

BUT ALWAYS APRIL

GILEAN DOUGLAS*

HE came slowly down the street in the April dusk and the house was there. He had known it would be, of course, but just the same it gave him a feeling of relief to see it.

He would have liked to go up the front walk between the perle rose hedge, but someone might see him. He looked along the street. No, no one in sight. But he cut across the lawn, through the dark pool of the forsythia and honeysuckle bushes, to the flower beds below the stone balustrade of the terrace. The light from the street lamps was dim and the burnt brick walls of the house loomed dark with shadow. But the white paint gleamed gallantly and the tulips were still red.

The magnolia tree should be budding now. He went over and took a branch between his fingers. Yes, buds all over it: like solid silk and with that faint lemon odor. There would be more flowers this year than ever. And everyone had told his father that magnolias wouldn't bloom in this climate!

He looked at the dining-room windows behind the little tree and they stared back at him with a bare, dark gaze. No white curtains or thick green hangings to soften them now, with the sheen of mahogany and the glitter of cut-glass decanters behind. But the dark green panelling would still be there and the squared beams of the ceiling and the fireplace with its built-in chimney seat. The tapestry that reminded him of all the forests he had ever known would still be on the walls of the front hall. The tapestry would follow the stairs up into the hall above and the black oak railing would be hand-smooth and warm. Or perhaps it wouldn't be warm now. The crimson hangings of the library at the top of the steps would glow deeply in the light from the street, as they had so many times when he had kneeled on the window sofa in the darkness watching for his father to come home. Perhaps even the rich smell of cigars would be there—it hadn't been so long; not quite three months—and the smooth, not-quite-scented smell of shaving soap in his father's dressing-room. And the smell of death in the blue bedroom.

He crossed the side lawn and stood with his back pressed against the elm tree, old and huge and straightly whole. In summer it shaded half the lawn towards the back fence and the

*Poet and journalist resident in Whaletown, B. C.

sidewalk and road in front. He had played knife under it and read "Scottish Chiefs" there and jumped in the snowdrifts piled around it.

A footstep sounded in the pavement and he pressed more closely against the rough bark. But the tree shielded him from the street as it had so many times. It must have shielded a lot of people: pioneers, Indians, soldiers. It must have seen death often. Death. That was a strange word: soft so that you couldn't grasp it, but yet so hard and cold that your hands could never, never warm it. The day before the funeral his father's hands had been like queer stone when he put his essay medal under them. He turned and laid his face against the great elm and spread his arms as far as he could around the trunk on either side. This wouldn't go. Not for a long, long time.

Then his eyes began to sting and he shook his head hard and ran towards the back of the lawn. The poplar was there. Once it had barely held his small weight on its lower branches and now it was half as high as the house. He swung himself up in it and found his favorite place: the forked limb where he could lie back and look up at the sky. There were stars in the sky now; he could see them clearly because the new leaves were so small. He closed his eyes and for a moment it was last April and his father was reading in the library inside. There were the same smells: the fresh and earthy one and the one like pavements just sprayed with water. There was the special April scent, too, that burned inside him when he breathed. But now it was a feeling; a mixture of feelings. Like the first time he had kicked a goal for the school, like the day he knew he was going to be a writer, like the night he was lost in the Muskoka woods.

"Grant."

He wasn't sure that he had heard the whisper. He twisted sideways and looked down through the branches. Yes, it was Catherine. She was standing at the foot of the tree looking up at him, her face softly white in the darkness. He swung himself down and stood beside her.

"I saw you come in."

"Yes."

"It was almost as though you were next door again."

He didn't answer that, but he stood thinking about it. He thought of teaching her to skate and climb and walk fences. Then the earliest memory of all: the day she had come over to

play with him for the first time and he shut the side door on her chubby fingers and then ran up the street when she bel-
lowed and Emily came hurrying from the kitchen garden.
But he had his spanking just the same. With a hair brush.
That was all between them now and drew them closer than
they stood. It seemed a natural thing to take her hand and
swing it as they turned and walked towards the street.

"Will you be back again?"

"Yes, I'd thought—well, once anyway before the holidays
are over. I stay with Aunt Margaret in the holidays."

"I'll watch for you."

"I'll be here Easter Sunday evening."

"That's night after next. I'll be here too."

He began to whistle softly as he strode up the street to-
wards the car line. The air seemed much warmer. Perhaps
the magnolia would be in bloom by Sunday.