SO BIG

By EDNA FERBER

(©, Doubleday, Page & Co.) WNU Service.

Chapter XV

The things that had mattered so vitally didn't seem to be important, somehow, now. The people who had seemed so desirable had become suddenly insignificant. The games he had played appeared silly games. He was seeing things through Dallas O'Mara's wise, beauty-loving eyes. Strangely enough, he did not realize that this girl saw life from much the same angle as that at which his mother regarded it. In the last few years his mother had often offended him by her attitude toward these rich and powerful friends of his—their ways, their games, their amusements, their manners. And her way of living in turn offended him. On his rare visits to the farm it seemed to him there was always some drab dejected female in the kitchen or living room or on the porch—a woman with broken teeth and comic shoes and tragic eyes—drinking great draughts of coffee and telling her woes to Selina—Safrey Gamish ladies smelling unpleasantly of peppermint and perspiration and poverty. "And he ain't had a lick of work since November—"

"You don't say! That's terrible!"

He wished she wouldn't.

Sometimes old Aun Hempel drove out there and Dirk would come upon the two snickering wickedly together about something that he knew concerned the North Shore crowd.

It had been years since Selina had said, socially, "What did they have for dinner, Dirk? H'm?"

"Well—soup—"

"Nothing before the soup?"

"Oh, yeh. Some kind of a—one of those canape things, you know. Caviare."

"My! Caviare!"

Sometimes Selina giggled like a naughty girl at things that Dirk had taken quite seriously. The fox hunts, for example. Lake Forest had taken to fox hunting; and the Tippecanoe crowd kept kennels. Dirk had learned to ride—pretty well. An Englishman—a certain Captain Stokes-Beatty—had initiated the North Shore into the mysteries of fox hunting. Huntin'. The North Shore learned to say nec'sry and conservat'ry. Captain Stokes-Beatty was a tall, bow-legged, and somewhat horse-faced young man, remote in manner. The nice Farnham girl seemed fated to marry him. Paula had had a hunt breakfast at Stornwood and it had been very successful, though the American men had balked a little at the deviled kidneys. The food had been patterned as far as possible after the pale flabby viands served at English hunt breakfasts and ruined in an atmosphere of lukewarm steam. The women were slim and perfectly tailored but wore their hunting clothes a trifle uneasily and self-consciously like girls in their first low-cut party dresses. Most of the men had turned stubborn on the subject of pink coats, but Captain Stokes-Beatty wore his handsomely. The fox—a worried and somewhat dejected-looking animal—had been shipped in a crate from the South and on being released had a way of sitting sociably in an Illinois corn field instead of leaping fleetly to cover. At the finish you had a feeling of guilt, as though you had killed a cockroach.

Dirk had told Selina about it; feeling rather magnificent. A fox hunt.

"A fox hunt! What for?"

"For! Why, what's any fox hunt for?"

"I can't imagine. They used to be for the purpose of ridding a fox-infested country of a nuisance. Have the foxes been bothering 'em out in Lake Forest?"

"Now, mother, don't be funny." He told her about the breakfast.

"Well, but it's so silly, Dirk. It's smart to copy from another country the things that that country does better than we do. England does gardens and woodcrips and dogs and tweeds and walking shoes and pipes and leisure better than we do. But those luke-warm steamy breakfasts of theirs! It's because they haven't gas, most of them. No Kansas or Nebraska farmer's wife would stand for one of their kitchens—not for a minute. And the hired man would balk at such bacon." She giggled.

"Oh, well, if you're going to talk like that."

But Dallas O'Mara felt much the same about these things. Dallas, it appeared, had been something of a fad with the North Shore society crowd after she had painted Mrs. Robinson Gilman's portrait. She had been invited to dinners and luncheons and dances, but their doings, she told Dirk, had bored her.

"They're nice," she said, "but they don't have much fun. They're all trying to be something they're not. And that's such hard work. The women were always explaining that they lived in Chicago because their husband's business was here. They all do things pretty well—dance or paint or ride or write or sing—but not well enough. They're professional amateurs, trying to express something they don't feel; or that they don't feel strongly enough to make it worth while expressing."

She admitted, though, that they did appreciate the things that other people did well. Visiting and acknowledged writers, painters, lecturers, heroes, they entertained lavishly and hospitably in their Florentine or English or Spanish or French palaces on the North side of Chicago, Ill. Especially foreign notables of this description.

Since 1918 these had descended upon Chicago (and all America), like a plague of locusts, starting usually in New York and sweeping westward, devouring the pleasant verdure of greenbacks and chirping as they came. Returning to Europe, bursting with profits and spleen, they thriftily wrote of what they had seen and the result was more clever than amiable; bearing, too, the taint of bad taste.

North Shore hostesses vied for the honor of entertaining these notables. Paula — pretty, clever, moneyed, shrewd—often emerged from these contests the winner. Her latest catch was Emile Goguet—Gen. Emile Goguet, hero of Champagne—Goguet of the stiff white beard, the empty left coatsleeve, and the score of medals. He was coming to America ostensibly to be the guest of the American division which, with Goguet's French troops, had turned the German onslaught at Champagne, but really, it was whispered, to cement friendly relations between his country and a somewhat diffident United States.

"And guess," thrilled Paula, "guess who's coming with him, Dirk! That wonderful Rodin Pool, the French sculptor!"

"What d'you mean—French sculptor! He's no more French than I am. He was born within a couple of miles of my mother's farm. His people were Dutch truck farmers. His father lived in High Prairie until a year ago, when he died of a stroke."

When he told Selina she flushed like a girl, as she sometimes still did when she was much excited. "Yes, I saw it in the paper. I wonder," she added, quietly, "if I shall see him."

That evening you might have seen her sitting, fingering the faded shabby time-worn objects the saving of which Dirk had denounced as sentimental. The crude drawing of the Haymarket; the wine-red cashmere dress; some faded brittle flowers.

Paula was giving a large—but not too large—dinner on the second night. She was very animated about it, excited, gay. "They say," she told Dirk, "that Goguet doesn't eat anything but hard-boiled eggs and rusks. Oh, well, the others won't object to squabs and mushrooms and things. And his hobby is his farm in Brittany. Pool's stunning—dark and somber and very white teeth."

Paula was very gay these days. Too gay. It seemed to Dirk that her nervous energy was inexhaustible—and exhausting. Dirk refused to admit to himself how irked he was by the sallow heart-shaped exquisite face, the lean brown clutching fingers, the air of ownership. He had begun to dislike things about her as an unfaithful spouse is irritated by quite innocent mannerisms of his unconscious mate. She scuffed her heels a little when she walked, for example. It maddened him. She had a way of biting the rough skin around her carefully tended nails when she was nervous. "Don't do that!" he said.

Dallas never irritated him. She rested him, he told himself. He would arm himself against her, but one minute after meeting her he would sink gratefully and resistlessly into her quiet depths. Sometimes he thought all this was an assumed manner in her.

"This calm of your—this effortlessness," he said to her one day, "is a pose, isn't it?" Anything to get her notice.

"Partly." Dallas had replied, amiably. "It's a nice pose though, don't you think?"

What are you going to do with a girl like that!

Here was the woman who could hold him entirely, and who never held out a finger to hold him. He tore at the smooth wall of her indifference, though he only cut and bruised his own hands in doing it.

"Is it because I'm a successful business man that you don't like me?"

"But I do like you. I think you're an awfully attractive man. Dangerous, that's wot."

"Oh, don't be the wide-eyed ingenue. You know d—d well what I mean. You've got me and you don't want me. If I had been a successful architect instead of a successful business man would that have made any difference?"

"Good Lord, no! Some day I'll probably marry a horny-handed son of toil, and if I do it'll be the horny hands that will win me. If you want to know, I like 'em with their scars on them. There's something about a man who has fought for it—I don't know what it is—a look in his eye—the feel of his hand. He needn't have been successful—though he probably would be. I don't know. I only know he—well, you haven't a mark on you. Not a mark. I'm not criticizing you. But you're all smooth. I like 'em bumpy. That sounds terrible. It isn't what I mean at all. It isn't—"

"Oh, never mind," Dirk said, wearily. "I think I know what you mean. Listen, Dallas. If I thought—I'd go back to Hollis & Sprague's and begin all over again at forty a week if I thought you'd—"

"Don't."

Continued on page 7)