

CHAPTER XXII

THE TERRIBLE NUCLEUS ARRIVES

When the company in the Ark had recovered from the astonishment produced by the narratives of De Beauxchamps and Cosmo Versál, and particularly the vivid description given by the latter of the strange idol concealed in the breast of the "Father of Horror," and the inferences which he drew concerning its prophetic character, the question again arose as to their future course.

Captain Arms was still for undertaking to follow the trough of the Red Sea, but Cosmo declared that this course would be doubly dangerous now that the water had lowered and that they no longer had the Jules Verne to act as a submarine scout, warning them of hidden perils.

They must now go by their own soundings, and this would be especially dangerous in the close neighborhood of half-submerged mountains, whose buttresses and foothills might rise suddenly out of the depths with slopes so steep that the lead would afford no certain guidance.

It was first necessary to learn if possible the actual height of the water, and whether it was still subsiding. It was partly for this purpose that they had passed over Egypt instead of keeping directly on toward the coast of lower Palestine.

But now Cosmo abandoned his purpose of taking his measurement by the aid of Mount Sinai or some of its neighboring peaks, on account of the dangerous character of that rugged region. If they had been furnished with deep-sea sounding apparatus they might have made a direct measurement of the depth in Egypt, but that was one of the few things which Cosmo Versál had overlooked in furnishing the Ark, and such an operation could not be undertaken.

He discovered that there was a mountain north of the Gulf of Akaba having an elevation of 3,450 feet, and since this was 220 feet higher than Monte Lauro, in Sicily, on which the Ark had grounded, he counted on it as a gage which would serve his purpose.

So they passed almost directly over Suez, and about 120 miles farther east they found the mountain they sought, rising to the west of the Wadi el Arabia, a continuation of the depression at whose deepest point lay the famous "Dead Sea," so often spoken of in the books of former times.

Here Cosmo was able to make a very accurate estimate from the height of the peak above the water, and he was gratified to find that the recession had not continued. The level of the water appeared to be exactly the same as when they made their unfortunate excursion in the direction of smoking Etna.

"It's all right," he said to Captain Arms. "We can get over into the

Syrian desert without much danger, although we must go slowly and carefully until we are well past these ranges that come down from the direction of the Dead Sea. After that I do not see that there is anything in our way until we reach the ancient plains of Babylon."

King Richard, who was full of the history of the Crusades, as well as of Bible narratives, wished to have the Ark turn northward, so that they might sail over Jerusalem, and up the Valley of the Jordan within sight of Mount Hermon and the Lebanon range.

Cosmo had had enough of that kind of adventure, while Captain Arms declared that he would resign on the spot if there was to be any more "fool navigating on mountain tops." But there were many persons in the Ark who would have been very glad if King Richard's suggestion had been carried out.

The feelings of some were deeply stirred when they learned that they were now crossing the lower end of Palestine, and that the scenes of so many incidents in the history of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua lay buried beneath the blue water, whose almost motionless surface was marked with a broad trail of foaming bubbles in the wake of the immense vessel.

Cosmo greatly regretted the absence of the submersible when they were picking their way over this perilous region, but they encountered no real difficulty, and at length found, by celestial observations, that they were beyond all dangers and safely arrived over the deeply

submerged desert.

They kept on for several days toward the rising sun, and then Captain Arms announced that the observations showed that they were over the site of Babylon.

This happened just at the time of the midday dinner, and over the dessert Cosmo seized the opportunity to make a little speech, which could be heard by all in the saloon.

"We are now arrived," he said, "over the very spot where the descendants of Noah are said to have erected a tower, known as the Tower of Babel, and which they intended to build so high that it would afford a secure refuge in case there should be another deluge.

"How vain were such expectations, if they were ever entertained, is sufficiently shown by the fact that, at this moment, the water rolls more than three thousand feet deep over the place where they put their tower, and before the present deluge is over it will be thirty thousand feet deep.

"More than half a mile beneath our feet lie the broad plains of Chaldea, where tradition asserts that the study of astronomy began. It was Berossus, a Chaldean, who predicted that there would come a second deluge.

"It occurs to me, since seeing the astounding spectacle disclosed by the falling apart of the Sphinx, that these people may have had an infinitely more profound knowledge of the secrets of the heavens than tradition has assigned to them.

"On the breast of the statue in the Sphinx was the figure of a crowned man, encircled by a huge ring, and having behind him the form of a boat containing two other human figures. The boat was represented as floating in a flood of waters.

"Now, this corresponds exactly with figures that have been found among the most ancient ruins in Chaldea. I regard that ring as symbolical of a nebula enveloping the earth, and I think that the second deluge, which we have lived to see, was foretold here thousands of years ago."

"Who foretold it first, then, the people who placed the statue in the Sphinx, or these astronomers of Chaldea?" asked Professor Abel Able.

"I believe," Cosmo replied, "that the knowledge originated here, beneath us, and that it was afterward conveyed to the Egyptians, who embodied it in their great symbolical god."

"Are we to understand," demanded Professor Jeremiah Moses, "that this figure was all that you saw on the breast of the statue, and that you simply inferred that the ring represented a nebula?"

"Not at all," Cosmo replied. "The principal representation was that of a world overwhelmed with a flood, and of a nebula descending upon it."

"How do you know that it was intended for a nebula?"

"Because it had the aspect of one, and it was clearly shown to be descending from the high heavens."

"A cloud," suggested Professor Moses.

"No, not a cloud. Mark this, which is a marvel in itself: It had the form of a spiral nebula. It was unmistakable."

At this point the discussion was interrupted by a call to Cosmo Versál from Captain Arms on the bridge. He hastily left the table and ascended to the captain's side.

He did not need to be told what to look for. Off in the north the sky had become a solid black mass, veined with the fiercest lightning. The pealing of the thunder came in a continuous roll, which soon grew so loud as to shake the Ark.

"Up with the side-plates!" shouted Cosmo, setting twenty bells ringing at once. "Close tight every opening! Screw down the port shutters!"

The crew of the Ark was, in a few seconds, running to and fro, executing

the orders that came in swift succession from the commander's bridge, and the passengers were thrown into wild commotion. But nobody had time to attend to them.

"It is upon us!" yelled Cosmo in the captain's ear, for the uproar had become deafening. "The nucleus is here!"

The open promenade decks had not yet all been turned into inner corridors when the downpour began upon the Ark. A great deal of water found its way aboard, but the men worked with a will, as fearful for their own safety as for that of others, and in a little while everything had been made snug and tight.

In a short time a tremendous tempest was blowing, the wind coming from the north, and the Ark, notwithstanding her immense breadth of beam, was canted over to leeward at an alarming angle. On the larboard side the waves washed to the top of the great elliptical dome and broke over it, and their thundering blows shook the vessel to her center, causing many to believe that she was about to founder.

The disorder was frightful. Men and women were flung about like tops, and no one could keep his feet. Crash after crash, that could be heard amid the howling of the storm, the battering of the waves, and the awful roar of the deluge descending on the roof, told the fate of the tableware and dishes that had been hastily left in the big dining saloon.

Chairs recently occupied by the passengers on what had been the promenade decks, and from which they had so serenely, if often sorrowfully, looked over the broad, peaceful surface of the waters, were now darting, rolling, tumbling, and banging about, intermingled with rugs, hats, coats, and other abandoned articles of clothing.

The pitching and rolling of the Ark were so much worse than they had been during the first days of the cataclysm, that Cosmo became very solicitous about his collection of animals.

He hurried down to the animal deck, and found, indeed, that things were in a lamentable shape. The trained keepers were themselves so much at the mercy of the storm that they had had all they could do to save themselves from being trampled to death by the frightened beasts.

The animals had been furnished with separate pens, but during the long continued calm the keepers, for the sake of giving their charges greater freedom and better air, had allowed many of them to go at large in the broad central space around which the pens were placed, and the tempest had come so unexpectedly that there had been no time to separate them and get them back into their lodgings.

When Cosmo descended the scene that met his eyes caused him to cry out in dismay, but he could not have been heard if he had spoken through a trumpet. The noise and uproar were stunning, and the spectacle was

indescribable. The keepers had taken refuge on a kind of gallery running round the central space, and were hanging on there for their lives.

Around them, on the railings, clinging with their claws, wildly flapping their wings, and swinging with every roll of the vessel, were all the fowls and every winged creature in the Ark except the giant turkeys, whose power of wing was insufficient to lift them out of the mêlée.

But all the four-footed beasts were rolling, tumbling, and struggling in the open space below. With every lurch of the Ark they were swept across the floor in an indistinguishable mass.

The elephants wisely did not attempt to get upon their feet, but allowed themselves to slide from side to side, sometimes crushing the smaller animals, and sometimes, in spite of all their efforts, rolling upon their backs, with their titanic limbs swaying above them, and their trunks wildly grasping whatever came within their reach.

The huge Californian cattle were in no better case, and the poor sheep presented a pitiable spectacle as they were tumbled in woolly heaps from side to side.

Strangest sight of all was that of the great Astoria turtles. They had been pitched upon their backs and were unable to turn themselves over, and their big carapaces served admirably for sliders.

They glided with the speed of logs in a chute, now this way, now that, shooting like immense projectiles through the throng of struggling beasts, cutting down those that happened to be upon their feet, and not ending their course until they had crashed against the nearest wall.

As one of the turtles slid toward the bottom of the steps on which Cosmo was clinging it cut under the legs of one of the giant turkeys, and the latter, making a superphasianidae effort, half leaped, half flapped its way upon the steps to the side of Cosmo Versál, embracing him with one of its stumpy wings, while its red neck and head, with bloodshot eyes, swayed high above his bald dome.

The keepers gradually made their way round the gallery to Cosmo's side, and he indicated to them by signs that they must quit the place with him, and wait for a lull of the tempest before trying to do anything for their charges.

A few hours later the wind died down, and then they collected all that remained alive of the animals in their pens and secured them as best they could against the consequences of another period of rolling and pitching.

The experiences of the passengers had been hardly less severe, and panic reigned throughout the Ark. After the lull came, however, some degree of order was restored, and Cosmo had all who were in a condition to leave their rooms assemble in the grand saloon, where he informed them of the

situation of affairs, and tried to restore their confidence. The roar on the roof, in spite of the sound-absorbing cover which had been re-erected, compelled him to use a trumpet.

"I do not conceal from you," he said in conclusion, "that the worst has now arrived. I do not look for any cessation of the flood from the sky until we shall have passed through the nucleus of the nebula. But the Ark is a stout vessel, we are fully provisioned, and we shall get through.

"All your chambers have been specially padded, as you may have remarked, and I wish you to remain in them, only issuing when summoned for assembly here.

"I shall call you out whenever the condition of the sea renders it safe for you to leave your rooms. Food will be regularly served in your quarters, and I beg you to have perfect confidence in me and my assistants."

But the confidence which Cosmo Versál recommended to the others was hardly shared by himself and Captain Arms. The fury of the blast which had just left them had exceeded everything that Cosmo had anticipated, and he saw that, in the face of such hurricanes, the Ark would be practically unmanageable.

One of his first cares was to ascertain the rate at which the downpour

was raising the level of the water. This, too, surprised him. His gages showed, time after time, that the rainfall was at the rate of about four inches per minute. Sometimes it amounted to as much as six!

"The central part of the nebula," he said to the captain, through the speaking-tube which they had arranged for their intercommunications on the bridge, "is denser than I had supposed. The condensation is enormous, but it is irregular, and I think it very likely that it is more rapid in the north, where the front of the globe is plunging most directly into the nebulous mass.

"From this we should anticipate a tremendous flow southward, which may sweep us away in that direction. This will not be a bad thing for a while, since it is southward that we must go in order to reach the region of the Indian Ocean. But, in order not to be carried too rapidly that way, I think it would be the best thing to point the Ark toward the northeast."

"How am I to know anything about the points in this blackness?" growled the captain.

"You must go the best you can by the compass," said Cosmo.

Cosmo Versál, as subsequently appeared, was right in supposing that the nucleus of the nebula was exceedingly irregular in density. The condensation was not only much heavier in the north, but it was very

erratic.

Some parts of the earth received a great deal more water from the opened flood-gates above than others, and this difference, for some reason that has never been entirely explained, was especially marked between the eastern and western hemispheres.

We have already seen that when the downpour recommenced in Colorado it was much less severe than during the first days of the flood. This difference continued. It seems that all the denser parts of the nucleus happened to encounter the planet on its eastern side.

This may have been partly due to the fact that as the rotating earth moved on in its eastward motion round the sun the comparatively dense masses of the nebula were always encountered at the times when the eastern hemisphere was in advance. The fact, which soon became apparent to Cosmo, that the downpour was always the most severe in the morning hours, bears out this hypothesis.

It accords with what has been observed with respect to meteors, viz., that they are more abundant in the early morning. But then it must be supposed that the condensed masses in the nebula were relatively so small that they became successively exhausted, so to speak, before the western hemisphere had come fairly into the line of fire.

Of course the irregularity in the arrival of the water did not, in the

end, affect the general level of the flood, which became the same all over the globe, but it caused immense currents, as Cosmo had foreseen.

But there was one consequence which he had overlooked. The currents, instead of sweeping the Ark continually southward, as he had anticipated, formed a gigantic whirl, set up unquestionably by the great ranges of the Himalayas, the Hindoo Koosh, and the Caucasus.

This tremendous maelstrom formed directly over Persia and Arabia, and, turning in the direction of the hands of a watch, its influence extended westward beyond the place where the Ark now was.

The consequence was that, in spite of all their efforts, Cosmo and the captain found their vessel swept resistlessly up the course of the valley containing the Euphrates and the Tigris.

They were unable to form an opinion of their precise location, but they knew the general direction of the movement, and by persistent logging got some idea of the rate of progress.

Fortunately the wind seldom blew with its first violence, but the effects of the whirling current could be but little counteracted by the utmost engine power of the Ark.

Day after day passed in this manner, although, owing to the density of the rain, the difference between day and night was only perceptible by

the periodical changes from absolute blackness to a very faint illumination when the sun was above the horizon.

The rise of the flood, which could not have been at a less rate than six hundred feet every twenty-four hours, lifted the Ark above the level of the mountains of Kurdistan by the time that they arrived over the upper part of the Mesopotamian plain, and the uncertain observations which they occasionally obtained of the location of the sun, combined with such dead reckoning as they were able to make, finally convinced them that they must certainly be approaching the location of the Black Sea and the Caucasus range.

"I'll tell you what you're going to do," yelled Captain Arms. "You're going to make a smash on old Ararat, where your predecessor, Noah, made his landfall."

"Très bien!" shouted De Beauxchamps, who was frequently on the bridge, and whose Gallic spirits nothing could daunt. "That's a good omen! M. Versál should send out one of his turkeys to spy a landing place."

They were really nearer Ararat than they imagined, and Captain Arms's prediction narrowly missed fulfillment. Within a couple of hours after he had spoken a dark mass suddenly loomed through the dense air directly in their track.

Almost at the same time, and while the captain was making desperate

efforts to sheer off, the sky lightened a little, and they saw an immense heap of rock within a hundred fathoms of the vessel.

"Ararat, by all that's good!" yelled the captain. "Sta'board! Sta'board, I tell you! Full power ahead!"

The Ark yielded slowly to her helm, and the screws whirled madly, driving her rapidly past the rocks, so close that they might have tossed a biscuit upon them. The set of the current also aided them, and they got past the danger.

"Mountain navigation again!" yelled the captain. "Here we are in a nest of these sky-shoals! What are you going to do now?"

"It is impossible to tell," returned Cosmo, "whether this is Great or Little Ararat. The former is over 17,000 feet high, and the latter at least 13,000. It is now twelve days since the flooding recommenced.

"If we assume a rise of 600 feet in twenty-four hours, that makes a total of 7,200 feet, which, added to the 3,300 that we had before, gives 10,500 feet for the present elevation. This estimate may be considerably out of the way.

"I feel sure that both the Ararats are yet well above the water line. We must get out of this region as quickly as possible. Luckily the swirl of the current is now setting us eastward. We are on its northern edge. It

will carry the Ark down south of Mount Demavend, and the Elburz range, and over the Persian plateau, and if we can escape from it, as I hope, by getting away over Beluchistan, we can go directly over India and skirt the southern side of the Himalayas. Then we shall be near the goal which we have had in mind."

"Bless me!" said the captain, staring with mingled admiration and doubt at Cosmo Versál, "if you couldn't beat old Noah round the world, and give him half the longitude. But I'd rather you'd navigate this hooker. The ghost of Captain Sumner itself couldn't work a traverse over Beluchistan."

"You'll do it all right," returned Cosmo, "and the next time you drop your anchor it will probably be on the head of Mount Everest."