SO BIG

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CHAPTER 11—Continued

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During the Early Spring Dirk and Selina Talked Things Over Again, Seated Before Their Own Fireplace in the High Prairie Farmhouse.

Prairie farmhouse. Selina had had that fireplace built five years before and her love of it amounted to worship. She had it lighted always on winter evenings and in the spring when the nights were sharp. In Dirk's absence she would sit before it at night long after the rest of the weary household had gone to bed. High Prairie never knew how many guests Selina entertained there before her fire those winter evenings—old friends and new. Sobig was there, the plump earth-grimed baby who rolled and tumbled in the fields while his young mother wiped the sweat from her face to look at him with fond eyes. Dirk DeJong of ten years hence was there. Simeon Peake, dapper, soft-spoken, ironic, in his shiny boots and his hat always a little on one side. Pervus DeJong, a blue-shirted giant with strong tender hands and little fine golden hairs on the backs of them. In strange contrast to these was the patient, tireless figure of Maartje Pool standing in the doorway of Roelf's little shed, her arms tucked in her apron for warmth. "You make fun, huh?" she said, wistfully, "you and Roelf. You make fun." And Roelf, the dark vivid boy, misunderstood. Roelf, the gentle. He was always one of the company.

Oh, Selina DeJong never was lonely on these winter evenings before her fire.

She and Dirk sat there one fine sharp evening in early April. It was Saturday. Of late Dirk had not always come to the farm for the week-end. Eugene and Paula Arnold had been home for the Easter holidays. Julie Arnold had invited Dirk to the gay parties at the Prairie avenue house. He had even spent two entire week-ends there. After the brocaded luxury of the Prairie avenue house his farm bedroom seemed almost startlingly stark and bare.

Selina frankly enjoyed Dirk's somewhat fragmentary accounts of these visits; extracted from them as much vicarious pleasure as he had had in the reality—more, probably.

"Now, tell me what you had to eat," she would say, sociably, like a child. "What did you have for dinner, for example? Was it grand? Julie tells me they have a butler now. Well! I can't wait till I hear Aug Hempel on the subject."

He would tell her of the grandeurs of the Arnold menage. She would interrupt and exclaim: "Mayonnaise! On fruit! Oh, I don't believe I'd like that. You did! Well, I'll have it for you next week when you come home. I'll get the recipe from Julie."

He didn't think he'd be home next week. One of the fellows he'd met at the Arnolds' had invited him to their place out north, on the lake. He had a boat.

"That'll be lovely!" Selina exclaimed, after an almost unnoticeable moment of silence—silence with panic in it. "I'll try not to fuss and be worried like an old hen every minute of the time I think you're on the water. . . . Now, do go on, Sobig. First fruit with mayonnaise, hm? What kind of soup?"

He was not a naturally talkative person. There was nothing surly about his silence. It was a taciturn streak inherited from his Dutch ancestry. This time, though, he was more voluble than usual. "Paula . . ." came again and again into his conversation. "Paula . . . Paula . . ." and again ". . . Paula." He did not seem conscious of the repetition, but Selina's quick ear caught it.

"I haven't seen her," Selina said, "since she went away to school the first year. She must be—let's see—she's a year older than you are. She's nineteen going on twenty. Last time I saw her I thought she was a dark scrawny little thing. Too bad she didn't inherit Julie's lovely gold coloring and good looks, instead of Eugene, who doesn't need 'em."

"She isn't," said Dirk, tersely. "She's dark and slim and sort of—uh—sensuous"—Selina started visibly, and raised her hand quickly to her mouth to hide a smile—"like Cleopatra. Her eyes are big and kind of slanting—not squinty I don't mean, but slanting up a little at the corners. Cut out, kind of, so that they look bigger than most people's."

"My eyes used to be considered rather fine," said Selina, mischievously; but he did not hear.

"She makes all the other girls look sort of blowzy." He was silent a moment. Selina was silent, too, and it was not a happy silence. Dirk spoke again, suddenly, as though continuing aloud a train of thought, "—all but her hands."

Selina made her voice sound natural, not sharply inquisitive. "What's the matter with her hands, Dirk?"

He pondered a moment, his brows knitted. At last, slowly: "Well, I don't know. They're brown, and awfully thin and sort of—grabby. I mean it makes me nervous to watch them. And when the rest of her is cool they're hot when you touch them."

He looked at his mother's hands that were busy with some sewing. The stuff on which she was working was a bit of satin ribbon; part of a hood intended to grace the head of Geertje Pool Vander Slide's second baby. She had difficulty in keeping her rough fingers from catching on the soft surface of the satin. Manual work, water, sun, and wind had tanned those hands, hardened them, enlarged the knuckles, spread them, roughened them. Yet how sure they were, and strong, and cool and reliable—and tender. Suddenly, looking at them, Dirk said, "Now your hands. I love your hands, Mother."

She put down her work hastily, yet quietly, so that the sudden rush of happy grateful tears in her eyes should not sully the pink satin ribbon. She was flushed, like a girl. "Do you, Sobig?" she said.

After a moment she took up her sewing again. Her face looked young, eager, fresh, like the face of the girl who had found embroidery so beautiful that night when she bounced along the rutty Halsted road with Klaas Pool, many years ago. It came into her face, that look, when she was happy, exhilarated, excited. That was why those who loved her and brought that look into her face thought her beautiful, while those who did not love her never saw the look and consequently considered her a plain woman.

There was another silence between the two. Then: "Mother, what would you think of my going east next fall, to take a course in architecture?"

"Would you like that, Dirk?"

"Yes, I think so—yes."

"Then I'd like it better than anything in the world. I—it makes me happy just to think of it."

"It would—cost an awful lot."

"I'll manage. I'll manage. . . . What made you decide on architecture?"

"I don't know, exactly. The new buildings at the university—Gothic, you know—are such a contrast to the old. Then Paula and I were talking the other day. She hates their house on Prairie—terrible old lumpy gray stone pile, with the black of the I. C. trains all over it. She wants her father to build north—an Italian villa or French chateau. Something of that sort. So many of her friends are moving to the North shore, away from these hideous South-side and North-side Chicago houses with their stoops, and their bay windows and their terrible turrets. Ugh!"

"Well, now, do you know," Selina remonstrated mildly, "I like 'em. I suppose I'm wrong, but to me they seem sort of natural and solid and unpretentious, like the clothes that old August Hempel wears, so squarecut and baggy. Those houses look dignified to me, and fitting. They may be ugly—probably are—but, anyway, they're not ridiculous. They have a certain rugged grandeur. They're Chicago. Those French and Italian gimcracky things they—they're incongruous. It's as if Abraham Lincoln were to appear suddenly in pink satin knee breeches and buckled shoes, and lace ruffles at his wrists."

Dirk could laugh at that picture. But he protested, too. "But there's no native architecture, so what's to be done? You wouldn't call those smoke-blackened old stone and brick piles with their iron fences and their conservatories and cupolas and gingerbread exactly native, would you?"

"No," Selina admitted, "but those Italian villas and French chateaux in north Chicago suburbs are a good deal like a lace evening gown in the Arizona desert. It wouldn't keep you cool in the daytime, and it wouldn't be warm enough at night. I suppose a native architecture is evolved from building for the local climate and the needs of the community, keeping beauty in mind as you go. We don't need turrets and towers any more than we need draw-bridges and moats. It's all right to keep them, I suppose, where they grew up, in a country where the feudal system meant that any day your next-door neighbor might take it into his head to come in his camp around him and sneak up to steal your wife and tapestries and gold dishes and drinking cups."

Dirk was interested and amused. Talks with his mother were likely to affect him thus. "What's your idea of a real Chicago house, mother?"

Selina answered quickly, as if she had thought often about it; as if she would have liked just such a dwelling on the site of the old DeJong farmhouse in which they now were seated so comfortably. "Well, it would need big porches for the hot days and nights, so's to catch the prevailing southwest winds from the prairies in the summer—a porch that would be swung clear around to the east, too—or a terrace or another porch east so that if the precious old lake breeze should come up just when you think you're dying of the heat, as it sometimes does, you could catch that, too. It ought to be built—the house, I mean—rather squarish and tight and solid against our cold winters and northeasters. Then sleeping porches, of course. There's a grand American institution for you! England may have its afternoon tea on the terrace, and Spain may have its patio, and France its courtyard, and Italy its pergola, vine-covered; but America's got the sleeping porch—the screened-in open-air sleeping porch, and I shouldn't wonder if the man who first thought of that would get precedence on Judgment day over the men who invented the airplane, the talking machine and the telephone. After all, he had nothing in mind but the health of the human race." After which grand period Selina grinned at Dirk, and Dirk grinned at Selina and the two giggled together there by the fireplace, companionably.

"Mother, you're simply wonderful!—only your native Chicago dwelling seems to be mostly porch."

Selina waved such carping criticism away with a careless hand. "Oh, well, any house that has enough porches, and two or three bathrooms and at least eight closets can be lived in comfortably, no matter what else it has or hasn't got."

Next day they were more serious. The eastern college and the architectural career seemed to be settled things. Selina was content, happy. Dirk was troubled about the expense. He spoke of it at breakfast next morning (Dirk's breakfast; his mother had been hours before and now as he drank his coffee, was sitting with him a moment and glancing at the paper that had come in the rural mail delivery). She had been out in the fields overseeing the transplanting of young tomato seedlings from hotbed to field. She wore an old gray sweater buttoned up tight, for the air was still sharp. On her head was a battered black felt soft hat (an old one of Dirk's) much like the one she had worn to the Haymarket that day ten years ago.

"I've been thinking," he began, "the expense—"

"Pigs'll do it," Selina said, calmly. "I've been wanting to put them in for three or four years. It's August Hempel's idea. Boys, I should have said."

He echoed, "Hogs!" rather faintly.

"High-bred hogs. They're worth their weight in silver this minute, and will be for years to come. I won't go in for them extensively. Just enough to make an architect out of Mr. Dirk DeJong." Then, at the expression in his face: "Don't look so pained, son. There's nothing revolting about a hog—he's a handsome, impressive-looking animal, the hog, when he isn't treated like one."

He looked dejected. "I'd rather not go to school on—hogs."

She took off the felt hat and tossed it over to the old couch by the window; smoothed her hair back with the flat of her palm. You saw that the soft dark hair was liberally sprinkled with gray now, but the eyes were bright and clear as ever.

"You know, Sobig, this is what they call a paying farm—as vegetable farms go. We're out of debt, the land's in good shape, the crop promises well if we don't have another rainy cold spring like last year's. I'm having a grand time. When I see the asparagus plantation actually yielding, that I planted ten years ago, I'm as happy as if I'd stumbled on a gold mine. I think, sometimes, of the way your father objected to my planting the first one. April, like this, in the country, with everything coming up green and new in the rich black loam—I can't tell you. And when I know that it goes to market as food—the best kind of food, that keeps people's bodies clean and clear and flexible and strong! I like to think of babies' mothers saying: 'Now eat your spinach, every scrap, or you can't have any dessert!' . . . Carrots make your eyes bright. . . . Finish your potato. Potatoes make you strong!'"

Selina laughed, flushed a little.

"Yes, but how about hogs? Do you feel that way about hogs?"

"Certainly," said Selina, briskly. She pushed toward him a little blue-and-white platter that lay on the white cloth near her elbow. "Have a bit more bacon, Dirk. One of these nice curly slivers that are so crisp."

"I've finished my breakfast, Mother." He rose.

The following autumn saw him a student of architecture at Cornell. He worked hard, studied even during his vacation.

He would come home to the heat and humidity of the Illinois summers and spend hours each day in his own room that he had fitted up with a long work-table and a drawing board. His T-square was at hand; two triangles—a 45 and a 60; his compass; a pair of dividers. Selina sometimes stood behind him watching him as he carefully worked on the tracing paper. His contempt for the local architecture was now complete. Especially did he hold forth on the subject of the apartment houses that were mushrooming on every street in Chicago from Hyde Park on the south to Evanston on the north. Chicago was very elegant in speaking of these; never called them "flats"; always apartments. In front of each of these (there were usually six to a building) was stuck a little glass-enclosed cubicle known as a sun-parlor. In these (sometimes you heard them spoken of grandly, as solariums) Chicago dwellers took refuge from the leaden skies, the heavy lake atmosphere, the gray mist and fog and smoke that so frequently swathed the city in gloom. They were done in yellow or rose cretonnes. Silk lampshades glowed therein, and flower-laden boxes. In these frank little boxes Chicago read its paper, sewed, played bridge, even ate its breakfast. It never pulled down the shades.

"Terrible!" Dirk fumed. "Not only are they hideous in themselves, stuck on the front of those houses like three pairs of spectacles; but the lack of decent privacy! They do everything but bathe in 'em. Have they never heard the advice given people who live in glass houses!"

By his junior year he was talking in a large way about the Beaux Arts. But Selina did not laugh at this. "Perhaps," she thought. "Who can tell? After a year or two in an office here, why not another year of study in Paris if he needs it."

Though it was her busiest time on the farm Selina went to Ithaca for his graduation in 1913. He was twenty-two and, she was calmly sure, the best-looking man in his class. Undeniably he was a figure to please the eye; tall, well-built, as his father had been, and blond, too, like his father, except for his eyes. These were brown—not so dark as Selina's, but with some of the soft liquid quality of her glance. They strengthened his face, somehow; gave him an ardent look of which he was not conscious. Women, feeling the ardor of that dark glance turned upon them, were likely to credit him with feelings toward themselves of which he was quite innocent. They did not know that the glance and its effect were mere matters of pigmentation and eye-conformation. Then, too, the gaze of a man who talks little is always more effective than that of one who is loquacious.

Selina, in her black silk dress, and her plain black hat, and her sensible shoes, was rather a quaint little figure among all those vivacious, bevelled, and beribboned mammas. But a distinctive little figure, too. Dirk need not be ashamed of her. She eyed the rather paunchy, prosperous, middle-aged fathers and thought, with a pang, how much handsomer Pervus would have been than any of these, if only he could have lived to see this day. Then, involuntarily, she wondered if this day would ever have occurred, had Pervus lived. Chided herself for thinking thus.

When he returned to Chicago, Dirk went into the office of Hollis & Sprague, architects. But his work there was little more than that of draughtsman, and his weekly stipend could hardly be dignified by the term of salary. But he had large ideas about architecture and he found expression for his suppressed feelings on his week-ends spent with Selina at the farm.

"Baroque" was the word with which he dismissed the new Beachside hotel, north. He said the new Lincoln park bandstand looked like an igloo. He said that the city council ought to order the Potter Palmer mansion destroyed as a blot on the landscape, and waxed profane on the subject of the east face of the Public Library building, downtown.

"Never mind," Selina assured him, happily. "It was all thrown up so hastily. Remember that just yesterday, or the day before, Chicago was an Indian fort, with tepees where towers are now, and mud wallows in place of asphalt. Beauty needs time to perfect it. Perhaps we've been waiting all these years for just such youngsters as you. And maybe some day I'll be driving down Michigan boulevard with a distinguished visitor—Roelf Pool, perhaps. Why not? Let's say Roelf Pool, the famous sculptor. And he'll say, 'Who designed that building—the one that is so strong and yet so light? So gay and graceful and yet so reticent?' And I'll say, 'Oh, that! That's one of the earlier efforts of my son, Dirk DeJong.'"

But Dirk pulled at his pipe moodily; shook his head. "Oh, you don't know, mother. It's so d—d slow. First thing you know I'll be thirty. And what am I? An office boy—or little more than that—at Hollis'."

During his university years Dirk had seen much of the Arnolds, Eugene and Paula, but it sometimes seemed to Selina that he avoided these meetings—these parties and week-ends. She was content that this should be so, for she guessed that the matter of money held him back. She thought it was well that he should realize the difference now. Eugene had his own car—one of five in the Arnold garage. Paula, too, had hers. Her fascination for Dirk was strong. Selina knew that, too. In the last year or two he had talked very little of Paula and that, Selina knew, meant that he was hard hit.

Sometimes Paula and Eugene drove out to the farm. Eugene would appear in rakish cap, loose London knickers, queer brogans with an English look about them, a carefully careless looseness about the hang and fit of his jacket. Paula did not affect sports clothes for herself. She was not the type, she said. Slim, dark, vivacious, she wore stinky clothes—crepes, chiffons. Her eyes were languorous, lovely. She worshiped luxury and said so.

"I'll have to marry money," she declared. "Now that they've finished calling poor grandpa a beef-baron and taken I don't know how many millions away from him, we're practically on the streets."

"You look it!" from Dirk; and there was bitterness beneath his light tone.

"Well, it's true. All this silly muckraking in the past ten years or more. Poor father! Of course, granddad was pretty rough, let me tell you. I read some of the accounts of that last indictment—the 1910 one—and I must say I gathered that dear old Aug made Jesse James look like a philanthropist. I should think, at his age, he'd be a little scared. After all, when you're over seventy you're likely to have some doubts and fears about punishment in the next world. But not a grand old pirate like grandfather. He'll sack and burn and plunder until he goes down with the ship. And it looks to me as if the old boat had a pretty strong list to starboard right now. Father says himself that unless a war breaks, or something, which isn't at all likely, the packing industry is going to spring a leak."

"Elaborate figure of speech," murmured Eugene. The four of them—Paula, Dirk, Eugene and Selina—were sitting on the wide screened porch that Selina had had built at the southwest corner of the house. Paula was, of course, in the couch-swing. Occasionally she touched one slim languid foot to the floor and gave indolent impetus to the couch.

"It is, rather, isn't it? Might as well finish it, then. Darling Aug's been the grand old captain right through the village. Dad's never been more than a pretty-bum second mate. And as for you, Gene my love, cabin boy would be, y'understand me, big." Eugene had gone into the business a year before.

"What can you expect," retorted Eugene, "of a lad that hates salt water? And every other kind of pig meat?" He despised the yards and all that went with it.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Deceived the Spider

When a spider at the London zoo recently lost a forelegs and thus was unable to feed himself, he was attracted to food held in tweezers, by a tuning fork which gave a buzzing sound similar to that of a fly.

Remarkable Acoustics

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