

CHAPTER XXIII

ROBBING THE CROWN OF THE WORLD

Now that they were going with the current instead of striving to stem it, the Ark made much more rapid way than during the time that it was drifting toward the Black Sea.

They averaged at least six knots, and, with the aid of the current, could have done much better, but they thought it well to be cautious, especially as they had so little means of guessing at their exact location from day to day. The water was rough.

There was, most of the time, little wind, and often a large number of the passengers assembled in the saloon.

The noise of the deluge on the roof was so much greater than it had been at the start that it was difficult to converse, but there was plenty of light, and they could, at least, see one another, and communicate by signs if not very easily by the voice. Cosmo's library was well selected, and many passed hours in reading stories of the world they were to see no more!

King Richard and Amos Blank imitated Cosmo and the captain by furnishing themselves with a speaking-tube, which they put alternately to their

lips and their ears, and thus held long conversations, presumably exchanging with one another the secrets of high finance and kingly government.

Both of them had enough historical knowledge and sufficient imagination to be greatly impressed by the fact that they were drifting, amidst this terrible storm, over the vast empire that Alexander the Great had conquered.

They mused over the events of the great Macedonian's long marches through deserts and over mountains, and the king, who loved the story of these glories of the past, though he had cultivated peace in his own dominions, often sighed while they recalled them to one another. Lord Swansdown and the other Englishmen aboard seldom joined their king since he had preferred the company of an untitled American to theirs.

The first named could not often have made a member of the party if he had wished, for he kept his room most of the time, declaring that he had never been so beastly seasick in his life. He thought that such an abominable roller as the Ark should never have been permitted to go into commission, don't you know.

On the morning of the twelfth day after they left the neighborhood of Mount Ararat Captain Arms averred that their position must be somewhere near longitude 69 degrees east, latitude 26 degrees north.

"Then you have worked your traverse over Beluchistan very well," said Cosmo, "and we are now afloat above the valley of the River Indus. We have the desert of northwestern India ahead, and from that locality we can continue right down the course of the Ganges. In fact it would be perfectly safe to turn northward and skirt the Himalayas within reach of the high peaks. I think that's what I'll do."

"If you go fooling round any more peaks," shouted Captain Arms, in a fog-horn voice, "you'll have to do your own steering! I've had enough of that kind of navigation!"

Nevertheless when Cosmo Versál gave the order the captain turned the prow of the Ark toward the presumable location of the great Himalayan range, although the rebellion of his spirit showed in the erect set of his whiskers. They were now entirely beyond the influence of the whirl that had at first got them into trouble, and then helped them out of it, in western Asia.

Behind the barrier of the ancient "Roof of the World" the sea was relatively calm, although, at times, they felt the effect of currents pouring down from the north, which had made their way through the lofty passes from the Tibetan side.

Cosmo calculated from his estimate of the probable rate of rise of the flood and from the direction and force of the currents that all but the very highest of the Pamirs must already be submerged.

It was probable, he thought, that the water had attained a level of between seventeen and eighteen thousand feet. This, as subsequent events indicated, was undoubtedly an underestimate. The downpour in the north must have been far greater than Cosmo thought, and the real height of the flood was considerably in excess of what he supposed.

If they could have seen some of the gigantic peaks as they approached the mountains in the eastern Punjab, south of Cashmere, they would have been aware of the error.

As it was, owing to the impossibility of seeing more than a short distance even when the light was brightest, they kept farther south than was really necessary, and after passing, as they believed, over Delhi, steered south by east, following substantially the course that Cosmo had originally named along the line of the Ganges valley.

They were voyaging much slower now, and after another ten days had passed an unexpected change came on. The downpour diminished in severity, and at times the sun broke forth, and for an hour or two the rain would cease entirely, although the sky had a coppery tinge, and at night small stars were not clearly visible.

Cosmo was greatly surprised at this. He could only conclude that the central part of the nebula had been less extensive, though more dense, than he had estimated. It was only thirty-four days since the deluge had

recommenced, and unless present appearances were deceptive, its end might be close at hand.

Captain Arms seized the opportunity to make celestial and solar observations which delighted his seaman's heart, and with great glee he informed Cosmo that they were in longitude 88 degrees 20 minutes east, latitude 24 degrees 15 minutes north, and he would stake his reputation as a navigator upon it.

"Almost exactly the location of Moorshedabad, in Bengal," said Cosmo, consulting his chart. "The mighty peak of Kunchingunga is hardly more than two hundred miles toward the north, and Mount Everest, the highest point in the world, is within a hundred miles of that!"

"But you're not going skimming around them!" cried the captain with some alarm.

"I shall, if the sky continues in its present condition, go as far as Darjeeling," replied Cosmo. "Then we can turn eastward and get over upper Burmah and so on into China. From there we can turn north again.

"I think we can manage to get into Tibet somewhere between the ranges. It all depends upon the height of the water, and that I can ascertain exactly by getting a close look at Kunchingunga. I would follow the line of the Brahmaputra River if I dared, but the way is too beset with perils."

"I think you've made a big mistake," said the captain. "Why didn't you come directly across Russia, after first running up to the Black Sea from the Mediterranean, and so straight into Tibet?"

"I begin to think that that's what I ought to have done," responded Cosmo, thoughtfully, "but when we started the water was not high enough to make me sure of that route, and after we got down into Egypt I didn't want to run back. But I guess it would have been better."

"Better a sight than steering among these five-mile peaks," growled Captain Arms. "How high does Darjeeling lie? I don't want to run aground again."

"Oh, that's perfectly safe," responded Cosmo. "Darjeeling is only about 7,350 feet above the old sea-level. I think we can go almost to the foot of Kunchingunga without any danger."

"Well, the name sounds dangerous enough in itself," said the captain, "but I suppose you'll have your way. Give me the bearings and we'll be off."

They took two days to get to the location of Darjeeling, for at times the sky darkened and the rain came down again in tremendous torrents. But these spells did not last more than two or three hours, and the weather cleared between them.

As soon as they advanced beyond Darjeeling, keeping a sharp outlook for Kunchingunga, Cosmo began to perceive the error of his calculation of the height of the flood.

The mountain should still have projected more than three thousand feet above the waves, allowing that the average rise during the thirty-six days since the recommencement of the flood had been six hundred feet a day.

But, in fact, they did not see it at all, and thought at first that it had been totally submerged. At last they found it, a little rocky island, less than two hundred feet above the water, according to Cosmo's careful measure, made from a distance of a quarter of a mile.

"This is great news for us," he exclaimed, as soon as he had completed the work. "This will save us a long journey round. The water must now stand at about 27,900 feet, and although there are a considerable number of peaks in the Himalayas approaching such an elevation, there are only three or four known to reach or exceed it, of which Kunchingunga is one.

"We can, then, run right over the roof of the world, and there we'll be, in Tibet. Then we can determine from what side it is safest to approach Mount Everest, for I am very desirous to get near that celebrated peak, and, if possible, see it go under."

"But the weather isn't safe yet," objected Captain Arms. "Suppose we should be caught in another downpour, and everything black about us! I'm not going to navigate this ship by searchlight among mountains twenty-eight thousand feet tall, when the best beam that ever shot from a mirror won't show an object a hundred fathoms away."

"Very well," Cosmo replied, "we'll circle around south for a few days and see what will happen. I think myself that it's not quite over yet. The fact is, I hope it isn't, for now that it has gone so far, I'd like to see the top-knot of the earth covered."

"Well, it certainly couldn't do any more harm if it got up as high as the moon," responded the captain.

They spent four days sailing to and fro over India, and during the first three of those days there were intermittent downpours. But the whole of the last period of twenty-four hours was entirely without rain, and the color of the sky changed so much that Cosmo declared he would wait no longer.

"Everest," he said, "is only 940 feet higher than Kunchingunga, and it may be sunk out of sight before we can get there."

"Do you think the water is still rising?" asked De Beauxchamps, while King Richard and Amos Blank listened eagerly for the reply, for now that the weather had cleared, the old company was all assembled on the

bridge.

"Yes, slowly," said Cosmo. "There is a perceptible current from the north which indicates that condensation is still going on there. You'll see that it'll come extremely close to the six miles I predicted before it's all over."

By the time they had returned to the neighborhood of the mountains the sky had become blue, with only occasionally a passing sunshower, and Cosmo ordered the promenades to be thrown open, and the passengers, with great rejoicings, resumed their daily lounging and walking on deck.

It required a little effort of thought to make them realize their situation, but when they did it grew upon them until they could not sufficiently express their wonder.

Here they were, on an almost placid sea, with tepid airs blowing gently in their faces, and a scorching sun overhead, whose rays had to be shielded off, floating over the highest pinnacles of the roof of the world, the traditional "Abode of Snow!"

All around them, beneath the rippled blue surface, lined here and there with little white windrows of foam, stood submerged peaks, 24,000, 25,000, 26,000, 27,000, 28,000 feet in elevation! They sailed over their summits and saw them not.

All began now to sympathize with Cosmo's desire to find Everest before it should have disappeared with its giant brothers. Its location was accurately known from the Indian government surveys, and Captain Arms had every facility for finding the exact position of the Ark. They advanced slowly toward the northwest, a hundred glasses eagerly scanning the horizon ahead.

Finally, at noon on the third day of their search, the welcome cry of "Land ho!" came down from the crow's nest. Captain Arms immediately set his course for the landfall, and in the course of a little more than an hour had it broad abeam.

"It's Everest, without question," said Cosmo. "It's the crown of the world."

But how strange was its appearance! A reddish-brown mass of rock, rising abruptly out of the blue water, really a kind of crown in form, but not more than a couple of square rods in extent, and about three feet high at its loftiest point.

There was no snow, of course, for that had long since disappeared, owing to the rise of temperature, and no snow would have fallen in that latitude now, even in mid-winter, because the whole base of the atmosphere had been lifted up nearly six miles.

Sea-level pressures were prevailing where the barometric column would

once have dropped almost to the bottom of its tube. It was all that was left of the world!

North of them, under the all-concealing ocean, lay the mighty plateau of Tibet; far toward the east was China, deeply buried with its 500,000,000 of inhabitants; toward the south lay India, over which they had so long been sailing; northwestward the tremendous heights of the Pamir region and of the Hindu-Kush were sunk beneath the sea.

"When this enormous peak was covered with snow," said Cosmo, "its height was estimated at 29,002 feet, or almost five and three-quarter miles.

The removal of the snow has, of course, lowered it, but I think it probable that this point, being evidently steep on all sides, and of very small area, was so swept by the wind that the snow was never very deep upon it.

"If we allow ten, or even twenty feet for the snow, the height of this rock cannot be much less than 29,000 feet above the former sea-level. But I do not dare to approach closer, because Everest had a broad summit, and we might possibly ground upon a sharp ridge."

"And you are sure that the water is still rising?" asked De Beauxchamps again.

"Watch and you will see," Cosmo responded.

The Ark was kept circling very slowly within a furlong of the rocky crown, and everybody who had a glass fixed his eyes upon it.

"The peak is certainly sinking," said De Beauxchamps at last. "I believe it has gone down three inches in the last fifteen minutes."

"Keep your eyes fixed on some definite point," said Cosmo to the others who were looking, "and you will easily note the rise of the water."

They watched it until nobody felt any doubt. Inch by inch the crown of the world was going under. In an hour Cosmo's instruments showed that the highest point had settled to a height of but two feet above the sea.

"But when will the elevation that you have predicted begin?" asked one.

"Its effects will not become evident immediately," Cosmo replied. "It may possibly already have begun, but if so, it is masked by the continued rise of the water."

"And how long shall we have to wait for the re-emergence of Tibet?"

"I cannot tell, but it will be a long time. But do not worry about that. We have plenty of provisions, and the weather will continue fine after the departure of the nebula."

They circled about until only a foot or so of the rock remained above

the reach of the gently washing waves. Suddenly struck by a happy thought, De Beauxchamps exclaimed:

"I must have a souvenir from the crown of the disappearing world. M. Versál, will you permit me to land upon it with one of your boats?"

De Beauxchamps's suggestion was greeted with cheers, and twenty others immediately expressed a desire to go.

"No," said Cosmo to the eager applicants, "it is M. De Beauxchamps's idea; let him go alone. Yes," he continued, addressing the Frenchman, "you can have a boat, and I will send two men with you to manage it. You'd better hurry, or there will be nothing left to land upon."

The necessary orders were quickly given, and in five minutes De Beauxchamps, watched by envious eyes, was rapidly approaching the disappearing rock. They saw him scramble out upon it, and they gave a mighty cheer as he waved his hand at them.

He had taken a hammer with him, and with breathless interest they watched him pounding and prying about the rock. They could see that he selected the very highest point for his operations.

While he worked away, evidently filling his pockets, the interest of the onlookers became more and more intense.

"Look out!" they presently began to shout at him, "you will be caught by the water."

But he paid no attention, working with feverish rapidity. Suddenly the watchers saw a little ripple break over the last speck of dry land on the globe, and De Beauxchamps standing up to his shoe-laces in water. Cries of dismay came from the Ark. De Beauxchamps now gave over his work, and, with apparent reluctance, entered the boat, which was rowed close up to the place where he was standing.

As the returning boat approached the Ark, another volley of cheers broke forth, and the Frenchman, standing up to his full height, waved with a triumphant air something that sparkled brilliantly in the sunshine.

"I congratulate you, M. De Beauxchamps," cried Cosmo, as the adventurer scrambled aboard. "You have stood where no human foot has ever been before, and I see that you have secured your souvenir of the world that was."

"Yes," responded De Beauxchamps exultantly, "and see what it is--a worthy decoration for such a coronet."

He held up his prize, amid exclamations of astonishment and admiration from those who were near enough to see it.

"The most beautiful specimen of amethyst I ever beheld!" cried a

mineralogist enthusiastically, taking it from De Beauxchamps's hand.

"What was the rock?"

"Unfortunately, I am no mineralogist," replied the Frenchman, "and I cannot tell you, but these gems were abundant. I could have almost filled the boat if I had had time.

"The amethyst," he added gayly, "is the traditional talisman against intoxication, but, although these adorned her tiara, the poor old world has drunk her fill."

"But it is only water," said Cosmo, smiling.

"Too much, at any rate," returned the Frenchman.

"I should say," continued the mineralogist, "that the rock was some variety of syenite, from its general appearance."

"I know nothing of that," replied De Beauxchamps, "but I have the jewels of the terrestrial queen, and," he continued gallantly, "I shall have the pleasure of bestowing them upon the ladies."

He emptied his pockets, and found that he had enough to give every woman aboard the Ark a specimen, with several left over for some of the men, Cosmo, of course, being one of the recipients.

"There," said De Beauxchamps, as he handed the stone to Cosmo, "there is a memento from the Gaurisankar."

"I beg your pardon--Mount Everest, if you please," interposed Edward Whistlington.

"No," responded the Frenchman stoutly, "it is the Gaurisankar. Why will you English persist in renaming everything in the world? Gaurisankar is the native name, and, in my opinion, far more appropriate and euphonious than Everest."

This discussion was not continued, for now everybody became interested in the movements of the Ark. Cosmo had decided that it would be safe to approach close to the point where the last peak of the mountain had disappeared.

Cautiously they drew nearer and nearer, until, looking through the wonderfully transparent water, they caught sight of a vast precipice descending with frightful steepness, down and down, until all was lost in the profundity beneath.

The point on which De Beauxchamps had landed was now covered so deep that the water had ceased to swirl about it, but lay everywhere in an unbroken sheet, which was every moment becoming more placid and refulgent in the sunshine.

The world was drowned at last! As they looked abroad over the convex surface, they thought, with a shudder, that now the earth, seen from space, was only a great, glassy ball, mirroring the sun and the stars.

But they were ignorant of what had happened far in the west!