

## THE TREASURE TREE

by Kathy Dutton

The city bought the McCarey orchard in 1955, and that spring a crew of workmen started undoing Johnny Appleseed's planting. One by one the blossom-laden trees crashed to the ground, making room for the new housing complex. The work stopped momentarily when a giant elm was discovered. Because of its great size and the consequent difficulty in felling it, the tree was spared. The work resumed, and soon only the elm stood in the field. The complex was soon finished, and the houses looked like rows of boxes that had been painted different colors. Each lot had two maple saplings in the front yard and two in the back, except 410 which had the giant elm in its back yard. Families came to choose the box of their favorite color, and soon all the boxes were filled with people. The family that lived in 410 was luckier than the others, because the elm shaded their house and kept it cool in the summer. In the evening, the shade extended into the next yard, and the people in 414 shared the luxury.

In the summer of 1957, Mr. and Mrs. Dutton and their seven daughters moved to 414 East South "E" Street. During the first afternoon in their new home, the Dutton girls hurried next door to inspect the giant elm. It was not as pretty as it had once been; lightning had struck the elm during a thunderstorm, and now the tree was dead. The bark had rotted away until the tree, except for part of the trunk, was naked. The huge, bare elm looked strangely out-of-place amid the thriving young maples. Linda, the eldest daughter, stripped a piece of bark from the tree, revealing hundreds of red ants that scurried away in as many directions. Then Larry, the boy who lived at 410, came outside and said to the girls, "You can't play with my tree unless you ask me." The girls quickly went home. Later they met Larry's younger sister, Theresa, and she invited them to play under the elm.

That summer the tree caught on fire, but the children used the garden hose to put out the fire. The tree was spared.

Once Larry announced that there was a treasure buried under the tree and that he was going to cut down the tree and dig up the treasure. The children watched as Larry and Rod started chopping the tree at the burned part. One girl felt silent tears run down her cheeks—the

tears the tree could not cry. The boys chopped until they had made a triangular opening in the base of the hollow tree. They decided to crawl inside, but the opening was too small for them. Anita Dutton, the second daughter, was the only one small enough and brave enough to crawl inside. As she crawled into the tree, she noticed a difference in the light. The brilliant light outside could not compare to the light inside the tree. The long, slender rays of quiet sunlight cast soft shadows within the tree. She looked up and watched a small portion of the sky through the opening at the top of the tree. The world outside seemed far away. Anita heard a woodpecker hunting for insects in the wood of the tree, and she heard bees buzzing far up in the tree; but it was a long time before she heard her mother telling her to come out of the tree. When she crawled out, the brilliant light hurt her eyes, and she had no words with which to tell the others what she had seen. In time the children forgot about cutting down the tree and finding the treasure, but Anita did not forget that the tree sheltered life.

When Larry's pet rat died, the children buried the tiny animal inside the tree. Thereafter the tree sheltered the graveyard for the pets that died and any dead animals that the children found.

The elm was magically transformed into a winter fortress, and the boys on "E" street never lost a home snowball fight. In the summers the girls played house and the boys wrestled under the elm, and the tree was always "safe" when they played tag. The years passed, and the elm silently watched over the children.

Then those children forgot the elm. The girls primped, and the boys took odd jobs; but the wonderful tree remained the same and was inherited by younger children.

The year after Larry was graduated from high school and was drafted into the army, his parents decided to cut down the elm. A young girl ran to her mother, crying the words that the tree could not say, "Mother, don't let them kill our tree."

"But, Honey, the tree is already dead."

"Not to us!"

The ashes of the tree were still burning in the pet graveyard when it was learned that Larry had been killed in Vietnam. The tree had again been spared—spared the grief of losing one of its children.