

1  
"What was that?" Night down over them now on this sand shore,  
Karlsson was at the fire boiling clams for supper when Wennberg came  
and tossed something into the flames.

<sup>about</sup>  
<sup>Kelosh</sup>  
"That calendar of Braaf's, found it in the bottom of the canoe."

<sup>drift-</sup>  
Wennberg picked up a branch to add to the fire. "He won't need it  
in eternity, him."

<sup>little</sup>  
Karlsson reached, plucked the branch from Wennberg, with it  
flipped the hand-sized rectangle of wood from the fire. Its edges were  
charred slightly at the edges and the day-peg <sup>browned, seared</sup> partially burned away,  
<sup>the wood was whole.</sup> but could be salvaged.

<sup>damned</sup>  
"What's that for, then?" demanded Wennberg. "Every day along here  
is every other <sup>damned</sup> day, it helps nothing to keep adding ~~up~~ them up." <sup>Why count ~~the~~ misery?"</sup>

<sup>Supper  
2/4/97  
2019</sup>  
"Maybe not. But this ought be kept." Karlsson moved the peg  
the two days since Braaf had gone into the tide trough, then shaved  
the char off the calendar with his dagger. He realized Wennberg still  
was staring at him. "It's all we have of Braaf."

"All we ~~are~~? Of Braaf? That hive of fingers ~~is~~..?"

10-1-81

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REVISED

2

Karlsson stopped work on the char, but held to the dagger. He took long inventory of ~~looked long at Wennberg.~~

# Finally Karlsson said:

"Braaf happened to be a thief, and he happened to be as high a man as any. I know there's little space in there for it, but try get both those into mind."

"Karlsson, I'll never savvy you--" Wennberg's eyes slid from their lock with Karlsson's. The dagger,

~~blade~~ had come up <sup>the blade</sup> from the charred wood. It paused; then thrust

under the bail of the kettle. # The slender man hoisted the mealware

from the coals and set it to the ground. # "Food," said Karlsson.

#



The coast uncluttered itself for them for the next four days.

The beaches <sup>stayed</sup> ~~were~~ steadily sand, and ample, <sup>while</sup> the ocean and continent

marginated straighter here, as if this might be a careful boundary of

truce. Waves arrived cream-colored, then thinned to milk as they

spilled far up the barely-tilted shore. Once in a while rocks ganged

themselves along tideline,

but nothing of the <sup>dour constant</sup> ~~throngs~~ <sup>days just past.</sup> to the north. The dolloped rock islands

quit off too, except the one early on Karlsson and Wennberg's second

<sup>morning</sup> ~~day~~ of this new coastscape, a long bench out <sup>a few miles</sup> in the ocean.

One last new reach of coast, then, and its visible population

only these two kinned against their will, the one family of the kind

in all creation, slim Swede and wide Swede arked in a Tlingit canoe.

#



The beach at the end of their fourth day was widest yet. Wide as kingdom after the ledge-like weeks to the north, somehow a visit of desert here between timbered continent and cold ocean.

Scoured shore, too. Between surf and high tideline nothing but a speckle of broken clam and sand dollar shells, suggesting that only seagulls prospered here.

Inland, the sand began to rumple. Over the line of dunes, like the spiking on a manor wall the top of forest showed.

"I ought go have a look," Karlsson offered.

"Look your eyes out, for what I care."

The dune-grass poked nose-high to Karlsson, and he climbed the crest of <sup>a</sup> the sand-wave for better view. Before him now, swale of more sand, a couple of hundred strides across. Then a second rumple of slope, scrub evergreens spotting this one. Tight beyond that, forest thick as bear hair.

Southeast, though; southeast, the magnetic direction of this voyage: southeast the spikeline of timber <sup>barbed</sup> ~~wood~~ higher. Two headlands, plateaus of forest, spread into the horizon.



the palest  
Karlsson hadn't ~~an~~ inkling of what would mark the river Columbia,  
whether some manner of Gibraltar attended it--from what Melander had  
told of the river's mightiness, and to go by this coast's penchant for  
drama of rock, that seemed fitting--or whether sharp lower cliff, like  
at the Strait of Fuca, simply would skirt away and reveal Astoria.

A broad opening in the coast this mid-afternoon had shown them  
disappointment; only bay or sound, not vast rivermouth. Wennberg still  
was in a grump from it.

And here, put as wishful an eye to this pair of ~~sharp~~ bluffs as  
he could, Karlsson could not believe them into likelihood as river  
guardians. They rose inland from the shore a half-mile or so, and  
did not shear away as if a river was working at them. Greater chance,  
just two more of all such continental ribs he and Wennberg already  
peerèd at  
had seen on this coast.

.. Not there then, where to Hell is it? God's bones, how much  
farther? . . .



Eyeing around, Karlsson found himself unexpectedly longing for the narrow northern beaches, the wild scatter of seastacks, the tucked coves where they had made camp. On the sand expanse where the canoe stretched at rest and Wennberg was propping the sailcloth shelter, <sup>whatsoever</sup> there was nothing ~~at all~~ they could do to put themselves from sight. This beach held the canoe and its two men prominently as three sprats on a platter.

#

The rough tongue of the wind started on their shelter early in the night. Noise of the sailcloth bucking woke Wennberg a minute after

Karlsson.

"Blowing solid, ~~it~~ sounds like," the blacksmith said. And the next minute, was slumbering again.

Karlsson, though, still was awake when rain began to edge into the windsound.

#



By morning, the storm was major. Sails of spray flew in ~~fast~~ off

wind came so strong now  
the wavecrests, and the ~~icker~~ of wind around that even its noise

seemed to ~~have~~ push <sup>into</sup> at Wennberg and Karlsson. And all that day, as

the two hunched under the shelter when they weren't having to foray

out for firewood or to try <sup>to</sup> dig clams; all that day, ~~rain~~ downpour.

(not) At New Archangel they had known every manner of rain, but none  
of it was anything to this. This was as if the sky was trying to  
step on you.

#

8 ~~1044~~ OK

The Indian arrived at the Astoria customs house with an item and a tale. South from the village his people called Hosett he had gone to hunt seals, but soon sighted instead a great tangle of kelp brought ~~inshore~~ inshore by the tide, and the kelp had seined in with it the body of a white person. Now he had <sup>adventured</sup> ~~come~~ downcoast aboard a lumber schooner to report of this find. "Tole," the native said, the coastal jargon word

for "boy." Not until he pantomimed and pidgined the description of a downy fluff of beard did the customs collector grasp that a grown man was being depicted.

*With thought of the days*  
*of* Thinking of the week of sloshing canoe travel it would take to reach the coastal spot and return, the customs collector prodded hopefully: And...?

And the Indian had done the ~~disposition~~, rapidly ~~had~~ buried the corpse in hope that the spirit had not yet got out of it. But had thought first to clip proof for his report. He handed the customs collector a forelock of straw-colored hair.

That the weather since Christmas had been violent against vessels trying to cross the bar into the Columbia River was all too well known to the customs collector. Merrithew, Mindoro, Vandalia, Bordeaux-- two barks and two brigs,

→



they all had gone to grief along <sup>this rageful</sup> that coast in these weeks. # Taking

up his pen, the collector wrote the native his paper of reward: The

bearer of this, Wha-laltl Asabuy, has assisted the duties of the

<sup>astoria</sup>  
~~Puget Sound~~ District of Customs Collection by his report of... # He

then turned to his daybook and began the official epitaph of Braaf:

A body, supposed from one or another of the vessels wrecked north of

Cape Disappointment during this fearful winter, has come ashore near

the Makah village of Hosett.--It is that of an unknown young seaman,

light hair, round faced...

#



By the end of the day, rain still blinded the coast.

Karlsson took out the Aleut calendar from the mapcase where he was keeping it now. Moved the peg rightward, one hole. A moment, contemplated the little board.

... Might as well know as not. Pass time by counting time, that's one way. . .

<sup>came out</sup>  
It was a few weeks worse even than Karlsson had thought. Since they had left New Archangel, sixty-four days.

He looked across to Wennberg; decided the arithmetic of their situation would not be welcome news in that quarter; and put the calendar back into the mapcase.

"Smaland," said Wennberg, startling Karlsson.





11

~~The next day again, rain blinded the coast.~~

~~"Smaland," ventured Wennberg at last.~~

Karlsson waited to see what venture this was.

"Smaland. What sort of place's that? What I mean, what'd you

do there?"

Karlsson eyed the burly man. There had been a palisade of

silence between them, the only loopholes Wennberg's curses against

the weather and Karlsson's setting of chores. All other conversation,

the storm's--low grumble of surf, whickers of wind, drone of rain

on the shelter-cloth. Into the <sup>night</sup> ~~afternoon~~ now, Wennberg evidently <sup>was</sup>

at desperation's edge for something other to hear than <sup>weather</sup> ~~storm~~.

...Come off your tall horse, have you?...

"Farmed. My family did." Melander's description of farming

arrived to mind. "Tickled rocks with a plow, more like."

"If stone were hardbread, Sweden'd be heaven's bakery,"

Wennberg quoted.

"Yes. And the family of us, living at each other's elbows.

Left the farmstead when I was thirteen, me."

# Karlsson reached a stick, tidied coals in from the edge of the fire.

These days and weeks of his mind always leaning ahead, aimed where the canoe was aimed, it had been a time since he thought back. But memory, always there in its bone house. What can it be for, remembering? To keep us from falling into the same ditch every day, certainly.

But more, too. Memory we hold up and gaze into as proof of ourselves.

Like thumbprint on a window, remembering is mindprint: I made this,

no one else has quite this pattern, whorl here and sliver of scar

there, ~~yes~~, they are me. Karlsson was in Smaland now, hills of pine

forest, cottages roofed with sod and bark--and yes, stone in the fields

and rye short as your ankles and a Karlsson tipped from the land to

find what livelihood he could. . .





"On a forge by thirteen, I was," Wennberg was saying. "Apprenticed, so I had to hammer out plowshares. Thought my arms'd break off. Bad as this bedamned paddling."

Wennberg when young--he was the fifth son, ~~and~~ the last and and least schoolable one, ~~most~~ stubborn and brawlsome, of an inspector of mines in the Nordmark

~~iron district of Vermland--Wennberg when young a~~

Wennberg when young already was a figure which might have been knocked together in one of the red-glowing forges of ~~Vermland~~<sup>a</sup>.

Who can say how it is in such instances, whether the person simply

chanced ~~happened~~ into the body which best ~~fit~~<sup>fits</sup> him or whether the body

has grasped command of that mind: but Wennberg as boy looked just

what he was, a blacksmith waiting to happen. A beam for shoulders,

arms ~~bunched~~<sup>plump</sup> with strength. A neck wide as his head; very nearly

as thick, too, in all senses.

"At least there's an end to this paddling."

"Maybe. Could be wrong kind, though. Melander's had his end, and Braaf his."

"And chewing over their deaths doesn't undo them. Wennberg, each day we ~~are~~<sup>pull ourselves nearer</sup> ~~stride~~ closer to Astoria."

"Or to drowning or to Kolosh or to Christ knows just whatever. . .

I ought've taken <sup>my</sup> death and been done with it, the day somebody spoke

'Merica  
America to me."

Of that continent which had begun to pull Swedes as the moon

draws the tides, the young blacksmith had <sup>knew</sup> known only the

<sup>name</sup> glittering pun <sup>its</sup> the word made against the Swedish tongue. <sup>America,</sup> 'Merica:

mer rika, more rich. That there somehow was a Russian 'Merica

besides the one that the Swedish farm families were flocking to

mystified Wennberg only briefly. He imagined the 'Mericas must be

side by side there the other side of the ocean, that the ship made

a turn like going down one <sup>road-fork</sup> ~~road-fork~~ instead of the other.

<sup>the Nordmark region</sup>  
Then word arrived to <sup>the Nordmark region</sup> Långbanshyttan, in the person of a <sup>over from Karlstad,</sup> Karlstad merchant, that the Russians were recruiting blacksmiths to work iron

in their America. Wennberg's father, heartily weary of a son with

temper enough in him to burn down Hell, managed to see to it that

Wennberg was one of the three smiths chosen, and that Wennberg went

<sup>south</sup> off with the others to board ship at Stockholm. They were joining

the voyage of ~~the~~ Arvid Adolf Etholen, a Swede serving as a Russian

naval officer and now to become the new governor of Russian America. Wennberg

Whenever  
Ocean  
was

use four  
names

no 4



15 ##

OK

never worked clear how it was ~~that~~ <sup>simultaneously</sup> Etholin could be both Swede and


Russian and captain and governor, but then Wennberg had ahead of

him years of finding out that double-dabble of such sort was not <sup>rare</sup> ~~unusual~~

where the Russians were concerned. A Russian system, at least as <sup>he found it</sup>

practiced in Alaska, did not need to make any too much sense, it simply

<sup>needed</sup> ~~had to be followed~~ <sup>relentlessly</sup> and the effort pounded into it would <sup>force</sup> ~~produce~~ result

of some sort out the far end. 

or a page  
any other  
portion of  
sample,

needed

major channel which would prove to be the phantom Northwest  
Passage through the top of America, and they had a tricky enough  
time even with that. (Recall Captain Cook, that tremendous  
discoverer, offshore somewhere in heavy weather in February of  
1778: "It is in this very latitude where we now were that  
geographers have placed the pretended Strait of Juan de Fuca.  
But we saw nothing like it, nor is there any possibility that  
any such thing ever existed.") Not worn any shipwrecked crews  
likely to have set off overland and stumbled onto Lake Goretz;  
the Olympic Peninsula was known to be a fitted jungle vaguely  
the size of all of England.  
Indeed, there is a strange and welcome slowing-down of  
exploration where the Olympic Peninsula is concerned. Not

~~and remote as day~~

"You can't close your ears always," Karlsson said.

"Maybe not," concurred Wennberg. "The trouble is to know when the devil's doing the talking."

Finns predominated in the number that voyaged for Russian America during the term of Etholin; weavers, masons, tanners and tailors, sailmakers, carpenters. But for ironwork, a Wennberg was wanted;

must have been these Varmland Swedes. the forge was the cradle of a ~~Langbanshyttan Swede~~. So Wennberg with new governor Etholin's entourage 1839-40. was shipboard those nine months from the Baltic to Alaska in 0000.

Etholin with his prim little mustache and those hooded eyes which

seemed to see all over the ship at once; he was said to know more

of Alaska than any of the Tsar's men since Baranov. And Etholin's

big-nosed young wife, pious as Deuteronomy said backwards; and

Pastor Cygnaeus, and the governor's servants, and the naval officers;

and red wheels too, journeying oh, it was a high carriage for a blacksmith, to be in company with such as these.

"Tell me truth, Karlsson," Wennberg blurted now. "How many

more days d'you think it <sup>can</sup> be? To Astoria?"

Karlsson, carefully: "There's no count to <sup>what you can't see,</sup> Wennberg. I'd

give much ~~to~~ to put a finger a place on Braaf's counting-board

and say, 'Here. Astoria day, this one.' But we can't know that.



We can just know tomorrow will carry us closer to ~~it~~ it."

Wennberg shook his head. "I've played cards against men like you, Karlsson. They count too much ~~on~~ on the next flip from the deck."

"While your style won you the world?"

Wennberg's embarkation to Russian America carried him to a fresh corner of the world, a familiar livelihood and religion, and a doom. At first, curiosity was all there was to it, a way to ~~pass~~ <sup>ease</sup> hours--watching the card-players. Then he edged into the gaming, merely an ~~occasional~~ <sup>now and again,</sup> evening, which in a feet-first man such as truly guardful he was being. Wennberg ~~shows how wary he truly was.~~ Some money vanished from him in the first years, but not all so much, no amount to keep a man

awake nights. Besides, Pastor Cygnaeus was one to inveigh <sup>against</sup> ~~waywardness,~~ the devil's trinity of drink and cards and the flesh, <sup>and</sup> as it is with those who have some of the bully in them, Wennberg <sup>by close-herding</sup> could be bullied into the general direction of moderation. But came the spring of

1845, Pastor Cygnaeus departed New Archangel, sailed back for Europe

with Etholen at his end of term as governor. Wennberg yet had two years of indenture, and during them his gaming, and all else, changed.



"Back there at the tide trough."

face moving  
nothing

Karlsson waited, impassive.

"If I'd been to the right of you and Braaf to the left, I'd've gone into that millrace instead of him."

... If that'd been, my ears would get rest <sup>this</sup> these nights. ...

Aloud: "If the moon were window we could see up angels' nighties, too.

Lay it <sup>away</sup> up, Wennberg." Less than anything did Karlsson want to discuss

the perishing of Braaf. "Tomorrow paddles will still fit our

hands, and the canoe will still fit into the ocean. Live by that."

# Wennberg Karlsson moved his head from side to side. He was a boulder

with a beard now. "You can wash your mind of such matters, Karlsson.

I can't. Death this side of me and then that, I <sup>need</sup> have to think on it.

See through to why I was let live."

# "Maybe God's aim is bad."

"No, got to be more to it than that." Wennberg would not be

swerved. "Maybe like sheep and goats. ... 'And He shall set the

sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. ...' No,

Braaf ~~was~~ was to ~~the right~~ the right. ..."

that  
"Wennberg. Stop it."

Karlsson  
has the  
to discuss  
something  
nothing



Wennberg peered earnestly through the firelight to Karlsson.

"You know what the <sup>pastors'd</sup> ~~parsons'd~~ say, about all this."

<sup>damn well</sup>  
"No, and I don't give a . . ."

"They'd say I'm being put to test. All this, bedamned coast, you other

three, Kolosh<sup>es</sup> . . ." Just now a thought could be seen to surprise

Wennberg: "Maybe even you, too, Karlsson! Being put to test!"

<sup>his</sup>  
~~The~~ proclamation of ~~eligibility~~ did not noticeably enthuse

Karlsson. "Wennberg, I know at least this. We're not playing

whist with God along this coast. Either we paddle to the place

Astoria or die in the try. One or other. Just that."

~~Wennberg shook his head. Not, as it turned out, against~~  
Wennberg shook his head. Not, as it turned out, against

Karlsson; the pastors. "But they don't know a thumb's worth about  
it either. Found that out, I did, when it happened with--with her."

Karlsson looked the question to Wennberg.

"Katya," the blacksmith said.

"Katya?" Karlsson echoed.

~~"My wife."~~

"My wife." Wennberg wiped the back of his hand across his mouth,  
as if clearing away for the next words. ~~Think you're the~~ "Think you're the  
only one ever looked at a woman, do you? You've ~~been~~ fiddled your time,  
among the Sitka Kolosh, <sup>north</sup> there. You know what the creole women can be,  
the young ones. Black diamonds, the Russians call them. Katya was one,  
right enough. . . .

*more?*  
*unit?*  
*not* "But why'd she die?" Wennberg's look was beseeching, as if  
*be withholding*  
Karlsson might ~~have~~ the answer. "If she hadn't, I'd not be in  
all this. God's will, the pastor said. God's swill, right enough,  
I told him back. What kind of thing is that to do, kill a man's  
*whooping cough?*  
wife with ~~croup~~? Didn't even seem ill at first, Katya. Just a  
cough. And then--'O satisfy us early with Thy mercy,' that clodhopper  
of a Finn preaching when we buried her on the hill. Mercy? Late  
for mercy on Katya. And me. How's I to go through life with her  
grave up there on the hill from me all the while. If I could've  
bought my way out of that Russian shitpile, back to Sweden. If  
the gambling'd worked ~~==~~ <sup>""</sup> ~~..~~ <sup>..</sup>



21  
Evenings, that spring of 1845, a particular plump Russian clerk sat into the barracks card games.

Three times out of five now, when this clerk departed the table

he took with him just a bit more of Wennberg's money than Wennberg

ought to have let himself lose. Nor was Cygnaeus's successor any

help as a vigilant; he too suffered from that same soul-sweat, New

Archangel ague, the fever of cards at night and clammy remorse by

day. Before Wennberg quite knew any of it, then, the fetters of

debt and of more years in Russian 'Merica were on him, and Wennberg

had turned with fury against a God who let such chaining happen

and a God's man who stood by mumbling while it did. Against, it

might be said, life.

✓ # " " — But no, oh no, and God's little Firmlander

telling me, 'Steady yourself, Wennberg, keep from the cards,' and

~~he~~ himself squatting at the table with the Russians half the night.

Man of God. God doesn't have men, he has demons of some kind which

strangle women with the <sup>whooping cough</sup> ~~croup~~ and blast the back of their head off

✓ Melander and drown Braaf like a blind pup."

Wind flapped the shelter-cloth behind Karlsson's head, rain

still was pelting. He and Wennberg in shared life those hundreds of

days at New Archangel, now these dozens in the narrow canoe and beside

the campfires, they had wrangled and come to blows, might do so again,

how was it, you could know ~~so much~~ <sup>every inch</sup> of a man and know not <sup>of him</sup> much at all?

Unexpected as winter thunder, something like this, and as hard to

answer.

"Wennberg, I--"

"What you said, just then." Wennberg was looking harshly across

at Karlsson. "That about the cards. More than style is in it. Luck.

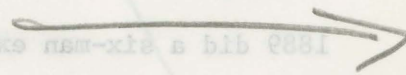
Luck I haven't had since Varmland, except the black sort that ended

me up with you.

be familiar

get  
come  
to  
wonder

more





quickened

It had ~~gone~~ past them, the moment. They were plowshare and rock again. Karlsson heard himself saying as stone will answer iron--

"You've had some in plenty, recent days."

"What, dragging along this boil-and-goiter coast? You call that luck?"

"The two of us who are dead, neither of them is you. There's your luck, Wennberg."

Now shut your gab and get some sleep."

#

At morning, sky and shore showed hard use by the storm. Both were smudged, vague. The rain had dwindled and the wind ceased, but not more than a quarter-mile in each direction from Wennberg and Karlsson and the canoe, fog grayed out the beach.

. . . Fog ought mean the wind is gone, we won't swamp. But this cloud on our necks, we won't see along the coast, either. Stays sand beach, that won't matter. Rocks, though. Rocks'd matter. Can't mend it before it happens. Rocks we'll face when they face us. . .

"Whyn't we go it afoot, here on?"

This new corner of reluctance on Wennberg took all of the early morning to be worked off. Karlsson's constant answer was question back: what when they hiked themselves to a river, or another sound, or headland cliff? Swim, Wennberg? Take a running jump at it? Fly?

"But Goddamn, out into that cloud--beach here like a street, maybe there won't be water in the way--"

"Wennberg. Ever since New Archangel, there has been. Wish won't change that." *There'll be water.*



When at last the jitter wore out of Wennberg, he looked spent.

So much so that Karlsson came wary that the man's next notion would

be not to move at all. Wennberg cast him up a look, though, and

fanned enough exasperation in himself to <sup>blurt</sup> say:

"Karlsson, one more time I hear 'need to' out of you and--"

"You'll be that much closer to the place Astoria each time

you hear it. Off your bottom now. This's as close a tide as

we'll likely get."

By the time they pushed the canoe ~~across~~ the distance across the

sand to the tideline, both were panting and stumbling. Wennberg

hesitated, looked back at the beach. Then surf surged in, swirled

up his shins; Wennberg shoved the canoe ahead, half-clambered half-fell

into the bow.

The most wobbly launch of the entire journey, this one, the canoe

nearly broaching into a wave before Karlsson managed to steer it steady.

Straight out to ocean they paddled, until Wennberg stopped stroking

and turned to demand: "Where to Hell're you taking us? Shore's almost

out of sight."



"We need to stay out from those surf waves, or your belly will be visiting your mouth again. I'll head us by compass the way the coast <sup>15</sup> ~~has~~ been pointing."

Wennberg could be seen to be choosing <sup>swallow</sup> seasickness, or Karlsson's <sup>all-but-</sup> notion of voyaging ~~near-blind~~.

He said something Karlsson couldn't catch. And dipped his paddle.

# Fog, <sup>#</sup> gray dew on the air. During a rest-pause Karlsson touched a hand to his face ~~in thought~~, and was <sup>found</sup> ~~surprised~~ that his beard ~~wet as if washed.~~ was ~~wet~~. Maybe the fog was coming into them.

Fog, the breath of--what, ocean, sky, the forest? Or some mingling of <sup>all</sup> ~~them~~ as when breath smoked out of everyone at New Archangel the morning after the December snow?

Fog, and more of it as they <sup>canoe men</sup> labored southeast. The shore was <sup>dimmiest</sup> a ~~dim~~ margin of forest, ~~now glimpsed, now gone.~~

of Karlsson and Wennberg. This day, different eyes had been set in their heads. Nothing they saw except the beak of the canoe had sharpness, definite edge, to it. This must have been what it would be like to drift ~~and~~



across the sky amid mare's tail clouds.

# —

. . . Got to be near, Astoria. All the miles we've come. Can't have gone past. River mouth would tell us, Melander said it's a river of the world, big as Sitka Sound. Can't have missed that. . .

# —

#

In the slim space of the canoe the two of

<sup>now</sup> them were the pared outlines of their New Archangel selves. The

lengthened, disburdened, with a pair of men  
canoe, though, seemed to have grown; looked enlarged with two men

astride it rather than four.

# —

As best they could, Karlsson and Wennberg <sup>settled</sup> came to terms with

the shadowless, unedged day. Their paddling was slower now, with

frequent need to rest.

In what might have been the vicinity of noon they ate cold clams from

the potfull Karlsson had cooked the night before. Then resumed

stroking.

# —

End and beginning, land and water, <sup>endurance and task;</sup> the Pacific's fusions seemed

to distill up endlessly, come into the mind as if the fog was the

elixir of <sup>all</sup> such matters. Into a belowstairs corner of this ocean--

the year, 1770--another of Cook's vessels nosed. The inlet was about

to be dubbed Botany Bay and the arrival was history-turning, arrival

of white exploration to an unknown coast of Australia. A hundred five

feet long and thunderheads of canvas over her, Cook's Endeavour swept

into Botany Bay, while the black people on the shore and in the bay

registered--nothing. Past fishermen in dugout canoes the great ship

hovered, and the fishermen did not even <sup>for</sup> give a second glance. A woman

ashore looked to the Endeavour, expressed neither surprise nor concern,

and squatted to light her meal fire. Too strange <sup>for</sup> to be comprehended,

Cook's spectral ship to the aborigines; in the dreaming, they accepted

it to be, an apparition, a waft of the mind. Just so, here on their

own gable-end of the Pacific, was the fog taking Karlsson and Wennberg

into a dreaming of their own. Through the hours it sifted, and diluted,

then came potent again: the vast hover of coastline <sup>north</sup> behind them, Alaska

to Kaigani to Vancouver to wherever this way <sup>S</sup>, the join of timber to

ocean, islands beneath peaks, Tsarman beside seven-year men, Koloshes



*beside*  
 whales; it curled and sought, then to now: Melander's vision of how  
 they would run on the sea, and Braaf's single stride wrong on this  
 forgiveless shore, and Karlsson day by day finding dimension he never  
 knew of, and Wennberg in over his head as he always would be in life;  
 it gathered, touched its way here in the mind of one paddling man  
 and there in the mind of the other: all a dreaming, and not.

# ———  
 Someway, the ~~two~~ two canoeemen stretched their strength, did  
 not give way until the day ~~did~~ at last did. Dusk and fog together  
 now hid all, shore as well as canoe clasped into their cloud.

Watching how sluggish Wennberg had become, Karlsson was not  
 sure he was any better himself. *Thirty* Ten more, he vaguely heard himself

decide. ~~Just then~~ Aloud, to Wennberg? He wasn't sure.

*thirty* *numbly*  
 Those ~~ten~~ strokes ~~numbly~~ done, Karlsson turned the craft  
 toward where the compass said shore ought to be.

# ———  
 Sunday, the second of September, the Indians dispatched for black cod  
 return with 25 of the fish. Specimens they may be, but I had the tongues  
 cut out and fried, and a chowder made of the heads, and roes and livers  
 fried. They were all first rate.



~~How to Hell far out'd you take us?"~~

"How to Hell far out'd you take us?"

"Ought be almost in now."

"Where's shore, then?"

"Just ahead."

"Maybe that compass's gone wrong, maybe you've steered us to sea--"

"We're with the tide, Wennberg. Can't be taking us anywhere

but in."

"This Goddamn fog." ~~Listen~~

"Wennberg, listen."

"So? You think you can say anything that'll bring shore, fetch

it out--"

"Not to me, Goddamn it. Listen for rocks."

"Rocks? What, you--?"

Karlsson and Wennberg both had stopped paddling, the canoe being

carried by the tide, the slosh of surf now near in the fog. ~~Behind~~

Both

~~listening~~ listening, listening until it seemed each ear must narrow as a

squinting eye would.

But the slosh around them stayed steady, no underdrum of tidal  
rock anywhere <sup>behind</sup> in it, and the canoe continued to be carried in.



The sightlessness seemed to extend time, the ride through slosh went on and on. Still no beach, no dark bank of forest.

They were onto shore before they ever saw it. The canoe simply stopped, as if reined up short.

Karlsson and Wennberg lurched out of the canoe and sank ankle-deep into tideflat. "Muck," said Wennberg as if it was exactly what he had expected. And then they pushed, the canoe ~~upset~~ asking shove and shove, until finally it was beyond water and mud. Only then ~~that~~ could the leaden men beside it see the forest, a tangle at the edge of the fog and near-dark.

Something of the landfall nudged at Karlsson. couldn't surface But through his weariness. It was as much as he could manage to grasp that the fog

had not fed Wennberg and him to the coast's rocks, that they had fumbled the sailcloth ~~and~~ shelter and blankets out, that Wennberg already had sagged off under them, that he now was being let to sink from the day.

#



It shot clear to Karlsson as he woke in the morning.

...Wrong side. Sweet sweat of Christ, water's to the wrong

side of us, how...

Water east rather than water west, and water that was not ocean,

but a broadsheet of bay, miles of it.

Through the hills across the bay a silvery haze hung, but

Karlsson could make out that those hills and the shore forest all

around were like the Alaska coastline pressed down and spread:

rumpled and green but low.

Karlsson clambered across the beach toward the treeline for higher

view, turned, scanned fervently. Beyond the canoe, across the broad

brown tideflat, into all the blue of water, his search: and nowhere

in it, any steady move of current which would mark a great river

flowing out.

#



"Is it? Got to be--" Wennberg was haggard, hung between hope and alarm. "Karlsson, is it?"

Karlsson still studied into the bay. "I--don't think so."

"Got to be! What the Hell are those, if this isn't river mouth, if there aren't whites here to put those up? Karlsson, this's got to be--"

Karlsson tried to make his mind work past Wennberg's insistences, figure what the thin shapes rising from the water could signify. Four wands of them, like long, peeled willows implanted out in the tidewater north of the canoe. Standing like four corners of a plot of--water? Wennberg had the point that they'd never seen anything of the sort done by Koloshes. But if whites had, why? and where was ~~any~~ sign of anyone, except those skinny cornerposts of nothing?

"Karlsson! Give a look!"

... Oh Christ, he's moonstruck about this, how'll I...

"No, there!" Wennberg was pointing north along the low shore.

"There, there!"

The cabin sat in the distance, on the far side of ~~the water~~ where the tideflat made a thrust into the beach.

Not since New Archangel had they set eye on such a dwelling, a spell of houslessness which asked some moments of blink to cure itself, to allow in the news of peaked green roof, weathered gray walls, hearth, warmth--

"Those markers out there!" Wennberg, all over himself with excitement. "Told you there had to be whites here! Fishermen of some sort, must be. Christ-of-mercy, let's get ourselves across there!"

Into the muck the pair of men plunged, veering inland rapidly as they could to make a slogging arc toward the cabin. Whenever he had breath, Wennberg hallooed, his calls hoarse and lonely in the stillness.

"Got to be someone about, got to," insisted Wennberg.

They labored two-thirds of the distance to the cabin before Karlsson could make himself bring out what was ~~long~~ wispings in his mind.



35 123  
"Doesn't look right."

"We don't give a fly's shit how it looks," Wennberg panted.

"Just so it's roof and walls."

"Wennberg. Wennberg, it's not."

Goddamn  
"Not? Skin your eyes, Karlsson, it's right there, it's ~~it's~~."

But a further twenty yards dissolved the cabin profile entirely.

All the Wennbergs and Karlssons of the world could have put wish

to it at once and still the shape would have been only what it was

emerging as, the green roof roughening into growth of ~~the~~ bush, the

weather-silvered side of wood, high as the men, dropping pretence of

gray cabin wall. A huge butt of cedar driftlog, nursery of ~~the~~ <sup>salal</sup> atop

it.

a mammoth chip from this coast of wood, undercut by some patient

stream or other and carried in here, years since, by the tide.

Karlsson swallowed, felt ~~the~~ <sup>an</sup> ache sharpen behind his eyes.

Wennberg for once was too disheartened for temper. He stood

and shook his head, like an ox discouraging flies. "Why couldn't

it've been. . ."

The way one plods the distances of a dream, both of them slogged on to the huge log. Wennberg slumped against it, sagged until he sat with his back to the silvered wood. His knees came up, and his head went down to them.

Karlsson was against the inland edge of the log, propped <sup>his</sup> ~~for~~ weariness there ~~rest~~ as he looked north along the bay edge.

. . . More of it. Got to be a mouth there somewhere. Over those dunes. ~~now~~ Find it, figure . . .

"Wennberg. Wennberg, we need to get a look. Just over there. Find how to get the canoe out of here."

"No." The blacksmith's <sup>tone</sup> ~~voice~~ was muffled, head still to his knees. "No use to it," he droned. "Just more muck."

"The bay mouth. Need to see what it's like."

"No."

"You'll stay to the log, then." Karlsson tried to focus ~~point~~

~~of~~ instruction. "Just where you are."

more argument

ju

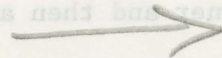


. . . If he goes off into the mire and tide catches him, there'll

be his end. Ironhead he is, but not that. Doesn't deserve that. . .

"Wennberg! Wennberg, hear me! You'll stay to the log. Aye?"

"Stay--" agreed the muffled voice.



Karlsson aimed inland, off the mud of the tideflat. When he reached sand and made his turn north, now he was wallowing through dune grass high as his waist.

. . . Maps, we'd know. Could see to the place Astoria, on them.

But we'd still be in here, ~~the fog~~ . . .

He pushed the grass aside as he trudged, until he felt its sharpnesses biting at his hands. To stop the stabs he brought his hands up and in, put his elbows out, woodsman's habit against brush.

. . . Step it off. Like pacing where the tree'll fall. . .

4 The whetted grass was on all sides of him now, color of a faded ryefield, lines of these sown dunes rolling parallel with the bay.

*Guts are*  
... The heart's out of Wennberg. Somehow get him on his feet, get us out. . .

Karlsson tramped north until it came through to him that the footing was wavering, ~~unsteady~~ creeping, in front of him. A slow crawl like tan snakes: sand blowing in ropey slinking patterns. He was out of the dune grass, water lay a ~~field's~~ <sup>meadow's</sup> width in front of him.





. . . Kept in life this long, I can keep longer. Takes God  
and His Brother to kill a Smalander. . .

Beautiful blue.

Now at water edge. Peering out into the bay entrance which  
the fog had ~~carried~~ <sup>poured</sup> through them into.

poured  
them thru

Karlsson squinted to be sure of what he was seeing now.

~~he was seeing.~~ Instead of surf stacking against the shore three

and four and five ~~waves~~ <sup>deep</sup> as had been happening all along this

coast, here the ~~whitecaps~~ <sup>waves</sup> flowed and flowed past Karlsson into the

bay, as if breaking into ~~stampede~~ <sup>the bay as if in</sup>. They flashed ~~white~~ <sup>right, left and before,</sup> for what

across the entire neck of entrance. A mile-breadth of whitecaps.

Karlsson looked long at the breakers, willing against what he  
knew to be the truth written white in them. Even could he persuade

Wennberg back to the canoe and they somehow summoned muscle to launch  
into the mud-bay, against such flow as this the two of them were

too weary to paddle through to ocean. Never in this lifetime.

Whatever candle-end of it was left to them.

#

Gugtn't

...Melander. Then Braaf. ~~Shouldn't have~~ happened, either time.

They were keeping in life, bending themselves to our voyage. So why...

The dune grass was attacking the backs of Karlsson's hands again.

...Hadr't been for the last storm and the fog, we'd done it. Be  
at Astoria now, wherever place it is. If wishes were colts beggars  
would ride...

The surface under him changed Karlsson's slog once more, on the  
tidal mud again now, the gray <sup>log</sup> ~~stump~~ with its wig of green was ahead.

Wennberg was against the log as Karlsson had left him. He  
lifted his head, mumbled something, and lapsed off again.

...Finish me, Wennberg made me the promise once. At least  
we've jumped that. No need, coast'll do it for him. Not yet, though.

more 7

Don't we





Not just damn yet. . . . The last of dusk. Beyond Lake Quinault.

Pacific edge of the Olympic Peninsula, we are passing through miles of forest. Karlsson put his back against the high driftlog, could feel the

cedar grain beneath his fingers. Against every urge of the fatigue

all through him, did not let himself sit but stayed propped there, looking across the tideflat to the shore forest. To the spread of

bay. To the four marking sticks, tall and thin, striking their

reflections crooked across the tidewater. To a lone dark stretched

form between the mud and the timber which, his mind slowly managed to

register, was the canoe.

#

The Sea Runners

by Ivan Doig



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

Carried up and up 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 crest of wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of black spruce forest. On modern charts of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska this particular landfall is inscribed as Aristazabal Island. ~~But~~ three of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in a January dusk of the year 1853 <sup>however,</sup> know nothing of this name, nor would it matter to them if they 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 times in those days; brave almost as often. Here at Aristazabal 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.

no double space

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.  
You would have spied Melander early in any day's comings and goings  
at that far-north shoreside assemblage of hewn logs and Russian  
tenacity. 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 as well, and so too his forehead; in all the extent of him,  
only the bright blue eyes and stub nose and short mouth were 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.

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 affirming whether he really dared continue  
with so mesmerizing a line of conversation.

"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. Aye?"



1

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# 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 affirming whether he really dared continue with so mesmerizing a line of conversation. # "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. Aye?" # <sup>add</sup> Needless to ~~say~~ 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..."

Born on the isle of Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, Melander actually numbered in the landless



nationality, that of the sea. On Gotland his people had been fisher-folk beyond memory, generation upon generation automatically capable with herring nets as if born with hands shaped only for that task, and it had been 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. He proved apt aboard ship, <sup>the</sup> ~~this~~ young ~~sea-roamer~~ ~~Gotlander~~ of alert eyes and adroit tongue, and in a dozen years of sailing the Baltic and the North Atlantic seaboard of Europe bettered his position voyage by voyage. It was as first mate of a schooner bringing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm in the spring of 1851 that Melander arrived to Alaska, ~~Russian~~ <sup>of wilderness</sup> America, as it would be until the ~~expanse~~ <sup>was</sup> passed from Russian hands to American by sale in 1867 and this vital speck of port-and-capital called New Archangel ~~would be~~ <sup>was</sup> rechristened to what the coast's natives knew it as, Sitka.

Although he had no <sup>farthest</sup> thought of it at the onset of that voyage, a pair of matters ~~in~~ swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The prospect of an eleven-

month return voyage under the schooner's captain, a fidgety little circle-faced Finn who was veteran in the Baltic trade had proved to be but quite literally out of his depth on the ocean; and the ~~Russian-American Company's~~ <sup>Russian-American Company's</sup> sight of the steamship Emperor Nicholas I berthed against the backdrop of <sup>boundless</sup> ~~endless~~ Alaskan forest.

no 4 Far from having a wind sailor's usual contempt for steam vessels, Melander was more than a little intrigued with ~~the~~ <sup>these</sup>



4 5 ✓

4

contraptions. Pointing course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism--this was just the sort of thing to appeal to him. <sup>Mister First Mate Melander</sup>  
In <sup>a</sup> ~~an~~ <sup>earlier, he</sup> ~~earlier~~ time and place, ~~Melander~~ <sup>he</sup> would have been the <sup>fellow</sup> ~~man~~ 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 <sup>sat</sup> ~~was~~ at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters navigated, in what had historically been a lurching and uncertain style, by the <sup>fur-trading</sup> ~~Russians~~.

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

¶ Melander maybe under different policy, would have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company <sup>at New Archangel</sup> ~~there~~ 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 <sup>men of</sup> ~~enterprise~~ and empire.

not ¶ 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 territory is tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow. And that <sup>our man</sup> Melander 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, <sup>within</sup> the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy. Seven-year men. "The Russians' oxen," as Melander more than once grumbled it.

For 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 was of a vintage requiring

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

SA

6

New Archangel. In his first Alaskan year Melander was permitted to steam out with the Nicholas <sup>only</sup> whenever Rosenberg, the Russian governor, took his official retinue on an outing to the hot spring at an outpost called Ozherskoi, a little distance south along the coast from Sitka Sound. This happened precisely twice, and Melander's sea-time-under-steam totaled six days. The rest of the workspan was an assignment conferred upon him by a Russian overseer 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 <sup>what followed</sup> ~~the rest 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 Russian as well as Swedish <sup>a bit of</sup> and Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, <sup>henceforth was</sup> Melander ~~was put~~ <sup>crew which salted</sup> in charge of the ~~salting of~~ catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder. ~~Melander at~~

Melander at this tiny capital of Russian America had become absented, then, from three homes. His birthland. The sea. And his chosen livelihood. Which had anyone within the Russian-American Company officialdom at New Archangel taken the trouble to tot up the situation made the lanky and capable Swede a man pinned in place by triple tines of exile, <sup>==</sup> a most restless position.

#



One of the first lengthening evenings of summer of 1852, the time of year when New Archangel's twilight began to dawdle on in dusk until near midnight, Melander

~~declared~~

~~said~~, to no one in particular among the card-players and conversationists

in the workmen's barracks: "A seven-year man is a bladeless knife

without a handle." <sup>#</sup> Then he stood up, a process like staves suddenly

framing themselves together into a very large scarecrow, and in

~~his galumphing~~

~~great~~ strides went from the building.

Only because it afforded the most distance for his impatient boots,

Melander roved west through the narrow shoreline crescent of settlement.

In about three hundred <sup>paces</sup> ~~strides~~ his traipse necessarily ended, the

high timbered gate of the stockade there stoppering New Archangel

~~until morning~~

~~for the night~~. Melander still needed motion. He changed course

to the north. Rapidly passed the gate watchman yawning within his

hut. Climbed the short knoll where the first of the stockade's

blockhouses overlooked the gate. In long pulls clambered up the

ladder to the catwalk beside the blockhouse. <sup>H</sup> ~~There~~ met the quizzing

glance of the Russian sentry and muttered: "The Firms 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. <sup>Leaving</sup> ~~Which left~~ Melander, solitary against the dusky sky, scanning out beyond Sitka Sound ~~its~~ and its dark-treed islands schooled like furry whales, to the threadline of horizon that is the Pacific.

After a moment, as if satisfied that the water portion of the world still <sup>hung</sup> ~~was~~ in place, Melander dropped his gaze until he was peering directly down at the <sup>edge</sup> ~~line~~ of shore which <sup>intersected</sup> ~~met~~ the outside end of the stockade. <sup>Here</sup> ~~There~~ his looking held for a <sup>good</sup> ~~while~~. # Eventually, and so softly that the sentry nearby in the blockhouse mistook it for another mutter against twittering Finns, the tall man murmured:

"Perhaps not bladeless."

<sup>Do</sup> ~~If~~ such things have a <sup>single</sup> ~~first~~ moment, <sup>If so,</sup> just here Melander begins to depart from a further half dozen years of <sup>the salting of fish</sup> ~~herring and halibut~~ and

# You have <sup>discerned</sup> ~~seen~~ that this Melander had capability brimming in him. The surprise is the rapidity also at wait within his lanky frame. It would have taken the most earnest <sup>of him</sup> ~~of~~ watching, across the next number of days, to notice change: one or two fewer Melanderesque forays of language, some sorting glances <sup>toward</sup> ~~among~~ his fellow seven-year men as they performed their tasks. Yet in no more than a pair of weeks, Melander

It has been seen



sifted through his plan down to details the size of fishhooks,  
and was ready now to take up the question--question? not word  
enough for so life-pivoting a decision--of who could be got to  
flee New Archangel with him and challenge a thousand miles of



wilderness coastline.

within a further week.

Karlsson he nominated into the escape ~~at once.~~

Karlsson was slender and withdrawn, with a narrow bland face like that of a village parson. The sort of man with not much to say, nor of whom much was said. A figure almost in camouflage, compared to the <sup>so-seldom</sup> ~~never~~ wordless Melander. But Melander one time had noticed Karlsson canoeing back from a day's hunting--Karlsson was a skilled enough woodsman from his upbringing near the forests of Skaneateles that he occasionally was sent out with a hunting party to help provision the port; ordinarily, he worked as

an axman in the wood-cutting crew--by skimming across Sitka Sound with steady stopless strokes. Watching him, Melander had been put in mind of the regularity of a millwheel.

<sup>Another</sup> ~~One other~~ 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.

What brought down Melander's decision in favor of Karlsson, however, was a tinier thing, a feather of instant remembered from shipboard. Karlsson had <sup>billeted</sup> ~~come~~ 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 <sup>spruce</sup> islands of ~~black spruce~~ and the sudden mountains behind the settlement, the usual morning wind off the bay lazed to a breeze, to approach Karlsson <sup>Melander's thought was that</sup> before work-call. ~~If Karlsson would consider escape on the best of New Archangel's days, Melander thought,~~ he was truly ready. ¶ "Let's take our tea outside the stockade. Flavor always improves away from the Russians."

Tin mugs in hand, the two of them <sup>sauntered</sup> ~~strolled~~ past the sentry <sup>opened gateway of the stockade and went to the edge of</sup> at the ~~stockade gate and went a short way into~~ 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 ~~down~~ to when he stood atop the stockade. "We could step into one here and step out at Stockholm."

imagined

Karlsson's face, all at once not quite so bland, suggested the standard skepticism toward talk of uncooping oneself from New Archangel. Because of New Archangel's isolation <sup>so</sup> 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 point: where, except up to heaven, was there to go?

Quickly 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 beyond the Russian territory and that of the Hudson's Bay Company the Americans had a fur-trading post at Astoria, from there ships would come and go, ships to ports of Europe; to, at last, Stockholm.

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

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 island--Baranof<sup>\*</sup>, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now--like a broad knife blade.

A scatter of much smaller islands, then the large Queen Charlottes group, south-pointing too, like the sheath Baranof had been pulled from.



Another broken isle-chain of coast, then the long blunt slant of Vancouver Island.

At last, the fourth and biggest solidity in the succession Melander was drawing, the American coastline leading to the Columbia River, and Astoria.

A month's canoe journey, Melander estimated it would be to Astoria. If they had luck, three weeks.

Karlsson stood silent for a minute, looking off around the island-speckled bay. Melander noticed his glance linger in the direction 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 the measured clamor of hammer against anvil. As if roused by the clangor, Karlsson turned back to Melander.

"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 explained.

# —————

That is the way they became <sup>two</sup>~~three~~. Disquieted shipman,  
musing woodman, ~~agreeable thief~~, now plotters <sup>both</sup>~~all~~. 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

~~being~~ done with white wakes of sailing ships; sealanes along  
which 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 <sup>for decades to come</sup>. North America: the gray-gowned wee

queen of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and  
Bella Coolas, merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk <sup>being</sup> were provided  
fortunes by bales of Alaskan furs, the United States <sup>was taking</sup> took unto  
itself a second broad oceanfront. Such maritime tracework seemed <sup>in short</sup>  
to be succeeding astoundingly.



~~10~~ ~~11a~~  
15

But all this atlas of order rested on the fact that it requires acceptance, a faith of seeing and saying, "Ah yes, that is the Great Dipper, and here Pegasus comes flying, and there sits shining Andromeda, exactly so," 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 <sup>next</sup> 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. ¶ 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 of Swedes 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, nothing was said against him.

It would have been hard anyway to make a convicting case against Braaf. At twenty, he displayed the round ruddy face of a farmboy--an apple of a face--and a gaze which lofted innocently just above the eyes of whomever he was talking to, as if he were considerately measuring you for a hat.



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

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

In his <sup>quietly</sup> suggesting manner, Karlsson <sup>instructed</sup> told Braaf to put a bung in his spout and hear ~~what~~ Melander <sup>is proposition.</sup> ~~had to say.~~

"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 ~~re~~ outlined the plan.

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

"Astoria," Melander repeated <sup>with patience.</sup> ~~patiently.~~ "Named for the rich <sup>American</sup> fur man Astor. It's the port for a part of <sup>this</sup> ~~the~~ coast <sup>the Americans</sup> ~~called~~ Oregon."

"Imagine," said Braaf politely ~~through~~ 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 canoes float like <sup>waterbugs</sup> ~~this~~ ~~tristledown~~ <sup>1</sup>.

You'd have to be an oaf to tip one over."

"I've seen 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 <sup>in the cheeks of</sup> ~~in~~ your ass, too."

"Braaf," Melander resumed as if reciting to a simple child.  
 "You have a choice here, <sup>which comes rare in life.</sup> Join us and leave this Russian <sup>shitpile,</sup> ~~manure pile,~~  
 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 <sup>up and down</sup> ~~all over~~ your back. Aye?"

"A pretty choice, <sup>you paint,</sup> ~~Melander.~~ Rock and hard 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 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."

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

"I already said the devil."

Only for ~~an~~ 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 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 Baranov, first governor of Russian America and contriver of the Russian-American Company's system of fur-gathering. <sup>Historians exclaim</sup> ~~It was said~~ of Baranov, like Napoleon, that he was a little great man, and he 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 one of the Tsar's cannonades of a gunships.

The single sizable and well-sheltered harbor indenting the archipelagic shoreline of southeastern Alaska, Sitka Sound represented the maritime ringhold Baranov needed for the firm knotting of Russian influence. Along virtually all of that coast mountains drop sheer to the Pacific, spruce slopes like green avalanches into the seawater, but at Sitka a long notch of bay is sided by a ledge of shore, and further grudging bequest of topography, at the shore's southmost hook a knoll of rock pokes up like a giant soldier's helmet. This mound, sixty or so feet in elevation and twice as broad, the Kolosh had employed as a stronghold, and Baranov seized the commanding 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 startling oddity of this port of New Archangel was that it had 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 needed. 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 New Archangel, as one visitor put 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 wool britches, and urinates. As he stands spraddled, Karlsson studies the Kolosh canoes, prows rising in extension like the necks of fantastic horses, in their graceful rank along the beach.



and hulks)

# All of New Archangel, cathedral and Castle and the fifty or so squared-log buildings painted a pale yellow as though they were seaside cottages, sat dwarfed by the thronging Alaskan mountains. Virtually atop the town as 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 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 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~~ <sup>eldermost</sup> 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 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 ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> in service as a cannon battery aimed into the Kolosh village, but dry rot has claimed this vessel of Braaf's. He slips through a gangway ~~carpentered~~ <sup>carpentered</sup> into the ship's hull when it became a storehouse, creeps to the forecastle, and within a particular one of 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,



he begins to measure by handwidths the depth and breadth--which is to say, the cache capacity--of other of these abandoned receptacles.

5400 - Perpetually at combat with the massed mountains around Sitka Sound was its 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 would rise and lop every crag, leaving a ~~broad, broad~~ <sup>broad</sup> tremendous plateau of forest beneath. Or cloud of stranger sort, ~~clumps~~ <sup>clumps</sup> patches of wan light, warmth fallen through chinks in the overcast, ~~now~~ <sup>now</sup> would pinto the forest flanks. Betweentimes a silken rain probably ~~sifted into~~ <sup>sifted into</sup> had materialized in the New Archangel air, a dew standing in droplets on your clothing before you were quite aware of it, and it could be four days before you cast your 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 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~~ <sup>At</sup> mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging from the ~~cemetery slope~~ <sup>direction of the bulk</sup> 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."



17A

22

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 <sup>and smithing, the</sup> carpentry, it imported <sup>the</sup> seven-year men from Scandinavia. The hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly were Finns; ~~the~~ Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlsson made a minority within this minority.

Yet even this social pyramid, sharp-tipped and broad-bottomed as the triangle peaks above the little port, did not account 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 <sup>stockade</sup> the wall of defense <sup>twenty-five</sup> ~~eighteen~~ feet high and five hundred yards long and four ~~bulky~~ <sup>built of fat logs</sup> blockhouses, and a couple of dozen full-time sentries constantly expressed the

more people of Finns

~~stockade~~



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 muster themselves and try, just short of success, to obliterate this one as well. # Precisely this prudence toward each and every day the Kolosh, the way New Archangel daily had to set its most vigilant face toward those who might scheme to get in, Melander was 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 level <sup>densened to</sup> ~~level~~ <sup>of saturation.</sup> very nearly became one great solid cube. 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, came from across the room, and in three steps Karlsson could see the ~~hazy~~ <sup>hazed</sup> 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. But Braaf wants to shake New Archangel from his boots as badly as we do. He'll do much to achieve that. Much that neither of us can do, just as he can't canoe himself down this coast. The three of us are like a ~~bundle~~ <sup>bundle</sup> when are harvested, of rye ~~in~~ your Skane fields, 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 <sup>might be</sup> ~~is~~ 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. What I forgot to look at was the wormy souls of these Russians."

"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." 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 not."

"Good. Tomorrow, begin your harvest."

"A thing more, Melander." Karlsson, afresh. "How is it we 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."

# —————  
So adept a provisioner did Braaf prove to be that Melander soon was forced to ration out his stealing assignments, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery. Melander had known Braaf's type on shipboard a time or two, men with their instinct always to vanish just before a topsail needed reefing, and of course the armies of all history have known him as well, the scrounger, the dog-robber; <sup>now</sup> in Braaf's specific instance, the <sup>gleaner who</sup> ~~figure that now~~ drifted through New



Archangel like steam freed from the bathhouse.

# By the end of July, <sup>Braaf's</sup> ~~the planners'~~ <sup>for the plotters</sup> cache 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 <sup>he</sup> ~~Braaf~~ <sup>to it</sup> added a gaff hook, <sup>excellent Kolosh</sup> three knives, a couple of hatchets, and a fire flint apiece.

# September's gleanings were a second compass--Melander wanted to be as certain as possible about navigation--a small iron <sup>a spyglass,</sup> kettle, 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 shell with a prow which angled up into a high sharp needle of nose. The ~~sprightly~~ craft lay amid the dozen canoes nearest the stockade gate, convenient, and Karlsson had watched to see that the native who owned it was scrupulous, on New Archangel's rare warm days, about sloshing water over the cedar interior to prevent its drying out and cracking, and in damp weather heaped woven mats over it for shelter.

Melander and Braaf took turns at casual glances down the shoreline to Karlsson's choice. True, the canoe had <sup>50</sup> ~~such a~~ <sup>2</sup> ~~sprightly~~ look ~~about it~~ that it seemed only to be awaiting the right word of magic before flying off upward. But Melander <sup>believed he too</sup> ~~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 Archangel. Indeed, it can be realized now that those journeys were first filaments in the spinning of his decision that seven-yearhood 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~~ opinion, Braaf mumbled that any canoe was smaller than he preferred.

~~had~~ ~~My point is that Karlsson~~ <sup>his nominee</sup> Karlsson maintained that ~~the canoe~~ <sup>had</sup> 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 ~~his wondrous~~ that ~~the~~ canoe was bigger on the inside than on the out.

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

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

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

Bow and stern, Melander quickly advised him before Karlsson ~~got~~ <sup>touched</sup> off again, and the 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~~ <sup>whats,</sup> ~~what~~ demanded Braaf.



Evil minnows that would ~~jump out of the water~~ <sup>leap from the sea</sup> and piss in ~~your~~ <sup>Braaf's</sup> ear, Melander said in exasperation, how the hell did he know what evil whats the Kolosh were spooked by? Now: the three of them were agreed on the canoe, was there anything more--

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

# Braaf frowned. He had full reasons, 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 a fourth paddle.

# Like the single eye of some great watchful creature, each morning at six the stockade gate near the westmost corner of New Archangel winked open, at six each evening it swung resolutely closed. # Only during those dozen hours of day were the Kolosh allowed into the settlement, in scrutinized numbers, and the market area where they were permitted to trade was delineated directly inside the gate, so that they could be rapidly shoved out in event of commotion. Moreover, the first of the four gun-slitted blockhouses buttressing the east-stretching wall of stockade sat close by the area of market and gate on a shieldlike short slope of rock, miniature of the strong knob supporting Baranov's Castle. Scan it from



inside or out, here at New Archangel's portal Russian <sup>wariness</sup> ~~caution~~  
~~about the Kolosh~~ showed 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 night, it was not unknown that a recreative stay might be made in the Kolosh village. For those dwelling within New Archangel rather than without, the second and unofficial--and by order of the governor, absolute--curfew at the big gate was full dark.

In these months of preparation, 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. Be it said, these Siberian vagabonds had not been encouraged onward to Russian America because they had the habit of pushing ducks into puddles. Thugs, thieves, hopeless sots, no few murderers, the flotsam of any vast frontier, were among them. ("Where," Baranov <sup>once</sup> wrote home to ~~one of the~~ <sup>a</sup> grandees of the Russian-American Company, "do you get such men?") But so were debtors, escaped serfs, those whose

only instinct <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ to drift. Bilibin might be pegged somewhere amid these milder miscreants, without doubt having <sup>skinned</sup> ~~bumped~~ his nose against one law or another but not the most hellbound soul you can <sup>call to mind, either.</sup> ~~think of.~~

~~either.~~




But for our purpose here, which is that of Karlsson and Braaf and Melander, Bilibin's significant <sup>earmark</sup> ~~flow~~ was longevity. Sufficiently a scapegrace to have exasperated a generation of superiors, Bilibin now stood the least desirable of watch shifts, the one spanning the middle of the night. Turned about, the matter was that the superiors over the years had sufficiently knouted and berated him that Bilibin took care not to rush into their attention.

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

But did nothing. Rousting out a sergeant because a Swede couldn't finish his rutting on time, well, now, ~~that might not be exactly greeted...~~

The next time, having conferred that <sup>evening</sup> ~~day~~ with Melander, Karlsson staggered later than ever from the Kolosh village to



the gate, singing as if drunk--"The fruit of the heart-tree, do not eat;" Karlsson within himself was astounded with the evident believability of his gate performances--"for sorrow grows there, black as peat"--and carrying a jug of the native

liquor called hootchina. Which without undue difficulty he persuaded Bilibin to take a reviveful swig from: "Have fifteen drops, Pavel, it drives the snakes from one's boots..."

The hootchina did its task. Under the New Archangel allotment of fifty cups of rum per man per year, Bilibin was a man perpetually parched. Soon Karlsson was not departing the stockade until nearly dark--"Come along and put your spoon in the kettle," he would invite; "No, no, no, I'm limber as a goose's neck, no more women for me, you can have mine too," Bilibin would splutter back at him--and returning far into the night to proffer the hootchina jug.

By ~~first snowfall of that~~ autumn of 1852, Karlsson was well on his way to legendary status among the native women along Sitka Sound, and Bilibin had been primed carefully as a stubborn pump for the escape.

# In early November, Melander said in his procedural way that the time had come for Braaf to steal the coastal maps by which they would navigate south. "It's the Tebenkov maps we want. Tebenkov must have been one Russian who had something other than cabbage between his ears. When he was governor



here he made his captains chart all of this coastline, and there's a set aboard each ship. I saw the steamship's while Rosenberg was bathing his bottom at Ozherskoï. We'll take those, they won't be missed until spring or whenever in hell's time the steamship gets fired up again. Can you read Russian, Braaf?" Braaf shook his head. "No? Well, no matter, we need the ones from latitude 57 degrees as far south as 46 degrees, and you'll see they're marked like this."

# NW bepera Amepuku, Melander printed carefully. NW coast of America. # The theft would be tricky, Melander cautioned, because Braaf would need to sort rapidly among all the maps in the steamship's chart room and--Melander stopped short as Braaf ~~shook~~ <sup>wagged</sup> his head again. "Aye?" Melander demanded. "What is it?"

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

The single thing certain to irk Melander was the unforeseen, and this incapacity of Braaf's he had not calculated on at all. Rarest annoyance crossed his face, then Melander ~~swerved~~ <sup>swerved</sup> to Karlsson and his disposition readjusted itself. "So. It seems to fall to you. This'll at least

be a change from galloping a Kolosh maiden, wouldn't you say? Now: the maps are kept--" # Karlsson was shaking his lean head in reprise of Braaf. "I'm being sent hunting. Perhaps for as long as ten days."

Now Karlsson looked steadily at Melander and for once, so did Braaf. # Under the pressure of these ~~looks~~ <sup>gazes</sup> Melander grimaced,

then scowled, then swore. "Jesu Maria. Have to become a common sneakthief, do I? The pair of you..."

# ———  
 The pair of them met <sup>Melander</sup> ~~him~~ with the same square glances two weeks later. "I have them, I have them," <sup>he</sup> ~~Melander~~ said edgily. "But a close matter it was. Christ on the cross, Braaf, how you go around like a deacon's ghost I'll never know. I was at the maps when for some damnable reason two of the Russian officers came aboard. They clomped off somewhere on the port ~~one side of the boat~~ <sup>starboard.</sup> and I got away along ~~the other.~~" Melander opened his mouth as if to go on, but went into thought instead. After a moment ~~he said~~ <sup>and done.</sup> "Aye. Anyway, it's done. Let's get on with our enterprise. We'll need new sailcloth for the canoe, can't trust the rotten cheesecloth these Kolosh use. You can recognize sailcloth, Braaf, can't you?"

# ———  
 Minutes after the next morning's work-call, Braaf was ~~and~~ making away with the sailcloth, the folded length of it cradled beneath an armload of skins he ostensibly was carrying toward the tannery, when into his left ear, a voice suggested huskily ~~in his ear~~ "Let's talk about what you have under those skins."

Through his ~~cold~~ <sup>cold</sup> flash of fright it did register on Braaf that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian. He inched his head leftward the fraction enough to recognize the

wide sideburn-framed face beside him. The recognition unfroze his mind...one of the blacksmiths...vain bastard he is...

Wennstrom, Wennblad: "Wennberg? What..."



"No, don't walk away and don't put them down." Not suggestion now: orders. "We'll have a visit until we see which interesting thing happens first." <sup>¶</sup> Wennberg moved himself in front of Braaf as companionably as if he had every matter in the <sup>universe</sup> world to discuss with him. "Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your friend Melander trots himself over here."

Melander arrived with a lanky swiftness which to any onlooker would seem as if he had been beckoned over to consult with the pair. There the three of them stood, centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate as if time had <sup>snagged to a stop</sup> stalled within their little radius, while around them ~~humanity~~ All New Archangel's morning life eddied, quartermasters and overseers and shipwrights and caulkers and <sup>and Kolosh and Castle officers,</sup> brassworkers and sailors, humanity in its start-of-day seeps and spurts of motion.

Melander's dark look met Wennberg's broad blandness like a cloud against a cliff-face.

"Well, Melander," Wennberg said. "Braaf and I were just speaking of how much heavier skins have gotten this year. It seems a man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these days."

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

"You always were a thinker, Melander, Isn't he, Braaf?" The blacksmith stepped close and pressed his elbow slowly, powerfully, into Braaf's <sup>left</sup> right bicep, drawing a strangled gasp

from the laden man. "A thinker, humm?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered rapidly. "You obviously have much to say about matters of weight." <sup>4</sup> If there is an axis of life in every man, Melander's whirled where the rest of us have an ordinary tongue. Wennberg hesitated, then nodded as if the words were a debt paid.

Braaf lurched his way out of sight in the general direction of the tannery as the other two, Melander more angular than ever beside the wide Wennberg, strode to a building not far inside the stockade gate. The smithing shop transected the middle of the structure, and within its open arched doorway stood three big forges, like stabled iron creatures of some nature, aligned from the outside in. The outermost forge was Wennberg's. <sup>4</sup> Melander ~~now~~ scanned out into the parade ground from here where Wennberg stood by the hour at his work,

wagged his head in rueful understanding of the view thus presented of all comings and goings and most particularly of Braaf's storage hulk, and proffered: "So?"

"You have plans to get away from this Russian bearpit, and I'm coming with you."

"Are you?"

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



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

<sup>clever</sup>  
 "Don't come ~~sly~~ with me, Melander. I've watched your trained ~~rat~~ <sup>packrat</sup> Braaf, these weeks."

"Braaf is his own man."

"Braaf is operated by your ~~him~~ jabber. So is 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 would ~~jabber~~ talk as long as there is day, Melander. It's time we barter. My silence for your plan."

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

<sup>cousin to</sup>  
 "My reasons are ~~your~~ yours. Because I am sick of life under these Russians. Because there are wider places of the world than this stockade." Grudgingly: "Because if anyone here is slyboots enough to escape, it's likely you."

"Flattering."

<sup>high for</sup>  
 "Which doesn't mean I wouldn't happily see you hung ~~up~~ <sup>as</sup> magpie food, if that's your choice. Decide."

Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a ~~lack~~ <sup>look</sup> with his own, then gave the serious smile.

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

~~Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own, then gave the serious smile.~~

~~"First you speak of too much weight, then of too much height. Wennberg, I think you maybe underestimate how far a man can stretch himself if he has to. Can you handle a Clyoquot paddle?"~~

↙  
Melander spent considerable talking to convince Braaf and Karlsson that the best choice was to bring Wennberg into the plan. # Braaf volunteered to kill the blacksmith, if someone would tell him how it might be done. # Melander agreed it was an understandable ambition, but no. He had thought it through, and the death of a valued smith such as Wennberg, especially when the killing would have to be done here within the fort, would breed more questions than it was worth. "Besides, he is a hill bull for strength. We can use him."

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

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

# ~~Wennberg."~~



II ———  
A night later, the four of them met. Karlsson openly ~~studied~~ <sup>appraised</sup> Wennberg. 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 side-whiskers, 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 the blacksmith had re-edged an axe for Karlsson, but Karlsson knew ~~nothing~~ <sup>little</sup> more of him than those spaced hammerblows onto red metal. He found it interesting that the man was amounting to so much more than arm.

41 Wennberg meanwhile ~~gave back~~ <sup>reciprocated</sup> as much scrutiny as he got.

16 Braaf's gaze now floated steadily along three foreheads instead of two.

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

Challenge of this sort was not what Wennberg had been expecting, and he retorted hotly. "Your tongue is bigger than

your brain, Melander. It's not for you to tell me who stands where. Don't forget that I can walk out of here and show the Russians the hidey-hole <sup>in that hulk</sup> where you've had Braaf stashing things these months."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there," Melander said with such politeness it seemed almost an apology. "Since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole. Braaf <sup>has the knack of</sup> ~~is good at~~ finding such places. You'll know where the new cache is when we load the canoe, and not the minute before. So trot to the Russians whenever you feel like it, but you'll have nothing to show them."

"Except mouse turds." This unexpectedly from Braaf, who still was scanning above the other three. Wennberg shot him a look which all but <sup>thundered.</sup> ~~left sparks in the air.~~

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



At this Wennberg began to flare again, but Melander beat him to speech once more.

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

Wennberg stared at Melander as if the lanky seaman had just changed skin color before his eyes. Then he swung his heavy look to Braaf, at last and longest to Karlsson.

"You set of squareheads may be better at this than I thought," Wennberg rumbled finally. "I am with you. Now you ~~can~~ <sup>know</sup> tell me, if you ~~can~~ <sup>know</sup>, how we are to run on the sea."

Et ———  
Tong  
Test the plan <sup>around</sup> in the forge of his mind as he would, Wennberg could come up with only a short splatter of questions when Melander had finished.

"Why all this fuss with old Bilibin? Why not just cut his stupid throat when we're ready?"

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

"What of muskets? How many can Braaf lay his dainty hands on?"

Melander replied that they had the advantage of two ready at hand; Karlsson's long-barreled .69 calibre hunting rifle, and the military musket which would be plucked from Bilibin. Then

on the night of the escape, Melander continued, Braaf would gather them a few more. "Six, to be exact."

Braaf blinked rapidly at this and ~~even~~ Karlsson looked mildly surprised, but it was Wennberg who blurted: <sup>#</sup> "Great good God, Melander, eight <sup>guns</sup> ~~rifles~~ altogether? We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war!"

"Can you name me a better cargo, Wennberg? Do you think the ravens are going to feed us on this journey, and the bears will guard us with their kind teeth? We don't know what we'll face, but I want ball and powder to face it with. If you wish to come along naked, so be it."

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

Melander congratulated him gravely on entering the spirit of their enterprise. <sup>#</sup> "There, Braaf, he's made you amends. You'll need to pluck only five <sup>firepieces</sup> ~~muskets~~ 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 unreckonable, opposite from usual, about the blacksmith, <sup>as</sup> when the eyelid of a wood duck watching you closes casually from the bottom up.

<sup>was not done with</sup> Wennberg ~~caromed on~~ from the topic of muskets, ~~"And you know~~



"Just where is our little magnet here, Braaf, to pluck up these guns?"

"You do harp on one string, don't you, Wennberg? But since you bring it up..." Melander turned his long head to Braaf <sup>in the manner of</sup> ~~like~~ a kindly uncle. "Braaf, what of it? Where do you say the guns can be got on our night?"

"The officers' lodgings," Braaf responded with entire matter-of-factness. "The gun room."

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

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

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



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

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

~~This~~ <sup>That</sup> silenced even Wennberg. # At last, Karlsson spoke up.

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

"I can conjure us a time, ~~when the cross is all right~~," Melander <sup>mused</sup> ~~said now~~. "But getting <sup>those</sup> the guns <sup>loose</sup> free..."

"Wennberg," murmured Braaf.

"Mister Blacksmith!" Melander proclaimed.

"You squarehead <sup>ed</sup> sons of whores," Wennberg said unhappily.

# ———  
Now Melander disclosed to them the escape date. Christmas.

The Russians would be celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off. The officers and any of the ~~Company~~ Company Russians who frequented their lodgings for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument all would be at the governor's ~~for~~ ball in Baranov's Castle, leaving the gun-room accessible. When the escapees' absence was discovered, the Russians would not be eager to leave their warm festivities to chase them through the cold of Alaskan night. Moreover, <sup>what could</sup>

be more natural than for Karlsson to offer Bilibin a few extra holiday swigs of ~~hoochins~~ <sup>hooch?</sup>.

Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, all would be their allies for the escape, the tall leader concluded. The best possible guests for New Archangel Christmas.

# ———  
The waiting became a kind of ghost attaching itself to 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 days wholly in thought of the voyage ahead.

## Melander as he waited studied the Tebenkov maps ever more firmly into his mind. Before long, their south-descending coastal chain of islands could have been recited out of him like Old Testament genealogy. New Archangel's island of Sitka (it is Baranof on today's charts of the splattered southeastern Alaska coastline) 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 because he had in him the seaman's way of letting the days take care of distance, simply accepting that because there is more time than there is expanse of the world any journey at last will end, Melander tended to think of the escape in this stepping-stone manner, rarely <sup>in</sup> by the totality of what he and the other three were undertaking. This made a loss to them all, for Melander alone of the four had traveled greatly enough on the planet to entirely understand the scope of their escape, to grasp that their intended ten hundred miles of paddling stretched--wove, rather, through the island-thick wilderness coast--as far as the distance from Stockholm to Venice, or from Gibraltar across all the top of Africa to Sicily. Each mile of the thousand, too,

along a cold northern brink of ocean which in winter is misnamed entirely: not pacific at all, but malign. His knowledge of water enwrapping the world, the <sup>canny</sup> force of its resistance to the intentions of man, he might have used to put a tempered edge on the plan. To have said, in his silver style of saying, "Listen. Things beyond all imagining may happen to us..." Yet--it may be necessity for those who choose vast risk--even Melander seemed not able to face the thought of all the miles at once. Only those from island to island to island.

~~canny force~~

# — In his waiting, Wennberg also spent long spells of calculation. Turning and turning the question of whether to betray the escape. Certainty did not seem to be in the matter. If the Russians could be relied upon to reward him, say grant an early return to Sweden; but it did not seem likely the Russians would forfeit a blacksmith so readily, whatever they promised. If he told of the plan but Melander convinced the Russians there was nothing to it, Wennberg would never after be safe in New Archangel; Karlsson and perhaps even that stealer of milk teeth Braaf would be a steady threat to his life. If he fled with the other three, into freedom; or perhaps into the bottom of this ocean like cats in a sack. If and perhaps; work at them as he would, Wennberg could make them do no more than somersault themselves into perhaps and if. Stanzas of <sup>debate</sup> ~~argument~~ were not Wennberg's style. He preferred to bang a point, go on to the next if it misechoed. But this, this damned



skitter of a matter...Wennberg did not at all have full faith in the prospects of Melander's plan, but neither did he see, now, any clear path out of it. What Wennberg imagined was going to be his power over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their power over him.

# —————  
Karlsson waited with less edginess than the others. There always was about Karlsson a calm just short of chill. He possessed a close idea of his own capabilities, could gauge himself with some dispassion as to whether he was living up to them, and had not much interest in people who lacked either capability or gauge. Karlsson went through life in the manner of a man in wait. This patience of his ~~was not~~ <sup>cannot</sup> nearly all *be counted* virtue. It kept him in situations when Wennberg would have crashed out or Braaf wriggled out, and indeed it had deposited him, without over-ample decision or debate, into Alaska. Karlsson was a particle of the Swedish diaspora which began in the 1840's, a man uncoupled from his family's farm by a surplus of brothers and absence of opportunity. The two brothers younger than Karlsson caught America fever, put themselves into the emigrant stream aimed to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes, at their suggestion that he come along, Karlsson said only:  
"I am no farm maker." His liking for time in the forest, ~~that~~

*learned as*  
learned as helper to a gamekeeper on a nearby manor during his Skane boyhood, bent him toward Alaska even at the price of becoming a seven-year man. The occasional hunting forays out from New Archangel he savored considerably

—————→

greatly, and the work as an axman seemed to him an unobjectionably crisp task, although he had been caused to rethink that a bit by Melander's josh that New Archangel's true enterprise was the making of axes to cut down trees to turn into charcoal, which was then used to make more axes. All in all, Karlsson minded New Archangel life a good deal less than did any of the other three Swedes. What held Karlsson into the pattern of the escape was the plan itself. That question of capability, whether Melander's idea could be made real, could transport men so far along the wild coast. There was also the musing to be done about how he himself would perform. For one thing, Karlsson wondered whether sometime during the escape he would have to kill Wennberg. And for another, whether he could manage to kill him.

# ——— The hardest wait among them was Braaf's. Melander <sup>had</sup> ~~having~~ forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and food on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy Braaf <sup>took</sup> ~~had taken~~ up carving. After his first effort, a copying of a madonna in the Russian cathedral who emerged from Braaf's fingers somehow looking simultaneously <sup>m</sup> ~~s~~ mournful and sly, Melander suggested, "Carve us a little figurehead for the journey, Braaf. A lady for luck." It had been Wennberg who added, "Where we're going, better make her a mermaid," and so Braaf did.

# ———



~~added at here~~

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

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

"Be GREETed joyful MORning HOURLRR," he bawled. <sup>"A Savior COMES"</sup> ~~"Christ the~~  
<sup>with LOVE'S sweet POWERRR..."</sup> ~~SAVior is BORNNN..."~~

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

¶ From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the high gate wink grayly open, then close. Two man-shapes bobbed together; Karlsson's slurred mutter and Bilibin's guffaw were heard.

Melander swiveled his head toward the end of the smithing shop farthest from the gate and spoke: ¶ "Now." ¶ A piece of the darkness-- its name was Braaf-- disengaged itself and instantly was vanished around the corner.

For three hundred yards across New Archangel Melander strode rapidly, then halted outside the workers' barracks and drew deep breaths. ¶ Entering the barracks, he clattered the door shut behind him, began to shrug out of his rainshirt, mumbled something about having forgot his gloves in the toilet, and was gone out the door <sup>way</sup> again. ¶ A person attentively watching the arrival and departure of Melander would have had time to blink



perhaps three times.

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

The pair of them, tree and stump somehow endowed with legs, moved with no word through the night for ~~three~~<sup>two</sup> minutes, ~~three~~<sup>four</sup>. Apprehension rode them both. Apprehensions, rather, for their anxieties were as different as the men.

Late-going Russians yet within the officers' lodgings...clatter within the gun room heard by a sentry ~~in~~<sup>at</sup> the eastmost blockhouse...

Melander's months of planning now ~~teetered~~

on such chances, and the fret of it all moved with him in the dark.

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

Abruptly a barrier of building met them. As Melander and Wennberg hesitated before the officers' ~~club~~<sup>lodgings</sup>, a third upright



shadow joined them, thrust into Wennberg's hands a heavy sharp-pointed pry bar and into Melander's a pair of long-handled smithing snippers, and muttered: "This way."

In the dark and rain Melander and Wennberg stood rooted for a moment, as though the cold feel of metal conferred on them by Braaf would vanish if they so much as twitched.

"Come on, you pair of lumps."

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

"Stick in your thing, Wennberg," Braaf said under his breath.

"Don't be bashful, the padlock won't giggle."

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

The blacksmith inserted the key-like end into the keyhole of the padlock; shafted the sharp point of the pry bar through the doughnut-end; moved his thick hands to the outer end of the pry bar for all possible leverage; and strained downward.

The lockwork inside the padlock made a single sharp clack, and Braaf reached ~~quickly~~ quickly to lift away the sprung lock.

"Good job ~~work~~ of work," congratulated Melander. "Now one more." He handed Wennberg the snippers.

With two exertions on the long handles of the snippers, tempered jaws crushed through filigreed metal, ~~and~~ Wennberg had cut away the triggerguard of the first rifle, and Braaf plucked <sup>the gun</sup> ~~it~~ free and handed it to Melander.

Four more rifles clipped rapidly in the same fashion, the men exited the officers' lodgings, hefted their new armory, and set off through ~~the~~ into the dark, west across New Archangel toward the stockade gate.

④ The noise exploded atop them then.

④ PALONG! PALONG!

④ Braaf was four running strides away from the frozen Melander and Wennberg before he, and they, realized--PALONG! PALONG!--how cathedral bells resound to those who sneak through the streets at night.

"Your Russian is found of bells," a visitor who departed

*dialogue*



New Archangel with ringing ears once noted down, and the sweet-sad holiday peals from the belfry of the cathedral followed the tall figure and the shorter two across the settlement toward the stockade gate. <sup>4</sup> A few feet from the sentry lean-to the trio paused, and Melander called in huskily: "Karlsson."

A figure loomed out in sentry cap with a musket at quarter arms. This time Wennberg's nerve-ends ignited first: the blacksmith rumbled a curse and grabbed for the knife inside his rainshirt.

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

"It's time," Melander said as if announcing tea.

<sup>4</sup> Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip

through with the guns. Minutes stretched, then the three were back from the canoe <sup>and</sup> ~~within~~ the blackness of the Kolosh village.

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

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

"What are we doing here?" Wennberg rumbled to Melander. "Where's this hidey-hole of Braaf?" <sup>S</sup>

"Here."

"What?"

"In the sill loft. Above your forge." The sill loft was a

narrow platform, like a span of board ceiling, laid across the center of the rafters of the smithing shop; wood to make windowsills and doorframes was stowed there to dry for a number of months in the heat which rose from the forges, to ~~prevent~~ <sup>forestall</sup> warp or shrinkage when a new building was put up. "On Gotland, we say the darkest place is under the candlestick."

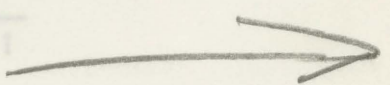
"You pissants! If the Russians'd looked up there they'd have hanged me!"

"The thought did ~~cross~~ <sup>visit</sup> our minds. But you had luck, the Russians didn't look. Up the ladder, Braaf, and begin handing to us, aye?"

It took ~~three~~ <sup>three</sup> trips, Braaf and Wernberg lugging while Melander stowed and stowed, to convey the trove which Braaf had accumulated month upon month like a discriminating packrat. Then all at once Melander, alone, was back at the gate to say to Karlsson:

† "Ready. Come when you can."

Karlsson began to wait out a span of motionless time. The hammer chorale of the bells at last had ceased, and the all-but-silence, just the soft rainsound, was worse. Too, there was an occasional stirring from Bilibin, ~~trussed and gagged~~ <sup>trussed and gagged and bleary</sup> on the floor of the hut behind him. Karlsson decided it was best





Karlsson began to wait out a span of motionless time. The hammer chorale of the bells at last had ceased, and the all-but-silence, just the soft rainsound, was worse. Yet Karlsson managed to keep busy within himself, saying and resaying the words.

Then the words, as if in chorus to his silent recitings of them, <sup>flew</sup> came out of the dark to him, in call down from the blockhouse on the hump of ridge above the stockade gate.

"Eleventh hour, all quiet, God save our father the Tsar."

Having been endlessly rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian was better than his own, Karlsson swallowed, cupped his hands to his mouth, and as close as he could raise his voice to Bilibin's bray, cried back the watch call.

Silence from the blockhouse.

Karlsson cracked the gate for himself.

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

<sup>a frozen</sup> An eternal moment, Karlsson rummaged ~~in~~ the times he had shared the hootch jug with Bilibin. ~~Then he brayed once more~~ Then brayed once more:

"Nothing fifteen drops won't cure."

Fresh silence at the other guardpost. Deeper, <sup>silence,</sup> tauter, it seemed to Karlsson.

At last:

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

Merry Christmas, Pavel Ivanovich!"

# — As if in mock of some dance step the Russians just then were gyrating through in the Castle, the Swedes' vast voyage southward started off with <sup>an abrupt</sup> a sidestep to the west.

Melander had shown Karlsson on the first of the Tebenkov

maps the pair of southgoing channels threaded like careful seams among the islands of Sitka Sound, and Karlsson had said: "At night? Probably in rain?"<sup>4</sup> That nubbin of opinion pivoted the escapees to the third possible route, a veer around large Japonski Island directly across from the Kolosh village and then outside the shoal of Sound islands. Such a loop was longer than the other channels and unsheltered from the ocean currents, but at least it was not a blindfolded plunge into the labyrinth of isles.

It was, however, the inauguration for Braaf and Wennberg into paddling in untame waters. The canoe bucked, slid down nose first, rocked to one side, bucked again, slid again and rocked to the other side, a nautical jig new to the pair of them, and a horrifying one in the wet dark. Their paddling efforts were stabs into the sloshing turmoil below them until Karlsson, in the bow of the canoe and feeling the splutters of attempt occurring behind him, directed over his shoulder:<sup>4</sup> "Spread your hands wide as you can on the paddle and stroke only when I say. Now--now--now--now--now--"

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

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

As the canoe swayed around, the other three saw what he meant. Back through one of the channel-canyons amid the



*of Sitka Sound,*  
islands, an astonishing wide box of lights sat in the air.  
Baranov's Castle, every window lamp-lit for this night of  
Christmas merriment, sent outward through the black and the  
rain their final glittering glimpse of New Archangel.

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

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

# —  
"You bastard, Melander." This was Wennberg. "'The Russians  
won't follow us,' ay?"

"They haven't," Melander retorted. "Those are Kolosh. We'll  
see how eager they are to die. Braaf, load those fancy rifles  
of yours, then pass Karlsson his hunting gun."

# *Worse* —  
The Kolosh chieftain in the chasing canoe counted carefully  
as Braaf worked at the loading, and did not like how the numbers  
added and added. The half-drunk Russian officer who had roused  
the Kolosh crew told them the escaping men were only three--  
Braaf at first had not been missed, his whereabouts as usual the  
most obscure matter this side of ghostcraft--but plainly there were  
four of the whitehairs, they possessed at least two muskets apiece,  
and this one doing the loading was rapid at his task. Against the  
four and their evident armory the Kolosh chieftain had his six

paddlers and himself, with but three muskets and some spears. "Fools they are, you'll skewer them like fish in a barrel," the Russian officer had said. "If they haven't drowned themselves first." But fools these men ahead now did not noticeably seem to be. They had paddled far, they seemed prepared to fight, and they held the total of muskets in their favor. Much tobacco and molasses had been promised by the angry Russian, but was it worth the battle these whitehairs might put up? Once wondering starts there is no cure, and the leader of the Kolosh definitely had begun to wonder.

As the chieftain sought to balance it all in his mind, muskets and molasses and Russians and tobacco and four steady-armed whitehairs instead of three exhausted cowardly ones, and the exertion of his crew steadily shortened the water between the canoes, the craft in front suddenly swung broadside, the figure in its bow leveling a rifle as the canoe came around.

Startled, for the range was greater than they themselves would expend shots across, the Kolosh paddlers ducked and grappled for their own few muskets, but the chieftain sat steady and watched. If this was his moment to die, he owed the instant all the attention within his being.

Smoke puffed from the rifle of the slender whitehair, and splinters sprayed from the high curve of the stern behind the chieftain at the level of his chest. The chieftain knew, as only one man of combat can see into the power of another, what

more -  
point am?



Karlsson had done. The whitehair had touched across phenomenal distance to the chieftain's life, plucked it up easily as a kitten, then let it fall back into place.

Rattled by the turnabout of men who were supposed to be desperately fleeing them, the Kolosh crew tried to yank their rifles into place, the canoe rocking with their confusion. The chieftain still watched ahead. He knew himself to be twice the watcher here, the one intent on the rifleman across the water and the other in gaze to himself at this unexpected point between existences. The slender whitehair lifted another rifle--the other three steadily aiming their weapons but not firing--and swung it into place, once more on a line through the air to the Kolosh leader. This time the chieftain could see in the manner of the aiming man that he would claim from his watcher the existence called life.

The decision was spoken by the chieftain's mouth before his mind entirely knew of the words.

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

In the other canoe, the slender man set aside his rifle; so did the big whitehair in the stern. The Kolosh watched silently as the pair of them then powerfully paddled the canoe away while the other two kept their rifles pointed.

"Let the sea eat them," the chieftain said.

# —

~~the story of~~ 60 47

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

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

"Excellency."

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

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

"Yes. Oblige me, if you will: Were these men"--Rosenberg glanced at the list of four names his secretary had initiated this blighted day with, and read them aloud--"parishioners of yours?"



48  
✓

61

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

"Formerly? Oblige me further."

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

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

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

Rosenberg pinched the area between his eyes again and asked: "Drink, do you mean?"

"Actually, no. He, ah, gambled."

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

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

Rosenberg rose, crossed to a window, leaned his forehead against the glass coolness, and stared out at the clouded coastline south across Sitka Sound. Worthless to send the Nicholas to alert Ozherskoi; if the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they would be past Ozherskoi by now. Nor could the steamship hunt down a canoe which would hide among the coves and islands of this coast like a mouse in a stable. The single piece of luck Rosenberg found in the situation was that his request to be relieved of his governorship--"ill health...family reasons": in truth, a sufficiency of New Archangel--months ago had been dispatched to Russia, and the insight arrived to him now that with a resourceful bit of delay, this matter of the runaway Swedes could slide out of sight into the paperwork his successor would inherit. For his part, Rosenberg would reap one further anecdote with which to regale dinner parties in St. Petersburg.

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

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

"Excellency."

# —————  
That evening, some forty miles downcoast from New Archangel and a secure twenty beyond the Ozherskoi outpost, the four canoeists pulled ashore behind a small headland, in a cove snug as a mountainside tarn. Weariness weighted every smallest move as they tried to uncramp their legs. Then Melander creakily leaned to Braaf and whispered.



~~something to Braaf~~ # Braaf nodded and ran a hand into the supplies  
stowed within the canoe. When his hand came up, it held a small  
jug.

"Karlsson, forgive us that it isn't hootchina, but rum from  
the officers' club was the best Braaf could manage under the  
circumstances." # As he spoke Melander's long face was centered  
with a colossal grin, which now began to repeat itself on  
Karlsson and even Wennberg. # "We think it may do well enough  
for a toast to our first day of journey even so," Melander purred  
on. "Braaf, would you care to sip first?"

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

"May you live forever and I never die."

Then he drank deep.