

The VANISHING FLEETS

ILLUSTRATED BY A. WEIL

BY ROY NORTON

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 inventor Roberts, are introduced as lovers. The government is much criticised because of its lack of preparation for strife.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

"Listen," he commanded, again leaning toward her. "There is something which makes me think you love me. I shall ask nothing more of your father, or of your plans, because I want to make you see the position." He frowned at the waiter, who came toward them and then retreated. "Norm," he went on, "there is to be war. Your country is unprepared. It will be overrun by an enemy that is ruthless and that will come to conquer. The end may not be defeat; but as certain as death this country will write and suffer before it can regain the ground it will lose in the outset. Can't you see that? Can't you understand what it will be for you and your father here under such conditions? Don't you know that for your very safety you must leave? As my wife, or even my betrothed, I can make the way so much easier for you! Give me the right, dear, give me the right!"

"It is impossible," she replied, turning toward him again; and he looked hurt. "It is the very danger of war that makes it so. You don't know how much I wish I could say yes to you; but it's impossible. I must be with my father. I owe it to him. He can't go away, nor can I leave him. So until the way is clear we can be friends only, and no more."

He sat stunned for a moment, vainly striving to understand a circumstance or combination of conditions which could have dictated such an answer. Then the thought came that perhaps the girl before him was making a sacrifice to some awful menace, and it could be only one thing—the threatened insanity of her father. But what had the war to do with that? Perhaps she would never be more to him if her father went insane, because then she would say no because of her very love for him, and the fear for posterity. Their happiness, then, was to depend upon the condition of an old man's mind.

"Norm," he asked, softly, "is it insanity?" She turned toward him in amazement, not fathoming his line of reasoning. "I can tell you nothing more." She spoke as one under stress and suppression. "You must ask nothing more. You must take my love on faith or not at all until you know it is time for you to tell me again that I am necessary to you."

He felt that it was a crisis with them, and slowly thought of what he might say to break away this barrier or induce her to remove the embargo. They sat looking into the distance; but before he could formulate an argument the sound of a horse's hoofs madly clattering over the pavements caught their attention. It came nearer and nearer, and then past them on the street below a man in soldier's uniform flashed by. They looked at each other wonderingly, half starting to their feet, and as they looked a sudden pandemonium broke forth.

From an alleyway nearby burst an army of newsboys, the streets suddenly became alive with pedestrians belching forth from cafes and hotels, and above all other sounds came the cries of "Extry! Extry! War broken out! War! War! War!"

She turned away from him as if in those cries were an irrevocable sentence of misery, parted the vines and stood silently looking out into the night; and he knew without seeing that in her eyes were tears.

CHAPTER II.

The Sword of the Samurai.

The nation was in a turmoil. Throughout the night and the following day the newspapers of the country sent forth a more or less trustworthy recount of the opening of hostilities. It had been known for weeks that the transports of Japan guarded by her entire navy had assembled off Nagasaki. It had even been reported that they had sailed away for southern waters; but this had met with later denial. The blow had fallen as swiftly as would that of a rattlesnake which for weeks had been coiled and sinuously moving its head in preparation for attack.

Strangely enough the first reports of war came from foreign sources; but they were undoubtedly official, having been imparted by Japan to her ally, Great Britain. The bulletins issued by the London papers bore the undoubted ring of semi-official utterances. That of the Daily Mail, cabled in full to the American press, read:

"Japan, reluctantly abandoning hope of peace by ordinary methods, has been driven to the extreme recourse and has officially declared war against the United States of America."

Within half an hour after the issuance of this bulletin a second announcement was made, which took no cognizance of the fact that the official

declaration must have been preceded by decisive action:

"The Japanese war office has been advised that on the 27th instant at noon the Philippine Islands were compelled to surrender to the Japanese fleet, which appeared off Manila. Not only did the city itself capitulate, but possession of the entire islands has been given over. The Japanese government announces with due modesty that it has gained a complete and unqualified victory without the loss of a man."

"Later,—It is announced by the Japanese government that the parole of all officers and men of the United States army in the Philippines has been accepted, and the men of the vanquished army have been allowed to sail for San Francisco on board foreign ships, which were lying in the harbor at the time of surrender."

From every quarter of the land came insistent demands for official news from the government, coupled with requests for detailed accounts of the defeat. The administration replied with the brief statement that no verified report of the action in the Philippines could be given out at that time. It did state, however, that the official declaration of war had been duly re-



The Ambassador Rose from His Seat.

ceived, that the Japanese ambassador had been withdrawn, the legation closed and that the officials would leave New York for their own country that evening, sailing by way of Liverpool.

Public clamor gave way to popular indignation. The country was aflame with war spirit. Guardsmen gathered in their armories, awaiting official bulletins and the expected call to arms; and yet no orders came. The governors of several states telegraphed to the war department for advice; but their only satisfaction was in the following message sent broadcast by the secretary of state:

"The government, recognizing the patriotism and readiness of the National Guard of the United States, does not at this immediate moment desire its services. It is well to bear in mind, however, that a sudden call may be issued at a later date and to be prepared for emergencies. It wishes to announce further that in its judgment there will be no necessity for fighting on land, and that the situation is completely under control. So far there have been no casualties reported from the Philippines."

Whatever may have been the state of the public mind before the issuance of this declaration, the country now gasped with amazement. Some of the more violent and outspoken journals demanded of the men at Washington a statement of what they purposed to do in this emergency, and the most radical intimated in no uncertain terms that incompetent administrations were subject to impeachment. But to all of this outburst the government officials most directly interested presented only the same calm, placid and indifferent front. There was nothing to be detected in their demeanor to indicate that any action whatever had been taken.

The various members of the diplomatic corps, even to the highest of the foreign ambassadors, gathered no new information. They were invariably told, first, that the United States knew there had been a declaration of war; second, that the United States knew that the Philippines had been surrendered; third, that no orders had been issued up to that hour for the sailing of any fleet, but that it was expected orders would be given before the day was over. The men of the foreign representation one and all felt a gentle rebuff tantamount to being told that the United States was attending strictly to its own business and desired neither to be advised nor to be compelled to answer questions.

None felt this more keenly than the members of the British legation, and Guy Hillier in particular. His meeting of the night before with Miss Roberts had not terminated satisfactorily, but had come to an abrupt close when he bade her good night at the door of her home, and with all his questions unanswered. Since that moment there had been little time for him either to brood over the situation or to conjecture over her strange attitude.

Throughout the early morning he hurried this way and that, receiving visitors and answering requests for information from Great Britain. His superior, heated and exasperated, broke in upon him almost as he was starting to call up Miss Roberts' residence.

"Guy," the ambassador said, "we are in a country of lunatics. There is something in this government's attitude that is inexplicable. It can't be that they are all cowards, and yet I have something to show you."

The ambassador drew a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped the perspiration from his forehead, after which he reached a large pudgy finger

He walked up and down the room excitedly for a few moments, freely expressing his perplexity over the turn of events, and ended by abruptly ringing for a timetable and a sailing list, which he consulted before again addressing himself to his secretary.

"Get out of here as quickly as you can!" he ordered. "Go to your rooms, throw what stuff you need into a bag, and take the first train you can get for New York! I shall meet you at the station here and give you such reports of conditions as I can write in the meantime. When you get to New York, go as quickly as you can to the Cunard dock, from which the Lusania is due to sail early in the morning. I shall hold her up until you arrive. Deliver my letters in person to the foreign secretary's office in London, and answer such questions as you can regarding this remarkable situation and this incomprehensible government. These matters are too important to admit of delay and ordinary official reports. Go quickly!" he concluded, almost shoving Hillier through the door. "I'll attend to everything here. Don't let there be any delay on your part!"

The secretary hurried away to make preparations for his departure, leaving the perturbed ambassador to prepare his reports. He called a cab and drove to his apartment, intent on first telephoning to Miss Roberts. His man met him at the door and handed him a letter addressed in a familiar hand, which he hastily tore open and read as he stood in the open doorway:

"Dear Guy: I have been called away very suddenly, and am going to my father. He needs me now more than ever. I cannot alter anything which I told you last night, nor can I add anything, save to say that sometime, somehow, God willing, we shall be together again, under circumstances where I can tell you all the truth. It will do no good to write to the old address; for I shall not be there. There will be no means of our communicating, I fear, for an indefinite time. It is always within the realms of possibility, when war is on a land, that friends may never meet again. If such should be our case, I pray that you will remember this even up to the last—I loved you. Good-by. NORMA."

Stunned by this unexpected missive, he hurried to the telephone, and in a fever of haste and anxiety called up her home, only to be told that she had departed in the earlier hours of the morning after receiving a message presumably from her father. He could learn nothing further of her. He was stopped as if by an insurmountable wall. He cursed the fate which separated them and the order which sent him away without giving time to see her, and a most in open rebellion thought for a moment of refusing to act as king's courier, resolving rather to resign from his position and abandon his post; but he was bound by the training of years and the demands of duty, and at the last moment boarded the train which was to take him from the country and the woman he loved.

And even as he went the object of his solicitude was speeding away into the south on a special train.

The train consisted of only two Pullmans and a dining car. Before it in its southern flight the way seemed always open, and hour after hour it rushed onward, drawn by the most powerful locomotives that could be obtained. Norma was the only woman passenger aboard; all the others were grim-faced, sun-tanned men of the sea, who had been summoned to Washington from various navy yards and ships within the month. Of all on board she was the only civilian, and yet the one whom the government seemed most anxious to transport. The officers themselves gathered into little groups, discussing the war which had opened so abruptly, and speculating as to why in such an important crisis they had been ordered from their posts of duty to report for further advice and sealed instructions at so unimportant and isolated a seaport as the small one on the coast of Florida to which they were heading.

Another singular feature of this journey was that all aboard, from the distinguished admiral to the junior lieutenant commander, were, by order, in the plainest of civilian dress. That it had been the intention of the war department to maintain their identity secret was proved by the comments of a railway official who stood near one of the coaches while waiting for a change of locomotives.

"You understand, don't you," he said to a man apparently a train dispatcher, standing beside him, "that this train has the right of way over everything? Sidetrack the flyer if necessary to get this through. There can't be anything in front of her, and the only limit to her time is the speed of the engine that pulls her. I understand it's a party of secret service people the government is sending to Cuba. That's all I know about it, and it's in line with everything else you naturally can expect from such a lot of insane men as they seem to have in Washington."

They whirled away from the station, looking at each other blankly, and wondering what the outcome of all this mystery could be. Every action so far was without precedent. There was a disposition on the part of some of them to bemoan the fate which had detached them from their ships at a time when the country was to be defended and glory won; but this was brought to a sudden end by grim old "Fighting Bob" Bevin, the admiral, who reprimanded them for daring to criticize their superiors or their orders.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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