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Jack London's Graphic Story of the Japs Driving Russians Across the Yalu River

***First Pen Picture Presented by Any War Correspondent Eyewitness of the Remarkable
Bravery and Skillful Tactics of the Victorious Japanese Army at Antung***

ANTUNG (Manchuria), May 5, 1904.—That the Japanese are desperately brave and intelligent fighters and thorough masters of the machinery of modern warfare has been well demonstrated by the operations which culminated in their crossing of the Yalu on May 1st. Their disposition and handling of artillery far excelled the Russians. The latter may be said to have inflicted no damage with their guns. Beyond the loss of a man or two and several minor casualties, the Japanese were untouched. The powder burned in the Russian guns was just so much powder thrown away.

The Russian batteries were at all time ineffectual, while the Japanese batteries, especially on the last day of April and the first of May, did fearful execution. This was due to the precision of their fire, to their intelligence and shrewdness in the placing of their guns and to the absolute thoroughness with which they do everything.

A visit to the ridge and conical hill of the Russian position showed a surface plowed and pitted by the Japanese shells and carpeted with shrapnel bullets. In the center of the position, where the battery occupied the crown of the conical hill, one could literally step from shellhole to shellhole. Those who lived through that rain of fire must have taken away with them a first-hand knowledge of hell far beyond the imaginings of Dante and Milton.

But it was not alone the precision of fire that destroyed the Russians. Had they dug their trenches and protected their guns and themselves with half the thoroughness displayed by the Japanese they would not have suffered so terribly. On an unsheltered hilltop they only partially sheltered themselves. Even then their losses would have been much less during the artillery duels of April 29th and 30th had they not obstinately remained by their guns during the thick of the Japanese fire. There was no need for them to remain by their unsheltered guns when to remain meant heavy loss. They were not directly menaced. No infantry was advancing upon them under protection of the Japanese guns. Only were they being stormed at from the batteries across the river, and yet they remained.

In marked contrast was the behavior of the one Japanese battery I observed. This battery was situated near the Summer Pavilion of Wiju Castle, and when the Russian guns turned loose on it its gunners promptly sought refuge in the casemates.

After the artillery duel of April 30th, wherein the Russian position was swept by the Japanese fire, it is almost incomprehensible that the Russians should have retained it for their rear guard detachment next day. This rear guard detachment was composed of infantry. The guns had been withdrawn during the night. There was no protection for these riflemen from the Japanese fire which could be counted upon to concentrate on them, no guns of their own to reply and mitigate in the slightest the rain of shell and shrapnel.

The one glimmering explanation that arises is that the Russians did not intend to hold this position, but that they were caught before they could retire and choose a better by the Japanese swiftness of movement. Something like 8,000 Russians guarded the north bank of the Yalu. It was not their intention to make a determined stand, but merely to retard the Japanese advance. The lodgment of the East Division (Japanese) on the north bank and on the Russian left flank and the overpowering artillery brought to bear upon their whole position warned the Russians that it was time to retire. Accordingly, on the night of April 30th, they withdrew their guns, with their main force, leaving between 1,500 and 2,000 men as a detached rear guard.

And it was thus that this rear guard was cut to pieces. The Japanese army, strung out for a great distance along the Yalu, had shrewdly concentrated. The first light of next morning disclosed it on the sands of the Yalu and practically across the Yalu. The main channels were to the rear. Overwhelmed in an exposed position by the concentrated fire of the Japanese guns, having no guns with which to reply and at the same time charged by the concentrated Japanese army, nothing remained to the comparative handful of Russians but a losing fight.

Cut to pieces, destroyed, the rear guard failed in its task of protecting the retreat of the Russian guns, and the Japanese, taking up the pursuit, caught two batteries at Hamatan. Now Hamatan is only six miles back from the Yalu, and the question arises, Why, when the Russians withdrew their guns, the previous night, had they covered no more than six miles? Were they short of horses? Unwitting of the speed with which the Japanese move, had they dallied by the way? Undreaming of the concentration of the whole Japanese army, had they rested secure in the fancied protection of their rear guard? Or, laboring under all these misapprehensions, was it their intention to take up a new position with the two batteries, later to be strengthened by the arrival of the rear guard, and then renew their policy of worrying and retarding the Japanese advance?

These are questions which only the Russians can answer. Whatever were their intentions, the Japanese settled them out of hand, destroying the rear guard, capturing the guns and delivering a crushing blow to the Russians on the very soil they have elected to take for their own.