

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST DROPS OF THE DELUGE

The utterance of the Carnegie Institution indeed fell flat, and Cosmo Versál's star reigned in the ascendent. He pushed his preparations with amazing speed, and not only politics, but even the war that had just broken out in South America was swallowed up in the newspapers by endless descriptions of the mysterious proceedings at Mineola. Cosmo still found time every day to write articles and to give out interviews; and Joseph Smith was kept constantly on the jump, running for street-cars or trains, or leaping, with his long coat flapping, into and out of elevators on ceaseless missions to the papers, the scientific societies, and the meetings of learned or unlearned bodies which had been persuaded to investigate the subject of the coming flood. Between the work of preparation and that of proselytism it is difficult to see how Cosmo found time to sleep.

Day by day the Ark of Safety rose higher upon its great platform, its huge metallic ribs and broad, bulging sides glinting strangely in the unbroken sunshine--for, as if imitating the ominous quiet before an earthquake, the July sky had stripped itself of all clouds. No thunder-storms broke the serenity of the long days, and never had the overarching heavens seemed so spotless and motionless in their cerulean depths.

All over the world, as the news dispatches showed, the same strange calm prevailed. Cosmo did not fail to call attention to this unparalleled repose of nature as a sure prognostic of the awful event in preparation.

The heat became tremendous. Hundreds were stricken down in the blazing streets. Multitudes fled to the seashore, and lay panting under umbrellas on the burning sands, or vainly sought relief by plunging into the heated water, which, rolling lazily in with the tide, felt as if it had come from over a boiler.

Still, perspiring crowds constantly watched the workmen, who struggled with the overpowering heat, although Cosmo had erected canvas screens for them and installed a hundred immense electric fans to create a breeze.

Beginning with five hundred men, he had, in less than a month, increased his force to nearer five thousand, many of whom, not engaged in the actual construction, were preparing the materials and bringing them together. The ark was being made of pure levium, the wonderful new metal which, although already employed in the construction of aeroplanes and the framework of dirigible balloons, had not before been used for shipbuilding, except in the case of a few small boats, and these used only in the navy.

For mere raw material Cosmo must have expended an enormous sum, and his

expenses were quadrupled by the fact that he was compelled, in order to save time, practically to lease several of the largest steel plants in the country. Fortunately levium was easily rolled into plates, and the supply was sufficient, owing to the discovery two years before of an expeditious process of producing the metal from its ores.

The wireless telegraph and telephone offices were besieged by correspondents eager to send inland, and all over Europe and Asia, the latest particulars of the construction of the great ark. Nobody followed Cosmo's advice or example, but everybody was intensely interested and puzzled.

At last the government officials found themselves forced to take cognizance of the affair. They could no longer ignore it after they discovered that it was seriously interfering with the conduct of public business. Cosmo Versál's pressing orders, accompanied by cash, displaced or delayed orders of the government commanding materials for the navy and the air fleet. In consequence, about the middle of July he received a summons to visit the President of the United States. Cosmo hurried to Washington on the given date, and presented his card at the White House. He was shown immediately into the President's reception-room, where he found the entire Cabinet in presence. As he entered he was the focus of a formidable battery of curious and not too friendly eyes.

President Samson was a large, heavy man, more than six feet tall. Every member of his Cabinet was above the average in avoirdupois, and the

heavyweight president of the Carnegie Institution, Professor Pludder, who had been specially invited, added by his presence to the air of ponderosity that characterized the assemblage. All seemed magnified by the thin white garments which they wore on account of the oppressive heat. Many of them had come in haste from various summer resorts, and were plainly annoyed by the necessity of attending at the President's command.

Cosmo Versál was the only cool man there, and his diminutive form presented a striking contrast to the others. But he looked as if he carried more brains than all of them put together.

He was not in the least overawed by the hostile glances of the statesmen. On the contrary, his lips perceptibly curled, in a half-disdainful smile, as he took the big hand which the President extended to him. As soon as Cosmo Versál had sunk into the embrace of a large easy chair, the President opened the subject.

"I have directed you to come," he said in a majestic tone, "in order the sooner to dispel the effects of your unjustifiable predictions and extraordinary proceedings on the public mind--and, I may add, on public affairs. Are you aware that you have interfered with the measures of this government for the defense of the country? You have stepped in front of the government, and delayed the beginning of four battleships which Congress has authorized in urgent haste on account of the threatening aspect of affairs in the East? I need hardly say to you that

we shall, if necessary, find means to set aside the private agreements under which you are proceeding, as inimical to public interests, but you have already struck a serious blow at the security of your country."

The President pronounced the last sentence with oratorical unction, and Cosmo was conscious of an approving movement of big official shoulders around him. The disdain deepened on his lips.

After a moment's pause the President continued:

"Before proceeding to extremities I have wished to see you personally, in order, in the first place, to assure myself that you are mentally responsible, and then to appeal to your patriotism, which should lead you to withdraw at once an obstruction so dangerous to the nation. Do you know the position in which you have placed yourself?"

Cosmo Versál got upon his feet and advanced to the center of the room like a little David. Every eye was fixed upon him. His voice was steady, but intense with suppressed nervousness.

"Mr. President," he said, "you have accused me of obstructing the measures of the government for the defense of the country. Sir, I am trying to save the whole human race from a danger in comparison with which that of war is infinitesimal--a danger which is rushing down upon us with appalling speed, and which will strike every land on the globe simultaneously. Within seven months not a warship or any other existing

vessel will remain afloat."

The listeners smiled, and nodded significantly to one another, but the speaker only grew more earnest.

"You think I am insane," he said, "but the truth is you are hoodwinked by official stupidity. That man," pointing at Professor Pludder, "who knows me well, and who has had all my proofs laid before him, is either too thick-headed to understand a demonstration or too pig-headed to confess his own error."

"Come, come," interrupted the President sternly, while Professor Pludder flushed very red, "this will not do! Indulge in no personalities here. I have, strained a point in offering to listen to you at all, and I have invited the head of the greatest of our scientific societies to be present, with the hope that here before us all he might convince you of your folly, and thus bring the whole unfortunate affair promptly to an end."

"He convince me !" cried Cosmo Versál disdainfully. "He is incapable of understanding the A, B, C of my work. But let me tell you this, Mr. President--there are men in his own council who are not so blind. I know what occurred at the recent meeting of that council, and I know that the ridiculous announcement put forth in its name to deceive the public was whipped into shape by him, and does not express the real opinion of many of the members."

Professor Pludder's face grew redder than ever.

"Name one!" he thundered.

"Ah," said Cosmo sneeringly, "that hits hard, doesn't it? You want me to name one; well, I'll name three. What did Professor Alexander Jones and Professor Abel Able say about the existence of watery nebula, and what was the opinion expressed by Professor Jeremiah Moses about the actual approach of one out of the northern sky, and what it could do if it hit the earth? What was the unanimous opinion of the entire council about the correctness of my mathematical work? And what," he continued, approaching Professor Pludder and shaking his finger up at him--"what have you done with those three dispatches from Iceland, the North Cape, and Kamchatka, which absolutely confirmed my announcement that the nebula was already visible?"

Professor Pludder began stammeringly:

"Some spy--"

"Ah," cried Cosmo, catching him up, "a spy, hey? Then, you admit it! Mr. President, I beg you to notice that he admits it. Sir, this is a conspiracy to conceal the truth. Great Heaven, the world is on the point of being drowned, and yet the pride of officialism is so strong in this plodder--Pludder--and others of his ilk that they'd sooner take the

chance of letting the human race be destroyed than recognize the truth!"

Cosmo Versál spoke with such tremendous concentration of mental energy, and with such evident sincerity of conviction, and he had so plainly put Professor Pludder to rout, that the President, no less than the other listening statesmen, was thrown into a quandary.

There was a creaking of heavily burdened chairs, a ponderous stir all round the circle, while a look of perplexity became visible on every face. Professor Pludder's conduct helped to produce the change of moral atmosphere. He had been so completely surprised by Cosmo's accusation, based on facts which he had supposed were known only to himself and the council, that he was unable for a minute to speak at all, and before he could align his faculties his triumphant little opponent renewed the attack.

"Mr. President," he said, laying his hand on the arm of Mr. Samson's big chair, which was nearly on a level with his breast, and speaking with persuasive earnestness, "you are the executive head of a mighty nation--the nation that sets the pace for the world. It is in your power to do a vast, an incalculable, service to humanity. One official word from you would save millions upon millions of lives. I implore you, instead of interfering with my work, to give instant order for the construction of as many arks, based upon the plans I have perfected, as the navy yard can possibly turn out. Issue a proclamation to the people, warning them that this is their only chance of escape."

By a curious operation of the human mind, this speech cost Cosmo nearly all the advantage that he had previously gained. His ominous suggestion of a great nebula rushing out of the heavens to overwhelm the earth had immensely impressed the imagination of his hearers, and his uncontradicted accusation that Professor Pludder was concealing the facts had almost convinced them that he was right. But when he mentioned "arks," the strain was relieved, and a smile broke out on the broad face of the President. He shook his head, and was about to speak, when Cosmo, perceiving that he had lost ground, changed his tactics.

"Still you are incredulous!" he exclaimed. "But the proof is before you! Look at the blazing heavens! The annals of meteorology do not record another such summer as this. The vanguard of the fatal nebula is already upon us. The signs of disaster are in the sky. But, note what I say--this is only the first sign. There is another following on its heels which may be here at any moment. To heat will succeed cold, and as we rush through the tenuous outer spirals the earth will alternately be whipped with tempests of snow and sleet, and scorched by fierce outbursts of solar fire. For three weeks the atmosphere has been heated by the inrush of invisible vapor--but look out, I warn you, for the change that is impending!"

These extraordinary words, pronounced with the wild air of a prophet, completed the growing conviction of the listeners that they really had a madman to deal with, and Professor Pludder, having recovered his

self--command, rose to his feet.

"Mr. President," he began, "the evidence which we have just seen of an unbalanced mind--"

He got no further. A pall of darkness suddenly dropped upon the room. An inky curtain seemed to have fallen from the sky. At the same time the windows were shaken by tremendous blasts of wind, and, as the electric lights were hastily turned on, huge snowflakes, intermingled with rattling hailstones, were seen careering outside. In a few seconds several large panes of glass were broken, and the chilling wind, sweeping round the apartment, made the teeth of the thinly clad statesmen chatter, while the noise of the storm became deafening. The sky lightened, but at the same moment dreadful thunderpeals shook the building. Two or three trees in the White House grounds were struck by the bolts, and their broken branches were driven through the air and carried high above the ground by the whirling winds, and one of them was thrown against the building with such force that for a moment it seemed as if the wall had been shattered.

After the first stunning effect of this outbreak of the elements had passed, everybody rushed to the windows to look out--everybody except Cosmo Versál, who remained standing in the center of the room.

"I told you!" he said; but nobody listened to him. What they saw outside absorbed every faculty. The noise was so stunning that they could not

have heard him.

We have said that the air lightened after the passage of the first pall of darkness, but it was not the reappearance of the sun that caused the brightening. It was an awful light, which seemed to be born out of the air itself. It had a menacing, coppery hue, continually changing in character. The whole upper atmosphere was choked with dense clouds, which swirled and tumbled, and twisted themselves into great vortical rolls, spinning like gigantic millshafts. Once, one of these vortexes shot downward, with projectile speed, rapidly assuming the terrible form of the trombe of a tornado, and where it struck the ground it tore everything to pieces--trees, houses, the very earth itself were ground to powder and then whirled aloft by the resistless suction.

Occasionally the darkness returned for a few minutes, as if a cover had been clapped upon the sky, and then, again, the murk would roll off, and the reddish gleam would reappear. These swift alternations of impenetrable gloom and unearthly light shook the hearts of the dumfounded statesmen even more than the roar and rush of the storm.

A cry of horror broke from the onlookers when a man and a woman suddenly appeared trying to cross the White House grounds to reach a place of comparative safety, and were caught up by the wind, clinging desperately to each other, and hurled against a wall, at whose base they fell in a heap.

Then came another outburst of lightning, and a vicious bolt descended upon the Washington Monument, and, twisting round it, seemed to envelop the great shaft in a pulsating corkscrew of blinding fire. The report that instantly followed made the White House dance upon its foundations, and, as if that had been a signal, the flood-gates of the sky immediately opened, and rain so dense that it looked like a solid cataract of water poured down upon the earth. The raging water burst into the basement of the building, and ran off in a shoreless river toward the Potomac.

The streaming rain, still driven by the wind, poured through the broken windows, driving the President and the others to the middle of the room, where they soon stood in rills of water soaking the thick carpet.

They were all as pale as death. Their eyes sought one another's faces in dumb amazement. Cosmo Versál alone retained perfect self-command. In spite of his slight stature he looked their master. Raising his voice to the highest pitch, in order to be heard, he shouted:

"These are the first drops of the Deluge! Will you believe now?"