

Ballad: Emily, John, James, And I. A Derby Legend

In the ballad "Emily, John, James, and I," part of the Bab Ballads collection, we are introduced to a tale of rivalry and love set against the backdrop of the Derby. Emily Jane, a dedicated nursery maid, finds herself the object of affection of two very different suitors: James, a gallant Life Guard, and John, a constable with a modest income. The narrator, presenting themselves as a "doggerel bard," humorously interjects personal commentary throughout, aligning themselves with the characters in their virtues and vices.

The narrative unfolds with Emily unable to choose between her admirers, prompting her to set a challenge: she will marry whichever of the two takes her to the Epsom Race. James eagerly accepts the challenge, much to John's dismay and frustration, which leads to John physically lashing out in his anger. Meanwhile, the narrator whimsically notes their own propensity for such vexations in difficult situations.

As Derby Day arrives, the scene at Epsom Racecourse is vividly painted with its eclectic mix of attendees - from the innocent and gaudy to the nefariously inclined, all under the watchful eyes of the law and the narrator, who claims to have narrowly avoided trouble themselves. James fulfills his promise to Emily, taking her to the race, while John commits to his duties, apprehending anyone causing disturbances.

Through this charmingly narrated story, the author weaves a comedic yet endearing tale of love, jealousy, and duty, all played out under the sun of the Derby, with characters who are as flawed as they are devoted. The inclusion of the narrator as a character provides a meta-textual layer to the ballad, drawing the reader into the whimsical and sometimes absurd world of the Bab Ballads.