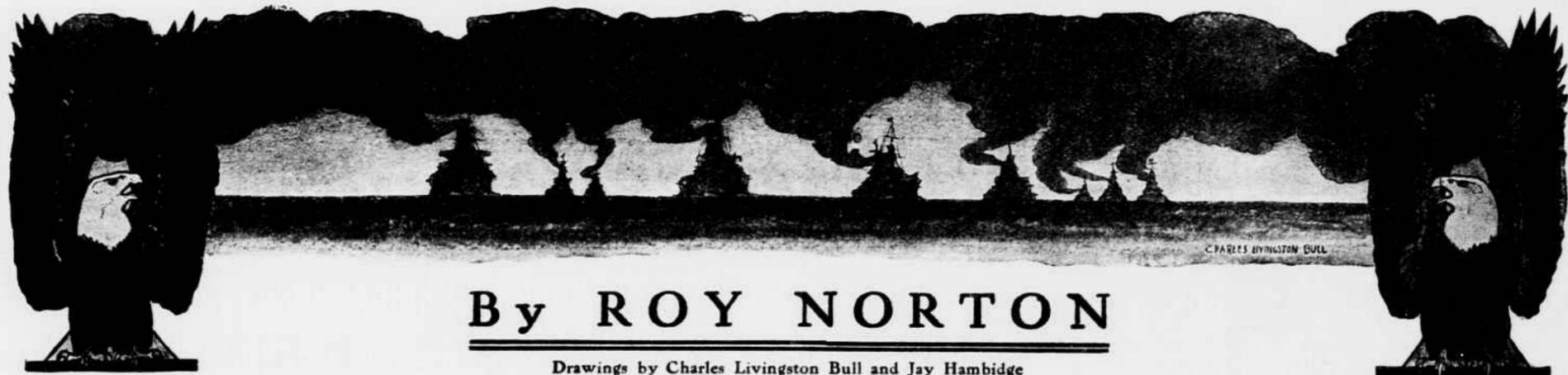


THE VANISHING FLEETS



By ROY NORTON

Drawings by Charles Livingston Bull and Jay Hambidge

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters at End of This Instalment

CHAPTER VII.

JAPAN, grown arrogant through easy success and confident of the supremacy of her navy, cast aside the cloak of secrecy, and boldly announced her intention to attack the seaport cities of the western coast of America. No word had come from Seigo to bid her pause. The most formidable armada that ever sailed the seas, attended by lighters that were to provide coal, and accompanied by transports conveying an army of men, steamed away to the land of easy conquest. In the hope of striking terror into the hearts of those they would subdue, the Japanese announced their purpose, and gave a somewhat exaggerated account of the forces being sent. The newspapers of the world teemed with stories of the sailing of this monster fleet, told how all Japan had shouted "Banzai!" described the flower garlanded maids who sang gay songs, and pictured the remarkable modesty and valor of the Admirals in command.

In some quarters of the globe great sympathy was expressed for the United States, which apparently had no chance whatever in such an unequal contest, and was foredoomed to calamity and dissolution. The wisacres of European Powers rose as a unit and told how for more than fifty years it had been repeatedly pointed out that the over-sea colossus was facing destruction through neglect of her navy. Monarchical adherents saw deeper into the cause of a nation's obliteration, asserting that the proof had again been given to the world that a republican form of government was one which, by its very lack of cohesion and unwieldiness, could not exist.

Other advanced thinkers, who looked far into the future, began a discussion as to the final outcome, what partition would be made of the conquered territory, and whether Japan would hold it as a colony for her own surplus population under a regulation colonial gubernation. English writers expressed grave doubts as to Japan's ability to conduct colonies successfully, and were rather of the opinion that the country should be given to Great Britain, whose remarkable success in India and elsewhere had made her the fountainhead in this branch of government. New maps of the world were published in the most progressive periodicals, and souvenir buttons were sold in the streets of Tokio depicting a very valiant little Japanese soldier kicking Uncle Sam into the sea, and taking possession of his land. All the world bowed down to do honor to the "brave little brown men," and many aggressive Powers regretted that they had not been the first to think of taking possession of the United States, which their statesmen sometimes spoke of as being a nice little country and capable under reasonable rule of becoming quite a place.

The nation under discussion remained in the same astounding condition of silence and inaction. At first it had seemed that a clash along the Canadian border was inevitable. The massing of such great bodies of troops in such a position appeared almost a threat, and Great Britain in the first instance began hurriedly concentrating forces at points where they would be available in case of attack; but as day after day passed, with no forward move and no action save that of preventing the passage of any person or the transmission of any communication, alarm gave way

to bewilderment. Canadian secret service men who succeeded in entering the camps of the soldiers soon returned to report that apparently the troops knew no more of the reason for their being stationed there than did the world at large.

In the meantime there gathered into the sounds, bays, and harbors of foreign ports American vessels of war, which came to anchor and remained. On board these ships were the most disconsolate body of officers and men that were ever collected in hulls. The last orders any of them had received had been made so positive, so plain and unequivocal, that they had no choice other than to obey. They had been commanded to gain these neutral berths and under no circumstances to leave them. They were not even permitted to assume the slate color which betokens war on the waters, and therefore retained their dress of immaculate white. They too seemed under the ban, and, like war dogs in leash, strained impotently for action. Nor was there an officer in all these idle and scattered ships who did not wish himself on the waves of the Pacific, across which the enemy's fleet was now forging.

The time advanced until the Japanese warships were due to arrive at Honolulu, where they were to report, coal, and prepare for the final struggle. The cable between Hawaii and Japan, now in possession of the Mikado's operators, continued its daily reports of most favorable weather; but still no squadron hove in sight.

One day, two days, and three, passed before Japan felt anxiety, or the world began its discussion as to the cause of the long delay. Then, when the fleet was more than a week overdue, it became almost a certainty that some disaster had overtaken it, although from no section of the sea had there been a typhoon reported or anything but excellent barometric conditions. Ten days passed in this same way, and on the last the report from Honolulu was identical with that which had been made on all those previous: "Nothing in sight, and nothing arrived."

Once more the world stood in expectancy, and vainly sought the solution for the latest enigma. Storms were eliminated; for no tempest could have wiped out such a magnificent body of ships so effectually as to leave none to bear the sad tidings to the nearest port. And then, as a full realization of what

must have happened dawned upon the watching Powers, a shudder of dread passed through them all. It was plain that America had some new and terrific naval strength, some unheard of monster of the deep, that gave it the mastery of the seas. The evolution of submarines had been rapid; but no one had knowledge of a craft that could steam such a distance as would have been necessary to intercept the Japanese before they reached Honolulu, engage them, and either destroy them completely or capture and convey them to an American port.

It must have been total destruction, the world argued, because in case of capture great battleships themselves would scarcely have been able to make the complete trip to a Pacific coast on the supply of coal they carried in their bunkers. Forced drafts required great expenditure of fuel, and never at any time had there been any other intention than of replenishing at Hawaii. It seemed impossible that a civilized nation should have chosen deliberately to exterminate its enemies by wholesale; and yet there was no other conclusion tenable.

How terrific must have been that onslaught, coming up out of the waters of the sea, and how remorselessly executed! All losses of life in previous naval engagements sank into insignificance when compared with this sudden and swift obliteration of a fleet of warships, transports, and colliers. It would be nearly impossible to spare lives in such a battle, and it seemed a certainty that the great steel monsters that had sailed away to easy conquest had become mere metal coffins for those who manned them, and were now resting somewhere on the floor of the heedless Pacific. If such was the case, it was time the United States ceased to exist as a nation, when peopled by inhuman monsters who calmly slew their adversaries when threatened.

Japan was left a helpless little island in the sea, without ships to assail an enemy or to defend herself. Shorn of power and pride, she was plunged as deeply in mourning as only a few weeks before she had been exalted in glory. She plaintively bewailed the barbarities of her enemy, and proudly pointed to her own high state of civilization, which made such warfare impossible. She asserted that had she possessed such monsters of destruction as were evidently owned by the United States, she would have scorned to use them without notifying the whole world of her power. It was a country of desolation.

There was hardly a prominent home in Japan which had not contributed some member of its family to that splendid navy which had sailed so proudly away when early June was spreading its flowers over the Empire; now there were sobs of bereavement and woe.

Across the ancient lands of the Pharaohs and up through the provinces of Kings there swept a unanimous desire for an explanation. It could come from only one source,—this land of mystery which had cut itself off from all the world and stood silent, guarding its secret, and suddenly grown ominous in its possibilities and potentialities.

Japan, hopeless and driven to extremities, appealed to her ally, Great Britain, for news. She showed no cowardly spirit by asking for aid of arms, and sought the assistance of her closest friend only that she might gain information. And Great Britain after due consideration responded.

The Premier of the Dominion of Canada was asked in the interests of humanity to pass a communication to



"If That Message Did Miscarry, the Results Might Be Fatal."