Permitting the others their champagne sleep, Melander enlists the last of dusk and begins to re-stow the canoe, taking more care than could be had in the dark and hurry at New Archangel. As he occupies himself at this, another picture is needed in the mind, large as you can manage to make it. Perhaps larger yet, for this image must be of the northmost arc of the Pacific Ocean: the chill ascendant quarter-moon of that hemisphere of water, from the schooled islands of Japan up to the Siberian coast and across to the Alaskan, then downcurving south and east along the continental extent of Canada and America.

Vaster stretches can be found on the earth, but not all that many. The Pacific Ocean is the blue mammoth among features of this planet. Sum the reaches of Pacific water—nine thousand miles across from the Philippines to Panama, 0000 from the Bering Sea to Cape Horn—and they add up to area much greater than all the earth's land surfaces. Of this colossal integer, the North Pacific makes the hugest fraction. Is, to cast the image geographically once more, a kind of shard-shaped planet unto itself, possessed of its own fierce logics of existence. Most of the climates imaginable are engendered somewhere along its horizon of coast, from polar chill to the stun of desert heat. The North Pacific's special law of gravity is lateral and violent: currents of water and weather rule. The most tremendous of these, something like a gigantic permanent storm under the water, is called the Kuroshio, the Japanese Current, and puts an easterly push into several thousand miles of ocean. Even here at the farthest littoral from the current's origins, Melander and Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf feel Kuroshio's shove against their journey without realizing it.
These four Swedes in a Tlingit canoe are attempting a thousand miles of this North Pacific world. Not all that much, you may say. A fraction of a fraction, after all. One thousand miles: in forty or fifty sturdy days one could walk such a distance and perhaps yet have a wafer's-worth of leather on one's boot soles. Except that this particular distance is exploded into archipelago; island, island, island, flattened, like a field of asteroids. Or thickly bristled with forest when not riven with channels. Except, too, for season being fully against these men, the winter weather capable of halting them any hour of each day. Except, finally, for details of barrier the eye and mind cannot yet reach, so much more complex is this jagged slope of the North Pacific than the mere arithmetic of its miles. No, in this picture, big Melander as he raptly stashes his boxes of tea and swags of sailcloth amounts to a worker ant on the rock toe of an Alp.

"Tumble up! Fall onto your feet and suffer morning!"

Melander roused his trio as rapidly as if they constituted the crew of a schooner aiming into storm, and for the identical reason: to steal minutes. Snatch time whenever it could be was going to be the policy of his captaincy. Any distance gained here at the front of their voyage served as that much less to be ground out later, when they would be wearier.

They took the same canoe positions as the night before. Karlsson the bow paddler. Behind him, Wennberg. Behind Wennberg, Braaf. Melander in the stern. Melander as ever had his reason for such placement.
Karlsson was the strongest paddler, the best to handle the prow of the
craft. Wennberg, behind Karlsson's example and with the eyes of the
other two on him, would try to keep pace with Karlsson. Braaf, Melander
wanted under his own nearest scrutiny, to see that he shirked no more
than could be prevented.

Their first miles went in silence, as if the canoemen were not sure
they could afford effort on talk. Then—"Melander, you said these first
days we'd only to keep this shore on our left, there's no other land
along here. What do you call that out there?"

Wennberg pointed southwest, where a dim bulk rose on the horizon.

"You've sighted Cape Flyaway," Melander said. "Clouds. Sometimes
they sink down on the water like brood hens and you'd swear they're land,
couldn't be anything but. That Finn skipper spent half of one morning
searching our charts for a thunderhead he thought was a piece of Hawaii.
We need to take care. This coast'd gladly stand us on our ears.
Read the map, read the compass, read the landmarks, and not go chasing
clouds. That'll fetch us to Astoria. Aye?"

"What'll it be like?" This was Braaf, who took the chance to
stop his paddle while asking. "Another wet woodpile like New Archangel?"

"The sailors' buzz I've heard is that it's a proper port but small.
Sits on a fat river with hell's own sandbar at its mouth. The Americans——
paddle, Braaf, a scissor of a lad like you is sharp enough to move
your mouth and arms at the same time, aye?—the Americans, recent years,
have taken it back from the British and they boast it as tomorrow's town
of this coast. But all we care is whether ships touch at the place, and touch they do."

Melander helmed them to near North Cape, 00 miled downcoast from New Archangel, before stopping. By then Braaf, the least accustomed to exertion, looked particulary done in. But he said nothing, and lent a hand in hefting the canoe into shelter among a shore-touching stand of spruce. Wennberg was cajoled into building a fire, Melander apportioned beans and salt beef into a kettle, Karlsson spread the sail-cloth which would serve as a ground tarp, and dark brought night two of their leaving of New Archangel.

"Cheery as a gravestone, isn't it? The Russians deserve such country."

They were into their second full day of paddling beside the gray-rocked foreshore of Baranof Island, and Melander thought it time to brighten the situation.

"Maybe we should have pointed north." Karlsson was going along with the try. "I've been up the coast there with the bear-robbers (the hunters) and those cliffs are white as cottages."

"You'd see enough white, all right, sooner than soon. Icebergs and glaciers. It's the north slope of hell up there. No, at least credit me with knowing enough to point us the other way. Aye?"

Wennberg jumped for that. "Does that mean you're taking us down hell's south slope, Melander?"

Melander blew out his breath. "Wennberg, your soul is as gray as those rocks. Shut your gab and paddle."
It took them that day and most of the one after to reach the southern tip of Baranof Island, Cape Ommaney. In that time Braaf and Wennberg and Melander began to realize, though it never would have occurred to the first two to offer it aloud and even Melander found the matter a bit unwieldy to frame into words, that in all their time at New Archangel they never truly had seen the Alaskan forest. Pinched onto its site as it was, New Archangel grand as Stockholm when compared with this universe of standing wood. True, timber hedged the fort and settlement, furred the isles of Sitka Sound and the humped backs of mountains around. But now the forest stretched like the black-green legions of time itself, the horizon on the left of the canoemen relentlessly jutting with trees, wherever there was firmament for them to fasten themselves upright on. Where soil ran out at the shore edge, trees teetered on rock.

The Swedes saw not another human—which was what Melander had banked on—nor even sea-life to speak of, for the Russian-American Company’s hunters long since had harvested these waters bare of otters and seals. What abounded were birds. Baleful ravens, big as midnight cats. Eagles riding the air above the coastal lines of bluff, patrolling in great watchful glides before letting the air spiral them high again. Seagulls, cormorants, grebes, ducks of a dozen kinds. At times, every breathing thing of this coastline except the four paddlers seemed to have taken wing.
Cape Ommaney steepened southward until hunching nearly half a mile high, evidently determined to poise there as the land's last sentry against the open water all around. Perhaps the stony bluff put Wennberg in mind of the roundbacked mountains near New Archangel, for that evening after supper he nodded out toward the bay between the canoeists' camp and the cape and asked: "What would you do, Melander, if the Nicholas came around that point just now?"

"After I emptied my britches, do you mean? So then, Wennberg, the Nicholas chugs in your dreams tonight, does it? Me, I think she's still anchored in Sitka Sound and the Russians are in their beds with their thumbs up their butts." Melander was in high humor from their progress thus far. "But what about you other pair, what's your guess? Are the Russians panting after us like hounds onto hares as Brother Wennberg thinks? Aye?

"No," Karlsson offered. "They think we can't survive."

"What makes you think we can?" retorted Wennberg.

"Because we're alive to this moment, and closer to Astoria with each stroke of the paddle."

"Your prediction, Braaf?"

"They're not after us. They don't think of us at all by now."

Wennberg snorted. "We dance out of New Archangel practically under their noses and they don't even think about us? Braaf, your head is mud."
"They have to forget us, or we'll mean too much to them. You learn that fast in the streets. The ones who rule never bother their minds with the likes of us. The provisions I took from the Russians, they regret. That they're short of four faces at work-call, they regret. Maybe they even regret the Kolosh canoe. But us ourselves, we're wisps to them by now."

None of them had ever heard so many sentences one after another out of Braaf, and in the silence that followed, it seemed to be taken as truth even by Wennberg that whatever they encountered onward along this coast, and there might be much, the challenge probably now would not be Russian.

They readied in the morning to cross the channel from Cape Ommaney east to Kuiu, the first of the island stairsteps onward from Baranof. On Melander's map Kuiu could have been the mapmaker's seizure of palsy, a spatter of crooked shores and hedging rocks. Melander said nothing of this to the other three, simply told them that he judged there'd be stout current up this passage so that they would need to aim mostly south to end up east.

It worked out his way, and by noon the canoe was nearing Kuiu, snow-scarved peaks rising beyond shore. Here, however, the map's muss of dots and squiggles became real, and the coastline stood to them with a rugged headland.

"No hole in the shore, aye?" Surf blasted whitely across rocks not far off the point. "Let's stay away from that horse market,"
Melander decreed, and avoiding the channel between headland and rocks, the canoe stood south again, the paddlers now working directly against the current.

In a few miles a cove revealed itself, but faced open to the weather from the west.

The next break in the shore yawned more exposure yet.

"Jesu Maria." Melander's exasperation was outgrowing his epithets. "Is this whole damn stone of an island unbuttoned like this?"

Two further inhospitable coves answered him.

Dusk waited not far by now, and the labor of paddling against the current was becoming terrible. From weariness, they nearly blundered into a broad slop of kelp before Karlsson glimpsed it in the gloom.

By now the canoe had reached the southern tip of Kuu, off a rocky point which bade less welcome than any profile of the island yet. But surprisingly, what looked like clumps of timber stood in the water beyond. Melander lit a candle lantern in order to peer close at his map. A thread of line hung through this channel, indicating a ship had navigated it. That testimony was needed, because low rocks and shoals could hide themselves easily in the gray mingle of water and dusk. Melander set the craft for the timber clumps; they proved to be small islands, and the canoeists pulled to shelter on one of the narrowest just short of full dark.
That was their first day of stumble, two stairstreads of island when but one had been intended. Yet Melander and his canoeman had alit secure, and after Kuiu the going smoothened. In the days now, they jinked their way southeast amid constant accessible islands. The major island called Prince of Wales rests dominantly in this topography like a long platter, and the strew of smaller isolates along its west is as if that rim of the plateware has been pounded to bits by the North Pacific. Here the canoeists could cut a course which, while Melander said a snake would break its back trying to follow their wake, kept them steadily shielded from the ocean's weather.

The spaces between stars are where the work of the universe is done. Forces hang invisibly there, tethering the spheres across the black infinite canyons: a cosmic harness which somehow tugs night and sun, ebbtide and flood, season and coming season. So too the distances among men cast in with one another on an ocean must operate. In their days of steady paddling, these four in the keen-beaked canoe found that they needed to cohere in ways they had never dreamt of—to perform all within the same close orbit yet not shoulder against one another.

Meals were an instant quandary. Melander began as cook, but fussed the matter too much. His suppers perpetually lagged behind everyone else's hunger. When he could no longer stand Melander's dawdling and poking, Wennberg volunteered himself, but proved too rough and ready. "Wennberg, you're not smithing axeheads here," Braaf murmured
as he poked at the char of Wennberg's victuals. Braaf himself, it went without saying, could not be entirely relied upon to prevent food from finding its way into his mouth before it could arrive at the others' plates. By the fifth day, then, the cooking chore had chosen Karlsson. He was no chef de cuisine, but his output at least stilled the nightly grumbling that one had might as well go off into the forest and graze.

Wennberg's particular tithe turned out to be his paddling. He was not built best for it, much too much ham at his shoulders and upper arms, but his impatience made him take on the water like a windmill in a high breeze. Always exerting toward Karlsson's example of deftness, Wennberg stroked at half again the pace Melander could manage, twice as great as the inconstant Braaf. Day on day, the canoe pulled itself through the water primarily on the forward paddles of Karlsson and Wennberg. Melander would have preferred more balance to the propulsion, yet it worked.

To his own surprise as much as anyone's, Braaf proved the best of them at reading the weather. Long before even Melander, the one seasoned sailor among them, Braaf would know a change was coming onto the ocean, as if along with his naive robin face he had a bird's hollow bones in which to feel the atmosphere's shift.

And Melander, Melander provided the edge strength to hold them all into place. Navigating, finding water for the cask, fetching firewood, mothering the canoe and its stowage, detail was Melander's personal orbit. Yet this ability to hover usefully was less notable
to the other men than his vocal trait. Had parts been subtracted from Melander in successive value to the escape, his tongue would have been the ultimate item.

For Melander knew what poets and prime ministers know, that the cave of the mouth is where men's spirits shelter. His gift for talk had stood him well with crews on all the vessels of his voyaging. Now he worked words on Wennberg and Braaf and Karlsson like a polish rag on brass. "Keep your hair on, Wennberg, there'll be supper quick as quick...Braaf, it would be pretty to think this canoe will paddle itself, but it won't. Get the holiday out of your stroking, aye?...Karlsson, that surf looks to me like worse and more of it. Let's bend our way around, so-fashion..."

"Too much smoke." Melander once more. He drops to his knees to fan the fire into purer flame.

"You'd never have lasted over a forge," jeers Wennberg. "A bit of smoke tans the soul."

Melander calculates. Three camps in a row, this smokey debate with Wennberg. The tall man makes his decision.

"You need to know a thing, Wennberg. Braaf, Karlsson, you also. I heard this from Dobzhansky, that interpreter who helped me out at first with the Kolosh fishing crews. He came once somewhere into these waters with a trading mission the Russians tried..."

The mission had been contrived as retaliation against the Hudson's Bay Company for its practice of slipping firearms to the Sitka Kolosh, so both the Russians and the downcoast natives were in a mood to make
as much face as possible. They began with a night of feast, and
Dobzhansky found himself sharing a baked salmon and goathorn cups
of fermented berry juice with a canoe chief. The pair discovered
they could converse in the trading tongue of the coast, Chinook
jargon. At once the native wanted to know of Dobzhansky how many
heads the Tsar had.

"How many heads? Why, one like you and me."

No, the native made Dobzhansky understand, not how many heads.
How many skulls?

"Skulls? What would the Tsar do with skulls?"

Sleep on them, the way Callicum does, the native said, pointing
out to Dobzhansky the tribal chief in the middle of the carousel.

"Sleeps on them? Why does he do that?"

For strength, the native answered. Anyone who sleeps on a pile
of skulls is a strong man, is he not?

Melander had not meant to tell his crew Dobzhansky's story of
this coast's people. He was not certain he should have. But no more
objections were heard about care over campfire smoke.

The water met their daily moods with its own. One morning their
channel would drowse heavily, lie with a molten look like gray bottle
glass. Another, it would wake in full fret, white lids of wave opened
by wind or current.

The weather could change with knife-edge sharpness. Once they
saw to the southeast a pastel fluff of clouds, peach and pale blue, which was directly abutted by an ink-cloud of squall: a tender seascape neighboring with tantrum. The join of continent and ocean seemed to excite the weather into such local targeting. Time and time, the canoemen would see a storm swoop onto a single mountain amid many, as if sacking up a hostage as a lesson to all the rest.

Once Braaf pointed out for the others a narrow white sheet of sky, very likely snow, north on the coast behind them. "Stay north and frost the Russians' asses," Melander directed the storm with a push of his hands. It stayed.

A thirty-nosed sea creature poked abruptly from the water, delivered the canoeists a thunderous burp, and sank.

"Sea-lions," Karlsson called. When the school surfaced again, each pug-nosed head making steady quick thrusts as if breaking the silver pane of the water, they swam for awhile alongside the canoe, watching the upright creatures in it.

Melander had learned from his herring crew that the practice of the southward natives was to dub the bowman of a canoe "Captain Nose." He bestowed the title on Karlsson, and Braaf and Wennberg took it up. For the next few days, it was all "Captain Nose, Your Honor, what's it to be for supper tonight?" and "May I suggest, Captain Nose, that we point ourselves to the right of that rock."
"Rye-cakes," Wennberg burst out one night beside the fire. The other three broke into laughter. "Laugh yourselves crooked, you bastards, but you'd give as much for a rye-cake right now as I would. Currant jam on it, you'd trip your own mother to get to it."

"Mister Blacksmith is right," Melander admitted with a chuckle. "Though with me it's not rye-cakes, but a featherbed in a sailors' inn I know at Danzig. I could bob in that for a week and never open an eye except to look for more sleep, aye?"

Karlsson nominated next. "A woman I knew in our village in Skane," he said slowly. "Her name was Ulrika and her hair was fox-red."

Braaf blinked as the other three looked at him, awaiting his choice. "I'll settle just for three paces of headstart on each of you."

To do something about the sameness of their menu, Karlsson suggested they try trolling. Out of the canoe, back alongside Melander, was let a line and a hook baited with a sliver of salt beef. On their second day of attempt, Melander yelped when the line whipped taut across his shins. "It's collect the whale or stove the boat," he boomed happily as he hand-over-hand pulled at their catch.

Melander tugged the head of the fish out of the water against the side of the canoe, then halted his grapple. "Mother of Moses," he swore in wonder.
The other three peered over the side at the snouty dark lump glaring up at Melander.

"Ugly pig of a thing," observed Wennberg. "What the devil is it?"

"Looks like a shark fathered by a toad," muttered Melander. None of them had ever seen the miniature species of shark called dogfish.

"Well, how do you say? Do we try to eat it?"

No one wanted to be the first, repellent as the dogfish looked, to commit one way or the other. Finally Karlsson offered, "I'm the potman, and I'll give a try. But I don't know..."

"Hunger is good sauce," Braaf put in dubiously.

"It better be," said Wennberg.

"At least cut off its head first," Braaf prompted. "Else it looks like it'll be gnawing on us before we can get to it."

"Eat it is," Melander proclaimed. "Somebody reached the hatchet and conk the bastard."

"Maybe all this fuss with cooking isn't needed." Skinned and baked over coals, the dogfish had proved surprisingly civil to the taste, and Karlsson was so relieved he was trying a rare joke. "I saw a bear eat fish once, near Ozherskoi. He looked big as an ox. Swatted salmon out of the water and skoffed them down belly-first."

Melander pretended to ponder. "I think it was well you didn't invite him for supper tonight. He might have turned up his nose at that sea beast we've just put into ourselves."
A moment of these encamped nights, cherish with Melander the scroll he fetches from its snug place in the canoe.

Hunkered within the firelight as Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson settle to sleep, one by one he polishes four biscuit-sized stones against the leg of his britches. Wipes his fingers down his shirt front. From a pocket digs a stub of pencil. Lays a small square of sailcloth, smooths it flat. Now like a Muslim with a prayer rug, unfurls the roll tenderly onto the cloth and sets a scrubbed stone to weight each corner.

Each time, this unfolding of the Tebenkov maps ruffles a pleasure through Melander. It is as if an entire tiny kingdom has sprung to creation just for him. Sprigs small as the point of his pencil denote where forest stands. Tideflats are delicately dotted, as if speck-sized clams breathe beneath. Wherever the land soars—and this coastline, recall, abounds in up and down—the rise in elevation is shown as a scalloped plateau. Threaded among the shores and islets are the proven sailing routes, as though an exploring spider has spun his test-voyage of each passage. The total of engraver's strokes on each map is astounding, thousands. Melander cannot imagine who among the Russian pen-jabbers in the Castle possessed the skill and energy for such work. (In actuality, none. After Governor Tebenkov wrenched the navigational information from his ship captains, he turned it over to a gifted copper-engraver among the New Archangel Creoles.)

In our time, a poet has offered the thought that it is within
civilization's portions of maps now that the injunction ought be inked, Here be monsters. Melander's firelit maps represent an instant of balance in humankind's relationship with the North Pacific: an era after sea serpents were discounted, and before ports and their tentacles of shipping lanes proliferated. To cast a glance onto these functional maps is like seeing suddenly beneath the fog-and-cloud skin of this shore, down to the truth of bone and muscle and ligament. The frame of this shoulder of the Pacific is what Melander avidly needs to know, and the T ebenkov maps peel it into sight for him.

The first map, that of New Archangel and Sitka Sound, Melander particularly gazes at again and again. The detail here is most phenomenal of all: the exact black speck, slightly longer than wide, which was their barracks is shown just above the cross-within-a-cross indicating the church of St. Michael. (Melander had unrolled for Karlsson this map for his opinion about the best route through the Sound's covey of islands and been gratified by Karlsson's blink of surprise. "You can see everything but the flea in the governor's ear, aye".) Melander worked much with maps in his sea-time, but to be able to trace from the very dwelling where you packed your sea-bag, well, now, this is a new thing of the world.

The coastscape at hand just now is not Sitka Sound, however, but the geography enwrapped in the third of Melander's furl of maps. Here these 0 dozen miles south from Sitka, the map begins to report a lingual stew, islands left as Heceta and Noyes, Baker and Suemez, Dall
and San Fernando, from the crisscross of British and Spanish explorations, these names Russified by the Creole mapmaker: Melander of Sweden gives his centered grin when the full hibble-bibble occurs to him.

Yet seen another way, such a muss of languages is exactly apt, for everything else of this map Number Three sprawls in pieces as well. Dabs, driblets, peninsulas, spits and spatters, this portion of coast-line when drawn is something like a breathing moil of sea things, jellyfish and oysters and barnacles and limpets and anemones. It takes an effort of will, even for Melander, to believe they are going to hold motionless, either on the map or in actuality, to permit voyage among them.

The four fresh beards itched. At New Archangel, because the Russians sported beards, most of the Finns and Swedes had made it a point to keep clean-shaven. Now Melander's face and Karlsson's were barbed with growth as blonde as barley stubble, while Wennberg's whiskers came a surprising rich sorrel shade. Braaf sprouted a thin downy fluff of almost white. "Angel feathers," Wennberg snickered.

Melander had started from camp to gather firewood from the drift-piles along the top of the tideline when Braaf surprised him by saying, "I'll fetch with you." Braaf volunteering for a chore was an event to put you on your guard considerably, as when a parson might offer to keep you company on your stroll to a brothel.
When they were out of earshot of the others and had started on their armloads, Braaf asked: "Melander, tell me something, can you?"

"If I can. Aye."

Braaf gave him his upcast look and began. "You were a sailor."

"I was that. Until the Russians set me to putting salt on fishes' tails."

"I had a half-brother. Or at least people said he was, and we looked alike. He was years older, and a sailor like you. I would see him on the docks at Stockholm when his ship was in. The Ambrosius, a brig, it was. Then I heard the Ambrosius had sunk. They said it followed false lights onto the rocks somewhere, England or Spain, one of those places, and everyone of its crew was drowned, and then the people there took its cargo from the wreck. Do they do that, Melander? Set false lights so that a ship will come onto the rocks?"

For once Melander's tongue held back. Finally the tall man let his breath out with great slowness and said: "They are called moon-cursers, Braaf. On a black night they hobble a horse and put him along the shore with a lantern tied to his bridle. The lantern looks like the running light of a ship, and a ship at sea will follow in because it seems a safe course. Aye, Braaf, they do that."

Braaf nodded above his armload of wood. "I thought they did," he said, and turned back toward camp.
"Braaf, you piss near me one more time and I'll rub your nose in it like a bitch pup."

Wennberg's warning halted Braaf in mid-pull at the front of his thighs. Thoughtfully he arced a look from the item of interest there to the blacksmith seated a few yards away. The look, it could have been, of a marksman calculating parabola and windage. Across the campsite from the pair, ever so slightly Melander shook his head in message: No, Braaf, don't rile the bull.

"I'll wait the day I've enough to drown you," Braaf said off-handedly and eased away into the forest.

A dusk breeze gossiped here and there in the higher-up swags of fir.

Abruptly Braaf stopped hearing the wind, all his listening jerked elsewhere. Standing there with his legs wide, Braaf felt the touch of being watched, as when the thief's timbre within him would warn that the instant was wrong for pilferage. But in these woods, who...

Braaf spun and met the eyes. Eyes big as his hands, staring at him from either side of an arm-long hooked beak.

In a half-moment Braaf recognized that the phantasm was blind, as wood must be: and that up from its carved stare but obscured by tree limbs squatted several more ganderig creatures, a ladder of sets of eyes.

Braaf broke to the edge of the trees and urged softly to the other
three men, "Come look."

Within and around an opening in the forest they found other acrobat columns of gargoyles, some atilt as if peering more sharply down at the interlopers.

"What is all this?" Braaf asked.

"I'd guess a kind of cathedral," Melander replied.

"Don't give us your fiddles, Melander." Wennberg was reaching a hand up to inspect the joinery of the beak-piece onto the column seen first by Braaf. Rather, which first had seen him. In spite of himself, the blacksmith was tugged close by the serene craft of these goblin poles.

Melander looked steadily at Wennberg. "A kind of cathedral," he repeated. "Whatever it is that these people believe is said in these carvings. Like rune stones, aye?"

Until now, insofar as Melander and company could discern in their clamber down the precipice of coastline, not another human might ever have existed among these shore islands. Take the matter to truth, though, and their journey more resembled the course a late-of-night stroller might follow through slumbering neighborhoods. In tribal clusters of gaudy culture, Tlingits, Haidas, Tsimshians, Bellabellas, Bella Coolas, Kwakiutls, Nootkans, perhaps as many as sixty thousand residents peopled this long littoral of what would become British Columbia.
Their coastal life asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous. In spawning time the rivers were stippled thick with salmon, veins of protein bulging there in the water to be wrested, fileted, dried for the winter larder. Above stream the wealth was wood, particularly the cedar whose cunning these people knew how to release; under their hands it transformed to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent trawler, and art, alarming art. Tree-sized columns of carvings simply offered the most evident form of how these tribes told stories of the creatures of timber and sea, sang and recited them, danced and acted them behind masks, in cold times wore pelts as if taking the saga-animals into themselves. (And thereby drew the attention of white newcomers to the coast, who bartered for those furs to cargo them beyond the bend of the world and barter in turn to yellow people: linkage queer in its way as any carved concatenation.) Out of this vivid swirl wafted, inevitably, tales such as that matter of the pillow of skulls. It is first known to have been told to the English captain, Meares, when he arrived into the North Pacific on the scent of furs in 1788, and like all good horrors it held a core of truth. On ceremonial occasions, one or another tribal chief might employ a bag of skulls to show his strength of heart. Not a society of polite tinkling of teacups, this. If the four interloping Swedes had luck, they would not encounter the populated coves where the rain season was being whiled away in performance and potlatch.
Just now Braaf was the one of them to speak that dialect called if.

"Why's this deserted? If it is."

"Likely they do as the Kolosh," Melander guessed. "Hunt from a summer village right around here, in winter pull back to a main village somewhere."

In the dusk, eagle poised eternally atop bear. Whale stood on end in dive through contorted lesser creatures. One thing, possibly frog the size of calf, pranced merrily upside down. Every sort of winkless forest changeling, they goggled in unison at the backs of the retreating men.

Later, the others breathing their rhythms of night beside the fire, Melander could not find sleep. His memory was at a New Archangel market morning, hubbub of Sitka Kolosh and three or four dozen visiting tribesmen from somewhere to the north. Amid the newcomers hawking their wares squatted a seam-faced carver. Word had spread through the settlement about this man's daggers: blades of power with each hilt carved as the rising neck of some beast. The head topping a hilt-neck sometimes would be a bear with glinting abalone inlays of eyes and teeth, sometimes a long-faced wolf; always, angled and fierce and unforgettable. The interpreter Dobzhansky tried to converse with the northern carver. Dobzhansky's first question received answer, then the native stayed silent. Melander inquired what had been said. Dobzhansky related that he had asked how many years it took to attain such skill.
"So long as I have lived, so long have I carved," the daggerman responded. "If the spirit people will let me, I will carve even after I am dead."

Even Melander could not have said why, but that response echoed around in the corners of his mind this night.

A day more, the canoemen continued along the lengthy island, Dall. That night: "Sleep deep," Melander advised. "Tomorrow we introduce ourselves to Kaigani."

The letters spoke large near the bottom of Melander's third map, and in sober block rather than the finespun script elsewhere on the paper. The space framing them, three widths of Melander's thumb could have spanned. In actuality the plain of water represented there extends twice the distance of the English Channel between Dover and Calais, and no calm white cliffs stand as guides. Taken all in all, calculated Melander, they compressed into themselves a marathon day of paddling, did those two thickset words: Proli Kaigani. Kaigani Strait.

The water stretched to them out of a horizonless gray, a blob of overcast messily sealing together sea and sky. Melander did not at all like it that no line of land could be seen out there. In their island-by-island descent of the coast, Kaigani and the channel which intersected it to the east, Hecate Strait, were the first expanses
where the day's shore did not stand steadily in sight. Yet the map
vouched to Melander that across in that fume of seawater and cloud, the
northeast tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands arced toward the canoeists.
By holding to a heading of south-southeast they would aim into its
embrace. At least, Melander had to believe that south-southeast could
be held to. If not, if current swung them too far eastward, they would
be swept from Kaigani directly on into Hecate Strait. One waterstead of
distance and risk, Melander reckoned they would manage in the day. Two,
he doubted greatly.

Melander studied forward along the canoe at the others. Stock-
still, Karlsson. Wennberg eyeing askance at the wide water. Braaf
with his paddle across the canoe thwarts and his fingers restless atop
the wood as if absently plucking music.

What was required of Melander now was a division of faith. Certain
of himself, confident of what he could make in his mind, going through
life as if he had always a following wind; this had been Melander's
history, self-belief. Now he needed to apportion into these other
three in the canoe with him, into the coil of map which promised firm
earth out there over the precipice of water, into the hovering grayness,
into the canoe, paddles, compass...

Melander spat over the side to clear his mouth, not recognizing
the taste of diluted faith but decidedly not caring much for it. Then
he said: "Time for our stroll."

The powerful rumple of the Pacific made itself felt to them at
once. Swells were spaced wide, perhaps two lengths of the canoe between crests, but regular as great slow breathings. Each swell levered up the prow of the canoe, Karlsson, Captain Nose, instantly created taller than the men behind, then the craft was shrugged downward.

"More beef, Wennberg. Push that paddle deeper, aye?"

Melander's urging began while the tips of the fir trees of Dall Island still feathered distinct against the sky behind them. Wennberg he had not expected to be slack in this situation; it was Braaf who could be anticipated to scant his labor if heaven itself depended on it. But Braaf was thrusting steadily, and onto Melander's admonition tossed gibe of his own.

"Bashful are you, Wennberg? Reach right down there and meet the wet, why not..."

Wennberg grumped something unhearable, but his paddling picked up markedly.

Today called Dixon Entrance, a name engrafted for the English captain who delved the region in the ship Queen Charlotte, Kaigani Strait formed one of dozens of plains of water between the broken lands of the North Pacific coastline, yet was individual in its perils. "The tidal currents are much confused," modern navigators are cautioned; in storm the channel can seem to be forty white miles of breakers. Fog spends its season in summer, gales from first autumn until April. All times of year, the flood tide east into Hecate Strait can surge as
rapid as a man can walk. Small wonder that at the eastern reach of
this mariners' thicket, islands are bunched like galleons seeking a
lee anchorage.

Not a whit of this showed from that calm space between shorelines
on Melander's map.

Thirty or forty hillocks of water later, again the heart-skip in
the rhythm of the boat.

"Wennberg!" Melander's tone crackled now. "You're dabbing at
it again."

The broad man held his paddle just above the wave surface, as
though trying to recall whether water or air was the element in which
it operated. He swiveled the upper part of his body enough to find
Melander. Wennberg's face hung open in a look of surprise. His mouth
made motions but no sound. Then, with effort: "I'm. Getting. Sick."

"If you don't paddle you'll get dead, and us with you. Have a
puke now and be done with it, Wennberg. We need your arms, aye?"

Wennberg put his head over the side of the canoe and gaped his
mouth as if inhaling better health up from the ocean. After a minute
his gasps managed to be words: "Can't. Too. Sick."

"You've got to. Wennberg, listen to me, aye? Jab a finger down
your gullet, tell yourself you've swallowed baneberries, pretend that
Braaf here plopped a slug into your tea this morning--do anything,
but heave the sickness out of you now. Do it, Wennberg. Dump your gut."
"Keep on, you'll have me puking too," muttered Braaf.

Just then Melander's prescriptions took their intended effect on Wennberg.

"There now," Melander proclaimed in satisfaction. "You'll be a bull again before you know it. Rest a bit, we can spare you until you get your breath back."

Wennberg focused whitely toward Melander. "Melander, one time I'll reach down that mouth of yours and..." But before long, he picked up his paddle and, while still not stroking in smoothness with the others, was adding push to theirs.

For a time—say, the first several dozen hundred paddlestrokes of their journey—a wall of reassurance yet could be seen behind the canoemen, the outline of Dall Island and its greater neighbor, Prince of Wales. Farther though it was becoming, the shoreline of the islands seemed a footing, a ledge to return to. Then, just after Melander reckoned aloud that they might be a third of the way across, Karlsson glanced back and saw that the landwall was gone. In place of the islands hung a sheet of fog. Kaigani had enwrapped the canoe and its men, nothing but water or cloud or fog anywhere about them.

Karlsson's face could have served as figurehead for the craft, if imagination permits that a Kolosh canoe would breast the sea with a Skone parson's profile at its front. Everything, each fiber, of Karlsson was set to the twin grips of his hands on the paddle, the portioning-out
of effort. In the Sahara, this human implement automatically would have begun the slog that stride on stride had to add up into the route to oasis. Loose him on the Eiger, foothold-handhold-foothold-handhold would ensue until further elevation could not present itself. If stone profile and millwork arms could grind a way across Kaigani, Karlsson meant to do it.

Behind him, Wennberg tussled with a hive of woes. The tipping water was bad enough, and the unending exertion, and the over-the-side-of-the-world absence of land or even horizon. But worst of all the nausea which hid so sly within him, re-attacking whenever he thought it might have receded. The blacksmith felt weaker than he could ever remember, yet the labor of paddling needed to be attempted. Wennberg too fell into a machined rhythm, jab-lift-pull back-jab, but out of a different drivewheel than Karlsson's. Overswarmed with doom and unhealth, Wennberg could think of no way to struggle back but to move his arms, which happened to have a flat-faced rod of wood at their end.

Among the larger men Braaf sat small and hunched with caution. He was the one of the four of them most in place in this situation, for at basis, this crossing of Kaigani Strait constituted an act of theft. Of stealing survival from a hazard which held every intention of denying it to you. Afloat, you exist in balance between unthinkable distances. Above, the sky and the down-push of all its vastnesses. Under, the
thickness of ocean with its queer unruly upward law of gravity, buoyancy. In time the greater deep, that of sky, must win the pushing contest in which you are the flake of contention, and you will go down. The game is to scamper landward before this obliteration can happen. None of this could Braaf have declaimed aloud—just as there never was a philosopher who could consciencelessly pocket another man's snuffbox—yet Braaf understood the proposition of Kaigani profoundly: it had to do with dodging life's odds, like all else. Braaf, then, did not stroke mechanically in Karlsson's way, nor try to fend strenuously as Wennberg did. Braaf poked his paddle to the water as if using a stick to discourage a very big dog.

So ultimately the matter, like a good many of this coast's matters, came down to muscle. Melander preached to his crew like a prophet promising geysers of honey just there beyond shovel point. "Dig that paddle, Wennberg. You're strong as bran wine now...Braaf, can you find it in your heart to stroke along with the rest of us?...We're doing it, Karlsson. No water is wide as forever..."

They had no timepiece, but an onlooker could have clocked Melander's decrees to within two minutes' regularity of one another. Each time he called rest, one man continued to paddle to keep the canoe from backsliding in the swells. That sentinel then rested briefly while the other three resumed, then plunged to work again. At the next rest, the solitary paddling duty slid to the next man. While Melander
regulated, Wennberg grunted dismally and Braaf once in a while shirked, out of sheer habit when he wasn't reminding himself otherwise, and at the bow Karlsson stayed a human piston: all of them trying to put from mind the numbing of their knees and the growing ache of their arms, and across Kaigani Strait the canoe moving steadily southeast, a black sharp-snouted creature against the gray, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at the water, running on the sea.

Near to what Melander estimated ought to be the mid-point of the channel, waves began to chop more rapidly at the canoe. A fresh sound, a slapping higher against the side of the craft, could be heard, and spray now and again tossed itself over the bow and Karlsson.

Braaf, though, noticed an absence. The gulls which hung in curiosity beside them in the island waters and the early distance offshore from Dall were vanished. He discovered too that the air felt different, more tooth in it, and that off to the west a particular splotch of weather resembled neither fog nor rain.

Braaf turned his head enough to pass softly over his shoulder to Melander, as if it were their secret: "Snow."

"Jesu Maria," Melander said back.

The squall hit them first with wind. Gust tagged closely onto gust, taking the canoe at an angle from the southwest. Melander watched the surface of Kaigani intently, and what he dreaded sprung to creation: wind streaks on the water, long ropey crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander knew as from his shipboard years, and knew too that they are
the spawn of a thirty-knot gale.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down the wind which now steadied into a constant whirl past the canoemen's ears. Melander looked away from his compass only to monitor the stroking of his crew and to glance at the angle of the swells to the canoe. The compass could not be wrong, daren't be, yet there was constant urge to check it against the evidence of his eyes...

Water was finding its way into the canoe. Melander needed to decide rapidly. Still struggling against sea-sickness, Wennberg was erratic at the paddle. But if he put his head down to bail, he would be sicker yet. So--"Braaf, you'll need to bail, and quick..."

The water had three motions now: the broad sloshing advance of the waves themselves; the lizardy wrinkle of their texture; and the gale ripple skipping ahead. At odds with all these and with the wind-spun snow as well, the canoe's progress fell to a kind of embarrassed wallow, as when a good steed is forced to slog through mire.

Working the bailer, a cedar scoop which coupled over his hand like a hollowed-out hoof, Braaf pawed seawater from the canoe's bottom. Karlsson gritted against bowspray and snow and tried to hold in mind nothing but the pace of paddle. But he did hear an imploring take place behind him. "Oh God who watches over fools and babes," Wennberg whispered. "What am I doing in this pisspot of a canoe?"

Melander woke on thoroughly tame terrain. Not a boulder nor so
much as a fist-sized stone; a beach all sand, tan satin. Waves did not pound its tideline—the water seeming to hold itself back, simply shying tiny clouds of spume along the sand then lapping away. The canoe had taken shore here in the dark, Swedes having prevailed—barely—over storm in the wrestle that went on all day and across dusk and into the first of night. The men had dragged the canoe onto whatever this place was, groped together a shelter of sailcloth and collapsed to sleep.

By this morning's evidence, Kaigani had flung them through the customary coastal geography to a reversed order of things: everything flat, discreet.

Except, it registered now on Melander, that the treetops spearing up through a mist just to the west of him stood twice the height it was conceivable for trees to stand.

"Are we on the same ocean as last night?" Karlsson was at his elbow.

"Quite a millpond, isn't it? Ever see trees to that height, up to the clouds like steeples?"

Karlsson shook his head.

"Nor I. Has to be a rise of land in that fog. We should have a look there, aye? Wake Braaf enough to tell him, will you, so he and Wennberg won't think we've gone yachting off without them."

Having pushed the canoe into the placid seawater and turned toward the misted trees, Karlsson and Melander found themselves crossing
the mouth of a river, a sixty-foot width of black water so dark and slow it seemed more solid than the beach and forest on either side of it. Small circlets of foam spun along its surface at them like ghostly anemones. On the far side, a black rim of rock showed itself over the waterline.

Rapidly this rim bent outward into a point, not lofty at all but too sharp-sided to land the canoe.

"On around," Melander decreed, and they began to skirt the protrusion.

Karlsson glanced inland, drew his paddle into the canoe, and pointed upward. The fog was lifting from the forest and abruptly, half a small mountain stood into view: a startling humped cliff as if one of the cannonball peaks around Sitka had been sawed in half from its summit downward.

Around the point they pulled the canoe to security and clambered onto the flow of black rock for a full look.

"God's bones, what a place," Melander murmured. The point had been convulsed into hummocks and parapets, pitted with holes as if having been under siege from small cannon, strewn with a tumble of black boulders the size of oxcarts, and finally riven with tidal troughs. As Melander and Karlsson stood gawking, surf blasted up from a blowhole behind them, a mocking geyser of white bowing toward them as they whirled to it.

"Aye, well. At least we know what's hung those trees into the middle of the air." Out of the dome of cliff above them tall firs poked
forth like feathers in a war bonnet. "I had better find a way up there and see if I can place us on the map."

Staying in range of the canoe, Karlsson waited for Melander by exploring into the stand of forest between the half-mountain and the river. Beside the bole of a particularly big hemlock, a fat bead of water ticked his right wrist.

Surprised, Karlsson tipped his head until he was staring straight up. He saw another water bead detach from a limb eighty feet above him and drop like a slow tiny jewel, giving him time to step aside before it struck. Like strange slowed-down rain the droplets descended two or three to the minute; Karlsson found he could dodge each of them, stepping back and forth around the tree trunk, head aimed up like a drunk man at the gate of God. The play of it captured him. His mind went free and nothing existed but the dazzles of water and his slow-dancing body...

"Aye, well, d'you have time to hear the report?" Melander's amusement twitched behind his mouth. Feeling vastly foolish, Karlsson halted in place, looked around at the taller man, and was promptly splattered with a dew glob atop his head. In a moment Karlsson smiled and mimicked to Melander: "Oh, aye, what's the outlook from the crow's nest?"

Melander found from the summit that the arc of beach continued some miles eastward, to Hecate Strait. That intelligence turned into
taunt, however, by the time he and Karlsson returned to the campsite. A stiff wind was blowing in off Kaigani. Not wanting a repeat of the crossing they had just endured, the canoemen sat to try to wait it out.

For the next two days of blow, they gained no distance, which to Melander was the same as losing it.

"A lazy wind, we call it on Gotland. It goes through you instead of around you."

"Melander, serve you a plate of fly shit and you'd declare it pepper," muttered Wennberg.

"And you'd lend me your soul as salt, aye, Mister Blacksmith? But we have deciding to do. We've been holed here too long. The water ahead of us doesn't shrink while we're here. I say we'd better chance the next stretch today, wind or no. Karlsson?"

"You're the sailor of us. But how much of this wind is between us and the next island?"

"I think six hours' paddling."

"Six hours, we can last. I say chance."

"Braaf?"

The thief glanced out into the white-capped water, then somewhere above Melander's brow. "Chance."

"Wennberg?"
"The only thing worse than that water is this waiting. Chance, Melander. Teach us how to eat the wind. It may sit better on my stomach than that last ration did."

For a change, luck puffed on them. Once they had struggled the canoe around the horn-tip of the beach, they came into a wind skewing directly across Hecate Strait. For the first time since their leaving of New Archangel they were able to put up the canoe's small lugsail. "Not much of a suit of sails, more like a kerchief," as Melander said, but the canvas carried them across the strait and once more into a scatter of shoreline islands.

"Even this hardtack isn't as bad as it might be." Melander, musing, their first day of paddling after coming across Hecate Strait. "A time I can tell you on the brig Odin, we had to break our biscuits into our coffee and skim away the weevils as they came up. No, not so bad, aye?"

Braaf, at the onset of their second day after: "I know what Valhalla is now. It's where I never again hear Melander say, 'Tumble up.'"

Wennberg, midway of their third day and a Melander monologue:
"Melander, I wonder you don't swallow your tongue sometime for the savor of it."

"Good job of work done": Karlsson, startling them all as they came ashore at the close of their fourth straight progressful day.

The river shoved through the land like a smooth gray glacier. Had the surface been solid enough to walk on--before many years, one emigrant or another would inaugurate the joke that in the season of run-off not much more mud content was needed to make the flow pedestrian--a man crossing here from its north shore toward its south would have had to stride for a full hour. That man would have stridden the Columbia, largest river of the Pacific shore of the Americas, and there on its south bank he would have stamped silt from his feet at Astoria.

Already, Astoria was in its third incarnation. John Jacob Astor's wealth, not to say intentions for more of it, installed the settlement as a fur depot in 1811. The War of 1812 dealt the site to British control, with a consequent rechristening as Fort George. By 1818 it stubbornly was American, and Astoria, once more. The ensuing three and a half decades had not made it much more of a place: post office, some stores and saloons, blockhouse: all in all, a few dozen crate-like structures piled along the foot of a shaggy Columbia headland. Yet also the recognized port of America's Pacific Northwest, and a
busy enough one. If, for whatever reason, you found yourself at Astoria, yes, you could aim your way on into the world from one of its modest docks.

This night, the four canoe-going Swedes are encamped just more than half the water distance downcoast from New Archangel to Astoria.

Trying to yawn the last of sleep from himself, Karlsson eased out through the trees toward the island's edge. As usual, he was the first awake and the earliest to wonder about weather. This morning he found that the Pacific lay gray with cold, but no storm sheeted up from its surface. Along the beach ahead of Karlsson a small surf pushed ashore, idly washed back on itself: low tide. A pair of cormorants amid a spill of tidal boulders hung their wings wide. High up on the beach gravel a hundred or so strides away the sharp-prowed canoe rested, as if having plowed to a furrow-end and now waiting to be turned for another day's tilling.

Between one eye-blink and the next, Karlsson's brain filled with the jolt of what he was seeing. He and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf had carried their canoe as ever into the cover of forest for the night: this canoe could not be theirs: it sat larger by half and the designs entwining the prow were different, simpler and bolder, and Karlsson by now was in crouched retreat toward the trees, staring hard at the wall of forest beyond the canoe for any sign that he had been detected.
Putting his fingers lightly across the tall man's mouth to signal silence, he roused Melander. Melander snapped awake with the quickness learned of arising to some thousands of shipboard watches and crept behind Karlsson away from the camp.

"A big one," Karlsson husked when they had sidled far enough not to be heard. "Eight, ten paddlemen at least."

"Cabbageheads. Why aren't they holed up for the winter like the Kolosh? What do they think this is, the Midsummer's Day yacht races? Aye?"

"We had better hope they're not going to hole up here."

"No, just one canoe, they couldn't be. Seal hunters or some such, out for a few days. Cabbageheads."

"You already called them that, and they're still here."

"Aye, well. Can we get our canoe to the water and slide away without them seeing us?"

"No."

"No." Melander grimaced as if his echo-word had hurt his ears, then looked back toward camp. "You greet Braaf, I'll do Wennberg."

Again fingers of silence awoke lips. Again Karlsson told the situation. When his words had sunk into Wennberg and Braaf, Melander sent Braaf, the most accomplished slinker among them, to keep watch on the beach. Then Melander glanced at Karlsson, and Karlsson, after hesitation, nodded. "Yes, it has to be him."
The pair of them turned their eyes to Wennberg. Melander asked:
"How are you at turning yourself into a sand crab?"

Wennberg's debut into the art of creeping also marked the first occasion in his life that he ever regretted his strength. Regretted, rather, that more of his power wasn't directly beneath his nose, as Melander's was. "This one is your line of country, Wennberg. You have to do it, or those people of that canoe will snore tonight on our skulls." And Karlsson in his rock-faced way agreeing that only Wennberg possessed the muscle for it; Wennberg could not choose between fury at Karlsson for siding with Melander or ire at him for doing it dubiously. Every lens of clarity, Wennberg believed, had slipped from his life when he leagued himself with this muddle of...

A stone nicked Wennberg's right knee and cued his attention back to creeping. Here in the first eighty yards or so he had cover of a sort, a rib of rock and drift logs behind which he managed to scuttle, chest almost down to his knees, without showing himself, much. But next lay an open distance of thirty yards. An angle across and up the beach, to the unfamiliar canoe.

At the end now of his final driftlog, Wennberg squatted dismally, rubbed the stone bruise on his right knee, and glared back toward where he had departed from Melander, Karlsson and Braaf. "Puny bastards," he muttered. From amid the spruce there a hand flashed into sight--Wennberg knew it would be Melander's--and patiently waved him on.
Wennberg braced, unhunched himself, and in a rolling stride ran
toward the beached canoe. He ran with his elbows out wide, and his
head sighted low, as if butting his way. Under his boots gravel
clattered wildly, avalanche-loud to Wennberg. Jesu Maria, those
fish-fuckers in the forest would have to be without ears not to hear
this commotion...

Past the stern of the canoe Wennberg plunged, like a ball rolling
beyond its target. He hovered an instant, selecting, then stopped to
thrust both hands beneath a gray boulder wide as his chest. Gravel
bit the backs of his hands, his wrists, and finally his forearms as
Wennberg wrestled the rock. With a grunt he brought the burden upward,
grappled it into balance on his knees, then across his waist, and like
a washerwoman carrying an overfull tub of water, turned with the boulder
toward the canoe.

It was five staggering steps to the wooden wall of the craft,
Wennberg more certain with each one that the gunblast which would close
off his life was being cocked behind him.

Amidships of the canoe, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his
arms to the height of his neck, then with a grunt let it crash into
the bottom of the craft.

The crunch was not loud, to Wennberg the first luck anywhere in
this situation, but the canoe bottom fractured downward beneath the
rock and a split as wide as a finger now creviced toward the craft's
bow. Wennberg gave one rapid look at his result, then skirted the
stern of the canoe and ran again, a bear in a footrace.

He had just passed the driftlog when he heard the shout behind him, and he did not look back.

Ahead of him, Melander and Karlsson and Braaf were putting their own canoe into the surf, Melander somehow finding time as well to yell at Wennberg to hurry up and lend a hand.

They shoved with their paddles just as the first musket ball blooped the water beside them. Wennberg in puffing agony glanced around to see two natives with rifles raise, others clustered around the spine-broken canoe, more oh God more emerging from the forest.

Karlsson hurried a shot at the two riflemen, missed but caused them to flinch back from the shot's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle—Jesu Maria—paddle—paddle!" Melander was instructing. The Swedes stroked as if hurling the ocean behind them as a barrier, and the canoe climbed a mild breaker, sped down its seaward side, climbed a stronger wave and downsped again, then slid rapidly southward from the firing figures on the beach.

Out of the fear and excitement of the escape something other began to grope through to Karlsson in the next minutes. From his place at its forepart, he sensed a change about the canoe. Its rhythm felt lightened; not gone erratic as during Wennberg's sickness at Kaigani, but lessened, thinned.
Karlsson turned enough to look straight back.

"Sten?" he called. "Sten!"

At the stern of the canoe Melander, almost tidily, lay folded forward, the upper part of his body across his knees, the back of his head inclined toward the other three canoe men as if to show them where the musket ball had torn a red hole.
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-snorthers 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 thawacking 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
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's 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
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
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
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
surely arrive when he could pilfer them back. Stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and the captain of a Danish fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska he had veered to because, after a steady growth of skill from beggary to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination beckoning to him was kastell: prison. Braaf arrived to New Archangel when Karlsson and Melander had, and at once skinning knives and snuff boxes and twists of Kirghiz tobacco and other unattached items began to vanish from the settlement as if having sprung wings in the night. The Russians vented fury on the harborfront natives for the outbreak of vanishment, but the contingent of Swedes rapidly made a different guess, for Braaf was becoming a kind of human commissary in the barracks. Because he was reasonable in his prices--interested less in income than in chipping the monotony of Alaskan life, which he found to be a rain-walled prison in its own right--and was diplomatic enough not to forage anything major from his countrymen, nothing was said against him.

It would have been hard anyway to make a convicting case against Braaf. At twenty, he displayed the round ruddy face of a farmboy--an apple of a face--and a gaze which lofted innocently just above the eyes of whomever he was talking to, as if he were considerately measuring you for a hat.
The next morning after tea was taken outside the stockade 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
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
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
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 cames 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 storefront of New Archangel; indeed, those journeys were main strands in his decision that seven-yeardom 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. Rousing 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 Ozerskoi. 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,
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 bear pit, 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 hootchitsina.

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 Tenever 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 tongue 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.

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