

SO BIG

EDNA FERBER



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ONE

UNTIL he was almost ten the name stuck to him. He had literally to fight his way free of it. From So Big (of fond and infantile derivation) it had been condensed into Sobig. And Sobig DeJong, in all its consonantal disharmony, he had remained until he was a ten-year-old schoolboy in that incredibly Dutch district southwest of Chicago known first as New Holland and later as High Prairie. At ten, by dint of fists, teeth, copper-toed boots, and temper, he earned the right to be called by his real name, Dirk DeJong. Now and then, of course, the nickname bobbed up and had to be subdued in a brief and bitter skirmish. His mother, with whom the name had originated, was the worst offender. When she lapsed he did not, naturally, use schoolyard tactics on her. But he sulked and glowered portentously and refused to answer, though her tone, when she called him So Big, would have melted the heart of any but that natural savage, a boy of ten.

The nickname had sprung from the early and idiotic question invariably put to babies and answered by them, with infinite patience, through the years of their infancy.

Selina DeJong, darting expertly about her kitchen, from wash-tub to baking board, from stove to table, or, if at work in the fields of the truck farm, straightening the numbed back for a moment's respite from the close-set rows of carrots, turnips, spinach, or beets over which she was labouring, would wipe the sweat beads from

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nose and forehead with a quick duck of her head in the crook of her bent arm. Those great fine dark eyes of hers would regard the child perched impermanently on a little heap of empty potato sacks, one of which comprised his costume. He was constantly detaching himself from the parent sack heap to dig and burrow in the rich warm black loam of the truck garden. Selina DeJong had little time for the expression of affection. The work was always hot at her heels. You saw a young woman in a blue calico dress, faded and earth-grimed. Between her eyes was a driven look as of one who walks always a little ahead of herself in her haste. Her dark abundant hair was skewered into a utilitarian knob from which soft loops and strands were constantly escaping, to be pushed back by that same harried ducking gesture of head and bent arm. Her hands, for such use, were usually too crusted and inground with the soil into which she was delving. You saw a child of perhaps two years, dirt-streaked, sunburned, and generally otherwise defaced by those bumps, bites, scratches, and contusions that are the common lot of the farm child of a mother harried by work. Yet, in that moment, as the woman looked at the child there in the warm moist spring of the Illinois prairie land, or in the cluttered kitchen of the farmhouse, there quivered and vibrated between them and all about them an aura, a glow, that imparted to them and their surroundings a mystery, a beauty, a radiance.

"How big is baby?" Selina would demand, senselessly. "How big is my man?"

The child would momentarily cease to poke plump fingers into the rich black loam. He would smile a gummy though slightly weary smile and stretch wide his arms. She, too, would open her tired arms wide, wide. Then they would say in a duet, his mouth a puckered pink petal, hers quivering with tenderness and a certain amusement, "So-o-o-o big!" with the voice soaring on the prolonged vowel and dropping suddenly with the second word. Part of the game. The child became so habituated to this question that

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sometimes, if Selina happened to glance round at him suddenly in the midst of her task, he would take his cue without the familiar question being put and would squeal his "So-o-o-o big!" rather absently, in dutiful solo. Then he would throw back his head and laugh a triumphant laugh, his open mouth a coral orifice. She would run to him, and swoop down upon him, and bury her flushed face in the warm moist creases of his neck, and make as though to devour him. "So big!"

But of course he wasn't. He wasn't as big as that. In fact, he never became as big as the wide-stretched arms of her love and imagination would have had him. You would have thought she should have been satisfied when, in later years, he was the Dirk DeJong whose name you saw (engraved) at the top of heavy cream linen paper, so rich and thick and stiff as to have the effect of being starched and ironed by some costly American business process; whose clothes were made by Peter Peel, the English tailor; whose roadster ran on a French chassis; whose cabinet held mellow Italian vermouth and Spanish sherry; whose wants were served by a Japanese houseman; whose life, in short, was that of the successful citizen of the Republic. But she wasn't. Not only was she dissatisfied: she was at once remorseful and indignant, as though she, Selina DeJong, the vegetable pedler, had been partly to blame for this success of his, and partly cheated by it.

When Selina DeJong had been Selina Peake she had lived in Chicago with her father. They had lived in many other cities as well. In Denver during the rampant '80s. In New York when Selina was twelve. In Milwaukee briefly. There was even a San Francisco interlude which was always a little sketchy in Selina's mind and which had ended in a departure so hurried as to bewilder even Selina who had learned to accept sudden comings and abrupt goings without question. "Business," her father always said. "Little deal." She never knew until the day of his death how literally the word deal was applicable to his business transactions. Simeon Peake, travelling the country with his little daughter, was

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a gambler by profession, temperament, and natural talents. When in luck they lived royally, stopping at the best hotels, eating strange, succulent sea-viands, going to the play, driving in hired rigs (always with two horses. If Simeon Peake had not enough money for a two-horse equipage he walked). When fortune hid her face they lived in boarding houses, ate boarding-house meals, wore the clothes bought when Fortune's breath was balmy. During all this time Selina attended schools, good, bad, private, public, with surprising regularity considering her nomadic existence. Deep-bosomed matrons, seeing this dark-eyed serious child seated alone in a hotel lobby or boarding-house parlour, would bend over her in solicitous questioning.

"Where is your mamma, little girl?"

"She is dead," Selina would reply, politely and composedly.

"Oh, my poor little dear!" Then, with a warm rush, "Don't you want to come and play with my little girl? She loves little girls to play with. H'm?" The "m" of the interrogation held hummingly, tenderly.

"No, thank you very much. I'm waiting for my father. He would be disappointed not to find me here."

These good ladies wasted their sympathy. Selina had a beautiful time. Except for three years, to recall which was to her like entering a sombre icy room on leaving a warm and glowing one, her life was free, interesting, varied. She made decisions usually devolving upon the adult mind. She selected clothes. She ruled her father. She read absorbedly books found in boarding-house parlours, in hotels, in such public libraries as the times afforded. She was alone for hours a day, daily. Frequently her father, fearful of loneliness for her, brought her an armful of books and she had an orgy, dipping and swooping about among them in a sort of gourmand's ecstasy of indecision. In this way, at fifteen, she knew the writings of Byron, Jane Austen, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Felicia Hemans. Not to speak of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, Bertha M. Clay, and that good fairy of the scullery, the

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Fireside Companion, in whose pages factory girls and dukes were brought together as inevitably as steak and onions. These last were, of course, the result of Selina's mode of living, and were loaned her by kind-hearted landladies, chambermaids, and waitresses all the way from California to New York.

Her three dark years—from nine to twelve—were spent with her two maiden aunts, the Misses Sarah and Abbie Peake, in the dim, prim Vermont Peake house from which her father, the black sheep, had run away when a boy. After her mother's death Simeon Peake had sent his little daughter back east in a fit of remorse and temporary helplessness on his part and a spurt of forgiveness and churchly charity on the part of his two sisters. The two women were incredibly drawn in the pattern of the New England spinster of fiction. Mitts, preserves, Bible, chilly best room, solemn and kittenless cat, order, little-girls-mustn't. They smelled of apples—of withered apples that have rotted at the core. Selina had once found such an apple in a corner of a disorderly school-desk, had sniffed it, regarded its wrinkled, sapless pink cheek, and had bitten into it adventuresomely, only to spit out the mouthful in an explosive and unladylike spray. It had been all black and mouldy at its heart.

Something of this she must have conveyed, in her desperation, to her father in an uncensored letter. Without warning he had come for her, and at sight of him she had been guilty of the only fit of hysteria that marked her life, before or after the episode.

So, then, from twelve to nineteen she was happy. They had come to Chicago in 1885, when she was sixteen. There they remained. Selina attended Miss Fister's Select School for Young Ladies. When her father brought her there he had raised quite a flutter in the Fister breast—so soft-spoken was he, so gentle, so sad-appearing, so winning as to smile. In the investment business, he explained. Stocks and that kind of thing. A widower. Miss Fister said, yes, she understood.

Simeon Peake had had nothing of the look of the professional

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gambler of the day. The wide slouch hat, the flowing mustache, the glittering eye, the too-bright boots, the gay cravat, all were missing in Simeon Peake's makeup. True, he did sport a singularly clear white diamond pin in his shirt front; and his hat he wore just a little on one side. But then, these both were in the male mode and quite commonly seen. For the rest he seemed a mild and suave man, slim, a trifle diffident, speaking seldom and then with a New England drawl by which he had come honestly enough, Vermont Peake that he was.

Chicago was his meat. It was booming, prosperous. Jeff Hankins's red plush and mirrored gambling house, and Mike McDonald's, too, both on Clark Street, knew him daily. He played in good luck and bad, but he managed somehow to see to it that there was always the money to pay for the Fister schooling. His was the ideal poker face—bland, emotionless, immobile. When he was flush they ate at the Palmer House, dining off chicken or quail and thick rich soup and the apple pie for which the hostelry was famous. Waiters hovered solicitously about Simeon Peake, though he rarely addressed them and never looked at them. Selina was happy. She knew only such young people—girls—as she met at Miss Fister's school. Of men, other than her father, she knew as little as a nun—less. For those cloistered creatures must, if only in the conning of their Bible, learn much of the moods and passions that sway the male. The Songs of Solomon alone are a glorious sex education. But the Bible was not included in Selina's haphazard reading, and the Gideonite was not then a force in the hotel world.

Her chum was Julie Hempel, daughter of August Hempel, the Clark Street butcher. You probably now own some Hempel stock, if you're lucky; and eat Hempel bacon and Hempel hams cured in the hickory, for in Chicago the distance from butcher of 1885 to packer of 1890 was only a five-year leap.

Being so much alone developed in her a gift for the make-believe. In a comfortable, well-dressed way she was a sort of mix-

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ture of Dick Swiveller's Marchioness and Sarah Crewe. Even in her childhood she extracted from life the double enjoyment that comes usually only to the creative mind. "Now I'm doing this. Now I'm doing that," she told herself while she was doing it. Looking on while she participated. Perhaps her theatre-going had something to do with this. At an age when most little girls were not only unheard but practically unseen, she occupied a grown-up seat at the play, her rapt face, with its dark serious eyes, glowing in a sort of luminous pallor as she sat proudly next her father. Simeon Peake had the gambler's love of the theatre, himself possessing the dramatic quality necessary to the successful following of his profession.

In this way Selina, half-hidden in the depths of an orchestra seat, wriggled in ecstatic anticipation when the curtain ascended on the grotesque rows of Haverly's minstrels. She wept (as did Simeon) over the agonies of *The Two Orphans* when Kitty Blanchard and McKee Rankin came to Chicago with the Union Square Stock Company. She witnessed that startling innovation, a Jewish play, called *Samuel of Posen*. She saw Fanny Davenport in *Pique*. Simeon even took her to a performance of that shocking and delightful form of new entertainment, the *Extravaganza*. She thought the plump creature in tights and spangles, descending the long stairway, the most beautiful being she had ever seen.

"The thing I like about plays and books is that anything can happen. Anything! You never know," Selina said, after one of these evenings.

"No different from life," Simeon Peake assured her. "You've no idea the things that happen to you if you just relax and take them as they come."

Curiously enough, Simeon Peake said this, not through ignorance, but deliberately and with reason. In his way and day he was a very modern father. "I want you to see all kinds," he would say to her. "I want you to realize that this whole thing is just a

grand adventure. A fine show. The trick is to play in it and look at it at the same time."

"What whole thing?"

"Living. All mixed up. The more kinds of people you see, and the more things you do, and the more things that happen to you, the richer you are. Even if they're not pleasant things. That's living. Remember, no matter what happens, good or bad, it's just so much"—he used the gambler's term, unconsciously—"just so much velvet."

But Selina, somehow, understood. "You mean that anything's better than being Aunt Sarah and Aunt Abbie."

"Well—yes. There are only two kinds of people in the world that really count. One kind's wheat and the other kind's emeralds."

"Fanny Davenport's an emerald," said Selina, quickly, and rather surprised to find herself saying it.

"Yes. That's it."

"And—and Julie Hempel's father—he's wheat."

"By golly, Sele!" shouted Simeon Peake. "You're a shrewd little tykel!"

It was after reading "Pride and Prejudice" that she decided to be the Jane Austen of her time. She became very mysterious and enjoyed a brief period of unpopularity at Miss Fister's owing to her veiled allusions to her "work"; and an annoying way of smiling to herself and tapping a ruminative toe as though engaged in visions far too exquisite for the common eye. Her chum Julie Hempel, properly enough, became enraged at this and gave Selina to understand that she must make her choice between revealing her secret or being cast out of the Hempel heart. Selina swore her to secrecy.

"Very well, then. Now I'll tell you. I'm going to be a novelist." Julie was palpably disappointed, though she said, "Selina!" as though properly impressed, but followed it up with: "Still, I don't see why you had to be so mysterious about it."

"You just don't understand, Julie. Writers have to study life at