CHAPTER II

MOCKING AT FATE

When New York recovered from its first astonishment over the extraordinary posters, it indulged in a loud laugh. Everybody knew who Cosmo Versál was. His eccentricities had filled many readable columns in the newspapers. Yet there was a certain respect for him, too. This was due to his extraordinary intellectual ability and unquestionable scientific knowledge. But his imagination was as free as the winds, and it often led him upon excursions in which nobody could follow him, and which caused the more steady-going scientific brethren to shake their heads. They called him able but flighty. The public considered him brilliant and amusing.

His father, who had sprung from some unknown source in southeastern Europe, and, beginning as a newsboy in New York, had made his way to the front in the financial world, had left his entire fortune to Cosmo. The latter had no taste for finance or business, but a devouring appetite for science, to which, in his own way, he devoted all his powers, all his time, and all his money. He never married, was never seen in society, and had very few intimates--but he was known by sight, or reputation, to everybody. There was not a scientific body or association of any consequence in the world of which he was not a member. Those which looked askance at his bizarre ideas were glad to accept pecuniary

aid from him.

The notion that the world was to be drowned had taken possession of him about three years before the opening scene of this narrative. To work out the idea, he built an observatory, set up a laboratory, invented instruments, including his strange spectroscope, which was scoffed at by the scientific world.

Finally, submitting the results of his observations to mathematical treatment, he proved, to his own satisfaction, the absolute correctness of his thesis that the well-known "proper motion of the solar system" was about to result in an encounter between the earth and an invisible watery nebula, which would have the effect of inundating the globe. As this startling idea gradually took shape, he communicated it to scientific men in all lands, but failed to find a single disciple, except his friend Joseph Smith, who, without being able to follow all his reasonings, accepted on trust the conclusions of Cosmo's more powerful mind. Accordingly, at the end of his investigation, he enlisted Smith as secretary, propagandist, and publicity agent.

New York laughed a whole day and night at the warning red letters. They were the talk of the town. People joked about them in cafés, clubs, at home, in the streets, in the offices, in the exchanges, in the street-cars, on the Elevated, in the Subways. Crowds gathered on corners to watch the flapping posters aloft on the kite lines. The afternoon newspapers issued specials which were all about the coming flood, and

everywhere one heard the cry of the newsboys: "Extra-a-a! Drowning of a Thousand Million people! Cosmo Versál predicts the End of the World!" On their editorial pages the papers were careful to discount the scare lines, and terrific pictures, that covered the front sheets, with humorous jibes at the author of the formidable prediction.

The Owl, which was the only paper that put the news in half a column of ordinary type, took a judicial attitude, called upon the city authorities to tear down the posters, and hinted that "this absurd person, Cosmo Versál, who disgraces a once honored name with his childish attempt to create a sensation that may cause untold harm among the ignorant masses," had laid himself open to criminal prosecution.

In their latest editions, several of the papers printed an interview with Cosmo Versál, in which he gave figures and calculations that, on their face, seemed to offer mathematical proof of the correctness of his forecast. In impassioned language, he implored the public to believe that he would not mislead them, spoke of the instant necessity of constructing arks of safety, and averred that the presence of the terrible nebula that was so soon to drown the world was already manifest in the heavens.

Some readers of these confident statements began to waver, especially when confronted with mathematics which they could not understand. But still, in general, the laugh went on. It broke into boisterousness in one of the largest theaters where a bright-witted "artist," who always

made a point of hitting off the very latest sensation, got himself up in a lifelike imitation of the well-known figure of Cosmo Versál, topped with a bald head as big as a bushel, and sailed away into the flies with a pretty member of the ballet, whom he had gallantly snatched from a tumbling ocean of green baize, singing at the top of his voice until they disappeared behind the proscenium arch:

"Oh, th' Nebula is coming
  To drown the wicked earth,
With all his spirals humming
  'S he waltzes in his mirth.

Chorus
"Don't hesitate a second,
  Get ready to embark,
And skip away to safety
  With Cosmo and his ark.

"Th' Nebula is a direful bird
  'S he skims the ether blue!
He's angry over what he's heard,
  'N's got his eye on you.

Chorus
"Don't hesitate a second, etc.

"When Nebulas begin to pipe
  The bloomin' O.H.[subscript]2
Y'bet yer life the time is ripe
  To think what you will do.

Chorus
"Don't hesitate a second, etc.

"He'll tip th' Atlantic o'er its brim,
  And swamp the mountains tall;
He'll let the broad Pacific in,
  And leave no land at all.

Chorus
"Don't hesitate a second, etc.

"He's got an option on the spheres;
  He's leased the Milky Way;
He's caught the planets in arrears,
  'N's bound to make 'em pay.

Chorus
"Don't hesitate a second, etc."

The roars of laughter and applause with which this effusion of vaudeville genius was greeted, showed the cheerful spirit in which the

public took the affair. No harm seemed to have come to the "ignorant masses" yet.

But the next morning there was a suspicious change in the popular mind. People were surprised to see new posters in place of the old ones, more lurid in letters and language than the original. The morning papers had columns of description and comment, and some of them seemed disposed to treat the prophet and his prediction with a certain degree of seriousness.

The savants who had been interviewed overnight, did not talk very convincingly, and made the mistake of flinging contempt on both Cosmo and "the gullible public."

Naturally, the public wouldn't stand for that, and the pendulum of opinion began to swing the other way. Cosmo helped his cause by sending to every newspaper a carefully prepared statement of his observations and calculations, in which he spoke with such force of conviction that few could read his words without feeling a thrill of apprehensive uncertainty. This was strengthened by published dispatches which showed that he had forwarded his warnings to all the well-known scientific bodies of the world, which, while decrying them, made no effective response.

And then came a note of positive alarm in a double-leaded bulletin from the new observatory at Mount McKinley, which affirmed that during the

preceding night a singular obscurity had been suspected in the northern sky, seeming to veil many stars below the twelfth magnitude. It was added that the phenomenon was unprecedented, but that the observation was both difficult and uncertain.

Nowhere was the atmosphere of doubt and mystery, which now began to hang over the public, so remarkable as in Wall Street. The sensitive currents there responded like electric waves to the new influence, and, to the dismay of hard-headed observers, the market dropped as if it had been hit with a sledge-hammer. Stocks went down five, ten, in some cases twenty points in as many minutes.

The speculative issues slid down like wheat into a bin when the chutes are opened. Nobody could trace the exact origin of the movement, but selling-orders came tumbling in until there was a veritable panic.

From London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, flashed dispatches announcing that the same unreasonable slump had manifested itself there, and all united in holding Cosmo Versál solely responsible for the foolish break in prices. Leaders of finance rushed to the exchanges trying by arguments and expostulations to arrest the downfall, but in vain.

In the afternoon, however, reason partially resumed its sway; then a quick recovery was felt, and many who had rushed to sell all they had, found cause to regret their precipitancy. The next day all was on the

mend, as far as the stock market was concerned, but among the people at large the poison of awakened credulity continued to spread, nourished by fresh announcements from the fountain head.

Cosmo issued another statement to the effect that he had perfected plans for an ark of safety, which he would begin at once to construct in the neighborhood of New York, and he not only offered freely to give his plans to any who wished to commence construction on their own account, but he urged them, in the name of Heaven, to lose no time. This produced a prodigious effect, and multitudes began to be infected with a nameless fear.

Meanwhile an extraordinary scene occurred, behind closed doors, at the headquarters of the Carnegie Institution in Washington. Joseph Smith, acting under Cosmo Versál's direction, had forwarded an elaborate précis of the latter's argument, accompanied with full mathematical details, to the head of the institution. The character of this document was such that it could not be ignored. Moreover, the savants composing the council of the most important scientific association in the world were aware of the state of the public mind, and felt that it was incumbent upon them to do something to allay the alarm. Of late years a sort of supervisory control over scientific news of all kinds had been accorded to them, and they appreciated the fact that a duty now rested upon their shoulders.

Accordingly, a special meeting was called to consider the communication

from Cosmo Versál. It was the general belief that a little critical examination would result in complete proof of the fallacy of all his work, proof which could be put in a form that the most uninstructed would understand.

But the papers, diagrams, and mathematical formulae had no sooner been spread upon the table under the knowing eyes of the learned members of the council, than a chill of conscious impuissance ran through them. They saw that Cosmo's mathematics were unimpeachable. His formulae were accurately deduced, and his operations absolutely correct.

They could do nothing but attack his fundamental data, based on the alleged revelations of his new form of spectroscope, and on telescopic observations which were described in so much detail that the only way to combat them was by the general assertion that they were illusory. This was felt to be a very unsatisfactory method of procedure, as far as the public was concerned, because it amounted to no more than attacking the credibility of a witness who pretended to describe only what he himself had seen--and there is nothing so hard as to prove a negative.

Then, Cosmo had on his side the whole force of that curious tendency of the human mind which habitually gravitates toward whatever is extraordinary, revolutionary, and mysterious.

But a yet greater difficulty arose. Mention has been made of the strange bulletin from the Mount McKinley observatory. That had been incautiously

sent out to the public by a thoughtless observer, who was more intent upon describing a singular phenomenon than upon considering its possible effect on the popular imagination. He had immediately received an expostulatory dispatch from headquarters which henceforth shut his mouth--but he had told the simple truth, and how embarrassing that was became evident when, on the very table around which the savants were now assembled, three dispatches were laid in quick succession from the great observatories of Mount Hekla, Iceland, the North Cape, and Kamchatka, all corroborating the statement of the Mount McKinley observer, that an inexplicable veiling of faint stars had manifested itself in the boreal quarter of the sky.

When the president read these dispatches--which the senders had taken the precaution to mark "confidential"--the members of the council looked at one another with no little dismay. Here was the most unprejudiced corroboration of Cosmo Versál's assertion that the great nebula was already within the range of observation. How could they dispute such testimony, and what were they to make of it?

Two or three of the members began to be shaken in their convictions.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Professor Alexander Jones, "but this is very curious! And suppose the fellow should be right, after all?"

"Right!" cried the president, Professor Pludder, disdainfully. "Who ever heard of a watery nebula? The thing's absurd!"

"I don't see that it's absurd," replied Professor Jones. "There's plenty of proof of the existence of hydrogen in some of the nebulae."

"So there is," chimed in Professor Abel Able, "and if there's hydrogen there may be oxygen, and there you have all that's necessary. It's not the idea that a nebula may consist of watery vapor that's absurd, but it is that a watery nebula, large enough to drown the earth by condensation upon it could have approached so near as this one must now be without sooner betraying its presence."

"How so?" demanded a voice.

"By its attraction. Cosmo Versál says it is already less than three hundred million miles away. If it is massive enough to drown the earth, it ought long ago to have been discovered by its disturbance of the planetary orbits."

"Not at all," exclaimed Professor Jeremiah Moses. "If you stick to that argument you'll be drowned sure. Just look at these facts. The earth weighs six and a half sextillions of tons, and the ocean one and a half quintillions. The average depth of the oceans is two and one-fifth miles. Now--if the level of the oceans were raised only about 1,600 feet, practically all the inhabited parts of the world would be flooded. To cause that increase in the level of the oceans only about one-eighth part would have to be added to their total mass, or, say, one-seventh

part, allowing for the greater surface to be covered. That would be one thirty-thousandth of the weight of the globe, and if you suppose that only one-hundredth of the entire nebula were condensed on the earth, the whole mass of the nebula would not need to exceed one three-hundredth of the weight of the earth, or a quarter that of the moon--and nobody here will be bold enough to say that the approach of a mass no greater than that would be likely to be discovered through its attraction when it was three hundred million miles away."

Several of the astronomers present shook their heads at this, and Professor Pludder irritably declared that it was absurd.

"The attraction would be noticeable when it was a thousand millions of miles away," he continued.

"Yes, 'noticeable' I admit," replied Professor Moses, "but all the same you wouldn't notice it, because you wouldn't be looking for it unless the nebula were visible first, and even then it would require months of observation to detect the effects. And how are you going to get around those bulletins? The thing is beginning to be visible now, and I'll bet that if, from this time on, you study carefully the planetary motions, you will find evidence of the disturbance becoming stronger and stronger. Versál has pointed out that very thing, and calculated the perturbations. This thing has come like a thief in the night."

"You'd better hurry up and secure a place in the ark," said Professor

Pludder sarcastically.

"I don't know but I shall, if I can get one," returned Professor Moses. "You may not think this is such a laughing matter a few months hence."

"I'm surprised," pursued the president, "that a man of your scientific standing should stultify himself by taking seriously such balderdash as this. I tell you the thing is absurd."

"And I tell you, you are absurd to say so!" retorted Professor Moses, losing his temper. "You've got four of the biggest telescopes in the world under your control; why don't you order your observers to look for this thing?"

Professor Pludder, who was a very big man, reared up his rotund form, and, bringing his fist down upon the table with a resounding whack, exclaimed:

"I'll do nothing so ridiculous! These bulletins have undoubtedly been influenced by the popular excitement. There has possibly been a little obscurity in the atmosphere--cirrus clouds, or something--and the observers have imagined the rest. I'm not going to insult science by encouraging the proceedings of a mountebank like Cosmo Versál. What we've got to do is to prepare a dispatch for the press reassuring the populace and throwing the weight of this institution on the side of common sense and public tranquillity. Let the secretary indite such a

dispatch, and then we'll edit it and send it out."

Professor Pludder, naturally dictatorial, was sometimes a little overbearing, but being a man of great ability, and universally respected for his high rank in the scientific world, his colleagues usually bowed to his decisions. On this occasion his force of character sufficed to silence the doubters, and when the statement intended for the press had received its final touches it contained no hint of the seeds of discord that Cosmo Versál had sown among America's foremost savants. The next morning it appeared in all the newspapers as follows:

> Official Statement from the Carnegie Institution
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> In consequence of the popular excitement caused by the sensational utterance of a notorious pretender to scientific knowledge in New York, the council of this institution authorizes the statement that it has examined the alleged grounds on which the prediction of a great flood, to be caused by a nebula encountering the earth, is based, and finds, as all real men of science knew beforehand, that the entire matter is simply a canard.
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> The nebulae are not composed of water; if they were composed of water they could not cause a flood on the earth; the report that some strange, misty object is visible in the starry heavens is based on a misapprehension; and finally, the so-called

calculations of the author of this inexcusable hoax are baseless and totally devoid of validity.

The public is earnestly advised to pay no further attention to the matter. If there were any danger to the earth--and such a thing is not to be seriously considered--astronomers would know it long in advance, and would give due and official warning.

Unfortunately for the popular effect of this pronouncement, on the very morning when it appeared in print, thirty thousand people were crowded around the old aviation field at Mineola, excitedly watching Cosmo Versál, with five hundred workmen, laying the foundations of a huge platform, while about the field were stretched sheets of canvas displaying the words:

THE ARK OF SAFETY
Earnest Inspection Invited by All
Attendants will Furnish Gratis Plans for Similar Constructions
Small Arks Can Be Built for Families
Act While There Is Yet Time

The multitude saw at a glance that here was a work that would cost millions, and the spectacle of this immense expenditure, the evidence that Cosmo was backing his words with his money, furnished a silent argument which was irresistible. In the midst of all, flying about among

his men, was Cosmo, impressing every beholder with the feeling that intellect was in charge.

Like the gray coat of Napoleon on a battlefield, the sight of that mighty brow bred confidence.