

A high-nosed cedar canoe, nimble as a seabird, atop a tumbling white ridge of ocean.

Carried nearer and nearer by the water's determined sweep, the craft now, in this first necessary picture in your mind, sleds across the curling crest of wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of black spruce forest. On a modern chart of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca this particular landfall is written in as Arisankhana Island. None of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in a January dusk of the year 1853, however, knows anything of this name, nor would it matter to their prospect if any did.

Now the canoeman as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf. Nineteen days they have been together in the slender canoe, dodging from one of this coast's constant humps of forest-and-rock to the next. Each man of them has been afraid a number of times in those days; brave almost as often. Here at Arisankhana they land

wetly, heft their slim but laden ark across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and salmonberry, then turn away to the abrupt timber.

As the trees sieve them from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water by which the four were borne to this shore where they are selecting their night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.

Their escape from New Archangel had been of Melander's making. In any day's comings and goings at that far-north shoreside assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity, you would have spied Melander early. Tall man with lanks of arms and high hips, so that he seemed to be all long sections and hinges. His line of jaw ran on as well, and so too his forehead; in all the extent of Melander, only the bright blue eyes and stub nose and short mouth neighbored closely, a sudden alert center of face amid the jaw-and-forehead expanse as if peering in wily surprise out of the hole of a tree trunk at you.

"A strong right arm is the lever of life, these Russians say. You'd think by chance the Castle crowd might once put the lever to something other than hoisting a glass of champagne. Aye?" Early on, too, you would have come to know the jointed talk of the man, this Melander habit of interrupting himself to affirm whether he dared go on with so mesmerizing a line of conversation. All such reluctance to dazzle further notwithstanding, thirty-one

times out of thirty Melander could be counted on for continuation. "But no, lie around up there like seals they all do, yip-yipping down at the rest of us...To be Russian is to be a toothache to the world."

Born on the isle of Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, Melander actually numbered in the landless nationality, that of the sea. Fisher-folk beyond memory his people on Gotland had been, generation upon generation automatically capable with herring nets as if having happened into the world with hands shaped only for that task. So it came as a startling flex of independence when Melander, himself beginning to resemble a sizable height of pine spar, went off from his village of Slite to tall-masted vessels. Aboard ship he proved instantly apt, the type of sea/roamer of whom it was appraised that his every hair was a rope/yarn and each drop of his blood black Stockholm tar. In a dozen years of sailing the Baltic and the North Sea he bettered his position almost voyage by voyage. "If I'd been born with brass on my corners, you'd one day be calling me Admiral," Melander half-joked to his deckhands the day he was made first mate.

Such a billet, second in command of a schooner bearing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm in the spring of 1851, was the one which shunted Melander to Alaska. Russian America, it yet was, the wholesale purchase by the United States--and consequent re-christening of New Archangel to what the coast's natives knew this

vital speck of site as, Sitka--waiting a decade and a half into the future.

Although he had no farthest thought of it at the onset of that voyage, a pair of outlooks swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The first was the eleven-month expanse of return voyage in the company of the schooner's captain, a fidgety little circle-faced Finn who was veteran in the Baltic trade but had proved to be quite literally out of his depth on the ocean. The other lay sidewise to Mister First Mate Melander's scrutiny, berthed there against a backdrop of Alaskan forest the spring morning when he reached final exasperation with his dim captain--the Russian-American Company's steamship, the Emperor Nicholas I.

In a time and place earlier, Melander would have been the fellow you wanted to set a spire on a cathedral; in a later, to oversee a fleet of mail planes. But on an April day in 1851, at one of the rim-ends of the known world, what sat at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters which the fur-trading Russians historically had navigated, pre-Nicholas and pre-Melander, like men lurching across ice.

"If the wind were clever enough," Melander observed to the baffled Finnish skipper upon taking leave of him, "it would snuff out these steamsnorters before they get a start. Aye?"

Melander maybe under different policy would have gone on to earn his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company at New Archangel like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, let us say, that elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northmost North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company by learning to lead brigades of trappers and traders, keep the native tribes cowed or in collaboration, deliver a reliable 15 per cent profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, to hold those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the British crown which underlay the company's charter terms like an ornate watermark. Finlayson, McLoughlin, Simpson, Mackenzie, Fraser, others: Caledonians who whittled system into the wilderness, names we known even yet as this continent's northern roster of men of enterprise and empire. But maybe is only maybe, and the facts enough are that on the broad map of midnineteenth-century empires Alaska lies apart from the Hudson's Bay span of Canadian dominion. That, indeed, this colossal crude crown of northwestmost wilderness is tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow. That within the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy,

Swedes and other outlanders who signed on with the Russian-American Company's fur-gathering enterprise did so as indentured laborers, seven-year men. And that our man Melander's name thus is not to be discovered anywhere among the frontier baronage.

As will happen, Melander after pledging to the Russian-American Company did find his life altered by the alluring new nautical machinery, but not as hoped. Only seldom the Russians fired up the Nicholas, which proved to require approximately two days of chopping by the wood crew to feed the boilers for each day of voyage--a visiting Hudson's Bay officer once amended the vessel's name to Old Nick, on the ground that it consumed fuel at about the rate you might expect of Hell--and on the occasions when its paddlewheels were set into ponderous thwacking motion, positions aboard were snatched by bored officers of the small Russian navy contingent stationed at New Archangel. Melander's service aboard the Nicholas occurred whenever the Russian governor, Rosenberg, took his official retinue on an outing to the hot spring at Ozherskoi, an outpost south eighteen miles along the coast from Sitka Sound. In Melander's first Alaskan year this happened precisely twice, and his sea-time-under-steam totaled six days.

The rest of his workspan? A Russian overseer conferred assignment on Melander as promptly as the supply schooner vanished over the horizon on its voyage back to Stockholm and Kronstadt. "Friend sailor, we are going to give you a chance to dry out your bones a bit," the overseer began, and Melander knew that what followed

was not going to be good. Because of his ability of handling men and, from time on the Baltic, his tongue's capability with a bit of Russian and spatter of Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, henceforth Melander was in charge of the crew which salted catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder.

Seven-year men. "The Russians' oxen," as Melander more than once grumbled it.

"Deacon Step-and-a-Half is at it again."

Melander peered with interest along the card-players and conversationists in the workmen's barracks to see where the gibe had flown from. A fresh turn of tongue was all too rare in New Archangel. He himself had just tried out his latest declaration to no one in particular: "A seven-year man is a bladeless knife without a handle, aye?" That had attracted him the anonymous dart, not nearly the first to bounce off his seaman's hide.

These shipmates--Melander corrected himself: barrackmates--were an every-sided lot. Finns and Swedes under this roof, about all they could count in common were their seven years' indenturement and the conviction that they were sounder souls than the Russian workforce in the several neighboring dwellings. The Scandinavians, after all, had been pulled here. Most of the Russian laborers had been shoved; stuffed aboard ship at Okhotsk on the coast of Siberia and pitched across the North Pacific to the Tsar's Alaskan fur field. Be it said,

these Siberian vagabonds had not been encouraged onward to Russian America for habits such as nudging ducks into paddles. Thugs, thieves, hopeless sots, no few murderers, the flotsam of any vast frontier, jostled among them. ("Where," a governor of New Archangel once wrote home to a grandee of the Russian-American Company, "do you get such men?") But so did debtors, escaped serfs, those whose only instinct was to drift. Melander, by now no admirer of anything Russian, saved his contempt for the New Archangel officialdom. These others, the Okhotskans, simply had made humankind's usual blunder, forgot to get themselves highborn.

Abruptly Melander stood up, a process like staves suddenly framing themselves together into a very large scarecrow. Amid a card game several bunks away, a shipwright from Karlskrona flicked a nervous glance his way. Melander grinned at so easy a giveaway, awarded a mocking nod to his derider, and in galumphing strides went from the barracks.

Outside held another sort of confinement, but at least airier than in. Melander as ever glanced up, as if checking a topsail, at the peak which thrust over all their lives at New Archangel, dark Verstovia. Its summit a triangle of rough rock atop a vaster triangle of firred slope, Verstovia sat up there plump and becrowned, the first presence in your life each morning, the last at every dusk. On both sides Verstovia was attended by other, snowier crags. A threefold Jericho, this place New Archangel, walled first by the

stockade, next by these tremendous mountains, and last, the distances to anywhere else of the world.

Melander moved off toward the central street of the settlement and here encountered one of the Company clerks, no doubt on his way to stroll in the Governor's hill garden. Many of the Castle Russians took such a constitutional at evening. Melander considered that more than beds of pansies and fuschias were required to sweeten the soul of any Russian. Nonetheless, "drastia," the lanky Swede said with a civil nod, and was greeted in turn. Since Melander could not rise at New Archangel, he was taking some care to stay level.

This was one of the first lengthening evenings of summer of 1852, the moment of year when New Archangel's dusk began to dawdle on until close onto midnight. The long light copied Swedish summer, so while this slow vesper of the day was the time Melander liked best, it also cast the remindful shadows of all that he had become absented from. His birthland. The sea. And his chosen livelihood. Triple tines of exile. Much to be prodded by.

Only because it afforded the most distance for his restless boots, Melander roved on west through the narrow shoreline crescent of settlement. Past log building after log building; if bulk of timbering were the standard of civilization, New Archangel would have preened grand as Stockholm. Sea-drifter he was, Melander had never got used to this hefty clamped-into-the-wilderness feel of the port-town.

"Log barns and sawdust heads," he called the style of Russian America.

In about four hundred paces from his barracks departure Melander's traipse necessarily ended, the high timbered gate of the stockade here stoppering New Archangel until morning.

Melander still needed motion. He changed course to the north. Rapidly passed the gate watchman yawning within his hut. Climbed the short knoll where the first of the stockade's blockhouses overlooked the gate. In long pulls clambered up the ladder to the catwalk beside the blockhouse. Here met the quizzing glance of the Russian sentry and muttered: "The Finns are singing in the barracks again. They sound like death arguing with the devil."

The sentry nodded in pitying savvy and returned to his watching-slot within the timbered tower. Melander was left solitary against the dusky sky, scanning out beyond Sitka Sound and its dark-treed islands schooled like furry whales, to the threadline of horizon that is the Pacific.

A time of studying seaward. Then as if reassured that the water portion of the world still hung in place, Melander dropped his gaze until he was



peering directly down at the edge of shore subjacent to the outside end of the stockade.

Here his looking held for a good while.

Eventually, and so softly that the sentry nearby in the block-house mistook it for another mutter against twittering Finns, the tall man murmured: "Perhaps not bladeless."

Do such things have a single first moment? If so, just here Melander begins to depart from a further half dozen years of the salting of fish.

Karlsson was a part-time bear-milker. That is to say, ordinarily he worked as an axman in the wood-cutting crew, but his ~~upbringing~~ ~~upbringing~~ near the forests of Skane had sufficiently skilled him as a woodsman that he was sent with the hunting party which occasionally forayed out to help provision New Archangel; to milk the bears, as it was jested. The sort of fellow with nothing much he cared to put to voice, and of whom even less was remarked, Karlsson. It is told that at a Scandinavian free-for-all, Danes will be the ones dancing and laughing, Norwegians endeavoring to start a fight, Finns passing bottles, and Swedes standing along the wall waiting to be introduced. Melander constituted a tall exception to this slander, but Karlsson, narrow bland face like that of a village parson, would have been there among the wall-props.

Sociability was not what Melander sought out of Karlsson. A time, he had noticed Karlsson canoeing in Sitka Sound, back from

a day's hunting. Karlsson's thrifty strokes went beyond steady: tireless, in a neat-handed, workaday fashion. Watching him, Melander had been put in mind of the regularity of a millwheel.

Another impression of interesting constancy about Karlsson he also had stored away. The observation that the slender untalkative man visited more often to the women in the native village outside the stockade wall than did any of the merchants of wind who perpetually bragged in the barracks about their lust. Or as Melander mused it to himself, "The mermaids have got hold of his towrope, but he never yips about it."

What brought down Melander's decision in favor of Karlsson, however, was a feather of instant remembered from shipboard. Karlsson had been borne to Alaska on the same schooner as Melander, and Melander recalled that just before sailing when others of the indentured group, the torque of their journey-to-come tremendous in them at the moment, were talking large of the certain success ahead, the excitement the frontier life would furnish and how rapidly and with what staggering profit their seven years of contract with the Russians would pass, Karlsson had listened, given a small mirthless smile and a single shake of his head, and moved off along the deck by himself. Whatever directed Karlsson to Alaska, it had not been a false sun over his future.

Melander chose a rainless late-June morning, gentle gray-silver overcast cupping the day's light downward to lend clarity

to the harbor's spruce islands and the sudden spearing mountains behind the settlement, the usual morning wind off the bay lazed to a breeze, to approach Karlsson before work-call. His thought was that if Karlsson would consider escape on the most silken of New Archangel's days, he truly was ready as ready.

"Take our tea outside the stockade, why don't we? The farther you get from the Russians, the better it tastes."

Tin mugs in hand, the two of them sauntered past the sentry at the opened gateway of the stockade and went to the edge of the native village which extended in a single-file march of dwellings far along the shoreline.

As Melander and Karlsson stood and sipped, a dozen natives emerged from one of the nearest longhouses, men and women together and all naked, and waded casually into the bay to bathe.

"Those canoes are longer then they look, aye?" Melander began, motioning to the natives' cedar shells in a row on the beach before them; the line of lithe craft, like sea-creatures dozing side by side on the white sand, which his gaze had been drawn to when he stood atop the stockade. "We could step into one here and step out at Stockholm."

Karlsson's face, all at once not nearly so bland, suggested the standard skepticism toward talk of uncooping oneself from New Archangel. Because of the isolation so far into the North Pacific and because muskeg and sinkholes and an alpine forest so thick it

seemed to be thatched began just beyond the stockade walls, the matter of escape always narrowed instantly to the same ~~worn~~ point: where, except up to the sweet blue meadows of heaven, was there to go?

"The world has many wheres," said Melander. "We need just four of them."

Melander drained his mug in a final gulp, folded himself down to rest one knee on the dirt and with a stick began to diagram.

A first south-pointing stab of shoreline, like a broad knife blade. Baranov Island, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now.

A speckle of isles, then a large landform, south-pointing too, like the sheath Baranov had been pulled from. The Queen Charlotte group of islands.

Another brief broken isle-chain of coast, then a long blunt slant, almost sideways to the other coastal chunks. Vancouver Island.

At last, fourth and biggest solidity in this geographical flagstone of Melander's, the American coastline leading to the Columbia River. The place where the coast and the river met, Melander Xed ^{large.} ~~as if making~~ ~~his name mark.~~ Astoria.

Map lesson done, Melander recited the mainframe of his plan. That if they selected their time well and escaped by night they could work a canoe south along the coast. That there at its southern extent, down beyond the Russian territory and that of the Hudson's Bay Company, the place called Astoria was operated by the Americans as an entry

port. From there ships would come and go, ships to the docks of Europe. To, at last, Stockholm.

Six weeks' canoe journey, Melander estimated it would be to Astoria. If they caught luck, a month.

"You talk us in royal style from here to there, Melander. But this God-forgotten coast, in a canoe..."

Karlsson fell silent for a time then, looking off around the island-speckled bay and up into the timber-maned mountains. There always was about this Karlsson a calm just short of chill. Right now he might have been appraising Alaska as if someone had offered him the whole tumbled country for forty kronor.

Then again, Melander noticed Karlsson's glance come back twice and linger in the vicinity of the bathing native women.

On such a New Archangel day sound carried like light, and from the blacksmith shop within the stockade began to chorus the measured clamor of hammer against anvil.

As if roused by the clangor, Karlsson turned to the taller man.



"Two of us are not enough strength for that much paddling."

"No," Melander agreed. "Our other man is Braaf."

"Braaf? That puppy?"

Melander tendered his new co-conspirator a serious smile which might have been a replica of Karlsson's own aboard the schooner in Stockholm harbor.

"We need a thief," Melander explained.

That is the way they became two. Disquieted shipman, musing woodman, now plotters both. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing apparatuses have to be, stood New Archangel and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to ponder it. For empires exist on the principle of constellations in the night sky--pattern imposed across unimaginable expanse--and the New Archangels of the planet at the time, whether named Singapore or Santa Fe or Dakar or Astoria or Luanda or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they themselves were.

That voyage which deposited Melander and Karlsson into their indentured situation reminds that here in the middle of the nineteenth century, this work of putting out the lines of star-web across the planet ~~had~~ had to be done with the slow white wakes of sailing ships. But done it was. Sealanes were extended and along them the imperial energies resolutely pulsed back and forth, capital to colony and colony

to capital. Africa, Asia: the lines of route from Europe were converging and tensing one another into place for decades to come. North America: the gray-gowned wee queen of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and Bella Coolas, the United States was taking unto itself the western vastness between the Mississippi and the Pacific, merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk were being provided fortunes by bales of Alaskan furs.

Such maritime tracework seemed, in short, to be succeeding astoundingly. Yet...yet all this atlas of order rested on the fact that it requires acceptance, a faith of seeing and saying, "Ah yes, here is our Great Dipper, hung onto its nail in heaven," to make constellations real. So that what the makers of any imperial configuration always had to be most wary of was minds--such as Melander's, such as Karlsson's, such as the one Melander was calculating upon next to ally with their two--which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be gone from New Archangel. He had, after all, the thief's outlook that in this vast world of opportunity, an occasion would surely arrive when he could pilfer them back.

Put it simply, stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and the captain of a Danish fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska he had veered to because, after a steady growth of skill from beggary to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination

prominently beckoning to him was kastell: prison.

So Braaf became another in the 1851 contingent to New Archangel, and at once skinning knives and snuff boxes and twists of Kirghiz tobacco and other unattached items began to vanish from the settlement as if having sprung wings in the night. The Russians vented fury on the harborfront natives for the outbreak of vanishment, but the coterie of Swedes and Finns rapidly made a different guess, for Braaf was becoming a kind of human commissary in the barracks. Because he was reasonable in his prices--interested less in income than in chipping the monotony of Alaskan life, which he found to be a rain-walled prison in its own right--and was diplomatic enough not to forage anything major from his own barrackmates, nothing was said against him.

How hard it would have been, anyway, to lodge a believable case against Braaf. At twenty, he displayed the round ruddy face of a farmboy--an apple of a face--and in talking with you lofted his gaze with innocent interest just above your eyes, as if considerately measuring you for a hat.

The morning after tea was taken outside the stockade of New Archangel by a pair of ~~men,~~^{Swedes,} it was taken by a trio.

"Me?" Braaf murmured when Melander loomed over him and Karlsson appeared at his opposite shoulder. "No, I was just about to...Sorry, I must...Maybe the noon-break, I'lli..."

In his quietly suggesting manner, Karlsson instructed Braaf to shove a bung in his spout and hear out Melander's proposition.

"You put it that way," Braaf agreed, "and my ears are yours."

On the slope of shore above the ~~Kolosh~~ canoes, Braaf studied back and forth from Melander's forehead to Karlsson's as Melander once more outlined the plan.

"Austria, I've heard of that. But is it anywhere around here?"

"Astoria," Melander repeated with patience. "Named for the rich American fur man Astor. It's the port for a part of this coast the Americans call Oregon."

"Imagine," said Braaf politely through a slurp of tea.

"Braaf, we need your skill of, umm, acquiring. It'll take supplies and supplies for such a journey."

"Why should I?"

"Because you're stuck here like a stump if you don't."

"That's a reason, I suppose. Why won't we drown?"

"God's bones, Braaf, these Kolosh canoes float like waterbugs. You'd need to be an oaf to tip one over."

"I've been in company with an oaf or two in my time."

"Braaf, listen," Karlsson broke in. "I go in these canoes all the time, and I am undrowned."

"For all I know you have gills in the cheeks of your ass, too."

"Braaf," Melander resumed as if reciting to a limited child.

"You have a choice here which comes rare in life. Join us and leave

this Russian shitpile, or stay and be caught one day lifting one snuff box too many. You've seen what these Russians can do with a knout. That sergeant of the sentries will sign his name up and down your back. Aye?"

"Pretty choice you paint. Rock and stony place."

"What else is the world? Come in with us, Braaf. It'll take your fast fingers to get us out of here. But we can get out."

"My fingers should ever see the day they're fast as your tongue, Melander."

"Thank you, but we can race some other time. Are you with us?"

"You know for heaven-certain that we'll find this American fort at--what's the place, Asturia?"

"Astoria. It is there. I have known sailors whose ships have called there. Perhaps we will not even need to go that far, if we meet a merchantman or supply ship along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil, it won't matter. So long as they're not Russians. Aye?"

"And the downcoast natives? Kolosh and whatever-the-hell-else they might be?"

"I already said the devil."

Only for an instant now, about the duration of a held breath, did Braaf's eyes come steady with those of Melander and Karlsson. Just before he nodded agreement to join the escape. And that is how

they became three.

In the galaxy of frontier enclaves sparked into creation by imperialism, New Archangel was a mapdot unlike any other. Simultaneously a far-north backwater port and capital of a territory greater than France and Spain and England and Ireland **together**, the settlement ran on Russian capacities for hard labor and doggedness, and was kept from running any better than it did by Russian penchants for muddle and infighting. New Archangel here fifty years after its founding still stood forth in the image of its progenitor, the stumpy and tenacious Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov, first governor of Russian America and contriver of the Russian-American Company's system of fur-gathering. Historians exclaim of Baranov, like Napoleon, that he was a little great man, for Baranov it was who in 1791 began to stretch Russian strength from the Aleutian chain of atolls down the great arc of Alaska's coast, bending or breaking the native cultures along the route one after another: Aleuts chastened into becoming the Russians' seasonal hunters of seals and sea otters, people of the Kenai cajoled into allegiance by Baranov's mating with the daughter of the foremost chief, stubbornly combative Tlingits-- whom the Russians dubbed Kolosh--at last in 1804 dislodged from Sitka Sound by the cannonades of one of the Tsar's gunships.

Baranov had true need of Sitka. The most sizable and best-sheltered harbor indenting the archipelagic shoreline of southeastern Alaska, Sitka Sound represented the maritime ringhold into which Russian influence could be firmly knotted. Along virtually all of that **stupendous** Alaskan

coast the mountains drop sheer to the Pacific, spruce slopes like green avalanches into the seawater. But at Sitka the deep notch of bay is sided by a handy shelf of shore. And a further grudging bequest of topography, at the shore's southmost hook a knoll of rock some forty feet in elevation and four times as broad pokes up like a helmet. Amid the coastline of shoulder to shoulder mountains, this single odd granite callus is the strategic bayside point: the Kolosh employed the mound as their stronghold and Baranov seized the commanding perch for his own thicklogged bastion.

In this summer of 1852, the estimable Aleksandr Andreevich three decades dead, a double-storied governor's house still called Baranov's Castle squats there in the air at the mound-end of New Archangel's single street. At the opposite extent rises the onion dome and carrot spire of the comely little Russian Orthodox cathedral. Betwixt and around, the habitations of New Archangel amount to two hundred or so squared-log buildings, many painted a pale yellow as though they were seaside cottages. Their rooflines are hipped, slanting down in all four directions from the ridgepole; where gables have been fashioned in, they are windowed with small spoked semicircles of glass, like half-suns which never manage either to set or to rise. A burly-looking low-slung town, New Archangel is, beneath the lording styles of cathedral and Castle.

One aspect further, and this one the startling oddity. This port of Russian America has a larger fleet of ships permantly aland than are usually to be found in its harbor. When they can no longer be safely

sailed, hulks are winched onto shore and then improvised upon as needed. ("The Tsar's notion of an unsinkable squadron," Melander of course has gibed.) Of the first two, beached into usefulness in Baranov's time, one hulk had been used as a church and the other as a gun battery-- a pairing of enterprises, canon and cannon, which may have caused the Kolosh to ponder a bit about their new landlords. Its habit of collecting hull-corpses lends New Archangel, as one visitor summed it, "an original, foreign, and fossilized kind of appearance."

The morning after Braaf joined the escape plan, Karlsson emerges from around a corner of the cathedral, on his way from the Scandinavian workmen's barracks a short span to its north, and walks the brief dirt street between God's domain and the Governor's. So deft with an ax that he often is lent to help with the shaping of a mainmast, Karlsson has been delegated to work this day with the shipbuilding crew. But before reaching the shipyard just beyond Baranov's Castle, he veers west toward the stockade gate and the Kolosh village beyond, steps outside and along the wall toward the beach, hunkers and begins to scour the blade of his ax in the pale sand. Polishing away rust, this conscientious timberwright. And second work too, for as he squats, Karlsson from the corner of his eye studies the Kolosh canoes, prows rising in extension like the necks of fantastic horses, in their graceful rank along the beach.

All of New Archangel, stockade and cathedral and Castle and hulks and enterprises and dwellings, sits dwarfed this day by the Alaskan mountains, Verstovia and its throng of minions. Virtually atop the

town in the manner that the spire and dome crown the cathedral, the peaks are precisely those a child would draw. Sharp tall pyramids of forest, occasionally a lesser summit round as a cannonball for comparison's sake. Topknots of snow show here and there, but the color everywhere else on these stretching peaks is the black-green which only a northern coastal fir forest enmixes.

As Karlsson begins hewing pine at the shipyard, Braaf materializes at the southwestern extent of the settlement, beside the eldermost of two schooner-hulks beached there. When Braaf arrived to New Archangel and it became evident that he was not, as listed on one manifest, a shipwright, nor, as supposed on another item of record, a shoemaker, and Braaf with shy innocence denied knowing how such misunderstandings possibly could have come about, a perplexed Russian-American Company clerk assigned him to the readiest unskilled job, as a cook's helper. Daily Braaf manages to use this livelihood to manufacture free time for himself, much of it spent hiding out somewhere within this maritime carcass. The hulk neighboring it yet is in service as a cannon battery aimed into the Kolosh village, but dry rot has made a casualty of this vessel of Braaf's. He slips through a gangway carpentered into the ship's hull when it became a storehouse, creeps to the forecastle, and within a particular one of the several stave-sprung barrels there makes a deposit, a walrus-ivory snuffbox which hitherto was the possession of a Russian quarter-master. Then, per Melander's instructions, Braaf begins to measure by

handwidths the depth and breadth--which is to say, the cache capacity-- of other of these abandoned and forgotten receptacles.

Perpetually at combat with the massed mountains around Sitka Sound is the weather, changing even now, for New Archangel lives two days of three in rain and ~~much~~ oftener than that in cloud. One minute the vapor flows along the bottoms of the mountains to float all the peaks like dark icebergs. The next the cloud layer will rise and lop every crag, leaving a broad, broad plateau of forest beneath. Or imprint of stranger sort, clumps of wan light, warmths fallen through chinks in the overcast, ^{will} now pinto the forest flanks. Between times a silken rain probably has sifted into the New Archangel air, a dew standing in drop-lets on your clothing before you quite become aware of it, and it can be four days before you cast your next shadow. Yet the diminutive port within all this swirl is a place of queer clarity as well, its rinsed air somehow holding a tint of blue light which causes everything to stand forth: smallest swags of spruce limbs on mountains a mile off, rock skirts of the timbered islands throughout the harbor. Voices and the barking of dogs carry extraordinarily.

At mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging from the direction of the hulk toward chores for the noon meal, Melander on work-break presents himself from within the saltery being constructed on the point of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares amply in the twenty-foot tides of this region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tideflat a pig is rooting up clams. His finds,

one after another, are seized from him by ravens. Melander watches for a moment, then laughs. Other workmen inquire to him over their mugs of tea. Melander points to the raucous gulping birds: "The Castle Russians at one of their banquets."

Fully equal in complication and unlikelihood to its architecture and geography and weather is New Archangel's tenantry. The settlement is ruled by the Russian navy, administered by a covey of Russian-American Company clerks and other functionaries, provisioned chiefly by British ships of the rival Hudson's Bay Company, seasonally abounds with Aleut fur hunters, relies for most of its muscle work upon creoles--those born of Russian fathers and Kolosh mothers; of New Archangel's sum of about a thousand persons, this adds up to far the most sizable group--or upon Russian vagabonds given the push out of Okhotsk, and for its craftwork, such as carpentry and smithing, it imports the seven-year men from Scandinavia. Colony within a colony, the hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly are Finns; Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlsson make an even further minority.

Yet not even this social pyramid, sharp-tipped and broad-bottomed as the triangle peaks above the little port, takes in the most numerous populace on Sitka Sound. The Kolosh, the Sitka Tlingits. Their low-roofed longhouses straggle for nearly a mile along the beach west of New Archangel's huddle of buildings, and the stockade wall of defense

26A follows →

twenty-five feet high and five hundred yards long, four blockhouses built of fat logs, and a couple of dozen full-time sentries constantly express the colony's wariness of the natives. With cause. The Sitka Tlingits obliterated the first settlement Baranov implanted here, and a bare three years after this summer of 1852 they will muster themselves and try, just short of success, to obliterate this one as well.

Precisely this prudence toward the Kolosh, the way New Archangel each and every day must set its most vigilant face toward those who might scheme to get in, it would take someone of Melander's angle of mind to count on as advantage for getting out.

Steam whiffed around Karlsson as he stepped into the workmen's bathhouse. Every seventh day the sauna tender heated the rocks in the center of this room for ten hours on a bed of charcoal, and by this far in the night, man after man of the New Archangel workforce having sought to scour weariness from his muscles, the steam densened to one great cube of saturation.

Karlsson stood within the heavy warmth for a moment, slender and very white in his nakedness, before bringing the small woven reed breathing mask to his mouth and holding it there within his cupped right hand.

"At least this cloud is a hot one. New Archangel could use a few such outside, aye?"

Melander's voice, deeper for being muffled, resounded from across the room, and in three steps Karlsson could see the hazed man, his body alone in its long-boned angles on the bathing bench. Melander's reed respirator mask all but disappeared in the big hand palmed around it, so that he seemed to be covering a perpetual chuckle.

"Are you tasting it yet?" Melander went on. "Our venture, I mean? I find myself thinking of salt air. Ocean air. Better than sniffing herring, I can tell you."

"Where's our pickpurse?"

"He will come. The hours of Braaf's day are not like any other man's."

"How far do you trust him?"

"Ordinarily, only a whisker's width." Melander had known Braaf's type all too well on shipboard, men with the instinct always to vanish just before a topsail needed clewing up, and of course the armies of all history have known him best, the scrounger, the dog-robber. "He'd steal the milk out of your tea, aye? But Braaf wants to shake New Archangel from his boots as badly as we do. He'll do much to achieve that. Much that neither of us can do, just as he can't canoe himself down this coast. The three of us are like a bundle of rye when your Skane fields are harvested, Karlsson. Together we lean in support of one another. Take any one away and we fall."

"And are trampled by the Russians."

"Aye, well. The answer to that is not to fall, nor to let each other fall."

"I need to know one matter about you, Melander. Why didn't you stay on with the schooner?"

"Yes, I can see that might be a matter to know. Promise me not to laugh. But I stayed for a pretty sight. A pretty face, you might understand better. But it was this. What took my eyes was the Nicholas, these islands and mountains and the northern ocean. I could see myself on that steam-whale, going places of the world here I could never have dreamed of." Melander's eyes tightened above the reed mask. "What I forgot to look at was the wormy souls of these Russians, aye?"

"And wasn't that a fall, of a sort?"

"A stumble, my friend, a stumble. The strides we will take together along this coast shall make up for it."

"A stumble, that's nothing," said a third voice. "Unless a noose is around your neck at the time."

The steam thinned as the opened doorway sucked it away, and brought into view Braaf. With his clothes off, he looked more than ever like an outsized boy rather than a man. Both Melander and Karlsson noticed that Braaf did not even pause to accustom himself to the cumulus of heat before crossing the room to them, nor bother to put the steam-sieving mask to his mouth until he was seated, a little way from the other two.

"Our commissary officer. Welcome, Braaf. Let's have no more thoughts than necessary of nooses and the like, however." Now that all three of them were at hand, Melander was, for him, singularly businesslike. "What we need to talk of is our divvy of tasks. Braaf, we are going to want--" and here Melander recited, in crisp fashion which would have done honor to a king's remembrancer, the list of supplies for the escape. "Any of this you can't lay your hands on?"

"No. Some harder, some easier, but no."

"Good. Tomorrow, begin your harvest."

"A thing more, Melander." Karlsson, afresh. "How is it we're to get ourselves and all this truck out of this stockade, when the time comes?"

"Oh, aye, did I not tell you? Through the gate."

"Through the...?"

"Well that you asked," Melander's voice clarifying as he took aside the reed mouth mask to display a growing grin, "for you are the one with the lever to open that gate for us." Melander instructed Karlsson with monumental joviality now. "It's there between your legs."

In the next days, a gleaner drifted about in New Archangel like a cloudlet of steam freed from the bathhouse. So adept a provisioner did Braaf prove to be that Melander soon had to ration out his stealing

assignments, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery.

By the end of July, Braaf's cache for the plotters held a compass, two tins of gunpowder, one of the three-pound boxes of tea the Russians used to trade with the natives, several fishing lines and hooks, and a coil of rope.

During August he added to it a gaff hook, three excellent Kolosh daggers, a small candle lantern, a couple of hatchets, and a fire flint apiece.

September's gleanings comprised a second compass--Melander wanted to be double certain about navigation--a small three-legged iron kettle, a spyglass, another box of tea and a water cask.

Early in October, New Archangel's month of curtaining rain, the plotters convened about the matter of a canoe.

Karlsson had eyed out a choice, a twenty-foot shell with a prow which angled up into a high sharp needle of nose. If a sizable cedar tree had decided to transform into a swimming petrel, this craft of alert grace would have been the result. Thrift of line and exaltation of design, that jugglery somehow perfected by this coast's canoewrights. Karlsson's candidate lay amid the beached fleet of a dozen nearest the stockade gate, convenient,

and Karlsson had watched to insure that its possessor was scrupulous. On New Archangel's rare warm days, the native sloshed water over the cedar interior to prevent its drying out and cracking; in normal damp weather, heaped woven mats over the craft for shelter. A canoe of fit and fettle, and style, endorsed Karlsson.

Melander and Braaf took turns at casual glances down the shoreline to Karlsson's nominee.

True, the canoe had so sprightly a look that it seemed only to be awaiting the right word of magic before flying off upward. But Melander believed he too knew something of canoes from having paddled a number of times with Kolosh crews to the fishing grounds off the western shorefront of Sitka Sound; indeed, it can be realized now that those journeys were first filaments in the spinning of his decision that seven-year-dom could be fled by water. The fishing canoes were half again the length of this keen-beaked version singled out by Karlsson, and this question of size balked Melander.

Asked his opinion, Braaf mumbled that any canoe was smaller than he preferred.

Karlsson maintained that his nominee had all the capacity they needed. What did Melander have in mind, to stuff the craft like a sausage?

Melander could not resist asking Karlsson if he was arguing that his wondrous canoe was bigger on the inside than on the out.

No, goddamn Melander's tongue, Karlsson retorted, it simply was a matter of waterworthiness, this canoe would amply carry their cache of supplies and be livelier to steer than a larger canoe and less weight to propel and...

Grinning, Melander was persuaded. Rarely did Karlsson trouble to assert himself about anything, so if he waxed passionate for this particular canoe that was stout enough testimony.

Braaf desired to know what all the jibber-jabber at the front and back of the canoe was.

Bow and stern, Melander rapidly advised him before Karlsson got touched off again, and the canoe's painted designs, boxy patterns of red and white which flowed deftly in and out of one another, were Kolosh symbols to ward off evil.

Evil whats, demanded Braaf.

Evil minnows that would leap from the sea and piss in Braaf's ear, Melander said in exasperation, how in hell's flaming name was he supposed to know what evil whats the Kolosh were spooked by?

Now: the three of them were of one mind for the canoe, was there any other--

Paddles, Karlsson announced, and insisted they be Haida paddles, a deft leaf-bladed type carved by a tribe somewhere downcoast and occasionally bartered north as far as New Archangel as prized items of trade.

Hearing this, Braaf frowned. He had full reason. It took him all of the next week to accumulate a trio of ~~Haida~~ paddles from the natives along the harbor.

"Three?" said Karlsson when they met again. "What if we lose one over the side?"

Braaf cursed in his sweet voice, and went off to start the thief's siege of watching and waiting which would accrue a fourth paddle.

Like the single eye of some great watchful creature, each morning at six the stockade gate near the westmost corner of New Archangel winked open, at six each evening it swung resolutely shut.

Only during those dozen hours of day were the Kolosh allowed into the settlement, in scrutinized numbers, and the market area where they were permitted to trade was delineated directly inside the gate, so that they could be rapidly shoved out in event of commotion. Moreover, the first of the four gun-slitted blockhouses buttressing the stockade sat close above the area of market and gate on a shieldlike short slope of rock, miniature of the strong knob supporting Baranov's Castle. Scan it from inside or out, here at New Archangel's portal Russian wariness held its strongest focus.

Except. Except that, bachelor existence on a frontier being what it was, the gate sometimes peeped open in the evenings. Until dusk went into solid night, it was not unknown that a recreative stay might be made among certain bargainable women in the Kolosh village. For those dwelling within New Archangel rather than without, then, the second and unofficial--and by order of the governor, absolute--curfew at the big gate was full dark.

"There you are, then," Melander explained to Karlsson. "Free ride on the spotted pony, so to speak."

Karlsson quirked his mouth enough to show skepticism. Melander was one who would have you believe that sideways is always true north. But Karlsson was a vane of another sort. He possessed a close idea of his own capabilities and could gauge himself with some dispassion as to whether he was living up to them. (That he had not much interest in people who lacked either capability or gauge, his stand-off style more than half-hinted.) What Melander was proposing, Karlsson doubted he could fashion himself to.

"Right fit or not," Melander assured him, "you're the only fit."

And so Karlsson began to increase his frequency of visit to the native village, and by lingering on after the other visitants, to stretch each stay deeper into dusk. Eventually he was nudging regularly against the second curfew, much to the discomfiture of the night watchman at the gate of the stockade, Bilibin.

Bilibin was one of the longest-serving of the Russian indenturees who had been funneled out through the Siberian port of Okhotsk and

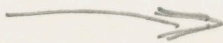
across the northern seas to New Archangel. Peg him, perhaps, somewhere amid the milder miscreants, without doubt having skinned his nose against one law or another but not the most hellbound soul you can call to mind, either. For our purpose here, however, which is that of Karlsson and Braaf and Melander, Bilibin's significant earmark was his longevity at New Archangel. Sufficiently a scapegrace to have exasperated a generation of superiors, Bilibin now stood the least desirable of shifts, the gravy-eye watch, those heavy hours spanning the middle of the night. Turned about, the matter was that his superiors over the years had sufficiently knouted and berated him that Bilibin took some care not to rush from under his canopy of dark into their attention.

Thus: the first time Karlsson arrived back to the gate past curfew, Bilibin blustered a threat to march him double-quick to the sergeant in charge of the sentries. "He'll knout you red, Viking. My scars ache to think of those he'll stripe on you, oh yes..."

But did nothing. Rousting out a sergeant because a Swede couldn't finish his rutting on time, well, now...

The next time, having conferred beforehand with Melander, Karlsson staggered later than ever from the Kolosh village to the gate. He sang as if drunk:

"The fruit of the heart-tree,
do not eat,
for sorrow grows there,
black as peat."

Also, he carried 

a jug of the native liquor called hootchina. Which without undue difficulty he persuaded Bilibin to take a reviveful swig from:

"Have fifteen drops, Pavel, it drives the snakes from one's boots..."

Karlsson was astounded with the evident believability of his gate performances. The hootch, however, deserved at least equal billing. Under the New Archangel allotment of fifty cups of rum per man per year, Bilibin was a man perpetually parched. "They might as well be spooning out dust to us," he averred to Karlsson between swigs.

By autumn of 1852, Karlsson was not departing the stockade until nearly dark--"Come along and dip your ladle in the kettle," the slim Swede would invite; "No, no, no, I'm limber as a goose's neck, no more women for me, you can have mine too," Bilibin would splutter back at him--and returning far into the night, proffering the hootchina jug.

In mid-November, Melander said in his procedural way that the time had come for Braaf to steal the coastal maps by which they would navigate south. "It's the Tebenkov maps we want. Tebenkov must have been one Russian who had something other than cabbage between his ears. When he was governor here he made his captains chart all of this coastline, and there's a set aboard each ship. I saw the steamship's while Rosenberg was bathing his bottom at Ozherskoi. We'll take those, they won't be missed until spring or whenever in hell's time the steamship gets fired up again. Can you read Russian, Braaf?" Braaf shook his head. "No? Well, no matter, we need the

ones from latitude 57 degrees as far south as 46 degrees, and you'll see they're marked like this."

NW bepera Amepuku, Melander printed carefully. NW coast of America.

The theft would be tricky, Melander cautioned, because Braaf would need to sort rapidly among all the maps in the steamship's chart room and--Melander stopped short as Braaf wagged his head again. "Aye?" Melander demanded. "What is it?"

"I can't read anything," Braaf said.

The single event certain to irk Melander was the unforeseen, and this incapacity of Braaf's he had not calculated on at all. Rarest annoyance crossed Melander's face, then he swerved to Karlsson and his disposition readjusted itself. "So. It seems to fall to you. This'll at least be a change from galloping a Kolosh maiden, wouldn't you say? Now: the maps are kept--"

Karlsson was shaking his lean head in reprise of Braaf.

"I'm being sent hunting. Perhaps for as long as ten days."

Now Karlsson looked steadily into Melander's eyes and for once, so did Braaf.

Under the pressure of these gazes Melander grimaced. Scowled. Swore. "Jesu Maria. Have to become a common sneakthief next, do I? The pair of you..."

The pair of them met Melander with the same square glances two weeks later.

"I have them, I have them," the tall man said edgily. "But a close matter it was. Christ on the cross, Braaf, how you go around like a deacon's ghost I'll never know. I was at the maps when for some damnable reason two of the Russian officers came aboard. They clomped off somewhere on the port side and I got away along starboard."

Melander opened his mouth as if to go on, but went into thought instead. After a moment:

"Aye. Anyway, it's done and done. Let's get on with our enterprise. We'll need new sail for the canoe, can't trust the rotten cheesecloth these Kolosh use. You are able to recognize sail canvas, Braaf, aren't you?"

Minutes after the next morning's work-call, Braaf was making away with the sailcloth, the folded length of it cradled snug as Moses beneath an armload of skins he ostensibly was transporting toward the tannery, when a voice suggested huskily into his left ear, "Shouldn't've skinned so deep this time, Braaf. Let's talk about the bottom of your cargo, there."

Through the cold lightning of fright it did register on Braaf that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian. He inched his head leftward the fraction enough to test the wide sideburn-framed face beside him. Recognition unfroze his mind... one of the blacksmiths...vain bastard he is...Wennstrom, Wennblad: "Wennberg? What..."

"No, ^{don't} ~~en't~~ walk away and ~~en't~~ put them down." Not suggestion now: orders. "We'll have a visit until we see which happens." Wennberg moved himself in front of Braaf as companionably as if he had every matter in the universe to discuss with him. "Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your friend Melander lopes himself over here."

With a lanky swiftness which to any onlooker would seem as if he had been beckoned over to consult with the pair, Melander arrived. His dark look met Wennberg's blandness like a cloud against a cliff-face. For a long moment, there the three of them stood centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate as if time had snagged to a stop within their little radius, around them morning life eddying, quartermasters and overseers and shipwrights and caulkers and brassworkers and sailors and Kolosh and Castle officers, New Archangel humanity in all its start-of-day seeps and spurts of motion.

"So, Melander," Wennberg broke their silence. "Braaf and I were just speaking of how much heavier skins've gotten this year. It

seems a man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these days."

"A man can carry as much as the world puts on him, it is said," Melander responded crisply, still glowering at Wennberg.

"You're always a thinker, Melander. Isn't he, Braaf?" The blacksmith stepped close and pressed his elbow slowly, powerfully, into Braaf's left upper arm, drawing a strangled gasp from the laden man. "A thinker, hmm?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered rapidly. "You obviously have much to say about matters of weight."

Wennberg hesitated, cast a glance into the thinning stream of the workshift, then nodded as if Melander's words were the first coins down on a debt.

Braaf lurched his way out of sight in the general direction of the tannery. The other two, Melander more toplofty than ever beside the wide Wennberg, strode toward a building not far inside the stockade gate. The smithing shop transected the middle of this structure and within its open arched doorway stood three huge forges aligned from the outside in like stabled iron creatures of some nature. The outermost forge was Wennberg's.

From where Wennberg stood day-long as he directed the heavy dance of hammer and fire, Melander scanned out into the parade ground.

The line of view took in all comings and goings there, and most particularly the route into Braaf's storage hulk just across the way.

Melander wagged his head in rueful admission and proffered to the blacksmith: "So?"

"You've plans to crawl out of this Russian bearpit, and I'm coming with you."

"Are you?"

"I am. Else you and Braaf and Karlsson'll be hung from the top of the stockade for the magpies to feast on."

"Tsk. On all this big island there should be plenty for the birds to feed on without going to that. Aye? What makes you think we're kissing goodbye to New Archangel?"

"Don't come clever with me, Melander. I've watched your trained packrat Braaf, these weeks."

"Braaf is his own man."

"Braaf's operated by your jabber. So's that stiff-cock Karlsson."

"Such powers I seem to have. You'll want to watch out I don't command your sidewhiskers to turn into louse nests."

"You're not the high-and-mighty to command anything just now."

"Do you come down with these fevers often, Wennberg? Say we wanted to flee, how would we? Call ourselves Jonah and ask a whale to bunk us aboard?"

"You'd yatter as long as water runs downhill, Melander. Time we barter. My silence for your plan."

"Silence I don't much believe in. But school me: why are you interested in notions of fleeing from here?"

"My reasons come cousin to yours. Because I'm sick of life under these shit-beetle Russians. Because there're wider places of the world than this stockade." Grudgingly: "Because if anyone here is slyboots enough to escape, it's likely you."

"Flattering."

"Which doesn't mean I wouldn't laugh to see you hung high for magpie food, if that's your choice. Decide."

Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own. Then the serious smile **made** its appearance.

"First you preach to poor Braaf of too much weight, now you keep cautioning me of too much height. Wennberg, I think you maybe underestimate how far a man can stretch himself if he has to. Aye? Can you handle a **Haida** paddle?"

Melander spent considerable talking that night to convince Braaf and Karlsson that the best choice was to bring Wennberg into the plan.

Braaf remained indignant about the incident on the parade ground. He volunteered to convert the blacksmith into a dead man, if someone would tell him how it might be done.

Melander soothingly agreed it was an understandable^d ambition, and laudable too, but no. He had thought the issue through and through, and the death of a valued smith such as Wennberg, especially when the killing would have to be achieved here within the fort, would breed more questions than it was worth. "Besides, he is a hill bull for strength. We can use him."

Karlsson squinted in reflection, then said that what galled him was to be at Wennberg's mercy in any way. What if Wennberg took it into his narrow bull mind to betray them to the Russians for a reward?

Aye, Melander concurred, that was the very problem to be grappled. "We shall have to set a snare for Mister Blacksmith."

A few nights later, their first time as four.

Karlsson openly appraised Wennberg as if the blacksmith were marrying into the family. Their newcomer was both hefty and wide, like a cut of very broad plank. An unexpectedness atop his girth was the fluffy set of sideburns--light brown, as against the blondness of the other three Swedes--which framed his face all the way down to where his jaw joined his neck. Except for young dandies among the Russian officers no one else of New Archangel sported such feathery sidewhiskers, but then it would be assumed that no one either was going to invoke foppery against this walking slab of brawn. A time or two Wennberg had re-edged an axe for Karlsson, but Karlsson ~~new~~^{knew} little more of him than those spaced hammerblows onto red metal. He found it interesting that the man was amounting to so much more than arm.

Wennberg meanwhile tried to reciprocate as much scrutiny as he got, but was at the disadvantage of having to share it around the trio of them: fancymouth Melander, this mute fox Karlsson, Satan's choirboy Braaf...

"We have a thing to tell you, Wennberg," Melander set in at once. "Since you're new to our midst, we can't really know whether your fondest wish is to go with us from here or to sell us to the Russians as runaways. If you've had any waverings, it'll be a relief to you to know we've made up your mind for you. There's no profit whatsoever for you to go to the Russians."

Challenge of this raw sort was not at all what Wennberg had expected. "Your tongue is bigger than your judgment, Melander," the blacksmith flared. "It's not for you to tell me who stands where. You forget I can walk out of here and show the Russians the hidey-hole in that hulk where you've had Braaf stashing things these months."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there," Melander said with such politeness it seemed almost an apology.

Wennberg stared at Melander as if the lanky seaman just had changed skin color before his eyes.

"Since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole," Melander went on. "Braaf has the knack of finding such places, aye? You'll know where the new cache is when we load the canoe, and not an eyeblink before. So trot to the Russians whenever you feel like it, but you'll have nothing in the hulk to show them."

"Except mouse turds." This unexpectedly from Braaf, whose gaze now floated steadily along three foreheads instead of two. Wennberg shot him a look which all but thundered.

"Yes, except mouse turds," Melander chuckled. "And even the Russians might find it hard to believe that we've been busy storing away treasure of such sort. No, Wennberg, it's you against the three of us, and we'll see who the Russians choose to believe. Our souls are fresh and there's spring green in our eye, so far as they know. You wouldn't be the first one here to be thought off his head, or a maker of mischief for some other reason." Melander paused, then said in his know-all fashion: "You play a hand of cards now and again, don't you, Wennberg? I suggest you have a second look before you wager."

The blacksmith began to retort hotly: "Now listen, you three walrus-puzzles..." But Melander beat him to speech yet again.

"Be careful of your words, Wennberg. If you're coming with us, we have much time ahead together and don't need the burden of bad feelings. If you're going to the Russians, you don't want your last sentiments to weigh wrongly on your soul."

Wennberg was boulder-still, in stare at Melander. Fury had him, but evidently something other, too, for he had clamped his mouth until his lips all but vanished. Words were having their spines snapped there, the other three could see.

Finally Wennberg broke his glower. Swung a heavy look to Braaf, at last and longest to the silent one, Karlsson.

"You set of squareheads may be better at this than I thought," he rumbled. "I'm with you, Christ help me. Now you've to tell me,

if you know, how we are to ~~become~~ pilgrims in the wilderness of water."

Tong the plan around in the forge of his mind as he would, Wennberg could come up with only a few questions to bang out when Melander had finished.

"Why all this fuss with old Bilibin? Whyn't we just cut his stupid throat when we're ready?" ~~At this,~~ Karlsson stirred a bit, ~~at this.~~

"Because if we kill one of his men, Rosenberg will have to have his people chase us," Melander said instructively. "If we leave Bilibin alive, Rosenberg will take it out on him."

"What of muskets? How many can Braaf lay his dainty hands on?" Melander replied that they had the advantage of two ready at hand; Karlsson's long-barreled .69 calibre hunting rifle, and the military musket which would be plucked from Bilibin. Then on the night of the escape, Melander continued, Braaf would gather them a few more. "Six, to be exact."

Braaf blinked rapidly ~~at this~~ and Karlsson looked mildly surprised, but it was Wennberg who blurted:

"Great good God, Melander, eight guns altogether? We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war!"

"Can you name me a better cargo, Wennberg? Do you think the ravens are going to feed us on this journey, and the bears will guard us with their kind teeth? We don't know what we'll face,

but I want plenty of ball and powder to face it with. Aye? If you wish to come along naked, so be it."

Wennberg grumbled, then offered that if Melander was so fanatic on muskets, he was willing to help out. A sentry's musket had been sent into the smith shop for a new buttplate. He could hold it back by saying he hadn't got around to affixing the repair yet.

Melander congratulated him gravely on entering the spirit of their enterprise.

"There, Braaf, he's made you amends. You'll need to pluck only five firepieces when the time is ready."

Braaf said nothing.

Karlsson too stayed unspeaking, but he had begun to have a feeling about Wennberg. There was something not reckonable, opposite from usual, about this blacksmith. As when the eyelid of a wood duck watching you closes casually from the bottom up.

Wennberg was not done with the topic of muskets.

"Just where's our little magnet here, Braaf, to pluck up these guns, anyway?"

"You do take three bites at every berry, don't you, Wennberg? But since you bring the matter up..." Melander turned his long head to Braaf in the manner of an indulging uncle. "Braaf, what of it? Where can the guns best be got on our night?"

"The officers' lodgings," Braaf responded with entire matter-

of-factness. "The gun room."

For the single time in all the unfolding of the plan, Melander blanched. Karlsson pulled once at his thin nose. Wennberg grumped sardonically: "Next, Braaf, you'll want to parade up to the Castle Russians and ask if we can have their underwear for warmth on our little journey."

Braaf shrugged. "Sauerkraut is in the smelliest barrels, guns are in a gun room."

Melander found voice, restrained Wennberg, chided Braaf, and the matter began to be argued out. It emerged that Braaf probably was right. That the collection of rifles racked like fat billiard cues within the officers' gun room--on one of his invented errands which wafted him into all crannies of the settlement Braaf had spotted the weapons--and which were used for shooting parties when the governor's retinue went downcoast to Ozherskoi, this small armory was New Archangel's richest trove of firearms unguarded by sentries.

But, as Wennberg suspiciously demanded, why unsentined...?

"Because of the padlock on the door and the chain through the triggerguards?" Braaf suggested.

This silenced even Wennberg.

Karlsson at last spoke up.

"There's a second stick to this cross. The officers and Company men coming and going. They flow in and out of that place day and

night."

"I can wink us a safe time," Melander mused. "But getting those guns loose..."

"Wennberg," murmured Braaf.

"Mister Blacksmith!" Melander proclaimed.

"You square headed sons of whores," Wennberg said unhappily.

The waiting became a kind of ghost attaching itself within each of their lives, as if a man now cast two shadows and one somehow fell into his body instead of away. The outer man had to perform as ever--do his work, eat, sleep, carry on barracks gabble--while inside, this sudden new shadow-creature, the one in wait, bided the next six weeks and six days wholly in thought of the immense voyage ahead.

Melander as he waited studied the Tebenkov maps ever more firmly into his mind. Before long, their descending coastal chain of islands could have been recited out of him like Old Testament genealogy. New Archangel's island of Baranof would beget Kuiu Island, Kuiu beget Kosciusko, Kosciusko Heceta and Heceta Suemez, south and south and south through watery geography and explorers' mother tongues until the eventual rivermouth port called Astoria. Perhaps it was because Melander had in him the seaman's way of letting days take care of distance, the necessary nautical faith that there is more time than there is expanse of the world and so any voyage at

last will end, that these stepping-stone details predominated in his thinking about the escape. Rarely, and then never aloud to any of the other three, did Melander mull the totality of the coastal journey ahead. This made a loss to them all, for Melander alone of the four had traveled greatly enough on the planet to understand the full scope of what they would be attempting. To grasp that their intended ten hundred miles of paddling stretched--wove, rather, through the island-thick wilderness coast--as far as the distance from Stockholm to Venice, or from Gibraltar across all the top of Africa to Sicily. Each mile of the thousand, too, along a cold northern brink of ocean which in winter is misnamed entirely: not pacific at all, but malign. Melander's knowledge of water enwrapping the world, the canny force of its resistance to the intentions of man, he might have used to put a tempered edge on the escape plan. To have said, in his silver style of saying, "Hear me on this, heart's friends. Things beyond all imagining may happen to us down this coast, aye? But we'll have gone free into our fate. Besides, a man draws nearer to death wherever he strides..."

But no, and it may be necessity for those who choose vast risk, even Melander seemed not able to confront the thought of all the miles at once. Only those from island to island to island.

In his waiting, Wennberg too spent long spells of calculation.

Turning and turning the question of whether there was a way to betray the escape. Certainty did not seem to be in the matter. If the Russians could be convinced and then be relied upon to reward him, say grant return to Sweden; but it did not seem likely the Russians would forfeit a blacksmith so readily, whatever they might promise. If he told of the plan but Melander persuaded the Russians there was nothing to it, Wennberg would never after be safe in New Archangel; Karlsson and perhaps even that stealer of milk teeth Braaf would be a steady threat to his life. If he fled with the other three, into freedom; or perhaps into the bottom of this ocean like cats in a sack.

If and perhaps; coax at them as he would, Wennberg could make them do no more than somersault into perhaps and if. This, this damned skitter of a matter...Wennberg did not at all have well-bottom faith in the prospects of Melander's plan, but neither did he see, now, any clear path out of it. What Wennberg imagined was going to be his power over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their power over him.

Karlsson bided the time with less edginess than the others. Since he went through life anyway in the manner of a man in wait, the space of weeks until the escape was to him simply one more duration, and not as long as most.

This patience of Karlsson's cannot entirely be counted virtue. It evidently kept him in situations, for instance, when Wennberg would have crashed out or Braaf wriggled out, and indeed may have deposited him, without over-ample debate or decision, into Alaska. Karlsson's liking for time in the forest, learned as helper to a gamekeeper on a nearby manor during his Skane boyhood, had bent him toward a frontier life even at the price of becoming a seven-year man, he once had told Melander. The occasional hunting forays out from New Archangel he savored considerably, and the work as an axman seemed to him an unobjectionably crisp task, although he had been caused to rethink that a bit by Melander's josh that New Archangel's true enterprise was the making of axes to cut down trees to turn into charcoal which was then used as forge-fire to make more axes. All in all, then, Karlsson minded New Archangel life a good deal less than any of the three other Swedes. What held Karlsson into the pattern of the escape was the plan itself. That question of capability, whether Melander's idea could be made real, could transport men so far along the wild coast.

That, and the musing to be done about how he himself would perform. Out of somewhere, the session with Wennberg had brought unlooked-for new considerations of this sort. For one thing, Karlsson wondered now whether sometime during the escape he would have to kill Wennberg. And for another, whether he could manage to kill him.

The hardest wait among them was Braaf's. Melander had forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and food on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy Braaf took up scrimshaw. His first effort, a copying onto whale's tooth of a madonna in the Russian cathedral, emerged from his fingers somehow looking simultaneously mournful and sly.

Night, the sixth of January, 1853. By Russian Orthodox custom, the night of Christmas.

Karlsson staggered from the Kolosh village to the outside of the stockade gate, bounced hard against it, propped himself and threw back his head.

"Be GREETed joyful MORning HOURR," he bawled. "A Savior COMES with LOVE'S sweet POWERR..."

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have that sergeant down here," Bilibin called urgently, hustled from the hut sheltering him from the rain, and hurriedly cracked the gate. "Quick, in, in..."

From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the gate wink grayly open, then close. Two man-shapes bobbed together; Karlsson's slurred mutter and Bilibin's guffaw were heard. Melander swiveled his head toward the end of the smithing shop farthest from the gate and spoke:

"Now."

A piece of the darkness--its name was Braaf--disengaged itself and instantly was vanished around the corner.

Now Melander became motion. Across New Archangel for three hundred yards he hastened, in black reversal of a route he had roved one twilit evening a half-year ago. A different being, that Deacon Step-and-a-Half had been, not yet cumbered with a thousand miles of plan...

Outside the Scandinavian workers' barracks Melander halted and drew deep breaths. For half a minute the rain ticked down on him.

Entering, Melander clattered the barracks door shut behind him, began to shrug out of his rainshirt, mumbled this or that about having forgot his gloves in the toilet, and was vanished out the doorway again.

A person attentively watching the arrival and departure of Melander would have had time to blink perhaps three times.

Wennberg had been idly stropping a knife as he spectated the card game being played by three carpenters and a sailmaker. Now he grunted that he too was off to mount the throne of Denmark, if the Russians allowed pants to be dropped on such a holy night, and to the chuckles of the card players pulled on his rainshirt and stepped into the dark beside Melander.

The pair of them, tree and stump somehow endowed with legs, moved with no word through the night for two minutes, three. Apprehension strode with them both. Apprehensions, rather, for their anxieties were sized as different as the men.

Melander told himself, a thousandth time, the logic by which he had singled out this night. Certain as anything, the Russians would be celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off. Assuredly, the officers and any of the Company Russians who frequented their lodgings for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument, all of them would be at the governor's ball in Baranov's Castle, leaving the gun-room accessible. Nor, when the escapees' absence was discovered, would the Russians be eager to leave their snug festivities to chase them through the cold of Alaskan night. The Kolosh meanwhile would be keeping to their longhouses, staying clear of drunk and boisterous Tsarmen. Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, all would be the Swedes' Christmas allies for escape. But late-going Russians yet within the officers' lodgings...clatter in the gun room heard by a sentry at the eastmost blockhouse...Melander's months of planning now teethered on such points beyond logic, and the fret of them moved with him in the dark.

Wennberg's perturbation was with himself. Until he stood up from beside the card-players in the barracks the blacksmith had not been convinced he would go through with the escape. How came it that now he was traipsing off with Melander into disaster's black avid mouth?

Abruptly a barrier of building met them. As Melander and Wennberg hesitated before the officers' lodgings, a third upright shadow joined them. It thrust into Wennberg's hands a heavy sharp-pointed pry bar and into Melander's a pair of long-handled smithing snippers, and it muttered: "This way."

In the dark and rain Melander and Wennberg stayed rooted for a moment, as though the cold feel of metal conferred on them by Braaf had frozen them into place.

"Come on, you pair of lumps," Braaf's jab brought them to life, tumbled the big men inside the doorway of the officers' club where he waited. "Stay an arm's length behind me, and try not walk on each other's ankles."

Braaf led Melander and Wennberg through rooms their eyes never really took in, so much focus were the two of them devoting to listening, breathing silently, and creeping. Which may go to explain how the outer edge of Wennberg's left boot clanked against a hallway spittoon.

Braaf appeared more offended than concerned. He whispered to Wennberg, "Plowhorse."

The door of the gun room stood like the lid of a colossal strongbox tipped up on end. Heavy hinges and hasp, a corner-to-corner X of strap iron to thwart notions of chopping in, a padlock the size of a big man's fist.

"Stick in your thing, blacksmith," Braaf said under his breath.
"Don't be bashful, the padlock won't giggle."

Wennberg pulled from his breeches a queer piece of metalwork about the length of a serving spoon. At its small end the device was shaped like a thick skeleton key. At the other, it flared into a fat doughnut of metal, like the eye of a sizable ringbolt. It was of iron, and had taken Wennberg great time to forge in secret.

Into the keyhole of the padlock the blacksmith inserted the key-like end of his device. Shafted the sharp point of the pry bar through the doughnut-end. Moved his thick hands to the outer end of the pry bar for all possible leverage. And strained downward.

The lockwork inside the padlock made a single sharp clack. Braaf reached instantly and the sprung lock was lifted away.

"Done, hair and hide," congratulated Melander. "Now one job more." The tall leader handled Wennberg the snippers and tugged open the powerful door.

Somehow rifles racked together multiply their power, akin to the way that cavalry does by drawing up abreast. The repeat of pattern, the echoing numerousness it implies, as though this concentrated squad is just a swatch from bigger trouble--such impress now met the three men, black tubes of barrel and brass ramrod pipes rising straight up from the chain which threaded through each triggerguard. Truth be known, except for an occasional Beaumarchais sportsman's weapon and one hefty American Sharps, the guns here were

eccentric old Bakers or Brunswicks bought from the Hudson's Bay traders; the Brunswicks in particular were hard-recoiling, scatter-barreled specimens recently given up on by the British Army. None of this could be known to Braaf, Wennberg, Melander: blast and thunder ~~were~~ ~~was~~ their want, not ballistic nicety.

In went Wennberg, then Braaf. Two exertions on the long handles of the snippers, and tempered jaws crushed twice through filigreed metal. The triggerguard of the first rifle cut away, Braaf plucked the weapon free of its restraining chain and handed it past Wennberg to Melander.

Four more rifles the blacksmith clipped rapidly in the same fashion. "Aye," Melander saying softly each time.

Hefting their new armory, the trio readied themselves. Braaf shouldered shut the gun room door, slipped the padlock back onto its hasp. The right cast of look would show at once that the lock was awry, but it would be a rare Russian who came home tonight with a quick eye.

Braaf moved in front of the other two; advised under his breath to Wennberg, "Try pick up your hooves this time;" and led.

They exited the officers' lodgings and through the dark set off together, now west across New Archangel toward the stockade gate, Braaf like a bat choosing the most shadowed route.

The noise exploded atop them then.

PALONG! PALONG!

Braaf was four running strides away from the petrified Melander and Wennberg before he, and they, realized--PALONG! PALONG!-- how cathedral bells resound to those who sneak through the streets at night.

"Your Russian is fond of bells," a visitor who departed New Archangel with ringing ears once noted down, and the sweet-sad holiday peals from the belfry of the Russian Orthodox cathedral followed the tall figure and the shorter two all across the settlement toward the stockade gate.

A few feet from the sentry lean-to the trio paused, and Melander called in huskily: "Karlsson?"

Out loomed a figure in sentry cap, with a musket at quarter arms.

Wennberg grunted a curse and grabbed for the knife inside his rainshirt.

In Karlsson's voice the figure mildly chided: "I thought I had better look the part. You don't find Bilibin's cap becoming on me, Wennberg?"

"Speaking of caps," Melander said as if announcing tea, "it's time to fling our hat over the nunnery wall."

Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip through with the guns. Minutes stretched, then the three were back from the canoe and the blackness of the Kolosh village.

"We're off to the cache," whispered Melander. "Stand ready with the gate."

Fewer than fifty paces later, Melander and Braaf halted beside the blacksmith shop.

"What're we doing here?" Wennberg rumbled low to Melander. "Where's this hidey-hole of Braaf's?"

"Here."

"What?"

"In the sill loft. Above your forge." The sill loft was a narrow platform, like a span of board ceiling, laid across the center of the rafters of the smithing shop. Wood to make windowsills and doorframes was stowed there winter-long in the heat rising from the forges, to forestall warp or shrinkage; until the summer building season came, no one paid it any mind. Except of course Melander, who said now: "On Gotland, we say the darkest place is under the candlestick."

"You pissants!" The stun of it set Wennberg back a step, these weeks of the war within himself, escape-or-betray, the lobes of his mind standing and fighting each other like crabs over it, and all the while..."If the Russians'd looked up there they'd have hung me!"

"That thought did visit us. But you had luck, the Russians didn't peek. Shinny the ladder, Braaf, and begin handing down to us, aye?"

Three trips it took, Braaf and Wennberg lugging now while Melander stowed and stowed, to convey the trove which Braaf had accumulated like a discriminating packrat.

Then all at once Melander, alone, was back at the gate.

"We're cargoed," he said to Karlsson. "You'll be our last item, aye?" And was gone.

Karlsson began to wait out a span of becalmed time. The hammer chorale of the bells at last had ceased, and the all-but-silence, just the soft rainsound, was worse. Too, there was an occasional stirring from Bilibin, trussed and gagged and bleary on the floor of the hut behind him. Karlsson decided it was best to keep busy within himself, saying and resaying the word.

There are moments, central moments such as what Karlsson awaits now, which form themselves unlike any that have come before in our lives or will again. Ours might seem a kindlier evolution if what we know as memory had been set in us the other way: if these pith incidents of existence already waited on display there in the mind when you, I, Karlsson enter the world--a glance, and scene A ready to happen some certain Thursday; beyond it, B in clear view, due on a Wednesday two years and seventeen days off...The snag of course is Z, the single exactitude we could never bear to know: death's date. So then that we can stand existence, the apparatus fetches backward for us rather than ahead, memory instead of foreknowledge, and Karlsson on wait here in the Alaska night is like all of us in life's dark, able to know only that a moment is coming due and to hope it is not the last of the series.

Then the word, as if in chorus to his silent recitings, flew out of the dark to Karlsson, in call down from the blockhouse on the hump of ridge above the stockade gate.

"Vnimats!"

Every hour it boomed from sentry post to sentry post, this call to attention. Having been endlessly rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian was better than his own, Karlsson swallowed, cupped his hands to his mouth; and as close as he could raise his voice to Bilibin's bray, cried back the watch call.

Silence from the blockhouse.

Karlsson cracked the gate for himself.

"You're croaking like a raven down there tonight." Karlsson spun to the resumed voice from the blockhouse. "Something got you by the throat?"

Motionless, Karlsson frantically rummaged the times he had shared the hootch jug with Bilibin, what words...

Then from beside him in the blackness, a bray in Russian:

"Nothing fifteen drops won't cure!"

Karlsson's right elbow was being gripped by the largest hand imaginable, which told him what his eyes could not in the dark: Melander.

Fresh silence at the other guardpost. Deeper, tauter silence, it seemed to Karlsson, unrelenting as Melander's grip.

At last:

"Swig fifteen more for me and make a start on my woes as well.

Merry Christmas, Pavel Ivanovich!"

As if in mock of some dance the Russians just then were gyrating through in the Castle, the Swedes' vast voyage southward started off with an abrupt two-step to the west.

On the first of the Tebenkov maps Melander had shown Karlsson the pair of southgoing channels threaded like careful seams among the islands of Sitka Sound. Karlsson had glanced down and immediately up: "At night? Probably in rain?"

That granite nubbin of opinion pivoted the escapees to the third possible route, a veer around large Japonski Island, directly across the channel from the Kolosh village and then outside the shoal of Sound islands. Such a loop was longer than the other channels and unsheltered from the ocean currents, but at least it was not a blindfolded plunge into the labyrinth of isles.

It was, however, the inauguration for Braaf and Wennberg into paddling in untame waters. The canoe bucked, slid down nose first, rocked to one side, bucked again, slid again and rocked to the other side, a nautical jig new to the pair of them, and a horrifying one in the wet dark.

Their paddling efforts were stabs into the sloshing turmoil below them until Karlsson, in the bow of the canoe and feeling the splutters of attempt occurring behind him, directed over his shoulder:

"Spread your hands wide as you can on the paddle and stroke only when I say. Now--now--now--now--now--"

This contrived tick and tock, Karlsson's nows and the breath-space between, advanced them through the blackness until Melander spoke from the stern of the canoe.

"Hold up, bring us broadside a moment, Karlsson. We've at least earned a look."

As the canoe swayed around, the other three saw his meaning. Back through one of the channel-canyons amid the islands of Sitka Sound, an astonishing wide box of lights sat in the air. Baranov's Castle, every window bright for this night of Christmas merriment, sent outward through the black and the rain their final glittering glimpse of New Archangel.

The course out of the harbor looped them toward the ocean, then veered southeast, to bring them along the shoreline of Baranof Island. From launching the canoe, the men's legs were wet to just above their knees, and in the winter night it took the first half hour of paddling to warm themselves.

The night was windless, which they needed. The Baranof coastline they could estimate by the surf sound, and occasionally by a moving margin of lightness as a wave struck and swashed. To their right, the ocean side, the black was intense, of a sort our modern eyes have been weaned from: starless, so much so that it seemed nothing ever had kindled in that cosmic cave, and vast, beyond all reason vast. New Archangel apart, the next lamp in that black flickered thousands of miles across the Pacific, if indeed the residents of Japan lit lamps.

The four tried to stroke steadily rather than rapidly. Not even Wennberg was impatient about this, for he knew with the others that they needed to pull themselves as far from New Archangel as possible by dawn, and that meant pace, endurance. Perhaps twenty strokes each minute, four men stroking, rest-pausing as little as possible, seven-eight hours to daybreak: an approximate thirty thousand of these exertions and they could seek out a dawn cove for hiding.

Hours and hours later, near-eternities later to the numbed arms of Melander and Braaf and Wennberg, darkness thinned toward dawn's gray.

Karlsson, glancing back to judge the stamina left in the other three, was the first to see the slim arc of canoe, like a middle distance reflection of their own craft, closing the distance behind them.

"You bastard, Melander." This was ^{Wennberg}~~Wennberg~~. "'The Russians won't follow us, ' ay?"

"They haven't," Melander retorted. "Kolosh, those are. We'll see how quick they are to die for the little white father in Petersburg. Braaf, load those fancy rifles of yours, then pass Karlsson his hunting gun."

The Kolosh chieftain in the chasing canoe counted carefully

as Braaf worked at the loading, and did not like how the numbers added and added. The half-drunk Russian officer who had roused the Kolosh crew told them the escaping men were only three-- Braaf at first had not been missed, his whereabouts as usual the most obscure matter this side of ghostcraft--but plainly there were four of the whitehairs, they possessed at least two muskets apiece, and this one doing the loading was rapid at his task. Against the four and their evident armory the Kolosh chieftain had his six paddlers and himself, with but three muskets and some spears. "Fools they are, you'll skewer them like fish in a barrel," the Russian officer had proclaimed. "If they haven't drowned themselves first."

But fools these men ahead did not noticeably seem to be. They had paddled far, almost a surprise how far; a canoe chief of less knowledge than his own would not have reckoned them yet to this distance. They seemed prepared to fight, and held the total of muskets in their favor. Tobacco, molasses, even the yellow coins had been promised by the angry Russian. Those, against the battle these whitehairs might put up. Once wondering begins there is no cure, and here was much, muskets and molasses and Russians and the nature of promises and tobacco and coins and four steady-armed whitehairs instead of three exhausted timorous ones, to be wondered about.

As the leader of the Kolosh sought to balance it all in his mind and the exertion of his crew shortened the water between the canoes, the craft in front suddenly swung broadside, the figure in its bow leveling a long rifle as the canoe came around.

Startled, the range being greater than they themselves would expend shots across, the Kolosh paddlers ducked and grappled for their own muskets. But the chieftain sat steady and watched. Here was an instant he owed all the attention within his being.

The slender whitehair swung his rifle into place, on a line through the air to the Kolosh leader.

The chieftain knew, as only one man of combat can see into the power of another, what Karlsson was doing. The whitehair was touching across distance to the chieftain's life, plucking it up easily as a kitten, either to claim or to let drop back into place.

The other three whitehairs aimed their weapons as well, but not with the slender one's measure.

Rattled by the turnabout of men who were supposed to be desperately fleeing them, the Kolosh crew still were trying to yank their rifles into place, the canoe rocking with their confusion.

The chieftain still watched ahead. He knew himself to be twice the watcher here, the one intent on the waiting rifleman across the water and the other in gaze to himself at this unexpected point between existences.

The decision was out the chieftain's mouth before his mind knew it had concluded the weighing.

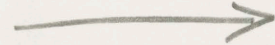
The Kolosh paddlers slid their muskets into the bottom of their canoe.

In the other canoe, the slender man set aside his rifle; as did the big whitehair in the stern. Silently the Kolosh watched as the two of them, strokesmen of power, paddled the canoe away while the other pair maintained rifles.

The craft was passing from view around a shorewall of timber when the chieftain said one thing more.

"Let the sea eat them."

#



Shortly before noon, Naval Captain of Second Rank Nikolai Yakovlevich Rosenberg, governor of Russian America, pinched hard at the bridge of his nose in hope of alleviating the aftereffect of the previous night's festivities, decided that no remedy known to man could staunch such aches as were contending within his forehead, sighed, and instructed his secretary to send in the Lutheran pastor.

The pastor, a Finn from Saarijaarvi who was considered something of a clodhopper not only by the Russian officers but the Stockholm contingent of Swedes, dolefully had been anticipating his call into the governor's chamber. By breakfast every tongue in New Archangel knew of the escape. The double number of sentries along the stockade catwalk retold the news, and the sidelong glances every Russian was casting at every Swede and Finn this morning bespoke most eloquently of all. The pastor's hesitant entrance into the governor's presence gathered beneath a single ceiling two of the three unhappiest men in New Archangel. The third was named Bilibin.

"Excellency."

"Pastor. As you may have heard, our citizenry is fewer by four this morning."

"I did happen to hear the, ah, rumor."

"Yes. Oblige me, if you will. Were these men parishioners of yours?" Rosenberg intoned through the list of four names his secretary had initiated this blighted day with. Melander: incredible, that gabby stork of a sailor a plotter. Karlsson and Wennberg: the Governor could put vague faces to them; average slag among the seven-year force. Braaf: this one he could not recall ever having heard of at all.

The pastor cleared his throat. "Wennberg was. Formerly, I mean to say."

"Formerly? Oblige me further."

The pastor housecleaned in his vocal box some more, then ventured into history. "Wennberg was in the group of artisans who came here with Governor Etholin--was it ten, twelve years ago? When I myself arrived to succeed Pastor Cygnaeus, Wennberg was a member of the congregation. He had married a Kolosh woman. Sometime soon after, the woman died. Croup, I believe."

The pastor paused to sort his words with some care here.

"When I sought to console him, Wennberg cursed me. He also cursed--God. Since then he has fallen, if I may say so, into harmful ways."

Rosenberg pinched the area between his eyes again. Had Melander's name been able to speak off the list, the Governor would have been solemnly assured he had caught the morning-after affliction that they on Gotland called hont i haret: pain in the hair, aye?

"Drink, do you mean, Pastor?"

"Actually, no. Wennberg, ah, gambled."

At this, the governor pursed his lips and looked quizzically at the pastor, who himself was known at the officers' club as a devout plunger at the card table. The pastor hurried on:

"Wennberg, you see, is--was--long past his seven years of service here, his gambling debts have kept him on. He has become, may God grant that the see his erring way, a man destroying himself. Sullen, unpredictable. A loose cannon, I think the naval phrase is? If you would like my opinion, he is capable of destroying others as well."

Rosenberg rose, crossed to a window, leaned his forehead against the glass coolness, and stared out at the clouded coastline south across Sitka Sound. Worthless to send the Nicholas to alert Ozherskoi; if the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they would be beyond the redoubt by now. Nor could the steamship hunt down a canoe which would hide among the coves and islands of this coast like a mouse in a stable. Yet this was no idle matter, the economics in the loss of four indenturees, twenty-eight man-years... and the example to the other laborers could be treacherous. No, can't be remedied but can't be ignored, therefore paper it over. The Governor knew the saying that paper is the schoolman's forest, and the Governor had been to school. On quite a number of matters been to school, as a further saying had it. Months ago the dispatch

had gone off to Russia requesting that he be relieved of his governorship--"ill health...family reasons." In truth, a sufficiency of New Archangel. With a resourceful bit of clerkship, this matter of the runaway Swedes could slide out of sight into the morass of inkwork his successor would inherit. For his part, Rosenberg would reap one further anecdote with which to regale dinner parties in St. Petersburg.

"Three fools and a lunatic in a Kolosh canoe," he intoned against the window pane as if practicing.

Then, realizing he had rehearsed aloud, the governor added without turning: "That will be all, Pastor. If you know a prayer for the souls of fools and lunatics, you perhaps might go say it."

"Excellency."

That evening, some ~~forty~~^{twenty} miles downcoast from New Archangel and a secure ~~twenty~~^{several} beyond the Ozherskoi outpost, the four canoeists pulled ashore behind a small headland, in a cove snug as a mountainside tarn.

Weariness weighted every smallest move as they tried to uncramp their legs, shrug the hunch from the top of their backs. Creakily, Melander leaned toward Braaf and whispered.

Braaf nodded and ran a swift hand into the supplies stowed within the canoe. When his hand came up, it held an elegant dark bottle.

"Karlsson, forgive us that it isn't hootchina, but champagne from the officers' club was the best Braaf could manage under the circumstances."

Melander's long face as he spoke was centered with a colossal grin, which now began to repeat itself on Karlsson and even Wennberg.

"We think it may do well enough for a toast to our first day of journey even so," Melander purred on. "Braaf, would you care to sip first?"

Melander, like the others, expected Braaf merely to swig and pass along. Instead Braaf stood looking at the slim bottle in his hands and murmured: "Let me remember a moment...Yes, I know..." He lifted his glance to the other three, sent it on above their heads and recited:

"May you live forever and I never die."

Then he drank deep.

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Permitting the others their champagne sleep, Melander enlists the last of dusk and begins to re-stow the canoe, taking more care than could be had in the dark and hurry at New Archangel. Fit the spyglass into this cranny, handy to hand; center the water cask more exactly... As Melander occupies himself at this, another picture is called for in the mind, large as you can manage to make it. Perhaps larger yet, for this image must be of the northmost arc of the Pacific Ocean: the chill ascendant quarter-moon of that hemisphere of water, from the schooled islands of Japan up to the Siberian coast and across to the Alaskan, then curving south and east along the continental extent of Canada and America.

Vaster stretches can be found on the earth, but not all so many, and none as fiercely changeable. Most of the climates imaginable are engendered somewhere along the North Pacific's horizon coast, from polar chill to the stun of desert heat. Within its water-world, the special law of gravity is lateral and violent; currents of brine and air rule. Most famous and elusive of these is the extreme wind called the williwaw--an ambusher, an abrupt torrent of gust flung seaward from the snow-held Alaskan mountains. The North Pacific's most tremendous force, however, something like a permanent typhoon under the water, is the Kuroshio, the Japanese Current, which puts easterly push into several thousand miles of ocean. Even here at the farthest littoral from the current's origins, Melander and Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf feel Kuroshio's ceaseless shove against their journey without

realizing it. But should a storm whirl south out of the Gulf of Alaska, where Kuroshio collides with cold northern water, they will know in full the North Pacific's set of strengths.

These four Swedes in a Tlingit canoe are attempting a thousand miles of this North Pacific-world. Not all that much, you may say. A fraction of a shard of an ocean, after all. One thousand miles: in forty or fifty sturdy days one could walk such a distance and perhaps yet have a wafer's-worth of leather on one's boot soles. Except that much of this particular distance is exploded into archipelago; island, island, island, island, like a field of flattened asteroids. Except, too, for season being fully against these watergoing men, the weather of winter capable of blustering them to a halt any hour of each day. Except, finally, for details of barrier the eye and mind just now are beginning to reach--forbidding bristle of forest on those countless islands, white smash of breakers on rocks hidden amid the moating channels--so greatly more complex is this jagged slope of the North Pacific than the plain arithmetic of its miles.

In this picture, Melander as he raptly stashes his boxes of tea and swags of sailcloth amounts to a worker ant on the rock toe of an Alp.

"Tumble up! Fall onto your feet and suffer morning!"

Melander roused his trio as rapidly as if they constituted the crew of a schooner aiming into storm, and for the identical reason: to steal minutes. Snatch time whenever it could be was going to be