

Selected Articles.

CURIOSITIES OF COMBUSTION.

BY PROFESSOR CHARLES A. SEELY.

"Combustion is the disengagement of heat and light which accompanies chemical combination." This is a very good definition, the best one I remember to have seen. I intend this as a high compliment for I have observed that school-book definitions often need more explanation than the thing defined. It is a very interesting and profitable mental exercise, to discover the heterogeneous things that a definition owing to its inaccuracy of languages, is obliged to cover. Any book on the physical sciences will furnish good material. It is a very ancient amusement. Plato once defined man to be a "two-legged animal without feathers," a definition of man about as precise as ever was made. But Diogenes plucked a goose, and throwing it into the Academy, exclaimed, "Plato, behold your man." So I might bring phosphorous and rotten wood which shine in the dark and to a delicate thermometer exhibit heat, as cases of combustion. But Dr. Ure, the author of the definition, might very aptly retort, as did the preacher whose sermon was criticised "better it if you can." And I should be forced to reply, "I cannot unless you allow me to use a great many more words."

The combustion with which we are most familiar is that where oxygen is one of the elements concerned. A very interesting peculiarity of this ordinary combustion is the fact that its beginning requires a high temperature. We consider coal, wood, oil, sulphur, and gunpowder very combustible, but there is no combustion, although oxygen be present, until they be set on fire or ignited, that is, some portion be heated up to a high temperature. Oxygen is very different from other supporters of combustion in this respect, for with them combustion begins at ordinary temperatures. If suddenly chlorine were put in the air in place of oxygen, or if the oxygen should assume its active form known as ozone, every thing combustible upon the earth would take fire and be consumed with fervent heat in a few hours. This property of oxygen, to which I allude, is another of the striking evidences of the adorable Wisdom everywhere to be found in the order of nature.

The temperature of ignition varies greatly for the different combustibles. Phosphorus, sulphur, and sodium take fire below a red heat, while the ignition point with others is so high that we have an opportunity to see them burn. The combustible nature of iron, lead, copper, silver, and gold, was not even suspected until a recent period. We know now that they burn even more readily and fiercely than any common fire, when once they are kindled; if I wanted to make the most gorgeous pyrotechnic display I would make a bon-fire in which I would burn up a few tons of iron. The ignition temperature have been determined for only a few substances. Here is useful work to be commended to the rising generation of chemists. The facts ought to be determined and put into the form of a table.

The philosophy of spontaneous combustion is now well determined and can be made plain to everyone. Heat is always a product of oxidation, or in other words, heat always accompanies the union of oxygen with another substance. The amount of heat produced is, moreover, exactly proportioned to the amount of oxidation. If a day or a year be employed in burning (oxidizing) a pound of coal the amount of heat in the two cases is precisely the same. The rapidity of burning has nothing to do with quantity of heat; it is a question of intensity, quite another thing. The pound of coal burning in a minute gives an intense heat and consequently light, but let the heat be distributed over the space of a year, and it would require an instrument far more delicate than our senses to detect that which would appear in a second or a day. In slow burning or oxidation the heat is simply diluted in time or space. Let a child's supply of candy be divided and administered constantly, and in the homeopathic doses, he would never suspect that candy had any taste.

The rust which is produced from a pound of iron indicates or represents an amount of heat sufficient to raise nearly 3,000 pounds of water 1° Fah; that is such a quantity of heat was produced by the rusting or oxidation. As the specific heat of iron is one-ninth (nearly) that of water, this quantity of heat is sufficient to raise the temperature of one pound of iron to the temperature of 27,000°, or nine pounds to 3,000° which last is without doubt above the ignition point of iron. Suppose the heat of rusting be retained in rust. Would not we have a spontaneous combustion which would be fearful even to think of?

In ordinary oxidation the heat leaks away by radiation and conduction as fast as it is generated. Let us see how we may retain it. As oxidation takes place only at the surface it is plain that its rapidity will be increased just as we increase the surface. Thus, a pound of iron extended so as to have double the surface will be rusted in half the time, with one-hundredth the surface in one-hundredth the time. Suppose the pound of iron to be originally in the form of a ball and that we divide it successfully into balls smaller and smaller. The surface of balls are to each other as the squares of their diameters, while their weights are as the cubes of their diameters, and the ratio of the surfaces to the weights is constantly increasing as the division goes on. It is evident that by so dividing and increasing the surface a point might be reached where the heat would be generated by oxidation more rapidly than it could leak away, and that thus the ignition temperature would be reached when combustion would ensue.

This is no speculation. I can prove the facts by actual experiments, dividing the iron and exhibiting it taking fire, with far less labor than I have put on this article. Prussian blue is a compound of iron, nitrogen, and carbon. If it be heated to a bright red heat in a tube or crucible from which the air is excluded, till fumes cease to be evolved, the iron is left finely divided. When the apparatus is cool the iron may be taken out and on exposure to the air it will immediately take fire. Ordinary lead is not easily set on fire. But get it in fine powder! Fill a small vial with tartrate of lead, fit in a clay stopper, set the vial in a sand