

CHAPTER VIII

STORMING THE ARK

There was to be no more respite now. The time of warnings was past. The "signs" had all been shown to a skeptical and vacillating world, and at last the fulfillment was at hand.

There was no crying of "extras" in the streets, for men had something more pressing to think of than sending and reading news about their distresses and those of their fellow-men. Many of the newspapers ceased publication; every business place was abandoned; there was no thought but of the means of escape.

But how should they escape? And whither should they fly?

The lower lying streets were under water. The Atlantic still surged back and forth as if the ocean itself were in agony. And every time the waves poured in they rose higher. The new shores of the bay, and the new coasts of Long Island and New Jersey, receding inward hour by hour, were strewn with the wrecks of hundreds of vessel of all kinds which had been caught by the surges and pitilessly hurled to destruction.

Even if men did not yet fully believe in Cosmo Versál's theory of a whelming nebula, they were terrified to the bottom of their souls by the

conviction, which nobody could resist, that the vast ice-fields of the north, the glaciers of Greenland, the icy mountains of Alaska, had melted away under the terrible downpour of heat, and were swelling the oceans over their brims. And then a greater fear dropped like a blanket upon them. Some one thought of the antarctic ice.

The latest dispatches that had come, before the cessation of all communication to the newspapers, had told of the prevalence of stifling heat throughout the southern hemisphere, and of the vast fleets of antarctic icebergs that filled the south seas. The mighty deposits of ice, towering to mountain heights, that stretched a thousand miles in every direction around the south pole were melting as the arctic ice had melted, and, when the water thus formed was added to the already overflowing seas, to what elevation might not the flood attain!

The antarctic ice was known to be the principal mass of frozen water on the globe. The frigid cap of the north was nothing in comparison with it. It had long been believed that that tremendous accumulation unbalanced the globe and was the principal cause of the unsteadiness of the earth's axis of rotation.

Every fresh exploration had only served to magnify the conception of the incredible vastness of that deposit. The skirts of the Antarctic Continent had proved to be rich in minerals wherever the rocks could find a place to penetrate through the gigantic burden of ice, and the principal nations had quarreled over the possession or control of these

protruding bits of wealth-crammed strata. But behind the bordering cliffs of ice, rising in places a thousand feet above the level of the sea, and towering farther inland so high that this region was, in mean elevation, the loftiest on the planet, nothing but ice could be seen.

And now that ice was dissolving and flowing into the swollen oceans, adding billions of tons of water every minute!

Men did not stop to calculate, as Cosmo Versál had done, just how much the dissolution of all the ice and permanent snow of the globe would add to the volume of the seas. He knew that it would be but a drop in the bucket--although sufficient to start the flood--and that the great thing to be feared was the condensation of the aqueous nebula, already beginning to enwrap the planet in its stifling folds.

The public could understand the melting ice, although it could not fully understand the nebula; it could understand the swelling sea, and the raging rivers, and the lakes breaking over their banks--and the terror and despair became universal.

But what should they do?

Those who had thought of building arks hurried to see if the work might not yet be completed, but most of them had begun their foundations on low land, which was already submerged.

Then a cry arose, terrible in its significance and in its consequences--one of those cries that the vanished but unconquerable god Pan occasionally sets ringing, nobody can tell how:

"Cosmo's ark! Get aboard! Storm it!"

And thereupon there was a mighty rush for Mineola. Nobody who caught the infection stopped to reason. Some of them had to wade through water, which in places was knee-deep. They came from various directions, and united in a yelling mob. They meant to carry the ark with a rush. They would not be denied. As the excited throngs neared the great vessel they saw its huge form rising like a mount of safety, with an American flag flapping over it, and they broke into a mighty cheer. On they sped, seized with the unreason of a crowd, shouting, falling over one another, struggling, fighting for places, men dragging their wives and children through the awful crush, many trampled helpless under the myriads of struggling feet--driving the last traces of sanity from one another's minds.

The foremost ranks presently spied Cosmo Versál, watching them from an open gangway sixty feet above their heads. They were dismayed at finding the approaches gone. How should they get into the ark? How could they climb up its vertical sides?

But they would find means. They would re-erect the approaches. They would get in somehow.

Cosmo waved them off with frantic gesticulations; then, through a trumpet, he shouted in a voice audible above the din:

"Keep back, for your lives!"

But they paid no attention to him; they rushed upon the raised wall, surrounding the field where Cosmo had buried his mysterious lines of wire. Then the meaning of that enigmatical work was flashed upon them.

As the first to arrive laid their hands upon the top of the low wall they fell as if shot through the brain, tumbling backward on those behind. Others pushed wildly on, but the instant they touched the wall they too collapsed. Wicked blue-green sparks occasionally flashed above the struggling mass.

The explanation was clear. Cosmo, foreseeing the probability of a despairing attack, had surrounded the ark with an impassable electric barrier. The sound of a whirring dynamo could be heard. A tremendous current was flowing through the hidden wires and transmitting its paralyzing energy to the metallic crest of the wall.

Still those behind pushed on, until rank after rank had sunk helpless at the impregnable line of defense. They were not killed--at least, not many--but the shock was so paralyzing that those who had experienced its effects made no further attempts to cross the barrier. Many lay for a

time helpless upon the sodden ground.

Cosmo and Joseph Smith, who had now appeared at his side, continued to shout warnings, which began to be heeded when the nature of the obstacle became known. The rush was stopped, and the multitude stood at bay, dazed, and uncertain what to do. Then a murmur arose, growing louder and more angry and threatening, until suddenly a shot was heard in the midst of the crowd, and Cosmo was seen to start backward, while Joseph Smith instantly dodged out of sight.

A cry arose:

"Shoot him! That's right! Shoot the devil! He's a witch! He's drowning the world!"

They meant it--at least, half of them did. It was the logic of terror.

Hundreds of shots were now fired from all quarters, and heads that had been seen flitting behind the various portholes instantly disappeared. The bullets rattled on the huge sides of the ark, but they came from small pistols and had not force enough to penetrate.

Cosmo Versál alone remained in sight. Occasionally a quick motion showed that even his nerves were not steady enough to defy the whistling of the bullets passing close; but he held his ground, and stretched out his hand to implore attention.

When the fusillade ceased for a moment he put his trumpet again to his lips and shouted:

"I have done my best to save you, but you would not listen. Although I know that you must perish, I would not myself harm a hair of your heads. Go back, I implore you. You may prolong your lives if you will fly to the highlands and the mountains--but here you cannot enter. The ark is full."

Another volley of shots was the only answer. One broad-shouldered man forced his way to the front, took his stand close to the wall, and yelled in stentorian tones:

"Cosmo Versál, listen to me! You are the curse of the world! You have brought this flood upon us with your damnable incantations. Your infernal nebula is the seal of Satan! Here, beast and devil, here at my feet, lies my only son, slain by your hellish device. By the Eternal I swear you shall go back to the pit!"

Instantly a pistol flashed in the speaker's hand, and five shots rang in quick succession. One after another they whistled by Cosmo's head and flattened themselves upon the metal-work behind. Cosmo Versál, untouched, folded his arms and looked straight at his foe. The man, staring a moment confusedly, as if he could not comprehend his failure, threw up his arms with a despairing gesture, and fell prone upon the

ground.

Then yells and shots once more broke out. Cosmo stepped back, and a great metallic door swung to, closing the gangway.

But three minutes later the door opened, and the mob saw two machine-guns trained upon them.

Once more Cosmo appeared, with the trumpet.

"If you fire again," he cried, "I shall sweep you with grapeshot. I have told you how you can prolong your lives. Now go!"

Not another shot was fired. In the face of the guns, whose terrible power all comprehended, no one dared to make a hostile movement.

But, perhaps, if Cosmo Versál had not set new thoughts running in the minds of the assailants by telling them there was temporary safety to be found by seeking high ground, even the terror of the guns would not have daunted them. Now their hopefulness was reawakened, and many began to ponder upon his words.

"He says we must perish, and yet that we can find safety in the hills and mountains," said one man. "I believe half of that is a lie. We are not going to be drowned. The water won't rise much higher. The flood from the south pole that they talk about must be here by this time, and

then what's left to come?"

"The nebula," suggested one.

"Aw, the nebula be hanged! There's no such thing! I live on high ground; I'm going to keep a sharp outlook, and if the water begins to shut off Manhattan I'll take my family up the Hudson to the Highlands. I guess old Storm King'll keep his head above. That's where I come from--up that way. I used to hear people say when I was a boy that New York was bound to sink some day. I used to laugh at that then, but it looks mighty like it now, don't it?"

"Say," put in another, "what did the fellow mean by saying the ark was full? That's funny, ain't it? Who's he got inside, anyway?"

"Oh, he ain't got nobody," said another.

"Yes, he has. I seen a goodish lot through the portholes. He's got somebody, sure."

"A lot of fools like himself, most likely."

"Well, if he's a fool, and they's fools, what are we, I'd like to know? What did you come here for, hey?"

It was a puzzling question, and brought forth only a sheepish laugh,

followed by the remark:

"I guess we fooled ourselves considerable. We got scared too easy."

"Maybe you'll feel scared again when you see the water climbing up the streets in New York. I don't half like this thing. I'm going to follow his advice and light out for higher ground."

Soon conversation of this sort was heard on all sides, and the crowd began to disperse, only those lingering behind who had friends or relatives that had been struck down at the fatal wall. It turned out that not more than one or two had been mortally shocked. The rest were able to limp away, and many had fully recovered within five minutes after suffering the shock. In half an hour not a dozen persons were in sight from the ark.

But when the retreating throngs drew near the shores of the Sound, and the East River, which had expanded into a true arm of the sea, and found that there had been a perceptible rise since they set out to capture the ark, they began to shake their heads and fear once more entered their hearts.

Thousands then and there resolved that they would not lose another instant in setting out for high land, up the Hudson, in Connecticut, among the hills of New Jersey. In fact, many had already fled thither, some escaping on aeros; and hosts would now have followed but for a

marvelous change that came just before nightfall and prevented them.

For some days the heavens had alternately darkened and lightened, as gushes of mist came and went, but there had been no actual rain. Now, without warning, a steady downpour began. Even at the beginning it would have been called, in ordinary times, a veritable cloudburst; but it rapidly grew worse and worse, until there was no word in the vernacular or in the terminology of science to describe it.

It seemed, in truth, that "all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened." The water thundered upon the roofs, and poured off them in torrents. In five minutes every sloping street had become an angry river, and every level place a swelling lake. People caught out of doors were almost beaten to the ground by the force of the water falling upon them as if they had been standing under a cataract.

In a short time every cellar and every basement was filled to overflowing, and in the avenues the flood, lapping every instant higher upon the doorsteps and the walls, rushed by with frightful roarings, bearing in its awful embrace pieces of furniture, clothing, bedding, washed out of ground-floor rooms--and, alas! human beings; some motionless, already mercifully deprived of life, but others struggling and shouting for aid which could not be given.

So terrible a spectacle no one had ever looked upon, no one had ever

imagined. Those who beheld it were too stunned to cry out, too overwhelmed with terror and horror to utter a word. They stood, or fell into chairs or upon the floor, trembling in every limb, with staring eyes and drooping jaws, passively awaiting their fate.

As night came on there was no light. The awful darkness of the third sign once more settled upon the great city, but now it was not the terror of indefinite expectation that crushed down the souls of men and women--it was the weight of doom accomplished!

There was no longer any room for self-deception; every quaking heart felt now that the nebula had come. Cosmo Versál had been right!

After the water had attained a certain height in the streets and yards, depending upon the ratio between the amount descending from the sky and that which could find its way to the rivers, the flood for the time being rose no higher. The actual drowning of New York could not happen until the Hudson and the East River should become so swollen that the water would stand above the level of the highest buildings, and turn the whole region round about, as far as the Orange hills, the Ramapo Mountains, the Highlands, and the Housatonic hills, into an inland sea.

But before we tell that story we must return to see what was going on at Mineola. Cosmo Versál, on that awful night when New York first knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, or the gleam of a hope, that it was doomed, presided over a remarkable assembly in the grand saloon of his

ark.