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KEN FOLLETT

Author of *A Dangerous Fortune*

A NOVEL

A PLACE CALLED FREEDOM

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A FAWCET CREST INTERNATIONAL EDITION 0-449-22517-8

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Ken Follett

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books

Maps courtesy the Bettmann Archive

http://www.randomhouse.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 95-96170

ISBN 0-449-22517-X

This edition published by arrangement with Crown Publishers, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books International Edition: June 1996

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A PLACE CALLED FREEDOM

By Ken Follett

A DANGEROUS FORTUNE
NIGHT OVER WATER
THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH
LIE DOWN WITH LIONS
ON WINGS OF EAGLES
THE MAN FROM ST. PETERSBURG
THE KEY TO REBECCA
TRIPLE
EYE OF THE NEEDLE
A PLACE CALLED FREEDOM*

**Published by Fawcett Books*

Dedicated to
the memory of
JOHN SMITH


NORD
LOUISIANE

I did a lot of gardening when I first moved into High Glen House, and that's how I found the iron collar.

The house was falling down and the garden was overgrown. A crazy old lady had lived here for twenty years and never given it a lick of paint. She died and I bought it from her son, who owns the Toyota dealership in Kirkburn, the nearest town, fifty miles away.

You might wonder why a person would buy a dilapidated house fifty miles from nowhere. But I just love this valley. There are shy deer in the woods and an eagles' nest right at the top of the ridge. Out in the garden I would spend half the time leaning on my spade and staring at the blue-green mountainsides.

But I did some digging too. I decided to plant some shrubs around the outhouse. It's not a handsome building—clapboard walls with no windows—and I wanted to screen it with bushes. While I was digging the trench, I found a box.

It wasn't very big, about the size of those cases that contain twelve bottles of good wine. It wasn't fancy either: just plain unvarnished wood held together with rusty nails. I broke it open with the blade of my spade.

There were two things inside.

One was a big old book. I got quite excited at that: perhaps it was a family Bible, with an intriguing history written on the flyleaf—the births, marriages and deaths of people who had lived in my house a hundred years ago. But I was disappointed. When I opened it I found

that the pages had turned to pulp. Not a word could be read.

The other item was an oilcloth bag. That, too, was rotten, and when I touched it with my gardening gloves it disintegrated. Inside was an iron ring about six inches across. It was tarnished, but the oilcloth bag had prevented it from rusting away.

It looked crudely made, probably by a village blacksmith, and at first I thought it might have been part of a cart or a plow. But why had someone wrapped it carefully in oilcloth to preserve it? There was a break in the ring and it had been bent. I began to think of it as a collar that some prisoner had been forced to wear. When the prisoner escaped the ring had been broken with a heavy blacksmith's tool, then bent to get it off.

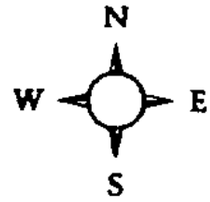
I took it in the house and started to clean it up. It was slow work, so I steeped it in RustAway overnight then tried again in the morning. As I polished it with a rag, an inscription became visible.

It was engraved in old-fashioned curly writing, and it took me a while to figure it out, but this is what it said:

This man is the property of
Sir George Jamisson of Fife.
A.D. 1767

It's here on my desk, beside the computer. I use it as a paperweight. I often pick it up and turn it in my hands, rereading that inscription. If the iron collar could talk, I think to myself, what kind of story would it tell?

I



Scotland

1

SNOW CROWNED THE RIDGES OF HIGH GLEN AND LAY on the wooded slopes in pearly patches, like jewelry on the bosom of a green silk dress. In the valley bottom a hasty stream dodged between icy rocks. The bitter wind that howled inland from the North Sea brought flurries of sleet and hail.

Walking to church in the morning the McAsh twins, Malachi and Esther, followed a zigzag trail along the eastern slope of the glen. Malachi, known as Mack, wore a plaid cape and tweed breeches, but his legs were bare below the knee, and his feet, without stockings, froze in his wooden clogs. However, he was young and hot-blooded, and he hardly noticed the cold.

This was not the shortest way to church but High Glen always thrilled him. The high mountainsides, the quiet mysterious woods and the laughing water formed a landscape familiar to his soul. He had watched a pair of eagles raise three sets of nestlings here. Like the eagles, he had stolen the laird's salmon from the teeming stream. And, like the deer, he had hidden in the trees, silent and still, when the gamekeepers came.

The laird was a woman, Lady Hallim, a widow with a daughter. The land on the far side of the mountain belonged to Sir George Jamisson, and it was a different world. Engineers had torn great holes in the mountainsides; manmade hills of slag disfigured the valley; massive wagons loaded with coal plowed the muddy road; and the stream was black with dust. There the twins

lived, in a village called Heugh, a long row of low stone houses marching uphill like a staircase.

They were male and female versions of the same image. Both had fair hair blackened by coal dust, and striking pale green eyes. Both were short and broad backed, with strongly muscled arms and legs. Both were opinionated and argumentative.

Arguments were a family tradition. Their father had been an all-round nonconformist, eager to disagree with the government, the church or any other authority. Their mother had worked for Lady Hallim before her marriage, and like many servants she identified with the upper class. One bitter winter, when the pit had closed for a month after an explosion, Father had died of the black spit, the cough that killed so many coal miners; and Mother got pneumonia and followed him within a few weeks. But the arguments went on, usually on Saturday nights in Mrs. Wheighel's parlor, the nearest thing to a tavern in the village of Heugh.

The estate workers and the crofters took Mother's view. They said the king was appointed by God, and that was why people had to obey him. The coal miners had heard newer ideas. John Locke and other philosophers said a government's authority could come only from the consent of the people. This theory appealed to Mack.

Few miners in Heugh could read, but Mack's mother could, and he had pestered her to teach him. She had taught both her children, ignoring the gibes of her husband, who said she had ideas above her station. At Mrs. Wheighel's Mack was called on to read aloud from the *Times*, the *Edinburgh Advertiser*, and political journals such as the radical *North Briton*. The papers were always weeks out of date, sometimes months, but the men and women of the village listened avidly to long speeches reported verbatim, satirical diatribes, and accounts of strikes, protests and riots.

It was after a Saturday night argument at Mrs. Wheighel's that Mack had written the letter.

None of the miners had ever written a letter before, and there had been long consultations about every word. It was addressed to Caspar Gordonson, a London lawyer who wrote articles in the journals ridiculing the government. The letter had been entrusted to Davey Patch, the one-eyed peddler, for posting; and Mack had wondered if it would ever reach its destination.

The reply had come yesterday, and it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to Mack. It would change his life beyond recognition, he thought. It might set him free.

As far back as he could remember he had longed to be free. As a child he had envied Davey Patch, who roamed from village to village selling knives and string and ballads. What was so wonderful about Davey's life, to the child Mack, was that he could get up at sunrise and go to sleep when he felt tired. Mack, from the age of seven, had been shaken awake by his mother a few minutes before two o'clock in the morning and had worked down the mine for fifteen hours, finishing at five o'clock in the afternoon; then had staggered home, often to fall asleep over his evening porridge.

Mack no longer wanted to be a peddler, but he still yearned for a different life. He dreamed of building a house for himself, in a valley like High Glen, on a piece of land he could call his own; of working from dawn to dusk and resting all the hours of darkness; of the freedom to go fishing on a sunny day, in a place where the salmon belonged not to the laird but to whoever caught them. And the letter in his hand meant that his dreams might come true.

"I'm still not sure you should read it aloud in church," Esther said as they tramped across the frozen mountainside.

Mack was not sure either, but he said: "Why not?"

"There'll be trouble. Ratchett will be furious." Harry

Ratchett was the viewer, the man who managed the mine on behalf of the owner. "He might even tell Sir George, and then what will they do to you?"

He knew she was right, and his heart was full of trepidation. But that did not stop him arguing with her. "If I keep the letter to myself, it's pointless," he said.

"Well, you could show it to Ratchett privately. He might let you leave quietly, without any fuss."

Mack glanced at his twin out of the corner of his eye. She was not in a dogmatic frame of mind, he could tell. She looked troubled rather than combative. He felt a surge of affection for her. Whatever happened, she would be on his side.

All the same he shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not the only one affected by this letter. There's at least five lads would want to get away from here, if they knew they could. And what about future generations?"

She gave him a shrewd look. "You may be right—but that's not the real reason. You want to stand up in church and prove the mine owner wrong."

"No, I don't!" Mack protested. Then he thought for a moment and grinned. "Well, there may be something in what you say. We've heard so many sermons about obeying the law and respecting our betters. Now we find that they've been lying to us, all along, about the one law that affects us most. Of course I want to stand up and shout it aloud."

"Don't give them reason to punish you," she said worriedly.

He tried to reassure her. "I'll be as polite and humble as can be," he said. "You'll hardly recognize me."

"Humble!" she said skeptically. "I'd like to see that."

"I'm just going to say what the law is—how can that be wrong?"

"It's incautious."

"Aye, that it is," he conceded. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

They crossed a ridge and dropped down the far side,

back into Coalpit Glen. As they descended, the air became a little less cold. A few moments later the small stone church came into view, beside a bridge over the dirty river.

Near the churchyard clustered a few crofters' hovels. These were round huts with an open fire in the middle of the earth floor and a hole in the roof to let the smoke out, the one room shared by cattle and people all winter. The miners' houses, farther up the glen near the pits, were better: though they, too, had earth floors and turf roofs, every one had a fireplace and a proper chimney, and glass in the little window by the door; and miners were not obliged to share their space with cows. All the same the crofters considered themselves free and independent, and looked down on the miners.

However, it was not the peasants' huts that now arrested the attention of Mack and Esther and brought them up short. A closed carriage with a fine pair of grays in harness stood at the church porch. Several ladies in hooped skirts and fur wraps were getting out, helped by the pastor, holding on to their fashionable lacy hats.

Esther touched Mack's arm and pointed to the bridge. Riding across on a big chestnut hunter, his head bent into the cold wind, was the owner of the mine, the laird of the glen, Sir George Jamisson.

Jamisson had not been seen here for five years. He lived in London, which was a week's journey by ship, two weeks by stagecoach. He had once been a penny-pinching Edinburgh chandler, people said, selling candles and gin from a corner shop, and no more honest than he had to be. Then a relative died young and childless, and George had inherited the castle and the mines. On that foundation he had built a business empire that stretched to such unimaginably distant places as Barbados and Virginia. And he was now starchily respectable: a baronet, a magistrate, and alderman of Wapping,