

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE®

NOVEMBER 1959
Vol. 12 No. 1

HENRY SCHARF
Publisher

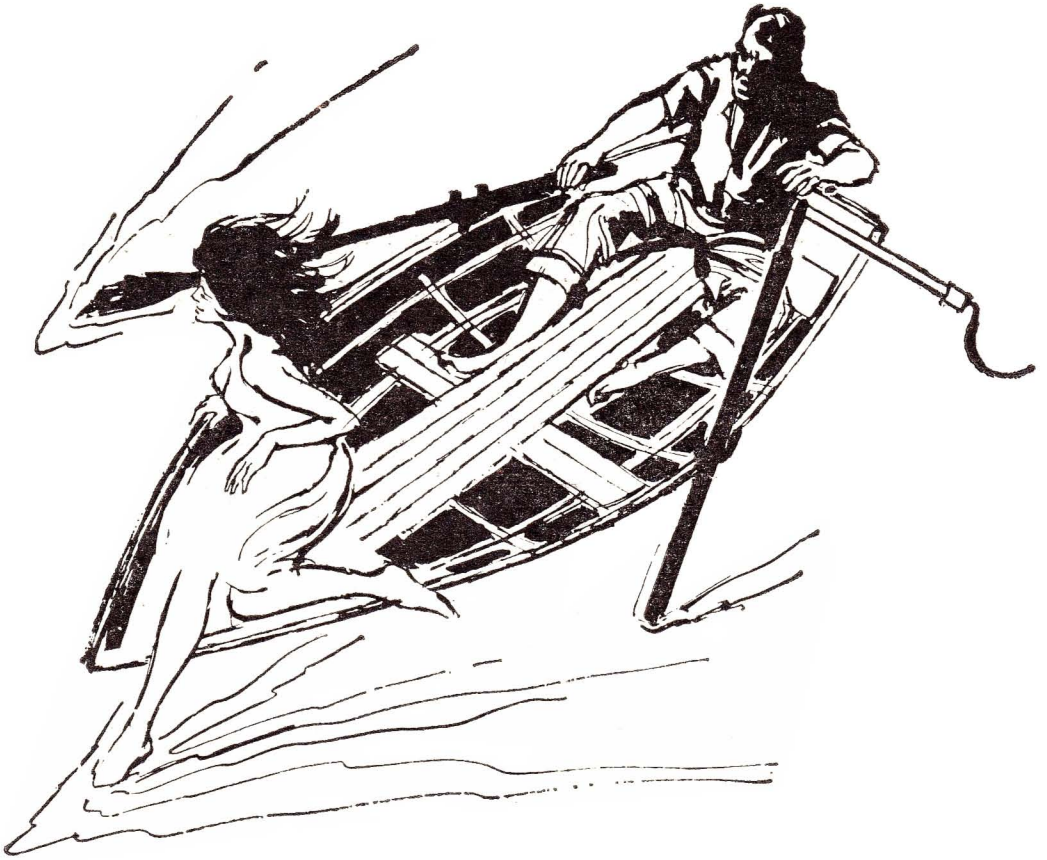
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THE COMANLEIGH

by MYRLE BENEDICT

WHEN THE night came, and a storm was lowering, nobody ever ventured out onto the water, not even to cross the little bridge at the edge of the village. People kept close to their cottages even though they knew that they were safe from the comanleigh when they were on dry land.

Even the children knew. They could sense the fear, even though nobody ever told them the cause, not until they were almost full-grown. When a night-storm threatened, no mother ever had to stand and call a child, for they were all at her skirts as she stood and watched anxiously for her man's fishing-sloop to dash into harbor and safety.

There were many stories told about the comanleigh, and as sometimes happens, not all of them were true. Some said that the comanleigh lived in the waters beyond the harbor in a house at the bottom of the sea made of the bones of drowned men. Some said that the comanleigh wouldn't

harm a gypsy, nor a man who had said a Black Mass, nor a foundling. Some said that the comanleigh was an unmortally beautiful woman who lured men to a watery grave to use their bones as building-stones, and who hated and devoured women because they clung to the men and wouldn't let her have them; some said the storm-hag had the head of a wolf, the teeth and claws of a lion, and the body of a monstrous serpent. And some said there wasn't a comanleigh at all.

One of these was Rad Amish. "Sure, there's na comanleigh," he'd declare, enjoying the shocked and frightened looks of the other men at the tavern, "na more thin Bess here has na Ma or Pa. What say you, Bess? A foundling you are, sure you're na skeert o' na comanleigh?"

"Hold tongue, Rad Amish," Bess would retort, busy with the glasses, "for you know na, na more thin you know."

"Aye, Tha's your fact," Maxwell Blaunt would say, heaving his vast bulk up from the landlord's seat. "Comanleigh or na 's time, and come again."

"'Tis na time, and you know it Maxwell," replied Rad. "Ye want na scrabble amoung your fine glassware. I'll huh ma tongue, thin, an' say only tha' comanleigh or na, 'tis a foolish man who wad venture out on sea with a storm screechin' round his ears."

"Weel, thin, anither hour," said Maxwell, settling back in his chair. "Fill up all round, Bess, there's a fine lass."

"Indeed an' she is," declared Welton Sharum, hurriedly draining his mug before Bess refilled it. "How soon is't before this lumberin' oxen will ask ye to wife?"

"I'll do ma own askin', please you," said Rad, "an' you na be ma friend, I'd box your ears proper. I would na ha' thought Chell be such a pleasant body to wive, or I would ha' wived her long before you!"

"Oh, indeed?" said Bess hotly. "An, how, when she'd na more thin pass time o' day with likes o' you?"

"Ah, there's them as thinks they like th' bookish sort, or a proper sinoo-man show them otherwise, an' them as knows a strong back makes a happy wife—eh, Bess?"

"Thin, 'tis Chell's good fortune to have both," Bess retorted saucily, making the laughter go round.

And because it was true that Welton Sharum could haul a net as well as he could read a book, Rad's laughter was no less hearty.

"Ah," he said to himself, "a fine wife you'll make me, Bess-Wi'-Na-Name, an' soon, too." Contentedly, he thought of the little poke of coin tucked at the bottom of his clothes-chest. Soon he would have enough to get a proper cottage and furnish it, to, and sooner even than most, because he worked hard and wasted little.

True, his best friend had beat him, but Welton's Pa had died, and by

selling his boat, he had had enough and to spare to wed Chell. In fact, Welton could even be considered a bit wealthy, as he hadn't had to build a cottage, and thus had set his coin by. Rad shook his head. Lucky it was that Welton's Ma and Chell got on. His own Ma, on the other hand, and Bess. Ma had expressed her opinions on the foundling-girl, and a bar-maid at that, too many times.

"Child o' a wanderin' slut cast out o' proper house for her pranks!" Ma Amish would snort. "A heathern gypsy, like."

"Na gypsy, Ma," he'd reply. "Husband nor na husband makes na nevermind to gypsy."

"Thin what sort o' mother puts babe on a tavern-step?" she would demand.

Rad got no help from his Pa, who usually sat well back out of the light during these arguments. But then, he never voiced for Ma, either, and Rad secretly thought that the older man admired Bess, but wouldn't speak out against his wife.

Bess interrupted his reverie.

"Be you drunken, best get for home. Maxwell tolerates na drunkenness."

He looked up to see Bess's laughing face, and then, as the others joined in the laughter, her brows lifted slightly and a question formed in her eyes.

He nodded imperceptibly, a nod that was more a blink of the eyes than a movement of the head.

"I was na drunk, just thinkin'."

"You'd be like Walton, eh? Weel, think outside. It's time, gentlemen, an' come again."

This time, Bess was firm where Maxwell had been not. The men found themselves outside the tavern door in short order, where they drifted into little groups, and then as the groups dissolved, into single figures turning into well-worn paths home.

"Shall I walk a way with you?" asked Walton. "You've to go clean

cross village, t'other side o' bridge."

"Beholden, but no. Chell will be frettin', especially now."

"True. Her belly is beginnin' to swell a bit now, you know, and she put my hand on't to let me feel t' wee thump, na more thin a cricket, but a thump it was." His homely, honest face with the shock of straw-colored hair hanging over the forehead lit with joy. "Ah, Rad, you've but to feel your son kickin' away under your hand, and t' know that you an' your wife put it there sometime in th' long nights when you were lovin' th' other—man, 'tis a grand feelin'!"

"I'll know it. I've na much longer t' go, an' I'll have ma money in hand—an' don't go an' try t' give me none. I'll have na of it. I'll earn ma bride, an' ma Ma be domned to her."

"Rad!"

"Ah, hush. Th' only blasphemy is th' talkin' against her that Ma is makin' far an' wide, like a hound givin' tongue to th' wind."

Walton shook his head. "You've a fearsome tongue, yourself."

"That I have. 'Tisn't th' first time I've domned her, an' 'twon't be th' last, as ever man in village weel known. She's needful o' domnin', for her unbendin' ways. Weel, fear na more for ma soul, an' get along to your woman, afore she skins you alive!"

"I'll that, and good night to you."

"Good night."

Rad turned and walked a few steps, then waited until he was sure that Walton was out of sight. Then he stole quietly behind the tavern to where the window of Bess's room was slightly ajar.

"Get your hulk in quick, before some blabberin' nosybody sees!" she whispered.

He swung his legs over the sill and took her slender form in his arms.

"Ah, Bess, you're pretty. Th' moon makes your dark blue eyes as black as your hair."

She sighed. "Words are all I'll be

havin' o' you tonight, Rad. We must watch tilt o' moon."

"Aye, that we must, 'til we're proper wed more thin a bit o' your hair in a locket round ma neck an' a bit o' mine round yours. 'Twill be soon, though, I promise you, Bess."

"Aye, I know. Now, kiss me an' get home. Th' comanleigh will be out afore mornin', and you'll have to work hard to find a fish."

Rad looked at the sky. A small tatter of cloud skudded across the moon.

"It may rain a drop, but it na looks stormish. How do you know?"

"I know. I can na tell you how, but I know."

"That you do. Weel, thin, give me your lips, an' I'll be leavin'."

She raised her head and he kissed her gently. With a small sob she pressed herself to him.

"Ah, Rad, I love you with a love that's more than mortal flesh ever loved other!"

He kissed her again, unable to speak, and then firmly climbed out of the window. At the corner of the tavern he looked back. She was at the window, a small, pale figure raising a forlorn hand in farewell.

Bess, Bess, Bride Bess, his thoughts echoed his footsteps. He had loved her, and she him since they were young children romping over the seaside. They had known they belonged together, and it was only after Ma Amish turned aside and prevented his Pa from secretly helping him with his store of coin, as the other pa's did with their sons, that they had wedded with locks of each other's hair, knowing that it would likely be longer than others had to wait, and she had yielded him her maiden-head, stifling her cry of pleasure-pain so that old Maxwell wouldn't hear. Outwardly, their life went on as before, with him busy by day at his boat and his nets, and she serving at the tavern, but each night when he could, he would silently creep into her room and for a while they would pretend they

didn't have to leave each other's arms in an hour. Whether or not they sinned, Rad knew not, nor did he care. As for Bess, whatever she thought, she kept it to herself, as befitted a woman.

On the bridge, he paused, leaning against the railing, gazing out over the rows of masts toward the faintly glittering water. As he stood, the breeze freshened, bringing with it a smell of rain and of storm. Clouds were rolling in from nowhere and a faint brief glow of lightening lit the sky to the left of him. He glanced around, and then froze.

Something—a shape, a shadow, a thing insubstantial and yet so real that he could feel its presence all along the side of him turned toward it—sped along the ground. Then it swerved, headed straight for him, gaining speed. Rad was acutely conscious that he was standing over water, and not on dry ground. His lips moved, seeking a prayer, but no words came out.

He could only watch as it came closer and closer. Almost on him, the dark form stopped, checked in its mad rush, then turned and sped over the water toward the sea. There was a soundless sigh from the thing that Rad interpreted as exasperation, and a horrible, sickening stench from its passing. He had an impression of mingled horror and beauty, and above all, of a terrible transparency.

He stared after it, as the storm clouds boiled and rolled and thunder muttered behind them. A drop fell on his hand and he started, but it wasn't rain; it was cold sweat falling from his face. As he came to himself, he realized that the whole thing had happened in a brief instant.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" he whispered shakily. "I have na seen what I have seen—and be I did see it, thin a dead man I am, for na other has seen and told it!"

Slowly, he loosened his hands from where they had been gripping the

bridge railing so tightly the wood groaned under them.

"T'was na comanleigh. Na, na, I'll na believe it. 'Twas but I had a drop, an' I went daft between winks o' ma eye."

Stumbling slightly, he turned toward his cottage as the first drops started to fall, but he took no notice, so that he was soaked to the skin when he finally reached the door.

All that night, the storm racked the little village with a screaming fury that abated, as usual, with the morning. Folks said that the comanleigh hated honest sunlight and had to quit her frenzied storming with the first light.

The next morning, the villagers crept cautiously out of their cottages, fearful of what they would find. Everything was well, however, except for one boat that had been carelessly drawn up on the beach, and had drifted out into the harbor. With a sigh and a shrug, the men got to their work, hoping that it would be some time before the comanleigh broke loose again. And Rad Amish said nothing about what he had seen.

Nor did he, in the weeks that followed, deny the comanleigh, as he was used to. And the other men noticed it, and remarked on it.

"I've changed mind," he'd reply gruffly to all gibes and laughter. "I'll na say there is one, y' understand, but nor I'll say there's na one, nuther." And there the matter would fall, for he refused to speak further.

As summer drew on, the comanleigh came less frequently, though her temper was fierce when she did, and the men brought home full nets more and more often. At last came the day when Rad added the final coins to the bulging hoard.

"There, now, Ma," he said triumphantly. "I've ma portion in ma hand, and I'll go to claim ma wife."

"Aye, you will that," sighed the old woman. "You're a full sinoo-man, an' I can na more say you na. But it's

a black day when ma son takes a foundling lass for wife. I'll say na more, for I've said ma say. Come, an' I'll kiss you again, like I did when I had ma wee lad on ma knee, and thin' go, as you've a mind to."

She kissed him on the cheek, and then he hugged her fast.

"Bess is a grand lass, foundling or na," he said, not unkindly.

He got his cap from the peg, and money in hand, left. The old woman watched him until he was out of sight, and her face had a troubled look.

He began building his cottage at once, a sturdy house on a little promontory just beyond the bridge at the edge of the village where Bess could look from her kitchen window and see his boat come in and out of the harbor. And he did not neglect his other work, so that when he was finished, his coin-poke was not empty.

The priest married them, and with great celebration and joy, Rad Amish carried his bride to their new house.

"Fix it as you will, Bess," he said, placing the poke in her hands. "It's your home, and your coin."

The days flew by, and Bess turned the bare little cottage into a sweet haven, with bright colored cloth at the windows and clean-scrubbed pans hanging by the neat-swept fireplace. And with all of it, she still found time to go down and help Maxwell at the tavern of an evening.

And then came the day when she remarked casually to Rad, "I'll be goin' to tavern na more."

"Eh? And why not?" he asked.

"For it would na be fittin' for th' mother o' your son to be a servin' wench."

"Bess!" he roared. "'Tis na true!"

"Aye, it is."

He grabbed her up and swung her around with her heels off the ground, then guiltily set her down gently.

"Ah, I should na do that. Bess, Bess! You're sure 'twil be a son?"

"I hope so. I surely hope. But what if—" Her face clouded. "Ah, Rad Amish, I'm sore askeert, I am!"

He folded her close. "Sure, you've na thing to be askeert of. Natural it is, as th' ma-cat you've been feedin' slyly that you thought I took na mind of! Ah, come now, Bess, dry eyes. I've na wish to take your dear pet from you. She'll keep mice an' such beasties from th' house, an' her kits will be a frolicsome sight on th' hearth. Stop your lip from tremblin'. dear Bess, an' put a smile on it for me. Eh. A wee smile? Ah, tha's ma brave Bess."

Gradually her trembling stopped as his vast bulk surrounded her, shutting out all but a bit of the sky she could see over his shoulder, a bit of blue sky that for a moment held no hint of dark.

Now her days were occupied with sewing and fixing for the new son soon to be. Although she had never been one to waste idle time gadding fom house to house as some of the women were wont to do, she found in Chell Sharum a warm and close friend, what with her own time so near, and often she bustled about the cottage doing all her work in the morning so she could take her needle-basket and go and sit with Chell so they could talk together and sew together and knit and mend together. And surely the work went better and faster when the clickiting needles were accompanied by clacketing tongues.

Chell Sharum was a tiny thing, not much thicker than a needle, herself, but made of the same fine steel. With many a warm smile, she welcomed Bess, at first because of Welton's and Rad's long friendship, and then because Bess responded gratefully to her. Always kept busy at the tavern, Bess's romps with the other children had been few, and as she had had eyes for no one but Rad, she had never had a friend of her own before.

"Sure, it's a fine thing we have, we

two," Chell often remarked. "To be loved and petted by our men, an' our wee ones sheltered inside us, waitin' for light o' day. I'm thinkin' you're happier than ever you've been, Bess Amish."

"Aye, I am that," she would reply. "Only sometimes..."

"Sometimes what?"

"Ah, nothin'," Bess would sigh. "It's a busy time, is all, and I'm thankful for it."

Rad Amish also was not idle as his wife was not. Every day he was out while it was morning-dark, and not back til it was evening-dark, and it was not many days that he came home without his nets bulging. Happily, he set aside his stores for the hard winter that would soon be upon them, the bleak part of the winter when no fishing-boat dared venture out of the cove, and wild storms raged up and down the coast, and the comanleigh would most likely be raging with them.

And they neither one thought of the comaneigh, or if they did, it was only a brief thought, dismissed quickly as something to be thought of later, if ever a proper time came for it.

In weeks that passed, Bess's cat had three healthy, fat kits, and Rad and Bess laughed at the fine easy wonder of it. And then, when the kits were large enough to romp and get underfoot and get Bess's hearty scolding for it, Rad's Pa died of a wasting he'd kept hid until it finally had him to bed the last week. And then, when the funeral and the sharpest of the mourning had passed, Chell Sharum gave birth to a son, tiny and frail as she, but they hoped, with the spring steel that was in his mother as well. And then the hard winter set in, so that the time in between was taken up with borning and dying.

Rad Amish kept close to the cottage now, for the child was stirring in Bess's belly, and she became nervous and fretful, especially when the wind and rain whipped and howled

around the point of land their cottage stood on. Then she would stand at a window, sometimes for hours, staring out at the black outside, her lips pale and cheeks gaunt, forgetful of everything but the rage of the storm just beyond her eyes. Or if she slept, oftentimes her breathing would grow shallow though even, and she would lie quietly, without moving, sometimes for hours, until all at once her breath would return to her, and with a sigh she would turn and push her nose comfortably against Rad's wakeful shoulder. And Rad Amish saw these things, and noted them, but refused to let himself ponder them. He began to hope mightily for spring, and the birth of the child. Then, he felt surely, Bess's vaporings and oddities would be gone, with her being so busy with her new son.

It was in March, just before the year's warming brought the comanleigh shrieking back as if to show that winter's wandering was merely play, that Bess stopped suddenly, while stirring the stew on the hearth, and put her hand to her back.

"Rad, I feel so queer," she said, and then her eyes widened and dilated. "Ah, no, Rad Amish, it can na be! It is na time yet!" And then she winced and would have fallen, had not Rad Amish caught her.

"If th' lad says it's time, thin time it must be," he said quietly. "Come now, lass, let's get you ta bed, and I'll fetch Old Annie t' midwife t' you."

She nodded, knowing as he did that a man's mother should help his son into the world, but Ma Amish would never lift a hand to do it. So it must be Old Annie, who generally sat in the shadows and waited, should a more experienced pair of hands be needed at a birthing.

Although he hurried, by the time he got back with old Annie at his heels, Bess was writhing on the bed, while the forgotten stew scorched on the hearth. Dumbly, he stood by while Old Annie hurried past him

and began doing what had to be done.

It was nearly cold morning before Rad Amish's daughter's first wail filled the cottage. At the sound, he rushed from the window, first to the tiny mite Old Annie was carefully wrapping in a broidered blanket, and then to Bess, who lay very white and spent on the bed.

"A daughter!" he breathed, soft with wonder, and going down on his knees so that his face was very close to her. "A scrap o' a girl, wi' your dear face, an' ma own red glint in her hair!"

"A daughter?" she murmured weakly, her lips barely moving as she slowly turned her head on the pillow and her eyes opened a little. He could see a bright tear forming, and gently slid over her temple. "Ah, a man's first-born should be a son, surely."

"Fret not, darlin'. 'Twas bound t' be one or 'tother, an' I'm thinkin' that I like th' idea of th' oldest of our brood bein' a daughter t' help her mother with th' young'erns." He laughed softly and stroked her sweat-dampened hair. "Ah, poor sweet, you thought I'd be disappointed in you, t' produce th' prettiest little girl-thing I've laid eyes on in all ma life, exceptin' you."

But no matter how he petted her and soothed her, the tears slid from her eyes, until, finally, she slept. Old Annie, her shawl around her shoulders, touched him.

"I'll be ta home now, Rad Amish," she said. "I'll sleep a while, an' tend ma house, an' thin be back. She'll not be liftin' head from pillow for a while yet, for 'twas a difficult time she had of it."

He nodded, and after the cottage door closed behind her, laid his head by Bess's shoulder and slept also.

Old Annie came back again each day, and soon Bess mended, and got up, and even smiled when Rad held his daughter in his arms and watched her tiny hand grip his finger.

"Such a grip she has!" he cried de-

lightedly. "Like a sinoo-man in th' strength of her, and her but a wee babe!"

But he watched his wife, too, and saw the shadow behind her eyes that never laughed.

"A, weel," he thought to himself. "'Twill pass, belike. It's only that she had such a hard time of it."

And then one day, when the baby was not yet a month old and still unnamed, came a bright warm day, as sometimes comes before spring is full upon the world, and he hastened to uncover his boat and unfurl his sails.

"Ye'll not be goin' out?" asked Bess anxiously, having followed him, the baby in her arms, to the dock.

"That I will," he replied, his finger busy with nets and bait. "A fine day like this, th' fish will fair t' swarm in th' nets! An' would you be wantin' mine t' be th' only ones empty? 'Tis a poor wife you are, Bess, not t' want your husband t' prosper!" But his voice was gay with the release brought by the prospect of a man's work after the inactivity he'd been forced to.

"Na, na, I'd not be wantin' that, but do keep in mind t' be careful! Tis treacherous weather, beguillin' warm, and I'd trust it not!"

"Sure, an' I'll bring you a fat flounder to roast for our supper," he laughed, and so saying, pushed the boat free, catching the wind in the sail with a backward wave at Bess, left standing on the shore behind him.

Silently, as all women had before her, she trudged back to the cottage to tend the baby and wait the long hours until her man returned.

Rad guided his boat toward the mouth of the cove, feeling light and free, watching other boats dashing happily in the same direction. There was much laughing and halloing back and forth in the warm sunlight, and promises to add a poor fish or two to the empty nets from his own full ones. And then he was out of the

cove, he and the other men, and they scattered, each to his own favorite spot where he knew the balmy air would bring the fish bubbling and frolicking to swim carelessly into his nets.

Time passed richly, and Rad thought that never had he seen such a fortunate beginning to spring. As he had thought, the fish were there, fat and beautiful with gorging themselves on the bottom. Extravagantly, he tossed back fish after fish, because they were too short, or too old, or were otherwise flawed. Only the best, the choice, for his first catch of the year!

So absorbed did he become in his pleasant occupation, when he finally looked up, wiping his forehead, he was surprised to see the sun dipping low.

Working quickly, he stowed his catch away, all but an especially large an succulent-looking flounder that he promised himself for his and Bess's supper, and began to head for the cove.

IN the meantime, however, clouds had sprung up, with a freshening breeze from the shore, and in spite of all the skillful tacking he could do, he made little headway. The boat, loaded as it was, wallowed through the waves that were beginning to slap in increased force and vigor against the sides of the little boat. A pat of rain slapped his hand, and he looked up, worried for the first time, as the scudding clouds rolled together with unbelievable swiftness. There was a rumble of thunder.

"Ah, an' it's na good time for me t' be out," he said to himself, scanning the horizon. "So busy I've been wi' th' nets, wi' na proper sense about me, an' th' others have all got safe by now, belike. Aweel, come now, Rad Amish, an' show yoursel' proper sinoo-an' sailor-man, an' get boat t' shore, else storm catch an' soak you, wi' a round scoldin' from Bess in th' bargain!"

And so he redoubled his efforts, so

that he would have no time to think the word "comanleigh".

Rad Amish was a good sailor—some say the best—and by careful tacking and delicate handling of the full boat, he got within sight of the little cove before the wind died altogether, leaving a lowering, settling green light that washed liquidly over everything, and told even the dullest that a storm was trembling to break.

Rad Amish gave his line a turn over a cleat and took up his oars. With luck and by heaving mightily, he could make it yet. He got far enough in that he make out his own cottage in the strange clear light, before the storm broke.

There was nothing he could do. He quickly furled his sail, before the wind could shred it, stowed away his oars, and tossed out the sea-anchor, hoping it would keep him from drifting too far. The heavily-loaded boat tossed sluggishly, heeling dangerously far with every wave, and Rad Amish began to wonder if he would have to sacrifice his catch in order to stay afloat. He huddled down into himself, feeling rivulets of water coursing down his back and set himself to think of Bess, the baby, his catch, anything at all but the comanleigh.

He felt it, felt it in the prickle of his neck, long before he saw it or heard it. And then his nostrils twitched, as he smelled once more that singular, unmistakable nauseating stench he had smelled that night on the bridge. He looked up, and there it was, visible even through the foam-flecked rain, and his guts grew cold as across the water a dim shape sped unerringly toward him. Shaking, he fumbled for the crucifix round his neck and held it before him, only to have the wind—he thought it was the wind—rip it from his fingers.

The shape engulfed him, surrounded him, and a throatless, maniacal laugh filled the air around him, filled and overflowed it, so that he crouched

and cowered where he sat as the booming, titanic laughter deafened his ears and made them ring. The stench half-strangled him, and he began to cough and gasp for breath. The air around him began to be full of luminescence, blurred by his tear-filled eyes, and they swam and circled, and swarmed into one spot, and gradually solidified into a something wearing a woman's form, perched lightly on the wide of the boat. Her fingers trailed in the water and it instantly became smooth for a little way around the boat.

"Stupid man!"

Was it a voice? It echoed hollowly and seemed to come from the very air around him, though the woman-thing's lips had moved. It dripped contempt like seaweed.

"The comanleigh!" he whispered.

"Aye, the storm-hag herself!" the woman-thing cried, and she threw back her head and opened her mouth, while from the air around him came peal after peal after peal of the booming, deafening laughter.

"I am beautiful, am I not? Even more beautiful than they say! Ah, yes, I know the tales they tell, do you think that I do not? I can be hideous, too, but I'm a woman—a beautiful woman," she repeated, running her tongue over her hungry red lips, "and an impatient woman." She slid toward him along the side of the boat.

He sat mesmerized, mouth agape, watching her, and knowing she was weaving her spell, and unable to do anything about it. A giant dark-haired spider she seemed, weaving, weaving.

"It's been so long," she said, closer, closer, "and it's seldom that I get such a man as you. A strong sinoo-man—"

"No, no," he muttered.

"No?" she said in mock surprise. "But why? Am I not lovely? Would not a man—any man—gladly give everything to be embraced in these

arms?" She lifted them temptingly, slipping white and round from the gauziness of her garment. "Or be pressed to this breast?" The gauze slipped to her waist. "Many a man has thought so, and gladly."

What was it, he wondered dimly? Why was she playing with him? Stories he'd heard—what was it? He moved back awkwardly, and from someplace far off felt a dull pain in the back of his leg. His steel net-hook. With an effort he moved his arm back and touched it. Why didn't she devour him in her hellish embrace and get it over? Let her lock her limbs about him and suck his marrow. What was it about her—oh, God!

"Enough, devil that you are!" he burst out in agony. "Must you rack mind as well as body? Do you always have to look like her gone rotten with evil?"

"Like who?"

"Like her—like th' woman th' man loves dearest! God in Heaven, 'tis terrible, but you look, for all th' evil tha's in you, in face an' form like ma own Bess!"

"Your Bess? Your foundling Bess?" For a moment the comanleigh looked startled, and then the laughter began again, great cascading roars and shouts until Rad Amish put his head on his knees with his hands to his ears until it had spent itself.

"So you're the one!" the storm-hag screeched. "So you're the one who's so dear that I wasn't allowed to touch you, when I could have, by all my rights, because she wouldn't let me! For the first time I—I was denied, because of her love!" She moved closer, her eyes gleaming in hellish anticipation. "Of course, I look like Bess! You fool, had you never wondered why Bess always knew when the comanleigh was going to be out? Had you never wondered why she acted so strangely when there was a storm?"

"D'you mean..." he forced the words out, "d'you mean—that you—"

that Bess...that you're her?"

The comanleigh sneered. "You clod, you less than man! I live in her. I lived in her mother before her, and her grandmother before that, clear back, and they were foundlings all, and knew it not, except that they must go and have a daughter too, one way or other, and wander away to die, the fools. Young, fresh life I live in! And shall, so long as there's a daughter of a daughter of the first hapless wretch who spawned me in union with a sea-serpent!"

"But ma Bess...she was so... real!"

The comanleigh shrugged. "Oh, she's human enough, save for the bit I own, struggle though it may. She fought me. And hoped for a son, once she was with child. But I was inside, and knew!"

He gaped stupidly, still unable to comprehend fully. "But I thought you had a house, at bottom o' th' cove."

The comanleigh's manner changed instantly, becoming smooth, and intimate. "And so I have," she said oilily, sliding ever nearer him. "It's such a nice house. You'll like it..."

"Na, na!" he cried suddenly, unable to bear any more. He sprang up, the steel hook in his hands. "Stupid I am, an' careless, t' let you catch me like this, but if you've na touched me afore because o' Bess, you've na touched me now because o' Bess! Some small power I must have now, masel', because o' her an' her love, an' praise God, I'll use it proper afore you'll pick ma bones!" And so saying, he swung the hook in a murderous circle around him.

A look of hellish fury seethed over the evil, familiar face before him, and as he watched, the mouth and jaws lengthened and the cold blue eyes grew lupine. Great cat-teeth gnashed and champed, claws sprang from the woman's fingers, and the gauzy garment now seemed to conceal a more

sinuous form. The hideous stench arose anew and surrounded him, choking him.

As the mouth changed, words tried to form in it, but they were drowned in a single shattering shriek as the comanleigh slithered forward just as Rad Amish's steel hook sank jarringly into her side. Not even appearing to notice, she launched herself at him again, the teeth rending, the claws slashing, while the serpent tail sought to envelope and crush him. Again and again he smashed his hook into her, nearly faint from the overpowering rotten smell of her opened flesh. He knew he was weakening, but his one thought was to kill, to find a vital spot so that Bess...his tiny, unnamed daughter...

They stood locked in deadly combat on the little boat, the man silent, save for a grunt when a bone snapped, the sea-hag screaming her fury. Serpent coils slid up his body to the waist, tightening, tightening. Desperately, he raised his steel hook far over his head with both hands and brought it smashing down with all his gigantic strength, full into the horrid wolf-mouth so close to him. He felt the coils about him shudder, and he struck again...and again...

Tottering, he finally felt them loosen and slide downward, and then his own strength ebbed away and he collapsed into the bottom of the boat. Struggling up on one elbow, he looked at the comanleigh. A malevolent shrewdness gleamed from the one remaining eye.

"Never mind, never mind..." the ruined mouth managed to say, and then the comanleigh could only lie there while Rad Amish, with the remaining strength in him, triumphantly, painfully scratched with his steel hook into the side of the boat, the words "thas na more comanleigh". Then he slid back, helpless. He was dying, he knew, but he didn't mind. Bess and the baby, that's all that mat-

tered, and they were safe...

Darkness buzzed into his ears, filling his eyes and mouth, and a small, reluctant thought swam to and fro in his dying mind. "As long as there's a daughter of a daughter...", but the darkness drowned it before he could quite understand it.

And then, save for the last labored breathings, there was silence on the little boat.

Two days later, Rad Amish's boat drifted in quietly into the harbor and nudged up onto the beach. Inside was the broken skeleton of a man, a ruined cargo of fish, and an unexplained mound of putrescence that gave off such a terrible odor that the men had to tie handkerchiefs over their faces in order to take out Rad Amish's bones.

They buried them beside the place where his wife lay, the infant in her arms, and Welton and Chell Sharum stood by the grave, while Ma Amish looked on in tight-lipped silence and whispers ran through the crowd.

"... 'tain't nateral, her found lyin' dead, all scratched an' torn, an' th' infant beside her with its neck broke. They say it looked like it were a fearful struggle in th' cottage, like an intruder..."

"...na who, more belike *what* 'twas done it..."

"...boat comes in wi' na but bones..."

"...an' th' words on th' boat. D'you suppose he really fought wi' th' comanleigh an' killed it?..."

"... 'uz crazed, belike, but th' storm stoppin' sa sudden..."

"...an' thin her an' th' infant—suppose she saw? Watchin' from th' land, maybe?..."

"...standin' sa stiff an' proud. They say he cursed her an' started it all..."

"...that wasn't th' curse did it. Likely one long before that 'un..."

"...lifted for good an' all, mayhap? Seems air tastes better thin in a long time..."

Mothers no longer frighten their children into good behavior with tales of the comanleigh. Occasionally, some of the old people will talk about it, and they will discuss Rad Amish and his foundling wife and daughter and their incomprehensible deaths in puzzled, hushed tones. Ma Amish claimed to her death-day that Bess killed the infant, and could they hope that in the sacrifice of strong young lives the comanleigh was gone? Sure, the storms were less frequent and less violent, but still—And the old people shake their heads, though they know in their hearts the answer, that the comanleigh left the ruined shell of herself in the boat and raced back to claim the infant, and Bess, seeing it come, mercifully broke the child's neck, to die herself in the comanleigh's final death-thrashings. How and why they know this, they can't say, but the knowledge is there. This is the part that they hold in their hearts, while they talk about other things.

And the children, who listen and don't comprehend the old folks' talk, sometimes play at being Rad Amish, and Bess, and comanleigh, who has become nothing more frightening than a bogeyman.

But when a storm howls and rages, the men are still well enough content to stay within doors while their boats rock patiently in the harbor.