

# Analogy and Conjecture

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## Spontaneous Human Combustion

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### SHC: A Fantasist's Fad

Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC) is a supposed supernatural burning of otherwise healthy people into a pile of ashes with no discernible cause. SHC had become a fad in the latter quarter of the twentieth century and books and TV programmes were written about it. This fad replicated the similar fad for it in the mid-nineteenth century when authors like Captain Marryott and Charles Dickens even featured it in their novels.

The modern day industry concocted by charlatans intent of fleecing the gullible has made this into a modern fad, but there is one curious fact that is glossed over by the confidence tricksters and accepted by their gullible believers, and that is that most of the cases cited and illustrated by photographic evidence are of unfortunate people who have not burst into flames spontaneously, but have ignited themselves, most often by falling into a fire! Such cases are offered by the sources as SHC!



Unknown woman fallen into a fire.

Cases had been common even in the eighteenth century, but, in the *Age of Reason*, they had not been considered by most authorities as supernatural. The doctors and policemen of the time were aware that many people comforted themselves with excess gin or cheap brandy, often smoked clay pipes and kept themselves warm with wood or coal fires. That they never woke up on a morning after a night's carousing because they had incinerated themselves was no particular surprise. Indeed, the name "supernatural combustion" was effectively invented by the clergy who claimed it was God's retribution being rent on those who had taken to the demon drink. That was why it has the fancy name "Fire from Heaven."

A classic case from this time, often cited, is that of the Countess Zangari and Bandi who was found by her maid incinerated on the floor four feet from the foot of her bed in 1731. Her skull was only half burned and her legs and stockings were not blackened. The rest of her was ashes, greasy and stinking. The air was full of specks of soot. The floor was covered in gluish moisture, not easily got rid of, and a greasy yellow liquid with a loathsome smell ran down the windows. An oil lamp was on the floor covered in ashes but devoid of oil, proof of the supernatural nature of the cremation, the believers think! Two candles had melted on the nearby table.

The bed was unharmed and had been turned back, when the Countess arose from it. The woman did not drink spirits but did have the curious habit of

washing herself all over with camphorated brandy when she felt ill. The reports do not say whether she had done this, but the lamp on the floor obviously close to the corpse because it was covered in ashes, was the likely source of combustion—the oil having evaporated by the heat, or possibly spilt causing the initial blaze. It is not said that the lamp was upright, nor whether the maid had touched anything.

## A Case Worth Investigating

What is odd about many of the cases is not that the corpse spontaneously ignited but that:

- it was so thoroughly burnt;
- nearby things were scarcely scorched.

There is something therefore worth investigating but it is not in the least supernatural. Some writers have tried to make the distinction of this surprising combustibility of the human body and the so-called SHC by renaming the phenomenon as "Preternatural Combustibility" (PC). It is a better name in that the word "preternatural" can mean "extraordinary" or "strange," and that will be how it was intended, but it is also taken to mean supernatural, and so just adds a scientific caché for the nitwits who think it is supernatural—"fire from heaven," or poltergeist phenomena or whatever other foolish non-explanation is invented for it.

A summary of some of the factors involved over the years is that victims often:

- were chronic alcoholics;
- were often elderly, and especially elderly women;
- died near a grate, a lamp or a candle, or were known to smoke a pipe or cigarettes;
- were corpulent;
- were alone;
- were reduced to a black mass of greasy charcoal and ashes, while the room is pervaded with a greasy and sooty smoke that condenses on anything cool, like windows, cool walls, and metalwork and mirrors away from the heat;
- left nothing of the corpse untouched by the heat except extremities—especially the lower limbs and feet, but sometimes the hands and the head.

The point that is important is that the nearby objects are not really harmed provided that they are more than a few feet away from the burning body. The Oh-Ah! brigade deduce from the state of incineration of the body that it had burnt at a temperature of 1000 degrees or more because such temperatures are used in crematoria, but the unburnt objects nearby, often inflammable as they are, show that no such high temperatures were reached, or at least were not on the outside of the cadaver. In short, although the believing authors of SHC propaganda say that the body must have been an inferno, the evidence is that it was not!

These believing authors of books on SHC are either themselves believers in the supernatural and therefore are opposed to natural science, or they are cynical exploiters of the supernatural fad, and the distaste for science propagated by Fleet Street hacks and the churches too. They therefore spend much of the space they have in their books necessarily trying to demolish the credibility of science whether doctors, forensic anthropologists or ordinary policemen seeking forensic evidence that will mean something to a judge, a coroner or a jury. Scientists are dolts and bigots is their perpetual plea. The critical reader soon appreciates who really are.

## Typical Cases

Their problem is like that of the Ufologists. Cases of death by burning which are genuinely unusual are so rare that they are obliged to add evidence that quite obviously is trivial—evidence like those already mentioned that are plainly accidents. Bob Rickard, an editor of *Fortean Times*, asks in the caption of a picture of Mrs E M found incinerated in her grate at Hammersmith, West London, in 1958:

Was she burnt by the fire in the grate or did she combust of her own accord?

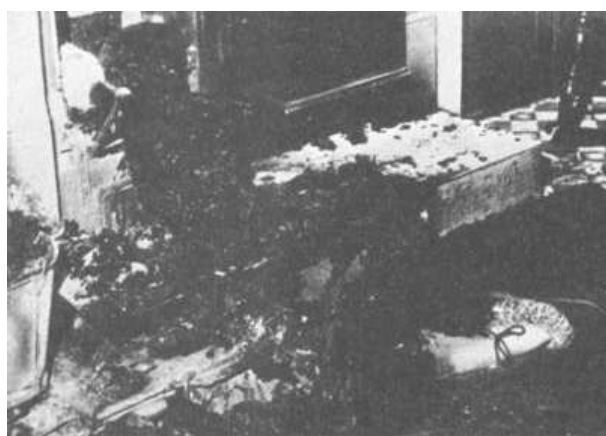


Mrs E M, Hammersmith 1958

No prizes for the answer. Doubtless Rickard is showing his own ironical disdain for the “believers” in his caption, but it is typical, and remains opportunistic as long as the irony is not certain, as it cannot be for the many believing readers of *The Unexplained*, a UK weekly partwork of 1980-1983.

What is unusual is not that the unfortunate Mrs E M died by spontaneously igniting—she obviously died or passed out by the fire and fell into it—but that her body was so much consumed by a mere household fire. The coal scuttle to the left of the fire shows it was an open coal fire. A wooden and fabric cottage chair to the right of the picture seemed undamaged—assuming the photograph was of the untouched scene of the accident—even though it was within 30 cm of the burning corpse.

It seems likely that the old woman was rising from her fireside chair when she fell unconscious and fell backwards into the fireplace. Her upper body was propped against the back of the fireplace and she was roasted by the flames until her own body fat began to feed the fire. She was then slowly burnt until her torso fell more or less flat into the grate. The burning body obviously burnt by a sooty flame, the marks around the fireplace showing it. Hot flames are not sooty, and the damage was done by a long slow combustion, not by a rapid hot one. That is why the nearby chair was not burnt, and items on the shelf and the bed seem scarcely damaged.



Slim Lady 1963

Nor were the old woman's legs burnt. They were away from the grate and there was insufficient radiant heat from the burning body to damage them. A human torso cannot be expected to burn vigorously, but in contact with hot coals for some long time, would burn once the water had evaporated from the flesh. Nothing seems uncertain except whether a long slow roasting could cause such damage to 70 or 80 pounds of human tissue.

Another photograph offered as evidence of SHC is that of an 85 year old

woman, "slim" and in "good health," who died in 1963. The woman's blackened corpse seems to be lying against an old fashioned kitchen range. A bucket of coal is visible at the left edge of the picture, and to the right of the corpse seems to be an oven. The victim's head looks to be against the fireplace. Whatever the degree of "preternatural combustibility" that the old woman had, she can hardly have ignited spontaneously, so this is not a case of SHC. This was apparently the case that inspired Dr D G Gee to experiment on the combustibility of human fat. He seems to have been the first scientist to formulate any reasonable hypotheses and try to test them, however inadequately.

The authors of the "Gee-Whizz" books on the supernatural are obliged to relate every case they can find of deaths and injuries by fire with some curious or dubious element involved. These, they all lump together, then try finding supernatural explanations. Neither of the above two cases were SHC—the cause of ignition could hardly be doubted. The fictional case related by Charles Dickens, in *Bleak House*, of the death of the wicked miser, Krook, is likely to be a concatenation of the many cases he had studied. The miser was a drunk and died in front of an open grate in which a few coals remained. The walls were covered in a dark greasy coating, and all that remained of the old man was a pile of oily ashes, like a burnt log. It is the "preternatural combustibility," not the supposed spontaneity, that is the odd feature.

## **Believers and Pseuds**

Deceitful writers are usually so desperate for material, they have to go back to before the time of Dickens, into the eighteenth century, when deaths by burning were less uncommon than they are now. They find plenty of material but the forensic details are scanty. That is actually a boon—the believing author can twist them to suit his argument. They rarely seek any corroboration, even when they could, and unwanted evidence presented in the report is fobbed off as police or scientific prejudice. Thus when old people have died by their fires, the shyster authors tell us the fire was out! Usually by the time the victim is found, they are out too, but the actuality of their having been alight recently is indisputable! By an odd coincidence, the incidence of SHC more than doubles the annual average in the winter months of December and January. Of course, that can have no bearing on combustion which happens without a heat source!

A fire that is "out" when the burnt body was found cannot for these propagators of deceit have been the cause of the tragedy. If the victim had been trying to light something with matches, the matches would have been quickly consumed once a blaze began. Modern forensic experts, literally sifting the evidence, might indeed find traces of matches, but even today coroners are not inclined to spend too much time on open and shut cases. Since the believers even deny evidence when it is present, it is utterly natural to them to deny reasonable deductions when direct evidence is not found.

A 93 year old man is incinerated so severely in his bathroom that his ashes fall through a hole burnt in the floor into the cellar below. He was known to have been a clumsy smoker of a pipe but he must have spontaneously ignited! Supernaturalists usually chant, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," but it is here.

A 79 year old woman, found asphyxiated in her bathroom, had been repeatedly warned by her friends for her habit of smoking in bed. The woman's bedroom, sure enough, had been gutted by fire. The woman seems to have become aware the room was on fire, perhaps from sleep, and choking with the smoke, had sought refuge in the bathroom, where she died. The believing author commented that this is a mystery because no evidence of a cigarette had been



found.

There are no matches or cigarettes after these events, so matches and cigarettes did not cause these fires. Dishonest and deranged authors find mysteries where common sense cannot reach.

In some cases young women have apparently burst into flames while dancing or just afterwards. Believing authors are not interested in finding an explanation. Girls in party frocks or evening gowns often took immense risks because fancy fabrics were often highly inflammable. Even when a dress material is not so inflammable that a touch of a cigarette will ignite it, spillage of some ardent spirit like brandy or gin might make it so. Even cotton, if flimsy or raised and not treated with some anti-flaming agent, can be dangerous, and small girls in flimsy fluffy night gowns were in constant danger in the days of open fires. Girls at dances are among people who are smoking and drinking. Smokers have cigarettes, matches and lighters, and people who have been drinking may lose their judgement, and even become loutish. When loutishness comes into it, deliberate acts of arson cannot be discounted. Louts will furtively try to light someone's teeshirt in a crowd as a jape! A lighter can give a continuous flame sufficient to light a fabric without being seen at a dance.

One believing writer wants us to accept that water is a fuel for preternatural combustion. On this man's theory, the supernatural flame takes the oxygen to burn even from water, leaving the hydrogen as additional fuel. That scientists have never thought of this is a sign of their bias! If there is any truth in the assertion that water does not help, it is because the source of the fire is fat, and hot oil and water do not mix. That is why water should not be used on fat fires in kitchens.

One remarkable case is of a hotel guest who slept through what the author thinks would have become a case of SHC, if the blaze had not been noticed in time! Hotel staff saw smoke issuing from the room, and called in the fire brigade. The guest's bed was on fire and the blaze, not vigorous, was put out. Meanwhile, the guest remained asleep! The author even says the hotel staff replaced the sheets on the bed, and the guest stayed asleep. A doctor arrived and examined him for burns or asphyxiation, and pronounced him all right, but he remained asleep!

This is undoubtedly a case of PDS, "preternaturally deep sleep," and the author cannot resist formulating a theory about it. SHC is accompanied by a deep trance, proving its supernatural origins! The author was not interested enough to seek out relevant answers. Deep trances that accompany self-incineration are usually brought on by drunkenness. Had this guest been drinking? Had he taken sleeping pills? Was he a smoker? The crackpot author concludes that this was an "unusual" case of Spontaneous "Human" Combustion in that the combustion was directed against the bed rather than a person, proving that some intelligence was behind it that made mistakes!

This case is not SHC but SBC, "Spontaneous Bed Combustion," a phenomenon no more likely than SHC but, without any implications of spontaneity about it, much more likely. Preternatural combustion is careful not to burn nearby objects, but has no qualms about burning beds and chairs, sometimes missing the real human object. Zeus is a lousy shot with his thunderbolts! The literature on the subject, like most baloney literature, is shot through with double standards.

The double dealing authors say that sometimes the supernatural flames can be so intense that no one can get to the victim—a bit like real flames. People ought to be able to walk to about two feet from the blazing victim without feeling anything worse than a hot flush. You know what the explanation is? The flames

are also intelligent. When other humans interfere, they want to drive people off! Except for the man lying drunk in his hotel room, when they just gave in! Only a trainee fire demon, obviously.

## Unanswered Questions

In the end, the pseuds who write this stuff will use any death by burning in which the circumstances are not transparently evident. A foundry worker who was a depressed alcoholic was found burning fiercely behind the door of his bedroom in a Louisiana apartment in 1952. It seems that the fire was fierce, but damage to the bedroom was slight, and, as the victim was still alive when he was found, he cannot have been burning for long before the flames were expunged.

Besides that, he had slashed an artery in his arm and had cut both his wrists and his ankles, according to the reports, and had done this in his kitchen to judge by the blood splashed there. It seemed the man was intent on suicide, but he died from inhaling the flames of the fire that was consuming him when he was found. The coroner decided the victim had set himself alight with kerosene as part of his suicide attempt, even though, it seems that no sign of kerosene or matches was ever found in the apartment. This is a classic case for the believers, who have a retribution "theory" of the "Fire from Heaven!"

Needless to say, no relevant questions are asked, and therefore are not answered. There were no matches, but a kitchen would have a gas pilot light, or a catalytic or an electric lighter. If the man slashed himself in the kitchen, could he have ignited himself there first? There must have been a trail of blood from the kitchen to the bedroom showing the man's route from the one to the other. Were there any signs of fire or smoke damage *en route*? Could any other flammable spirit have been used instead of kerosene? The man was an alcoholic. Plain drinking liquor could have sufficed. Were there empty bottles of liquor lying around, especially in the bedroom since the fire when he was found was apparently fierce? Were these bottles of liquor simply dismissed because the man was an alcoholic, and were not considered as a fuel?

Believers will say that such questions are typical of skeptics. They are! This unfortunate death is far less mysterious than it is made out to be. Had the coroner thought it worth pursuing thoroughly, the forensic scientists and detectives would have reached a natural conclusion. The man had been intent on suicide, it seemed clear, and he succeeded. That was sufficient for the coroner. The forensic workers were free to investigate cases where a crime was involved.

An ancient case of SHC was, in fact, pronounced by a coroner. The wife of farmer Patrick Rooney died in her kitchen near Seneca, Illinois, on Christmas Eve, 1885. Farmer Rooney died too, but not by combustion. He died of asphyxiation from inhaling the fumes from his burning wife! Rooney had bought a flagon of whisky to celebrate Christmas in Irish fashion with his wife, his son, who farmed a few miles off, and his labourer, John Larson. Larson only had the proverbial "couple" and then retired to bed on the first floor.

He arose early in the morning feeling ill, and fumbled his way to the kitchen where he tried to strike a lucifer on the stove. It was covered in grease and would not light so he struck one on his thumbnail, lighting a lamp. Rooney was dead on the floor next to his chair, but his wife seemed not to be present. The labourer assumed that the son had returned to his own farm late at night, and so he rode to the younger Rooney's farm, and the two men returned finding a hole burned through the floorboards where the farmer's wife had been sitting at the table. All that remained of her was a blackened skull, some other bones and

a pile of greasy ashes resting on the dirt beneath the boards.

Whatever the coroner pronounced, there is nothing in the case to suggest any spontaneity of combustion. The woman had evidently slumped on her chair at the table and somehow set herself alight. With both husband and wife in a whisky stupor, the woman had slowly burned during the night, eventually her embers falling on to the boards and continuing to burn through them, while the husband had suffocated from the fumes. Mrs Rooney had weighed 14 stones (90kg, 200lbs).

Important questions are left unanswered like, the whereabouts of the flagon of whisky. Could the woman have spilt the remains of it on herself? Did any of them smoke? Could the woman have been taking a light for her pipe or cigar from the lamp. They obviously used lamps to see by and used a stove to keep warm and to cook, so there were sources of ignition in the kitchen. Could a lamp on the table have spilt on to the unconscious woman, perhaps when Rooney fell off his chair? No mention is made of the labourer thinking there was an odd smell, but the whole farmhouse might have smelt of burning oil from the lamps and fuel from the stove. The whole scene looks to be of a natural if unfortunate accidental burning, but again it is the thoroughness of the cremation not its spontaneity that is odd.

## Localised to the Body

Curious phrases used by the tricky-dick writers look like an effort to deceive without actually lying. A woman in Manchester, New Hampshire, was found "burned to death in a room in whose fireplace no fire had been lit." The author concluded:

**There was no discoverable source of fire.**

It looks like a deliberate evasion to allow the conclusion to be drawn. It implies that the fire had been set but not lit, so the woman could have been in the act of trying to light the fire. She was burned beyond recognition and must have been "a human torch," although nothing else in the room had been particularly burned, and the house itself, a timber framed building had survived all right. If the woman had been a "human torch," it is impossible to see how the house could have survived. The situation is characteristic of a long slow burning, but the author is intent on giving credence to the spontaneity of the fire, when she seems to have been about to light it. Somehow she lit herself.

The nature of the fire is revealed in many of these cases. The fire is localised to the person being consumed. As the person is consumed, the chair that supports them collapses dropping the smouldering corpse on to the floor. Then the floorboards and the ceiling below, if there is one, also burn through and the ashes fall to the space beneath. Dr J I Bentley, a retired doctor of Coudersport, Pennsylvania, died like this in December 1966, but evidently his support while he burned was a Zimmer frame. He was the old pipe smoker mentioned above, aged 93. Apparently he had discarded his robe, which was alight, into the bath tub, where it continued to



Dr Bentley burnt supported by his walking frame until his embers fell to the floor and burnt a hole through the boards depositing his ashes in the basement below 1966.

smoulder, so he knew he was on fire. In May 1953, A Mrs Dubin of Los Angeles, died burning in a chair and what remained of her finished up in the room below. These cases show that the supernatural delicacy of the combustion does not extend to what the corpse rests or falls on to.

## **Priests Ancient and Modern**

These cracked authors, all opposed to science, are suddenly apt to become amateur empiricists, and actually do experiments. They put lighted cigarettes on cushions to see how they burn them. They do the same with dressing gowns, mattresses and party frocks. They never catch fire. Most of us will be delighted to know that manufacturers are making our beds, chairs and party frocks so resistant to inflaming, but these tests sre neither exhaustive nor thorough. Many factors are not allowed for but should be.

Did they test all possible materials? If they did, why is it that many three piece suites in the last thirty years have been withdrawn from the market as a fire risk, and more rigorous standards have been applied. Was all this foolhardy? Did they test the effects when spirits like whisky had been split on the mattress or dressing gown? Smokers who drink often wake up to find a hole burnt in the chair thay sat on. They should be glad that they had not spilled their drink when they fell asleep. And they should be glad that most furniture is fire retardant these days. First of all, though, they should give up the risk by not smoking.

The shyster authors try to tell us that some supernatural explanation such as poltergeists—itself a dubious phenomenon—are the cause of SHC, thus explaining one speculation with another after the fashion of the Persian Sufis. At the same time, they seek to extend the realm of the fires from heaven as wide as they can by suggesting that many, if not most, cases of arson are really supernatural combustion. Religions were invented to offer supernatural explanations like these, and because God does not change, the same explanations that had to suffice 2500 years ago still have to suffice today—even when they are stupid!

These people are doing what ancient priests did then. There are awful supernatural dangers out there. "Read my garbage and you will be prepared for it," they want you to believe. Equally, religions expect people to buy their books and drop coins into their platters to get supernatural relief from something that will only bother a fraction of a percentage of the population, and in the cases where the victim did not contribute to their own demise by carelessness or negligence, it was their own human frailty that did.

The supernatural is necessary for religions. It is essential to account for their supernatural reward of eternal life when they seem to any spectator to be quite dead, and it is essential to scare people—through making up supernatural fears like hell fire and evil demons plotting to cut out their immortal souls—into believing that there is some salvation from these things and the trickster authors and clergy alone have it. The clergy help them learn how to get God on their side to save them from the monsters waiting to burn them up whether in hell or in their armchair.

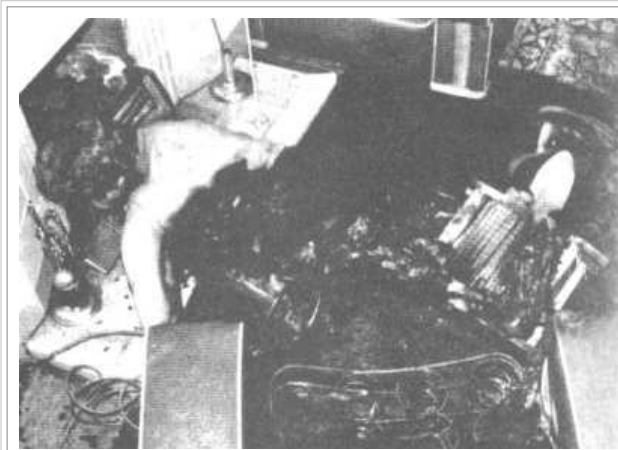
It is doubtful that SHC victims are more or less religious than the average in the population, but in one case often cited a tawdry statue of the holy family on the dashboard of a man who was burnt to death committing suicide by CO poisoning in his car in his garage was the only thing damaged besides the incinerated victim himself. Evidently the fire demon was not scared at all by the holy image, and indeed seemed to make a point of destroying it too! There seems therefore some doubt that religious devotion is helpful in these cases, and, if the demons are sent by God's enemies, then being religious might make them a target.



Christianity is about as consistent in these matters as the authors of these deceitful books.

## Electrical SHC?

We commonly have extremely hot objects in our cold rooms to keep us warm, but usually, treated with respect and caution, they cause no trouble. Electric fires are used with relative impunity and do not set fire to rooms even though they are radiating several kilowatts of power at a temperature of hundreds of degrees C. We make sure that the fires are away from combustible materials, a few feet normally sufficing, and take care not to drop anything on to them.



Woman burnt by an electric fire.

If however someone falls into a faint and collapses on to an electric fire, the outcome can be a case of SHC. This poor woman has fallen with her head into a fireplace but that has not caused the damage here because she was heating herself with an electric fire, far too close to the chair she was using. Her upper body has survived but her lower body all bar her feet has been reduced to charcoal. The seat of the chair she was using is also consumed, showing that whatever is close

enough will still ignite. The woman might have been sitting on the chair, realised she had caught fire, stood up and tripped in a panic or fainted in fright.

The loose wires visible look dangerous and highly suspicious, especially as the electric fire seems to be between her legs. She might have tripped on them and dragged the fire on to her. Another possibility is suggested by her posture. She had moved the electric fire from the hearth—where perhaps she had it fairly safe when she had no coal fire lit—to the rug in front of the fire. The reason was that she was setting the coal fire. Unfortunately she had left the electric fire on and it ignited her skirt from behind or she fainted into the fireplace and the electric fire behind her, feet either side of it, set her ablaze. Inspection of the accident scene should have made the choice of these options clear. What is clear from the picture is that it was not spontaneous combustion at all.

A 75 year old woman, Mrs Thompson, found dead in her incinerated armchair, had been trying to light a fire, her inquest established. The interest here for the phonies was that a psychic connexion existed between this case and another woman of the same name who had been hanged 50 years before! The “psychic connection” was simply the name.

In another case, an author found that simultaneous combustions were linked by the letter “U.” Others are linked by the letter “S.” Seriously! Will we go through the whole alphabet? In another case, a Mrs Carpenter witnessed the results of SHC, and, amazingly, the author found another case 13 years before where a Mrs Carpenter had herself been incinerated! Gee!

## The Cinder Woman

Mrs Carpenter, the witness, was the landlady of 67 years old Mrs Mary Reeser of St Petersburg, Florida, who told her son, on the evening preceding her death, that she was going to take two sleeping tablets and retire to bed. Mrs Carpenter

visited her in her small apartment around 9.00pm and left her reclining in her armchair smoking a cigarette. Around 5.00pm, Mrs Carpenter awoke to the smell of burning, and assumed it was the boiler malfunctioning. She arose and went to switch off the boiler, returning to bed. The next day, the unfortunate Mrs Reeser was found reduced to hardly anything at all—just ashes and the remains of her overstuffed armchair. She became known as the “Cinder Woman.” Only part of one foot was not burnt away, and there was an explanation for it. The old woman had a stiff leg which she could not bend properly and had to leave stretched out when she sat down. This was the foot of her stiff leg.

This was a remarkable and well-documented case because it was investigated by the FBI. The walls were greasy and blackened with soot above a line about four feet from the floor. The damage was done within about two feet (70cm) of the woman in the chair, though candles on a cabinet had melted leaving the wicks, and an electric clock had stopped at 4.20pm, though it worked all right when separately tested. Plainly, this had not been an inferno. Fierce burning would have set up convection currents that would not have left such a clear line on the wall, and objects in the room that were unharmed would have been. The convection currents that had been set up must have been quite gentle, such that the hot, sooty and greasy air rose to the upper part of the room but did not form vortices that forced it down towards the floor. It was another case explicable only by slow combustion—gradual burning with a sooty flame and from a damp and greasy source—a human body! Mrs Reeser was quite a large woman of 175lbs (80kg, 13 stones).

The FBI’s report noted that the combustion had been slow, produced a lot of soot, and the heat produced had risen by convection to occupy the top part of the flat. Below four feet from the floor, the flat had remained reasonably cool, but above it, the candles had melted and some plastic light fittings, and presumably the clock fitting had melted too. The old woman had been wearing a rayon nightgown.

## Wilton M Krogman

Professor Wilton M Krogman of Pennsylvania university was called in on the case of Mrs Reeser, but seemed not to have the wit to try any experiments. Krogman had apparently incinerated corpses with the help of gasoline, coal, oil, acetylene and various types of wood, as well as bones with flesh attached and stripped clean, both moist and dry. He had decided it was not easy to dispose of corpses in these ways, and commented that even in a crematorium furnace at temperatures of over 1000C for eight hours, some human bones remain recognizable. Usually in these cases the humanity of the remains are clear. The “Cinder Woman” was exceptional.



Professor Wilton M  
Krogman.

It seems professor Krogman did not consider the need to check whether wrapping corpses in clothes and subjecting them to persistent but moderate heat might produce a wick effect that might be a sufficiently different method of burning that it produced unusual results. Wrapping corpses in cotton vests, woolly jumpers and frocks must have seemed too unscientific for the good professor, even though those are what humans wear. He had seen corpses fail to burn well when doused in petrol, and that was end of story. For him, human beings were “bags of salt water,” and simply could not burn. So much for scientific curiosity.

Faced with the almost total incineration of Mrs Reeser, Krogman was speechless, amazed, gobsmacked. The only theory possible for him was that the woman had been removed from the room, incinerated in a furnace, then returned to the scene of the crime, and the peripheral effects were simulated to make the death look like a local incineration! Krogman's hypothesis seems more unlikely than SHC. It is the lack of scientific curiosity of people like Krogman who have the means to test hypotheses, that gives shysters the chance to slate science. Unfortunately scientists are not saints, and all of them are not immensely clever, but they should have curiosity to qualify as scientists, surely.

## **The Wick Effect**

There is at the core of these reports an interesting phenomenon. It is that human beings subject to prolonged heat cook like any fatty meat, and the fat thus rendered from the body sustains the source of the heat. This is compounded by the wick effect whereby the fat oozing from the adipose layer of the cooking flesh soaks into clothing, the carbonized structure of the fabrics, and perhaps even through the carbonized bones, burning like a candle at the surface.

The effect of the bones, especially the long ones, is a factor not adequately considered and needing some testing, as much of it all does. Bones have a porous structure, and once the aqueous substances in them have been evaporated, the pores left seem able to raise the rendered human fat through them by capillarity. Perhaps they are better conductors of heat than imagined. If a bone is kept burning at one end, what happens along its length? If bone is porous and long bones are hollow, when the marrow dries out and burns away, can the hollow bones act as conduits of heat? One woman fell and was burnt near a hearth. The pathologist reported that her femora were carbonized and her knee joints had opened up, but her stockings were unharmed.

The circumstances are rare. People who are alone and therefore not subject to immediate assistance, through a faint or perhaps death, fall into or against a coal fire or an electric fire. In even rarer instances they somehow set their clothing on fire unknown to themselves. Such circumstances apply mainly to elderly people who are unsteady or likely to have giddy spells, or people who fall unconscious through drink or drugs. Against the heat source, they begin to cook, and fat is rendered into their clothing where it ignites and adds to the heat, perhaps eventually replacing it. Women are traditionally colder than men, and women's clothes were traditionally more bulky offering more substantial wicks. Women spend more time around fires and cooking.

Slowly, the fat is rendered out and the water in the flesh and bones is evaporated off forming the greasy deposit that condenses on the walls and windows. The porous charcoal that remains probably continues to act as a wick for the fat as long as fat is being rendered. The slow continuous nature of the combustion, perhaps with the bones acting as wicks, successfully destroys what is hard to burn even by high external temperatures in a crematorium.

Ultimately the process is similar to what most people have noticed burning greenwood in a garden. Greenwood is too damp to burn easily and dampens down even a hot fire when added to it, producing thick steamy smoke. The greenwood nearest the source of the heat dries out sufficiently to burn itself, adding to the heat source. Eventually, the wood is all consumed except for branches sticking out, too far from the core of the fire, because they do not dry out sufficiently to ignite.

Dr D G Gee, a lecturer in forensic medicine at the University of Leeds, UK, seems to have been the first forensic scientist scientific enough to propose and

want to test this hypothesis. He tested the flash point of human fat—the temperature at which an inflammable substance gives off enough vapour to ignite from an open flame—and found it to be 250C. Remarkably, though, he found that a cloth wick dipped in human fat would burn at room temperature—like a tallow candle!

Gee made up a simple test rig by wrapping layers of gauze dipped in human fat around a test tube. He finished with a tube about eight inches (20cm) long, and several layers of gauze in depth. He found that the layers would burn slowly once ignited by a Bunsen burner and given a sufficient draft of air. It would burn backwards against the air current and consumed the whole lot in about an hour. The flame was a smoky yellow and produced a lot of soot. He elaborated the experiment by wrapping human skin around the gauze layers and found it made no difference.

Now these simple experiments offer no more than a basis for the main hypothesis, but believers cannot even get their minds round this. They lack the ability to imagine the experiment scaled up from a few grams of human fat and some gauze to a 170lbs of fatty human tissue, encased in several pounds of woollen and cotton clothing, making excellent wicks. They will not accept that often these poor people actually are being burnt by a live fire which is rendering the fat and the water from the human flesh, quite unlike the experimental rig where only the fat itself was the source once ignited. They cannot conceive of the destructive effect possible when someone is slowly burning like this for twelve to twenty or more hours. They cannot see that the fire is necessarily local to the corpse because it is the fat of the corpse that is burning, once it has begun to render, and there is no huge conflagration as they imagine. Effectively the body is being distilled, and because one of the products of the distillation is a fuel, it is self-sustaining.

In 1905, a drunken woman was found as a heap of ashes with a skull on top in front of her chair. A table cloth a yard (100cm) away was not scorched but the ceiling above the chair was slightly blackened. The report says the woman must have been a pillar of fire but, if she were, the room would have ignited. More likely is the wick effect. In a still but well aerated room, the convection would have taken the heat directly upwards to the ceiling above the chair, but as radiant heat would have been only slight, objects close by horizontally would not have been harmed.

Attempts of the believers to counter these experiments are foolish and futile. They return to the ancient clerical belief that alcohol is the main cause of the preternatural combustibility of these people, and by soaking flesh in spirits for weeks or even months, and showing that it is no more inflammable once the spirit is dabbed off, they think they have refuted Gee! Let them try Gee's experiments on a larger scale, perhaps soaking an outer woollen layer with alcohol to see whether alcohol soaked into fabrics helps the fat to render. That would be more useful.

There are undoubtedly mysterious deaths by burning that do not come into the category of wick effect combustion, but the absurd tendency of the believers to lump rather than separate and categorize, to dismiss factors or refuse to seek them out, rather than getting all the relevant data they can, does not help the study of these cases, some of which might be criminal acts or criminal negligence.

When a patient undergoing an operation bursts into flames, the anaesthetist should be the first suspect, and the procedures of the operation need careful and honest review. When a man is found having apparently committed suicide in his garage by carbon monoxide poisoning, but has his genitals burnt to a crisp and other parts of his body severely burnt, but little other damage done, then



criminal action should be suspected. This man was a welder, and such particular burning could have been done with a welding torch.

In many cases, serious forensic work should be undertaken. Talk of SHC merely muddies the water. The fantasists should learn what science is about and get real.

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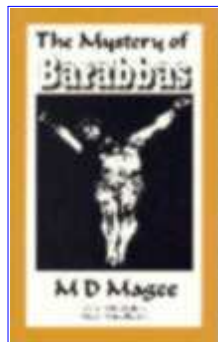
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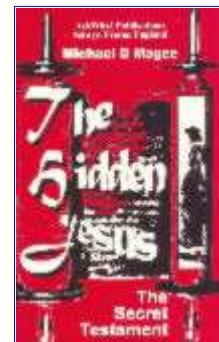
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