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PIERRE BOUCHARDON

LE CRIME
□ □ DU □ □
CHATEAU
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BITREMONT



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The 1850 murder of Gustave Fougnyes in Belgium is famous because it's the true story of the first documented nicotine murder. It was the inspiration for the 1925 novel "Le crime du chateau de Bitremont" by Pierre Bouchardon.



Chateau de Bitremont

We probably know nicotine best today for its role in creating the highly addictive chemistry of tobacco, a reason that so many people find it difficult to quit smoking even though the habit is so conclusively linked to disorders ranging from heart disease to lung cancer. The compound has such a potent effect on the brain that some researchers have even suggested that it provides a gateway for drugs such as cocaine.

Nicotine is a rapidly effective poison, in the same group as morphine, strychnine and aconitine. Its initial effect is that of a stimulant, but in poisonous doses it produces nausea and cardiac irregularity, eventually paralysing the respiratory system. The lethal dose for an adult is between 60 and 90mg. One cigar contains enough nicotine to kill two adults if it were administered by injection. Death may take place within a few minutes. Homicidal use of nicotine is rare but its use in horticultural sprays has led to many cases of accidental poisoning through skin absorption. Although by 1847, tests had been devised to identify vegetable poisons in their pure forms in the laboratory, this did not help in cases of suspicious deaths, when the poison would be embedded in the organs of the victim. Scientists were unable to isolate vegetable poisons from animal tissue. When the tissue was destroyed - the normal procedure in the search for arsenic - the poison was destroyed as well. The leading toxicologist of the day, Mathieu Orfila, lamented that the alkaloid poisons, as these vegetable substances were known, might remain forever undetectable. He was proved wrong only three years later in this remarkable case with the help of one completely obsessive chemist named Jean Servais Stas.

Count Hyppolyte Visart de Bocarmé was part Belgian and part Dutch, and, in keeping with his extraordinary lifestyle, he had been born on the high seas in the middle of a storm. His family had been bound for Java, where his father held the post of Governor. The boy had been neglected during his childhood, and was allowed to run wild. In later years the legend sprang up that he had been suckled by a lioness. Later on, his father had become a tobacco dealer and then a hunter. It was not until the family returned to Europe that the boy received any education, when he displayed an interest in agriculture and science. He was a badly behaved youth, well known to be a swindler and womaniser. When he was 24 his father died, and he succeeded to the title and took over the Château de Bitremont, near the Belgian community of Bury. He rather fancied himself a chemist also. He built a laboratory in the wash house of his new rambling estate, ostensibly for the purpose of brewing up perfumes. But in the summer of 1850 – according to one of the gardeners – he also bought an astonishingly large quantity of tobacco leaves and stored them in a barn. Slowly the leaves began to disappear though.

Bocarmé liked to live an extravagant life, and in 1843, to increase the family fortunes, he married a bourgeoisie, Lydie Fougny, whom he believed to be wealthy. Her father was an eccentric apothecary, and had raised his two children, Lydie and a sickly son, Gustave, to aim for marriage into a titled family. After the marriage, Bocarmé found that Lydie was not nearly as wealthy as he had imagined. The couple became famous for wild parties and extravagant hunts, and her income was not nearly enough to support this, not to mention the upkeep of the château and its staff of servants. This situation created some tension between the couple, and violent quarrels would alternate with bouts of mutual passion. Both husband and wife were expecting a large inheritance when her father died, but instead it was just an increase in her annual income that was far below what they expected, and needed to support their extravagant lifestyle. The old man left almost all his money to his son, Gustave. The brother, long-troubled by ill health. Gustave had made his own will, handily leaving all to his sister in the event of his death. Their hope was that Gustave, would die unmarried, in which case, all his vast possessions would go to his sister. This was a likely scenario, as Gustave, who had never been strong, had been very ill since the amputation of a leg.

In the spring of 1850, Gustave bought the château of an impoverished noble family, and there were rumours of his interest in the former owner, Demoiselle de Dudzech. By the fall of 1850, as it would turn out, the Count had distilled two large bottles of pure nicotine from his tobacco leaves. Investigators would later discover the bodies of farm cats and birds that he'd apparently used for testing his poison with. If you spend any time studying poisoners, you learn that they're by nature planners and plotters and very patient with it. Who knows how long the Count might have waited on his brother-in-law's ill health. That winter though, Gustave forced his hand. He had decided to get married to Demoiselle de Dudzech.

On 20th November, messengers arrived at the Bocarmés to say that Gustave would be arriving at noon to announce his engagement. A number of curious preparations were made for this event. The children, who usually ate with the family, were instead sent away to the nursery. The countess as well had insisted on serving the meal herself when normally she liked to be waited upon.

That afternoon, the maid, Emmerance, heard a sound from the dining room as if someone had fallen to the floor, and Gustave crying out "Oh, oh, pardon, Hypolyte!" She went to see what the matter was, but as she approached the dining room door she collided with the

Countess who was rushing out, closing the door behind her. The Countess ran into the kitchen, fetched some vessels of hot water, and ran back to the dining room. Soon afterwards she called to Emmerance, and Gilles the coachman, for help, saying that Gustave had been taken ill, and she thought he had had a stroke.

They found Gustave lying on the floor of the dining room. Bocarmé was in a state of great excitement. He ordered vinegar to be brought to him, and proceeded to pour glass after glass of it down Gustave's throat. He then ordered that Gustave should be undressed and his body washed with vinegar. The Countess rushed to the laundry with Gustave's clothes and threw them into hot soapy water. Gilles, after throwing more and more vinegar over Gustave at Bocarmé's excited orders, was then told to remove the body to Emmerance's room and lay it on the bed.

The Countess was up most of that night scrubbing the floor of the dining room. She also scrubbed Gustave's crutches, but later decided to burn them. Early in the morning the Count took a knife and began scraping the dining room floorboards. He continued in this task until late afternoon. Eventually, the Count and Countess, by now both exhausted, went to bed. At this point the servants met together and discussed what to do. All of them were alarmed and terrified by the events of the last twenty-four hours. They decided to go to the priest and tell their story. By the time they had done so, rumour had also reached the examining magistrate in Tournai that Gustave Fougny had died an unnatural death.

The examining magistrate, Heughebaert, arrived in Bury accompanied by three gendarmes and three surgeons. He was sceptical of the rumours and so, leaving the gendarmes behind in Bury, arrived at the walled and moated château with only the surgeons and the town clerk for company. The fireplace of the dining room was filled with ashes, and it was clear that books and papers had been burned there, while the dining room floor was littered with wood shavings. At first the Count refused to see the magistrate, but eventually he was obliged to appear. When Heughebaert asked to see the body he was led reluctantly to a darkened room, and when the Countess refused to draw the curtains he did so himself. Bocarmé tried to hide Gustave's face with his hands, but it was apparent that this was anything but a natural death. The young man's face was badly cut, and the mouth appeared burned and blackened.

Heughebaert ordered that the body be examined at once. The doctors carried it to the coach-house, and two hours later, announced their verdict. The mouth, tongue, throat and stomach showed distinct corrosive burns and they believed that Gustave had died from drinking some corrosive liquid, probably sulphuric acid. Heughebaert supervised the removal from the body of all the organs that might be useful for a chemical examination. They were sealed in vessels containing pure alcohol. He then placed the Count and Countess under arrest.

Once back at Tournai, Heughebaert engaged a carriage with fast horses and went to Brussels with the specimens. There was only one man he wanted to examine the remains, a professor of chemistry called Jean Stas. Stas was at thirty seven the leading chemist in the country. When he found the laboratory at the École Militaire where he taught, to be poorly equipped, he set up equipment in his own home, turning the whole house from cellar to roof garden into a laboratory. In later years, ministers and kings would come to visit him there. It was in this home laboratory between the months of December 1850 and February 1851, that Stas made the breakthrough - he devised the method for demonstrating the presence of vegetable poisons in human tissue.

He was quickly able to rule out sulphuric acid as a cause of death. Like most of his contemporaries, he used his sense of taste and smell to identify chemicals. He at once remarked to Heughebaert on the smell of vinegar, and was told of the repeated washing of the body in this substance. It occurred to him that this might well have been done to mask the presence of another poison. After a number of experiments, he identified a smell which reminded him somewhat of conium, the poison found in hemlock, and realised that he might be dealing with a vegetable poison. Further purification of the material resulted in a brownish substance with the unmistakable smell of tobacco. He was able to submit this to the laboratory tests for pure nicotine, and obtained a positive result. Stas sent his extract to Heughebaert with a letter suggesting that he investigate whether the Bocarmé's had ever had nicotine in their possession.

Heughebaert at once went to search the château and questioned the servants. The feeble minded gardener told him that during the summer, he had helped the Count prepare eau-de-cologne, and for this purpose, the Count had bought enormous quantities of tobacco leaves and made extracts of these in a laboratory in the castle washhouse. The resultant extract had been placed in a cupboard in the dining room, and the following day the Count had removed all the equipment from the washhouse. In the next few days, Heughebaert was able to trace a number of chemists to whom Bocarmé had gone to seek advice about the extraction of nicotine from tobacco leaves. He found the buried bodies of cats and ducks which Bocarmé had experimented upon, and eventually he found the equipment, hidden behind some panelling in the château. He sent the animal remains to Stas, as well as samples of wood from the floorboards and even the trousers the gardener had worn when preparing the "eau-de-cologne". Stas found traces of nicotine in all of them.

So how had Stas made the breakthrough? Vegetable poisons are alkaline, and soluble in both water and alcohol. The substances of which the human body are made are soluble either in water or in alcohol, or else they are insoluble in both. If the material is reduced to a pulp, and exposed to alcohol to which an acid has been added, the resultant filtrate will take with it those substances soluble in alcohol together with the poison, leaving behind the insoluble bodily substances. Water could then be used to dissolve the poison, leaving behind those bodily substances insoluble in water. The crucial thing therefore was the mixture of alcohol and acid. The organs had, it will be recalled, been preserved in alcohol - and the acid? Bocarmé had added this himself - the vinegar.

At the trial in the following May, the two defendants had no recourse but to accuse each other. The Countess admitted that she had helped to murder her brother but said that her husband had compelled her by brute force. The Count admitted he had made the poison but said he had stored it in a wine bottle and his wife had given it to her brother. It was a feeble lie that fooled no-one. It was obvious from the appearance of the body that Gustave had died violently, probably being held down while the nicotine was forced down his throat. Bocarmé must have thought that his rank would protect him. A court reporter wrote of him "His air of assurance is prodigious". His counsel painted the Countess as a designing woman and sought the sympathy of the court by pointing out that his client had had a disturbed upbringing. The Count was found guilty of murder, but the Countess, to the indignation of the populace was acquitted, it is said because the jury could not bear to send a lady to the guillotine. There were no such scruples about her husband, however, and despite his petitioning the King, Bocarmé went to the scaffold on July 19, 1851. His last request was for a clean death; he asked that the blade be very sharp

Stas earned lasting fame, and his method of identifying the alkaloid poisons is fundamentally the same as that used today.