

# The VANISHING FLEETS

BY ROYAL NORRIS

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ILLUSTRATED BY A. WEIL

**SYNOPSIS.**

"Vanishing Fleets," a story of "what might have happened," opens in Washington with the United States and Japan on the verge of war. Guy Hillier, secretary of the British embassy, and Miss Norma Roberts, chief aide of the inventor, are introduced as lovers. A Japanese declaration of war and the capture of the Florida coast, Hawaii is captured by the Japs. All ports are closed. Tokyo learns of the Japanese fleet and sends word to the United States that the United States has some powerful war vessels. England decides to send the American fleet to the Pacific to protect against what the British suppose is a terrible submarine fleet. Hillier is sent to Canada to attempt to force his way through American lines with a message. The fleet mysteriously disappears. Hillier makes a failure of effort to deliver messages to the president. War between Great Britain and Germany is threatened. The Kaiser disappears. King Edward of England is confronted by Admiral Bevis of the United States, and upon promising to present the missing British admiral, the monarch agrees to accompany Bevis on tour, which the latter says will protect the agent of war and end all conflicts. The headmaster of England's warships is discovered at an important point in the Panama canal. The mystery of the kingdom. The story goes back to a time many months before the war breaks out and inventor Roberts visits the president and cabinet, telling of an exhibiting a metal production. This new production when electrified and is to be applied to vessels to increase speed to 50 miles an hour. A city for the manufacture of the mysterious discovery is built up on the coast of Florida and Norma Roberts arrives on scene.

**CHAPTER XV.**

**The Great Discovery.**

From the shore came a dull, moaning sound, now rising, now falling, but incessant, as if some gigantic animal, stricken and suffering, was shrieking the anguish of its death throes to the solitudes of the keys and the white-capped waters round them. The frightened birds took flight to the north to escape the weird monotone, and the timid animals of the forest cowered in fear; but the men of the island looked at one another excitedly, with mutual congratulations on the rapidity of their work. The blast furnace which was to cast the plates was being blown in.

Days and nights of unremitting toil had followed that first landing; machine shops had been completely installed, power plants perfected, and buildings for the men erected; additional supplies had been received; and another gunboat, the Columbia, augmented the patrol which guarded ceaselessly round the keys, passing their secret and warning inquisitive fishermen to avoid the waters; corps of expert smelting men from the mines of the west had joined the colony—and all for this, the casting of the first plate, which was to take place this day.

In the assay rooms there had been the constant testing of crude metals, and apportioning them and discarding those which were inferior. Trained hands were those that worked over the bucking boards and manipulated the delicate scales, while the most delicate work of a lead pencil with as great accuracy as they would a pound weight. Everywhere about the plant were men who wrought with precision and interest, bound together in the great enterprise until differences in station were forgotten and all were as a family praying for success.

"Old Bill" Roberts, assisted by his daughter, had permitted no foot but theirs to enter the room where his apparatus was installed, and no hand but theirs to touch its complicated mechanism. With the love of a creator he had spent the last hours fondling its cold, unresponsive parts and adjusting it, and then stood and watched, as a mother watches her firstborn, the initial movements of the great masterpiece which was a mystery to all the world but him and Norma.

Engineers and officers from all parts of the plant, warned that the crucial test was at hand, gathered round the door of the innermost room, and invited in by the inventor, and then slowly entered and found standing places at a safe distance from the intricate mass, whose polished knobs, twisted bars and gleaming tubes seemed to them a tangled riddle. Norma, garbed in the stained khaki wrapper which she wore in the laboratory at home, hovered here and there round the apparatus, lightly trying an adjustment or closely inspecting a joint, her face grave, calm, and self-possessed. Her father, his thin old face drawn into a scowl of concentration, bustled himself likewise, and made the final connections. So careful was he that he even inspected the duplicate apparatus which stood as a reserve at the other end of a casting mold, but which it was not his intention to use except in case of emergency. Satisfied that all was in readiness, he beckoned to two assistants, who trundled in the first composite plate and deposited it in its bed. He made the connection with the electrodes in a few minutes' deft work, and then straightened up and looked about the room, where all was still and expectant.

The wondering engineers saw him wave his daughter back a short distance as though fearing for her safety, watched him take a final look over his appliance, and then throw a switch. Brilliant streaks of purple, of unknown reds and glaring whites, raced each other in quick succession through the tubes, little indicators here and there sparked out scintillations, and the machine seemed to leap, strain and throb with a life of its own, uncanny and mysterious because of its silence. The group of men peered cautiously at

"Gentlemen," she said, "the first experiment is a failure."

the plate, saw it glow a dull red, pass the cherry stage to a dull pigeon blue, and then suddenly burst into a gleaming mass of iridescent white.

"Fusion!" one of the engineers whispered to a man beside him. "He has fused that plate in less time than it could be done by any means I ever heard of. That is the way he metamorphoses his metal."

The rays died out, the apparatus stopped its quivering, and the inventor with hands clasped behind him stood intently watching the now cooling metal. Within the laboratory all was silence. From the adjoining buildings came the regular sound of hammers, and from somewhere off toward the cabins a man's voice was raised in a song of soldiery. The sheet of metal lost its color and became dark.

"Old Bill" Roberts pressed a button above his head, and cooling sprays began dissipating themselves over the surface, sending up brief splutterings and clouds of rapidly diminishing steam.

"It's cool enough now to handle," he said in an oddly constrained tone of voice, turning to the engineers, "and if some of you will help me carry it to the testing tank you may see me prove the first plate on which hangs the fate of our country."

In an awed hush of expectancy they all volunteered; but only three men were needed to hold it while it was attached to the great arms which were to revolve it in the water and demonstrate its resistance. The inventor threw a switch, and the sheet began to move. Before him was a dial, and beneath it a scale of friction pulls showing the resistance offered by normal metal. He fastened his eyes on the indicator with a look of strained watchfulness. Slowly the needle point swung round as the arms gained the maximum of speed, and then it came to a standstill, while a look of doubt and perplexity crept over the scientist's face.

"Norm," he called, huskily—"Norm! Was everything all right? Is everything working true?"

admiral which aroused them to renewed action. "Shave, Bill! That's nothing," he growled. "Here! We've got more plates cast. Throw another one, and give it a try-out. Wake up man! Wake up! We've got to make it go!"

Jenkins and two others rushed to the adjoining room and brought in a second slab of metal, and the old inventor, giving himself a shake as if pulling back from the very vortex of despair, with trembling hands placed the sheet of insulation and made the new connections with the plate.

"Norm," he almost whispered, "you look it over and turn the current on this time. Somehow my eyes seem to have gone back on me."

Again they watched from a distance the steady movements of the assistant, who without a tremor threw on the current, held it in leash, and directed it as if within her hand she held the clutch of a friend. Once more they saw the metal cool, the sprays turned on, and then came a dull, grinding, riving sound, and a column of dust shot up into the air and belloved out over the room. They saw her fall back unconscious as if from some sudden shock, and instinctively sprang to her aid.

In mortal fear that some disaster had overtaken her, some unknown injury from that apparatus whose sweeps through a murderer's chair, they picked her up and carried her out into one of the draughting rooms and laid her limp form on a table.

Her father in a burst of terrible anxiety tore open her corsage and ran his hand over her heart. "She's not dead!" he whispered, hoarsely. "She's been knocked out by a wild current or something I don't understand."

A long breath of relief enfolded the room. Not until she recovered consciousness and sat weakly up was the suspense mitigated.

wires, a picture of perplexity or despair. He came back and crowded through their midst, examining a connection and tracing out one of the strands, and then stood in listless attitude, his brows drawn into a frown, and his arms hanging loose and pendulous from his shoulders. The time stretched to minutes, and Jenkins and Norma began a discussion, to which the others listened, striving to understand the phraseology of electrical science, of which many of them had little more than the layman's knowledge. Suddenly a sharp cry came from the inventor.

They looked to the other side of the room, whither he had retreated, and beheld him jumping up and down like a madman. His fists were clenched and thrust into the air, where they opened clawlike and waved a tremolo of excitement. "I've got it! I've got it!" he screamed. "I've solved it!"

They drew back from him, fearing that failure had loosened his brain; but he rushed through the group, excitedly calling for men to repair the break. The admiral, unused to his periods of enthusiasm, stared at him blankly, his lower jaw unconsciously dropping until his mouth yawned in cavernous suspense. In his mind nothing but insanity could account for this outburst.

Norma, on the other hand, laid a restraining hand on his arm and said: "Father, what's the matter? What is it?"

"We've been working in the dark!" he answered vehemently, and then with the jubilation of a boy but in a calmer tone continued: "By an accident we have discovered powers in our combination of electricity and metallurgy that we have not dreamed of, and which, if we can control them, make the resistant armor we came down here to manufacture as useless as a wooden hull!"

The admiral suddenly dropped his bulk to a stool. "Good God!" he gasped, "are you mad?"

Norma, like one from whose eyes a hoodwink has been suddenly removed, and appearing almost to have read her father's mind, put her hand out to his shoulder and looked at him searchingly.

A slow grin of great exultation swept over the lean old face into which she peered, drove the wrinkles into the corners of the eyes, and a mass of radiating furrows round the mouth.

"You've guessed it," he said, and then turned to the admiral. "Brocton, you don't know what that hole meant; but in an hour from now I'm going to show you. That is, Norma, my assistant, and I will."

Then in a sudden frenzy for work he asked them all to leave until he sent for them, and they, wondering and speculating on his next endeavor, obeyed. Only the workmen, who had descended into the cavity and were preparing to hoist the plate and mold, and the admiral, by special invitation, remained. The clang of hammers resounded hollowly through the room as the timbers beneath the floor were shored up by the carpenters; then came the setting of another and larger tank than the one which had been so unexpectedly driven into the earth. The smaller plates which had been intended only for experimental purposes were exhausted, and therefore they had nothing on which to operate save two immense castings weighing many tons. Wide sliding doors rolled back, and workmen from the foundry, with straining muscles and clinging toes, slowly pushed in low-wheeled cars on which rested the huge pieces of metal. A steel crane projected its ungainly arm, reached slowly down, and in a Titanic grasp picked up one piece, moved it into position over the new bed, and deposited it in a great basin whose material indicated that it would be able to withstand any heat.

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