

The Four White Days

The Doom of London

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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*A tale of London in the grip of an Arctic winter—
showing the danger any winter might bring from
famine, cold, and fire.*

I

THE editor of *The Daily Chat* wondered a little vaguely why he had come down to the office at all. Here was the thermometer down to 110 with every prospect of touching zero before daybreak, and you can't fill a morning paper with weather reports. Besides, nothing was coming in from the North of the Trent beyond the curt information that all telegraphic and telephonic communication beyond was impossible. There was a huge blizzard, a heavy fall of snow nipped hard by the terrific frost and—silence.

To-morrow—January 25th—would see a pretty poor paper unless America roused up to a sense of her responsibility and sent something hot to go on with. The Land's End cables often obliged in that way. There was the next chapter of the Beef and Bread Trust, for instance. Was Silas X. Brett going to prove successful in his attempt to corner the world's supply? That Brett had been a pawnbroker's assistant a year ago mattered little. That he might at any time emerge a penniless adventurer mattered less. From a press point of view he was good for three columns.

The chief „sub“ came in, blowing his fingers. The remark that he was frozen to the marrow caused no particular sympathy.

„Going to be a funeral rag to-morrow,“ the editor said curtly.

„That's so,“ Gough admitted cheerfully. „We've drawn a thrilling picture of the Thames impassable to craft—and well it might be after a week of this Arctic weather. For days not a carcase or a sack of flour has been brought in. Under the circumstances we were justified in prophesying a bread and meat famine. And we've had our customary gibe at Silas X. Brett. But still, it's poor stuff.“

The editor thought he would go home. Still he dallied, on the off chance of something turning up. It was a little after midnight when he began to catch the suggestion of excitement that seemed to be simmering in the sub-editor's room. There was a clatter of footsteps outside. By magic the place began to hum like a hive.

„What have you struck, Gough?“ the editor cried.

Gough came tumbling in, a sheaf of flimsies in his hand.

„Brett's burst,“ he gasped. „It's a real godsend, Mr. Fisher. I've got enough here to make three columns. Brett's committed suicide.“

Fisher slipped out of his overcoat. Everything comes to the man who waits. He ran his trained eyes over the flimsies; he could see his way to a pretty elaboration.

„The danger of the corner is over,“ he said, later, „but the fact remains that we are still short of supplies; there are few provision ships on the seas, and if they were close at hand they couldn't get into port with all this ice about. Don't say that London is on the verge of a famine, but you can hint it.“

Gough winked slightly and withdrew. An hour later and the presses were kicking and coughing away in earnest. There was a flaming contents bill, so that Fisher went off drowsily through the driving snow Bedford Square way with a feeling that there was not much the matter with the world after all.

It was piercingly cold, the wind had come up from the east, the steely blue sky of the last few days had gone.

Fisher doubled before the wind that seemed to grip his very soul. On reaching home he shuddered as he hung over the stove in the hall.

„My word,“ he muttered as he glanced at the barometer. „Down half-an-inch since dinner time. And a depression on top that you could lie in. Don't ever recollect London under the lash of a real blizzard, but it's come now.“

A blast of wind, as he spoke, shook the house like some unreasoning fury.

II

IT WAS in the evening of the 24th of January that the first force of the snowstorm swept London. There had been no sign of any abatement in the gripping frost, but the wind had suddenly shifted to the east, and almost immediately snow had commenced to fall. But as yet there was no hint of the coming calamity.

A little after midnight the full force of the gale was blowing. The snow fell in powder so fine that it was almost imperceptible, but gradually the mass deepened until at daybreak it lay some eighteen inches in the streets. Some of the thoroughfares facing the wind were swept bare as a newly reaped field, in others the drifts were four or five feet in height.

A tearing, roaring, blighting wind was still blowing as the grey day struggled in. The fine snow still tinkled against glass and brick. By nine o'clock hundreds of telephone wires were broken. The snow and the force of the wind had torn them away bodily. As far as could be ascertained at present the same thing had happened to the telegraphic lines. At eleven o'clock nothing beyond local letters had been delivered, and the postal authorities notified that no telegrams could be guaranteed in any direction outside the radius. There was nothing from the Continent at all.

Still, there appeared to be no great cause for alarm. The snow must cease presently. There was absolutely no business doing in the City, seeing that three-fourths of the suburban residents had not managed to reach London by two o'clock. An hour later it became generally known that no main line train had been scheduled at a single London terminus since midday.

Deep cuttings and tunnels were alike rendered impassable by drifted snow.

But the snow would cease presently; it could not go on like this. Yet when dusk fell it was still coming down in the same grey whirling powder.

That night London was as a city of the dead. Except where the force of the gale had swept bare patches, the drifts were high—so high in some cases that they reached to the first floor windows. A half-hearted attempt had been made to clear the roadways earlier in the day, but only two or three main roads running north and south, and east and west were at all passable.

Meanwhile the gripping frost never abated a jot. The thermometer stood steadily at 15° below freezing even in the forenoon; the ordinary tweed clothing of the average Briton was sorry stuff to keep out a wind like that. But for the piercing draught the condition of things might have been tolerable. London had

experienced colder weather so far as degrees went, but never anything that battered and gripped like this. And still the fine white powder fell.

After dark, the passage from one main road to another was a real peril. Belated stragglers fought their way along their own streets without the slightest idea of locality, the dazzle of the snow was absolutely blinding. In sheltered corners the authorities had set up blazing fires for the safety of the police and public. Hardly a vehicle had been seen in the streets for hours.

At the end of the first four and twenty hours the mean fall of snow had been four feet. Narrow streets were piled up with the white powder. Most of the thoroughfares on the south side of the Strand were mere grey ramparts. Here and there people could be seen looking anxiously out of upper windows and beckoning for assistance. Such was the spectacle that London presented at daybreak on the second day.

It was not till nearly midday of the 26th of January that the downfall ceased. For thirty six hours the gale had hurled its force mercilessly over London. There had been nothing like it in the memory of man, nothing like it on record. The thin wrack of cloud cleared and the sun shone down on the brilliant scene.

A strange, still, weird London. A white deserted city with a hardy pedestrian here and there, who looked curiously out of place in a town where one expects to see the usual toiling millions. And yet the few people who were about did not seem to fit into the picture. The crunch of their feet on the crisp snow was an offence, the muffled hoarseness of their voices jarred.

London woke uneasily with a sense of coming disaster. By midday the continuous frost rendered the snow quite firm enough for traffic. The curious sight of people climbing out of their bedroom windows and sliding down snow mountains into the streets excited no wonder. As to the work-a-day side of things that was absolutely forgotten. For the nonce Londoners were transformed into Laplanders, whose first and foremost idea was food and warmth.

So far as could be ascertained the belt of the blizzard had come from the East in a straight line some thirty miles wide. Beyond St. Albans there was very little snow, the same remark applying to the South from Redhill. But London itself lay in the centre of a grip of Arctic, ice-bound country; and was almost as inaccessible to the outside world as the North Pole itself.

There was practically no motive power beyond that of the underground railways, and most of the lighting standards had been damaged by the gale; last calamity of all, the frost affected the gas so that evening saw London practically in darkness.

But the great want of many thousands was fuel. Coal was there at the wharfs, but getting it to its destination was quite another thing. It was very well for a light sleigh and horse to slip over the frozen snow, but a heavily laden cart would have found progression an absolute impossibility. Something might have been done with the electric trams, but all overhead wires were down.

In addition to this, the great grain wharfs along the Thames were very low. Local contractors and merchants had not been in the least frightened by the vagaries of Mr. Silas X. Brett; they had bought „short“, feeling pretty sure that sooner or later their foresight would be rewarded.

Therefore they had been trading from hand to mouth. The same policy had been pursued by the small „rings“ of wholesale meat merchants who supply pretty well

the whole of London with flesh food. The great majority of the struggling classes pay the American prices and get American produce, an enormous supply of which is in daily demand.

Here Silas X. Brett had come in again. Again the wholesale men had declined to make contracts except from day to day.

Last and worst of all, the Thames—the chief highway for supplies— was, for the only time in the memory of living man, choked with ice below Greenwich.

London was in a state of siege as close and gripping as if a foreign army had been at her gates. Supplies were cut off, and were likely to be for some days to come.

The price of bread quickly advanced to ninepence the loaf, and it was impossible to purchase the cheapest meat under two shillings per pound. Bacon and flour, and such like provisions, rose in a corresponding ratio; coal was offered at “2 per ton, with the proviso that the purchaser must fetch it himself.

Meanwhile, there was no cheering news from the outside—London seemed to be cut off from the universe. It was as bad as bad could be, but the more thoughtful could see that there was worse to follow.

Illustration:

The Sight of a figure staggering up a snow drift to a bedroom window in Keppel Street aroused no astonishment in the breast of a stolid policeman

III

THE SIGHT of a figure staggering up a snow drift to a bedroom window in Keppel Street aroused no astonishment in the breast of a stolid policeman. It was the only way of entry into some of the houses in that locality. Yet a little further on the pavements were clear and hard.

Besides, the figure was pounding on the window, and burglars don't generally do that. Presently the sleeper within awoke. From the glow of his oil stove he could see that it was past twelve.

„Something gone wrong at the office?“ Fisher muttered. „Hang the paper! Why bother about publishing the *Chat* in this weather?“

He rolled out of bed, and opened the window. A draught of icy air caught his heart in a grip like death for the moment. Gough scrambled into the room, and made haste to shut out the murderous air.

„Nearly five below zero,“ he said. „You must come down to the office, Mr. Fisher.“

Fisher lit the gas. Just for the moment he was lost in admiration of Gough's figure. His head was muffled in a rag torn from an old sealskin jacket. He was wrapped from head to foot in a sheepskin recently stripped from the carcass of an animal.

„Got the dodge from an old Arctic traveller,“ Gough explained. „It’s pretty greasy inside, but it keeps that perishing cold out.“

„I said I shouldn’t come down to the office to-night,“ Fisher muttered. „This is the only place where I can keep decently warm. A good paper is no good to us—we shan’t sell five thousand copies to-morrow.“

„Oh, yes, we shall, Gough put in eagerly. „Hampden, the member for East Battersea is waiting for you. One of the smart city gangs has cornered the coal supply. There is about half a million tons in London, but there is no prospect of more for days to come. The whole lot was bought up yesterday by a small syndicate, and the price to-morrow is fixed at three pounds per ton—to begin with. Hampden is furious.“

Fisher shovelled his clothes on hastily. The journalistic instinct was aroused.

At his door Fisher staggered back as the cold struck him. With two overcoats, and a scarf round his head, the cold seemed to draw the life out of him. A brilliant moon was shining in a sky like steel, the air was filled with the fine frosty needles, a heavy hoar coated Gough’s fleecy breast. The gardens in Russell Square were one huge mound, Southampton Row was one white pipe. It seemed to Gough and Fisher that they had London to themselves.

They did not speak, speech was next to impossible. Fisher staggered into his office and at length gasped for brandy. He declared that he had no feeling whatever. His moustache hung painfully, as if two heavy diamonds were dragging at the ends of it. The fine athletic figure of John Hampden, M.P., raged up and down the office. Physical weakness or suffering seemed to be strangers to him.

„I want you to rub it in thick,“ he shouted. „Make a picture of it in to-morrow’s Chat. It’s exclusive information I am giving you. Properly handled, there’s enough coal in London to get over this crisis. If it isn’t properly handled, then some hundreds of families are going to perish of cold and starvation. The State ought to have power to commandeer these things in a crisis like this, and sell them at a fair price—give them away if necessary. And now we have a handful of rich men who mean to profit by a great public calamity. I mean Hayes and Rhys-Smith and that lot. You’ve fallen foul of them before. I want you to call upon the poorer classes not to stand this abominable outrage. I want to go down to the House of Commons to-morrow afternoon with some thousands of honest working-men behind me to demand that this crime shall be stopped. No rioting, no violence, mind. The workman who buys his coals by the hundredweight will be the worst off. If I have my way, he won’t suffer at all—he will just take what he wants.“

Fisher’s eyes gleamed with the light of battle. He was warm now and the liberal dose of brandy had done its work. Here was a good special and a popular one to his hand. The calamity of the blizzard and the snow and the frost was bad enough, but the calamity of a failing coal supply would be hideous. Legally, there was no way of preventing those City bandits from making the most of their booty. But if a few thousand working-men in London made up their minds to have coal, nothing could prevent them.

„I’ll do my best,“ Fisher exclaimed. „I’ll take my coat off to the job—figuratively, of course. There ought to be an exciting afternoon sitting of the House to-morrow. On the whole I’m glad that Gough dragged me out.“

The *Chat* was a little late to press, but seeing that anything like a country edition was impossible, that made little difference Fisher and Gough had made the most of their opportunity. The ears of Messrs. Hayes Co. were likely to tingle over the *Chat* in the morning.

Fisher finished at length with a sigh of satisfaction. Huddled up in his overcoat and scarf he descended to the street. The cold struck more piercingly than ever. A belated policeman so starved as to be almost bereft of his senses asked for brandy—anything to keep frozen body and soul together. Gough, secure in his grotesque sheep skin, had already disappeared down the street.

„Come in,“ Fisher gasped. „It’s dreadful. I was going home, but upon my word I dare not face it. I shall sleep by the side of my office fire to-night.“

The man in blue slowly thawed out. His teeth chattered, his face was ghastly blue.

„An’ I’ll beg a shelter too, sir,“ he said. „I shall get kicked out of the force. I shall lose my pension. But what’s the good of a pension to an officer what’s picked up frozen in the Strand?“

„That’s logic,“ Fisher said sleepily. „And as to burglars—“

„Burglars! A night like this! I wish that the streets of London were always as safe. If I might be allowed to make up the fire, sir—“

But Fisher was already asleep ranged up close alongside the fender.

IV

THE UNEASY impression made by the *Chat* special was soon confirmed next morning. No coal was available at the wharves under three shillings per hundredweight. Some of the poorer classes bought at the price, but the majority turned away, muttering of vengeance, and deeply disappointed.

Whatever way they went the same story assailed them. The stereotyped reply was given at King’s Cross, Euston, St. Pancras and in the Caledonian Road. The situation had suddenly grown dangerous and critical. The sullen, grotesque stream flowed back westward with a headway towards Trafalgar Square. A good many sheepskins were worn, for Gough’s idea had become popular.

In some mysterious way it got abroad that John Hampden was going to address a mass meeting. By half past two Trafalgar Square and the approaches thereto were packed.

It was a little later that Hampden appeared. There was very little cheering or enthusiasm, for it was too cold. The crowd had no disposition to riot, all they wanted was for the popular tribune to show them some way of getting coal—their one great necessity—at a reasonable price.

Hampden, too, was singularly quiet and restrained. There was none of the wildness that usually accompanied his oratory. He counselled quietness and prudence. He pledged the vast gathering that before night he would show a way of getting the coal. All he required was a vast orderly crowd outside St. Stephen’s where he was going almost at once to interrogate Ministers upon the present crisis. There was a question on the paper of which he had given the President of

the Board of Trade private notice. If nothing came of that he would know how to act.

There was little more, but that little to the point. An hour later a dense mass of men had gathered about St. Stephen's. But they were grim and silent and orderly.

For an ordinary afternoon sitting the House was exceeding full. As the light fell on the square hard face of John Hampden a prosy bore prating on some ubiquitous subject was howled down. A minute later and Hampden rose.

He put his question clearly and to the point. Then he turned and faced the modestly retiring forms of Mr. John Hayes and his colleague Rhys-Smith, and for ten minutes they writhed under the lash of his bitter invective. As far as he could gather from the very vague reply of the Board of Trade representative, the Government were powerless to act in the matter. A gang of financiers had deliberately chosen to put money in their pockets out of the great misfortune that had befallen London. Unless the new syndicate saw their way to bow to public opinion—

„It is a business transaction,“ Hayes stammered. „We shall not give way. If the Government likes to make a grant to the poorer classes—“

A yell of anger drowned the sentence. All parts of the House took part in the heated demonstration. The only two cool heads there were the Speaker and John Hampden. The First Lord rose to throw oil on the troubled waters.

„There is a way out of it,“ he said presently. „We can pass a short bill giving Parliament powers to acquire all fuel and provisions for the public welfare in the face of crises like these. It was done on similar lines in the Dynamite Bill. In two days the bill would be in the Statute Book—“

„And in the meantime the poorer classes will be frozen,“ Hampden cried. „The Leader of the House has done his best, he will see that the bill becomes law. After to-night the working-people in London will be prepared to wait till the law gives them the power to draw their supplies without fear of punishment. But you can't punish a crowd like the one outside. I am going to show the world what a few thousands of resolute men can accomplish. If the two honourable members opposite are curious to see how it is done let them accompany me, and I will offer them a personal guarantee of safety.“

He flung his hand wide to the House; he quitted his place and strode out. Hayes rose to speak, but nobody listened. The dramatic episode was at an end, and Hampden had promised another. Within a few minutes the House was empty. Outside was the dense mass of silent, patient, shivering humanity.

„Wonderful man, Hampden,“ the First Lord whispered to the President of the Board of Trade; „wonder what he's up to now. If those people yonder only knew their power! I should have more leisure then.“

V

OUTSIDE the House a great crowd of men, silent, grim, and determined, waited for Hampden. A deep murmur floated over the mass as those in front read from Hampden's face that he had failed so far as his diplomacy was concerned.

His obstinate jaw was firmer, if possible, there was a gleam in his deep-set eyes. So the greedy capitalists were going to have their pound of flesh, they were not ashamed to grow fat on public misfortune.

Illustration:

Hampden stood there by the railings of Palace Yard
and explained everything in a short, curt speech.

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Only those who were in need of coal were present. But there would be others tomorrow and the next day and so on. Then let them go and take it. The thing must be done in a perfectly orderly fashion. There were huge supplies at King's Cross, Euston, St. Pancras, in Caledonian Road, amply sufficient to give a couple or so of hundredweight per head and leave plenty over for the needs of others. Let them go and take it. Let each man insist upon leaving behind him a voucher admitting that he had taken away so much, or, if he had the money, put it down there and then at the usual winter's rate per hundredweight. The method would be of the rough rule of thumb kind, but it would be a guarantee of honesty and respectability. There were but few military in London, and against a force like that the police would be perfectly powerless. It was to be a bloodless revolution and a vindication of the rights of men.

A constable stepped forward and touched Hampden on the shoulder. Most of those near at hand knew what had happened. Hampden had been arrested for inciting the mob to an illegal act. He smiled grimly. After all, the law had to be respected. With not the slightest sign of hostility the great mass of people began to pass away. With one accord they turned their faces to the North. The North-Western district was to be invaded.

„Case for bail, I suppose?“ Hampden asked curtly.

„Under certain conditions, sir,“ the inspector said. „I shall have formally to charge you, and you will have to promise to take no further part in this matter.“

Hampden promised that readily enough. He had done his part of the work so that the rest did not signify. He was looking tired and haggard now, as well he might, seeing that he had been sitting up all night with some scores of labour representatives planning this thing out. He made a remark about it to Fisher who was standing by, mentally photographing the great event.

Then he fastened upon Hampden eagerly, „I want all the details,“ he said. „I wasn't so foolish as to regard this thing as quite spontaneous. You must have worked like a horse.“

„So we have,“ Hampden admitted. „Fact is, perils that might beset Londoners have long been a favourite speculative study of mine. And when a thing like this—be it famine, flood, or an Arctic winter—comes we are certain to be the mark of the greedy capitalist. And I knew that the Government would be powerless. Fuel, or the want of it, was one of the very early ideas that occurred to me. I found out where—the big supplies were kept, and pretty well what the normal stock is. I pigeon-holed those figures. You can imagine how useful they were last night. There are some two hundred officials of Trades Unions with yonder orderly mob,

and every one of them knows exactly where to go. There will be very little crowding or rioting or confusion. And before dark everybody will have his coal.“

Fisher followed with the deepest interest.

„Then you are going to leave the rest to your lieutenants?“ he asked.

„I‘m bound to. In a few minutes I shall be on my way to Bow Street. Inciting to robbery, you know. No, there is no occasion to trouble—a hundred men here will be willing to go bail for me. If I were you I should have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of King‘*s* Cross by this time.“

Fisher nodded and winked as he drew his sheepskin about him. He wore a pair of grotesque old cavalry boots, the tops of which were stuffed with cotton wool. A large woollen hood, such as old Highland women wear, covered his head and ears. There were many legislators similarly attired, but nobody laughed and nobody seemed to be in the least alive to the humours of the situation.

„Come along,“ Fisher said to Gough, who was trying to warm the end of his nose with a large cigar. „Seems a pity to waste all this album of copy upon a paper without any circulation.“

„What would have a circulation in this frost?“ Gough growled. „How deserted the place is! Seems shuddering to think that a man might fall down in Trafalgar Square in the broad daylight and die of exposure, but there it is. Hang me if the solitude isn‘t getting on my nerves.“

Gough shivered as he pulled his sheepskin closer around him.

„This is getting a nightmare,“ he said. „We shall find ourselves dodging Polar bears presently. It isn‘t gregarious enough for me. Let‘*s* get along in the direction where Hampden‘*s* friends are.“

VI

MEANWHILE the vast mob of London‘*s* workers was steadily pressing north. There were hundreds of carts without wheels, which necessarily hampered the rate of progression, but would save time in the long run, for there were any number up to a dozen with each conveyance, seeing that various neighbours were working upon the co-operation system.

Gradually the force began to break and turn in certain directions. It became like an army marching upon given points by a score or more of avenues. It was pretty well known that there were a couple of hundred men amongst the multitude who knew exactly where to go and who had instructions as to certain grimy goals.

They were breaking away in all directions now, quiet, steady, and determined, covering a wide area from Caledonian Road to Euston, and from Finsbury Park to King‘*s* Cross. They were so quiet and orderly that only the crunch of the snow and the sound of heavy breathing could be heard.

Near Euston Station the first sign of resistance was encountered. A force of eighty police barred the way. The mob closed in. There was no hot blood, no more than grim determination with a dash of sardonic humour in it. A head or two was broken by the thrashing staves, but the odds were too great. In five minutes the whole posse of constables was disarmed, made secure by their own handcuffs and

taken along as honoured prisoners of war. Perhaps their sympathies were with the mob, for they made nothing like so fine a fight of it as is usually the case.

Up by King's Cross Station a still larger force of police had massed, and here there was some considerable amount of bloodshed. But there were thousands of men within easy distance of the fray, and the white silence of the place became black with swaying figures and the noise of turmoil carried far. Finally the police were beaten back, squeezed in between two vastly superior forces and surrendered at discretion.

The victory was easier than it seemed, for obviously the constables had no heart for the work before them. Not a few of them were thinking of their own firesides, and that they would be better off in the ranks of their antagonists.

Meanwhile, many of the local municipalities were being urged to call out the military. With one accord they declined to do anything of the kind. It was the psychological moment when one touch of nature makes the whole world akin. In the House of Commons, to the agonised appeal of Hayes and his partner, the Secretary for War coldly preferred to be unable to interfere unless the Mayor of this or that borough applied for assistance after reading the Riot Act. The matter was in the hands of the police, who would know how to act upon an emergency.

Hustled and bustled and pushed good-naturedly, Fisher and his colleague found themselves at length beyond a pair of huge gates that opened into a yard just beyond Euston Station. There was a large square area and beyond three small mountains of coal, all carefully stacked in the usual way. Before the welcome sight the stolid demeanour of the two thousand men who had raided the yard fairly broke down. They threw up their hands and laughed and cheered. They stormed the office of the big coal company, who were ostensible owners of all that black wealth, and dragged the clerks into the yard. From behind came the crash and rattle of the wheel-less carts as they were dragged forward.

„No cause to be frightened,“ the man in command explained. „We're here to buy that coal, one or two or three hundredweight each, as the case may be, and you can have your money in cash or vouchers, as you please. But we're going to have the stuff and don't you forget it. You just stand by the gates and check us out. You'll have to guess a bit, but that won't be any loss to you. And the price is eighteen pence a hundredweight.“

The three clerks grinned uneasily. At the same moment the same strange scene was being enacted in over a hundred other coalyards. Three or four hundred men were already swarming over the big mound, there was a crash and a rattle as the huge blocks fell, the air was filled with a grimy, gritty black powder, every face was soon black with it.

Very soon there was a steady stream away from the radius of the coal stacks. A big stream of coal carts went crunching over the hard, frozen snow pulled by one or two or three men according to the load, or how many had co-operated, and as they went along they sang and shouted in their victory. It was disorderly, it was wrong, it was a direct violation of the law, but man makes laws for man.

Gough and Fisher, passing down parallel with Euston Road, presently found themselves suddenly in the thick of an excited mob. The doors of a wharf had been smashed in, but in the centre of the yard stood a resolute knot of men who had affixed a hose pipe to one of the water mains and defied the marauders with

vigorous invective. Just for a moment there was a pause. The idea of being drenched from head to foot with a thermometer verging upon zero was appalling. These men would have faced fire, but the other death, for death it would mean, was terrible.

Illustration:

In the centre of the yard stood a resolute knot of men
who had affixed a hose pipe to one of the water mains
and defied the marauders with vigorous invective.

„Does that chap want to get murdered?“ Fisher exclaimed. „If he does that, they will tear him to pieces. I say, sir, are you mad?“

He pressed forward impulsively. Mistaking his intention, the man with the hosepipe turned on the cock vigorously. A howl of rage followed. But the dramatic touch was absent, not one spot of water came. A sudden yell of laughter arose in time to save the life of the amateur fireman.

„The water is frozen in the mains,“ a voice cried.

It was even as the voice said. In a flash everything became commonplace again. Fisher was very grave as he walked away.

„This is a calamity in itself,“ he said. „The water frozen in the mains! By this time to-morrow there won't be a single drop available.“

VII

INSIDE the House a hot debate was in progress on the following day. Martial law for London had been suggested. It was a chance for the handful of cranks and faddists not to be neglected. It was an interference with the liberty of the subject and all the rest of it. The debate was still on at ten o'clock when Fisher came back languidly to the Press gallery. At eleven one of the champion bores was still speaking. Suddenly an electric thrill ran through the House.

The dreary orator paused—perhaps he was getting a little tired of himself. Something dramatic had happened. There was the curious tense atmosphere that causes a tightening of the chest and a gripping of the throat before actual knowledge comes. Heedless of all decorum, a member stood behind the Speaker's chair, and called aloud:

„The Hotel Cecil is on fire!“ he yelled. „The place is well a-blaze!“

Fisher darted from the gallery into the yard. Even the prosy Demosthenes collapsed in the midst of his oration, and hurried out of the House. There was no occasion to tell anybody what the magnitude of the disaster meant. Everybody knew that in the face of such a disaster the fire brigade would be useless.

In the Strand and along the approaches thereto, along the Embankment and upon the bridges, a dense mass of humanity had gathered. They were muffled in all sorts of strange and grotesque garments, but they did not seem to heed the piercing cold.

In the Strand it was as light as day. A huge column of red and white flame shot far into the sky, the steady roar of the blaze was like surf on a stony beach. There was a constant crackle like musketry fire.

The magnificent hotel, one of the boldest and most prominent features of the Strand and the Thames Embankment, was absolutely doomed. Now and then the great showers of falling sparks would flutter and catch some adjacent woodwork but all the roofs around were covered with firemen who beat out the flames at once. Tons of snow were conveyed up the fire escapes and by means of hastily rigged up pullies, so that gradually the adjacent buildings became moist and cool. But for this merciful presence of the snow, the south side of the Strand from Wellington Street to Charing Cross might have passed into history.

As it was now, unless something utterly unforeseen occurred, the great calamity had been averted. There was still much for the firemen to do.

„Let's get back to the office,“ Fisher said, with chattering teeth. „I would sell my kingdom for a little hot brandy. I hope the next blizzard we get we shall be more prepared for. I suppose that out in the States they would make nothing of this. And we haven't got a single snow plough worthy of the name this side of Edinburgh.“

„We are ready for nothing,“ Gough grumbled. „If there had been a wind to-night, nothing could have saved the Strand. The disaster may occur again; indeed, there is certain to be a fire, half-a-dozen fires, before daybreak. Given a good stiff breeze and where would London be? It makes one giddy to think of it.“

Gough said nothing. It was too cold even to think. Gradually the two of them thawed out before the office fire. A languid sub came in with a pile of flimsies. Quite as languidly Gough turned them over. His eyes gleamed.

„My word,“ he gasped. „I hope this is true. They've had two days' deluge in New York. We are to keep our eyes open for strong Westerly gales with a deep depression—“

For the next two hours Fisher bent over his desk. The room seemed warmer. Perhaps it was the brandy. He took off his sheepskin and then his overcoat below. Presently a little bead of moisture grew on his forehead. He drew a little further from the fire. He felt stifling and faint, a desire for air came over him.

A little doubtful of his own condition he almost shamefacedly opened the window. The air was cold and fresh and revived him, but it was not the steely, polished, murderous air of the last few days. Somebody passing over the snow below slipped along with a peculiar soaking soddened sound.

Fisher craned his head out of the window. Something moist fell on the nape of his neck. He yelled for Gough almost hysterically. Gough also was devoid of his overcoat.

„I thought it was fancy,“ he said unsteadily.

Fisher answered nothing. The strain was released, he breathed freely. And outside the whole, white, silent world was dripping, dripping, dripping...

