



e Are His
Witnesses

AN ANABAPTIST MARTYR STORY

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him. Acts 5:29-32

Claudia Esh

We Are His Witnesses

Claudia Esh

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WALNUT CREEK

Dedication

To the Lord Jesus Christ,

*“Who...loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood,
And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father;
to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”*

Introduction

The inspiration for this story comes from the *Martyr's Mirror*, where the story of John and Peter's martyrdom is recorded. The unnamed girl in that account I called Elaine. Leonhard Keyser's story is also factual. The rest of the characters and the majority of the story plot are fictional.

One interesting thing about church history is how often young people were such strong, faithful witnesses. Their stories show us that we don't need to wait until we are thirty or so to throw our lives wholeheartedly into the cause of the Kingdom. The Lord calls us to follow Him—now! May this story draw our hearts to Him, and may He receive all the praise.

Thanks to Dad and Mom and my dear siblings for their prayers and encouragement. And to all my friends, your interest and prayers mean so much. Praying that the Lord will bless you, and everyone who reads this story.

Table of Contents

1.	The Beginnings	1
2.	Lukas	15
3.	The Unexpected	25
4.	The Forbidden Word	33
5.	Peter, John...and Lisbeth.	45
6.	We Are His Witnesses.	55
7.	The Reason Why	61
8.	Elaine's Promise	89
9.	Just to Do Something	99
10.	"Lord, Where Are You?"	107
11.	Memories, Promises, and Pleas	115
12.	The End?	127
13.	Better Than Strawberries.	135
14.	Under the Oak Tree	141
15.	"There Are None Here"	149
16.	Suspicion	157
17.	A Trip to Vinderhout	171
18.	Tower of Sorrow	183
19.	John!	193
20.	I Must Go.	203
21.	Franz Bartlimer.	215
22.	Too Late	221
23.	News from Flanders	227
24.	For His Name's Sake	233
25.	The Strangers	239

1

The Beginnings

July 1535

“But Mr. Meister—”

The man shifted nervously and fixed a steady stare at the young carpenter. “I mean what I say, John.”

John looked at him. Gerald Meister stood like a steel post; his hair and eyes were a flat gray, his jaws and fists tense. In the yellow sunlight streaming in the doorway and illuminating the placid shop, full of the soft odor of pine, his metallic presence seemed out of place.

“Look here, youngster, there’s no need to argue,” Gerald said, his face expressionless. “It’s not a hard thing, is it? An hour at court, a few sentences to say, and it’s yours.” The golden guilder glittered in his outstretched hand.

John opened his mouth, but Gerald was still talking. “You’ll be in Ghent anyway. Is it such a big thing to do a favor for an old friend?”

John glanced at the money in his hand and the corners of his mouth turned up in amusement, but the tone of his voice remained even when he spoke. “Ask somebody else, Mr. Meister. I’m not interested.”

Gerald’s gray eyes hardened. “Look, this isn’t a bribe. It’s just payment for going out of your way to do a kindness.”

“I don’t even know this Franz Bartlimer.”

“Ah, but I’ll tell you what to say.”

John looked disgusted. He picked up a hammer and tapped a dowel into a half-finished chair. “Mr. Meister, you expect me to stand up in a courtroom and defend somebody I never met? I don’t know anything good or bad about him. That’s dishonest.”

“I just told you all you need to know about him. You—” He stopped at the look in John’s eyes. “Well, all right.” And then in a stealthy mutter intended to be heard, he said, “What a fool!”

His cold shadow walled off the sunshine as he stood in the doorway, watching the young man work. Those steely eyes never wavered in their steady stare; even though he did not look up, John felt them drilling into him.

“Can I do anything else for you?” he asked when the absolute silence dragged into an uncomfortable battle.

“No.” Gerald shifted and rested a hand on the doorpost. He let the silence go on a little longer, then stated, “It’d be in your best interest to help me out here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Father Matthys is counting on you.”

John looked up and laid down his hammer. “Then you mean our priest is involved in this lawbreaking?”

Gerald’s gaze swung quickly around the shop and back to John. “Who said we’re breaking the law? Helping out a friend, that’s what it’s called. Saving his reputation.”

“Some people’s reputation doesn’t deserve to be saved,” John said, more sharply than he intended to. “You can call it what you like, Mr. Meister, but the honest name for it is dodging justice, and you’re not going to convince me otherwise. If he’s innocent, that’ll come to light.” He paused. “What interest does Father Matthys have in all this?”

Gerald tapped his foot on the dirt floor. “Franz is an old friend. Anyway, if you don’t want to help, you don’t need the details.” He let the silence hang for just the right amount of time

before adding, "Of course you know that if you're wise you'll keep your mouth shut."

John didn't answer.

Gerald's eyes narrowed to bits of iron as he studied the boy before him. He might have stayed longer, but just then a cheerful girlish voice said, "Excuse me, sir," and two teenage girls stepped inside.

Gerald lingered for a moment, then with an abrupt, "So long," he turned away, his soft-soled shoes falling quietly on the dusty road and fading into the brightness of the afternoon.

"Hi, cousins," John greeted the newcomers, picking up his hammer again.

"I brought the payment for that barrel," Elaine said, laying the coins on the workbench. She was a bright-eyed, sweet-looking girl with her wayward auburn hair escaping her coiled braid and flying in wisps around her face.

"What did that Gerald want?" Lisbeth asked.

John sighed, a little fire coming into his dark eyes. "Oh, he wanted me to testify for a Franz Bartlimer in Ghent next week."

"Franz *who*?"

"Franz Bartlimer. I never heard of him before either, but he's been accused of sympathizing with heretics and he'll be on trial about the time I'm in Ghent next week."

Lisbeth blinked and brushed a strand of brown hair away from her face. "What good are you for what he wants?"

"Gerald wanted to pay me to testify that Franz is loyal."

"Well, of all the absurd things!"

"What's absurd?" a voice said behind them, and Peter stepped into the shop with a small brown sack in his hand. "Well, what a gathering. You getting anything done today, John? Or are you just standing there talking to the girls?" Peter was Lisbeth's older brother, a brown-eyed, fair-haired boy who delighted in laughter.

But John was in no mood to laugh just then. “No,” he said shortly. “Just answering their questions.”

“What were you saying about our priest before we came in?” Lisbeth asked.

“Oh, Father Matthys is involved in all this too. Why, I can’t imagine. The whole sticky situation is just disgusting.”

“But what did Franz do?” Lisbeth wondered.

“Apparently he said some things that were sympathetic to the rebellion at Münster. If you can believe Gerald, though, he’s one of the most devout Catholics in Flemish Brabant. Maybe he had a little too much wine some evening and said the wrong thing at the wrong time.”

“Say, somebody explain what you all are talking about. It sounds interesting,” Peter interrupted, grinning. “What language are you speaking, Spanish or something?”

“I’ll tell you about it later, Peter,” John said.

The subject was dropped, and Elaine and Lisbeth left without saying much more.

The sun glistened on the dirt streets, packed hard and rutted by hundreds of carts and feet. Neat wooden houses with yellow roofs lined the road, with flowers and herbs blooming in beds and oaks throwing dappled patches of shade.

The two girls turned at the corner and Lisbeth went in to her home, leaving Elaine alone on the dusty road. Birds chirped above her as she walked, and the sun shone hot on her hair, but her thoughts were far away. The Münsterite uprising and the radicals’ capture of the city of Münster a year and half before, in 1534, was an event that turned even the citizens of Flanders touchy and suspicious. And Elaine did not like it.

Was it necessary, this clashing of religions, the turmoil and hate and blood? All Europe flamed with blazing tirades, steely laws, frantic regulations, and ever-increasing execution of those

people who were too stubborn to give up what they believed. All over Flanders, especially in the North, magistrates resorted to the sword to put down the heretics, who, they feared, would start a rebellion like Münster if not dealt with immediately and harshly.

Yes, Elaine could understand the desperation of a man falsely accused of sympathizing with the hated rebels. But Father Matthys resorting to dishonesty, even to help a friend...that bothered Elaine more than she wanted to admit.

A firecrest warbler fluttered overhead, shrilling its airy song. Elaine looked up in time to see the flash of its yellow wings disappear behind a big oak. She sighed; somehow the beauty of the world clashed with the bloody feuds that man carried on under the azure sky.

“Someday,” she whispered. “Someday maybe there will be peace.”



The pink rays of sunset twinkled over the glassy waters of the Schelde River as it flowed placidly past Mereedor. The little village made a beautiful sight in the soft light as the cottages with their thick yellow roofs sat comfortably along the rutted roads. Nothing disturbed the evening stillness, for Mereedor had looked about the same two hundred years before, and it seemed as though it might continue unchanged for decades to come.

Twilight threw hazy purple shadows over the fields and a single star shimmered above the eastern horizon. Through the open window, Elaine heard the clatter of footsteps on the streets as someone hurried home. A cool breeze curled up from the Schelde, dragging the evening mists with it over the village.

Elaine, seated at the table in their little cottage, held the quill poised over the wrinkled paper. It had been nearly a year since

she had traded five yards of her own deep red fabric for the sheets of cheap paper, but the first page was barely half full with tiny writing. She ran her eyes quickly over the last entry: *May 1, 1535. My 14th birthday. I wonder what will happen this year. I hope it is as good as last year.*

Elaine sat and gazed out the open window for a long time before she dipped her pen and wrote carefully, *July 14, 1535. We just found out today that Münster in Lower Saxony was captured on the 24th of last month.* She paused, then wrote, *I'm worried about Lisbeth.*

She did not explain why, and presently she folded the papers, slipped them under her pillow in the loft, and went outside.

She wandered through the street and toward the canal, dark blue and sparkling in the evening sun. The eastern sky was the color of ripe peaches, glowing with warm radiance, but Elaine didn't notice it.

"Elaine!"

She jumped. "Lisbeth?"

Lisbeth forced a laugh and walked over to her. "You needed some time to think, too? I can go away."

"No, no, stay," Elaine said quickly. "What'd you come here for?"

Lisbeth sat down amidst the poppies. "Same thing you did, I guess. What do you think about Münster? Don't you...pity them, a little at least?"

"Yes," Elaine said quietly. "I really do."

There was a short silence. The rebellion in the German town of Münster had been going on for more than a year, and events were rumbling to a climax. Elaine and Lisbeth didn't have many sources of information except Gerald, a German-born carpenter, but they turned over, dissected, and discussed every tidbit they heard.

"You remember Helena?" Lisbeth asked suddenly.

“Of course,” Elaine answered. Helena was Lisbeth’s little sister.

Lisbeth’s voice softened. “She would have been nine this year.”

“You’re right.” Elaine felt unsure of herself. She knew Helena’s death was still hard on Lisbeth, and she often didn’t know what to say.

Suddenly Lisbeth turned and looked Elaine full in the face. “Elaine Reidel, listen to me. Helena might have lived if we had had the money to buy her what she needed. I believe she died because we couldn’t feed her properly when she got sick.”

Elaine nodded sadly. “You might be right.” She thought of her father, who died of the same deadly disease. More than two dozen people had died within one month. Her mother had become sick also, and Elaine remembered the blurred days and nights of frantic care for her parents. Then the awful grief when her father died and her relief when her mother finally recovered.

Elaine had gotten a lighter case of it herself, and for a few days had had a raging fever and ached all over. But her mother, still weak herself, had nursed her only daughter as only a mother could, and Elaine recovered.

“I’ve heard that the nobles usually pull through,” Lisbeth went on forlornly. “They have money enough for proper care. But Elaine, can’t you see? Father Matthys was—and is—much richer than we are. He could have helped! The Church could help in such things!”

Elaine’s eyes widened. “But Lisbeth—”

“He made the rounds of Mereedor, administering the last rites and generally comforting everyone. But why couldn’t he have given a coin or two to each family to buy proper food and medicine?”

“I—”