

CHAPTER XV

PROFESSOR PLUDDER'S DEVICE

Morning dawned brilliantly on Mount Mitchell and revealed to the astonished eyes of the watchers an endless expanse of water, gleaming and sparkling in the morning sunlight. It was a spectacle at once beautiful and fearful, and calculated to make their hearts sink with pity no less than with terror. But for a time they were distracted from the awful thoughts which such a sight must inspire by anxiety concerning themselves. They could not drive away the fear that, at any moment, the awful clouds might return and the terrible downpour be resumed.

But Professor Pludder, whose comprehension of the cause of the deluge was growing clearer the more he thought about it, did not share the anxiety of the President and the others.

"The brightness of the sky," he said, "shows that there is no considerable quantity of condensing vapor left in the atmosphere. If the earth has run out of the nebula, that is likely to be the end of the thing. If there is more of the nebulous matter in surrounding space we may miss it entirely, or, if not, a long time would elapse before we came upon it.

"The gaps that exist in nebulae are millions of miles across, and the earth would require days and weeks to go such distances, granting that it

were traveling in the proper direction. I think it altogether probable that this nebula, which must be a small one as such things go, consists of a single mass, and that, having traversed it, we are done with it. We are out of our troubles."

"Well, hardly," said the President. "Here we are, prisoners on a mountain, with no way of getting down, the whole land beneath being turned into a sea. We can't stay here indefinitely. For how long a time are we provisioned?"

"We have compressed food enough to last this party a month," replied Professor Pludder; "that is to say, if we are sparing of it. For water we cannot lack, since this that surrounds us is not salt, and if it were we could manage to distil it. But, of course, when I said we were out of our troubles I meant only that there was no longer any danger of being swallowed up by the flood. It is true that we cannot think of remaining here. We must get off."

"But how? Where can we go?"

Professor Pludder thought a long time before he answered this question. Finally he said, measuring his words:

"The water is four thousand feet above the former level of the sea. There is no land sufficiently lofty to rise above it this side of the Colorado plateau."

"And how far is that?"

"Not less than eleven hundred miles in an air line."

The President shuddered.

"Then, all this vast country of ours from here to the feet of the Rocky Mountains is now under water thousands of feet deep!"

"There can be no doubt of it. The Atlantic Coast States, the Southern States, the Mississippi Valley, the region of the Great Lakes, and Canada are now a part of the Atlantic Ocean."

"And all the great cities--gone! Merciful Father! What a thought!"

The President mused for a time, and gradually a frown came upon his brow. He glanced at Professor Pludder with a singular look. Then his cheek reddened, and an angry expression came into his eyes. Suddenly he turned to the professor and said sternly:

"You said you did not wish to discuss Cosmo Versál. I should not think you would! Who predicted this deluge? Did you?"

"I----" began Professor Pludder, taken aback by the President's manner.

"Oh, yes," interrupted the President, "I know what you would say. You didn't predict it because you didn't see it coming. But why didn't you see it? What have we got observatories and scientific societies for if they can't see or comprehend anything? Didn't Cosmo Versál warn you? Didn't he tell you where to look, and what to look for? Didn't he show you his proofs?"

"We thought they were fallacious," stammered Professor Pludder.

"You thought they were fallacious--well, were they fallacious? Does this spectacle of a nation drowned look 'fallacious' to you? Why didn't you study the matter until you understood it? Why did you issue officially, and with my ignorant sanction--may God forgive me for my blindness!--statement after statement, assuring the people that there was no danger--statements that were even abusive toward him who alone should have been heard?"

"And yet, as now appears, you knew nothing about it. Millions upon millions have perished through your obstinate opposition to the truth. They might have saved themselves if they had been permitted to listen to the many times reiterated warnings of Cosmo Versál.

"Oh, if I had only listened to him, and issued a proclamation as he urged me to do! But I followed your advice--you, in whose learning and pretended science I put blind faith! Abiel Pludder, I would not have upon my soul the weight that now rests on yours for all the wealth that the lost

world carried down into its watery grave!"

As the President ceased speaking he turned away and sank upon a rock, pressing his hands upon his throat to suppress the sobs that broke forth despite his efforts. His form shook like an aspen.

The others crowded around excitedly, some of the women in hysterics, and the men not knowing what to do or say. Professor Pludder, completely overwhelmed by the suddenness and violence of the attack, went off by himself and sat down with his head in his hands. After a while he arose and approached the President, who had not moved from his place on the rock.

"George," he said--they had known each other from boyhood--"I have made a terrible mistake. And yet I was not alone in it. The majority of my colleagues were of my opinion, as were all the learned societies of Europe. No such thing as a watery nebula has ever been known to science. It was inconceivable."

"Some of your colleagues did not think so," said the President, looking up.

"But they were not really convinced, and they were aware that they were flying in the face of all known laws."

"I am afraid," said the President dryly, "that science does not know all

the laws of the universe yet."

"I repeat," resumed Professor Pludder, "that I made a fearful mistake. I have recognized the truth too late. I accept the awful burden of blame that rests upon me, and I now wish to do everything in my power to retrieve the consequences of my terrible error."

The President arose and grasped the professor's hand.

"Forgive me, Abiel," he said, with emotion, "if I have spoken too much in the manner of a judge pronouncing sentence. I was overwhelmed by the thought of the inconceivable calamity that has come upon us. I believe that you acted conscientiously and according to your best lights, and it is not for any mortal to judge you for an error thus committed. Let us think only of what we must do now."

"To that thought," responded Professor Pludder, returning the pressure of the President's hand, "I shall devote all my energy. If I can save only this little party I shall have done something in the way of atonement."

It was a deep humiliation for a man of Professor Pludder's proud and uncompromising nature to confess that he had committed an error more fearful in its consequences than had ever been laid at the door of a human being, but Cosmo Versál had rightly judged him when he assured Joseph Smith that Pludder was morally sound, and, in a scientific sense, had the root of the matter in him. When his mental vision was clear, and

unclouded by prejudice, no one was more capable of high achievements.

He quickly proved his capacity now, as he had already proved it during the preceding, adventures of the President's party. It was perfectly plain to him that their only chance was in getting to Colorado at the earliest possible moment. The eastern part of the continent was hopelessly buried, and even on the high plains of the Middle West the fury of the downpour might have spread universal disaster and destroyed nearly all the vegetation; but, in any event, it was there alone that the means of prolonging life could be sought.

With the problem squarely before his mind, he was not long in finding a solution. His first step was to make a thorough examination of the aero, with the hope that the damage that it had suffered might be reparable. He had all the tools that would be needed, as it was the custom for express aersos to carry a complete equipment for repairs; but unfortunately one of the planes of the aero was wrecked beyond the possibility of repair. He knew upon what delicate adjustments the safety of the modern airship depended, and he did not dare undertake a voyage with a lame craft.

Then the idea occurred to him of trying to escape by water. The aero was a machine of the very latest type, and made of levium, consequently it would float better than wood.

If the opposition of shipbuilders, incited and backed by selfish interests, had not prevented the employment of levium in marine construction, millions

of lives might now have been saved; but, as we have before said, only a few experimental boats of levium had been made.

Moreover, like all aeros intended for long trips, this one had what was called a "boat-bottom," intended to enable it to remain afloat with its burden in case of an accidental fall into a large body of water. Pludder saw that this fact would enable him to turn the wreck into a raft.

It would only be necessary to reshape the craft a little, and this was the easier because the aero was put together in such a manner with screw-bolts and nuts that it could be articulated or disarticulated as readily as a watch. He had entire confidence in his engineering skill, and in the ability of the three experienced men of the crew to aid him. He decided to employ the planes for outriders, which would serve to increase the buoyancy and stability.

As soon as he had completed his plan in his mind he explained his intentions to the President. The latter and the other members of the party were at first as much startled as surprised by the idea of embarking on a voyage of eleven hundred miles in so questionable a craft, but Professor Pludder assured them that everything would go well.

"But how about the propulsion?" asked Mr. Samson. "You can't depend on the wind, and we've got no sails."

"I have thought that all out," said Pludder. "I shall use the engine, and

rearrange one of the aerial screws so that it will serve for a propeller.

I do not expect to get up any great speed, but if we can make only as much as two miles an hour we shall arrive on the borders of the Colorado upland, five thousand feet above sea, within about twenty-three days. We may be able to do better than that."

Nobody felt much confidence in this scheme except its inventor, but it appeared to be the only thing that could be done, and so they all fell to work, each aiding as best he could, and after four days of hard work the remarkable craft was ready for its adventurous voyage.

Professor Pludder had succeeded even better than he anticipated in transforming one of the aerial screws into a propeller. Its original situation was such that it naturally, as it were, fell into the proper place when the "hull" was partly submerged, and, the blades being made of concentric rows of small plates, there was no difficulty in reducing them to a manageable size. The position of the engine did not need to be shifted at all.

The "outriders," made up of the discarded planes, promised to serve their purpose well, and the cabin remained for a comfortable "deck-house." A rudder had been contrived by an alteration of the one which had served for guiding the aero in its flights.

The water was close to their feet, and there was no great difficulty in pushing the affair off the rocks and getting it afloat. The women and

children were first put aboard, and then the men scrambled in, and Pludder set the motors going. The improvised propeller churned and spluttered, but it did its work after a fashion, and, under a blue sky, in dazzling sunshine, with a soft southerly breeze fanning the strange sea that spread around them, they soon saw the bared rocks and deeply scored flanks of Mount Mitchell receding behind them.

They were delighted to find that they were making, at the very start, no less than three miles an hour. Pludder clapped his hands and exclaimed:

"This is capital! In but little over two weeks we shall be safe on the great plains. I have good hope that many have survived there, and that we shall find a plenty of everything needed. With the instruments that were aboard the aero I can make observations to determine our position, and I shall steer for the Pike's Peak region."

When the party had become accustomed to their situation, and had gained confidence in their craft by observing how buoyantly it bore them, they became almost cheerful in their demeanor. The children gradually lost all fear, and, with the thoughtless joy of childhood in the pleasures and wonders of the present moment, amused themselves in the cabin, and about the deck, which had been surrounded with guard lines made of wire cable.

The water was almost waveless, and, if no storm should arise, there appeared to be no reason for anxiety concerning the outcome of their adventure. But as they drove slowly on over the submerged range of the

Great Smokies, and across the valleys of Eastern Tennessee, and then over the Cumberland range, and so out above the lowlands, they could not keep their thoughts from turning to what lay beneath that fearful ocean. And occasionally something floated to the surface that wrenched their heart-strings and caused them to avert their faces.

Professor Pludder kept them informed of their location. Now they were over central Tennessee; now Nashville lay more than three thousand feet beneath their keel; now they were crossing the valley of the Tennessee River; now the great Mississippi was under them, hidden deep beneath the universal flood; now they were over the highlands of southern Missouri; and now over those of Kansas.

"George," said Professor Pludder one day, addressing the President, with more emotion than was often to be detected in his voice, "would you like to know what is beneath us now?"

"What is it, Abiel?"

"Our boyhood home--Wichita."

The President bowed his head upon his hands and groaned.

"Yes," continued Professor Pludder musingly, "there it lies, three thousand feet deep. There is the Arkansas, along whose banks we used to play, with its golden waters now mingling feebly with the mighty flood that covers

them. There is the schoolhouse and the sandy road where we ran races barefoot in the hot summer dust. There is your father's house, and mine, and the homes of all our early friends--and where are they? Would to God that I had not been so blind!"

"But there was another not so blind," said the President, with something of the condemnatory manner of his former speech.

"I know it--I know it too well now," returned the professor. "But do not condemn me, George, for what I did not foresee and could not help."

"I am sorry," said the President sadly, "that you have awakened these old memories. But I do not condemn you, though I condemn your science--or your lack of science. But we can do nothing. Let us speak of it no more."

The weather was wonderful, considering what had so recently occurred. No clouds formed in the sky, there was only a gentle breeze stirring, at night the heavens glittered with starry gems, and by day the sun shone so hotly that awnings were spread over those whose duties required them to be employed outside the shelter of the cabin. The improvised propeller and rudder worked to admiration, and some days they made as much as eighty miles in the twenty-four hours.

At length, on the fourteenth day of their strange voyage, they caught sight of a curiously shaped "pike" that projected above the horizon far to the west. At the same time they saw, not far away toward the north and

toward the south, a low line, like a sea-beach.

"We are getting into shallow water now," said Professor Pludder. "I have been following the course of the Arkansas in order to be sure of a sufficient depth, but now we must be very careful. We are close to the site of Las Animas, which is surrounded with land rising four thousand feet above sea-level. If we should get aground there would be no hope for us. That pike in the distance is Pike's Peak."

"And what is that long line of beach that stretches on the north and south?" asked the President.

"It is the topographic line of four thousand feet," replied the professor.

"And we shall encounter it ahead?"

"Yes, it makes a curve about Las Animas, and then the land lies at an average elevation of four thousand feet, until it takes another rise beyond Pueblo."

"But we cannot sail across this half-submerged area," said the President.

"There are depressions," Professor Pludder responded, "and I hope to be able to follow their traces until we reach land that still lies well above the water."

Near nightfall they got so close to the "beach" that they could hear the surf, not a thundering sound, but a soft, rippling wash of the slight waves. The water about them was ruddy with thick sediment. Professor Pludder did not dare to venture farther in the coming darkness, and he dropped overboard two of the aero's grapples, which he had heavily weighted and attached to wire cables. They took the ground at a depth of only ten feet. There was no wind and no perceptible current, and so they rode all night at anchor off this strangest of coasts.

At daybreak they lifted their anchors, and went in search of the depressions of which the professor had spoken. So accurate was his topographic knowledge and so great his skill, that late in the afternoon they saw a tall chimney projecting above the water a little ahead.

"There's all that remains of Pueblo," said Professor Pludder.

They anchored again that night, and the next day, cautiously approaching a bluff that arose precipitously from the water, their hearts were gladdened by the sight of three men, standing on a bluff, excitedly beckoning to them, and shouting at the top of their voices.