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If I Were a Blackbird

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"Did Jane Austen see Caro Lapsford in London that summer? It’s unlikely, but it pleases me to imagine that they did -- they could have exchanged glances - even a cat can look at a queen. Perhaps, Caro caught a glimpse of Jane as she descended from her carriage, and there was a brief exchange of glances before Jane lowered her eyes under the hood of her bonnet.

They were both twenty-one years old in 1797; each bent on their own mission; Jane was trying to sell her first novel, Caro was intent on helping her lover escape.

Austen’s characters are surrounded with faceless servants, and their stories will never be told. But, Caro is no one’s servant and when she receives the news that her lover, Kemp Saunders, has been press-ganged into the Navy, she is determined to help him escape. She persuades her father to sail his trawler to London, because she wants to be there when the Channel Fleet returns to port.

She finds lodgings in a dockside tavern and earns her living plying a dinghy among the anchored ships, selling fresh produce to the hungry crews -- and waits.

Kemp and his two brothers were taken by force when their merchant ship was waylaid on the high seas by a British man-o-war. Among the pressed men is William Benson, an American citizen working his passage back to Boston. Benson and Kemp will become firm friends.

Chapter one describes Caro's hopes and fears, as she lays in a hammock onboard the H.M S Dido and waits for Kemp to come off duty.

Chapter two is a flashback, chronicling how the Saunders brothers were hijacked.

Chapter three recounts Caro's reaction when she first received news of Kemp's impressment. For the next nine chapters the story alternates between Caro's life in England, and the sea adventures of the Saunders brothers.

There is much unrest among the crew when the fleet finally returns to port. The men have not been paid for two years; sixty percent are ""pressed men"", only the officers are allowed ashore during the ship's refit. Fearing a mutiny the Captain of H M S Dido reluctantly allows women to come on board for a visit.

Caro plans to dress Kemp as a woman and smuggle him ashore. But, Kemp is caught up in a web of intrigue, when the men of the fleet refuse to obey further orders until they receive their back pay. It is the first labor strike – history will record it as The Great Naval Mutiny.

Kemp cannot get away, so his brother Robert takes his place and escapes with the help of a young widow, named Lizzie. Caro leaves the pair to set up camp on a deserted island while she returns to the Dido, hoping Kemp will be able to slip over board under cover of darkness and swim to her dinghy,
However, it is Will Benson who escapes; bringing a letter from Kemp. The ships are locked down -it is impossible for Kemp to escape. The two couples decide to wait for further development. The mutiny is suppressed, and the men return to duty. Kemp is among the ring leaders who are hung.

A heart-broken Caro is determined to recover her lover's body and give him a decent burial before she leaves London. Following this episode the four sail back to Chiswick. On the way home, they encounter a series of adventures, and meet up with a strange sexton, who agrees to marry Caro and Robert. Caro is carrying Kemp's child and she is anxious to give her child the protection of a father's name.

When they arrive in Chiswick, Will Benson secures a berth on an American Schooner. Caro soon realizes that Robert is secretly in love with Lizzie, and when the pressgang comes looking for Robert again, he flees with Lizzie.

Peace finally come to Europe and Will Benson returns to find Caro. He discovers Caro's marriage to Robert was a hoax, and declares his love for her. Caro finally admits her feelings for Will, and agrees to sail to America with him, and start a new life."

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