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Mister
Tidwell,
Gunner

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

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MISTER TIDWELL looked very calm standing there against the rail of the *Swiftsure*, but his outward appearance was no indication of the volcanic fires of loathing which seethed behind his small eyeglasses and bubbled beneath his gray frock coat.

Had anyone on the *Swiftsure* been told about those fires, he would have laughed heartily and long in the honest fashion of a Royal Navy tar.

The nub of Mister Tidwell's grievance was this. Here in the midst of rolling drums and clamorous trumpets which called to quarters, his purpose was lost. In a moment, if he did not like a taste of the cat, he would have to go below, far below into the evil smelling cockpit where the surgeon and his assistants were even now preparing for the toll.

The French man-o'-war had grown into a white sail mountain out of the Mediterranean blue, a bone in her teeth, looking like a mad dog frothing at the mouth, abristle with seventy-four naval cannon.

This, the high tide of the Napoleonic Wars, was the year 1798. Horatio Nelson, that quaint, efficient little man, was back on the sea, his right sleeve empty, his cheeks sunken with the effects of nine months of suffering in England.

The hot summer days were filled with ugly misgivings.

England, her Continental Alliance split apart, was suffering a dark day. And Nelson, the poor devil, was about to become the butt of a political fiasco solely because Boney's fleet had left Toulon for parts unknown and because Nelson, dismasted in a gale, had been unable to track the French across the trackless sea.

The whole, vibrant problem amounted to one question. Where were the French?

Alexandria? No, Nelson had called in. Asia Minor? No! Syracuse? No!

And here, rising like a ghost out of the seas came a French man-o'-war ready to do battle, nay, anxious to fight. The whereabouts of Boney's fleet must be muted at all costs. The French must take India. They must drive England out of the Mediterranean.

And the *Swiftsure*, all alone in the lazy blue expanse, girded the loins of her fighting men and prepared to deal iron in grape and canister doses.

And Mister Tidwell, pushed back and forth by hurrying gun crews and anxious Marines, gazed somberly at the approaching vessel and murmured a wish that he might be able to witness just one engagement in the light and air.

Two midshipmen, gold lace stiff and militant, scrambled up on the bulwark, small swords clanking, and began their ascent into the shrouds.

Mister Tidwell watched them go. Harvey and Sloan. Twelve years old, future officers, two of an uncontrollable band of twenty-four who harassed officers and men and Mister Tidwell without mercy.

Especially Mister Tidwell. He was their schoolmaster.

The crack brained idea which sent young men of twelve to sea, fostered in the dim past by King Charles, who thought his navy needed officers trained from infancy, had only been capped by another king's thought that these urchins should have the benefits of schooling at the hands of a trained master.

Mister Tidwell, along with several score of well-meaning professors, had long suffered the effects of those laws.

The small pay and the arduous life offered little attraction to any man of the day, much less a learned gentleman, and so His Majesty had been forced to conceive a stratagem which was nothing more than literary press ganging.

Two years before Mister Tidwell had written a paper. A mild, well worded paper, which dealt with the tax system. For that he had been sent to sea. And here he was, standing in the *Swiftsure's* scuppers, watching battle approach, knowing that he was even now late for the cockpit.

Marines swarmed up the ratlines, white crossbelts shimmering, muskets clenched, faces strained as they took their posts in the crosstrees. Mister Tidwell envied those Marines. Their sole duty consisted of taking pot shots at Marines in the rigging of the French ships, and what if they did die? They at least stayed out in the sun and air.

The long and short of Mister Tidwell's aversion to answering that call to quarters was blood.

A horizontal plume of smoke rapped out from the Frenchman's bow chasers. Round shot smashed solidly into the rail. Splinters sang like shrapnel. Two sailors clutched their lacerated faces and leaned sickly against their guns. One

of them looked at the maw of the hatch from whence came a stream of powder monkeys bearing their leathern buckets. He looked away again and strove to staunch the flow of blood with his white cotton shirt. No, that gunner certainly did not want to go below to the hospital.

The Frenchman was a quarter of a mile away, swinging into position for a broadside. On the *Swiftsure*, drums still rolled and trumpets blared, filling Mister Tidwell with uneasiness.

Gun captains blew on their matches. A twenty-four pounder spurted flame from muzzle and touchhole, leaped up and slammed back on the deck, splintering a wooden wheel. The shot sang through the Frenchman's rigging.

The broadside smashed out, enveloping the entire enemy ship with smoke. Sails and spars rained on the *Swiftsure's* deck. A Marine came down like a shot tropical bird, hitting the planks solidly to roll over on his face. An officer leaned over him for a moment, hand pressed against the crimsoning crossbelts, and then jerked his thumb toward the rail. The Marine was thrown over the side.

Lucky, thought Mister Tidwell. The man hadn't lived to see the cockpit in action.

A hand fell on Tidwell's shoulder. A petty officer, face contorted with excitement and anger, shook the gray coat and sent Mister Tidwell hurtling toward the hatch.

A midshipman, holding a musket bigger than he was, paused in his ascent up a ratline long enough to grin. Mister Tidwell reproved the boy with a glance and then went below.

No one paid any attention to him on the second gun deck. The cannon had begun to fire, bucking out of line, filling

the place with choking fumes. Mister Tidwell paused for a moment, reluctant to go below again. He saw the sweating torsos of the gunners through the dim welter of round shot, flying splinters, gashed beams and exploding guns.

He sighed, and then shrugging his small shoulders inside his gray frock coat, he adjusted his eye glasses and went down another ladder to the third gun deck.

The stream of black powder monkeys and their black cargoes choked the passageway for a moment. Mister Tidwell stood aside to let them by. Powder was strewn all over the planking. One match would finish the ship. It was ever thus.

Mister Tidwell went aft, ducking his head to avoid the beams. A tall man was forced to take to his hands and knees through this passageway. The cockpit was ahead.

A great lantern filled with sputtering candles burned against the beams. The midshipmen slept here when things were peaceful. Now the midshipmen's chests had been drawn together to make a low table. A piece of tarpaulin, already black with blood, was spread over the surface.

The surgeon, a tall, gaunt impassive gentleman, stood over a small stove heating his saws and knives and soldering irons. His assistants were placing buckets all about the improvised table, making ready for the men soon to come.

This was Mister Tidwell's battle station. Here he was no longer schoolmaster to the midshipmen, he was part of the surgeon's machine.

"About time," muttered an assistant. "Peel off that coat. Hear those guns? They'll be coming down here soon."

Mister Tidwell peeled off the gray coat, folded it up and

placed it in the corner. He felt nauseated already. The smell of the bilge, mixed with powder smoke, stale food, dirty clothes and dried blood was already affecting him.

The cannons barked overhead. Their wheels roared across the upper decks in constant discord. The *Swiftsure* lurched and rolled under the impacts of recoil and canister, by courtesy of the French.

Mister Tidwell felt some interest in the guns. He had devoted considerable time and much mathematics to the study of ordnance. He felt no interest at all in surgery. But he rolled up his sleeves, squinted his eyes through the bad light and waited nervously for things to happen.

The first victim was a brawny lad, carried between two sailors. The man's eyes were narrow with pain and his mouth was set. His leg was mangled at the thigh. He lived only through grace of a tight tourniquet.

Mister Tidwell knew his duty. He picked up a bottle of rum and shoved the mouth between the brawny lad's teeth. He let the fluid gurgle until the surgeon, in an impassive voice, said, "That's enough. We'll need some for the others."

Thereupon, Mister Tidwell and three assistants seized the man, threw him upon the low table and the surgeon went to work. Mister Tidwell placed a wooden peg in the victim's mouth so that he would not break his teeth.

The surgeon, with a heated knife, slashed the flesh away from the bone in one swift, semi-circular slash. He snatched up the saw and went through the living bone.

The mangled limb was thrown into a bucket, the stump was swiftly wrapped, the brawny lad, eyes wild with agony,

ceased to struggle in the grip of the assistants. He was thrown to one side.

Mister Tidwell looked behind him. The men were piling up like cord wood against the bulkhead. Rifle wounds, splinters, charred faces from flarebacks, smashed hands, crushed arms . . . Mister Tidwell swallowed hard and selected the next victim.

This was a bullet hole in the chest. The surgeon waived aside the rum. This was not a serious operation. A soldering iron was taken from the stove. Mister Tidwell and the assistants had to hold hard to keep the victim still. The iron was plunged deep in the wound.

With a tremor, the sailor laid very still. Blood was frothing out of his mouth.

"He's dead," said the surgeon, and motioned for the man to be cast aside.

The work went on. The buckets were growing full. Blood dripped slowly to the floor and ran in rivulets toward the bulkheads.

Mister Tidwell administered rum until his arms were tired and when the rum gave out he gave them gin. And when the gin gave out, he gave them nothing. They bore their agony in silence as well as they could.

A strapping big Marine was carried in and laid with the others on the floor. His brown eyes were big and staring as he watched the surgeon work. The slash of the knife through living flesh seemed to fascinate him. The Marine's whole arm was crushed.

Mister Tidwell turned just in time to see the Marine

crawling away. He tried to screen the escape but the surgeon said, "Bring him next."

They threw the Marine on the table. They ripped off his crossbelts. They tore his scarlet coat. He turned his face away, looking at the big lantern. The grate of the saw could be heard above the rumble of cannon wheels. Quietly, the Marine fainted.

Hours and hours it went on. The cockpit filled with men who had received the administrations of the surgeon. Then at last the cannonading stopped and the ship became quiet.

Mister Tidwell, splattered with blood, wanted to go on deck, but there was still work to be done. He was given a sponge and told to bathe out the lesser wounds. One sponge to a dozen men.

Mister Tidwell, working beside these men who were making the sea safe for British merchant ships, men who had been dragged forcefully away by the press gangs, knew the futility of his work. Once he had written a paper on medicine and infection. He had some inkling of germs and the reasons for the spread of gangrene. He knew that half these men would die in a week, another quarter in a month and that the rest would hobble through life with wrecked health.

But he worked on with his sponge, under orders, his frail shoulders bent, his eyes very tired, his bony hands shaking.

How different this was from the quiet thoughtfulness of Oxford where he had spent the greater part of his life. Had anyone told him three years before that in the summer of 1798 he would be in the Mediterranean administering to

wounded men under the direction of a coldblooded surgeon, he would have thought it an immense joke.

He could bear his duties of teaching midshipmen, however arrogant, however unruly they might be, but each time an engagement came close, he shivered at the thought of the cockpit.

It was night before he got on deck. The battle had been a draw, but the *Swiftsure* had been unable to pursue the Frenchman. However, the losses were not without compensation. The French vessel had headed for Alexandria.

Mister Tidwell listened to his midshipmen. One of them was dead, another bore a glorious bandage about his brow where a langrage shot had grazed him.

Harvey, who had acquitted himself with honor by pistoling a French seaman, drew himself up proudly and walked along the stained deck with not a little swagger, excusable in a boy twelve years of age and a future admiral.

"I should think," said Mister Tidwell, "that the French would be in Alexandria if the vessel headed that way."

Harvey's voice was shrill and full of scorn. "What the hell would you know about it, hiding down in the cockpit all during the fight? We cleaned up Boney's scow and no mistake. She had to head in for repairs, that's what. She damned well needs them too."

"But by my casual observance of naval tactics, reporting to the commander would seem to be more vital than refitting a single ship."

Sloan looked about at his brother midshipmen and laughed.