

Swordplay

The boy heard the clattering of hooves up the cobbled road, slipped unseen around the corner of a dark alley. He knew that some of the Council of Lords were attending the play. Word had got around that trouble had been arranged, something to do with a swordsman. He wanted to see the fight, if it was going to happen, but to keep out of trouble at the same time.

In the narrow street, people flattened against the stone walls of the city buildings as six fine horses approached, harnesses jingling. The horses coats shone, displaying the livery of each noble's house. Astride the saddles, the young lords were gorgeously attired in richly coloured clothes; russet wool with cuffs of fine white lace, indigo velvet with rubies flashing on a collar. One even had a peacock blue suit that flashed showily from beneath his black velvet cloak. The boy knew the names of the colours. He'd helped an artist mix them in his studio loft in return for food.

As the crowd reformed behind the riders, he blended in with the ragged people up from Woodside to pick the pockets of gentlemen come for the entertainment. The boy didn't know this part of the city, didn't usually come this far from home.

People were pointing to something ahead. 'Banners,' he heard someone call out, and there ahead, just like a story-castle, he could see banners flying on poles. Made of bright cloth, they were painted with devices that appeared and vanished in the crackling wind; a dragon, roses, a winged horse, a crown.

Outside the theatre, it was like a fair. Grooms were walking horses and clearing the way for carriages. Girls walked amongst them, selling bouquets of flowers and herbs, cups of wine, packets of fruit and nuts. There were printed copies of the play, and scarves, and ribbons the same colour as the banners.

Even mid city people like shopkeepers and craftsmen were dressed extravagantly, trimmed up with bits of lace and ribbon. They were coming early to ensure themselves good seats for the play, but the boy couldn't see anyone who looked like a swordsman.

Loud voices attracted his attention. Two men were quarrelling, their hands on the pommel of swords hanging by their sides. 'Is it a challenge you want?' one called out, and suddenly shiny steel flashed in the cold winter air.

The other's sword appeared in a swift movement. 'Make room!' he shouted.

The watching crowd parted and the boy saw his chance to get close. A fight! It might be staged but it was still entertainment. He slithered between shawls and coats until he reached the front. The swordfight played from one corner of the yard to another, dodging someone declaiming a speech from the play, flowing around a blind fiddler with a dancing dog, nearly tripping over it, until honour was satisfied with a draw.

Perhaps the fight was to be in the theatre. How was he going to get in? The boy was caught in the crush. Elbows and muddy boots and unwashed smells surrounded him. Crouching behind the cloak of a large woman, who winked complicitly at him, he slid inside the theatre, unnoticed by the ticket sellers at the door.

'Thankee, mam,' he said, then looking at the seats fast filling up, 'Can I sit with you?'

She shrugged. 'Suit yourself. It's every man for himself on the benches.'

The boy followed closely in her generous wake which provided a pathway of sorts, and crammed his skinny body into a space beside her on one of the middle benches. A pair of serving girls squeezed in beside him until he was almost in their laps. He was too short to see much of the open air stage, now bathed in sunlight.

Looking up behind him he watched the men and women in private boxes in the gallery, in splendid costumes and jewels, wigs and swords. 'Look, that's Master Robisson,' the giggling girls pointed. 'He's the top swordsman of the city.' The boy was all ears. 'When a nobleman wants to fight another, they hire professional swordsmen like him to do the job. That way the nobles can stay safe and keep their honour at the same time.'

The swordsman, with a companion in his box, didn't look threatening, but the sound of trumpets from above took the boy's attention away. 'Tan tantara tantara, tantara.'

'That's the nobles coming into their boxes,' the girls eyes were bright with anticipation. 'There's Lord Beattie and his lady. He's going to have fireworks on his barge in the river tonight for her birthday. We're going on the bridge to watch.'

'Who's that?' The boy craned his neck to see people crossing the stage with much affectation and show.

'The Duke and his courtiers. They're the actors. They'll begin to speak soon.'

The play sounded much like an actual conversation except all the words were in a spoken rhythm. Rhyming sentences were exchanged around the actors like the beat of music.

'Don't wriggle so much,' complained the large lady.

'I can't see,' the boy objected.

'Then sit in my lap, for goodness sake,' she ordered in a loud whisper. 'That'll give us some peace and quiet.'

The play was boring. He squirmed until the woman pinched his ear, then he sat still, wondering when the fight would be, not understanding the words. At last, as a clock struck twelve, he saw a figure in a billowing cloak descending a giant staircase on stage. The swordsman drew his steel and ran it through his victim calling loud enough for even the boy to hear, 'Thus perish the enemies of the king.' But it turned out to be his lady friend he'd killed by mistake. From the gallery rained a shower of small bags of almonds and raisins thrown towards the stage in appreciation of the acting.

Now the stage emptied of actors, carrying the woman faking death. Disappointed, the boy got up with the other theatre goers to stretch legs. Surely there was to be more than that! They milled around buying food and drink, watching nobles sending notes or flowers between their boxes and the gallery and gossiping about the

recipients. The boy trod on something squishy, discovered it was a bag of raisins, inaccurately thrown. What a prize!

Trumpets sounded for the play to begin again. This time the actors put up a good swordfight, crouching and swerving, defending and dodging their way across the wooden floor of the stage, the ring of steel reverberating back from the gallery boxes. It was exciting stuff! The breath of the boy came fast, his heart pounded, colour high and his eyes were lit up with admiration. If only he could learn to do those moves!

His sharp ears caught a chorus of shouts outside in the yard. Had a real fight been happening while everyone was diverted watching the stage fight? Desperate to find out, and thin enough, he crawled under benches while people were on their feet, clapping and throwing things to the actors. Puffing and panting, he pushed through the exit and ran in the direction of the shouting, at the back of the theatre.

He was too late. The fight, and it had been a real one, was over. The victor was standing calmly wiping blood from his sword with a rag, then he sheathed it, tossing the rag away. His white shirt was ugly with splatters of bright red blood. The swordsman reached for his cloak hanging over the fence and made away before the theatre crowds arrived. They'd want to buy him drinks, hear all about the fight. He was a professional, not flashy like some.

The boy's eyes dropped to another man lying on the ground, blood seeping from his chest, dead. He gasped. It was horrible. His arms bore wounds and his sword had been flicked away for the final fatal thrust by the victor. It lay at a distance, useless, inert like its owner. Blood pooled around the body.

'This is how it ends,' said a man who'd come up behind him and was closing the dead man's eyes. 'Don't ever think you'll live to a ripe old age if you live by the sword.'

'No sir,' the boy gulped, his face pale and stomach feeling sick. So much blood – he'd never expected.....

'What's your name boy?'

'Ralph, sir.'

'Here, Ralph, take this coin and run down to the Watch by the bridge. Tell them we need someone to carry this poor chap away. Fast.'

As he ran, Ralph's thoughts flew like his heels. Swordplay – if he wanted to learn, he'd find the best tutor and somehow pay him. He would have to become the best, the very best because otherwise he'd end up with his lights snuffed out too. And he didn't fancy that.