

Shadow Shapes

(Memoirs of a Chinese Student in America)

ANONYMOUS

PART FIVE

THE COLUMNS

ONCE more Lee was alone. But it was not, as when he had left China, a separation which was more or less natural. Nobody had expected him to spend his life within the four walls of his home. Someday he would have to leave his parents, and to face the world alone. Now someone remained behind, and she had come to mean so much in his life that he thought less of himself than of her. Lee thought only of how different the first few days would be for Edna. His mind was occupied with those harmless little worries which so easily assume alarming proportions in the minds of people who live alone and are always tormenting themselves about those whom they love.

He called every day at the postoffice for her letters. Once or twice the mails were late, and instantly he was overwhelmed with anxiety. She might be sick. She might not love him any more. Such little things stabbed Lee to the heart. He was angry with himself for being so sensitive and accused himself of selfishness. He knew quite well that it would be absurd, even wrong and unnatural, for him to doubt her. Yes, he knew all that. But what good did it do? He could not help it, if for last twenty years he had seen mostly falsehood and fickleness in human nature.

He tried bravely to keep himself occupied and to take up his studies and read his text books. But alas! how empty were the dean's lectures and the

marvels of modern newspapers without Edna! No doubt they were interesting but Edna was not there. What is the good of informative lectures if the ears of the beloved are not there to hear them? What is the use of knowledge, what is the use even of success, if they cannot be shared with the beloved?

He spent his evenings alone in his room, a prey to his thoughts. He would sit there far into the night, writing to Edna, reading her letters, dreaming, shivering. He would live through the months in Colorado again. He would be terribly frightened at the thought of the overwhelming obstacles which they had to face. A dumb, aching fear. Social persecutions looming like a bloody monster laughed at its helpless victim, its feet trampled on his heart. Edna might be devoured by the towering giant. Poor little Edna! Her soul in its weakness might be swamped by the forces of a nation of bigotry and prejudices.

Columbia was a typical college town, where everything revolved around the campus. There was no street car. They did not need any. If you kept walking for ten blocks in one direction, you would be out in the country. The Phi Beta Kappas were omnipresent. They served ginger ale at drug stores, played saxophone in restaurants, and highbrowed the other intellectual morons in classes. Standing at the centre of the Quadrangle were six Greek columns, symbolic of classical beauty.

Mrs. Roberts, his landlady, was a fat little woman. Lee remembered how she had hesitated at first to rent a room to him for fear that the other roomers in the house "might not like it." She had a conference with her son, Carl, who was all for the Chinese, and so they finally decided "to take a chance."

Carl had taught music in Hawaii, and was an accomplished pianist. He was studying in the School of Fine Arts of the university. Some good Chinese cooking which he tasted during his stay on the Pacific islands was largely responsible for his approval of the Chinese race. The mother and son were apparently proud of their generosity in taking a Chinese roomer. "The woman next door," they told Lee, "spoke last night in church on foreign missions. She urged the congregation to contribute freely to a fund supporting their missionary work in China. And this morning when a Chinese student went to her house looking for rooms, she banged the door in his face. She said she had to do it for her daughter's sake!"

There were four university students in the house, among them was a freshman. The upperclassmen paddled the poor boy whenever they felt like having a little fun, threw his books out of the window, and put salt in his bed. The boy accepted the treatment with an indifference that puzzled Lee. What a difference in China. The parents, the college authorities, and even the public would not permit it. Students went to college for an education, not to become an object for amusements.

Foreigners in China often criticized the disorderly conduct of the audience in Chinese theaters. It was nothing compared with the behavior of the audiences in Columbia theaters. They, women not an exception, brought bags of pop-corn into the theaters and stretched their feet over the backs of the seats in front, while their paws indulged in more strenuous exercises. The crowd whistled and roar-

ed in laughter if on the stage a woman performer should raise her skirt above the knees. Smoking, talking, jeering, laughing—the orchestra buzzed, and the peanut balcony stormed applause. He noted the people in the audiences—workingmen, farmers, seniors, wearing the latest Arrow collar, juniors whose socks and necktie matched, and coeds to whom "Red" Grange represented ideal manhood.

Nothing attracted him. Lee was too much taken up with thoughts of Edna to notice what was going on around him. People thought it strange for him so young in heart as he was, to have lost all sense of enjoyment. Everybody else about him seemed to take a simple delight in life and nature. His whole being was absorbed in love, passion, ambition, desire and one fixed idea—to return to his Edna.

In the evening Lee often went for long walks. Winter was setting in. The sun was dying down. Nature was weary. Under the thick mists and clouds of October the colors were fading fast. He would sit under the Greek columns, surrendering to the grandeur of sunset. The students left the campus one by one, and then several at a time. In the darkness Lee mused sadly, and in silence the columns wept with the lonely figure.

It was sad to think of their separation, but sadder still to see the passing of an autumn, which had brought them love and happiness, and which had been an oasis in their lives. From the depths there came the sweet plaintive cry of a solitary bird who felt the coming of winter. Through the mist came the tinkling sound of the angelus, far away, so faint he could hardly hear it, so faint as though it came up from his inmost heart.

ABOVE ALL NATIONS IS HUMANITY

A crowd always bothered Lee. Of the people he knew, really knew, he could count with his fingers, and somehow he never could feel at home among strangers.

Each time he was introduced to someone, he had to tell a lie. "I am pleased to meet you, I am sure." He was assuredly not.

The Chinese students in Columbia literally pushed him into Mrs. Brown's house to play a saxophone solo at the first meeting of the Cosmopolitan Club of the university. Every nationality represented in the university community was supposed to take part in the program. Lee played the "Song of Love" from *Blossom Time*, accompanied by an American girl at the piano. And they liked it. There was certainly nothing Chinese in a saxophone!

It was the first time Lee had attended a meeting of its kind. A professor of the university was speaking. "Jealousy and prejudices breed war and hatred among nations. It is our mission, who have the privilege to mingle here with other races and to exchange with each other our thoughts and knowledge, to bring back to our home countries the message of world peace and international brotherhood—Above all nations is humanity, the watchword of all good cosmopolitans."

Strange to say, the members kept to their national groups. The president of the club complained of the poor attendance at meetings, and threatened to dissolve the club if the members continued to show little interest in the club activities. The American girls were impatient at his long-winded talk, for the floor was newly waxed. Then a member from South America got up and said something in Spanish. While more than one half of the members wished they had taken Spanish in their sophomore year, the other half seemed to enjoy more of the exclusiveness of his talk than what the member actually wanted to say.

Lee went home that night with Paul Chang, a Chinese student at the university, perplexed as well as amused. "The election of new officers," Paul said, "will be held next Friday." The speaker showed undeniable interest in the coming election. "The South Americans," he

continued, "have been running the club for the last couple of years, and it is now more dead than a rock. It is a pity. You know, if you run it right, it can easily become one of the most popular organizations on the campus."

Lee knew what Paul had in mind. "Do you want to run for the president?"

"I sure like to, Tom," Paul admitted, "but I don't see how I can ever make it."

"If you want to, it's easy." Lee was only kidding, but Paul could not see it that way.

"Tell me how!"

Lee really had no plan of any sort in mind. But he did not like the idea of him falling flat on his own statement.

"You see, in any organization like this, the girl members always control the votes." Lee never knew why in the world the remark had ever entered his head, except to kill time until he could hit on some workable idea. But on second thought, the idea pleased him and he decided to follow it up.

"If we can get the girls to support you, everything will be easy. Let me see . . . the Chinese students' club here can give a real Chinese dinner sometime, and have all the girls in the club there. We will do the cooking, you know . . ."

"Great! Tom, I can cook, I was in the restaurant business for some time in Kansas City and St. Louis."

This encouraged Lee. He could not even boil rice, and had never tasted Chinese food for almost two years.

The election campaign was a great success. The girls forgot football for once, cut dates, and came to the Chinese students' club dinner with empty stomachs. Chop-sticks were the favorite toy at the table.

They liked everything served. Chicken chow-mein, water chestnut, almond cakes, egg fowyun—they ate enough to last them a week. When Paul, the cook, was introduced, the girls fairly swamped

him with praises. He was instantly the most popular man at the gathering.

Beautifully embroidered mandarin coats were among the other attractions. The girls fought like cats for a chance to wear the coats. They had to run into Mrs. Robert's room, and to strike numerous poses before the mirror before they could part with their coats. They made inquiries about the next dinner. Would it come soon? Would they be invited again?

The girls went home happy, and the election result came out as expected. Paul was selected the president, and Lee the secretary of the Cosmopolitan club of the university.

It was about this time when Lee broke his promise to Edna. He danced. For months he had refused to dance at the meetings, insisting that he did not know how.

Once a group of girls, headed by Rosalie, a vivacious sophomore girl, decided to "break him in." They dragged him to the centre of the floor, and Rosalie with a paddle in her hand, threatened to give him "a good thrashing," if he would not dance with one of the girls.

"I dont know how" Lee still stuck to his gun.

"But you have to learn sometime," the girls shouted back.

The president of the university and many of the faculty members were there. Everybody, except Lee, seemed to be for the girls. He was cornered. There was no way of getting out of the situation without making himself look the part of a fool, except to dance. And he did.

With one arm around Rosalie, he led her lightly across the floor. The crowd was dumbfounded. "I thought you could not dance!" whispered Rosalie who still could not believe that she was actually dancing in his arms. Lee only smiled.

"Why didn't you dance all these months, Tom?" Rosalie asked him in the taxi.

Lee explained to her. There was a girl in the West. He had made a promise before he left. They wanted to be faithful to each other, so they promised not to have dates or go to dances when they were apart. Rosalie and Lee were both silent when he finished.

Lee felt miserable the following day. He had not in any sense been unfaithful to Edna. But a promise was broken, especially one of such sentimental nature. Like a broken doll, the shattered treasure could not be replaced.

In the evening he received a note from Rosalie. Under the crudely drawn picture of a little girl who was crying, he found the following words:

Tom:

Are you still mad at me? I am so sorry!

Rosalie

Lee read the little note, laughed, and thought the whole thing was childish. Of course, he was not mad with her. Would Edna be mad with him, if she knew that he had danced? No, not when she understood him so well. Picking up Edna's picture on her desk, he covered it with kisses, and read fifty pages of *The Practice of Journalism*.

ENTERS HELEN

Snow flakes were falling when Lee met Helen for the first time at a party. He thought she had such pretty hair—so curly and brown. But he did not dare to tell her so.

Spring was in its prime when he met her for the second time, and found her every bit as beautiful. This time they were working together on a Chinese play for the Cosmopolitan Night. The committee had decided to use *Puppets of Fate* written by Lee especially for the occasion.

And he recited to her seriously and banteringly the plot and background for this satire on the old Chinese marriage customs. He explained with the playful manner of a professor who is lecturing

and she listened with interest, somewhat moved by the fate of the two lovers in the story. Her hands trembled when bitter remarks were made against divorces in America and she almost came to tears when the boy and girl in the story were finally forced to marry without love. She continued to listen to him, vibrating with emotion, her eyes fixed upon him, her ear eager for novel observations on marriage problems.

When he heard her discuss his play, his heart beat faster. He was pleased when people praised his talent. From the play their conversation wandered to politics, philosophy and the eternal selves. Seated beside each other their intellectual enthusiasm was aroused. Bits of poetry, or reminiscences of little incidents in their lives would follow each other according to their mood.

She was amused when he was gay. When he was profound, she endeavored to follow, not always successfully. She seemed to listen so intelligently and to enjoy so keenly their conversation that he was moved by the discovery of a delicate soul, gentle and receptive.

Finally came the Cosmopolitan Night. The play was a success. That night on their way to the dormitories their walk was silent and contemplative. She was flattered to have been noticed by Lee, having discovered in him a charming intelligence, an alert and cultivated mind, delicacy, imagination, and a gift of lending to his words a color that seemed to illumine all he sought to express. A personality that seemed to remind her of cherry blossoms.

And he liked her reserved manners and speech, as he was better accustomed to the restricted and modest atmosphere of the Chinese society.

The air seemed pure to him. Life was good that day. His body again felt the vivacity of a little boy. The moon had risen upon the trees. When they neared her dormitory, one thought was in the

minds of both—"Why do such moments as this pass so quickly?"

"Shall we walk?"

"Yes," Helen nodded and they turned toward the hills.

Across the milky mist that covered the fields the horizon looked boundless. High up in the air, long slender clouds seemed made of silver shells. They walked on, their hands about each other's waist. Helen and Lee appeared under this clear night to have the same joyful and care-free hearts. Dogs were barking afar in the country. A little of her breath and her warmth mingled with the soul of the night.

He would write a play, Lee told Helen, for the Farewell Night of the club. The story of two lovers in the ancient Chinese mythology would be introduced in the play.

"Do you see those two stars on opposite sides of the Milky Way?" Lee pointed toward the stars and continued. "An angel once fell in love with a young man working on a farm. She escaped from heaven to live with him. This aroused the anger of the Goddess of the angels and she separated the two lovers, permitting them to meet only once a year."

Helen, with shining eyes, was breathing deeply. His voice at times grew tremulous, and softened.

"Those two stars you see on opposite sides of the Milky Way meet each other once a year on July 7, so it is the custom in China for lovers to pray and make their wishes on that night."

"Oh, how beautiful!" Helen almost sighed.

"Helen, you will play the part of the angel in that play."

"And you—" she stopped, then pointing towards one of the two stars, said, "will be the other?"

He would not have at this hour the strength to say "no," even had he wanted to. She came nearer. Lee stood looking at Helen, thinking that he had never seen before a more ravishing face, and regret-

ting somewhat that he was not an artist and that he was unable to make a sketch.

When they returned to her dormitory, the door was locked.

"Take off your shoes!" whispered Helen, "or we will wake up the matron." With their shoes in hand, they tiptoed to the back of the building.

She pointed to a window on the third floor.

"Tom, wrap some dirt with a handkerchief and throw it at the window."

Presently a head appeared. "Is it you, Helen?"

"Yes," she motioned the other girl to open the front door. Helen and Lee tiptoed back. They were directly under the matron's room. Fearing that the slightest sound might bring her to the door, they spoke with their eyes. Helen's roommate, with her scanty clothing, was shivering and finally dragged Helen in.

When Lee was alone once more, he felt that he had just spent the most delightful moments of his life, that he had experienced the strangest and most complete emotion a man might feel, an emotion which defied analysis. Love? No. Friendship? Perhaps.

And Helen who did not like to go to bed was the one who went to sleep directly.

LOVER'S LEAP

A rapid friendship sprang up between Helen and Lee, and more and more each day. Their handclasp seemed to entwine some emanation of their hearts. Then with no definite purpose, Helen experienced a growing desire to charm him. She simply wanted to hold him—an attitude a woman instinctively assumes toward the man she prefers. Her air, her glances, her smiles took on a seductive charm.

She led him on to talk at length, to show him, as she listened, how deeply he might engage her attention. Almost every day they met and walked. As Lee put his hand upon the bell of Helen's door his heart throbbed with impatience. The

carpet in the hall seemed the softest his feet has ever pressed.

One Sunday afternoon they strolled hand in hand along the Hinkson Creek. They were conscious only of the fragrance of the wild flowers and the intoxicating silence of the hills. They looked at the trees, the houses, the farms with eyes that were vacant and saw nothing. Nor did they think of anything.

After, perhaps, half an hour of this strange repose, Helen murmured: "It is strange; I feel so happy just to be with you."

In his turn, Lee murmured: "I am too; how good it seems to live."

Half a dozen ducks were gently floating in the creek, as clean and calm as porcelain birds. They passed in front of the two, turned back and passed again. Helen and Lee sat down near the water, and the ducks came floating toward them, expecting to be fed.

The weather was warm. Birds were singing in the foliage, and exchanging visits from the top of one tree to another. Towering above them was the Lover's Leap, a huge rock rising several hundred feet above the creek.

"A young man," Helen told him, "went to the War. He came back to find his sweetheart had married another man. He jumped off that rock into the creek." Helen first pointed to the rock, then at the creek, making the motion of a falling object. The gesture pained Lee. Somehow it made him feel as if someone he loved had jumped off that rock.

"Tom, you have never told me your Chinese name." Lee said his thanks silently when she changed the subject of their conversation.

Lee told her. She tried to say it several times, but finally gave it up.

"You may be . . . whatever it may be . . . but you are Tommy, just Tommy to me."

"Do people always call you Helen?" Lee asked her. They found a strange personal intimacy in names.

"When I was a little baby, they used to call me Fuzzy. I did not like it. It always made me mad. In fact, I made so much fuss over it that they stopped calling me by that name years ago."

"Will you be sore at me, if I call you Fuzzy?" Lee began to tease her.

"No I won't." She paused for a moment, seeming to weigh the matter in her mind, then continued, "in fact, I want you to call me Fuzzy."

"Why?"

"Just because nobody else dares to, and I won't permit anyone else to call me by that name. Aren't you glad that you are the only person who enjoys that privilege?"

She inquired about his play. He was working on the last act. Helen told him she had sent a duplicate copy of the first act to her folks and how they were planning to motor up to Columbia to see her in the play. While she pictured herself on the stage, she noticed that Lee had suddenly looked moody. Several times he appeared to be trying to speak, but could not.

"What is the matter? You look sad."

"Helen . . . I mean Fuzzy," Lee stopped like a tired runner struggling for breath. "I shall not be in the play."

"What! You won't be in the play? Aren't you going to play opposite me?"

"No!"

"Is it because you prefer some other girl?"

Lee shook his head.

"Oh, I know." Helens little body trembled with rage. "So, you like Rosalie better. That fat, red-headed devil! I suppose Josephine has something to do with this too. I always knew she was jealous of me."

Lee stared before him helplessly. Her bitterness and anger surprised him. He did not know that a girl so sweet could be so mean and harsh, and yet he did not know but that she was partly justified.

"It has nothing to do with Rosalie or Josephine, Fuzzy," Lee explained calmly.

Helen, changing at once from accusing rage to helpless misery, was crying. Placing his hands on her shoulders, Lee folded her in his arms.

"There is a girl in the West. I should have told you this before, Fuzzy, but I never knew it would matter. Anyhow, I have a letter from her today, and she forbids me to take part in the play. You see, she can't understand."

"Do you love her?" she asked after a time.

"Yes."

Longing for sympathy, she allowed herself to be pulled to him, her head on his shoulder, and there she cried more copiously than ever. Lee for the moment felt terribly grieved. He was really sorry for her. It just wasn't right.

"I am sorry," he whispered, "really I am." And she cried some more. It was not easy to bring her back to her normal self. He fondled her, but she never came out of her mood. She just understood better.

They had their supper at Inglebrook. The place was deserted. Most of the students had gone away for their spring recess. Helen stayed against the wishes of her parents.

"I am going home tomorrow." Her voice was barely audible. Lee was thoroughly ashamed of himself. He did not even have the courage to ask her to stay.

She went with him to his house where they sat in a swing on the porch. They talked now and then to keep up appearances, but both kept their thoughts to themselves. It was cooler later in the evening. Lee went upstairs and returned with a heavy blanket. They wrapped themselves in it and hugged each other close to keep their bodies warm. Cheek against cheek and their feet keeping the swing in motion, they sat there until midnight. Both hated to part, for deep in their hearts they felt for the first time that something had come between them. Somehow they knew that everything soon

would be over between them. It was only a matter of time.

She wrote to him every day from home for a week. Several days passed in silence. Morning and night, Lee went to the street corner to wait for the postman, but returned without any word from her. Strangely perturbed in mind. What was she doing?

Spring recess came to an end, but

Helen did not return. What had happened to her? Lee was worried. One day he met a girl from her home town, from whom he learned that Helen was married.

"What I can't understand is why in the world she wanted to marry somebody whom she hardly knew. Isn't she a crazy old girl?" The girl laughed and turned toward the library, leaving Lee crushed, stupefied.

To Be Continued