

From the Podcast Forgotten Sci-Fi

by Craig Patterson

The Undersea Express

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2500 A. D.

For years I had planned a voyage to London in one of the big I. E. C. submersibles, yet never until this day had I been able to adjust my business and other affairs so as to arrange the trip. There were compensations in this, however, for the patents of the International Express Company had lately expired, making it possible for me to see the newer developments which had placed the Company's vessels so far ahead of the many other submarine ships that unloaded their cargoes from the water-filled labyrinth beneath the city streets. Mr. Babbington, Vice President of the Company, had been kindness personified. He had arranged for me to see everything. Yet, as we waited for a sight of the scheduled ship, each succeeding minute served to increase my impatience,

Half an hour of this and I was decidedly ill-humored. I glared about the little subterranean room, noticing for the tenth time, the small elevator which nestled in the corner ready to lift us to the level of old, Broadway 300 feet overhead. I stared balefully at the pale little man who sat before a small switchboard fingering a row of push-buttons. I felt like clutching his throat, not because he was the cause of the submersible's lateness, but because I was angry and he was anemic and miserable-looking. My eyes wandered to the channel side of the chamber, an immense wall of thick, though transparent glass, the size of a show-window, whose protecting bars of steel reminded me of the prisons used in the days of our forefathers. Then, as I gazed out into the green liquid on the far side of the glass, I was conscious that my friend, Mr. Babbington, had touched the operator at the switchboard. For a moment I thought the latter had turned on another big lamp, which was filling the channel with light, but as I looked, the glare came nearer, and with a sudden pumping of my heart, I knew that my ship had come at last.

The giant cigar-shaped vessel nosed her way along and as the forward portion of her length slipped by, I saw the captain at the bridge, which resembled a small bay-window. He waved a hand to Mr. Babbington, whom I heard muttering about Fate and Fortune and the monetary value of the forty-five minutes which the submersible had lost. Then, just as I read the large white letters upon her hull, signifying that she was the International Express Company Ship Number 352 of New York City, she came to a stop with a gentle tremor against the bumper side-clips.

A second later the pale operator pushed one of his buttons and as my eyes followed the direction of his, I saw a huge vertical cylinder cleaving the water in its descent upon the waiting submarine ... There was a mild clash of steel on steel and then, as another button felt the anemic finger

of the operator, six metal arms swung out from the cylinder, locking themselves firmly to as many thistle-keys. Simultaneously, a current of bubbling water began to stream from a series of electro-hinged ports extending around the base of the big tube. This, however, ceased in a few seconds, whereupon a light flashed on above the switchboard.

"Come on," cried Mr. Babbington. "That's the signal-the water is ejected from the cylinder. The 352 will open her hatches and loading will begin."

I followed him into the elevator which whisked us up 265 feet to the loading room where the clang and din of New York's busy streets were wafted down through the ventilators. These noises were as echoes of the sounds which should have issued from this room of arriving crates and departing boxes. But from the room itself there were no loud noises, no clashing of heavy articles, no shouting, no rattling of trucks. I noticed piles of packages and crates deposited gently on the floor by compressed air chutes leading from the checking room on the street level. Each pile was labeled according to its destination - Seattle, San Francisco, London, Paris, Singapore, Peking, etc. The shipments for Chicago and Seattle were at the moment being gathered up by powerful little gas-reciprocating cranes and dumped on large lift platforms which carried them up through the ceiling. Mr. Babbington nodded toward the ascending boxes. "To the Air Liners," he said. "Elevators go to landing towers on the roof."

We arrived at the tubular shafts leading to the channel in time to see my baggage disappear into the depths. Two elevators were unloading while a third sent down a stream of various sized bales. Soon one lift was switched to loading work and shortly after all three were carrying down their consignments destined for points in the British Isles.

As the loading work neared completion, the passenger lift brought up a ruddy, white-haired man dressed in the uniform of a ship captain.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Babbington," he said advancing toward us, "But I can make up the forty-five minutes if I can get up on the surface somewhere on the other side of this storm."

"That's all right, Judson," replied the Vice President with more good humor than he felt. "But what happened to you? My locator dial showed you off Sandy Hook not two hours ago."

"Didn't you get my message?"

"No, I have been showing our plant to my friend here." And turning to me, "This is Captain Judson, skipper of the 352 who will take care of you aboard ship."

Judson shook my hand heartily and continued.

"There is quite a blow out there," he went on. "Some surface ship dragged her anchor and pulled up one of those old, old cables - a relic of the days of wire communication. Well, it fouled my propeller and I had to stop long enough for my divers to repair the damage."

"I trust you have better luck this trip," replied Mr. Babbington in serious tones. "You have a consignment aboard which must reach the London office of Littleton & Roberts by 5:00 P. M. tomorrow; otherwise we lose the \$50,000 guarantee we put up."

"Don't worry, we shall reach London on time," said the captain.

A hurrying official brought Captain Judson his clearance papers before Mr. Babbington could put in another word, and we all walked to the passenger elevator. A handshake, a wave of adieu, and two of us were speeding downward through the steel tube.

I stepped out into a well-lighted passage-way as Captain Judson, following me, pressed a signal button on the door of the elevator. This conveyance, passengerless, rose from our midst and disappeared up the shaft. Some unseen mechanism caused the heavy rods and guides to slide noiselessly against the wall and the great hatch slowly swung upwards on its hinges to close the aperture above it. Before I followed my conductor toward the bow, I heard the grating and clank of metal above the closed hatch as the cylinder was released from its thistlekeys.

"Captain," I said with some awe, "suppose that through an error, one of those telescopic cylinders should be withdrawn before you close the hatch? We should be drowned like rats."

"Couldn't," he retorted shortly, "thistle-keys won't unlock until hatch has clicked shut."

We emerged into a chamber which the captain identified as the bridge. Opposite us I could see the channel lights through the long narrow arc of glass extending from beam to beam. A seaman stood at the wheel surrounded by numerous dials and indicators. Captain Judson joined him and, when a green light flashed on above the binnacle, moved forward the throttle.

I looked out and saw the slimy walls of the channel slip by under the intense brilliance of our headlight. At intervals, traffic lamps came into view and shadows flitted across our bows as we approached and passed under them. Twice I saw submersibles being loaded from cylinders similar to that through which I had descended.

In the distance appeared a red light blinking rapidly. I noticed our skipper's hand retard the throttle and felt the thrumming of the ship decrease to a bare perceptibility. We came to a complete stop beneath the red glow and, as I strained my eyes at the window, a tremendous submarine vessel lumbered athwart our bow.

"United Tobacco Freighter," mumbled Judson. "Biggest submersibles built-800 footers, but very slow."

The light suspended above us turned green and the 352 forged ahead. We emerged into a small lake where the helm was put over hard so that the beam of our headlight shone into another channel leading to the open sea.

Fifteen minutes had passed when a young man I walked in.

"This is Mr. Larkin, my First Officer," grumbled the captain, by way of introduction.

We bowed and grinned at each other as our commander continued.

"Those two lights we just passed mark the entrance to the channel," he said, addressing me. "See that green light off our port bow? That is the

Rockaway Guide Light. Over there is the Manhattan Beach Guide, yes, that flashing one. In a few minutes you will see the Sandy Hook Light off our starboard side."

I remembered having read about the latter light - the most powerful in use. It was invented by Gauttauve, who, after spending his life in research, offered the results of his labor to the government. But although the strongest underwater light then known could not be seen from a distance of eight miles, this wonderful lamp was rejected. Gauttauve died a soured and disappointed man, but his discoveries and inventions, as united in his lamp, lived after him to light the submerged shores of the principal ports of the world.

Larkin interrupted my thoughts by stepping up to take his turn on the bridge, but Captain Judson shook his head.

"I'll stick it out until we get well away from these fights and buoys," he said. "You take our friend through the ship." Larkin smilingly led me down the corridor.

"The Old Man is obsessed with the idea that all hose lights are confusing to the rest of us," murmured the first officer good humouredly. "The truth is that he is prejudiced against them. He prates for hours at a time of the days when submarine navigation was done with no other aids than headlight and compass."

We went down a short companionway to the engine room where the powerful machinery was driving us along at ninety knots an hour. Just inside the door and extending across the breadth of the room, were batteries of immense vacuum tubes whose cathode rays gave off characteristic gleams of phosphorescence.

"Each one capable of 500 H.P.," remarked Larkin, imply, during his explanations.

But to me the real marvel was the gas, which, under the magic of cathode rays, possessed unfathomed properties of expansion. The great difficulty in its use was to employ all its tremendous power; that is, to control the expansion. Larkin told me that the man who could do this would receive a fortune even greater than that of Carpenter, he discoverer of the gas.

I watched the great whirring turbines and I wondered if man-made machinery could ever withstand the full power of the expansion. I heard the whistling gas leap from the triple expansion chambers and, still under the action of cathode rays, lash against the vanes of the turbines only to scream Es way out on the far side and die a natural death in the refrigerating system.

We began the inspection of the ventilating plant where pure oxygen, manufactured from bilge water, was diffused through every inch of our ship's four hundred and twenty feet of length. I was about to press Larkin for details when an alarm bell on the wall began ringing furiously.

"Every man to his post!" he shouted. "Come on the bridge and we'll find out what's up."

We rushed in to find Captain Judson bending over the collision guide. "We're going to be delayed!" he groaned. "Have to go to the assistance of a tramp. The lubber was too near the surface and scraped the bottom of an iceberg. Well, we'll see what can be done. Larkin, take a turn about the ship and see that everyone is standing by. You may then remain at the P. E. while I keep the bridge."

As the mate departed, I glanced at the depth indicator. The arrow was fairly flying, 450, 460, 470, 480 it read. The pointer on the collision guide now extended straight toward our bow.

A nervous voice shouted from the communicator horn, "Ahoy, 352, do you hear me?"

Judson growled assent through his communicator mouthpiece.

"Well, for God's sake, hurry! My power plant is dead now and I can't get any more pressure in my safety tanks. We'll be cracked like an egg shell if you don't reach us soon. We're at 600 feet now and still going down."

"I'll be alongside in five minutes," returned Judson through his mouthpiece. "How much water are you taking in?"

"I don't know. I think I'm full amidships," was the response. "My engineer had to run for it just now. He says the water is seeping in fast."

For a short while there was silence broken only by the singing of my ears subjected for the first time to the increasing air pressure of the compensating tanks.

Captain Judson suddenly spoke into the communicator. "Ahoy, Bristol," he cried. "Can you muster enough pressure around your intake pipe valves to receive a pump line from us?"

"Lord, no!" came the reply. "There's no chance of your pumping. My pressure wouldn't stay up for ten minutes."

Judson ground his teeth. "Well, what do you expect me to do, sink with you?" He paused momentarily, and then, "You've turned down everything I've suggested. Now this is my last word. I'm not going to attempt the saving of that tub of yours. She is completely gone anyway. You've no power and but little air and you're filling fast. I'll take off your crew and that's all."

He ceased, with an angry snort, and cut off our power. The friction of the sea slowed us down almost immediately and as we eased along, I caught sight of a long finger of metal shining in the beam of our headlight.

It was the Bristol. She was settling by the stern, her bow at an angle of thirty degrees vainly pointing toward the surface, which her tireless crew had fought so hard to gain. She was going faster now and only a few moments remained before she would fall into that sickening dive from which there is no recovery.

But our skipper brought us alongside with consummate skill. As I looked out on the port side it seemed that I could almost touch the great black hull which descended nearer and nearer to our level. Judson, too, gazed at the disabled submersible, his hand on the depth valve key which he turned with a slow, continuous motion, keeping pace with the sinking shell beside us.

Then he nodded at Larkin in the doorway. I dashed out to the passenger's emergency port, called the P. E. aboard ship, arriving just in time to see two of the crew enter the little chamber. Before the heavy hatch closed behind them I caught a glimpse of their gigantic copper extreme-pressure suits.

Then as the steel cut them off from my vision, the outer hatch was opened and the sea entered the chamber with a noise like thunder.

I held my breath while the dauntless two sought the stanchions of the Bristol's emergency hatch. The 352 was worked forward ever so little, but always sinking, sinking.

Abruptly Captain Judson's voice yelled into the communicator, "We've got you, we've got you! Quick! Get your men aboard."

There was a faint answering roar of crashing water, then the whistle of compressed air in our own chamber. In a moment the inner hatch opened and a dozen men staggered into view.

I turned again to the bridge with the intention of congratulating Captain Judson for his fine work, but that old sailor was doubled up over his depth valve key.

"They've got no more pressure," he muttered half to himself. "The skipper is alone - had to work the valves for the others. He's going to open his hatch and try to drag himself against that deluge--"

Suddenly there was a gurgling smash. We looked up quickly as the elevated bow of the Bristol came down opposite our windows. The sight seemed to freeze Judson to immobility, one hand on the depth valve key, the other on the throttle. While he watched during that breathless moment, the Bristol hovered on an even keel and then with a quick lurch, her bow settled and the long, black hull plunged downward. At the same moment a claxon sounded discordantly and I was knocked to the floor by the instantaneous jump of our ship as Judson opened wide the throttle. But we were safe from the dangerous suction and we had saved our man - snatched him from the jaws of death.

The nervous tension over, Captain Judson swore softly at the loss of our lead gangplank which had been torn from its runners by our sudden forward lurch for freedom. Except for this slight outbreak, however, everyone went about his work quietly and as Larkin took the bridge and began the long, gradual ascent to our cruising depth, I turned to seek my stateroom.

I must have slept heavily, for when my first meal was finished, I saw the noon shift walking aft toward the engine room. I hurriedly walked in the opposite direction, mentally framing an excuse for my laziness; but when I reached the bridge, there was not a soul in sight. To say I was puzzled would hardly describe my sensation, but as I pondered this peculiar situation, the truth dawned upon me - we were on the surface. That continuous sheet of water beating against the glass was our bow spray; that bright light was the glorious sun.

I raced for the companionway leading to the after deck and stumbled up the steps. Larkin, at the surface gear, looked through his goggles at my puzzled expression.

"Had to come up to make up our lost time," he explained. "We're making 130 knots now."

Indeed, every appearance supported the truth of the latter assertion. Although the sea was smooth and the swell was hardly discernible, the whole forward portion of our deck was awash in the stream of foam displaced by our piercing bows. The wind, whistling through the surface gear, burned into my eyes and tugged at my clothing. Yes, we were indeed speeding and I wondered if our artificial wind was much less than that created by the great airship which passed over us just then, some 6000 feet in the clouds.

My reflections were cut short, however, by the appearance of a blue haze in the distance. Land! It became more distinct with each passing second. But just as I was beginning to watch for landmarks on the distant cliffs, the word was given to go below. There I watched Larkin dive our ship into the depths and lay a course for the Channel. Lights soon began to appear-red, green and white, some flashing, others unblinking, continuous-forming a pattern so complex and confusing that I wondered how a human being could guide us through the maze.

True to form, old Judson strode in to watch, with narrowed eyes, the actions of his protégé among the lights.

"The red lights are shoals and rocks," he explained for my benefit. "The first one we passed was Wolfe Rock. Yes, the white lights indicate a city, though there are exceptions to the rule. That's the Falmouth Light directly opposite. There's no submarine channel in Falmouth; subs have to enter the harbor on the surface. That double white light off in the distance is the entrance to the Plymouth Channel."

I became intensely interested in this submerged galaxy and the time passed so quickly that it seemed but a moment before we had rounded the green and white blinkers of Ramsgate and begun to bear down on the steady glow of the Chatham Beacon. We slowed down for the entrance of the Chatham Channel, but once within its confines, Larkin kept the speed indicator hovering around 35 knots. We glided swiftly past the submerged docks of Chatham and soon approached the brilliantly lighted passages beneath London. When we reduced our speed again I caught sight of the unmistakable lamps of the Express Company Landing, and as Larkin eased us into our berth and the bumper side-clips snapped shut, I knew the journey was ended.

I said good-bye to Larkin and his chief in the passenger elevator, so that upon reaching the street level, I immediately stepped out upon the crowded thoroughfare. A clock on Picadilly registered four o'clock less three minutes and I knew then that Captain Judson had saved the \$50,000.00 guarantee and the crew of the Bristol as well.