

# A Strange Assignment.

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ONE of the guides awoke me softly and, as I sat up, he warned me in an undertone to be silent.

On either side a wall of darkness hid everything, and not a sound came to my ears. For weeks we had been paddling up the great Yangtse river, expecting every day to be attacked by hostile Mongolians, who infest the interior of China.

Here I was away in the middle of China, on one of the strangest missions any newspaperman had ever had anything to do with. Three months before I was in New York in the Review office, quietly talking to the editor, when young Atherley came in with a story of the mobilization of a huge army in China, and a mysterious leader, said to be at its head. Atherley always did have some wild dream like that, but I was astonished at the time that the editor should take this one seriously.

"Charleson," he said, turning to me, "We need that story, and you are going to get it for us. Leave for China in the morning; order what you want, but be sure to get away." I had been war correspondent in the Boer war and all through the Japanese-Russian trouble, and this work coming immediately on top of the latter seemed hard. But there was nothing for it but to go, and, consequently, three months later, I found myself on the broad Yangtse on the night of which I speak.

Both guides were sitting up now, eagerly listening and trouble seemed brewing. We were not kept in suspense long. A single rifle shot rang out sharply and a bullet skipped along the water ahead of our boat. "Chance shot," I said to myself, but another, then another, cut the blackness and silence of the night, each bullet following directly in the path of the first. A fusilade of shots at regular intervals followed. As I looked at the guides one was crouching terrified in the boat, but the other was paddling

gently, seemingly not at all alarmed by the attack. I was rather excited and hardly realized what he was about, nevertheless we moved slowly along, while from the shore the sound of hoof beats told me that the riflemen on the bank were keeping pace with us, firing at regular intervals. It appeared that their intention was to follow us until daylight and then pot us from the bank. Unless they did so they had little chance of capturing us, as they had no boats. But I was soon to find out that the Oriental mind is capable of getting over a little difficulty like that.

The first warning I had that something was wrong was the sound of the boat grating on the beach, and the bow man leaping out with a loud yell. Then I knew what had happened. The river took a big sweep at this point and the rower had gradually worked the boat on to the shore. It was a cunning trick, and had been arranged probably at one of the stopping places down stream, although I had flattered myself that I had watched my men well. I sent a hurried shot after the deserter, but in the darkness it had no effect. As I scrambled to land a band of horsemen swept down to the beach, and in a moment I was a prisoner.

Everything seemed ready for our reception, and soon we were speeding inland. Dawn was just breaking as we rode along and the first faint light of day showed a band of horsemen, wild looking, but well mounted and well armed. Their modern rifles and soldierly bearing revealed military training such as few European regiments could have improved upon. Far inland a huge range of mountains loomed faintly in the dim light and towards this the soldiers made their way. The accurate shooting in the thick darkness had aroused my curiosity, and, as the light grew stronger, I looked more closely at my captors. On each man's rifle was a