

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE OF THE PRESIDENT

When Professor Abiel Pludder indited his savage response to Cosmo Versál's invitation to become one of the regenerators of mankind by embarking in the Ark, he was expressing his professional prejudice rather than his intellectual conviction. As Cosmo had remarked, Pludder had a good brain and great scientific acuteness, and, although he did not believe in the nebular theory of a flood, and was obstinately opposed to everything that was not altogether regular and according to recognized authority in science, yet he could not shut his eyes to the fact that something was going wrong in the machinery of the heavens. But it annoyed him to find that his own explanations were always falsified by the event, while Cosmo Versál seemed to have a superhuman foreglimpse of whatever happened.

His pride would not allow him to recede from the position that he had taken, but he could not free himself from a certain anxiety about the future. After he had refused Cosmo Versál's invitation, the course of events strengthened this anxiety. He found that the official meteorologists were totally unable to account for the marvelous vagaries of the weather.

Finally, when the news came of tremendous floods in the north, and of the

overflowing of Hudson Bay, he secretly determined to make some preparations of his own. He still rejected the idea of a watery nebula, but he began to think it possible that all the lowlands of the earth might be overflowed by the sea, and by the melting of mountain snows and glaciers, together with deluging rainfall. After what had passed, he could not think of making any public confession of his change of heart, but his sense of humanity compelled him to give confidential warning to his friends that it would be well to be prepared to get on high ground at a moment's notice.

He was on the point of issuing, but without his signature, an official statement cautioning the public against unprecedented inundations, when the first tidal wave arrived on the Atlantic coast and rendered any utterance of that kind unnecessary. People's eyes were opened, and now they would look out for themselves.

Pludder's private preparations amounted to no more than the securing of a large express aero, in which, if the necessity for suddenly leaving Washington should arise, he intended to take flight, together with President Samson, who was his personal friend, and a number of other close friends, with their families. He did not think that it would be necessary, in any event, to go farther than the mountains of Virginia.

The rising of the sea, mounting higher at each return, at length convinced him that the time had come to get away. Hundreds of air craft had already departed westward, not only from Washington, but from New York,

Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and other seaboard cities, before Professor Pludder assembled his friends by telephone on the Capitol grounds, where his aero was waiting.

The lower streets of the city were under water from the overflow of the Potomac, which was backed up by the influx of the Atlantic into Chesapeake Bay, and the most distressing scenes were enacted there, people fleeing in the utmost disorder toward higher ground, carrying their children and some of their household goods, and uttering doleful cries. Many, thinking that the best way to escape, embarked in frail boats on the river, which was running up-stream with frightful velocity, and rising perceptibly higher every second. Most of these boats were immediately overturned or swamped.

If the start had been delayed but a little longer, the aero would have been mobbed by the excited people, who uttered yells of disappointment and rage when they saw it rise from its tower and sail over the city. It was the last airship that left Washington, and it carried the last persons who escaped from the national capital before the downpour from the atmosphere began which put an end to all possibility of getting away.

There were on board, in addition to a crew of three, twenty-two persons. These included President Samson, with his wife and three children, seven other men with their families, making, together, sixteen persons, and Professor Pludder, who had no family.

More because they wished to escape from the painful scenes beneath them

than because they deemed that there was any occasion for particular haste, they started off at high speed, and it was probably lucky for them that this speed was maintained after they had left Washington out of sight. They rapidly approached the Blue Ridge in the neighborhood of Luray, and Pludder was about to order a landing there as night was approaching, when with great suddenness the sky filled with dense clouds and a tremendous downpour began. This was the same phenomenon which has already been described as following closely the attack at New York on Cosmo Versál's Ark.

The aero, luckily, was one of the best type, and well covered, so that they were protected from the terrible force of the rain, but in the tumult there could be no more thought of descending. It would have been impossible to make a landing in the midst of the storm and the pouring water, which rushed in torrents down the mountainside. Professor Pludder was a brave man and full of resources when driven into a corner. Being familiar with the construction and management of aeros, for he had been educated as an engineer, he now took charge of the airship.

Within twenty minutes after the sky had opened its batteries--for the rain had almost the force of plunging shot--a mighty wind arose, and the aero, pitching, tossing, and dipping like a mad thing, was driven with frightful speed eastward. This wild rush continued for more than an hour. By this time it was full night, and the pouring rain around them was as impenetrable to the sight as a black wall.

They had their electric lamps inside, and their searchlights, but it was impossible to tell where they were. Pludder turned the searchlight downward, but he could not make out the features of the ground beneath them. It is likely that they were driven at least as far as Chesapeake Bay, and they may have passed directly over Washington.

At last, however, the wind slewed round, and began to blow with undiminished violence from the northeast. Plunging and swerving, and sometimes threatened with a complete somersault, the aero hurried away in its crazy flight, while its unfortunate inmates clung to one another, and held on by any object within reach, in the endeavor to keep from being dashed against the metallic walls.

The crew of the aero were picked men, but no experience could have prepared them for the work which they now had to do. Without the ready brain of Professor Pludder to direct their efforts, and without his personal exertions, their aerial ship would have been wrecked within a quarter of an hour after the storm struck it. He seemed transformed into another person. Hatless and coatless, and streaming with water, he worked like a demon. He was ready at each emergency with some device which, under his direction, had the effect of magic.

A hundred times the aero plunged for the ground, but was saved and turned upward again just as it seemed on the point of striking. Up and down, right and left, it ran and pitched and whirled, like a cork in a whirlpool. Sometimes it actually skimmed the ground, plowing its way through a

torrent of rushing water, and yet it rose again and was saved from destruction.

This terrible contest lasted another hour after the turning of the wind, and then the latter died out. Relieved from its pressure, the aero ran on with comparative ease. Professor Pludder, suspecting that they might now be getting into a mountainous district, made every effort to keep the craft at a high elevation, and this, notwithstanding the depressing force of the rain, they succeeded in doing. After the dying out of the wind they kept on, by the aid of their propellers, in the same direction in which it had been driving them, because, in the circumstances, one way was as good as another.

The terrible discomfort of the President and his companions in the cabin of the aero was greatly relieved by the cessation of the wind, but still they were in a most unfortunate state. The rain, driven by the fierce blasts, had penetrated through every crevice, and they were drenched to the skin. No one tried to speak, for it would have been almost impossible to make oneself heard amid the uproar. They simply looked at one another in dismay and prayed for safety.

Professor Pludder, not now compelled to spend every moment in the management of the craft, entered the cabin occasionally, pressed the hand of the President, smiled encouragingly on the women and children, and did all he could, in pantomime, to restore some degree of confidence. Inside, the lights were aglow, but outside it was as dark as pitch, except where

the broad finger of the searchlight, plunging into the mass of tumbling water, glittered and flashed.

The awful night seemed endless, but at last a pale illumination appeared in the air, and they knew that day had come. The spectacle of the skyey deluge was now so terrible that it struck cold even to their already benumbed hearts. The atmosphere seemed to have been turned into a mighty cataract thundering down upon the whole face of the earth. Now that they could see as well as hear, the miracle of the preservation of the aero appeared incredible.

As the light slowly brightened, Professor Pludder, constantly on the outlook, caught a glimpse of a dark, misty object ahead. It loomed up so suddenly, and was already so close, that before he could sufficiently alter the course of the aero, it struck with such violence as to crush the forward end of the craft and break one of the aeroplanes. Everybody was pitched headforemost, those inside falling on the flooring, while Pludder and the three men of the crew were thrown out upon a mass of rocks. All were more or less seriously injured, but none was killed or totally disabled.

Pludder sprang to his feet, and, slipping and plunging amid the downpour, managed to get back to the wreck and aid the President and the others to get upon their feet.

"We're lodged on a mountain!" he yelled. "Stay inside, under the shelter

of the roof!"

The three men who, together with the professor, had been precipitated out among the rocks, also scrambled in, and there they stood, or sat, the most disconsolate and despairing group of human beings that ever the eye of an overseeing Providence looked down upon.

The President presented the most pitiable sight of all. Like the rest, his garments were sopping, his eyes were bloodshot, his face was ghastly, and his tall silk hat, which he had jammed down upon his brow, had been softened by the water and crushed by repeated blows into the form of a closed accordion. Of the women and children it is needless to speak; no description could convey an idea of their condition.

In these circumstances, the real strength of Professor Abiel Pludder's mind was splendidly displayed. He did not lose his head, and he comprehended the situation, and what it was necessary to do, in a flash. He got out some provisions and distributed them to the company, in some cases actually forcing them to eat. With his own hands he prepared coffee, with the apparatus always carried by express aeros, and made them drink it.

When all had thus been refreshed he approached President Samson and shouted in his ear:

"We shall have to stay here until the downpour ceases. To guard against the

effects of a tempest, if one should arise, we must secure the aero in its place. For that I need the aid of every man in the party. We have, fortunately, struck in a spot on the mountain where we are out of the way of the torrents of water that are pouring down through the ravines on either side. We can make our lodgment secure, but we must go to work immediately."

Stimulated by his example, the President and the others set to work, and with great difficulty, for they had to guard their eyes and nostrils from the driving rain, which, sometimes, in spite of their precautions, nearly smothered them, they succeeded in fastening the aero to the rocks by means of metallic cables taken from its stores. When this work was finished they returned under the shelter of the cabin roof and lay down exhausted. So worn out were they that all of them quickly fell into a troubled sleep.

It would be needless to relate in detail the sufferings, mental and physical, that they underwent during the next ten days. While they were hanging there on the mountain the seaboard cities of the world were drowned, and Cosmo Versál's Ark departed on the remarkable voyage that has been described in a former chapter. They had plenty of provisions, for the aero had been well stored, but partly through precaution and partly because of lack of appetite they ate sparingly. The electric generators of the aero had not been injured in the wreck of the craft, and they were able to supply themselves with sufficient heat, and with light inside the cabin at night.

Once they had a strange visitor--a half-drowned bear, which had struggled up the mountain from its den somewhere below--but that was the only living creature beside themselves that they saw. After gazing wistfully at the aero from the top of a rock the poor bear, fighting the choking rain with its soaked paws, stumbled into one of the torrents that poured furiously down on each side, and was swept from their sight.

Fortunately, the wind that they had anticipated did not come, but frequently they saw or heard the roaring downpours of solid watery columns like those that had so much astonished Cosmo Versál and Captain Arms in the midst of the Atlantic, but none came very near them.

Professor Pludder ventured out from time to time, clambering a little way up and down the projecting ridge of the mountain on which they were lodged, and at length was able to assure his companions that they were on the northwestern face of Mount Mitchell, the highest peak of the Appalachian range. With the aid of his pocket aneroid, making allowance for the effect of the lifting of the whole atmosphere by the flood, and summoning his knowledge of the locality--for he had explored, in former years, all the mountains in this region--he arrived at the conclusion that their place of refuge was elevated about four thousand feet above the former level of the sea.

At first their range of vision did not allow them to see the condition of the valleys below them, but as the water crept higher it gradually came into view. It rose steadily up the slopes beneath, which had already been

stripped of their covering of trees and vegetation by the force of the descending torrents, until on the tenth day it had arrived almost within reach. Since, as has just been said, they were four thousand feet above the former level of the sea, it will be observed that the water must have been rising much more rapidly than the measurements of Cosmo Versál indicated. Its average rate of rise had been three instead of two inches per minute, and the world was buried deeper than Cosmo thought. The cause of his error will be explained later.

The consternation of the little party when they thus beheld the rapid drowning of the world below them, and saw no possibility of escape for themselves if the water continued to advance, as it evidently would do, cannot be depicted. Some of them were driven insane, and were with difficulty prevented by those who retained their senses from throwing themselves into the flood.

Pludder was the only one who maintained a command over his nerves, although he now at last believed in the nebula. He recognized that there was no other possible explanation of the flood than that which Cosmo Versál had offered long before it began. In his secret heart he had no expectation of ultimate escape, yet he was strong enough to continue to encourage his companions with hopes which he could not himself entertain.

When, after nightfall on the tenth day, the water began to lap the lower parts of the aero, he was on the point of persuading the party to clamber up the rocks in search of the shelter above, but as he stepped out of the

door of the cabin to reconnoiter the way, with the aid of the searchlight which he had turned up along the ridge, he was astonished to find the rain rapidly diminishing in force; and a few minutes later it ceased entirely, and the stars shone out.

The sudden cessation of the roar upon the roof brought everybody to their feet, and before Professor Pludder could communicate the good news all were out under the sky, rejoicing and offering thanks for their deliverance. The women were especially affected. They wept in one another's arms, or convulsively clasped their children to their breasts.

At length the President found his voice.

"What has happened?" he asked.

Professor Pludder, with the new light that had come to him, was as ready with an explanation as Cosmo Versál himself had been under similar circumstances.

"We must have run out of the nebula."

"The nebula!" returned Mr. Samson in surprise. "Has there been a nebula, then?"

"Without question," was the professor's answer. "Nothing but an encounter with a watery nebula could have had such a result."

"But you always said----" began the President.

"Yes," Pludder broke in, "but one may be in error sometimes."

"Then, Cosmo Versál----"

"Let us not discuss Cosmo Versál," exclaimed Professor Pludder, with a return of his old dictatorial manner.