

Stirring Stories of the Sea

by Morgan Robertson

The Last Battleship

Remarkable Tale of a Battleship, an Airship and a Submarine

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It was nearly midnight, and the battleship Argyle, stripped to bare steel, was drifting with bared fires, but 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 happens 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 "dreadnaught" 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



He Was Clinging to the Stanchion of an Airship.

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 caustic 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.

"How do you overcome gravitation?"

"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 light 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 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."

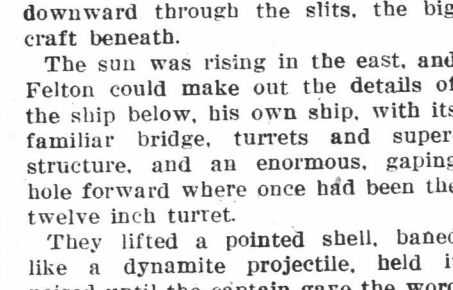
They poised another shell, and at the word "drop" down it went. The commander pocketed his watch and said: "Now for the rest of her. After turret next."

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 ven-



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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 my 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.

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