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JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN
Author of **THE WHITE TOWER**

THE SANDS OF KARAKORUM

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JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

THE SANDS OF KARAKORUM



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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 53-8929

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To

HAROLD MATSON

Godfather

Have pity upon me . . . O ye my friends;
for the hand of God hath touched me.

Job, 19:21

ONE

It is all right until the wind blows.

I do my work. I go my rounds. I make my phone calls and get my interviews and file my cable, and the next day the by-line, *by Frank Knight*, appears in fifty-odd newspapers from Vermont to Texas. Now the cable is from Japan; now from Korea, Hong Kong, Indo-China, Malaya. Except for China, my beat is the same as ever. The world is as fouled up as ever. My life is the same as ever.

Until the wind blows.

Until it is night and I am alone in my hotel room at the typewriter, trying to sort the day's confused grist into the neat precision of words; and then sometimes, in the darkness beyond the window, I hear the sound of the wind. It is always a low sound, deep and humming, and seeming to be a part of the darkness. And on those nights I raise my head and listen; I leave my typewriter and turn off the light and lie on my bed, listening; and soon everything else is gone—my work, my life, the world itself, all gone and lost—and that is all there is: the darkness and the wind.

It is only the fever, I think. Only the old fever again, the residue of typhus stirring in my blood. But in the next instant I am not sure. I listen, and the wind hums, and the humming seems a thing of my own body and brain. But then, suddenly, it has changed. It is outside me, beyond me. It flows into the room from the night beyond; from the night over the city, the night over the land. It comes to me from a great distance, across a sea and a continent, across the mountains and the deserts, from the deep heart of Asia.

I try to sleep. But there is no sleep. There is only the wind and the dark and, beyond them, the two faint figures that are John and Eleanor Bickel. . . . Receding. Receding. But never gone. . . . And presently I get up and go back to the typewriter, but this time it is not to write a dispatch. It is to tell their story. Perhaps, by setting it down, I can exor-

cise them, forget them. Or perhaps—and this would be better—it will bring me at last to an understanding of what they have done and where they have gone. But, whatever the outcome, it is a story that I must tell.

At least the clicking keys hold back the sound of the wind.

TWO

North Station, Shanghai. June of 1950.

There were still Americans in Shanghai then. Not many. But a few. Although the Communists had held the city for more than a year, they had taken their time in cleaning out the foreign colony, concentrating first on the big proprietors, agents and bankers and leaving the smaller fry until last. In that late spring of '50 perhaps a thousand Americans were left: a nucleus of teachers and missionaries; a scattering of clerks, salesmen, technicians, professional men; a handful of correspondents. And I was one of them.

Not that there was much for a newspaperman to do, for the Bamboo Curtain was already high and thick. My dispatches were censored down almost to the prepositions and conjunctions. But my syndicate felt that even a gagged correspondent was better than no correspondent and had told me to stay on as long as I could. At least when I was put out—which might well be any month, or week, or day—I would have a backlog of experience and observation that would be useful for the future.

That was the theory, and I stayed on. I went my rounds and made my calls and wrangled with commissars and wrangled with censors and drank too many pink gins and played poker at night at what was left of the Press Club. And on a bright June morning in "The Year of Liberation, 2" I went to the North Station to meet a train.

Partly it was job; for the train was bringing a load of missionaries whom the Reds had expelled from one of the interior provinces, and the story warranted covering, whatever the censor might subsequently do to it. But even more it was a personal affair, for among the refugees, I was certain, would be the Bickels. . . . John, Eleanor, their daughter Jean. . . . Jean would be—what?—almost twelve now, I figured, as my pedicab threaded the narrow streets near the station. I had not seen the Bickels for more than two years.

As soon as I heard of the missionary train I had called the Shanghai headquarters of their society.

Would they be on it? I asked.

Yes, they were expecting them.

Had they heard from Bickel?

Not directly, no. Communications with the interior were terrible. But the train was supposed to be bringing everyone from Honan Province, and that would of course include them.

So now I was at the station. Outside, the swarming square: crowds in blue cotton tunics; oxcarts and pedicabs and coolies with their loads and shoulderpoles; sleek American cars carrying officials and American jeeps and trucks carrying soldiers; children playing, peddlers clanking their bells; heat, dust, smells. Inside, a dingy cavern, more crowds, posters of Mao and Chu Te; then clouds of steam, an engine panting. From long experience I had timed it right in being two hours late, and the refugee train was just pulling in. Clustered at the gate were the remnants of the clerical population of Shanghai, waiting to greet their colleagues. In China, as elsewhere, the First and Fourth Estates inhabited very different worlds, and I saw only a few vaguely familiar faces. Whether any of them was from Bickel's society I didn't know.

The train had stopped. The crowd tightened. Guards, trainmen and officials were moving about the platform. Then a whistle blew, the coach doors opened, and the refugees began descending and moving toward us. It was a strange and bizarre procession. First came a group of gray-robed nuns, then two aged priests carried on coolies' backs, then a file of Chinese Trappist monks, moving silently with downcast eyes. There were other Chinese, Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians; Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Adventists. There were young rawboned men in boots and khaki, old frail men with umbrellas and paper suitcases, women in robes and women in homemade print dresses, carrying knapsacks on their backs and babies in their arms. There was, in cross-section, the whole missionary world of China, and I would scarcely have been surprised if one of the coach doors had opened suddenly to disgorge the Twelve Apostles.

Yet, for all its variety, it was not a colorful procession. It was drab. It was slow-footed. Even the children walked slowly and silently, holding tightly to their parents' hands. They had spent the night—and God knows how many previous nights—on the wooden benches of the train; and they

were tired, bone tired. But there was also something beyond tiredness, something deeper than tiredness, that showed in their gait, their bodies, their faces, their eyes. It was a trance-like somnambulistic quality, the same that I had seen a hundred times over, for fifteen years, in the barracks and queues and waiting rooms and wire cages of the gray half-world of the refugee. The Book of Exodus, I thought: Shanghai, A.D. 1950. Without a Moses to lead them, they came down the platform and through the gate, in the slow straggling march of the uprooted and the homeless.

I watched for the Bickels. Even in a crowd much larger than this John Bickel's six-foot-three would be easy to spot, and I stood a little back from the press at the gate, waiting for him to appear. But he did not appear. The procession flowed on, dwindled, ended. A one-legged Carmelite friar limped through, supported by two of his brothers; and that was the last of it. The Bickels were not there.

The refugees were being herded into one of the smaller waiting rooms, and, along with the others who had come to meet them, I followed them in. It was a low-ceilinged airless place, full of confusion, smells and piles of battered baggage, and for a few minutes I wandered about aimlessly. Off to one side the Chinese Trappists squatted motionless against a wall. Near them, on a bench, six nuns sat in a row, absorbed in their rosaries. Here and there were knots of animation, handclasps, greetings. Those with no one to meet them stood patiently waiting. . . . For what? . . . Somewhere a thin reedy voice began singing *Jesus Loves Me*. Soon a few others joined in.

My eye fell on a man standing alone—youngish, alert-looking, obviously American—and I went over and spoke to him.

"Do you know John Bickel?" I asked.

He repeated the name and shook his head. "From Honan?" he said.

"Yes."

"What district?"

"A town called Sanchow."

"Sanchow is in the far west of the province. I am from the east. I have never been there."

I tried others, but with little more result. Most of them were from eastern Honan, around the capital city of Kaifeng. A few had heard Bickel's name, but knew nothing about him. "It has not been like in the old days," said one, "when we

could move about freely through the country. For the past year we have been like prisoners, each in our own mission."

On my rounds I picked up fragments of stories that I might or might not be permitted to use in a dispatch. Stories of house arrest, prison arrest, of intimidation, persecution, execution. One Italian priest had been jailed without trial for six months on a charge of giving medical supplies to non-Communists. Another—an Irishman—had been tied to a stake and forced to watch while three of his Chinese assistants had been beheaded, for "espionage." And so on. Perhaps the saddest part of their sad stories was that they were all so similar, and so familiar. In the Year of The Red Star, 1950, they were no longer even news.

Did any of them know John Bickel?

No.

Had any been to Sanchow?

No.

An official had come into the room and was seated at a table, checking off names as the refugees passed before him.

"Do you have a Bickel?" I asked him.

He looked up at me in annoyance.

"Bickel." I spelled it.

He glanced through his list. "No, there is no Bickel."

"You're sure?"

"Look for yourself."

"Is there another train coming?"

"From Honan?" he said. "No, there is no other train from Honan. All the priests and such from Honan are on this train."

"All?"

"Yes, all."

I started to go, changed my mind, and stood near him while the refugees filed by. . . . Fra Augustino Ruffo, Franciscan, from Kaifeng. . . . The Reverend T. M. McPherson, Glasgow Missionary Society, Siping. . . . Lay Brother Vainu Riholuoma, Evangelical Church of Finland, Mingkiang. . . . Sister Theresa Anna Vospenska, Carmelite, Kaifeng. . . .

A dozen more went by.

. . . Archibald Granger, Society of Friends, Kioshan.
. . . Father Anton Naganyi, Order of Preachers, Sanchow. . . .

He was a small man, a wisp of a man, with a white haunted face and skeletal hands. He wore shell-rimmed glasses with broken frames patched with adhesive tape. The

white habit of his order was soiled and threadbare, and on his feet were torn blue tennis sneakers.

When he had passed the official I stepped up to him. He was a Central European, I was sure. Probably Hungarian. I spoke to him in Chinese.

"Where is John Bickel?" I asked.

He stared at me, as if he had not understood.

"The Bickels," I said. "From Sanchow. Where are they?"

He shook his head slowly. "They are not here."

"Why not? Where are they?"

"They did not come."

The priest made as if to move on, but I stopped him. "Why didn't they come?" I persisted. "What's happened to them?"

"I do not know," he said. "I have not seen them for many months."

"They were in Sanchow, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"And you too?"

"Only until six months ago. Then I was made to leave and sent to our house in Kaifeng."

"And the Bickels—weren't *they* made to leave?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I do not know," he said.

"But if you were both there—"

"Even in the beginning I saw little of Mr. Bickel. I am a Catholic. I had my own work, with my own people. And he had his. Then, after the new government came, I was under house arrest and could see no one."

"You must have heard about him. . . . Something."

The priest's eyes met mine for an instant, pale and flickering behind the glasses. Then he looked away. "No," he murmured, "I heard nothing. I know nothing."

The line of refugees moved past us. A child had begun to cry. Over in the corner they were ~~singing~~ *singing Rock of Ages*.

"All right, Father," I said. I touched his arm, and under the sleeve of his habit it seemed no more than a bare bone. "If you can't tell me, you can't. What about the others here? Is there anyone who would know?"

"No," he said. "There is no one."

"Anyone anywhere?"

He hesitated.

"Please, Father—"

"There is one who might know," he said at last. "He is—"
"Yes?"

"He is the former mayor of Sanchow. He knew Mr. Bickel better than I, and also he stayed on after I had gone. But I have heard he has since come to Shanghai."

"Where can I find him?"

Again the priest hesitated. His pale eyes searched my face. Then he said:

"You are from Mr. Bickel's society?"

"No. I am his friend."

"An American?"

"Yes."

"And not a—"

"No," I said, "not a Communist."

"Then—" He made his decision. "You have a pencil?" he asked. "Some paper?"

I gave them to him, and he wrote quickly and nervously. "Here," he said. "Here is the name and an address. I do not know that he is in Shanghai, you understand? I have only heard so. And if he is, he may be elsewhere. This is the home of his brother, and once, when I came here, I delivered a message for him." He returned the pencil and paper. "That is all I know. All I can tell you. But perhaps—"

A bell rang. The official had risen from the table. Guards began herding the crowd from the room.

"—perhaps, if he is there," the priest said, "he can tell you what you wish to know."

A guard tapped his shoulder and pointed. He picked up an umbrella and cardboard suitcase and moved away.

"Thank you, Father," I said.

I put paper and pencil in my pocket and went out by another door. Behind me, through the street noises, I could still hear the child crying and the voices singing:

*Rock of ages
Cleft for me . . .*

That was the beginning.

THREE

I am aware that an explanation is in order. In almost the same breath I have said that missionaries and correspondents live in different worlds and indicated that I was the close friend of a missionary family. That both happen to be true is what made my relationship with the Bickels so extraordinary.

Even the circumstances of our first meeting had been unusual. It had been back in 1937—my second year in the East—when I was stationed in Peiping, and one day, in need of exercise, I had gone to the YMCA for a game of handball. My opponent was to have been a chap called Lasker, of the United Press; but he didn't show up, and I had been about to leave when a tall redheaded man appeared and asked if I would like to play. Glad to, I told him, and we went at it. He was big-boned, slow-footed, a little awkward, and at first I had the notion that I was well within my class. The illusion was short-lived, however. Speed or no speed, wherever I hit the ball he was there waiting for it, and a split-second later it was banging back at me as if shot from a gun. He took the first game, 21-9, and the second, 21-6. Then in the third he merely went through the motions and I won by two points.

"Thanks for the charity," I told him.

"No, you were hitting your stride there," he assured me. "All you need is some practice."

We showered and dressed, and he put on ordinary street clothes, and I had him marked down as a businessman or perhaps an engineer for one of the oil companies. Then, out in the street, I suggested a drink, but he declined with thanks.

"Better not tonight," he explained. "I've a service coming up."

"Service?"

"At the mission. We have one every Thursday, and then a sort of party for the younger people."

"Oh."

He saw my reaction and smiled. "Another time, though, I'd be glad to," he said. "If you'd care to play again, that is."

"Why—of course."

"Don't worry, I won't try to convert you. Unless you ask for it."

"You can start off," I grinned, "by converting my handball."

So we played twice a week for perhaps a month, and though nothing much happened to my handball, at least my waist went down from 36 to 34. After the second session we did have a drink, and after a few others as well, and in the process we began to get acquainted. It was a gradual process, for John Bickel was not a man to open up quickly; and also, there was the great gap between our lives, work and interests. He knew no one I knew, rarely visited downtown Peiping, and was wholly unfamiliar with the hotels, clubs and restaurants that were the cosmopolitan center of the city. And I, for my part, had never heard of the district, much less the street, in which his mission was located.

Yet from the very beginning I liked his company. There was an attraction. A pull. He was about my own age (which was then in the early thirties), showed none of the bloodless stuffiness that I had always associated with his calling, and talked intelligently about everything from the cooking of noodles to press censorship and the Japs in Manchuria to big league baseball. His speech, like his movements, was slow and deliberate. There was in him no vestige of the frenetic restlessness that was the occupational disease of my own profession. But neither was there heaviness or dullness. The soft voice, the clear gray eyes, the flaming thatch of hair were charged with energy and power: the same latent power, I thought, that I had already seen on the handball court, lashing out from those long-boned arms to propel a ball like a bullet.

It was after our fifth or sixth game that he asked me to come home with him. And at first I hesitated.

"My wife's a real cook," he smiled. "It will be a good change for you after all those hotels and restaurants."

So I went with him: not north from the Y, as I had always gone before, but south, into terra incognita, through the deep twisting streets of the native city. His mission house was in the very heart of a slum, a nondescript box of a place that might once have been a warehouse, shouldered in by a