

Chapter One

Reverend John Alford awoke from frantic dreams of war, brutal soldiers, pure women sabered against pews, babies torn from tender wombs. He sat bolt upright. Where was he?

In his boarding house in Quebec City in October, 1899. Then what was this all about? Oh yes, those troops crowding the narrow streets. And rumours that the Boers in their devilry had attacked the good Queen's soldiers serving in South Africa. Jack, the nickname he preferred, pushed the images from his mind and dressed quickly.

After a good breakfast in his lodging, he hurried along the flat land below the great ramparts of Quebec, the oldest city in Canada. Three- four-story houses lined this narrow rue du Petit Champlain, just as in mediaeval Bordeaux. He turned up Côte de la Montagne, its steep curves crowded with young soldiers. A calèche rattled past loaded with rowdy recruits singing, shouting, celebrating their one last leave. Beside him an overloaded horse dug its shoes into cobblestones as it hauled more revellers up to the plateau above with its finer houses, important churches and government buildings. The soldiers wore Glengarry caps and kilts, or forage caps, some clad in the regulation rifle-green serge uniforms. All with loyal hearts, Jack could see, having assembled here from all over Canada for their great embarkation — volunteers, he reflected, who had been activated by the

purest patriotism, responding to the call of religion, blood, glory and progress, to fight and bleed for the Empire's greatest need.

These past weeks ministering to his parishes in Northern Quebec, Jack had heard little of the rapidly approaching war in South Africa nor the frantic enlistments across Canada; far from newspapers on their remote but hard-worked acres, his farmers had little means of acquiring news. Only yesterday morning, as he checked in at the cathedral office, had Jack received his first earful. That alarming report, and the city busy with excited recruits, had overcharged his imagination and nourished his nightmares.

He heard from behind: "Beg pardon, Father..." He paused and turned. "Would you know where a fella might eat a good meal without all that Frenchie sauce?" The obligatory military moustache had begun to grace the young man's lips, but no uniform indicated that he'd just enlisted as he gleamed with enthusiasm. "It took us a long train journey to get here, fer shore. Now I'm rarin' to go, but I gotta eat something."

"Go? You're off to South Africa with the troops?"

"Monday, they told us. The sooner the better. No time to lose — them Boers went and invaded the British Colony of Natal. They up and attacked Her Majesty's forces on their own ground."

"Really? I knew the Boers sent an ultimatum three weeks ago. They demanded a reply from the British within forty-eight hours — got everyone in an uproar, so I'm told."

"Me too! Those hateful scum went and encircled Colonel Baden-Powell at Mafeking. And they're advancing on Ladysmith! That's why I volunteered. Hard to get in, you know, lotsa fellas got turned down: too short, too young, size of chest or fitness — though some got in because o' who they knew." He went on proudly. "They say about a thousand of us is gonna get on that there Sardinian Monday."

“Quite a force,” Jack exclaimed.

“Bringin’ two or three doctors, some nurses, even a YMCA man — all to look after us.”

“And who is the chaplain, by the way? Someone from Ontario?” Jack wondered if the clergyman in question had volunteered or been selected by his bishop.

“Chaplain? No chaplain, Father.”

Jack frowned. “You sure?”

“Yes, Father. My cousin, he’s Captain of “A” Company, we’re from Manitoba, regular churchgoer, so he got complaining last night on the train. The Frenchies, they got one, but we don’t.”

Jack absorbed that. How dare they send off this young laddie with others his age to face death and suffering without a spiritual counsellor?

He pulled himself together, and gestured. “Now if you just go on up straight ahead, turn left and go down rue St. Louis, you’ll be sure to find lots of restaurants with whatever you like to eat.”

The soldier thanked him and set off. Jack turned right before Place d’Armes and strode up Sainte Anne Street, now even more worried and still haunted by his dreams. These young Canadians going into battle... How would he have felt if, even before attending university, he’d had to face a murderous foe? Not many hardened veterans hereabouts — just happy-go-lucky fellows with little hint of malice. Here they all were, for the first time in their lives traipsing up and down the quaint, old narrow streets that might have belonged to some crumbling city in Europe. How would they survive against those beastly and bloodthirsty Boers?

He entered the close of Holy Trinity Cathedral, centre of the vast Quebec diocese, an area that included much of Labrador and most of Quebec, five times the size of England. As the seat of the Bishop, it drew Jack back every month or so from his little

parishes around Lake St. John. The cathedral's day-to-day goings-on fell, as was usual, to the Dean, Lennox Williams, who'd been born in Lennoxville where Jack attended Bishop's University. Jack had even coached a bit of rugby across the St. Francis river at Bishop's College School which Lennox had attended, so they might have something in common. But no, on the whole the Dean paid Jack scant attention. And this weekend, the bishop, Andrew Hunter Dunn, would have far too much on his hands, so the Dean was his only conduit to resolving the question of a chaplain.

Opening the door to the church office, Jack saw his stiff figure bent over the desk of their prim secretary, Margaret. "May I have a word with you, Dean?"

"Not just now, Alford. We're expecting a packed cathedral tomorrow. Canon Scott is preaching." His high forehead over well-marked dark eyebrows, his dark, heavy moustache and short, neat beard, all signalled a fearsome presence to Jack.

"Oh? I look forward to that. So all the troops are Church of England then?"

"Mostly, I'd say," mumbled Williams. "Some Presbyterians, I'm told, and of course, Romans, mostly French from this province. Father O'Leary is leading a Low Mass for them tomorrow in the Basilica. He's embarking with them, we've heard."

As the Dean turned to go, Jack asked, "Have you heard who is representing us?"

"No idea. Whoever he is, he's not preaching tomorrow at any rate."

"I've heard they've not chosen a clergyman as chaplain yet."

"Impossible, Alford. Of course they have. They must've."

"No sir, I've heard not."

The Dean, preoccupied with tomorrow's service, was paying little attention.

But still, the horror of these young innocents heading off to fight and die for the Empire distressed Jack. Did they not deserve succour? Could it be true that not one of the clergy had volunteered? He had no intention of going off himself... But then again, as he reflected, ever since getting his B.A. degree recently he had wanted to visit that dark mysterious African continent.

He blurted out, "Sir, I'll take the challenge if no one else will."

The Dean stopped and turned.

Now where did that come from? Jack asked himself. A ghastly mistake? But Jack was not one to shirk a challenge. After spending two years in the most inhospitable environment on earth, the Labrador Coast, he made up his mind: let their tramp steamer be shipwrecked, let his regiment be devastated by cannonball or bayonet, let the chaplains be slaughtered by those Devil's henchmen, no matter — if he were chosen, yes, he would go.

"You, Alford?" Lennox Williams snapped. "Out of the question! What about your parishioners? How would they get along if you went off adventuring?" The Dean shook his head. "Can't have one shirking one's duties now, can we?" He strode off down the hall and closed his door.

So much for that. Jack's shoulders sagged, but he saw Margaret, tight-lipped, watching. A few months ago, he'd even gone so far as to ask her out. His heavy-set athletic frame was shorter than hers, but his large and piercing eyes, although almost black, carried some warmth as they looked into parishioners' souls. Well, with the ecclesiastic taboos on relations with parishioners, and his travelling, he'd not benefited from any female friendship since the Labrador, where the lovely Lorna had been a warm confidante, before she left. Margaret, though cold as those winter flocks along the St. Lawrence, was at least a female. Still unmarried, she was skinny as a hoe, but ever since she had aborted his attempt at friendship, in his presence she

kept extolling neat, handsome and well-dressed men, which of course quite excluded Jack, with his round moon-like face and his slightly rumpled appearance. But then, Lennox Williams, of a wealthy family, could pay more attention to his wardrobe.

For this reason she seemed partial to the Dean, by no means a romantic figure. Perhaps, thought Jack, like him I should start being unpleasant to her. But in truth, she was about as inviting as an icicle.

Jack went to find a more sheltering environment: up the four cathedral steps he leaped and let himself in through the great oaken doors. For all its plain, block-like exterior and bold steeple, the interior was impressive. But Jack didn't notice. He paused at a pew, then slipped through its door, and sidled in to kneel. The small doors reminded him that only last year, the practice of pew-renting had been abolished. He glanced at the bold, brass eagle on the lectern from which he had occasionally read the lesson.

In the peace of the cathedral, a certain calm descended. After a few moments, Jack bowed his head. The dream images still haunted him. "Please Lord," he whispered, "in this great enterprise, make sure our lads have someone worthy to guide them spiritually." He felt strongly that in their righteous battle against such inhuman devils, the soldiers needed a wise and courageous padre.

After a time, Jack sat back on his pew, deep in thought. Should he press his point? No, of course not, he was much too inexperienced. He glanced up at the balcony to his left, which boasted the country's only imperial box, fronted by a brass balustrade and decorated in royal blue. The Monarch's coat of arms reminded him in no uncertain terms of the British Empire. As did the gift given by the King himself over a century ago: solid silver plate, chalice, pattens and candlesticks, all lying in a glass

case along the right-hand wall. Jack's country parishes bore no such splendour. One day, he thought, I might be Curate here.

The doors broke open and the present curate, Ingall Smith, some ten years his senior, called out, "Ah, there you are, Jack!" He came up wearing a worried frown, frizzy hair falling about his ears but thinning on top, his large and piercing nose supporting thick steel glasses. "Jack, I'm frightfully sorry to ask, but would you mind doing me a tremendous favour, in fact doing us all one."

"Of course."

"The Bishop has asked me to get these orders of service to Canon Scott over at St. Matthews. But for some odd reason, I haven't been as diligent as I might and I'm afraid we don't have enough wine for all those troops' Eucharist tomorrow. Our delivery's not till Thursday. Would you mind awfully running down and picking up some? You do know our supplier?"

Jack nodded. "I'd be delighted, Ingall." Although the supplier was a good mile away, Jack saw he had no alternative. And indeed, a good brisk walk might do his spirit some good.

"Ripping of you, old man. You see, then I must run home and change, because the bishop has invited me, along with the Dean, to the banquet for the officers of the contingent. It's being given by members of the Garrison Club in the Citadel itself. I've never been. Have you?"

Jack shook his head. The Citadel, quite a landmark, had been designed in 1820 in the shape of a four-pointed polygon as a defence system; it covered thirty-seven acres and took thirty years to build. Jack would love to have gone, for it now served as the transit billet for the Royal Canadian Regiment's officers heading to Africa.

He watched Ingall whirl and hurry out. He had managed to throw not one but several barbs in Jack's direction. Barbs? How

uncharitable! But nonetheless, it did bother Jack that he had not been invited to the Citadel.

Back at the office, he faced Margaret. "Any chance now of seeing the Bishop?"

None, the Secretary confirmed, and pressed her lips together.

Time's awasting, thought Jack. Repressing his annoyance, he grabbed the money in an envelope she held out for the wine and headed across the cathedral close, passing a railway clerk who came hurrying in, telegram in hand. On impulse, Jack followed him back into the office where the clerk handed his telegram to the church secretary. Savagely, she tore it open. In her floral cotton frock and prim hairdo, she stared at the telegram and then looked up abruptly. "You should see this, Mr. Alford, before I hand it to the Bishop."

Jack looked down at it — one of his favourite students in his parish of Blue Point, Eino Virtanen, a Finnish lad, had been drowned along with his father, Heikki, in Lac St. Jean. Their funeral was Tuesday. Would Jack please return Monday to perform the last rites?

He folded it and gave it back to the Secretary. What a shame. Such a fine student, and a good family too. Return for the funeral? Oh yes, he certainly would.

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Jack walked into the store that already had a goodly share of visitors. Most of them were young men buying supplies to take on the troopship moored in the harbour. He threaded through the lads to the owner behind the counter, himself a rather portly English member of the Holy Trinity congregation. "I see business is good," Jack offered, "with all the troops arriving."

"Business may be good, but not the soldiers' mission, for sure."

"Oh?"

The storekeeper shook his head. “We’ve got no business, no business at all messing with people like those Boers — after all, they’re colonists just like us. My wife says it’s a crime — put on us by politicians and businessmen — they’re just trying to make a dollar out of armaments and uniforms, and such. And you know what? They’re after the gold and diamonds there. They want to grab all that through the blood of our offspring.”

A voice from behind Jack spoke up: “What’s that I hear?” A young lad with red hair and freckles had his dander up. “Say that again.”

The plump, grey-haired storekeeper wiped his hands on his apron, looked at him, but did not speak.

“We heard what you said,” the soldier went on. “No right to go over there? No right to go fight savages who’ve had the audacity to attack her Majesty the Queen?”

The storekeeper raised his eyes. “They didn’t attack our Queen; they defended their land. Pushed into doing that by British politicians: Cecil Rhodes and businessmen like him. They be bigger savages than the Boers, if you ask me.” The red-haired lad tried to interrupt but the storekeeper kept right on. “Gold, that’s what they want. And diamonds! Once that got discovered in the Transvaal, those businessmen, they sure set their sights on that fortune. Why else go way down there and fight? That greedy bunch, it’s their problem, not ours.”

“Do you hear that boys?” the redhead said. “I’m putting back my supplies right now. I’m not buying from anyone who won’t support Her Majesty and our fight for freedom!” With that, he dropped his supplies on the floor and stomped out.

Jack stared as one after another the soldiers, some reluctantly, placed their provisions on counters and barrels and walked out, too. Jack was left standing, with the storekeeper angrily returning the goods to the shelves.

Jack turned. "Are there many who feel as you do?"

"All my wife's family. She's French Canadian. They're against our fighting Britain's battles for them. Read the *Quebec Telegraph*, or the *Vérité* — even our own *Canadian Clergyman*. They're all against it, too. Not one single French Canadian in Quebec wants this war."

Jack frowned. "I've heard a good few French Canadians are leaving with the contingent."

"That's as may be. Always fools in any bunch. If you ask me, those politicians in London, Chamberlain and — "

"He's the Colonial Secretary?"

"Yes sir, and that Lord Minto, our own Governor-General, he's British too, just as bad as the rest — they all want us to go get shot or killed so's Rhodes and his bunch can get their hands on all the gold and diamonds. That's what my family says. And that's what I say too." He glanced up. "You've come for wine?"

Jack nodded and handed over the envelope from the church office. The man gave him two sizable bottles of port, and Jack went off, head spinning with new thoughts.

Chapter Two

By the time Jack reached the cathedral office with the wine, everyone had gone home to prepare for the evening's festivities — and festivities there were sure to be, packed with fun: the officers and their clergy being feasted just outside the gate at the magnificent Garrison Club.

At his desk, Jack found a message from the Rev. Lennox Williams saying that for the enlisted men, a grand smoking concert or party had been planned, and asking him if he would be kind enough to “show the flag” and attend that dinner beforehand, and say an appropriate Grace.

Jack walked down from the cathedral to the Lower Town, passing old draw-bridges and piers with barrels of oysters for sale; idle fishing smacks bobbing beside the last of the great sailing ships, moored incongruously next to docked steam-driven freighters loading freight from swaybacked horses' carts. As dusk settled, he turned onto one of the southeast piers that reached out into the icy St. Lawrence, and headed for the low barrack-like immigration sheds, the Quebec home of the enlisted men of the Royal Canadian Regiment.

He tramped through the gates of the high picket fence and joined a group gathering for supper. He lost no time in checking to see if anyone had heard of any Church of England chaplain being assigned. Not a one. When the doors opened, Jack went in with them and found himself at a folding table to the right of

a grizzled old corporal at its head. “God Save the Queen” began the proceedings, concluding with huzzas and cheers, and then Jack rose and proclaimed a suitable Grace.

The Corporal proved quick to introduce himself as Joseph Ferguson, from Glace Bay. He asked, “You the new Chaplain?” Ferguson had a short mop of greying hair, trim frame, and grizzled brows under which knowing black eyes had clearly seen it all. But Jack saw that beneath the tough exterior and well-worn uniform beat a good heart.

Jack shook his head. “I’m staying at the cathedral this week, and my dean, he asked me to come down and say the Grace.”

The ladies of the lower town had volunteered to help out, and now they dished up hearty knuckles of meat, mushy potatoes and coarse bread. Ferguson lost no time in tucking in. “We’ll not be seeing a lot of this on the battlefield, I can tell you.”

“You been though a few battles, have you?”

“Enough to know we should avoid them. Specially this bunch.”

“You mean the enlistees who’ve come here?” Jack asked.

Ferguson nodded, glanced at Jack, and lifted a heavy knuckle to gnaw at it.

“They’re inexperienced, I know,” persisted Jack, “but they all seem healthy and hearty, and raring to go.”

Ferguson nodded again. “Ask any o’ them what a Mauser is. Ask any o’ them what to do when you hear a shell whistling.” He shook his head.

“A bit untrained?” Jack began eating, and oddly enough, found it tasty. Ferguson shot him a look, and put down his knuckle. “Half the boys here never fired a rifle, Padre. They think that me and us other NCOs are gonna whip ’em all into shape on that there cattle boat.” He snorted in disgust, and went on eating.

“Cattle boat?”

“The *Sardinian*. Converted it into a troopship. Fit for five hundred, maybe, maximum, and they’re gonna cram a thousand on it. You know how long it takes to get to South Africa?”

Jack shrugged. “No idea. Probably a couple of weeks.”

“More.” Ferguson shook his head, still chewing hungrily. “I’m not looking forward to it. You watch, they’re doing this in such a rush, I’ll take a bet there’ll not be enough food, or maybe it’s water, or maybe it’s ammunition, there’s always something missing, just when you need it.”

His companion across the table, a corporal, nodded vigorously. “Corp’s right. He’s always right. Trust him.”

“Lucky you’re not coming, Father,” Ferguson went on. “Stick to your nice safe cathedral up there on the hill. And just pray they don’t pick you.”

“So it is true they have no chaplain yet.”

“Not on your life. You think we’ve had a chaplain with us these last fifteen years? No sir. Not since they stuck a couple of theology students on us in them Indian battles. I was a private then, saw no use fer ’em m’self.”

Jack was shocked. “Not even when you had to fight?”

“Well... we haven’t done that much fighting, I will say that. Few knockabouts with some Indians, but nothing to write home about.” He coughed, and then shovelled in some mashed potatoes. “You just wait till we get to them dry deserts over there, crawling with blood-thirsty Boers. That’ll give the lads something to worry about —” he swallowed a mouthful — “even if they do hand us enough rifles and ammo, which I still frankly doubt.” He looked up as another corporal at an adjacent table rose, clearly primed with the demon alcohol, and proposed a rambling toast to the Queen and their own speedy victory — which should come in just a few months, long before the one

year term they had signed for, and more than enough time to vanquish that raggle-taggle Boer army.

This was soon followed by other toasts, uproariously proclaimed and thoroughly enjoyed, for most men had already partaken of good amounts of intoxicants.

As they continued eating and drinking, Jack found his need to be a part of this Militia mounting, in spite of the Corporal's predictions. He admired the camaraderie amongst these men who had made the cut. In later conversations during the evening, he discovered that in Vancouver they had taken only seventeen of some sixty applications, in Nelson BC only eight out of seventy, and so on. These men clearly felt that they were "the chosen" and their spirit of patriotism was running high.

As Jack moved around after they had risen from the tables, he found himself gravitating towards the companies from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. One group of young men were being entertained by a tall, craggy youth whose accent showed him to be a Maritimer, and Jack wandered over. His face seemed as beaten up by the elements as one much older, and carried a few pocks and pimples.

The merriment ceased due to Jack's clerical collar. He wished on occasions such as this he could be seen as one of the boys; after all, was he not a Maritimer himself? Brought up on a farm, and with the same life, at least until he'd gone into the church.

The lads formed a respectful circle, and after Jack introduced himself and where he was from, their leader took over. "Aye, a Gaspesian! Well sir, I'm from Dingwall, Eamon McAndrews at your service." A couple of the others, still intimidated by Jack's garb, bashfully gave their names.

"And what induced you to leave that beautiful Cape Breton and set off for South Africa, Eamon? A sense of adventure?" Jack didn't want to seem too patriotic at the start.