

## The Petrovski Murder

By

Don Erickson

We were sitting in the grand lounge of the Empress Hotel listening to Billy Tickle's orchestra and waiting for Walter Dillon to arrive. I'll never forget the date, August 2, 1925, because it was the beginning of my first big case working for Charlie Chatterson, Private Detective. I'd been in his employ for over a year, and a lot of the work wasn't exactly exciting. I mean sitting in a hot car and waiting for some guy to emerge so that you could follow him was okay for maybe two hours. But four hours or even six hours? Forget it. Renowned as I knew Charlie was, and anxious as I was to learn from him, I was getting just a little bit bored. Hell, I was only 22 and I fretted for action.

My job wasn't made any easier by the fact that Charlie had a contract to act as what the hotel management called in their snobby way –security officer – which really meant 'house detective'. I had to do a large part of the house detecting while Charlie sat in his downtown office smoking cigars, or so it seemed to me. I even slept in the hotel – a small room rent free, of course, because I was on call every night all night. Not much action there, mind you. Oh, a late party to break up now and then, or a domestic dispute that got out of hand, but in this hotel, as in the city of Victoria itself, most of the time it was like the Sargasso Sea, where nothing seemed to move.

Billy Tickle's orchestra had stopped playing and were departing the stage, and still Walter Dillon had not shown up.

"Who is this Walter Dillon anyway?" I asked.

"He's a police detective here – but used to be on the Winnipeg force with me." Charlie paused with something like a glint in his gray eyes. "Until the Chief was found out with his hand in the till."

"Whose till?"

"Ah, you may well ask, Jimmy, you may well ask!" Charlie had this maddening habit of seldom giving a straight answer to anything, and playing it for dramatic effect. So I waited patiently, though it is not my nature to wait patiently.

"He was scooping" Charlie said portentously, "the lady behind the ladies of the night."

"You mean the prostitutes?" I asked, puzzled.

"You couldn't have heard me, Jimmy. I did not say the prostitutes, I said the lady for whom the prostitutes worked."

"You must mean the pimps," I said, still puzzled.

"Most prostitutes do not work for pimps," he said. "And in any case pimps are males. No, most prostitutes work in brothels. You've heard of brothels?"

"Sure, whore houses."

"Very good. And who runs a whore house?"

"A madam."

"You've got it, Jimmy. And in Winnipeg, as in a few other cities, one madam had gradually taken control of most of the houses. It was she who, as they say, colluded with the Chief. The price was something they call protection, but it was really coercion.

Someday I'll tell you how I found out the facts, but I now see my old friend Walter.”

Victoria, B.C. was English to the core. Union Jacks flew everywhere. The proud Provincial Legislature looked like a medieval castle without the moat. People walked at maybe a quarter the speed of a New Yorker, as if they really didn't want to go anywhere. And all this was summed up in the Empress itself with its afternoon tea in the grand lounge served at tiny mahogany tables on the best English bone china, crumpets and scones wrapped in fine linen and garnished with gooseberry jam. I've already mentioned Billy Tickle and his Orchestra playing slow Edwardian songs – enough to stultify any couple's honeymoon expectations.

Charlie did not fit in with all this. For one thing he, was too massive – not fat, just massive, at about 6 ft. 3in. and with enormous shoulders. True, he wore a gold chain across his expanse of vest ending in a watch large enough so that the ordinary hand could hardly close on it and, true, he wore spats on his shoes, but the total effect made him look more like a Chicago gangster boss than anything else. Also, he was from the Midwest, from Winnipeg, the accent being very close to our neighbors across the border in North Dakota where he counted quite a few friends and relatives. Despite his English forebears, he was certainly no Englishman, and I wondered how long he could last in Victoria's Empress Hotel. I sensed that the hotel management looked upon him with something close to alarm. I'm sure they hired him mainly because he had served with the Duke of Connaught's Light Cavalry in the Boer War, though he certainly bore no resemblance to the typical English cavalryman.

Walter had seen us, too. If Charlie was massive, Walter was the opposite – agile and wiry, with gray hair and warm brown eyes. He was obviously delighted to see Charlie, and they clasped hands.

“Meet my assistant Jimmy Jameson, Walter. One day he will buy my business and set me up in affluence.” He grinned ruefully. “I’ve been telling him about our Chief and how he skimmed the Ladies of the Night.”

Walter pursed his lips and shook his head. “A grim story – hardly fit for young ears, Charlie.”

“He has to learn, Walter, he has to learn it all.”

“In that case you ought to tell him,” Walter said caustically, “how you bust the Chief’s nose and so got fired – just luckily escaping jail.”

“That was no luck, Walter, that was because the Chief knew if he threw me in jail the shabby truth would all come spilling out like worms from a fishing can.”

“And is that also how you got him to give you a good reference for this Empress contract?”

“You know too much, Walter – it’s hardly fit for young ears.”

They both laughed uproariously, while several of the guests peered timorously toward them.

“I suppose you’d like a cup of tea, Walter.”

“Tea? What’s that for – reading tea leaves?”

Again they broke up and I squirmed with embarrassment. At last Charlie raised a finger and a young waiter scuttled over.

“Yes, sir?”

“Two double scotches, neat.”

“Neat, sir?” He was obviously an English boy.

“That means without H2O, lad – sometimes called water. Oh, and a single shot for Detective Jameson here.”

Walter flashed a grin at me and then turned to Charlie.

“You said you had something for me, and it wasn’t scotch.”

“I do have something for you,” Charlie said portentously reaching into his side pocket and taking out a newspaper photograph which he handed to Walter. “It was in the morning paper yesterday.”

Walter stared at the picture. “Yeah, I know. I’m on the job only ten days here, and they hand me this case. I never thought there were murders in a cute place like Victoria.”

“So it was murder for sure.”

“No doubt about it. He took a slug in the back of his head from maybe three feet. He sure as hell didn’t do that himself.”

“The weapon?”

“A .32 caliber pistol. We found the slug.”

“Shot in his own place.”

“That’s right. A small house he rented. Just him on the living room floor – nothing else disturbed. He was a young guy and good looking. Whoever shot him might have been a former friend, for there was no sign of a break-in. Maybe it was a jealous lover. So what’s your interest, Charlie?”

“I know him,” Charlie said.

“You what?”

“I mean I knew him in that I saw him visit the hotel about once every other week.”

“From a distance?”

“Believe me – I knew him.”

“I believe you, Charlie – your fame for identifying people can never be questioned.” He said this in mock gravity, and Charlie smiled thinly as he took his glass of Scotch from the waiter.

“And I didn’t only see him from a distance, I followed him because he wasn’t registered at the hotel. Jimmy followed him, too.” I nodded. “He always visited the rooms of one person – a Countess Orlov.”

“A who?” Walter sounded somewhat baffled.

“Countess Orlov. She really is, or was, a Countess and lives in the hotel. Escaped the Russian Bolsheviks in 1919 with all her jewelry. Sold most of it and lives very well off the interest. We should be seeing her just about now,” he said peering down at his big silver watch. “She always comes down to dinner at 6:00 PM on the dot.”

“Maybe she can identify this young man for us.”

“We’ll soon find out. It’s six o’clock and ah, there is the Countess Orlov.”

Of course, I too knew who she was. Charlie had already told me to keep an eye on her for he was puzzled by the visits of the young man. She walked slowly with a cane, slightly bent over, a slender old woman with silver hair and a splendid necklace dangling in front of her.

“That necklace,” I said to Walter, “is made up of emeralds and diamonds.”

“Whoeee,” was Walter’s response. “Hope it’s insured.”

“It’s a fake,” Charlie said without the least hint of uncertainty. The Countess was being ushered into the dining room by the maitre de.

“How do you know that?” I asked, somewhat aggrieved..

“Because I checked,” Charlie said. “She has a real one, but it’s in the hotel vault and I’ve seen it. She told me that she wears the real one only once a year on the former Tsarina’s birthday. In remembrance. She thought the world of the Tsarina whom, as you know, the Bolsheviks murdered together with the Tsar and the whole family.”

Walter shook his head sadly. “So this is the lady our young man visited. But why?”

“Ah,” said Charlie mysteriously. “Well, we can ask her, can’t we Walter? I’ve arranged for us to meet her in her rooms at 7:30. Meanwhile, we’ll go to the restaurant downstairs for a bite. The dining room is too goddamned grand for my taste.”

I’m sure Countess Orlov had the most sumptuous suite in the hotel. She had managed to procure fine furniture, including English Regency which along with a few Georgian pieces was the only English style she could truly respect. She said she favored Italianate settees and tables made from what looked like exotic woods.

Charlie had introduced me to her some months ago when I’d started work in the hotel. I had thought of her simply as a small, old woman who maintained an air of dignity, but for some reason she now emanated a sense of exotic majesty and mystery. I could see that Walter was similarly affected, but it would have taken a King Cobra to impress Charlie.

“Countess, I would like to introduce you to Walter Dillon, Detective with the Victoria Police Force. I am helping him run down the killer of this young man.” He handed the

newspaper picture to her, but she did not take it – merely glancing at it. “For the past several months this lad has been visiting you regularly. Could we ask you the purpose of those visits?”

She sighed. “I found out about his death just four days ago, and am still in shock about it.”

Countess Orlov spoke English with an Oxford accent.

“Before the Bolshevik Revolution I got to know his father who was a well known portrait painter in St. Petersburg – and indeed he painted my portrait as he did many of the aristocracy. His son, this boy, used to come with his father to these sessions. After the Revolution he managed to escape over the ice to Finland, but his father and mother were executed by the Bolsheviks because they revered the old Russian nobility. Eventually, the boy found his way here to Victoria where he was hoping to teach languages. That’s where I came in.” She paused, waiting for our question. “You see, I’m fluent in four languages besides my native Russian – English, of course, French, German, and Italian.”

“And so, Countess,” Walter put in, “you were helping him learn these languages.”

“Actually, only one – French – for he had a fairly good command of English, and French is the second language in this country.”

“Could you give us his name?” Walter asked.

“Of course. It was Sergei Petrovski.”

“He lived nearby?”

“He lived in a small rented house a mile and half from here.”

“So he had an income.”



“He told me that he had a small income translating Russian documents and literature into English.”

“Excuse me, Countess, how did you find out where he lived? Did you visit him?”

She appeared slightly shocked.

“Visit him? Of course not. I found out from another person who visits me now and then – a Katerina Sansovitch – another escapee. Her mother was a governess to me – one who, by the way, taught me English – the best sort of English.”

“Would you tell us Katerina’s connection to Petrovich?” Charlie asked.

“No, I would not!” the Countess answered with asperity.

There was a momentary pause.

“You had another fairly frequent visitor,” Charlie said, “An older man with white hair and an elegant cane which he did not need.”

“Ah, Roman Semerinoff. Our families were connected in Russia. In fact he is a second cousin to me. He visits me about once a month, just to keep up the relationship, which is precious to both of us. So few of us are left.”

Walter held a hand up to Charlie.

“Countess, we found out about the murder from a young woman who phoned us but would not leave her name. She must have had a key to the victim’s place of residence. The time of the call was 11:14 PM. The coroner placed the time of death at 11:00 PM give or take a half hour. You can understand why we need to question this young woman who may be the Katerina you are speaking of, especially since the officer taking the call said that she had a fairly strong accent. Do you have Katerina’s address and that of your cousin, Roman Semerinoff?”

The Countess stared at him with a slightly pained look on her face. Then she turned abruptly and went to her Regency desk, opened a drawer, and took out a small book, handing it to Charlie who leafed through it quickly and found the addresses they wanted.

“What an elegant old lady,” I said as we walked down the hall.

“An elegant liar” was Charlie’s acid comment.

“Why do you say that?” I countered, feeling a little offended.

“She knows very well what’s been going on between Katerina and our victim. Second, why would Katerina tell her that he lived in a small house a mile and a half away? Finally, I quickly flipped through that local address book and it’s loaded with Russian names, yet she said ‘So few of us left.’”

He turned to Walter.

“I think we’ve reached the fire-on-the-foot stage, Walter.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means,” Walter said, “we could close this case in no time if we turn up the heat. I think we should go to Katerina’s place right now. It’s only just after 8:00 PM.”

So we drove in Walter’s car the eleven blocks to Katerina’s apartment block.

As though he were driving, Charlie never took his eyes off the road. “Did you notice anything about our meeting with the Countess, Jim?”

I thought about it.

“Well, she didn’t invite us to sit down.”

“Good. And why not?”

After a moment, I shrugged my shoulders. “You’ve got me.”

“Two reasons: we’re not of her class nor her guests. Also she made us feel a mite uncomfortable and that shortened the meeting. You can conclude that she doesn’t like this investigation.”

“I see...” I muttered, not really seeing much at all.

Walter parked the car in front of an apartment block on Balmoral Avenue. Then he turned to me.

“Being a good detective is simple, Jim. You miss nothing and you remember everything.”

“Along with one other thing,” Charlie said. “Turn it all upside down, shake it, and out comes the rabbit.”

Walter nodded wisely, but it made very little sense to me.

Katerina was what you might call a Slavic beauty with high cheekbones, gray eyes, a lithe figure, and boots that reached almost to her knees.

We identified ourselves and she let us in, though I could see she was not happy about it.

“I am not so good with English,” she said. “Don’t like it. And how it spells is crazy.”

“You bet,” Charlie said.

“You see? ‘You bet.’ Means nothing.”

“Half of what we say means nothing,” Charlie said, “and the other half is less than half true.”

“Then why come to me?”

“So you can tell us some lies and we can catch you at it.”

Her eyes widened a little, then narrowed angrily.

“You make fun of me.”

“My partner makes fun of everybody,” Walter said nonchalantly. “Do you know this man?” He handed her the photograph. She stared at it, frowning, then handed it back.

“I went out with him – a little,” she said carefully.

“Were you lovers?” Charlie asked.

“No,” the girl replied, staring defiantly at Charlie.

“Yet you had a key to his place.”

For a moment she did not answer. “Why do you think that?”

“Because no one else had entry and you were the person who found him dead.”

She sat down abruptly, her head turned away, struggling with tears.

Walter sat on the arm of the sofa nearest her.

“We’re sorry, Katerina,” Walter said, “but you need to tell us everything if we’re to arrest whoever shot Mr. Petrovski. What time did you find him?”

“About 11:00 PM.”

“So you phoned us – the police.”

“Yes.”

She now wept in earnest, tears flooding her cheeks.

“You were his lover, weren’t you?”

She nodded, eyes closed.

“Did he have a rival, Katerina?”

“A what?”

“Was some other man after you?”

She shook her head vehemently. “No – no one.”

“Someone who had been your lover, before Sergei?”

“I said – no one – no one..” Her crying was uncontrollable now, and Charlie signaled Walter that they should leave.

I felt pretty mad at the rough way Charlie had questioned Katerina, so in the car I asked him if it was okay to lie to a suspect about what you know.

“Assuredly not,” he answered.

“Well when you questioned Katerina you said that she was the person who found Petrovitch dead.”

“And so she was.”

“But you didn’t know that.”

“Ah,” he said in as dulcet a tone as Charlie could manage. “But I did. First, Jim, do you remember my question to the Countess – ‘Would you tell us Katerina’s connection to Petrovski?’ – and her answer, said in heat, ‘no I would not’ – which meant that she knew of such a connection but did not wish to divulge it. Secondly, remember my question to Katerina whether she had a key to Sergei’s place? She did not deny it but asked why I thought that. All that backed up what I said next – that no one else had entry and if so she had to be the one who phoned the police at 11:15 PM. Her actions after that confirmed what I said.”

“He’s right, Jim boy,” Walter added. “Learn the fine art of questioning. Notice that I then came in with the soft approach and cleaned up the rest of the problems. Except one, Charlie.”

“Yeah I know, Walt – who killed Sergei Petrovski?”

The break, or the beginning of a break came the next day.

The newspapers had been publishing, along with his photograph, pleas by the police asking the public for any information about Sergei Petrovski , and the day after the interviews with the Countess and Katerina a message was left by one Greg Domingo to please call him. He turned out to be late-shift caretaker/janitor at the central train station. He was sure the photograph in the paper was of the same young man he had noticed coming to open his locker regularly once a week on Fridays. It was always late at night and he always took away a grip of some type and returned it two or three hours later.

So Walter, leading a police squad, broke into the locker indicated by Domingo and found there a short wave radio plus what turned out to be a codebook.

At 8:10 PM that night I was sitting in Charlie's office, about to return to the hotel, when Walter walked in and told us the news.

"So guess who's taken over the case," Walter said.

"The Mounties," Charlie said, without hesitation.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because now it looks like some sort of espionage is involved. So it's a Federal problem."

"Oh Hell," I said, feeling cheated of my first case.

"We're not through yet," Charlie said. "All the Mounties care about is the espionage angle. All we care about is who killed Sergei Petrovski. The two may not overlap."

Walter looked skeptical. "I wish you were right, Charlie. But I've got to keep my nose clean on this one. Count me out – unless you find the killer."

Charlie grinned broadly.

“What do you make of it, Jim?” Charlie asked after Walter departed. “What’s our next move?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

Charlie had just finished lighting his cigar, puffed out the match and threw it at me.

“Get with it,” he said.

“Okay. I’d interview the old guy – you know – Semerinoff.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he knew Petrovski, or of him. Or maybe he knows Katerina and can tell us about her. These Russians seem to like to stick together.”

Charlie pulled out his fat wallet, removed a piece of paper, and handed it to me.

“Here’s his address, Jim. Go and interview him.”

“Without you?”

“Without me.”

“Okay,” I said. “Great,” I said. I was at last doing something special – on my own – or at least given the privilege of trying. “And what are you going to do, Charlie?”

“I’m going to have a smell.”

Another Charleyism thrown at me. So to get my own back I said, “What about that rabbit?” But he wasn’t taken by surprise.

“That’s it, the rabbit,” he said reflectively. “Yes.” And he nodded almost wisely.

Roman Semerinoff was a tall distinguished looking man with white hair and a perfectly trimmed little beard. He invited me into the sitting room of his apartment and, unlike the Countess, offered me a chair. I showed him the newspaper photograph of Segei Petrovski and outlined what was known about the murder.

“What a pity,” he said in perfect English. “We had that sort of thing going on in Russia due to the Bolsheviks. Only they weren’t so kind as to kill you instantly. They carried you off for weeks and months of torture until, eventually, you died.”

“Did you ever meet him, sir?”

“Once, when I ran into him coming out of the Countess’. But I knew nothing about him beyond what the Countess told me – that he was trying to be a translator.”

“Then you wouldn’t have known that he was probably a spy?” I explained about the police finding the short wave radio and code book.

“Well, well,” he said. His old blue eyes surveyed me appraisingly. “Working for the Bolsheviks, you mean?”

“It would seem so, sir. The radio set he had was designed for intercontinental transmission. Who else would he be reporting to except the Bolshevik government in Moscow?” I decided to do another leap into the unknown – do a Charley, so to speak.

“The opposition to which you belong, sir, is scattered around the world. If Petrovski were on your side he’d report directly to people like you.”

Semerinoff’s eyebrows had lifted measurably

“Do you think that I am active in such opposition?” He seemed a little disturbed.

“Once upon a time, perhaps, but not anymore.”

“Unless, sir, you believed there was a real chance of undermining the Bolshies.”



He stood up.

“Young man, I think you’re a little over your depth.” I expected an immediate dismissal, so I was surprised by his next question. “Are you suggesting that it could have been one of us who shot Petrovski?”

I spoke carefully. “That thought will have occurred to the Mounted Police, of course.”

I’d made a score, I knew it, but I didn’t know what to do about it. I described our conversation to Charlie.

“Good boy,” he chuckled. “You’re learning fast.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “I forgot to ask him about Katerina.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Charlie said. “We’re going to see Katerina now. The case is all but solved.”

If anything Katerina was even less happy to see us than she had been the first time.

“I have nothing more to tell you,” she said.

“Are you an agent of the Bolshevik government?” Charlie asked abruptly.

“Are you crazy? I hate them. They betrayed my family – all my loved ones...”

“But you knew or guessed that Petrovski was working for them.”

“Oh my God!” She sat down and plunged her face into the palms of her hands. Then she looked up. “I came to guess it, yes. But I was denying it at the same time. You see, I loved him...I loved him...” She began to cry.

“How did you come to guess it?”

“Because Sergei was trying little by little to turn me around – to get me to come over to his way of thinking and he almost succeeded – because of my love for him. I kept thinking – the revolution is all over anyway, and the government of the Czar did bad things too. But I didn’t know he was really working for the Bolsheviks. I mean I couldn’t believe it. And then he did not phone me for a couple of weeks, and I thought he was angry with me for disagreeing with him. Do you know, that evening when I went over I was ready to capitulate – at least not oppose his beliefs, even though I couldn’t accept them for myself. And so I came to him and found him dead...”

She wept silently and bitterly.

Charlie took a small vial from his pocket and twisted it open. In seconds the room was filled with the most exotic perfume I had ever smelled. He turned to me, flashing a small smile. “The rabbit.”

Katerina stood up, a wild look on her face.

“Where did you...?”

“This is what you smelled when you came into Sergei’s apartment and found him dead.”

Katerina stood speechless.

“You recognized it, Katerina, because you came upon the scene about ten minutes after the homicide. They always say that you don’t notice the best perfumes, but this one which I got from a perfumerie downtown is nevertheless one of the best and most expensive perfumes in existence – straight from Paris. It is the same perfume the Countess always wore, and wore on the day she murdered Sergei Petrovski.”

Katerina gasped: “But why would she ... I don’t understand...she has been a second mother to me.”

“After I got this vial of perfume, I went to the Countess’ apartment, and screwed off the cap. Right away she knew that I knew, and so she talked. Sergei was working for the OGPU – the Secret Service of the Bolsheviks – and was visiting her to find out the identity and whereabouts of certain key people belonging to a group who were financing and helping to organize a counter-revolution in Russia. The goal of the OGPU was simply to assassinate these key people, the most important of whom the Countess knew, included your friend Semerinoff. Finally, Sergei threatened to have her two sisters living in Vancouver terminated if she would not cooperate. And that is why she shot him. She phoned him and said she was coming over with the information he wanted. She gave him a sealed envelope. He opened it, lighting the standing lamp nearby, and turned away to read it. She took out her .32 calibre pistol and shot him in the back of the head.”

He was silent. Katerina stared at him with horror.

“She had no choice, Katerina,” he said softly.

We drove away from Katerina’s place in silence.

“That interview with the Countess – that’s when you smelled the perfume,” I said.

“Well, before then. You did, too, at that interview, but you didn’t separate it out from the rest of the scene – the expensive clothes and jewelry, the fine furniture and draperies and old paintings – the whole thing struck you as just exotic, which it was – the perfume being one element of the scene. I’m always separating things out – more’s the pity.”

We were silent again.

Then Charlie said: “She belonged to a different race and knew it. Living at the Empress, the nearest space she could find to grandeur, walking around in that fake necklace, wearing the most expensive French perfume, all that kept her apart where she was used to being. It was all bullshit – but she’s a great lady.”

“And now she’ll get the noose,” I mumbled.

“No she won’t. Not if I know my Walter Dillon, who’s off the case anyway. And the Mounties wouldn’t know the smell of perfume from alfalfa.”

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