SO BIG

BY EDNA FERBER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARK AGNEW.

(Continued from last week.)

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 1888, 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 schoolteacher.

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.

CHAPTER III.—The monotonous life of a country school-teacher at that time, is Selina's, brightened somewhat by the companionship of the sensitive, artistic boy Roelf.

Adam Ooms' glance swept the hall until it reached the tall figure towering in the doorway—reached it, and rested there. His gimlet eyes seemed to bore their way into Pervus DeJong's steady stare. He raised his right arm aloft, brandishing the potato masher. The whole room fixed its gaze on the blond head in the doorway. "Speak up! Young men of High Prairie! Heh, you, Pervus DeJong! WhatmIbidwhatmIbidwhatmIbid!"

"Fifty cents!" The bid came from Gerrit Pon at the other end of the hall. A dashing offer, as a start, in this district where one dollar often represented the profits on a whole load of market truck brought to the city.

Crash! went the potato masher. "Fifty cents I'm bid. Who'll make it seventy-five? Who'll make it seventy-five?"

"Sixty!" Johannes Ambuul, a widower, his age more than the sum of his bid.

"Seventy!" Gerrit Pon.

Adam Ooms whispered it—hissed it. "S-s-s-seventy. Ladies and gents, I wouldn't repeat out loud sucha figger. I would be ashamed. Look at this basket, gents, and then you can say . . . s-s-seventy!"

"Seventy-five!" the cautious Ambuul.

Scarlet, flooding her face, belied the widow's outward air of composure. Pervus DeJong, standing beside Selina, viewed the proceedings with an air of detachment. High Prairie was looking at him expectantly, openly. The widow bit her red lip, tossed her head. Pervus DeJong returned the auctioneer's meaning smirk with the mild gaze of a disinterested outsider.

"Gents!" Adam Ooms' voice took on a tearful note—the tone of one who is more hurt than angry. "Gents!" Slowly, with infinite reverence, he lifted one corner of the damask cloth that concealed the hamper's contents—lifted it and peered within as at a treasure. At what he saw there he started back dramatically, at once rapturous, despairing, amazed. He rolled his eyes. He smacked his lips. He rubbed his stomach. The sort of dumb show that, since the days of the Greek drama, has been used to denote gastronomic delight.

"Eighty!" was wrenched suddenly from Goris Von Vuuren, the nineteen-year-old fat and gluttonous son of a prosperous New Haarlem farmer.

Adam Ooms rubbed brisk palms together. "Now then! A dollar! A dollar! It's an insult to this basket to make it less than a dollar." He leaned far forward over his improvised pulpit. "Did I hear you say a dollar, Pervus DeJong?" DeJong stared, immovable, unabashed. "Eighty-eighty-eighty-eighty—gents! I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to whisper a secret." His lean face was veined with craftiness. "Gents. Listen. It isn't chicken in this beautiful basket. It isn't chicken. It's"—a dramatic pause—"it's roast duck!" He swayed back, mopped his brow with his red handkerchief, held one hand high in the air. His last card.

"Eighty-five!" groaned the fat Goris Von Vuuren.

"Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-fiveeightyfiveeightyfive eighty - five! Gents! Gen-tle-men! Eighty-five once! Eighty-five—twice!" (Crash)! "Gone to Goris Von Vuuren for eighty-five."

A sigh went up from the assemblage; a sigh that was the wind before the storm. There followed a tornado of talk. It crackled and thundered. The rich Widow Paarlenberg would have to eat her supper with Von Vuuren's boy, the great thick Goris. And there in the doorway, talking to teacher as if they had known each other for years, was Pervus DeJong with his money in his pocket. It was as good as a play.

Adam Ooms was angry. His lean fox-like face became pinched with spite. He prided himself on his antics as auctioneer; and his chef d'oeuvre had brought a meager eighty-five cents, besides doubtless winning him the enmity of that profitable store customer, the Widow Paarlenberg. Goris Von Vuuren came forward to claim his prize amidst shouting, clapping, laughter. The great hamper was handed down to him.

Adam Ooms scuffled about among the many baskets at his feet. His nostrils looked pinched and his skinny hands shook a little as he searched for one small object.

When he stood upright once more he was smiling. His little eyes gleamed. His wooden scepter pounded for silence. High in one hand, balanced daintily on his finger tips, he held Selina's little white shoe box, with its red ribbon binding it, and the plume of evergreen stuck in the ribbon. Affecting great solicitude he brought it down then to read the name written on it; held it aloft again, smirking.

He said nothing. Grinning, he held it high. He turned his body at the waist from side to side, so that all might see. The eyes of those before him still held a mental picture of the huge hamper, food-packed, that had just been handed down. The contrast was too absurd, too cruel. A ripple of laughter swept the room; rose; swelled to a roar. Adam Ooms waited with a nice sense of the dramatic until the laughter had reached its height, then held up a hand for silence. A great scraping "Ahem!" as he cleared his throat threatened to send the crowd off again.

"Ladies—and gents! Here's a dainty little tidbit. Here's something not only for the inner man, but a feast for the eye. Well, boys, if the last lot was too much for you this lot ought to be just about right. If the food ain't quite enough for you, you can tie the ribbon in the lady's hair and put the posy in your bottonhole and there you are. There you are! What's more, the lady herself goes with it. You don't get a country girl with this here box, gents. A city girl, you can tell by looking at it, just. And who is she? Who did up this dainty little box just big enough for two?" He inspected it again, solemnly, and added, as an afterthought, "If you ain't feeling specially hungry. Who?—" He looked about, apishly.

Selina's cheeks matched her gown. Her eyes were wide and dark with the effort she was making to force back the hot haze threatening them. Why had she mounted this wretched soap box! Why had she come to this hideous party! Why had she come to High Prairie! Why! . . .

"Miss Selina Peake, that's who. Miss Se-li-na Peake!"

A hundred balloon faces pulled by a single cord turned toward her as she stood there on the box for all to see. They swam toward her. She put up a hand to push them back.

"What'm I bid! What'm I bid! What'm I bid for this here lovely little toothful, gents! Start her up!"

"Five cents!" piped up old Johannes Ambuul, with a snicker. The tittering crowd broke into a guffaw. Selina was conscious of a little sick feeling at the pit of her stomach. Through the haze she saw the widow's face, no longer sulky, but smiling now. She saw Roelf's dear dark head. His face was set, like a man's. He was coming toward her, or trying to, but the crowd wedged him in, small as he was among those great bodies. She lost sight of him. How hot it was! how hot. . . . An arm at her waist. Someone had mounted the little box and stood teetering there beside her, pressed against her slightly, reassuringly. Pervus DeJong. Her head was on a level with the doorway, on the soap box, for all High Prairie to see.

"Five cents I'm bid for this lovely little mouthful put up by the school teacher's own fair hands. Five cents! Five—"

"One dollar!" Pervus DeJong.

The balloon faces were suddenly punctured with holes. High Prairie's jaw dropped with astonishment. Its mouth stood open.

There was nothing plain about Selina now. Her dark head was held high, and his fair one beside it made a vivid foil. The purchase of the wine-colored cashmere was at last justified.

"And ten!" cackled old Johannes Ambuul, his rheumy eyes on Selina.

Art and human spitefulness struggled visibly for mastery in Adam Ooms' face—and art won. The auctioneer triumphed over the man. The term "crowd psychology" was unknown to him, but he was artist enough to sense that some curious magic process, working through this roomful of people, had transformed the little white box, from a thing despised and ridiculed, into an object of beauty, of value, of infinite desirability. He now eyed it in a catalepsy of admiration.

"One-ten I'm bid for this box all tied with a ribbon to match the gown of the girl who brought it. Gents, you get the ribbon, the lunch, and the girl. And only one-ten bid for all that. Gents! Gents! Remember, it ain't only a lunch—it's a picture. It pleases the eye. Do I hear one—"

"Five bits!" Barend DeRoo, of Low Prairie, in the lists. A strapping young Dutchman, the Brom Bones of the district. He drove to the Haymarket with his load of produce and played cards all night on the wagon under the gas torches while the street girls of the neighborhood assailed him in vain. Six feet three, his red face shone now like a harvest moon above the crowd. A merry, mischievous eye that laughed at Pervus DeJong and his dollar bid.

"Dollar and a half!" A high clear voice—a boy's voice. Roelf.

"Oh, no!" said Selina aloud. But she was unheard in the gabble. Roelf had once confided to her that he had saved three dollars and fifty cents in the last three years. Five dollars would purchase a set of tools that his mind had been fixed on for months past. Selina saw Klaas Pool's look of astonishment changing to anger. Saw Maartje Pool's quick hand on his arm, restraining him.

"Two dollars!" Pervus DeJong.

"And ten." Johannes Ambuul's cautious bid.

"Two and a quarter." Barend DeRoo.

"Two-fifty!" Pervus DeJong.

"Three dollars!" The high voice of the boy. It cracked a little on the last syllable, and the crowd laughed.

"Three-three-three-three-three - three-three. Three once—"

"And a half." Pervus DeJong.

"Three sixty."

"Four!" DeRoo.

"And ten."

The boy's voice was heard no more.

"I wish they'd stop," whispered Selina.

"Five!" Pervus DeJong.

"Six!" DeRoo, his face very red.

"And ten."

"Seven!"

"It's only jelly sandwiches," said Selina to DeJong, in a panic.

"Eight!" Johannes Ambuul, gone mad.

"Nine!" DeRoo.

"Nine! Nine I'm bid! Nine-nine-nine! Who'll make it—"

"Let him have it. The cup cakes fell a little. Don't—"

"Ten!" said Pervus DeJong.

Barend DeRoo shrugged his great shoulders.

"Ten-ten-ten. Do I hear eleven? Do I hear ten-fifty. Ten-ten-ten tententententententen! Gents! Ten once. Ten

"Gone!—for Ten Dollars to Pervus DeJong."

twice! Gone—for ten dollars to Pervus DeJong. And a bargain." Adam Ooms mopped his bald head and his cheeks and the damp spot under his chin.

Ten dollars. Adam Ooms knew, as did all the countryside, this was not the sum of ten dollars merely. No basket of food, though it contained nightingales' tongues, the golden apple of Atalanta, wines of rare vintage, could have been adequate recompense for these ten dollars. They represented sweat and blood; toil and hardship; hours under the burning prairie sun at midday; work doggedly carried on through the drenching showers of spring; nights of restless sleep snatched an hour at a time under the sky in the Chicago market place; miles of weary travel down the rude corduroy road between High Prairie and Chicago, now up to the hubs in mud, now blinded by dust and blowing sand.

A sale at Christie's, with a miniature going for a million, could not have met with a deeper hush, a more dramatic babble following the hush.

They ate their lunch together in one corner of Adam Ooms' hall. Selina opened the box and took out the deviled eggs, and the cup cakes that had fallen a little, and the apples, and the sandwiches sliced very, very thin. The coldly appraising eye of all High Prairie, Low Prairie, and New Haarlem watched this sparse provender emerge from the ribbon-tied shoe box. She offered him a sandwich. It looked infinitesimal in his great paw. Suddenly all Selina's agony of embarrassment was swept away, and she was laughing, not wildly or hysterically, but joyously and girlishly. She sank her little white teeth into one of the absurd sandwiches and looked at him, expecting to find him laughing, too. But he wasn't laughing. He looked very earnest, and his blue eyes were fixed hard on the bit of bread in his hand, and his face was very red and clean-shaven. He bit into the sandwich and chewed it solemnly. And Selina thought: "Why, the dear thing! The great big dear thing! And he might have been eating breast of duck. . . . Ten dollars!" Aloud she said, "What made you do it?"

He seemed not to hear her; bit ruminantly into one of the cup cakes. Suddenly: "I can't hardly write at all, only to sign my name and like that."

"Read?"

"Only to spell out the words. Anyways I don't get time for reading. But figuring I wish I knew. 'Rithmetic. I can figger some, but those fellows in Haymarket they are too sharp for me. They do numbers in their head—like that, so quick."

Selina leaned toward him. "I'll teach you. I'll teach you."

"How do you mean, teach me?"

"Evenings."

He looked down at his great calloused palms, then up at her. "What would you take for pay?"

"Pay! I don't want any pay." She was genuinely shocked.

His face lighted up with a sudden thought. "Tell you what. I could start for you the fire, mornings, in the school. And thaw the pump and bring in a pail of water. This month, and January and February and part of March, even, now I don't go to market on account it's winter, I could start you the fire. Till spring. And I could come maybe three times a week, evenings, to Pool's place, for lessons." He looked so helpless, so humble, so huge; and the more pathetic for his hugeness.

She felt a little rush of warmth toward him that was at once impersonal and maternal. She thought again, "Why, the dear thing! The great helpless big thing! How serious he is! And funny." She laughed, suddenly, a gay little laugh, and he, after a puzzled pause, joined her companionably.

"Three evenings a week," repeated Selina, then, from the depths of her ignorance. "Why, I'd love to. I'd—love to."

Chapter V

The evenings turned out to be Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Supper was over by six-thirty in the Pool household. Pervus was there by seven, very clean as to shirt, his hair brushed till it shone; shy, and given to dropping his hat and bumping against chairs, and looking solemn. Selina was torn between pity and mirth. If only he had blustered. A blustering big man puts the world on the defensive. A gentle giant disarms it.

Selina got out her McBride's grammar and Duffy's arithmetic, and together they started to parse verbs, paper walls, dig cisterns, and extract square roots. They found study impossible at the oilcloth-covered kitchen table, with the Pool household eddying about it. Jakob built a fire in the parlor stove and there they sat, teacher and pupil, their feet resting cosily on the gleaming nickel railing that encircled the wood burner.

On the evening of the first lesson Roelf had glowered throughout supper and had disappeared into the work shed, whence issued a great sound of hammering, sawing, and general clatter. He and Selina had got into the way of spending much time together, in or out of doors. The boy worshiped her inarticulately. She had early discovered that he had a feeling for beauty—beauty of line, texture, color, and grouping—that was rare in one of his years. The feel of a satin ribbon in his fingers; the orange and rose of a sunset; the folds of the wine-red cashmere dress; the cadence of a spoken line, brought a look to his face that startled her.

Since the gathering at Ooms' hall he had been moody and sullen; had refused to answer when she spoke to him of his bid for her basket. Urged, he would only say, "Oh, it was just fun to make old Ooms mad."

Now, with the advent of Pervus DeJong, Roelf presented that most touching and miserable of spectacles, a small boy jealous and helpless in his jealousy. Selina had asked him to join the tri-weekly evening lessons; had, indeed, insisted that he be a pupil in the class round the parlor stove.

Roelf would not. He disappeared into his work-shed after supper; did not emerge until after DeJong's departure.

There was something about the sight of this great creature bent laboriously over a slate, the pencil held clumsily in his huge fingers, that moved Selina strangely. Pity wracked her. If she had known to what emotion this pity was akin she might have taken away the slate and given him a tablet, and the whole course of her life would have been different. "Poor lad," she thought. "Poor lad." Chided herself for being amused at his childlike earnestness.

He did not make an apt pupil, though painstaking. Selina would go over a problem or a sentence again and again, patiently, patiently. Then, suddenly, like a hand passed over his face, his smile would come, transforming it. He would smile like a child, and Selina should have been warned by the warm rush of joy that his smile gave her. She would smile, too. He was as pleased as though he had made a fresh and wonderful discovery.

"Its easy," he would say, "when you know it once." Like a boy.

He usually went home by eight-thirty or nine. Often the Pools went to bed before he left. After he had gone Selina was wakeful. She would heat water and wash; brush her hair vigorously; feeling at once buoyant and depressed.

Sometimes they fell to talking. His wife had died in the second year of their marriage, when the child was born. The child, too, had died. A girl. He was unlucky, like that. It was the same with the farm.

Selina's heart melted in pity. He would look down at the great calloused hands; up at her. One of the charms of Pervus DeJong lay in the things that his eyes said and his tongue did not. Women always imagined he was about to say what he looked, but he never did. It made otherwise dull conversation with him most exciting.

His was in no way a shrewd mind. His respect for Selina was almost reverence. But he had this advantage: he had married a woman, had lived with her for two years. She had borne him a child. Selina was a girl in experience. She was a woman capable of a great deal of passion, but she did not know that. Passion was a thing no woman possessed, much less talked about. It simply did not exist, except in men, and then it was something to be ashamed of, like a violent temper, or a weak stomach.

By the first of March he could speak a slow, careful and fairly grammatical English. He could master simple sums. By the middle of March the lessons would cease. There was too much work to do about the farm—night work as well as day. She found herself trying not to think about the time when the lessons should cease. She refused to look ahead to April.

One night, late in February, Selina was conscious that she was trying to control something. She was trying to keep her eyes away from something. She realized that she was trying not to look at his hands. She wanted, crazily, to touch them. She wanted to feel them about her throat. She wanted to put her lips on his hands—brush the backs of them, slowly, moistily, with her mouth, lingeringly. She was terribly frightened. She thought to herself: "I am going crazy. I am losing my mind. There is something the matter with me. I wonder how I look. I must look queer."

At half-past eight she closed her book suddenly. "I'm tired. I think it's the spring coming on." She smiled a little wavering smile. He rose and stretched himself, his great arms high above his head. Selina shivered.

"Two more weeks," he said, "is the last lesson. Well, do you think I have done pretty good—well?"

"Very well," Selina replied evenly. She felt very tired.

The first week in March he was ill, and did not come. A rheumatic affliction to which he was subject. It was the curse of the truck farmer. Selina's evenings were free to devote to Roelf, who glowed again. She sewed, too; read; helped Mrs. Pool with the housework in a gust of sympathy and found strange relief therein; made over an old dress; studied; wrote all her letters (few enough), even one to the dried-apple aunts in Vermont. She no longer wrote to Julie Hempel. She had heard that Julie was to be married to a Kansas man named Arnold. Julie herself had not written. The first week in March passed. He did not come. Nor did he come the following Tuesday or Thursday.

She was bewildered, frightened. All that week she had a curious feeling—or succession of feelings. She was restless, listless, by turns. Period of furious activity, followed by days of inertia. It was the spring, Maartje said. Selina hoped she wasn't going to be ill. She had never felt like that before. She wanted to cry. She was irritable to the point of waspishness with the children in the schoolroom.

On Saturday—the fourteenth of March—he walked in at seven. Klaas, Maartje and Roelf had driven off to a gathering at Low Prairie, leaving Selina with the pigtails and old Jakob. She had promised to make taffy for them, and was in the midst of it when his knock sounded at the kitchen door. All the blood in her body rushed to her head; pounded there hotly. He entered. There slipped down over her a complete armor of calmness, of self-possession; of glib how do you do Mr. DeJong and how are you feeling and won't you sit down and there's no fire in the parlor we'll have to sit here.

He took part in the taffy pulling. Selina wondered if Geertje and Jozina would ever have done squealing. It was half-past eight before she bundled them off to bed with a plate of clipped taffy lozenges between them. She heard them scuffling and scrimmaging about in the rare freedom of their parents' absence.

Pervus DeJong and Selina sat at the kitchen table, their books spread out before them on the oilcloth. The sweet, heavy scent of fruit filled the room. Selina brought the parlor lamp into the kitchen, the better to see. It was a nickel-bellied lamp, with a yellow glass shade that cast a mellow golden glow.

"You didn't go to the meeting," primly. "Mr. and Mrs. Pool went."

"No. I didn't go."

"Why not?"

She saw him swallow. "I got through too late. We're fixing to sow tomato seeds in the hotbeds tomorrow."

Selina opened McBride's grammar. "Ahem!" a school-teacherly cough. "Now, then, we'll parse this sentence: Blucher arrived on the field of Waterloo just as Wellington was receiving the last onslaught of Napoleon. 'Just' may be treated as a modifier of the dependent clause. That is: 'Just' means: at the time at which. Well. Just here modifies at the time. And Wellington is the . . ."

This for half an hour. Selina kept her eyes resolutely on the book. His voice went on with the dry business of parsing and its deep resonance struck a response from her as a harp responds when a hand is swept over its strings. Selina kept her eyes resolutely on the book. Yet she saw, as though her eyes rested on them, his large, strong hands. On the backs of them was a fine golden down that deepened at his wrists. Heavier and darker at the wrists. She found herself praying a little for strength—for strength against this horror and wickedness. This sin, this abomination that held her. A terrible, stark and pitiful prayer, couched in the idiom of the Bible.

"Oh, God, keep my eyes and my thoughts away from him. Away from his hands. Let me keep my eyes and my thoughts away from the golden hairs on his wrists. Let me not think of his wrists. . . . "The owner of the southwest quarter sells a strip 20 rods wide along the south side of his farm. How much does he receive at $150 per acre?"

He triumphed in this transaction, began the struggle with the square root of 576. Square roots agonized him. She washed the slate clean with her little sponge. He was leaning close in his effort to comprehend the fiendish little figures that marched obstractably under Selina's masterly pencil.

She took it up, glibly. "The remainder must contain twice the product of the tens by the units plus the square of the units." He blinked.

She was breathing rather fast. The fire in the kitchen stove snapped and cracked. "Now, then, suppose you do that for me. We'll wipe it out. There! What must the remainder contain?"

He took it up, slowly, haltingly. The house was terribly still except for the man's voice. "The remainder . . . twice . . . product . . . tens . . . units . . ." A something in his voice—a note—a timbre. She felt herself swaying queerly, as though the whole house were gently rocking. Little delicious agonizing shivers chased each other, hot and cold, up her arms, down her legs, over her spine. . . . "plus the square of the units is the same as the sum twice the tens . . . twice . . . the tens . . . the tens." His voice stopped.

Selina's eyes leaped from the book to his hands, uncontrollably. Something about them startled her. They were clenched fists. Her eyes now leaped from those clenched fists to the face of the man beside her. Her head came up, and back. Her wide, startled eyes met his. His were a blaze of blinding blue in his tanned face. Some corner of her mind that was still working clearly noted this. Then his hands unclenched. The blue blaze scorched her, enveloped her. Her cheek knew

Her Cheek Knew the Harsh Cool Feel of a Man's Cheek.

the harsh, cool feel of a man's cheek. She sensed the potent, terrifying, pungent odor of close contact—a mixture of tobacco smoke, his hair, freshly laundered linen, an indefinable body smell. It was a mingling that disgusted and attracted her. She was at once repelled and drawn. Then she felt his lips on hers and her own, incredibly, responding eagerly, wholly to that pressure.

(Continued next week.)

Museum at Priestley House.

Alumni chemists of The Pennsylvania State College who own the house on the banks of the Susquehanna at Northumberland built about 1794 by Dr. Joseph Priestley, the Unitarian minister who discovered oxygen, are planning to build a fire-proof museum there to house the historic relics and laboratory equipment used by the pioneer chemist. The Penn State chemists bought the house in the hope that it could be moved to the college campus but this was found to be impossible. Through Dr. Gerald L. Wendt, dean of the Penn State school of chemistry and physics, the American Chemical Society has been invited by the Penn State chemists to celebrate the sesqui-centennial of the discovery of the oxygen at the old Priestley home during September, 1926. The society was organized at Northumberland fifty years ago.

——An egg contains a large portion of albumen, intended by nature for the nourishment of the growing chick. It is for this reason that it is impossible to cook an egg on top of a high mountain, for there, owing to a lesser atmospheric pressure, the water boils at a lower temperature, and this temperature being under "coagulation point," the egg never "cooks."