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A ridge of surf, rumpling in from the wakeful January ocean.

Add atop its taut whiteness the high-nosed cedar canoe, poised and buoyant as a magnified seabird.

Carried nearer and nearer by the water's determined sweep at the sky, the nimble craft now, in this first necessary picture in your mind, sleds across the curled crest of wave and begins to glide toward the dark frame of the 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. Here in a deep-winter dusk of the year 1853, however, three of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore know nothing of this name, nor would it matter the least whit 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.

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?"

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

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

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, the young sea-roamer 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 America, as it would be until the expanse of wilderness passed from Russian hands to American by sale in 1867 and this vital speck of port-and-capital called New Archangel was rechristened to what the coast's natives knew it as, Sitka.

Although he had no farthest thought of it at the onset of that voyage, a pair of matters 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 but had proved to be quite literally out of his depth on the ocean; and the Russian-American Company's steamship Emperor Nicholas I berthed against the backdrop of boundless Alaskan forest. Far from having a wind sailor's usual contempt for steam vessels, Melander was more than a little intrigued with these contraptions. Pointing course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism--this was just the sort of thing to appeal to Mister First Mate Melander. In a time and place earlier, he would have been the fellow you wanted to set a spire on a cathedral; in a later, to oversee a fleet of mail planes. But on an April day in 1851, at one of the rim-ends of the known world, what sat at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters navigated, in what had historically been a lurching and uncertain style, by the fur-trading 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 at New Archangel like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, let us say, that elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northmost North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company

by learning to lead brigades of trappers and traders, keep the native tribes cowed or in collaboration, deliver a reliable 15 per cent profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, to hold those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the British crown which underlay the company's charter terms like an ornate watermark. Finlayson, McLoughlin, Simpson, Mackenzie, Fraser, others: Caledonians who whittled system into the wilderness, names we know even yet as this continent's northern roster of men of enterprise and empire. But maybe is only maybe, and the facts enough are that on the broad map of midnineteenth-century empires Alaska lies apart from the Hudson's Bay span of dominion across most of what has come to be Canada. That, indeed, this colossal crude crown of northwestmost territory is tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow. And that our man 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, within 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 New Archangel. In his first Alaskan year Melander was permitted to steam out with the Nicholas only 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 what followed was not going to be good. Because of his ability of handling men and, from his time on Baltic voyages, his tongue's capability with Russian as well as Swedish and a bit of Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, Melander henceforth was in charge of the crew which salted catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder.

Melander 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. 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 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."

Then he stood up, a process like staves suddenly framing themselves together into a very large scarecrow, and in his galumphing 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 paces his traipse necessarily ended, the high timbered gate of the stockade there stoppering New Archangel until morning. Melander still needed motion. He changed course to the north. Rapidly passed the gate watchman yawning within his hut. Climbed the short knoll where the first of the stockade's blockhouses overlooked the gate. In long pulls clambered up the ladder to the catwalk beside the blockhouse. Here met the quizzing glance of the Russian sentry and muttered: "The Finns are singing in the barracks again. They sound like death arguing with the devil."

The sentry nodded in pitying savvy and returned to his watching-slot within the timbered tower. Leaving Melander solitary against the dusky sky, scanning out beyond Sitka Sound and its dark-treed islands schooled like furry whales, to the threadline of horizon

that is the Pacific.

After a moment, as if satisfied that the water portion of the world still hung in place, Melander dropped his gaze until he was peering directly down at the edge of shore which interseated the outside end of the stockade. Here his looking held for a good while.

Eventually, and so softly that the sentry nearby in the block-house mistook it for another mutter against twittering Finns, the tall man murmured: "Perhaps not bladeless."

Do such things have a single first moment? If so, just here Melander begins to depart from a further half dozen years of the salting of fish.

You have discerned 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 watching of him, across the next number of days, to notice change: one or two fewer Melanderesque forays of language, some sorting glances toward his fellow seven-year men as they performed their tasks. Yet in no more than a pair of weeks, Melander sifted through his plan down to details the size of fish-hooks, 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.

Karlsson he nominated into the escape within a further week.

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 so-seldom 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 Skane 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 stop-less strokes. Watching him, Melander had been put in mind of the regularity of a millwheel.

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

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

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

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

"Let's take our tea outside the stockade. Flavor always improves away from the Russians."

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

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

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

Karlsson's face, all at once not quite so bland, suggested the standard skepticism toward talk of uncooping oneself from New Archangel. Because of New Archangel's isolation so far into the North Pacific and because muskeg and sinkholes and an alpine forest so thick it seemed to be thatched began just beyond the stockade walls, the matter of escape always narrowed instantly to the same fine 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--Baranov, 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 Baranov 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 two. Disquieted shipman, musing woodman, now plotters both. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing apparatuses have to be, stood New Archangel and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to ponder it. For empires exist on the principle of constellations in the night sky--pattern imposed across otherwise unimaginable expanse--and the New Archangels of the planet at the time, whether named Singapore or Santa Fe or Dakar or Astoria or Luanda or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they themselves were. That voyage which deposited Melander and Karlsson into their indentured situation reminds us that here in the middle of the nineteenth century, this work of putting out the lines of star-web across the planet yet had to be done with 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 for decades to come. North America: the gray-gowned wee queen of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and Bella Coolas, merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk were being provided fortunes by bales of Alaskan furs, the United States

was taking unto itself a second broad oceanfront. Such maritime tracework seemed, in short, to be succeeding astoundingly.

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 next to join their two--which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be gone from New Archangel. He had, after all, the thief's outlook that in this vast world of opportunity, an occasion would surely arrive when he could pilfer them back. Stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and the captain of a Danish fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska he had veered to because, after a steady growth of skill from beggary to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination beckoning to him was kastell: prison.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why should I?"

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

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

"God's bones, Braaf, these canoes float like waterbugs. 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 in the cheeks of your ass, too."

"Braaf," Melander resumed as if reciting to a simple child. "You have a choice here which comes rare in life. Join us and leave this Russian shitpile, or stay and get caught one day lifting one snuff box too many. You've seen what these Russians can do with a knout. That sergeant of the sentires will sign his name up and down your back. Aye?"

"A pretty choice you paint. 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 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. Historians exclaim 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 cannonades of one of the Tsar's 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.

All of New Archangel, cathedral and Castle and hulks 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 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 is 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 into the ship's hull when it became a storehouse, creeps to the forecastle, and within a particular one of the several stave-sprung barrels there makes a deposit, a walrus-ivory snuffbox which hitherto has been the possession of a Russian quatermaster. Then, as Melander instructed, Braaf begins to measure by handwidths the depth and breadth--which is to say, the cache capacity--of other of these abandoned receptacles.

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 plateau of forest beneath. Or cloud of stranger sort, clumps of wan light, warmths fallen through chinks in the overcast, now would pinto the forest flanks. Between times a silken rain probably had sifted into 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 mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging from the direction of the hulk toward chores for the noon meal, Melander on work-break presents himself from within the saltery being constructed on the point of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares amply in the twenty-foot tides of this region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tideflat a pig is rooting up clams while ravens seize his finds one after another. Melander watches for a moment, then laughs. Other workmen look over at him from their mugs of tea. Melander points to the raucous gulping birds: "The Castle Russians at one of their banquets."

Fully equal in complication and unlikelihood to its architecture and geography and weather was New Archangel's tenantry. The settlement was ruled by the Russian navy, administered by a covey of Russian-American Company clerks and other functionaries, was provisioned chiefly by British ships of the rival Hudson's Bay Company, seasonally abounded with Aleut fur hunters, relied for most of its muscle work upon creoles--those born of Russian fathers and Kolosh mothers; of New Archangel's sum of about a thousand persons, this was far the most sizable group--or upon Russian vagabonds from the Siberian port of Okhotsk, and for its craftwork, such as carpentry and smithings, it imported the seven-year men from

Scandinavia. The hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly were Finns; 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 the stockade wall of defense twenty-five feet high and five hundred yards long and four blockhouses built of fat logs and a couple of dozen full-time sentries constantly expressed the colony's wariness of the natives. With cause. The Sitka Tlingits obliterated the first settlement Baranov implanted here, and a bare three years after this summer of 1852 they were to muster themselves and try, just short of success, to obliterate this one as well.

Precisely this prudence toward the Kolosh, the way New Archangel each and every day had to 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

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

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

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

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

"Where's our pickpurse?"

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

"How far do you trust him?"

"Ordinarily, only a whisker's width. 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 bindle of rye when your Skane fields are harvested, Karlsson. Together we lean in support of one another. Take any one away and we fall."

"And are trampled by the Russians."

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

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

"Yes, I can see that might be a matter to know. Promise me not to laugh. But I stayed for a pretty sight. A pretty face, you might understand better. But it was this. What took my eyes was the Nicholas, these islands and mountains and the northern ocean. I could see myself on that steam-whale, going places of the world here I could never have dreamed of. 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 no."

"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 the 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; now, in Braaf's specific instance, the gleaner who drifted through New Archangel like steam freed from the bathhose.

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

During August he added to it a gaff hook, three excellent Kolosh knives, 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 kettle, a spyglass, another box of tea and a water cask.

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

Karlsson had eyed out a candidate, an eighteen-foot shell with a prow which angled up into a high sharp needle of nose. The 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 so sprightly a look that it seemed only to be awaiting the right word of magic before flying off upward. But Melander believed he too knew something of canoes from having paddled a number of times with Kolosh crews to the fishing grounds off the western shorefront of New Archangel. Indeed, it can be realized now that those journeys were first filaments in the spinning of his decision that seven-yeardom could be fled by water. The fishing canoes were half again the length of this keen-beaked version singled out by Karlsson, and this question of size balked Melander.

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

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

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

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

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 touched 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 whats, demanded Braaf.

Evil minnows that would leap from the sea and piss in Braaf's 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 reason. It took him all of the next week to accumulate a trio of Clyoquot paddles from the natives along the harbor.

"Three?" said Karlsson when they met again. "What if we lose one over the side?"

Braaf cursed in his sweet voice, and went off to start the thief's siege of watching and waiting which would glean 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 wariness 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 once wrote home to a grandee of the Russian-American Company, "do you get such men?") But so were debtors, escaped serfs, those whose only instinct was to drift. Bilibin might be pegged somewhere amid these milder miscreants, without doubt having skinned his nose against one law or another but not the most hellbound soul you can call to mind, either.

But for our purpose here, which is that of Karlsson and Braaf and Melander, Bilibin's significant earmark 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...

The next time, having conferred that evening 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 hootch 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 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 Ozherskoi. 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 wagged 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 to Karlsson and his disposition readjusted itself. "So. It seem 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 gazes Melander grimaced, then scrowled, then swore. "Jesu Maria. Have to become a common sneakthief, do I? The pair of you..."

The pair of them met Melander with the same square glances two weeks later. "I have them, I have them," he 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 side and I got away along starboard." Melander opened his mouth as if to go on, but went into thought instead. After a moment: "Aye. Anyway, it's done and done. Let's get on with our enterprise. We'll need new 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 making away with the sailcloth, the folded length of it cradled beneath an armload of skins he ostensibly was carrying toward the tannery, when a voice suggested huskily into his left ear, "Let's talk about what you have under those skins."

Through his cold 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."

Wennberg moved himself in front of Braaf as companionably as if he had every matter in the universe to discuss with him. "Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your friend Melander 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 stockage gate as if time had snagged to a stop within their little radius, while around them all New Archangel's morning life eddied, quartermasters and overseers and shipwrights and caulkers and brassworkers and sailors and Kolosh and Castle officers, 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 left bicep, drawing a strangled gasp from the laden man. "A thinker, hmm?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered rapidly. "You obviously have much to say about matters of weight."

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.

Melander 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."

"Tsk. On all this big island 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?"

"Don't come clever with me, Melander. I've watched your trained packrat Braaf, these weeks."

"Braaf is his own man."

"Braaf is operated by your 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 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 school me: why are you interested in notions of fleeing from here?"

"My reasons are cousin to 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."

"Which doesn't mean I wouldn't happily see you hung high for magpie food, if that's your choice. Decide."

Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own, then 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 may-be 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."

A night later, the four of them met. Karlsson openly appraised 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 little more of him than those spaced hammerblows onto red metal. He found it interesting that the man was amounting to so much more than arm.

Wennberg meanwhile reciprocated as much scrutiny as he got.

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 in that hulk where you've had Braaf stashing things these months."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there," Melander said with such politeness it seemed almost an apology. "Since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole. Braaf has the knack of 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 thundered.

"Yes, except mouse turds," Melander chuckled. "And even the Russians might find it hard to believe that we've been busy storing away treasure of such sort. 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 tell me, if you know, how we are to run on the sea."

Tong the plan around in the forge of his mind as he would, Wennberg could come up with only a 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 Karlsson looked mildly surprised, but it was Wennberg who blurted:

"Great good God, Melander, eight guns altogether? We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war!"

"Can you name me a better cargo, Wennberg? Do you think the ravens are going to feed us on this journey, and the bears will guard us with their kind teeth? We don't know what we'll face, but I want 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 repair yet.

Melander congratulated him gravely on entering the spirit of their enterprise.

"There, Braaf, he's made you amends. You'll need to pluck only five firepieces when the time is ready."

Braaf said nothing.

Karlsson too stayed unspeaking, but he had begun to have a feeling about Wennberg. There was something unreckonable, opposite

from usual, about the blacksmith. As when the eyelid of a wood duck watching you closes casually from the bottom up.

Wennberg was not done with the topic of muskets.

"Just where 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 in the manner of 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 errands which wafted him into all crannies of the settlement Braaf had spotted the weapons--and which were used for shooting parties when the governor's retinue went downcoast to Ozherskoi was New Archangel's 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 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," Melander mused. "But getting those guns loose..."

"Wennberg," murmured Braaf.

"Mister Blacksmith!" Melander proclaimed.

"You squareheaded 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 Russians who frequented their lodgings for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument all would be at the governor's 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, what could be more natural than for Karlsson to offer Bilibin a few extra holiday swigs of hootch?

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 Baranov 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 in 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 Gilbraltar 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 canny 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.

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 debate were not Wennberg's style. He preferred to bang a point, go on to the next if it mis-echoed. 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 cannot 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, 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 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 Archagel'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 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 had forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and food on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy

Braaf took up carving. After his first effort, a copying of a madonna in the Russian cathedral who emerged from Braaf's fingers somehow looking simultaneously 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.

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 HOURR," he bawled. "A Savior COMES with LOVE'S sweet POWERR..."

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

From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the 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 doorway 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 two minutes, three. 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 at 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 perturbance 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' lodgings, 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 to lift away the sprung lock.

"Good job 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, Wennberg had cut away the triggerguard of the first rifle, and Braaf plucked the gun 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 into the dark, west across New Archangel toward the stockade gate.

The noise exploded atop them then.

PALONG! PALONG!

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 fond of bells," a visitor who departed New Archangel with ringing ears once noted down, and the sweet-sad

holiday peals from the belfry of the cathedral followed the tall figure and the shorter two across the settlement toward the stockade gate.

A few feet from the sentry lean-to the trio paused, and Melander called in huskily: "Karlsson."

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.

Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip through with the guns. Minutes stretched, then the three were back from the canoe and the blackness of the Kolosh village.

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

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

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

"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 window-sills and doorframes was stowed there to dry for a number of months in the heat which rose from the forges, to forestall 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 look up there they'd have hanged me!"

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

It took three trips, Braaf and Wennberg 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 and bleary on the floor of the hut behind him. Karlsson decided it was best to keep busy within himself, saying and resaying the words.

Then the words, as if in chorus to his silent recitings of them, flew out of the dark to him, in call down from the block-

house 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?"

A frozen moment, Karlsson rummaged the times he had shared the hootch jug with Bilibin. Then brayed once more:

"Nothing fifteen drops won't cure."

Fresh silence at the other guardpost. Deeper, tauter silence, 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 an abrupt sidestep to the west.

~~Melander had shown Karlsson on the first of the Tebenkov~~