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Twenty Fathoms Down

GALAXY
PRESENTS

The Stowaway

HAWK RIDLEY picked up the yellow sheets of parchment, folded them into a compact bundle, and placed the whole in the pouch that hung around his neck. "I'll take charge of these things now that we're under weigh," he said. "If they're worth a hundred thousand dollars to Chuck Mercer, they're worth ten times that to us."

Captain Steve Gregory gave the receding lights of New York a parting squint and then glanced out across the rain-spattered decks of the *Stingaree*.

"Judging from past events," he remarked, "I'd say those things are a good death warrant. Believe me, Hawk, I look for plenty of trouble down off Haiti. It's my guess that that old galleon has more than a few million in gold aboard her."

Hawk's lean, bronzed face relaxed in a grin and he shifted his lanky weight against the charting table. Youth and the anticipation of adventure made his sea blue eyes sparkle. The captain looked at his chief and then his own round, sunburned face also relaxed.

"Doesn't worry you much, does it, Hawk?" continued Gregory. "You'd think that a diver like you would be having the shakes. Why, boy, you don't even know what Mercer may have in store for us! Twenty fathoms down is pretty darn—"

"Stokey Watts and I will take care of twenty fathoms,"

Hawk interrupted. "All you've got to do is to get this tub of rust down into the Windward Passage off Haiti. We'll do the rest. We're going to get that treasure this time, Greg, and don't you forget it!"

Gregory laughed suddenly. "Anyway, you sure gave Al Mercer a send-off! I'll be a long time forgetting the way that boy took the dive when you threw him down the gangway tonight!"

"He did look funny, didn't he?" agreed Hawk. "But any time anybody points a gun at me and demands that I hand over anything, I'm apt to get cross. They've tried to buy these charts, then steal them, and then to put us out of commission. Lord only knows what they'll do next."

The *Stingaree's* captain was suddenly sober. "Yes, the Lord only knows. I'm looking for trouble, Hawk. Not that I want it, but I know it's coming. Al and Chuck made enough sly remarks as to what would happen if we so much as weighed anchor to go after that bullion."

Hawk looked out across the sea as though his keen eyes could pierce the rain-drenched dark and see the coast which was their goal.

"They're certainly after us," he said.

Well, it was enough that the salvage ship was at last putting out for the West Indies with her diving equipment and competent crew. The sailing had been delayed day by day for two weeks. Minor troubles, just serious enough to rasp on the men's nerves, had occurred with relentless regularity, and the blame had been laid—not without reason—at the

door of Ocean Salvage, a rival firm managed by Chuck and Al Mercer.

The bridge itself gave enough indication that trouble of one sort or another was anticipated. Racks of rifles climbed up the after side of the chart room, and ammunition boxes were carefully stowed so as to be handy, yet out of the way.

Even the engines below decks seemed to throb in a subdued, cautious key, as though they, too, sensed danger. The rain, whispering against the steel plates of the decks, added to the feeling of danger ahead.

But though Hawk Ridley and Gregory were keyed up against surprise, the seeming apparition that appeared in the open doorway gave them a shock. For, of all things they expected to see on a salvage ship, a slender, lovely girl in a bedraggled wedding dress was the last.

She stood with one hand resting upon the side of the doorway, gazing into the room with half-frightened, half-pleading eyes.

At first, Hawk felt as though someone had swept away the world about him to replace it with one of fantasy. Then he had only eyes for the delicate beauty of her face.

It was the girl who broke the silence.

"I suppose," she faltered, "that you'll set me ashore, now that you know I'm here."

"What the—?" came Gregory's gasp. "What are you doing on the *Stingaree*?"

Hawk managed to collect himself enough to speak. "Come on in," he said. "You'll catch your death of cold in those wet

things.” He stepped forward and held out a hand to help her over the door jamb.

Hesitantly the girl entered. She stood there looking about. Hawk pulled a chair to the side of the steam radiator and motioned for her to sit down. With a sigh, she spread out the wet white satin of her gown and seated herself.

Her lips quivered as she looked up at Hawk. “What do you do with stowaways, Mr. Ridley? It’s not an awful crime, is it?”

“Stowaway?” said Hawk. “Do you mean—that is, you’re a stowaway?”

“What’s it look like?” interjected Gregory, regaining his dignity as master of a ship. “Who are you, anyway?”

The girl looked at Hawk, as though he might prove her ally. “I won’t be any trouble to you. Really I won’t be any trouble. I knew you were sailing and I had to come. There wasn’t anything else I could do, was there?” She sent the question straight up at Hawk.

Hawk was once more in a trance and he did not seem to hear her words. She continued:

“You see, I’m Vick—Fredericka Stanton, Charles Stanton’s daughter. I had to come. There wasn’t any other way!”

Gregory’s eyes went hard. “C. H. Stanton, eh? You mean that you, C. H. Stanton’s daughter, have got the unmitigated crust to come on board this ship when we’re putting out to sea? I happen to know that Stanton and the Mercers do business together. That lets you out, understand?” Gregory turned to Hawk. “Guess we’ll have to put her ashore, Hawk.”

The girl gasped. “No, oh, no! You can’t do that! You can’t

put me ashore. I have money in New York. I'll pay you well to take me with you. Just as soon as we get back, I'll pay you in cash! You *must* let me go!"

"Yeah?" snapped Gregory. "Listen here, little lady, I see your game. Mercer wants an agent aboard this ship and he got Stanton to send you along. He thought you could play on our sympathy with some cock-and-bull story, eh? Well, he's wrong, and you're wrong! You're going to get off the *Stingaree* just as soon as I can place you within launch distance of the beach!"

"Keep still!" Hawk said so suddenly that Gregory jumped. "Can't you see the girl is shot to pieces? Who's running this ship, anyway?"

The girl gave him a grateful, relieved glance. "I knew you'd help me, Mr. Ridley. I've heard so much about you, and I know you're decent. That's why I came. I knew that you were the only person I could appeal to. All the others—" Tears brightened in her eyes.

"Don't let a pretty girl wreck you!" Gregory cried. "Can't you see that Mercer sent her aboard to get the charts or tip him off? It's a grandstand play, Hawk!"

Hawk looked at him with eyes chill as ice. "Some of these days, Captain, you're going to put in your two cents just once too often. This girl is cold and wet and miserable. Let her alone!"

The captain brushed a nervous hand across his brow. "You're like that, Hawk. Every time I try to hand out some advice you get stubborn. The answer's as plain as the nose on your face. This girl's a plant! Just because she's pretty—"

“Go tell the steward,” said Hawk coldly, “to make up a spare cabin. And tell him to get this girl some dry clothes and something to eat. And,” he paused for effect, “if I catch one man on this ship bothering her, I’ll give him a good stiff jolt to remember me by.”

When Gregory had gone the girl looked up at Hawk with a faint smile of gratitude.

“I knew you’d understand,” she said. “There wasn’t any place for me to go but here—so I came.”

Hawk leaned back against the charting table. “Maybe I’m crazy, Miss Stanton, and maybe it does look funny, your coming aboard in a wet wedding dress, but somehow I’d stake everything I’ve got on you. I don’t know why you’re here, but I know that you’ve a good reason, and I’m not such a roughneck that I’d let a lady down.”

Vick Stanton’s smile was radiant. “And I was almost ready to believe that chivalry was dead!” she said.