It has often been said that the coward's method of murder is by poisoning. It is one of the oldest ways, and certainly the most popular, especially among those for whom assault weapons are not readily available, or those who would prefer to dispose of their victims without calling too much attention to themselves. While today's poisoners use everything from ancient poisons to legal drugs in excess, many still continue in the tradition of the poisoners of old by using classic poisons such as arsenic, the king of poisons; and strychnine, the worst way to die by poison. So perhaps it is a fitting (if dubious) tribute to these 'traditionalists' that an entry be dedicated to them.

In the world of poison homicide, there are three things: the supplier, the poisoner, and the poisoners' club.

**Purveyors of Poisons**

It has to begin somewhere. While poison might have been available to the populace back in the old days, there were those who preferred a more discreet method of poison transaction. Enter the purveyors of poison of the fairer sex, who were very often poisoners themselves.

**Toffana**

In an age when the White Look was fashionable, a 17th-Century Neapolitan woman named Toffana invented an arsenic-based face paint called *Acqua Toffana*, supposedly a miraculous substance oozing from the tomb of St Nicholas di Bari. While the potion was marketed as a cosmetic, female customers were advised to pay Toffana a visit to learn the proper uses of the makeup. Many women became considerably rich widows after wearing the cosmetic on their cheeks when their spouses were around. Because of her dread of being found out, Toffana had taken to continually changing her name and residence and seeking ecclesiastical protection, which enabled her to continue her ways for years.

Unfortunately for Toffana, the authorities eventually discovered her after about 600 dead husbands, and adroitly smeared her reputation by spreading rumours of her poisoning the city's wells and fountains, causing the populace to turn against her. She was arrested, tortured and strangled in prison in 1709.

**Catherine Deshayes**

Another 17th-Century supplier who catered to the needs of women who no longer wanted their husbands around, Catherine Deshayes (also known as 'La Voison') was herself an infamous poisoner when she wasn't going about her midwifery and fortune-telling business. Apparently, so great was her reputation that her clients included Olympe Mancini, the Italian Comtesse de Soissons and mother of Prince Eugene of Savoy, and her sister Marie Anne; Francoise Athenais de Rochechouart, the Marchioness of Montespan and mistress of King Louis XIV; and Marshal Luxembourg, the duke and peer of France and military hero. Unfortunately, Deshayes' luck ran out when she was involved in a failed plot to assassinate the King. She was tried and convicted before the Chambre Ardente, found guilty, and subsequently burned as a sorceress in 1680.
Individual Poisoners

While there are thousands - perhaps millions - of notorious and obscure poisoners, perhaps a few of them deserve a little more attention than others:

Aconite: Dr Henry George Lamson

Year: 1881
Motive: Financial gain

Dr Lamson's story is one of many in which the good doctor turns bad. After graduating from medical school in Paris, he served with distinction in the French Ambulance Corps during the Franco-Prussian War. In 1876, he went into active service in the Balkans. For his efforts he was decorated by both the Serbian and Romanian governments. Just two years later, he married Kate John, a wealthy ward of Chancery.

Unfortunately, his medical career began spiraling downwards. His addiction to morphine, which had started during his stay in the Balkans, drew him to involvement in destructive activities ranging from investing his wife's money in a series of failed medical practices to masquerading as a famous doctor and issuing false cheques. His financial crisis led him to consider alternative means of acquiring money. This resulted in the poisoning of his wife's youngest brother, Percy (who ironically worshipped him as a hero and clung onto his every word) to gain the boy's share of inheritance money through Kate. The police eventually smoked out Lamson, and he was hanged on 18 April, 1882.

Antimony: Dr Edward William Pritchard

Year: 1865
Motive: Unknown

When investigating a fire that had broken out in the home of Dr Edward William Pritchard and Mary Jane Pritchard (née Taylor) in 1863, police found the body of a maid in the decimated attic, whose face, arms and trunk were badly charred, but whose stocking-encased legs resisted flames. The strange condition of her body and the circumstances under which she was found were enough to cause tongues to wag. Understandably, the Pritchards decided to avoid scandal and moved house.

Shortly after, Mary Jane took ill with vomiting and diarrhea - a condition diagnosed as a chill by her physician husband - and moved to Edinburgh, where she convalesced in the home of her parents. Mysteriously, her symptoms returned after she came back. The second bout of illness was enough to draw Mary Jane's mother to her bedside, but illness struck Mrs. Taylor as well when she, her daughter and the cook all fell ill after eating tapioca pudding. By the end of the month, she had lapsed into a coma. The doctor who attended to her reported that she seemed to be under the influence of a very powerful narcotic - which was understandable, as Mrs. Taylor dealt with her neuralgia with frequent doses of Battley's Sedative Solution. Mysteriously, it was discovered after her death that the concoction contained both aconite and antimony salts, which were not in the original recipe. Meanwhile, Mary Jane died following ingestion of a pick-me-up prepared by her husband, while a servant who tasted it became violently ill. The death certificate reported death by gastric fever. However, an anonymous letter to the Procurator-Fiscal persuaded the police to exhume the bodies of both women, both of which were found to contain high levels of antimony. Furthermore, the distribution of the poison in Mary Jane's body showed that she had been slowly poisoned over an extended period of time.
Dr Pritchard was hanged for his crime on 28 July, 1865 in front of 100,000 spectators. He was the last man to be publicly hanged in Glasgow.

**Arsenic: Frederick Henry Seddon**

*Year: 1911*  
*Motive: Financial gain*

Although the annals of crime are filled with despicable poisoners who used arsenic as a murder weapon, none of them are any competition for Frederick Seddon, who had the reputation for being the single meanest murderer in the history of poisoning.

Seddon was a 40-year-old Superintendent of Collectors for a national insurance company. He had a wife, five children, and a live-in father - and an unhealthy obsession with the acquisition of money. To rake in extra cash, he ran a second-hand clothes business in his wife’s name, speculated in the buying and selling of property, and let out the second floor of his house to the woman from whom he would eventually profit greatly.

The woman was Eliza Barrow, a 49-year-old spinster, whose friend's ten-year-old nephew Ernest Grant moved in with her in the summer of 1910. Money began mysteriously finding its way from Barrow to Seddon. It began with Seddon becoming Barrow's adviser in financial matters, and the subsequent transference of £1,500 of India Stock to Seddon in return for a small annuity and remission of rent. By 1911, two Camden properties had found their way into Seddon's coffers as Eliza Barrow's annuity rose to £3 per week. As Lloyd George's budget and the Birkbeck financial crash became news, the spinster withdrew £200 from her savings bank (acting on Seddon’s advice) and placed the money in the care of her landlord.

In August, the Seddons, Ms Barrow and her young ward all went on vacation to Southend. Upon their return, Frederick Seddon's daughter Maggie was dispatched to buy a threepenny packet of flypaper from the chemist's. One month later, Eliza Barrow took ill.

When Barrow died in September that year, Frederick Seddon became the sole executor and guardian of Ernie Grant, and wasted no time in appropriating Ms Barrow’s remaining stock and property, claiming that he had had to dig into his own pockets for the funeral expenses and the cost of Ernie's upkeep. Unfortunately, all this incurred the wrath of Ms Barrow's cousins, the Vonderahes, who had themselves expected to inherit. They drove the police to exhume Ms Barrow's body, whereupon the senior Home Office specialist William Willicox and young pathologist Bernard Spilsbury (who had already proved himself in the Harvey Crippen case, and who would go on to become the adviser to the greatest deception in the history of modern military strategy, Operation Mincemeat) found damning proof of arsenic poisoning.

Despite a fierce battle put up by the defense, who vehemently claimed death by chronic ingestion of an arsenic-containing medicinal preparation; and despite Seddon's preposterous claim that Ms Barrow might have drunk water from the dishes of flypaper placed in her room to keep away flies, the jury pronounced him guilty, no doubt influenced by his loathsome arrogance in court. He was subsequently hanged in Pentonville Prison on 18 April, 1912.
Arsenic: Mary Ann Cotton

Years: 1865 - 1872
Motive: Financial gain/Convenience

The award for the largest number of family members murdered goes to Mary Ann Cotton, who reputedly poisoned as many as 21 people with arsenic.

Mary Ann Cotton's childhood was not a happy one. Her father had died falling into a mineshaft when she was eight, and she only narrowly escaped the workhouse because her mother remarried. Leaving behind the hard discipline of her stepfather at the age of 16, Mary Ann brought with her the one valuable lesson that money had to keep on coming in, no matter what the method.

Her adult life consisted of a string of bad marriages and deaths. Four of her five children from her first marriage to William Mowbray died in infancy or soon after - a suspiciously high rate, even at a time when child mortality was high - and her husband followed shortly, of sudden intestinal disorder. Similarly, her second husband, George Ward, a man she met while working at the Sunderland Infirmary developed health problems not long after the marriage, and subsequently died. Her third husband, a pallion shipwright by the name of James Robinson, escaped death, but three of his children went to the grave. Meanwhile, Mary Ann Cotton's ailing mother had died of stomach problems in Mary Ann's able hands, as had her remaining daughter by William Mowbray.

When Robinson, already suspicious of Mary Ann's persistence that he insures his life, discovered that his wife was running up debts behind his back and coercing his remaining children to pawn household valuables for her, he threw her out into the arms of a widower named Frederick Cotton, the brother of her friend Margaret. Following the marriage, Mary Ann quickly insures the lives of Cotton and his two sons. Unfortunately for Cotton, his wife's unfaithful streak led to her reacquaintance with former paramour Joseph Nattrass, and Cotton's death. Nattrass's luck didn't hold out for very long, however, as Mary Ann found a more suitable partner in an excise officer named John Quick-Manning, and he died shortly after two other Cotton children - but not before he'd revised his will leaving everything to his dear wife.

And then Charles Cotton died.

His death proved to be Mary Ann Cotton's undoing. Prior to his death, Mary Ann had talked to Thomas Riley, a minor government official, about the prospect of sending the boy to a workhouse as he was getting in the way of her marriage to Quick-Manning. When told that she would have to accompany him, she declared that 'I won't be troubled long. He'll go like the rest of the Cotton family.' So naturally, when Charles - a healthy young lad - died, suspicions were immediately raised. It was recalled that Mary Ann had dispatched a neighbor to buy arsenic for her, as Charles was not old enough to make the purchase. It certainly did not help Mary Ann's case that, instead of fetching the doctor upon her son's death, she had instead tried to cash in on his insurance. Quick-Manning, distressed by the rumors surrounding his to-be wife's supposed activities, severed all connections.

Autopsies carried out upon Joseph Nattrass and Charles Cotton revealed the presence of arsenic. It took only 90 minutes for the jury to find Mary Ann Cotton guilty for the murder of Charles Cotton, and for the judge to sentence her to death by hanging. Her execution was carried out in Durham prison on 29 March, 1873, but because of logistic misjudgment, she was left to dangle for three minutes instead of dying a quick death.
Arsenic/Miscellaneous: Vera Renczi

Years: Mid-20th Century
Motive: Jealousy

While most other poisoners were killing off loved ones for money or getting rid of unwanted relatives, the Bucharest aristocrat Vera Renczi (born in 1903) murdered her men because of a deeply implanted belief that males could not be trusted. At the first ‘sign’ of infidelity - even the most innocent glance at another woman, or the mere thought of her mate in the arms of another woman - these men received their gift of poison, and a custom-made coffin in her wine cellar. A story would invariably be fabricated about the men running off. By the time a scorned wife (whose unfaithful husband never returned from the Renczi residence) set the police upon her, Vera had sent two husbands, a son (who had stumbled upon her wayward occupation and attempted to blackmail her) and about 32 lovers to the grave. It is said that her story may have inspired Joseph Kesselring’s play *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Chloroform: Dr Thomas Neill Cream

See the section on Strychnine for details.

Cyanide: John Tawell

Year: 1845
Motive: Concealment of affair

The John Tawell murder case is unique in that it was the first case in which a murderer was apprehended with the newly-invented electric telegraph. It may not be an exciting fact now, but this was back in 1845, only 14 years since Faraday discovered the means of generating electricity on a practical scale.

The victim was a woman named Sarah Hart. On the evening of 1 January, 1845 she was found in bed by a neighbor who had heard her screaming: a man had been seen entering and leaving Sarah’s home twice in the same day. When another neighbor tried to pour water down the woman’s throat, foam rose to the woman’s lips. Another person who had responded to the screams was the vicar of Upton-cum-Chumley, who had the good sense to take note of the neighbor’s description of the suspect and rushed off to intercept him at the Slough train station.

By then the train had already left, and no doubt the murderer was inside, feeling smug about getting away with murder. Unfortunately for him, the train station he departed from was equipped with the newly-invented telegraph, and a message (now famous) was sent to Paddington:

*A murder has just been committed at Salt Hill and the suspected murderer was seen to take a first-class ticket to London by the train that left Slough at 7.42pm. He is in the garb of a Quaker with a brown great coat on which reaches his feet. He is in the last compartment of the second first-class carriage.*

The telegram resulted in the arrest of one John Tawell, a Quaker druggist.

Meanwhile, back at Salt Hill, H Montague Champneys, the doctor whose job it was to autopsy Sarah’s body, reported smelling prussic acid upon opening the body. Because he found no anomaly
other than inflammation of the lungs, he summarily bottled up the contents of the stomach and sent it to Mr. Cooper, the Analytical Chemist and Lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence, along with the bottle of beer and tumbler containing a mixture of beer and water which was found at the scene of death. The bottle was found to contain cyanide. It was later discovered that on the day of the murder, John Tawell had purchased 2 drachms of Scheele's Prussic Acid from a chemist at Bishopsgate Street in London, claiming it was for external application to varicose veins.

Gradually the facts surrounding the murder were revealed. Sarah Hart was John Tawell's lover. They had met when Sarah became a nurse to John's late wife Mary, and the consummation of their affair had led to the birth of two children. Unfortunately, by this time Tawell had fallen in love with Quaker widow, and all that stood in the way of their marriage was Sarah.

Tawell was eventually found guilty. In a written confession to the jail chaplain, Tawell admitted that he'd committed the murder to prevent his new wife from discovering the illicit affair. He was hanged on 28 March that year in front of 10,000 people.

**Cyanide: John Kuklinski**

*Years: 1981 - ?  
Motive: Financial gain/Personal reasons*

Although John 'Iceman' Kuklinski is better known as a scam artist-hitman who may have killed as many as over a hundred people, he deserves mention in this article for his notorious use of cyanide in some of his murders.

The abuse and humiliation he had suffered at the hands of his father taught him to distance himself emotionally, a case of bad upbringing bringing out the worst in someone. He'd already killed from an early age: at the age of 14, he fatally beat up a bully who was encroaching on his territory. Later, he fell in with Brooklyn-based Ray DeMeo, the most feared hit man for the Gambino family - but it wasn't until he met Robert Prongay, an army-trained demolitions expert, that he learnt the art of cyanide poisoning by spray bottle technique. Some of his victims were targets of his scam trades, but it was also a convenient way for him to dispose of associates who were weak, and who'd already had the police hot on their tracks.

Eventually, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office and the New Jersey State Police Organised Crime Task Force managed to pin him down with the aid of Special Agent Dominick Polifrone, who managed to make contact with Kuklinski as a dealer of cocaine, arms and cyanide (which Kuklinski was in dire need of, having killed his mentor following an argument in 1984). Polifrone asked Kuklinski for help on a hit on a 'rich Jewish kid' who had a lot of money for a cocaine deal. The agreement was to poison an egg sandwich with cyanide (actually quinine) which would be presented to the victim. Kuklinski agreed and left for the hit - but returned to his house instead. Because he had actually applied the fake poison to the egg sandwich, it was possible for the prosecution to prove his intent to commit murder in court. Kuklinski was charged with 5 murders on 25 January, 1988, but in the absence of eyewitness testimony, he escaped execution and was given two life sentences.

Two HBO documentaries were made about him: one in 1991, called *The Iceman Confesses*, and another ten years later, titled *The Iceman Tapes: Conversations With a Killer*. Kuklinski has also cooperated with crime writer Anthony Bruno to publish the book *The Iceman* (1993). He is currently serving time at Trenton state prison.
Hyoscine: Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen

Year: 1910
Motive: Love

Interestingly, although Dr Crippen has the dubious honour of introducing hyoscine as a homicide weapon, it was not the poison that did the victim in.

Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen was a doctor, but he was not your average medical physician. Rather, his medical degree was earned at Cleveland’s Homeopathy Hospital in an age when Samuel Hahnemann and homeopathy were popular in Europe. His wife was Belle Elmore, a mediocre singer whose dreams of becoming a famous diva were undermined by her sheer lack of talent and her vulgarity, though she hoped that her marriage to a man of medical standing would give her the boost up into the opera limelight where she belonged.

Alas for her, the country's attitude towards homeopathy took a plunge shortly after their marriage, and the country hit a financial depression (for which Grover Cleveland was blamed). Crippen moved through a series of dubious medical jobs (which ultimately landed the couple in London) while his wife, instead of basking in the applause of an appreciative audience, found herself doing laundry. At home, domestic life had degenerated into a predictable alternation of vehement arguments and coldness.

Their marriage, mismatched from the start, took a turn for the worse as both husband and wife simultaneously became involved in illicit affairs: Crippen with his secretary and bookkeeper Ethel Le Neve, and Belle with a Chicago prizefighter-turned-showman named Bruce Miller. At some point, rumors of Crippen's affair and Ethel's unexpected pregnancy reached Belle's ears. While nobody knows for certain what happened, it was probably something Belle screamed at her husband during one of their many arguments that caused Crippen to crack. Belle would have to go.

On 17 January, 1910 Crippen purchased five grains of hyoscine hydrobromide (a drug commonly used to quiet violently insane and alcoholic patients at London’s Bedlam Institute), and administered it upon his wife on 1 February. Unfortunately for Crippen, he gave her too much. Instead of being sedated, Belle went into a babbling and screaming frenzy. Alarmed, Crippen threw all plans for poisoning out the proverbial door and shot her in the head.

What now to do with the body? The ribs and spine were both removed from the body, which went into the bathtub for further processing. The bones went into the kitchen hearth. The torso went under the stone blocks of the cellar. The limbs, head and internal organs, weighted down in a sack containing bricks, went into the Holloway Sanitation Canal.

Meanwhile, the women in Belle’s Ladies’ Guild were becoming increasingly suspicious of Belle’s disappearance and Crippen’s lax treatment of Belle’s possessions, most of which wound up on Ethel. Numerous inconsistencies regarding her whereabouts, accounts of her fleeing into the arms of Miller, and her supposed death brought the police to Crippen’s doors. Eventually, Crippen and Ethel decided to escape to Canada. They did not escape the observant eye of the ship’s captain Harry Kendall, who had seen their wanted picture in the day's newspaper, and who subsequently telegraphed the police.

Instead of finding sanctuary in Quebec, the couple found the English police and a warrant for their arrest. Ethel was, predictably, acquitted; Crippen was found guilty, and executed on 23 November, 1910.
**Mercury: Elizabeth Woolcock?**

**Year:** 1873  
**Motive:** Unknown

Elizabeth Woolcock's case is strange in that a conclusion was never reached concerning her innocence or guilt, although she was convicted and executed on 3 January, 1874: the only woman to be hanged in Adelaide Gaol in South Australia.

Her father objected to her marriage to Thomas Woolcock in 1867, and it was years later that she admitted he had been right after all. When Thomas died in September 1873, apparently from prolonged illness, large amounts of mercury were found in his intestines and liver. The prosecution and the jury apparently found this to be damning proof, and convicted Elizabeth of murder.

However, after she died there was great controversy as to whether she actually had a hand in Thomas's death. In a recent re-enactment of her trial by the Adelaide Gaol Preservation Society, the defense pointed out that the lack of bedsores on Thomas's body inferred that he had been cared for by Elizabeth during his illness. They further raised the possibility that Thomas might have been ill with something else, and that his death had been hastened by the mercury-containing medicines administered by his physician Dr Bull, a drug addict who was supposedly infamous for recklessly mixing his prescriptions when under the influence.

Was Woolcock really a murderer, or was she the victim of a miscarriage of justice? It no longer matters for a woman who is buried among the guilty.

**Morphine: Dr Robert Buchanan**

**Year:** 1892  
**Motive:** Financial gain

When committing a murder, a person would do well to remember that golden rule: never open your mouth. It was a rule that Dr Buchanan, for all his intelligence and arrogance, overlooked.

Robert Buchanan was a Scottish-American who did his medical studies in Edinburgh but went into practice in New York in 1886. Nobody actually knows what led to his decision to leave his wife in favor of someone who most people would consider a trollop: Ms Anna Sutherland, the wealthy proprietress of a successful brothel.

Marital bliss did not apparently last very long. In 1892, Mrs. Anna Buchanan fell seriously ill and died shortly after. Her death was reported as brain hemorrhage, and Robert came into a fortune of $50,000. Dissatisfied with the autopsy reports, one of Anna's former amours harassed the medical examiner about the possibility of death by morphine overdose. The examiner flatly dismissed the drug on account of the absence of the pupil pinpointing characteristic of morphine poisoning. Eventually, however, a second post-mortem was carried out by America's foremost toxicologist, Professor Rudolf Witthous, who found one-tenth of a grain of morphine in the deceased's body. By extrapolation, this constituted a fatal dose of 2-3 grains. Robert Buchanan was promptly arrested.

Buchanan might have got off scot-free, if he hadn't been so arrogant about his knowledge of medicine. In conversations with several people, he had disparaged the morphine poisoner Carlyle Harris as a 'bungling amateur' because the latter hadn't the sense to put several drops of belladonna in the victim's eyes to arrest the contraction of the pupils. Other witnesses recalled that Buchanan
had, for no reason, administered the said substance to his wife's eyes shortly before her death.

His exemplary knowledge of circumventing poisoning symptoms damned him, and on 2 July, 1895, Dr Robert Buchanan was shown the electric chair at Sing Sing prison.

**Morphine/Diamorphine (Heroin): Dr Harold Frederick Shipman**

**Years:** ?1971 - 1998  
**Motive:** Unknown

Until the late 20th Century, Mary Ann Cotton was the most notorious serial killer to walk the streets of England. And then a new killer arose to put her record to shame.

**Dr Harold Shipman** had a relatively normal, if cosseted, childhood, under the influence of his doting mother Vera, whose superior attitude governed his choice of friends and his life in general. Many would later say that the image of his dying mother in bed with a cup of tea and a dose of morphine was what ultimately turned him into the murderer that he was; others would claim it was the feeling of superiority above others. 10

Whatever it was, Shipman went to Leeds University, graduated and proceeded to join a medical practice in Yorkshire, where he simultaneously earned a reputation as a respected doctor and a control freak. Unfortunately, his good reputation did not last long when his pilfering of controlled narcotics was found out, thanks to his atrocious forgery skills. He was bounced out of the hospital and into a drug rehabilitation centre, where he spent the next two years. Upon rejoining the world, he found a new job at Donneybrook Medical Centre in Hyde where, once again, he worked himself into the trust of his peers. In 1992, he took leave of hospitals to open his own surgery at Hyde's Market Street.

Who knows how many deaths it took before the local undertaker began noticing a strange trend in the mysterious deaths of Shipman's patients? They were all at home, they died fully-clothed and out of bed, and there was nothing in their residences to indicate that they were critically ill - and they were dying at an alarming rate. (Conveniently, most of them were also cremated.) The undertaker's daughter, not convinced by the assurances received from Shipman, took matters into her own hands by forging an alliance with another doctor, Susan Booth; however, investigations on the matter led to a dead end because Shipman's treatment and death records matched. Shipman was off the hook, but not for long.

Abysmal forgery talents and a callous air of superiority are a bad combination, as would be revealed in Shipman's case. He'd forged the will of a patient, former Hyde mayoress Katherine Grundy, leaving all her money to him. What he never knew was that: (1) Grundy's daughter was a solicitor, and personally handled her legal affairs; and (2) because of Grundy's meticulous nature, the badly-written will might as well have been a neon billboard screaming out 'forgery!' Further investigations revealed that the doctor had backdated his patient records. While it would have been impossible to trace on most doctors' paper records, the self-proclaimed tech whiz had kept his data on his computer, and the machine had dutifully recorded his every alteration of the records.

Meanwhile, post-mortem investigations of Grundy's exhumed body revealed fatal quantities of morphine, which Shipman tried to explain by making her out to be a junkie. As Shipman was put to trial, incriminating evidence poured in, revealing that none of his deceased patients had needed the morphine he prescribed. Indeed, he never attempted to revive his patients, and was quick to pronounce them dead. With the torrent of indisputable evidence against him, Shipman was found guilty on 15 counts of murder and one of forgery, and was given 15 consecutive life sentences.
Until Shipman's suicide in 2004 in Wakefield prison, it was assumed that his victims totaled about 215 people. However, new investigations into Shipman's early practice in Yorkshire revealed that the actual figure was closer to 284 (although Shipman had allegedly confessed to at least 508 while in prison), thus putting him in the murderers' hall of fame as the world's most prolific serial killer to date.

Ricin: Case of the Umbrella Murder

Year: 1978
Motive: Political assassination?

On 7 September, 1978, a Bulgarian writer named Georgi Markov was returning from work with the BBC World Service when he felt a jab in his thigh, coming from behind. Turning round, he saw a man stooping to pick up an umbrella. Markov thought nothing of the incident and returned home, but by nightfall he had developed both a high fever and vomiting.

When Markov was admitted to hospital the next day, the doctors noticed a small area of hardening around the puncture wound, but X-rays revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Markov's condition continued to worsen, however, and when he died on 11 September, he was found to have an incredible white blood cell count of 33,000 per cubic millimeter, over three times the normal level. Investigations yielded a 1.77mm pellet in his thigh, the construction of which revealed that it was clearly intended to contain some kind of toxin. The pathologists narrowed down the list of poisons, based on the symptoms of Markov's case. What they were left with was ricin. The identity of the poison was confirmed when doctors injected a pig with the appropriate amount of the poison. The pig died and its post-mortem appearances were identical to Markov's. The poison was later confirmed, and it was established that a total of 0.2mg of ricin had been inserted in the pellet.

What had happened? Markov had been heard to mutter allegations about political assassination ever since he'd received the jab, but nobody had taken it seriously until news reached Britain of another Bulgarian exile who'd died in Paris after feeling a stabbing jab in his back while on a train trip. All suspicion seemed to point towards the Soviet KGB.

In June 1991, Bulgaria's interior minister Khristo Danov was reported to have said that nothing could convince him it wasn't the Bulgarian secret service that did Georgi Markov in. Later, the blame for Markov's supposed assassination was placed on the country's former communist leader, Todor Zhirkov. In February 1992, former Bulgarian intelligence chief Stoyan Savoc, charged with destroying official papers pertaining to the Markov incident, committed suicide while awaiting trial. Four months later, General Vladimir Todorov, the former Bulgarian intelligence chief, was given 16 months in jail for the destruction of ten volumes of materials pertaining to the case. The man believed to have been the operational commander of the plot, Vasil Kotsev, was never brought to court, having died in an unexplained car accident. The case still remains open.

Strychnine: Dr Thomas Neill Cream

Years: 1877? - 1892
Motive: Hatred

During the Victorian Age, two infamous murderers were running rampant on the streets of England. One was Jack the Ripper. The other was Dr Thomas Neill Cream.

The psychology of Thomas Cream is hard to understand. He mingled with the ladies of the upper
circle and murdered the ladies of the night: he desired these street women, yet at the same time he hated them with a ferocious intensity. Perhaps he even felt himself the self-appointed executioner of those he viewed as the ‘spawns of Lucifer’.

Cream was no stranger to murder by the time he reached London. A Briton who grew up in Canada, he had allegedly poisoned his first wife, whom he’d accidentally got pregnant and was forced to marry. One of his abortion patients was found dead in the woodshed behind his office building, reeking of chloroform. He narrowly avoided imprisonment twice while in Chicago, when two of his patients died under mysterious circumstances, the second one having died of strychnine poisoning. However, an affair with the wife of one of his patients had led to the man’s murder by means of strychnine-laced pills, and, subsequently, to Cream’s incarceration at Joliet, thanks to the testimony of the wife. Instead of serving a life sentence, however, he got out at the end of ten years and moved back to London.

Perhaps it was the involvement of a woman in sending him to jail that reinforced Cream’s confused hatred for womankind. His love-hate dilemma was understandable - in an age of government hypocrisy, when prostitution was denounced and yet prostitutes were allowed to continue roaming the streets, and when Victorian prudishness was giving way to the risqué, it probably didn’t take much to convince him that women were temptresses leading men to evil. Whatever the reason, it soon caused him to kill again.

His modus operandi was this: he would pick up a woman, maybe take her for an evening stroll or adjourn to her place, and slip her some pills, suggesting that she looked a little under the weather, or for the purpose of preventing venereal diseases. He would then promise to meet her again later, and promptly vanish into the night while the woman proceeded to die an agonizing death by strychnine poisoning. Of these victims, only one woman survived - one Lou Harvey (Louisa Harris) who secretly threw away the pills he gave her.

Ultimately, it was Cream’s greed and big mouth that did him in. He’d sent Scotland Yard a letter informing them that the strychnine murderer was a Dr Walter Harper. At the same time, an extortion letter was forwarded to Harper’s father Dr Joseph Harper, promising that if £156 were coughed up, all evidence pointing to Walter would be destroyed. Earlier, he had sent a similar blackmail letter accusing a popular Member of Parliament of the murder of the first victim, extorting a sum of £3,000 from the man. When the police compared notes, it was confirmed that this was the work of the same blackmailer who had blackmailed a further two people for the murder of one Matilda Clover. This confused the police, as her death reportedly was caused by mixing alcohol with sedatives.

While the police were puzzling over this, Cream befriended a detective, John Haynes, and astounded the man by demonstrating uncanny knowledge of the murder cases that surpassed the detective’s own awareness, including the names of two victims that the police had not heard of: Harvey and Clover. The detective found it odd that Cream was able to ‘intuit’ so much regarding the exact whereabouts of the murder and the women’s final moments, and mentioned it to a Scotland Yard friend, Patrick McIntyre. The information gave the police several important investigation leads, and Clover’s exhumed body was found to contain strychnine. All this resulted in Cream’s arrest on 3 June.

Thomas Neill Cream’s fate was sealed the day the woman he’d thought to be dead, Lou Harvey, walked into the courtroom to testify against him. He was found guilty on 21 October, 1892, and hanged on the 16 November. His final words as he dropped - ‘I am Jack’ - still confuse people, though Ripperologists are eager to jump to the conclusion that this was Cream’s final admission of his other identity. However, the fact that Cream was in prison while Jack the Ripper was running around London carving up women, and Cream’s obvious preference for poisons, clears him of these
allegations.

**Strychnine: Thomas Griffiths Wainewright**

**Year:** 1829 - 1830  
**Motive:** Financial gain

Thomas Wainewright's case is evidence that murder by poisoning is not solely reserved for infamous leaders and widows.

From his good upbringing, few would have guessed that the man who would become a famous writer and artist would later become a notorious murderer as well. Brought up by his grandfather, Wainewright was surrounded by the arts from the start. His uncle, Dr George ‘Ralph’ Griffiths, was the editor of the *Monthly Review*, London's first literary magazine, and it was through him that Wainewright was ushered into the art and literary circles of London. He became friends with Wordsworth, Blake and Dickens, painted pieces that apparently were worth exhibiting at the Royal Art Academy, and developed a talent for art criticism. He wrote regularly for journals and magazines, and became a popular figure at dinner parties.

If this sounds like too good a life to be true, well, it was. Because of his extravagant lifestyle, Wainewright soon found himself deep in debt. And like many, he succumbed to temptation. After his marriage to Frances Ward, Wainewright went into the dubious business of forgery to deal with his money problems, but of course this only brought him worse financial difficulties. And then suddenly people started dying.

The first was his uncle George, who had been persuaded to let the Wainewrights lodge at his house. The house went to Wainewright, of course. Almost immediately after he'd invited his mother-in-law and two sisters-in-law to live with his family, Wainewright had one of the girls, Helen, insured by five different companies. His mother-in-law, who'd objected to his attempts to increase the said insurance to £5,000, died from a mysterious painful illness, thus clearing the way for Wainewright to increase Helen's insurance to £20,000. Not surprisingly, Helen followed her mother to the grave four days before Christmas of 1830.

Unfortunately for Wainewright, the insurance company smelled a rat and refused to cough up the money. While Wainewright initially took legal action against them, speculations of these mysterious deaths were beginning to take their toll upon his reputation. He vanished to France, where he spent five years in the company of a fellow lodger who mysteriously died of a painful illness and left £3,000 of insurance money to Wainewright.

While it was never proved, it was hypothesized that Helen's illness had been brought about by antimony poisoning, causing her to exhibit symptoms such as vomiting and nausea. At the same time, a relatively indigestible meal was served to provide a reason for her illness. The final blow was struck with the administration of strychnine, concealed in sweet sticky jam. She might have been told that the bitter strychnine powder was an all-purpose remedy. Experts point out that the convulsions described in all three deaths are consistent with poisoning by strychnine, which would have been easy to procure during this time. Furthermore, Wainewright apparently had several books on poisons in his library, and would have been well-informed on the subject.

Upon his return to England, he was promptly arrested - not for the murders, which could not be proved due to insufficient evidence, but for the forgery he'd committed ten years earlier to gain access to his full inheritance. He was tossed into Newgate Prison, and later transported to Tasmania where he spent the rest of his life working in a chain gang, doing community service and painting
portraits of the local dignitaries and their families.

**Thallium: Graham Young**

Years: 1962 - 1971  
Motive: Obsession

Graham Frederick ‘Toxomaniac’ Young had an early start on poison lore. At age 11, he became interested in the use of chemicals for the purpose of gaining power; by age 14, he’d killed his stepmother with a mixture of antimony and thallium. Nobody realized he’d caused her death until his confession many years later. However, he’d also attempted to murder his father, sister and friend, which ultimately caused him to spend nine years in the Broadmoor secure psychiatric hospital.

Far from being cured, the first thing Young did upon release was to befriend and poison a 34-year-old man named Trevor Sparkes (although Sparkes survived the attempt). Young then proceeded to find employment as a shopkeeper at Bovingdon, Hertfordshire, where his co-workers were one by one struck by a mysterious illness. The storeroom manager, Bob Engle, died, shortly followed by the distribution manager, Fred Biggs. Unfortunately, Young made the very same mistake that proved to be the undoing of many poisoners who’d felt they had committed the ultimate crime: he let on far too much. This brought the police to his door on 21 November, 1971. The lethal dose of thallium in his pocket was more than enough to incriminate Young, and he was found guilty of murder in July 1972 and sentenced to life imprisonment. When he finally died of a heart attack in Parkhurst prison on 1 August, 1990, Graham Young was 42 years old.

**Murderous Duos**

Whereas most poisoners work alone, there have been the occasional instances of Bonnie-and-Clyde-type poisoner duos. Of these, two pairs are well-known: Brinvilliers and Sainte-Croix and the Besnards.

As the trend of poisoning spread through Europe in the 17th Century, an adulterous couple took to bringing patients at the local hospitals presents of food or wine, laced with poison. The woman was the Marquise de Brinvilliers, wife of Antoine Gobelin; her male counterpart was Sainte-Croix, a man who was constantly mired in financial difficulties yet at the same time ingratiated with de Brinvilliers. Discovering a common passion for poisons, they soon began experimenting with recipes procured from a Swiss apothecary called Christopher Glasser. The unfortunate hospital patients were the guinea pigs for their experiments. Sainte-Croix was ultimately imprisoned in the Bastille for his amorous adventures with the marquise, where he apparently picked up some pointers from an Italian man called Exili, who was said to have caused the deaths of 150 people in Rome. Resuming the relationship after Sainte-Croix’s release, the murderous duo continued their ghastly poison affair until the marquise’s arrest and trial in 1676.

Three centuries later, another infamous pair would emerge from France. Marie Dvaillaud was already a murderer (having killed her first husband) when, in 1929, she met Leon Besnard, whose roguishness made him her perfect mate. Together, they ingratiated themselves with as many relatives as they could and secured their position as inheritors, whereupon the hapless relatives mysteriously died off one by one. Not content with bumping off their immediate relatives, their circle of cunning and murder extended to neighbors and acquaintances, including an elderly (very sickly and very rich) couple named Rivet, who left everything they had to the murderous Besnards.
The partnership came to an abrupt end when Marie decided that Leon was no longer the man for her, and she poisoned his wine in 1947. And then she made a mistake. When rumors began to spread that she had killed her mother (which she had), she decided to go around threatening these chatterboxes with their lives. Contrary to her expectations, she was promptly arrested, and post-mortem investigations carried out upon the dead relatives revealed that they had been poisoned.

It would probably have spelled the end for any other poisoner - but then again, most poisoners didn't have her resources. With her incredible, if wrongly appropriated, wealth, she engaged the top defense lawyers in France, who proceeded to maneuver all three of her trials (between 1951 and 1961) into hung juries, thus redefining the term 'the perfect crime'.

**Poison Organizations**

Although most poisoners work alone, there are accounts telling of ancient secret societies established for the purpose of causing intentional death by poisoning. One of the earliest documented was a conspiracy dating back to the 4th Century BC, involving a group of women who plotted to poison men for profit. As the poison business boomed in Europe during the 16th Century, an organization called the Council of Ten was established in Italy by a group of morally-challenged alchemists catering to the needs of people who needed elimination services.

In the 17th Century, the Catholic clergy became alarmed by the number of young women confessing that they had killed their husbands with slow poisons, and informed the head of the church. When the papal authorities began inquiries, they learnt of a society of young wives that was meeting nightly at the house of a reputed witch and fortuneteller named Hieronyma Spara. A woman was sent to infiltrate the society, and found out that La Spara would sell an imploring young wife a few drops of poison to send her husband to his 'last long sleep'. This resulted in the arrest of La Spara and her secret society. While La Spara maintained her silence even under torture, another member, La Gratiosa, broke down and revealed the secrets of the society. Five women, including La Spara and Gratiosa, were hanged together in Rome; more than thirty others were later whipped through the streets, hanged, exiled or fined heavily.

Around the time of the First World War, a community of killers who called themselves 'The Angel-Makers of Nagyrev' flourished in a Hungarian farming village. The women, who'd enjoyed sexual freedom in the absence of their husbands in the company of Allied prisoners of war camped in the area, were not especially happy to see the men return from battle. The midwives in the village had a solution, of boiled flypaper arsenic, for these problems. Unfortunately, this began getting out of hand, as the wives began seeing this as a general solution for their family problems as well. Ultimately, a woman who was caught poisoning a man's wine blew the cover off the operation when she unknowingly led the authorities to the houses of all the poisoners in the area. Of the twenty-six women who went to trial, eight were executed, and the others received jail terms of varying length.

A more recent example of an organized poison society is the Philadelphia Poison Ring. In 1938, Philadelphia Assistant District Attorney Vincent McDevitt was assigned a homicide case involving the death of one Ferdinando Alfonsi, whose demise was attributed to cult activity. Prior to this, information had poured into the Secret Service office from George Meyer, the owner of an upholstery cleaning company, who had been offered a considerable sum of money both in the form of legal tender and counterfeit bills for carrying out a hit on Alfonsi.

The man who'd offered the job to Meyer was Herman Petrillo, a notorious counterfeiter whose activities had so far managed to escape police sting operations, and whose cousin Paul ran an insurance scam business by selling cheap policies to sickly middle-aged men, and making himself
sole beneficiary without his clients' knowledge. The agent who had made contact with Meyer inserted another agent, Stanley Phillips, to work with Meyer in playing along with this assassination scheme in an attempt to get hold of some of Petrillo's counterfeit bills. The operation brought them the bills they needed to get at Petrillo; alas, the target also died of arsenic poisoning while their attention was diverted to the procurement of the money.

It was assumed that when Petrillo was brought in, he would clam up. Instead he started rattling off name after name of conspirators and victims, including his cousin and a man named Morris Bolber, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who'd moved from New York to Philadelphia during the depression to become a faith healer. It was later discovered that the Petrillos and Bolber ran a matrimonial agency, supposedly to find new husbands for the widows of their victims. The widows would then take out life insurances on their new spouses, whereupon ring members would take it upon themselves to kill these husbands and appropriate the insurance money. Of their 70 or so victims, all but three were killed with arsenic.

Herman and Paul Petrillo were both sentenced to death by electrocution in 1941. Morris Bolber was sentenced to life imprisonment; a further 13 men and women involved in the ring were also convicted and incarcerated.

Endnote

History gave us a great man who fathered modern astronomy. Now, as it turns out, it may have also given us a world-famous murderer who got away with the perfect crime.

In a recent publication, couple Joshua and Anne-Lee Gilder presented compelling evidence that the great astronomer Tycho Brahe, who has long since been thought to have died in 1601 of an exploded bladder, was actually murdered by his student, the famous Johannes Kepler.

In 1991, forensic investigations carried out upon request by Bent Kaempe, the director of the Department of Forensic Chemistry at the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Copenhagen, had revealed the presence of mercury in Brahe's hair, and reached the conclusion that Tycho Brahe's uremia can probably be traced to mercury poisoning, most likely due to Brahe's experiments with his elixir 11-12 days before his death. While history tells of many ill-informed experimenters who had accidentally died by their own hand following ingestion of poisons, some historians disagree that Brahe was responsible for his own death. The Gilders in particular pointed out that the alchemists of old, dating all the way back to the ancient Hindus, were aware of the toxic properties of mercuric compounds, and that Tycho Brahe, along with the leading alchemists of his day, was not only aware of these facts, but was actively seeking to develop an elixir to neutralize the harmful properties of this metal while retaining its medicinal value. Furthermore, Brahe's normally robust health and the sudden onset of his illness had led his friends and relatives to suspect death by deliberate poisoning.

And who more likely to murder him than his own student? It was already known that Brahe and Kepler had had a strained relationship. Now the Gilders were showing Brahe as the unyielding authority controlling the money and power, and Kepler as the sociopathic, seething young student, whose desire for patronage and valuable data drove him to kill his master and steal his observational data.

While there is little concrete evidence to support the Gilders' claim, it nevertheless is a fascinating (if implausible) notion: the perfect crime committed by one of the most famous names in science.
References


1 This distinguishes them from the innocent pharmacists and apothecaries who have unwittingly supplied murderers with poison.
2 Their mother was the widow of a wealthy Manchester merchant who left money in trust to her three daughters and two sons.
3 Instead of mourning her husband's death, she apparently bought herself a dress with the insurance money.
4 Where she built a reputation of keeping the wards clean with soap and arsenic.
5 Because Mary Ann Cotton continued to maintain her innocence about the deaths of her other family members, it was never determined just how many people she had actually poisoned. However, the unusually high rate of 'convenient' deaths would suggest that she had had a hand in many, if not most, of their deaths.
6 An apothecaries' unit of weight equal to 3.888 grams.
7 He also suffered a case of dissociative identity disorder, thanks to his attempts to endure his childhood abuse by means of emotional distancing, for he seemed to be two entirely different people at once: a man who cared deeply for his wife and three daughters, and a cold-blooded killer who murdered not only for money but also for convenience and experimentation.
8 A letter had arrived for them, supposedly from Belle, declaring the withdrawal of her membership on account of her going to America to see a sick relative; it wasn't in her handwriting, and it made no sense for her to write, especially when one could simply pick up the telephone.
9 The electric telegraph was responsible for the arrest of John Tawell; the Crippen case was the first in which a criminal was apprehended with the aid of a wireless telegraph.
10 It was only revealed recently that Shipman had mocked his victims in his records by giving those derogatory codes, and that he had seen himself as the star of his trial.
11 Shipman had been hoarding the drug through patients who never needed it, and by confiscating those belonging to patients he had killed.
12 Markov, a playwright and satirist, had defected to the UK where he broadcast scathing accounts on Bulgarian Communist high-life.
13 The reluctant groom bolted the morning after, but had apparently sent her medicine some time later. There was no physical evidence of the medicine by the time his wife died, however, so charges were never made despite the attending physician's suspicions.
14 Cream had suggested suicide as the explanation for her death, but the absence of a bottle and the scratch marks upon her face suggested foul play.
15 Although Cream had written a letter accusing the pharmacist of adding strychnine to his formula, the exceptional reputation of the pharmacist cleared him of all blame.
16 He, a novelist, and she, a former TV investigative reporter and producer.