Freedom

Mack Reynolds

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Author: Dallas McCord Reynolds

Illustrator: Schoenherr

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FREEDOM

by MACK REYNOLDS

Illustrated by Schoenherr

Freedom is a very dangerous thing indeed. It is so catching—like a plague—even the doctors get it.

C

olonel Ilya Simonov tooled his Zil aircushion convertible along the edge of Red Square, turned right immediately beyond St. Basil's Cathedral, crossed the Moscow River by the Moskvocetski Bridge and debouched into the heavy, and largely automated traffic of Pyarnikskaya. At Dobryninskaya Square he turned west to Gorki Park which he paralleled on Kaluga until he reached the old baroque palace which housed the Ministry.

There were no flags, no signs, nothing to indicate the present nature of the aged Czarist building.

He left the car at the curb, slamming its door behind him and walking briskly to the entrance. Hard, handsome in the Slavic tradition, dedicated, Ilya Simonov was young for his rank. A plainclothes man, idling a hundred feet down the street, eyed him briefly then turned his attention elsewhere. The two guards at the gate snapped to attention, their eyes straight ahead. Colonel Simonov was in mufti and didn't answer the salute.

The inside of the old building was well known to him. He went along marble halls which contained antique statuary and other relics of the past which, for unknown reason, no one had ever bothered to remove. At the heavy door which entered upon the office of his destination he came to a halt and spoke briefly to the lieutenant at the desk there.

"The Minister is expecting me," Simonov clipped.

The lieutenant did the things receptionists do everywhere and looked up in a moment to say, "Go right in, Colonel Simonov."

Minister Kliment Blagonravov looked up from his desk at Simonov's entrance. He was a heavy-set man, heavy of face and he still affected the shaven head, now rapidly disappearing among upper-echelons of the Party. His jacket had been thrown over the back of a chair and his collar loosened; even so there was a sheen of sweat on his face.

He looked up at his most trusted field man, said in the way of greeting, "Ilya," and twisted in his swivel chair to a portable bar. He swung open the door of the small refrigerator and emerged with a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka. He plucked two three-ounce glasses from a shelf and pulled the bottle's cork with his teeth. "Sit down, sit down, Ilya," he grunted as he filled the glasses. "How was Magnitogorsk?"

Ilya Simonov secured his glass before seating himself in one of the room's heavy leathern chairs. He sighed, relaxed, and said, "Terrible, I loath those ultra-industrialized cities. I wonder if the Americans do any better with Pittsburgh or the British with Birmingham."

"I know what you mean," the security head rumbled. "How did you make out with you assignment, Ilya?"

Colonel Simonov frowned down into the colorlessness of the vodka before dashing it back over his palate. "It's all in my report, Kliment." He was the only man in the organization who called Blagonravov by his first name.

His chief grunted again and reached forward to refill the glass. "I'm sure it is. Do you know how many reports go across this desk daily? And did you know that Ilya Simonov is the most long-winded, as the Americans say, of my some two hundred first-line operatives?"

The colonel shifted in his chair. "Sorry," he said. "I'll keep that in mind."

His chief rumbled his sour version of a chuckle. "Nothing, nothing, Ilya. I was jesting. However, give me a brief of your mission."

Ilya Simonov frowned again at his refilled vodka glass but didn't take it up for a moment. "A routine matter," he said. "A dozen or so engineers and technicians, two or three fairly high-ranking scientists, and three or four of the local intelligentsia had formed some sort of informal club. They were discussing

national and international affairs."

Kliment Blagonravov's thin eyebrows went up but he waited for the other to go on.

Ilya said impatiently, "It was the ordinary. They featured complete freedom of opinion and expression in their weekly get-togethers. They began by criticizing without extremism, local affairs, matters concerned with their duties, that sort of thing. In the beginning, they even sent a few letters of protest to the local press, signing the name of the club. After their ideas went further out, they didn't dare do that, of course."

He took up his second drink and belted it back, not wanting to give it time to lose its chill.

His chief filled in. "And they delved further and further into matters that should be discussed only within the party—if even there—until they arrived at what point?"

Colonel Simonov shrugged. "Until they finally got to the point of discussing how best to overthrow the Soviet State and what socio-economic system should follow it. The usual thing. I've run into possible two dozen such outfits in the past five years."

His chief grunted and tossed back his own drink. "My dear Ilya," he rumbled sourly, "I've *run into*, as you say, more than two hundred."

Simonov was taken back by the figure but he only looked at the other.

Blagonravov said, "What did you do about it?"

"Several of them were popular locally. In view of Comrade Zverev's recent pronouncements of increased freedom of press and speech, I thought it best not to make a public display. Instead, I took measures to charge individual members with inefficiency in their work, with corruption or graft, or with other crimes having nothing to do with the reality of the situation. Six or seven in all were imprisoned, others demoted. Ten or twelve I had switched to other cities, principally into more backward areas in the virgin lands."

"And the ringleaders?" the security head asked.

"There were two of them, one a research chemist of some prominence, the other

a steel plane manager. They were both, ah, unfortunately killed in an automobile accident while under the influence of drink."

"I see," Blagonravov nodded. "So actually the whole rat's nest was stamped out without attention being brought to it so far as the Magnitogorsk public is concerned." He nodded heavily again. "You can almost always be depended upon to do the right thing, Ilya. If you weren't so confoundedly good a field man, I'd make you my deputy."

Which was exactly what Simonov would have hated, but he said nothing.

"One thing," his chief said. "The origin of this, ah, *club* which turned into a tiny underground all of its own. Did you detect the finger of the West, stirring up trouble?"

"No." Simonov shook his head. "If such was the case, the agents involved were more clever than I'd ordinarily give either America or Common Europe credit for. I could be wrong, of course."

"Perhaps," the police head growled. He eyed the bottle before him but made no motion toward it. He wiped the palm of his right hand back over his bald pate, in unconscious irritation. "But there is something at work that we are not getting at." Blagonravov seemed to change subjects. "You can speak Czech, so I understand."

"That's right. My mother was from Bratislava. My father met her there during the Hitler war."

"And you know Czechoslovakia?"

"I've spent several vacations in the Tatras at such resorts as Tatranski Lomnica since the country's been made such a tourist center of the satellites." Ilya Simonov didn't understand this trend of the conversation.

"You have some knowledge of automobiles, too?"

Simonov shrugged. "I've driven all my life."

His chief rumbled thoughtfully, "Time isn't of essence. You can take a quick course at the Moskvich plant. A week or two would give you all the background you need."

Ilya laughed easily. "I seem to have missed something. Have my shortcomings

caught up with me? Am I to be demoted to automobile mechanic?"

Kliment Blagonravov became definite. "You are being given the most important assignment of your career, Ilya. This rot, this ever growing ferment against the Party, must be cut out, liquidated. It seems to fester worse among the middle echelons of ... what did that Yugoslavian Djilas call us?... the *New Class*. Why? That's what we must know."

He sat farther back in his chair and his heavy lips made a *mout*. "Why, Ilya?" he repeated. "After more than half a century the Party has attained all its goals. Lenin's millennium is here; the end for which Stalin purged ten millions and more, is reached; the sacrifices demanded by Khrushchev in the Seven-Year Plans have finally paid off, as the Yankees say. Our gross national product, our per capita production, our standard of living, is the highest in the world. Sacrifices are no longer necessary."

There had been an almost whining note in his voice. But now he broke it off. He poured them still another drink. "At any rate, Ilya, I was with Frol Zverev this morning. Number One is incensed. It seems that in the Azerbaijan Republic, for one example, that even the Komsomols were circulating among themselves various proscribed books and pamphlets. Comrade Zverev instructed me to concentrate on discovering the reason for this disease."

Colonel Simonov scowled. "What's this got to do with Czechoslovakia—and automobiles?"

The security head waggled a fat finger at him. "What we've been doing, thus far, is dashing forth upon hearing of a new conflagration and stamping it out. Obviously, that's no answer. We must find who is behind it. How it begins. Why it begins. That's your job?"

"Why Czechoslovakia?"

"You're unknown as a security agent there, for one thing. You will go to Prague and become manager of the Moskvich automobile distribution agency. No one, not even the Czech unit of our ministry will be aware of your identity. You will play it by ear, as the Americans say."

"To whom do I report?"

"Only to me, until the task is completed. When it is, you will return to Moscow and report fully." A grimace twisted Blagonravov's face. "If I am still here.

Number One is truly incensed, Ilya."

There had been some more. Kliment Blagonravov had evidently chosen Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, as the seat of operations in a suspicion that the wave of unrest spreading insidiously throughout the Soviet Complex owed its origins to the West. Thus far, there had been no evidence of this but the suspicion refused to die. If not the West, then who? The Cold War was long over but the battle for men's minds continued even in peace.

Ideally, Ilya Simonov was to infiltrate whatever Czech groups might be active in the illicit movement and then, if he discovered there was a higher organization, a center of the movement, he was to attempt to become a part of it. If possible he was to rise in the organisation to as high a point as he could.

Blagonravov, Minister of the *Chrezvychainaya Komissiya*, the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, was of the opinion that if this virus of revolt was originating from the West, then it would be stronger in the satellite countries than in Russia itself. Simonov held no opinion as yet. He would wait and see. However, there was an uncomfortable feeling about the whole assignment. The group in Magnitogorsk, he was all but sure, had no connections with Western agents, nor anyone else, for that matter. Of course, it might have been an exception.

He left the Ministry, his face thoughtful as he climbed into his waiting Zil. This assignment was going to be a lengthy one. He'd have to wind up various affairs here in Moscow, personal as well as business. He might be away for a year or more.

There was a sheet of paper on the seat of his aircushion car. He frowned at it. It couldn't have been there before. He picked it up.

It was a mimeographed throw-away.

It was entitled, *FREEDOM*, and it began: *Comrades, more than a hundred years ago the founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, explained that the State was incompatible with liberty, that the State was an instrument of repression of one class by another. They explained that for true freedom ever to exist the State must wither away.*

Under the leadership of Lenin, Stalin, Krushchev and now Zverev, the State has become ever stronger. Far from withering away, it continues to oppress us. Fellow Russians, it is time we take action! We must....

Colonel Simonov bounced from his car again, shot his eyes up and down the street. He barely refrained from drawing the 9 mm automatic which nestled under his left shoulder and which he knew how to use so well.

He curtly beckoned to the plainclothes man, still idling against the building a hundred feet or so up the street. The other approached him, touched the brim of his hat in a half salute.

Simonov snapped, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, colonel."

Ilya Simonov thrust the leaflet forward. "How did this get into my car?"

The other looked at it blankly. "I don't know, Colonel Simonov."

"You've been here all this time?"

"Why, yes colonel."

"With my car in plain sight?"

That didn't seem to call for an answer. The plainclothesman looked apprehensive but blank.

Simonov turned on his heel and approached the two guards at the gate. They were not more than thirty feet from where he was parked. They came to the salute but he growled, "At ease. Look here, did anyone approach my vehicle while I was inside?"

One of the soldiers said, "Sir, twenty or thirty people have passed since the Comrade colonel entered the Ministry."

The other one said, "Yes, sir."

Ilya Simonov looked from the guards to the plainclothes man and back, in frustration. Finally he spun on his heel again and re-entered the car. He slapped the elevation lever, twisted the wheel sharply, hit the jets pedal with his foot and shot into the traffic.

The plainclothes man looked after him and muttered to the guards, "Blagonravov's hatchetman. He's killed more men than the plague. A bad one to have down on you."

Simonov bowled down the Kaluga at excessive speed. "Driving like a young *stilyagi*," he growled in irritation at himself. But, confound it, how far had things gone when subversive leaflets were placed in cars parked in front of the ministry devoted to combating counter revolution.

He'd been away from Moscow for over a month and the amenities in the smog, smoke and coke fumes blanketing industrial complex of Magnitogorsk hadn't been particularly of the best. Ilya Simonov headed now for Gorki Street and the Baku Restaurant. He had an idea that it was going to be some time before the opportunity would be repeated for him to sit down to Zakouski, the salty, spicy Russian hors d'oeuvres, and to Siberian pilmeny and a bottle of Tsinandali.

The restaurant, as usual, was packed. In irritation, Ilya Simonov stood for a while waiting for a table, then, taking the head waiter's advice, agreed to share one with a stranger.

The stranger, a bearded little man, who was dwaddling over his Gurievskaya kasha dessert while reading *Izvestia*, glanced up at him, unseemingly, bobbed his head at Simonov's request to share his table, and returned to the newspaper.

The harried waiter took his time in turning up with a menu. Ilya Simonov attempted to relax. He had no particular reason to be upset by the leaflet found in his car. Obviously, whoever had thrown it there was distributing haphazardly. The fact that it was mimeographed, rather than printed, was an indication of lack of resources, an amateur affair. But what in the world did these people want? What did they want?

The Soviet State was turning out consumer's goods, homes, cars as no nation in the world. Vacations were lengthy, working hours short. A four-day week, even! What did they *want*? What motivates a man who is living on a scale unknown to a Czarist boyar to risk his position, even his life! in a stupidly impossible revolt against the country's government?

The man across from him snorted in contempt.

He looked over the top of his paper at Smirnov and said, "The election in Italy. Ridiculous!"

Ilya Simonov brought his mind back to the present. "How did they turn out? I understand the depression is terrible there."

"So I understand," the other said. "The vote turned out as was to be expected."

Simonov's eyebrows went up. "The Party has been voted into power?"

"Ha!" the other snorted. "The vote for the Party has fallen off by more than a third."

The security colonel scowled at him. "That doesn't sound reasonable, if the economic situation is as bad as has been reported."

His table mate put down the paper. "Why not? Has there ever been a country where the Party was *voted* into power? Anywhere—at any time during the more than half a century since the Bolsheviks first took over here in Russia?"

Simonov looked at him.

The other was talking out opinions he'd evidently formed while reading the *Izvestia* account of the Italian elections, not paying particular attention to the stranger across from him.

He said, his voice irritated, "Nor will there ever be. They know better. In the early days of the revolution the workers might have had illusions about the Party and it goals. Now they've lost them. Everywhere, they've lost them."

Ilya Simonov said tightly, "How do you mean?"

"I mean the Party has been rejected. With the exception of China and Yugoslavia, both of whom have their own varieties, the only countries that have adopted our system have done it under pressure from outside—not by their own efforts. Not by the will of the majority."

Colonel Simonov said flatly, "You seem to think that Marxism will never dominate the world."

"Marxism!" the other snorted. "If Marx were alive in Russia today, Frol Zverev would have him in a Siberian labor camp within twenty-four hours."

Ilya Simonov brought forth his wallet and opened it to his police credentials. He

said coldly, "Let me see your identification papers. You are under arrest."

The other stared at him for a moment, then snorted his contempt. He brought forth his own wallet and handed it across the table.

Simonov flicked it open, his face hard. He looked at the man. "Konstantin Kasatkin."

"Candidate member of the Academy of Sciences," the other snapped. "And bearer of the Hero of the Soviet Union award."

Simonov flung the wallet back to him in anger. "And as such, practically immune."

The other grinned nastily at him. "Scientists, my police friend, cannot be bothered with politics. Where would the Soviet Complex be if you took to throwing biologists such as myself into prison for making unguarded statements in an absent-minded moment?"

Simonov slapped a palm down on the table. "Confound it, Comrade," he snapped, "how is the Party to maintain discipline in the country if high ranking persons such as yourself speak open subversion to strangers."

The other sported his contempt. "Perhaps there's too much discipline in Russia, Comrade policeman."

"Rather, far from enough," Simonov snapped back.

The waiter, at last, approached and extended a menu to the security officer. But Ilya Simonov had come to his feet. "Never mind," he clipped in disgust. "There is an air of degenerate decay about here."

The waiter stared at him. The biologist snorted and returned to his paper. Simonov turned and stormed out. He could find something to eat and drink in his own apartment.

The old, old town of Prague, the *Golden City of a Hundred Spires* was as always the beautifully stolid medieval metropolis which even a quarter of a century and more of Party rule could not change. The Old Town, nestled in a bend of the

Vltava River, as no other city in Europe, breathed its centuries, its air of yesteryear.

Colonel Ilya Simonov, in spite of his profession, was not immune to beauty. He deliberately failed to notify his new office of his arrival, flew in on a Ceskoslovenskè Aerolinie Tupolev rocket liner and spent his first night at the Alcron Hotel just off Wenceslas Square. He knew that as the new manager of the local Moskvich distribution agency he'd have fairly elaborate quarters, probably in a good section of town, but this first night he wanted to himself.

He spent it wandering quietly in the old quarter, dropping in to the age-old beer halls for a half liter of Pilsen Urquell here, a foaming stein of Smichov Lager there. Czech beer, he was reminded all over again, is the best in the world. No argument, no debate, the best in the world.

He ate in the endless automated cafeterias that line the Viclavské Námesi the entertainment center of Prague. Ate an open sandwich here, some crabmeat salad there, a sausage and another glass of Pilsen somewhere else again. He was getting the feel of the town and of its people. Of recent years, some of the tension had gone out of the atmosphere in Moscow and the other Soviet centers; with the coming of economic prosperity there had also come a relaxation. The *fear*, so heavy in the Stalin era, had fallen off in that of Khrushchev and still more so in the present reign of Frol Zverev. In fact, Ilya Simonov was not alone in Party circles in wondering whether or not discipline had been allowed to slip too far. It is easier, the old Russian proverb goes, to hang onto the reins than to regain them once dropped.

But if Moscow had lost much of its pall of fear, Prague had certainly gone even further. In fact, in the U Pinkasu beer hall Simonov had idly picked up a magazine left by some earlier wassailer. It was a light literary publication devoted almost exclusively to humor. There were various cartoons, some of them touching political subjects. Ilya Simonov had been shocked to see a caricature of Frol Zverev himself. Zverev, Number One! Ridiculed in a second-rate magazine in a satellite country!

Ilya Simonov made a note of the name and address of the magazine and the issue.

Across the heavy wooden community table from him, a beer drinker grinned, in typically friendly Czech style. "A good magazine," he said. "You should subscribe."

A waiter, bearing an even dozen liter-size steins of beer hurried along, spotted the fact that Simonov's mug was empty, slipped a full one into its place, gave the police agent's saucer a quick mark of a pencil, and hurried on again. In the U Pinkasu, it was supposed that you wanted another beer so long as you remained sitting. When you finally staggered to your feet, the nearest waiter counted the number of pencil marks on your saucer and you paid up.

Ilya Simonov said cautiously to his neighbor, "Seems to be quite, ah, brash." He tapped the magazine with a finger.

The other shrugged and grinned again. "Things loosen up as the years go by," he said. "What a man wouldn't have dared say to his own wife five years ago, they have on TV today."

"I'm surprised the police don't take steps," Simonov said, trying to keep his voice expressionless.

The other took a deep swallow of his Pilsen Urquell. He pursed his lips and thought about it. "You know, I wonder if they'd dare. Such a case brought into the People's Courts might lead to all sort of public reaction these days."

It had been some years since Ilya Simonov had been in Prague and even then he'd only gone through on the way to the ski resorts in the mountains. He was shocked to find the Czech state's control had fallen off to this extent. Why, here he was, a complete stranger, being openly talked to on political subjects.

His cross-the-table neighbor shook his head, obviously pleased. "If you think Prague is good, you ought to see Warsaw. It's as free as Paris! I saw a Tri-D cinema up there about two months ago. You know what it was about? The purges in Moscow back in the 1930s."

"A rather unique subject," Simonov said.

"Um-m-m, made a very strong case for Bukharin, in particular."

Simonov said, very slowly, "I don't understand. You mean this ... this film supported the, ah, Old Bolsheviks?"

"Of course. Why not? Everybody knows they weren't guilty." The Czech snorted deprecation. "At least not guilty of what they were charged with. They were in Stalin's way and he liquidated them." The Czech thought about it for a while. "I wonder if he was already insane, that far back."

Had he taken up his mug of beer and dashed it into Simonov's face, he couldn't have surprised the Russian more.

Ilya Simonov had to take control of himself. His first instinct was to show his credentials, arrest the man and have him hauled up before the local agency of Simonov's ministry.

But obviously that was out of the question. He was in Czechoslovakia and, although Moscow still dominated the Soviet Complex, there was local autonomy and the Czech police just didn't enjoy their affairs being meddled with unless in extreme urgency.

Besides, this man was obviously only one among many. A stranger in a beer hall. Ilya Simonov suspected that if he continued his wanderings about the town, he'd meet in the process of only one evening a score of persons who would talk the same way.

Besides, still again, he was here in Prague incognito, his job to trace the sources of this dry rot, not to run down individual Czechs.

But the cinema, and TV! Surely anti-Party sentiment hadn't been allowed to go this far!

He got up from the table shakily, paid up for his beer and forced himself to nod good-bye in friendly fashion to the subversive Czech he'd been talking to.

In the morning he strolled over to the offices of the Moskvich Agency which was located only a few blocks from his hotel on Celetna Hybernski. The Russian car agency, he knew, was having a fairly hard go of it in Prague and elsewhere in Czechoslovakia. The Czechs, long before the Party took over in 1948, had been a highly industrialized, modern nation. They consequently had their own automobile works, such as Skoda, and their models were locally more popular than the Russian Moskvich, Zim and Pobeda.

Theoretically, the reason Ilya Simonov was the newly appointed agency head was to push Moskvich sales among the Czechs. He thought, half humorously, half sourly, to himself, even under the Party we have competition and pressure for higher sales. What was it that some American economist had called them? a system of State-Capitalism.

At the Moskvich offices he found himself in command of a staff that consisted of three fellow Russians, and a dozen or so Czech assistants. His immediate

subordinate was a Catherina Panova, whose dossier revealed her to be a party member, though evidently not a particularly active one, at least not since she'd been assigned here in Prague.

She was somewhere in her mid-twenties, a graduate of the University of Moscow, and although she'd been in the Czech capital only a matter of six months or so, had already adapted to the more fashionable dress that the style-conscious women of this former Western capital went in for. Besides that, Catherina Panova managed to be one of the downright prettiest girls Ilya Simonov had ever seen.

His career had largely kept him from serious involvement in the past. Certainly the dedicated women you usually found in Party ranks seldom were of the type that inspired you to romance but he wondered now, looking at this new assistant of his, if he hadn't let too much of his youth go by without more investigation into the usually favorite pastime of youth.

He wondered also, but only briefly, if he should reveal his actual identity to her. She was, after all, a party member. But then he checked himself. Kliment Blagonravov had stressed the necessity of complete secrecy. Not even the local offices of the ministry were to be acquainted with his presence.

He let Catherina introduce him around, familiarize him with the local methods of going about their business affairs and the problems they were running into.

She ran a hand back over her forehead, placing a wisp of errant hair, and said, "I suppose, as an expert from Moscow, you'll be installing a whole set of new methods."

It was far from his intention to spend much time at office work. He said, "Not at all. There is no hurry. For a time, we'll continues your present policies, just to get the feel of the situation. Then perhaps in a few months, we'll come up with some ideas."

She obviously liked his use of "we" rather than "I." Evidently, the staff had been a bit nervous upon his appointment as new manager. He already felt, vaguely, that the three Russians here had no desire to return to their homeland. Evidently, there was something about Czechoslovakia that appealed to them all. The fact irritated him but somehow didn't surprise.

Catherina said, "As a matter of fact, I have some opinions on possible changes

myself. Perhaps if you'll have dinner with me tonight, we can discuss them informally."

Ilya Simonov was only mildly surprised at her suggesting a rendezvous with him. Party members were expected to ignore sex and be on an equal footing. She was as free to suggest a dinner date to him, as he was to her. Of course, she wasn't speaking as a Party member now. In fact, he hadn't even revealed to her his own membership.

As it worked out, they never got around to discussing distribution of the new Moskvich aircushion jet car. They became far too busy enjoying food, drink, dancing—and each other.

They ate at the Budapest, in the Prava Hotel, complete with Hungarian dishes and Riesling, and they danced to the inevitable gypsy music. It occurred to Ilya Simonov that there was a certain pleasure to be derived from the fact that your feminine companion was the most beautiful woman in the establishment and one of the most attractively dressed. There was a certain lift to be enjoyed when you realized that the eyes of half the other males present were following you in envy.

One thing led to another. He insisted on introducing her to barack, the Hungarian national spirit, in the way of a digestive. The apricot brandy, distilled to the point of losing all sweetness and fruit flavor, required learning. It must be tossed back just so. By the time Catherina had the knack, neither of them were feeling strain. In fact, it became obviously necessary for him to be given a guided tour of Prague's night spots.

It turned out that Prague offered considerably more than Moscow, which even with the new relaxation was still one of the most staid cities in the Soviet Complex.

They took in the vaudeville at the Alhambra, and the variety at the Prazské Varieté.

They took in the show at the U Sv Tomíse, the age old tavern which had been making its own smoked black beer since the fifteenth century. And here Catherina with the assistance of revelers from neighboring tables taught him the correct pronunciation of *Na zdraví!* the Czech toast. It seemed required to go from heavy planked table to table practicing the new salutation to the accompaniment of the pungent borovika gin.

Somewhere in here they saw the Joseph Skupa puppets, and at this stage, Ilya Simonov found only great amusement at the political innuendoes involved in half the skits. It would never had one in Moscow or Leningrad, of course, but here it was very amusing indeed. There was even a caricature of a security police minister who could only have been his superior Kliment Blagonravov.

They wound up finally at the U Kalicha, made famous by Hasek in "The Good Soldier Schweik." In fact various illustrations from the original classic were framed on the walls.

They had been laughing over their early morning snack, now Ilya Simonov looked at her approvingly. "See here," he said. "We must do this again."

"Fine," she laughed.

"In fact, tomorrow," he insisted. He looked at his watch. "I mean tonight."

She laughed at him. "Our great expert from Moscow. Far from improving our operations, there'll be less accomplished than ever if you make a nightly practice of carrying on like we did this evening."

He laughed too. "But tonight," he said insistently.

She shook her head. "Sorry, but I'm already booked up for this evening."

He scowled for the first time in hours. He'd seemingly forgotten that he hardly knew this girl. What her personal life was, he had no idea. For that matter, she might be engaged or even married. The very idea irritated him.

He said stiffly, "Ah, you have a date?"

Catherina laughed again. "My, what a dark face. If I didn't know you to be an automobile distributor expert, I would suspect you of being a security police agent." She shook her head. "Not a date. If by that you mean another man. There is a meeting that I would like to attend."

"A meeting! It sounds dry as—"

She was shaking her head. "Oh, no. A group I belong to. Very interesting. We're to be addressed by an American journalist."

Suddenly he was all but sober.

He tried to smooth over the short space of silence his surprise had precipitated.

"An American journalist? Under government auspices?"

"Hardly." She smiled at him over her glass of Pilsen. "I forget," she said. "If you're from Moscow, you probably aren't aware of how open things are here in Prague. A whiff of fresh air."

"I don't understand. Is this group of yours, ah, illegal?"

She shrugged impatiently. "Oh, of course not. Don't be silly. We gather to hear various speakers, to discuss world affairs. That sort of thing. Oh, of course, *theoretically* it's illegal, but for that matter even the head of the Skoda plant attended last week. It's only for the more advanced intellectuals, of course. Very advanced. But, for that matter, I know a dozen or so Party members, both Czech and Russian, who attend."

"But an American journalist? What's he doing in the country? Is he accredited?"

"No, no. You misunderstand. He entered as a tourist, came across some Prague newspapermen and as an upshot he's to give a talk on freedom of the press."

"I see," Simonov said.

She was impatient with him. "You don't understand at all. See here, why don't you come along tonight? I'm sure I can get you in."

"It sounds like a good idea," Ilya Simonov said. He was completely sober now.

He made a written report to Kliment Blagonravov before turning in. He mentioned the rather free discussion of matters political in the Czech capital, using the man he'd met in the beer hall as an example. He reported—although, undoubtedly, Blagonravov would already have the information—hearing of a Polish Tri-D film which had defended the Old Bolsheviks purged in the 1930s. He mentioned the literary magazine, with its caricature of Frol Zverev, and, last of all, and then after hesitation, he reported party member Catherina Panova, who evidently belonged to a group of intellectuals who were not above listening to a talk given by a foreign journalist who was not speaking under the auspices of the Czech Party nor the government.

At the office, later, Catherina grinned at him and made a face. She ticked it off

on her fingers. "Riesling, barack, smoked black beer, and borovika gin—we should have know better."

He went along with her, putting one hand to his forehead. "We should have stuck to vodka."

"Well," she said, "tonight we can be virtuous. An intellectual evening, rather than a carouse."

Actually, she didn't look at all the worse for wear. Evidently, Catherina Panova was still young enough that she could pub crawl all night, and still look fresh and alert in the morning. His own mouth felt lined with improperly tanned suede.

He was quickly fitting into the routine of the office. Actually, it worked smoothly enough that little effort was demanded of him. The Czech employees handled almost all the details. Evidently, the word of his evening on the town had somehow spread, and the fact that he was prone to a good time had relieved their fears of a martinet sent down from the central offices. They were beginning to relax in his presence.

In fact, they relaxed to the point where one of the girls didn't even bother to hide the book she was reading during a period where there was a lull in activity. It was Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago."

He frowned remembering vaguely the controversy over the book a couple of decades earlier. Ilya Simonov said, "Pasternak. Do they print his works here in Czechoslovakia?"

The girl shrugged and looked at the back of the cover. "German publisher," she said idly. "Printed in Frankfurt."

He kept his voice from registering either surprise or disapproval. "You mean such books are imported? By whom?"

"Oh, not imported by an official agency, but we Czechs are doing a good deal more travel than we used to. Business trips, tourist trips, vacations. And, of course, we bring back books you can't get here." She shrugged again. "Very common."

Simonov said blankly. "But the customs. The border police—"

She smiled in a manner that suggested he lacked sophistication. "They never

bother any more. They're human, too."

Ilya Simonov wandered off. He was astonished at the extent to which controls were slipping in a satellite country. There seemed practically no discipline, in the old sense, at all. He began to see one reason why his superior had sent him here to Prague. For years, most of his work had been either in Moscow or in the newly opened industrial areas in Siberia. He had lost touch with developments in this part of the Soviet Complex.

It came to him that this sort of thing could work like a geometric progression. Give a man a bit of rope one day, and he expects, and takes, twice as much the next, and twice that the next. And as with individuals, so with whole populations.

This was going to have to be stopped soon, or Party control would disappear. Ilya Simonov felt an edge of uncertainty. Nikita Khrushchev should never have made those first motions of liberalization following Stalin's death. Not if they eventually culminated in this sort of thing.

He and Catherina drove to her meeting place that evening after dinner.

She explained as they went that the group was quite informal, usually meeting at the homes of group members who had fairly large places in the country. She didn't seem to know how it had originally begun. The meetings had been going on for a year of more before she arrived in Prague. A Czech friend had taken her along one night, and she'd been attending ever since. There were other, similar groups, in town.

"But what's the purpose of the organization?" Simonov asked her.

She was driving her little aircushion Moskvich. They crossed over the Vltava River by the Cechuv Bridge and turned right. On the hill above them loomed the fantastically large statue of Stalin which had been raised immediately following the Second War. She grimaced at it, muttered, "I wonder if he was insane from the first."

He hadn't understood her change of subject. "How do you mean?" he said.

"Stalin. I wonder how early it was in his career that he went insane."

This was the second time in the past few days that Ilya Simonov had run into this matter of the former dictator's mental condition. He said now, "I've heard the

opinion before. Where did you pick it up?"

"Oh, it's quite commonly believed in the Western countries."

"But, have you ever been, ah, West?"

"Oh, from time to time! Berlin, Vienna, Geneva. Even Paris twice, on vacation, you know, and to various conferences. But that's not what I mean. In the western magazines and newspapers. You can get them here in Prague now. But to get back to your question. There is no particular purpose of the organization."

She turned the car left on Budenská and sped up into the Holesovice section of town.

The nonchalance of it all was what stopped Ilya Simonov. Here was a Party member calmly discussing whether or not the greatest Russian of them all, after Lenin, had been mad. The implications were, of course, that many of the purges, certainly the latter ones, were the result of the whims of a mental case, that the Soviet Complex had for long years been ruled by a man as unbalanced as Czar Peter the Great.

They pulled up before a rather large house that would have been called a dacha back in Moscow. Evidently, Ilya Simonov decided, whoever was sponsoring this night's get together, was a man of prominence. He grimaced inwardly. A lot of high placed heads were going to roll before he was through.

It turned out that the host was Leos Dvorak, the internationally famed cinema director and quite an idol of Ilya Simonov in his earlier days when he'd found more time for entertainment. It was a shock to meet the man under these circumstances.

Catherina Panova was obviously quite popular among this gathering. Their host gave her an affectionate squeeze in way of greeting, then shook hands with Simonov when Catherina introduced him.

"Newly from Moscow, eh?" the film director said, squinting at the security agent. He had a sharp glance, almost, it seemed to Simonov, as though he detected the real nature of the newcomer. "It's been several years since I've been to Moscow. Are things loosening up there?"

"Loosening up?" Simonov said.

Leos Dvorak laughed and said to Catherina, "Probably not. I've always been of the opinion that the Party's influence would shrivel away first at its extremities. Membership would fall off abroad, in the neutral countries and in Common Europe and the Americas. Then in the so-called satellite countries. Last of all in Russia herself. But, very last, Moscow—the dullest, stodgiest, most backward intellectually, capital city in the world." The director laughed again and turned away to greet a new guest.

This was open treason. Ilya Simonov had been lucky. Within the first few days of being in the Czech capital he'd contacted one of the groups which he'd been sent to unmask.

Now he said mildly to Catherina Panova, "He seems rather outspoken."

She chuckled. "Leos is quite strongly opinionated. His theory is that the more successful the Party is in attaining the goals it set half a century ago, the less necessary it becomes. He's of the opinion that it will eventually atrophy, shrivel away to the point that all that will be needed will be the slightest of pushes to end its domination."

Ilya Simonov said, "And the rest of the group here, do they agree?"

Catherina shrugged. "Some do, some don't. Some of them are of the opinion that it will take another blood bath. That the party will attempt to hang onto its power and will have to be destroyed."

Simonov said evenly, "And you? What do you think?"

She frowned, prettily. "I'm not sure. I suppose I'm still in the process of forming an opinion."

Their host was calling them together and leading the way to the garden where chairs had been set up. There seemed to be about twenty-five persons present in all. Ilya Simonov had been introduced to no more than half of them. His memory was good and already he was composing a report to Kliment Blagonravov, listing those names he recalled. Some were Czechs, some citizens of other satellite countries, several, including Catherina, were actually Russians.

The American, a newspaperman named Dickson, had an open-faced freshness, hardly plausible in an agent from the West trying to subvert Party leadership.

Ilya Simonov couldn't quite figure him out.

Dickson was introduced by Leos Dvorak who informed his guests that the American had been reluctant but had finally agreed to give them his opinion on the press on both sides of what had once been called the Iron Curtain.

Dickson grinned boyishly and said, "I'm not a public speaker, and, for that matter, I haven't had time to put together a talk for you. I think what I'll do is read a little clipping I've got here—sort of a text—and then, well, throw the meeting open to questions. I'll try to answer anything you have to ask."

He brought forth a piece of paper. "This is from the British writer, Huxley. I think it's pretty good." He cleared his voice and began to read.

Mass communication ... is simply a force and like any other force, it can be used either well or ill. Used one way, the press, the radio and the cinema are indispensible to the survival of democracy. Used in another way, they are among the most powerful weapons in the dictator's armory. In the field of mass communications as in almost every other field of enterprise, technological progress has hurt the Little Man and helped the Big Man. As lately as fifty years ago, every democratic country could boast of a great number of small journals and local newspapers. Thousands of country editors expressed thousands of independent opinions. Somewhere or other almost anybody could get almost anything printed. Today the press is still legally free; but most of the little papers have disappeared. The cost of wood pulp, of modern printing machinery and of syndicated news is too high for the Little Man. In the totalitarian East there is political censorship, and the media of mass communications are controlled by the State. In the democratic West there is economic censorship and the media of mass communication are controlled by members of the Power Elite. Censorship by rising costs and the concentration of communication-power in the hands of a few big concerns is less objectionable than State Ownership and government propaganda; but certainly it is not something to which a Jeffersonian democrat could approve.

Ilya Simonov looked blankly at Catherina and whispered, "Why, what he's reading is as much an attack on the West as it is on us."

She looked at him and whispered back, "Well, why not? This gathering is to discuss freedom of the press."

He said blankly, "But as an agent of the West—"

She frowned at him. "Mr. Dickson isn't an agent of the West. He's an American journalist."

"Surely you can't believe he has no connections with the imperialist governments."

"Certainly, he hasn't. What sort of meeting do you think this is? We're not interested in Western propaganda. We're a group of intellectuals searching for freedom of ideas."

Ilya Simonov was taken back once again.

Colonel Ilya Simonov dismissed his cab in front of the Ministry and walked toward the gate. Down the street the same plainclothes man, who had been lounging there the last time he'd reported, once again took him in, then looked away. The two guards snapped to attention, and the security agent strode by them unnoticing.

At the lieutenant's desk, before the offices of Kliment Blagonravov, he stopped and said, "Colonel Simonov. I have no appointment but I think the Minister will see me."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," the lieutenant said. He spoke into an inter-office communicator, then looked up. "Minister Blagonravov will be able to see you in a few minutes, sir."

Ilya Simonov stared nervously and unseeingly out a window while he waited. Gorki Park lay across the way. It, like Moscow in general, had changed a good deal in Simonov's memory. Everything in Russia had changed a good deal, he realized. And was changing. And what was the end to be? Or was there ever an end? Of course not. There is no end, ever. Only new changes to come.

The lieutenant said, "The Minister is free now, Comrade Colonel."

Ilya Simonov muttered something to him and pushed his way through the heavy door.

Blagonravov looked up from his desk and rumbled affectionately, "Ilya! It's good to see you. Have a drink! You've lost weight, Ilya!"

His top field man sank into the same chair he'd occupied nine months before, and accepted the ice-cold vodka.

Blagonravov poured another drink for himself, then scowled at the other. "Where have you been? When you first went off to Prague, I got reports from you almost every day. These last few months I've hardly heard from you." He rumbled his version of a chuckle. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think there was a woman."

Ilya Simonov looked at him wanly. "That too, Kliment."

"You are jesting!"

"No. Not really. I had hoped to become engaged—soon."

"A party member? I never thought of you as the marrying type, Ilya."

Simonov said slowly, "Yes, a Party member. Catherina Panova, my assistant in the automobile agency in Prague."

Blagonravov scowled heavily at him, put forth his fat lips in a thoughtful pout. He came to his feet, approached a file cabinet, fishing from his pocket a key ring. He unlocked the cabinet, brought forth a sheaf of papers with which he returned to his desk. He fumbled though them for a moment, found the paper he wanted and read it. He scowled again and looked up at his agent.

"Your first report," he said. "Catherina Panova. From what you say here, a dangerous reactionary. Certainly she has no place in Party ranks."

Ilya Simonov said, "Is that the complete file of my assignment?"

"Yes. I've kept it here in my own office. I've wanted this to be ultra-undercover. No one except you and me. I had hopes of you working your way up into the enemy's organization, and I wanted no possible chance of you being betrayed. You don't seem to have been too successful."

"I was as successful as it's possible to be."

The security minister leaned forward. "Ah ha! I knew I could trust you to bring back results, Ilya. This will take Frol Zverev's pressure off me. Number One has been riding me hard." Blagonravov poured them both another drink. "You were able to insert yourself into their higher circles?"

Simonov said, "Kliment, there are no higher circles."

His chief glared at him. "Nonsense!" He tapped the file with a pudgy finger. "In your early reports you described several groups, small organizations, illegal meetings. There must be an upper organization, some movement supported from the West most likely."

Ilya Simonov was shaking his head. "No. They're all spontaneous."

His chief growled, "I tell you there are literally thousands of these little groups. That hardly sounds like a spontaneous phenomenon."

"Nevertheless, that is what my investigations have led me to believe."

Blagonravov glowered at him, uncertainly. Finally, he said, "Well, confound it, you've spent the better part of a year among them. What's it all about? What do they want?"

Ilya Simonov said flatly, "They want freedom, Kliment."

"Freedom! What do you mean, freedom? The Soviet Complex is the most highly industrialized area of the world. Our people have the highest standard of living anywhere. Don't they understand? We've met all the promises we ever made. We've reached far and beyond the point ever dreamed of by Utopians. The people, all of the people, have it made as the Americans say."

"Except for freedom," Simonov said doggedly. "These groups are springing up everywhere, spontaneously. Thus far, perhaps, our ministry has been able to suppress some of them. But the pace is accelerating. They aren't inter-organized now. But how soon they'll start to be, I don't know. Sooner or later, someone is going to come up with a unifying idea. A new socio-political system to advocate a way of guaranteeing the basic liberties. Then, of course, the fat will be in the fire."

"Ilya! You've been working too hard. I've pushed you too much, relied on you too much. You need a good lengthy vacation."

Simonov shrugged. "Perhaps. But what I've just said is the truth."

His chief snorted heavily. "You half sound as though you agree with them."

"I do, Kliment."

"I am in no mood for gags, as the Yankees say."

Ilya Simonov looked at him wearily. He said slowly, "You sent me to investigate an epidemic, a spreading disease. Very well, I report that it's highly contagious."

Blagonravov poured himself more vodka angrily. "Explain yourself. What's this all about?"

His former best field man said, "Kliment—"

"I want no familiarities from you, colonel!"

"Yes, sir." Ilya Simonov went on doggedly. "Man never achieves complete freedom. It's a goal never reached, but one continually striven for. The moment as small a group as two or three gather together, all of them must give up some of the individual's freedom. When man associates with millions of his fellow men, he gives up a good many freedoms for the sake of the community. But always he works to retain as much liberty as possible, and to gain more. It's the nature of our species, I suppose."

"You sound as though you've become corrupted by Western ideas," the security head muttered dangerously.

Simonov shook his head. "No. The same thing applies over there. Even in countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, where institutions are as free as anywhere in the world, the people are continually striving for more. Governments and socio-economic systems seem continually to whittle away at individual liberty. But always man fights back and tries to achieve new heights for himself.

"In the name of developing our country, the Party all but eliminated freedom in the Soviet Complex, but now the goals have been reached and the people will no longer put up with us, sir."

"*Us!*" Kliment Blagonravov growled bitterly. "You are hardly to be considered in the Party's ranks any longer, Simonov. Why in the world did you ever return here?" He sneered fatly. "Your best bet would have been to escape over the border into the West."

Simonov looked at the file on the other's desk. "I wanted to regain those reports I made in the early days of my assignment. I've listed in them some fifty names,

names of men and women who are now my friends."

The fat lips worked in and out. "It must be that woman. You've become soft in the head, Simonov." Blagonravov tapped the file beneath his heavy fingers. "Never fear, before the week is out these fifty persons will be either in prison or in their graves."

With a fluid motion, Ilya Simonov produced a small caliber gun, a special model designed for security agents. An unusual snout proclaimed its quiet virtues as guns go.

"No, Kliment," Ilya Simonov said.

"Are you mad!"

"No, Kliment, but I must have those reports." Ilya Simonov came to his feet and reached for them.

With a roar of rage, Kliment Blagonravov slammed open a drawer and dove a beefy paw into it. With shocking speed for so heavy a man, he scooped up a heavy military revolver.

And Colonel Ilya Simonov shot him neatly and accurately in the head. The silenced gun made no more sound than a pop.

Blagonravov, his dying eyes registering unbelieving shock, fell back into his heavy swivel chair.

Simonov worked quickly. He gathered up his reports, checked quickly to see they were all there. Struck a match, lit one of the reports and dropped it into the large ashtray on the desk. One by one he lit them all and when all were consumed, stirred the ashes until they were completely pulverized.

He poured himself another vodka, downed it, stiff wristed, then without turning to look at the dead man again, made his way to the door.

He slipped out and said to the lieutenant, "The Minister says that he is under no circumstances to be disturbed for the next hour."

The lieutenant frowned at him. "But he has an appointment."

Colonel Ilya Simonov shrugged. "Those were his instructions. Not to be bothered under any circumstances."

"But it was an appointment with Number One!"

That was bad. And unforeseen. Ilya Simonov said, "It's probably been canceled. All I'm saying is that Minister Blagonravov instructs you not to bother him under any circumstances for the next hour."

He left the other and strode down the corridor, keeping himself from too obvious, a quickened pace.

At the entrance to the Ministry, he shot his glance up and down the street. He was in the clutch now, and knew it. He had few illusions.

Not a cab in sight. He began to cross the road toward the park. In a matter of moments there, he'd be lost in the trees and shrubbery. He had rather vague plans. Actually, he was playing things as they came. There was a close friend in whose apartment he could hide, a man who owed him his life. He could disguise himself. Possibly buy or borrow a car. If he could get back to Prague, he was safe. Perhaps he and Catherina could defect to the West.

Somebody was screaming something from a window in the Ministry.

Ilya Simonov quickened his pace. He was nearly across the street now. He thought, foolishly, *Whoever that is shouting is so excited he sounds more like a woman than a man.*

Another voice took up the shout. It was the plainclothes man. Feet began pounding.

There were two more shouts. The guards. But he was across now. The shrubs were only a foot away.

The shattering blackness hit him in the back of the head. It was over immediately.

Afterwards, the plainclothes man and the two guards stood over him. Men began pouring from the Ministry in their direction.

Colonel Ilya Simonov was a meaningless, bloody heap on the edge of the park's grass.

The guard who had shot said, "He killed the Minister. He must have been crazy to think he could get away with it. What did he want?"

"Well, we'll never know now," the plainclothesman grunted.

THE END

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