

SO BIG

By
EDNA FERBER(C. Doubleday, Page & Co.)
WOLF SERVICE

CHAPTER II—Continued

Selma got up and walked to the end of the porch. "There's Adam coming in with the last load for the day. He'll be driving into town now. Cornelius started an hour ago. She went down the steps on her way to oversee the loading of Adam's wagon. At the bottom of the steps she turned. "Why can't you two stay to supper? You can quarrel comfortably right through the meal and drive home in the cool of the evening."

"I'll stay," said Paula. "Thanks. If you'll have all kinds of vegetables, cooked and uncooked, and let me go out into the fields and pick 'em myself like Maude Muller or Marie Adolante or any of those make-believe rustic gals."

In her French-heeled slippers and her tiny silk stockings she went out into the rich black furrows of the fields. Dirk, carrying the basket.

"Asparagus," she ordered first. Then, "But where is it? Is that it?" "You dig for it, idiot," said Dirk, stooping and taking from his basket the queerly curved sharp knife or spud used for cutting the asparagus shoots. "Cut the shoots three or four inches below the surface."

"Oh, let me do it!" She was down on her silken knees in the dirt, ruled a goodly patch of the fine, tender shoots, gave it up and sat watching Dirk's expert manipulation of the knife. "Let's have radishes, and corn, and tomatoes and lettuce and peas and artichokes and—"

"Artichokes grow in California, not Idaho," "That's where that soil, the good soil about carrying a radish. You were joking, weren't you?"

"I wasn't. I'd like being poor, or even just moderately rich. I'm used to money—loads of it. I'm twenty-four. And I'm looking around."

"He kicked an innocent best-top with his foot." "You like me better than any man you know."

"Of course I do. Just my luck."

"Well, then, let's take these vegetables in."

She made a pretense of lifting the heavy basket. Dirk snatched it roughly out of her hand so that she gave a little cry and looked ruefully down at the red mark on her palm. He caught her by the shoulder—even snook her a little. "Look here, Paula. Do you mean to tell me you marry a man simply because he happened to have a lot of money?"

"Perhaps not simply because he had a lot of money. But it certainly would be a factor, among other things."

Six months later Paula Arnold was married to Theodore A. Storm, a man of fifty, a friend of her father's, head of so many companies, stockholder in so many banks, director of so many corporations that even old Ag Hempl seemed a recluse from business in comparison. She never called him Teddy. No one ever did. Theodore Storm was a large man—not exactly stout, perhaps, but bulky. He had saved him from "the world."

He had a large white serious face, fine thick dark hair, graying at the temples. Within three years, Paula had two children, a boy and a girl. "There! That's done," she said. Her marriage was a great mistake and she knew it. For the war, coming in 1914, a few months after her wedding, sent the Hempl-Arnold interests skyrocketing. Millions of pounds of American beef and pork were shipped to Europe. In two years the Hempl fortune was greater than it ever had been. Paula was up to her eyes in relief work for Bleeding Belgium.

Dirk had not seen her in months. She telephoned him unexpectedly one Friday afternoon in his office at Hollis & Sprague's.

"Come out and spend Saturday and Sunday with us, won't you? We're running away to the country this afternoon. I'm so sick of Bleeding Belgium, you can't imagine. I'm sending the children out this morning. I can't get away so early. I'll call for you in the roadster this afternoon at four, and drive you out myself."

"I don't think I—"

"I'll call for you at four. I'll be at the curb. Don't keep me waiting, will you?"

Chapter XII

In town Dirk lived in a large front room and a living room, the alcove as a bedroom. He and Selma had furnished it together, disregarding all of the room's original belongings except the bed, a table, and one fat comfortable faded old armchair whose broad surface hinted a past grandeur. When he had got his books ranged in open shelves along one wall, soft-shaded lamps on table and desk, the place looked more than livable; lived in. During the process of furnishing Selma got into the way of coming into town for a day or two to prove the nation rooms and the second-hand stores. She had a genius for this sort of thing; hated the spick-and-span varnish and veneer of the new furniture to be got in the regular way.

She enjoyed these rare trips into town; made a holiday of them. Dirk would take her to the theater and she would sit entranced. Strangely enough, considering the lack of what the world calls romance and adventure in her life, she did not like the motion pictures. "All the difference in the world," she would say, "between the movies and the thrill act out of a play at the theater. My, yes! Like feeling with paper dolls when you could be playing with a real live baby."

The day was marvelously mild for March in Chicago. Spring, usually so soggy in this region, had flung herself at them head first. As the massive revolving door of Dirk's office building fanned him into the street he saw Paula in her long low sporting roadster at the curb. She was dressed in black. All feminine fashionable and middle-class Chicago was dressed in black. All feminine fashionable and middle-class America was dressed in black. Two years of war had robbed Paris of its husbands, brothers, sons. All Paris walked in black. America, untouched, gayly borrowed the smart habits of mourning and now Michigan boulevard and Fifth avenue walked demurely in the gloom of crepe and chiffon; black hats, black gloves, black slippers. Only black was "good" this year.

Paula smiled up at him, patted the leather seat beside her with one hand that was absurdly thick-fingered in its fur-lined glove.

"It's cold driving. Button up tight. Where'll we stop for your bag?"

He climbed into the seat beside her. Her manipulation of the wheel was witchcraft. The roadster slid in and out of traffic like a fluid thing, an eel, a stream, silent as a swift current in a river. When his house was reached, "I'm coming up," she said. "I suppose you haven't any tea?"

"Goah, no! What do you think I am! A young man in an English novel?"

"Oh, don't be provincial like the Chicago girls," Dirk said. They climbed the three flights of stairs. She looked about. Her glance was not disapproving. "This isn't so bad. Who did it? She did! Very nice. But of course you ought to have your own smart little apartment, with a Jap to do you up. To do that for you, for example."

"Yes," grimly. He was packing his bag—not throwing clothes into it, but folding them deftly, neatly, as the son of a wise mother packs. "My salary'd just about keep him in while house-coats."

"I'm going to send you some things for your room, Dirk."

"For God's sake don't!"

"Why not?"

"Two kinds of women in the world. I learned that at college. Those who send men things for their rooms and those that don't."

"You're very rude."

"You asked me. There! I'm all set. He snatched the lock of his bag. "I'm sorry I can't give you anything. I haven't a thing. Not even a glass of wine and a—what is it they say in books?—oh, yeh—a biscuit."

In the roadster again Paula maintained a fierce and steady speed for the remainder of the drive.

"We call the place Stormwood," Paula told him. "And nobody outside the dear family knows how fitting that is. Don't sowl. I'm not going to tell you my marital woes. And don't you say I asked for it. . . . How's the job?"

"Rotten."

"You don't like it? The work?"

"I like it well enough, only—well, you see we leave the university architectural course thinking we're all going to be Stanford Whites or Cass Giberts, tooting off a Woolworth building and making ourselves famous overnight. I've spent all yesterday and today planning a drygoods box that's going up on the corner of Milwaukee avenue and Ashland, west."

"Add ten years from now?"

"Ten years from now maybe they'll let me do the plans for the drygoods box all alone."

"Why don't you drop it?"

He was startled. "Drop it! How do you mean?"

"Chuck it. Do something that will bring you quick results. This isn't an age of waiting. Suppose, twenty years from now, you do plan a grand office building to grace this new and glorified Michigan boulevard they're always shouting about! You'll be a middle-aged man then. In a middle-class house in a middle-class suburb with a middle-class wife."

"Maybe," slightly nettled.

They turned in at the gates of Stormwood. A final turn of the drive. A driveway of trees. A house, massive, pillared, porticoed. The door opened as they drew up at the entrance. A maid in cap and apron stood in the doorway. A maid appeared at the side door, carrying a package. She looked at the car.

The glow of an open fire in the hall welcomed them. "He'll bring up your bag," said Paula. "How're the babies, Anna? Has Mr. Storm got here?"

"He telephoned, Mrs. Storm. He says he won't be out till late—maybe ten or after. Anyway, you're not to wait dinner."

Paula, from being the limp, expert, fearless driver of the high-powered roadster was now suddenly very much the mistress of the house, quietly observing, giving an order with a lift of the eyebrow or a nod of the head. Would Dirk like to go to his room at once? Dinner at seven-thirty. He needn't dress. Just as he liked. Everything was very informal here. They roughed it. (Dirk had counted thirteen servants by noon next day and hadn't been near the kitchen.)

He decided to bathe and change into dinner clothes and was clad of this when he found Paula in black chiffon before the fire in the great bedroom.

room she had called the library. Dirk thought she looked very beautiful in that diaphanous stuff, with the pearls. Her heart-shaped face, with its large eyes that slanted a little at the corners; her long slim throat; her dark hair piled high and away from her little ears. He decided not to mention it.

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Vast Desert Stretch

The boundaries of the Great American desert are vague. The outer limits are the Rockies and the continuation in New Mexico and Texas on the east; the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges on the west. The north and south limits are British Columbia and the Mexican boundary. Only a part of this area is actually arid waste land, comprising about 500,000 square miles.

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