

Ballad: Etiquette

The ballad "Etiquette" from "The Bab Ballads" tells a humorous yet insightful story about the absurdities of social conventions and the powerful role of personal connections. The tale begins with the sinking of the BALLYSHANNON off the coast of Cariboo, leading to the unfortunate drowning of its crew, captains, and greedy owners. However, two passengers, Young PETER GRAY, a tea taster for BAKER, CROOP, AND CO., and SOMERS, an importer of indigo from Eastern shores, survive by clinging to a mast and eventually find themselves cast away on a deserted island.

Despite their desperate situation, the two men adhere rigidly to social etiquette, refusing to communicate or cooperate with each other because they have not been formally introduced. As a result, they divide the island between them, with GRAY taking the north and SOMERS the south. Ironically, their respective sides of the island yield the very resources each man cannot stand or are sickened by—oysters for GRAY and turtles for SOMERS.

The turning point in their relationship comes when GRAY overhears SOMERS mention a mutual acquaintance, ROBINSON, sparking a conversation and leading to their formal introduction. This discovery of a shared connection transforms them from strangers to friends, enabling them to enjoy each other's resources and companionship. They bond over singing, writing odes, and sharing tales of wives and past adventures, even saving each other's lives on several occasions.

Their story takes another turn with the arrival of a frigate, which they initially consider as a means to return to England. Yet, they decide against leaving when they discover the ship is a convict vessel, humorously recognizing a fellow named ROBINSON among the convicts, condemned for embezzlement. This revelation causes a rift between GRAY and SOMERS, as associating with someone connected to a convict tarnishes their newfound friendship. They return to their previous arrangement, dividing the island and resuming their solitary lives, now estranged due to the unfortunate association with ROBINSON.

Through witty verses and a clever narrative, "Etiquette" satirizes the ludicrous yet pervasive influence of social norms and the whimsical nature of human relationships, all set against the backdrop of survival and friendship tested by societal constraints.