

SURVIVAL

Or,

**Tales Of Hope And Villainy
From A Time Of Plague**

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

Copyright © 2020 by DAVID HINGLEY

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

SURVIVAL

DAVID HINGLEY

INSTALMENT ONE

I

The library was as full of apprehension as it was of books. Books which bulged from each shelf, the spines jammed one against the other with barely a sliver of space left.

‘But do you need to go back?’ said Mercia. ‘After what the peddler said, would it not be safer to send word?’

Gripping the same tankard of weak ale he had been clutching for the past half hour, the young man she was talking to seemed ready to bolt. ‘Who else is going to fetch her?’ he said. ‘As it is I’ll have to be certain she’s not ill. God’s truth, I should have gone back already.’

Mercia looked out the window onto the flowering rose garden. ‘That is my fault, Nicholas. I have kept you here longer than you wished.’

‘It was my choice. I wanted to stay longer to help you put things in order. But now I have to go.’

‘I know you do,’ she said, turning to face the familiar eyes of green. ‘Then go down and come back as quickly as you are able. And – do not worry about cost. I will provide what you need.’

‘Thank you.’ He swallowed, running his free hand through his unkempt hair. ‘I know ‘tis an impertinence, but with the way things seem to be getting worse in the city –’

‘Nicholas, after all you have done for me, the cost of the carriage there and back is no such thing, nor so the care of your child once she arrives. The difficulty may be finding a coach to take you. Bethany thinks they may not be running as well as they did, if ever well is the word that could be used on that rutted route.’

‘I’ll have to try. If I ride to Oxford this afternoon, I can get the coach early tomorrow. There’ll likely be fewer people wanting to travel to London now, so there

should be room, even if 'tis on the roof. If it isn't running, I'll get them to hire me a fast horse and I'll ride myself.'

'If the coaches are all stopped, I doubt the coachmen would let you take a horse either. If needs arise, you can continue with mine all the way from here. 'Tis not as though you cannot shoe a horse yourself if one slips.'

'Can horses get plague, then?' he asked.

'To say true, I do not know. I do not think so. But you know how folk are. Rumour and panic oft fly swifter than truth.'

'Hell's teeth!' he swore. 'A year abroad and as soon as you're home in your manor house – this. I really don't want to risk. . . but I don't know where else to take her. If she falls ill on the way, I'll head straight back to London.'

'Let us pray for now that Eliza is well. The peddler may have been embellishing his tale. As for the plague, it will pass in time, as ever it does. But I wish there was more I could do myself.' Thinking, she sucked at her lower lip. 'Perhaps I should come to London with you and –'

Nicholas punched down his beaker, a little harsher than he intended. 'No. No, no. You will not come to London. No.'

Amused, she tilted her head, her hair's ringlets shimmering in the noontime light that was falling through the lead-paned window. 'I thought I was the one in charge here.'

The attempt at humour did little to break his sombre mood. He folded his arms.

'Well first, I'm no longer in your service, and second, even so, I'm still going to want to protect you. Mercia, there's plague in London. 'Tis getting serious. It seems we barely got you away in time. Even the King is on the cusp of leaving, if those reports are true. You have to stay here.'

'Still, I –'

'How many trials have you survived to get back here? What would be the point of them if you catch your death now?' The stern mask eased a little. 'I know I'm just a farrier and you're a grand lady, but that's the end of it. Besides, think of Daniel. Think of your mother.'

‘Thinking of Daniel and my mother is the only reason I agree with you. But there must be something I can do.’ She began to pace up and down the black and white tiles of the floor. ‘Besting murderers and spies seems easy compared to this unseen menace. ‘Tis precisely because I have faced all those trials, as you put it, that I find it hard to sit here while hundreds are at peril of death.’ She paused in her pacing, resting her outstretched fingertips on a pile of musty books. ‘There has been enough of that in this country of late. War, strife, war again. Now plague. Sometimes I fear we are cursed.’

‘Let’s just think on it,’ said Nicholas. ‘In the meantime, look to yourself for once. Let Phibae and Bethany take care of you.’ He glanced at the side of her dress, an elegant brown outfit slit at the front and tied fast at the back. ‘You’re sure you’re being honest when you say that doesn’t hurt?’

‘Well, the wound might ache at times, but I refuse to let it stop me dressing well.’

He sighed. ‘It was not so long ago you were near death. At least stop walking so much.’

‘I like walking.’

‘And I like rum, but I won’t be drinking it while I’m riding south.’ He reached out, but even with the bonds of their shared endeavours he stopped short of resting his hand on her shoulder. ‘Thank you, Mercia, again. I’d hoped not to be a burden, but offering to help – it means a lot. One day I’ll pay you back.’

‘You are always welcome, Nicholas. And you have already paid me back, countless times over. But do one thing for me?’

‘Anything.’

‘Ask your family if they would return with you. Your sister, her husband, their children. This house is large enough to provide sanctuary to them also.’

‘Oh. . . no, Mercia, I can’t ask that of you. Besides, I know my sister. She won’t want to leave home.’

‘Still, ask. And Nicholas?’

He bounced on his heels, impatient to prepare to leave. ‘Yes?’

‘Be wary as you go. Plague or no, there are plenty of villains about.’

Earlier that morning, Mercia's maid Bethany had appeared in the parlour of the house with a roughly dressed man in her wake. Dusty hat in hand, more like one of those the Puritans used to wear than anything in fashion now, his eyes roved the tidy room, settling everywhere but on the mistress of the house. Setting down the volume of poetry she was reading – a daily tonic for her recuperation – Mercia looked at Bethany with a querying eye.

'Sorry to disturb you, mistress,' she had said, 'but this man has news. He's a peddler from Witney, come to the house to sell wares he gathered at market, but I asked him to come and tell you what he just told me.'

Mercia nodded almost imperceptibly at her maid, an upright stalwart of around sixty years, immaculate as always in her crisp white bonnet and apron. 'Thank you, Bethany,' she said. Then she turned to the man, by contrast a nervous, ill-shaven individual, with a faded brown mark staining the patched waistcoat he had hooked into his woollen breeches.

'What is your name, sir?' she asked.

The man blinked more than once, but mustered the courage to look at her and bow. 'Roger Beech, my lady.'

Mercia rolled an internal eyebrow. 'There is no need to call me my lady, for I am not one. Mrs Blakewood will do.'

The man nodded, turning his hat round on the left thumb he had poked through the small hole in its apex.

'Your maid ask me to come and speak with you, Mrs Blakewood.' His eyes darted about once more, taking in the brightness of the space. 'I never come in before, I always ring at the door and get sent on my way, but it never hurts to ask.'

'I'm told Mr Beech only started visiting last year,' explained Bethany.

'I see,' said Mercia, her lightly cuffed wrist hanging over the thin arm of her chair. 'Well, Mr Beech, there has been a restoration of ownership at Halescott. As the King was restored to his throne, so I have been restored to my manor. You will doubtless find more welcome here now than when my mother-in-law was in residence.'

'If you say so, my lady, although your maid here is a fair fierce creature.'

Bethany sucked in indignant air, but Mercia could barely suppress her smile.

‘Pray, Mr Beech,’ she implored with a deliberate air of formality, striving to hide her amusement. ‘Tell me your news?’

The poor man swallowed. ‘Tis just what I heard about the plague, my lady. How it’s getting bad.’

Immediately Mercia’s frivolity vanished. ‘In scarce one fortnight? How so?’

‘They’ve started fleeing the city for places like here,’ he continued. ‘Merchants and the like, them that can afford to get out, they’re coming up to be safe. Some folk don’t like it, they reckon they might bring it with them, but I say good, let them come and sell me their things so I’ve got more to sell on.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I got a nice set of candlesticks in my basket out there, they’d look lovely in that grand hall you got.’

Mercia held up her hand. ‘No doubt the candlesticks are lovely. I am more concerned with what you have to say about the plague. I was in London all of last month, it was appearing here and there but it was largely confined. Has that changed?’

An image drifted into her mind of the haggard woman she had met on a crowded London thoroughfare, warning passers-by against walking down a particular street, where a red cross had been painted on one of the many doors. The woman’s unfeelingness had shocked her; she had thought on that moment often since.

‘Yes, my lady, and fast,’ said the peddler. ‘They’d hoped it was going down, but now hundreds are dead, more and more each week, and where one is ill, whole families are shut up in their homes with no hope of escape. Foreigners are to blame, some think, and it did start overseas. The King is running to Salisbury, ‘tis said, and Parliament is shut. The deaths can only increase.’

‘May the Lord have mercy,’ said Mercia, and then a cold, stabbing shock flashed through her body that had nothing to do with the wound she had suffered. ‘Dear God. Which parishes are worst hit, Mr Beech?’

‘St Giles is where it started, they say, but ‘tis spreading all over. The theatres are closing in Drury Lane. Holborn’s got it, Charing Cross near the palace, even the lawyers near Lincoln’s Inn, round Newgate, serve them right if it gets in there o’ course, Smithfield with the cattle market, getting round Cowcross and the like, even some the other way down in Westminster, now over the wall inside the city itself, they say a doctor got it there, and he shut himself up to stop the spread –’

‘Cowcross?’ said Mercia, and the cruel chill deepened. ‘You say Cowcross?’

‘Yes, my lady. And three days have passed since the merchants I spoke with left. Things must be getting worse every day. And ‘tis so hot in the city, they say, worse than here.’

‘Dear Lord.’ Mercia rubbed her temples, feeling sick. ‘Bethany, fetch Nicholas quick. Cowcross is where his family lives. And Mr Beech, thank you for your report.’ She reached into a purse and threw him a penny. ‘Please return with more news if you hear anything else.’

Beech caught the penny as Bethany disappeared through the door. ‘Thank you, my – Mrs Blakewood – I will.’ He shifted on his feet. ‘In the meantime, I don’t suppose – would you be interested in those candlesticks?’

Mercia dismissed him with a look. ‘Thank you, Mr Beech. In the meantime, I would not.’

II

Nicholas had been lucky in Oxford, finding a coach able to take him on the two-day journey to London as well as a seat up front. He had been obliged to sit outside, true, but the weather was dry and hot, and the prattle of the driver beside him had not always been unwelcome on what felt like a very long road. Now at journey's end, Nicholas leapt from the scuffed footboard and turned to watch his less fortunate travelling companion jump from his perch on the roof, the new boots Mercia had bought for the nimble boy skidding on the ground as he landed with a deft bump.

Dust was still swirling around the wheels of the coach, hanging steady over the alighting passengers in the absence of a dispersing breeze. Eight people had made the trip to London, and for a time all eight remained on the spot, surveying their surroundings as though uncertain whether to progress with their journey or return to the country right away.

'You take care now, Nick,' said the driver, a portly man whom Nicholas had got to know well following the hours squeezed up alongside. 'And your strange friend there.' He nodded at the teenager who had jumped from the roof. 'I go back in the morning at eight, remember, eight. I'm not waiting in this town any longer than I have to.'

'You're not anywhere near the town,' said Nicholas, taking in the fields around them. 'Tis still two miles off.'

'I'm not taking any chances. You saw the carts and coaches going the other way. Never seen so many panicked faces in my life.' He spat, rotating his shoulders as if to stretch away his worry. 'I don't mind bringing folk down if they've got to come,

but I'm not going into London myself. This is close enough for you to be there in an hour or two.'

'And what about her?' said Nicholas, gesturing towards an old woman his companion was helping retrieve a small case from the rear of the coach.

'She seems sprightly enough,' shrugged the driver, and then clearing his throat he raised his voice. 'Any of you wanting to go back after tomorrow, forget it. No one who's been in London for more than a day is getting on this coach or on anyone else's I know. Any of you feel ill, get a cough, start sweating. . . you're not coming either. I'll be watching you before you get on, so don't try to trick me 'cos I'll know. You can't hide the plague.'

Heaving himself back on his coach, he geed up his horses and set off in the direction they'd come, falling in line with a row of scurrying traffic to head for the coaching inn they'd passed a few miles back. Nicholas turned to his companion.

'Ready, Kwadwo?' The teenager nodded. 'Good. Then let's go.'

Pulling his bag over his shoulder, Nicholas led the way against the oncoming crowds, heading for the city of death.

The old woman was as vigorous as the driver had observed, keeping easy pace with Nicholas and Kwadwo as they walked towards the first houses that marked the edge of London. More than once they were forced to leave the road, until Nicholas decided that traipsing through the grass was preferable to the constant threat of being run down by a cart or bumping into an irate stranger.

'Tis just like the ride down,' said another of the passengers, an innocuous man of around thirty who was walking with their small group. 'I think my shoulder will be forever bruised from the number of times that coachman swerved to avoid the coaches fleeing north. Thank the Lord for his cursing, else we would have had no warning a jolt was coming at all.'

'I was more concerned with that abandoned cart,' said the old woman. 'A highwayman's ruse, ha!'

'The driver seemed to think it was.'

'Ha!' she repeated. 'Walk ten feet from the cart and you'll have found a body. Folk are dying in the roads, I'm sure of it.'

‘From. . .?’

‘From the plague, you can say it, man. They leave town and it overtakes them before they can get ten miles. You’re all too young to remember, but I’ve seen it all before.’

The innocuous man laughed nervously, then nodded up ahead where two of their fellow passengers had built up a steady lead, not waiting for anyone as they marched towards the town.

‘What do you think?’ he said. ‘Those two. Soldiers?’

‘You were in the coach with them,’ said Nicholas, wishing the man had marched ahead himself.

‘They didn’t say much. Nothing at all, indeed. Seemed quite perturbed when I asked them their business. And have you noticed,’ he continued, clearly enjoying his ruminations. ‘The other two from the coach, behind us, that strange man and his wife. Both times we’ve paused to rest they’ve lingered back. I wonder what they’re whispering about? They didn’t care much to talk with me on the journey either.’

I wonder why, thought Nicholas, but he merely shrugged, reaching to take his turn with the old woman’s case. ‘I tried to talk with them when we stopped for the night but they said they were tired. I think folk are just anxious, you can understand it.’

‘Why don’t you leave that, Nicholas,’ said the old woman, pointing to the case. ‘You’ll be wanting to see your daughter. Go on ahead.’

‘A few minutes longer on the road won’t hurt. And you’ll be wanting to reach home, just as quick. You don’t want to dally with all these madmen rushing past.’

‘I know, but – ‘tis not the same, is it? At least we old folk have had our time, it’s when the youngsters go it breaks your heart.’ She looked into the distance. ‘I’ve had twelve children, you know that? And only four of them passed their eleventh year. Never got any easier.’ She touched Nicholas’s shoulder. ‘Your child’s your first?’

He nodded, not much put at ease by her abruptness. But it had the effect of making the innocuous man drop back.

‘And your wife?’ the woman pursued. ‘What’s she look like? Pretty, I’m sure, handsome fellow like you.’

‘I don’t have a wife,’ he said, short in his turn. ‘My sister looks after my daughter while I try to earn money to feed them.’

‘Oh. Well, none of my business I suppose.’ She waited a moment. ‘Is the child’s mother. . .?’

Nicholas sighed. ‘I don’t know where she is. We knew each other for a short time, then she went away. A few months later she came back with a babe in her arms, told me to take what was mine, and left again. I’ve never seen her since.’

‘Oh! Cruel heart!’

‘Maybe. But she gave me Eliza, and I won’t ever regret that.’

The old woman linked his free arm with hers. ‘You’re a good lad, Nicholas. You get your daughter and leave the city as quickly as you can.’ She nodded. ‘A lucky lad, too. My niece I was visiting in Oxford, many a time she’s told me of the Goodridge family, or the Blakewood family as she is since getting wed, that – oh, what is her name. . .? Strange name, after some old kingdom or other.’

‘Mercia, you mean? Her father was keen on old times, from what she tells me, named her after something – Saxon, is it? Goes over my head, I tell you.’

‘Didn’t go over his head though, did it, when it got cut off his shoulders?’ The woman shook her head in pity. ‘More’s the shame. And her a widow so young.’ She sniffed. ‘Still, I’m glad she got her house back from them who lived there last year. My niece heard she kicked them out soon as she was back.’

‘News travels fast,’ said Nicholas.

‘Not as fast as the plague, son. You don’t take any chances.’ She glanced to her side, where Kwadwo was ambling along caught in his own thoughts. ‘How did you get to know this one?’

‘Would you believe me if I said at Whitehall Palace?’

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘Tis true! Mercia knows the King, in a way, and he put her in the palace to find out a traitor. I was her manservant, Kwadwo there was servant to one of the women she was after, although his mistress treated him like a dog. Mercia got him out of there, not two weeks back, so he helped her home and now he’s coming back, to see to a mate of his with all this going on.’

‘Another brave soul,’ she said. ‘Most would stay well away.’

‘Why have you come back, then? Couldn’t you have stayed with your niece?’ He smiled. ‘For all you like to talk, you haven’t said much about that.’

‘Saucy cove!’ She laughed. ‘Well it must be an hour ‘til we get to Soho. Plenty of time if you want to hear, though I might need to rest once in a while to catch my breath.’

THE OLD WOMAN’S TALE

‘How old do you think I am? Ha! That’s kind. No young man, I’m seventy one. I was born in the last century, when Good Queen Bess was still alive, a haggard, cantankerous old mare, much like I am now. Oh, you think not? There’s plenty wouldn’t agree.

Yes, I was a child when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up King James. Already old when they lopped off the first Charles’s head. Ancient before his son came skulking from his hiding place to take back the throne he said was his. Does it offend you that I spit at his name? No. I thought not.

I’ve lived through it all, see, that terrible war we had when you were just a babe, King against Parliament they said, like it were all so grand, though it were more brother against brother from what we could tell, men and lads killing each other over nothing – nothing! Then Cromwell and his lot, ending everything left and right, until the King come back, so tell me, what was it for?

Me, I look out for my own, I help those that need it, and I scold those that need that. I bested the last plague thirty year ago, and the one twenty year before that. Maybe this time it’ll do for me, or mayhap I’ll keep going for another ten year. ‘Tis in the lap of God, say the priests, but then the priests are often in the lap of something else – a rum lass most like – so they have little to say to me.

That’s right, my boy, this isn’t the first plague I’ve known. What was your name again? Kwadwo, you say? Hmm. Got any meaning to it, that name? Ah, born on a

Monday. Well yes, plague's nothing new for us London folk. When Queen Bess died, thousands followed not long after and the same happened when the Scot went, James, as if thousands couldn't bear to live without him. Peculiar, that, how plague came down on us twice then, yet I'll wager Charles is still alive, the randy dog, no kingly death to warn of this new sickness. Ha! He'll go on and on, that one, unless some rogue comes along and runs him through.

No, I don't much care for kings, you can tell. I'm more worried that my brother could get stuck in a loft, no one to pass the days with him if things get bad, if he falls sick and his lodgings are shut up. My brother, yes, who fought gladly for the King in that cursed war, and finished with nothing but an arm sawn away at the elbow and a payment promised but never got. No, don't you be sorry, young man. Don't you be sorry.

Me? I'm in rude health, and as you asked, I live with my son and his wife – and five of their children besides, although the two eldest are already flown – one a worker of metal like his pa, one about to have a child of her own, so soon! – 'tis cramped but we get by, I won't moan when I have a warm bed and a warm hearth. So many don't. But my brother's alone, his wife gone in childbirth, and his children, poor things, long since with our Lord. Me, yes I'm widowed, my husband's been dead near twenty year, taken by some consumption, and that were bad enough.

Our niece I've been with Oxford way, just out of town, she's widowed too, widowed in the war she was, but that's nothing strange, there's many a woman suffered that. Every year I go to stay, for a summer treat for us both, well more for me, I should say, being a whole score older. The sweet air is good for my humours, must be, and my son gets a rest from his ma. I pass a pleasant month but I'm not idle, no fear! I help with the household – when Annie's not telling me to sit, but I tell her right, ha! I'm not dead, I can work, better than she can with her back. Sometimes her sons come round too – twins, they are, about your age I reckon, they're good lads. But it's been hot this year, too hot.

Then same as you, I heard word the plague was getting bad and I thought of my brother and I had to come back. The babe of the family he is, at least to me, never mind he's past sixty. He'll always be my youngest brother, ever since he were a chit

and I helped him with the bullies in the lane, and he's the only one of my brothers and sisters I've got left.

How times have changed for us! Who'd have thought we'd have lived through so much, but that's the point, young man, we lived. Don't know why, or how, but we lived. Through plague and war, fights with the French and the froglander Dutch, bad harvests, cold winters, we got through it, London got through it, and through this new plague we'll get through it again. God's truth, there'll be bad times, and He knows there'll be villains as much as kind souls to bring us succour, but we'll fight and fight as ever we do.

I've seen it all, lad, and what do you think I've learnt from these many years I've been given? That who's above us, for all my talk, them lot's not important, what matters is who's about you, people who'll help each other to come through, stop us getting lost in our squabbling. After every storm there's a harbour waiting, that's what I say. And if I don't make it through this time, there's plenty who will. Those that die, we mourn them, but we think of the good they did, and we remember a friend worth having, and that has to be enough.

No, Nicholas, don't worry for me. Look to your daughter, give her a life as long as mine, not the same as mine, to be hoped, but a better one. You keep close with that Mercia, she seems like the sort to see you right. And you, lad – Kwadwo or whatever you're called, you don't take any chances, you hear me? You're only young, see to your friends but you see to yourself too.

You hear?'

Kwadwo rolled his eyes. 'I hear.'

'And here we are,' said Nicholas, accentuating the 'here'. 'Well, the edge of town, at least. Just down that road is Soho Square.' He looked at the old woman. 'You know, for all we should be worried by plague, I'm glad to be back.'

The old woman reached out a hand. 'Of course you are. For you and for me, this is home. 'Tis where we belong.'

Nicholas looked around him, at the boundary of field and town, and relinquishing the old woman's case to the innocuous man's grudging care, he shook out his aching arm and took a single step forward.

'Well,' he said. 'Shall we see how things fare?'

Next instalment available now

www.davidhingley.com

[@dhingley_author](https://twitter.com/dhingley_author)