The Day the Soldiers Came

"Things are always happening otherwise than one expects … the Lord helps us to be quite satisfied, whatever he sends our way this day," said John Stam in a letter to a friend, December 5th, 1934; the day before his arrest.[1]

It was just after eight in the morning when the first knock came. Breakfast already eaten and cleared away, Betty was with the Chinese maid (or "amah"), preparing baby Helen for her bath. Her husband, John, was settling down to a morning of letter writing and study, while the cook, Li Ming-Chin, was busy in the kitchen. The urgent thumping at the door, at this early hour, took everyone by surprise.

The man at the door was a stranger to John. "The magistrate told me to come," he explained, breathlessly. John could see that the man was agitated, his eyes large and frightened, the sweat forming beads upon his forehead. "The communist soldiers … they were

1. Geraldine Taylor, *The Triumph of John & Betty Stam* (Chicago: Moody, 1935), p.100.

at Yang Chi last night. It's only fifty or sixty "li" away! You must be careful … and you must be ready to leave at any moment."

A "li" was roughly equal to one third of a mile, and the soldiers would be on foot. John was not immediately concerned. There had always been risks to the missionaries settling here in Tsingteh, but they had been carefully evaluated before the decision had been made. The local magistrates had assured John that a Communist attack was unlikely; and should such a thing come to pass, the Government troops were close by to step in. They promised to protect the family – and that was good enough for John and Betty Stam, as well as the officials at the China Inland Mission, the organization that had sent them out. After all, being a missionary to China in the 1930s was never going to be free of risk. The Stams accepted that, and they trusted that God was in control.

So John was able to reassure the man at his door that morning. Smiling, he reached out to pat the messenger's shoulder.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, gently. "Thank you for coming to tell us. But I doubt they will come to this little place."

As the messenger hurriedly departed, John turned to find the cook close behind him, anxiety written all over his face.

"I think you should go," Li urged his master. "The Reds aren't like the local bandits. There are so many of them,

they won't be afraid of a few Government soldiers. And they're so unpredictable – you never know where they will be next. They're here today and there tomorrow!"

Despite the man's insistence, John didn't want to react too hastily. His temperament was a calm, steady one, not given to impulsive decisions.

"We'll wait and see," he responded. "A pastor from the next province is due to visit this afternoon … let's see what news he brings."

But in spite of John's optimism, things were to move much faster than that. A little over an hour later, a man was seen running down the main street of Tsingteh, panting and shouting.

"Hurry! The Reds are coming! They will soon be here!"

The magistrate had sent this man out into the countryside as a scout, to see if the rumors were true. It was confirmed: the Communist soldiers were now just ten li away. It would not be long. Upon receiving this alarming report, Magistrate Peng gave the order that the city gates be closed at once.

At the doorway of the Stams' house, Li looked out to see people running in all directions. With a mounting fear, he called desperately to John.

"Look! The Red soldiers must be near!"

John was surprised.

"Surely they couldn't travel so far in one night," he wondered, aloud. "But I'll go myself and see what I can find out."