

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology.

TRUTH OR FABLE?

In his once well-known book "Weather," the British meteorologist Ralph Abercromby, writing of deaths by freezing in our American blizzards, says: "A very curious circumstance attends these deaths. In almost every case the victims are found to have begun to strip themselves. When the body is nearly reduced to an icicle, only a very little blood continues to circulate languidly through the brain. Then delirium sets in, with a delusive sensation of heat, under the influence of which the traveler begins to divest himself of his clothes."

In a review of the book, Prof. M. W. Harrington, later chief of the U.S. Weather Bureau, stated that, though he was born and bred on the outskirts of the blizzard region, he had never heard of such an effect of freezing, to which Abercromby replied by quoting the following from H. M. Robinson's "The Great Fur Land" (New York, 1879):

"I have had five cases of freezing to death brought under my personal observation. In every case the subject gave indubitable indications of insanity before death, and in every case exhibited it in the same way -- by casting off his clothing and wandering away from it. One subject was entirely nude, and fully a mile from the last article of clothing he had discarded."

Death by freezing happens from time to time in all the colder parts of the world, and there is no reason to suppose that the effect mentioned -- if it occurs at all -- is peculiar to blizzards. But does it occur at all?

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21st and Constitution Ave.
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