

Shadow Shapes

(MEMOIRS OF A CHINESE STUDENT IN AMERICA)

Anonymous

*"We are no other than a moving row
of magic Shadow Shapes that come and go
Round with this Sun illumined Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show."*

SHANGHAI

AMERICA!

Thomas Lee saw with his mind's eye a picture of skyscrapers piling one over the top of another. Steel, concrete, glass, lights—he was stupefied by such a crammed mass of materials.

Someone whispering awoke Lee from his day dreams. Human faces began to take shapes around him. Something was wrong. A feeling of uneasiness crept over him. Lee drew a long breath. Wasn't he making a farewell speech on behalf of a group of students who were leaving for America the next day? He must have stopped right in the middle of his speech while he imagined himself in America.

The speaker stood there dumb and seemingly helpless, as if he had been suddenly robbed of his power of speech. The chairman rubbed his hands nervously. Some of the more impatient ones in the audience changed the position of their feet, making an irritating noise on the wooden floor. A light sweat stood in beads upon Lee's brows. His eyes grew moist. He struggled two or three times to resume talking before his words were finally audible. Then what a flood of words! Words absolutely meaningless, incoherent and stupid were spoken with such an apparent ease and vigor that astonished even himself.

This outburst of energy was shortlived. Suddenly he felt tired. His voice began to weaken. He was trying to think now before he spoke. Words had strange-

ly disappeared. He staggered out of the room remembering but vaguely that he had thanked the audience for their "kind attention," and that there was a perfunctory applause.

Four of his friends met him in the hall. Only three months ago the same group congratulated Lee whose brilliant oratory had won an important inter-collegiate debate for his alma mater. He tried to say something to his friends, but he was too demoralized to want to be conscious of his disgrace. His head was aching. After a few hurried handshakes, Lee ran into the street.

Thomas Lee was nineteen years old. His shoulders were unusually broad for his size. A straw hat concealed his straight, black hair, which he combed back sleekly. As a boy Lee had excited his parents. They had offered themselves ambitious explanations of his startling literary ability. He wrote poetry at nine.

He did not like to meet people or to hear them talk. Being extremely sensitive and nervous, he brooded over the slightest irritation. There was a silence about him that was mysterious to his friends. He seemed to be always preoccupied with something that did not concern others.

The coolness of the night had a soothing effect on Lee's mind. He walked along the Bund, busied himself with incomplete images. Images of people and days. He stared at the dark waters and threw back his head as if he was shaking

a dream out of his eyes. Yes, this same river flowing into the ocean would soon carry him away from his native shore.

A blind fortune-teller had once told his mother that her son would someday be drowned. His ship was modernly equipped. It could accurately direct its course, and could reach its destination with a mathematical certainty. Somehow he had little faith in human creations. He could only picture a ship powerless and drifting. In fact, he expected his ship would be wrecked at sea. The thought, strange to say, did not disturb him.

Shanghai seemed to be rebuilt and re-peopled for him that night. The city was never before so odd and beautiful. Rickshas, automobiles, sing-song girls, French danceuse, majong, poker, Isis Theatre, Chinese opera house, symphony orchestra, bamboo flutes, street cars, illuminating signs covered with Chinese characters—this was Shanghai.

In the opera house throngs of Chinese in loose, silk garments sat in a cloud of cigarette smoke. People talking . . . women's oily hair . . . "peanuts . . . fresh apples" . . . a candy-boy is coming down the aisle . . . fiddles shrieking . . . cymbals screaming . . . masks, rows of wierd-looking masks grinned behind the footlights. A people lived behind masks, whose soul remained mysterious, unexplored.

Almost across the street a different crowd gathered. On the stage a girl was singing a long-forgotten hit from Broadway. A woman sat at a battered piano. Her cigarette smouldering on a yellow key. Squeaking, wiry notes. Russian prostitutes, drunken men, sailors . . . the air was hot, heavy and foul, reeking with the smell of cheap perfume.

There was no such thing as a medley of the Orient and the Occident. They met but they would never mix. The two civilizations slept under the same roof, came into direct contact with each other

in many ways. But they were strangers. They could not understand one another, and never cared to either. A city of foreigners.

Midnight. The streets grew empty. Lighted windows and stores one by one collapsed into darkness and silence. But what a waste of time, going to bed, when Lee had only one night to spend in China! He loathed returning to his hotel. How could one dream in a room where he had to leave his most sacred thoughts, most intimate dreams, to be detected, and perhaps abused by some future occupants? God knows who they might be!

He wished Ivy was there with him. Not that he cared for her. He was only lonesome, and wanted to talk to someone. The thought amused him. Ivy was such a dumb little thing! Lee blushed when he recalled what the maid servant said before he left home. It had always been a puzzle in his mind why everybody took it for granted that he and Ivy would someday be married. Maybe he just imagined people did.

Although Lee knew a few girls, the social custom in the country prevented him from being closely associated with them. Women were a mystery to him.

His father had taken him once to the home of a sing-song girl. Lee was but a child then. Four men were playing majong. Seated beside a fat, bald-headed fellow was a girl who talked mostly with her nose. One girl was singing, while her "mother" played the fiddle. Her little eyes twinkled naughtily when she came to the line, "are you always mine, sweetheart?" And instantly the men roared in chorus, "yes, dearie!"

In the lap of a bespectacled scholar, a flat-chested and thickly-painted girl was telling him how much she loved him. Why, she even went to a Buddhist temple the other day to offer a prayer for his happiness. At this expression of her devotion, the scholar adjusted his spec-

tacles and mused philosophically, "Hm, you must have spoiled the poor, innocent monks!"

On their way home Lee's father bought the boy a box of candy, and told him not to say a word to his mother. Lee could not understand the meaning of all this. He never dared to ask anybody. The memory of this incident troubled him, but he never knew why.

When they were children, Ivy and Lee were playmates. The friendship between the two families had a peculiar start. Her father was a dentist. Once he extracted four teeth for Lee's father, and sent the latter a big bill for the painful operation. The patient said something terrible when he got the bill, but he paid the dentist and they became good friends.

After Lee went to school in Peking at twelve, he saw her only occasionally during the summer vacations. One summer he came home to hear that Ivy and he would be married when they grew up, if he did not object to such a union.

Lee received the news calmly. The idea of somebody else choosing a mate for him was indeed unpleasant. But marriage, to him at that time, was not a sufficiently important matter over which to feel unhappy. Besides, it mattered little to him whether it was Ivy or some other girl he would marry. Since he did not understand women, one was just as good, or as bad as another.

He was surprised to find himself taking his marriage problem so lightly. Tomorrow he would be leaving. He was glad that he was going. His mind and spirit seemed to be in such a rut lately. Ivy, Shanghai and thoughts were gradually crowded out of his mind. He felt himself further away. There was a new world which yet could not assume forms. Houses, streets, faces . . . they were meaningless.

Bon Voyage!

A wonderful day. A deep blue sky. Sails, smoke, masts, junks in the Huang-

poo, sailors, people on the wharf waving handkerchieves and flags—how far away they seemed! Nobody was conscious of an orchestra playing on the promenade, "Aloha Oe," so divinely sweet . . .

" . . . A sign that we two must be parted,

I can't hide thee in my arms and keep thee,

I can only hide that I am broken hearted . . ."

The violin player looked as though he had gone to sleep. A banjo was strumming. The dragging movement of the fingers across the strings excited the nerves painfully.

"Farewell to thee, farewell to thee,

I shall always wait for thee among the flowers;

One fond embrace, one kiss, and then, Farewell, until we meet again!"

It was more than music. It was a winged translation of life. The seeds of parting were sown when two hearts embraced and blossomed!

There were faces . . . mother . . . father . . . Ivy. Ah, memories so sad and sweet! They stole into the melody quivering and weeping. Yet they were shapeless. They were everywhere about him. Was Lee really going away? No, how could he?

But look! The crowd had suddenly gone mad. With arms upraised, they were calling — names of persons going away. On the deck the boys were singing:

"Oh come and join our hearty song, as proudly here we stand,

Blood burned in Lee's body. He almost heard his heart thumping. Deep ringing voices, flags waving. His eyes shone with a strange light. There were the sound of tramping feet, and the brisk rattle of drums in his ears. His face upturned, his mind intoxicated with the glories of his alma mater, his voice hoarse and dry, like a soldier marching to war, Lee joined in chorus:

"We're loyal, we're faithful, we'll stand for you!"

Gradually these noises diminished. Houses were moving. No, the ship had left the wharf. Human figures formed specks in the distance. Islands, water, the sea of deep, mineral blue. Evening came.

How slow and cruel the hours suddenly seemed to him! China, his country! How far away she was! A fair maiden in her sleep! A pale yellow moon. A sad calm had fallen upon Thomas Lee. He stared at the sea. Above the dark water, he thought he had seen two arms stretched yearningly towards him, so cool and white like his mother's. He closed his eyes for moments. He wanted to cry, but no tear came.

"Poor Tom . . . poor Tom," Lee kept murmuring to himself. He was thinking of things that were no more. He caught a memory of Chunchi. She was a brunette. He was glad he had burned all her letters before he left home. He had been cruel to her, quite unnecessarily. Could she forgive him? Lee was just a child then. He must have time to learn to walk, to breathe, and to discover the meanings of life. Chunchi had reached maturity. She knew the arts of flirtation. There was ardor in her blood. Perhaps she was infatuated with him. Letter, letter, letter, one came after another.

Lee's idea of feminine modesty was shocked. He demanded an explanation. Liked him? No, that could not be accepted as an excuse for sexual love. Just what love was, he did not know. He was not sure whether there could be any such thing as pure love.

He frankly condemned her for her unconventional behavior. The tone of his letters became more severe each time till he finally stopped writing altogether. Two months later, a story about her marriage to the vice-minister of education was prominently displayed in a local newspaper. He read the story with an

apparently casual glance. But he learned painfully a lesson in realism.

Women, love . . . how fickle! She might have this minute a baby in her arms, kissing it, teasing it. He saw with a bewildered and hurt mind the girl waiting for her husband at the door, smiling and happy. Only few months ago she was willing to walk to the end of the world for his love, and now she lived as another man's wife. Oh, how could she? how could she?

He wished he had let his parents come to Shanghai to see him off. And Minnie, his sister, wanted to so bad! He could almost single out in his mind a little red-brick house standing in the centre of Nanking. The rest of the city blurred. There were the pine trees guarding the gate where he had told his mother to be brave.

He closed his eyes and wept. But they would all be at the wharf five years from now. He would come back a victor, a hero. There would be no sobbing and heartache. The vision of a golden statue crowned with wreaths arose before him.

Pacific!

Water . . . sky . . . up . . . down
. . . sky . . . dull thumping of the engine . . . water . . . sky . . . up . . . down . . . painful regularity . . . blue water . . . blue sky . . . blue . . . blue . . . endless repetition . . . water . . . sky . . . water . . . water . . . going nowhere . . . up . . . up . . . monotony . . . emptiness . . . a ship at sea.

It was a stormy night. The sea was lashed into furious, livid foam. Above the roaring of the ocean, came the captain's orders. Scurried shadows . . . sailors . . . lightning . . . darkness.

The storm has subsided. Moonlight crept through the clouds, hanging above the horizon like the fringe of a mighty waterfall. A strange awesome silence shrouded the sea.

There was a commotion on the lower deck. Passengers stifled by the foul air in the steerage were coming up to seek

relief. Women, with babies in their arms and their hair streaming before the wind, were followed by the men. No word was spoken. They sat quietly on the deck-floor, huddling under blankets.

A soft baritone voice broke the tragic stillness. It was more than a Russian peasant's song. It was the weeping of the dead. Weeping over the bitterness of life which had long deserted its corpse! Even death could not bring forgetfulness!

The thought sent a painful shudder down Lee's spine. He turned and ran. He wanted to run away from this scene of human agonies. He could almost feel the icy breath of the dead on his neck, its white claws on his shoulders. He ran across the promenade, through the smoking room, and slumped into a sofa in the social hall. Out of breath and perspiring, his eyes caught a sight which petrified him.

A girl was sitting at a piano. At her feet on the floor lay a young man. Her slender fingers glided over the ivory keys. Every now and then she turned and smiled at the young man whose up-turned face never moved from the graceful, bending figure. The two were so absorbed in themselves that they failed to notice the presence of a stranger in the hall.

The melody floated further and further away. It had not the fire and passion of Liszt, but had all the sweetness and smoothness of Schubert. The music of eternal spring! Dream roses showered upon the lovers and scattered fragrance around them. The young man leaned forward, gently kissing the edge of her skirt, and rubbed his cheeks against the softness of its silken folds.

Lee felt transported by the ecstasy of love. He had never known that love could be so beautiful. To him, love was but part of a necessary social institution called matrimony. It was forced upon the people, and people accepted it because there was no other alternative. He felt

as though he had intruded into a sacred shrine. He withdrew stealthily.

Benny Wong, his cabin-mate, had gone to sleep. Lee undressed slowly and slipped between the icy sheets. He closed his eyes but could not sleep. Storm . . . huddling forms on the deck . . . human agonies . . . death . . . white arms . . . bare shoulders . . . Schubert . . . spring . . . love . . . rubbed his cheeks against the softness of its silken folds . . . Images came and vanished. The more he thought, the deeper were the mysteries of life.

A voice interrupted his reverie. Benny was calling him.

"Tom, are you asleep?"

"No, why?"

"I just woke up a few minutes ago, and darn it, I can't go back to sleep again . . . say, Tom, can you keep a secret? . . ." Benny did not wait for an answer. "Bill was married!"

"You mean Bill Wu? I hope he is more fortunate . . . you know . . . most of our married men never even see their wives before marriage."

"Worse than that! Bill was engaged to his wife before he was born! Their dads were pals. One day the two old men took a notion that if one had a son and the other a daughter, the children would be married. Bill had to marry that girl no matter whether she grew up to be bow-legged, or an one-eyed girl!"

"That's tough. Still, I don't know . . . we don't have divorces in China. You see, our boys and girls don't know anyone else except the ones their parents choose for them. They are bound to be contented. In the West, they say they marry for love, but we read nothing but divorce scandals in their newspapers. I really don't know, Benny." Lee wondered why he wanted to defend the old Chinese marriage system. Perhaps because somebody was attacking it.

"But Bill has a girl in Peking."

"He has? Well, I'll be darned!"

"On the wedding day, Bill ran away

from home. He came to my place in Soochow. We were just going out to see the city the following morning when his dad and two private detectives met us at the door. The poor old man went down on his knees. Father and son were both crying . . ."

"Too bad!" Lee sighed. "I feel kind of sorry for his father too. We can't blame him. It is not entirely his fault. It is the society, tradition . . ." Here Benny interrupted him.

"Whoever is to be blamed, I don't know. This, I know. The day before we sailed, Bill was married to a girl who was not any more than a lifeless corpse to him! And the worst of all this mess is that Bill's girl in Peking, I am told, is pregnant. We certainly have a great marriage system, don't we? Thank God, my parents are all dead! Say, Tom, I am just too sleepy to talk. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight!"

But Lee could not sleep. He lay on his back thinking. Huddling forms on the deck . . . death . . . bare shoulders . . . Bill . . . pregnant . . . marriage . . . Ivy. Why he thought of Ivy, he did not know. Certainly he was not going to marry her. Would his life end up that way too—going to bed every night with a corpse lying beside him? Oh, God, corpse . . . death . . . white arms . . . mysteries of life!

Sleepless Night!

"Extra! Extra! Japanese earthquake! Thousands killed! Extra! Extra! Japanese . . ." The news boys were shouting on the streets of Seattle.

The damned Japs! Why didn't it kill them all? Thomas Lee thought to himself as he stepped into a taxi.

"To Y. M. C. A.!"

"Yes sir!" As the driver slowly steered the car out of the wharf, he whistled, showing two unusually red lips. "It's three o'clock in the morning, we've danced the whole night through."

Suddenly he turned around and said

to Lee, "Too bad, it must be pretty tough now in your country." Seeing the puzzled look on Lee's face, he explained, "you know, that damn earthquake in your country . . ."

"You mean . . . in Japan?"

"Why, aren't you a Japanese?"

"No, I am a Chinese."

"Oh, I see, I thought you were a Japanese. My mistake." He resumed whistling, "'and daylight soon will be dawning, just one more waltz with you'."

Lee suddenly felt sorry for the Japanese. He wondered why he had wished the earthquake would kill them all. Just prejudice, too darn bigoted to be sympathetic! Only two weeks ago Lee was in Tokio. The cherry blossoms in the parks . . . the green-roofed imperial palaces . . . little girls in their kimono-like dress playing on the streets. He was frightened by the thought that he came near being trapped in the earthquake. He was glad to be in Seattle. He felt so generous that he not only did not mind the whistling of the driver, his feet begun to beat time with the music. "That melody so entrancing, seems to be made for us two . . ."

"What's your name, Johnny?"

"Thomas Lee."

"Your room is on the fifth floor. Number 519. Fifth floor . . ." The clerk waltzed lightly across the floor to get the key for Lee's room . . . "we've danced the whole night through, and daylight soon will be dawning . . ."

"Going up!" shouted the elevator boy. "That melody so entrancing, seems to be made for us . . . fifth floor, did you say? Number 519? Turn to the left. First door on the right . . . I could just keep right on dancing forever, dear, with you . . ."

There were plenty of barber shops in Seattle, but Lee could not get his hair cut. Most barbers politely informed him that there was a place for the "colored people just around the corner." He was

unaccustomed to such treatment. Several times he came near letting his temper go. A Chinese student who had been in Seattle long, reminded Lee each time that he was in America, not China.

"My friend," he said, "you will soon get used to it. I know it is hard to stand, but what can we do?"

"Get used to it!" The idea was simply absurd to Lee. "Get used" to insults and humiliations? No, not him! He was sorry he had come to America. What was all that talk about Sino-American friendship? Somebody had lied!

His companion told him that in theatres Chinese were admitted only to certain sections where the negroes sat. Not that Lee particularly objected to sitting with negroes, but the unjust discrimination stirred his blood. He did not have to mix with Americans. He did not have to go to theatres.

On his way to a banquet given by the different organizations in the city, Lee wondered whether he was unfair to judge all Americans by the behavior of a few persons he met in Seattle. Certainly not at all of them had racial prejudices. He hoped so, anyway.

Across the dining hall stretched a huge placard reading, "Seattle welcomes you." An elderly gentleman arose to address the guests.

"My friends, every home in Seattle is open to you. Make this city your home. We are proud to have you with us tonight, and may we hope that you will always stay with us."

The speaker was apparently sincere, but Lee was not in a mood that night to accept the remarks without some suspicion. What did all this mean? It was something more than a joke. The same city insulted him on the streets, and extended him later a hand of welcome at the banquet. Which represented the true public opinion? He had no idea.

At the close of the banquet, the chairman announced that a special evening

service had been arranged for the guests at a local church.

Lee had never seen any church so beautiful — everything spelled gold and riches. Unconsciously he caught a picture of the little church in his home town. That old rickety-looking thing could not possibly cost over five thousand dollars.

The singing was altogether too perfect for a church choir, Lee thought. His idea of religious music was a song, sung perhaps crudely by amateur church-goers, not professionals. Did the church really need a palatial home to worship God? Would a less expensive structure do just as good? Christ's sermons were never graced by the costly notes of a pipe-organ.

Damn it! Lee was mad at himself. He promised not to argue about religion. It was one of those subjects on which no two persons' opinion could agree.

Honk! Honk! Automobiles were passing by. "Extra. . . Extra. . . new earthquake in Japan! More people killed! Extra! Extra. . . ." The noise of the street car gave Lee a toothache. Honk! Honk! More automobiles. "It's three o'clock in the morning, we've danced the whole night through. . ." Couples were dancing in a ball across the street. "Extra! Extra!" Dong! Dong! Dong! The street was full of running. He heard the splattering hoof-beats and the frenzied bell of a fire engine. Fire! Fire! "And daylight soon will be dawning, just one more waltz with you. The melody so entrancing, seems to be made for us two. . . ." Still dancing. Tat. . . tat. . . tat. . . It was the milkman's wagon, making his morning deliveries. Honk! Honk! More automobiles.

For God sake, how could one sleep at night in this country? Thomas Lee threw up his arms in despair. "I could just keep right on dancing forever, dear, with you. . ." Did people ever

go to bed in America, he wondered. "Morning papers...Post...Times..." It was almost time for him to catch the train for Colorado Springs.

"Why are you up so early? Your train won't leave for two hours or so." A clerk asked Lee who was pacing nervously back and forth in the lobby.

"How could one sleep with these automobiles, fire engines, street cars, and news boys running all over town?"

"This is a noisy country, my boy," the clerk smiled, then moistened his lips and whistled, "and daylight soon will be dawning, just one more waltz..."

To Be Continued