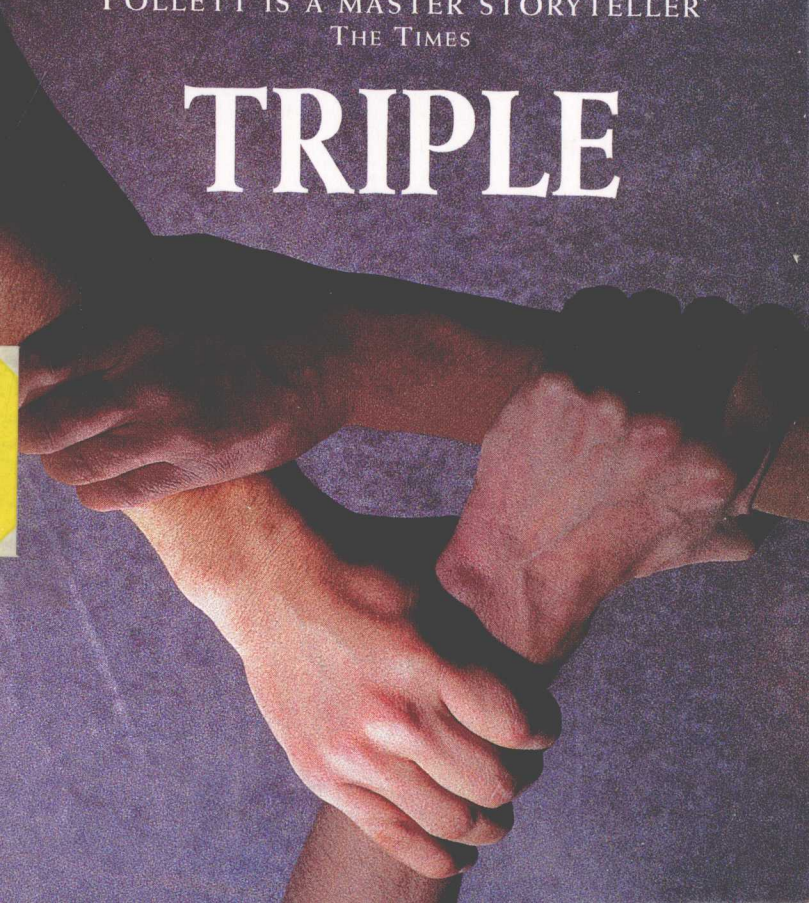


# KEN FOLLETT

'FOLLETT IS A MASTER STORYTELLER'  
THE TIMES

## TRIPLE



KEN FOLLETT

TRIPLE



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# TRIPLE

Ken Follett was only twenty-seven when he wrote the award-winning *Eye of the Needle*, which became an international bestseller. He has since written several equally successful novels including, most recently, *World Without End*, the sequel to the bestselling *The Pillars of the Earth*. He is also the author of the non-fiction bestseller *On Wings of Eagles*. Ken Follett lives with his family in London and Hertfordshire.

Visit the Ken Follett website at [www.ken-follett.com](http://www.ken-follett.com)

*Also by Ken Follett*

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WHITEOUT  
WORLD WITHOUT END

It must be appreciated that the only difficult part of making a fission bomb of some sort is the preparation of a supply of fissionable material of adequate purity; the design of the bomb itself is relatively easy . . .

– *Encyclopedia Americana*



*To Al Zuckerman*

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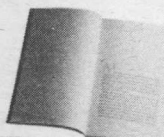
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TRIPLE



## PROLOGUE

**T**HERE WAS a time, just once, when they were all together.

They met many years ago, when they were young, before all *this* happened; but the meeting cast shadows far across the decades.

It was the first Sunday in November, 1947, to be exact; and each of them met all the others – indeed, for a few minutes they were all in one room. Some of them immediately forgot the faces they saw and the names they heard spoken in formal introductions. Some of them actually forgot the whole day; and when it became so important, twenty-one years later, they had to pretend to remember; to stare at blurred photographs and murmur ‘Ah, yes, of course,’ in a knowing way.

This early meeting is a coincidence, but not a very startling one. They were mostly young and able; they were destined to have power, to take decisions, and to make changes, each in their different ways, in their different countries; and those people often meet in their youth at places like Oxford University. Furthermore, when all this happened, those who were not involved initially were sucked into it just because they had met the others at Oxford.

However, it did not seem like an historic meeting at the time. It was just another sherry party in a place where there were too many sherry parties (and, undergraduates would add, not enough sherry). It was an uneventful occasion. Well, almost.

Al Cortone knocked and waited in the hall for a dead man to open the door.

The suspicion that his friend was dead had grown to a conviction in the past three years. First, Cortone had heard that Nat Dickstein had been taken prisoner. Towards the end of the war, stories began to circulate about what was happening to Jews in the Nazi camps. Then, at the end, the grim truth came out.

On the other side of the door, a ghost scraped a chair on the floor and padded across the room.

Cortone felt suddenly nervous. What if Dickstein were disabled, deformed? Suppose he had become unhinged? Cortone had never known how to deal with cripples or crazy men. He and Dickstein had become very close, just for a few days back in 1943; but what was Dickstein like now?

The door opened, and Cortone said, 'Hi, Nat.'

Dickstein stared at him, then his face split in a wide grin and he came out with one of his ridiculous Cockney phrases: 'Gawd, stone the crows!'

Cortone grinned back, relieved. They shook hands, and slapped each other on the back, and let rip some soldierly language just for the hell of it; then they went inside.

Dickstein's home was one high-ceilinged room of an old house in a run-down part of the city. There was a single bed, neatly made up in army fashion; a heavy old wardrobe of dark wood with a matching dresser; and a table piled with books in front of a small window. Cortone thought the room looked bare. If he had to live here he would put some personal stuff all around to make the place look like his own: photographs of his family, souvenirs of Niagara and Miami Beach, his high school football trophy.

Dickstein said, 'What I want to know is, how did you find me?'

'I'll tell you, it wasn't easy.' Cortone took off his uniform jacket and laid it on the narrow bed. 'It took me most of yesterday.' He eyed the only easy chair in the room. Both arms tilted sideways at odd angles, a spring poked through the faded chrysanthemums of the fabric, and one missing foot had been replaced with a copy of Plato's *Theaetetus*. 'Can human beings sit on that?'

'Not above the rank of sergeant. But—'

'They aren't human anyway.'

They both laughed: it was an old joke. Dickstein brought a bentwood chair from the table and straddled it. He looked his friend up and down for a moment and said, 'You're getting fat.'

Cortone patted the slight swell of his stomach. 'We live well in Frankfurt — you really missed out, getting demobilized.' He leaned forward and lowered his voice, as if what he was saying was somewhat confidential. 'I have made a *fortune*. Jewellery, china, antiques all bought for

cigarettes and soap. The Germans are starving. And – best of all – the girls will do anything for a Tootsie Roll.’ He sat back, waiting for a laugh, but Dickstein just stared at him straight-faced. Disconcerted, Cortone changed the subject. ‘One thing you ain’t, is fat.’

At first he had been so relieved to see Dickstein still in one piece and grinning the same grin that he had not looked at him closely. Now he realized that his friend was worse than thin: he looked wasted. Nat Dickstein had always been short and slight, but now he seemed all bones. The dead-white skin, and the large brown eyes behind the plastic-rimmed spectacles, accentuated the effect. Between the top of his sock and the cuff of his trouser-leg a few inches of pale shin showed like matchwood. Four years ago Dickstein had been brown, stringy, as hard as the leather soles of his British Army boots. When Cortone talked about his English buddy, as he often did, he would say, ‘The toughest, meanest bastard fighting soldier that ever saved my goddamn life, and I ain’t shittin’ you.’

‘Fat? No,’ Dickstein said. ‘This country is still on iron rations, mate. But we manage.’

‘You’ve known worse.’

Dickstein smiled. ‘And eaten it.’

‘You got took prisoner.’

‘At La Molina.’

‘How the hell did they tie you down?’

‘Easy.’ Dickstein shrugged. ‘A bullet broke my leg and I passed out. When I came round I was in a German truck.’

Cortone looked at Dickstein’s legs. ‘It mended okay?’

'I was lucky. There was a medic in my truck on the POW train – he set the bone.'

Cortone nodded. 'And then the camp...' He thought maybe he should not ask, but he wanted to know.

Dickstein looked away. 'It was all right until they found out I'm Jewish. Do you want a cup of tea? I can't afford whisky.'

'No.' Cortone wished he had kept his mouth shut. 'Anyway, I don't drink whisky in the morning anymore. Life doesn't seem as short as it used to.'

Dickstein's eyes swivelled back toward Cortone. 'They decided to find out how many times they could break a leg in the same place and mend it again.'

'Jesus.' Cortone's voice was a whisper.

'That was the best part,' Dickstein said in a flat monotone. He looked away again.

Cortone said, 'Bastards.' He could not think of anything else to say. There was a strange expression on Dickstein's face; something Cortone had not seen before, something – he realized after a moment – that was very like fear. It was odd. After all, it was over now, wasn't it? 'Well, hell, at least we won, didn't we?' He punched Dickstein's shoulder.

Dickstein grinned. 'We did. Now, what are you doing in England? And how did you find me?'

'I managed to get a stopover in London on my way back to Buffalo. I went to the War Office...' Cortone hesitated. He had gone to the War Office to find out how and when Dickstein died. 'They gave me an address in Stepney,' he continued. 'When I got there,



there was only one house left standing in the whole street. In this house, underneath an inch of dust, I find this old man.'

'Tommy Coster.'

'Right. Well, after I drink nineteen cups of weak tea and listen to the story of his life, he sends me to another house around the corner, where I find your mother, drink more weak tea and hear the story of her life. By the time I get your address it's too late to catch the last train to Oxford, so I wait until the morning, and here I am. I only have a few hours – my ship sails tomorrow.'

'You've got your discharge?'

'In three weeks, two days and ninety-four minutes.'

'What are you going to do, back home?'

'Run the family business. I've discovered, in the last couple of years, that I am a terrific businessman.'

'What business is your family in? You never told me.'

'Trucking,' Cortone said shortly. 'And you? What is this with Oxford University, for Christ's sake? What are you studying?'

'Hebrew Literature.'

'You're kidding.'

'I could write Hebrew before I went to school, didn't I ever tell you? My grandfather was a real scholar. He lived in one smelly room over a pie shop in the Mile End Road. I went there every Saturday and Sunday, since before I can remember. I never complained – I loved it. Anyway, what else would I study?'

Cortone shrugged. 'I don't know, atomic physics maybe, or business management. Why study at all?'

'To become happy, clever and rich.'

Cortone shook his head. 'Weird as ever. Lots of girls here?'

'Very few. Besides, I'm busy.'

He thought Dickstein was blushing. 'Liar. You're in love, you fool. I can tell. Who is she?'

'Well, to be honest . . .' Dickstein was embarrassed. 'She's out of reach. A professor's wife. Exotic, intelligent, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.'

Cortone made a dubious face. 'It's not promising, Nat.'

'I know, but still . . .' Dickstein stood up. 'You'll see what I mean.'

'I get to meet her?'

'Professor Ashford is giving a sherry party. I'm invited. I was just leaving when you got here.' Dickstein put on his jacket.

'A sherry party in Oxford,' Cortone said. 'Wait till they hear about this in Buffalo!'

It was a cold, bright morning. Pale sunshine washed the cream-coloured stone of the city's old buildings. They walked in comfortable silence, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched against the biting November wind which whistled through the streets. Cortone kept muttering, 'Dreaming spires. Fuck.'

There were very few people about, but after they had walked a mile or so Dickstein pointed across the road to a tall man with a college scarf wound around his neck. 'There's the Russian,' he said. He called, 'Hey, Rostov!'