



MYSTERIOUS FIRES:  
SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION.

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## INTRODUCTION.

"Unearthly indeed is the fate of bursting into flames without benefit of ignition from any known source."  
(Mysteries of the Unexplained, published by Reader's Digest).

In January 1985 , in a New Horizons Monograph entitled Strange and Anomalous Phenomena, we wrote a chapter on Spontaneous Human Combustion. This is a very strange, albeit very rare, phenomenon, that has fascinated us for some years. As well as stories of people bursting into flames for no apparent reason, in the literature of parapsychology there exist many other stories of strange fires, some of them associated with poltergeist outbreaks, others not. Since 1985 many more accounts of spontaneous fires have been published, and this seems a good time to review the whole subject once again.

Over the years we have become familiar with the fact that in some poltergeist situations fires seem to occur spontaneously. There are other reported cases where people have reported that a hand or an arm, or some other part of their body suddenly caught fire for no apparent reason. And then there are the people who seem to have spontaneously combusted and burned to death.

We would like to address the question as to whether these kinds of event are related; is spontaneous human combustion an extreme form of poltergeist activity, or are there other explanations for this very strange and rare phenomenon?

## FIRES IN POLTERGEIST SITUATIONS.

Small fires, occurring spontaneously, are a well-known feature of some poltergeist outbreaks. Fortunately, they are not all that common, but the literature contains many examples of such occurrences. Usually the fire is small, and quickly found and put out, but some conflagrations have been serious. Since many poltergeist outbreaks occur around children it has often been assumed that the child set the fire out of mischief, and many people have, over the years, discounted the fire raising aspects of poltergeisty. However, over recent years, in a few cases, more positive evidence has come to light, and the phenomenon has gained more credibility.

A few months ago we received a videotape of the experiments that have been conducted over some twenty years by a group of people in Missouri. They called themselves the Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesés - SORRAT - for short, and they conducted extensive experiments on psychokinesis. Their experiments were done in what they called a mini-lab, a large, totally sealed box. Objects were placed in this box, sitting on switches, which, when the object moved, triggered lights and cameras, which then filmed what was happening in the mini-lab. As a general rule nobody was present when the events took place. A full description of these experiments must be the subject of another review. However we should say here that the experiments were conducted in a most rigorous and scientific manner, and the people involved were always most careful to avoid any possibility of fraud or error.

Many events of a poltergeist-like nature occurred and were filmed. Of interest to us in this paper was the fact that on some occasions small fires were filmed starting in the mini-lab. It is true that a small book of matches was part of the experiment, and that this book was seen, on camera, on many occasions moving around the box. No matches were struck however. The fires occurred when two thin paper rings had moved around in the box and linked themselves together. After this linkage had occurred the paper at the junction was seen to be smouldering, and it broke into a small flame which consumed some of the rings, and then died out. It was as if the energy needed to link the rings had been sufficient to produce a heat that set them on fire. This is particularly interesting as the action was captured on camera, as it happened.

One reads occasionally of such fires being started when nobody is around. A typical story is one we read recently - "As caretaker Victor Webber opened up the Leasowes Sports Centre in Kent Road, Halesowen, on 22 March 1981, he smelled smoke and called the fire brigade. They discovered a blazing mop in a broom cupboard. There was nothing near it to show how it had caught fire. "It had not been used for some time. Heaven knows how it started, it looks like one of those cases of spontaneous combustion" he said. Fire brigade spokesman said "we took the mop outside and put out the flames, it's a mystery. There were no electrics or anything around it, which could have set it off".

A sceptic would say that the story could have been invented, or that the caretaker had an ulterior motive and had set the mop on fire himself, but the story has a ring of truth, and since it appeared in the local newspaper one would expect the fire brigade members to have set the record straight if the account was incorrect.

More frequently, however, these spontaneous fires occur, as we have said, in situations where a person is present who is manifesting poltergeist phenomena.

In 1982, a 10-year old boy, Benedetto Supina, the son of a carpenter living in Formia, near Rome, Italy, was apparently able to set objects ablaze by simply gazing at them. He was described as a fairly shy and studious boy, embarrassed at all the attention that was generated. It began when a comic he was reading in a dentist's sitting room caught fire. On another occasion his bedclothes caught fire and he was painfully burned. He does not smoke, and the incident mystified and frightened both him and his family. A plastic object, held by an uncle, burst into flames as Benedetto stared at it. Everywhere he went, furniture, fittings and objects smouldered (Note: the smouldering is interesting, it reminds us of the paper rings in the SORRAT video, they smouldered for some time before a flame appeared). Pages of books became scorched when Benedetto touched them. Along with the fiery phenomena came peculiar electromagnetic effects, of a kind which have also been observed in poltergeist cases - electrical objects in the house would function erratically, and the power supply actually failed several times. When he visited his father's workshop machinery would stop, or not start. Witnesses have said they have seen his hands glow on occasion. A picture of him holding a burned sheet is in the Appendix.

Naturally his distraught parents took him to a number of doctors, and he came to the attention of top scientists. The Dean of Physical Medicine at Rome University, Dr. Giovanni Ballesio, said "It is wrong to call him an 'Electric Boy' because he really does not possess any more electricity than anybody else". Prof. Mario Scuncio of the Tivoli Social Medical Centre said the boy was perfectly normal. Another celebrated doctor, Dr. Massimo Inardi thought the boy was "clearly capable of projecting his aggressive powers on outside objects in an extraordinary manner". The local Archbishop pronounced the phenomena "not malign" and warned against considering them miracles!.

The above two cases are typical of the many such that are scattered through the literature on mysterious fires. Many times the incidents are sporadic, and are not fully investigated - too often the victims seem to prefer to forget the whole experience.

At the same time that Benedetto Supina was experiencing his fire-setting phenomena a young Scottish nanny, Carole Compton was on trial in another part of Italy on charges that she had attempted to murder her charge, 3 year old Agnese Cecchine, by setting fire to her cot. The case was reminiscent of the dark days of witch persecutions, as the child's grandmother accused the nanny of being a witch and setting fires using the 'Evil Eye'. Carole was defended by a Scottish lawyer who was on holiday nearby when the charges were laid. It was alleged the nanny had set fire to the child's cot, but the child was not burned because she was sleeping on the other side of the cot. Carole claimed that she was not in the room when the fire happened, she was having breakfast with the family. On a previous night a similar fire had occurred in the grandfather's bedroom while the nanny was also having dinner with the family.

To us, an interesting feature of this is that the family obviously did not believe the fires were set by normal means, they must have been satisfied that Carole did not actually put a match to the fires, or the case would have been a straightforward case of arson. They had to resort to the accusation of witchcraft in order to put the blame on her. Authorities did not take the witchcraft allegations seriously, but asked for a psychiatric examination, which apparently established that the girl was not mentally disturbed. It is interesting to note however, that she had gone to Italy to be with her fiance, who had broken off the engagement just previously to the fires occurring. Also on the day before there were accounts of a bowl jumping off a table, and a glass falling for no reason. It seems to us a typical poltergeist reaction to stress. During the trial expert witnesses who had been examining Benedetto Supina were called in Carole's defence, and the last we heard was that after an extensive and lengthy trial, accompanied by much publicity, the charges were dropped.

The above accounts are of recent episodes of fire-raising in poltergeist type situations. Many such stories abound in many of the earlier well-known poltergeist cases. We will mention a few, just to remind our readers.

In the famous Amherst case the poltergeist 'entity' had been threatening to burn the house down, and indeed lighted matches had been appearing in the air, falling down from the ceiling. A young woman, Esther Cox, was the apparent focus of the poltergeist phenomena which was happening. Walter Hubbell, writes in 1988, in his book "The Great Amherst Mystery" that on a night following a fall of lighted matches, Esther was in bed, and in the bedroom were Dr. Caritte, Mr. & Mrs. Daniel Teed, and Jennie and William Cox. The family could now converse with the 'power' by asking questions which were responded to by knocks, in the usual fashion in such circumstances. Daniel asked if the house would really be set on fire, and the reply was "Yes". And a fire was started in the following manner. The invisible ghost that had spoken to Esther took a dress belonging to her that was hanging on a nail in the wall near the door, and after rolling it up, and placing it under the bed, before their eyes, but so quickly that they could not prevent the action, set it on fire.

There was a report in the New York Times of August 1929 which stated that a negro girl, of Liberta, Antigua, B.W.I. burst into flames while walking along a street. At home, her clothes, it is said, often burst into flames and burned, as did the bedclothes when she was between them. She herself was apparently unharmed. (Note: bedsheets have been mentioned on more than one occasion as burning; we read an interesting one recently where a young woman who had been involved in a car crash was taken to the UCLA Medical Centre in Los Angeles where she was operated on for her injuries. The operation was finished, and she was about to be wheeled out of the operating room on a gurney, when the sheets covering her caught fire. The medical staff tried to put out the fire, but were forced out of the room by smoke. The blaze had almost burned itself out when the firefighters arrived a few moments later. The fire wasn't hot enough to set off the sprinklers in the ceiling. No smoke was found in her lungs, and it was determined that both burns and crash injuries had contributed to her death. The writer of the report speculated that perhaps a spark from a cauterizer, which is used sometimes to stop bleeding during surgery, could have been responsible for the blaze.

The medical staff did not say whether a cauterizer had been used, but it certainly seems strange that a spark from such an instrument could cause an undetected fire in a bedsheet some time after its use. The patient had been sewn up and bandaged before the fire started, and nobody had detected any hint of fire until the sheets burst into such a flame that the would-be rescuers were driven out of the room and unable to save their patient. A very strange story!).

To return to some of the older cases:- A family named Hoyt, consisting of Mr. Hoyt, his wife, four children of their own, and two nieces, were living in 1887 in a house in Victoria Street, Woodstock, New Brunswick. The report of the phenomena reads as follows "All within a few hours forty separate fires broke out, which did not extend to their surroundings, because they were immediately put out, or because of some unknown limitation. The press report says, for what it is worth "The fires can be traced to no known human agency, and even the most sceptical are staggered. Now a curtain, high up and out of reach, would burst into flames, then a bed quilt in another room; a basket of clothes on a stool, a child's dress hanging on a hook".

The New York Sun of February 2 1932 gave a very similar description of events in the home of Mr. C.H. Williamson, of Bladenboro, North Carolina. "Fires, which apparently spring from nowhere, consuming the household effects of Mr. C.H. Williamson, have placed this community in a state of excitement, and continue to burn. Saturday a window shade and curtain burned in the Williamson home. Since then fire has burst out in five rooms. Five window shades, bed coverings, tablecloths, and other effects have suddenly burst into flames, under the noses of the watchers. Williamson's daughter stood in the middle of the floor, with no fire near. Suddenly her dress ignited. That was too much, and household goods were removed from the house.

A similar and interesting case occurred at Thorah, near Toronto, in December of 1891. Mr. & Mrs. Robert Dawson, and their adopted daughter, an orphan English girl of fourteen, living in a farmhouse in this rural community were plagued by spontaneous fires<sup>for</sup> about a week. According to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat on December 19th, the girl went into some sort of 'trance' and exclaimed "Look at that". She was pointing to the ceiling, which was afire. Next day many fires broke out, another starting as soon as the last was extinguished. While Mrs. Dawson and Jenny were sitting facing a wall the wallpaper blazed,

Jennie's dress blazed, and Mrs. Dawson's hands were burned in putting it out. On one occasion a kitten flamed. The Toronto Globe of November 9 gave an account by a reporter who had visited the farm. He described the wallpaper as having charred patches, which looked as if a lighted lamp had been held there. Jennie had been returned to the orphanage, as she was presumed the cause of the fires. The reporter asked questions about the child's knowledge of chemistry, obviously thinking that perhaps the fires were caused by the application of chemical substances, but this really seems very unlikely. There may well be chemicals that will ignite walls and ceilings spontaneously after having been exposed to the air for a certain time, but it seems unlikely that an orphan girl in rural Ontario would actually have both the knowledge of them, and access to supplies, in order to pull a trick like this.

Four years later press reports give a fascinating picture of the puzzlement and inconsistency of officials when faced with the problem of the fires in Adam Colwell's frame house, 84, Guernsey Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York. According to the New York Herald of January 6 1895, Colwell said that on the afternoon of January 4 1895, an empty parlor stove was overturned, and four pictures fell from the walls. He was out but his wife and stepdaughter, Rhoda, aged sixteen were at home. Just after Colwell returned they found a bed on fire. A policeman, named Daly, was called to put it out, and stayed in the house. He saw wallpaper ignite near the shoulder of Willie, Colwell's son. Detective Sergeant Dunn arrived. there were more fires, and eventually the house burned down, and the Colwells lost everything they had. Captain Rhoades of the police department said "..... the more I look into it the deeper the mystery. So far I can attribute it to no cause other than a supernatural agency. Why, the fires broke out under the very noses of the men I sent to investigate". Sergeant Dunn declared "There were things that happened before my eyes that I did not believe were possible". The fire marshall stated "It might be though possible that the child Rhoda started two of the fires, but she cannot be guilty of the others, as she was being questioned when some of them began. I do not want to be quoted as a believer in the supernatural, but I have no explanation to offer as to the cause of the fires, or the throwing around of the furniture". (Note - that last remark makes it clear that poltergeist type phenomena also seem to have been

well established and witnessed).

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that in some of these cases wallpaper, bed linen, and house furnishings are the objects set ablaze. One would imagine that it is very difficult to furtively set wallpaper or bed linen alight, for instance, they would not easily catch fire. Many other objects in a home are much more easily flammable.

For the record there is another Canadian case that may be already familiar to our readers where poltergeistry and fires were features of the phenomena. We refer to the Dagg case. Again an orphan child from England, sent to Canada in the late 1800's ostensibly for adoption, but really, in many cases, as a source of cheap labour, was the centre of the happenings. The child was adopted by Mr. & Mrs. Dagg in 1889. They lived at Clarendon in the province of Quebec. The child became the centre of a violent poltergeist outbreak which attracted the attention of the local press, and a Mr. Woodcock faithfully chronicled the events. Fifteen witnesses, all described by Woodcock as responsible people living in the district, testified to their experiences of the phenomena. In this case, among all the other events, fires broke out spontaneously throughout the house on many occasions, as many as eight occurring in one day, six being in the house and two outside. The window curtains were burned while on the windows, and this happened in broad daylight, whilst the family and neighbours were in the house.

There are some interesting features of some of these fires. In many cases, as we have described, the fires tend to happen in unusual objects, such as wallpaper and curtains, or bed linen. In the majority of cases these fires were easily put out, although occasionally, as in the Colwell's case the home was eventually burned down. But in other cases the fires seem to be curiously confined. For instance, again in 1889 (a good year for this type of phenomenon it seems!), on October 2nd, a series of restricted fires occurred in the home of Samuel Miller, in Findley, Ohio. It is reported that on different occasions two beds burst into flames, each burning down to a heap of ashes, but in each case nothing else was set alight, nor was the flooring underneath the beds scorched. On another day a chest containing clothing flamed and was consumed without setting anything else on fire.

### SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION.

The burning of objects, furnishings, and property is one thing. What about the actual burning of human beings?

Spontaneous human combustion is a well-documented, though relatively rare, phenomenon in which a human body ignites and burns without any known contact with an external source of heat. In some cases, the damage is slight. In others, the victim is reduced to ashes, and in most of these cases nearby objects escape relatively unscathed, for instance the chair or bed on which the victim was sitting or lying; sometimes the clothes on the charred body may be undamaged, or only slightly singed. Often to a single foot or the tips of fingers may remain intact, although the rest of the body is consumed.

Cases of spontaneous human combustion began to appear in medical reports as far back as the 17th century, and by the twentieth century there were many accounts - more than two hundred, in fact - many of them very detailed.

In earlier times it was generally believed that the victims of this fiery fate were alcoholic, elderly and corpulent women, who were usually living alone, and were burnt indoors on winter nights, their remains having been found near an open fire. There were no witnesses, and they were usually regarded as the authors of their own fate. But there were exceptions to this, and in fact it has been shown recently that there is a fairly equal representation of both sexes, and the age of the victim can vary between infancy to the very elderly. Also many of the victims have been both abstemious and thin. Some have been burnt while near a fire, but others have ignited while they were driving, or even walking outside in surroundings where there is no external source of fire. Thus the old explanation no longer holds.

An explanation for this phenomenon has not yet been formulated. Contemporary scientific and expert medical opinion rejects the theory of spontaneous human combustion, but has no explanation to offer for the facts. There is no sound physiological model that can explain how a human body can possibly self-ignite, or how it can burn fiercely enough to reduce to ashes. This type of consumption is only possible at the extreme temperature of 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the kind of temperature produced in a modern pressurized crematorium. And in this kind of heat, how is it possible that clothing, bed linen, or even one limb can escape damage, let alone incineration?

Before we attempt to deal with the cases where the person has been totally consumed by the combustion process, it might be helpful to refer to a number of cases in which the victim has escaped with his or her life.

There are a number of such cases on record, and we will list a few, at random. In 1983, Professor James Hamilton, of Nashville, Tennessee felt a sudden stinging sensation in his left leg. He related that he "saw a light flame at the extent of its base of a ten cent piece or coin, with a surface approaching to convexity, somewhat flattened at the top, and having a complexion which nearest resembles that of quicksilver". Dr. Hamilton, thinking quickly, deprived the flame of oxygen by cupping his hands over it, and by great good fortune the flame went out. However, his doctor, when treating the site, viewed the burn as being internal rather than external, and supporting this belief was the fact that although the fabric of his silk and wollen drawers next to the site of the burn had a small hole burned through, the outer pantaloons escaped with merely a slightly tinged, yellow hued discoloration on the inner layer. The flame had burned from the inside.

Paul Weekly of Sioux City twice in one night had to contend with a similar experience. He awoke during the night in a hotel room with an itchy foot. He threw back the covers to see what was the matter, and saw a blue glare leaping from his toes, which were on fire. He wrapped the bedclothes round the toes extinguishing the flames, and went back to sleep. It is reported that later in the night he again woke with an itchy foot and had to repeat the performance with the bedsheets. Again this case bears a resemblance to others in that there is apparently no sensation of burning as such, and also blue or silver flames, as opposed to red ones, are seen.

In the above two cases one is led to wonder if some chemical source might be responsible for the burning. We are reminded of two cases reported in the 1800's that seemed to have involved the use of sulphur.

The first case was reported in August of 1856, at the home of Mr. Moulton of Bedford, in England. Mr. Moulton went on a business trip to Ireland leaving behind at home, his wife and the housemaid, Anne Fennimore. In order to fumigate the house, the maid burned some sulphur in an earthenware jar that was standing on the floor. The burning sulphur overflowed and set the floor alight. This fire was put out, not having extended from that one room. About an hour later a mattress was found burning in another room, and this was followed by a series of isolated fires. Moulton was sent for, and returned on August 16 (four days later). The next day there started a succession of about forty fires in curtains, closets, and in bureau drawers.

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Neighbours and policemen came in, and it<sup>is</sup>/said, were soon fearful for their safety. Objects around them flamed, and also their handkerchiefs. No one was harmed, but it appears there was an official investigation, which took the unusual form of a coroner's inquest. Witnesses told of such occurrences as picking up a pillow, and having it burst into flames as it was put down. Moulton had insured neither the house nor its contents, and nothing suggesting arson was found. Two physicians gave the opinion that flammable sulphurous fumes had spread through the house. The jury refused to accept this "explanation" because chairs and sofas had ignited after they had been set out in the yard. The verdict was that the original fire from the burning sulphur was accidental, but that there was no evidence to establish the cause of the later ones.

M. Richond Des Brus. in a paper published in the Annales de la Societe d'Agriculture du Puy, published in 1827, describes another case in which sulphur had been present. We quote from a translation of that article: " M. Dessimont, a 24-year old man of medium height and build with thick black hair, sanguine, in good health, and a tee-totaller went to church in Le Puy on the evening of 19 April 1827. He did not stay there very long, as he felt too hot, so he retired to his brother's house near the Pannessec city gates. Around half past nine, as his brother was burning a lump of sulphur over a candle, a few drops of the liquified burning sulphur dripped onto his fingers, and, when he shook his hands in pain, some fell on his coat and set it alight. When he yelled for help, M. Dessimont, who was busying himself a few feet away, ran to him, and managed to put out the flame by squeezing the burning coat in his hands. His brother had burnt two fingers, and a hole in his coat. M. Dessimont, however, had hardly realised that his brother was out of danger, when he felt severe pain in his hands; he cried out, and Mdme. Ginhoux, running up to him, saw that his hands were covered with flames; they were burning like candles, she told me, with a bluish flame.

Their first thought was that the flame was being produced by the sulphur, and they tried in vain to put it out with cold water. A poultice made from flour and oil was hastily made, but the fire got worse. Dessimont went down to a cutler's shop in the same building and soaked his hands in the slush under the grindstone; it was not a great relief. Finally, after half an hour of intolerable pain, he asked someone to open the door for him, and he ran to my office. During this

flight, both he and Mdme. Ginhoux who was with him, saw quite clearly a flame that was bright enough to light the way. At the frantic ringing of the bell, I hurried downstairs. The door was hardly open when M. Dessimont, wild-eyed, scarlet-faced, and with a look of despair, rushed past me shrieking "Quickly, sir, put something on my hands, I'm on fire, I'm burning, Look, I'm burning!" and he showed me his hands; they were very red and swollen, and a sort of steam or smoke was coming off them.

He could hardly stay still for two minutes to tell me the cause of his accident; he was moving all the time, cursing my slowness in taking care of him. As bathing in cold liquid is the best remedy in such cases, I told him to go to the fountain opposite the house and to keep his hands immersed until he felt better, and to get some cold baths ready for the night; then he fled towards the fountain. When he said "Im burning, I'm on fire" I did not take him literally; I took it as a metaphorical description of the pain he was feeling, and did not follow him as I surely would have done if I had understood him better. It was only the following day that I got the details of his adventure, to my great amazement. M. Dessimont assured me that he had only felt relief as long as he kept his hands in the fountain, when the flames went out, and that he had been able to run for a certain time without being able to see the flames, but after about 150 steps they reappeared.

At home he had two buckets prepared for him, and put one hand in each. In a very short time the water got hot and had to be changed. Although the pain was severe all night, the water gave some relief. Every time he took his hands out of the water, he told me, he saw a sort of oil flowing over his fingers, and the bluish flame would reappear immediately, but he could only see it clearly when he examined his hands under the table to screen them from the candlelight. M. Varette, a young student of 15, who slept in the same room, saw the flames several times during the course of the night, and his words had a ring of truth to them. Towards dawn M. Dessimont could see nothing more than a few sparks, which he wrongly believed he could put out by rubbing his hands together.

The pain was severe for part of the day, but it was a different sort of pain. It was less biting, less searing than at first. His hands were covered all over, with

enormous blisters, full of a reddish pus. In several places the epidermis had completely gone, and the corium looked greyish and eaten away."

Dr. Des Brus continues his account with a description of the treatment he initiated for the burns, and he concludes this part of his account with the remark that when M. Dessimont left after the treatment he was wearing the same clothing as he had worn on the day of the accident, and this had not been burnt in any way. M. Dessimont recovered from his ordeal and was restored to perfect health. Dr. Des Brus says "Fairly wide scars could be seen on his fingers and wrists; one of them affected the articulation of the little finger of the left hand. Several nails were gone or were ready to drop off; one of them had been burnt to the quick and will probably not grow back".

Dr. Des Brus states that he had visited the home immediately after the accident happened and questioned the witnesses carefully, and was convinced that he was hearing an accurate account of the events that transpired.

These two accounts of combustion where sulphur has been present are extremely interesting, but one is left wondering if the sulphur was a factor why M. Dessimont's brother, who was the first to be burnt, apparently fairly severely, did not continue to burn in the same way? Perhaps some people are physiologically different. Dr. Des Brus, in his paper put forward a theory that some people produce some form of electricity in their bodies. He first discusses, and discounts, the theories that had been previously discussed that some victims produce a gas in the body, which under certain circumstances can ignite, and then goes on to remark that although in some cases, such as the ones discussed above, the victim had been in contact with a burning substance, in many other cases no such contact had existed. He remarks that many other eminent doctors of the day believe in the electrical theory, and feels that this is a possibility.

He mentions many instances of what we now recognise as static electricity to support this theory.

There are other cases in the literature where an unfortunate victim has apparently suddenly caught alight. Dr. Des Brus reminds his readers of the story of a priest, Bertholi, who while reading his breviary, after a long walk, felt a sudden pain in his arm, as if he had been struck with a stick, and saw that his arm had caught fire. He also tells the story of a blacksmith, on his way home from work, with his jacket on a stick over his shoulder, as it was very hot, who suddenly felt a severe pain in the index finger of his right hand, which started to tingle and give off fire and smoke. He tried to put out the flame by pinching it with his thumb and the tip of his middle finger, but they caught light also, and when he put his hand in his pocket to crush the flame his clothing caught fire. He also attempted to put out the flames in a bucket of cold water, to no effect. Des Brus concludes from these cases that some people seem to have a predisposition to burning, which defies all rational explanation. Des Brus made a very detailed and extensive study of the subject in his day and age, and we have to agree with his final conclusion, that 'nature still has thousands of secrets, and that medicine, although progressing by leaps and bounds, has not yet reached the degree of perfection it one day will achieve". More than one hundred and fifty years later that remark is still true!

Although we have described these older cases in some detail, it should not be assumed that the phenomenon belongs only to the past. Cases, although rare, continue to happen in the present day, and the cause of these mysterious burnings is still unknown.

For instance, in June 1980 in Toronto, a thirty-one year old woman went to bed about 2.30 a.m. She awoke at her normal time about four hours later to find that during the night her thighs and abdomen had developed third degree burns. Six months of agonizing skin grafts were needed to repair the damage, but nothing else in the room had burnt, her nightclothes and bed linen were untouched, and she had not felt pain enough to wake her. Presumably the fact that she normally had only four hours sleep, and therefore slept for a shorter time than most people, saved her from being totally consumed. What is especially interesting about this incident is that the young woman did not feel the pain of her burning, although the skin grafting that followed was described as agonizing. She did not have a specially

low pain threshold obviously, so why did she not feel the burns, as the people did in the other cases we have described?

We read of other stories in the modern press. We have read of a young lady whose body - NOT her dress - started to burn while she was on the dance floor; and another story we read told of a young woman in New Jersey who was cradling her child in her arms on the back seat of a car driven by her husband when some sort of 'explosion' occurred in her body, and one side of her neck was badly burned. However her hair was unsinged, and the baby unharmed. Her physician, for want of a better explanation, blamed it on her seatbelt!

Perhaps, before we go on to the next section of this paper, we should mention the 'ball lightning' theory. Ball lightning has only been recognised as a natural phenomenon recently; in previous decades stories of small balls of light, or energy, that could suddenly appear in a room and move mysteriously around, and then disappear, with a loud bang, were regarded as fictitious or imaginary. However, it is now known that this phenomenon does occur, although it is not completely understood. However ball lightning is not responsible for the type of phenomenon we are describing here. People have experienced being burned by ball lightning, and there is a good account on record of a housewife in England, who was standing in her kitchen, and a ball of lightning came in through the window, passed through the skirt of her dress, and went out through the open door, leaving a large burnt hole in her dress and she herself was unharmed. This is a totally different type of phenomenon from spontaneous human combustion.

#### DEATHS FROM SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION.

The cases described so far have not resulted in the deaths of the people who have experienced these mysterious burns. However, throughout history we read accounts of people who have been mysteriously consumed by fire and have died as a result. Cases have been recorded as far back as 1673, and although they are rare there are several hundred recorded cases.

The phenomenon was so well known during the 18th and 19th centuries that it featured in many of the literary works of the

day. Charles Dickens disposed of a character named Krook, an evil character, symbolic of all the social evils and inequities then rampant in England (was Krook the origin of the current use of the slang "crook" for a criminal, we wonder?) Krook, as we say, was disposed of by means of spontaneous human combustion. The novel was Bleak House. In Frederick Marryat's novel Jacob Faithful the hero's mother is a victim of the same fiery fate aboard a barge on the Thames. The account reads as follows -

"The lamp fixed against the after bulkhead with a glass before it, was still alight, and I could see plainly to every corner of the cabin. Nothing was burning - not even the curtains to my mother's bed appeared to be singed .... there appeared to be a black mass in the middle of the bed. I put my hand fearfully upon it - it was a sort of unctous pitchy cinder. I screamed with horror ... I staggered from the cabin and fell down on the deck in a state amounting almost to insanity ... She perished from what is called spontaneous combustion ...."

The above account Marryat based closely upon a case reported in 1832 in London, and it has all the hallmarks of an authentic case. In the room the light was still burning, nothing else was burning, the bed curtains were unsinged, yet the body was reduced to a black mass. The description of the 'unctous pitchy cinder' accords well with many other descriptions of the state of the residue after such an incident.

Certain features seem common to most of these cases of spontaneous human combustion.

1. The area of destruction is very limited, in some cases to a very small area. The rest of the room, and perhaps even the clothing the victim is wearing is untouched. In some cases, even, a limb, or part of a limb is left unscorched, while the rest of the body is a heap of ash, or pitchy residue.
2. The temperature requited to produce such utter destruction is so high (approx. 3000°F) that it cannot be envisaged how such a temperature could be produced under the circumstances of the event.
3. There is practically no report of smoke or smell, nothing to cause alarm. Yet when the remains are found we hear tell of oily sooty remains, "unctous pitchy cinder" and so on.
4. It seems possible that many of the victims of this strange phenomenon do not experience pain. In many cases they have been found in such circumstances

that it seems that if they had felt pain they would have been able to save themselves.

We mentioned above, for instance, in this matter of feeling pain, the young woman who woke up to find third degree burns on her thighs and abdomen, and who had felt no pain while these burns were happening. There is a similar case on record of a salesman who escaped total incineration in a similar fashion. Jack Angel, in 1974, was a travelling salesman, selling clothing. He was said to be healthy, happy, and happily married. His motorhome had been converted to a travelling showroom and he often slept in it while on the road. On the 12th November 1974 he parked his motorhome and prepared to retire for the night. He pushed aside the racks of clothing, put sheets on the sofa cushions, donned his pyjamas, and retired. Four days later, at noon, he awoke. His right hand was burned black on both sides from the wrists to the fingers; but worse still he had a hole in his chest where he had been burned, and in addition he had burns on his legs, his groin, his ankles, and his back. Neither his clothing nor the sheets were touched by the fire.

When he reached hospital he was told by the doctors that he had not been burned externally but internally. A later search revealed no signs of electrical faults, no blackness around electrical sockets, none of the hanging garments were scorched or marked, no evidence of fire whatever in his motorhome. But he had been severely burned. The burning was so severe of his hand and arm that eventually the hand and forearm were amputated. Interestingly, as we have said, Jack Angel felt no pain during the burning; the burns had occurred during sleep, and had not caused sufficient pain to awaken him. He felt the pain of the subsequent surgery, however. Again, as in many similar cases, the characteristic odour of burning flesh was absent.

There have been a few reports of infants as victims of spontaneous combustion, notably four month old Ricky Pruitt of Rockford, Illinois, in 1959; seven month old Parvinder Kauer at Birmingham in 1973, and six month old Lisa Tipton of Stafford in 1974. In Ricky's case, although the child died of severe burns neither his bedding nor his garments were scorched. In the case of Parvinder both the child and his baby carriage are reported to have suddenly burst into flames, whereas Lisa was found burned in an unexplained fire confined only to the room in which she was.

Inexplicable indeed is the case of Waymon Wood of Greenville, South Carolina, who was found in the front seat of his closed car, burned to a crisp. The windshield of the car had bubbled and sagged from the intense heat, little remained of the body, yet the car, containing half a tank full of gas, was otherwise unaffected by the fire.

On the 12th November 1978 Maria Gmiterek, aged 8, hammered frantically on her neighbour's door. Mrs. Elizabeth Randall, of Baker Street, Reading, said "the little girl came running in, saying something was wrong with her mummy. I ran back with her and smelt smoke in the house, and then Maria said there had been a fire. She said her mother was in the basement, and when we got down, there she was lying on the floor". The report of this incident continues "Police and fire experts are known to be puzzled why Mrs. Gmiterek should have burned to death while the rest of the room was only barely damaged". In the first report, the girl, Maria, was said to have stumbled upon the grim scene; the "charred remains" of her mother were "lying on the stone floor of the basement .. but police say there was only slight fire damage to the building". (As we have already noted, it can take a fire of 2-3,000°F quite a while to incinerate a human body).

On the 5th August 1982 Winfield Gattlin (aged 45) and his girl friend were sitting in Gattlin's car in Chicago, when they noticed a woman crossing the road in front of them. When he next looked she was about a block away and she was aflame, standing on the sidewalk. Gattlin got out of his car to help her, but the burning woman collapsed. By the time police arrived the woman's body was "scorched and disintegrating". Detective Dan Fitzgerald of the Brighton Park Violent Crimes Unit said "she was completely burned: I mean scorched. It was obviously not just a case of her clothing catching fire. We really don't know what happened here. She could have been carrying something flammable, or doused with something flammable". But despite their efforts, police and fire department officials could find no trace of "accelerants" in the vicinity of the remains. The firefighters themselves first thought it was a "rubbish fire" and were "stunned" to discover the body of a woman burned beyond recognition. The only other evidence was scraps of a blouse, and her purse, said to be untouched by the blaze. The body was found with hands in front, "in a boxer position" said the police detective.

A famous case of apparent spontaneous human combustion was that of Dr. John Irving Bentley. On December 5 1966 Don Gosnell, a meter reader for the North Penn Gas Company, was due to read the meter at 403, North Main Street, in Coudersport, Pennsylvania. He opened the front door and yelled a greeting to the tenant on the building's first floor, Dr. J. Irving Bentley. There was no answer to his call, and thinking this unusual, he nevertheless descended to the basement to read the meter. There, on his way to the gas meter he sensed a 'light-blue smoke of unusual odor'. He described it as being like that when a new heating system is being started up- - "somewhat sweet". In a corner of the dirt-floored basement was a pile of ash, approximately 14" in diameter and peaking to 5" high; nochalantly he kicked and scattered the mound.

He returned upstairs to look in on the semi-invalid doctor; light-blue smoke issued from the apartment's living-bedroom. Gosnell entered and peered into the adjoining bathroom. "A hole about two-and-a-half feet wide and no longer than four feet had burned through the bathroom floor" he found, "exposing pipes leading to the lavatory, and running across the ceiling of the basement". Tangent to this hole he saw a "browned leg from the knee down", like that of a mannequin. "I didn't look further" he recalled. He rushed down the street to the gas company's office and shouted "Dr. Bentley burnt up".

The coroner describes what he found "All I found was a knee joint, which was atop a post in the basement, the lower leg with its foot on the bathroom floor, and the now scattered ashes six feet below." Another witness, Carl McCloud said "I helped the undertaker pick up the remains and we put it in a rubber bag and carried it to the car. I would say there wasn't much of him remaining".

The Fire Department was called, but the first fireman who responded was told not to go in. There was no fire to fight. There was just smouldering, no sparks at all. Gosnell himself stated that he saw no fire whatsoever, embers only around the hole.

Dr. Bentley had suffered a broken hip six years previously, and his left leg was without feeling. He made his way about with the aid of a "walker". Because of his state the doctor was regularly attended by friends, and Mr. & Mrs. Nicholson had visited him last, departing at 9 p.m. on the evening previous to the tragedy.

We shall discuss the inquest findings of some of these cases later in this paper.

Another well known case involved a Mrs. Mary Reeser, of St. Petersburg, Florida, who was found reduced to ashes in a practically undamaged apartment on July 1st 1951.

It was reported as the first instance where every possible tool of modern scientific investigation was used to determine the cause of this mysterious phenomenon. Yet despite the efforts of the FBI, fire officials, arson experts, and pathologists, a year after the incident, Detective Cass Burgess of the St. Petersburg Police commented as follows:

"Our investigation had turned up nothing that could be singled out as proving, beyond a doubt, what actually happened. The case is still open. We are still as far from establishing any logical cause for the death as we were when we first entered Mrs. Reeser's apartment."

The Police Chief added this comment:

As far as logical explanations go, this is one of those things that just couldn't have happened, but it did. The case is not closed, and may never be to the satisfaction of all concerned".

Dr. Wilton M. Krogman, a physical anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine, and a world-renowned expert on the effects of fire on the human body, finally gave up trying to understand what had happened.

He said "I regard it as the most amazing thing I have ever seen. As I review it, the short hairs on my neck bristle with vague fear. Were I living in the Middle Ages, I'd mutter something about Black Magic".

The circumstances were as follows. Mrs. Mary Hardy Reeser, a widow of 67 years old, was living in St. Petersburg, Florida, to be near her son, Dr. Richard Reeser. On the evening of July 1, 1951, she had remained in her son's home with one of her grandchildren, while the rest of the family went to the beach. When they returned they found Mrs. Reeser had already left for her own apartment. The younger Mrs. Reeser drove to her mother-in-law's to see if everything was alright. According to her testimony, there

was nothing in Mrs. Mary Reeser's appearance, or demeanour, to cause any alarm. Dr. Reeser visited his mother later that evening. She was mildly depressed that she had not heard from two friends who were supposed to rent an apartment for her in anticipation of a return trip to Columbia, Pennsylvania, formerly her hometown. His mother told him that she wished to retire early and take two sleeping pills, to ensure a good night's rest. Dr. Reeser left about 8.30 p.m. and returned to his home.

The last person to see Mrs. Reeser alive was her landlady, Mrs. Pansy M. Carpenter, who lived in another apartment in the four-unit building (the two units between them were unoccupied). Mrs. Carpenter saw Mrs. Reeser briefly at about 9 p.m. She was wearing her nightgown, a housecoat, and black satin slippers, and was lounging in a comfortable chair, smoking a cigarette. The bed covers had been turned back. It was a typical summer night in Florida, the sky was overcast, with occasional flashes of heat lightning in the distance.

When Mrs. Carpenter woke up Monday morning at 5 a.m. she noticed a slight odor of smoke, but was not alarmed, since she attributed the smell to a water pump in the garage that had been overheating lately. She got up, turned off the pump, and settled back into bed. When she got up an hour later to collect her newspaper outside, she no longer smelled any smoke.

At 8 a.m. a telegram arrived for Mrs. Reeser. Mrs. Carpenter signed the receipt and went to her tenant's apartment to bring her the telegram. The doorknob, when she placed her hand on it, was hot. Alarmed, she stepped back and shouted for help. Two painters working across the street ran over. One of them opened the door; as he entered, he felt a blast of hot air. Thinking of rescuing Mrs. Reeser, he frantically looked around but saw no signs of her. The bed was empty. There was some smoke, but the only fire was a small flame on a wooden beam over a partition separating the living room and kitchenette.

The firemen arrived, put out the small flame with a hand pump, and tore away part of the partition. When Assistant Fire Chief S.O. Griffith began his inspection of the premises, he could not believe his eyes. In the middle of the floor there was a charred area roughly four feet in diameter, inside which he found a number of blackened chair springs, and the

ghastly remains of a human body, consisting of a charred liver attached to a piece of the spine, a shrunken skull, one foot still wearing a black satin slipper, and a small pile of ashes. Coroner Edward T. Silk arrived to examine the body and survey the apartment. Although deeply puzzled he decided that the death was accidental and authorized the removal of the remains to a local hospital.

The ensuing investigation included police and fire officials, as well as arson experts. The facts that confronted them seemed inexplicable considering the great heat necessary to account for Mrs. Reeser's incinerated body. Little of the furniture, other than the chair and the end table next to it, was badly damaged, but the apartment had suffered some peculiar effects:

"The ceiling, draperies, and walls, from a point exactly four feet above the floor, were coated with smelly, oily soot. Below the four-foot mark there was none. The wall paint adjacent to the chair was faintly brown, but the carpet where the chair had rested was not even burned through. A wall mirror 10 feet away had cracked, probably from heat. On a dressing table, 12 feet away, two pink wax candles had puddled, but their wicks lay undamaged in their holders. Plastic wall outlets above the four-foot mark were melted, but the fuses were not blown, and the current was on. The baseboard electrical outlets were undamaged. An electric clock plugged into one of the fused fixtures had stopped at precisely 4.20 ... but the same clock ran perfectly when plugged into one of the baseboard outlets.

Newspapers nearby on a table and draperies and linens on the daybed close at hand -- all flammable -- were not damaged. And though the painters and Mrs. Carpenter had felt a wave of heat when they opened the door, no one had noted smoke or burning odor, and there were no embers or flames in the ashes."

Faced with such a mystery the St. Petersburg authorities called in the FBI. Laboratory findings showed that Mrs. Reeser's estimated weight of 175 pounds had been reduced to a total of less than 10 pounds, including the foot and shrunken head. The final report concluded that no known chemical agents or other accelerants had been involved in starting the fire, and ended by stating that the case was "unusual and improbable".

A top arson specialist of the National Board of Underwriters was also stumped. "I can only say" he admitted "the victim died from fire"... Finally, the aforementioned Dr. Krogman, an authority on different kinds of burns, was asked to help clarify the mystery. After checking the findings of the other authorities he began eliminating possibilities. He considered lightning as a cause, but an engineer who specialized in the effects of lightning bolts on the human body flatly dismissed such a conjecture. Besides, lightning was not reported in the immediate neighbourhood during the night of the accident. Another possibility was that the sedatives taken by Mrs. Reeser had made her so drowsy that she did not notice a fire set to her nightgown or chair by the cigarette she was smoking. However, neither the gown nor the chair was particularly flammable, and besides there was not enough material available in these items to produce the intense heat necessary to reduce a human body to ashes. Dr. Krogman has burned cadavers with gasoline, oil, wood, and all kinds of other agents. He has experimented with bones encased in flesh, or stripped, both moist and dry. His tests have utilised combustion apparatus ranging from outdoor pyres to the most modern pressurized crematorium equipment. He has demonstrated conclusively that it takes enormous heat to consume a body and that only at over 3,000°F would bone become volatile enough to lose its shape and leave only ashes. "These are very great heats" he said "that would sear, char, scorch, or otherwise mar or affect anything and everything within a considerable radius..." "They say truth is stranger than fiction and this case proves it".

The remaining slippered foot was a mystery in itself. It was established that Mrs. Reeser was in the habit of stretching out her left leg because of some physical discomfort in that limb. The foot was left unburned, apparently, because it was outside the mysterious four-foot radius of incineration.

Another speculation, that the fire might have been caused by some failure in the electrical system, was also ruled out by the experts; the fuse would have blown. Finally, murder and suicide were considered. Murder was eliminated because there were no known suspects, the apartment had not been disturbed, and there was no hypothesis to account for how such a murder could have been accomplished. Suicide, too, was ruled out; Mrs. Reeser was well provided for, and not depressed, and again, how could she have set such a fire?

The experts, after one of the most thorough investigations of such a case, admitted complete defeat. They find themselves completely unable to explain how Mrs. Reeser met her death.

As we mentioned earlier there have been some two hundred cases of spontaneous human combustion recorded over the centuries, some of them more detailed and convincing than others. In some cases the investigators have made most meticulous inquiries into the circumstances of the death, and in others the reports are sparse and give very little detail.

We would like to mention a few, just for illustration:

On the 2nd March 1773, Mary Clues, aged 50, was found reduced to white ash, except for a leg and thigh, between the bed and the fireplace, nothing else in the room having been damaged.

In 1780, in Ireland, an almshouse keeper, named O'Neil, was awakened by a lodger, who showed him the body of a Mrs. Peacock, who had roomed on the floor above, and who had fallen into the room below, the body being described as "flaming and red as copper". A hole burned through the ceiling, and shaped like a woman's body showed where she had fallen through.

In 1788 A young English chambermaid was said to have been sweeping the kitchen floor when her back burst into flame, unnoticed by her, until her master came in and shouted at her. It was said he was unable to put out the fire. (Note: It might not be regarded as unusual that a maid, engaged in her daily duties, might perhaps be set on fire if her clothing swept near an open fire - but she was apparently unaware of what seems a very fierce flame until her master noticed it. Where was the pain?)

In 1802, in Massachusetts, we read of an elderly woman who evaporated and disappeared from some internal and unknown cause, in the duration of about one hour and a half, .... on the floor there was a sort of greasy soot and ashes, with remains of a human body, and an unusual smell in the room. All the clothes, in this case were consumed.

In 1836, in Italy, Countess Cornelia Zangari, aged 62, was found on the floor of her room, reduced to a heap of ashes, except for her arms, and legs, and part of her head. The floor and furniture were undamaged, but there was fine soot throughout the room, and a disagreeable odour.

On the 27th December 1885, the remains of a Mrs. Patrick Rooney, of Ottawa, Illinois, were found on the ground beneath a 3 x 4 foot hole in the kitchen floor. All that was left of the combustion were a burned piece of skull, two charred vertebrae, a few foot bones, and a pile of ashes. Again, there was soot throughout the house, but no other damage.

In 1908, in England Mary Hart, an invalid, was found burning

in a chair. Her sister smothered the flames, carried her up to her bed, and then ran for help. When they returned they found Mary reduced to ashes, except for her head and several fingers. The bed sheets were undamaged, though there was soot on the walls.

In 1933, the author, Temple Thurston, recuperating from influenza, was found nearly consumed in his chair.

On the 30th July 1938 a young woman, paddling in a boat with her husband and children, suddenly burst into flame, and was quickly reduced to a pile of ashes. Her family were not injured and the boat was undamaged.

Again, in England, in September 1938, we read of a young woman, who was in the middle of a dance floor, when blue flames burst from her body. The flames could not be extinguished, and "in minutes she was ashes, unrecognizable as a human being".

The accounts continue - In 1956, Mrs. Cecil Rogers, of Pleasantville, Ohio, was "burned to a cinder". The bed was somewhat charred on top, but nearby furniture was merely scorched. That same year, in Benecia, California, Harold Hall, aged 59, was found on the kitchen floor, his chest, arms, and face charred. He was still alive, but could not explain what had happened, and he died shortly after.

Often the accounts describe the flames emanating from these unfortunate victims as being blue, as opposed to the red or orange colour we might expect. In December 1956, Young Sik Kim of Honolulu was found wrapped in blue flames, too hot to approach. When the firemen arrived the victim and his chair were ashes; however his feet were still undamaged, and there was no other damage in the room. Similarly, in San Francisco in 1959, Jack Larber was given a glass of milk by an orderly, who returned in five minutes to find his patient wrapped in blue flames.

A more recent case has been described by Jenny Randles and Peter Hough in their book Spontaneous Human Combustion (Robert Hale, London, 1992). I quote -

"When fireman Tony McMunn was called to a blaze in Chorley in March 1980, nothing in his training or 23 years of experience prepared him for the sight in a pensioner's bedroom. All that remained of its occupant were her relatively unscathed legs from the knees down; the rest was calcined ash.

There was no fire damage to the surrounding area; only smoke damage to the upper walls and ceiling. McMunn recalls: "I was taken aback. I had never seen anything like it before; neither had the ambulance men nor the police" McMunn noted also "Even the bones were gone, yet nearby objects, such as a brushed nylon footstool, and clothes, were just stained."

A case that made many headlines in the newspapers and which became the subject of an intensive investigation is that of Jacqueline Fitzsimon, a young cookery student, only 17 years old, from Widnes in Cheshire. According to reports made at the time Jacqueline had attended a morning cookery class at Halton College of Further Education, Widnes, on January 28th 1985. She was coming downstairs after an exam, chatting to friends, when she suddenly became a "human torch". The flames were beaten out and she was rushed to Whiston Hospital, near Liverpool, where she died on February 12th, after fifteen days in intensive care. The Daily Express of 25th February reported "The heartbroken parents of a 17-year old girl who suddenly burst into flames said "Our daughter's death is a complete mystery. No one seems to know what happened". It was added that Jacqueline was believed to be a victim of spontaneous human combustion. Investigating scientists were quoted as saying "It is a real possibility at the moment. We cannot find any other reason, but the investigation is still going on .... reports are being prepared by the police, fire chiefs, and the Government Health and Safety Executive".

The Daily Express piece was just one of a number of newspaper and television features in the wake of the original (quickly adjourned) inquest on 22nd February. At this, Cheshire Fire Prevention Officer, Bert Gilles had said: "I have interviewed seven eye-witnesses. So far there is no clear explanation of the fire..... Spontaneous combustion is a theory most of us have treated highly sceptically, but it should be examined". The next four months, during which the inquest was held in stasis, offered the authorities the chance to conduct extensive enquiries.

Here was a unique opportunity to get to grips with this grimly fascinating phenomenon, which paranormal researchers could not afford to miss. With the support of the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena, two people, Peter A. Hough and Jenny Randles agreed to follow the case in depth.

### INQUESTS INTO CASES OF SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION.

In most cases of death by burning, the circumstances are straightforward and obvious. But the cases of apparent spontaneous human combustion are riddled with mysteries. In this section we will review some of the evidence that has been put forward at various inquests into these mysterious deaths. Most people who die as a result of fires do so, either by inhaling the fumes of the fire, or by carbon monoxide poisoning, due to the fact that the fire has consumed the oxygen present, or by actually catching alight and burning. In these latter cases it is usual for the clothing to catch alight, and burn the unfortunate wearer. Unless the clothing is of a very flammable nature, or the victim is very helpless (due to age or illness), such a fire is usually quickly and easily extinguished, and while the victim may suffer severe and painful burns, it is usual for them to recover from such an experience. Of course, if the victim has been doused with an accelerant, or very flammable liquid, the fire is much more intense, and the victim will likely die. In cases where the victim expires as a result of the fumes, it is usual to find the surroundings completely burnt, but the body, although charred and singed, is usually intact and recognizable.

We will detail first the inquest on Jacqueline Fitzsimons. This inquest was held on June 28th, some five months after the young woman had burst into flames. By then our investigators had already discovered that the newspaper report had erred in one respect, at least. Jacqueline had, it seems, not been seriously burnt, and in fact had been sitting up in bed, talking to friends and relatives a few days after the fire. The impression that had been given that she had been lying seriously burnt and ill for fifteen days in the intensive care unit was erroneous. The first witness, the pathologist, Dr. Cradwell, confirmed this, stating that Jacqueline had suffered superficial burns on her buttocks and back from bra to pantie line. There had been damage to the lungs, however, and she had inflamed bronchia, and a degree of septicaemia. Death, in the pathologist's view was due to "shock-lung". One might wonder why, if her lungs were so badly affected, she was able to sit up and talk to her friends and relatives a few days after the fire, or how she could have died if the burns were so minor. Our investigators state that although three lawyers, representing the family of the deceased, the college, and the authorities, were present, neither they, nor the members of the jury, asked the pathologist a single question, and he left immediately after giving his testimony.

In spite of its being a fairly lengthy report it is worth quoting the investigators' account of the inquest in full. It serves as an illustration for several points we shall make later. It demonstrates that there was indeed an extensive inquiry into the circumstances, and it also illustrates many of the difficulties that can occur in determining the causes of such mysterious deaths.

Our investigators report:

"We then learnt that nine teenaged students and their lecturer, Mr. Robert Carson, had been in the cookery class in room Cl6 on the third floor of the building. The test had begun at 9 a.m. and involved making creme caramel, sponge pudding, and bread rolls. By 9.40 a.m. after the caramel was made, the cookers were no longer required and should have been turned off. Jacqueline, working on the same cooker as her friend Wendy Hughes, finished first. At 10.40 a.m. these two, together with their friend, Paula McGeever, asked permission to leave early for a scheduled break. Mr. Carson denied them this, and the class was dismissed at 10.55 a.m.

Wendy Hughes and Paula McGeever gave evidence first. Both agreed that the three of them left the room first, in high spirits, none of them smoking. The cooker rings were left on after the caramel was ready, because the room was cold. Lecturer Robert Carson later vehemently denied this, although other staff pointed out that the room had no central heating because it was heated by the ovens.

Wendy and Paula said that the three of them had spent most of the unoccupied fifteen minutes leaning against the worktops and cookers, and that Jacqueline must have been about eight inches from the nearest lighted jet. (Note, obviously these were gas cookers, not electric). However, when they left the room none of them smelt or saw smouldering on their friend's back, and Carson, who watched them leave, noticed nothing either. The girls wore standard issue white smocks upon which burning should have been obvious.

Arms linked, they walked to the top of the stairs, where Wendy unlinked and began moving down towards 'B' Floor and the canteen. Both agreed that, near the bottom of this first flight of stairs, Jacqueline called out "My back's hot. Am I on fire?" Smouldering pieces of cloth were suddenly rising into the air, and in a few seconds their friend was covered in flames. The girls, together

with staff and other students, beat out the flames on her back. An ambulance arrived and took her to Whiston Hospital. She remained conscious and rational throughout.

According to these first two witnesses the flame from the gas ring had set her clothing smouldering, which had later caught fire. But how did her smock smoulder for at least five minutes without being detected?

Three male students in the class next gave evidence, and added further confusion. Jamie Hayes insisted that the girls had been hanging around the door for at least two minutes prior to leaving, adding to the supposed smouldering time. Graham Littler (one of these students) was shown a signed statement which he had made to a fire officer on January 29th (the day after the fire), in which he said that Paula McGeever told him that she and Jacqueline had been in the toilets on "C" floor before going down the stairs. Jacqueline had come out saying "I'm sure I am on fire. Can you smell burning?" Previously, both girls had denied flatly going into the toilets. Littler, although agreeing he had written the statement, now retracted it, and looked decidedly uncomfortable about the whole thing. This was never resolved.

Now, one of the lawyers advised us, there was a second theory. Had the girls been in the toilets playing "flamethrowers" by lighting hair spray jets with matches? This insane idea was seriously mooted to explain how Jacqueline had ignited so rapidly, although no spray cans were offered as evidence. Presumably, we thought, the forensic tests would clear this matter up, but we were much too optimistic.

Three more students from the class remained to give evidence. Maria Green claimed that she had gone looking for Jacqueline after word got back to C16 of the incident. For some reason she went into the toilets, where the door was ajar, and found it full of smoke, with a smell of burning paper. In her statement made the day after the fire, she said a girl from the hairdressing class had told her: "Your mate's just come out of the toilet on fire". That was the reason she had made straight for the toilets.

Vanessa Dean confirmed all this, and also said she had seen the smoke in the toilet. She added that Jacqueline had been standing by the door, well away from the cooker, for at least five minutes before leaving the cooking class.

Perhaps the final student, Karen Quirk, would resolve matters! Despite being instructed to attend, Karen had not turned up. Now an amazing exhibit of expediency was displayed by the coroner, Gordon Glasgow. He pointed out to both jury and lawyers that if any of them wished to ask Karen any questions, then the inquest would have to be adjourned. As both Maria and Vanessa had implied that Karen knew something about the story of Jacqueline running from the toilets, imagine our amazement when both lawyers and jury replied that none of them had any wish to cross-examine the girl! (Two months after the inquest we called Karen Quirk. She spoke reluctantly and briefly. Like many of the witnesses at the inquest she was uneasy and refused to make comment on Spontaneous human combustion, although she admitted to being questioned about it by fire officers. Neither would she be drawn about other aspects of the case. On the day of the inquest she claimed she got lost, and that no-one had asked her since why she had not attended).

To return to the inquest: we next heard from two mature students, John Foy and Neil Gargan, HNC students in Electrical Engineering, who had no connection with anyone involved. It was from them the SHC theory at last found support. Foy works for a chemical manufacturer, and Gargan for the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board; they were seconded to the college part time. Both were walking up the stairs when they passed the three girls talking animatedly. They insisted there was no smoke and no smell of burning. Literally a few seconds later they heard cries and turned to find Jacqueline ablaze "like a stunt man on TV" said John Foy. The speed with which such a horrible fire evolved stunned them both. The two men helped put out the flames. Foy said she seemed fine, despite melted acrylic all over her back; she only complained of a burnt finger.

Karena Leazer and fellow hair-dressing student Rachael Heckle, had something else to add to the mystery. While passing them on the stairs Karena said she saw "a strange glowing light" above Jacqueline's right shoulder. It seemed to appear in mid-air and fall down her back. Jacqueline allegedly called out "It's gone down my back - get it out". Thirty seconds later they heard screams and saw Jacqueline burning fiercely. Rachael confirmed this, although she thought originally Karen had spoken of a cigarette seen falling down the victim's back. Karena denied this. Eventually both girls confirmed it had been just a strange glowing light.

No evidence was presented by anyone that any of the three girls was smoking, but could a lighted cigarette have been dropped from above? Rachael Heckle now astounded everyone by insisting that the girl passed on the stairs was not Jacqueline Fitzsimon! Amazingly, she was not cross-examined about this extraordinary claim.

Three staff members then told how they arrived on the scene after hearing the screams and helped put out the fire. It was not easy, but despite fairly nasty looking burns, Jacqueline seemed remarkably free from pain.

Then cookery lecturer Robert Carson came to the stand. He was adamant the rings on the cookers were turned off an hour before the end of the lesson, and Jacqueline had not been leaning against them anyway. He stated that the girl and her friends had waited by the door to be dismissed at precisely 10.50 a.m. and that in over twenty years of catering "I have never seen a catering jacket on fire. I am sure that if it had been alight, I would have noticed or smelt something".

Peter Hatton, Senior Administrator in charge of health and safety at the college, was called to give evidence about the special catering clothes. He claimed not to know whether the clothes were inflammable! By now it was clear that the coroner was guiding the jury towards the far-fetched conclusion that Jacqueline had caught fire by leaning against the cooker.

Detective Sergeant Geoffrey Abel of the Cheshire Police gave astonishing evidence which was subjected to little or no examination. Why were the police not informed until January 30th, two days after the fire? Why were the CID asked to investigate? Det. Sgt. Abel and Det. Constable Plant visited the college at 6 p.m. that night and found it rife with rumours about the tragedy. They took a detailed statement from Jacqueline at Whiston Hospital. She was sitting up in bed, looking, in the circumstances, quite happy. After seeing her that night, the police officer commented "To be perfectly honest, what has subsequently transpired is amazing".

Jacqueline was interviewed in the presence of her father. Several times she said "It must have been the cooker. I must have stood too near the cooker," although she could not remember having done so. However, she admitted the back rings had been left on. She stated that after leaving C16 she had gone straight downstairs with Wendy and Paula. They were not smoking, had been nowhere near the toilets; and had passed no-one smoking.

She had felt nothing and smelt nothing until half-way down the stairs, when her back started to get hot. Within seconds there were flames and she put one hand on her head, fearing her hair lacquer would catch light. With the other she tried to take off her smock, but the burning material kept disintegrating in her hands.

Det. Sgt. Abel pointed out that in the two days before his visit Jacqueline had talked to several friends, she knew all the stories going round the college and had already made up her mind what had occurred.

A service manager from the Gas Board, Leslie Mayo, stated that gas flames could become invisible in strong sunlight, but would cause discomfort to anyone leaning near them. The weather on January 28th does not indicate strong sunlight - in fact it rained after lunch.

Philip Jones, a chartered chemist working for the Home Office, visited the college with a uniformed police officer, on the 21st, and conducted tests into the combustibility of the white smock. The ignition point, he discovered, was near the bottom of the jacket. The coroner referred to the possibility of a lighted cigarette causing the fire. Jones said that contrary to popular belief, it is very difficult indeed for a cigarette to cause this sort of fire. He had held the jacket near the cooker flame in a simulated air-flow, similar to that found on a stairwell, until it smouldered. He was asked how long he thought this smouldering would continue before Jacqueline would notice anything. Thirty seconds, he suggested, was the maximum before smell or heat would give the game away. Five minutes was far too long.

One of the lawyers then asked Jones how near to the flames the jacket had been held to cause smouldering. Millimetres, he replied. Did the chartered chemist realise the distance between the gas jet and anyone leaning against the cooker was eight inches? And how many times during the tests had the smouldering jacket burst into flames? "None" came the embarrassed reply, "not even when air flow had been simulated". The best it had ever done was smoulder a bit.

The coroner asked Jones what he thought of Spontaneous Combustion. He replied with a rambling lecture how compost heaps and haystacks can burst into flames. adding that he had never known it to happen "in these circumstances".

Jones had started off with the theory that Jacqueline had caught alight from the cooker. Under cross-examination his certainty crumbled, and he agreed that none of his evidence supported this conclusion, calling it merely "a possible explanation", and admitting that "my idea is by no means certain" and no more than "feasible". We were already puzzled why, at a fire death enquiry, there was not a single representative of the Cheshire Fire Brigade! Jones was aware that the Chief Fire Prevention Officer had carried out independent tests. Amazingly the scientist claimed not to know this, and would not be drawn into comment. To our further astonishment the lawyer did not press him.

The Fire Brigade had solicited an investigation by Manchester's Shirley Institute, a prestigious scientific establishment. The joint Shirley Institute/Cheshire Fire Brigade report was thirty pages long, and their tests had been much more extensive than those of Jones. The garment burned less violently than previous evidence had suggested; they could not get it alight from simply smouldering. However, if it had caught light, flames would be apparent within twenty-five seconds. All of this evidence, in their view, showed that the girl's clothes could not have ignited from the cooker.

Philip Jones would make no further comment, and we were left wondering why this very important document was not presented as evidence at the inquest; especially as its existence had only become apparent almost by accident. Following further enquiries it was reported that the document had been sent to the coroner for use at the inquest but that "Coroner Glasgow had decided not to use the document as evidence".

Next, police constable Jenion, who acted for the coroner, and had accompanied Jones to the college, took the stand. He simply agreed with the Home Office conclusion, and stated that Jacqueline's family had been very upset about all the nonsense about spontaneous human combustion. "I have found no evidence of spontaneous human combustion" he assured the inquest, without explaining what the evidence would be, or how he would go about finding it. He thought that the latent smouldering theory was correct, but admitted he had never seen a smouldering piece of cloth burst into flames, adding "but it's common knowledge, isn't it?"

The coroner had opened proceedings by advising the jury to ignore all the talk in the media about spontaneous human combustion. Now, six and a half hours later, he concluded with a summary biased in favour of the Home Office conclusions, and seemed to instruct the jury to conclude that the death was a result of leaning against the gas cooker.

The jury could have returned an open verdict, which, to us, was the only fair conclusion. Yet, after only ten minutes, they returned with a verdict of misadventure, an endorsement of the discredited cooker theory, and an outright rejection of spontaneous human combustion. ...."

Our investigators conclude their report with the following remarks -

"In writing about this case we found ourselves in something of a no-man's land between the authorities, seemingly carrying out a cover-up, and the media and certain self-styled experts on the phenomenon, eager to incorporate the Fitzsimon tragedy into the SHC mythos. We are not experts. You will have to make up your own mind".

We have chosen to report this inquest fully, as it illustrates in many ways the great difficulties involved in coming to reasonable conclusions about these mysterious fires. In many ways the case of Jacqueline Fitzsimons was not a typical spontaneous human combustion phenomenon, and perhaps should not have been considered as such from the very beginning. She was not reduced totally to ash, as in many other such instances, and her death seemed to have been related to the possible lung damage, rather than from the actual burning. Also, her clothing was clearly where the fire originated, as opposed to her actual body, which seems to be the case in other such cases.

Nevertheless, since the case was widely reported as having been due to spontaneous human combustion until the inquest was held, at least, it merited detailed examination. It did indeed in the beginning seem that Jacqueline's death would become incorporated in the SHC mythos, and if the report of the inquest is not widely publicised, it may indeed live on in some of the lesser known journals as a properly ascertained and proved case.

Having said that, however, one has to look at the report of the inquest carefully, and decide if the coroner and

his jury really did come to the proper and right decision as to how the fire had come about. Do we really know, fore sure, what was the cause of the fire?

It seems clear from the report by investigators Peter Hough and Jenny Randles that the coroner himself had been biased from the beginning and had decided that the theory that Jacqueline had caught light from leaning against the cooker was the only explanation for her death. It is also clear that in some way the coroner had imposed this view on his jury, they were absent for only ten minutes before returning with their verdict - hardly time to go to the jury room, take an immediate vote, and return. They clearly did not discuss any of the evidence among themselves.

While studying the notes of this inquest, a few thoughts occurred, which might be worth mentioning.

In the first instance, one is reinforced regarding the unreliability of press reports. Before the inquest was held the headlines in the newspapers were proclaiming loudly that Jacqueline had died as a result of this mysterious phenomenon known as spontaneous human combustion. The same newspapers after the inquest distanced themselves neatly by saying "rumours that cookery student, Jacqueline Fitzsimons died of spontaneous human combustion were not true....."

It is clearly difficult, even at an inquest, when witnesses are under oath, to arrive at the facts, even, in this case, a few simple facts.

There was discrepancy in witnesses statements as to when the gas ring was actually turned off. The lecturer was adamant that it had been turned off an hour before the class finished, other students said that it was usual to leave the rings on in order to keep the room warm. Jacqueline herself when interviewed said the back ring had been left on. (But she had been talking to her friends and had already come to the conclusion that this was the cause of her fire).

The discrepancy regarding the smock is very bothersome. Nowhere in our report is it actually stated what material the smock was made of. The safety officer at the school stated that the material was not flammable, and the tests

performed by the experts showed that the regular smocks would smoulder and not burst into flame. But one of the mature students, Foy, who works for a chemical manufacturer describes her clothing as having caught fire in a moment, she was "ablaze like a stunt man on TV," and had melted acrylic all over her back. Jacqueline herself stated that within seconds of her feeling hot her smock was in flames, and when she tried to get it off the burning material kept disintegrating in her hands. Had we been on the jury we would have liked more questions asked about that smock. Many young women at school, especially around Jacqueline's age, naturally like to look their best. Was she in fact wearing the regulation 'safe' smock, or had she brought to school a smarter, lighter, nylon smock, which was flammable? If so, this would not have been set alight by a gas ring, or rather, it would have flared up immediately on contact with the gas ring, and she would not have had opportunity to get as far as the stairwell before being enveloped in flames. But such a smock would perhaps have flared up if a lighted cigarette had been flicked at it from above, in the manner that Karen Leazer suggested, and in accordance with the fact that she alleged Jacqueline called out "'It's gone down my back, get it out".

This might also accord with another fact that seems to be a puzzle. It seems that, in fact, her body was not too badly burned, in spite of the extent of the flames, and she actually died from damage and septicaemia in her lungs. Burning acrylic would cause much more damage to her lungs than would ordinary cotton or linen material when on fire. It is well known, for instance, that in burning airplanes, people are overcome almost instantaneously by the fumes from burning acrylic materials. Jacqueline was in an open stairwell, where some of the smoke would escape, but she nevertheless sustained sufficient lung damage to kill her,

The question as to whether Jacqueline and her friend had been smoking, or whether they had in fact been playing with the hair spray, was not satisfactorily resolved in our opinion. Obviously the girls would try to cover-up if they had been engaged in such illegal activities.

In our considered view this was not a case of spontaneous human combustion, but, as we have said, we felt it merited detailed reporting in order that the difficulties might be realised when trying to investigate such cases.

Earlier in this paper we reported the case of Jack Angel, a travelling salesman, who had been said to have gone to bed in his motorhome on the 12th November 1974, and to have woken four days later, with a badly burned hand, a hole in his chest where he had been burned, and other burns on his legs, groin, ankles, and back. His clothing and sheets were untouched by fire. On admission to hospital the doctors told him that he had been burned internally, not externally, and he accepted their explanation. This case has been quoted extensively in the literature on spontaneous human combustion and has been regarded as a classic example. However, things are not always what they seem.

Again we have to recognize the fact that the media do not constitute reliable sources when dealing with sensational stories. The December 1981 edition of Omni, the popular science magazine, which many people would regard as infallible in its reports, stated, in reporting the case of Jack Angel, "Angel's Savannah physician specifically attributed the burns to "spontaneous combustion"... described as a bizarre molecular reaction, that causes people to burn up inside". The physician, Dr. David Fern, who had reportedly been summoned to the scene of Angel's accident, supposedly maintained there was no other reasonable explanation, since nearby objects in the mobile trailer showed no traces of fire damage."

Actually, Dr. Fern had neither gone to the scene, nor rushed to any such judgement. While declining to make a determination as to the exact cause the physician stated "Mr. Angel presented himself to the hospital with a severe burn injury of the hand and minor injury of the chest wall. Dr. Fern later stated that 'the description of the burn and the findings in surgery are very typical of an electric-type injury. This generates a high-powered heat source because of the resistance of the skin and the underlying tissue'".

However, thorough investigation eliminated such external sources as power lines and lightning storms. Angel hired lawyers, who in turn, hired an engineering laboratory to inspect the motorhome's interior. "Electrical test instruments evaluated the vehicle's Onan generator and AC wiring and uncovered no problems. Further inspection failed to locate discoloration or other physical evidence which might have been left by the heat that burned Angel's body" they reported.

However, they finally turned to the only remaining suspected source of heat in the vehicle; its hot water plumbing system. The radiator cap was tightly in place, and there were no ruptured pipes or other certain indications that hot water could have been the cause. There was nevertheless, one clue: the hot water pump had a slipped drive belt. This led the engineers to theorize that, lacking hot water for a shower, Angel had gone outside, removed the heater's metal cover, and opened its safety valve. As a consequence, according to the eningeers' theory Angel was thus subjected to a blast of pressurized scalding hot water.

There were indications that Angel was in a stupor after the accident, in fact Angel told an investigator "I was staggering like a drunk". In fact, his first impulse was to visit a bar and order hard liquor, rather than seek medical assistance. If he had been earlier in a stupor could this have contributed to the accident?

Credence is given to this theory by the fact that Angel subsequently sued the manufacturer of the motorhome for the defect that lead to this accident. Further corroboration for this theory is given by the fact that one Ed. Jonikens, who visited Angel in hospital, and then drove his vehicle home, who thought Angel's injuries appeared to be due to scalding, and when he reached the motorhome he found the panel on the water heater to be "extremely hot". The engineers who examined the motor home found not only that the water pump's drive belt was off, but that the water heater's safety-relief valve was in the open position. This was confirmed by a later study commissioned by the motorhome corporation's insurance company.

Jack Angel escaped with his life. But many of the other alleged victims of spontaneous human combustion did not so survive. As we have already noted, many such were reduced to heaps of ashes. Their fate was certainly different from that of both Jack Angel and Jacqueline Fitzsimons. Some writers have expressed doubts about the fate of Mary Reeser, mentioned earlier in this paper. It is certainly true that the last time she was seen alive was when she was sitting in a chair, dressed in flammable clothing, and smoking a cigarette, having just taken a couple of sleeping pills. Some investigators have said that this is sufficient reason to conclude that she was not the victim of spontaneous human combustion.

Despite the criticisms we have made of the Jacqueline Fitzsimons inquest, that conducted into the fate of Mary Reeser seems to have been both exhaustive and meticulous. When the firemen arrived, despite the fact that Mrs. Reeser had been reduced to a pile of ash, there was only a small flame present, which was easily put out. As we reported earlier, one foot, still wearing a black satin slipper, was still intact, and most of the furniture was unaffected. Newspapers, draperies, bed linens in the room were not damaged. This was a death that the authorities found themselves unable to solve, and the verdict remained open. One little nagging question remained with us. Mrs. Reeser, an apparently healthy 67-yr. old woman, had been reported as staying with, or looking after one of her grandchildren, while the family went to the beach. When the family returned from the beach she had gone home - unusual if she was officially babysitting the grandchild, but not of course if she were merely visiting. However, the parents of the children were sufficiently concerned that first the daughter-in-law drove to her mother-in-law's house 'to see if everything was alright'. Later her son also drove to his mother's home to visit her. These actions seem to indicate an unusual amount of concern over a woman of that age, apparently in good health, and able to get around. She was taking sleeping pills, that was reported. The reason for these two subsequent visits by the younger Reesers was not discussed, as far as we are aware.

One wonder sometimes, in the cases where people have met such an untimely death, why it seems they have made no effort to escape. Mrs. Reeser, of course, may have been too drowsy from the effects of the sleeping pills to attempt to escape. But we are puzzled by the fate of Mary Norris, aged 32, of Woodstock Avenue, Isleworth, in England. The fire that killed her was said to have been small enough to have been put out in minutes; neighbours had seen no smoke or flames, and yet she perished. It was the second time that she had been involved in a fire, her bedroom had been gutted a few weeks previously. In a similar fashion, Andrea Deeley, aged 20, was found dead, still sitting on the settee in her home in Hunter's Road, Handsworth, Birmingham. The settee had apparently caught light, but the girl had made no attempt to escape the flames. But, of course, the possibility remains in these two last cases that they were overcome by fumes before they were able to move to save themselves. It would not be reasonable to suppose that these were genuine cases of spontaneous human combustion.

# CRITERIA FOR THEORIES OF SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION.

As is evident from our accounts, and from the reader's general knowledge, many mysterious fires occur involving either danger to human life, or actual death, that are not easily explained, and the circumstances are not always made clear, even if extensive and meticulous inquests have been conducted. Simply because the origin of a fire is not easily ascertainable it does not follow that the person died of spontaneous human combustion. Police constable Jenion, at the inquest on Jacqueline Fitzsimons, stated that he had found no evidence of spontaneous combustion, without explaining what such evidence might consist of, or how he would go about finding it.

We would like to recap, for our reader's benefit, the characteristics of what might be regarded as a genuine case of spontaneous human combustion.

SHC (spontaneous human combustion) does not burn like a normal fire. Typical cases share a number of consistent characteristics (though not all of them at once.

(1) The victims often seem to feel no pain, or at least do not cry out. For instance, during a series of unexplained fires on a farm at Binbrook, Lincolnshire, in 1905, a maid was observed to carry on her sweeping, unconscious of the flames that engulfed her shoulders. She was rescued in time, fortunately.

(2) The heat must be intense. Several experts have confirmed that crematoria require a temperature of about 900 degrees C, intensified by a forced draught, and sustained for several hours to reduce a dead body to ashes. Then a pulveriser is used to crunch up the lumpy bits. In cases of SHC bodies have been reduced to piles of white, or sooty ash, in a short period of time, sometimes, as we have indicated, leaving a limb untouched, and without seriously affecting the surroundings.

(3) SHC not only reaches the required temperatures rapidly, but pursues its course quickly and quietly. In Mrs. Reeser's case, for instance, a neighbouring apartment was occupied by Mrs. Carpenter, who heard nothing, and only smelt a slight odor of smoke, while the burning was apparently happening.

(4) SHC seems to burn from the inside outwards, beginning in the chest, abdomen, or in the deep muscles. In many reported cases the victim's body is burned, and the clothing left unscorched. (We would however, point out that the case of Jack Angel has been often quoted as evidence of this point, and it is now widely accepted that he died of scalding).

(5) Along with the above, SHC can be weirdly selective. In 1908, Wilhelmina Dewar burned to death in her unscorched bed in Blyth. Likewise, in 1943, in Sussex, Madge Knight lay in bed unaware she was burning; later she awoke screaming, her back burned so badly she died later. (This case is undoubtedly reminiscent of Jacqueline Fitzsimons).

(6) The intense heat of SHC can be focussed or localised. Often easily combustible materials nearby are untouched or merely scorched. When Dr. Irving Bentley died in Pennsylvania in 1966, he seemed to have been taken by a pillar of fire intense enough to burn through the floor where he was standing, yet the bath nearby was barely scorched. Bentley's left leg, burned off below the knee, lay by the hole. Mrs. Reeser was another such example. On 19th Feb. 1988 Dr. Mackenzie Booth, a lecturer at Aberdeen University, was called to a loft of a stable in town. There he found the charred body of a 65-year old man; most of the abdominal flesh was burned away, leaving the calcined ends of bones. The body had burned through the floorboards, and was resting on a charred beam; and directly above the body the roofing slats had burned away, causing roofing slates to fall on the corpse's head. The body was surrounded by untouched wood, and bales of hay. Dr. Booth noted that the features of the man's face were preserved, and concluded "from the comfortably recumbent attitude of the body, it was evident there had been no death struggle".

(7) Although in many SHC cases the body is consumed leaving a hand or foot (the latter sometimes wearing an unscorched slipper) there are also cases where the extremities are the first to be consumed.

(8) Finally, a frequently reported detail is an unpleasant greasy brownish tar that coats most of the smooth surfaces at the SHC scene. It seems to be a byproduct of burning flesh. We would add, also, that in those cases where a person

has been seen to be catching fire, and have been rescued, namely some where the fire has started in the extremities, the flame has been described as being blue, rather than red or orange.

### CONCLUSIONS.

So what are we to make of all these accounts?

The first conclusion that we have come to is that there is always a great deal of confusion, and perhaps cover-up when somebody has met their death in a mysterious fire. Despite the extensive and meticulous inquests into the deaths of Mrs. Reeser and Jacqueline Fitzsimons there still seem to be some unanswered questions.

Secondly, one should never underestimate the media. Such stories make spectacular news and sell newspapers and magazines. Newspaper and TV reporters cannot be relied on for unbiased reports in sensational cases, they can be quite unscrupulous in their reporting, and will quite happily omit to report facts that contradict their own theories. Corrections of misleading reports, if ever made, are relegated to back pages, and small paragraphs. For instance, the true story of Jack Angel's misadventure has been well known to investigators for some years, but it is still reported both in the media, and in journals and magazines, as a proper case of SHC whenever the subject comes up for discussion. The myth becomes perpetuated.

Having said that, however, there is not the slightest doubt, in our minds, that rare, and we would repeat, extremely rare, cases of what appear to be spontaneous human combustion do indeed occur. The reader might like to decide among the cases we have quoted which best fit the criteria!

We have begun to wonder if in fact these cases should really be looked at as if they were caused by some ordinary kind of fire? Could they in fact be caused by some kind of reaction that was described by Dr. Fern when testifying in the Jack Angel inquest. He talked of a 'bizarre molecular reaction .... that causes people to burn up inside'. If it were, in fact, some kind of chemical, or molecular, reaction that goes on inside the body, then perhaps that could account for some of the unusual facts we have mentioned.

Such a reaction might account for the fact that the process seems to start within the body itself, rather than in the clothing. It would account for the surroundings being relatively untouched, and for the fact that, in some cases, part of the body is unconsumed. It could account for the extent of the damage to the body itself; a chemical reaction of that kind of nature might perhaps cause the complete destruction that has been described. It might even account for the fact that some of the victims seem to feel no pain, even when their flesh is apparently blazing.

Many theories have been put forward over the years in an effort to account for this mysterious phenomenon. In the early days, and in some literature, investigators have speculated that the victims had been killed by gases in their bodies which had caught fire. They were often described as elderly, and sometimes handicapped, people who had imbibed too much liquor, which had then somehow caught fire inside them. These theories had to be discounted when it became clear that these criteria by no means fit all the reported cases.

Some earlier cases were attributed to supernatural causes; Grace Pett, of Ipswich, who burned to death in 1744, was widely believed to be a witch, and it was said she had cast one spell too many, and it rebounded with fiery consequences.

Most of the discussions of SHC in text-books on forensic toxicology concern its use as a cover for murder, based on a famous French case from 1725, in which an accused man successfully persuaded a court in Rheims that his wife had spontaneously combusted in her armchair. Some medical textbooks acknowledge a few cases where the almost complete destruction of the body and the localisation of the fire are baffling, and grudgingly suppose that the human body, can, under circumstances unknown, develop an unusually combustible constitution.

Another theory that has been put forward is the "wick" theory. Professor David Gee, of Leeds University, has argued that burning clothes boil off the body water, then absorb the melted fat, becoming in effect a wick around the body, which continues to burn until the fire has consumed all its fuel (fatty tissue, clothes, or alcohol-saturated flesh). Serious experiments, however - including those performed by Baron Justus von Liebig, a father of modern chemistry,

in the mid-1800s - only demonstrate the limitations of this theory. Ignition of living tissue by sparks or smouldering cloth is extremely difficult, due to the body's being 72% water with an active blood supply to redistribute the heat. If clothing smouldered long enough to "boil off" the nine or ten gallons of water in the average-sized body before it could dessicate the flesh, there would be none left to act as a wick. By the same token, the old notion of someone boozing themselves into a human firefighter is also untenable; a drinker would die of alcohol poisoning long before his tissues were saturated enough to make them combustible.

A corollary of the 'wick' theory is one which speculates that the body must have been in a draught between a door or window, and the chimney. Under normal circumstances any smouldering fire (e.g. in clothes or an armchair) would not be intense enough to inflict more than serious surface burns. The draught theory postulates that the extra oxygen contained in a current of air between door or window and chimney would allow the fire to reach greater temperatures than it would unaided, just as fan-forced oxygen is required by incinerating machines in crematoria. But it seems doubtful that draught-fed fires could reach the temperatures required to fuse bone, or reduce it to ash, as in Mrs. Reeser's case. (See Plate II). In fact one case was actually reported by an investigator, Mr. Heymer, as actually occurring in a room sealed with draught-excluders.

Heymer's experience with the SHC case he had become involved in in Gwent, and its subsequent investigation made him scathing about the way his forensic advisers relied on the wick and draught theories. In an article in the New Scientist, of 15 May 1986, he wrote "Let them try to incinerate to ashes a clothed corpse in an airless room without damaging the furnishings". He bravely proposed an ingenious theory of his own, based upon the same electrochemical processes that power the U.S. space-flights. Electricity passed through water can split it into hydrogen and oxygen. Heymer wondered if an unknown biochemical action in the human cells, powered by a build-up of electrostatic charge, caused the water in these cells to split into its constituent gasses. "The burning hydrogen would use up all the oxygen, leaving none to support the combustion of other materials", he wrote. A biochemical fire of this nature could accelerate rapidly from cell to cell, like a bushfire, from the deep tissues outward, and be extinguished just as quickly when it loses its momentum.

No scientist, as far as we are aware, has as yet commented on the feasibility of Heymer's theory.

The Fortean writer, Ivan Sanderson, wondered whether loneliness might affect the metabolism, causing an accumulation of inflammable nitroglycerine-like phosphagens in muscle tissue. From the annals of medical curiosities, we also know of cases of inflammable perspiration, electric people who emit sparks and glows, and of accumulations of methane and 'phosphorated hydrogen gases'. What if the heat-generating processes in the liver and brown fat layers went out of control? Could that be a factor in HSC?

According to yogic teachings some kind of biofeedback control over the body's heat generation is possible. In the Tibetan rite of Tumo, for example, the adept has to sit naked in the cold air, and by meditating upon fire, increases his body heat so that he can survive. There are stories of monks being able to dry out dozens of sheets soaked in freezing water this way. Normally, the body's autonomic nervous control system is beyond conscious intervention, but perhaps in SHC a kind of negative interference is operating.

Again, in Eastern and esoteric traditions, the use of psychic powers can also generate heat as a byproduct, either in the body or in a magical object. In some poltergeist cases, for example, objects flung through the air, or on materialising, are found to be hot. We also cannot discount the fact that spontaneous fires often occur around people who are experiencing this type of phenomenon. We referred to some of these at the beginning of this paper. It seems to us a theory well worth considering. If this idea has any substance it may provide a link between SHC and undisciplined psychic activity.

In a few modern cases of unexplained fires, tests to detect possible microwave radiation have proved negative, nevertheless as a method of generating heat at a distance, which can also cook from the inside out, this should not be ruled out entirely in cases of SHC. Similarly, some investigators have wondered about the effects of ELF radiation from power lines. These ideas, however, do not account for SHC cases that occurred before the availability of power broadcasting and distribution. Lightning is a natural source of microwaves, and can create weird balls of plasma energy which play poltergeist-like tricks; this was writer Maxwell Cade's candidate for triggering SHC.

The biochemical mass of the human body still has sensitivities both unexplored and undiscovered. One researcher, Livingston Gearhart, in 1875, found a correlation between HSC events and changes in the peaks of the earth's geomagnetic field, as though the fluctuations of the field had triggered the combustions.

A final theory relates the event to something like nuclear disintegration, bridging the mystical and the physical. It supposes that there is a life-force which holds together the constituents of the body. If this malfunctions, the body structure begins to disintegrate, giving off heat in an uncontrolled equivalent of the way in which nuclear fission is used in a power station. As far as we know, no one has yet taken a Geiger counter to the scene of an SHC to check for residual radiation.

We ourselves are reluctant to put forward a theory. The reader must judge for himself or herself. From all we have read of the subject, most reputation minded physicians and scientists steer well clear of attempting to explain the phenomenon. Most of those who have been involved in any way in investigating such cases declare themselves completely baffled. In spite of intensive inquiry and and lengthy and comprehensive inquests, the experts usually come up with an ambiguous conclusion, at the very best. While it is certain that some cases where death is reported as being due to SHC there may be some reasonable doubt about what happened, in others the evidence seems ironclad. It is difficult indeed to find an explanation for the deaths of Mrs. Reeser, and Dr. Bentley, for instance.

Spontaneous human combustion, is a rare and frightening phenomenon, but it remains as much of a puzzle as when it was first reported some four centuries ago.

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## THE HUMAN FLAME-THROWER

During the trial of Carole Compton, the Scottish nanny accused of setting fires in Italy, allegedly by paranormal powers [see FIRES on p46. ], mention was made of the concurrent native sensation Benedetto Supino, a 10yr-old boy who can demonstrably set objects ablaze by gazing at them.

Benedetto is the son of a carpenter, and lives in the resort of Formia, not far from Rome. A fairly shy and studious boy, he is slightly embarrassed at all the attention he is getting for purely involuntary incidents. It began, so we are told, in 1982, when a comic he was reading, in a dentist's sitting room, caught fire. One morning he awoke to find his bedclothes on fire — he was painfully burned. He does not smoke and the incident mystified and frightened him and his family. "I don't want things to catch fire. But what can I do," he shrugs.

A plastic object held by his Uncle Erasmo burst into flames as Benedetto stared at it. Everywhere he went furniture, fittings and objects smouldered. Pages of books were scorched where he touched them. Along with the fiery phenomena came the peculiar electromagnetic effects which were a familiar feature of the famous Rosenheim poltergeist case and others. Electrical objects in the house would function erratically, and the power supply actually failed several times. When he visited his father's workshop machinery would stop or not start, and the firm spent over £3000 on repairs before they made the surprising connection. Witnesses have seen his hands glow at such times.

His distraught parents began taking him to doctors, and so prominent was the boy's unwanted gift that he soon came to the attention of top scientists. Dr Giovanni Ballezio, Dean of Physical Medicine at Rome University said: "It is wrong to call him an 'Electric Boy' because

he really doesn't possess any more electricity than anybody else." Prof Mario Scuncio of the Tivoli Social Medical Centre said the boy was "perfectly normal." We wonder what abnormal or paranormal means to this professor? Dr Massimo Inardi, a celebrated TV doctor, thought the boy was "clearly capable of projecting his aggressive powers on outside objects in an extraordinary manner." Though the family got no comfort from these statements, they were undoubtedly relieved when, after an examination, Archbishop Vincenzo Fagiolo pronounced the phenomenon "not malign," and warned, "Neither must his extraordinary powers be considered miracles." Meanwhile, a noted parapsychologist, Dr Demetrio Croce, has taken Benedetto under his wing, hoping to channel his "extrasensory powers of considerable force" into healing and research by teaching the boy how to control the phenomenon. S.

*Mirror* 21 Aug;  
*Weekend ?*  
Nov 1983.



Benedetto Supino, holding one of his sheets which had burned through. [Photo: *Weekend ?* Nov 1983.]

## APPENDIX

### PLATE I

# APPENDIX: PLATE II

## THE ARMCHAIR OF OBLIVION

*"No! No! Not the comfy chair!"*  
M. Python.

In the annals of SHC, probably the best known case is that of Mrs Mary Reeser (inset), who was almost totally consumed by a fire of unknown origin as she reclined in an overstuffed armchair in her apartment in St Petersburg, Florida, in the night of 1

July 1951. In the morning, her landlady took her a telegram and found the door-knob too hot to handle. She called for help, and the party were met by a blast of hot air as they opened the door. In a charred circle lay the few remains of Mrs Reeser and her chair: burnt springs, fragments of backbone, a cooked liver, and a skull shrunk to the size of fist.

The photo shows the damage in the region of the chair; above a four-foot line, heat had buckled, cracked and melted fragile items and coated walls with greasy soot. The inquest deter-

mined that heat in excess of 2500F was needed to reduce a living body to this state, yet a pile of papers less than a foot away had not caught fire.

An FBI statement suggested that Mrs Reeser had fallen asleep while smoking, having taken her usual sleeping pills, but this was refuted by experts at the inquest who testified that even if her clothes had ignited this way it would have caused only superficial burns, and even if the armchair stuffing smouldered it could not have generated enough intensity to ignite or char a living body so completely.



ee. The coroner who presided at the inquest was the same one who had twice denied that it had taken place...

In another case from north-west England, two people had emerged from a high-rise flat as human fireballs and died as a result of their injuries. The story had made the front page of one regional newspaper, but it never carried details of the post mortem or the inquest (which we discovered was held remarkably fast and established an 'open verdict'.

We visited the scene of the tragedy and found the area rife with rumours. Staff on the local paper were puzzled that they had never carried the story at all. "We covered every little chip pan fire", noted a senior reporter incredulously. But this double fire mystery on their door step which was common knowledge

locally, with all sorts of connotations (love triangle, suicide pact, even murder allegations) got not one word. We never found out why.

As for official help on the matter, we were sent from one department to the next, faced with replies such as: "I don't think I can tell you that". At one stage the person we spoke to had to go and check if they could give us a department phone number we could have got from the phone book!

After weeks of on-the-beat investigation, we were able to tell the police more than their press officer could tell us when they finally agreed to say anything at all. Ultimately, the coroner agreed to provide a few quotes that, frankly, made the case more contentious.

The point is that, while we were asking for nothing that could not be obtained by reason-



## APPENDIX: PLATE III

### STRANGE FIRES

■ Mary Carter, 86, an elderly widow, was found dead in the hall of her flat in Ivor Rd, Sparkhill, Birmingham. Although she died from a heart attack, she had severe burns, yet there was no evidence of any fire in the flat, her inquest was told. A fire investigation team concluded that her clothing must have caught fire "elsewhere" and she had been running for help when she was engulfed by flame. There were candles and matches in some rooms but none near the body. If there was any evidence that these had been alight, or had ignited her clothes, it would not have been labelled a 'fire riddle'. *Wolverhampton Express & Star* 23 April 1985.

■ Paul Hayes, a 19yr-old London computer operator, is one of that select band who seem to have survived a spontaneous combustion - see photo. What happened to him, as he walked along a quiet road in Stepney Green, late on the night of 25th May 1985, remains a mystery to police and medical investigators, because he suddenly and inexplicably burst into flames. From the waist up, he was surrounded by intense flames, as though, in his own words, he had been doused with petrol and set alight. "It was indescribable...like being plunged into the heat of a furnace...My arms felt as though they were being prodded by red-hot poker, from my shoulders to my wrists. My cheeks were red-hot, my ears were numb. My chest felt like boiling water had

been poured over it. I thought I could hear my brains bubbling." Fearing more for his eyes, he instinctively shut them tight and put his hands over them. Screaming and shouting, "I tried to run, stupidly thinking I could race ahead of the flames." But he fell to the pavement. In distress and pain, he curled up into a ball. "I thought I was dying. Images of my parents, my friends, my girlfriend, came to mind." Then, as suddenly as it began, his half minute ordeal was over. "I opened my eyes. There was no flame, no smoke. For a few minutes I lay still, terrified. I began to shiver with shock." He felt himself gingerly. "I was numb in some spots, white-

hot in others." Luckily he was only a few streets away from the London Hospital, and he stumbled into casualty, where he received prompt treatment for burns on his hands, forearms, face, neck and ears. Paul does not smoke. *London Standard* 31 May; *National Enquirer* 23 July 1985.

■ Earlier still last year was news of an "enigmatic explosion" in the mouth of a 61yr-old patient at the Innsbruck University Clinic. According to the accounts of other patients, the pensioner "suddenly spat fire" and suffered burns to the face. Only the speedy intervention of other patients prevented him from further injury. *AP. Soester Anzeiger* 15 Feb 1985.



Paul Hayes holds up the shirt he was wearing the night he burst into flame unaccountably.

Photo © *National Enquirer* 23 July 1985.