

## SO BIG



By  
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(C. Doubleday, Page & Co.)  
Story Service

## CHAPTER 10—Continued

At eighteen, it had been almost unheard of for Dirk DeJong, high school senior, to be going away to college. A neighbor's son said, "Going to Wisconsin? Agricultural course there?"

"My gosh, no!" Dirk had answered. "I'd like to take that course myself, if you must know. They say it's wonderful." She looked at him, suddenly. "Dirk, you wouldn't like to take it, would you? To go to Madison, I mean. Is that what you'd like?"

"He started, 'Me! No! Unless you want me to, mother. Then I would, gladly. I hate your working like this, on the farm, while I go off to school. It makes me feel kind of rotten, having my mother working for me. The other fellows—'"

"I'm doing the work I'm interested in, for the person I love best in the world. I'd be lost—unhappy—without the farm. If the city creeps up on me here, as they predict it will, I don't know what I shall do."

"Just you wait till I'm successful. Then there'll be no more working for you."

"What do you mean by 'successful,' Sobig?" She had not called him that in years. But now the old nickname came to her tongue perhaps because they were speaking of his future, his success. "What do you mean by 'successful,' Sobig?"

"Rich. Lots of money."

"No, no, Dirk! No! That's not success. Roelf—the thing Roelf does—that's success."

"Oh, well. If you have money enough you can buy the things he makes, and

have 'em. That's almost as good isn't it?"

Dirk commenced his studies at Midwest university in the autumn of 1909. His first year was none too agreeable, as is usually the case in first years. He got on well, though. Before the end of the first semester he was popular. He had great natural charm of manner. The men liked him, and the girls, too. He rarely "cut" a class. He would have felt that this was unfair and disloyal to his mother. Some of his fellow students looked about this faithfulness to his classes. "Prep work would think you were an Unclassified," they said.

The Unclassifieds were made up, for the most part, of earnest and rather middle-aged students whose education was delayed. They usually were not enrolled for a full course, or were taking double work feverishly.

The professors found them a shade too eager, perhaps; too inquiring; demanding too much. They stayed after class and asked innumerable questions. They bristled with interrogation. They were prone to hold forth in the classroom. "Well, I have found it to be the case in my experience that—"

But the professor preferred to do the lecturing himself. If there was to be any experience related it should come from the teacher's platform, not the student's chair.

In his first year Dirk made the almost fatal mistake of being rather friendly with one of these Unclassifieds—a female Unclassified, a large, good-natured, plump girl, about thirty-eight, with a shiny skin which she never powdered and thick hair that exuded a disagreeable odor of oil. She was sympathetic and jolly, but her clothes were a fright, the Classics would have told you, and no matter how cold the day there was always a half-moon of stain showing under her armpits. She had a really sane mind, quick, eager, balanced, almost judicial. She knew just which references were valuable, which useless. Her name was Schweengauer—Mattie Schweengauer. Terrible!

She and Dirk got in the way of walking out of the classroom together, across the campus. She told him something of herself.

"Your people farmers?" Surprised, she looked at his well-cut clothes, his slim, strong, unmarked hands, his smart shoes and cap. "Why, so are mine. Iowa." She pronounced it "Ioway."

"I lived on the farm all my life till I was twenty-seven. I always wanted to go away to school, but we never had the money and I couldn't come to town to earn because I was the oldest, and Ma was sickly after Emma—that's the youngest—there are

use of us—was born. Ma was anxious, I should go and Pa was willing, but it couldn't be. No fault of theirs. One year the summer would be so hot, with no rain hardly from spring till fall, and the corn would just dry up on the stalks, like paper. The next year it would be so wet the seed would rot in the ground. Ma died when I was twenty-six. The kids were all pretty well grown up by that time. Pa married again in a year. I came to Chicago about five years ago. . . . I've done all kinds of work, I guess, except digging in a coal mine. I'd have done that if I'd had to."

She told him all this glibly, simply, Dirk felt drawn toward her, sorry for her. His was a nature quick to sympathy.

He told his mother about her. Selma was deeply interested and stirred. "Do you think she'd spend some Saturday and Sunday here with us on the farm? She could come with you on Friday and go back Sunday night if she wanted to. Or stay until Monday morning and go back with you. There's the spare room, all quiet and cool. She could do as she liked."

Mattie came one Friday night. It was the end of October, and Indian summer, the most beautiful time of the year on the Illinois prairie. About the countryside for miles was a look of homeliness, of plenty, of prophecy fulfilled as when a beautiful and fertile woman having borne her children and found them good, now sits serene-eyed, graceful, amply bosomed, satisfied.

Into the face of Mattie Schweengauer there came a certain glory. When she and Selma clasped hands Selma stared at her rather curiously, as though startled. Afterward she said to Dirk, aside: "But I thought you said she was ugly!"

"Well, she is, or—well, isn't she?" "Look at her!"

Mattie Schweengauer was talking to Meend Bras, the housekeeper. She was standing with her hands on her ample hips, her fine head thrown back, her eyes alight, her lips smiling so that you saw her strong square teeth. Something had amused Mattie. She laughed. It was the laugh of a young girl, care-free, relaxed, at ease.

For two days Mattie did as she pleased, which meant she helped pull vegetables in the garden, milk the cows, saddle the horses; rode them without a saddle in the pasture. "It got so I hated to do all those things on the farm," she said, laughing a little shamefacedly. "I guess it was because I had to. But now it comes back to me and I enjoy it because it's natural to me, I suppose. Anyway, I'm having a grand time,

Mrs. DeJong. The grandest time I ever had in my life." Her face was radiant and almost beautiful.

"If you want me to believe that," said Selma, "you'll come again."

But Mattie Schweengauer never did come again.

Early the next week one of the university students approached Dirk. He was a Junior, very influential in his class, and a member of the fraternity to which Dirk was practically pledged. A decidedly desirable frat.

"Say, look here, DeJong, I want to talk to you a minute. Uh, you've got to cut out that girl—Svengauer or whatever her name is—or it's all off with the fellows in the frat."

"What do you mean? Cut out? What's the matter with her?"

"Matter! She's Unclassified, isn't she? And do you know what the story is? She told it herself as an economy hint to a girl who was working her way through. She bathes with her union suit and white stockings to save laundry soap. Scrubs 'em on her! 'S the God's truth."

Into Dirk's mind there flashed a picture of this large girl in her dirty knitted union suit and her white stockings sitting in a tub half full of water and scrubbing them and herself simultaneously. A comic picture, and a revolting one. Pathetic, too, but he would not admit that.

"Imagine," the frat brother-to-be was saying. "Well, we can't have a fellow who goes around with a girl like that. You got to cut her out, see? Completely. The fellows won't stand for it."

Dirk had a mental picture of himself striking a noble attitude and saying, "Won't stand for it, huh! She's worth more than the whole caboodle of you put together. And you can all go to hell!"

I instead he said, vaguely, "Oh, well, Uh—"

Dirk changed his seat in the classroom, avoided Mattie's eyes, shot out of the door the minute class was over.

One day he saw her coming toward him in the campus and he sensed that she intended to stop and speak to him—chide him laughingly, perhaps. He quickened his pace, averted a little to one side, and as he neared lifted his cap and nodded, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Out of the tail of his eye he could see her standing a moment irresolutely in the path.

He got into the dormitory. The fellows liked him from the first. Selma said once or twice, "Why don't you bring that nice Mattie home with you again some time soon? Such a nice girl—woman, rather. A fine mind too. She'll make something of herself. You'll see. Bring her next week, huh?"

Dirk shuffled, coughed, looked away. "Oh, I dunno. Haven't seen her lately. Guess she's busy with another crowd,

or something."

He tried not to think of what he had done, for he was honestly ashamed. Terribly ashamed. So he said to himself, "Oh, what of it!" and hid his shame.

A month later Selma again said, "I wish you'd invite Mattie for Thanksgiving dinner. Unless she's going home, which I doubt. We'll have turkey and pumpkin pie and all the rest of it. She'll love it."

"Mattie?" He had actually forgotten her name.

"Yes, of course. Isn't that right? Mattie Schweengauer?"

"Oh, her. Uh—well—I haven't been seeing her lately."

"Oh, Dirk, you haven't quarreled with that nice girl?"

He decided to have it out. "Listen, mother. There are a lot of different crowds at the U, see? And Mattie doesn't belong to any of 'em. You wouldn't understand, but it's like this. She—she's smart and jolly and every thing, but she just doesn't belong. Being friends with a girl like that doesn't get you anywhere. Besides, she isn't a girl. She's a middle-aged woman, when you come to think of it."

"Doesn't get you anywhere?" Selma's tone was cool and even. Then, as the boy's gaze did not meet hers: "Why, Dirk DeJong, Mattie Schweengauer is one of my reasons for going to a university. She's what I call part of a university education. Just talking to her is learning something valuable. I don't mean that you wouldn't naturally prefer pretty young girls of your own age to go around with, and all. It would be queer if you didn't. But this Mattie—why, she's life. Do you remember that story of when she washed dishes in the supper restaurant over on Twelfth street and the proprietor used to rent out dishes and cutlery for Irish and Italian neighborhood weddings where they had pork and goodness knows what all, and then use them next day in the restaurant, again for the kosher customers?"

Selma wrote Mattie, inviting her to the farm for Thanksgiving, and Mattie answered gratefully, declining. "I shall always remember you," she wrote in that letter, "with love."

## Chapter XI

Throughout Dirk's Freshman year there were, for him, no heartening, informal, mellow talks before the wood-fire in the book-lined study of some professor whose wisdom was such a mixture of classic lore and modernism as to be an inspiration to his listeners. Midwest professors delivered their lectures in the classroom as they had been delivering them in the past ten or twenty years and as

they would deliver them until death or a trustees' meeting should remove them. The younger professors and instructors in natty gray suits and brightly colored ties made a point of being unpedantic in the classroom and rather overdid it. They posed as being one of the fellows; would dashingly use a bit of slang to create a laugh from the boys and an astringent titter from the girls. Dirk somehow preferred the pedants to these. When these had to give an informal talk to the men before some university event they would start by saying, "Now listen, fellows—" At the dances they were not above "rushing" the pretty rooks.

Two of Dirk's classes were conducted by women professors. They were well on toward middle age; or past it; dedicated women. Only their eyes were alive. Their clothes were of some indefinite dark stuff, brown or drab-gray; their hair lifeless; their hands long, bony, unvital. They had seen classes and classes and classes. A roomful of fresh young faces that appeared briefly only to be replaced by another roomful of fresh young faces like round white pencil marks manipulated momentarily on a slate, only to be sponged off to give way to other round white marks. Of the two women one—the elder—was occasionally likely to flare into sudden life; a flame in the ashes of a burned-out grate. She had humor and a certain caustic wit, qualities that had managed miraculously to survive even the deadly and numbing effects of thirty years in the classroom. A fine mind, and inelastic, hampered by the restrictions of a conventional community and the seal of a congenial spinster.

Under the guidance of these Dirk chafed and grew restless. Miss Euphemia Hollingsworth had a way of emphasizing every third or fifth syllable, bringing her voice down hard on it.

He found himself waiting for that emphasis and shuffling from it as from a sledge-hammer blow. It hurt his head.

Miss Lodge drolled. She approached a word with a maddening uh-uh-uh-uh. In the uh-uh-uh face of the uh-uh-uh geometrical situation of the uh-uh-uh—

He shifted restlessly in his chair, found his hands clenched into fists, and took refuge in watching the shadow cast by an oak branch outside the window on a patch of sunlight against the blackboard behind her.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Virtue Diffuses Itself

The virtue of the noble-minded man is as the wind, and that of inferior men as grass; the grass must bend when the wind blows upon it.

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