

CHAPTER XX

THE ADVENTURES IN COLORADO

When Professor Pludder, the President, and their companions on the aero-raft, saw the three men on the bluff motioning and shouting to them, they immediately sought the means of bringing their craft to land. This did not prove to be exceedingly difficult, for there was a convenient rock with deep water around it on which they could disembark.

The men ran down to meet them, and to help them ashore, exhibiting the utmost astonishment at seeing them there.

"Whar in creation did you come from?" exclaimed one, giving the professor a pull up the bank. "Mebbe you're Cosmo Versál, and that's yer Ark."

"I'm Professor Pludder, and this is the President of the United States."

"The President of the Un----See here, stranger, I'll take considerable from you, considering the fix yer in, but you don't want to go too far."

"It's true," asseverated the professor. "This gentleman is the President, and we've escaped from Washington. Please help the ladies."

"I'll help the ladies all right, but I'm blamed if I believe yer yarn.

How'd you git here? You couldn't hev floated across the continent on that thing."

"We came on the raft that you see," interrupted Mr. Samson. "We left the Appalachian Mountains two weeks ago."

"Well, by--it must be true!" muttered the man. "They couldn't hev come from anywhar else in that direction. I reckon the hull blamed continent is under water."

"So it is," said Professor Pludder, "and we made for Colorado, knowing that it was the only land left above the flood."

All finally got upon the bluff, rejoiced to feel solid ground once more beneath their feet. But it was a desolate prospect that they saw before them. The face of the land had been scoured and gullied by the pouring waters, the vegetation had been stripped off, except where in hollows it had been covered with new-formed lakes, some of which had drained off after the downpour ceased, the water finding its way into the enveloping sea.

They asked the three men what had become of the other inhabitants, and whether there was any shelter at hand.

"We've be'n wiped out," said the original spokesman. "Cosmo Versál has

done a pretty clean job with his flood. There's a kind of a cover that we three hev built, a ways back yonder, out o' timber o' one kind and another that was lodged about. But it wouldn't amount to much if there was another cloudburst. It wouldn't stand a minute. It's good to sleep in."

"Are you the only survivors in this region?" asked the President.

"I reckon you see all thet's left of us. The' ain't one out o' a hundred that's left alive in these parts."

"What became of them?"

"Swept off!" replied the man, with an expressive gesture--"and drowned right out under the sky."

"And how did you and your companions escape?"

"By gitting up amongst some rocks that was higher'n the average."

"How did you manage to live--what did you have to eat?"

"We didn't eat much--we didn't hev much time to think o' eatin'. We had one hoss with us, and he served, when his time come. After the sky cleared we skirmished about and dug up something that we could manage to eat, lodged in gullies where the water had washed together what had been

in houses and cellars. We've got a gun and a little ammunition, and once in a while we could kill an animal that had contrived to escape somehow."

"And you think that there are no other human beings left alive anywhere around here?"

"I know th' ain't. The's probably some up in the foothills, and around the Pike. They had a better chance to git among rocks. We hed jest made up our minds to go hunting for 'em when we ketched sight o' you, and then we concluded to stay and see who you was."

"I'm surprised that you didn't go sooner."

"We couldn't. There was a roarin' torrent coming down from the mountains that cut us off. It's only last night that it stopped."

"Well, it's evident that we cannot stay here," said Professor Pludder.

"We must go with these men toward the mountains. Let us take what's left of the compressed provisions out of the raft, and then we'll eat a good meal and be off."

The three men were invited to share the repast, and they ate with an appetite that would have amused their hosts if they had not been so anxious to reserve as much as possible of their provisions for future necessities.

The meal finished, they started off, their new friends aiding to carry provisions, and what little extra clothing there was. The aspect of the country they traversed affrighted them. Here and there were partially demolished houses or farm structures, or cellars, choked with débris of what had once been houses.

Farm implements and machinery were scattered about and half buried in the torrent-furrowed land. In the wreck of one considerable village through which they passed they found a stone church, and several stone houses of considerable pretensions, standing almost intact as to walls, but with roofs, doors, and windows smashed and torn off.

It was evident that this place, which lay in a depression of the land, had been buried by the rushing water as high as high as the top stories of the buildings. From some of the sights that they saw they shrank away, and afterward tried to forget them.

Owing to the presence of the women and children their progress was slower than it might otherwise have been. They had great difficulty in crossing the course of the torrent which their companions had described as cutting them off from the foothills of the Pike's Peak range.

The water had washed out a veritable cañon, a hundred or more feet deep in places, and with ragged, precipitous walls and banks, which they had to descend on one side and ascend on the other. Here the skill and local

knowledge of their three new-found friends stood them in good stead. There was yet enough water in the bottom of the great gully to compel them to wade, carrying the women and children.

But, just before nightfall, they succeeded in reaching a range of rocky heights, where they determined to pass the night. They managed to make a fire with brush that had been swept down the mountain flanks and had remained wedged in the rocks, and thus they dried their soaked garments, and were able to do some cooking, and to have a blaze to give them a little heat during the night, for the air turned cold after the disappearance of the sun.

When the others had sunk into an uneasy slumber, the President and Professor Pludder sat long, replenishing the fire, and talking of what would be their future course.

"I think," said the professor, "that we shall find a considerable population alive among the mountains. There is nothing in Colorado below four thousand feet elevation, and not much below five thousand. The great inner 'parks' were probably turned into lakes, but they will drain off, as the land around us here has done already.

"Those who managed to find places of comparative shelter will now descend into the level lands and try to hunt up the sites of their homes. If only some plants and grain have been preserved they can, after a fashion, begin to cultivate the soil."

"But there is no soil," said the President, shuddering at the recollection of the devastation he had witnessed. "It has all been washed off."

"No," replied the professor, "there's yet a good deal in the low places, where the water rested."

"But it is now the middle of winter."

"Reckoned by the almanac it is, but you see that the temperature is that of summer, and has been such for months. I think that this is due in some way to the influence of the nebula, although I cannot account for it. At any rate it will be possible to plant and sow.

"The whole body of the atmosphere having been raised four thousand feet, the atmospheric conditions here now are virtually the same as at the former sea-level. If we can find the people and reassure them, we must take the lead in restoring the land to fertility, and also in the reconstruction of homes."

"Suppose the flood should recommence?"

"There is no likelihood of it."

"Then," said the President, putting his face between his hands and

gazing sadly into the fire, "here is all that remains of the mightiest nation of the world, the richest, the most populous--and we are to build up out of this remnant a new fatherland."

"This is not the only remnant," said Professor Pludder. "One-quarter, at least, of the area of the United States is still above sea-level. Think of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, the larger part of California, Wyoming, a part of Montana, two-thirds of Idaho, a half of Oregon and Washington--all above the critical level of four thousand feet, and all except the steepest mountainsides can be reclaimed.

"There is hope for our country yet. Remember that the climate of this entire region will now be changed, since the barometric isobars have been lifted up, and the line of thirty inches pressure now meets the edge of the Colorado plateau. There may be a corresponding change in the rainfall and in all the conditions of culture and fertility."

"Yes," sighed the President, "but I cannot, I cannot withdraw my mind from the thought of the millions, millions, millions who have perished!"

"I do not say that we should forget them," replied Professor Pludder; "Heaven forbid! But I do say that we must give our attention to those that remain, and turn our faces steadily toward the future."

"Abiel," returned the President, pressing the professor's hand, "you are

right. My confidence in you was shaken, but now I follow you again."

Thus they talked until midnight, and then got a little rest with the others. They were up and off at break of day, and as they mounted higher they began to encounter immense rocks that had come tumbling down from above.

"How can you talk of people escaping toward the mountains if they had to encounter these?" demanded the President.

"Some of these rocks have undoubtedly been brought down by the torrents," Professor Pludder replied, "but I believe that the greater number fell earlier, during the earthquakes that accompanied the first invasions of the sea."

"But those earthquakes may have continued all through."

"I do not think so. We have felt no trembling of the earth. I believe that the convulsions lasted only for a brief period, while the rocks were yielding to the pressure along the old sea-coast. After a little the crust below adjusted itself to the new conditions. And even if the rocks fell while people were trying to escape from the flood below, they must, like the water, have followed the gorges and hollow places, while the fugitives would, of course, keep upon the ridges."

Whatever perils they may have encountered, people had certainly escaped

as the professor had averred. When the party, in the middle of the day, were seated at their lunch, on an elevated point from which they could see far over the strange ocean that they had left behind them, while the southern buttresses of Pike's Peak rose steeply toward the north, they discovered the first evidence of the existence of refugees in the mountains. This was a smoke rising over an intervening ridge, which their new companions declared could be due to nothing less than a large camp-fire.

They hastened to finish their meal, and then climbed the ridge. As soon as they were upon it they found themselves looking down into a broad, shallow cañon, where there were nearly twenty rudely constructed cabins, with a huge fire blazing in the midst of the place, and half a dozen red-shirted men busy about it, evidently occupied in the preparation of the dinner of a large party.

Their friends recognized an acquaintance in one of the men below and hailed him with delight. Instantly men, women, and children came running out of the huts to look at them, and as they descended into this improvised village they were received with a hospitality that was almost hilarious.

The refugees consisted of persons who had escaped from the lower lands in the immediate vicinity, and they were struck dumb when told that they were entertaining the President of the United States and his family.

The entire history of their adventures was related on both sides. The refugees told how, at the commencement of the great rain, when it became evident that the water would inundate their farms and buildings, they loaded themselves with as many provisions as they could carry, and, in spite of the suffocating downpour that filled the air, managed to fight their way to the ridge overhanging the deep cut in which they were now encamped.

Hardly a quarter of those who started arrived in safety. They sheltered themselves to the number of about thirty, in a huge cavern, which faced down the mountain, and had a slightly upward sloping floor, so that the water did not enter. Here, by careful economy, they were able to eke out their provisions until the sky cleared, after which the men, being used to outdoor labor and hunting, contrived to supply the wants of the forlorn little community.

They managed to kill a few animals, and found the bodies of others recently killed, or drowned. Later they descended into the lowlands, as the water ran off, and searching among the ruins of their houses found some remnants of supplies in the cellars and about the foundations of the barns. They were preparing to go down in a body and seek to re-establish themselves on the sites of their old homes, when the President's party came upon them.

The meeting with these refugees was but the first of a series of similar encounters on the way along the eastern face of the Pike's Peak range.

In the aggregate they met several hundred survivors who had established themselves on the site of Colorado Springs, where a large number of houses, standing on the higher ground, had escaped.

They had been soaked with water, descending through the shattered roofs and broken windows, and pouring into the basements and cellars. The fugitives came from all directions, some from the caverns on the mountains, and some from the rocks toward the north and east. A considerable number asserted that they had found refuge in the Garden of the Gods.

As near as could be estimated, about a quarter of the population remained alive.

The strong points of Professor Pludder now, once more, came out conspicuously. He proved himself an admirable organizer. He explored all the country round, and enheartened everybody, setting them to work to repair the damage as much as possible.

Some horses and cattle were found which, following their instincts, had managed to escape the flood. In the houses and other buildings yet standing a great deal of food and other supplies were discovered, so that there was no danger of a famine. As he had anticipated, the soil had not all been washed away from the flat land, and he advised the inhabitants to plant quick-growing seeds at once.

He utilized the horses to send couriers in all directions, some going even as far as Denver. Everywhere virtually the same conditions were found--many had escaped and were alive, only needing the guidance of a quicker intelligence, and this was supplied by the advice which the professor instructed his envoys to spread among the people. He sought to cheer them still more by the information that the President was among them, and looking out for their welfare.

One thing which his couriers at last began to report to him was a cause of surprise. They said that the level of the water was rapidly falling. Some who had gone far toward the east declared that it had gone down hundreds of feet. But the professor reflected that this was impossible, because evaporation could not account for it, and he could not persuade himself that so much water could have found its way into the interior of the crust.

He concluded that his informants had allowed their hopes to affect their eyesight, and, strong as usual in his professional dogmas, he made no personal examination. Besides, Professor Pludder was beginning to be shaken in his first belief that all trouble from the nebula was at an end. Once having been forced to accept the hypothesis that a watery nebula had met the earth, he began to reflect that they might not be through with it.

In any event, he deemed it wise to prepare for it if it should come back. Accordingly he advised that the population that remained should

concentrate in the stronger houses, built of stone, and that every effort should be made to strengthen them further and to make the roofs as solid as possible. He also directed that no houses should be occupied that were not situated on high ground, surrounded with slopes that would give ready flow to the water in case the deluging rain should recommence.

He had no fixed conviction that it would recommence, but he was uneasy, owing to his reflections, and wished to be on the safe side. He sent similar instructions as far as his horsemen could reach.

The wisdom of his doubts became manifest about two weeks after the arrival of the President's party. Without warning the sky, which had been perfectly blue and cloudless for a month, turned a sickly yellow. Then mists hid the head, and in a little while the entire outline of Pike's Peak, and after that a heavy rain began.

Terror instantly seized the people, and at first nobody ventured out of doors. But as time went on and the rain did not assume the proportions of the former débâcle, although it was very heavy and continuous, hope revived. Everybody was on the watch for a sudden clearing up.

Instead of clearing, however, the rain became very irregular, gushing at times in torrents which were even worse than the original downpour, but these tremendous gushes were of brief duration, so that the water had an opportunity to run off the higher ground before the next downpour

occurred.

This went on for a week, and then the people were terrified at finding that water was pouring up through all the depressions of the land, cutting off the highlands from Pike's Peak with an arm of the sea. It was evident that the flood had been rapidly rising, and if it should rise but little higher they would be caught in a trap. The inland sea, it was clear, had now invaded the whole of Colorado to the feet of the mountains, and was creeping up on them.

Just at this time a series of earthquakes began. They were not severe, but were continuous. The ground cracked open in places, and some houses were overturned, but there were no wall-shattering shocks--only a continual and dreadful trembling, accompanied by awful subterranean sounds.

This terrible state of affairs had lasted for a day before a remarkable discovery was made, which filled many hearts with joy, although it seemed to puzzle Professor Pludder as much as it rejoiced him.

The new advance of the sea was arrested! There could be no question of that, for too many had anxiously noted the points to which the water had attained.

We have said that Professor Pludder was puzzled. He was seeking, in his mind, a connection between the seismic tremors and the cessation of the

advance of the sea. Inasmuch as the downpour continued, the flood ought still to rise.

He rejected as soon as it occurred to him the idea that the earth could be drinking up the waters as fast as they fell, and that the trembling was an accompaniment of this gigantic deglutition.

Sitting in a room with the President and other members of the party from Washington, he remained buried in his thoughts, answering inquiries only in monosyllables. Presently he opened his eyes very wide and a long-drawn "A-ah!" came from his mouth. Then he sprang to his feet and cried out, but only as if uttering a thought aloud to himself, the strange word:

"Batholite!"