

the policy of his captaincy. Any distance gained here at the front of their voyage served as that much less to be slogged out later, when weariness would be like a weight grown into their bones.

They took the same canoe positions as the night before. Karlsson the bow paddler. Behind him, Wennberg. Behind Wennberg, Braaf. Melander in the stern. In such placement too, Melander had reason. Karlsson was the strongest paddler, the best to handle the prow of the craft. Wennberg, behind Karlsson's example and with the eyes of the other two on him, would try to keep pace with Karlsson. Braaf, Melander wanted under his own nearest scrutiny, to see that he shirked no more than could be prevented.

Their first miles went in silence, as if the canoemen were not sure they could afford effort on talk. Then--

"Melander, you said these first days we'd only to keep this shore on our left, there's no other land along here. What do you call that out there?"

Wennberg was pointing southwest, where a dim bulk rose on the horizon.

"You've sighted Cape Flyaway," Melander said. "Clouds. Sometimes they sit down on the water like brood hens and you'd swear they're land, couldn't be anything but. That Finn skipper spent half of one morning searching our charts for a thunderhead he thought was a piece of Hawaii. We need to take care. This coast would gladly stand us on our ears. Read the map, read the compass, read the landmarks, and not go chasing clouds. That'll fetch us to Astoria. Aye?"

"What'll it be like?" This was Braaf, who took the chance to stop his paddle while asking. "Another wet woodpile like New Archangel?"

"The sailors' buzz I've heard is that it's a proper port but small. Sits on a fat river with hell's own sandbar at its mouth. The Americans--paddle, Braaf, a scissor of a lad like you is sharp enough to move your mouth and arms at the same time, aye?--the Americans, recent years, have been coming into that country in numbers and they boast Astoria as tomorrow's town of this coast. **But** all we care is whether ships touch at the place, and touch they do."

Melander helmed them to near North Cape, twenty-five miles downcoast from New Archangel, before stopping. By then Braaf, the least accustomed to exertion, looked particularly ¹/_X done in. But he said nothing, and lent a hand in hefting the canoe into shelter among a shore-touching stand of spruce. Wennberg was cajoled into building a fire, Melander apportioned beans and salt beef into a kettle, Karlsson spread the sail cloth which would serve as a ground tarp, and dark brought night two of their leaving of New Archangel.

"Cheery as a gravestone, isn't it? The Russians deserve such country."

They were into their second full day of paddling beside the drab-rocked foreshore of Baranof Island, mile of whitish gray following mile of grayish white, and Melander thought it time to brighten the situation.

"Maybe we ought to have pointed north." Karlsson was going along with the try. "I've been up the coast a way with the bear-milkers and those cliffs are good dark ground."

"You'd see enough gray-gray-gray, white-white-white there too, Karlsson. Icebergs and glaciers. That's the north slope of hell up there. No, at least credit me with knowing enough to point us the other way. Aye?"

Wennberg jumped for that. "Does that mean you're taking us down hell's south slope, Melander?"

Melander blew out his breath. "Wennberg, your soul is as dingy as those rocks. Shut your gab and paddle."

If these new canoemen could have bent their vision upward over Baranov's dour foreshore to see what they were traveling on the edge of, they would have been appalled beyond any saying of it. A high-standing sea of mountains, white chop of snow and ice and rock, with arms of the Pacific, blue fjords and inlets, thrusting in at whatever chance: Alaska's locked grapple of continent and ocean.

Of a sudden, rain swept the coast. Not New Archangel's soft, muslin-like showers, but cold hard rods of wet, drilling down on the men. The downfall stuttered on their garments--pitpitpitpit--like restless fingers drumming on a knee.

The other three had donned well-worn sealgut rainshirts, but Braaf

sat resplendent in a knee-length Aleut parka, bright yarn embroidery at the cuffs, a front ruff of eagle down.

"What're you, the crown prince?" Wennberg demanded. "Where'd you come up with that rig?"

Braaf held up a wrist and admired the sewn filigree. "Round and about, where all good ware comes from, blacksmith."

"Elegant as new ivory, Braaf," Melander put in drily. "If the Kolosh come pestering again, we'll tell them you're the Little Father the Tsar, aye? Now paddle."

It took them that day and most of the one after to reach the southern tip of Baranof Island, Cape Ommaney.

In that time Braaf and Wennberg and Melander began to realize, though it never would have occurred to the first two to offer it aloud and even Melander found the sentiment a bit unwieldy to frame into words, that in all their seasons at New Archangel they never ^{really} ~~truly~~ had seen the Alaskan forest. True, timber hedged the stockade and settlement, furred the isles of Sitka Sound and the humped backs of mountains around. But here downcoast, the forest stretched like black-green legions of time itself, the horizon on the left of the canoemen relentlessly jutting with trees wherever there was firmament for them to fasten themselves upright on. Where soil ran out at the shore edge, trees teetered on rock. Fleece-thick as the forest was, it seemed possible that every tree of this coast was in touch with every other, limb to limb, a continent-long tagline of thicket.

Along this universe of standing wood the Swedes saw not another human--which was what Melander had banked on--nor even sea-life to speak of, the Russian-American Company's hunters long since having harvested these waters bare of otters and seals. What abounded were birds. Baleful ravens, big as midnight cats. Eagles riding the air above the coastal lines of bluff, patrolling in great watchful glides before letting the air spiral them high again. Seagulls, cormorants, grebes, ducks of a dozen kinds. At times, every breathing thing of this coastline except the four paddlers seemed to have taken wing.

Cape Ommaney steepened southward into nearly half a mile of summit, evidently determined to hunch there as the land's last high sentry against the open water all around. Perhaps the stony bluff put Wennberg in mind of the roundbacked mountains near New Archangel, for that evening after supper he nodded out toward the bay between the canoeists' camp and the cape and asked: "What would you do, Melander, if the Nicholas came around that point just now?"

"After I emptied my britches, do you mean? So then, Wennberg, the Nicholas chugs in your dreams tonight, does it? Me, I think she's still anchored in Sitka Sound and the Russians are in their beds with their thumbs up their butts." Melander was in high humor from their progress thus far. "But what about you other pair, what's your guess? Are the Russians panting after us like hounds onto hares as Brother Wennberg thinks? Aye?"

"No," Karlsson offered. "They think we can't survive."

"What makes you think we can?" retorted Wennberg.

"Because we're alive to this moment, and closer to Astoria with each stroke of the paddle."

"Your prediction, Braaf?"

"They're not after us. They don't think of us at all by now."

Wennberg snorted. "We dance out of New Archangel practically under their noses and they don't even think about us? Braaf, your head is mud."

"They have to forget us, or we'll mean too much to them. You learn that fast in the streets. The ones who rule never bother their minds with the likes of us. The provisions I took from the Russians, they regret. That they're short of four faces at work call, they regret. Maybe they even regret the Kolosh canoe gone. But us ourselves, we're wisps to them by now."

None of them had ever heard so many sentences one after another out of Braaf, and in the silence that followed, it seemed to be taken as truth even by Wennberg that whatever they encountered onward along this coast, and there might be much, the challenge probably now would not be Russian.

They readied in the morning to cross the channel from Cape Ommaney east to Kuiu, the first of the island stairsteps onward from Baranof. On Melander's map Kuiu could have been where palsy seized the mapmaker's hand, a spatter of crooked shores and hedging rocks.

Melander said nothing of all this quiver to the other three, simply told them that he judged there'd be stout current up the passage so that they would need to aim mostly south to end up east.

It worked out his way, and by noon the canoe was nearing Kuiu, snow-scarved peaks rising beyond shore. Here, however, the map's muss of dots and squiggles became real, and the coastline stood to them with a rugged headland.

"No hole in the shore, aye?" Surf blasted whitely across rocks not far off the point. "Let's stay away from that horse market," Melander decreed. Avoiding the channel between headland and rocks the canoe stood south again, the paddlers now working directly against the current.

In a few miles a cove revealed itself, but faced open to the weather from the west.

The next break in the shore yawned more exposure yet.

"Jesu Maria." Melander's exasperation was outgrowing his epithets. "Is this whole whole damn stone of an island unbuttoned like this?"

Two further inhospitable Kuiu coves answered him.

Dusk waited not far by now, and the labor of paddling against the current was becoming terrible. From weariness, they nearly blundered into a broad slop of kelp before Karlsson glimpsed it in the gloom.

By now the canoe had reached the southern tip of the islands, a rocky point which bade less welcome than any profile yet.

"Bleak as ashes," Melander bestowed on this last of Kuiu. "Karlsson, take the spyglass, see if there's any hope out in the channel, aye?"

Maybe, Karlsson reported. In the water beyond them stood what looked like thin clumps of timber.

Melander lit the candle lantern in order to peer close at his map. Through the channel hung a thread of line; a ship had navigated here, testimony which was needed now because low rocks and shoals so easily could hide themselves in the gray mingle of water and dusk.

Melander set the craft for the timber clumps. They proved to be small islands, and on one of the narrowest, the kind that sailors said could be put through an hourglass in half a day, the canoeists pulled to shelter just short of full dark.

That was their first day of stumble, two stair treads of island when but one had been intended. Yet Melander and his canoeman somehow had alit secure, and after Kuiu the going smoothed.

In the days now, the canoe jinked its way southeast amid constant accessible landfall. The major island called Prince of Wales rests dominantly in this topography like a solitary platter on a table, and the strew of smaller isles along its west is as if that rim of the plateware had been pounded to bits by the North Pacific. Here the canoeists could cut a course which, while Melander said a snake would break its back trying to follow their wake, kept them steadily shielded from the ocean's tempers of weather.

The spaces between stars are where the work of the universe is

done. Forces hang invisibly there, tethering the spheres across the black infinite canyons: an unseeable cosmic harness which somehow tugs night and sun, ebbtide and flood, season and coming season. So too the distances among men cast in with one another on an ocean must operate. In their days of steady paddling, these four, various as Joseph's robe when they embarked from New Archangel, found that they needed to cohere in ways they had never dreamt of. To perform all within the same close orbit yet not bang against one another.

Meals made an instant quandary. Melander began as cook, but fussed the matter. Perpetually his suppers lagged behind everyone else's hunger. When he could no longer stand Melander's dawdling and poking, Wennberg volunteered himself. That lasted two tries. "You're not smithing axeheads here," Braaf murmured as he poked at the char of Wennberg's victuals. Braaf himself, it went without saying, could not be entirely relied upon to prevent food from detouring between his lips instead of arriving at the others' plates. By the sixth day, then, the cooking chore had singled out Karlsson. He was no chef de cuisine, but his output at least stilled the nightly grumbling that one had might as well go off into the forest and graze.

Wennberg's particular tithe turned out to be his paddling. He was not built best for it, much too much ham at his shoulders and upper arms, but his impatience made him take on the water like a windmill in a high breeze. Always exerting toward Karlsson's example of deftness, Wennberg stroked at half again the pace Melander could manage, twice

"Too much smoke. We're not signaling Saint Peter from here."
Melander once more. He dropped to his knees to fan the camp fire into purer flame.

"You'd've never lasted over a forge," ~~jeered~~ ^{jeered} Wennberg. "A whiff of smoke tans the soul."

Melander calculated. Three camps in a row, this smokey debate with Wennberg. The tall man made his decision.

"You need to know a thing, Mister Blacksmith. Braaf, Karlsson, you also. This I heard from Dobzhansky, that interpreter who helped me out at first with the Kolosh fishing crews. He came once somewhere into these waters with a trading mission the Russians tried..."

The mission had been contrived as retaliation against the Hudson's Bay Company for its practice of slipping firearms to the Sitka Kolosh, so both the Russians and the downcoast natives were in a mood to make as much face as possible. They inaugurated with a night of feast, and Dobzhansky found himself sharing a baked salmon and goathorn cups of fermented berry juice with a canoe chieftain. The pair discovered they could converse in the trading tongue of the coast, Chinook jargon. At once the native sought to know of Dobzhansky how many heads the Tsar had.

"How many heads? Why, one like you and me."

No, the native made Dobzhansky understand, not how many heads.
How many skulls?

"Skulls? What would the Tsar do with skulls?"

Sleep on them, the way Callicum does, the native said, pointing out to Dobzhansky the tribal chief in the middle of the carousal.

"Sleeps on them? Why does he do that?"

For strength, the native answered. Anyone who sleeps on a pile of skulls is a strong man, is he not?

Melander had not intended to tell his crew Dobzhansky's tale of this coast's people. He was not heaven-certain he should have.

But no more objections were heard about care over campfire smoke.

The water met their daily moods with its own. One morning their channel would drowse, lie heavy, with a molten look like gray bottle glass. Another, it would wake in full fret, white lids of wave opened by wind or current.

The weather could change with knife-edge sharpness. Once they saw to the southeast a pastel fluff of clouds, peach and pale blue, which was directly abutted by an ink-cloud of squall: a tender seascape neighboring with tantrum. The join of continent and ocean seemed to excite the weather into such local targeting. Time and time, the canoemen would see a storm swoop onto a single mountain amid many, as if sacking up a hostage as a lesson to all the rest.

Once Braaf pointed out for the others a narrow white sheet of sky, very likely snow, north on the coast behind them. "Stay north

and frost the Russians' asses," Melander directed the storm with a push of his hands. It stayed.

A thirty-nosed sea creature poked abruptly from the water, delivered the canoeists a thunderous burp, and sank.

"Sea lions," Karlsson called. When the school surfaced again, each pug-nosed head making steady quick thrusts as if breaking the silver pane of the water, the leathery swimmers held pace for awhile alongside the canoe, watching the upright creatures in it.

Melander had learned from his herring crew that the practice of the southward natives was to dub the bowman of a canoe "Captain Nose." Accordingly he bestowed the title on Karlsson, and Braaf and Wennberg took it up. For the next few days, it was all "Captain Nose, Your Honor, what's it to be for supper tonight?" and "May I suggest, Captain Nose, that we point ourselves to the right of that rock."

It took a number of nights for any of them to become accustomed to the noise of ocean contending against coast. Surf expelling up the beach and draining back, the increasing crash of tide incoming, the held-breath instants of silence at lowest low tide.

Melander's unease went on longest; an absence of some sort nagged through the dark at him. At last he placed it. He was listening for the creak of ship timbers, the other part of the choir whenever ocean was heard.

Pouched as they were in the canoe day on day, the closeness now and then rubbed on them. ~~For~~ be it said, among these four watermen waited crosscurrents which, if they were let to flow free, might prove as roily as any of the North Pacific's.

Wennberg of course was the oftenest source of tension, for after his manner of wedging himself into the escape none of the others could entirely put trust in him. Then too, as with many strong-tempered men, the anger in Wennberg that could flare pure and fast as pitch-fire covered his other qualities. The blacksmith was a highly capable voyager, able to put up with the discomforts and as steady at the canoe work as could be asked--if some incident did not set him off. But the trigger in him was always close to click.

As for Melander, the problem with so toplofty a type is that ordinary men cannot always see eye to eye with him. Difficult to be totally at ease with a man who is thinking so many steps ahead, even though those stairs of thought may be your salvation.

Similarly, Karlsson's silent style could be judged a bit too aloof. There was not much visit in this slender man from Skane, and less jokery. "An icicle up his ass," Wennberg was heard to mutter of Karlsson.

Braaf? Being around Braaf was like being in the presence of a natural phenomenon, such as St. Elmo's fire or marsh vapors. Braaf simply was there, on his own misty terms, take him for what he was.

As if still in echo of their encounter on the parade ground, it was Braaf and Wennberg who were most apt to jangle with each other.

Wennberg would suggest that Braaf had about as much weight in the world as the fart of a fly, and Braaf would recommend that Wennberg shove his head up the nearest horse's behind to see whether it held any more exact turds like him. Melander was able to slow their slanging, but never quite to stop it.

"Rye-cakes," Wennberg burst out one night beside the fire.

The other three broke into laughter.

"Laugh yourselves crooked, you bastards, but you'd give as much for a rye-cake right now as I would. Currant jam on it, you'd trip your own mother to get to it."

"Mister Blacksmith is right," Melander admitted with a chuckle.

"Though with me it's not rye-cakes, but a featherbed in a sailors' inn I know at Danzig. I could bob in that for a week and never open an eye except to look for more sleep, aye?"

Karlsson nominated next. "A woman I knew in our village in Skane," he said slowly. "Her name was Ulrika and her hair was fox-red."

Braaf blinked as the other three looked at him, awaiting his choice. "I'll settle just for three paces of headstart on each of you."

To do something about the sameness of their menu, Karlsson suggested they try trolling. Out of the canoe, back alongside Melander, was let a line and a hook baited with a sliver of salt beef. On **their** second

day of attempt, Melander yelped when the line whipped taut across his shins. "It's collect the whale or stove the boat," he boomed happily as he hand-over-handed at their catch.

Melander tugged the head of the fish out of the water against the side of the canoe, then halted his grapple. "Mother of Moses," he swore in wonder.

The other three peered over the side at the snouty dark lump glaring up at Melander.

"Ugly pig of a thing," observed Wennberg. "What the devil is it?"

"Looks like a shark fathered by a toad," muttered Melander. None of them had ever seen the miniature species of shark called dogfish.

"Well, how do you say? Do we try to eat it?"

No one wanted to be the first, repellent as the dogfish looked, to commit one way or the other. Finally Karlsson offered, "I'm the potman, and I'll give a try. But I don't know..."

"Hunger is good sauce," Braaf put in dubiously.

"It better be," said Wennberg.

"At least cut off its head first," Braaf prompted. "Else it looks like it'll be gnawing on us before we can get to it."

"Eat it is," Melander proclaimed. "Somebody reach the gaff and heave the bastard aboard."

"Maybe all this fuss with cooking isn't needed." Skinned and baked over coals, the dogfish had proved surprisingly civil to the taste, and

Karlsson's relief was such that he was trying a rare joke. "I saw a bear eat fish once, near Ozherskoi. He looked big as a bullock. Swatted salmon out of the water and skoffed them down belly-first."

Melander pretended to ponder. "I think it was well you didn't invite him for supper tonight. He might have turned up his nose at that sea beast we've just put into ourselves."

A moment of these encamped nights, cherish with Melander the scroll he fetches from its snug place in the canoe.

Hunkered within the firelight as Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson settle to sleep, one by one he polishes four biscuit-sized stones against the leg of his britches. Wipes his fingers down his shirt front. From a pocket digs a stub of pencil. Lays a square of sailcloth the size of a baker's apron, smooths it creaseless. Now like a Muslim with a prayer rug, unfurls the roll tenderly onto the cloth and sets a scrubbed stone to weight each corner.

Each time, this unfolding of the Tebenkov maps ruffles a profound pleasure through Melander. It is as if an entire tiny commonwealth has sprung to creation just for him. Sprigs small as the point of his pencil denote the great stands of forest. Tideflats are delicately dotted, as if speck-sized clams breathe calmly beneath. Wherever the land soars-- and this coastline, recall, abounds in up and down--the rise in elevation is shown as a scalloped plateau. Threaded among the shores and islets go the proven sailing routes, as though an exploring spider has spun

his test-voyage of each passage. The total of engraver's strokes on each map is astounding, thousands. Melander cannot imagine who among the Russian pen-jabbers in the Castle possessed the skill and energy for such pin-precise work. (In actuality, none. After Governor Tebenkov wrenched the navigational information from his ship captains, he turned it over to a gifted copper-engraver among the New Archangel Creoles.)

In our time, a poet has offered the thought that it is within civilization's portions of maps now that the injunction ought be inked, Here be monsters. Melander's firelit maps represent an instant of balance in humankind's relationship with the North Pacific: after sea serpents were discounted, and before ports and their tentacles of shipping lanes proliferated. To cast a glance onto these superbly functional maps is like seeing suddenly beneath the fog-and-cloud skin of this shore, down to the truth of nature's bone and muscle and ligament. The frame of this shoulder of the Pacific is what Melander avidly needs to know, and the Tebenkov maps peel it into sight for him.

The first map, that of New Archangel and Sitka Sound, Melander particularly gazes at again and again. Detail here comes most phenomenal of all: the exact black speck, slightly longer than wide, which was the Swedes' barracks is shown just above the cross-within-a-cross indicating the Russian cathedral. (Melander had unrolled for Karlsson this map for his opinion about the best route through the Sound's covey of islands and been gratified by Karlsson's blink of

surprise. "You can see everything but the flea in the governor's ear, aye?") Melander worked much with maps in his sea-time, but to be able to trace from the very dwelling where you packed your sea-bag, this now is a new thing of the world.

The coastscape at hand just now is not Sitka Sound, however, but the geography enwrapped in the third of Melander's furl of maps. Here these dozen days south from Sitka, the map begins to report a lingual stew, islands left as Heceta and Noyes, Baker and Suemez, Dall and San Fernando, from the crisscross of British and Spanish explorations, these names Russified by the Creole mapmaker: Melander of Sweden gives his centered grin when the full hibble-bibble occurs to him.

Yet seen another way, such a muss of languages is exactly apt, for everything else of this map Number Three sprawls in pieces as well. Dabs, driblets, peninsulas, spits and spatters, this portion of coastline when rendered into linework looks startlingly like a breathing moil of sea things, jellyfish and oysters and barnacles and limpets and anemones. It takes an effort of will, even for Melander on his knees, to believe they are going to hold motionless, either on the map or in actuality, to permit voyage among them.

The four fresh beards itched. At New Archangel, because the Russians sported beards, most of the Finns and Swedes had made it a point to keep clean-shaven. Now Melander's face and Karlsson's were barbed with growth as blonde as barley stubble, while Wennberg's ducal

whiskers came a surprising rich sorrel shade. Braaf sprouted a thin downy fluff of almost white. "Angel feathers," Wennberg snickered. "Spread cream on and a cat'd lick them off for you."

Melander had started from camp to gather firewood from the drift-piles along the top of the tideline when Braaf surprised him by saying, "I'll fetch with you." Braaf volunteering for a chore was an event to put you on your guard considerably, as when a parson might offer to keep you company on your stroll to a brothel.

When they were out of earshot of the others and had started on their armloads, Braaf asked: "Melander, tell me something, can you?"

"If I can. Aye."

Braaf gave him his upcast look and began. "You were a sailor."

"I was that. Until the Russians set me to putting salt on fishes' tails."

"I had a half-brother. Or at least people said he was, and we looked alike. He was years older, and a sailor like you. I would see him on the docks at Stockholm when his ship was in. The Ambrosius, a brig, it was. Then I heard the Ambrosius had sunk. They said it followed false lights onto the rocks somewhere, England or Spain, one of those places, and everyone of its crew was drowned, and then the people there took its cargo from the wreck. Do they do that, Melander? Set false lights so that a ship will come onto the rocks?"

For once Melander's tongue held back. Finally the tall man let his breath out with great slowness and began.

"They are called moon-cursers, Braaf. On a black night they hobble a horse and lead him along the shore with a lantern tied to his bridle. The lantern looks like the running light of a ship, and a ship at sea will follow in because it seems a proven course. Aye, Braaf, they do that."

Braaf nodded above his armload of wood. "I thought they did," he said, and turned back toward camp.

By now, it could be noticed that daylight, what there was of it, stayed with them a bit longer. "After Christmas, each day gets a chicken-step longer," Melander assured them solemnly.

Even in these sheltered waters, the currents sometimes twirled witches' knots in themselves. Once the canoemen watched as such a whirlpool took a drifting tree and spun it like a compass needle in total turn.

The sky opened entirely one morning, cloudless as if curtains had been taken down.

After days of hovering gray the ~~breath~~^{breadth} of existence was astounding. The nearest mountains stood green as May meadows. The next, loftier group darkened toward black. Then the highest, the horizon peaks

farthest east and south, were a shadowed blue, as though thinning of substance as they extended along the coast.

"Mid-Summer Day come early," Melander exulted. "Today we jump over our own heads."

But through the morning the sun hung so low along the southern horizon that its glare made hazard of the water in front of the canoe. An hour or so of the ferocious dazzle left the men air-headed, sozzled with light. Melander squinted and swore. "Too much of everything, this bedamned coast has..." By strong afternoon effort, when the sun had swung out above the ocean, the canoeists managed to make a usual day's mileage.

"Braaf, you piss near me one more time and I'll rub your nose in it like a bitch pup."

Wennberg's warning halted Braaf in mid-pull at the front of his thighs. Thoughtfully he arced a look from the item of interest there to the blacksmith seated a few yards away. The look, it could have been, of a marksman calculating windage and declination. Across the campsite from the pair, ever so slightly Melander shook his head in message: No, Braaf, don't rile the bull.

"I'll wait the day I've enough to drown you," Braaf said off-handedly and eased away into the timber.

A dusk breeze gossiped here and there in the higher-up swags of fir. His wool britches undone, Braaf stood spraddled, any mother's lad with head cocked dreamily to the croon of the great forest.

Abruptly Braaf stopped hearing the wind, all his listening jerked elsewhere. Standing there with his legs wide, Braaf felt the touch of being watched, as when the thief's timbre within him would warn that the instant was wrong for pilferage. But in these woods, who...

Braaf spun and met the eyes. Eyes big as his hands, staring at him from either side of an arm-long hooked beak.

In a half-moment Braaf recognized that the phantasm was blind, as wood must be: and that up from its carved stare squatted several more stock-still gandering creatures, a ladder of sets of eyes.

Braaf broke to the edge of the trees and urged softly to the other three men, "Come look."

Within and around an opening in the forest they found other acrobat columns of gargoyles, some atilt as if peering more sharply down at the interlopers. Creature upon creature bursting from cedar bole, these carvings annihilated reality, loomed in a middle air of existence, as if the knife, adze, whatever edged tool shaved fantasy into form, somehow had flinted life into them as well.

"What is all this?" asked Braaf.

"I'd guess a kind of cathedral," Melander replied.

"Don't give us your hagbag riddles, Melander." Wennberg was reaching a hand up to inspect the joinery of the beak-piece onto the column seen first by Braaf. Rather, which first had seen Braaf. In spite of himself, the blacksmith was tugged close by the serene craft of these goblin

poles. "Next you'll be telling us Braaf is the saint of egg-snitchers."

Melander looked steadily at Wennberg. "A kind of cathedral," he repeated. "Whatever it is that these people believe is said in these carvings. Like rune stones, aye?"

Until now, insofar as Melander and company could discern in their clamber down the precipice of coastline, not another human might ever have existed among these shore islands. Take the matter to truth, though, and their journey more resembled the course a late-of-night stroller might follow through slumbering neighborhoods. In tribal clusters, perhaps as many as sixty thousand residents inhabited this long littoral of what would become British Columbia: Tlingits, Haidas, Tsimshians, Bellabellas, Bella Coolas, Nootkans, peoples often at odds among themselves but who had in common that they put their backs to the rest of the continent and went about matters as if they alone knew the terms of life. For theirs was a Pacific-nurtured existence which asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous. In spawning time the coastal rivers were stippled thick with salmon, veins of protein bulging there in the water to be wrested, fileted, dried for the winter larder. Abovestream the wealth was wood, particularly the cedar whose cunning these people knew how to set free; under their hands it transformed to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent trawler, and art, the most startling of art. Tree-sized columns of carvings simply offered the most evident form of how these tribes told stories of

the creatures of timber and sea, sang and recited them, danced and acted them behind masks, in chill times wore pelts as if taking the saga-animals into themselves. (And thereby drew the attention of white newcomers to the coast, who bartered for those furs to cargo them beyond the bend of the world and barter in turn to yellow people: linkage queer in its way as any carved concatenation.)

Out of this vivid swirl wafted, inevitably, the reputation of these coastal people as canoe warriors and slave-takers--plus illustrative tales such as that matter of the pillow of skulls. These four interloping Swedes knew no specifics of the downcoast tribes, but reason told them this much; if they never dipped paddle into a one of the populated coves where the rain season was being whiled away in performance and potlatch, so much the better luck.

Just now Braaf was the one of them to speak that dialect called if.

"Why's this deserted? If it is."

"Likely they do as the Kolosh," Melander guessed. "Hunt from a summer village right around here, in winter pull back to a main village somewhere."

In the dusk, eagle poised eternally atop bear. Whale stood on end in dive through contorted lesser creatures. One being, possibly frog the size of calf, pranced merrily upside down. Every sort of winkless forest changeling, they goggled in unison at the backs of the retreating men.

—

Later, the others breathing their rhythms of night beside the fire, Melander could not find sleep. His memory was at a New Archangel market morning, hubbub of Sitka Kolosh and three or four dozen visiting tribesmen from somewhere to the north. Amid the newcomers hawking their wares squatted a seam-faced carver. Word had rippled through the settlement about this man's daggers: blades of power with each hilt carved as the rising neck of some alarming beast. The head topping a hilt-neck sometimes would be a bear with glinting abalone inlays of eyes and nostrils and teeth, sometimes a long-faced wolf, again a great-toothed beaver; always, angled and fierce and magical as dragons. The interpreter Dobzhansky tried to converse with the northern carver. Dobzhansky's first question received answer, then the native stayed silent. Melander inquired what had been said. Dobzhansky related that he had asked how many years it took to obtain such skill.



"So long as I have lived, so long have I carved," the dagger-man responded. "If the spirit people will let me, I will carve even after I am dead."

Even Melander could not have said why, but that response echoed around in the corners of his mind this night.

Just past daybreak, the four men slide the canoe out into surf. Usual bruised-looking sky, tatters of fog in the tree tops. This coast's mornings are as if brawl had gone on in the heavens all night.

As ever, trees push down to absolute waterline: boundless green, then immediate blue. You could reach up from swimming and make your way arm-over-arm through the forest.

This day more, the canoemen continue along a lengthy timber-thick island, Dall.

That night: "Sleep deep," Melander advises. "Tomorrow we introduce ourselves to Kaigani."

The letters spoke large near the bottom of Melander's third map, and in sober block rather than the finespun script elsewhere on the paper. The space framing them, three widths of Melander's thumb could have spanned. In actuality the plain of water represented there extends twice the distance of the English Channel between Dover and Calais, and no calm white cliffs stand as guides. Taken all in all, calculated

Melander, they compressed into themselves a marathon day of canoe voyage, did those two thickset words: Prol Kaigani. Kaigani Strait.

The water stretched to them out of a horizonless gray, a blob of overcast messily sealing together sea and sky. Melander did not at all like it that no line of land could be seen out there. In their island-by-island descent of the coast, Kaigani and the channel which intersected it to the east, Hecate Strait, were the first expanses where the day's shore did not stand steadily in sight. Yet the map vouched to Melander that across in that fume of seawater and cloud, the northeast tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands arced toward the canoeists. By holding to a heading of south-southeast they would aim into its embrace. At least, Melander had to believe that south-southeast could be held to. If not, if current swung them too far eastward, they would be swept from Kaigani directly on into Hecate Strait. One waterstead of distance and risk, Melander reckoned they would manage in the day. Two, he doubted gravely.

Melander studied forward along the canoe at the others. Stockstill, Karlsson. Wennberg eyeing askance at the wide water. Braaf with his paddle across the canoe thwarts and his fingers restless atop the wood as if absently plucking music.

What was required of Melander now was a division of faith. Certain of himself, confident of what he could make in his mind, going through life as if had always a following wind; such had been Melander's history, self-belief. Now he needed to apportion trust into these other

three in the canoe with him, into the coil of map which promised firm earth out there over the precipice of water, into the hovering grayness, into the canoe, paddles, compass...

Melander spat over the side to clear his mouth, not recognizing the taste of diluted faith but decidedly not caring much for it. Then he said: "Time for our stroll."

The powerful rumple of the Pacific made itself felt to them at once. Swells were spaced wide, perhaps two lengths of the canoe between crests, but regular as great slow breathings. Each swell levered up the prow of the canoe, Karlsson, Captain Nose, instantly created taller than the men behind, then the craft was shrugged downward.

"More beef, Wennberg. Push that paddle deeper, aye?"

Melander's urging began while the tips of the fir trees of Dall Island still feathered distinct against the sky behind them. Wennberg he had not expected to be slack in this situation; it was Braaf who could be anticipated to scant his labor if high heaven itself depended on it. But Braaf was thrusting steadily, and onto Melander's admonition tossed gibe of his own.

"Bashful are you, Wennberg? Reach right down there and meet the wet, why not..."

Wennberg grumped something unhearable, but his paddling picked up markedly.

Kaigani Strait today is called Dixon Entrance, a name engrafted for the English captain who delved the region in the ship Queen Charlotte. By whatever christening, the expanse forms one of the largest of dozens of plains of water between the broken lands of the North Pacific coastline. For canoeists to come onto this span of water from days in the frequent islands to its north was as if, having got accustomed to visiting from castle to castle across moats, they now found themselves looking from Normandy across to Devon. This water is extensive in its perils as well. "The tidal currents are much confused," modern navigators are cautioned; in storm the channel can seem to be forty white miles of breakers. Fog spends its season in summer, gales from first autumn until April. All times of year, the flood tide east into Hecate Strait can surge as rapid as a man can walk. Small wonder that at the eastern reach of this mariners' thicket, islands are bunched like galleons desperately seeking a lee anchorage.

Not a whit of this was suggested from that calm space between shorelines on Melander's map.

Thirty or forty hillocks of water later, again the heart-skip in the rhythm of the boat.

"Wennberg!" Melander's tone crackled now. "You're dabbing at it again."

Wennberg held his paddle just above the lapping waves, as though trying to recall whether water or air was the element in which it operated. The broad man swiveled the upper part of his body enough

to find Melander. Wennberg's face hung open in surprise. His mouth made motions but no sound. Then, with gulped effort: "I'm. Getting. Sick."

"If you don't paddle you'll get dead, and us with you. Have a puke now and be done with it, Wennberg. We need your arms, aye?"

Wennberg put his head over the side of the canoe and gaped his mouth as if hoping to inhale better health up from the ocean. After a minute his gasps managed to be words: "Can't. Too. Sick."

"You've got to. Wennberg, listen to me, aye? Jab a finger down your gullet, tell yourself you've swallowed baneberries, pretend that Braaf here plopped a slug into your tea this morning--do anything, but heave the sickness out of you now. Do it, Wennberg. Dump your gut."

"Keep on, you'll have me tossing up, too," muttered Braaf.

Just then Melander's prescriptions took their intended effect on Wennberg.

"There now, you're empty and scraped," Melander proclaimed in satisfaction. "You'll be a bull again before you know it. Rest a half-moment, we can spare you until you get your breath back."

Wennberg focused whitely toward Melander. "Melander, one time I'll reach down that mouth of yours and..." But before long, he retrieved his paddle and, while still not able to stroke in smoothness with the others, was adding push to theirs.

For a time--say, the first several dozen hundred paddlestrokes of their journey--a wall of reassurance yet could be seen behind the canoemen, the outline of Dall Island and its greater neighbor, Prince of Wales. Farther though it was becoming, the shoreline of the islands lay as a footing, a ledge to return to.

Then, just after Melander reckoned aloud that they might be a third of the way across, Karlsson glanced back and saw that the landwall was gone. In place of the islands hovered a sheet of fog. Kaigani had enwrapped the canoe and its men, anywhere about them nothing other than water or cloud or fog.

They had no timepiece, but an onlooker could have clocked Melander's decrees to within two minutes' regularity of one another. Each time he called rest, one man continued to paddle to keep the canoe from back-sliding in the swells. That sentinel then rested briefly while the other three resumed, then plunged to work again. At the next rest, the solitary paddling duty slid to the next man.

Near to what Melander estimated ought to be the mid-point of the channel, waves began to chop more rapidly at the canoe. A fresh sound, a slapping higher against the side of the craft, could be heard, and spray now and again tossed itself over the bow and Karlsson.

Braaf, though, noticed an absence. The gulls which hung in curiosity beside them in the island waters and the early distance offshore from Dall were vanished. He discovered too that the air felt different, more tooth in it, and that off to the west a particular splotch of weather resembled neither fog nor rain.

Braaf turned his head enough to pass softly over his shoulder to Melander, as if it were their secret: "Snow."

"Jesu Maria," Melander said back.

The squall hit them first with wind. Gust tagged closely onto gust, taking the canoe at an angle from the southwest.

Melander watched the surface of Kaigani intently, and what he dreaded sprung to creation. Wind streaks on the water, long ropey crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander knew them as from his shipboard years, and knew too that they are the spawn of a thirty-knot gale.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down the wind which now steadied into a constant whirl past the canoemen's ears. Melander looked away from his compass only to monitor the stroking of his crew and to glance at the angle of the swells to the canoe. The compass could not be wrong, daren't be, yet there was constant urge to check it against the evidence of his eyes...

Water was finding its way into the canoe. Melander needed rapid

decision. Still struggling against sea-sickness, Wennberg was erratic at the paddle. But if he lowered his head to bail, he would be sicker yet. So--"Braaf, you'll need to shovel water, and quick..."

Three motions fought in the water now: the broad sloshing advance of the waves themselves; the lizardy wrinkle of their texture; and the gale ripple skipping ahead. At odds with all these and with the wind-spun snow as well, the canoe's progress fell to a kind of embarrassed wallow, as when a good steed is forced to slog through mire.

Working the bailer, a cedar scoop which coupled over his hand like a hollowed-out hoof, Braaf pawed seawater from the canoe's bottom. Karlsson gritted against bowspray and snow and tried to hold in mind nothing but the pace of paddle. But he did hear the near-whisper behind him. "Oh God who watches over fools and babes," Wennberg implored. "What am I doing in this pisspot of a canoe?"

Like a prophet promising ~~geyers~~^{geysers} of honey just there beyond shovel point, Melander preached steadily to his straining crew now..."We're straddling it, Karlsson. No water is wide as forever..." Karlsson's face could have served as figurehead for the craft, if imagination permits that a Kolosh canoe would breast the sea with a Skane parson's profile at its front. Everything, each fiber, of Karlsson was set to

the twin grips of his hands on the paddle, the portioning-out of effort. In the Sahara, this human implement automatically would have begun the slog that stride on stride had to add up into the route to oasis. Loose him up the Eiger, foothold-handhold-foothold-handhold would ensue until further elevation could not present itself. If stone profile and millwork arms could grind a way across Kaigani, Karlsson meant to do it...Melander: "Dig that paddle, Wennberg. You're strong as bran wine now. (Melander within: May he not go ill on us again, this lumpy water is no place for a cripple in the crew...) But Wennberg yet tussled with a hive of woes. The tipping wave surface was bad enough, and the unending exertion, and the over-the-side-of-the-world absence of land or even horizon. Worst of all, the nausea which hid so sly within him, re-ambushing whenever he thought it might have receded. The blacksmith felt weaker than he could ever remember, yet this uphill labor of paddling demanded and demanded of him. Wennberg too fell into a machined rhythm, jab-lift-pull back-jab, but out of a different drivewheel than Karlsson's. Overswarmed with doom and unhealth, Wennberg could think of no way to struggle back but to move his arms, which happened to have a flat-faced rod of wood at their end...Melander: "Braaf, can you find it in your heart to stroke along with the rest of us?" (Melander within: May the canoe dance as lightly on these waves as it has been. If just they don't rise...) Among the larger men Braaf sat small and hunched with caution. He was the one of the four of them most in place in this situation, for at basis, this crossing

of Kaigani Strait constituted an act of theft. Of stealing survival from a hazard which held every intention of denying it to you. Afloat, you exist in balance between unthinkable distances. Above, the sky and the down-push of all its vastnesses. Under, the thickness of ocean with its queer unruly upward law of gravity, buoyancy. In time the greater deep, that of sky, must win this pushing contest in which you are the flake of contention, and you will go down. The game is to scamper landward before this obliteration can happen. None of this could Braaf have declaimed aloud--just as there never was a philosopher who could pocket another man's snuffbox with no itch of conscience--yet Braaf understood the proposition of Kaigani profoundly: it had to do with dodging life's odds, like all else. Braaf, then did not stroke mechanically in Karlsson's way, nor try to fend strenuously as Wennberg did. Braaf poked his paddle to the water as if using a stick to discourage a very big dog...Melander: "Neck or nothing, now. Pull...pull...pull..." (Melander within: May this storm hold to the compass where it is. But oh God if it shifts, shoves us east into the miles of Hecate...) So the matter, like most of this coast's matters, came down to perseverance. While Melander regulated, Wennberg grunted dismally and Braaf once in a while shirked, out of sheer habit when he wasn't reminding himself otherwise, and at the bow Karlsson stayed a human piston: all of them trying to put from mind the numbing of their knees and the deepening ache of their arms, and across Kaigani Strait the canoe striving steadily southeast, a black sharp-snouted creature stretched low against the gray

wavescape, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at the water, running on the sea.

Melander came awake on the tamest of terrain. Not a sea-cliff nor boulder nor so much as a fist-sized stone anywhere in sight. A beach of sand, all tan satin. Waves did not pound at the tideline, simply teased it, shying tiny clouds of spume along the water edge and then lapping away.

The canoe had taken shore here in the dark, Swedes having prevailed--barely--over storm in the wrestle that went on all day and across dusk and into the first of night. At last dragging their craft onto whatever this place was, the four men groped together a shelter of sailcloth and collapsed to sleep--now to find, by this morning's evidence, that Kaigani had flung them through the customary coastal geography to an opposite order of matters: everything flat, discreet, lullful.

No, not everything meek. It registered now on Melander that the treetops spearing up through mist just to the west of him stood twice the height it was conceivable for trees to stand.

"Are we on the same ocean as last night?" Karlsson was at his elbow.

"Maiden's milk this morning, isn't it?" agreed Melander. "Ever see trees to that height, up to the clouds like steeples?"

Karlsson shook his head.

"Nor I. Has to be a rise of land in that fog. We ought to have a look there, aye? Wake Braaf enough to tell him, will you, so he and Wennberg won't think we've gone yachting off without them."

The tall man and the slim one pushed the canoe into the placid tidewater, turned their ark toward the middle-air mix of mist and timber. They found that they were crossing the mouth of a river, a sixty-foot width of black water so dense and slow it seemed more solid than the beach and forest on either side of it. Lacquered and beautiful, this surprise ebony river, and along its surface small circlets of foam spun like ghostly anemones.

On the river's far side a gray-black rim of rock showed itself, over the waterline and just under the bank of mist. Rapidly this dour rim bent outward into a point, of no height to speak of but too sharp-sided to land the canoe.

"On around," Melander decreed, and they began to skirt the protrusion.

Karlsson glanced inland, drew his paddle into the canoe, and pointed upward. The fog was lifting from the forest and abruptly, half a small mountain stepped into view: a startling humped cliff as if one of the cannonball peaks around Sitka had been sawed in half from its summit downward. This very top, start of the astonishing sunder, the pair of men could see only by putting their heads back as far as they could. They might have been peering through the dust of eons rather than the morning's last waft of sea-mist. On the sheerness, clumps of long grass somehow had rooted here and there atop basalt columns;

together with moss growth, these tufts made the cliff face seem greatly age-spotted, Methuselan. As the men gaped up, two bald eagles swept soundlessly across the orb of stone.

Around the point Melander and Karlsson pulled the canoe to security and clambered onto the flow of black rock beneath the cliff for a fuller look.

"God's bones, what a place," Melander murmured.

The point had been convulsed into hummocks and parapets, pitted with holes as if having come under siege from small cannon, strewn with a tumble of black boulders the size of oxcarts, and finally riven with tidal troughs. As Melander and Karlsson stood gawking, surf blasted up from a blowhole behind them. A mocking geyser of white bowed toward them as they whirled to the commotion.

"Aye, well. At least we know what's hung those trees into the middle of the air." Atop the dome of cliff over them, tall firs poked forth like feathers in a war bonnet. "I had better find a way up there and see if I can place us on the map. If any Kolosh show up, trade Wennberg to them for a haunch of beef, aye?"

Melander long-gaited off around the base of the cliff. Staying in range of where they had landed the canoe, Karlsson passed time by exploring into the start of the stand of forest between half-mountain and river. He was beside the hole of a particularly huge hemlock when a fat bead of water ticked his right wrist.

In surprise, Karlsson tipped his head until he was peering

straight up. He saw another water bead detach from a limb eighty feet above him and drop like a slow tiny jewel, giving him time to step aside before it struck. Another, another. Karlsson stepped, stepped again. Like strange slowed-down rain the droplets descended two, three to the minute. The forest trees had become sharp green clouds, Karlsson upturned to them as a sunflower will seek the sun, the leisured freshet the pulse of attraction between them. Drop and drop and drop, Karlsson evaded lithely, stepping back and forth around the gnith of the tree, face up like a drunk man at the gate of God. As coal is said to concentrate to diamond, the coastal world of water spun tiny in these falling crystals: the flicker of a mountain stream trying to leap from itself, the white veils of spray brushing back from the Pacific's wave-brows, the quick thin lakes strewn by a half-day rain, all here now flying down in sparkle. The moment bathed Karlsson. His mind went free, vaulted the exertions and dangers of the past many days, nothing existed but the beaded dazzles from above and his body, slow-dancing with water...

"At least I know who not to stand sentry the next time it rains, aye?"

Feeling vastly foolish, Karlsson halted in place, looked around at Melander, and was promptly splattered with a dew glob atop his head. The tall man's amusement twitched behind his mouth.

"Moonbeams must have got into me," Karlsson offered ruefully.

"I can believe this place sends a man lopsided," said Melander.

"Let's get back to the beach before I go chasing raindrops myself."

Melander discovered from the summit that the arc of beach continued some miles north eastward, to Hecate Strait. This intelligence turned into taunt, however, by the time he and Karlsson returned to the campsite. A stiff wind was pushing in off Kaigani. Not wanting a repeat of the crossing they had just endured, the canoemen sat to wait out the bluster.

Braaf scuffed a boot against something in the sand, close by where the other three sat sheltered. A dead loon, its bill thrust ahead like a bayonet, one checkered wing stiffly cocked a bit as though readying to fly, the rest of the body beneath the beach surface.

"Buried as Bering," said Melander.

"Means what?" queried Braaf.

"It's something the Russian navy men say. Bering was a skipper, an old sir, first one into the islands up where the Aleuts come from. He was sailing in the Tsar's hire, a ship called the Saint Peter. A true Russian vessel, leaky as a basket. Somewhere up there among the Aleuts they got themselves wintered in. Those islands don't have a whisker of timber, so Bering and his crew dug into sandhills, pulled over sail canvas for roof. Lived in burrows like lemmings, aye? Lived till they died, at least, and then, the Rooski tell it, foxes would come into camp and gobble the bodies. Bering himself took frail

and they laid him in one of the dugouts. Sand caved down over his feet, but he wouldn't let the crew dig it away. Said it kept him warm. Then sand over his knees. Still wouldn't let them dig. Then up to his waist. Next his belly, just before he died. Very nearly all in his grave before the last breath was out of him. So, buried as Bering, a Rooskaya says to feel sorry for himself."

"How about melon-headed as Melander?" Wennberg suggested. "Do the Russians say that one, too?"

Melander cut a quick look at Wennberg. His sarcasm notwithstanding, the broad man did not seem to be in the brownest of his moods.

"Wennberg, Wennberg. Always ready to bone the guff out of me, aye? Tell me a thing, how do we come by this honor of having you in our crew? What sugar was it that kept you on at New Archangel past your years?"

Wennberg studied the tall leader. Then he spat to one side and muttered: "Serving for Rachel."

Melander tugged an ear. ^{Lend}~~Give~~ "Give us that again?" Karlsson and Braaf also glanced over at Wennberg.

"'Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah was tender-eyed, but Rachel was beautiful and well favored. And Jacob loved Rachel, and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel.'" Wennberg broke off his recital and spat again.

Melander and Braaf and Karlsson stared at him.

"Never heard Genesis before?" Wennberg resumed. "Doesn't surprise me, you'd all be off diddling squirrels instead of..."

"Wennberg a Bible-spouter!" Braaf looked genuinely shocked.

The blacksmith shifted uneasily. "My family were church-strong. So was I, when I was a young fool."

"This Rachel matter," Melander put in. "It sounds more like a sweetmeat for Karlsson than for you."

"Judas's single ball, Melander, can't you tell a saying when it comes out anybody's mouth but your own? Serving for Rachel means... it means being done out of something." Wennberg drew a breath. "'And Jacob said unto Laban, give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her...And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban, what is this thou hast done unto me? Did I not serve with thee for Rachel?'" Wennberg glowered across at Melander. "Now d'you savvy it?"

"Aye," said Melander softly. "I just didn't recognize Laban as a Russian name."

For the next two days of blow, they held to the site--gaining no distance, which Melander knew was the same as losing it.

"A lazy wind, we call this on Gotland. It goes through you instead

of around you."

"Melander, serve you a plate of fly shit and you'd declare it pepper," muttered Wennberg.

"And you'd lend me your soul as salt, aye, Mister Blacksmith? But we have deciding to do. We've been holed here too long. The water ahead of us doesn't shrink while we're here. I say we had better chance the next stretch today, wind or no. Karlsson?"

"You're the sailor of us. But how much of this wind is between us and the next island?"

"I think six hours' paddling.

"Six hours, we can last. I say chance."

"Braaf?"

The thief glanced out into the white-capped water, then somewhere above Melander's brow. "Chance."

"Wennberg?"

"The only thing worse than that water is this waiting. Chance, Melander. Teach us how to eat the wind. May it sit better on my stomach than that last ration did."

For a change, luck puffed on them. Once the paddling men had struggled the canoe around the horn-tip of the beach, they came into a wind skewing directly across Hecate Strait. For the first time since their leaving of New Archangel, up went the canoe's small pole of mast and a lugsail. "Not much of a suit of sails, more like a kerchief,"

as Melander said, but the canvas carried them across the strait and once more into a scatter of shoreline islands.

"Even this hardtack isn't as bad as it might be." Melander, musing, their first day of south-paddling after wafting across Hecate Strait. "A time I can tell you on the brig Odin, we had to break our biscuits into our coffee and skim away the weevils as they came up. No, not so bad, aye?"

Braaf, at the onset of their second day after: "I know what Valhalla is now. It's where I never again hear Melander say, 'Tumble~~up~~.'"

Wennberg, midway of their third day and yet another Melander monologue: "Melander, I wonder you don't swallow your tongue sometime for the savor of it."

"Good job of work done": Karlsson, startling them all as they hefted ashore at the close of their fourth straight progressful day.

The river shoved through the land like a glacier of slate. Had the surface been solid as its turbid appearance--one newcoming settler

or another had inaugurated the jest that in the season of run-off not much more mud content was needed to make the flow pedestriable-- a man crossing here from its north shore toward its south would have had to hike steadily for a full hour. That man would have stridden the Columbia, largest river of the Pacific shore of the Americas, and there on its south bank he would have stamped silt from his feet at Astoria.

Already, Astoria was in its third incarnation. John Jacob Astor's wealth, not to say intentions for more of it, installed the settlement as a fur depot in 1811. The War of 1812 dealt the site to British control, with a consequent rechristening as Fort George. By 1818 it stubbornly was American, and Astoria, once more. The ensuing three and a half decades had not made it much more of a place: post office, customs house, long T-shaped dock straddling into the tidal flow, cooperage, Methodist church, handful of stores and saloons catering to the settlers sprinkled south and north of the river's mouth, several tall Yankee houses along the foot of a shaggy Columbia headland. Yet also the recognized port of America's Pacific Northwest, tapping the 1200-mile-long Columbia and its tributaries like a cup hung to gather the sugar of a giant maple. If, through whatever unlikelihood, you found yourself at Astoria, you could aim yourself onward into the world aboard one of the dozen or fifteen vessels which plied here month by month. ⁴This night, the four canoe-going Swedes are encamped just more than half the water distance downcoast from New Archangel

to that long T of dock at Astoria.

Trying to yawn the last of sleep from himself, Karlsson eased out through the trees toward the island's edge. As usual, he was the first awake and the earliest to wonder about weather. This morning he found that the Pacific lay gray with cold, but no storm sheeted up from its surface. Along the beach ahead of Karlsson a small surf pushed ashore, idly rinsed back on itself: low tide. A pair of cormorants amid a spill of tidal boulders hung their wings wide. High up on the beach gravel a hundred or so strides away the sharp-prowed canoe rested, as if having plowed to a furrow-end and now waiting to be turned for another day's tilling.

Between one eye-blink and the next, Karlsson's brain filled with the jolt of what he was seeing. He and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf had carried their canoe as ever into the cover of forest for the night: this canoe sat larger by half: the painted designs entwining the prow were different, simpler, bolder: and Karlsson by now was in crouched retreat toward the trees, staring hard at the wall of forest beyond the canoe for any sign that he had been detected.

Putting his fingers lightly across the tall man's mouth to signal silence, he roused Melander. Melander snapped awake with the quickness learned of arising to some thousands of shipboard watches and crept behind Karlsson away from the camp.

"A big one," Karlsson husked when they had sidled far enough not to be heard. "Eight, ten paddlemen at least."

"Cabbageheads. Why aren't they holed up for the winter like the Kolosh? What do they think this is, the Midsummer's Day yacht races? Aye?"

"We had better hope they're not going to hole up here."

"No, just one canoe, they couldn't be. Seal hunters or some such, out for a few days. Cabbageheads."

"You already called them that, and they're still here."

"Aye, so. What's your guess, can we get our canoe to the water and slide away without them seeing us?"

"No."

"No. Outwait them without them tumbling onto us?"

"No."

"No." Melander grimaced as if his echo-word had hurt his ears, then looked back toward camp. "You greet Braaf, I'll do Wennberg."

Again fingers of silence awoke lips. Again Karlsson told the situation. When his words had sunk into Wennberg and Braaf, Melander sent Braaf, the most accomplished slinker among them, to keep watch on the beach. Then Melander glanced at Karlsson, and Karlsson, after hesitation, nodded. "Yes, it has to be him."

The pair of them turned their eyes to Wennberg. Melander asked: "How are you at turning yourself into a sand crab?"

Wennberg's debut into the art of creeping also marked the first occasion in his life that he ever regretted his strength. Regretted, rather, that more of his power wasn't directly beneath his nose, as Melander's was. "This one is your line of country, Wennberg. You have to do it, or those people of that canoe will snore tonight on our skulls." And Karlsson in his rock-faced way agreeing that only Wennberg possessed the muscle for it; Wennberg could not choose between fury at Karlsson for siding with Melander or ire at him for doing it dubiously. Every lens of clarity, Wennberg believed, had slipped from his life when he leagued himself with this muddle of..."

A stone nicked Wennberg's right knee and cued his attention back to creeping. Here in the first eighty yards or so he had cover of a sort, a rib of rock and drift logs behind which he managed to scuttle, chest almost down to his knees, without showing himself, much. But next lay a naked distance of thirty yards. An angle across and up the beach, to the unfamiliar canoe.

At the end now of his final driftlog, Wennberg squatted dismally, rubbed the stone bruise on his right knee, and glared back toward where he had departed from Melander, Karlsson and Braaf.

"Puny bastards," he muttered.

From amid the spruce there a hand flashed into sight--Wennberg knew it would be Melander's--and patiently waved him on.

Wennberg braced, unhunched himself, and in a rolling stride ran toward the beached canoe. He ran with his elbows cocked almost full out and his head sighted low, as if butting his way. Under his boots gravel clattered wildly, avalanche-loud it seemed to him. Jesu Maria, those fish-fuckers in the forest would have to be without ears not to hear this commotion...

Past the stern of the canoe Wennberg plunged, like a ball rolling beyond its target. He hovered an instant, selecting, then stooped to thrust both hands beneath a gray boulder wide as his chest. Gravel bit the backs of his hands, his wrists, and finally his forearms as Wennberg wrestled the rock. His breath ached in his throat. With a grunt he brought the burden upward. Grappled it into balance on his knees, next across his waist. Now like a washerwoman carrying an overfull tub of water, turned with the boulder toward the canoe.

Five staggering steps to the wooden wall of the craft, Wennberg more certain with each that the gunblast which would close off his life was being cocked behind him.

Amidships of the canoe, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his arms to the height of his neck, then with one last grunt let it crash onto the bottom of the cedar craft.

The crunch was not loud, to Wennberg the first luck anywhere in this situation. But the canoe bottom fractured downward beneath the rock, and a split as wide as a finger sprung forward toward the craft's bow. Wennberg gave a rapid glance at his sabotage, skirted the

stern of the canoe and was running again, a bear in a footrace.

He had just passed the driftlog when he heard the shout behind him, and he did not look back.

Ahead of him, Melander and Karlsson and Braaf were putting their own canoe into the surf, Melander somehow finding time as well to shout at Wennberg to hurry and lend a hand.

They shoved with their paddles just as the first musket ball blooped the water beside them. Wennberg in puffing agony glanced around to see two natives with rifles raised, others clustered around the spine-broken canoe, more oh God more emerged from the forest.

Karlsson hurried a shot at the two riflemen, missed but caused them to flinch back from the bullet's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle-Jesu Maria-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing. The Swedes stroked as if hurling the ocean behind them as a barrier, and the canoe climbed a mild breaker, sped down its seaward side, climbed a stronger wave and downsped again, then slid rapidly southward from the firing figures on the beach.

Out of the fear and excitement of the escape something other began to grope through to Karlsson in the next minutes. From his place at its forepart, he sensed a change about the canoe. Its rhythm felt lightened; not gone erratic as during Wennberg's sickness at Kaigani, but lessened, thinned.

Karlsson turned enough to look straight back.

"Sven?" he called. "Sven!"

At the stern of the canoe Melander, almost tidily, lay folded forward, the upper part of his long body across his knees, the back of his head inclined toward the other three canoemen as if to show them where the musket ball had torn its red hole.