

FICTION

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE COLD SNAP

By Edward Bellamy

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In the extremes of winter and summer, when the weather is either extraordinarily cold or hot, I confess to experiencing a peculiar sense of helplessness and vague uneasiness. I have a feeling that a trifling additional rise or fall of temperature, such as might be caused by any slight hitch in the machinery of the universe, would quite crowd mankind out of existence. To be sure, the hitch never has occurred, but what if it should? Conscious that I have about reached the limit of my own endurance, the thought of the bare contingency is unpleasant enough to cause a feeling of relief, not altogether physical, when the rising or falling mercury begins to turn. The consciousness how wholly by sufferance it is that man exists at all on the earth is rather forcibly borne in upon the mind at such times. The spaces above and below zero are indefinite.

I have to take my vacations as the fluctuations of a rather exacting business permit, and so it happened that I was, with my wife, passing a fortnight in the coldest part of winter at the family homestead in New England. The ten previous days had been very cold, and the cold had "got into the house," which means that it had so penetrated and chilled the very walls and timbers that a cold day now took hold of us as it had not earlier in the season. Finally there came a day that was colder than any before it. The credit of discovering and first asserting that it was the coldest day of the season is due to myself,—no slight distinction in the country, where the weather is always a more prominent topic than in the city, and the weather-wise are accordingly esteemed. Every one hastened to corroborate this verdict with some piece of evidence. Mother said that the frost had not gone off the kitchen window nearest the stove in all the day, and that was a sign. The sleighs and sledges as they went by in the road creaked on the snow, so that we heard them through the double windows, and that was a sign; while the teamsters swung their benumbed arms like the sails of a windmill to keep up the circulation, and the frozen vapor puffed out from the horses' nostrils in a manner reminding one of the snorting coursers in sensational pictures. The schoolboys on their way from school did not stop to play, and that was a sign. No women had been seen on the street since noon. Young men, as they hurried past on the peculiar high-stepping trot of persons who have their hands over their ears, looked strangely antiquated with their mustaches and beards all grizzled with the frost.

Toward dusk I took a short run to the post-office. I was well wrapped up, but that did not prevent me from having very singular sensations before I got home. The air, as I stepped out from cover, did not seem like air at all, but like some almost solid medium, whose impact was like a blow. It went right through my overcoat at the first assault, and nosed about hungrily for my little spark of vital heat. A strong wind with the flavor of glaciers was blowing straight from the pole. How inexpressibly bleak was the aspect of the leaden clouds that were banked up around the horizon! I shivered as I looked at the sullen masses. The houses seemed little citadels against the sky. I had not taken fifty steps before my face stiffened into a sort of mask, so that it hurt me to move the facial muscles. I came home on an undignified run, experiencing a lively sense of the inadequacy of two hands to protect two ears and a nose. Did the Creator intend man to inhabit high latitudes?

At nightfall father, Bill, and Jim, the two latter being my younger brothers, arrived from their offices, each in succession declaring, with many "whews" and "ughs," that it was by all odds the coldest night yet. Undeniably we all felt proud of it, too. A spirited man rather welcomes ten or fifteen degrees extra, if so be they make the temperature superlatively low; while he would very likely grumble at a much less positive chilliness coupled with the disheartening feeling that he was enduring nothing extraordinary. The general exaltation of spirit and suspension of the conventionalities for the time being, which an extraordinarily, hot or cold snap produces in a community, especially in the country, is noteworthy. During that run of mine to the post-office every man I met grinned confidentially, as if to say, "We're hearty fellows to stand it as we do." We regarded each other with an increase of mutual respect. That sense of fellowship which springs up between those associated in an emergency seemed to dispense with ordinary formalities, and neighbors with whom I had not a bowing acquaintance fairly beamed on me as we passed.

After tea Ella (Ella was a sister) got the evening paper out of somebody's overcoat, and was running it over in the dainty, skimming fashion peculiar to the gentler sex when favoring the press with their attention. It reminds one of sea-birds skimming the water, and anon diving for a tidbit. She read aloud: "Old Prob. reports another cold wave on the way East. It will probably reach the New England States this evening. The thermometers along its course range from 40deg below zero at Fort Laramie, to 38deg in Omaha, 31deg in Chicago, and 30deg in Cleveland. Numerous cases of death by freezing are reported. Our readers will do well to put an extra shovelful on the furnace overnight."

"Don't forget that, Jim," said father.

A gentleman friend called to take Ella out to a concert or something of the sort. Her mother was for having her give it up on account of the cold. But it so happens that young people, who, having life before them, can much better afford than their elders to forego particular pleasures, are much less resigned to doing so. The matter was compromised by piling so many wraps upon her that she protested it was like being put to bed. But, before they had been gone fifteen minutes, they were back again, half frozen. It had proved so shockingly cold they had not dared to keep on, and persuaded themselves accordingly that the entertainment had probably been postponed. The streets were entirely deserted; not even a policeman was visible, and the chilled gas in the street lamps gave but a dull light.

Ella proposed to give us our regular evening treat of music, but found the corner of the room where the melodeon stood too cold. Generally the room is warm in every part, and Jim got upbraided for keeping a poor fire. But he succeeded in proving that it was better than common; the weather was the matter. As the evening wore on, the members of the family gradually edged around the register, finally radiating from it as a centre like the spokes of a wheel, of which the collected feet of the group made the hub.

My wife is from the Southern States; and the huge cold of the North had been a new and rather terrifying experience to her. She had been growing nervous all the evening, as the signs and portents of the weather accumulated. She was really half frightened.

"Aren't you afraid it will get so cold it will never be able to get warm again,--and then what would become of us?" she asked.

Of course we laughed at her, but I think her fears infected me with a slight, vague anxiety, as the evidences of extraordinary and still increasing cold went on multiplying. I had so far gotten over my bravado earlier in the evening that I should have been secretly relieved if the thermometer had taken a turn.

At length, one by one, the members of the family, with an anticipatory shiver over the register, went to their rooms, and were doubtless in bed in the shortest possible time, and I fear without saying their prayers. Finally my wife suggested that we had better go before we got too cold to do so.

The bedroom was shockingly cold. Going to bed is a test of character. I pride myself on the fact that generally, even when my room is cold, I can, with steady nerve and resolute hand, remove the last habiliment, and without undignified precipitation reach for and indue the nocturnal garment, I admit, however, that on this occasion I gave way to a weak irresolution at the critical instant and shivered for some moments in constantly increasing demoralization, before I could make up my mind to the final change. Then ensued the slow and gradual conquest of the frozen bed to a tolerable warmth, a result attained only by clever strategic combinations of bedclothes and the most methodical policy. As I lay awake, I heard the sides of the house crack in the cold. "What," said I to myself with a shiver, "should I do if anything happened that required me to get up and dress again?" It seemed to me I should be capable of letting a man die in the next room for need of succor. Being of an imaginative temperament, not to feel prepared for possible contingencies is for me to feel guilty and miserable. The last thing I remember before dropping off to sleep was solemnly promising my wife never to trust ourselves North another winter. I then fell asleep and dreamed of the ineffable cold of the interstellar spaces, which the scientific people talk about.

The next thing I was sensible of was a feeling of the most utter discomfort I ever experienced. My whole body had become gradually chilled through. I could feel the flesh rising in goose pimples at every movement. What has happened? was my first thought. The bedclothes were all there, four inches of them, and to find myself shivering under such a pile seemed a reversal of the laws of nature. Shivering is an unpleasant operation at best and at briefest; but when one has shivered till the flesh is lame, and every quiver is a racking; aching pain, that is something quite different from any ordinary shivering. My wife was awake and in the same condition. What did I ever bring her to this terrible country for? She had been lying as still as possible for an hour or so, waiting till she should die or something; and feeling that if she stirred she should freeze, as water near the freezing point crystallizes when agitated. She said that when I had disturbed the clothes by any movement, she had felt like hating me. We were both almost scared, it must be confessed. Such an experience had never been ours before. In voices muffled by the bedclothes we held dismal confab, and concluded that we must make our way to the sitting-room and get over the register.

I have had my share of unpleasant duties to face in my life. I remember how I felt at Spottsylvania when I stepped up and out from behind a breastwork of fence rails, over which the bullets were whistling like hailstones, to charge the enemy. Worse still, I remember how I felt at one or two public banquets when I rose from my seat to reply to a toast, and to meet the gaze of a hundred expectant faces with an overpowering consciousness of looking like a fool, and of total inability to do or say anything which would not justify the presumption. But never did an act of my life call for so much of sheer will-power as stepping out of that comfortless bed into that freezing room. It is a general rule in getting up winter mornings that the air never proves so cold as was anticipated while lying warm in bed. But it did this time, probably because my system was deprived of all elasticity and power of reaction by being so thoroughly chilled. Hastily donning in the dark what was absolutely necessary, my poor wife and myself, with chattering teeth and prickly bodies, the most thoroughly demoralized couple in history, ran downstairs to the sitting-room.

Much to our surprise, we found the gas lighted and the other members of the family already gathered there, huddling over the register. I felt a sinking at the heart as I marked the strained, anxious look on each face, a look that asked what strange thing had come upon us. They had been there, they said, for some time. Ella, Jim, and Bill, who slept alone, had been the first to leave their beds. Then father and mother, and finally my wife and I, had followed. Soon after our arrival there was a fumbling at the door, and the two Irish girls, who help mother keep house, put in their blue, pinched faces. They scarcely waited an invitation to come up to the register.

The room was but dimly lighted, for the gas, affected by the fearful chill, was flowing slowly and threatened to go out. The gloom added to the depressing effect of our strange situation. Little was said. The actual occurrence of strange and unheard-of events excites very much less wonderment than the account of them written or rehearsed. Indeed, the feeling of surprise often seems wholly left out of the mental experience of those who undergo or behold the most prodigious catastrophes. The sensibility to the marvelous is the one of our faculties which is, perhaps, the soonest exhausted by a strain. Human nature takes naturally to miracles, after all. "What can it mean?" was the inquiry a dozen times on the lips of each one of us, but beyond that, I recall little that was said. Bill, who was the joker of the family, had essayed a jest or two at first on our strange predicament, but they had been poorly received. The discomfort was too serious, and the extraordinary nature of the visitation filled every mind with nameless forebodings and a great, unformed fear.

We asked each other if our neighbors were all in the same plight with ourselves. They must be, of course, and many of them far less prepared to meet it. There might be whole families in the last extremity of cold right about us. I went to the window, and with my knife scraped away the rime of frost, an eighth of an inch thick, which obscured it, till I could see out. A whitish-gray light was on the landscape. Every object seemed still, with a quite peculiar stillness that might be called intense. From the chimneys of some of the houses around thick columns of smoke and sparks were pouring, showing that the fires were being crowded below. Other chimneys showed no smoke at all. Here and there a dull light shone from a window. There was no other sign of life anywhere. The streets were absolutely empty. No one suggested trying to communicate with other houses. This was a plight in which human concourse could avail nothing.

After piling all the coal on the furnace it would hold, the volume of heat rising from the register was such as to singe the clothes of those over it, while those waiting their turn were shivering a few feet off. The men of course yielded the nearest places to the women, and, as we walked briskly up and down in the room, the frost gathered on our mustaches. The morning, we said, would bring relief, but none of us fully believed it, for the strange experience we were enduring appeared to imply a suspension of the ordinary course of nature.

A number of cats and dogs, driven from their accustomed haunts by the intense cold, had gathered under the windows, and there piteously moaned and whined for entrance.

Swiftly it grew colder. The iron casing of the register was cold in spite of the volume of heat pouring through it. Every point or surface of metal in the room was covered with a thick coating of frost. The frost even settled upon a few filaments of cobweb in the corners of the room which had escaped the housemaid's broom, and which now shone like hidden sins in the day of judgment. The door-knob, mop-boards, and wooden casings of the room glistened. We were so chilled that woolen was as cold to the touch as wood or iron. There being no more any heat in our bodies, the non-conducting quality of a substance was no appreciable advantage. To avoid the greater cold near the floor, several of our number got upon the tables, presenting, with their feet tucked under them, an aspect that would have been sufficiently laughable under other circumstances. But, as a rule, fun does not survive the freezing point. Every few moments the beams of the house snapped like the timbers of a straining ship, and at intervals the frozen ground cracked with a noise like cannon,—the hyperborean earthquake.

A ruddy light shone against the windows. Bill went and rubbed away the ice. A neighbor's house was burning. It was one of those whose chimneys were vomiting forth sparks when I had looked out before. There was promise of an extensive conflagration. Nobody appeared in the streets, and, as there were intervening houses, we could not see what became of the inmates. The very slight interest which this threatening conflagration aroused in our minds was doubtless a mark of the already stupefying effect of the cold. Even our voices had become weak and altered.

The cold is a sad enemy to beauty. My poor wife and Ella, with their pinched faces, strained, aching expression, red, rheumy eyes and noses, and blue or pallid cheeks were sad parodies on their comely selves. Other forces of nature have in them something the spirit of man can sympathize with, as the wind, the waves, the sun; but there is something terribly inhuman about the cold. I can imagine it as a congenial principle brooding over the face of chaos in the aeons before light was.

Hours had passed, it might have been years, when father said, "Let us pray." He knelt down, and we all mechanically followed his example, as from childhood up we had done at morning and evening. Ever before, the act had seemed merely a fit and graceful ceremony, from which no one had expected anything in particular to follow, or had experienced aught save the placid reaction that commonly results from a devotional act. But now the meaning so long latent became eloquent. The morning and evening ceremony became the sole resource in an imminent and fearful emergency. There was a familiar strangeness about the act under these circumstances which touched us all. With me, as with most,

something of the feeling implied in the adage, "Familiarity breeds contempt," had impaired my faith in the practical efficacy of prayer. How could extraordinary results be expected from so common an instrumentality, and especially from so ordinary and every-day a thing as family prayer? Our faith in the present instance was also not a little lessened by the peculiar nature of the visitation. In any ordinary emergency God might help us, but we had a sort of dim apprehension that even He could not do anything in such weather. So far as humbleness was concerned, there was no lack of that. There are some inflictions which, although terrible, are capable of stirring in haughty human hearts a rebellious indignation. But to cold succumb soul and mind. It has always seemed to me that cold would have broken down Milton's Satan. I felt as if I could grovel to be vouchsafed a moment's immunity from the gripe of the savage frost.

Owing to the sustaining power there is in habit, the participation in family devotions proved strengthening to us all. In emergencies, we get back from our habits the mental and moral vigor that first went to their formation, and has since remained on interest.

It is not the weakest who succumb first to cold, as was strikingly proved in our experience. The prostration of the faculties may be long postponed by the power of the will. All assaults on human nature, whether of cold, exhaustion, terror, or any other kind, respect the dignity of the mind, and await its capitulation before finally storming the stronghold of life. I am as strong in physique as men average, but I gave out before my mother. The voices of mother and Bill, as they took counsel for our salvation, fell on my ears like an idle sound. This was the crisis of the night.

The next thing I knew, Bill was urging us to eat some beefsteak and bread. The former, I afterward learned, he had got out of the pantry and cooked over the furnace fire. It was about five o'clock, and we had eaten nothing for nearly twelve hours. The general exhaustion of our powers had prevented a natural appetite from making itself felt, but mother had suggested that we should try food, and it saved us. It was still fearfully cold, but the danger was gone as soon as we felt the reviving effect of the food. An ounce of food is worth a pound of blankets. Trying to warm the body from the outside is working at a tremendous disadvantage. It was a strange picnic as, perched on chairs and tables in the dimly lighted room, we munched our morsels, or warmed the frozen bread over the register. After this, some of us got a little sleep.

I shall never forget my sensations when, at last, I looked out at the eastern window and saw the rising sun. The effect was indeed peculiarly splendid, for the air was full of particles of ice, and the sun had the effect of shining through a mist of diamond dust. Bill had dosed us with whiskey, and perhaps it had got into our heads, for I shouted, and my wife cried. It was, at the end of the weary night, like the first sight of our country's flag when returning from a foreign world.