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COVER BY FEODOR RIMSKY

EXPEDITER

His assignment was to get things done;
he definitely did so.
Not quite the things intended, perhaps,
but definitely done.

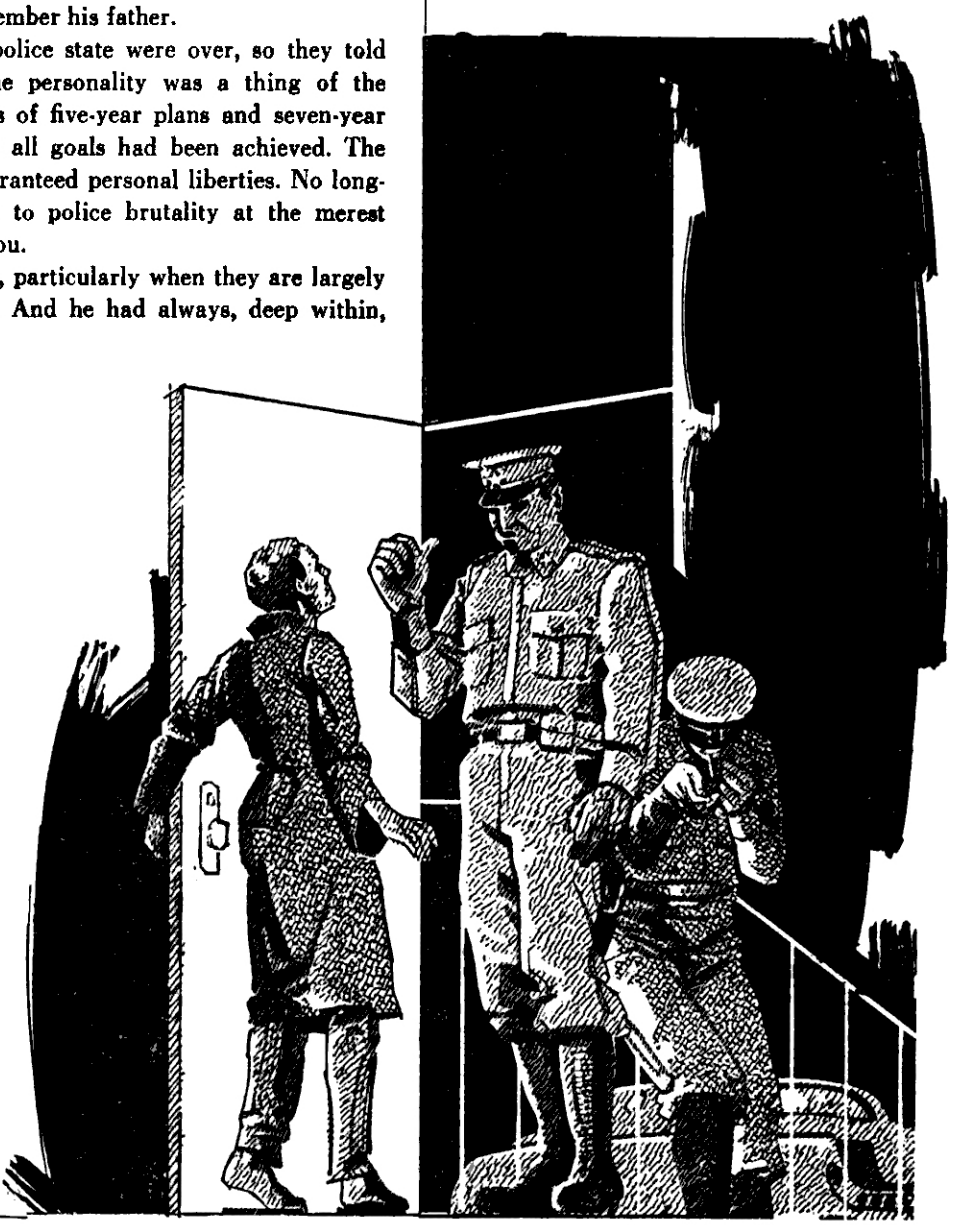
by MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE SCHELLING

The knock at the door came in the middle of the night, as Josip Pekic had always thought it would. He had been but four years of age when the knock had come that first time and the three large men had given his father a matter of only minutes to dress and accompany them. He could barely remember his father.

The days of the police state were over, so they told you. The cult of the personality was a thing of the past. The long series of five-year plans and seven-year plans were over and all goals had been achieved. The new constitution guaranteed personal liberties. No longer were you subject to police brutality at the merest whim. So they told you.

But fears die hard, particularly when they are largely of the subconscious. And he had always, deep within, expected the knock.



He was not mistaken. The rap came again, abrupt, impatient. Josip Pekic allowed himself but one chill of apprehension, then rolled from his bed, squared slightly stooped shoulders, and made his way to the door. He flicked on the light and opened up, even as the burly, empty faced zombi there was preparing to pound still again.

There were two of them, not three as he had always dreamed. As three had come for his father, more than two decades before.

His father had been a rightist deviationist, so the papers had said, a follower of one of whom Josip had never heard in any other context other than his father's trial and later execution. But he had not cracked under whatever pressures had been exerted upon him, and of that his son was proud.

He had not cracked, and in later years, when the cult of personality was a thing of the past, his name had been cleared and returned to the history books. And now it was an honor, rather than a disgrace, to be the son of Ljubo Pekic, who had posthumously been awarded the title Hero of the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

But though his father was now a hero, Josip still expected that knock. However, he was rather bewildered at the timing, having no idea of why he was to be under arrest.

The first of the zombi twins said expressionlessly, "Comrade Josip Pekic?"

If tremor there was in his voice, it was negligible. He was the son of Ljubo Pekic. He said, "That is correct. Uh . . . to what do I owe this intrusion upon my privacy?" That last in the way of bravado.

The other ignored the question. "Get dressed and come with us, Comrade," he said flatly.

At least they still called him comrade. That was some indication, he hoped, that the charges might not be too serious.

He chose his dark suit. Older than the brown one, but in it he felt he presented a more self-possessed demeanor. He could use the quality. Five foot seven, slightly underweight and with an air of unhappy self-deprecation, Josip Pekic's personality didn't exactly dominate in a group. He chose a conservative tie and a white shirt, although he knew that currently some frowned upon white shirts as a bourgeois affectation. It was all the thing, these days, to look proletarian, whatever that meant.

The zombis stood, watching him emptily as he dressed. He wondered what they would have said had he asked them to wait in the hallway until he was finished. Probably nothing. They hadn't bothered to answer when he asked what the charge against him was.

He put his basic papers, his identity card, his student cards, his work record and all the rest in an inner pocket, and faced them. "I am ready," he said as evenly as he could make it come.

They turned and led the way down to the street and to the black limousine there. And in it was the third one, sitting in the front seat, as empty of face as the other two. He hadn't bothered to turn off the vehicle's cushion jets and allow it to settle to the street. He had known how very quickly his colleagues would reappear with their prisoner.

Josip Pekic sat in the back between the two, wondering just where he was being taken, and, above all, why. For the life of him he couldn't think of what the charge might be. True enough, he read the usual number of prescribed books, but no more than was common among other intellectuals, among the students and the country's avant garde, if such you could call it. He had attended the usual parties and informal debates in the coffee shops where the more courageous attacked this facet or that of the People's Dictatorship. But he belonged to no active organizations which opposed the State, nor did his tendencies attract him in that direction. Politics were not his interest.

At this time of the night, there was little traffic on the streets of Zagurest, and few parked vehicles. Most of those which had been rented for the day had been returned to the car-pool garages. It was the one advantage Josip could think of that Zagurest had over the cities of the West which he had seen. The streets were not cluttered with vehicles. Few people owned a car outright. If you required one, you had the local car pool deliver it, and you kept it so long as you needed transportation.

He had expected to head for the Kalemegdan Prison where political prisoners were traditionally taken, but instead, they slid off to the right at Partisan Square, and up the Boulevard of the November Revolution. Josip Pekic, in surprise, opened his mouth to say something to the security policeman next to him, but then closed it again and his lips paled. He knew where they were going, now. Whatever the charge against him, it was not minor.

A short kilometer from the park, the government buildings began. The Skupstina, the old Parliment left over from the days when Transbalkania was a backward, feudo-capitalistic power of third class. The National Bank, the new buildings of the Borba and the Politica. And finally, set back a hundred feet from the boulevard, the sullen, squat Ministry of Internal Affairs.

It had been built in the old days, when the Russians had still dominated the country, and in slavish imitation of the architectural horror known as Stalin Gothic. Meant to be above all efficient and imposing and winding up simply—grim.

Yes. Josip Pekic knew where they were going now.

The limousine slid smoothly on its cushion of air, up the curved driveway, past the massive iron statue of the worker struggling against the forces of reaction, a rifle in one hand, a wrench in the other and stopped before, at last, the well-guarded doorway.

Without speaking, the two police who had come to his room opened the car door and climbed out. One made a motion with his head, and Josip followed. The limousine slid away immediately.

Between them, he mounted the marble stairs. It occurred to him that this was the route his father must have taken, two decades before.

He had never been in the building of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, before. Few Transbalkanians had, other than those who were employed in the MVD, or who came under the Ministry's scrutiny.

Doors opened before them, closed behind them. Somewhat to Josip Pekic's surprise the place was copiously adorned with a surplus of metal and marble statues, paintings and tapestries. It had similarities to one of Zagurest's heavy museums.

Through doors and down halls and through larger rooms, finally to a smaller one in which sat alone at a desk a lean, competent and assured type who jittered over a heavy sheaf of papers with an electro-marking computer pen. He was nattily and immaculately dressed and smoked his cigarette in one of the small pipelike holders once made *de riguer* through the Balkans by Marshal Tito.

The three of them came to a halt before his desk and, at long last, expression came to the faces of the zombis. Respect, with possibly an edge of perturbation. Here, obviously, was authority.

He at the desk finished a paper, tore it from the sheaf, pushed it into the maw of the desk chute from whence it would be transported to the auto-punch for preparation for recording. He looked up in busy impatience.

Then, to Josip Pekic's astonishment, the other came to his feet quickly, smoothly and with a grin on his face. Josip hadn't considered the possibility of being grinned at in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

"Aleksander Kardelj," he said in self-introduction, sticking out a lean hand to be shaken. "You're Pekic, eh? We've been waiting for you."

Josip shook, bewildered. He looked at the zombi next to him, uncomprehendingly.

He who had introduced himself, darted a look of comprehension from Josip to the two. He said disgustedly, but with mild humor oddly mixed, "What's the matter, did these hoodlums frighten you?"

Josip fingered his chin nervously. "Of course not."

One of the zombis shifted his feet. "We did nothing except obey orders."

Kardelj grimaced in sour amusement. "I can imagine," he grunted. "Milka, you see too many of these imported Telly shows from the West. I suspect you see yourself as a present day Transbalkanian G-Man."

"Yes, Comrade," Milka said, and then shook his head.

"Oh, hush up and get out," Kardelj said. He flicked the cigarette butt from its holder with a thumb and took up a fresh one from a desk humidor and wedged it into the small bowl. He looked at Josip and grinned again, the action giving his face an unsophisticated youthful expression.

"You can't imagine how pleased I am to meet you, at last," he said. "I've been looking for you for months."

Josip Pekic ogled him blankly. The name had come through to him at last. Aleksander Kardelj was seldom in the news, practically never photographed, and then in the background in a group of Party functionaries, usually with a wry smile on his face. But he was known throughout the boundaries of the State, if not internationally. Aleksander Kardelj was Number Two. Right-hand man of Zoran Jankez himself, second in command of the Party and rumored to be the brains behind the throne.

The zombis had gone, hurriedly.

"Looking for me?" Josip said blankly. "I haven't been in hiding. You've made some mistake. All I am is a student of—"

"Of course, of course," Kardelj said, humorously impatient. He took up a folder from his desk and shook it absently in Josip's general direction. "I've studied your dossier thoroughly." He flicked his eyes up at a wall clock. "Come along. Comrade Jankez is expecting us. We'll leave explanations until then."

In a daze, Josip Pekic followed him.

Comrade Jankez, Number One. Zoran Jankez, Secretary General of the Party. President of the U.B.S.R., the United Balkan Soviet Republics. Number One.

Josip could hardly remember so far back that Zoran Jankez wasn't head of the Party, when his face, or sculptered bust, wasn't to be seen in every store, on the walls of banks, railroad stations, barber shops, or bars. Never a newsreel but that part of it wasn't devoted to Comrade Jankez, never a Telly newscast but that Number One was brought to the attention of the viewers. His coming to power had been a quiet, bloodless affair upon the death of the Number One who had preceded him, and he had remained in his position for a generation.

Josip Pekic followed Aleksander Kardelj in a daze, through a door to the rear of the desk, and into a somewhat bigger room, largely barren of furniture save for a massive table with a dozen chairs about it. At the table, looking some ten years older than in any photo Josip had ever seen, sat Zoran Jankez.

He looked ten years older, and his face bore a heavy weariness, a grayness, that never came through in his publicity shots. He looked up from a report he was perusing and grunted a welcome to them.

Kardelj said in pleasurable enthusiasm, "Here he is, Zoran. Our Comrade Josip Pekic. The average young citizen of Transbalkania."

Number One grunted again, and took in the less than imposing figure of Josip Pekic. Josip felt an urge to nibble at his fingernails, and repressed it. He had recently broken himself of the smoking habit and was hard put to find occupation for his hands when nervous.

Zoran Jankez growled an invitation for them to be seated and Kardelj adjusted his trousers to preserve the crease, threw one leg up along the heavy conference table, and rested on a buttock, looking at ease but as though ready to take off instantly.

Josip fumbled himself into one of the sturdy oaken chairs, staring back and forth at the two most powerful men of his native land. Thus far, no one had said anything that made any sense whatsoever to him since he had been hauled from his bed half an hour ago.

Zoran Jankez rasped, "I have gone through your dossier, Comrade. I note that you are the son of Hero of the People's Democratic Dictatorship, Ljubo Pekic."

"Yes, Comrade Jankez," Josip got out. He fussed with his hands, decided it would be improper to stick them in his pockets.

Number One grunted. "I knew Ljubo well. You must realize that his arrest was before my time. I had no power to aid him. It was, of course, after my being elected to the Secretary Generalship that he was exonerated and his name restored to the list of those who have gloriously served the State. But then, of course, you bear no malice at this late date. Ljubo has been posthumously given the hero's award."

It wasn't exactly the way Josip knew the story, but there was little point in his objecting. He simply nodded. He said, unhappily, "Comrades, I feel some mistake has been made. I . . . I have no idea—"

Kardelj was chuckling, as though highly pleased with some development. He held up a hand to cut Josip short and turned to his superior. "You see, Zoran. A most average, laudable young man. Born under our regime, raised under the People's Democratic Dictatorship. Exactly our man."

Zoran Jankez seemed not to hear the other He was studying Josip heavily, all but gloomily.

A beefy paw went out and banged a button inset in the table and which Josip had not noticed before. Almost instantly a door in the rear opened and a white-jacketed servant entered, pushing a wheeled combination bar and hors d'oeuvres cart before him. He brought the lavishly laden wagon to within reach of the heavy-set Party head, his face in servile expressionlessness.

Jankez grunted something and the waiter, not quite bowing and scraping, retreated again from the room. Number One's heavy lips moved in and out as his eyes went over the display.

Kardelj said easily, "Let me, Zoran." He arose and brought a towel-wrapped bottle from a refrigerated bucket set into the wagon, and deftly took up a delicate three-ounce glass which he filled and placed before his superior. He took up another and raised his eyebrows at Josip Pekic who shook his head—a stomach as queasy as his wasn't going to be helped by alcohol. Kardelj poured a short one for himself and resumed his place at the heavy conference table.

Jankez, his eyes small and piggish, took up a heavy slice of dark bread and ladled a full quarter pound of Danube caviar upon it. He took up the glass and tossed the chilled spirits back over his palate, grunted and stuffed the open sandwich into his mouth.

Josip's eyes went to the hors d'oeuvres wagon. The spread would have cost him six months' income.

Number One rumbled, his mouth full, "Comrade, I am not surprised at your confusion. We will get to the point immediately. Actually, you must consider yourself a very fortunate young man." He belched, took another huge bite, then went on. "Have you ever heard the term, expediter?"

"I . . . I don't know . . . I mean think so, Comrade Jankez."

The party head poured himself some more of the yellow spirits and took down half of it. "It is not important," he rasped. "Comrade Kardelj first came upon the germ of this project of ours whilst reading of American industrial successes during the Second World War. They were attempting to double, triple, quadruple their production of such war materiel as ships and aircraft in a matter of mere months. Obviously, a thousand bottlenecks appeared. All was confusion. So they resorted to expediters. Extremely competent efficiency engineers whose sole purpose was to seek out such bottlenecks and eliminate them. A hundred aircraft might be kept from completion by the lack of a single part. The expediter found them though they be as far away as England, and flew them by chartered plane to California. A score of top research chemists might be needed for a certain project in Tennessee, the expediter located them, though it meant the stripping of valued men from jobs of lesser importance. I need give no further examples. Their powers were sweeping. Their expense accounts unlimited. Their successes unbelievable." Number One's

eyes went back to the piles of food, as though he'd grown tired of so much talk.

Josip fidgeted, still uncomprehending.

While the Party leader built himself a huge sandwich of Dalmatian ham and *pohovano pile* chicken, Aleksander Kardelj put in an enthusiastic word. "We're adapting the idea to our own needs, Comrade. You have been selected to be our first expediter."

If anything, Josip Pekic was more confused than ever. "Expediter," he said blankly. "To . . . to expedite *what?*"

"That is for you to decide," Kardelj said blithely. "You're our average Transbalkanian. You feel as the average man in the street feels. You're our what the Yankees call, Common Man."

Josip said plaintively, "You keep saying that, but I don't know what you mean, Comrade. Please forgive me, perhaps I'm dense, but what is this about me being uh, the average man? There's nothing special about me. I . . ."

"Exactly," Kardelj said triumphantly. "There's nothing special about you. You're the average man of all Transbalkania. We have gone to a great deal of difficulty to seek you out."

Number One belched and took over heavily. "Comrade, we have made extensive tests in this effort to find our average man. You are the result. You are of average age, of average height, weight, of education, and of intelligence quotient. You finished secondary school, worked for several years, and have returned to the university where you are now in your second year. Which is average for you who have been born in your generation. Your tastes, your ambitions, your . . . dreams, Comrade Pekic, are either known to be, or assumed to be, those of the average Transbalkanian." He took up a rich baklava dessert, saturated with honey, and devoured it.

Josip Pekic and his associates had wondered at some of the examinations and tests that had been so prevalent of recent date. He accepted the words of the two Party leaders. Very well, he was the average of the country's some seventy million population. Well, then?

Number One had pushed himself back in his chair, and Josip was only mildly surprised to note that the man seemed considerably paunchier than his photos indicated. Perhaps he wore a girdle in public.

Zoran Jankez took up a paper. "I have here a report from a journalist of the West who but recently returned from a tour of our country. She reports, with some indignation, that the only available eyebrow pencils were to be found on the black market, were of French import, and cost a thousand dinars apiece. She contends that Transbalkanian women are indignant at paying such prices."

The Party head looked hopelessly at first Josip and then Kardelj. "What is an eyebrow pencil?"

Kardelj said, a light frown on his usually easy-going face, "I believe it is a cosmetic."

"You mean like lipstick?"

Josip took courage. He flustered. "They use it to darken their eyebrows—women, I mean. From what I understand, it comes and goes in popularity. Right now, it is ultra-popular. A new, uh, fad originating in Italy, is sweeping the West."

Number One stared at him. "How do you know all that?" he rasped.

Josip fiddled with the knot of his tie, uncomfortably. "It is probably in my dossier that I have journeyed abroad on four occasions. Twice to International Youth Peace Conferences, once as a representative to a Trades Union Convention in Vienna, and once on a tourist vacation guided tour. On those occasions I . . . ah . . . met various young women of the West."

Kardelj said triumphantly, "See what I mean, Zoran? This comrade is priceless."

Jankez looked at his right-hand man heavily. "Why, if our women desire this . . . this eyebrow pencil nonsense, is it not supplied them? Is there some ingredient we do not produce? If so, why cannot it be imported?" He picked at his uneven teeth with a thumbnail.

Kardelj held his lean hands up, as though in humorous supplication. "Because, Comrade, to this point we have not had expediters to find out such desires on the part of women comrades."

Number One grunted. He took up another report. "Here we have some comments upon service in our restaurants, right here in Zagurest, from an evidently widely published American travel reporter. He contends that the fact that there is no tipping leads to our waiters being surly and inefficient."

He glared up at his right-hand man. "I have never noticed when I have dined at the Sumadija or the Dva Ribara, that the waiters have been surly. And only last week I enjoyed *cigansko pecenje*, gypsy roast, followed by a very flaky cherry *strudla*, at the Gradski Podrum. The service was excellent."

Kardelj cleared his throat. "Perhaps you receive better service than the average tourist, Zoran."

Jankez growled, "The tourist trade is important. An excellent source of hard currencies." He glowered across at Josip. "These are typical of the weaknesses you must ferret out, Comrade."

He put the reports down with a grunt. "But these are comparatively minor. Last week a truck driver attached to a meat-packing house in Belbrovnik was instructed to deliver a load of frozen products to a town in Macenegro. When he arrived there, it was to find they had no refrigeration facilities. So he unloaded the frozen meat on a warehouse platform and returned to Belbrovnik. At this time of the year, obviously in four hours the meat was spoiled." He glowered at Kardelj and then at Josip Pekic. "Why do things like this continually happen? How can we overtake the United States of the

Americas and Common Europe, when on all levels our workers are afraid to take initiative? That truck driver fulfilled his instructions. He delivered the meat. He washed his hands of what happened to it afterward. Why, Comrades? Why did he not have the enterprise to preserve his valuable load, even, if necessary, make the decision to return with it to Belbrovnik?"

He grunted heavily and settled back into his chair as though through, finished with the whole question.

Aleksander Kardelj became brisk. He said to Josip Pekic with a smile. "This is your job. You are to travel about the country, finding bottlenecks, finding shortages, ferreting out mistakes and bringing them to the attention of those in position to rectify them."

Josip said glumly, "But suppose . . . suppose they ignore my findings?"

Number One snorted, but said nothing.

Kardelj said jovially, "Tomorrow the announcements will go out to every man, woman and child in the People's Democratic Dictatorship. Your word is law. You are answerable only to Comrade Jankez and myself. No restrictions whatsoever apply to you. No laws. No regulations. We will give you identification which all will recognize, and the bearer of which can do no wrong."

Josip was flabbergasted. "But . . . but suppose I come up against some . . . well, someone high in the Party, or, well . . . some general or admiral? Some—"

Kardelj said jocularly, "You answer only to us, Comrade Pekic. Your power is limitless. Comrade Jankez did not exaggerate. Frankly, were cold statistics enough, Transbalkania has already at long last overtaken the West in per capita production. Steel, agriculture, the tonnage of coal mined, of petroleum pumped. All these supposed indications of prosperity." He flung up his hands again in his semihumorous gesture of despair. "But all these things do not mesh. We cannot find such a simple matter as . . . as eyebrow pencils in our stores, nor can we be served acceptably in our restaurants and hotels. Each man passes the buck, as the Yankees say, and no man can care less whether or not school keeps. No man wants responsibility."

Josip was aghast, all over again. "But . . . but me . . . only me. What could you expect a single person to do?"

"Don't misunderstand, Comrade," Kardelj told him with amused compassion. "You are but an experiment. If it works out, we will seek others who are also deemed potential expediters to do similar work. Now, are there any further questions?"

Josip Pekic stared miserably back and forth between the two, wondering wildly what they would say if he turned the whole thing down. His eyes lit on the dour, heavy Number One, and inwardly he shook his head. No. There was no question about that. You didn't turn down Zoran Jankez. He looked at Aleksander Kardelj, and in spite of the other's smiling face, he decided you didn't turn down Number Two, either.

Josip said carefully, "From what you say, I . . . I can override anyone in Transbalkania, except yourselves. But . . . but what if I antagonize one of you? You know . . . with something I think I find wrong?"

The second in command of the Party chuckled, even as he fitted a fresh cigarette into his curved holder. "We've provided even for that, Comrade. Fifty thousand Common Europe francs have been deposited to your account in Switzerland. At any time you feel your revelations might endanger yourself, you are free to leave the country and achieve sanctuary abroad." He chuckled whimsically again. "Given the position you will occupy, a man above all law, with the whole of the nation's resources at his disposal, I cannot imagine you wishing to leave. The Swiss deposit is merely to give you complete confidence, complete security."

Number One was radiating fury as he stalked heavily down the corridors of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. On the surface, his face displayed nothing—which meant nothing. There was simply a raging aura of trouble.

Veljko Gosnjak, posted with one other before the office of Aleksander Kardelj, winced when he saw the Party head approaching. He muttered from the side of his mouth, "Watch out. He's on a rampage. In this mood, he'd as well set you to filling salt shakers in the Nairebis mines as . . ."

But Zoran Jankez was now near enough that he might hear, and Veljko Gosnjak cut himself off abruptly and came to even stiffer attention.

Number One ignored them both and pushed on through the door.

Even as his right-hand man looked up from his work, Jankez was growling ominously. "Do you know the latest from that brain-wave experiment?"

Kardelj was close enough to the other personally to at least pretend lack of awe. He grinned and said, "You mean young Josip? Sit down, Zoran. A drink?"

The Number Two Party man swiveled slightly and punched out a code on a series of buttons. Almost immediately, an area of approximately one square foot sank down from the upper right-hand corner of his desk, to rise again bearing two chilled glasses.

Jankez snorted his anger but took up one of the glasses. "These everlasting gadgets from the West," he growled. "One of these days, this confounded desk of yours will give you an electric shock that will set me to looking for a new assistant." He threw the contents of the glass back over his palate. "If I don't start looking before that time," he added ominously.

However, he savored the drink, then put down the glass, pursed his lips and rumbled, "Where do you get this excellent slivovka, Aleksander?"

Kardelj sipped part of his own drink. He said lightly. "That is the only secret I keep from you, Zoran. However, I will give you this hint. Its proper name is slji-

vovica, rather than slivovka. It does not come from Slovenia. I am afraid, once you know its origin, I will no longer be of use to you."

He laughed again. "But what is it that young Josip has done?"

His superior's face resumed its dark expression. He growled, "You know Velimir Crvenkovski, of course."

Kardelj raised scanty eyebrows. "Of course, Vice chairman of the Secretariat of Agriculture."

Zoran Jankez had lowered his clumsy bulk into a chair. Now he said heavily, his voice dangerous. "Velimir and I were partisans together. It was I who converted him to the Party, introduced him to the works of Lenin while we squatted in foxholes in Macenegro."

"Of course," the other repeated. "I know the story very well. A good Party man, Comrade Crvenkovski, never failing to vote with you in meetings of the Executive Committee."

"Yes," Jankez growled ominously. "And your precious Josip Pekic, your expediter, has removed him from his position as supreme presider of agriculture in Bosnatia."

Aleksander Kardelj cleared his throat. "I have just been reading the account. It would seem that production has fallen off considerably in the past five years in Bosnatia. Ah, Comrade Crvenkovski evidently had brought to his attention that wild life in the countryside, particularly birds, accounted for the loss of hundreds of thousands of tons of cereals and other produce annually."

"A well-known fact," Jankez rasped. He finished what remained of his drink, and reached forward to punch out the order for a fresh one. "What has that got to do with this pipsqueak using the confounded powers you invested him with to dismiss one of the best Party men in Transylvania?"

His right-hand man had not failed to note that he was now being given full credit for the expediter idea. He said, still cheerfully, however, "It would seem that Comrade Crvenkovski issued top priority orders to kill off, by whatever means possible, all birds. Shotguns, poison, nets were issued by the tens of thousands to the peasants."

"*Well?*" his superior said ominously. "Obviously, Velimir was clear minded enough to see the saving in gross production."

"Um-m-m," Kardelj said placatingly. "However, he failed to respond to the warnings of our agriculturists who have studied widely in the West. It seems as though the balance of nature calls for the presence of wildlife, and particularly birds. The increase in destructive insects has more than counterbalanced the amount of cereals the birds once consumed. Ah, Zoran," he said with a wry smile, "I would suggest we find another position for Comrade Crvenkovski."

The secretary-receptionist looked up at long last at the very average looking young man before him. "Yes," he said impatiently.

The stranger said, "I would like to see Comrade Broz."

"Surely you must realize that the Commissar is one of the busiest men in Transbalkania, Comrade." There was mocking sneer in the tone. "His time is not at the disposal of every citizen."

The newcomer looked at the petty authority thoughtfully. "Do you so address everyone that enters this office?" he asked mildly.

The other stared at him, flabbergasted. He suddenly banged upon a button on the desk.

When the security guard responded to the summons, he gestured curtly with his head at the newcomer. "Throw this fool out, Petar," he rapped.

Josip Pekic shook his head, almost sadly. "No," he said. "Throw *this* man out." He pointed at the secretary-receptionist.

The guard called Petar blinked at each of them in turn.

Josip brought forth his wallet, fidgeted a moment with the contents, then flashed his credentials. "State expediter," he said nervously. "Under direct authority of Comrade Zoran Jankez." He looked at the suddenly terrified receptionist. "I don't know what alternative work we can find to fit your talents. However, if I ever again hear of you holding down a position in which you meet the public, I will . . . will, ah, see you imprisoned."

The other scurried from the room before Josip thought of more to say.

Josip Pekic looked at the guard for a long moment. He said finally, unhappy still, "What are you needed for around here?"

"Why yes, Comrade. I am the security guard."

Petar, obviously no brain at the best, was taken aback.

"You didn't answer my question." Josip's hands were jittering so he jammed them into his pockets.

Petar had to think back to remember the wording of the question in question. Finally he came up triumphantly with, "Yes, Comrade. I guard Comrade Broz and the others from assassins. I am armed." He proudly displayed the Mikoyan Noiseless which he had holstered under his left shoulder.

Josip said, "Go back to your superior and inform him that I say you are superfluous on this assignment. No longer are commissars automaticallly to be guarded. Only under special circumstances. If . . . well, if our people dislike individual commissars sufficiently to wish to assassinate them, maybe they need assassination."

Petar stared at him.

"Oh, get out," Josip said, with attempted sharpness. But then, "What door leads to Comrade Broz's office?"

Petar pointed, then got out. At least he knew how to obey orders, Josip decided. What was there about the police mentality? Were they like that before they be-

came police, and the job sought them out? Or did the job make them all that way?

He pushed his way through the indicated door. The office beyond held but one inhabitant who stood, hands clasped behind his back, while he stared in obvious satisfaction at a wall of charts, maps and graphs.

The average young man looked at some of the lettering on the charts and shook his head. He said, his voice hesitant, "Commissar Broz?"

The other turned, frowning, not recognizing his caller and surprised to find him here without announcement. He said, "Yes, young man?"

Josip presented his credentials again.

Broz had heard of him. He hurried forth a chair, became expansive in manner. A cigar? A drink? A great pleasure to meet the Comrade Expediter. He had heard a great deal about the new experiment initiated by Comrade Jankez and ably assisted by Aleksander Kardelj. Happily, an expediter was not needed in the Transbalkian Steel Complex. It was expanding in such wise as to be the astonishment of the world, both East and West.

"Yes," Josip began glumly, "but—"

Broz was back on his feet and to his wall of charts and graphs. "See here," he beamed expansively. "This curve is steel production. See how it zooms? A veritable Sputnik, eh? Our statistics show that we are rapidly surpassing even the most foremost of the Western powers."

Josip Pekic said, almost apologetically in view of the other's enthusiasm. "That's what I came to discuss with you, Comrade. You see, I've been sitting around, ah, in the local wineshops, talking it over with the younger engineers and the men on the job."

The other frowned at him. "Talking what over?"

"This new policy of yours." Josip's voice was diffident.

"You mean overtaking the steel production of the West, by utilizing *all* methods of production?" The commissar's voice dropped. "I warn you Comrade, the germ of this idea originated with Zoran Jankez himself. We are old comrades and friends from back before the revolution."

"I'm sure you are," Josip said pessimistically, and suppressing an urge to bite at the skin of his thumb. "However . . . well, I'm not so sure Number One will admit your program originated with him. At least, it hasn't worked out that way in the recent past when something soured."

The other bug-eyed. He whispered, "That approaches cynical treason, Comrade."

Josip half nodded, said discouragedly, "You forget. By Comrade Jankez's own orders I . . . I can do no wrong. But so much for that. Now, well, this steel program. I'm afraid it's going to have to be scrapped."

"Scrapped!" the Commissar of the Transbalkanian Steel Complex stared at his visitor as though the other was rabid. "You fool! Our steel progress is the astonishment of the world! Why, not only are our ultramodern plants, built largely with foreign assistance, working on a twenty-four hour a day basis, but thousands of secondary smelters, some so small as to be operated by a handful of comrade citizens, in backyard establishments, by schoolchildren, working smelters of but a few tons monthly capacity in the schoolyard, by—"

The newly created State Expediter held up a hand dispiritedly. "I know. I know. Thousands of these backyard smelters exist . . . uh . . . especially in parts of the country where there is neither ore nor fuel available."

The commissar looked at him.

The younger man said, his voice seemingly deprecating his words, "The schoolchildren, taking time off from their studies, of course, bring scrap iron to be smelted. And they bring whatever fuel they can find, often pilfered from railway yards. And the more scrap and fuel they bring, the more praise they get. Unfortunately, the so-called scrap often turns out to be kitchen utensils, farm tools, even, on at least one occasion, some railroad tracks, from a narrow gauge line running up to a lumbering project, not in use that time of the year. Sooner or later, Comrade Broz, the nation is going to have to replace those kitchen utensils and farm tools and all the rest of the scrap that isn't really quite scrap."

The commissar began to protest heatedly, but Josip Pekic shook his head and tried to firm his less than dominating voice. "But even that's not the worst of it. Taking citizens away from their real occupations, or studies, and putting them to smelting steel where no ore exists. The worst of it is, so my young engineer friends tell me, that while the steel thus produced might have been a marvel back in the days of the Hittites, it hardly reaches specifications today. Perhaps it might be used ultimately to make simple farm tools such as hoes and rakes; if so, it would make quite an endless circle, because that is largely the source of the so-called steel to begin with—tools, utensils and such. But it hardly seems usable in modern industry."

The commissar had gone pale with anger by now. He put his two fists on his desk and leaned upon them, staring down at his seated visitor. "Comrade," he bit out, "I warn you. Comrade Jankez is enthusiastic about my successes. Beyond that, not only is he an old comrade, but my brother-in-law as well."

Josip Pekic nodded, unenthusiastically, and his voice continued to quiver. "So the trained engineers under you, have already warned me. However, Comrade Broz, you are . . . well, no longer Commissar of the Steel Complex. My report has already gone in to Comrades Jankez and Kardelj."

The knock came at the door in the middle of the night, as Aleksander Kardelj had always thought it would.

From those early days of his Party career, when his

ambitions had sent him climbing, pushing, tripping up others, on his way to the top, he had expected it eventually.

Oh, his had been a different approach, on the surface, an easygoing, laughing, gentler approach than one usually connected with members of the Secretariat of the Executive Commitee of the Party, but it made very little difference in the very long view. When one fell from the heights, he fell just as hard, whether or not he was noted for his sympathetic easy humor.

The fact was, Aleksander Kardelj was not asleep when the fist pounded at his door shortly after midnight. He had but recently turned off, with a shaking hand, the Telly-Phone, after a less than pleasant conversation with President of the United Balkan Soviet Republics, Zoran Jankez.

For the past ten years, Kardelj had been able to placate Zoran Jankez, even though Number One be at the peak of one of his surly rages, rages which seemed to be coming with increasing frequency of late. As the socio-economic system of the People's Democratic Dictatorship became increasingly complicated, as industrialization with its modern automation mushroomed in a geometric progression, the comparative simplicity of governing which applied in the past, was strictly of yesteryear. It had been one thing, rifle and grenades in hand, to seize the government, after a devastating war in which the nation had been leveled, and even to maintain it for a time, over illiterate peasants and unskilled proletarians. But industrialization calls for a highly educated element of scientists and technicians, nor does it stop there. One of sub-mentality can operate a shovel in a field, or even do a simple operation on an endless assembly line in a factory. But practically all workers must be highly skilled workers in the age of automation, and there is little room for the illiterate. The populace of the People's Dictatorship was no longer a dumb, driven herd, and their problems were no longer simple ones.

Yes, Number One was increasingly subject to his rages these days. It was Aleksander Kardelj's deepest belief that Jankez was finding himself out of his depth. He no longer was capable of understandng the problems which his planning bodies brought to his attention. And he who is confused, be he ditchdigger or dictator, is a man emotionally upset.

Zoran Jankez's face had come onto the Telly-Phone screen already enraged. He had snapped to his right-hand man, "Kardelj! Do you realize what that . . . that idiot of yours has been up to now?"

Inwardly, Kardelj had winced. His superior had been mountingly difficult of late, and particularly these past few days. He said now, cajolingly, "Zoran, I—"

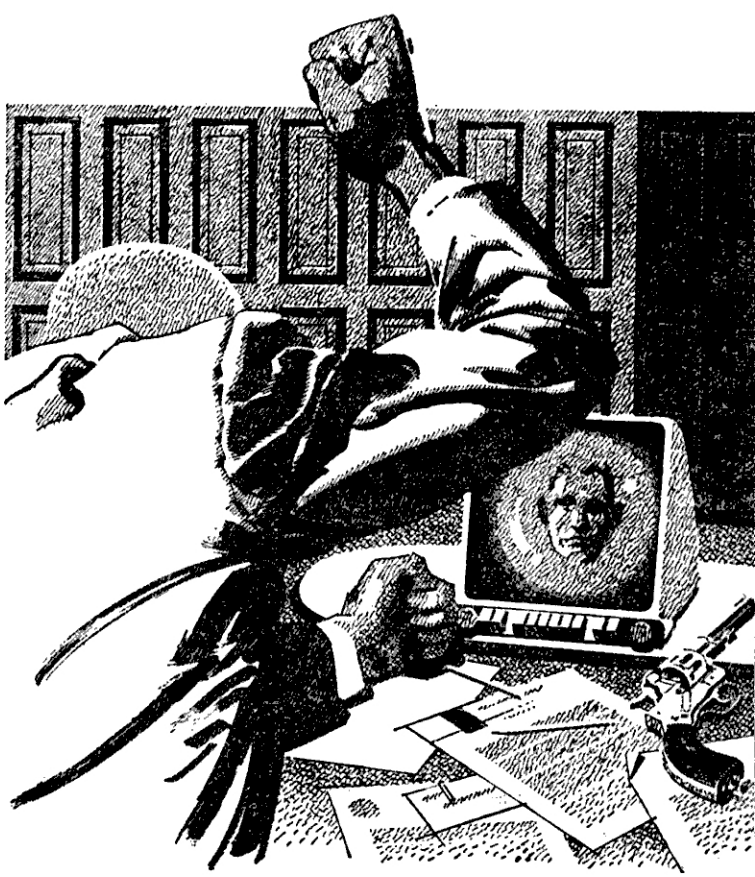
"Don't call me Zoran, Kardelj! And please preserve me from your sickening attempts to fawn, in view of your treacherous recommendations of recent months." He was so infuriated that his heavy jowls shook.

Kardelj had never seen him this furious. He said placatingly, "Comrade Jankez, I had already come to the conclusion that I should consult you on the desirability of revoking this young troublemaker's credentials and removing him from the—"

"I am not interested in what you were *going* to do, Kardelj. I am already in the process of ending this traitor's activities. I should have known, when you revealed he was the son of Ljubo Pekic, that he was an enemy of the State, deep within. I know the Pekic blood. It was I who put Ljubo to the question. Stubborn, wrong headed, a vicious foe of the revolution. And his son takes after him."

Kardelj had enough courage left to say, "Comrade, it would seem to me that young Pekic is a tanglefoot, but not a conscious traitor. I—"

"Don't call me comrade, Kardelj!" Number One roared. "I know your inner motivation. The reason you brought this agent provocateur, this Trotskite wrecker, to his position of ridiculous power. The two of you are in conspiracy to undermine my authority. This will be brought before the Secretariat of the Executive Committee, Kardelj. You've gone too far, this time!"



Aleksander Kardelj had his shortcomings but he was no coward. He said, wryly, "Very well, sir. But would you tell me what Josip Pekic has done now? My office has had no report on him for some time."

"What he has done! You fool, you traitorous fool, have you kept no record at all? He has been in the Macedonian area where my virgin lands program has been in full swing."

Kardelj cleared his throat at this point.

Jankez continued roaring. "The past three years, admittedly, the weather has been such, the confounded rains failing to arrive on schedule, that we have had our troubles. But this fool! This blundering traitorous idiot!"

"What has he done?" Kardelj asked, intrigued in spite of his position of danger.

"For all practical purposes he's ordered the whole program reversed. Something about a sandbowl developing, whatever that is supposed to mean. Something about introducing contour plowing, whatever nonsense that is. And even reforestating some areas. Some nonsense about watersheds. He evidently has blinded and misled the very men I had in charge. They are supporting him, openly."

Jankez, Kardelj knew, had been a miner as a youth, with no experience whatsoever on the soil. However, the virgin lands project had been his pet. He envisioned hundreds upon thousands of square miles of maize, corn as the Americans called it. This in turn would feed vast herds of cattle and swine so that ultimately the United Balkan Soviet Republics would have the highest meat consumption in the world.

Number One was raging on. Something about a conspiracy on the part of those who surrounded him. A conspiracy to overthrow him, Zoran Jankez, and betray the revolution to the Western powers, but he, Zoran Jankez, had been through this sort of plot before. He, Zoran Jankez, knew the answers to such situations.

Aleksander Kardelj grinned humorously, wryly, and reached to flick off the screen. He twisted a cigarette into the small pipelike holder, lit it and waited for the inevitable.

It was shortly after that the knock came on his door.

Zoran Jankez sat at his desk in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a heavy military revolver close to his right hand, a half empty liter of sljivovica and a water tumbler, to his left. Red of eye, he pored over endless reports from his agents, occasionally taking time out to growl a command into his desk mike. Tired he was, from the long sleepless hours he was putting in, but Number One was in his element. As he had told that incompetent, Kardelj, he had been through this thing before. It was no mistake that he was Number One.

After a time he put a beefy hand down on the reports. He could feel the rage coming upon him. Of late, he realized, there most certainly had developed a plot to undermine his health by constant frustrations. Was there no one, no one at all, to take some of these trivialities off his shoulders? Must he do everything in the People's Democratic Dictatorship? Make every decision and see it through?

He snapped into the mike, "Give me Lazar Jovanovic." And then, when the police head's shaven poll appeared in the screen of the Telly-Phone. "Comrade, I am giving you one last chance. Produce this traitor, Josip Pekic, within the next twenty-four hours, or answer to me." He glared at the other, whose face had tightened in fear. "I begin to doubt the sincerity of your efforts, in this, Comrade Jovanovic."

"But . . . but, Comrade, I—"

"That's all!" Number One snapped. He flicked off the instrument, then glowered at it for a full minute. If Jovanovic couldn't locate Pekic, he'd find someone who could. It was maddening that the pipsqueak had seemingly disappeared. To this point, seeking him had progressed in secret. There had been too much favorable publicity churned out in the early days of the expediter scheme to reverse matters to the point of having a public hue and cry. It was being done on the q.t.

But! Number One raged inwardly, if his police couldn't find the criminal soon enough, a full-scale hunt and purge could well enough be launched. There was more to all this than met the eye. Oh, he, Zoran Jankez had been through it before, though long years had lapsed since it had been necessary. The traitors, the secret conspiracies, and then the required purges to clean the Party ranks still once again.

The gentle summons of his Telly-Phone tinkled, and he flicked it on with a rough brush of his hand.

And there was the youthful face of Josip Pekic, currently being sought high and low by the full strength of the Internal Affairs Secretariat. Youthful, yes, but even as he stared his astonishment, Zoran Jankez could see that the past months had wrought their changes on the other's face. It was more mature, bore more of strain and weariness.

Before Jankez found his voice, Josip Pekic said diffidently, "I . . . I understand you've been, well . . . looking for me, sir."

"Looking for you!" the Party head bleated, his rage ebbing in all but uncontrollably. For a moment he couldn't find words.

Pekic said, his voice jittering, "I had some research to do. You see, sir, this . . . this project you and Kardelj started me off on—"

"I had nothing to do with it! It was Kardelj's scheme, confound his idiocy!" Number One all but screamed.

"Oh? Well . . . well, I had gathered the opinion that both of you concurred. Anyway, like I say, the project from the first didn't come off quite the way it started. I . . . well . . . we, were thinking in terms of finding out why waiters were surly, why workers and professionals and even officials all tried to, uh, beat the

rap, pass the buck, look out for themselves and the devil take the hindmost, and all those Americanisms that Kardelj is always using."

Jankez simmered, but let the other go on. Undoubtedly, his police chief, Lazar Jovanovic was even now tracing the call, and this young traitor would soon be under wraps where he could do no more damage to the economy of the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

"But, well, I found it wasn't just a matter of waiters, and truckdrivers and such. It . . . well . . . ran all the way from top to bottom. So, I finally felt as though I was sort of butting my head against the wall. I thought I better start at . . . kind of . . . fundamentals, so I began researching the manner in which the governments of the West handled some of these matters."

"Ah," Jankez said as smoothly as he was able to get out. "Ah. And?" This fool was hanging himself.

The younger man frowned in unhappy puzzlement. "Frankly, I was surprised. I have, of course, read Western propaganda to the extent I could get hold of it in Zagurest, and listened to the Voice of the West on the wireless. I was also, obviously, familiar with our own propaganda. Frankly . . . well . . . I had reserved my opinion in both cases."

This in itself was treason, but Number One managed to get out, almost encouragingly, "What are you driving at, Josip Pekic?"

"I found in one Western country that the government was actually paying its peasants, that is, farmers, not to plant crops. The same government subsidized other crops, keeping the prices up to the point where they were hard put to compete on the international markets."

Young Pekic made a moue, as though in puzzlement. "In other countries, in South America for instance, where the standard of living is possibly the lowest in the West and they need funds desperately to develop themselves, the governments build up large armies, although few of them have had any sort of warfare at all for over a century and have no threat of war."

"What is all this about?" Number One growled. Surely, Lazar Jovanovic was on the idiot traitor's trail by now.

Josip took a deep breath and hurried on nervously. "They've got other contradictions that seem unbelievable. For instance, their steel industry will be running at half capacity, in spite of the fact that millions of their citizens have unfulfilled needs, involving steel. Things like cars, refrigerators, stoves. In fact, in their so-called recessions, they'll actually close down perfectly good, modern factories, and throw their people out of employment, at the very time that there are millions of people who need that factory's product."

Josip said reasonably, "Why, sir, I've come to the conclusion that the West has some of the same problems we have. And the main one is politicians."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just that," Josip said with dogged glumness. "I . . . well, I don't know about the old days. A hundred, even fifty years ago, but as society becomes more complicated, more intricate, I simply don't think politicians are capable of directing it. The main problems are those of production and distribution of all the things our science and industry have learned to turn out. And politicians, all over the world, seem to foul it up."

Zoran Jankez growled ominously, "Are you suggesting that I am incompetent to direct the United Balkan Soviet Republics?"

"Yes, sir," Josip said brightly, as though the other had encouraged him. "That's what I mean. You or any other politician. Industry should be run by trained, competent technicians, scientists, industrialists—and to some extent, maybe, by the consumers, but not by politicians. By definition, politicians know about politics, not industry. But somehow, in the modern world, governments seem to be taking over the running of industry and even agriculture. They aren't doing such a good job, sir."

Jankez finally exploded. "Where are you calling from, Pekic?" he demanded. "You're under arrest!"

Josip Pekic cleared his throat, apologetically. "No, sir," he said. "Remember? I'm the average Transbalkanian citizen. And it is to be assumed I'd, well . . . react the way any other would. The difference is, I had the opportunity. I'm in Switzerland."

"Switzerland!" Number One roared. "You've defected. I knew you were a traitor, Pekic. Like father, like son! A true Transbalkanian would remain in his country and help it along the road to the future."

The younger man looked worried. "Well, yes, sir," he said. "I thought about that. But I think I've done about as much as I could accomplish. You see, these last few months, protected by those 'can do no wrong' credentials, I've been spreading this message around among all the engineers, technicians, professionals, all the more trained, competent people in Transbalkania. You'd be surprised how they took to it. I think it's kind of . . . well, snowballing. I mean the idea that politicians aren't capable of running industry. That if the United Balkan Soviet Republics are to ever get anywhere, some changes are going to have to be made."

Number One could no more than glare.

Josip Pekic, rubbed his nose nervously, and said, in the way of uneasy farewell, "I just thought it was only fair for me to call you and give a final report. After all, I didn't start all this. Didn't originate the situation. It was you and Kardelj who gave me my chance. I just . . . well . . . expedited things." His face faded from the screen, still apologetic of expression.

Zoran Jankez sat there for a long time, staring at the now dark instrument.

It was the middle of the night when the knock came at the door. But then, Zoran Jankez had always thought it would . . . finally. ■