rewriting drafts, Jan-June '81

A high-nosed cedar canoe, ~~poised and buoyant~~ nimble as a seabird, atop a ~~sharp~~ tumbling white ridge of ocean.

Carried ~~up~~ nearer and ~~up~~ nearer by the water's determined sweep, ~~at the sky~~, the ~~nimble~~ craft now, in this first necessary picture in your mind, sleds across the curled ing crest of wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of black spruce forest. On a modern chart of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca this particular landfall is ~~inscribed as Aristazabal~~ written in as Arisankhana Island. ~~Three~~ None of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in a January dusk of the year 1853, however, know ~~nothing~~ anything of this name, nor would it matter to ~~them if they~~ their prospect if any did.

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

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

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

Their escape from New Archangel had been of Melander's making. In any day's comings and goings at that far-north shoreside assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity, you would have spied Melander early.

Tall man with lanks of arms and high hips, so that he seemed to be all long sections and hinges. His line of jaw ran ~~lengthy~~ long as well, and so too his forehead; in all the extent of ~~him~~ Melander, only the bright blue eyes and stub nose and short mouth ~~were~~ neighbored closely, ~~set~~, a sudden alert center of face amid the jaw-and-forehead expanse as if peering in wily surprise out of the hole of a tree trunk at you.

"A strong right arm is the lever of life, these Russians say. You'd think by chance the Castle Russians might once put the lever to something other than hoisting a glass of ~~vodka~~ champagne. Aye?"

Even Melander's manner of talking was prominently jointed, ~~into lengths,~~ the habit he had of ~~every so often~~ interrupting himself with a querulous "aye?" as ~~if~~ though affirming whether he really dared continue with so mesmerizing a line of conversation.

Needless to add of such a quiz, thirty-one times out of thirty Melander could be counted on, all his reluctance to dazzle further notwithstanding, to continue.

"But no, lie around up there like seals they all do, yip-yipping down at the rest of us..."

"To be a Russian is to be a toothache to the world."

Born on the isle of Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, Melander actually numbered in the landless nationality, that of the sea. Fisher-folk beyond memory, his people on Gotland had been, generation upon generation automatically capable with herring nets as if born with hands shaped only for that task. So it came as a startling flex of independence when Melander, himself beginning to resemble a sizable height of pine spar, went off from his village of Slite to tall-masted vessels. Aboard ship he proved instantly apt, the type of sea-roamer of whom it was appraised that his every hair was a rope-yarn and each drop of his blood black Stockholm tar, and in a dozen years of sailing the Baltic and North Atlantic he bettered his position almost voyage by voyage. "If I'd been born with brass on my corners, you'd one day be calling me admiral," Melander half-joked to his deckhands the day he was made first mate. It was that billet, second in command of a schooner bearing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm in the spring of 1851, the one which stunted Melander was to Alaska. Russian America, as it would be until the expanse of wilderness passed from Russian governance to American by sale in 1867 and this vital speck of port-and-capital called New Archangel would be rechristened to what the coast's natives knew it as, Sitka.

Although he had no farthest thought of it at the onset of that voyage, a pair of ~~matters of geography~~ outlooks swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The first was the ~~prospect of an~~ eleven-month expanse of return voyage ~~ahead~~ 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 was the Emperor Nicholas I, the Russian-American Company's steamship berthed against a backdrop of boundless Alaskan forest the ~~spring~~ morning ~~day~~ when Melander reached final exasperation with his dim captain.

~~Alaskan forest.~~ # Far from having a wind sailor's usual contempt for steam vessels, Melander was more than a little intrigued with these contraptions. Pointing course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism--this was just the sort of thing to appeal to Mister First Mate Melander. In a time and place earlier, he would have been the fellow you wanted to set a spire on a cathedral; in a later, to oversee a fleet of mail planes. But on an April day in 1851, at one of the rim-ends of the known world, what sat at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters which the fur-trading Russians historically had navigated, pre-Nicholas and pre-Melander, like men lurching across ice.

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

As will happen, Melander after signing on with the Russian-American Company did find his life altered by the alluring new nautical machinery, right enough, but not as hoped. Only seldom did the Russians fire 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 name of the vessel to Old Nick, on the ground that it consumed fuel at about the rate you might expect of Hell--and on the occasions when its paddlewheels were set into ponderous thwacking motion, positions aboard were snatched by bored officers of the small Russian navy contingent stationed at New Archangel. Melander was permitted to steam out with the Nicholas only whenever the Russian governor, Rosenberg, took his official retinue on an outing a little distance south along the coast from Sitka Sound, to the hot spring at an outpost called Ozherskoi. In Melander's first Alaskan year this happened precisely twice, and his sea-time-under-steam totaled six days.

The rest of his workspan? A Russian overseer conferred assignment on Melander as promptly as the supply schooner vanished over the horizon on its voyage back to Stockholm and Kronstadt. "Friend sailor, we are going to give you a chance to dry out your bones a bit," the overseer began, and Melander knew that what followed was not going to be good. Because of his ability of handling men and, from his time on Baltic voyages, his tongue's capability with a bit of Russian and a spatter of Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, Melander henceforth was in charge of the crew which salted catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder.

Melander maybe under different policy would have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company at New Archangel like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, let us say, that elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northmost North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company by learning to lead brigades of trappers and traders, keep the native tribes cowed or in collaboration, deliver a reliable 15 per cent profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, to hold those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the British crown which underlay the company's charter terms like an ornate watermark. Finlayson, McLoughlin, Simpson, Mackenzie, Fraser, others: Caledonians who whittled system into the wilderness, names we know even yet as this continent's northern roster of men of enterprise and empire. But maybe is only maybe, and the facts enough are that on the broad map of midnineteenth-century empires Alaska lies apart from the Hudson's Bay span of dominion across most of what has come to be Canada. That, indeed, this colossal crude crown of northwestmost wilderness territory is tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow. And that our man Melander's name is not to be discovered among any frontier baronage. Instead, Melander at New Archangel rapidly came to hold contempt for the life he and the other Swedes found themselves in as indentured laborers of the Russian-American Company's fur-gathering enterprise, within the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy. Seven-year men. "The Russians' oxen," as Melander more than once grumbled it.

Karlsson was a part-time bear-robber. That is to say, his upbringing near the forests of Skane had sufficiently skilled him as a woodsman that he was sent out with the hunting party which occasionally went out to help provision the port; to rob the bears, as it was jested. Ordinarily, he worked as an axman in the wood-cutting crew. He was the sort of man with nothing much to say, nor of whom much was said. It is told that at a Scandinavian festival, the Danes would be the ones dancing and laughing, the Norwegians trying to start a fight, the Finns passing bottles, and the Swedes standing along the wall waiting to be introduced. Melander made a tall exception to this jape; Karlsson, narrow bland face like that of a village parson, would have been there among the wall-props.

But sociability was not at all what Melander had in mind about Karlsson. A time, he had noticed Karlsson canoeing in Sitka Sound, back from a day's hunting. Karlsson's strokes went beyond steady: stopless. Watching him, Melander had been put in mind of the regularity of a millwheel.

Another impression of interesting constancy about Karlsson Melander also had stored away. The observation that the slender untalkative man visited more often to the women in the native village outside the stockade wall than did any of the merchants of wind who perpetually bragged in the barracks about their lust.

Or as Melander mused it to himself, "The mermaids have got hold of his towrope, but he never yelps about it, aye?"

What brought down Melander's decision in favor of Karlsson, however, was a tinier thing, a feather of instant remembered from shipboard. Karlsson had billeted to Alaska on the same schooner as Melander, and Melander recalled that just before sailing when others of the indentured group, the torque of the journey-to-come tremendous in them at the moment, talked large of the certain

success ahead, the excitement the frontier life would furnish and how rapidly and with what staggering profit their seven years of contract with the Russians would pass, Karlsson listened, gave a small mirthless smile and a single shake of his head, and moved off along the deck by himself. Whatever propelled Karlsson to Alaska, it had not been self-delusion.

Melander chose a rainless late-June morning, gentle gray-silver overcast cupping the day's light downward to lend clarity to the harbor's spruce islands and the sudden mountains behind the settlement, the usual morning wind off the bay lazed to a breeze, to approach Karlsson before work-call. Melander's thought was that if Karlsson would consider escape on the best of New Archangel's days, he was truly ready.

"Let's take our tea outside the stockade, away from the Russians," the better it tastes, "aye?"

Tin mugs in hand, the two of them sauntered past the sentry at the opened gateway of the stockade and went to the edge of the native village which extended in a long single-file of dwellings along the shoreline. As they stood and sipped, a dozen natives emerged from one of the nearest longhouses, men and women together and all naked, and waded casually into the bay to bathe.

"Those canoes are longer then they look, aye?" Melander began, motioning to the natives' cedar shells in a row on the beach before them; the line of lithe craft, like sea-creatures dozing side by side on the white sand, which his gaze had been drawn to when he stood

atop the stockade. "We could step into one here and step out at Stockholm."

Karlsson's face, all at once not ~~quite~~ nearly so bland, suggested the standard skepticism toward talk of uncooping oneself from New Archangel. Because of ~~New Archangel's~~ 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 ~~fine~~ thin point: where, except up to the sweet blue meadows of heaven, was there to go?

"The world has many wheres. We need ~~xx~~ just four of them."

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

A first south-pointing stab of shoreline, like a broad knife blade--Baranov Island, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now. A ~~scatter of smaller islands~~ speckle of isles, then a large landform, south-pointing too, like the sheath Baranov had been pulled from--the Queen Charlotte group of islands.

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

At last, fourth and biggest solidity in this geographical flagstone of Melander's, the American coastline leading to the Columbia River. ~~Melander Xed~~ the place where the coast and the river met, Melander Xed—Astoria.

~~His~~ map lesson done, Melander recited the mainframe of his plan. That if they selected their time well and escaped by night they could

work a canoe south along the coast. That there at its southern extent, down beyond the Russian territory and that of the Hudson's Bay Company, the place called Astoria was ~~run~~ operated by the Americans as a fur-trading port. From there ships would come and go, ships to the docks of Europe. To, at last, Stockholm.

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

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

Karlsson fell silent for a time then, looking off around the island-speckled bay and up into the timber-maned mountains. Melander noticed his glance come back and linger in the ~~direction~~ 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 ~~come~~ ring, the measured clamor chorus of hammer against anvil. # As if roused by the clangor, Karlsson turned back to Melander. to the taller man.

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

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

"Braaf? That puppy?"

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

"We need a thief," ~~he~~ Melander explained.

#

That is the way they became two. Disquieted shipman, musing woodman, now plotters both. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing apparatuses have to be, stood New Archangel and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to ponder it. For empires exist on the principle of constellations in the night sky--pattern imposed across otherwise unimaginable expanse--and the New Archangels of the planet at the time, whether named Singapore or Santa Fe or Dakar or Astoria or Luanda or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they themselves were. That voyage which deposited Melander and Karlsson into their indentured situation reminds us that here in the middle of the nineteenth century, this work of putting out the lines of star-web across the planet yet 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, merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk were being provided fortunes by bales of Alaskan furs, the United States

was taking unto itself a second broad oceanfront. 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 your Great Dipper, hung on its nail in heaven," to make constellations real. So that what the makers of any imperial configuration always had to be most wary of was minds--such as Melander's, such as Karlsson's, such as the one Melander was calculating upon next to join their two--which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be gone from New Archangel. He had, after all, the thief's outlook that in this vast world of opportunity, an occasion would surely arrive when he could pilfer them back. Stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and the captain of a Danish fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska he had veered to because, after a steady growth of skill from beggary to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination beckoning to him was kastell: prison. So Braaf became another in, was another of the 1851 contingent to New Archangel, Braaf arrived to New Archangel when Karlsson and Melander had, and at once skinning knives and snuff boxes and twists of Kirghiz tobacco and other unattached items began to vanish from the settlement as if having sprung wings in the night. The

Russians vented fury on the harborfront natives for the outbreak of vanishment, but the ~~contingent~~ Karlo of Swedes and Finns rapidly made a different guess, for Braaf was becoming a kind of human commissary in the barracks. Because he was reasonable in his prices--interested less in income than in chipping the monotony of Alaskan life, which he found to be a rain-walled prison in its own right--and was diplomatic enough not to forage anything major from his ~~countrymen~~ own barrackmates, nothing was said against him.

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why should I?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Braaf," Melander resumed as if reciting to a limited child. "You have a choice here which comes rare in life. Join us and leave this Russian shitpile, or stay and get 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?"

"A pretty choice you paint. Rock and stony place."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I already said the devil."

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

In the galaxy of frontier enclaves sparked into creation by imperialism, New Archangel was a mapdot unlike any other. Simultaneously a far-north backwater port and capital of ~~more than half a million square miles, a greater territory~~ a territory greater than France and Spain and England and Ireland

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

Baranov had true need of Sitka. The most sizable and best-sheltered harbor indenting the archipelagic shoreline of southeastern Alaska, Sitka Sound represented the maritime ringhold into which Russian influence could be firmly knotted. Along virtually all of that tremendous Alaskan coast the mountains drop sheer to the Pacific, spruce slopes like green avalanches into the seawater, but at Sitka the long notch of bay is sided by a handy shelf of shore. And a further grudging

bequest of topography, at the shore's southmost hook a knoll of rock, 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 callus was the strategic point: the Kolosh had employed the mound as their stronghold and Baranov seized the commanding little site for his own thicklogged bastion.

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

One aspect further, and this one the startling oddity. This port of New Archangel has a larger fleet of ships permanently aland than were usually to be found in its harbor. When they could no longer be safely sailed hulks were pulled onto shore, then improvised upon as

194 follows

needed. ("The Tsar's notion of an unsinkable squadron," Melander of course has said.) Of the first two, beached into usefulness in Baranov's time, one had been used as a church and the other as a gun battery, a diversity which surely must have caused the Kolosh to ponder deeply about their new landlords. Its habit of collecting hull-corpses ~~gave~~ lends New Archangel, as one visitor ~~put~~ summed it, "an original, foreign, and fossilized kind of appearance."

The morning after Braaf joined the escape plan, Karlsson emerges from around a corner of the cathedral, on his way from the workmen's barracks a short span to its north, and walks the brief dirt street between God's domain and the Governor's.

Karlsson has been delegated to work this day at the shipyard, so deft with an ax that he often is lent to help with the shaping of a mainmast. Before reaching the shipyard just beyond Baranov's Castle, however, he veers west toward the stockade gate and the Kolosh village beyond, steps outside and along the wall, ~~undoes his~~ toward the ~~xxxx~~ beach, hunkers and begins to ~~polish~~ scour the blade of his ax in the pale sand, as if polishing away rust. As he squats, Karlsson from the corner of his eye studies the Kolosh canoes, prows rising in extension like the necks of fantastic horses, in their graceful rank along the beach.

All of New Archangel, stockade and cathedral and Castle and hulks and enterprises and dwellings, sits dwarfed this day by the ~~thronging~~ Alaskan mountains, Verstovia and its ~~minions~~ throng ~~crowd~~ of minions. Virtually atop the town in the manner that the spire and dome crown the cathedral, the peaks ~~were~~ are precisely those a child would draw. Sharp tall pyramids of forest, occasionally a lesser summit round as a cannonball for comparison's sake. Topknots of snow showed here and there, but the color everywhere else on these stretching peaks ~~was~~ is the black-green which only a coastal fir forest enmixes.

As Karlsson begins hewing pine at the shipyard, Braaf materializes at the southwesternmost extent of the settlement, beside the eldermost of two schooner-hulks beached there. When Braaf arrived to New Archangel and it ~~rapidly~~ 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-America Company clerk assigned him to the readiest unskilled job,

as a cook's helper. Daily Braaf manages to use this livelihood to manufacture free time for himself, much of it spent hiding out somewhere within this maritime carcass. The hulk neighboring it yet is in service as a cannon battery aimed into the Kolosh village, but dry rot has made a casualty of this vessel of Braaf's. He slips through a gangway carpentered into the ship's hull when it became a storehouse, creeps to the forecastle, and within a particular one of the several stave-sprung barrels there makes a deposit, a walrus-ivory snuffbox which hitherto has been the possession of a Russian quartermaster. Then, as Melander instructed, Braaf begins to measure by handwidths the depth and breadth--which is to say, the cache capacity--of other of these abandoned and forgotten receptacles.

Perpetually at combat with the massed mountains around Sitka Sound is the changing even now, weather, for New Archangel lived two days of three in rain and much oftener than that in cloud. One minute the vapor flowed along the bottoms of the mountains to float all the peaks like dark icebergs. The next the cloud layer will rise and lop every crag, leaving a broad, broad plateau of forest beneath. Or imprint of stranger sort, clumps of wan light, warmths fallen through chinks in the overcast, now pinto the forest flanks. Between times a silken rain probably had sifted into the New Archangel air, a dew standing in droplets on your clothing before you become quite aware of it, and it can be four days before you cast your next shadow. Yet the diminutive port within all this swirl is a place of queer clarity as well, its rinsed air somehow holding a tint

of blue light which caused everything to stand out: the smallest swags of spruce limbs on mountains a mile off, the rock skirts of the timbered islands throughout the harbor. Voices and the barking of dogs carried extraordinarily.

At mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging from the direction of the hulk toward chores for the noon meal, Melander on work-break presents himself from within the saltery being constructed on the point of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares amply in the twenty-foot tides of this region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tideflat a pig is rooting up clams while ravens seize his finds, one after another. Melander watches for a moment, then laughs. Other workmen look over at him from their mugs of tea. Melander points to the raucous gulping birds: "The Castle Russians at one of their banquets."

Fully equal in complication and unlikelihood to its architecture and geography and weather was New Archangel's tenantry. The settlement was ruled by the Russian navy, administered by a covey of Russian-American Company clerks and other functionaries, was provisioned chiefly by British ships of the rival Hudson's Bay Company, 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 was far the most sizable group--or upon Russian vagabonds from the Siberian port of Okhotsk, and for its craftwork, such as carpentry and smithings, it imported the seven-year men from

Colony within a colony,
Scandinavia. The hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly ~~were~~ are
Finns; Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlsson ~~made a~~ make an even further minority
~~within this minority.~~

Yet not even this social pyramid, sharp-tipped and broad-bottomed as the triangle peaks above the little port, ~~did not account~~ takes in the most numerous populace on Sitka Sound. The Kolosh, the Sitka Tlingits. 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 feet high and five hundred yards long, ~~and~~ 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. The Sitka Tlingits obliterated the first settlement Baranov implanted here, and a bare three years after this summer of 1852 they ~~were to~~ will muster themselves and try, just short of success, to obliterate this one as well.

Precisely this prudence toward the Kolosh, the way New Archangel each and every day ~~had to~~ must set its most vigilant face toward those who might scheme to get in, Melander ~~was~~ is counting on as advantage for getting out.

#

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

densened
~~denped~~ to one great cube of saturation. ¶ Karlsson stood within the heavy warmth for a moment, slender and very white in his nakedness, before bringing the small woven reed breathing mask to his mouth and holding it there within his cupped right hand.

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

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

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

"Where's our pickpurse?"

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

"How far do you trust him?"

"Ordinarily, only a whisker's width." Melander had known Braaf's type all too well on shipboard, men with the instinct always to vanish just before a topsail needed clewing up, and of course the armies of all history have known him best, the scrounger, the dog-robber. "He'd steal the milk out of your tea, aye? But Braaf wants to shake

24A follows →

New Archangel from his boots as badly as we do. He'll do much to achieve that. Much that neither of us can do, just as he can't canoe himself down this coast. The three of us are like a bindle of rye when your Skane fields are harvested, Karlsson. Together we lean in support of one another. Take any one away and we fall."

"And are trampled by the Russians."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The steam thinned as the opened doorway sucked it away, and brought into view Braaf. With his clothes off, he looked more than ever like an outsize 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. ~~Braaf seemed never to let the world get a fix on him, always easing, eluding.~~

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

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

"Good. Tomorrow, begin your harvest."

more dialogue?

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

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

"Through the...?"

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

#

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

#

the armies of all history have known him ~~as well~~ best, the scrounger, the dog-robber; now, in Braaf's specific instance, the gleaner who drifted through New Archangel like steam freed from the bathhouse.

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

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

September's gleanings ~~were~~ comprised a second compass--Melander wanted to be ~~as~~ doubly certain ~~as possible~~ about navigation--a small iron kettle, a spyglass, another box of tea and a water cask.

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

Karlsson had eyed out a candidate, ~~an eighteen-foot~~ a twenty-foot shell with a prow which angled up into a high sharp needle of nose. ~~The craft~~ If a sizable cedar tree had decided to transform into a sharp swimming petrel, this craft of alert grace would have been the result. The canoe lay amid the beached fleet of a dozen nearest the stockade gate, convenient, and Karlsson had watched to insure that its possessor was scrupulous. On New Archangel's rare warm days, the native sloshed water over the cedar interior to prevent its drying out and cracking; in normal damp weather, heaped woven mats over the craft for shelter. A canoe of fit and style, endorsed Karlsson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evil whats, demanded Braaf.

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

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

Paddles, Karlsson announced, and ~~went on to~~ insisted on Clyoquot paddles, a broad-headed type carved by a tribe far south along the coast and occasionally bartered north as far as New Archangel as prized items of trade.

Hearing this, Braaf frowned. He had full reason. It took him all of the next week to accumulate a trio of Clyoquot 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 ~~glean~~ accrue a fourth paddle.