

A WIDOW'D HOUSE

MARY WEEKES

THE house looks as we've known it these twenty years, except that there is no split wood thrown in a loose pile (as a man throws wood) against the back door, and that heavy shutters are fast against the front that opens upon Echo Lake. It is grey-weathered. It is trim. The door is padlocked shut as usual. But we who are neighbours know that it is a widow'd house.

The flat stepping-stones that form a path through weeds to the door are sunk in yellow thistles, and flanking these is a mat of Russian thistles. A full fierce crop, as always, they catch at the ankles. Just now they are in seed. And this year they will not be cut. The stepping-stones are narrow and irregular, and so groggy that a side-step, if one is not wary, will put the foot deep in earth that is a black sponge. A squashy mineral spring hugs fast to the foot-stones. But it is not the weed-filled path, or the crop of ripe thistles, or even the fast-closed shutters, that can proclaim the house to be widow'd. It is the absence of split-wood. The master was particular about his wood.

Outwardly, to strange eyes, everything about the house would seem the same. Nearby, out of a pipe that has been sunk far into the black bog to reach a spring, clear cool water gushes all day and all night. Above the gurgle of this clear water rises the clanking of tin pails, the talk and laughter of summer folk, a snatch of song, the fall of oars as boats with overflowing pails stowed aboard shove off the landing beneath the spring. These sounds swim round and past the widow'd house. To the master they were pleasant.

Now that nights are cold, new sounds have risen. It is the whirr of wings. Mallards and canvas-backs, flocking together for their southward flight, crowd with mud-hens to the very shadow of the widow'd house. Protection is there from the winds that ride down upon the lakes from the prairie 300 feet above. And there are weeds, thick and green, and wild rice hard against the shore. Only a few hundred yards beyond the shuttered windows loons sit at night upon the still water and call their sad laments. The master used to listen to them, and say that hundreds of years hence loons would be calling so. And still further out, pelicans, white and stately beyond description, drift at dawn upon the channel.

This is the setting of the widow'd house. Deep in the natural amphitheatre of the Qu'Appelle Valley, it has a setting of permanence in a world where life has no permanence. Life merely touches this age-old valley. This knowledge comes upon the stillness, the

lament of water-fowl, the music of flowing water. The master must have felt it.

Though we who are neighbours know the sadness of the widow'd house standing melancholy in its yellow thistles and rank nettles, we still expect, in a vague silly way, to see grey poplar smoke come in gusty puffs out of its stout chimney. We have felt the hospitable warmth of this chimney, we who have been summer neighbours. In its wide throat we've seen game of the valley, or a joint (the master was an Englishman) turning on a spit until it was roasted. And we've helped to heap logs into its ravenous gullet. We've known good quiet English cheer round the broad stone fireplace.

In a lean-to against the widow'd house there is a little motor boat which the master built. Light as a thistle. I've skimmed in it the length of the chain of lakes, which under the blue of heaven and between the green-girdling hills are sapphires. For miles and miles. And out in this little motor boat I've gone when the sapphire water was a white boiling demon. Nothing could swamp this little light craft, said the master, who was an engineer. He'd built his fancies into it. The motor was a slave subdued to his will. Now in the lean-to this thistle-weight craft lies easy, its seams opening, its motor rusting.

Inside the widow'd house, on a bare shelf against the wall, stands a pewter teapot that holds the gleam of silver. I remember the first time I saw it. I had come late one evening to my cottage with my children, and the master, seeing smoke at our place, came to fetch us to his place for a cup of tea. A bachelor, he said, liked a bit of company. In a twinkling he was extracting a quite extravagant pinch of tea from a cracker-box, and lo! we were drinking tea poured straight out of a hand-made pewter teapot. The design, our host said, he had taken from a silver tea service he had seen in the British Museum. He was a master craftsman.

In the widow'd house, scattered in awful and ignoble places—on work tables, heaped on the grocery shelf—we've admired curios that had come from the corners of the world. With his enthusiasm, the master could turn our dull hours into enchantment.

It is late evening now, and I have just come from walking past the widow'd house. A big pale moon was rising out of the lake. As I stumbled along the shore, in the half light there lifted from my feet a long long whirr of wings. Ducks disturbed moving down the lake. From deep water came the sob of loons; the green hills looked black and solid. A train whistle broke, was lost, in the long dark coulee. I looked at the widow'd house and I shivered a little. A bit of split wood piled in disorder against the door would have changed things so!