

THE FAMINE HOUSE

By CurtisCLennon

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The Famine House

The small group of tourists walked the wilding trail narrowing now from fields to hedges. Among them, went Dr. Glazebrook, his gladdening sigh accompanying an outstretched arm and steadying hand, thereby safely guiding Mrs. Glazebrook over the slow-moving stream. Taking a moment's reprieve from his ever-charming thoughts and entertaining observations, Dr. Glazebrook noted inwardly the grateful white-toothed, lip-gloss smile his wife returned him in response: a delight, simply in proving far easier on the eye than at any other previous time.

This, of course, was not to forget another important aspect, one equally relevant to the luxuriously perfected face beaming upturned before him. For, is it a crime to so admire the work of a skilled craftsman, even though it is no less, the handiwork of the self-same admirer? (The phrase he knew, jolted still, but remained unequalled in sentiment). Why no, of course not! Only the inartistic philistine might venture such a preposterous pronouncement. For, he reminded himself further, he of course, alone among men, saw the unique artistry of the artist at work, that delicately wrought legerdemain so dexterously at play (as he so often likened it). Who else but he, and his God-like guided hands, might take credit for this creation? Both loom and weaver, by consent of his own steadying hand he had deftly laboured, and brought this most-appealing countenance to life. Bestowed a comely surface reality, fruits to his dedicated benign vine, so that, unselfish to the last, others might gaze on in approval too. Should not one as he, blessed with such skill and expertise, and who, not unlike a multitude of men lately grown tired of a wife's aged face, seek restoration of that which might yet be faithfully restored? Yet tryingly still, to wheedle finally her consent, he'd suggested her continued obstinacy could only result in one outcome -- their marriage falling to a most unpleasantly abrupt end; did not the results justify the (he was not too proud to admit, slightly extreme) means? For if justice be done we must make further note he acted only to correct what was long overdue. For instance, setting selflessly to work, plumping to more natural curvatures her always too-thin lips, bravely deciding for them both, while she laid dumbly supine, a rough-cut hulk of stone primed for reshaping, on the operating table, to bid good riddance to those abominably ugly swarming nest-lines busy around her eyes. The idea things might otherwise be, was itself an absurdity. This truth so profound, Dr. Glazebrook instantly decided to reward himself with a second in as many minutes, self-indulgent sigh.

With such thoughts still freshly forming in his mind, Dr. Glazebrook, now with a noticeably more vigorous stride, passed cheerily on, just as the the sun-evaporating sea he'd crossed to be here finally disappeared from view, and even the once constantly companionable sound of swashing tide, like a million ear-pressed sea-shells, lay silent now, somewhere distant behind perpendicular pastel-coloured mountains. Until now, one noise alone breeched whatever dulling sensation renders even the squalliest windy days, such as this, almost too eerily silent, the occasional chattering, which Dr. Glazebrook's wife affectionately called as sounding the approach of yet another batch of ever-quaint locals going about their

various ways.

Understandably then, with evening fast approaching, these too were now no more heard. Indeed time soon no doubt, thought Dr. Glazebrook, when their group too, would start heading back, and in so doing, come full-face into the still-squalling wind - all that day long, a sharply prodding devilish trident - relentless at their backs. Whence from out this constant keening came a welcome and familiar voice.

"Just ahead" said the guide. "You should just make out our last stop for today."

Moving ever forwards, staring hard into the coarsening landscape marking the nearing rain-dirty hillside, all presently made out the draggled remains of an old cottage. Sight enough to reduce most of that assemblage of age-stiffened spines, not least Dr. Glazebrook's, to quixotic quivering tingles. Indeed, better to concede it too difficult a task to put into words exactly how this most pathos-inducing sight affected Dr. Glazebrook to such a profoundly grandiose degree! For nothing short of a rebirth might serve to describe aptly this effect, he gasped, as a historic version of his former self was then suddenly revealed, so that even the cutting swirls of wind now had their part to play, a gateway connecting the present with the past. To think, this green island was after all, his bygone home, and this, his first visit, no less a pilgrimage made into his ancestral past. So, festooned with these and other such wondrous ideas, Dr. Glazebrook believed his very thoughts now timbered in time to those few rickets-thin beams, a chorus of wooden wind-chimes, atop the creaking cottage roof.

While they stood there, the guide told how families would huddle-in with livestock for warmth. That, probably during winter months, the body heat generated by the family's kept pig, might be all keeping the younger one's alive. It was then Dr. Glazebrook's surgeon-precision eye alighted on a curiosity. One stirred by his deeply-felt connection to this place, and why he was then suddenly seized by a desperate need to convince those -- who years from now would count themselves among the hugely fortunate few -- about to hear the wisdom's, he was about to impart, as no less the reborn, living ancestor, to whom, the task of relating first-hand the desperate life he too once led in common with those unfortunates who likewise knew this pathetic abode, simply as 'home'. Surely, it was his God-given purpose, here and now to pass on into living memory those things only he could ever truly know! And to think too, he mused, a lifetime of memories till now hidden from me! Discovered here, rooted in this other time and place! Suffice; successful in his bid to divert attention away from the still-speaking guide towards him, he uttered the following, near ecstatic outburst.

"These strips of wood, you see . . . just here and there . . . the remains of nailed wooden boards put up against the windows . . . and barring the door too."

He paused a moment, warming to his newly attentive audience, a medium, channelling a past -- or even as then he began to suspect -- his own past life into the present. With face-bedecking benevolent grin aimed, one involuntarily and simultaneously drawing a raft of curious eyes too, towards the (at least to his mind), surprisingly still-smiling countenance of the upstaged guide.

"No doubt these wooden boards were put up as reinforcements. As the best defence against severest cold

and the ravaging blustery winds we too have been treated today."

As expected, a contagious outbreak of broad smiles and chuckles broke out among the group. Their mirth however, evidently not shared by the now-frowning guide, who still, from his shifting feet right up to the weighted stare now fixed in his eyes stood centre-stage -- the rapt focus of popular attention. When, only with the greatest effort, or so it seemed, he moved to speak of things which once heard, he knew from his own experience, are never afterwards forgotten.

"No! That was most certainly not the reason."

Though naturally soft-spoken, his voice carried far now, each of his words a cracking whip ensnaring the deathly hushed silence.

"These here boarded-up windows and doors were not put up to keep outside what threatened the beloved lives of those within. And not, as you heard just now, fixed on the outsides, but were more easily, boards, nailed to the insides. The choice made to keep the outside from knowing the horrors entombed within. You see, families boarded themselves in Even the starving-to-death cling to their dignity."
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