

CHAPTER V

THE THIRD SIGN

In the middle of the night, at New York, hundreds of thousands simultaneously awoke with a feeling of suffocation.

They struggled for breath as if they had suddenly been plunged into a steam bath.

The air was hot, heavy, and terribly oppressive.

The throwing open of windows brought no relief. The outer air was as stifling as that within.

It was so dark that, on looking out, one could not see his own doorsteps. The arc-lamps in the street flickered with an ineffective blue gleam which shed no illumination round about.

House lights, when turned on, looked like tiny candles inclosed in thick blue globes.

Frightened men and women stumbled around in the gloom of their chambers trying to dress themselves.

Cries and exclamations rang from room to room; children wailed; hysterical mothers ran wildly hither and thither, seeking their little ones. Many fainted, partly through terror and partly from the difficulty of breathing. Sick persons, seized with a terrible oppression of the chest, gasped, and never rose from their beds.

At every window, and in every doorway, throughout the vast city, invisible heads and forms were crowded, making their presence known by their voices--distracted householders striving to peer through the strange darkness, and to find out the cause of these terrifying phenomena.

Some managed to get a faint glimpse of their watches by holding them close against lamps, and thus noted the time. It was two o'clock in the morning.

Neighbors, unseen, called to one another, but got little comfort from the replies.

"What is it? In God's name, what has happened?"

"I don't know. I can hardly breathe."

"It is awful! We shall all be suffocated."

"Is it a fire?"

"No! No! It cannot be a fire."

"The air is full of steam. The stones and the window-panes are streaming with moisture."

"Great Heavens, how stifling it is!"

Then, into thousands of minds at once leaped the thought of the flood!

The memory of Cosmo Versál's reiterated warnings came back with overwhelming force. It must be the third sign that he had foretold. It had really come!

Those fateful words--"the flood" and "Cosmo Versál"--ran from lip to lip, and the hearts of those who spoke, and those who heard, sank like lead in their bosoms.

He would be a bold man, more confident in his powers of description than the present writer, who should attempt to picture the scenes in New York on that fearful night.

The gasping and terror-stricken millions waited and longed for the hour of sunrise, hoping that then the stygian darkness would be dissipated, so that people might, at least, see where to go and what to do. Many,

oppressed by the almost unbreathable air, gave up in despair, and no longer even hoped for morning to come.

In the midst of it all a collision occurred directly over Central Park between two aero-expresses, one coming from Boston and the other from Albany. (The use of small aeroplanes within the city limits had, for some time, been prohibited on account of the constant danger of collisions, but the long-distance lines were permitted to enter the metropolitan district, making their landings and departures on specially constructed towers.) These two, crowded with passengers, had, as it afterward appeared, completely lost their bearings--the strongest electric lights being invisible a few hundred feet away, while the wireless signals were confusing--and, before the danger was apprehended, they crashed together.

The collision occurred at a height of a thousand feet, on the Fifth Avenue side of the park. Both of the airships had their aeroplanes smashed and their decks crumpled up, and the unfortunate crews and passengers were hurled through the impenetrable darkness to the ground.

Only four or five, who were lucky enough to be entangled with the lighter parts of the wreckage, escaped with their lives. But they were too much injured to get upon their feet, and there they lay, their sufferings made tenfold worse by the stifling air, and the horror of their inexplicable situation, until they were found and humanely relieved, more than ten hours after their fall.

The noise of the collision had been heard in Fifth Avenue, and its meaning was understood; but amid the universal terror no one thought of trying to aid the victims. Everybody was absorbed in wondering what would become of himself.

When the long attended hour of sunrise approached, the watchers were appalled by the absence of even the slightest indication of the reappearance of the orb of day. There was no lightening of the dense cloak of darkness, and the great city seemed dead.

For the first time in its history it failed to awake after its regular period of repose, and to send forth its myriad voices. It could not be seen; it could not be heard; it made no sign. As far as any outward indication of its existence was concerned the mighty capital had ceased to be.

It was this frightful silence of the streets, and of all the outer world, that terrified the people, cooped up in their houses, and their rooms, by the walls of darkness, more than almost any other circumstance; it gave such an overwhelming sense of the universality of the disaster, whatever that disaster might be. Except where the voices of neighbors could be heard, one could not be sure that the whole population, outside his own family, had not perished.

As the hours passed, and yet no light appeared, another intimidating

circumstance manifested itself. From the start everybody had noticed the excessive humidity of the dense air. Every solid object that the hands came in contact with in the darkness was wet, as if a thick fog had condensed upon it. This supersaturation of the air (a principal cause of the difficulty experienced in breathing) led to a result which would quickly have been foreseen if people could have had the use of their eyes, but which, coming on invisibly, produced a panic fear when at last its presence was strikingly forced upon the attention.

The moisture collected on all exposed surfaces--on the roofs, the walls, the pavements--until its quantity became sufficient to form little rills, which sought the gutters, and there gathered force and volume. Presently the streams became large enough to create a noise of flowing water that attracted the attention of the anxious watchers at the open windows. Then cries of dismay arose. If the water had been visible it would not have been terrible.

But, to the overstrained imagination, the bubbling and splashing sound that came out of the darkness was magnified into the rush of a torrent. It seemed to grow louder every moment. What was but a murmur on the ear-drum became a roar in the excited brain-cells.

Once more were heard the ominous words, "The flood!"

They spread from room to room, and from house to house. The wild scenes that had attended the first awakening were tame in comparison with what

now occurred. Self-control, reason--everything--gave way to panic.

If they could only have seen what they were about!

But then they would not have been about it. Then their reason would not have been dethroned.

Darkness is the microscope of the imagination, and it magnifies a million times!

Some timorously descended their doorsteps, and feeling a current of water in the gutter, recoiled with cries of horror, as if they had slipped down the bank of a flooded river. As they retreated they believed that the water was rising at their heels!

Others made their way to the roofs, persuaded that the flood was already inundating the basements and the lower stories of their dwellings.

Women wrung their hands and wept, and children cried, and men pushed and stumbled about, and shouted, and would have done something if only they could have seen what to do. That was the pity of it! It was as if the world had been stricken blind, and then the trump of an archangel had sounded, crying:

"Fly! Fly! for the Avenger is on your heels!"

How could they fly?

This awful strain could not have lasted. It would have needed no deluge to finish New York if that maddening pall of darkness had remained unbroken a few hours longer. But, just when thousands had given up in despair, there came a rapid change.

At the hour of noon light suddenly broke overhead. Beginning in a round patch inclosed in an iridescent halo, it spread swiftly, seeming to melt its way down through the thick, dark mass that choked the air, and in less than fifteen minutes New York and all its surroundings emerged into the golden light of noonday.

People who had expected at any moment to feel the water pitilessly rising about them looked out of their windows, and were astonished to see only tiny rivulets which were already shriveling out of sight in the gutters. In a few minutes there was no running water left, although the dampness on the walls and walks showed how great the humidity of the air had been.

At the same time the oppression was lifted from the respiratory apparatus, and everybody breathed freely once more, and felt courage returning with each respiration.

The whole great city seemed to utter a vast sigh of relief.

And then its voice was heard, as it had never been heard before, rising higher and louder every moment. It was the first time that morning had ever broken at midday.

The streets became filled, with magical quickness, by hundreds of thousands, who chattered, and shouted, and laughed, and shook hands, and asked questions, and told their experiences, and demanded if anybody had ever heard of such a thing before, and wondered what it could have been, and what it meant, and whether it would come back again.

Telephones of all kinds were kept constantly busy. Women called up their friends, and talked hysterically; men called up their associates and partners, and tried to talk business.

There was a rush for the Elevated, for the Subways, for the street auto-cars. The great arteries of traffic became jammed, and the noise rose louder and louder.

Belated aero-expresses arrived at the towers from East and West, and their passengers hurried down to join the excited multitudes below.

In an incredibly brief time the newsboys were out with extras. Then everybody read with the utmost avidity what everybody knew already.

But before many hours passed there was real news, come by wireless, and by submarine telephone and telegraph, telling how the whole world had

been swept by the marvelous cloak of darkness.

In Europe it had arrived during the morning hours; in Asia during the afternoon.

The phenomena had varied in different places. In some the darkness had not been complete, but everywhere it was accompanied by extraordinary humidity, and occasionally by brief but torrential rains. The terror had been universal, and all believed that it was the third sign predicted by Cosmo Versál.

Of course, the latter was interviewed, and he gave out a characteristic manifesto.

"One of the outlying spirals of the nebula has struck the earth," he said. "But do not be deceived. It is nothing in comparison with what is coming. And it is the LAST WARNING that will be given! You have obstinately shut your eyes to the truth, and you have thrown away your lives!"

This, together with the recent awful experience, produced a great effect. Those who had begun to lay foundations for arks thought of resuming the work. Those who had before sought places with Cosmo called him up by telephone. But only the voice of Joseph Smith answered, and his words were not reassuring.

"Mr. Versál," he said, "directs me to say that at present he will allot no places. He is considering whom he will take."

The recipients of this reply looked very blank. But at least one of them, a well-known broker in Wall Street, was more angered than frightened:

"Let him go to the deuce!" he growled; "him and his flood together!"

Then he resolutely set out to bull the market.

It seems incredible--but such is human nature--that a few days of bright sunshine should once more have driven off the clouds of fear that had settled so densely over the popular mind. Of course, not everybody forgot the terrors of the third sign--they had struck too deep, but gradually the strain was relaxed, and people in general accepted the renewed assurances of the savants of the Pludder type that nothing that had occurred was inexplicable by the ordinary laws of nature. The great darkness, they averred, differed from previous occurrences of the kind only in degree, and it was to be ascribed to nothing more serious than atmospheric vagaries, such as that which produced the historic Dark Day in New England in the year 1780.

But more nervous persons noticed, with certain misgivings, that Cosmo Versál pushed on his operations, if possible more energetically than before. And there was a stir of renewed interest when the announcement

came out one day that the ark was finished. Then thousands hurried to Mineola to look upon the completed work.

The extraordinary massiveness of the ark was imposing. Towering ominously on its platform, which was so arranged that when the waters came they should lift the structure from its cradle and set it afloat without any other launching, it seemed in itself a prophecy of impending disaster.

Overhead it was roofed with an oblong dome of levium, through which rose four great metallic chimneys, placed above the mighty engines. The roof sloped down to the vertical sides, to afford protection from in-bursting waves. Rows of portholes, covered with thick, stout glass, indicated the location of the superposed decks. On each side four gangways gave access to the interior, and long, sloping approaches offered means of entry from the ground.

Cosmo had a force of trained guards on hand, but everybody who wished was permitted to enter and inspect the ark. Curious multitudes constantly mounted and descended the long approaches, being kept moving by the guards.

Inside they wandered about astonished by what they saw.

The three lower decks were devoted to the storage of food and of fuel for the electric generators which Cosmo Versál had been accumulating for

months.

Above these were two decks, which the visitors were informed would be occupied by animals, and by boxes of seeds and prepared roots of plants, with which it was intended to restore the vegetable life of the planet after the water should have sufficiently receded.

The five remaining decks were for human beings. There were roomy quarters for the commander and his officers, others for the crew, several large saloons, and five hundred sets of apartments of various sizes to be occupied by the passengers whom Cosmo should choose to accompany him. They had all the convenience of the most luxurious staterooms of the trans-oceanic liners. Many joking remarks were exchanged by the visitors as they inspected these rooms.

Cosmo ran about among his guests, explaining everything, showing great pride in his work, pointing out a thousand particulars in which his foresight had been displayed--but, to everybody's astonishment, he uttered no more warnings, and made no appeals. On the contrary, as some observant persons noticed, he seemed to avoid any reference to the fate of those who should not be included in his ship's company.

Some sensitive souls were disturbed by detecting in his eyes a look that seemed to express deep pity and regret. Occasionally he would draw apart, and gaze at the passing crowds with a compassionate expression, and then, slowly turning his back, while his fingers worked nervously,

would disappear, with downcast head, in his private room.

The comparatively few who particularly noticed this conduct of Cosmo's were deeply moved--more than they had been by all the enigmatic events of the past months. One man, Amos Blank, a rich manufacturer, who was notorious for the merciless methods that he had pursued in eliminating his weaker competitors, was so much disturbed by Cosmo Versál's change of manner that he sought an opportunity to speak to him privately. Cosmo received him with a reluctance that he could not but notice, and which, somehow, increased his anxiety.

"I--I--thought," said the billionaire hesitatingly, "that I ought--that is to say, that I might, perhaps, inquire--might inform myself--under what conditions one could, supposing the necessity to arise, obtain a passage in your--in your ark. Of course the question of cost does not enter in the matter--not with me."

Cosmo gazed at the man coldly, and all the compassion that had recently softened his steely eyes disappeared. For a moment he did not speak. Then he said, measuring his words and speaking with an emphasis that chilled the heart of his listener:

"Mr. Blank, the necessity has arisen."

"So you say--so you say--" began Mr. Blank.

"So I say," interrupted Cosmo sternly, "and I say further that this ark has been constructed to save those who are worthy of salvation, in order that all that is good and admirable in humanity may not perish from the earth."

"Exactly, exactly," responded the other, smiling, and rubbing his hands. "You are quite right to make a proper choice. If your flood is going to cause a general destruction of mankind, of course you are bound to select the best, the most advanced, those who have pushed to the front, those who have means, those with the strongest resources. The masses, who possess none of these qualifications and claims--"

Again Cosmo Versál interrupted him, more coldly than before:

"It costs nothing to be a passenger in this ark. Ten million dollars, a hundred millions, would not purchase a place in it! Did you ever hear the parable of the camel and the needle's eye? The price of a ticket here is an irreproachable record!"

With these astonishing words Cosmo turned his back upon his visitor and shut the door in his face.

The billionaire staggered back, rubbed his head, and then went off muttering:

"An idiot! A plain idiot! There will be no flood."