PART I

SCOTLAND

CHAPTER ONE

Snow crowned the ridges of High Glen and lay on the wooded slopes in pearly patches, like jewellery 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 mountain-sides; man-made hills of slag disfigured the valley; massive wagons loaded with coal ploughed 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 parlour, 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 jibes 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 pedlar, 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 pedlar, 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 sceptically. '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 greys 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 stage coach. 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 had 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, responsible for law and order along London's waterfront.

He was obviously paying a visit to his Scottish estate, accompanied by family and guests.

'Well, that's that,' Esther said with relief.

'What do you mean?' said Mack, although he could guess.

'You won't be able to read out your letter now.'

'Why not?'

'Malachi McAsh, don't be a damn fool!' she exclaimed. 'Not in front of the laird himself!'

'On the contrary,' he said stubbornly. 'This makes it all the better.'