

Stirring Stories of the Sea

by Morgan Robertson

The Last Battleship

Remarkable Tale of a Battleship, an Airship and a Submarine

From Success Magazine, New York

It was nearly midnight, and the battleship Argyle, stripped to bare steel, was drifting with bared ribs, with a full head of steam, waiting for daylight to discover the enemy.

Aft on the superstructure a group of officers off duty discussed the possibilities of future warfare and the coming place of the battleship under the menace of the bomb dropping dirigible balloon and the invisible submarine with its deadly torpedo.

The discussion finally had narrowed down to a wordy combat between the highest and the lowest of the commissioned officers. Mr. Clarkson, the executive officer, and young Mr. Felton, temporarily the torpedo lieutenant. Mr. Felton had become dogmatic in his assertions, which is excusable at sea only in the young.

"But, Mr. Felton," said the executive officer slowly and earnestly, "have a little common sense. Can't you see that conditions must change; that the battleship, like the steamship, has almost reached the limit of its size and development, while the airship and the submarine are in their infancy?"

"But there must be a center, a nucleus of the fleet. How can you preserve the line of battle without such a backbone? Where will you put the admiral?"

"Up in the air, where he can see things."

"And be seen too and shot at."

"Felton, an ordinary gas bag can travel faster than the speediest water craft ever constructed. We cannot hit a destroyer at full speed. How can we hit an airship high above us? Gun sights are useless at such elevations, even though guns could be pointed."

"All a matter of mathematics. Design new ones."

"And suppose a few bombs come down on deck or down the funnels. What'll happen to the boilers?"

"Armor the deck and do away with funnels. We will soon have internal combustion engines, anyhow."

"And for submarine attack? Armor the bottom too? Felton, a battleship will cease to be a battleship. With that weight of armor she could only carry the guns of a cruiser without a cruiser's speed."

"But she would still hold the line of battle."

"But she was further reduced. Then she would not be even a cruiser. Finally she would sacrifice some of her armor—side armor, we'll say, because unnecessary—then, with enemies only above and below, she would lose it all, seal up and dive or take wings and fly."

"Oh, Mr. Clarkson," said Felton wearily, "you are a visionary and theorist. The battleship is here, a perfect fighting machine."

"But she cannot grow much better, while the flying machine and the submarine have just begun. Imagine the three types starting together. Which would be chosen?"

"It would depend upon the judgment, experience and gray matter of the choosers. I—young Felton threw out his chest—"would choose the battleship."

"Because you never hit one. There goes eight bells. Turn in, Felton, and sleep it off."

And the laughter—for Mr. Felton as torpedo officer had not yet scored a hit in his department—of the listening officers the group dispersed to stand watch or sleep until four hours later, when the striking of eight bells would again bring a change on the watches.

It was Felton's turn in, and he went to his berth; but, hot and excited over the discussion, he remained awake, tossing and rolling and mentally arguing with the impractical "first luff," until one bell had struck, then two and finally three. Then he dozed off and was sound asleep when the familiar stroke of the bell again rang in his ears. "Clang clang, clang clang."

"Only four bells," he murmured, sinking back for another two hours of sleep. But he had hardly lost consciousness when the gunroom orderly tapped at his door.

"Going into action, sir," he said. "You were called, and I thought you had wakened. All hands are at stations, sir."

Felton sprang out of his berth. The enemy was within the "deadly radius" of torpedoes his station was on the bridge with the captain. He ran along the gun deck he heard

through the steel walls of the big ship the faint sound of distant firing, and when he had bounded up the forward companion steps to the main deck he could hear the singing of shells. A crash and a jar of the whole huge fabric told him that one ship of the enemy had the range.

There was no time for sightseeing. The bridge was above him, and the quickest road to it was the way of the turret, from the top of which he could swing himself up. He mounted the iron ladder bolted to the turret, but slipped on the hard steel roof and, with a force that deprived him of breath, was pressed sprawling on his face. But a deafening roar of sound from within the turret told him that the force came from below from the

explosion of a shell and one or more twelve inch charges, perhaps the whole magazine in the depths.

Hardly had his dazed faculties grasped this fact than another was borne in upon him. Gripping tightly the handhold of the turret hatch and choked with gas fumes, he felt that he was whirling through the air with the turret roof.

As it turned in air he could see for a moment the dim, bulky outline of the ship below; then it faded into darkness, and he was clinging for dear life to that slowly rotating disk of armored steel, until, as it assumed a perpendicular, he was holding his weight with one hand, very curiously, as he then thought, weighing very little.

Something hard and rigid brushed him on the shoulder, and in a moment he was torn from his support to find himself clutching a smooth, round rod of what seemed to be steel or iron. It was perpendicular, and soon he made out another and beyond another. Looking down, he saw a long platform, to the edge of which the rods led. He was clinging to the stanchion of an airship!

He slid down the stanchion to the deck and faced a man in the darkness. "How'd you get aboard?"

"I hardly know myself. I hardly know I'm alive. My name is Felton, torpedo officer of the battleship Argyle. There was an explosion in the forward turret, and I was on top. I went up with the roof."

"Was that a turret top? I wondered what they were shooting at us."

"Which side are you on in this mix?"

"The side of the Lord."

The man whistled shrilly, and immediately half a dozen dark forms materialized out of the dark. They threw themselves upon Felton, choked, pinioned and bore him down, and before he could speak his protest he found himself bound hand and foot.

Felton lay on the deck of the car, through the slits of which he could see lights below and the quick gleaming of distant gunfire.

He made out the shape, size and general construction of the craft that carried him. It was not the conventional elongated gas bag, with car and motor, rudder and screw. Nor was it suspended in the air by wings or plane, unless the long, concave roof above, toward the edge of which the stanchions led, performed some such function. Amidships were a vertical and a horizontal steering wheel, aft a noisily buzzing engine, and behind it in the darkness presumably were the screw and rudders that propelled and guided the craft. Symmetrically disposed about the deck were long steel cylinders that doubtless contained the compressed gas or air that worked the engine, and through and between them all a system of pipes, valves, levers and indicators, as complicated as the fittings of an engine room. The commander was at the wheel amidships, another man at the engine, and the rest of the crew, seven in all, were keeping lookout.

"There she is," said one, suddenly lifting his head. "Ahead and to port."

"I see her," said the captain, peering down and shifting the wheel.

"You see, young man," he said to Felton, "we had to rise so suddenly to fight that turret top that we lost sight of her."

"Do you mean to say," answered

Felton cautiously, for he did not yet understand the temper of these men. "That you can dodge anything?"

"We can dodge or outrun a shell or anything else big enough to see. But it was dark, and we didn't see that turret coming. It almost hit us."

"What is your lifting power, captain?"

"The centrifugal force of the earth—partly, inconvenient in one respect, for we rise at a tangent. We descend by its opposite and balancing force, gravitation, which is more direct."

"How do you tap this centrifugal force?" asked the amazed Felton.

"Gravitation is only one phase of magnetism. In magnetism repulsion equals attraction. By reversing our polarity we are repelled from the earth at the speed of a falling body, but, of course, at a tangent."

"It's beyond me," said Felton. "Of course that tangent would take you westward at the speed of the sun."

"In a succession of jumps, yes."

"But how do you change your polarity?" asked Felton, becoming interested.

"There is your ship down there, nearly beneath us." And the interest was crushed.

The engine now accelerated its speed, increasing its volume of noise, and this noise must have been heard on the battleship. A sudden illumination was seen—like a flash of heat lightning—then came the singing of a projectile.

"Oh, fudge!" said the captain gently and pityingly. "Go ahead, boys."

It was now light enough for Felton to examine the faces of these men. To his surprise, they were young, almost boyish. They were not in uniform. Their dress and faces were as commonplace as could be found in a factory, only the tall, thin young captain showing in voice and expression the signs of study and thought. He twirled the wheel, manipulated levers and valves within reach and watched, downward through the slits, the big craft beneath.

The sun was rising in the east, and Felton could make out the details of the ship below, his own ship, with its familiar bridge, turrets and superstructure, and an enormous, gaping hole forward where once had been the twelve inch turret.

They lifted a pointed shell, banded like a dynamite projectile, held it poised until the captain gave the word and dropped it. It went down true as a plummet and went out of sight. But its effects were soon seen in an up-lifting of the quarterdeck close to the stern and the rising of a cloud of yellow smoke.

A six inch gun on the superstructure was barking away, and shells still screamed upward, but none came near the airship.

"We'll silence that gun," the commander said, taking out his watch and slightly changing the course and speed. "Stand by."

They poised another shell, and at the word "drop" down it went. The commander pocketed his watch and said: "Now for the rest of her. After turret next."

Felton heard, but was watching the descent of the shell. It went out of sight like the others, but soon he saw the uplift of deck, the yellow smoke of explosion and a dismounted gun flying overboard.

"My God, captain," he exclaimed, "is this legitimate warfare? What chance has she? She can't hit back!"

"And she cost about four millions, didn't she?" answered the captain desirously.

Felton said no more, but watched while his ship was picked to pieces, and when the whole expanse was an uneven tangle of riven plates, twisted rods, smashed boats and uprooted ventilators.

"Now, you dog, take it!" he growled, launching his fist.

tilators the funnels came in for attention. Three open ten foot tubes leading to the vitals, water tube boilers and steam connections, one after another belched upward a mighty white cloud.

"I say, there," called the captain to Felton, "What blew up that forward turret? No gun fire can reach a magazine, and it wasn't I that did it."

"How do I know? Perhaps it was something else like you," snapped Felton.

"Do you think?"—and the commander's face took on an anxious expression—"that it might have been a submarine's torpedo?"

"Find out."

"That's what I'll have to do. We'll go down and see."

One of the men, a big, lumbering fellow with a dull, moonlike face, came up to where Felton lay and kicked him.

"Don't talk like that to the boss," he said.

"Curse you!" yelled Felton. "You kick a man bound and down. Loose his hands, if you dare. Loose my hands! I won't need my feet."

"Loose him!" called the captain unconcernedly. "Give him his way!"

The man stooped and unfettered the bond which held Felton's wrists, then even as he scrambled to his feet, he released his ankles.

"Now, you dog, take it!" he growled, launching his fist at the man's face. It landed squarely, and the man went down, bleeding.

Once more he went down, to rise again and tranquilly face his assailant. Felton hesitated, while his anger cooled a little. This kind of fighting was new to him. But the kick in his ribs flashed into his mind, and the anger came back. "Fight! Fight!" he growled and again knocked the fellow down.

"Any one else here who wants to kick me?" Felton said.

No one answered. They were all looking down, and even the victim joined in the scrutiny.

"Do you think," asked the captain, raising a troubled face, "that there are any submarine craft around?"

"How do I know?" answered Felton. "I don't feel easy at all."

"How the devil," exclaimed Felton, "can a submarine hurt you?"

The captain did not answer. The airship had descended to less than a hundred yards from the sea and hung poised, not over the floating scrap heap that had once been a battleship, but to starboard. One look was enough for Felton. He saw men writhing among the wreckage, unable to crawl to the rail and end their agony. Smoke was coming from every aperture, and here and there a small tongue of flame shot up and fell back into the smoke. Nauseated with horror, he closed his eyes, changed his position and opened them on the placid sea on the other side, away from the Argyle.

Far over a movement on the surface caught his eye. It was a triangular arrangement of ripples such as is made by the cutwater of a boat moving slowly. The apex of the triangle pointed toward the Argyle, and it was coming toward her. As it drew near Felton made out the cause, a short length of pole extending about three feet out of water.

"There's a submarine for you, captain," he called grimly. "See the periscope tube?"

"Where?" yelled the captain excitedly. "Where is it?"

"He sprang to his feet. "Oh, God help us!" cried the captain mournfully as he saw the tube and the shape beneath. "Jump—jump for your lives! Jump, you!"

He pointed at Felton and sprang toward him.

"Why should I jump?" asked Felton wonderingly and prepared for defense. The others came at him, each shouting his loudest: "Jump, jump for your life! Overboard with you! Quick, you fool!"

Then one sprang to the rail, poised a moment and threw himself out into space. Another followed and another. "Jump, will you?" yelled the captain, gesticulating earnestly. "I'm in command. I must be last to go. Over with you! Over with you all!"

They were crowding to the rail, where one after another the rest of the crew took the leap. With no further thought about the matter, Felton reached the rail and without looking down, drew a deep breath and leaped, a victim of suggestion.

Three hundred feet is a long jump. He turned over twice in that terrible descent, and once, looking upward, he saw the sprawling form of the captain and above it the quiescent airship.

With consciousness nearly gone he struck the water feet first and was almost split in two by the impact, but the cold shock brought back his lapsing senses, and he found himself feebly swimming, in which direction he could not tell, for it was pitch dark. Suddenly a light appeared. It was not a dim glow like diffused sunlight, but a spark, a point of yellow, that grew larger and became a disk. It was approaching, and now another appeared beside it, fainter and crescent shaped. On the other side appeared a third, and dazed with physical agony, that reached from lungs to brain, he recognized the dead lights of a submarine, and he looked for the hull beneath and saw it, a dark blur that was growing in size.

It came swiftly at him, and just as he was reaching out to ward himself from the pointed nose there was a coughing thud, and something brushed by him in a blast of bubbles and went on. Then, with many sharp knocks on head, ribs and knuckles, he was sucked with the inrush of water squarely into the open tube that had just discharged its torpedo. He heard a clang behind him, the shutting of the forward tube door, then a whistling sound.

The pressure had nearly burst his ear drums before the tube was emptied of water, and the inner door was opened. With a gasping call for help he crawled and lurched along the tube, and men, reached in to him. They pulled him out into the lighted hangar room, where, too weak to stand, he fell to the floor, breathing in deep, convulsive gasps.

A man brought a bottle, lifted his head and poured a generous portion of some stimulant down his throat. Felton had just strength to swallow, and it warmed and aroused him. He sat up and, being a torpedo expert, had little difficulty in assimilating his first impressions.

The craft resembled the conventional submarine that he knew. But there was this difference that he noted when able to turn his head: The boat was stiffened with upright stanchions about the size and length of the stanchions in the airship and placed in about the same position along the

sides. Another similarity struck him at his first glance around, and he wondered why he had not remarked it in the airship—the air flasks, trimming tanks and spare torpedoes arranged along the sides occupied the same relative positions as did the steel cylinders in the other, while the steering gear of both was amidships and the motive power aft.

"What have you caught this time, Bill?" called a voice from the wheel, a strangely familiar voice.

"Dunno," answered the man with the flask. "It's a sheep, I think, or maybe a dog, but it looks something like a horse. Have another drink and tell us what you are."

Felton did not refuse a second draft. It brought him to his feet.

"I'm a man," he answered, with spirit. "Are you guying me in this emergency? I'm near dead."

"He says he's a man, sir," called the man.

"All right. Send him aft."

Felton was pushed rather than led to the man amidships.

"How do you do?" he said kindly. "So you thought you'd visit us. We catch all our fish this way."

"My God, captain," answered Felton, "I'm not visiting! I jumped out of an airship and was sucked into your tube. I'm glad I'm alive."

And then—was the liquor affecting his brain?—the captain's face, like for

line, feature for feature, was the face of the captain of the airship, whom last he had seen sprawling above him in midair. Had he beaten him down and been picked up first? It seemed impossible.

"How—what—how?" he stammered, rubbing his eyes. "How did you get here, captain? You jumped after me."

"I jumped after you? You are wandering. I saw you all jump through the periscope, but I was here."

"Then it's the closest resemblance I ever saw. You're the living image of the airship's commander, or else it's the liquor. My head feels queer."

"No doubt, but it's not the liquor. You've had a terrible experience. It's a wonder the jump didn't kill you as well as affect your mind."

Felton was not satisfied with the explanation. It was a strange and striking resemblance, nothing more, and he was about to say as much when a man came forward from the engine with an oil can. He was the duplicate in face and form of the man he had pummeled, but without the contusions. Felton blinked in amazement, then looked at the others, whom in the agitation of his entrance he had not closely observed. Man for man, nine in all, they duplicated the crew of the airship.

"My God," he stuttered, "am I mad or drunk? You've drugged me," he yelled insanely. "Every man here is a double of another."

"Steady—steady, now," said the captain. "You're not drugged. You're a little off your balance, and the drink was too heavy. Every drunken man sees double. Isn't that so?"

This seemed logical, and Felton stammered assent. It was a terrible jump—300 feet. He had escaped death by a miracle. Men had gone insane under less pressure, and he had taken two drinks of a powerful stimulant. He would be all right in time—after a little sleep. The captain was peering into the periscope, the nonmagnifying telescope which gives a view of the seascape.

"Come up here," he said, "and take a look."

Felton climbed to the small platform on which the captain stood. Just before him was the eyepiece of the periscope, and at a sign from the captain he peeped into it. Pictured on the lens was the dismantled wreck of the Argyle, down by the head, a helpless, sinking wreck.

"She's floating on five compartments," said the captain. "I just filled the sixth, and I think we'll fill two at once this time. By the way, what did you fellows butt in for? It was my fight. I hit her last night and blew up the forward magazine. Then I lost her in the dark."

"But, say," answered Felton, "which side are you on in this mix? You blew up the turret, you say, and the airship destroyed her. But the crew of that airship displayed mortal fear of you and jumped overboard at sight of you."

"Exactly. They would have gone off at a tangent if they hadn't. It's better to die on your planet than to become a comet for all eternity."

"Like the airship. I see. But how did you do it, if I may ask?"

"I reversed his polarity; that's all. See that? Look and listen."

The captain turned a lever, and a dynamo near by began to revolve, while an arc lamp suspended from above glowed, glistened and sparkled as the current passed through the carbons. Soon it began a curious, musical buzzing, and the captain shut it off.

"Merely an alternating current through an arc," he explained. "But the electric impulses sent out by that singing arc are of a wave length and frequency produced by no other means

They are just right to turn his two magnetic poles into one, and away he goes."

"I don't understand. Yes, I understand that you might reverse his polarity or combine it, as you say, by some wireless method. But which side are you on?"

"The side of the Lord."

"Look here, captain," said Felton angrily, "that is the answer your double gave me when I asked him the same question last night. It means nothing. I am either a prisoner of war or a guest entitled to consideration. Why do you treat me like a fool?"

"Because you are a fool. You believe in the invulnerability of the battleship. Well, there is one of the best. Look at her."

"I see. Destroyed, but not by you; by an enemy of yours, one who feared you."

"Yes, as mediocrity fears intelligence, as the child fears the dark, the savage the gun of the civilized soldier, humanity as a whole the unseen, the unexpected, the invisible. The airship is potential, but not final; she can be seen."

"And shot," said Felton doggedly. "Did that battleship hit your airship? You know that she could not. The airship's limitations are contained in her visibility. She cannot be hit by shot or shell, but she can be seen and projected into space."

"Granted, but suppose she dropped a bomb on to your back before you saw her?"

"She could not, except in the dark; then she would have to strike a knife edge, and it would be an accident, one chance in millions. We are constructed like a razorback hog to deflect falling bombs."

"But you cannot deflect horizontal torpedoes," said Felton, looking up at the dome of the submarine. It looked curiously like the dome-shaped roof of the airship. "I know well," he went on, talking as was his wont among his fellow officers, "that if I could see your periscope tube with a telescope I could hit you with one of my torpedoes."

"Your torpedoes?"

"I am torpedo officer of that battleship. I was on the turret top when you blew it up last night and went up with it. I landed on the airship."

"You are a member of that battleship's crew?"

"I am," Felton dropped his eyes at the menace in the captain's voice. On the way his glance took in the curving walls of the submarine. They had become semitransparent, and even as he looked they vanished, leaving a clear view of the sky and horizon with its string of fighting ships, pursued and pursuing. He was again in the airship, and the upright stanchions that he had first observed as anomalies in a submarine now served their legitimate purpose of supports to the roof.

"The drink," he murmured, while his brain swam and his soundings disappeared in a mist. "They've drugged me."

"You belong to that battleship?" roared the captain, but Felton had sunk to the floor, incapable of voluntary action. The captain blew a whistle, and his crew answered.

"Back to the battleship!" thundered the captain. "Load him into the tube. Expel that torpedo and make room."

Men sprang to the tube and turned levers. The captain sprang to the periscope. "Right," he said. "I'll finish her."

How an airship could fire a torpedo was beyond Felton's benumbed faculties at the time. He was struggling weakly, trying to strike, but unable to, pounded on the face and body by the implacable victim of his fists in the former fight, helplessly borne along toward the tube, now emptied of water.

"Back to the battleship!" they chorused. "In with him!"

Powerless to resist, he was jammed head first into the tube. He heard the door break into place behind him; then

he felt the impact of cold water. Then, faintly as the voice of a telephone, came the voice of a man:

"The forward door's jammed; it won't open."

"Hammer it," came the captain's voice. "Get a two foot maul."

An age or two went by while Felton lay imprisoned in the tube, holding his breath and immersed in water. Then, faintly as the voices, came the sound of a heavy hammer on the walls of the tube:

"Clang clang, clang clang."

Felton awoke in his berth as wet with perspiration as though still immersed in that tube. The gunroom orderly tapped at his door.

"Eight bells, sir," he said.

"All right," he answered. "Eight bells," he murmured to himself. "I heard the first four of them—let's see—about twelve hours ago. Twelve hours of experience between the fourth and fifth strokes. How long does a dream take? Darn a dream, anyhow!"

Powerless to Resist, He Was Jammed Head First Into the Tube.

he felt the impact of cold water. Then, faintly as the voice of a telephone, came the voice of a man:

"The forward door's jammed; it won't open."

"Hammer it," came the captain's voice. "Get a two foot maul."

An age or two went by while Felton lay imprisoned in the tube, holding his breath and immersed in water. Then, faintly as the voices, came the sound of a heavy hammer on the walls of the tube:

"Clang clang, clang clang."

Felton awoke in his berth as wet with perspiration as though still immersed in that tube. The gunroom orderly tapped at his door.

"Eight bells, sir," he said.

"All right," he answered. "Eight bells," he murmured to himself. "I heard the first four of them—let's see—about twelve hours ago. Twelve hours of experience between the fourth and fifth strokes. How long does a dream take? Darn a dream, anyhow!"