last draft

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be transported from Sitka. That he would have been willing to do so was based on his confident assumption he would somehow be able to pilfer them back.

Stealing was in him like blood and breath; the Russians had tried to lash it from him out of parentless by the age of seven he had been a street boy in Stockholm, grown up by begging and thieving, and had come to son of a prostitute and on his own steady Alaska because the other site beckoning to him was OO jail. His arrival at Sitka, with arrived at Sitka the year after Melander and Karlsson, and at once loaves of bread and skinning knives and other unattached items began to vanish, the Russians venting fury on the shoreline natives for the outbreak. The Swedes guessed differently, for Braaf became a kind of barracks peddler... and because he was diplomatic enough not to steal anything important from his countrymen, nothing was said.

It would have been hard to make a case against Braaf. At Twenty, he had the round ruddy face of a farm boy--an apple of a face--and a gaze which seemed to loft innocently just above the eyes of whomever he was talking to: as if he were measuring you for a hat. interestedly He ~~seemed to~~ lk up & forth Melder's forehd to K n's as M ~~spoke~~ talked to him 7. plan escape Then his eyes came level c thers

and the last saloon of all, the Rainbow, did a more malicious one. The Rainbow gathered in the hardest drinkers of the valley and let them encourage one another.

The middling-sized saloon seemed innocent enough at first. Next door was one of the town's two cafes, also named the Rainbow, and in back was a large hall where dances were held every month or so. A sizeable portion of the country's social life took place inside the two Rainbows and the hall behind them. But soon enough, you noticed that the drinkers who came to the Rainbow night after night did not take their beer slowly and with plenty of talk, as most of the Stockman's regulars did. The Rainbow crowd tossed down whiskey shots and quickly bought one another a next round.

The Rainbow was the one place which made me uneasy for Dad. Whenever I got sleepy in one of the other saloons, I would go out to our pickup, clutch the gearshift into low to clear it out of my way, and lie down on the seat with a coat over me. If I couldn't keep warm or something woke me, I would hunt Dad down again and start asking when we were going home. Most times his answer was, <u>We'll go in just a minute, son</u> and three or four of these automatic replies later, we probably would be on the road. But the rule didn't hold at the Rainbow. Whatever he told me there about how soon we would be leaving, the drink buying would go on, and time stretched farther and farther into the night.

The Sea Runners

by Ivan Doig

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dedication for THE SEA RUNNERS

To John Roden

for splicing the lifeline at Ellen Creek

The old ocean at the land's foot, the vast
Gray extension beyond the long white violence...
And the gray air haunted with hawks:
This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen.
--Robinson Jeffers, "The Place for No Story"

for THE SEA RUNNERS front matter

Books by Ivan Doig

THE SEA RUNNERS (1982)

WINTER BROTHERS (1980)

THIS HOUSE OF SKY (1978)

REVISED

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 sleds across the curling crest of wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of this scene, a shore of black spruce forest. On a modern chart of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca this particular landfall is written in as Arisankhana Island. None of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in a ~~February~~ winter dusk of the year 1853, however, knows anything of this name, nor would it matter to their prospect if any did.

Now the canoemen as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf. More days than ~~Day and day and day, they~~ they wish to count 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, afraid a number of times in these days; brave almost as often. Here at Arisankhana they land wetly, heft their slim but laden craft across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and salmonberry.

"Hope to Christ"--the broad man, Wennberg, 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 in 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 was of Melander's making. In any day's comings and goings at that far-north assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity, Melander you would have spied early. Toplofty 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.

"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 were fisher-folk, generation upon generation automatically capable with their reaping nets ~~set-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~~ rapidly apt, the type of sea roamer of whom it was appraised that each drop of his blood was black Stockholm tar and his every hair

a rope yarn. ~~A dozen~~ Ten or so years of sailing the Baltic and the North Sea bettered his position ~~bettering~~ 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.

Just 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, that world-topping wilderness yet was, known as, its wholesale purchase by the United States--and consequent rechristening 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 ~~known farthest~~ farthest thought of new endeavor at the onset of that voyage, a pair of outlooks swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The first loomed square ahead--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. This, 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 ought to snuff out these steamsnorters before they get a start, aye?"

Melander maybe under different policy would have gone on to earn his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company at New Archangel like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, say, that along the adjoining 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 per cent of 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. Simpson, McLoughlin, Douglas, Campbell, Rae, others: ~~Finlayson, McLoughlin, Simpson, Mackenzie, Fraser, others:~~

Caledonians who whittled system into the wilderness, names known even yet at 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 aver, "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 St. Petersburg. 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 the name Melander 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, right enough, but not in the direction 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

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 only whenever the Russian governor, Rosenberg, took his official retinue on an outing to the hot springs at Ozherskoi, an outpost south ~~eighteen miles along the coast~~ a dozen miles 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 the voyage back to Stockholm and Kronstadt. "Friend sailor," the overseer began, "we are going to give you a chance to dry out your bones a bit," 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 herring 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

conversationalists in the workmen's barracks to see where the gibe had ~~flow~~ flown from. ~~In New Archangel,~~ a fresh turn of tongue was all too rare in New Archangel. Melander 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: barrackmates--were an everysided lot. Finns and Swedes under this roof, about all they could count in common were their ~~seven years'~~ term of 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 simply were 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 puddles. Thugs, thieves, hopeless sots, no few murderers, the flotsam of any vast frontier, jostled among them. ("Where," an appalled governor of New Archangel once wrote home to a grandee of the Russian-American Company, "do you get such men?") But so did debtors, escaped serfs, those whose only instinct was to drift. Melander, by now no admirer of anything Russian, saved his contempt for the New Archangel officialdom. These others, the Okhotskans, simply had made humankind's usual blunder, forgot to get themselves highborn.

As for this crew in evening dawdle all around him, they nested here idle as ~~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 glimpse his way. Grinning Melander 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 topgallant 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 forested slope, Verstovia presided up there broad and becrowned, the first presence each morning, the last at every dusk. And farther, snowier crags attended Verstovia 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 dull, the wage never quite totted up 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.

Melander moved off toward the central street of the settlement and encountered one of the Company clerks, no doubt on his way to the Governor's hill garden. Many of the Castle Russians strolled such a constitutional at evening, any custom of home being paced through more devoutly here than in Muscovy 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 offered with a civil nod and was greeted in turn. Perhaps a Melander could not rise at New Archangel, but at least he could 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. Which meant that while this slow vesper of the Alaskan day was the time Melander liked best, it also cast all the remindful shadows of what he had become absented from. His birthland. The sea. And his chosen livelihood. Triple tines of exile. Much to be prodded by.

Only because the route afforded the most distance for his restless boots, Melander roved on west through the narrow shoreline crescent of settlement. Past log building after log building, bakery, joinery, warehouses, officers' quarters, smithy; if bulk of timbering were the standard of civilization, New Archangel could 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," 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~~ stockade with its closed sally port here stoppering New Archangel until morning.

Melander still needed motion. And so 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 damned 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, 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 go to slag in a mere few seasons of forge: Melander aland was still Melander, First Mate.

A raven flapped past, pulled a glance from the tall man. The

black birds ruled the roofs of New Archangel and their metallic comment up there somehow 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 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 the sound for another mutter against twittering Finns.

It was not that, though. This:

"Maybe ~~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~~ swig outside the stockade, whyn't we? The farther you can ever get from these Russians, the better anything tastes. Aye?"

Tin mugs of tea 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.

mod 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.

This Karlsson was a part-time bear-milker. That is to say, ordinarily he worked as an axman in the timber-felling crew, but also had sufficiently skilled himself 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. ~~This~~ 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 towering exception to this slander, but Karlsson, narrow bland face like that of a village parson, would have been there among the wall-props.

"They say it'll be rice kasha for noon again. A true Russian feast they're setting us these days, anything you want so long as it's gruel, aye?"

"Seems so," answered Karlsson.

Sociability was nothing that Melander sought out of Karlsson. A time, he had noticed Karlsson canoeing in across Sitka Sound here, back from a day's hunting. Karlsson's thrifty strokes went beyond steady. Tireless, in a neat-handed, workaday fashion. The regularity

of a small millwheel, Melander had been put in mind of as he watched Karlsson paddle.

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~~ torsion of their journey-to-come tremendous in them at the moment, were talking large of the bright success ahead, what adventure the frontier life would furnish and how swiftly 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 northern sun over his future.

"I don't see why that water doesn't pucker them blue. They must have skins like seals with the hair off."

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

Karlsson's ~~answer~~ reply this time was a shrug.

One further 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 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 had hold of Karlsson's towrope but he didn't go around yipping the news.

Melander ~~now~~ swept the bay and channel, south to north, with an arm, as if in salute to the day. He purposely had chosen this rainless morning of late June, gentle gray-silver overcast cupping the day's light to lend clarity down to the spruce islands of the harbor 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 escape on this most silken of New Archangel days, he truly was ready as ready.

Melander's words, however, began where his motion ended. "Those canoes are longer than they look, aye?" In a row on the beach the natives' cedar shells lay; the line of lithe craft, like sea creatures dozing side by side on the 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~~ a lot of wheres," said Melander now. "We need just four of them."

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

A first south-pointing stab of shoreline, like a broad knife blade. "This one, we've got"-- Baranof Island, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now.

A speckle of isles, then another large landform, south-pointing too, like the sheath Baranof had been pulled from. "The Queen Charlottes."

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

At last, fourth and biggest solidity in this geographical flagstone of Melander's, the American coastline descending to the Columbia River. The place where the dirt-lines of coast and the river met, Melander Xed large. "Astoria," Melander said this ~~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.

p. 16A follows →

Six weeks' canoe journey, Melander estimated, to Astoria. If could manage to sail part of the voyage, 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,~~ again, 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; vast 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 Smålander, 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"--this was the anthem of Smålanders. Right now the lean man was appraising the horizon of Alaska as if someone had offered him the whole tumbled country for forty ~~dalers~~ riksdaler.

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~~ onto 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 in 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 the matter. For empires exist on the principle of constellations in the night sky—pattern imposed across unimaginable expanse—and the New Archangels of the planet at the time, whether

named Singapore or Santa Fe or Dakar or Astoria or Luanda or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they themselves were.

That voyage which deposited Melander and Karlsson into their indentured situation illustrates 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 tensing one another into place for decades to come. North America: the gray-gowned wee queen of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and Bella Coolas, the United States was taking unto itself the western vastness between the Mississippi and the Pacific, the Tsar's merchants of ~~St. Petersburg~~ and St. Petersburg ~~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 needed 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~~ fingers from either hand to be gone from New Archangel. He had after all the thief's outlook that in this many-cornered 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 was a Stockholm street boy, son of a waterfront prostitute and the captain of a ~~Danish~~ Baltic fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska he had veered to because after a steady growth of talent from beggary to picking pockets to thievery the other destination ~~prominently~~ imminently beckoning to him was ~~kasrell~~ fängelse: prison.

So Braaf turned up as another in the 1851 contingent to New Archangel, and at once skinning knives and snuff boxes and twists of Circassian 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~~ the new young Stockholmer among them ~~had~~ having set up shop as a kind of human commissary in the barracks. Because Braaf stayed reasonable in his prices--interested less in remuneration 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 from his own barrackmates, nothing was said ~~against~~ of his ~~enterprise.~~ against him.

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

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

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

In his quiet manner, Karlsson suggested Braaf had better shove a bung in his spout and hear out Melander's proposition.

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

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

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

"Astoria," Melander repeated with patience. "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 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? Step in with us, Braaf, it'll take your fast fingers to get us from 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 another time. With us, are you, or not?"

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

"Astoria. It is there. I have known sailors whose ships have

called there. ~~Perhaps~~ Could be we'll not even need to go that far, ~~if we~~ maybe meet a merchantman or trading ship or whaler along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil, won't matter which. 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,~~ colonialism, New Archangel was a mapdot unlike any other. Simultaneously a far-north backwater port and capital of a territory greater than France and Spain and England and Ireland taken 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 in-fighting. 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 fur 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 Koloshes--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 at Sitka, where miles of harbor indent the archipelagic shoreline, an inlet "infinitely sinuous," said an early observer, Sitka, where the deep notch of bay is sided by a handy shelf of shore. 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 stone callus was the strategic bayside point: the Koloshes 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, 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 squatted there in the air at the mound-end of New Archangel's single street. At the opposite extent rose the onion dome and carrot spire of the comely little Russian Orthodox cathedral. Betwixt and around, the habitations of New Archangel amounted to two hundred or so squared-log buildings, many painted an aspiring yellow as though tint and nearby shore qualified them as seaside cottages. But their rooflines were hipped, the heavy style slanting down in all four directions from the ridgepole; and where gables were fashioned in, they were windowed with small spoked semicircles of glass, like half-suns which never managed either to set or to rise. A burly low-slung town, New Archangel for all its best efforts was, beneath the lording styles of cathedral and Castle.

One aspect further, and this one the true civic eccentricity. This port of Russian America had as large a fleet of ships permanently aland as was customarily to be found in its harbor. Make-do was the architect here. When they no longer could be safely sailed, hulks were winched out of Sitka Sound onto shore and then improvised upon as needed. ("The Tsar's ~~notion of an~~ unsinkable squadron," of course is Melander's gibe.) 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. This habit of collecting hull-corpses ever since lent New Archangel, as one visitor summed it, "an original, foreign, and fossilized

kind of appearance."

The morning after Braaf joined the escape plan, Karlsson emerged from around a corner of the cathedral, on his way from the Scandinavian workmen's barracks a short span to its north, and began to walk ~~walked~~ the brief dirt street between God's domain and the Governor's. So deft with an ax that he often was sent to help with the shaping of a sailtimber, Karlsson was delegated to work this day with the shipwrighting ~~shipbuilding~~ crew.

He very nearly could have arrowed to the shipyard with his eyes bound over, merely following the delicious waft of yellow cedar. Yet before reaching the 'wrighting store of timbers the far side of ~~shipyard just beyond~~ Baranov's Castle, Karlsson veered west toward the stockade gate and the Kolosh village beyond.

Stepped outside and along the wall toward the beach.

Hunkered and began to scour the blade of his ax in the pale sand. Polishing away rust, this conscientious timberwright.

And second work too, for as he squatted, Karlsson from the corner of his eye studied 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, sat 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 crowned the cathedral, the peaks were precisely those a child would draw. Sharp tall pyramids of forest, occasionally a lesser summit rounded as a cannonball for comparison's sake. Topknots of snow showed here and there, but the color everywhere else on these stretching peaks was the black-green which only a northern coastal forest enmixes.

A kind of colossal constancy breathes at you from 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 began his shipyard hewing, Braaf materialized 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 managed 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 was in service as a cannon battery aimed into the Kolosh village, but dry rot had made a casualty of this vessel of Braaf's.

After a moment of endeavor at the doorlock with a small hook of metal, he slipped through the gangway carpentered into the ship's hull when it became a storehouse and crept to the forecastle. Within a particular one of the several stave-sprung barrels there he made a deposit, a walrus-ivory snuffbox which hitherto was the possession of a Russian quartermaster.

Then, per Melander's instructions, Braaf began 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 was the weather, changing even now, for New Archangel lived two days of three in rain and oftener than that in cloud. "Always autumn," it was said of ~~the gray~~ this diluted 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 ~~lap~~ immerse 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 would pinto the forest flanks. Between times a silken rain probably had ~~sighted~~ sifted into the New Archangel air, a dew standing in droplets on clothing before anyone quite became aware of it, and it could be a hundred hours before a man cast his next shadow. Yet the diminutive port within all this swirl was a place of queer clarity as well, its rinsed air somehow holding a tint of blue light which caused everything to stand forth: smallest swags of spruce limbs on mountains a mile off, rock skirts of the timbered islands throughout the harbor, the gold-and-russet trim of seaweed along those stone hems. Voices and the barking of dogs carried extraordinarily.

At mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging toward chores for the noon meal, Melander on workbreak presented himself from within the saltery being constructed on the point of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares amply in the wide tides of this region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tideflat a pig was

rooting up clams. His finds, one after another, were snatched from him by crows.

Melander watched for a moment, then laughed.

Other workmen inquired to him over their mugs of tea.

Melander pointed to the raucous gulping birds: "The Castle Russians at one of their banquets."

New Archangel's tenantry was fully equal ~~Fully equal~~ in complication and unlikelihood to its architecture and geography and weather ~~was New Archangel's tenantry.~~ the governor an officer agreed upon by the Russian-American Company; was The settlement was ruled by the Russian navy, administered by a covey of ~~Russian-American~~ Company clerks and other functionaries; seasonally abounded with Aleut fur hunters; relied 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 added 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 imported the seven-year men from Scandinavia. Colony within a colony, the hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly were Finns; one sift more, and the few dozen Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlsson were at last accounted.

Yet not even this social pyramid, sharp-tipped and broad-bottomed as the triangle peaks above the little port, indicated the most numerous populace on Sitka Sound. The Koloshes, the Sitka Tlingits. By their own legend, People of the Frog, a restless and vivid clan who had migrated to Sitka Sound with their great-eyed carved emblem in tow

behind their canoe fleet. Now their low-roofed longhouses straggled for nearly a mile along the beach west of New Archangel's huddle of buildings, and the stockade wall of defense, ~~twenty-five hundred yards long,~~ strategic batteries of cannon, 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~~ Stikine clan that at last a ~~years-standing~~ perpetual quarrel might be called quit. When the ~~Stikeen~~ Stikine peace delegation arrived, thirty-five of them were slain quick as a butchering, the few others 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 Koloshes, the way New Archangel each and every day needed to set its most vigilant face toward those who might scheme to get in, it would take someone of Melander's angle of mind to count on as advantage for getting out.

Steam whiffed around Karlsson as he stepped into the workmen's bathhouse. Every seventh day the vat of water was heated to boil, bucketsfull then sluiced onto the hot stones ringing the vat. 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~~ We could use a few such outside, aye?"

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

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

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 shock of rye when your Småland 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."

Melander swabbed sweat from himself with a spruce whisk.

"Aye, well." The answer to that is not to fall, nor 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...I stayed, I suppose, for a pretty sight. Pretty face, it'd been, 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. Up into the high north, there. Ice high as a church eave, they tell of along those shores. And creatures. Carpenter of a brig I shipped on, an old man-of-war's man, 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,' said to 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'll take together along this coast will make up for it."

"A stumble, that's nothing," said a third voice. "Unless a noose is around your neck just then."

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, though." Now that all three of them were at hand, Melander was, for him, singularly businesslike. "What we need to talk through 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 put your fingers to?"

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 plunder 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're the one with the lever to work that gate open for us." Melander instructed Karlsson with monumental joviality now. "It's there between your legs."

In New Archangel's next days, a gleaner drifted about within its walls like a cloudlet of steam freed from the bathhouse. So adept a provisioner did Braaf prove to be that, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery, Melander had to ration out his stealing assignments.

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 for trade with the natives, some ~~several~~ fishing lines and hooks, a blanket apiece, and a coil of rope.

During August he added a gaff hook, three excellent Kolosh

daggers, a number of candles, ~~a small candle lantern~~, a couple of hatchets, a fire steel and flint apiece, another blanket ~~apiece~~ each, and a leather mapcase waterproofed with birch tar.

September's gleanings comprised a second compass--double certain about navigation, Melander wanted to be--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 Koloshes 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 encupping it all, that most beautiful stunt of wood, a great cedar taken down with reverence and wile--I shall cut you down, tree. You will not twist and warp, tree. You will not have knot holes, tree. Black bear skins have been laid in the place where you will fall, tree. Fall down on them, tree.--and then hollowed and

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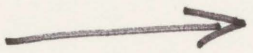
and shaped and stretched by heated water into a sleek pouch of vessel, its wooden skin not much more than the thickness of a thumb: exaltation of design and thrift of line, the jugglery of art somehow perfected



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 attested that he 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 style and fettle, 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. By any man's standards, a most 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 herring ~~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.

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

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 requested 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, oval outlines with black oval centers to them, like egg-shaped eyes, likely 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 Koloshes 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 further needed be a long 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 guarding creature, each morning at six the stockade gate near the westmost corner of New Archangel ~~winked~~ came open, at six each evening it swung resolutely shut.

Only during those hours of day were the Koloshes 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 uplifting Baranov's Castle. Scan 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 ~~big~~ gate's second and unofficial--and by order of the governor, absolute--curfew was full dark.

Karlsson quirked his mouth enough to show skepticism, for him a typhoon of emotion. Melander was one who would have you believe that sideways is always true north. But Karlsson was a vane of stiffer sort. He possessed a close idea of his own capabilities and could gauge himself with some dispassion as to whether he was living up to them. (That he had not much interest in people who lacked either capability or gauge, his stand-off style more than half-hinted.) What Melander was proposing in this gate enterprise, 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. Simply a burden-bearer of the sort life always puts double load onto: in this era when it was said, "Better even to go to the army than to Russian America," Bilibin had ended up at New Archangel and shouldering a musket as well.

For 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 Bilibin's superiors over the years had sufficiently knouted and berated him that he took some care not to rush from under his canopy of dark into their attention.

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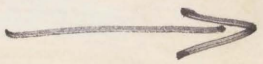
Thus: the first time Karlsson arrived back to the gate past curfew, Bilibin blustered a threat to march him double-quick to the sergeant in charge of the sentries.

"He'll knout you red, Viking. My scars ache to think of those he'll stripe on you, oh yes..."



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

The next time, having conferred beforehand with Melander, Karlsson staggered later than ever from the Kolosh village to Bilibin's gate, singing. Reedily, but singing.

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

Also, he carried a jug of the native liquor called hootchina. Which without undue difficulty he persuaded Bilibin to swig a reviveful mouth's worth from: "Have fifteen drops, Pavel, it drives the snakes from one's boots..."

That his gate performances were credited by Bilibin without more than a first squint of suspicion astounded Karlsson. Was the world so bait-hungry as this? Was he, Karlsson, so deft 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, Bilibin was a man perpetually parched. "The old sirs up there in the Castle," he groused 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 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," Bilibin 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~~ early November, Melander announced in his procedural way that the time had arrived for Braaf to ~~steal~~ acquire the coastal maps by which they would navigate south.

"It'll be the Tebenkov maps we want. One Russian who had something other than cabbage between his ears, Tebenkov was. Made his captains chart all of this coastline when he was governor here,

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 in hell's time the steamship gets fired up again. Read Russian, can you, Braaf?"

Braaf shook his head.

"No? Well, less 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 righted itself.

"So. It seems to fall to you. This'll at least make 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. Need 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've done, I've done," ~~"I have them, I have them,"~~ the tall man affirmed edgily. "But a narrow enough matter it was. Christ on the cross, Braaf, how you go around like a ~~deacon's~~ cat'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 figured..."

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

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

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

Through the cold lightning of fright it did register on Braaf that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian. Leftward, 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? Wait, listen now--"

"No, don't stroll off and don't put them down." Not suggestion now: orders. "We'll have a visit till we see which happens." Wennberg planted himself in front of Braaf as companionably as if he had every matter in the memory of the race to talk over with him. "Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your long-ass 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 spoke nothing. Nor Wennberg. Braaf was wordless with desperation. For a moment, there the three of them clustered, pegs of quiet centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate as if time had snagged to a stop within their little radius, while around them morning life eddied, quartermasters and overseers and promyshlenniki and shipwrights and caulkers and brassworkers and sailors ~~and Koloshes~~ and Castle officers, New Archangel humanity in all its start-of-day seeps and spurts of motion.

"So, Melander," Wennberg snapped their silence. "Braaf and I're just talking over how much heavier hides've gotten this year. A man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these days, seems like."

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

"You're always a deep one, 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. "Deep as the devil's pocket, isn't he, hmm?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shan't we?" Melander offered rapidly. "Matters of weight can always be talked over."

Wennberg hesitated. Cast a glance into the thinning stream of the workshift. Then, 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 hefty, wide-legged Wennberg, strode toward a building not far inside the stockade gate. The middle of this structure was transected by the smithing shop, and within its open arched doorway stood three huge forges, aligned from the outside in like stabled iron creatures. The outermost of these dusky fire-bins was Wennberg's.

From where Wennberg stood day-long as he directed the heavy dance of hammer and iron, Melander scanned out into the parade ground. All comings and goings there, the line of view took in, and most particularly the route into Braaf's storage hulk just across the way.

Rueful, Melander wagged his head in admission. Then proferred: "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 in ~~chains~~ irons and off to pass your years in Siberia."

"Tsk. ~~Chains~~ Irons, you say. That'd maybe be more burden even than Braaf's armload, just there. More than Swedes ought to have to carry for Russians, aye? What makes you think we're kissing good-bye to New Archangel?"

"Don't come clever with me, Melander. Been watching your trained packrat Braaf, I have, 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 burly man rumbled. "You're down the toilet looking up, and don't forget it."

"Come down with these fevers often, do you, Wennberg? Say we wanted to flee, just how would we? New Archangel is its own place of the world, and not much in between it and anything."

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

"Silence I've never much believed in. But school me: why're you interested in notions of fleeing from here?"

"My reasons're yours. Because I'm sick of life under these shit-beetle Russians." 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 suited up in ~~chains~~ irons and sent west into snowland, if that's your choice. High-and-mighty can't save you from this, Melander. Decide."

Melander calculated Wennberg. Then the serious smile made its appearance.

"First you preach to poor Braaf of too much weight, now you keep on at me about 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 better choice was to shepherd 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 ought be done.

Melander agreed it to be an understandable ambition, and laudable too, but no. Through and through he had thought the issue, 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 shortly 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'll need 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 could 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 seemed to find it of interest that the man was amounting to something 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-nosed one 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 pigeon off to the Russians."

Challenge of this raw sort was not at all what Wennberg had come shopping for.

"Your Goddamned tongue's fatter than your judgment, Melander," the blacksmith flared. "It's not for you to tell me who stands where. You forget. Walk straight out of here, I can, and show the Russians the hidey-hole in that hulk where you've had Braaf ~~doing stash,~~ stashing, these months."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend," 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 get ourselves a new hidey-hole," Melander went on. "Braaf has the knack of ~~digging an eye to~~ stumbling onto such places, aye? So this new cache now, you can know where it is when we load the canoe, and not an eyeblink before. 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, you against the three of us, that's the ~~pony race~~ tilt of it, and we'll see who the Russians choose to believe. Our souls are fresh and there's spring green in our eye, so far as they know. Nor'd you be the first one here to be thought off his head, or a ~~maker~~ merchant 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~~ take a second look up the queen's skirt before you wager."

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

"Careful of your words, Wennberg. If you're coming with us, we have ~~much~~ a lot of time ahead together and don't need a sack of bad feelings. If you're going off to the Russians"-- an even more eloquent Melander pause-- "you don't want your last sentiments weighing 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 ~~vanish~~ vanished. Words were having their spines snapped there, the other three could see.

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

"~~You~~ Goddamned 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 know down from up. How do we go be pilgrims in the wilderness of water?"

Circle the plan as he would like a farmer working at a stump, Wennberg found only a few questions to hack at when Melander was finished.

"Why all this fuss with old Bilibin? Whyn't 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 Bilibin alive, Rosenberg will take it out on him."

"What of rifles? How many can Braaf here lay his fancy fingers on?"

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

Braaf blinked rapidly 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 Goddamned man-of-war!"

"Name me a better cargo, can you, 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 in Hell-all 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,~~ firearms, he was willing to help out. A sentry's ~~musket~~ rifle had been sent into the smith shop for a new buttplate. He could hold the gun back by saying he hadn't got around to affixing the repair yet.

Gravely Melander congratulated him 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~~ weaponry.

"Just where's our little ~~magnet~~ storekeeper 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' clubhouse," 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. And sardonically, Wennberg: "Next, Braaf, you'll want to parade up to the Castle Russians and ask can we 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 ~~sentinels~~ sentries.

But, as Wennberg demanded, not without suspicion, why unsentried...?

"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~~ mark us a safe time," Melander mused. "But snatching those guns loose..."

"Wennberg," murmured Braaf.

"Mister Blacksmith!" Melander proclaimed.

"You squareheaded 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 or twelve hundred miles of ~~paddling~~ canoeing 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.~~ malevolent. 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 acquisitionist and ~~stallion~~ draft ox 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 a hard 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. 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 could be found a way to betray the escape.

Certainty did not seem to be anywhere in the ~~matter.~~ proposition. If the Russians could be convinced and then relied upon to reward him,

say grant return to Sweden; but that the Russians would forfeit a blacksmith so readily did not seem likely, 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 steady threat to his life. If he fled with the other three, into freedom; or perhaps into the bottom of that ocean like cats in a sack.

All of it strummed a man's nerves, not to say what fret this place New Archangel played on you anyway. Example, the 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. There near Baranov's Castle he reversed route to fetch it. 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 up 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 crest of Alaska, before he picked out that the cross was merely the Russian cathedral's topmost one, that in the morning dark the green-painted spire under it blended invisibly against 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-planted cross, but that in his years here he had never noticed this illusion before. Every morning now, despite himself, Wennberg 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 the pair 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 say over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their say 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, to him the space of weeks until the escape was simply one more duration, and not so long as most. Time passed, or you put it past. All in all, Karlsson showed a good deal less impatience with New Archangel existence than any of the other three. A man built smoke-tight, as Melander has said of him. What then held Karlsson into the pattern of the escape?

Braaf too had wondered.

"Why're you?"

He and Karlsson were dutied, this day, to the warehouse where

bundling was done. Beaver pelts had been brought in by the ~~Koloshes~~ Koloshes. The light task Braaf took, folding each dried hide ~~in half~~ into a square, fur side in. Karlsson then stacked the bundled pelts into the big 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~~ adorn Chinamen, neither Braaf nor Karlsson grasped. But here was the habiliment 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 their leave-taking of New Archangel, 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."

"Not much of a word spender, are you?"

"Not much."

"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 it's never invited 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 ever but he peered more interestedly at Braaf. The angle at which the sight of the young thief entered his eyes seemed to have altered. After a moment, Karlsson said:

"Maybe to see how it'll be."

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 passed to Braaf. "Work this in those lily hands of yours, as much as you can every day. Get calluses 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 further 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 second 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 slat 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

for the months, and in those rows one hole for every day of month. Braaf next discovered that 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 the frequent religious days, a cross-in-a-circle penciled around four or five of the peg holes each month; the notion being that wherever an Aleut huntsman might roam in his fur harvest for the Tsar, he would have along this steadfast guide to orderly obeisance. Lazily crude, though, this penciling 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 seventh of January, 1853. By the Russian calendar, the night after Christmas.

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

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

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have that sergeant down

here," Bilibin called urgently, hustled from the hut sheltering him from the rain, and hurriedly ~~cracked~~ worked the gate. "Quick, in, in..."

From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the gate ~~wink~~ crack 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 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 this arrival and departure 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 festive night, and to the chuckles of the card players pulled on his rainshirt and stepped into the streaming blackness 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 cathedral and then the Russian men paying calls on each other, toasting at every stop until by nightfall the streets were full of crisscrossing bands of them shouting back and forth, "You beat to windward, we'll steer to lee!" 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