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An Antarctic Mystery

Jules Verne

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Jules Verne

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‘An Antarctic Mystery’ (French: ‘Le Sphinx des glaces, The Sphinx of the Ice Fields’), is an 1897 adventure novel by Jules Verne and is a response to Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 novel ‘The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket.’ It follows the adventures of the narrator and his journey from the Kerguelen Islands aboard the Halbrane. Neither Poe nor Verne had actually visited the remote Kerguelen Islands, in the south Indian Ocean, but their works are some of the few literary (as opposed to exploratory) references to the archipelago.

The story is set in 1839, eleven years after the events in ‘Arthur Gordon Pym,’ one year after the publication of that book. The narrator is a wealthy American Jeorling, who has entertained himself with private studies of the wildlife on the Kerguelen Islands and is now looking for a passage back to the USA. Halbrane is one of the first ships to arrive at Kerguelen, and its captain Len Guy somewhat reluctantly agrees to have Jeorling as a passenger as far as Tristan da Cunha.

Underway, they meet a stray iceberg with a dead body on it, which turns out to be a sailor from a ship named Jane. A note found with him indicates that he and several others including Jane's captain William Guy had survived an assassination attempt and are still alive. Guy, who had talked to Jeorling earlier about the subject of Pym, reveals himself to be the brother of William Guy. He decides to try to come to the rescue of Jane's crew. After taking on provisions on Tristan da Cunha and the Falklands, they head South with Jeorling still on board. They also take aboard another mysterious sailor named Hunt who is eager to join the search for undisclosed reasons.

Extraordinarily mild weather allows the Halbrane to make good progress, and they break the pack ice barrier, which surrounds an ice-free Antarctic ocean, early in summer. They find first Bennet's islet, where Jane had made a stop, and finally Tsalal. But the island is completely devastated, apparently by a recent massive earthquake, and deserted. They find lots of remains of Tsalal's natives, who apparently died long before the earthquake, and the collar of Pym's dog, Tiger, but no trace of the Jane…

"[Jules Verne]’s first books, the shortest, ‘Around the World’ or ‘From the Earth to the Moon,’ are still the best in my view. However, the works should be judged as a whole rather than in detail, and on their results rather than their intrinsic quality. Over the last forty years, they have had an influence unequalled by any other books on the children of this and every country in Europe. And the influence has been good, in so far as can be judged today." (Léon Blum, L'Humanité, April 3, 1905).

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