

Excerpt from *John Clarke: The Fight for Soul Liberty Novel*

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Lynn, Massachusetts — July 20, 1651

The distant church bells had begun to fade.

Inside William Witter's cottage, Dr. John Clarke stood before the small gathering, his worn 1560 Geneva Bible in hand. There was no pulpit, no elevated platform. Obadiah Holmes and John Crandall, who had traveled with him from Newport - Rhode Island, sat nearby. William, elderly and nearly blind, rested beside his wife, Hannah. Around them, family and friends had gathered with their children.

“We have been warned there are proper buildings for worship. Proper words. Proper authorities.”

John looked around the room. “But Christ never waited for permission to speak truth. He met people where they were—at tables, on roads, in homes like this one.”

A moment passed.

“So today we speak plainly. We listen closely. And we trust that God is here with us.”

Five-year-old Abigail Whitaker whispered a little too loudly. “Is this the praying part?”

A few smiles passed through the room.

John looked at her. “It can be, if you would like.”

When the time came for communion, John reached for the freshly baked loaf of bread.

“This bread reminds us that Christ's life was given freely. Not for the righteous alone, but for all who hunger for truth and mercy.”

He broke the bread and passed it first to William. Hannah guided her husband's hands before passing it to the others.

John lifted the cup.

“This cup reminds us that faith is not forced. It is chosen. It is entered into willingly, with clarity of mind and an open heart.”

He passed it among them.

“Drink, in remembrance, and in peace.”

When the cup returned to the table, John continued. “For the kingdom of God—”

Without warning, the door crashed open and two constables burst into the cottage.

Chairs scraped backward. Parents drew their children closer. Holmes and Crandall rose. Abigail cried out for her mother.

William struggled to his feet, shaking as he leaned upon his cane. "Who are you to enter my house uninvited? This is my home."

The constables ignored him.

John stepped forward, placing himself between the constables and the gathered families. "By what authority do you claim the right to burst into a private home and interrupt our worship with such rude intrusion?"

One constable handed a folded paper to the other. "Read it."

The second man's hands trembled as he unfolded the document. "This warrant, signed by Boston Magistrate Robert Bridges, calls for the arrest of John Clarke and his two associates, Obadiah Holmes and John Crandall."

The room fell still.

Obadiah stepped forward. "We have harmed no man. We have gathered peacefully before God. By what right do you make criminals of us?"

One of the constables moved toward him. "Stand back!"

Obadiah held his ground, raising his voice. "For worship? For prayer? Is this now a crime in Massachusetts?"

John placed his hand on Obadiah's shoulder, quietly encouraging him to step back, then faced the constables. "No man, no church, no government has the right to command the conscience God has given us."

The constables stepped forward and seized the three men.

Sarah Crandall rushed toward her father.

"Father!"

One of the constables caught her before she could reach him.

"Remove your hands from my daughter at once!" Crandall demanded.

Sarah pushed past the constable and reached her father, sobbing. Crandall steadied her. "It is all right, Sarah. I will be fine."

Sarah fell back into the others, inconsolable, as the constables escorted the three Rhode Islanders toward the door.

John turned back once more, meeting the eyes of the children. His voice was unyielding and steady. "Hold fast to your faith. We must never answer fear with fear."

The door shut hard behind them.