

The Pioneers

Chapter one: The beginning

By Dan Boylan

Early evening, early spring, 1877

Hotel Metropolitan, West Moscow

Captain Laski peered along the ill-lit corridor. He glared, sneered, at the threadbare carpet, sniffed at the odour of unwashed bodies, stale vodka and the reek of cheap tobacco, then stiffened and strode purposefully forward. He glanced in the semi darkness at the door numbers, then stopped outside No 23 and gently tapped on the door.

“Come!” an authoritative voice commanded.

He stepped nimbly into the room. The light here was also dim, a pair of candles burned on the mantle shelf and illuminated the silhouette of a darkened figure who sat behind a desk. He stood in front of it and said, “I’m Hugo Laski, I understand that you wish to purchase a quantity of timber.”

“No Captain, that was simply an excuse to get you here. What I want from you is something very different!”

Laski stood quite still and remained silent, though his danger zone senses had moved to red alert.

“Sit down Captain,” the stranger said, “I may be able to do you a great service.”

He remained standing, “What do you want?” he demanded curtly.

“I want you to take a party of ‘down and outs’, misfits and losers far into the northern forests for a year. I want you to set up a small community, then cut several hundred tons of timber and float it downstream next spring!”

“Good bye!” announced the visitor and he turned towards the door.

“Good bye, and, oh, you should go out through the back door, Nikita Netchev’s cut-

throats are lurking in the tavern across the street because you haven't paid your gambling debts!"

"What?" he asked incredulously.

"Netchev has paid two Siberian roughnecks to collect the fifteen hundred roubles that you owe him, or they are to slit your throat. My men saw them arrive on this afternoon's ferry, they checked into room ten, just below us. Tread softly!"

"Who are you? Where did you get this... this shit... and what do you want from me?"

"I am Alexei, it's not my real name but it'll do. I've already told you what I want. I've had you... and several others, under surveillance for two months. I have built up quite a profile and I know a great deal about you. I know that you have not slept in the marital bed for two years. I know about your gambling debts, I also know that you also owe money to... now, let's see," and he flicked open a small note book, "eight hundred and forty roubles that you owe Solly Weitzman which you gave to Elga, the Swedish whore and he now wants back, plus interest... I also know that you have siphoned off five hundred from old Rabinski at the timber yard... and I know that he, suspects you too. I also know about your pregnant mistress Katerina and I know that your pretty wife Irena may soon know too!" He paused briefly for effect, then continued, "Solly wrote a letter to your father-in-law informing him of Elga, I intercepted it but I can't intercept them all. Your good luck streak has started to run out, it's time for you to make some decisions and your options are few."

Laski stared transfixed at the mystery man for several silent seconds, his emotions racing between anger, fear, self-pity and the merest whiff of a lifeline. Somewhere, his built-in sense of self-preservation told him that his tormentor, this arrogant upstart, could also be his salvation. He hesitated momentarily, then, in a moment of abandonment, he threw himself at his mercy.

"No doubt you hold a solution!" he said without candour or sarcasm.

"Indeed I do!" he replied without any emotion.

"And that is?"

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

“You get killed off, I smuggle you away, give you another identity and then you lead my miserable band of hopeless cases into the northern forest.”

“Are there any.....incentives for me?”

“Oh indeed, many! You get the chance to rule over your small kingdom with absolute authority, no nagging boss, wife or in-laws. Also I will give you a young widow with two sons, blonde hair and big tits, who looks a bit like ‘Elga the whore’. She will act as your housemaid and bedmate... oh, and if you’re any good... you get a fat bonus next spring!”

Laski shook his head and frowned. “My father-in-law would hunt me down to the four corners of the earth... then hack me into a thousand pieces!”

“Not if you’re dead and he has seen you laid in your coffin and lowered it into the ground!”

“That doesn’t help me much does it?”

“It does if it weren’t your body!”

He shook his head again, “You’re going too fast for me my friend, much too fast.”

The stranger pushed back his chair and poured a slug of vodka.

“Ok,” said Alexei, “I get a body, same shape and size as yours from the sanatorium where they are dying at the rate of twenty a day. An undertaker dyes the hair and beard same as yours. We disfigure the face beyond recognition by making it look as if a pile of timber has fallen on it. Dress it in your clothes, arrange a log fall in the timber yard, pour pigs or cows blood over the head... and smuggle you out, alive and in new clothes, to the ferry port... and the start of your new life. You change your appearance and go down the river to Irbtsk, collect your citizens, supplies, horse and wagon and head off into the woods. How’s that sound?”

Laski stared at him in an amazed silence. “You can’t find any holes in it can you?”

“I’m just amazed at you bloody audacity!” he admitted.

He held up his hand, “You’ve two minutes to make up your mind. I’ve arranged to see someone else in half an hour, he’s not as, er, suitable as you and I’d have to substitute the blonde widow for two teenage boys... but the result would be much the same! I want two years

from you, then I replace you, you get enough money to flee the country and go to France or America.”

They stared at each other for what seemed an age; a brittle silence was punctuated only by the singing of a drunken resident and a wailing child along the corridor. Laski took a deep breath, bit his lip, and looked the stranger squarely in the face and muttered and soft and hesitant, “Yes!”

“Go about your life as if nothing has happened. I will take care of everything. You do not have to take any measures. You must trust me and believe what I say. I need you to supervise this project.”

“Just one thing,” asked Laski, “what am I supposed to do with this band of misfits?”

He paused, rather impatiently, then said, “An engineer in Germany has invented a steam driven saw mill, it will convert a tree into square timbers in 10 minutes, the residue wood stokes the furnace. It can rip a tree trunk into floor boards in 15 minutes, which would take two men with a hand saw all day to do. It can also plane, rebate, mitre, drill and joint. It can convert ten logs into a house, ready for assembly in two hours. I have purchased two such machines; they will be here by autumn. I need a steady supply of spruce, pine and softwood, you will be the supplier. I will provide a map of where you should go and full details and enough cash to set up a logging camp. No more questions. I will give you all the information you need later. Go now, tell no one, I will send for you!”

Dan Boylan bio: Dan Boylan is an ageing Yorkshireman, a well-traveled army veteran and ex prison guard. He has been writing articles and travel features for a series of magazines and publications for some 25 years. His favourite genre is short fiction, usually liberally sprinkled with intrigue, humour and a twist in the tale/tail. He has been a member of Fareham Writers for over seven years which has produced over sixty short stories, dramas and rattling good yarns.