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 February 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 canoe men as they alight. Day and day and day, 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

"Hope to Christ"—the broad man, this—"this’s drier than last night’s."

"Oh, aye, and God send you wine and figs too, Wennberg?"

"Ought’ve left him, Melander." The one named Braaf, here. "Ought’ve left him cooped at New Archangel."

The slender one of them, called Karlsson, stays silent.

They 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 shore-side assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity, you would have spied Melander early. Toplofty 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 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... Luck for them that we were born, else they'd
starve to death figuring out right boot from left foot... To be Russian
is to be a toothache to the world, aye?"

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 seafarer of whom it was
appraised that each drop of his blood was black Stockholm tar and
his every hair a rope yarn. A dozen years of sailing the Baltic
and the North Sea he bettered his position almost voyage by voyage, and then--
"Had I
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, yet was,
that world-topping wilderness, 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 furs, 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.

("It was but natural," the magistrate of America's frontier history, H.H. Bancroft, would write, "in the gigantic robbery of half a world, that Russia should have a share; and had she been quicker about it, the belt might as well have been continued to Greenland and Iceland.")

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 [name] Melander's name thus is not to be discovered anywhere among the frontier baronage.

For 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 salmon and
\underline{herring} and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder.

Seven-year men. "The Russians' hornless 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
\underline{conversationists} in the workmen's barracks to see where the gibe
In New Archangel, a
\underline{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." That had attracted him the anonymous dart, not nearly the first to bounce off his seaman's hide.}

These shipmates--Melander corrected himself: barracksmates--were an everysided 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 mankind's usual blunder, forgot to get themselves highborn.

As for this crew in evening dawdle all around him, they nested here like...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, the way he might have checked a topsail sail, at the peak which thrust over all their lives at New Archangel, ungainly. Verstovia. Its summit a triangle of rough rock atop a vaster triangle of firred slope, Verstovia set up there plump and becrowned, the first presence in your life each morning, the last at every dusk.
And farther, snowier crags attended Verstowia on both sides. 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.

Odd, the deceit of distance. How it was that men would brave the miles to a new place, the very total of those miles seeming to promise a higher life than the old, and then to find the work was toiled in from up dull, the wage never quite came to what it should, the food was worse than ever—the longing to be elsewhere had pivoted straight around. Yes, that was the way for a seven-year man, distance played these tricks as if a spyglass had spun end-for-end in his hands.
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, any custom of home being paced
through more devoutly here than in Russia itself. Melander considered
that the man was wasting footsteps; 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. Perhaps a Melander could not rise at New Archangel, but he
at least would invest some care to stay level.

This was one of the first lengthening evenings of summer of 1852,
the moment of year when darkness seemed not to care to come and New
Archangel’s dusk took advantage to dawdle on and on.

Before the season turned, eventide would stretch
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
all also cast the remindful shadows of all that he had become absented
from. His birthland. The sea. And his chosen livelihood. Triple
times 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
bakery, joinery, warehouses, officers’ quarters, smithy; 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, was summed by Melander.

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.

And so 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. The ports of all the planet were out there. Danzig and Copenhagen, Kronstadt, Trondheim, Rotterdam, London... Men and women are hard ore, we do not become slag in only a few seasons of fire. Melander aland was still Melander, First Mate...

A raven flapped past, pulled a glance from Melander. The black birds ruled the roofs of New Archangel, and their metallic cries struck an odd humility into a person.

Finally, as if at last reassured that the water portion of the world still hung in place, Melander dropped his gaze. Now 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, the tall man murmured something. Something so softly said that the sentry nearby in the blockhouse mistook it for another mutter against twittering Finns. It was not that, though. Just this:

"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.

"Take our tea outside the stockade, whyn't we? The farther you can ever treipse from these Russians, the better anything tastes. Aye?"

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

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 in the forests of Gheorg 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 the slender untalkative man's interesting constancy also was stored away in Melander. The observation that Karlsson—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 around yipping 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 bright what adventure 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, purposely this distant, rainless late-June morning, gentle gray-silver overcast cupping the day's light downward to lend clarity down 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 entertain this escape on the most silken of New Archangel's days, he truly was ready as ready.

In front of the two Swedes now stretched Japonski, biggest of the islands schooled thick in Sitka Sound. The channel across to Japonski was just four hundred yards or so, but one of the quirks of New Archangel's spot in the world was that this moat-like side of water somehow emphasized isolation more than the open spans of the bay.

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

Another 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 as if making
his name mark. Astoria, he said the mark was.

Map lesson done, Melander recited to the close-tongued Karlsson
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 timbered mountains. Verstovia's skirt-forest showed every branch distinct today, almost every bristle; green lacework, it seemed.

Melander knew he was going to have a wait. There always was about this Karlsson a calm just short of chill. He was a Smalander, and that ilk were known to have in them whatever stone God had left over after He filled their fields with it. "One word, good as two"—that was the anthem of Smalanders. Right now the lean man was appraising the horizon of 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 pin spots 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 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 tending 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 many-cornered 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. Talent 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 among them had set up shop as 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
Swedes, by a pair of men 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've to...I must...Maybe the noon-break, I'll..."
In his quietly suggested manner, Karlsson instructed Braaf had better shove a bung in his spout and hear out Melander's proposition. concurred,
"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 had 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 "

"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 it, Astruria, at—what's the place, Astruria?"

"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 map dot 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. Of Baranov historians exclaim that, like Napoleon, he was a little great man, for Baranov it was who as first governor of Russian America began in 1791 to stretch Russian strength from the Aleutian chain of isles 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. Along virtually all of that stupendous southeast Alaskan coast the mountains drop sheer to the Pacific, spruce slopes like green avalanches into the seawater. Except Sitka, where miles of harbor indent the archipelagic shoreline.
Except Sitka, where the deep notch of bay is sided by a hardy shelf of shore. Except Sitka, where in 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 would lose no time in perching his own thicklogged bastion there. The Russian-American Company's frontier Gibraltar, perhaps say. So turn the issue this way, that and the other—beyond doubt, you may bet that Baranov whirled it dizzy—Sitka Sound represented the maritime ringhold into which Russian influence could be firmly knotted.

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 an aspiring yellow as though the tint and the nearby shore qualifies them as seaside cottages. But their rooflines are hipped, the heavy style slanting down in all four directions from the ridgepole; and 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 low-slung town, New Archangel for all its best efforts is, beneath the lording styles of cathedral and Castle.
One aspect further, and this one the true civic oddity. This port of Russian America has a larger fleet of ships permanently afloat than are customarily to be found in its harbor. Make-do is the architect here. When they no longer can be safely
sailed, hulks were 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 he very nearly could arrow to the shipyard with his eyes bound over, merely following the delicious waft of yellow cedar. 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 forest enmixes.
A kind of colossal constancy hovers in form and tone of this sort, the surety that beyond such mountains, wherever you could peer there would stand only more such mountains. Except, of course, west into the ocean, where there was only more ocean.

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 quartermaster. 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 oftener than that in cloud. "Always autumn,"
it was said of the gray climate. One minute, vapor would flow along
the bottoms of the mountains to float all the
peaks like dark icebergs. The next the cloud layer would 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, now into 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
a hundred hours 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; one silt more, and the few dozen Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlsson are at last accounted.

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

By their own legend, People of the Frog, a restless clan who had migrated to Sitka Sound with their great-eyed carved emblem, as a bear, in tow behind their canoe fleet. Now 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
twenty-five feet high and five hundred yards long, four blockhouses built of fat logs, and a couple of dozen full-time sentries constantly expressed the colony's wariness of the natives. With cause. This very year of 1852, the Sitka Tlingits had sent word to a Stikeen clan that, at last, a years-standing quarrel might be called quiet. When the Stikeen peace delegation arrived, thirty-five of them were slain quick as a butchering, five managed to beg sanctuary within New Archangel. Long memories on these Sitka Tlingits, then; of amplitude to recall that when Baranov implanted his first settlement here at their bay, they obliterated it and put the Russian heads up on stakes.

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 vat of water was heated to boil, bathhouse. Every seventh day the sauna-tender heared the rocks in bucketsfull then sluiced onto the hot stones ringing the vat, 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
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 the 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 fish guts, 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 clan 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. Up into the high north, there. Ice-foot high as a church-eave, they tell of along those shores. And creatures. Carpenter of a man-of-war's man, brig I shipped on, an old Melander, had been high north once on a whaler. Said whales stink like Hell's cess, but walruses were worth the trip to see. I've never forgot--'They have noble bones in their teeth,' he told me. And to sail it all by steam, just this fog around us now...So I looked on the Nicholas and saw luck, right enough." 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're 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?" Braaf contemplated the steam overhead. "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 work that gate open the one with the lever to open that gate for us." Melander instructed Karlsson with monumental joviality now. "It's there between your legs."

New Archangel's within its walls

In the next days, a gleaner drifted about in New Archangel like a cloudlet of steam freed from the bathhouse. So adept a provisioner rapidly did Braaf prove to be that Melander soon had to ration out his stealing lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery, Melander had to ration out his stealing assignments.
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, and a leather mapcase waterproofed with birch tar.

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.

The Kolosh had them in plenty, the slim vessels lying side by side in front of the longhouses as if drawn up to the starting line of a great regatta, canoes for hunting and canoes to carry trade and canoes for fishing and canoes for families and canoes for war, a navy of all canoes.

Karlsson had eyed out a choice—a twenty-foot shell with a high bold bow, the sheer of its hull rising and sharpening into
this cutwater as a scimitar curves in search of its point. High and pointy the stern, too, as though both the ends of this canoe were on sentry against the sea. Gunwales, rounded and deftly lipped. Four strong thwarts. And encircling it all, that most beautiful stunt of wood— the way a great red cedar had been hollowed and trimmed and stretched by heated water into a sleek pouch of vessel, its wooden skin not much more than the thickness of a thumb: exaltation of design and thrift of line, that jugglery of art somehow perfected by this coast's canoewrights. Karlsson's tongue was not the one to say it, but if the standing cedar tree had decided to transform into the swiftest of sea creatures, this craft of alert grace would have been the result.

Too, Karlsson's candidate lay amid the beached squadron of a dozen nearest the stockade gate, convenient enough, 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 settle, 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,

By any man's standards, a beckoning tool, keen blade for clearance of a route of water. /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-yeardom 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.

As asked his opinion, Braaf mumbled that any canoe was smaller than
\textit{desired.}
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
with black oval centers to them, like egg-shaped eyes, likely
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, and one of them needed be a maximum steering paddle of
perfect balance.
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 in this gate enterprise, 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. Like many another, he had stayed on and on in the employ of the Russian-American Company because he was in debt to it deep as his eyeteeth. He also was sufficiently a scapegrace to have exasperated a generation of superiors, so that he 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. Rousing 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 Bilibin's singing. Reedily, but singing. 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 Bilbin to take a revivifying swig from:

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

That his gate performances were credited by Bilbin without more than a first squint of suspicion astounded Karlsson. Was the world so bait-hungry as this? Was he, Karlsson, so deaf of deceit? Well, fair must be fair: the fact here was not hunger but thirst, and the hootch deserved at least equal billing with Karlsson.

Under the New Archangel allotment of fifty cups of rum per man per year, Bilbin was a man perpetually parched.

"The old sirs up there in the Castle," he averred to Karlsson between swigs, "might's well be spooning out dust to us."

By autumn of 1852, Verstovia now in a yellow-orange bodice of leather and deer cabbage, 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 as well," Bilbin would splutter back at him. And the gate would wink open. And wink again, far into the night, when Karlsson returned with a proffer of 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 had a look at the steamship's while Rosenberg was bathing his bottom at Ozherskoi. Those we'll take; they won't be missed until spring or whenever hell's time the steamship gets fired up again. Can you read Russian, less 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 narrow enough a close matter it was. Christ on the cross, Braaf, how you go around like a deacon's ghost I'll never know. I needed to sort and sort, paw through every bedamned scrap of sheet. Skimpy bastards, these Russians. Should have known..."

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 Brah that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian. He inched his head 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... Wait, listen now..."

"No, don't walk away and don't put them down." Not suggestion now: orders. "We'll have a visit until we see which happens." Wennberg moved himself in front of Brah 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, but he said nothing. Nor Wennberg. Brah was wordless with desperation. For a moment, there the three of them clustered, paged of quiet centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate as if time had snapped to a stop within their little while eddied, and promyslenniki 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. "Brah and I're talking over..."
seems a man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these
days, "it's seem like."

"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, huh?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered
"Matters of weight can always be talked over."
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, nodded.

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.

Rueful, 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," the blacksmith rumbled. "You're down the toilet looking up, and don't forget it."

"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 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--"

"And stupider than he is strong," Braaf put in.

"--and we can maybe make use of him," continued Melander. "Just maybe we can."

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 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. Dance on one foot of that and then the other, a man might. So if you've had wavering, it'll be relief to you to learn we've made up your mind for you. There's no profit whatsoever for you to be off 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. 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, "there's nothing there."

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 ought to get ourselves a new hidey-hole," Melander went on. "Braaf has the knack of finding such places, aye? You'll know where it is when we load the canoe, and not an eyelash before. So this new cache now, you can know where it 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
that's the pony race,
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
Nor'd you
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-pizzlies..." But Melander beat him to speech yet again.

"Be careful of your words, Wennberg. If you're coming with us,
a sack
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
weighing
last sentiments to weigh wrongly on your soul, do you now?"

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 glover. 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,
as if you knew down from up. How do we go be pilgrims in the wilderness of water?"

Circle the plan as he would like aetter working at a stump, Wennberg could come up with only a few questions to hack at when Melander was finished.

"Why all this fuss with old Bilbin? Why, we just cut his stupid throat when we're ready?" This theorem shifted Karlsson forward in his seat a bit.

"Because if we kill one of his men, Rosenberg will have to have his people chase us," Melander said instructively. "If we leave Bilbin 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 Bilbin. Then on the night of the escape, Melander continued, Braaf would gather them a few more. "Six, to be exact."

Braaf blinked rapidly 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.

Gravely 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 And -- "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 likely had it 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 unsentinred...? "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 down all of Europe to the sun-coasts of Italy.

Each mile of those hundreds, too, along a cold northern brink of ocean which in winter is misnamed entirely. Not pacific at all, but malign. And too, each mile maybe—or maybe not, this was the puzzle of ocean and ocean-goer—each mile maybe working away at this three-man crew of his, Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson. Thief and oaf and clam: or acquisitienist and stallion and canoe soldier; whichever each was now, he perhaps had sea-change ahead of him. The great over-water passage between one life and another. Melander in his sailoring had been at an edge of the nineteenth century's immigration tides, the tens of hundreds of thousands who were the forebears of us, and so knew how voyage could tower in the mind of a first-timer. It
couldn't not. Treadle of the waves week on week, the half-coffin berth to try to survive in, reliance for that survival on sailors who flew in the mast trees like clothed monkeys; a compressed existence, the voyage of a ship, like a battle or an illness or a first failed time in love, lodged in the memory at an angle not like that of any other set of days. And that was shipboard; this would be canoe, splinter of a true vessel. The sea-change could come all the more intense. But then, sometimes it never came at all, or again it simply made a man more of what he was, carved the lines of him deeper. You never knew. Not even a Melander had the how of sea-change. Yet, in this season of wait Melander might have hinted toward what lay in store when one went out to live on waves. His 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 begin in the matter. If the Russians could be convinced and then be relied upon to reward him, that 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.

All of it strummed a man's nerves, not to say what discordance this place New Archangel played on you anyway. Example, that morning soon after Wennberg added himself into the escape plan: he'd been on the way to begin his day of smithing when he remembered leaving his new-sewn leather apron back at the barracks. Just there near Baranov's Castle he reversed route to fetch it—and there the apparition reared, a Russian cross colossally thrusting out of the north slope of Verstovia. Wennberg stared a long minute at this, Calvary arrived.
just then gulls on a breeze off Sitka Sound flashed across the breast of Verstovia. White as winter creatures they glided, as if shooed in from the other, snowier crags. Wennberg had cast them a glance—and reared, there the apparition reared, a Russian cross thrusting out of the dark north slope of Verstovia. A long minute Wennberg stared at this, Calvary arrived
to the top of Alaska, before he picked out that the cross was the Russian cathedral's topmost one, that the green-painted spire under it blended into the forest of Verstovia.

As well as anyone, Wennberg knew that if you let yourself dwell on the menace of these mountains, you would go around in terror all day, every day, like a cowering dog. What jostled his frame of mind, though, was not just the surprise sky-hung cross, but that in his years here he had never noticed this illusion before. Every morning now, despite himself, he found himself stopping at the spot and casting a look back up there.

And all the rest of the day, if and perhaps. Coax at them however 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 simply one more duration, and not as long as most. Time passed, or you put it past.
All in all, Karlsson showed a good deal less impatience with New

(A man built smoke-tight, as Melander has said of him.
Archangel existence than any of the other three. What then held
Karlsson
him into the pattern of the escape?

Braaf too had wondered.

"Why're you?"

He and Karlsson had been dutied, this day, to the warehouse
Beaver pelts had been brought in by the Kolosh.
where bundling was done. Kolosh had brought in beaver pelts.
The light task Braaf took, folding each dried hide in half, fur
side in. Karlsson then stacked the bundled pelts into a screw press,
to be squeezed into bales for shipment to China. Quite why it was
that Swedes had been brought half around the world to pile together
animal skins which would then be cargoed half around the world again
to clothe Chinamen, neither Braaf nor Karlsson grasped. But here was
the habitation of several dozen former beavers, and here were they.

"Hmm, Karlsson? Why're you?"

"Same as you, I suppose." Karlsson did not seem much disposed
to talk about the escape, which of course focused Braaf onto it all the more.

"So then, why'm I?"

"To kiss goodbye to the Russians: and five more years here."

"Goodbye kisses aren't always happy ones."

"Some truth to that."
"I'll miss the snuffboxes. They hop into a man's hand, here. What of you? What'll you miss?"

Karlsson shrugged.

"What, can't put a name to her?" Braaf queried.

Karlsson gave him a fast look. After a bit, said: "Maybe she has a lot of names."

"All the more to miss."

"Braaf, easy with this. We may be heard."

"Only by heaven. The overseer's gone off to his bottle."

"You'd know."

"That iron-puddler. Wennberg. Think he's to be trusted?"

"Do you?"

"I don't trust anyone whose ears are buried in his whiskers."

"Melander has put trust in him."

"Melander isn't you."

Karlsson straightened a bundled pelt into line atop the others in the screw press. "We need trust Melander."

"All right, try this hole: the voyage, can we do it strong as Melander says?"

"Braaf, you've more questions than the king's cat."
"Nothing knocks at the ear if you don't invite it in. You still haven't said, you know."

"Said?"

"Why're you coming on the escape?"

Karlsson gave attention to peltry and screw press again. When he turned back, his narrow face was as little readable as he ever had been but now he peered more interestingly at Braaf. The angle at which the sight of the young thief entered his eyes seemed to have changed. After a moment, Karlsson said:

"Maybe to see what it'll be like."

Braaf was not entirely sure whether this constituted answer or not. But he nodded now, as though it did.
The hardest wait among them was Braaf's. Melander forbade him from further stealing until the final flurry of muskets and food on the date of the escape. How, then, to keep his fingers busy?

Melander had a part-answer: a hank of hefty rope he handed to Braaf. "Work this in those lily hands of yours, as much as you can every day. Get calusses started, else you'll bleed to death through the palms once we begin paddling."

But a man can't twiddle rope all day, and--

"An Aleut calendar," Melander at last came up with, the fifth or seventh time Braaf asked him if there wasn't just one more item wanted for the cache. "Carve us one, so we can number our time on the way to Astoria, aye?"

Braaf smiled like a boy given a sugar-cake. "I know where there's one, I can get it this after--"

"NO!" Melander swept a harried glance around, Braaf blinking up at him. "No. Don't steal one. Carve one. You may have never noticed, but there is a difference. Keep those damn fingers of yours at home, hear?"

So began Braaf's pastime of carvery, a fine Kolosh chunk of red cedar--Melander would not have wanted to ask how it found its way to Braaf--about the size of the lid of a music box and a half inch thick
shaved and shaved by him. Then the twelve rows of peg holes across, one hole for each day of month. Braaf next discovered than on the best-wrought of these calendars—Melander had neglected too to forbid borrowing for the sake of a look—the Russians marked for their Aleut converts each of the frequent religious days, a cross-in-a-circle
penciled around four or five of the peg holes each month. Lazily
 crude, this seemed to Braaf. He incised his crosses-in-circles.

Finally, there was the peg, to keep track of the day of year much
as count is recorded on a cribbage board. Braaf made his of walrus-
tooth ivory, an elegant knobbed peg like a tiny belaying pin.

"Aye, well," said Melander when Braaf shyly handed him the
polished little board. "May our days be fit for your calendar, Braaf."

"Which is the one, now?" Braaf asked. "When we go?"

Melander plucked out the ivory peg, counted briefly along a
row with it, inserted it.

"This one, Just here, Braaf. The day of days."

Night, the sixth of January, 1853. By Russian Orthodox
calendar, after 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 HOURL, he bawled. "A Savior
COMES with LOVE'S sweet POWER..."

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have that sergeant down
here," Bilibin called urgently, hustled from the hut shelter-
ing him from the rain, and hurriedly cracked the gate. "Quick,
in, in..."
From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched
the gate wink open ever so briefly, 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. Next, 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 this 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 streaming blackness 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.

A several hundredth time Melander retold himself the logic by which he had singled this night. On Christmas Eve the Russians had begun, all going around solemn as church mice, crossing themselves until it seemed they'd wear out the air, eating no bite until "the first star of evening." (Which baffled Braaf no little bit: "They wait to see a star over this place, won't they have a hungry winter?") Yesterday, it had been a morning of liturgy murmuring out of the twin-crossed church and then the Russian men paying calls on each other, toasting at every stop until by nightfall the streets were full of bands of them calling back and forth, "Beat to lee, we'll steer windward!" Now, the pious and visitational sides of Christmas having been observed, certain as anything this would be their night of celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off—up there in Baranov's Castle at the governor's ball they'd be, all the officers and any of the Company Russians who frequented their club house for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument, every breathing one of them. And when the escapees' absence was discovered, what Russian among them was going to be eager to dash from snug activities to chase Swedes through the damp black of Alaskan night? And meanwhile the Kolosh would be staying to their longhouses, leaning clear of drunk and boisterous Tsarmen... Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, Melander had them all carefully in rank as allies for escape. But
late-going Russians yet within the officers' club house... clatter in the gun room heard by a sentry at the eastmost blockhouse... just here, on such points beyond logic, Melander's months of planning teetered, and the quiver of them moved with him through the dark.

Wennberg's perturbance was purely 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. Why risk the tumble, ass-over-earhole, down this bedamned coast? Why trust even a minute to Melander or Karlsson or Braaf, these three orphans of Hell? So 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.

"Plowhorse," came his terse whisper to Wennberg.

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 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 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 ought to 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? Here where?"

"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 wrap 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, arriving, able to know only that a moment is coming due and to hope it is not the last of the series.
it came.

Then, the word, as if in chorus to his silent recitings, the word flying flew out of the dark to Karlsson, in call down from the block-

house on the hump of ridge above the stockade gate.

"Utrimandi!"

"Utrimash!"

Every New Archangel hour the word made its relay from sentry post to sentry post. Not much of an utterance, no recital on behalf of Tsar or God, perhaps the simplest cog in all the guardful apparatus of the capital of Russian America: simply the reminding call, "Attention!" But try, a time, with throat dry and all of life riding there on your tongue, try to echo such a word as if born to it... Having been endlessly rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian 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 blurt, 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. Down from the blockhouse, here it came yet again. "Something got you by the throat?"

Motionless, Karlsson frantically rummaged the times he had shared the hootch jug with Bilibin, tried to draw to mind the guard's gossipy gab, pluck words out, but 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. **Christ's season be merry for you,**
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 Tepenkov 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 islands.

"It was, however, the inauguration for Braaf and Wennberg into paddling in untame waters, and as promptly as this, it began that these men were brave and afraid and back and forth between the two.

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 Wennberg and Braaf and a horrifying one to meet in the wet dark.

"Steady up, don't beat the water to death," instructed Melander. But the paddling efforts of the pair in the middle of the canoe still were stabs into the sloshing turmoil until Karlsson 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.

By and large, a boat ride is a cold ride. 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 rain was not heavy, and gift above all, it was not snow. A few weeks before, a December snow had come, a white time when ice plated the tops of New Archangel's rainbarrels and Melander went around looking bleak. But then thaw, and the Sitka air's usual mood of moisture ever since.

The course out of the harbor looped the canoe toward the ocean, then swung southeast, to bring the craft along the shoreline of Baranof. Baranof's coastline the canoe men could estimate by the surf sound, and occasionally by a moving
margin of lightness as a wave struck and swashed. Their night vision was decent, accustomed by New Archangel's dim wintertime, but even so, any effort to see to their right, the ocean side, brought only intense black, 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.
Of all the kinds of toil there are, the ocean demands the most strange. A ship under sail asked constant trussing and re-trussing; the hauling about of ropes and sailcloth was like putting up and taking down a huge complicated tent, day and night. Advent of the steamship changed the chore to stuffing a mammoth incessant stove, between apprehensive glances at clock-faces which might but more likely might not indicate whether matters were going to go up in blast. Both of these unlikely sea vocations had drawn sweat from Melander, and now he was back to the ocean's original tool, the paddle. He was finding, with Braaf and Wennberg--Karlsson already been through the lesson—that the paddler's exertion is like that of pulling yourself hand-over-hand along an endless rope. The hands, wrists, arms—yes, they tire, stiffen. But where the effort eats deep is the shoulder blade. First at one, then when the paddle is shifted to the other side of the canoe for relief, the ache moves across to the other: as if all weariness chose to ride the back just there, on those twin bone saddles beneath the skin.
The four men in the darkness stroked 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 daybreak, and that meant pace, endurance. The invisible rope of route, more and more a hawser as you worked at it, was nothing to be raced along.

Perhaps fifteen strokes a minute, four men stroking, resting as little they could, seven-eight hours to daybreak: an approximate twenty-five thousand of these exertions and they could seek out a dawn cove for hiding.

Hours and hours later, near-etimes 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 space of water distance behind them.

"You, bastard, Melander!" This was 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. the rest of Braaf, load those fancy rifles of yours, then pass Karlsson his hunting gun."

Carefully 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 began to swing broadside, a bold-rocked creature of wood turning as if having decided, at last, to do fight even if the foe was of its own kind.

As the canoe came around, the figure in its stern leveled a long hunting gun.

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.
between existences. There was this and that to be said for courage
and a calm death, but the fact was that here was not the place and
audience a canoe chieftain of his years had a right to expect. So
if life was tasked with a decent departure, was this one, straddled
between the strange tribes of whitehairs and Tzarren?

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.

The craft rocked on the water, gentling, a steed of sea cavalry
settling into rest.

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 Cygnæus, Wennberg was a member of the congregation. He came of a God-fearing family, I believe. But you know how a Swede is, a hard knot even for God."

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

"He'd married, you see, a Kolosh woman. Sometime soon after my arrival here, the woman died. Croup, I believe. It was then Wennberg slipped from the path of right. When I sought to console him, he cursed me. He also cursed—God. Since then he has fallen, if I may say so, into even deeper 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. Not the first ever to—overstay. Yes, well, what I mean... Wennberg 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. So, now. Send the Nicholas to alert Ozerskoi? If the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they likely were beyond the redoubt by now. No, the decision was broader than that. Whether to order out the steamship to hunt down a canoe which could hide among the coves and islands of this coast like a mouse in a stable. Or let the bedamned Swedes go, let ocean and winter do the hunting of them. Yet this was no trifle of matter, thank you, the economics in the loss of four indenturees, two dozen or so man-years of service left in them... and the example to the other laborers could be treacherous. One thing, though, steamship or not: 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 and the declining fur trade and the inattention of
the Tsar's government half the world away. 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, securely downcoast from New Archangel and some
careful miles shy of 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 uncram
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.
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. Pauses now, gives a listen toward the water. Resumes: 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.

But times, too, the sea flings back the wind, gale so steady onto the coast it seems the continent has been made to lean.

swaying.
The North Pacific's most tremendous force, however, is something like a permanent typhoon under the water. 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 shove against their journey without realizing it. Are touched too by the clemency the current sends its limina near the Equator, from the Orient, for this region of coast the canoe men are groping their way along, the furrowed southeastern archipelago which on a map dithers at the flank of the main Alaskan peninsula like a puppy shadowing its mother, is spared the winterlong snow and crackling cold of the northland. Instead, a north-seeking offspring of Kuroshio, the Alaska Current, relays warmth along this shore, moderates winter here mostly to rain and fog. Not that rain and fog are small things, for they tap and sniff at man as if deeply suspicious whether he is substantial. But to storm, true North Pacific storm, they are only lazy cousins. Storm it will take, storm whirling south out of the Gulf of Alaska where the Alaska Current collides with chill northern water, for the canoe men to know in full the North Pacific's set of strengths.
These four Swedes in a Tlingit canoe are attempting a thousand or twelve hundred miles—something of that range, by Melander's estimate—of this North Pacific world. Not all so much, you may say. A fraction of a shard of an ocean, after all. Ten or a dozen hundred miles: in fifty or sixty sturdy days one might 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, more than that, current too being against them, the flow of the Alaska Current up this coast as they seek to stroke down it. 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 ocean-old 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
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 stern paddler. In front of him, Wennberg. In front of Wennberg, Braaf. Melander in the bow. In such placement, Melander of course had reason. Karlsson was the adept canoe man of them, far away the fittest to handle the large steersman's paddle. Wennberg, close by, would try to keep pace with him. Braaf, Melander wanted nearest his own scrutiny, to insure 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. If they 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. 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.
caught your eye on
"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."

Not far into the day, Melander called a pause in the paddling. "Time for a listen," he said.

"A listen—?" Wennberg caught on. "The steamship, you don't think—Melander, damn you seven ways, you said the Russians'd not come chasing after us with it—"

"I still say so. But maybe we'd do well to have a listen now and again, for the practice of it, aye? Close your face, Wennberg."

Melander cocked his long head as if counting the trees of the forested shore. Braaf sat as always, but still as a gravestone. Karlsson leaned down toward the water, to catch any bounce of sound. Wennberg concentrated so hard his back bowed.

The canoe rolled mildly, moved the heads of the men inches to this side, then same inches to the other, a slow tiny wigwag.

Melander at last turned his head, solemn, to Wennberg.

"What--" the blacksmith started, "is there something—Melander, d'you hear—?"

Melander steered them to near North Cape, twenty-five miles downcoast from New Archangel, before stopping. By then Braaf, the least accustomed to exertion, looked particularly done in. But he said nothing, and lent a hand in hefting the canoe into shelter among a shore-touching stand of spruce.

Melander stepped over to Braaf. "Let's see."

Braaf held out his hands. "Chafed somewhere"—the skin from the back of each thumb to the forefinger, particular target of sea spray as he'd paddled—"but not bad."

"So are mine," Melander said. "Three or four days, it'll take to toughen the skin there. But then you'll be solid as horn. Braaf, you'll make a deckhand yet."

Wennberg was cajoled into building a fire, Melander apportioned beans and salt beef into a kettle, Karlsson cut spruce boughs to sleep on and spread the sailcloth 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 breakfast, but at least he was going along with Melander's try, 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. Go far enough, up past the Aleuts, it's drift-ice and glacier, and glacier and drift-ice. Cold enough to make the walls creak. No, that's the north slope of hell up there, the high north. 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."

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."

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 had
put eyes on

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 tanoemen 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

this rock. Fleece-thick as the forest was, it seemed possible that every

the green
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
Lordly Crows, smaller and baleful about it, 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,
loons, 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
canoists' camp and the cape and asked: "What'd you
poked 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." The canoe's progress thus far had
set Melander up on stilts of humor. "But I've been in error before.
Once, anyway--the time I thought I was wrong. What about you other pair, now,
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
time we move a
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
smoke
wipes 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 blasting 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.

"Damn." "Jesus Maria!" Melander's exasperation was outgrowing his epithets.

"Is this 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 sapping the canoemen 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 in glimpse. When but one had been intended. Yet Melander and his canoeman somehow had alit secure, and after Kuiu the going smoothened.

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...
"New Archangel, there. What d'you suppose they're at, just now?"

"The Governor's just done his whole day's labor--taken a sniff of snuff."

"Okhotskans're staring themselves cross-eyed at the bedarred mountains."

"The Finns, they're praying for it to rain ale."

"Trade boots with any of them, would you?"

"No. Not yet."

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 festal prodigy, 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
as great as the inconstant Braaf. Day on day, the canoe pulled itself through the water primarily on the forward paddles of Karlsson and Wennberg. Melander would have preferred more balance to the propulsion, yet it worked.

To his own surprise as much as anyone's, Braaf proved the best of them at reading the weather. Long before even Melander, the one seasoned sailor among them, Braaf would know a change was coming onto the ocean, as if along with his naive robin face he possessed a bird's hollow bones in which to feel the atmosphere's shift.

And Melander, Melander's personal orbit was detail: Melander navigating, finding fresh water for the cask, fetching firewood, mothering the canoe and its stowage; Melander sew your button for you, treat your blister, commiserate your ache of knee; the edge strength to hold all into place, Melander provided.

More than this henwork he saw to, though. Subtract parts from this extensive man in their successive value to the escape, the ultimate item will be his tongue. For Melander knows what poets and prime ministers know, that the cave of the mouth is where men's spirits shelter. His gift of gab stood him well with crews on all the vessels of his voyaging. Now he works words on Wennberg and Braaf and Karlsson like a polish rag on brass. "Keep your hair on, Wennberg, there'll be supper quick as quick...Braaf, it would be pretty to think this canoe will paddle itself, but it won't. Get the holiday out of your stroking, aye?... Karlsson, that surf looks to me like worse and more of it. Let's bend our way around, so-fashion..."
Could you, from high, have held to view a certain time of each evening now—the brink when dark is just overcoming dusk—you would see a surprising tracery of bright embers southward from New Archangel: the fires of each campsite of the canoe men. Few, as yet, but trending, definitely trending, drafting fresh pattern along the night coast.

Rather as if fireflies mischievously were taking positions atop the constellation Ursa Major, the bear, and distending it into, say, a—

giraffe.

camel.
"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 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 carousel.

"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.

The past few days, Melander had traded about with Karlsson,
thinking it well that more than one of them be able to handle
paddle,
the steering canoe, and that these waters were the place to do it.
Melander had learned from his Kolosh fishing crew that the practice
of some southward natives was to dub the bowman of a canoe "Captain
Nose." Accordingly, with Karlsson's move forward Melander bestowed
the title on him, and Braaf and Wennberg took it up. For the next
while, it was all "Captain Nose, Your Honor, what's it to be for
supper tonight?" and "May I suggest, Captain Nose, that it's nice
to see something ahead besides Melander's back?"

tosaful passed before could
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. Be it said, among these four watermen waited cross-currents 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. Wennberg this elevated 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 though 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.

"Red berry pudding,"
"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 red berry pudding for a rye-cake right now as I would. Currant jam on it, you'd trip your own mother to get to it, too, you would."

"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 spiny, yellow-brown mottled 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."

"I saw a bear make supper on fish once, near Ogreskoil."

"Maybe all this fuss with cooking isn't needed."

Skinned and baked rock cod over coals, the dogfish had proved surprisingly civil to the taste, and
Karlsson's relief was such that he was breaking out in words. "He looked big as a bullock. But he swatted salmon out of the water and peeled off the skin with his claws, ate it daintily as anything."

"You'd ought to have 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, he places the waterproof mapcase beside him. 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 Tehenkov 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 quill-pushers 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 oddly paired, stew, islands left as Hecetia and Noyes, Baker and Suemez, Dall and San Fernando, from the crisscross of British and Spanish explorations, New Archangel.

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
"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'd
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. And cloaking rain breadth. After days of hovering gray the breath 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
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's it all?" asked Braaf. "Like those poles the Kolosh put up, but bigger."

"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, Bellabelas, 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, this 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
costal 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
wrinkless 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 daggerman 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.

From his resumed place at the bow, Melander studied back along the canoe at the others. Braaf with his paddle across the gunwales and his fingers restless atop the wood as if absently plucking music. Wennberg eyeing askance at the wide water. Stock-still, Karlsson; the steering paddle needed his skill today.

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
even a foremast of man, 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.

"Got a lump in it, it has," Melander admitted as a wave shuddered the canoe.

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 glassily found Melander, seemed to mull the suggestion, then shook his wide head.

"Drag it up," Melander insisted. "You've got to."

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 whitey 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 that landline 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 mix of the two.

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.

"A fast ship’s always wet forward," he called out, the while wondering how much more the water would thicken.
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.

"Melander!" Karlsson called forward. "We need be steadier with the paddles. That slap the Kolosh do, let's try..."

"Be the drum, my lad," Melander agreed instantly. "Braaf, Wennberg, listen sharp..."

Karlsson began as the next wave struck the canoe, quivered it. He paddled twice, deep strokes; then rapped his paddle against the side of the canoe, just below the gunwale.
The craft meanwhile mounted the roll of water, another hummock waited to slide under the hull; when it came, again Karlsson's double stroke and rap to signal pause.

The other three took the rhythm and the canoe steadied its pace, two climbing strokes up each wave, the tap of waiting, then next wave and same again.

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 his pulse stroke stroke slap, stroke stroke slap. But he somehow nothing but the pace of paddle, ...But he did hear the near-whisper in front of 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 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 Shone 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, it to be done...

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

broke

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.

"Mother'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 freschet the pulse of attraction between them. Drop and drop and drop, Karlsson evaded lithely, stepping back and forth around the girth 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.

And the wind stiffened. By the afternoon, there were roars of air. A sky-filling sound like that of vast flame. The wind itself seemed cross-purposed, now in great speed to one direction and the next moment whooshing back. Kaigani meanwhile turned ice-gray, with slopes and pools of foam everywhere on it.

When firewood was needed, the men cautiously went out from the shelter in pairs, one to gather, the other to watch for widomakers flying down out of the shore forest. Often, a gust slammed so hard a man had to bend his knees to stay upright.

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

During a lull, 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.
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. "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.
"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
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."
"Tell us a thing, Braaf. You've earned with your pockets, as they say. What's the harpest thing you ever stole?"

Braaf blinked in Wennberg's direction. "Your nose, from up your ass where you usually keep it."

"Just trying to be civil, you Stockholm whelp. Something to pass the time from squatting on this Goddamned sand, I thought."

"The pair of you," Melander conciliated. "Don't make a feather into five hens."

Braaf eyed up into the line of timber, "Could tell you, though, if I wanted. If I was asked right."

The request for etiquette sank through to Wennberg. "Oh, God's green socks, bones, all right, Braaf, all right—would you be so kind as to tell us whatever the hell is it you have in mind?"

"A time, I was working slow—"

"Working? I thought this was going to be true."

"Near enough the truth for common purposes, as we say on shipboard." Melander suggested. "Let him get on with it, Wennberg."

"Your little finger's between your legs, Wennberg. Working slow is a way we go about it in the streets. Walk as if counting the cobblestones, that's what it means. Do that, and you see what's around."

See who's forgot a window, or whose purse is sleeping fat in his coat. So I saw the thimble then. A shopman was sweeping—"

"Thimble? You went round Stockholm stealing thimbles? Christ and the devil, Braaf, some tales I've heard in my time but—"

"The thimble's the chance, iron-puddler. Means you see a chance for yourself. Haven't you heard anything in this world but a hammer?"

Wennberg muttered this or that. Braaf resumed.

"The shopman was sweeping the steps. Had one of those birch brooms--widow's musket they're called, isn't that so, Wennberg? So he had his back away from me, and the door open. I slipped in, knew I had to be fast. A shopkeeper likes to be clever. Else he wouldn't be a shopkeeper. Sometimes he'll stash money right there, in some crock like any other. Biscuits here and salt herring there and just maybe rijksdalers somewhere around. This time, there're crocks on parade. All along there. So I picked one, lifted the lid. And there they were, rijksdalers and more of them. My pockets had mumps when I went out of the place. I slid behind the shopman, he's at the other end of the steps by now, ask him is the store open? Never to the likes of me, he says. Runs me off. Tells himself, clever man like him he'll not let in some street stray."

"The money, Braaf," asked Wennberg. "What'd you do with it all?"

Braaf reflected. "It lasted just about as long as it's taken to tell of 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 the waiting. Chance, you know so God—all much, 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, 'Tumbleup.'"

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 newcomer 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.

Another frontier pin-spot of great name, 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. This 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. Saal 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.

Above the bow, just there where the interior of the canoe came to sharpness and the prow began to rise—just there where Melander had told him to target, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his arms to the height of his neck. Then with one last grunt let it crash onto the cedar craft.

The crunch was not loud, to Wennberg the first luck anywhere in this situation. But the end of the canoe, thin-carved for its sharp slide through water, split open—and back from the rock as well, a fracture wide as the side of a hand sprung toward 'midship'.

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, who had ended up in the bow, turned and hurried a
shot at the two riflemen. It missed but caused them
to flinch back from the bullet's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle-Jesus-paddle-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing.
Another toss of water, this one nearer. 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.