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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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A WELL-WORN TALE

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Back in the year 1784 James Hutton read before the Royal Society of Edinburgh his famous paper "The Theory of Rain," in which he endeavored to show that rainfall and snowfall are due to the mixing of masses of air having different temperatures and different charges of water vapor, which, by the way, is now known to be a much less common cause than the cooling of moist air by expansion. In this memoir he related an episode said to have occurred at St. Petersburg in 1773. In a crowded assembly the heat became uncomfortable. A gentleman broke a window-pane for relief; whereupon, says Hutton, "the cold air rushing in formed a visible circumgiration of a snowy substance" -- a Johnsonese way of saying that a miniature snowstorm occurred in the room.

This story has been repeated, with minor variations, by scores of later writers, and one wonders why. The phenomenon it describes is certainly not very rare. Millions of people must have seen snowflakes form when very cold air was suddenly admitted to a warm enclosure. Why do recent writers go back to the eighteenth century for a case in point?

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