

The Little Lady of the Big House

By

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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 concentrated 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, ebbled 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 rawhide, 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..."