This was no random act of malice, proclaims stage manager Nicholas Bracewell, after an audience brawl disrupts the latest comedic performance by Westfields Men, in Edward Marston's The Vagabond Clown. If there was any doubt of design behind this affray, its quickly dispelled by the discovery of a dead spectator in the gallery, Fortunates Hope--stabbed in the back. So who wielded the dagger, and why? Bracewell and the other members of his troupe havent the time to find out, before they are ousted from their usual stage in Elizabethan London and forced to take to the road for their income, beginning a tour of the Kent countryside that will bring them even more trouble than they could typically find in the English capital. Misfortune is guaranteed when--needing a clown to stand-in for the querulous Barnaby Gill, whose leg was broken during the riot--the company hires his hated but gifted rival, Gideon Mussett. Aware of Mussetts reputation for drunkenness and truculence, Bracewell wrests from him a pledge to behave. However, this proxy jester proves difficult to handle from the outset, and only becomes more so as his performances gain Westfields Men acclaim. Among his supposed infractions are several prankish attacks on the injured Gill, who has insisted on traveling with Westfields Men in order to ensure that Mussett wont try usurping his position. But Bracewell thinks fault for his company's recent adversities may lie, instead, with another, less successful band of thespians who are also traveling through the area, and whose patron knew the murdered Hope. Hes convinced of their culpability after Westfields Men are ambushed on the open road, Gill is threatened with drowning, and Giddy Mussett is assaulted in a stable. Somebody, it appears, is determined to bring the curtain down on Bracewells band, once and for all. The Nicholas Bracewell novels (of which The Vagabond Clown is the 13th) offer a fulfilling blend of hilarity and heart, romance and mystery. And Marstons flair for capturing both the upright and ribald elements of his Elizabethan setting is to be envied. If theres any disappointment in these

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pages, its that a late scene involving a sea chase never achieves the swashbuckling excitement it promises. --J. Kingston Pierce

My Personal Review:
The Westfields Men acting troupe consider themselves very lucky while in London to be based at The Queens Head Inn. It has an enclosed yard that is perfect as an outdoor theatre and it even has balconies for the aristocrats and wealthy merchants that want to attend a play without mingling with the common folk. When a riot breaks out during a play they are giving, one of their star performers is injured and a man in the balcony is murdered. It is clear to all that someone wanted to use the riot as a diversion for the killing. The proprietor of the Queens Head throws out the actors forcing them to take to the road. They hire a substitute player temporarily until the injured actor is ready to perform again. However, every place they stop they are welcomed by villains who try to sabotage their performances. At one stopover, a player is killed and Nicholas Bracewell, the book holder and the glue that keeps the company together, realizes somebody is out to destroy the company and he intends to stop them. Readers are privy to what happens behind the scenes in a traveling troupe's entourage. Westfields Men are a diverse lot of actors who are at times act petty and argumentative but are at the same time loyal to one another and the troupe as a whole. They love to act and it shows in the risks they take but it is Nicholas Bracewell, a hired hand, who manages to rise above the ensemble to make Westfields Men one of the best acting troupes in Elizabethan England. Harriet Klausner

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