



Invisible Death

"Burned under mysterious circumstances," the coroner says. How explain these fantastic deaths?

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IT is something more than just another newsworthy incident when someone gets burnt to a crisp in 10 seconds. When experts confess themselves baffled and the jury passes an issue-dodging verdict of accidental death, there is need for further investigation.

When, under circumstances which demand use of the imagination, a citizen "explodes," the rest of us are entitled to speculate on why and how it happened.

After summoning up the voluminous evidence, of which only a small part is to follow,

we are confronted with the ghastly notion that in addition to all the commonplace hazards of life there is risk of premature cremation on contact with a natural force, which on those rare occasions when it becomes visible, is known as a fireball.

On July 24, 1938, "Pester Lloyd" (Budapest) reported the crash of a Polish airliner near the Romano-Polish border. Fourteen were killed, including the Japanese military attache in Warsaw. The crash was described as "mysterious" and "inexplicable." It was said that the machine appeared to collide in mid-air with

something that was invisible!

But what becomes visible after it has fallen downstairs must obviously have been upstairs even though undetected. According to the "Birmingham Morning News," at one o'clock on December 7, 1872, the people of King's Sutton, Banbury, England, were terrorised by a jumbo fireball which appeared as a bolt from the blue and jounced around making a noise "like that of a locomotive." It did considerable damage before finally it disappeared "all at once."

Nine officers and men were killed when a U.S. Army bomber crashed ("Chicago Daily News," June 11, 1938). A woman witness swore that there had been a sudden "crash in mid-air" followed by a big flash and a blaze that lit up the sky. Then came a violent explosion and the plane plunged to earth.

"Queer" mid-air fire on the port main wing of a Wellesley long-range bomber caused a crash, killing an observer, reported the "Daily Telegraph." May 19, 1938. At the inquest no explanation could be found, and attending experts confessed themselves baffled. Much of this bafflement may be due to the pernicious habit of experts of regarding every strange case as being the only one of its kind, which it isn't. Strange cases are repeated again and again and again, while the experts suffer their occupational disease of selectivitis.

"Echo de Paris," June 23, 1938, reported seven of France's finest aviators were killed when their Potez twin-engined aircraft suddenly flew to pieces in mid-air near Tours. Villagers were awakened by the sound of a terrible crash overhead, followed by the din of falling debris.

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Five airmen had lost their lives in the same incomprehensible manner, in the same district, only a few months before.

WE insist that when a phenomenon occurs it has been caused by something. And if that something cannot be seen, it is invisible. We are striving to make it a piece of scientific dogma that if a thing cannot be seen, it is invisible, but there all the same.

Of course, flying machines are most frequently brought to destruction by known causes. Engine failure, prop breakage, wing-waggle, accumulation of ice and kindred hazards bring many planes down to disaster. We are interested in the others, the ones that collide with something unseen in mid-air, that explode or burn from unknown cause.

Four were killed when a French military plane plunged headlong into an invisible obstruction over Pau and showered down in little pieces ("Excelsior," Aug. 28, 1938). Two were killed by a similar incident at Varaville, Normandy, September 20, 1938.

"Reynold's News," August 14, 1938 reported six killed in a Royal Air Force flying boat off Felixstowe. The machine was shooting along quite normally, a few feet above the surface of the water, then—wallop! "A terrific column of water and smoke boosted into the air." When it had cleared the machine had vanished. A boatman eye-witness offered, "It was the most amazing crash I have ever seen!" He omitted to state how many he had seen.

"Reynold's News," May 29, 1938 reported nine men were injured by a mysterious blaze that fell upon them from the open

sky. One, a Mr. J. Hurn, said he saw an object drop which was like "a ball of fire." Another such ball flashed through a window, sheared off the belt buckle worn by Harry Campbell, but left him uninjured.

The New York papers early in 1937 carried a story of eight starlings, flying as though mad with fear, which suddenly dropped at the feet of a policeman in Verdi Square, New York. All were dead when picked up. R.S.P.C.A. agents said they had not been poisoned. Experts thought they might have been simultaneously electrocuted but couldn't suggest how or by what.

There was a parallel case in the south of England in 1949. "A flock of about 40 starlings" dived straight into an express locomotive "as if committing mass suicide." We have a third report of an explosion in the sky near Bournemouth, in mid-1943. Dead birds rained down. It was thought to "be something to do with the war," whatever that meant.

Whatever causes these crashes upstairs could be equally capable of fires, explosions and cremations downstairs. "Matin," January 6, 1939, reported—two killed, eight injured in panic during a furious fire in the Cabaret Casanova, popular whoopee joint in the Avenue Rachel, Paris. The blaze "came from nowhere and spread with breathtaking swiftness. How it started is a mystery." The experts never solved that one.

The fires that intrigue us are noteworthy for two features; mystery of origin and abnormal speed of spread, ultra-rapid holocausts like the one that made a distorted skeleton of that monster Zeppelin the "Hindenburg." That one, mark you, the experts

blamed on "St.: Elmo's Fire."

Violent fire of completely unknown origin killed Peter Seaton, 11 months, at Peckham Rye, London ("Daily Telegraph," January 4, 1939). Superintendent E. H. Davies, of London's fire department, said the blaze began in the child's room but "there was nothing whatever to suggest that it originated near an electric fire there." Witness Harold Edwin Huxstep, who vainly tried to rescue the child said, "It seemed as if I had opened a furnace door. There was a mass of flame and I was flung back across the hall. My hair caught alight and it was impossible to get Peter out."

A marquee "spontaneously" burst into flames at Solihull, Birmingham, England, scorching surrounding trees. And nobody could imagine how it happened—"Sunday Mercury," Birmingham, April 24, 1938). About the same time a serious fire reported "of unknown origin" afflicted the "Anglo-Indian," sister ship of the "Anglo-Australian" whose sudden vanishing has become one of the mysteries of the sea. Numberless "spontaneous" fires blazed furiously across Stoke Common, near Slough, Buckinghamshire, England—"Daily Herald," July 25, 1938).

More and more "unique phenomena" lose their uniqueness as we go along. "Nordiska Dagbladet," July 29, 1938—Phenomenon variously described as "lightning," "globe lightning" and "ball-fire" stunned the entire population of the village of Paraejaevaara, northern Lapland. One person was incinerated; five farmhouses burned down. Let's say it was St. Elmo's Fire.

The "News Chronicle," August 10, 1938—reported a house in Brook Street, St. Helens, Eng-

land, was hit by something that fell upon it from the sky. The phenomenon was described as "a blinding ball of blue light, thought to be a thunderbolt."

There was a "mystery" explosion at Bold Colliery, St. Helens, England, a short mile away. Witnesses at the colliery saw another "big blue light," after which came the bang. One dead, two injured. This preceded the sooty house by a fortnight, but experts showed no tendency to associate the two.

A terrific flash of something called "a ball of lightning" knocked down three players, dazed 10 others, during a cricket match at Goulburn, Australia—"Sydney Herald," March 29, 1938. Readers who admire quantity for its own sake are advised to refer to the "Sydney Herald," "Otago Witness" and contemporaries for months of November and December, 1902. They published amazing accounts of a veritable storm of fireballs which rained over most of Australia and New Zealand during that time. They caused fires and explosions over a huge area, disrupting business (always the yardstick of a true disaster) and, of lesser moment, burned down many people's homes. It was said that there had been "nothing like it before in the history of the colonies."

Some things in this world are now familiarities because at some time someone has investigated them energetically and undogmatically. Other things remain incomprehensible because experts have been lazy about them. Apparently many experts experience lack of blood to the brain once they have reached the limit of bolstering orthodoxy. We're all ignorant by one standard if not by another, but we

ought not to excuse indifference and laziness in the face of the unorthodox. 4

Any self-styled expert who resents the foregoing can call his own bluff by investigating the mystery of instantaneous holocausts in automobiles. "Liverpool Echo," April 7, 1938—a Birkenhead truck driver burned to death at Upton-by-Chester, England. He was incinerated in the cabin of his vehicle. Police gave evidence that the gasoline tank was intact and undamaged, the door of the cabin opened easily, but the interior was "a veritable furnace." The jury returned the verdict: "Accidental death," and remarked that there was nothing to show how the accident had occurred.

Same month, same year, we got a translated report taken from an unnamed Dutch paper, saying that a Dutchman named Willy Ten Bruik had been lugged out of his car near Nimegen. Willy was a cinder. The car was little damaged; doors opened, gas tank intact.

"Sheffield Independent," April 8, 1938—G. A. Shepherdson drove past a new housing estate near Hessle, Yorkshire, England, waved cheerily to acquaintances, and suffered compulsory cremation one minute later. He was burned to death "with startling suddenness." Experts said they were completely puzzled. The gasoline tank of Shepherdson's car was full and untouched, the doors opened easily but inside was the carbonized body.

An early 1949 "Sheffield Star" reported that the body of an unknown man was dragged out of his undamaged car, near Hessle, Yorkshire,—where Shepherdson got his! "Too badly burned to identify." Doors opened, tank intact.

Now let us show you how many incidents can be found in a very small space of time, leaving you to estimate (how many more have occurred in the world through the centuries.) It is a matter for a mathematical genius.

"Liverpool Echo," January 7, 1939—Mrs. N. Edwards, Makin Street, Walton, Liverpool, England, burned to death by her own clothes which caught fire—nobody knows how. "There was no fire or light in the house at the time." "Reynolds News," June 12, 1948—Butterworth (England) woman burned to death when her clothes "inexplicably" caught fire. "There was nothing to account for it." "Liverpool Echo," July 30, 1938—Woman burned to death on cruiser in Norfolk Broads, England. A policeman said, "Apparently her clothes caught fire," but it beat him how they did it.

Chelmsford (England) woman burned to death in the middle of a dance floor, cause unknown. After hearing all the evidence, Coroner L. F. Beccles said, "From all my experience I have never come across a case as mysterious as this!"—"Daily Telegraph," September 20, 1938.

"Sheffield Star," December 28, 1938—Mrs. Amelia Ridge burned to death because. Just because. "Daily Telegraph," same date, gave a small list of mysterious torchings: Sarah Pegler at Aston Street, Birmingham; Ellen Wright at Melbourne Street, Carlisle; Harriet Lawless at Battersby Lane, Warrington; Harriet Garner at Lind Street, Walton, Liverpool. In this last case the son, Joseph Garner, testified that he found his mother lying amid flaming bedclothes, with no other fire or light in the room. She had been "totally un-

able to explain what had happened."

"Liverpool Echo," January 2, 1939—Mrs. Selina Broadhurst, Wrexham, burned to a crisp by her own clothes in circumstances where it was not possible. "Reynolds News," November 6, 1938—Mrs. Sarah Butcher was incinerated in a blaze that also devoured her son, Fred, at Summer Street, Stroud, England. Would-be rescuers were driven back by the fury of the flames. Same paper, one week earlier—an identical tragedy in Elswick Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. "Daily Telegraph" and others, all on the same date, December 27, 1938—Mrs. Florence Hill at Croydon, England, Mrs. Agnes Flight at Brixton, England, Mrs. Louisa Gorringer at Downham, Kent, England, all inexplicably burned to death. James Duncan, Ballina, Co. Mayo, Ireland, became a pillar of flaming agony in his own bedroom. "So fierce the fire . . . that rescuers were unable to approach."

Some of these folk were old, some bedridden, but none were even near a light. All were described as "mysteries."

"Daily Telegraph," December 14, 1938—William Sanders of Sutton, England, was found dead in his garden. He had a fractured skull, a broken collarbone and a dislocated spine, but evidence showed beyond all doubt that he could not have fallen from any place and that he had not been attacked by anything human. Cause of death given as "laceration of the brain." And they left it at that. What did kill Sanders?

The foregoing is only part harvest for one pre-war year. It doesn't matter where one searches or how far back, the tragedies persist. Have you an answer?