

An excerpt from *The Counterfeit Husband* by Elizabeth

Mansfield

October, 1803

Thomas Collinson stood leaning on the rail of the merchant ship *Triton*, watching the waves slap away at the worn piles of the Southampton dock where the ship was moored. The wharf was dingy and rotting, but it was what the crew of a merchantman had come to expect in these days of war. Nelson's naval vessels had first choice of moorage space, and the vessels of the East India Company had their own prime anchorages. So ships like the *Triton* took what was left.

It was already dark; the sails had been furled and the rigging secured an hour earlier. The captain and most of the crew had already gone ashore, but a few stragglers were still making their way down the gangplank toward the waterfront taverns or, if they were lucky, a woman's bed. Most of these tag-tails were the ones who hadn't signed on for the next voyage and had spent the past hour packing their gear. Tom gave an occasional wave of the arm to a departing sailor. He, the ship's mate, had been given the watch, but he felt no resentment as his glance followed his shipmates, their seabags slung over their shoulders as they walked across the wharf and disappeared into the dark shadows beyond the dock where the light from the ship's forward lantern couldn't reach. He didn't mind having the watch. He was in no hurry to get ashore; there was no place on land for which he had any particular fancy.

A man came stealthily up behind him—a sailor, moving quietly toward the railing on tiptoe. He was not as tall as Tom but so powerfully built that the heavy seabag resting on his shoulder seemed a lightweight triviality. His approach was soundless, but some instinct made Tom whirl

about. He gave a snorting laugh. “You didn’t think you could sneak up behind me with success, did you, you whopstraw, with me waiting to see you off?”

The stocky sailor lowered his seabag to the deck and shrugged. “Tho’t I’d give it one last try.” He grinned at Tom with unabashed admiration. “I guess no press-man’ll take *you* unawares.”

Tom’s answering grin soon died as the two men stared at each other in silent realization that it might be for the last time. “So you’ve packed, eh, Daniel? Ready at last?” He forced a smile. “It’s goodbye, then.”

Daniel pulled off his cap and ran his fingers through his shock of curly red hair. “It’s the only thing I regret about leavin’, y’ know . . . sayin’ goodbye to ye, Tommy lad.” His soft brown eyes, usually gleaming with good cheer, now looked watery, as if the fellow was holding back tears. He thrust out his hand for a last farewell.

Tom ignored the hand and threw his arms about his friend in a warm embrace. “No need for the dismals, Daniel,” he said softly, patting his friend’s back with affection. “Where did you say Betsy is? Twyford, isn’t it? That’s less than a dozen miles north of here. We’ll see each other from time to time.”

“No, we won’t,” Daniel muttered, breaking out of the embrace and turning away his face. “Betsy an’ me’ll be movin’ to God-knows-where, an’ ye’ll get yerself a berth with the John Company, an’ we’ll lose track—”

“Stow the gab,” Tom ordered with an attempt at a laugh. “We can keep in touch if we try. There are letters . . .”

“I ain’t much good at writin’.”

“Then Betsy can do it for you. I’ve seen her letters . . . your wife writes a fine hand.”

Daniel sighed and put on his cap. “Aye, I suppose so.” He lifted his seabag to his shoulder and gave his friend a pathetic mockery of a grin. “Be seein’ ye, then, eh? We’ll let ye know where we’ll be settlin’.”

Tom nodded, finding himself suddenly too choked to speak. They walked together slowly toward the gangplank. “Are you sure you won’t sign on again? Just one more voyage?” he asked at last.

“What’s the use of it? Betsy’s heart’d break fer sure. It’s different fer you, Tommy. You haven’t a wife t’ cling to yer knees, sobbin’ her eyes out every time ye make fer the door. Besides, one more voyage an’ ye’ll have yer master’s papers. Why, next time I hear of ye, ye’ll be mate on a John Company ship.”

“Not very likely. East India Company berths are saved for rich men’s sons, not for the vicar’s daughter’s bastard.”

“You can try, can’t ye? Ol’ Aaron swears he heared that a mate on a company ship can pile up a couple o’ thousand quid on a single voyage!”

Tom shook his head dubiously. “Two *thousand*? What gammon! Don’t put your trust in those dreamers’ yarns. Besides, if I get to captain a ship like this tub we’re on, it’ll be good enough for me.”

“Aye, if that’s the sort of life ye want.”

“It is.” Tom threw his friend a worried look. “But what about you? What will you do now, do you think?”

“I dunno. I’ll find somethin’. I’ll *have* to, y’ know—what with Betsy makin’ me a father by spring.”

“Aye, you lucky bag-pudding,” Tom chuckled. “A *father*! Before you know it, there’ll be a strapping, red-headed whelp sitting astride your shoulder instead of that seabag. It’s a sight I’d give a yellow-boy to see.”

Daniel’s face clouded over. “Per’aps ye will,” he muttered without much conviction. “Per’aps you will.”

Tom felt a wave of depression spread over him. Daniel was probably right. They were about to set off on widely diverging paths, and the likelihood of ever meeting again was slim. And even

if they did, the close camaraderie of the past months would have long since evaporated into the unreality of nostalgic memory.

Daniel stuck out his hand again, and Tom gripped it tightly. They held on for a long while, and then, by some manner of wordless communication, let go at the same moment. The redheaded man turned abruptly away and marched purposefully down the gangplank. Tom watched him from his place on the railing, feeling bereft. *A sailor's life is always leavetaking*, he told himself glumly as he watched his friend trudge stolidly across the wharf. Just before Daniel was completely swallowed up by the shadows, Tom saw him pause, turn and give one last wave of farewell.

Tom waved back, his throat tingling with unexpected emotion. He grunted in self-disgust, annoyed at this indulgence in sentiment. If there was one requirement for a ship's master, it was hardness—hardness of body and of feeling. If he was ever to become a master, he'd better learn to behave like one. He'd be—

“Tom! *Tom! Press-gang!*” came a shout from the shadows.

Tom felt the blood drain from his face. “Good God! *Daniel!*”

He could hear, above the noisy slap of the water against the side of the ship, the sounds of a violent scuffle in the dark of the dock. His heart began to hammer in his chest, for he knew that the worst had happened. An attack by a press-gang was a merchant seaman's direst fear. He glanced about him desperately for some sort of weapon. Snatching up a belaying pin, he vaulted over the railing onto the gangplank and dashed down.

The sounds from the shadows became louder and more alarming as he tore across the wharf and neared the shadowy part of the dock beyond. “No, no, don't use the cutlass,” he heard a voice bark. “He's a good, stalwart specimen. I don't want him spoiled.”

Tom raced round a mound of crates and gasped at the sight that met his eyes. Daniel was struggling like a wild stallion against the tugs and blows of half-a-dozen ruffians armed with cutlasses and cudgels. Standing apart, his arms folded over his chest, was a King's officer

watching the proceedings with dispassionate interest. Tom would have liked to land him a proper facer, but the six bruisers had to be tackled first. He threw himself headlong into the melee. "All right, Daniel," he shouted, "let's give it to 'em!"

There was no answer from the beleaguered Daniel, but he struggled against his attackers with renewed energy. Tom swung the belaying pin about in violent desperation, striking one press-man on the shoulder hard enough to make him squeal and drop his hold on Daniel's arm. Turning quickly about, he swung the pin at the head of another attacker and heard a very satisfactory crack of the skull as the fellow slumped to the ground.

The shouting was deafening as shadowy figures swirled about him. He swung his makeshift weapon wildly, hoping desperately that he wouldn't accidentally strike his friend. "Daniel, are you . . . there?"

"Aye, lad," came a breathless, discouraged answer from somewhere behind him.

"Don't despair," Tom urged, swinging the belaying pin vigorously about him, keeping two of the ruffians at bay. Just then, from behind, came a sharp blow. The flat side of a cutlass had struck powerfully and painfully against his ear. He swayed dizzily. The pin was wrenched from his weakened grasp, and three men jumped on him at once. He felt himself toppling over backwards, but he kept swinging his fists as he fell. With a string of curses, his assailants slammed his head down upon the cobbles. It struck with an agonizing thud. Streaks of red and yellow lightning seemed to obscure his vision and sear his brain with pain.

By the time he could see again, the fight was over. He lifted his head and looked about him. Two of the press-men were leading Daniel off, his shoulders pathetically stooped and his hands bound behind his back. Three others of the gang, looking very much the worse for wear, were trussing up his own wrists with leather straps. And the sixth lay stretched out on the cobbles, blood trickling from his nose. Above it all, the King's officer stood apart, his hands unsullied by the struggle he'd just witnessed. Catching Tom's eye, the officer smiled in grim satisfaction. Tom well understood the expression. The man on the ground might be dead, and another of his gang

might not have the use of his right arm for a long spell, but the two men the officer had caught were trained seamen. He and Daniel were the sort of catch the press-gangs most desired. This had been, for the officer, a very good night's work.

After having been alternately shoved and dragged along the waterfront for what seemed like miles, his head aching painfully and his spirits in despair, Tom was pushed into a longboat manned by eight uniformed sailors. Daniel was nowhere in sight. The King's officer dismissed the ruffians of the press-gang and climbed into the boat, giving Tom a smug smile as he seated himself on a thwart facing his prisoner. Tom's fingers ached to choke that smile from his face.

The sailors began to row toward an imposing frigate (painted with the yellow and black stripes that Admiral Nelson required of naval vessels) which rode at anchor some distance from the dock. It was His Majesty's Ship *Undaunted*, and despite the darkness Tom could see that it carried at least fifty guns and floated in the water at over six hundred tons. As the longboat drew up alongside the vessel, a sailor prodded Tom with an oar, urging him to climb up the ladder to the upper deck.

Despite the desperation of his condition, Tom couldn't refrain from peering with considerable interest through the darkness at the activity on deck. While the King's officer, who had followed him up the ladder, held a whispered colloquy with the vessel's first lieutenant, Tom looked around, marvelling at the pristine neatness of the ship. But before he had an opportunity to scrutinize what was a vastly different vessel from the one he'd just abandoned, the lieutenant, a stocky, balding man in his mid-twenties, with a florid complexion that bespoke a hot temper, gave an order to the two sailors who were guarding him, and he was roughly dragged across the deck to the companionway.

At the end of the passage, he was unceremoniously ushered into what he instantly recognized was the captain's cabin. It was a low-ceilinged, unpretentious compartment with panelled walls and a row of wide windows (which usually graced the stern of a sailing ship) covering the far wall. The captain himself was nowhere in evidence, for the chair behind the huge

desk (a piece of furniture which gleamed with polish and importance in its impressive position at the dead center of the room) was empty. The only sign of the cabin's inhabitant was a coat trimmed with gold braid which had been thrown over a cabinet in the corner.

After his eyes became accustomed to the light—provided by a lamp swinging at eye level from the rafters on a long, brass chain—he could see that the desk was covered with navigational charts and a heavily-bound ship's log. But his eyes were immediately drawn to the group of men who had been standing at the desk when he'd entered. Two of them were uniformed sailors, set to guard the prisoner standing between them. It was Daniel, his face chalky-white in the lamplight, his hands still secured behind him and blood dripping from a cut on his upper lip. Tom felt his stomach lurch with nausea as their eyes met. Daniel's face was rigid with terror. *And no wonder*, Tom thought miserably. Daniel's life was no longer worth a brass farthing.

The worst circumstance that life could impose on Daniel had occurred: impressment. All through their sailing days, merchant seamen were edified with blood-chilling tales of the sort of life they could expect if they were so unfortunate as to be impressed into naval service. Service in His Majesty's Navy was hell for impressed seamen. They were forced to fill the most unwanted posts, to work at the dirtiest jobs and made to expose themselves to the greatest dangers. The food the King allotted for ordinary seamen was rotten beyond belief, and the pay a pittance. And the chance of coming out of the experience alive—after who-knew-how-many forced voyages—was slim indeed. The Navy, unable to recruit enough seamen to staff its ships because of this notorious mistreatment, had for centuries used the nightmarish device of impressment to fill its berths. And this time, Tom and his best friend had been caught in the net. For *him* there was a ray of hope—the ship-master's apprentice papers in the pocket of his coat; but for Daniel there was no hope at all.

He started across the cabin to stand beside his friend, but he was jerked back to his place by the sailors who were guarding him. The lieutenant and the King's officer conferred again briefly, and then the lieutenant went to a door near the far corner of the wall at Tom's right and tapped

gently. At the sound of a voice from within, the lieutenant opened the door and disappeared inside. He emerged a few moments later, followed by a tall, lean man of late middle age with a head of iron-grey hair, a short beard and a pair of narrow, glinting eyes. The man was in his shirt-sleeves, but Tom knew it was the captain even before he reached for the gold-trimmed coat and shrugged himself into it.

The lieutenant, meanwhile, came into the circle of light which surrounded the desk and, bending over, began to shuffle the papers about until he found what appeared to Tom to be a ship's roster.

"Sit down, Mr. Benson, sit down," the captain muttered from the shadows where he stood leaning his elbow on the cabinet and looking from Tom to Daniel and back again.

"Aye, aye, Captain." Mr. Benson, the lieutenant, took the chair behind the desk, picked up a pen from the inkstand and wrote something on the paper. Then he looked up at the two prisoners coldly. "Which one of you is the murderer?" he asked.

"It's the taller one, of course," came the captain's voice from the shadows. "Isn't that so, Moresby?"

The King's officer chuckled. "You're right again, Captain Brock."

At the sound of the captain's name, Daniel's eyes flew to Tom's with a look of desperation. Sir Everard Brock was notorious. His reputation for cruelty was legendary among seamen.

"Start with the other one," the captain ordered.

Mr. Benson nodded. "What's your name, fellow?" he demanded of Daniel.

"Dan'l Hicks, sir."

"You were an ordinary seaman on the *Triton*?"

"Aye, sir, but . . . I . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've finished my time."

"Finished? Didn't sign up again, eh? Had enough of the old scow?" Mr. Benson asked with a

sardonic grimace.

“Well, I . . . I suppose ye could say that.”

“Good. If they’re not expecting you back on board the *Triton*, no one will be looking for you.” He dipped the pen carefully in the inkwell.

“But ye see, sir, there *will* be someone—”

“What?” the lieutenant asked, writing.

“Someone lookin’ fer me. I have a wife, y’ see, an’ she—”

“Forget your wife, fellow. Can’t worry about wives. Haven’t you heard that the Prime Minister, Mr. Addington, declared war on Napoleon this past May? This is wartime,” Mr. Benson said pompously, adding Daniel’s name to the roster. “Cut his bonds,” he ordered the guards.

“Y’ don’t understand, sir,” Daniel pleaded as a sailor stepped behind him and sliced the cords at his wrists with a small, curved-bladed knife. “I—”

The lieutenant paid no attention but merely held out the pen. “Here. Put your X right here.”

Daniel’s hands were trembling. “But . . . y’ see . . . I *can’t* sign on. My wife’s in the family way, if y’ know what I mean. She’ll starve t’ death if I—”

Mr. Benson’s eyes narrowed angrily. “Are you daring to contradict me, Hicks? If I don’t have your X on this sheet at once, it’ll be ten stripes for you!”

“Twenty,” came the captain’s voice ominously out of the shadows.

“Twenty!” Mr. Benson echoed.

Daniel cast Tom a look of stricken anguish. Tom, his mind racing about to think of a way out of this rat-trap, could do nothing at the moment but signal with a blink of the eyes that Daniel should acquiesce. Poor Daniel groaned despairingly, stepped forward and took the pen from the lieutenant’s hand. He knew well enough how to sign his name, but he wrote an X as a gesture to himself that he still had a spark of rebellious spirit within him.

Mr. Benson threw a look of satisfaction over his shoulder at the captain and turned to Tom. “Now *you*, murderer,” he said with a kind of malicious enjoyment, “what’s *your* name?”

“Collinson, sir. Thomas Collinson.” Tom used the opportunity to move closer to the desk and Daniel’s side.

“You don’t appear to be overly disturbed about having killed a man,” the lieutenant remarked, looking him over interestedly.

“If you’re speaking of the press-man I laid low, he damn well deserved it.”

Mr. Benson’s self-satisfied expression changed to one of discomfort. He was not accustomed to back-talk. This fellow was a cool one, and that type could make him look foolish before the captain. “Watch your tongue, fellow,” he growled threateningly, “if you know what’s good for you.”

Tom shrugged. “May as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamp,” he said, brazenly directing his words to the captain.

Captain Brock said nothing, but he moved in closer to the light and peered at Tom intently. The lieutenant, meanwhile, jumped angrily to his feet. “Oh, you won’t hang, fellow,” he sneered, “but you’ll wish by tomorrow that you had. Hanging’s too good for the likes of you.”

“Don’t think to frighten me with this fustian,” Tom retorted. “A civil trial might be more damaging to the Navy than to me, and *that’s* why I won’t hang.”

The lieutenant, red-faced with fury, reached out and grasped Tom by the collar of his coat, but before he was able to do anything further, the captain’s voice stopped him. “Hold on there, Mr. Benson. Let the fellow be for a moment.” He walked into the circle of light and studied Tom’s face before turning to the King’s officer. “Speaks the King’s English, Moresby, did you notice? You haven’t made a mistake again, have you?”

The officer stepped forward, his brow wrinkled with sudden alarm. If a member of the nobility had been mistakenly caught in his net, he could find himself in a great deal of difficulty. He circled Tom slowly, looking carefully at his clothing, his hands and the careless way his hair had been cut. “I don’t think so, Captain Brock,” he said thoughtfully. “Looks all right to me. He came off the *Triton*, after all, and that’s not the sort of berth a gentleman would seek.”

“Where did you learn a gentleman’s English, fellow?” the captain asked Tom.

“At Cambridge. Where else?” Tom responded flippantly.

The captain drew in his breath and nodded at the lieutenant.

Mr. Benson, who still clutched Tom’s collar with one hand, smashed him in the mouth with the other. “The captain asked you a question, sailor. Answer him properly, or you’ll feel the taste of wet leather!”

Tom pulled himself free of the lieutenant’s grasp and licked the blood from his split lip before he answered. “I read a bit, that’s all,” he muttered.

“That’s *not* all,” the captain said in a voice so icy that Tom understood how he could command this ship with its crew of hundreds. “One doesn’t learn to speak well only by reading. Well?”

Tom gave the captain a sardonic shrug. “I had a mother who set great store by appearances. She trained me. She thought that if her boy *appeared* to be a gentleman, he might be taken for one.”

“How very interesting,” the captain murmured, his voice, even while tinged with amusement, still chillingly cold. “And *were* you taken for one?”

Tom smiled wryly. “Not until now.”

The captain let out a grudging laugh. “You’ve a sharp wit, Collinson, but you’ll find that wit is no advantage here. Carry on, Mr. Benson.” And he walked back out of the light.

The lieutenant sat down and leered up at Tom with satisfaction. “As I was saying, sailor, you’re not going to hang. That would be too easy a punishment for you. You’re going to serve on this ship. You’re going to labor through two watches every day. *Two!* And once a week, the bo’sun will deliver upon your back at least . . . er . . .”

“Thirty-five,” came the voice from the shadows.

“Thirty-five stripes. Do you understand, Collinson? *Thirty-five*. Every week. Why, when we put into port, you’ll be so bone-weary and sore you’ll be glad that you have to stay behind in the

brig instead of going ashore with the rest of the scum you'll be calling your shipmates. What have you to say to *that* with your clever tongue, eh, Collinson?"

Tom moved close to the desk, carefully stepping on Daniel's foot and pressing down on it with just enough weight to indicate that the pressure was not accidental. He hoped Daniel would recognize it as a signal to stay alert. Meanwhile, he faced Mr. Benson with a leer of his own. "What I have to say, sir, is that you can't do it. I'm sorry to disappoint you . . . and you too, Captain Brock. You may be able to bring me to the magistrates on the charge of murder, but you can't make me sign on. I have papers."

"Papers?" The lieutenant looked nonplussed. "What papers?"

"If you'll permit your men to untie my hands, I'll show you."

Mr. Benson looked over his shoulder for guidance. The captain nodded, and the lieutenant motioned to the guard with the knife to slice the straps. Then Tom reached into his coat and pulled out an oilskin packet. He was about to untie the strings when the lieutenant reached out his hand. "Here, give it to me."

Mr. Benson nervously undid the strings as if he feared a snake might emerge and sting his finger. He pulled out the contract which Tom had signed with the captain of the *Triton*, and his eyes slid over the closely-written words. Then, biting his lip, he looked hesitantly over his shoulder. With a sigh of annoyance, the captain came up behind him and picked up the document.

After a quick scan of the papers, the captain looked up at Tom, his lips twisted in a small smile. "So," he said with quiet menace, "you're a mate, are you? Well, well! You *have* brought me a good haul this time, Moresby. It's not often we get recruits who know the difference between main and mizzen."

"But you can't recruit me," Tom argued. "Those papers prove I'm exempted by law—"

"Papers?" the captain asked. "What papers?" He ripped the document in half and then in half again. "Did you see any papers, Mr. Benson?"

The lieutenant smirked. "No, Captain."

“Did anyone here see any papers?” Captain Brock asked, looking around at all the faces pleasantly, all the while tearing the precious sheets into shreds.

“No, Captain,” the sailor-guards said in unison.

Captain Brock turned and walked back into the shadows, reappearing again with a washbowl in his hand. He placed the bowl on the deck before Mr. Benson and threw the shreds of paper into it. “Burn it,” he said curtly, turned on his heel and strode off to his inner cabin, slamming the wooden door behind him.

Every man around the desk watched soundlessly as Tom’s papers burned. They all knew that a man’s future was going up in smoke. But Tom felt no emotion but a sharp, alert tension. *There’ll never be a better time*, he thought, and he pressed down hard on Daniel’s foot while, at the same moment, he snatched up the flaming washbowl and smashed it down on the lieutenant’s head. “Use the log book!” he shouted to Daniel, and he ducked down and lunged at the legs of the guard closest to him.

Daniel, with a cry of elation, snatched up the heavy volume and swung it at the head of the guard at his right, while the other one was busily occupied putting out the fire on the desk. Tom, meanwhile, from his place at the top of his first guard, grabbed the legs of the second and pulled him down. Before they’d recovered from their surprise, he scrambled to his feet in time to see the King’s officer advancing on him with a drawn cutlass. Again he ducked and dived for the fellow’s midsection. They toppled over in a heap, the officer waving his deadly implement wildly in the air. Tom grabbed at his wrist, for the officer was trying urgently to hack him to pieces. Suddenly Daniel loomed above them and, using the log book as a broadsword, knocked the cutlass out of the officer’s hand and sent it spinning across the floor. The fellow cried out in pain. Tom seized the moment and administered a smashing right to his jaw, while Daniel used the log book to good effect on the heads of the two tackled sailors who were just getting to their feet again.

Tom leaped up, fists ready, but only Daniel was still erect, his breast heaving and his eyes

shining with the glow of victory. Tom chortled in delighted surprise at the sight of six men sprawled about in various degrees of semi-consciousness. “We *did* it!” Daniel crowed, hugging Tom and slapping him on the back.

“Don’t congratulate yourselves too soon,” came the captain’s icy voice from the shadows, and they wheeled about to see him step into the light, pointing at them with the black, ugly barrel of a very long pistol.

“Go ahead and shoot, Captain Brock,” Tom said, moving in front of Daniel and motioning behind his back for Daniel to edge toward the cabin’s outer door. “I’d rather be dead than serve under you.”

“But you’ll live,” the captain muttered with chilling calm. “You’ll live . . . and you’ll serve!”

Tom wished he could look up at the lantern to gauge its distance accurately, but he knew that if he moved his eyes from the captain’s face he’d give his scheme away. “*Duck, Daniel!*” he shouted and swung his arm at the lantern.

A shot rang out, and he felt the ball whiz by the side of his face as the lantern swung across the desk, a glowing missile aimed right for the captain’s head.

They didn’t stay to watch it reach its mark but bolted for the door. The companionway was already filling with sailors who’d heard the noises, but they were either too startled by the sudden appearance of the fleeing men or too sympathetic to their plight to grab hold of them. “Head starboard,” Tom gasped as they broke onto the deck. They ran across the deck, meeting with no obstruction in the darkness, and came to the railing near the stern. With the sounds of shouts and running footsteps hot behind them, they climbed up on the railing and, with one quick look at one another, leaped overboard into the black water.