

Chapter 2

I REACH MORGANTON

The twenty-seventh of April, having left Washington the night before, I arrived at Raleigh, the capital of the State of North Carolina.

Two days before, the head of the federal police had called me to his room. He was awaiting me with some impatience. "John Strock," said he, "are you still the man who on so many occasions has proven to me both his devotion and his ability?"

"Mr. Ward," I answered, with a bow, "I cannot promise success or even ability, but as to devotion, I assure you, it is yours."

"I do not doubt it," responded the chief. "And I will ask you instead this more exact question: Are you as fond of riddles as ever? As eager to penetrate into mysteries, as I have known you before?"

"I am, Mr. Ward."

"Good, Strock; then listen."

Mr. Ward, a man of about fifty years, of great power and intellect, was fully master of the important position he filled. He had several

times entrusted to me difficult missions which I had accomplished successfully, and which had won me his confidence. For several months past, however, he had found no occasion for my services. Therefore I awaited with impatience what he had to say. I did not doubt that his questioning implied a serious and important task for me.

"Doubtless you know," said he, "what has happened down in the Blue-ridge Mountains near Morganton."

"Surely, Mr. Ward, the phenomena reported from there have been singular enough to arouse anyone's curiosity."

"They are singular, even remarkable, Strock. No doubt about that. But there is also reason to ask, if these phenomena about the Great Eyrie are not a source of continued danger to the people there, if they are not forerunners of some disaster as terrible as it is mysterious."

"It is to be feared, sir."

"So we must know, Strock, what is inside of that mountain. If we are helpless in the face of some great force of nature, people must be warned in time of the danger which threatens them."

"It is clearly the duty of the authorities, Mr. Ward," responded I, "to learn what is going on within there."

"True, Strock; but that presents great difficulties. Everyone reports that it is impossible to scale the precipices of the Great Eyrie and reach its interior. But has anyone ever attempted it with scientific appliances and under the best conditions? I doubt it, and believe a resolute attempt may bring success."

"Nothing is impossible, Mr. Ward; what we face here is merely a question of expense."

"We must not regard expense when we are seeking to reassure an entire population, or to preserve it from a catastrophe. There is another suggestion I would make to you. Perhaps this Great Eyrie is not so inaccessible as is supposed. Perhaps a band of malefactors have secreted themselves there, gaining access by ways known only to themselves."

"What! You suspect that robbers--"

"Perhaps I am wrong, Strock; and these strange sights and sounds have all had natural causes. Well, that is what we have to settle, and as quickly as possible."

"I have one question to ask."

"Go ahead, Strock."

"When the Great Eyrie has been visited, when we know the source of these phenomena, if there really is a crater there and an eruption is imminent, can we avert it?"

"No, Strock; but we can estimate the extent of the danger. If some volcano in the Alleghanies threatens North Carolina with a disaster similar to that of Martinique, buried beneath the outpourings of Mont Pelee, then these people must leave their homes."

"I hope, sir, there is no such widespread danger."

"I think not, Strock; it seems to me highly improbable that an active volcano exists in the Blueridge mountain chain. Our Appalachian mountain system is nowhere volcanic in its origin. But all these events cannot be without basis. In short, Strock, we have decided to make a strict inquiry into the phenomena of the Great Eyrie, to gather all the testimony, to question the people of the towns and farms. To do this, I have made choice of an agent in whom we have full confidence; and this agent is you, Strock."

"Good! I am ready, Mr. Ward," cried I, "and be sure that I shall neglect nothing to bring you full information."

"I know it, Strock, and I will add that I regard you as specially fitted for the work. You will have a splendid opportunity to exercise, and I hope to satisfy, your favorite passion of curiosity."

"As you say, sir."

"You will be free to act according to circumstances. As to expenses, if there seems reason to organize an ascension party, which will be costly, you have carte blanche."

"I will act as seems best, Mr. Ward."

"Let me caution you to act with all possible discretion. The people in the vicinity are already over-excited. It will be well to move secretly. Do not mention the suspicions I have suggested to you. And above all, avoid arousing any fresh panic."

"It is understood."

"You will be accredited to the Mayor of Morganton, who will assist you. Once more, be prudent, Strock, and acquaint no one with your mission, unless it is absolutely necessary. You have often given proofs of your intelligence and address; and this time I feel assured you will succeed."

I asked him only "When shall I start?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, I shall leave Washington; and the day after, I shall be at Morganton."

How little suspicion had I of what the future had in store for me!

I returned immediately to my house where I made my preparations for departure; and the next evening found me in Raleigh. There I passed the night, and in the course of the next afternoon arrived at the railroad station of Morganton.

Morganton is but a small town, built upon strata of the jurassic period, particularly rich in coal. Its mines give it some prosperity. It also has numerous unpleasant mineral waters, so that the season there attracts many visitors. Around Morganton is a rich farming country, with broad fields of grain. It lies in the midst of swamps, covered with mosses and reeds. Evergreen forests rise high up the mountain slopes. All that the region lacks is the wells of natural gas, that invaluable natural source of power, light, and warmth, so abundant in most of the Alleghany valleys. Villages and farms are numerous up to the very borders of the mountain forests. Thus there were many thousands of people threatened, if the Great Eyrie proved indeed a volcano, if the convulsions of nature extended to Pleasant Garden and to Morganton.

The mayor of Morganton, Mr. Elias Smith, was a tall man, vigorous and enterprising, forty years old or more, and of a health to defy all

the doctors of the two Americas. He was a great hunter of bears and panthers, beasts which may still be found in the wild gorges and mighty forests of the Alleghanies.

Mr. Smith was himself a rich land-owner, possessing several farms in the neighborhood. Even his most distant tenants received frequent visits from him. Indeed, whenever his official duties did not keep him in his so-called home at Morganton, he was exploring the surrounding country, irresistibly drawn by the instincts of the hunter.

I went at once to the house of Mr. Smith. He was expecting me, having been warned by telegram. He received me very frankly, without any formality, his pipe in his mouth, a glass of brandy on the table. A second glass was brought in by a servant, and I had to drink to my host before beginning our interview.

"Mr. Ward sent you," said he to me in a jovial tone. "Good; let us drink to Mr. Ward's health."

I clinked glasses with him, and drank in honor of the chief of police.

"And now," demanded Elias Smith, "what is worrying him?"

At this I made known to the mayor of Morganton the cause and the purpose of my mission in North Carolina. I assured him that my chief

had given me full power, and would render me every assistance, financial and otherwise, to solve the riddle and relieve the neighborhood of its anxiety relative to the Great Eyrie.

Elias Smith listened to me without uttering a word, but not without several times refilling his glass and mine. While he puffed steadily at his pipe, the close attention which he gave me was beyond question. I saw his cheeks flush at times, and his eyes gleam under their bushy brows. Evidently the chief magistrate of Morganton was uneasy about Great Eyrie, and would be as eager as I to discover the cause of these phenomena.

When I had finished my communication, Elias Smith gazed at me for some moments in silence. Then he said, softly, "So at Washington they wish to know what the Great Eyrie hides within its circuit?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith."

"And you, also?"

"I do."

"So do I, Mr. Strock."

He and I were as one in our curiosity.

"You will understand," added he, knocking the cinders from his pipe, "that as a land-owner, I am much interested in these stories of the Great Eyrie, and as mayor, I wish to protect my constituents."

"A double reason," I commented, "to stimulate you to discover the cause of these extraordinary occurrences! Without doubt, my dear Mr. Smith, they have appeared to you as inexplicable and as threatening as to your people."

"Inexplicable, certainly, Mr. Strock. For on my part, I do not believe it possible that the Great Eyrie can be a volcano; the Alleghanies are nowhere of volcanic origins. I, myself, in our immediate district, have never found any geological traces of scoria, or lava, or any eruptive rock whatever. I do not think, therefore, that Morganton can possibly be threatened from such a source."

"You really think not, Mr. Smith?"

"Certainly."

"But these tremblings of the earth that have been felt in the neighborhood!"

"Yes these tremblings! These tremblings!" repeated Mr. Smith, shaking his head; "but in the first place, is it certain that there have been tremblings? At the moment when the flames showed most sharply, I was

on my farm of Wildon, less than a mile from the Great Eyrie. There was certainly a tumult in the air, but I felt no quivering of the earth."

"But in the reports sent to Mr. Ward--"

"Reports made under the impulse of the panic," interrupted the mayor of Morganton. "I said nothing of any earth tremors in mine."

"But as to the flames which rose clearly above the crest?"

"Yes, as to those, Mr. Strock, that is different. I saw them; saw them with my own eyes, and the clouds certainly reflected them for miles around. Moreover noises certainly came from the crater of the Great Eyrie, hissings, as if a great boiler were letting off steam."

"You have reliable testimony of this?"

"Yes, the evidence of my own ears."

"And in the midst of this noise, Mr. Smith, did you believe that you heard that most remarkable of all the phenomena, a sound like the flapping of great wings?"

"I thought so, Mr. Strock; but what mighty bird could this be, which sped away after the flames had died down, and what wings could ever

make such tremendous sounds. I therefore seriously question, if this must not have been a deception of my imagination. The Great Eyrie a refuge for unknown monsters of the sky! Would they not have been seen long since, soaring above their immense nest of stone? In short, there is in all this a mystery which has not yet been solved."

"But we will solve it, Mr. Smith, if you will give me your aid."

"Surely, Mr. Strock; tomorrow we will start our campaign."

"Tomorrow." And on that word the mayor and I separated. I went to a hotel, and established myself for a stay which might be indefinitely prolonged. Then having dined, and written to Mr. Ward, I saw Mr. Smith again in the afternoon, and arranged to leave Morganton with him at daybreak.

Our first purpose was to undertake the ascent of the mountain, with the aid of two experienced guides. These men had ascended Mt. Mitchell and others of the highest peaks of the Blueridge. They had never, however, attempted the Great Eyrie, knowing that its walls of inaccessible cliffs defended it on every side. Moreover, before the recent startling occurrences the Great Eyrie had not particularly attracted the attention of tourists. Mr. Smith knew the two guides personally as men daring, skillful and trustworthy. They would stop at no obstacle; and we were resolved to follow them through everything.

Moreover Mr. Smith remarked at the last that perhaps it was no longer as difficult as formerly to penetrate within the Great Eyrie.

"And why?" asked I.

"Because a huge block has recently broken away from the mountain side and perhaps it has left a practicable path or entrance."

"That would be a fortunate chance, Mr. Smith."

"We shall know all about it, Mr. Strock, no later than tomorrow."

"Till tomorrow, then."