

**“The House of Many Eyes”**  
**By Frederick Philip Grove**

It was a January thaw, such as is common in the western provinces. There were two and a half feet of snow on the ground where it was level and sheltered. On the fields and roads, the water which formed was merely absorbed by the underlying loose, almost powdery masses, compacting them into spongy ice; but in town the eaves kept dripping for two whole days, ceasing to do so only with the chill of the night.

At the very east end of Fisher Landing, beyond the mill, stood a single house of peculiar, almost orientally fantastic roof-forms. It had once been the property of some great “booster” who had aimed at giving expression to his contempt for mere practicality by building into it many reentrant angles, a porte-cochère, and broken lines bewildering in their chaotic tangle. It was a very large house, for a small town. But, as rapidly almost as it had been run up, regardless of expense, it had decayed; for, though, in summer, it commanded a pretty view of the rapids of Fisher Creek, below the mill-race, it was, in winter, too far from the centre of the town to be a desirable residence for doctor, lawyer, or business man. What, to its original owner, must have appealed as its very beauty, had, in its decay, become its flagrant and ostentatious ugliness: down to its cracked and scaling paint in two contrasting shades of green with arabesque orange ornaments. Besides, it enjoyed the reputation, justly no doubt, of being the coldest house in town; for there was hardly a room within its compass which did not have a triple exposure to the weather.

Nearly every western town has some such, if not several, relics of a past prosperity which proclaim both the purse-proud lack of taste and the improvident lavishness of a generation of newly-rich promoters, parasitic upon the pioneer.

Thus, this particular house gave his first impression of the town to him who approached Fisher Landing from the west. At a distance, it greeted the new-comer many-eyed, snowy, garish like a decayed woman of the street who flaunts her paint and her cheap jewelry, her once ostentatious but now frayed

wraps, in a mistaken estimate of her irresistible charms. As the traveller approached, he saw the broken panes, the chipped-off paint, the cracking and warping boards, the bulging walls, and the once perpendicular corner-posts sadly out of plumb; just as he would see the poor, foolish pretence on passing, in the street, the once gay but now aging cocotte overflowing with fat.

Such houses, abounding in towns like Fisher Landing, stand mostly vacant. Since the original builder or a later purchaser has long since wearied of paying the annual charges, they are owned by the town, which has acquired them for the accumulated tax-bill. The town, anxious at all times to secure revenue, rents them for whatever periods and at whatever rentals it can, to transients; or, failing such, it houses in them its poor who have become a public charge; for of them too, there are plenty in such places which exist with no other justification but the promoters' ingenuity and greed.

At the present time the particular house in question had been assigned to a married but childless couple by name of Creighton.

The Creightons had, a few years ago, come from England under the provisions of the Empire Settlement Act. A farm had been bought for them out of government funds; they to pay for it in annual instalments distributed over thirty years. From the beginning, since they had been townspeople – Mr. Creighton had run a “pub” in a suburb of London – they had not made a success of the farming business. In fact, they would never have gone to the farm had it not been that they had engaged to do so in order to secure free transportation from overseas. Though they had lived in the country, Tom Creighton had, almost from the beginning, daily walked the three miles into Fisher Landing and worked at odd jobs – raking and mowing lawns, spading up flower beds, digging wells in summer; and shovelling snow or helping Pete Harrington saw wood in winter. They had prospered in a modest way though they had defaulted on the payments for the farm; so much so that, after three years of his pretence at farming, Tom Creighton had bought a circular saw and an engine of his own, on credit. With this outfit he had set

up in competition with Pete Harrington, his former employer who farmed north of the town, underbidding him by ten cents the cord of wood. At this new business, too, he had been reasonably successful though "the better class of citizens" remained loyal to Pete who, for many years, had supplied the town with its fuel.

Then a terrible accident had happened to Tom.

One day in spring when, as the consequence of a sudden and unlooked-for recrudescence of winter, the demand for the saw had been urgent and universal, Tom Creighton, in order to keep pace with Pete Harrington – Pete was a giant in stature and strength – had hired a half-grown boy of fifteen to help him. This boy, reckless and irresponsible – his task being to hand the cord-lengths up on the tilting table – had, at a moment when Tom's back was turned, thrown a heavy stick on to that table with such force that the table swung forward, against the rapidly, because idly, revolving saw, before the sidewise motion of the stick of wood had been arrested. The highly tempered and therefore brittle blade had, under the impact, and with a sound of "ping," burst into a score of fragments which were hurled into space with the full and unretarded force of a nine-horse-power engine. One of the fragments had entered the skull and brain of the lead-horse, killing it as a big-game bullet would fell a moose; another had entered Tom Creighton's back, near the spine, where it had lodged.

Henceforth, Tom Creighton had been a cripple. In spite of all Dr. Stanhope could do, he never walked upright again but remained bent double. Besides, he was periodically visited by next to unbearable pains.

The Creightons had promptly moved into town. Mrs. Creighton was a tall, strong, and competent woman, who, though she had never done any actual work, outside of her household, was well able to look after herself. People took pity on their plight; and Mrs. Creighton soon had all the

washing to do which she could take care of, both at home and at various houses where she went by the day or the half day.

At first, when this arrangement was being entered into, the Creightons, under the shadow of the disaster which had befallen them, had felt grateful that at least they could still make an honest living. But, as month after month had gone by, a change had crept into their mutual relations.

They had rented the many-eyed house. Mrs. Creighton rose at five or six in the morning and prepared breakfast; she came home again at five or six in the evening and prepared supper. The noon-day lunch Tom contrived to prepare for himself, his wife having put things handy for him in the morning. Tom Creighton felt grateful to his wife for what she did; she might have sent him to some public institution. Mrs. Creighton pitied him in his helplessness; for even when there were no pains, it took him ten minutes to climb down the stairway from his room to the kitchen.

But, as time went by and the memory of past sufferings and anxieties faded, the situation came to be accepted as an irremediable fact; and it defined itself by contrast to other households where the man was the bread-winner. More and more Tom Creighton – partly from a desire on his part to do the share of the work which in regular households is done by the woman, partly under the passive pressure exerted by his wife who simply ceased doing certain things – began to be the household drudge. Again, as formerly, before the accident which had disabled him, he rose, as winter came, first in the morning and lighted the fires. Since this took three or four times as long as it used to do, he had to rise in the small hours of the night in order to have a room warm by the time his wife came down. Next, he began to set the tables and even to cook the meals.

Concurrently with this development, their attitude to each other changed. Tom Creighton forgot that he had at least half voluntarily assumed his duties; and he saw as the only motive of his performing them the passive pressure exerted by his wife. She, too, forgot that she had at first been glad to be able

to go to work; it was true that she sometimes did more than she could without feeling over-burdened; but she assumed the speech and manners of the "boss" in the house, speaking sometimes as if she blamed her husband for his disability. Rarely, henceforth, did she consider his wishes; she acted and spoke as if she considered him an encumbrance. As a matter of fact, she sometimes thought of how much of her earning she might lay by if she were single, thus insuring herself against want in old age.

It showed in such trifles as this.

Tom Creighton smoked a pipe. He liked a certain kind of tobacco of which he consumed a pound a month, at a cost of a dollar and eighty cents. In the beginning, his wife had invariably brought home, on the first of every month, a pound tin of it; and Tom, having more leisure to smoke in than formerly, was sorely tempted to ask for a pound and a half, but refrained from doing so in order not to put an unnecessary burden on his wife; he timed himself, sucking an empty pipe rather than refilling it before he could do so without danger of exceeding his monthly allowance.

But when, on the first of October, his wife had brought him a pound of a different brand, cheaper by thirty cents, he had silently revolted. She, noticing it, had felt angered and resolved then and there to bring only a half-pound tin the next time. What an idea of his to smoke away month after month the earnings of a whole day's work, and her work at that!

Other trifles furnished the subject for silent comment and criticism: hundreds of trifles; yes, finally every single trifle of which their daily intercourse consisted.

On the particular afternoon of the day in the January thaw of which we were speaking, Tom Creighton lay on his bed in the front room upstairs which faced north. Outside, the sun shone brightly; and the moisture with which the air was saturated imparted to the day a springlike quality full of hope. Other people thought of the fact that such a thaw, three months hence, would mean the end of winter;

or they rejoiced at least in the general sparkle and glitter, in the very whiteness of the world. But Tom Creighton lay there, his dull look fastened to the wall where a little trickle of water seeped down from the ceiling; for in this crazy-built house with the many angles in the roof the joints were pulling apart. Snow had accumulated above as it does in holes in the ground; whereas it slipped down from other houses.

“Yes,” thus his thought ran, “Not even a decent house to live in! Not even a tiny little box of a house with two or three rooms at most, as we should have! We’ve got to rent this big maze of a thing, with ten rooms all piled topsy-turvy as out of a toy box! A ten-year old child could have built more sensibly! And why? Because we could not rent a hen-roost for less money!”

He groaned.

Then he thought of his wife; and his thought of her was tinged with hatred. Did she smile when she came home? God forbid! A serious, weary, superior, dissatisfied expression lay on her still handsome features, as if she hated the very thought of entering the house which held him.

Again he groaned.

“As if it were my fault! As if I had made myself a cripple on purpose! What did she come home for anyway, at noon? To spy on me! She might have stayed at the Bailies’; she had an all-day job to do there, confound it! A head-ache! As if Mrs. Bailie wouldn’t have given her a head-ache wafer! ... And how she said that! ‘I wish you would not smoke in here; I have a head-ache!’ Where the devil am I to smoke if not in the only room that is heated? Am I to sit outside?”

The kitchen was a large room; and there were two stoves: a cookstove and a small, so-called “air-tight” heater of tin. He lay and re-visualized his wife’s entrance, knitting his pale, sickly-looking forehead into a frown. First of all, she had gone to that heater and raised the lid. Seeing a fresh piece of

wood in it, she had said querulously, "It seems to me you might let one fire go out over noon on a day like this. I've got to work for that wood. Besides, you always lie down upstairs after dinner. What's the use of putting a fresh stick in just before?"

He thought and thought of that.

"I could have answered her, to be sure. But the dickens of it is, she is right. She works for the money! It's her money we are spending! It's best to keep quiet ... Only she might think of the fact that I suffer most from the situation. It's coarse of her to throw it in my face that way! Yes, coarse and indelicate! Does she think I like her to go and make the living? A man's got his pride! Doggone it! This life is a burden!"

And again he fastened his eye on the wall and that slow, slow trickle of water from the leaky roof.

"Eh!" he said aloud with the accent of utter disgust.

But his thought returned to his wife. She was the dominant fact in his life. He hated her very strength and efficiency: the very means which kept them from starving or becoming a public charge. He almost wished she, too, were crippled so that they'd at least be on a level.

But suddenly his thoughts took a turn. Sit outside? Let the fires go out? Save fuel? Ostentatiously and out of spite?

She inflicted suffering on him, mental suffering worse than physical pain.

He would punish her! Surely, he would punish her!

He painted the situation to himself in elaborate detail; from his intimate knowledge of her he guessed at the very words which she would use; and he prepared his answers, carefully, testingly, trying his very intonations so as to give them the proper sting.

Thus the afternoon wore on. He pulled his nickel watch and looked at the time. It was four o'clock. His wife had said she would be home shortly after five.

Painfully indeed, but much more painfully in appearance than in fact – as if there had been a witness – he lifted himself into a sitting position on his bed, throwing off the blanket; and slowly, bent double, leaning on his cane, he made his way to the stairway and down, descending step for step.

In the kitchen, he looked into the tin heater which was tightly closed off. The single stick which he had put in at noon and on which his wife had remarked was still smouldering. Carefully, with poker and ash-shovel, he picked it out and placed it in the fire-box of the cook-stove. Then he opened the outside door to let the room cool off. On the cook-stove, over the smouldering piece of wood, he placed a kettle half full of water.

Outside, it being midwinter, it had already begun to freeze again; it had done so now for the last two or three nights. He shivered even in the kitchen.

At last he closed the door, took a chair and dragged it over the floor, through the unfurnished and darkened front room which had once been the parlour of the house and out, through the front door, to the porch.

Then he returned for his old sheep-skin coat and his cane which he had left behind.

From the porch, he moved his chair down into the still slushy front yard and across it to the tumble-down fence along the roadside. And lastly he fetched coat and cane which he had left behind



again and sat down in the chair, throwing the coat over his bent and crippled back; for he could not do it without help.

It was a quarter to five when he had thus installed himself. The sun was sinking to the crest of the hills to the west.

He looked at the house and laughed contemptuously. "There's the snow on the roof that's melting into the house! And what a colour! That green! Like poison! And that silly, orange ornament running under the eaves! Disgusting! And all the points of the roof! No wonder the doggone thing is cold! And windows! Let's see. How many windows are there in that old parlour? There's the bay window in front, as large as five ordinary windows thrown together! And two on each side! Nine windows in one room! I'll be jiggered! I will! And open to the nice, cosy north wind on three sides! Some way of building that is! A blasted house!"

For twenty minutes he sat, bent over, his elbows resting on his knees, shivering in the evening chill, for the slushy snow was congealing now into a hard, rigid crust.

Then, slowly and carefully, so it would not hurt – but also in order to impress a possible spectator with his infirmities – he turned his head and peered along the street, towards town, or rather towards the mill which blocked the road.

Yes, his wife was coming; and her approach made him feel almost gay, for the tragicomedy which he was enacting would come to a head now; but he also felt nervous; he was not entirely without dread of the coming encounter.

"Well," Mrs. Creighton exclaimed ironically when she reached the yard gate. "What's the latest? Do you want to catch your death of cold? Sitting out here in the yard?"

Hurriedly he gathered up his cane. "I'm going in," he said with feigned and exaggerated meekness. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"What's the idea?" Reading his mind fully, she could not suppress an impulse of anger.

"Well," he said apologetically, "it was warmer out here than inside."

"What? Haven't you got a fire?"

"No," he replied innocently. "That is, I've just lit one in the cook-stove. I understood you to say ..." He paused at the recollection; a feeling of impotent rebellion overpowered him; and he spat his words out venomously. "I understood you to say that a cripple like me has no right to a fire in the heater ... Don't deny it now! That's what you said! Even if those weren't the exact words!"

Mrs. Creighton stood and stared at him. Strangely, she understood the full psychology of the situation; she even understood that there was only one remedy, that of "having it out" on the spot, of letting it come to a quarrel which would clear the atmosphere. But she also felt that it was just such a quarrel he was "driving for"; and, perversely, though she wished for it herself, she would not, at this moment, give him the satisfaction of letting him have his way.

She shrugged her shoulders, walked away with quick steps which made her broad hips quiver under her coat, entered the house, and slammed the door in his face.