

Make a picture in your mind of the cedar canoe atop a sharp white ridge of ocean. Carried up and up by the water's determined sweep at the sky, the high-nosed craft, poised and buoyant as a seabird, at last 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. Aristazabal Island, this particular landfall is inscribed on modern charts of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska, but three of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in late January of the year 1853 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. 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 Melander's plan. Melander maybe, under different policy, would have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company 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 north-most 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. 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; is indeed a great crude crown of northwestmost territory tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow; and that Melander held contempt for the life he and

the other Swedes found themselves in as seven-year men in Alaska. Indentured laborers of the Russian-American Company is fur-gathering enterprise, in the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy. "The Russians' oxen," as Melander more than once grumbled it.

You would have spied Melander at once in any day's comings and goings at the frontier port of New Archangel. Tall man with lanks of arms and high hips, so that he seemed to be all long sections and hinges. Even his manner of talking was prominently jointed into lengths, a habit he had of every so often ending a sentence with a querulous "aye?" as if affirming to his listener whether he really dared continue with so mesmerizing a line of conversation. Needless to say of such a quiz, thirty-one times out of thirty Melander could be counted on, all the reluctance born of politeness notwithstanding, to continue. Fortunately Melander was well worth sustained attention. His line of jaw ran lengthy, as did his forehead, but his 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 the hole of a tree trunk at you, and whatever Melander's tongue dealt with at any given opportunity, ayed and roundabout and chaff-strewn though the route might be, ended up with more weight per word to it than most men's mouthings.

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

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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, this young 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. Specifically, to the shoreside assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity called New Archangel. (Called so, that is, until Alaska passed from Russian hands to American by sale in 1867 and the settlement was rechristened to what the coast's natives knew it as, Sitka.) Once there, a pair of matters unexpectedly decided him to stay. 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 quite literally out of his depth on the ocean; and the sight of the steamship Emperor Nicholas I berthed against the backdrop of endless Alaskan forest.

Far from having a wind sailor's usual contempt for steam vessels, Melander was more than a little intrigued with the

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contraptions. Pointing course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism--this was just the sort of thing to appeal to him. In an earlier time and place, Melander would have been the 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 was at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen. "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?"

As will happen, Melander after signing on with the Russian-American Company did find his life veered by the alluring new machinery, right enough, but not as hoped. The Russians seldom fired 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 steamed out with the Nicholas only when 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

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Sitka Sound. This happened precisely twice, and Melander's sea-time-under-steam totaled six days. The rest of the workspan, 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 Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, Melander was put in charge of the salting of catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder. Melander at this tiny port-capital of Russian America had become veered, 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.

When it became ever more clear that the prospect for his next half dozen years still was going to be herring and halibut and the scorn and arrogance of the New Archangel Russians, Melander in the first lengthening evenings of summer of 1852 turned his mind toward devising a route for himself out of Alaska. The thinking went faster than fish-salting. (It was sped considerably by the day Melander listened with loathing to one Russian overseer proclaim to another: "A strong right arm is the lever of life.") In no more than a month, Melander had 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.

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. But Melander one time had noticed him canoeing back from a day's hunting--Karlsson was one of the few New Archangel Swedes occasionally sent out to hunt game 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.

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 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

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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 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 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 strolled past the sentry 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. "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 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.

Karlsson at once put question to Melander about the canoe route.

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.

A first south-pointing stab of island--Baranof, 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.

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

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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.

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The next morning after tea was taken outside the stockade by a pair of men, it was taken by a trio: Braaf studying back and forth from Melander's forehead to Karlsson's as Melander once more outlined the plan. Only for an instant, about the duration of a held breath, did Braaf's eyes come steady with theirs, just before he agreed to join the escape.

That is the way they became three. Disquieted shipman, musing woodman, agreeable thief, now plotters 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. There in the middle of the nineteenth century, this work of putting out the lines of star-web across the planet yet was 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. Such maritime tracework was succeeding

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astoundingly in North America as well. The gray-gowned wee queen of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and Bella Coolas, merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk were provided fortunes by bales of Alaskan furs, the United States took unto itself a second broad oceanfront.

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 which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.

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. It was said of Baranov, like Napoleon, that he was a little great man, and he it was who in 1791 began to

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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 a gunship.

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 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

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onion dome and carrot spire of the comely little Russian Orthodox cathedral. (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 does so, Karlsson studies the Kolosh canoes lined like sleeping serpents on the white sand of the beach.) 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. (As Karlsson begins hewing pine at the shipyard, Braaf materializes at the partially-wooded rise of land just north of the settlement and stockade. 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 on this brow of land which holds New Archangel's four capacious graveyards--Kolosh, Russian Orthodox, Lutheran, and unconsecrated. This morning as usual Braaf angles past the particularly handsome headstone of a Russian officer named Gavrilov. Braaf cannot comprehend the Russian inscription, but it reads: Peace be to your dust.) 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 peaks like dark icebergs. The next the cloud layer would rise and lop every crag, leaving a plateau of forest beneath. 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 cemetery slope 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.") A last 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."

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, it imported 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 the wall of defense eighteen feet high and five hundred yards long and four bulky blockhouses 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 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.

Melander was of singularly few words three evenings later-- June's last evening, another of New Archangel's summer twilights which dawdled on in dusk until near midnight--when he fell into step with Braaf and Karlsson on their way to the barracks.

"All right, Braaf. Tomorrow, begin your harvest."

Braaf proved so adept a provisioner that Melander soon was forced to ration out his stealing assignments, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery.

By the end of July, the planners' 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 Braaf added a gaff hook, 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 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 one to recommend, an eighteen-foot shell of unusual delicacy with a prow which, unlike the short terminating blade of bowsprit on most Kolosh canoes, angled onward into a high sharp needle of nose. It gave the craft the look of only awaiting the right instant before flying upward. Along both bow and stern, this alert canoe was vividly carved and painted: box-like designs with rounded corners, so that the lines flowed with smoothness in and out of one another.

Karlsson judged there was only one canoe more promising among all the Kolosh fleet, a chief's vessel, larger and more elegant; but its beaching spot was nearly to the far end of the village. This choice lay amid the half dozen canoes nearest the stockade gate, convenient.

Melander 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, those journeys were main strands in his decision that seven-year-dom could be fled by water. But the fishing canoes were half again the length of this keen-beaked version singled out by Karlsson. Asked his opinion, Braaf only mumbled that any canoe was smaller than he preferred. Karlsson vouched hard for the waterworthiness of his choice, pointing out that it would be livelier to steer than a larger canoe and less weight to propel. Further, he 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 was persuaded.

Next Karlsson, who rarely troubled to assert himself about anything but was displaying downright passion about everything to do with the canoe, insisted 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.

Karlsson's own task, in these months of preparation, was the night watchman at the gate of the stockade.

"You are the one with the wedge to open that gate for us," Melander instructed him jovially. "It's between your legs."

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 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.

Karlsson began to increase his frequency of visit to the native village, and to stretch each stay deeper into dusk. Before long, he was nudging regularly against the second curfew, much to the anxiety of a gate sentry named Bilibin. Bilibin was one of the longest-serving of the Russian laborers who had been pushed or pulled across from Siberia, but also something of a scapegrace who had exasperated a succession of superiors to the point where he now stood the least desirable of watch shifts, the one spanning the middle of the night. He had felt the knout enough times not to invite it again, and the first time Karlsson arrived back late, 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 was not the sort of thing Bilibin savored either.

The next time, having conferred that day with Melander, Karlsson staggered later than ever from the Kolosh village to

the gate, singing as if drunk--"If your blue eyes I could see, gloom would soon depart;" Karlsson was amazed with the evident believability of his acting; "for to me sweet maid Marie, is sunshine through the heart"--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 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 shook his head again. "Aye?" Melander demanded. "What is it?"

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

The unforeseen always irked Melander, and this he had not thought of at all. His stare of annoyance held on Braaf, then Melander swerved to Karlsson and his disposition restored 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 Melander grimaced,

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

The pair of them met him with the same square glances two weeks later. "I have them, I have them," 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 one side of the boat 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: "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?"

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--through his fright it did register on him that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian-- suggested huskily into his ear, "Let's talk about what you have under those skins."

Braaf turned his head 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 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. Around the three of them now centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate, New Archangel's morning life eddied, quartermasters and overseers and shipwrights and caulkers and 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 right 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 now scanned out into the parade ground from here where Wennberg stood by the hour at his work, nodded in understanding of the view thus presented, and asked: "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."

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."

A night later, the four of them met. Karlsson openly studied 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 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 gave back 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 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 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 left sparks in the air.

"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. 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."

Wennberg glowered around the trio, began to say something, but Melander beat him to it 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 can, how we are to run on the sea."

Test the plan 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: "Great good God, Melander, eight 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 buttplate 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 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: as when the eyelid of a wood duck watching you closes casually from the bottom up.

Wennberg caromed on from the topic of muskets: "And you know

for heaven-certain, Melander, that we'll find this American fort at--what is it, Asturia?"

"Astoria, named for the rich fur man Astor. 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."

Even Wennberg was silenced by that, and Melander now disclosed to them the escape date. Christmas. The Russians would be celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off. Nor, when the escapees' absence had been discovered, would the Russians be eager to leave their warm festivities to chase them through the cold of Alaskan night. Moreover, nothing could be more natural than for Karlsson to offer Bilibin a few extra holiday swigs of hootchina.

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 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 force of its resistance to the intentions of man, he might have used to put a tempered edge on the plan. To have said, "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 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 nearly all 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 then bent him toward Alaska, even at the price of becoming a seven-year man. The occasional hunting assignments he enjoyed

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 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 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 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.

she did sp 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. "Christ the SAVior is BORNNN..."

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have the sergeant down here," Bilibin called urgently, hustled from the 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, shut, and two shapes bob together. When he heard Karlsson's slurred mutter and Bilibin's guffaw, 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 again. A person attentively watching the arrival and departure of Melander would have had time to blink

perhaps three times.

Wennberg, who had been idly stropping a knife as he spectated the card game being played by three carpenters and a sailmaker, grunted that he too was off to the toilet, if the Russians allowed such a matter 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 minutes, four. Apprehension rode them both. Apprehensions, rather, for their anxieties were as different as the men. The single time in all the unfolding of the plan that Melander had visibly blanched was when he asked Braaf where best to steal the final installment of muskets on escape night and Braaf responded with entire matter-of-factness: "The officers' club. The gun room." ("Next, Braaf, you'll want to go up to the Castle Russians and ask if we can have their underwear for warmth," Wennberg had said sardonically.) But in arguing the matter out, it had emerged that Braaf probably was right. That the officers and Company Russians who frequented the clubhouse for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument probably all would be at the governor's Christmas ball in Baranov's Castle. That the small collection of rifles racked like fat billiard cues on one end wall of the clubhouse--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 probably could be got to on that necessary night. Probably. But a few late-going Russians yet within the clubhouse...a padlock on the door of the gun room...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, a third upright shadow joined them, thrust into the hands of each of them two hefty long rifles, and held the fifth weapon for itself.

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

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 found of bells," a visitor who departed

41

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, and the three men began to carry to the canoe somewhere in the blackness of the Kolosh village the five guns from the officers' club, Karlsson's hunting rifle and the sentry's musket Wennberg had dawdled over in the smithing shop; the trove Braaf had accumulated month upon month like a discriminating packrat; the final food he had diverted from the kitchen that very day.

It took a number of trips, for Melander would have stuffed the canoe full as a sausage if he hadn't had to leave room for the human occupants, Braaf and Wennberg lugging while Melander stowed and stowed, then all at once Melander, alone, was back at the gate to say, "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. 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, 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 cried back the watch call he had been saying inside himself, as close now as he could raise his voice to Bilibin's bray.

Silence from the blockhouse.

Karlsson cracked the gate for himself. And then, although he had no idea he was going to do such a thing, Karlsson turned his head up the hill and brayed once more:

"Merry Christmas!"

A moment of silence of another sort at the other guardpost--deeper, tauter, as of surprise. Then:

"And Merry Christmas to you, 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 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?" 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: "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

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. They saw then 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."

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

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.

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?"

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 and tideless as a mountainside tarn. Melander 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.