CHAPTER XII

THE SUBMERGENCE OF THE OLD WORLD

We now turn our attention for a time from the New World to the Old. What did the thronging populations of Europe, Africa, and Asia do when the signs of coming disaster chased one on another's heels, when the oceans began to burst their bonds, and when the windows of the firmament were opened?

The picture that can be drawn must necessarily be very fragmentary, because the number who escaped was small and the records that they left are few.

The savants of the older nations were, in general, quite as incredulous and as set in their opposition to Cosmo Versál's extraordinary out-givings as those of America. They decried his science and denounced his predictions as the work of a fool or a madman. The president of the Royal Astronomical Society of Great Britain proved to the satisfaction of most of his colleagues that a nebula could not possibly contain enough water to drown an asteroid, let alone the earth.

"The nebulae," said this learned astronomer, amid the plaudits of his hearers, "are infinitely rarer in composition than the rarest gas left in the receiver of an exhausted air-pump. I would undertake to swallow from a wineglass the entire substance of any nebula that could enter the

space between the earth and the sun, if it were condensed into the liquid state."

"It might be intoxicating," called out a facetious member.

"Will the chair permit me to point out," said another with great gravity, "that such a proceeding would be eminently rash, for the nebulous fluid might be highly poisonous." ["Hear! Hear!" and laughter.]

"What do you say of this strange darkness and these storms?" asked an earnest-looking man. (This meeting was held after the terrors of the third sign had occurred.)

"I say," replied the president, "that that is the affair of the Meteorological Society, and has nothing to do with astronomy. I dare say that they can account for it."

"And I dare say they can't," cried a voice.

"Hear! Hear!" "Who are you?" "Put him out!" "I dare say he's right!" "Cosmo Versál!" Everybody was talking at once.

"Will this gentleman identify himself?" asked the president. "Will he please explain his words?"

"That I will," said a tall man with long whiskers, rising at the rear end

of the room. "I am pretty well known. I----"

"It's Jameson, the astrologer," cried a voice. "What's he doing here?"

"Yes," said the whiskered man, "it's Jameson, the astrologer, and he has come here to let you know that Cosmo Versál was born under the sign Cancer, the first of the watery triplicity, and that Berosus, the Chaldean, declared----"

An uproar immediately ensued; half the members were on their feet at once; there was a scuffle in the back part of the room, and Jameson, the astrologer, was hustled out, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Berosus, the Chaldean, predicted that the world would be drowned when all the planets should assemble in the sign Cancer--and where are they now? Blind and stupid dolts that you are--where are they now?"

It was some time before order could be restored, and a number of members disappeared, having followed Jameson, the astrologer, possibly through sympathy, or possibly with a desire to learn more about the prediction of Berosus, the father of astrology.

When those who remained, and who constituted the great majority of the membership, had quieted down, the president remarked that the interruption which they had just experienced was quite in line with all the other

proceedings of the disturbers of public tranquillity who, under the lead of a crazy American charlatan, were trying to deceive the ignorant multitude. But they would find themselves seriously in error if they imagined that their absurd ideas were going to be "taken over" in England.

"I dare say," he concluded, "that there is some scheme behind it all."

"Another American 'trust'!" cried a voice.

The proceedings were finally brought to an end, but not before a modest member had risen in his place and timidly remarked that there was one question that he would like to put to the chair--one thing that did not seem to have been made quite clear--"Where were the planets now?"

A volley of hoots, mingled with a few "hears!" constituted the only reply.

Scenes not altogether unlike this occurred in the other great learned societies--astronomical, meteorological, and geological. The official representatives of science were virtually unanimous in condemnation of Cosmo Versál, and in persistent assertion that nothing that had occurred was inexplicable by known laws. But in no instance did they make it clear to anybody precisely what were the laws that they invoked, or how it happened that Cosmo Versál had been able to predict so many strange things which everybody knew really had come to pass, such as the sudden storms and the great darkness.

We are still, it must not be forgotten, dealing with a time anterior to the rising of the sea.

The Paris Academy of Sciences voted that the subject was unworthy of serious investigation, and similar action was taken at Berlin, St. Petersburg, Vienna, and elsewhere.

But among the people at large universal alarm prevailed, and nothing was so eagerly read as the dispatches from New York, detailing the proceedings of Cosmo Versál, and describing the progress of his great levium ark. In England many procured copies of Cosmo's circulars, in which the proper methods to be pursued in the construction of arks were carefully set forth. Some set to work to build such vessels; but, following British methods of construction, they doubled the weight of everything, with the result that, if Cosmo had seen what they were about he would have told them that such arks would go to the bottom faster than to the top.

In Germany the balloon idea took full possession of the public mind. Germany had long before developed the greatest fleet of dirigible balloons in existence, preferring them to every other type of flying apparatus. It was reported that the Kaiser was of the opinion that if worst came to worst the best manner of meeting the emergency would be by the multiplication of dirigibles and the increase of their capacity.

The result was that a considerable number of wealthy Germans began the

construction of such vessels. But when interviewed they denied that they were preparing for a flood. They said that they simply wished to enlarge and increase the number of their pleasure craft, after the example of the Kaiser. All this was in contemptuous defiance of the warning which Cosmo Versál had been careful to insert in his circulars, that "balloons and aeros of all kinds will be of no use whatever; the only safety will be found in arks, and they must be provisioned for at least five years."

The most remarkable thing of all happened in France. It might naturally have been expected that a Frenchman who thought it worth his while to take any precautions against the extinction of the human race would, when it became a question of a flood, have turned to the aero, for from the commencement of aerial navigation French engineers had maintained an unquestionable superiority in the construction and perfection of that kind of machine.

Their aeros could usually fly longer and carry more dead weight than those of any other nation. In the transoceanic aero races which occasionally took place the French furnished the most daring and the most frequently successful competitors.

But the French mind is masterly in appreciation of details, and Cosmo Versál's reasons for condemning the aero and the balloon as means of escaping the flood were promptly divined. In the first place it was seen that no kind of airship could be successfully provisioned for a flight of indefinite length, and in the second place the probable strength of the

winds, or the crushing weight of the descending water, in case, as Cosmo predicted, a nebula should condense upon the earth, would either sweep an aero or a balloon to swift destruction, or carry it down into the waves like a water-soaked butterfly.

Accordingly, when a few Frenchmen began seriously to consider the question of providing a way of escape from the flood--always supposing, for the sake of argument, that there would be a flood--they got together, under the leadership of an engineer officer named Yves de Beauxchamps, and discussed the matter in all its aspects. They were not long in arriving at the conclusion that the best and most logical thing that could possibly be done would be to construct a submarine.

In fact, this was almost an inevitable conclusion for them, because before the abandonment of submarines in war on account of their too great powers of destruction--a circumstance which had also led to the prohibition of the use of explosive bombs in the aerial navies--the French had held the lead in the construction and management of submersible vessels, even more decisively than in the case of aeros.

"A large submarine," said De Beauxchamps, "into whose construction a certain amount of levium entered, would possess manifest advantages over Versál's Ark. It could be provisioned to any extent desired, it would escape the discomforts of the waves, winds, and flooding rain, and it could easily rise to the surface whenever that might be desirable for change of air. It would have all the amphibious advantages of a whale."

The others were decidedly of De Beauxchamps's opinion, and it was enthusiastically resolved that a vessel of this kind should be begun at once.

"If we don't need it for a flood," said De Beauxchamps, "we can employ it for a pleasure vessel to visit the wonders of the deep. We will then make a reality of that marvelous dream of our countryman of old, that prince of dreamers, Jules Verne."

"Let's name it for him!" cried one.

"Admirable! Charming!" they all exclaimed. "Vive le 'Jules Verne'!"

Within two days, but without the knowledge of the public, the keel of the submersible Jules Verne was laid. But we shall hear of that remarkable craft again.

While animated, and in some cases violent, discussions were taking place in the learned circles of Europe, and a few were making ready in such manner as they deemed most effective for possible contingencies, waves of panic swept over the remainder of the Old World. There were yet hundreds of millions in Africa and Asia to whom the advantages of scientific instruction had not extended, but who, while still more or less under the dominion of ignorance and superstition, were in touch with the news of the whole planet.

The rumor that a wise man in America had discovered that the world was to be drowned was not long in reaching the most remote recesses of the African forests and of the boundless steppes of the greater continent, and, however it might be ridiculed or received with skeptical smiles in the strongholds of civilization, it met with ready belief in less enlightened minds.

Then, the three "signs"--the first great heat, the onslaught of storm and lightning, and the Noche Triste, the great darkness--had been world-wide in their effects, and each had heightened the terror caused by its predecessor. Moreover, in the less enlightened parts of the world the reassurances of the astronomers and others did not penetrate at all, or, if they did, had no effect, for not only does bad news run while good news walks, but it talks faster.

It will be recalled that one of the most disquieting incidents in America, immediately preceding the catastrophal rising of the oceans, was the melting of the Arctic snows and ice-fields, with consequent inundations in the north. This stage in the progress of the coming disaster was accentuated in Europe by the existence of the vast glaciers of the Alps. The Rocky Mountains, in their middle course, had relatively little snow and almost no true glaciers, and consequently there were no scenes of this kind in the United States comparable with those that occurred in the heart of Europe.

After the alarm caused by the great darkness in September had died out, and the long spell of continuous clear skies began, the summer resorts of Switzerland were crowded as they had seldom been. People were driven there by the heat, for one thing; and then, owing to the early melting of the winter's deposit of snow, the Alps presented themselves in a new aspect.

Mountain-climbers found it easy to make ascents upon peaks which had always hitherto presented great difficulties on account of the vast snow-fields, seamed with dangerous crevasses, which hung upon their flanks. These were now so far removed that it was practicable for amateur climbers to go where always before only trained Alpinists, accompanied by the most experienced guides, dared to venture.

But as the autumn days ran on and new snows fell, the deep-seated glaciers began to dissolve, and masses of ice that had lain for untold centuries in the mighty laps of the mountains, projecting frozen noses into the valleys, came tumbling down, partly in the form of torrents of water and partly in roaring avalanches.

The great Aletsch glacier was turned into a river that swept down into the valley of the Rhône, carrying everything before it. The glaciers at the head of the Rhône added their contribution. The whole of the Bernese Oberland seemed to have suddenly been dissolved like a huge mass of sugar candy, and on the north the valley of Interlaken was inundated, while the lakes of Thun and Brientz were lost in an inland sea which rapidly spread over all the lower lands between the Alps and the Swiss Jura.

Farther east the Rhine, swollen by the continual descent of the glacier water, burst its banks, and broadened out until Strasburg lay under water with the finger of its ancient cathedral helplessly pointing skyward out of the midst of the flood. All the ancient cities of the great valley from Basle to Mayence saw their streets inundated and the foundations of their most precious architectural monuments undermined by the searching water.

The swollen river reared back at the narrow pass through the Taunus range, and formed a huge eddy that swirled over the old city of Bingen. Then it tore down between the castle-crowned heights, sweeping away the villages on the river banks from Bingen to Coblentz, lashing the projecting rocks of the Lorelei, and carrying off houses, churches, and old abbeys in a rush of ruin.

It widened out as it approached Bonn and Cologne, but the water was still deep enough to inundate those cities, and finally it spread over the plain of Holland, finding a score of new mouths through which to pour into the German Ocean, while the reclaimed area of the Zuyder Zee once more joined the ocean, and Amsterdam and the other cities of the Netherlands were buried, in many cases to the tops of the house doors.

West and south the situation was the same. The Mer de Glace at Chamonix, and all the other glaciers of the Mont Blanc range, disappeared, sending floods down to Geneva and over the Dauphiny and down into the plains of Piedmont and Lombardy. The ruin was tremendous and the loss of life

incalculable. Geneva, Turin, Milan, and a hundred other cities, were swept by torrents.

The rapidity of this melting of the vast snow-beds and glaciers of the Alps was inconceivable, and the effect of the sudden denudation upon the mountains themselves was ghastly. Their seamed and cavernous sides stood forth, gaunt and naked, a revelation of Nature in her most fearful aspects such as men had never looked upon. Mont Blanc, without its blanket of snow and ice, towered like the blackened ruin of a fallen world, a sight that made the beholders shudder.

But this flood ended as suddenly as it had begun. When the age-long accumulations of snow had all melted the torrents ceased to pour down from the mountains, and immediately the courageous and industrious inhabitants of the Netherlands began to repair their broken dikes, while in Northern Italy and the plains of Southeastern France every effort was made to repair the terrible losses.

Of course similar scenes had been enacted, and on even a more fearful scale, in the plains of India, flooded by the melting of the enormous icy burden that covered the Himalayas, the "Abode of Snow." And all over the world, wherever icy mountains reared themselves above inhabited lands, the same story of destruction and death was told.

Then, after an interval, came the yet more awful invasion of the sea.

But few details can be given from lack of records. The Thames roared backward on its course, and London and all central England were inundated. A great bore of sea-water swept along the shores of the English Channel, and bursting through the Skager Rack, covered the lower end of Sweden, and rushed up the Gulf of Finland, burying St. Petersburg, and turning all Western Russia, and the plains of Pomerania into a sea. The Netherlands disappeared. The Atlantic poured through the narrow pass of the Strait of Gibraltar, leaving only the Lion Rock visible above the waves.

At length the ocean found its way into the Desert of Sahara, large areas of which had been reclaimed, and were inhabited by a considerable population of prosperous farmers. Nowhere did the sudden coming of the flood cause greater consternation than here--strange as that statement may seem. The people had an undefined idea that they were protected by a sort of barrier from any possible inundation.

It had taken so many years and such endless labor to introduce into the Sahara sufficient water to transform its potentially rich soil into arable land that the thought of any sudden superabundance of that element was far from the minds of the industrious agriculturalists. They had heard of the inundations caused by the melting of the mountain snows elsewhere, but there were no snow-clad mountains near them to be feared.

Accordingly, when a great wave of water came rushing upon them, surmounted, where it swept over yet unredeemed areas of the desert, by immense clouds of whirling dust, that darkened the air and recalled the old days of the

simoom, they were taken completely by surprise. But as the water rose higher they tried valiantly to escape. They were progressive people, and many of them had aeros. Besides, two or three lines of aero expresses crossed their country. All who could do so immediately embarked in airships, some fleeing toward Europe, and others hovering about, gazing in despair at the spreading waters beneath them.

As the invasion of the sea grew more and more serious, this flight by airship became a common spectacle over all the lower-lying parts of Europe, and in the British Isles. But, in the midst of it, the heavens opened their flood-gates, as they had done in the New World, and then the aeros, flooded with rain, and hurled about by contending blasts of wind, drooped, fluttered, and fell by hundreds into the fast mounting waves. The nebula was upon them!

In the meantime those who had provided arks of one kind or another, tried desperately to get them safely afloat. All the vessels that succeeded in leaving their wharves were packed with fugitives. Boats of every sort were pressed into use, and the few that survived were soon floating over the sites of the drowned homes of their occupants.

Before it was too late Yves de Beauxchamps and his friends launched their submarine, and plunged into the bosom of the flood.