

Murder on the Petulant Express

by Jack Pachuta

Act 1

LAW

A murder has been committed, a murder on the Petulant Express – and I’m here to ask your help in solving the case. My name is Law, Leo Law, brother of Police Chief Lawrence Law. As you read in today’s August 6, 1937 edition of the Akron Peek-In Journal, industrialist Peter Petulant was murdered last night in the Presidential Car of the Petulant Express. The details of the homicide are puzzling, but my colleagues and I have narrowed down the suspects to eight passengers who traveled aboard the train from New York City to Chicago with one stop in Akron, Ohio. It will be your assignment to listen carefully to each suspect as they give their testimonies. You’ll want to take good notes because you’ll have a chance to question them and find out more details that will help you solve this case. Here they are. First is a German Brewmaster. Franz Fassmacher. He is in America for a very specific reason.

FASSMACHER

Gruss Gott, Alles. That’s correct, Detective. I will be attending a convention of brewers. You Americans have much to learn from experts like me. The German tradition of brewing has been refined for centuries. I will be happy to answer questions. I have nothing to hide.

LAW

We'll find out about that. And, whatever we discover could be the perfect plot for a murder mystery by writer Christine Agatha.

AGATHA

Dear, dear, dear – a murderer in our midst. How delightful, Detective. My mysteries are inspired by real life events, so I will, of course, be taking copious notes about this case. Who knows? The result could be a best seller.

LAW

Anyone who follows politics in this country knows this next person - Senator Thurm Stroman. Senator, you claim to be the most-patriotic person in America.

STROMAN

That's right. My heart beats true under red, white and blue.

AGATHA

They are the colors of the Union Jack.

STROMAN

No, dag nab it. They are the colors of "Old Glory," the glorious banner that flies over the United States Capitol where I heroically serve the cause of liberty and justice for all.

LAW

As do I, Senator - with justice being my specialty. And, justice applies to everyone no matter where he or she calls home. Figure skater Tonya Fennie, your home is in Scandinavia.

FENNIE

But as an Olympic champion, you could say the world is my home. I'm certain everyone here has seen newsreels of my gold medal performance at last year's winter Olympics in Garmisch. I am recognized everywhere I travel.

LAW

And, you've been seen around the world, too, crocodile hunter Dingo Dugan.

DUGAN

Gooday! You might call me an international authority on those fascinating beasts, Detective. I help people all over the world read the minds of crocodiles. That's what I'm doing here in the States.

ROOT

If you want to talk about reading minds, I dare you to figure out what pitch Dizzy Dean will be aiming at you to strike you out. That's what I'm good at – hitting the baseball out of the park.

LAW

Kid Root, the Buddha of Baseball, you've just been traded by the New York Taxis to the Chicago Wet Sox. That's why you were on the train.

ROOT

I'll be setting new records in Chicago while Taxi fans are crying in their beers.

FASSMACHER

If it's American beer, no one will be able to tell the difference between their tears and the beer.

ALTAMONTE

But it will be tears of joy that when they are in the audience for one of my operatic performances.

LAW

Arianna Altamonte, you're one of the most-famous opera singers in the world. Many people call you a "diva".

ALTAMONTE

"Diva" in the best possible sense, Detective. But you probably heard them say "divine". They sound so much alike, and people simply can't hold back when they hear one of my arias.

LAW

And, Francine Cooper, despite your youth, you've made an impression on the fashion world.

COOPER

My ideas are innovative and unique. They'll make every other designer change their ways of thinking. I can't wait to tell everyone about how I plan to revolutionize ladies fashions.

LAW

I have questions for all of you before the investigators take over. Let's start with you, Fassmacher. We can't wait to hear what you have to say.

FASSMACHER

Of course, Detective. I'm told that this lovely train will not be the same without Peter Petulant. As I stated, I am in America to attend a brewers' convention in Chicago. What better way to travel than on this luxurious train? I'm certain that many people admire everything that is happening in Germany. Our technology is second to none. Just read the newspapers. Think of the progress that has been made in recent years. Surely you realize that Germany is again on the rise and nothing or no one will hold us back. *(Places hands on hips in a Superman pose.)*

LAW

The facts, Fassmacher. The facts about this case. Let's hear them.

FASSMACHER

(Indignantly.) I make no apologies for being excited about what is happening in the Mutterland. *(Addresses audience.)* Here is what I remember. After boarding the train yesterday, I spent most of the time in the lounge car. Of course, I had to sample your American beers. After all, I am the brewmaster at the Goldenes Loewe Brewery in Munich. The beers in America taste like water compared to the golden pilsners that are created in my brewery.

STROMAN

I resent that remark, Fassmacher. Everything in America is number one – the best in the world. You need a little re-education, and I’m just the person to do that.

FASSMACHER

(Laughs menacingly.) Allow me to continue. Last night, I talked with a several people, but in general, kept to myself. I was preparing my remarks to the convention and needed to make sure that I would accomplish everything that I had planned. There is much more I can tell you. I will, of course, hold nothing back if I can in any way assist the local authorities. I am ready to answer questions. What’s next, Detective?

LAW

Fassmacher, you and the other suspects will be intensely interrogated. We have some very savvy investigators. They’ll be able to figure out if you’re telling the truth or lying.

FASSMACHER

I am a truthful person, Detective, but I will only answer what is asked of me.

AGATHA

And it will be a delightful investigation, Detective. It's always delightful to weave the facts together and identify the perpetrator of the crime.

LAW

Christine Agatha, I've read some of your mysteries. You're good, but even you won't be able to fool these people if you are the perpetrator of this crime. Let's hear what you have to say.

AGATHA

I know what you're thinking. Of all the people on the train, I'm the one who knows the most about murder. Remember, though, I'm a mystery writer. My plots seem so real because I spend a great deal of time researching and planning them.

FASSMACHER

And why do you think you are so clever?

AGATHA

Observation is the key, my dear brewer. I spend time watching people and taking notes as I travel by train all over the world working on my murder

mysteries. That's why I was on the Petulant Express. I'm writing a novel with a plot that involves a homicide on a train. Men like Peter Petulant have their fingers in many pies around the world, and they make a lot of enemies. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if everyone riding the train could, if they thought about it, find a reason to want him dead. But motive is only one part of the puzzle. Don't forget means and opportunity. It takes all three to tie a good mystery together. Tonight will test everyone's powers of deduction as they attempt to solve the case that I would call "Murder on the Petulant Express." It would be an interesting title for a book.

LAW

You're right, ma'am. Motive, means and opportunity are the keys to identifying the killer from among the suspects.

STROMAN

There you go calling me a suspect again. How dare you, sir? I am a United States senator and a Southern gentleman. You can't believe that I would commit murder.

LAW

Senator Thurm Stroman, your reputation as a patriot is well known. What's also well known is that Peter Petulant's patriotism has been questioned. How did you feel about that?

STROMAN

Let me begin by saying, "God Bless America." It's the title of a new song that's just been written by some guy named Berlin. Anyone who doesn't believe that God should bless America is no friend of this here senator.

FASSMACHER

Berlin – what a beautiful name.

STROMAN

I've been in the senate longer than most of you have been alive and I know what it takes to defend this country against any threat. There's nothing I wouldn't do to protect the United States of America - and I do mean nothing. That's what patriotism is all about. It means doing whatever it takes to make sure that our enemies will never get a foothold on this great and glorious continent.

ALTAMONTE

But there are other continents, Senator. The European continent is, once again, on the rise. Many of us will be part of it.

STROMAN

But it will never be an America. This Petulant guy thought he could do anything he wanted to do and that no one would catch on. Well, it looks like someone knew he needed to be watched. If you ask me, the Petulant Express had a lot of foreigners on it. Any of them could be your murderer.