

AMAZING ADVENTURES

THRILLING ESCAPES ON LAND
AND SEA AND NEAR THE POLES



WINGS OVER THE ANTARCTIC
by **LINCOLN ELLSWORTH**

W. J. Roberts

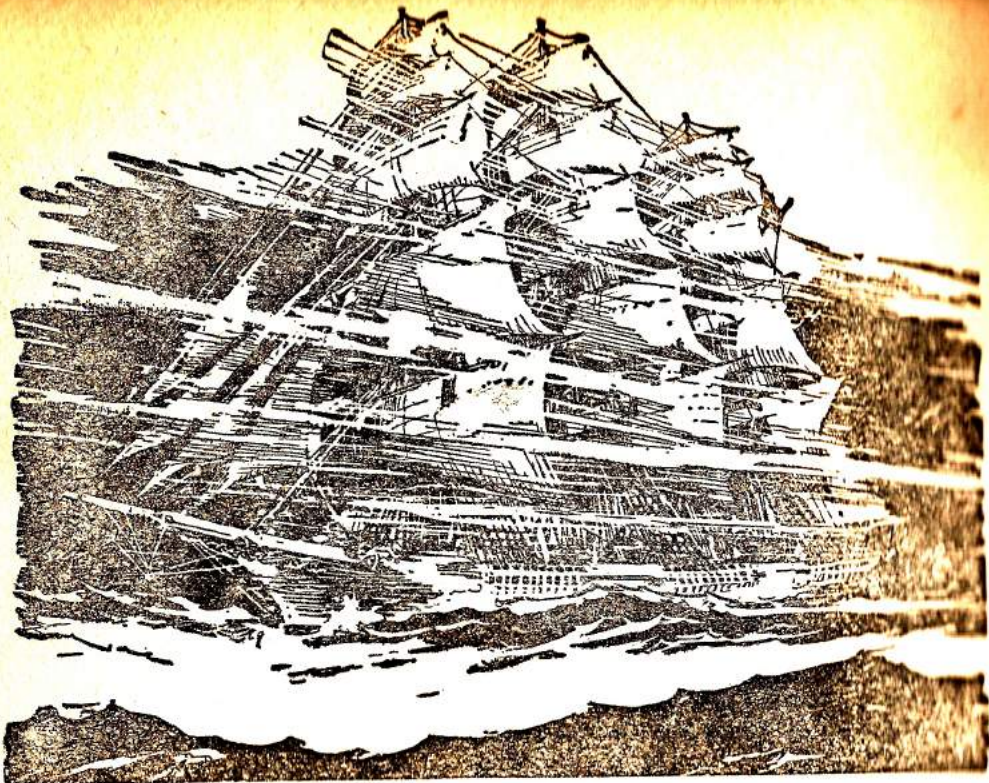
AMAZING ADVENTURES

TRUE STORIES BY GREAT ADVENTURERS

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The Loss of the Jeannette

An Arctic Tragedy

By EDWARD ELLSBERG

The failure of the "Jeannette" expedition under Commander G. W. De Long, to find the North Pole is one of the bravest in the many sad chronicles of Arctic exploration. Even for her day (1879) the "Jeannette" was a small ship, hardly 420 tons in displacement. She was only 142 feet long, 25 feet in the beam and drew but 13 feet of water when fully loaded. She was a three-master, able in a fair breeze, under full sail, to make six knots. Not having been built for Arctic service, she had to be reinforced to withstand the ice.

Until Commander Ellsberg, with the aid of journals—including the last day-to-day entries of de Long as he lay freezing to death—log books and a government investigation collected all the evidence, it has never been fully told. In Hell On Ice (Heinemann, 12/6) he reconstructs the whole story as seen through the eyes of Chief Engineer Melville, in whose report he has incorporated the various narratives and testimony. As the following extracts show, it is a moving human tale of almost superhuman endurance.

THE EDITOR.

SEPTEMBER passed, and the hoped-for gales which might break up the pack and allow us to escape, or at least to work into a winter harbour in distant Wrangel Land, failed to materialise. October came and went in the same manner, no real gales, no winds strong enough to have any effect on the ice, nothing but daily gusts of fine snow which cut our faces and spoiled our footing for exercise. Frozen in, we went with the ice drift, in a general north-westerly direction, till the rocky outline of Herald Island faded into the hummocky horizon to the south, while our continued failure to sight land to the westward made it less and less lively every day that Wrangel Land stretched northward as we had been led to expect.

But we were not idle. After all, our expedition was a scientific one. Aside from attempting to reach the Pole, aside from discovering new lands in this unexplored ocean, our major aim was to add to the world's knowledge of the Arctic seas, of the Arctic skies, of magnetic phenomena, of meteorological information and of animal life in the unknown north. For these purposes we were the most elaborately equipped expedition which had ever gone north. We carried two scientists and God only knew what varieties of scientific instruments gathered from the Smithsonian Institution and the Naval Hydrographic Office.

Since exploration and discovery were for the present out of question, De Long turned to all hands intensively on these scientific phases. On the ice a hundred yards away from the ship so as to be unaffected by the iron in her, we set up a canvas observatory, with compass, dip circle, anemometer, rain-gauge, barometer, pendulum, and a variety of thermometers.

Over the side, through a hole chopped in the thick ice, we provided an opening for our dredge and our drift lead. Hourly we took observations (and carefully recorded them) of every

type of phenomenon for which we were equipped to measure—magnetic variation and dip, wind velocity and direction, humidity, air pressure and temperature, gravity readings, temperature of the sea at top, bottom, and points in between, salinity of the sea water, speed and direction of drift—all this data laboriously read night and day in the Arctic chill went into our logs.

And for the zoological and botanical side of our expedition, all hands were directed to bring in for Newcomb's inspection specimens of anything found on the ice, under, or above it, which meant that whatever our guns could knock down in the form of birds or beasts, or our hooks could catch in the way of fish, passed under Newcomb's scrutiny before (in most cases) they went to Ah Sam, our Chinese cook, and were popped into the galley kettles.

And to top off all in completing our polar records, we brought along an extensive and expensive photograph outfit, intending to get a continuous record of our life in the Arctic and particularly some authentic views of *Aurora Borealis*.

So there being nothing else to compete with it for our time, science received a double dose of attention, too much in fact. Taking the multitude of readings every hour (there were sixteen thermometers alone to be read) kept the watch officer hopping, and as each of us, except Collins and Newcomb, had ship and personnel matters to look after, it became to a high degree a nuisance. Most of this scientific work naturally should have fallen to Collins and Newcomb, but unfortunately matters in their departments went none too smoothly.

The captain received a severe jolt when he learned that the photographic outfit, entrusted to Collins' care, was practically useless because our meteorologist had neglected when buying his photographic plates in San Francisco to get any developer for them and that not a picture he took could be

developed till we got back to civilisation. When on top of this, one of our barometers and some of our precious thermometers entrusted also to Collins were carelessly broken, the captain began to mistrust Collins as a scientist and loaded a considerable part of the observation work on Chipp, on Ambler, and on me—a development which did not help to make any more amicable the attitude of Collins towards his shipmates.

Speaking frankly, after two months' close association in the cabin of the *Jeannette*, we were beginning to get tired of each other's company. Life on shipboard is difficult at best with the same faces at every meal, the same idiosyncrasies constantly rubbing your nerves, the same shortcomings of your messmates to irritate you; but ordinarily there are compensations. Shore leave gets you away from your shipmates, while foreign ports, foreign customs, foreign scenes, and foreigners give flavour to a cruise that makes life not only livable but to my mind rich in variety, and to a person like myself, completely satisfying.

But in the polar ice, we came quickly to the realisation that life on the *Jeannette* was life on shipboard at its worst—a small cramped ship, a captain who socially had retired into himself, only a few officers, and not a solitary compensation. No possibility of shore leave, no foreign ports—nothing but the limitless ice pack holding us helpless and no hope of any change (except for the worse) till summer came and released us.

And, impossible to conceal, a mental despondency, as ponderable and as easily sensed as the cold pervading the ship gripped our captain as we drifted impotently with the pack between Herald Island and Wrangel Land, a thousand miles from that Pole which in a blare of publicity from the Press, he had set out in such confidence to conquer.

Gone now were all the fine theories

about the Kuro-Si-Wo Current and the open path to the northward through the Arctic Ocean that its warm waters would provide. We had only to look over the side at the ice floes fifteen feet thick gripping our hull to know that the "black tide" of Japan had no more contact with these frozen seas than had the green waters of the Nile.

And just as thoroughly exploded was that other delusion on which we had based our choice of route—the Herr Doktor Petermann's thesis that Wrangel Land was a continent stretching northward toward the Pole along the coasts of which with our dog teams we could sledge our way over firm ground to the Pole. Every glimpse we got of it as we drifted north-west with the pack for our first eight weeks showed conclusively enough that Wrangel Land was nothing more than a mountainous island to the southward and not a very large island at that.

As for Dr. Petermann and his idea that Greenland stretched upward across the Pole to reappear on the Siberian side as Wrangel Land, if that ponderous German scientist who so dominated current European opinion on polar matters could have been forced to spend a week in our crow's-nest observing how insignificant a speck his much publicised Wrangel Land formed of the Arctic scene, I am sure the result would have been such a deflation of his ego and his reputation as might be of great benefit at least to future explorers even if too late to be of service to us in the *Jeannette*, already led astray by the good doctor's teachings.

DOOMED

How much the general knowledge amongst our officers that every theory on which the expedition had been based was false had to do with the lack of sociability and of harmony among us, and how much of it may have been owing simply to our physical imprison-

ment in the ice, I will not venture to say. But in my mind, the belief of all that as a polar exploring expedition we were already a failure, doomed never to get anywhere near the Pole, had a decided, if an unconscious, bearing on the reactions of all of us, and most of all on the captain and on Collins, both of whom had brought along massive blank journals whose pages they had confidently expected to fill with the records of their discoveries.

The captain's journal I sometimes saw, as each evening around midnight he toiled over his entries. Instead of records of new lands discovered, of the attainment of ever-increasing latitudes exceeding those around 83° North reached by the English through Baffin Bay and Smith Sound, how it must have gnawed the captain's heart that his entries had to be confined to such items as my struggles with our distilling apparatus, our difficulties with such gadgets as telephones and electric generators, or the momentous facts that Aneguin, Alexey, or Captain Dunbar (as the case might be) had chased a polar bear (or perhaps a walrus) which had been shot (or had escaped). All of these happenings to De Long's chagrin must be recorded as having occurred in the low seventies, latitudes far to the south of those reached even by the insignificant and ill-equipped caravels of Dutch seamen three hundred years ago in their explorations of Spitzbergen.

What Collins put in his journal, I never knew. But I can well imagine how much it must have irked him, a newspaper man accustomed to live in an atmosphere of printing presses rumbling away over their grist of momentous world events to be spread daily before the eager eyes of readers, to have nothing to record except perhaps his personal sense of injustice. Yet put down something every day he did, for I can still see him, his long drooping moustaches almost sweeping the pages, religiously bending over the leather-

bound ledger every afternoon in his chilly cabin in the *Jeannette's* poop, pouring the bitterness of his soul on to those pages, building up a record with which I doubt not he hoped when we returned to civilisation to blast De Long out of the Service in disgrace.



On November 6th, two months to a day of our being trapped in the pack, came the first break in the monotony of our imprisonment. About four in the afternoon Collins, trudging perhaps for the thousandth time the rough path to the observatory across that hundred yards of ice which we had come to regard as substantial as a city pavement, came pell-mell back to the ship and up the gangway into the ward-room to startle us with the news that the pack ice had cracked wide open between our ship and the observatory!

We rushed on deck and over the side. Sure enough it was so. A little behind Dr. Ambler and the captain, I arrived at the edge of the rent, over a yard wide already and continuously growing wider. While we could still jump the gap, there was a wild dash to get our precious instruments out of the observatory and back across the opening to the ship, which (all the officers taking a hand) we shortly accomplished without mishap.

That done, with varying emotions we watched as over the next few hours the chasm widened, with the dark sea water showing in strong contrast to the whiteness of the snow-covered ice. But not for long did we see really open water,

for with the temperature far below zero, the water which was welling up to within two feet of the top of the parted edges of the floe promptly froze, even though it was salt, into a sheet of young ice. The gap nevertheless kept widening till by midnight it was perhaps ten fathoms across.

What was causing the rupture? One man's guess was as good as another's, and all were worthless, I suppose. There was little wind, no land in sight for the edge of the pack to strand on, no evidence of pressure from any direction, and plenty of water beneath us, for the soundings showed over twenty fathoms to a soft mud bottom. Chipp's surmise, that a tidal action was responsible, was as good an explanation as any. But what is not satisfactorily explainable is always fearsome, and it was perhaps excusable that we looked with some anxiety toward our ship and were secretly relieved to see her as steady as Gibraltar there in the ice some fifty fathoms off, still heeled as usual to starboard with her masts and spars showing not even a quiver as they stood sharply outlined against the frosty polar sky. And so the day ended.

But morning brought a different scene. During the night from somewhere came a push on the pack which closed that chasm, forcing the layer of young ice which had formed over it up into broken masses on our floe. Then with all the young ice squeezed out, the two parted edges of the original pack came together under such great pressure that the advancing sheet was shoved up over the edge of the floe holding the ship, leaving broken masses seven to eight feet thick strewn helter-skelter in a long ridge along the line of junction.

TITAN'S NUTCRACKER

As an engineer, I regarded that broken ice with severe misgivings. We fortunately were solidly frozen in, with

our thick floe spreading in all directions interposed as a buckler between us and the pressing pack, but suppose our floe should split and leave us exposed? Could any ship withstand a squeeze in that Titan's nutcracker? In spite of our thick sides and reinforcing trusses, the sight of those eight foot thick blocks of ice tumbled upon our floe was not reassuring.

On the *Jeannette*, men and officers alike questioningly scanned the scene while slowly the hours drifted by and we waited apprehensively in the silence of that Arctic morning for what was next, and while we waited even what light breeze there was died away to a perfect calm. Then without apparent reason and without warning, the gap in the ice suddenly yawned open to a width of some five fathoms and immediately down the canal thus formed, broken ice started to flow in a groaning, shrieking mass that so shook the floe in which the *Jeannette* was embedded that to us there, only a few yards away clinging to the rail of our ship, it appeared each instant the sheet of ice protecting us must shatter and the *Jeanette* herself be sucked in to join that swirling maelstrom of hurtling ice cakes.

Our eyes glued to the quaking floe into which we were frozen, we watched it shiver and throb under the battering of the broken blocks hurrying by, inwardly speculating on how long it would stand up. Occasionally I glanced furtively at the five sledges standing on the poop, packed with over a month's provisions for men and dogs, ready at a moment's notice to go over the side should we have to abandon ship. But if our ship, torn loose and caught in that mass of churning ice, was crushed and sank, how could we ever get safely away from her with our lives, let alone get clear those sledges carrying the food?

Five hours of that scene and of such thoughts we stood, and then, thank God, the flow of ice stopped. The *Jeanette* was unharmed. We were still safe.

But how long a respite would we have? Who knew? Evidently not our captain. As I went below, worn and frozen, I heard him call out to our executive officer:

"Knock off all regular ship's work, Chipp. Turn to immediately with all hands and make a couple of husky sledges to carry our dinghies over that ice if we have to abandon ship. And for God's sake, shake it up!"

We got a day's rest if one may call it that, while Nindemann, Sweetman, and both watches toiled feverishly on the sledges. Then came another day of strain, watching the moving ice grinding and smashing at our floe, breaking it away to within a hundred feet of us. Then a brief respite over night, only at 6 a.m. to have the motion start again worse than ever.

This time, hell seemed to have broken loose. From the pack came a noise the like of which I never heard before on land or sea, in war or peace, sounding like the shrieking of a thousand steamer whistles, the thunder of heavy artillery, the roaring of a hurricane, and the crash of collapsing houses all blended together as down that canal in the pack, a terrifying sight to behold, came stupendous pieces of floe ice as high as two or three storey buildings. Sliding by crazily upended, they churned and battered against each other and against the thick edges of our floe with such unearthly screeching and horrible groanings that my ear-drums seemed in a fair way to split under the impact of that sound!

Occasionally a berg would jam in the canal blocking the current. With that, under the force of the ice pressing behind, our floe would groan and heave up into waves till several feet of its edge cracked off, easing the pressure and relieving the jam—but each time leaving us with less and less of the floe between us and disaster.

Half an hour of this in the dim light of the early dawn, and then the movement ceased, leaving our tortured ears

and jumping nerves to return to normal as best they could while the day broke. But our relief was considerably tempered when in the better light we discovered that a new crack had formed a little distance ahead across our bows and that into this opening an advancing floeberg was being driven along like a wedge towards our port side, threatening to cut into the undisturbed pack there and leave us embedded in a tiny island of ice, to be exposed then to the wear of churning bergs on both sides of us!

READY FOR INSTANT FLIGHT

With no further noticeable movement of the pack, we were left in peace to contemplate the possibilities of this situation till late afternoon, when the main stream again got under way and bombarded our floe to starboard heavily for four hours so strenuously that it seemed to all of us that this time we must surely go adrift. But at about 8 p.m., the motion ceased again, leaving us all in such a state of mind that the captain's order for all hands to sleep in their clothes with knapsacks close at hand ready for instant flight, seemed to us the most natural thing in the world.

We didn't get much sleep. Hardly had the mid-watch ended, when little Newcomb, who, unable to rest at all, had, in spite of the bitter cold, stayed on deck till 4 a.m., darted into De Long's cabin, seized his shoulder, woke him with a shout:

"Turn out, captain! It's all over this time! That ice is coming right down on us!"

De Long, already fully clothed, sprang from his bunk, seized his knapsack, and rushed on deck. The rest of us in the poop, none too sound asleep ourselves, were roused by the noise and hurriedly followed him up to find that Newcomb had hardly exaggerated.

On the starboard side, like sky-scrapers being poured through a chute, the broken floes were cascading along

the channel at a livelier rate than ever, but that at least was hardly novel to us now. What froze our blood as we stood there in the cold light of the moon was the sight ahead. The rift in the pack which yesterday was headed across our bows, had changed direction squarely for our bowsprit, and now along that opening was coming toward us irresistibly and steadily, towering as high as our yard-arms, a torrent of floebergs, thundering down on the yet unbroken pack between with a violence that made the sturdy *Jeannette* quiver under our feet like jelly.

Hardly audible in the roaring of the ice, Jack Cole shrilled away on his bosun's pipe, then his hoarse voice belled along the berth deck:

"All hands! Stand by to abandon ship"

Our entire crew poured up from below to shiver in a temperature of twenty below zero and shake, I have no doubt for other good reasons, as they stood helpless round the main-mast, all eyes riveted on that fearful wall of advancing ice, with a crest of hummocks, weighing twenty to fifty tons each, toppling forward like surf breaking on our floe. Another crash, another startling advance of the floebergs, and on top of the deck-house I saw De Long suddenly grasp the mainstay with both hands and hang on for dear life, awaiting the final smash as that Niagara of ice struck us.

The blow never came. God alone knows why, but hardly twenty-five feet from our bows, the onrushing wall of ice suddenly halted, the pressure vanished, and we on the *Jeannette* were left to contemplate, in the deathly Arctic silence which ensued and in the growing light, the indescribable wreckage that had been wrought in the level floe that had once surrounded us. And then like a feeble anti-climax, the stillness was broken by the whistling of the bosun's pipe, followed by his call:

"All hands! Lay below for breakfast!"

Breakfast? Who really wanted breakfast? What each of us earnestly wished was only to be far to the south, away from that dreaded pack ready to crush us, but seemingly delaying the fatal moment as a cat delays, knowing that the mouse with which it toys cannot get away.

* * * *

(After eighteen months in the ice, over two years after sailing, the good ship came to her end.)



On June 5th, 1881, a Sunday morning, we got back to the *Jeannette*. After our exploration of bleak little Henrietta

Island, in the early afternoon, in honour of our safe return, De Long with his eyes hardly visible through his bandages, conducted a Thanksgiving Service, attended only by Dr. Ambler and myself, for the other two usual members of the congregation, Chipp and Dunbar, were both on the sick list. In further celebration of the event, the captain ordered in the evening the issue of a double ration of whisky forward, which ceremony, conducted in the fore-castle by Jack Cole, drew a somewhat larger attendance, I believe.

Our sick list was now considerable—Danenhower, Chipp, Newcomb, Dunbar, and Alexey, with the skipper himself really belonging there, but nevertheless permitted by the doctor to be up so long as he stayed off the ice for a few days till his cut had a fair chance to start to heal. Chipp, Newcomb, and Alexey were still badly off from lead poisoning, but Tong Sing, our steward, had recovered sufficiently to go back on duty and was now mainly engaged in tending the sick when not actually serving.

From this unsatisfactory state of our personnel, I turned my attention after a week's absence once more to the *Jeannette* and what was going on round her. Henrietta Island was rapidly dropping abaft our beam as we drifted westward past its northern side and it was evident that we would soon drop it out of sight. Jeannette Island had already vanished from our world.

MOVING ICE THREAT

But the action of the ice about us attracted most attention. Not since November, 1879, had we seen so much moving ice near the ship, the effect undoubtedly of near-by Henrietta Island. The day after my return, we found our floe reduced to an ice island about a mile one way and half of that the other, with ourselves about a hundred yards from the western edge, while all about us was a tumbling procession of floebergs, shrieking and howling as they rolled past. Leads opened and closed endlessly in the near distance with ridges of broken floes shooting thirty feet above the pack.

The roaring of the breaking floes sounded like continuous thunder. And in all this turmoil our ice island with the *Jeannette* in it moved majestically along. Meanwhile, we from our decks regarded it, thankful that our floe was not breaking up to crush our ship and leave our heavy boats and sledges to the mercies of that chaos, a half-mile of which with a sledge lightly loaded only, off Henrietta Island we had barely managed to survive.

Another day passed, leaving the island in our wake. The moving ice closed up again with long rows of piled-up floes all about us, one huge ridge of blocks seven to eight feet thick riding the pack not a hundred and fifty yards away from our bulwarks. And yet one more day and the captain got a sight, showing we were going due west at a fair rate, which if continued, unless we

turned north, would ultimately bring us out into the Atlantic, though the chances seemed better for a resumption of our north-west drift toward the Pole. But toward either of these, now that we had some discoveries to add to the world's charts, we looked forward hopefully. At any rate, since we had to leave the matter to the pack, for the present our motto was obviously: "Westward ho!"

June 10th came with our drift still steadily westward, clear weather, and the temperature about 25° F., well below freezing though above zero, which for us made it very pleasant weather. Alexey came off the sick list, and so also did Dunbar; leaving only Chipp as a bedridden case, and Newcomb, up, but acting as if he were exceedingly miserable, which I guess he was. Danenhower, permanently on the sick list, was allowed on deck an hour a day for exercise that the doctor hoped would gradually restore his health and save his one good eye, which now showed some signs of getting over its sympathetic inflammation.

During these hourly periods, Dan was sternly ordered to keep in the shade and wear his almost opaque shield, but unfortunately our overbold navigator stepped out into the sun and pulled aside the glass, attempting to get at least one decent look around. Instead he had an instant relapse of his inflamed eye which nearly drove both Ambler and the captain wild.

Fortunately, the captain had had all his bandages save one small one removed from his injured skull by now, or I think he would have ripped them off in his attempts to tear his hair over the results of Dan's reckless disobedience.

Except for this unfortunate mishap, June 10th passed away pleasantly enough. With no more thought than that it was just another day in the pack, most of us turned in at 10 p.m., concerned only about whether our drift next day would continue west or change