

Sword Practice

The early morning sun glinted off the great two-handed sword that was being brandished within the courtyard of Hugh Douglas of Longniddry. It wasn't being done in the name of violence, merely practice, as the young man with deep grey eyes and a serious expression tried to reacquaint himself with his country's chosen method of defence. Two young lads watched eagerly as their tutor, John Knox, thrust the blade with some skill into imaginary assailants.

'If you're thinking that this is going to make me forget your lessons, young sirs, then you are wrong.' John adjusted his stance before sweeping the large sword up and then down in a long arc. Deftly changing it from one hand to the other he altered his direction, thrusting the weapon briefly before standing back and doing it once again.

It wasn't exactly cold that morning, but John's breath still rose in clouds as his body warmed and the exercise made his heart pump. The sharp smell of horses and the sweet smell of hay pricked his nostrils. Gradually, a small drip of sweat broke out on his forehead. His body was beginning to work – something he had not been that used to lately. Tutoring the two young lads, avidly watching him from the sidelines, had been his main focus.

The impressive Douglas dwelling towered above them. It had been made to look more like a fortification than a family home, for that had been and still was, its main purpose. It could throw a gloomy shadow and was certainly large and foreboding. Some referred to it as Longniddry Castle. Although there were no royalty living there, the family was noble and respected by the ordinary folk.

A shiver edged its way down John's spine as he lifted the sword for another swipe. He stopped. Something made him take a long careful look across the countryside. 'It's best to be on my guard. I'll need to make that a habit now.' Even the Douglas family these days were becoming more cautious. Life was dangerous. John Knox knew that it made sense to keep your eyes open and your wits about you.

Seeing that there wasn't even a stray dog on the horizon, Knox got back to his training. He took a long look at his weapon, casting his gaze down the edge. It was a fine piece of craftsmanship and in the right pair of hands, could be lethal. However, it wouldn't be the Douglas family Knox would be protecting in the next few weeks; it would be the preacher, George Wishart, the name on everyone's tongue. Some looked on him as a dangerous reformer, others respected him as a powerful preacher.

The two young Douglas boys had barely moved an inch, they were so focussed on the sword that Knox held. Francis and his younger brother would soon be called upon to wield weapons like this themselves. Knox feared for their safety. What kind of world would

they grow up in? Would they live to see a Scotland at liberty to think, speak and worship? They had been born into a family that followed the Reformed faith, that obeyed the Word of God before the demands of priests. John knew that families like that were not looked on with favour by the crown or the church. In the current climate, it could mean a death sentence. John shook his head in disbelief. Others had died for their faith before now, and Scotland was getting worse rather than better. Thrusting his sword with a touch more savagery than before, John turned one way then the next.

Stopping to catch his breath, he wiped away the sweat from his brow. Perhaps it was time to return the blade to its scabbard, but he could see how disappointed the young lads were. Francis and his younger brother did not want to go back to the classroom just yet. 'They probably hope to have a shot of the sword themselves,' John smiled. 'But they are too young to hold a weapon of this weight and power,' he reminded himself. 'I'm the one who needs the practice so let's give them something to look at ...' But before he could swing the sword back into action, young Francis piped up with, 'Is that really George Wishart's sword?'

'It is indeed. I believe it will do the job,' John surmised.

'What job is that exactly?' Francis asked.

John grinned – he knew these boys well by now – this was another delaying tactic. 'So, my lads, do you want a story of adventure instead of studies?'

Francis nodded eagerly. John rubbed a bit of dirt off one of his boots before starting his tale, 'Well, you know who Mr Wishart, is don't you?'

'He's in the study with Father as we speak, I believe, and he has visited a couple of times, perhaps more,' Francis replied.

'Well,' John continued, 'Wishart is a preacher of God's Word, blessed with courage and God's Holy Spirit. His calling is to spread God's Word around this country of ours – but many would stop him if they could and some have tried. I've been given this sword on Mr Wishart's request and with your father's permission. Mr Wishart is in need of some protection as he makes his way about this land. He has enemies who would take him prisoner, if not attack him, and kill him. It's my responsibility to accompany him, to draw my sword should anyone attempt to take the man's life.'

'Why, what is it that he has done?' the younger brother enquired.

Francis laughed in derision, but Knox just smiled.

'It is not what he has done, for he has done nothing wrong, nothing to justify the threats of these evil minded men.' Knox lowered himself onto a milk stool that had been left out by one of the maids. 'It is what he thinks and says and believes that has made him enemies.'

'Can thoughts put you in prison?' Francis asked, puzzled and slightly worried.

'They can in this year of our Lord 1545. I myself have had to leave behind the priesthood to be a tutor

to you boys simply because I can no longer serve the Church of Rome. I believe it to be a false church. It is not the church of Christ, but a church of idols.’ Taking out a rag, John began to wipe down the sword while warming to his subject. ‘It is through hearing George Wishart preach and discussing these issues with him, that I have been brought to understand the truth.’ Raising up the sword again to see the glow of the morning sun glint against its burnished side, John nodded his head solemnly. ‘And it may be that I will have to raise this blade in the defence of truth, in the defence of one who speaks it with clarity and courage. Boys, I see it as a great honour to go ahead of George Wishart as his defender. By God’s grace, I will be one of the Almighty’s tools to bring truth to this land of ours.’

‘Are you afraid?’ the younger Douglas boy asked.

‘There are times, young sir, when I am afraid,’ John admitted. ‘But I trust in God. He is our Sovereign Lord and there is nothing that is outside of his control. Wishart has taught me that – and more.’

Looking both of his charges in the face, he smiled. They hung on his every word in much the same way as he listened to Wishart. But he was forgetting himself, ‘Francis, show your brother a good example by returning to the classroom and getting on with that Latin preparation I gave you. It’s not long before I will have to leave with Mr Wishart to his next preaching venue. I will be back before the month is out. There are other lessons and readings that you are to continue with while I’m away and on your father’s instruction

The Sharpened Sword

I am to test you both thoroughly on my return. Work hard while I'm gone and do not forget to pray for the safety of Mr Wishart as he and I travel to do God's work.'

Francis and his brother resigned themselves to the duty of study once again, but as they returned to the classroom, Francis looked back to see his tutor making ready for departure. He had such a desire to go with him, to experience adventure, to listen to more of John's stories, perhaps to witness Mr Knox beat the stuffing out of a couple of bandits. Now that would be fine! But the classroom was all that awaited him that day. 'Maybe on Mr Knox's return he will let me hold the sword for some practice.' He could but hope.