

CHAPTER XI

"A BILLION FOR A SHARE"

The Ark had lodged on the loftiest part of the Palisades. It was only after long and careful study of their position, rendered possible by occasional glimpses of the Orange Hills and high points further up the course of the Hudson, that Cosmo Versál and Captain Arms were able to reach that conclusion. Where New York had stood nothing was visible but an expanse of turbid and rushing water.

But suppose the hard trap rocks had penetrated the bottom of the Ark! It was a contingency too terrible to be thought of. Yet the facts must be ascertained at once.

Cosmo, calling Joseph Smith, and commanding him to go among the frightened passengers and assure them, in his name, that there was no danger, hurried, with the captain and a few trusty men, into the bowels of the vessel. They thoroughly sounded the bottom plates. No aperture and no indentation was to be found.

But, then, the bottom was double, and the outer plates might have been perforated. If this had happened the fact would reveal itself through the leakage of water into the intervening space. To ascertain if that had occurred it was necessary to unscrew the covers of some of the manholes in

the inner skin of levium.

It was an anxious moment when they cautiously removed one of these covers. At the last turns of the screw the workman who handled it instinctively turned his head aside, and made ready for a spring, more than half expecting that the cover would be driven from his hands, and a stream of water would burst in.

But the cover remained in place after it was completely loosened, and until it had been lifted off. A sigh of relief broke from every breast. No water was visible.

"Climb in there, and explore the bottom," Cosmo commanded.

There was a space of eighteen inches between the two bottoms, which were connected and braced by the curved ribs of the hull. A man immediately disappeared in the opening and began the exploration. Cosmo ordered the removal of other covers at various points, and the exploration was extended over the whole bottom. He himself passed through one of the manholes and aided in the work.

At last it was determined, beyond any doubt, that even the outer skin was uninjured. Not so much as a dent could be found in it.

"By the favor of Providence," said Cosmo Versál, as his great head emerged from a manhole, "the Ark has touched upon a place where the rocks are

covered with soil, and no harm has come to us. In a very short time the rising water will lift us off."

"And, with my consent, you'll do no more navigating over hills and mountains," grumbled Captain Arms. "The open sea for the sailor."

The covers were carefully replaced, and the party, in happier spirits, returned to the upper decks, where the good news was quickly spread.

The fact was that while the inspection was under way the Ark had floated off, and when Cosmo and the captain reached their bridge the man who had been left in charge reported that the vessel had swung halfway round.

"She's headed for the old Atlantic," sung out Captain Arms. "The sooner we're off the better."

But before the captain could signal the order to go ahead, Cosmo Versál laid his hand on his arm and said:

"Wait a moment; listen."

Through the lashing of the rain a voice penetrated with a sound between a call and a scream. There could be no doubt that it was human. The captain and Cosmo looked at one another in speechless astonishment. The idea that any one outside the Ark could have survived, and could now be afloat amid this turmoil of waters, had not occurred to their minds. They experienced

a creeping of the nerves. In a few minutes the voice came again, louder than before, and the words that it pronounced being now clearly audible, the two listeners could not believe their ears.

"Cosmo Versál!" it yelled. "Cosmo-o-o Ver-sá-al! A billion for a share! A billion, I say, a bil-li-on for a share!"

Then they perceived a little way off to the left something which looked like the outline of a boat, sunk to the gunwales, washed over by every wave; and standing in it, up to their waists in water, were four men, one of whom was gesticulating violently, while the others seemed dazed and incapable of voluntary movement.

It was the boat of levium that had been thrown out of the wreckage when the battleship ran down the Municipal tower, and we must now follow the thread of its adventures up to the time of its encounter with the Ark.

As the boat was driven westward from the drowned site of Madison Square it gradually freed itself from the objects floating around, most of which soon sunk, and in an hour or two its inmates were alone--the sole survivors of a dense population of many millions.

Alone they were in impenetrable darkness, for, as we have said, night had by this time once more fallen.

They floated on, half drowned, chilled to the bone, not trying to speak,

not really conscious of one another's presence. The rain beat down upon them, the waves washed over them, the unsinkable boat sluggishly rose and fell with the heaving of the water, and occasionally they were nearly flung overboard by a sudden lurch--and yet they clung with desperate tenacity to the thwarts, as if life were still dear, as if they thought that they might yet survive, though the world was drowned.

Thus hours passed, and at last a glimmer appeared in the streaming air, and a faint light stole over the face of the water. If they saw one another, it was with unrecognizing eyes. They were devoured with hunger, but they did not know it.

Suddenly one of them--it was he who had been so miraculously thrown into the boat when it shot out of the tangle of falling beams and walls--raised his head and threw up his arms, a wild light gleaming in his eyes.

In a hoarse, screaming voice he yelled:

"Cosmo Versál!"

No other syllables that the tongue could shape would have produced the effect of that name. It roused the three men who heard it from their lethargy of despair, and thrilled them to the marrow. With amazed eyes they stared at their companion. He did not look at them, but gazed off into the thick rain. Again his voice rose in a maniacal shriek:

"Cosmo Versál! Do you hear me? Let me in! A billion for a share!"

The men looked at each other, and, even in their desperate situation, felt a stir of pity in their hearts. They were not too dazed to comprehend that their companion had gone mad. One of them moved to his side, and laid a hand upon his shoulder, as if he would try to soothe him.

But the maniac threw him off, nearly precipitating him over the side of the submerged boat, crying:

"What are you doing in my boat? Overboard with you! I am looking for Cosmo Versál! He's got the biggest thing afloat! Securities! Securities! Gilt-edged! A billion, I tell you! Here I have them--look! Gilt-edged, every one!" and he snatched a thick bundle of papers from his pocket and waved them wildly until they melted into a pulpy mass with the downpour.

The others now shrank away from him in fear. Fear? Yes, for still they loved their lives, and the staggering support beneath their feet had become as precious to them as the solid earth. They would have fought with the fury of madmen to retain their places in that half-swamped shell. They were still capable of experiencing a keener fear than that of the flood. They were as terrified by the presence of this maniac as they would have been on encountering him in their homes.

But he did not attempt to follow them. He still looked off through the driving rain, balancing himself to the sluggish lurching of the boat, and

continuing to rave, and shout, and shake his soaked bundle of papers, until, exhausted by his efforts, and half-choked by the water that drove in his face, he sank helpless upon a thwart.

Then they fell back into their lethargy, but in a little while he was on his feet again, gesticulating and raging--and thus hours passed on, and still they were afloat, and still clinging to life.

Suddenly, looming out of the strange gloom, they perceived the huge form of the Ark, and all struggled to their feet, but none could find voice but the maniac.

As soon as he saw the men, Cosmo Versál had run down to the lowest deck, and ordered the opening of a gangway on that side. When the door swung back he found himself within a few yards of the swamped boat, but ten feet above its level. Joseph Smith, Professor Moses, Professor Jones, Professor Able, and others of the passengers, and several of the crew, hurried to his side, while the rest of the passengers crowded as near as they could get.

The instant that Cosmo appeared the maniac redoubled his cries.

"Here they are," he yelled, shaking what remained of his papers. "A billion--all gilt-edged! Let me in. But shut out the others. They're only little fellows. They've got no means. They can't float an enterprise like this. Ah, you're a bright one! You and me, Cosmo Versál--we'll squeeze 'em all out. I'll give you the secrets. We'll own the earth! I'm

Amos Blank!"

Cosmo Versál recognized the man in spite of the dreadful change that had come over him. His face was white and drawn, his eyes staring, his head bare, his hair matted with water, his clothing in shreds--but it was unmistakably Amos Blank, a man whose features the newspapers had rendered familiar to millions, a man who had for years stood before the public as the unabashed representative of the system of remorseless repression of competition, and shameless corruption of justice and legislation. After the world, for nearly two generations, had enjoyed the blessings of the reforms in business methods and social ideals that had been inaugurated by the great uprising of the people in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Amos Blank, and lesser men of his ilk, had swung back the pendulum, and re-established more firmly than ever the reign of monopoly and iniquitous privilege.

The water-logged little craft floated nearer until it almost touched the side of the Ark directly below the gangway. The madman's eyes glowed with eagerness, and he reached up his papers, continually yelling his refrain: "A billion! Gilt-edged! Let me in! Don't give the rabble a show!"

Cosmo made no reply, but gazed down upon the man and his bedraggled companions with impassive features, but thoughtful eyes. Any one who knew him intimately, as Joseph Smith alone did, could have read his mind. He was asking himself what he ought to do. Here was the whole fundamental question to be gone over again. To what purpose had he taken so great pains to

select the flower of mankind? Here was the head and chief of the offense that he had striven to eliminate appealing to him to be saved under circumstances which went straight to the heart and awoke every sentiment of humanity.

Presently he said in as low a voice as could be made audible:

"Joseph, advise me. What should I do?"

"You were willing to take Professor Pludder," replied Smith evasively, but with a plain leaning to the side of mercy.

"You know very well that that was different," Cosmo returned irritably.

"Pludder was not morally rotten. He was only mistaken. He had the fundamental scientific quality, and I'm sorry he threw himself away in his obstinacy. But this man--"

"Since he is alone," broke in Joseph Smith with a sudden illumination, "he could do no harm."

Cosmo Versál's expression instantly brightened.

"You are right!" he exclaimed. "By himself he can do nothing. I am sure there is no one aboard who would sympathize with his ideas. Alone, he is innocuous. Besides, he's insane, and I can't leave him to drown in that condition. And I must take the others, too. Let down a landing stage," he

continued in a louder voice, addressing some members of the crew.

In a few minutes all four of the unfortunates, seeming more dead than live, were helped into the Ark.

Amos Blank immediately precipitated himself upon Cosmo Versál, and, seizing him by the arm, tried to lead him apart, saying in his ear, as he glared round upon the faces of the throng which crowded every available space.

"Hist! Overboard with 'em! What's all this trash? Shovel 'em out! They'll want to get in with us; they'll queer the game!"

Then he turned furiously upon the persons nearest him, and began to push them toward the open gangway. At a signal from Cosmo Versál, two men seized him and pinioned his arms. At that his mood changed, and, wrenching himself loose, he once more ran to Cosmo, waving his bedraggled bundle, and shouting:

"A billion! Here's the certificates--gilt-edge! But," he continued, with a cunning leer, and suddenly thrusting the sodden papers into his pocket, "you'll make out the receipts first. I'll put in five billions to make it a sure go, if you won't let in another soul."

Cosmo shook off the man's grasp, and again calling the two members of the crew who had before pinioned his arms, told them to lead him away, at the same time saying to him:

"You go with these men into my room. I'll see you later."

Blank took it in the best part, and willingly accompanied his conductors, only stopping a moment to wink over his shoulder at Cosmo, and then he was led through the crowd, which regarded him with unconcealed astonishment, and in many cases with no small degree of fear. As soon as he was beyond earshot, Cosmo directed Joseph Smith to hurry ahead of the party and conduct them to a particular apartment, which he designated at the same time, saying to Smith:

"Turn the key on him as soon as he's inside."

Amos Blank, now an insane prisoner in Cosmo Versál's Ark, had been the greatest financial power in the world's metropolis, a man of iron nerve and the clearest of brains, who always kept his head and never uttered a foolish word. It was he who had stood over the flight of steps in the Municipal Building, coolly measuring with his eye the rise of the water, exposing the terrible error that sent such a wave of unreasoning joy through the hearts of the thousands of refugees crowded into the doomed edifice, and receiving blows and curses for making the truth known.

He had himself taken refuge there, after visiting his office and filling his pockets with his most precious papers. How, by a marvelous stroke of fate, he became one of the four persons who alone escaped from New York after the downpour began is already known.

The other men taken from the boat were treated like rescued mariners snatched from a wreck at sea. Every attention was lavished upon them, and Cosmo Versál did not appear to regret, as far as they were concerned, that his ship's company had been so unexpectedly recruited.