

JACK LONDON

**THE
LITTLE LADY
OF THE
BIG HOUSE**

Chapter I

He awoke in the dark. His awakening was simple, easy, without movement save for the eyes that opened and made him aware of darkness. Unlike most, who must feel and grope and listen to, and contact with, the world about them, he knew himself on the moment of awakening, instantly identifying himself in time and place and personality. After the lapsed hours of sleep he took up, without effort, the interrupted tale of his days. He knew himself to be Dick Forrest, the master of broad acres, who had fallen asleep hours before after drowsily putting a match between the pages of "Road Town" and pressing off the electric reading lamp.

Near at hand there was the ripple and gurgle of some sleepy fountain. From far off, so faint and far that only a keen ear could catch, he heard a sound that made him smile with pleasure. He knew it for the distant, throaty bawl of King Polo—King Polo, his champion Short Horn bull, thrice Grand Champion also of all bulls at Sacramento at the California State Fairs. The smile was slow in easing from Dick Forrest's face, for he dwelt a moment on the new triumphs he had destined that year for King Polo on the Eastern livestock circuits. He would show them that a bull, California born and finished, could compete with the cream of bulls corn-fed in Iowa or imported overseas from the immemorial home of Short Horns.

Not until the smile faded, which was a matter of seconds, did he reach out in the dark and press the first of a row of buttons. There were three rows of

such buttons. The concealed lighting that spilled from the huge bowl under the ceiling revealed a sleeping-porch, three sides of which were fine-meshed copper screen. The fourth side was the house wall, solid concrete, through which French windows gave access.

He pressed the second button in the row and the bright light centered at a particular place on the concrete wall, illuminating, in a row, a clock, a barometer, and centigrade and Fahrenheit thermometers. Almost in a sweep of glance he read the messages of the dials: time 4:30; air pressure, 29:80, which was normal at that altitude and season; and temperature, Fahrenheit, 36°. With another press, the gauges of time and heat and air were sent back into the darkness.

A third button turned on his reading lamp, so arranged that the light fell from above and behind without shining into his eyes. The first button turned off the concealed lighting overhead. He reached a mass of proofsheets from the reading stand, and, pencil in hand, lighting a cigarette, he began to correct.

The place was clearly the sleeping quarters of a man who worked. Efficiency was its key note, though comfort, not altogether Spartan, was also manifest. The bed was of gray enameled iron to tone with the concrete wall. Across the foot of the bed, an extra coverlet, hung a gray robe of wolfskins with every tail a-dangle. On the floor, where rested a pair of slippers, was spread a thick-coated skin of mountain goat.

Heaped orderly with books, magazines and scribble-pads, there was room on the big reading

stand for matches, cigarettes, an ash-tray, and a thermos bottle. A phonograph, for purposes of dictation, stood on a hinged and swinging bracket. On the wall, under the barometer and thermometers, from a round wooden frame laughed the face of a girl. On the wall, between the rows of buttons and a switchboard, from an open holster, loosely projected the butt of a .44 Colt's automatic.

At six o'clock, sharp, after gray light had begun to filter through the wire netting, Dick Forrest, without raising his eyes from the proofsheets, reached out his right hand and pressed a button in the second row. Five minutes later a soft-slippered Chinese emerged on the sleeping-porch. In his hands he bore a small tray of burnished copper on which rested a cup and saucer, a tiny coffee pot of silver, and a correspondingly tiny silver cream pitcher.

"Good morning, Oh My," was Dick Forrest's greeting, and his eyes smiled and his lips smiled as he uttered it.

"Good morning, Master," Oh My returned, as he busied himself with making room on the reading stand for the tray and with pouring the coffee and cream.

This done, without waiting further orders, noting that his master was already sipping coffee with one hand while he made a correction on the proof with the other, Oh My picked up a rosy, filmy, lacy boudoir cap from the floor and departed. His exit was noiseless. He ebbed away like a shadow through the open French windows.

At six-thirty, sharp to the minute, he was back with a larger tray. Dick Forrest put away the proofs,

reached for a book entitled "Commercial Breeding of Frogs," and prepared to eat. The breakfast was simple yet fairly substantial—more coffee, a half grape-fruit, two soft-boiled eggs made ready in a glass with a dab of butter and piping hot, and a sliver of bacon, not over-cooked, that he knew was of his own raising and curing.

By this time the sunshine was pouring in through the screening and across the bed. On the outside of the wire screen clung a number of house-flies, early-hatched for the season and numb with the night's cold. As Forrest ate he watched the hunting of the meat-eating yellow-jackets. Sturdy, more frost-resistant than bees, they were already on the wing and preying on the benumbed flies. Despite the rowdy noise of their flight, these yellow hunters of the air, with rarely ever a miss, pounced on their helpless victims and sailed away with them. The last fly was gone ere Forrest had sipped his last sip of coffee, marked "Commercial Breeding of Frogs" with a match, and taken up his proofsheets.

After a time, the liquid-mellow cry of the meadow-lark, first vocal for the day, caused him to desist. He looked at the clock. It marked seven. He set aside the proofs and began a series of conversations by means of the switchboard, which he manipulated with a practiced hand.

"Hello, Oh Joy," was his first talk. "Is Mr. Thayer up?... Very well. Don't disturb him. I don't think he'll breakfast in bed, but find out.... That's right, and show him how to work the hot water. Maybe he doesn't know... Yes, that's right. Plan for one more boy as soon as you can get him. There's always a

crowd when the good weather comes on.... Sure. Use your judgment. Good-by.”

“Mr. Hanley?... Yes,” was his second conversation, over another switch. “I’ve been thinking about the dam on the Buckeye. I want the figures on the gravel-haul and on the rock-crushing.... Yes, that’s it. I imagine that the gravel-haul will cost anywhere between six and ten cents a yard more than the crushed rock. That last pitch of hill is what eats up the gravel-teams. Work out the figures. ... No, we won’t be able to start for a fortnight. ... Yes, yes; the new tractors, if they ever deliver, will release the horses from the plowing, but they’ll have to go back for the checking.... No, you’ll have to see Mr. Everan about that. Good-by.”

And his third call:

“Mr. Dawson? Ha! Ha! Thirty-six on my porch right now. It must be white with frost down on the levels. But it’s most likely the last this year.... Yes, they swore the tractors would be delivered two days ago.... Call up the station agent. ... By the way, you catch Hanley for me. I forgot to tell him to start the ‘rat-catchers’ out with the second instalment of fly-traps.... Yes, pronto. There were a couple of dozen roosting on my screen this morning.... Yes.... Good-by.”

At this stage, Forrest slid out of bed in his pajamas, slipped his feet into the slippers, and strode through the French windows to the bath, already drawn by Oh My. A dozen minutes afterward, shaved as well, he was back in bed, reading his frog book while Oh My, punctual to the minute, massaged his legs.

They were the well-formed legs of a well-built, five-foot-ten man who weighed a hundred and eighty

pounds. Further, they told a tale of the man. The left thigh was marred by a scar ten inches in length. Across the left ankle, from instep to heel, were scattered half a dozen scars the size of half-dollars. When Oh My prodded and pulled the left knee a shade too severely, Forrest was guilty of a wince. The right shin was colored with several dark scars, while a big scar, just under the knee, was a positive dent in the bone. Midway between knee and groin was the mark of an ancient three-inch gash, curiously dotted with the minute scars of stitches.

A sudden, joyous nicker from without put the match between the pages of the frog book, and, while Oh My proceeded partly to dress his master in bed, including socks and shoes, the master, twisting partly on his side, stared out in the direction of the nicker. Down the road, through the swaying purple of the early lilacs, ridden by a picturesque cowboy, paced a great horse, glinting ruddy in the morning sun-gold, flinging free the snowy foam of his mighty fetlocks, his noble crest tossing, his eyes roving afield, the trumpet of his love-call echoing through the springing land.

Dick Forrest was smitten at the same instant with joy and anxiety—joy in the glorious beast pacing down between the lilac hedges; anxiety in that the stallion might have awakened the girl who laughed from the round wooden frame on his wall. He glanced quickly across the two-hundred-foot court to the long, shadowy jut of her wing of the house. The shades of her sleeping-porch were down. They did not stir. Again the stallion nickered, and all that moved was a flock of wild canaries, upspringing from the flowers and

shrubs of the court, rising like a green-gold spray of light flung from the sunrise.

He watched the stallion out of sight through the lilacs, seeing visions of fair Shire colts mighty of bone and frame and free from blemish, then turned, as ever he turned to the immediate thing, and spoke to his body servant.

“How’s that last boy, Oh My? Showing up?”

“Him pretty good boy, I think,” was the answer. “Him young boy. Everything new. Pretty slow. All the same bime by him show up good.”

“Why? What makes you think so?”

“I call him three, four morning now. Him sleep like baby. Him wake up smiling just like you. That very good.”

“Do I wake up smiling?” Forrest queried.

Oh My nodded his head violently.

“Many times, many years, I call you. Always your eyes open, your eyes smile, your mouth smile, your face smile, you smile all over, just like that, right away quick. That very good. A man wake up that way got plenty good sense. I know. This new boy like that. Bime by, pretty soon, he make fine boy. You see. His name Chow Gam. What name you call him this place?”

Dick Forrest meditated.

“What names have we already?” he asked.

“Oh Joy, Ah Well, Ah Me, and me; I am Oh My,” the Chinese rattled off. “Oh Joy him say call new boy—”

He hesitated and stared at his master with a challenging glint of eye. Forrest nodded.

“Oh Joy him say call new boy ‘Oh Hell.’”

“Oh ho!” Forrest laughed in appreciation. “Oh Joy is a joshier. A good name, but it won’t do. There is the Missus. We’ve got to think another name.”

“Oh Ho, that very good name.”

Forrest’s exclamation was still ringing in his consciousness so that he recognized the source of Oh My’s inspiration.

“Very well. The boy’s name is Oh Ho.”

Oh My lowered his head, ebbed swiftly through the French windows, and as swiftly returned with the rest of Forrest’s clothes-gear, helping him into undershirt and shirt, tossing a tie around his neck for him to knot, and, kneeling, putting on his leggings and spurs. A Baden Powell hat and a quirt completed his appareling—the quirt, Indian-braided of raw-hide, with ten ounces of lead braided into the butt that hung from his wrist on a loop of leather.

But Forrest was not yet free. Oh My handed him several letters, with the explanation that they had come up from the station the previous night after Forrest had gone to bed. He tore the right-hand ends across and glanced at the contents of all but one with speed. The latter he dwelt upon for a moment, with an irritated indrawing of brows, then swung out the phonograph from the wall, pressed the button that made the cylinder revolve, and swiftly dictated, without ever a pause for word or idea:

“In reply to yours of March 14, 1914, I am indeed sorry to learn that you were hit with hog cholera. I am equally sorry that you have seen fit to charge me with the responsibility. And just as equally am I sorry that the boar we sent you is dead.

“I can only assure you that we are quite clear of cholera here, and that we have been clear of cholera for eight years, with the exception of two Eastern importations, the last two years ago, both of which, according to our custom, were segregated on arrival and were destroyed before the contagion could be communicated to our herds.

“I feel that I must inform you that in neither case did I charge the sellers with having sent me diseased stock. On the contrary, as you should know, the incubation of hog cholera being nine days, I consulted the shipping dates of the animals and knew that they had been healthy when shipped.

“Has it ever entered your mind that the railroads are largely responsible for the spread of cholera? Did you ever hear of a railroad fumigating or disinfecting a car which had carried cholera? Consult the dates: First, of shipment by me; second, of receipt of the boar by you; and, third, of appearance of symptoms in the boar. As you say, because of washouts, the boar was five days on the way. Not until the seventh day after you receipted for same did the first symptoms appear. That makes twelve days after it left my hands.

“No; I must disagree with you. I am not responsible for the disaster that overtook your herd. Furthermore, doubly to assure you, write to the State Veterinary as to whether or not my place is free of cholera.

“Very truly yours...”

Chapter II

When Forrest went through the French windows from his sleeping-porch, he crossed, first, a comfortable dressing room, window-divaned, many-lockered, with a generous fireplace, out of which opened a bathroom; and, second, a long office room, wherein was all the paraphernalia of business—desks, dictaphones, filing cabinets, book cases, magazine files, and drawer-pigeonholes that tiered to the low, beamed ceiling.

Midway in the office room, he pressed a button and a series of book-freighted shelves swung on a pivot, revealing a tiny spiral stairway of steel, which he descended with care that his spurs might not catch, the bookshelves swinging into place behind him.

At the foot of the stairway, a press on another button pivoted more shelves of books and gave him entrance into a long low room shelved with books from floor to ceiling. He went directly to a case, directly to a shelf, and unerringly laid his hand on the book he sought. A minute he ran the pages, found the passage he was after, nodded his head to himself in vindication, and replaced the book.

A door gave way to a pergola of square concrete columns spanned with redwood logs and interlaced with smaller trunks of redwood, all rough and crinkled velvet with the ruddy purple of the bark.

It was evident, since he had to skirt several hundred feet of concrete walls of wandering house, that he had not taken the short way out. Under wide-spre-ading ancient oaks, where the long hitching-rails, bark-chewed,

and the hoof-beaten gravel showed the stamping place of many horses, he found a pale-golden, almost tan-golden, sorrel mare. Her well-groomed spring coat was alive and flaming in the morning sun that slanted straight under the edge of the roof of trees. She was herself alive and flaming. She was built like a stallion, and down her backbone ran a narrow dark strip of hair that advertised an ancestry of many range mustangs.

“How’s the Man-Eater this morning?” he queried, as he unsnapped the tie-rope from her throat.

She laid back the tiniest ears that ever a horse possessed—ears that told of some thoroughbred’s wild loves with wild mares among the hills—and snapped at Forrest with wicked teeth and wicked-gleaming eyes.

She sidled and attempted to rear as he swung into the saddle, and, sidling and attempting to rear, she went off down the graveled road. And rear she would have, had it not been for the martingale that held her head down and that, as well, saved the rider’s nose from her angry-tossing head.

So used was he to the mare, that he was scarcely aware of her antics. Automatically, with slightest touch of rein against arched neck, or with tickle of spur or press of knee, he kept the mare to the way he willed. Once, as she whirled and danced, he caught a glimpse of the Big House. Big it was in all seeming, and yet, such was the vagrant nature of it, it was not so big as it seemed. Eight hundred feet across the front face, it stretched. But much of this eight hundred feet was composed of mere corridors, concrete-walled, tile-roofed, that connected and assembled the various

parts of the building. There were patios and pergolas in proportion, and all the walls, with their many right-angled juts and recessions, arose out of a bed of greenery and bloom.

Spanish in character, the architecture of the Big House was not of the California-Spanish type which had been introduced by way of Mexico a hundred years before, and which had been modified by modern architects to the California-Spanish architecture of the day. Hispano-Moresque more technically classified the Big House in all its hybridness, although there were experts who heatedly quarreled with the term.

Spaciousness without austerity and beauty without ostentation were the fundamental impressions the Big House gave. Its lines, long and horizontal, broken only by lines that were vertical and by the lines of juts and recesses that were always right-angled, were as chaste as those of a monastery. The irregular roof-line, however, relieved the hint of monotony.

Low and rambling, without being squat, the square upthrusts of towers and of towers overtopping towers gave just proportion of height without being sky-aspiring. The sense of the Big House was solidarity. It defied earthquakes. It was planted for a thousand years. The honest concrete was overlaid by a cream-stucco of honest cement. Again, this very sameness of color might have proved monotonous to the eye had it not been saved by the many flat roofs of warm-red Spanish tile.

In that one sweeping glance while the mare whirled unduly, Dick Forrest's eyes, embracing all of the Big House, centered for a quick solicitous instant on the great wing across the two-hundred-foot

court, where, under climbing groups of towers, red-snooded in the morning sun, the drawn shades of the sleeping-porch tokened that his lady still slept.

About him, for three quadrants of the circle of the world, arose low-rolling hills, smooth, fenced, cropped, and pastured, that melted into higher hills and steeper wooded slopes that merged upward, steeper, into mighty mountains. The fourth quadrant was unbounded by mountain walls and hills. It faded away, descending easily to vast far flatlands, which, despite the clear brittle air of frost, were too vast and far to scan across.

The mare under him snorted. His knees tightened as he straightened her into the road and forced her to one side. Down upon him, with a pattering of feet on the gravel, flowed a river of white shimmering silk. He knew it at sight for his prize herd of Angora goats, each with a pedigree, each with a history. There had to be a near two hundred of them, and he knew, according to the rigorous selection he commanded, not having been clipped in the fall, that the shining mohair draping the sides of the least of them, as fine as any human new-born baby's hair and finer, as white as any human albino's thatch and whiter, was longer than the twelve-inch staple, and that the mohair of the best of them would dye any color into twenty-inch switches for women's heads and sell at prices unreasonable and profound.

The beauty of the sight held him as well. The roadway had become a flowing ribbon of silk, gemmed with yellow cat-like eyes that floated past wary and curious in their regard for him and his nervous horse. Two Basque herders brought up the rear. They were

short, broad, swarthy men, black-eyed, vivid-faced, contemplative and philosophic of expression. They pulled off their hats and ducked their heads to him. Forrest lifted his right hand, the quirt dangling from wrist, the straight forefinger touching the rim of his Baden Powell in semi-military salute.

The mare, prancing and whirling again, he held her with a touch of rein and threat of spur, and gazed after the four-footed silk that filled the road with shimmering white. He knew the significance of their presence. The time for kidding was approaching and they were being brought down from their brush-pastures to the brood-pens and shelters for jealous care and generous feed through the period of increase. And as he gazed, in his mind, comparing, was a vision of all the best of Turkish and South African mohair he had ever seen, and his flock bore the comparison well. It looked good. It looked very good.

He rode on. From all about arose the clacking whir of manure-spreaders. In the distance, on the low, easy-sloping hills, he saw team after team, and many teams, three to a team abreast, what he knew were his Shire mares, drawing the plows back and forth across, contour-plowing, turning the green sod of the hillsides to the rich dark brown of humus-filled earth so organic and friable that it would almost melt by gravity into fine-particled seed-bed. That was for the corn—and sorghum-planting for his silos. Other hill-slopes, in the due course of his rotation, were knee-high in barley; and still other slopes were showing the good green of burr clover and Canada pea.

Everywhere about him, large fields and small were arranged in a system of accessibility and workability