To be "well-groomed" requires an excessive amount of time, as taking exercise does.

A type of air suspension car is now being built, permitting wheels to be equipped with hard rubber tires.

SO BIG

By EDNA FERBER

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SELINA PEAKE

Well, here's a story by Edna Ferber. That settles the quality question. Probably there is no more popular writer of fiction in the whole country. As to short stories she's the woman "O. Henry." And as to novels—why, she has ten or a dozen to her credit and they are very much to her credit. Anyone who has not read "Buttered Side Down," "Roast Beef Medium" and "Fanny Herself" has missed a lot of good reading. All her stories and novels are worth while—clever in plot, well-written, clean, wholesome, glimpses of real life. Edna Ferber is called a "good scout" by both men and women, whether among the peaks of the Colorado Rockies or in the canyons of New York and Chicago. "So Big" is perhaps the best of all her novels. Anyway, it was one of the biggest successes of 1924—possibly the biggest. And that success was deserved; it's a real story of real people, you would say.

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

Then little Dirk DeJong, standing before his mother, would stretch his arms wide and squeal, 'So-o-o-o big!' in dutiful solo."

When he grew to be one of the most correct young men of Chicago's fashionable North Shore, he returned to his apartment one night, from visiting his mother, and questioned himself: "How big?" His answer is the story.

Chapter I

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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, Dirk DeJong.

The nickname had sprung up 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 washtub 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 laboring, would wipe the sweat beads from 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. 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.

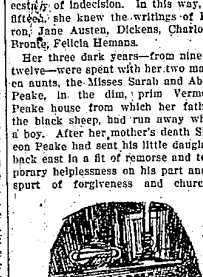
"How big is baby?" Selina would demand, senselessly. "How big is my man?"

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. 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 wants were served by a Japanese houseman; whose life, in short, was that of a successful citizen of the republic. But she wasn't. Not only was she dissatisfied; she was at once resentful and indignant, as though she, Selina DeJong, the vegetable peddler, 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 like a play 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, traveling the country with his little daughter, was 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. She 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 parlors, 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 Bronte, Felicia Hemans.

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



She Read Absorbedly Books Found in Boarding House Parlors.

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.

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 gambler of the day. The wide slouch hat, the flowing moustache, the glittering eye, the too-bright boots, the gay cravat, all were missing in Simeon Peake's make-up. 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. 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. Selina was happy. She knew only such young people—girls—as she met at Miss Fister's school.

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 mixture 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 theater-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.

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 witnessed that startling innovation, a Jewish play, called "Sam'l of Posen." She saw Fannie Davenport in "Fique." Simeon even took her to a performance of that shocking and delightful form of new entertainment, the Extravaganza.

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

"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, Selie!" shouted, Simeon Peake. "You're a shrewd little tyke!"

Julie Hempel and Selina Peake, both finished products of Miss Fister's school, were of an age—nineteen. Selina, on this September day, had been spending the afternoon with Julie, and now, adjusting her hat preparatory to leaving, she clapped her hands over her ears to shut out the sounds of Julie's importunings that she stay to supper. Certainly the prospect of the usual Monday evening meal in Mrs. Tebbitt's boarding house did not present sufficient excuse for Selina's refusal. Indeed, the Hempel supper as sketched dish for dish by the urgent Julie brought little greedy groans from Selina.

"It's prairie chickens—three of them—that a farmer west of town brought Father. Mother fixes them with stuffing, and there's currant jell. Creamed onions and baked tomatoes. And for dessert, apple roll."

Selina snapped the elastic holding her high-crowned hat under her chignon of hair in the back. She uttered a final and quavering groan. "On Monday nights we have cold mutton and cabbage at Mrs. Tebbitt's. This is Monday."

"Well then, silly, why not stay!"

"Father comes home at six. If I'm not there he's disappointed."

Julie, plump, blonde, placid, forsook her soft white banishments and tried steel against the steel of Selina's decision.

"He leaves you right after supper. And you're alone every night until twelve and after."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," Selina said stiffly. "If I'm not there he's disappointed. And that terrible Mrs. Tebbitt makes eyes at him. He hates it there."

"Then I don't see why you stay. I never could see. You've been there four months now, and I think it's horrid and stuffy, and oilcloth on the stairs."

"Father has had some temporary business setbacks."

Julie, fond though defeated, kissed her friend good-by.

Selina walked quickly the short distance from the Hempel house to Tebbitt's, on Dearborn avenue. Up in her second-floor room she took off her hat and called to her father, but he had

Thud—Shuffle—Thud—Shuffle—Up the Narrow Stairway.

not yet come in. She was glad of that. She had been fearful of being late. She regarded her hat with some distaste, decided to rip off the faded spring roses, did rip a stitch or two, only to discover that the hat material was more faded than the roses, and that the uncovered surface showed up a dark splotch like a wall-spot when a picture long hung, is removed. So she got a needle and prepared to tack the offending rose in its accustomed place.

Perched on the arm of a chair near the window, taking quick deft stitches, she heard a sound she had never heard before, and yet, hearing it, recognized it by one of those pangs, centuries old, called woman's instinct. Thud—shuffle—thud shuffle—up the narrow stairway, along the passage. She stood up, the needle poised in her hand. The hat fell to the floor. Her eyes were wide, fixed. Her lips slightly parted. The listening look. She knew.

She knew even before she heard the hoarse man's voice saying, "Lift 'er up there a little on the corner, now. Easy —e-e-easy." And Mrs. Tebbitt's high shrill clamor: "You can't bring it in there! You hadn't ought to bring it in here like this!"

Selina's suspended breath came back. She was panting now. She had flung open the door. A flat still burden partially covered with an overcoat carelessly flung over the face. The feet, in their square-toed boots, wobbled listlessly. Selina noticed how shiny the boots were. He was always very finicking about such things.

Simeon Peake had been shot in Jeff Hankins' place at five in the afternoon. The irony of it was that the bullet had not been intended for him at all. Its derelict course had been due to feminine aim. Sped by one of those overdramatic ladies who, armed with horsewhip or pistol in tardy defense of their honor, spangled Chicago's dull '80s with their doings, it had been meant for a well-known newspaper publisher (usually mentioned (in papers other than his own) as a bon vivant. The lady's leaden remonstrance was to have been proof of the fact that he had been more vivacious than bon.

Well, that's the end of her little world for Selina. What next for the orphan girl?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Greeting Cancels Stamp

One of the most original stamp cancellations ever put on a piece of United States mail was that used by the postmaster at Cassville, Wis., June 25, 1852, when he wrote, "Good Morning, Edward" across the stamp when he recognized the name of the addressee as that of one of his personal friends

Mystery

"How do you sell this lumberger?"

"I often wonder myself, ma'am."

One "take this" is better than two "thou shalt have."