

The Master of the World

By

Jules Verne

Contents

- 1 What Happened in the Mountains
- 2 I Reach Morganton
- 3 The Great Eyrie
- 4 A Meeting of the Automobile Club
- 5 Along the Shores of New England
- 6 The First Letter
- 7 A Third Machine
- 8 At Any Cost
- 9 The Second Letter
- 10 Outside the Law
- 11 The Campaign
- 12 Black Rock Creek
- 13 On Board the Terror
- 14 Niagara
- 15 The Eagle's Nest
- 16 Robur, the Conqueror
- 17 In the Name of the Law
- 18 The Old Housekeeper's Last Comment

Chapter 1

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MOUNTAINS

If I speak of myself in this story, it is because I have been deeply involved in its startling events, events doubtless among the most extraordinary which this twentieth century will witness. Sometimes I even ask myself if all this has really happened, if its pictures dwell in truth in my memory, and not merely in my imagination. In my position as head inspector in the federal police department at Washington, urged on moreover by the desire, which has always been very strong in me, to investigate and understand everything which is mysterious, I naturally became much interested in these remarkable occurrences. And as I have been employed by the government in various important affairs and secret missions since I was a mere lad, it also happened very naturally that the head of my department placed in my charge this astonishing investigation, wherein I found myself wrestling with so many impenetrable mysteries.

In the remarkable passages of the recital, it is important that you should believe my word. For some of the facts I can bring no other testimony than my own. If you do not wish to believe me, so be it. I can scarce believe it all myself.

The strange occurrences began in the western part of our great

American State of North Carolina. There, deep amid the Blueridge Mountains rises the crest called the Great Eyrie. Its huge rounded form is distinctly seen from the little town of Morganton on the Catawba River, and still more clearly as one approaches the mountains by way of the village of Pleasant Garden.

Why the name of Great Eyrie was originally given this mountain by the people of the surrounding region, I am not quite Sure It rises rocky and grim and inaccessible, and under certain atmospheric conditions has a peculiarly blue and distant effect. But the idea one would naturally get from the name is of a refuge for birds of prey, eagles condors, vultures; the home of vast numbers of the feathered tribes, wheeling and screaming above peaks beyond the reach of man. Now, the Great Eyrie did not seem particularly attractive to birds; on the contrary, the people of the neighborhood began to remark that on some days when birds approached its summit they mounted still further, circled high above the crest, and then flew swiftly away, troubling the air with harsh cries.

Why then the name Great Eyrie? Perhaps the mount might better have been called a crater, for in the center of those steep and rounded walls there might well be a huge deep basin. Perhaps there might even lie within their circuit a mountain lake, such as exists in other parts of the Appalachian mountain system, a lagoon fed by the rain and the winter snows.

In brief was not this the site of an ancient volcano, one which had slept through ages, but whose inner fires might yet reawake? Might not the Great Eyrie reproduce in its neighborhood the violence of Mount Krakatoa or the terrible disaster of Mont Pelee? If there were indeed a central lake, was there not danger that its waters, penetrating the strata beneath, would be turned to steam by the volcanic fires and tear their way forth in a tremendous explosion, deluging the fair plains of Carolina with an eruption such as that of 1902 in Martinique?

Indeed, with regard to this last possibility there had been certain symptoms recently observed which might well be due to volcanic action. Smoke had floated above the mountain and once the country folk passing near had heard subterranean noises, unexplainable rumblings. A glow in the sky had crowned the height at night.

When the wind blew the smoky cloud eastward toward Pleasant Garden, a few cinders and ashes drifted down from it. And finally one stormy night pale flames, reflected from the clouds above the summit, cast upon the district below a sinister, warning light.

In presence of these strange phenomena, it is not astonishing that the people of the surrounding district became seriously disquieted. And to the disquiet was joined an imperious need of knowing the true condition of the mountain. The Carolina newspapers had flaring headlines, "The Mystery of Great Eyrie!" They asked if it was not

dangerous to dwell in such a region. Their articles aroused curiosity and fear--curiosity among those who being in no danger themselves were interested in the disturbance merely as a strange phenomenon of nature, fear in those who were likely to be the victims if a catastrophe actually occurred. Those more immediately threatened were the citizens of Morganton, and even more the good folk of Pleasant Garden and the hamlets and farms yet closer to the mountain.

Assuredly it was regrettable that mountain climbers had not previously attempted to ascend to the summit of the Great Eyrie. The cliffs of rock which surrounded it had never been scaled. Perhaps they might offer no path by which even the most daring climber could penetrate to the interior. Yet, if a volcanic eruption menaced all the western region of the Carolinas, then a complete examination of the mountain was become absolutely necessary.

Now before the actual ascent of the crater, with its many serious difficulties, was attempted, there was one way which offered an opportunity of reconnoitering the interior, with out clambering up the precipices. In the first days of September of that memorable year, a well-known aeronaut named Wilker came to Morganton with his balloon. By waiting for a breeze from the east, he could easily rise in his balloon and drift over the Great Eyrie. There from a safe height above he could search with a powerful glass into its deeps. Thus he would know if the mouth of a volcano really opened amid the mighty rocks. This was the principal question. If this were settled,

it would be known if the surrounding country must fear an eruption at some period more or less distant.

The ascension was begun according to the programme suggested. The wind was fair and steady; the sky clear; the morning clouds were disappearing under the vigorous rays of the sun. If the interior of the Great Eyrie was not filled with smoke, the aeronaut would be able to search with his glass its entire extent. If the vapors were rising, he, no doubt, could detect their source.

The balloon rose at once to a height of fifteen hundred feet, and there rested almost motionless for a quarter of an hour. Evidently the east wind, which was brisk upon the Surface of the earth, did not make itself felt at that height. Then, unlucky chance, the balloon was caught in an adverse current, and began to drift toward the east. Its distance from the mountain chain rapidly increased. Despite all the efforts of the aeronaut, the citizens of Morganton saw the balloon disappear on the wrong horizon. Later, they learned that it had landed in the neighborhood of Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

This attempt having failed, it was agreed that it should be tried again under better conditions. Indeed, fresh rumblings were heard from the mountain, accompanied by heavy clouds and wavering glimmerings of light at night. Folk began to realize that the Great Eyrie was a serious and perhaps imminent source of danger. Yes, the

entire country lay under the threat of some seismic or volcanic disaster.

During the first days of April of that year, these more or less vague apprehensions turned to actual panic. The newspapers gave prompt echo to the public terror. The entire district between the mountains and Morganton was sure that an eruption was at hand.

The night of the fourth of April, the good folk of Pleasant Garden were awakened by a sudden uproar. They thought that the mountains were falling upon them. They rushed from their houses, ready for instant flight, fearing to see open before them some immense abyss, engulfing the farms and villages for miles around.

The night was very dark. A weight of heavy clouds pressed down upon the plain. Even had it been day the crest of the mountains would have been invisible.

In the midst of this impenetrable obscurity, there was no response to the cries which arose from every side. Frightened groups of men, women, and children groped their way along the black roads in wild confusion. From every quarter came the screaming voices: "It is an earthquake!" "It is an eruption!" "Whence comes it?" "From the Great Eyrie!"

Into Morganton sped the news that stones, lava, ashes, were raining

down upon the country.

Shrewd citizens of the town, however, observed that if there were an eruption the noise would have continued and increased, the flames would have appeared above the crater; or at least their lurid reflections would have penetrated the clouds. Now, even these reflections were no longer seen. If there had been an earthquake, the terrified people saw that at least their houses had not crumbled beneath the shock. It was possible that the uproar had been caused by an avalanche, the fall of some mighty rock from the summit of the mountains.

An hour passed without other incident. A wind from the west sweeping over the long chain of the Blueridge, set the pines and hemlocks wailing on the higher slopes. There seemed no new cause for panic; and folk began to return to their houses. All, however, awaited impatiently the return of day.

Then suddenly, toward three o'clock in the morning, another alarm! Flames leaped up above the rocky wall of the Great Eyrie. Reflected from the clouds, they illuminated the atmosphere for a great distance. A crackling, as if of many burning trees, was heard.

Had a fire spontaneously broken out? And to what cause was it due? Lightning could not have started the conflagration; for no thunder had been heard. True, there was plenty of material for fire; at this

height the chain of the Blueridge is well wooded. But these flames were too sudden for any ordinary cause.

"An eruption! An eruption!"

The cry resounded from all sides. An eruption! The Great Eyrie was then indeed the crater of a volcano buried in the bowels of the mountains. And after so many years, so many ages even, had it reawakened? Added to the flames, was a rain of stones and ashes about to follow? Were the lavas going to pour down torrents of molten fire, destroying everything in their passage, annihilating the towns, the villages, the farms, all this beautiful world of meadows, fields and forests, even as far as Pleasant Garden and Morganton?

This time the panic was overwhelming; nothing could stop it. Women carrying their infants, crazed with terror, rushed along the eastward roads. Men, deserting their homes, made hurried bundles of their most precious belongings and set free their livestock, cows, sheep, pigs, which fled in all directions. What disorder resulted from this agglomeration, human and animal, under darkest night, amid forests, threatened by the fires of the volcano, along the border of marshes whose waters might be upheaved and overflow! With the earth itself threatening to disappear from under the feet of the fugitives! Would they be in time to save themselves, if a cascade of glowing lava came rolling down the slope of the mountain across their route?

Nevertheless, some of the chief and shrewder farm owners were not swept away in this mad flight, which they did their best to restrain. Venturing within a mile of the mountain, they saw that the glare of the flames was decreasing. In truth it hardly seemed that the region was immediately menaced by any further upheaval. No stones were being hurled into space; no torrent of lava was visible upon the slopes; no rumblings rose from the ground. There was no further manifestation of any seismic disturbance capable of overwhelming the land.

At length, the flight of the fugitives ceased at a distance where they seemed secure from all danger. Then a few ventured back toward the mountain. Some farms were reoccupied before the break of day.

By morning the crests of the Great Eyrie showed scarcely the least remnant of its cloud of smoke. The fires were certainly at an end; and if it were impossible to determine their cause, one might at least hope that they would not break out again.

It appeared possible that the Great Eyrie had not really been the theater of volcanic phenomena at all. There was no further evidence that the neighborhood was at the mercy either of eruptions or of earthquakes.

Yet once more about five o'clock, from beneath the ridge of the mountain, where the shadows of night still lingered, a strange noise swept across the air, a sort of whirring, accompanied by the beating

of mighty wings. And had it been a clear day, perhaps the farmers would have seen the passage of a mighty bird of prey, some monster of the skies, which having risen from the Great Eyrie sped away toward the east.