that's where you are, evenings?" He was strangely relieved. "Let me go with you some time, will you?" Anything. Anything.

She took him with her one evening, steering him successfully past the stern Irishman who guarded the entrance to the basement classrooms; to her locker, got into her smock, grabbed her brushes, went directly to her place, fell to work at once. Dirk blinked in the strong light. He glanced at the dais toward which they were all gazing from time to time as they worked. On it lay a nude woman.

To himself Dirk said, in a sort of panic: "Why, say, she hasn't got any clothes on! My gosh! this is fierce. She hasn't got anything on!" He tried, meanwhile, to look easy, careless, critical. Strangely enough, he succeeded, after the first shock, not only in looking at ease, but feeling so. The class was doing the whole figure in oils.

The model was a moron with a skin like velvet and rose petals. She fell into poses that flowed like cream. Her hair was waved in wooden undulations and her nose was pure vulgarity and her earrings were drug-store pearls in triple strands but her back was probably finer than Helen's and her breasts twin snowdrifts peaked with coral. In twenty minutes Dirk found himself impersonally interested in tone, shadows, colors, line. He listened to the low-voiced instructor and squinted carefully to ascertain whether that shadow on the model's stomach really should be painted blue or brown.

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