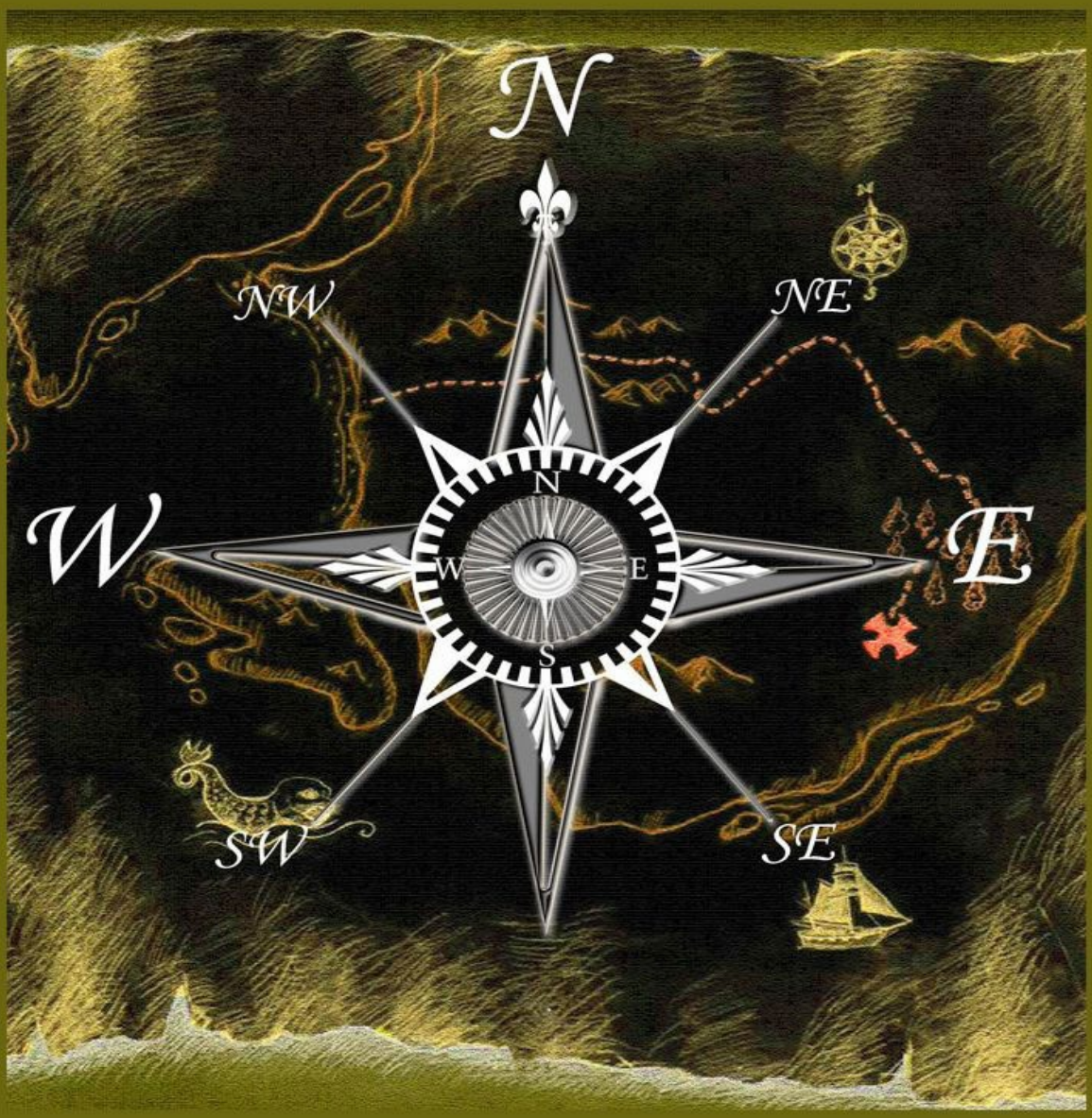
JULES VERNE



MASTER OF THE WORLD

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Master Of The World

Jules Verne

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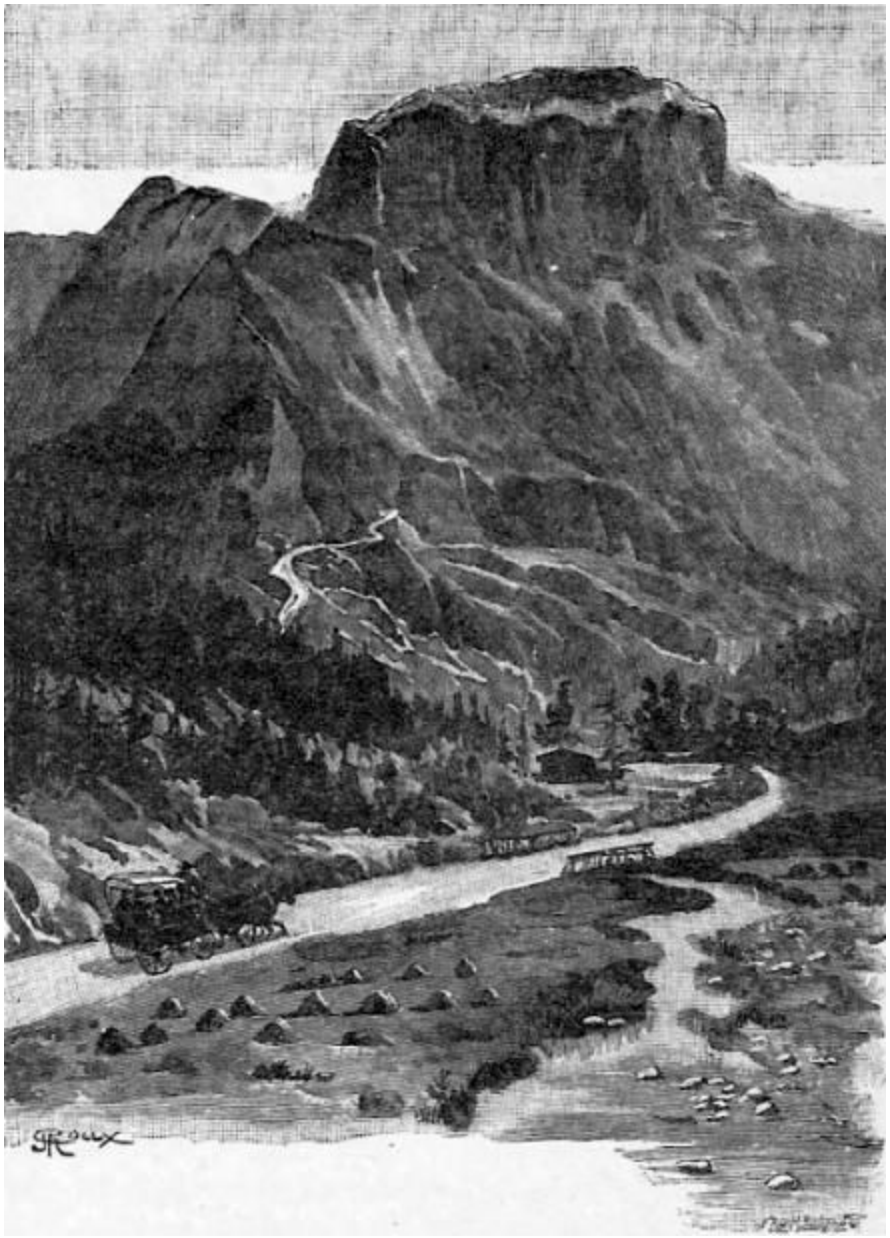
Jules Verne – A Biographical Primer

Jules Verne (1828–1905), French author, was born at Nantes on the 8th of February 1828. After completing his studies at the Nantes lycée, he went to Paris to study for the bar. About 1848, in conjunction with Michel Carré, he wrote librettos for two operettas, and in 1850 his verse comedy, Les Pailles rompues, in which Alexandre Dumas fils had some share, was produced at the Gymnase. For some years his interests alternated between the theatre and the bourse, but some travellers' stories which he wrote for the Musée des Familles seem to have revealed to him the true direction of his talent—the delineation, viz., of delightfully extravagant voyages and adventures to which cleverly prepared scientific and geographical details lent an air of versimilitude. Something of the kind had been done before, after kindred methods, by Cyrano de

Bergerac, by Swift and Defoe, and later by Mayne Reid. But in his own particular application of plausible scientific apparatus Verne undoubtedly struck out a department for himself in the wide literary genre of voyages imaginaires. His first success was obtained with Cinq semaines en ballon, which he wrote for Hetzel's Magazin d'Éducation in 1862, and thenceforward, for a quarter of a century, scarcely a year passed in which Hetzel did not publish one or more of his fantastic stories, illustrated generally by pictures of the most lurid and sensational description. The most successful of these romances include: Voyage au centre de la terre (1864); De la terre à la lune (1865); Vingt mille lieues sous les mers (1869); Les Anglais au pôle nord (1870); and Voyage autour du monde en quatre-vingts jours, which first appeared in Le Temps in 1872. The adaptation of this last (produced with success at the Porte St Martin theatre on the 8th of November 1874) and of another excellent tale, Michael Strogoff (at the Châtelet, 1880), both dramas being written in conjunction with Adolphe d'Ennery, proved the most acceptable of Verne's theatrical pieces. The novels were translated into the various European languages—and some even into Japanese and Arabic—and had an enormous success in England. But after 1877, when he published Hector Servadac, a romance of existence upon a comet, the writer's invention began to show signs of fatigue (his kingdom had been invaded in different directions and at different times times by such writers as R. M. Ballantyne, Rider Haggard and H. G. Wells), and he even committed himself, somewhat unguardedly, to very gloomy predictions as to the future of the novel. Jules Verne's own novels, however, will certainly long continue to delight readers by reason of their sparkling style, their picturesque verve—apparently inherited directly from Dumas—their amusing and good-natured national caricatures, and the ingenuity with which the love element is either subordinated or completely

excluded. M. Verne, who was always extremely popular in society, divided his time for the most part between Paris, his home at Amiens and his yacht. He was a member of the Legion of Honour, and several of his romances were crowned by the French Academy, but he was never enrolled among its members. He died at Amiens on the 24th of March 1905. His brother, Paul Verne, contributed to the Transactions of the French Alpine Club, and wrote an Ascension du Mont Blanc for his brother’s collection of Voyages extraordinaires in 1874.



Master Of The World

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 Blue Ridge 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, without 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 Blue Ridge, 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.

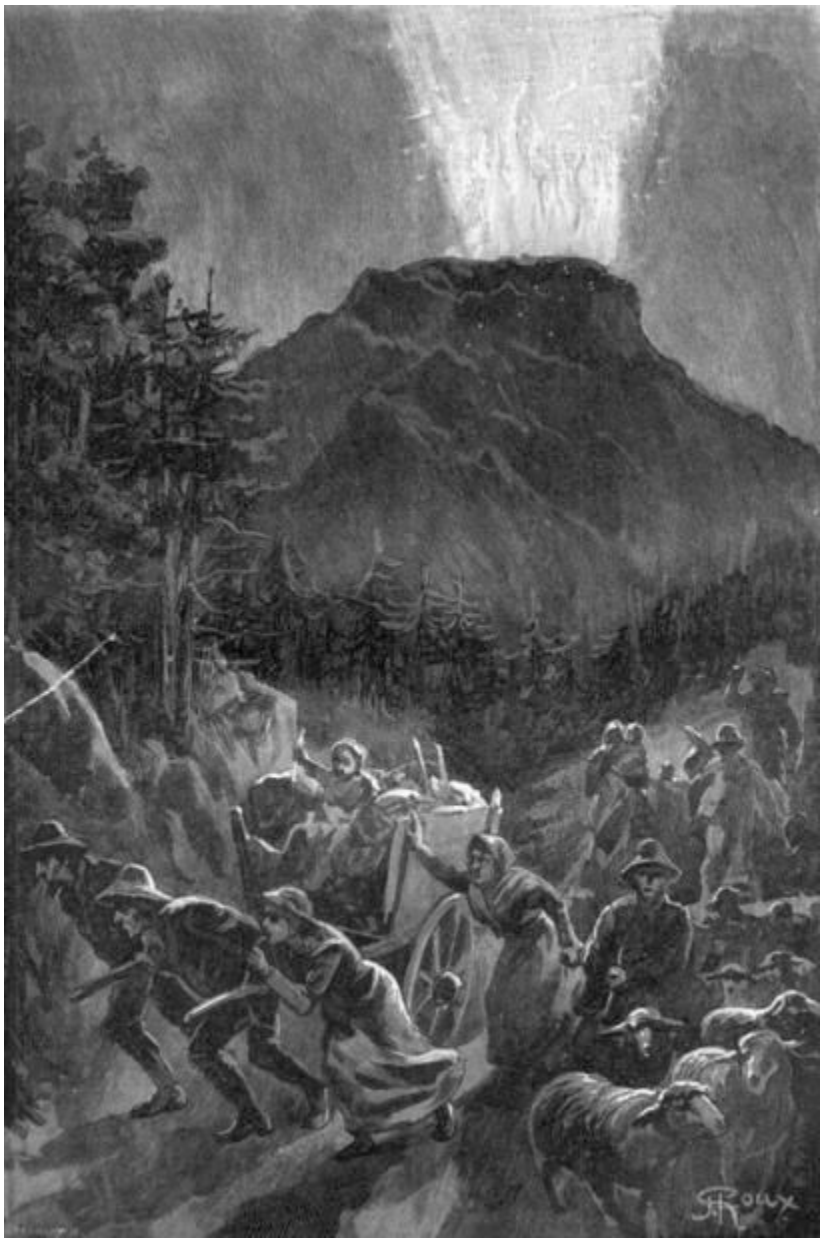
Then suddenly, toward three o’clock in the morning, another alarm! Flames leaped up above the rocky wall of the Great Eyrie. Reflected from the clouds, they illuminated the atmosphere for a great distance. A crackling, as if of many burning trees, was heard.

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 Blue Ridge 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.

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 Blue Ridge 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.”