

CHAPTER IV

THE WORLD SWEEPED WITH TERROR

The tempest of hail, snow, lightning, and rain, which burst so unexpectedly over Washington, was not a local phenomenon. It leveled the antennae of the wireless telegraph systems all over the world, cutting off communication everywhere. Only the submarine telephone cables remained unaffected, and by them was transmitted the most astonishing news of the ravages of the storm. Rivers had careered over their banks, low-lying towns were flooded, the swollen sewers of cities exploded and inundated the streets, and gradually news came in from country districts showing that vast areas of land had been submerged, and hundreds drowned.

The downfall of rain far exceeded everything that the meteorological bureaus had ever recorded.

The vagaries of the lightning, and the frightful power that it exhibited, were especially terrifying.

In London the Victoria Tower was partly dismantled by a bolt.

In Moscow the ancient and beautiful Church of St. Basil was nearly destroyed.

The celebrated Leaning Tower of Pisa, the wonder of centuries, was flung to the ground.

The vast dome of St. Peter's at Rome was said to have been encased during three whole minutes with a blinding armor of electric fire, though the only harm done was the throwing down of a statue in one of the chapels.

But, strangest freak of all, in New York a tremendous bolt, which seems to have entered the Pennsylvania tunnel on the Jersey side, followed the rails under the river, throwing two trains from the track, and, emerging in the great station in the heart of the city, expanded into a rose-colored sphere, which exploded with an awful report, and blew the great roof to pieces. And yet, although the fragments were scattered a dozen blocks away, hundreds of persons who were in the stations suffered no other injury than such as resulted from being flung violently to the floor, or against the walls.

Cosmo Versál's great ark seemed charmed. Not a single discharge of lightning occurred in its vicinity, a fact which he attributed to the dielectric properties of levium. Nevertheless, the wind carried away all his screens and electric fans.

If this storm had continued the predicted deluge would unquestionably have occurred at once, and even its prophet would have perished through

having begun his preparations too late. But the disturbed elements sank into repose as suddenly as they had broken out with fury. The rain did not last, in most places, more than twenty-four hours, although the atmosphere continued to be filled with troubled clouds for a week. At the end of that time the sun reappeared, as hot as before, and a spotless dome once more over-arched the earth; but from this time the sky never resumed its former brilliant azure--there was always a strange coppery tinge, the sight of which was appalling, although it gradually lost its first effect through familiarity.

The indifference and derision with which Cosmo's predictions and elaborate preparations had hitherto been regarded now vanished, and the world, in spite of itself, shivered with vague apprehension. No reassurances from those savants who still refused to admit the validity of Cosmo Versál's calculations and deductions had any permanent effect upon the public mind.

With amusing inconsequence people sold stocks again, until all the exchanges were once more swept with panic--and then put the money in their strong boxes, as if they thought that the mere possession of the lucre could protect them. They hugged the money and remained deaf to Cosmo's reiterated advice to build arks with it.

After all, they were only terrified, not convinced, and they felt that, somehow, everything would come out right, now that they had their possessions well in hand.

For, in spite of the scare, nobody really believed that an actual deluge was coming. There might be great floods, and great suffering and loss, but the world was not going to be drowned! Such things only occurred in early and dark ages.

Some nervous persons found comfort in the fact that when the skies cleared after the sudden downpour brilliant rainbows were seen. Their hearts bounded with joy.

"The 'Bow of Promise!'" they cried. "Behold the unvarying assurance that the world shall never again be drowned."

Then a great revival movement was set on foot, starting in the Mississippi valley under the leadership of an eloquent exhorter, who declared that, although a false prophet had arisen, whose delusive prediction was contrary to Scripture, yet it was true that the world was about to be punished in unexpected ways for its many iniquities.

This movement rapidly spread all over the country, and was taken up in England and throughout Protestant Europe, and soon prayers were offered in thousands of churches to avert the wrath of Heaven. Multitudes thus found their fears turned into a new direction, and by a strange reaction, Cosmo Versál came to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist who was seeking to mislead mankind.

Just at this juncture, to add to the dismay and uncertainty, a grand and fearful comet suddenly appeared. It came up unexpectedly from the south, blazed brightly close beside the sun, even at noonday, and a few nights later was visible after sunset with an immense fiery head and a broad curved tail that seemed to pulsate from end to end. It was so bright that it cast shadows at night, as distinct as those made by the moon. No such cometary monster had ever before been seen. People shuddered when they looked at it. It moved with amazing speed, sweeping across the firmament like a besom of destruction. Calculation showed that it was not more than 3,000,000 miles from the earth.

But one night the wonder and dread awakened by the comet were magnified a hundredfold by an occurrence so unexpected and extraordinary that the spectators gasped in amazement.

The writer happens to have before him an entry in a diary, which is, probably, the sole contemporary record of this event. It was written in the city of Washington by no less a person than Professor Jeremiah Moses, of the Council of the Carnegie Institution. Let it tell its own story:

"A marvelous thing happened this night. I walked out into the park near my house with the intention of viewing the great comet. The park on my side (the west), is bordered with a dense screen of tall trees, and I advanced toward the open place in the center in order to have an unobstructed sight of the flaming stranger. As I passed across the edge

of the shadow of the trees--the ground ahead being brilliantly illuminated by the light of the comet--I suddenly noticed, with an involuntary start, that I was being preceded by a double shadow, with a black center, which forked away from my feet.

"I cast my eyes behind me to find the cause of the phenomenon, and saw, to my inexpressible amazement, that the comet had divided into two. There were two distinct heads, already widely separated, but each, it seemed to me, as brilliant as the original one had been, and each supplied with a vast plume of fire a hundred degrees in length, and consequently stretching far past the zenith. The cause of the double shadow was evident at once--but what can have produced this sudden disruption of the comet? It must have occurred since last evening, and already, if the calculated distance of the comet is correct, the parts of the severed head are 300,000 miles asunder!"

Underneath this entry was scribbled:

"Can this have anything to do with Cosmo Versál's flood?"

Whether it had anything to do with the flood or not, at any rate the public believed that it had. People went about with fear written on their faces.

The double shadows had a surprising effect. The phantasm was pointed out, and stared at with superstitious terror by thousands every night.

The fact that there was nothing really mysterious about it made no difference. Even those who knew well that it was an inevitable optical result of the division of the bright comet were thrilled with instinctive dread when they saw that forked umbra, mimicking their every movement. There is nothing that so upsets the mind as a sudden change in the aspect of familiar things.

The astronomers now took their turn. Those who were absolutely incredulous about Cosmo's prediction, and genuinely desirous of allaying the popular alarm, issued statements in which, with a disingenuousness that may have been unintentional, they tried to sidetrack his arguments.

Professor Pludder led the way with a pronunciamento declaring that "the absurd vaporings of the modern Nostradamus of New York" had now demonstrated their own emptiness.

"A comet," said Professor Pludder, with reassuring seriousness, "cannot drown the earth. It is composed of rare gases, which, as the experience of Halley's comet many years ago showed, are unable to penetrate the atmosphere even when an actual encounter occurs. In this case there cannot even be an encounter; the comet is now moving away. Its division is not an unprecedented occurrence, for many previous comets have met with similar accidents. This comet happened to be of unusual size, and the partition of the head occurred when it was relatively nearby--whence the startling phenomena observed. There is nothing to be feared."

It will be remarked that Professor Pludder entirely avoided the real issue. Cosmo Versál had never said that the comet would drown the earth. In fact, he had been as much surprised by its appearance as everybody else. But when he read Professor Pludder's statement, followed by others of similar import, he took up the cudgels with a vengeance. All over the world, translated into a dozen languages, he scattered his reply, and the effect was startling.

"My fellow-citizens of the world in all lands, and of every race," he began, "you are face to face with destruction! And yet, while its heralds are plainly signaling from the sky, and shaking the earth with lightning to awaken it, blind leaders of blind try to deceive you!

"They are defying science itself!

"They say that the comet cannot touch the earth. That is true. It is passing away. I myself did not foresee its coming. It arrived by accident, but every step that it has made through the silent depths of space has been a proclamation of the presence of the nebula, which is the real agent of the perdition of the world!

"Why that ominous redness which overcasts the heavens? You have all noticed it. Why that blinding brightness which the comet has displayed, exceeding all that has ever been beheld in such visitors. The explanation is plain: the comet has been feeding on the substance of the nebula, which is rare yet because we have only encountered some of its

outlying spirals.

"But it is coming on with terrible speed. In a few short months we shall be plunged into its awful center, and then the oceans will swell to the mountaintops, and the continents will become the bottoms of angry seas.

"When the flood begins it will be too late to save yourselves. You have already lost too much precious time. I tell you solemnly that not one in a million can now be saved. Throw away every other consideration, and try, try desperately, to be of the little company of those who escape!

"Remember that your only chance is in building arks--arks of levium, the metal that floats. I have sent broadcast plans for such arks. They can be made of any size, but the larger the better. In my own ark I can take only a selected number, and when the complement is made up not another soul will be admitted.

"I have established all my facts by mathematical proofs. The most expert mathematicians of the world have been unable to detect any error in my calculations. They try to dispute the data, but the data are already before you for your own judgment. The heavens are so obscured that only the brightest stars can now be seen." (This was a fact which had caused bewilderment in the observatories.) "The recent outburst of storms and floods was the second sign of the approaching end, and the third sign will not be long delayed--and after that the deluge!"

It is futile to try to describe the haunting fear and horror which seized upon the majority of the millions who read these words. Business was paralyzed, for men found it impossible to concentrate their minds upon ordinary affairs. Every night the twin comets, still very bright, although they were fast retreating, brandished their fiery scimitars in the sky--more fearful to the imagination now, since Cosmo Versál had declared that it was the nebula that stimulated their energies. And by day the sky was watched with anxious eyes striving to detect signs of a deepening of the menacing hue, which, to an excited fancy, suggested a tinge of blood.

Now, at last, Cosmo's warnings and entreaties bore practical fruit. Men began to inquire about places in his ark, and to make preparations for building arks of their own.

He had not been interfered with after his memorable interview with the President of the United States, and had pushed his work at Mineola with redoubled energy, employing night gangs of workmen so that progress was continuous throughout the twenty-four hours.

Standing on its platform, the ark, whose hull was approaching completion, rose a hundred feet into the air. It was 800 feet long and 250 broad--proportions which practical ship-builders ridiculed, but Cosmo, as original in this as in everything else, declared that, taking into account the buoyancy of levium, no other form would answer as well. He estimated that when its great engines were in place, its immense

stores of material for producing power, its ballast, and its supplies of food stowed away, and its cargo of men and animals taken aboard, it would not draw more than twenty feet of water.

Hardly a day passed now without somebody coming to Cosmo to inquire about the best method of constructing arks. He gave the required information, in all possible detail, with the utmost willingness. He drew plans and sketches, made all kinds of practical suggestions, and never failed to urge the utmost haste. He inspired every visitor at the same time with alarm and a resolution to go to work at once.

Some did go to work. But their progress was slow, and as days passed, and the comets gradually faded out of sight, and then the dome of the sky showed a tendency to resume its natural blueness, the enthusiasm of Cosmo's imitators weakened, together with their confidence in his prophetic powers.

They concluded to postpone their operations until the need of arks should become more evident.

As to those who had sent inquiries about places in Cosmo's ark, now that the danger seemed to be blowing away, they did not even take the trouble to answer the very kind responses that he had made.

It is a singular circumstance that not one of these anxious inquirers seemed to have paid particular attention to a very significant sentence

in his reply. If they had given it a little thought, it would probably have set them pondering, although they might have been more puzzled than edified. The sentence ran as follows:

"While assuring you that my ark has been built for the benefit of my fellow men, I am bound to tell you that I reserve absolutely the right to determine who are truly representative of homo sapiens."

The fact was that Cosmo had been turning over in his mind the great fundamental question which he had asked himself when the idea of trying to save the human race from annihilation had first occurred to him, and apparently he had fixed upon certain principles that were to guide him.

Since, when the mind is under great strain through fear, the slightest relaxation, caused by an apparently favorable change, produces a rebound of hope, as unreasoning as the preceding terror, so, on this occasion, the vanishing of the comets, and the fading of the disquieting color of the sky, had a wonderful effect in restoring public confidence in the orderly procession of nature.

Cosmo Versál's vogue as a prophet of disaster was soon gone, and once more everybody began to laugh at him. People turned again to their neglected affairs with the general remark that they "guessed the world would manage to wade through."

Those who had begun preparations to build arks looked very sheepish when

their friends gayed them about their childish credulity.

Then a feeling of angry resentment arose, and one day Cosmo Versál was mobbed in the street, and the gamins threw stones at him.

People forgot the extraordinary storm of lightning and rain, the split comet, and all the other circumstances which, a little time before, had filled them with terror.

But they were making a fearful mistake!

With eyes blindfolded they were walking straight into the jaws of destruction.

Without warning, and as suddenly almost as an explosion, the third sign appeared, and on its heels came a veritable Reign of Terror!