

*A congenital preponderance of
fire elementals makes a man
impervious to fire*



CONSTITUTION OF MAN SERIES
A PREPONDERANCE OF FIRE ELEMENTALS MAKES A MAN IMPERVIOUS TO FIRE

An unusual proportion of Salamandrine properties permits a man to walk through beds of blazing fire unscathed.

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C.H. Hughes, M.D., Editor of the *Alienist and Neurologist*, gives in the April number of the periodical the following:

In a recent number of the *Michigan Medical News*, Dr. S.C. Woodman has made the following singular statement. We append thereto Dr. Woodman's letter on the subject in reply to our [Dr. Hughes'] inquiries.

"I have a singular phenomenon in the shape of a young man living here that I have studied with much interest, and I am satisfied that his peculiar power demonstrates that electricity is the nerve force beyond dispute. His name is William Underwood, age 27 years, and his gift is that of generating fire through the medium of his breath, assisted by manipulations with his hands. He will take anybody's handkerchief and hold it to his mouth, rub it vigorously with his hands while breathing on it, and immediately it bursts into flames and burns until consumed. He will strip, and rinse out his mouth thoroughly, wash his hands, and submit to the most rigid examination to preclude the possibility of any humbug, and then by his breath blown upon any paper or cloth envelope it in flame. He will, when out gunning and without matches, desirous of a fire, lie down after collecting dry leaves, and by breathing on them start the fire and then coolly take off his wet stockings and dry them. It is impossible to per-

¹ Title page illustration by Camilla d'Errico.

suade him to do it more than twice a day, and the effort is attended with the most extreme exhaustion. He will sink into a chair after doing it, and on one occasion, after he had a newspaper on fire, as I narrated, I placed my hand on his head and discovered his scalp to be violently twitching, as if under intense excitement. He will do it at any time, no matter where he is, under any circumstances, and I have repeatedly known of his sitting back from the dinner table, taking a swallow of water, and by blowing on his napkin at once set it on fire. He is ignorant, and says that he first discovered his strange power by inhaling and exhaling on a perfumed handkerchief that suddenly burnt while in his hands. It is certainly no humbug, but what is it?"

PAW PAW, MICHIGAN,
December 20th, 1882.

Dear Sirs:

Yours in regard to [William] Underwood at hand. The article referred to is no joke, but *strictly true*, as can be attested by any resident here, as he has been in the habit and indeed now will do it at any time for a small fee. It is a very singular thing, and in the light of it, although I might not be willing to take as a thesis that electricity is the nerve [102] force, I would be glad to combat the negative. I am wholly unable to understand it unless, as it now seems to me, he generates from his lungs or stomach gas, and then after filling the handkerchief with it sets the gas on fire by a spark of electricity, and this burns the paper or cloth. Either of the editors of our local papers, the *True Northerner* or *Free Press*, will substantiate all.

Very respectfully,

S.C. WOODMAN

To C.H. Hughes, M.D.

To the Editor, *The Theosophist*.

The above has been copied by me from the *Scientific American* of April 28th, 1883, page 264, and I forward it with the hope that it will, if published, be of interest to your readers, and if some further explanation is given by you concerning the nature of the phenomenon from an esoteric point of view, it would perhaps become still more interesting and instructive.

W.D. TILDEN, F.T.S.



Editorial Note by Madame Blavatsky.

The exhalation of fire from the mouth is one of the stock illusions of the itinerant jugglers of various countries. In their case the dried powder of *Lycopodium* is employed, we believe, and the same substance is used in theatrical performances when it is desired to simulate either fire or lightning flashes. It may be that the American human volcano in question employs some such agent to impose upon his spectators, and we are always bound to exhaust the theories of the possible before venturing upon those of the seemingly impossible. Yet, personal character being a prime factor always, we must take it for granted that Mr. Underwood is above such trickery, since his phenomenon has such respectable endorsement. If then we turn to occult science to seek for an explanation, we will find that there are cases on record of individuals who emit from their persons a luminous vapour or aura, under high states of nervous exaltation. Sometimes it appears as a wild radiance, sometimes as a lambent flame, and in others as an electric or rather odic coruscation.¹ Rarely it is observed by day, but most frequently by night, and still oftener while the subject is deeply engaged in his devotions. A noted example is that of [103] the fasting Peter of Alcantara,² a Catholic devotee. The halo, or nimbus which painters depict about the heads and bodies of saints, yogis, gods and goddesses, is familiar to everyone, and is a memento of this natural phenomenon. But the light in these instances is of an odic character, and though flaming and flickering like fire, has none of its combustive property. Writers upon sorcery and mediumship have frequently recorded anecdotes of the bursting forth of flames from the doors, windows, chimneys or roofs of buildings without apparent cause, and in fact at times when there was no fire in any part of the house, nor any articles stored within, such as cotton, cotton-waste, greased rags, or other substances liable to spontaneous combustion. These mysterious burnings have been sometimes attended with stone-showers or throwings, equally unaccountable. The Spiritualists affirm that the agents in all these cases have been spirits; but unless they be the fire-elementals or Salamanders of the Rosicrucians, they must be queer "Spirits." Among modern Western mediums, equally with Hindus of the same class, are many who can handle burning coals, red-hot iron, and molten metal with perfect impunity, and walk through beds of blazing fire unscathed. In America there is a female medium named Mrs. Suydam, who has this gift, and in Europe a late, and the most noted of male mediums, has not only exhibited the feat of handling hot coals without receiving harm, but even laid them upon the heads of non-mediums in the company present or upon newspapers or books, without injury to person or property. The explanation in both classes of cases is that the fire-proof individual is a medium for these fire elementals, and contains in himself an unusual proportion of Salamandrine properties, the result of an abnormal combination of elemental forces in his foetal development. Normally, a human being contains the elementals of all the four kingdoms in almost equal proportions, any slight preponderance of one or the other determining the so-called "temperament."



¹ See J.W. Jackson's *Lectures on Mesmerism*, pp. 116-17.

² [San Pedro de Alcantara, 1499-1562, Spanish Franciscan friar, canonized in 1669.]