

## Chapter 3

### THE GREAT EYRIE

The next day at dawn, Elias Smith and I left Morganton by a road which, winding along the left bank of the Catawba River, led to the village of Pleasant Garden. The guides accompanied us, Harry Horn, a man of thirty, and James Bruck, aged twenty-five. They were both natives of the region, and in constant demand among the tourists who climbed the peaks of the Blueridge and Cumberland Mountains.

A light wagon with two good horses was provided to carry us to the foot of the range. It contained provisions for two or three days, beyond which our trip surely would not be protracted. Mr. Smith had shown himself a generous provider both in meats and in liquors. As to water the mountain springs would furnish it in abundance, increased by the heavy rains, frequent in that region during springtime.

It is needless to add that the Mayor of Morganton in his role of hunter, had brought along his gun and his dog, Nisko, who gambled joyously about the wagon. Nisko, however, was to remain behind at the farm at Wildon, when we attempted our ascent. He could not possibly follow us to the Great Eyrie with its cliffs to scale and its crevasses to cross.

The day was beautiful, the fresh air in that climate is still cool of an April morning. A few fleecy clouds sped rapidly overhead, driven by a light breeze which swept across the long plains, from the distant Atlantic. The sun peeping forth at intervals, illumined all the fresh young verdure of the countryside.

An entire world animated the woods through which we passed. From before our equipage fled squirrels, field-mice, parroquets of brilliant colors and deafening loquacity. Opossums passed in hurried leaps, bearing their young in their pouches. Myriads of birds were scattered amid the foliage of banyans, palms, and masses of rhododendrons, so luxuriant that their thickets were impenetrable.

We arrived that evening at Pleasant Garden, where we were comfortably located for the night with the mayor of the town, a particular friend of Mr. Smith. Pleasant Garden proved little more than a village; but its mayor gave us a warm and generous reception, and we supped pleasantly in his charming home, which stood beneath the shades of some giant beech-trees.

Naturally the conversation turned upon our attempt to explore the interior of the Great Eyrie. "You are right," said our host, "until we all know what is hidden within there, our people will remain uneasy."

"Has nothing new occurred," I asked, "since the last appearance of

flames above the Great Eyrie?"

"Nothing, Mr. Strock. From Pleasant Garden we can see the entire crest of the mountain. Not a suspicious noise has come down to us. Not a spark has risen. If a legion of devils is in hiding there, they must have finished their infernal cookery, and soared away to some other haunt."

"Devils!" cried Mr. Smith. "Well, I hope they have not decamped without leaving some traces of their occupation, some parings of hoofs or horns or tails. We shall find them out."

On the morrow, the twenty-ninth of April, we started again at dawn. By the end of this second day, we expected to reach the farm of Wildon at the foot of the mountain. The country was much the same as before, except that our road led more steeply upward. Woods and marshes alternated, though the latter grew sparser, being drained by the sun as we approached the higher levels. The country was also less populous. There were only a few little hamlets, almost lost beneath the beech trees, a few lonely farms, abundantly watered by the many streams that rushed downward toward the Catawba River.

The smaller birds and beasts grew yet more numerous. "I am much tempted to take my gun," said Mr. Smith, "and to go off with Nisko. This will be the first time that I have passed here without trying my luck with the partridges and hares. The good beasts will not

recognize me. But not only have we plenty of provisions, but we have a bigger chase on hand today. The chase of a mystery."

"And let us hope," added I, "we do not come back disappointed hunters."

In the afternoon the whole chain of the Blueridge stretched before us at a distance of only six miles. The mountain crests were sharply outlined against the clear sky. Well wooded at the base, they grew more bare and showed only stunted evergreens toward the summit. There the scraggly trees, grotesquely twisted, gave to the rocky heights a bleak and bizarre appearance. Here and there the ridge rose in sharp peaks. On our right the Black Dome, nearly seven thousand feet high, reared its gigantic head, sparkling at times above the clouds.

"Have you ever climbed that dome, Mr. Smith?" I asked.

"No," answered he, "but I am told that it is a very difficult ascent. A few mountaineers have climbed it; but they report that it has no outlook commanding the crater of the Great Eyrie."

"That is so," said the guide, Harry Horn. "I have tried it myself."

"Perhaps," suggested I, "the weather was unfavorable."

"On the contrary, Mr. Strock, it was unusually clear. But the wall of

the Great Eyrie on that side rose so high, it completely hid the interior."

"Forward," cried Mr. Smith. "I shall not be sorry to set foot where no person has ever stepped, or even looked, before."

Certainly on this day the Great Eyrie looked tranquil enough. As we gazed upon it, there rose from its heights neither smoke nor flame.

Toward five o'clock our expedition halted at the Wildon farm, where the tenants warmly welcomed their landlord. The farmer assured us that nothing notable had happened about the Great Eyrie for some time. We supped at a common table with all the people of the farm; and our sleep that night was sound and wholly untroubled by premonitions of the future.

On the morrow, before break of day, we set out for the ascent of the mountain. The height of the Great Eyrie scarce exceeds five thousand feet. A modest altitude, often surpassed in this section of the Alleghanies. As we were already more than three thousand feet above sea level, the fatigue of the ascent could not be great. A few hours should suffice to bring us to the crest of the crater. Of course, difficulties might present themselves, precipices to scale, clefts and breaks in the ridge might necessitate painful and even dangerous detours. This was the unknown, the spur to our attempt. As I said, our guides knew no more than we upon this point. What made me

anxious, was, of course, the common report that the Great Eyrie was wholly inaccessible. But this remained unproven. And then there was the new chance that a fallen block had left a breach in the rocky wall.

"At last," said Mr. Smith to me, after lighting the first pipe of the twenty or more which he smoked each day, "we are well started. As to whether the ascent will take more or less time--"

"In any case, Mr. Smith," interrupted I, "you and I are fully resolved to pursue our quest to the end."

"Fully resolved, Mr. Strock."

"My chief has charged me to snatch the secret from this demon of the Great Eyrie."

"We will snatch it from him, willing or unwilling," vowed Mr. Smith, calling Heaven to witness. "Even if we have to search the very bowels of the mountain."

"As it may happen, then," said I, "that our excursion will be prolonged beyond today, it will be well to look to our provisions."

"Be easy, Mr. Strock; our guides have food for two days in their knapsacks, besides what we carry ourselves. Moreover, though I left

my brave Nisko at the farm, I have my gun. Game will be plentiful in the woods and gorges of the lower part of the mountain, and perhaps at the top we shall find a fire to cook it, already lighted."

"Already lighted, Mr. Smith?"

"And why not, Mr. Strock? These flames! These superb flames, which have so terrified our country folk! Is their fire absolutely cold, is no spark to be found beneath their ashes? And then, if this is truly a crater, is the volcano so wholly extinct that we cannot find there a single ember? Bah! This would be but a poor volcano if it hasn't enough fire even to cook an egg or roast a potato. Come, I repeat, we shall see! We shall see!"

At that point of the investigation I had, I confess, no opinion formed. I had my orders to examine the Great Eyrie. If it proved harmless, I would announce it, and people would be reassured. But at heart, I must admit, I had the very natural desire of a man possessed by the demon of curiosity. I should be glad, both for my own sake, and for the renown which would attach to my mission if the Great Eyrie proved the center of the most remarkable phenomena--of which I would discover the cause.

Our ascent began in this order. The two guides went in front to seek out the most practicable paths. Elias Smith and I followed more leisurely. We mounted by a narrow and not very steep gorge amid rocks

and trees. A tiny stream trickled downward under our feet. During the rainy season or after a heavy shower, the water doubtless bounded from rock to rock in tumultuous cascades. But it evidently was fed only by the rain, for now we could scarcely trace its course. It could not be the outlet of any lake within the Great Eyrie.

After an hour of climbing, the slope became so steep that we had to turn, now to the right, now to the left; and our progress was much delayed. Soon the gorge became wholly impracticable; its cliff-like sides offered no sufficient foothold. We had to cling by branches, to crawl upon our knees. At this rate the top would not be reached before sundown.

"Faith!" cried Mr. Smith, stopping for breath, "I realize why the climbers of the Great Eyrie have been few, so few, that it has never been ascended within my knowledge."

"The fact is," I responded, "that it would be much toil for very little profit. And if we had not special reasons to persist in our attempt."

"You never said a truer word," declared Harry Horn. "My comrade and I have scaled the Black Dome several times, but we never met such obstacles as these."

"The difficulties seem almost impassable," added James Bruck.



The question now was to determine to which side we should turn for a new route; to right, as to left, arose impenetrable masses of trees and bushes. In truth even the scaling of cliffs would have been more easy. Perhaps if we could get above this wooded slope we could advance with surer foot. Now, we could only go ahead blindly, and trust to the instincts of our two guides. James Bruck was especially useful. I believe that that gallant lad would have equaled a monkey in lightness and a wild goat in agility. Unfortunately, neither Elias Smith nor I was able to climb where he could.

However, when it is a matter of real need with me, I trust I shall never be backward, being resolute by nature and well-trained in bodily exercise. Where James Bruck went, I was determined to go, also; though it might cost me some uncomfortable falls. But it was not the same with the first magistrate of Morganton, less young, less vigorous, larger, stouter, and less persistent than we others. Plainly he made every effort, not to retard our progress, but he panted like a seal, and soon I insisted on his stopping to rest.

In short, it was evident that the ascent of the Great Eyrie would require far more time than we had estimated. We had expected to reach the foot of the rocky wall before eleven o'clock, but we now saw that mid-day would still find us several hundred feet below it.

Toward ten o'clock, after repeated attempts to discover some more

practicable route, after numberless turnings and returnings, one of the guides gave the signal to halt. We found ourselves at last on the upper border of the heavy wood. The trees, more thinly spaced, permitted us a glimpse upward to the base of the rocky wall which constituted the true Great Eyrie.

"Whew!" exclaimed Mr. Smith, leaning against a mighty pine tree, "a little respite, a little repose, and even a little repast would not go badly."

"We will rest an hour," said I.

"Yes; after working our lungs and our legs, we will make our stomachs work."

We were all agreed on this point. A rest would certainly freshen us. Our only cause for inquietude was now the appearance of the precipitous slope above us. We looked up toward one of those bare strips called in that region, slides. Amid this loose earth, these yielding stones, and these abrupt rocks there was no roadway.

Harry Horn said to his comrade, "It will not be easy."

"Perhaps impossible," responded Bruck.

Their comments caused me secret uneasiness. If I returned without

even having scaled the mountain, my mission would be a complete failure, without speaking of the torture to my curiosity. And when I stood again before Mr. Ward, shamed and confused, I should cut but a sorry figure.

We opened our knapsacks and lunched moderately on bread and cold meat. Our repast finished, in less than half an hour, Mr. Smith sprang up eager to push forward once more. James Bruck took the lead; and we had only to follow him as best we could.

We advanced slowly. Our guides did not attempt to conceal their doubt and hesitation. Soon Horn left us and went far ahead to spy out which road promised most chance of success.

Twenty minutes later he returned and led us onward toward the northwest. It was on this side that the Black Dome rose at a distance of three or four miles. Our path was still difficult and painful, amid the sliding stones, held in place only occasionally by wiry bushes. At length after a weary struggle, we gained some two hundred feet further upward and found ourselves facing a great gash, which, broke the earth at this spot. Here and there were scattered roots recently upturned, branches broken off, huge stones reduced to powder, as if an avalanche had rushed down this flank of the mountain.

"That must be the path taken by the huge block which broke away from the Great Eyrie," commented James Bruck.

"No doubt," answered Mr. Smith, "and I think we had better follow the road that it has made for us."

It was indeed this gash that Harry Horn had selected for our ascent. Our feet found lodgment in the firmer earth which had resisted the passage of the monster rock. Our task thus became much easier, and our progress was in a straight line upward, so that toward half past eleven we reached the upper border of the "slide."

Before us, less than a hundred feet away, but towering a hundred feet straight upwards in the air rose the rocky wall which formed the final crest, the last defence of the Great Eyrie.

From this side, the summit of the wall showed capriciously irregular, rising in rude towers and jagged needles. At one point the outline appeared to be an enormous eagle silhouetted against the sky, just ready to take flight. Upon this side, at least, the precipice was insurmountable.

"Rest a minute," said Mr. Smith, "and we will see if it is possible to make our way around the base of this cliff."

"At any rate," said Harry Horn, "the great block must have fallen from this part of the cliff; and it has left no breach for entering."

They were both right; we must seek entrance elsewhere. After a rest of ten minutes, we clambered up close to the foot of the wall, and began to make a circuit of its base.

Assuredly the Great Eyrie now took on to my eyes an aspect absolutely fantastic. Its heights seemed peopled by dragons and huge monsters. If chimeras, griffins, and all the creations of mythology had appeared to guard it, I should have been scarcely surprised.

With great difficulty and not without danger we continued our tour of this circumvallation, where it seemed that nature had worked as man does, with careful regularity. Nowhere was there any break in the fortification; nowhere a fault in the strata by which one might clamber up. Always this mighty wall, a hundred feet in height!

After an hour and a half of this laborious circuit, we regained our starting-place. I could not conceal my disappointment, and Mr. Smith was not less chagrined than I.

"A thousand devils!" cried he, "we know no better than before what is inside this confounded Great Eyrie, nor even if it is a crater."

"Volcano, or not," said I, "there are no suspicious noises now; neither smoke nor flame rises above it; nothing whatever threatens an eruption."

This was true. A profound silence reigned around us; and a perfectly clear sky shone overhead. We tasted the perfect calm of great altitudes.

It was worth noting that the circumference of the huge wall was about twelve or fifteen hundred feet. As to the space enclosed within, we could scarce reckon that without knowing the thickness of the encompassing wall. The surroundings were absolutely deserted. Probably not a living creature ever mounted to this height, except the few birds of prey which soared high above us.

Our watches showed three o'clock, and Mr. Smith cried in disgust, "What is the use of stopping here all day! We shall learn nothing more. We must make a start, Mr. Strock, if we want to get back to Pleasant Garden to-night."

I made no answer, and did not move from where I was seated; so he called again, "Come, Mr. Strock; you don't answer."

In truth, it cut me deeply to abandon our effort, to descend the slope without having achieved my mission. I felt an imperious need of persisting; my curiosity had redoubled. But what could I do? Could I tear open this unyielding earth? Overleap the mighty cliff? Throwing one last defiant glare at the Great Eyrie, I followed my companions.

The return was effected without great difficulty. We had only to

slide down where we had so laboriously scrambled up. Before five o'clock we descended the last slopes of the mountain, and the farmer of Wildon welcomed us to a much needed meal.

"Then you didn't get inside?" said he.

"No," responded Mr. Smith, "and I believe that the inside exists only in the imagination of our country folk."

At half past eight our carriage drew up before the house of the Mayor of Pleasant Garden, where we passed the night. While I strove vainly to sleep, I asked myself if I should not stop there in the village and organize a new ascent. But what better chance had it of succeeding than the first? The wisest course was, doubtless, to return to Washington and consult Mr. Ward.

So, the next day, having rewarded our two guides, I took leave of Mr. Smith at Morganton, and that same evening left by train for Washington.