

THE OLD LOG HOUSE

BY NEWTON MAC TAVISH

PENCIL DRAWINGS BY HARLOW WHITE*

IT is towards the evening of an autumn day forty years ago. An old man, the oldest in the village, a pioneer indeed, enters the little log house that snuggles behind the poplars half-way up the hill. Like the man, the house is rich in years; like him, also, it is battered and weather-beaten. But these two, the dweller and the dwelling, present many points of picturesqueness. They began here together, when the great forest almost smothered them, before the place itself had even a name, and together they have settled down in serene and complacent age. Still they are not alone, for the room into which the man enters confines a low, peculiar, whirring, crooning sound. It is a sound not unfamiliar to the neighbour boy who is suffered to enter at will, lured thither by the sight of mink and muskrat swinging from a gun across the old man's shoulder. Yet in the gloom of the interior, where no object is sharply defined, the sound impresses the boy as something weird and uncanny. He knows, however, that it is a homely sound, and as his eyes become accustomed to the dim light, he distinguishes the bent form of an old woman spinning yarn. The woman, like the house and man, has stood against time and hard weather, but upon her face, even now, you can see shining the spirit

of benevolence. She calls the boy to her side, and bids him watch her transfer the yarn from the spinner to the winder. Then she turns the smaller wheel slowly, and when it clicks, as she explains, it warns her that it has revolved forty times, which is one skein. A wooden wheel that speaks when it has done its work! And still we wonder at our latest inventions. But no marvel of this new century, can take the place in that boyish imagination of the little wooden winding-wheel in the log house behind the poplars.

The old man has been visiting his traps. He throws the game into the woodshed, lays a couple of traps in a corner, and hangs the gun on pegs close to the ceiling. It is a bit chilly, he thinks, and the old woman, who is setting her wheels aside, enjoins him to start a fire. So he takes down from a rude shelf above a ruder fireplace two small articles. One looks like a piece of stone, the other like a piece of iron. And that, in fact, is what they are: the flint and steel of former days. He goes down upon his knees before the fender, sets out a few pieces of punk, above which he poises his hands, the flint in one, the steel in the other. There is a moment of hesitation, and then he strikes. The sound is sharp and brittle, as the flint and steel come together with a

* Harlow White came to Canada from England, and in the early seventies he painted and sketched much of what he saw then. The drawings here reproduced are from the originals in the John Ross Robertson collection.