

CHAPTER 1

A Race for Life and Limb

The air nearly crackled it was so clear and crisp on this autumn day. The aroma of salt from the nearby Atlantic Ocean mingled with the scent of the balsam fir trees all about him to create a curious combination. And the trees were so startlingly beautiful, adorned in brilliant yellows, reds and oranges, they nearly whistled, “Look at us!” But neither the air, the aroma nor the foliage attracted the attention of the man on the tall, gray stallion. With one hand controlling the reins, the other cradling a book, and comfortably settled into his saddle, he was engrossed in the odd-looking characters that read right to left.

“*Ani la dodi va dodi le,*” he read aloud. “I am of my beloved and my beloved is of me....” He thought for a moment. “Ah, ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine’! Oh, I love that scripture.”

Francis Asbury turned to his companion, then remembered that Nicholas wasn't with him at the moment but had ridden on ahead to make arrangements for the week's meetings.

I wish I had grown up speaking Hebrew and had to learn English rather than the other way around, he thought absent mindedly with a chuckle. But he had taught himself Hebrew just as he had taught himself Greek, and he guessed he was better off for self-education than if he had spent four years at university learning the languages. Such learning would have delayed his ministry and shortened his time to save men's lives. So university may have been a sin in the end, eh? Silly thought.

Suddenly the hair on the back of his neck rose.

Something dark, something sinister lurked nearby. He pulled himself upright in his saddle, quietly shut his book and slowly scanned the woods around him, listening intently.

Somewhere to his left squirrels began squawking with loud

agitation, and something large, a partridge perhaps, battered wings through the underbrush in a rush skyward.

Something menacing. He couldn't see anything physically, but he sensed it spiritually. Something ominous nearby.

Francis tucked the Hebrew Torah into his shirt, bent down to his horse's ear, whispered, "Come on, Spark. Cha!" and the big stallion responded with a thrust that sent his rider back into the rear of the saddle.

A shot rang out from the woods to his left and Asbury heard a bullet hiss past. He lowered his head, bent toward the horse's neck and kicked his heels into the stallion's ribs, urging loudly now, "Hurry, boy. Hurry! Cha!"

An excellent horseman, Asbury had ridden more than two hundred thousand miles from Georgia to Quebec, up and down the Atlantic seaboard over the previous thirty-eight years. But he would need more than skill on his horse today. Even Spark couldn't outrun a bullet.

He lifted a prayer toward the heavens. “Lord, quicken our step.”

The path was barely two yards wide, an old Indian trail not wide enough for a carriage or wagon to pass—a shortcut he had used before. Francis turned to look behind him. Dark silhouettes on horseback rode in chase, probably a hundred yards away, visible only in the shafts of light flickering between the shadows of the trees. Two, maybe three he could see. No. There was a fourth, to his left—probably the one who had fired the shot.

Francis turned to look forward. A branch! He ducked just in time, and reached to catch hold of his hat as the limb nearly snapped it off his head. Spark, sure-footed through years of riding narrow trails in the dark of night, avoiding roots that stuck out of the ground, shouldered around a turn in the path as if he knew to tighten the turns to shorten the distance he must run.

Behind them, men were shouting directions to one another. Cursing. Other, muffled words Francis could not understand. Did these men know of a shortcut, through a field perhaps, to get in front of him?

“Lord, guide our path!” he called, thinking his creaking joints were too aged for a dash through the thick woods.

As he rode on, his senses heightened. He heard the sound of the leather saddle creaking beneath him, felt the lungs of his horse expand and contract, smelled the sweat that glistened on the great stallion’s neck. He looked for a landmark. He had been so absorbed in his reading he hadn’t known precisely where he was. He must be somewhere approaching Scarborough—near the meeting hall at Massacre Pond, where most of the local townspeople had been slaughtered by hostile Indians more than one hundred years before, back in the 1690s. The salt marshes and ocean would be somewhere, not far, eastward to his right.

Another shot rang out, and another, one bullet snapping through a branch just a yard or two to Francis' right. A shiver of fright flew down his spine.

“Giddy!” he hollered, and Spark seemed to stretch out his stride and drop lower to the ground. Francis pulled his hat down to his ears. Yes, he knew this path! There was Dunstan's Brook up ahead. Putting his right hand to Spark's neck, he spoke into his ear, “Don't slow down at the water, boy. Fire right through it!”

As if understanding every word, the horse leaped into the fifteen-yard-wide stream, causing Francis to hold on for dear life as he plowed fiercely through quickly flowing water. Asbury prayed they would get to the other side before the highwaymen reached the stream. If not, he was a dead man.

Another shot sounded and a bullet hit the water beside him with a muffled thud.

“Too many souls still to reach, Lord!” he called out.

“Protect Your child!”

A verse from a Psalm flashed before him—“*May the Lord fulfill your purpose*”—and he called again to the heavens, “Lord, my purpose isn’t fulfilled yet!”

As if sprung from a jack-in-the-box, Spark and Francis bounded out of the stream. Springing to the top of the four-foot-high stream bank, Spark bent into a turn in the path, entering a thick grove of balsam fir trees.

Francis knew he was only a quarter of a mile or so from the village. He heard loud cursing behind him. The rogues must have reached the stream.

Then, from his right another gunshot rang out. This time the bullet crackled through branches overhead. *The rifle sights must be off*, Francis thought with a strained smile. He lay prostrate along Spark’s back and settled his head to the left of the horse’s grand neck.

Francis refrained from digging in his heels. He and his horse were of one mind. Of that he was sure. Speed to safety. Speed. Safety. His senses now fully awakened, he didn't feel his sixty-four years of age at all. He simply felt he had to hang on now.

A moment later, they dashed out of the woods and into an open field. The village of Scarborough stood some two hundred yards away.

Surging toward the town, he leaned down to Spark's ear and cooed, "You're the best, Spark. I've loved all my horses, but you're the brightest and the best."

Thinking of the close call he had just escaped, he laughed and added aloud, "And the fastest."

As he approached the guardpost, Francis waved up to Horatio Short, who hollered down to him, "I heard gunfire, Bishop Asbury. Are you all right?"

"By the grace of God and the skin of my teeth, Horatio. Keep your eye out for trouble, though."

“Your sidekick’s in the general store, Bishop.”

Francis nodded, slowed Spark and guided him to the right, down what had become the village main street. How these people had bravely moved here in spite of the Indian slaughter was almost astonishing. They had courageous hearts, many of which he, Jesse Lee, or Bishop Philip Wagner had won to Christ.

Pulling Spark to a stop at the store, Francis dismounted, threw the reins over the hitching post, pulled the Hebrew Torah from inside his shirt and stuffed it into his saddlebag.

“Bishop Asbury! Bishop Asbury!” He looked up to see a small boy running toward him.

“Thomas!” he acknowledged the youth with a laugh.

The boy rushed up to him and held up his arms. Asbury bent to pick him up—a good-sized child of seven years. Raised up in his grasp, Thomas hugged Francis as best he could with his little arms.

Francis looked lovingly at the boy. “Have you been minding your P’s and Q’s?”

Thomas nodded. “Yessir!”

“He’s been so looking forward to your visit, Bishop.”

The lilting voice of Abigail Brackett reached Francis’ ears. His attention was drawn to a beautiful lady dressed in the earthy, functional dress of a pioneer woman, but it didn’t conceal that she was as stately as a lady-in-waiting in the Queen’s court.

“He wanted his face washed and trousers clean for your arrival,” she added with a smile as she continued on toward him. A basket hung in the crook of her arm. “He said he knew you’d want to cuddle him up.”

A tear trickled down Francis’ cheek at the thought of the boy’s love, and, vaguely, of the children he himself had never had.

He squeezed the child. “Well, Thomas,” he said, catching the boy’s eyes firmly in his own, “you certainly are cleaner than this dirty traveler before you!”

Thomas smiled proudly, then something grabbed his attention as he looked at Francis’ hat. His brow knit into a question mark.

“You’ve got a hole in your hat,” the boy declared.

“A hole?”

Thomas raised a finger to Francis’ hat and poked it into a hole the size of a pencil. “Hey, it goes right straight through!” he squealed.

“What?” Francis set the boy on his feet and removed his hat.

Sure enough. There were matching holes on either side of his hat. Francis pondered the mystery, but just for a moment.

“That last bullet,” he said quietly.