

Contents

A Really Unusual Tree	3
A Curious Neighbour	9
Problems with the Neighbours	16
A Feat of Hydraulic Engineering	21
The Migration Season	27
A Present from the Storks	36
A Party in the Tree	41
The Tenant's Curse	50
The Children Change Diet	55
Infant Lispings	63
The Intoxication of Flight	72
Signals in the Night	80
The Great Battle	88
Afterword	96

*For Aglaia,
who exists for real –
as does Bianca,
who is none other
than the Author*

A Really Unusual Tree

When you first saw it, it seemed a tree just like any other tree. It stood in the middle of a field on a gentle slope. Its trunk was quite thick, and it was covered with dense foliage.

The bark of the trunk was brown, and wrinkled knotty roots spread out around its base.

The leaves were green and thick, but they were too high up for you to see their shapes properly. At the foot of the tree there were clumps of grass, daisies, little stones and, whenever it rained, a few red-capped mushrooms, just like the ones you see in the pictures of a book. There were flowers and fruits on the branches, and butterflies, bees and little birds among them... It was just like any other tree.

But if you looked closely, you could see, at the bottom of the tree, a little door hidden among the knotty roots. It was wide enough to enter without getting stuck (unless you were a bit too fat). The trunk was in fact hollow, and inside it a little spiral staircase ran all the way up to the branches and the leaves. And if you

didn't want to use the secret little door, there were also broken-off branches sticking out of the trunk which went all the way up and which you could grab or step onto to climb above.

Aglaia of course preferred this way. She'd scamper up as quick as a squirrel.

She was eight years old and lived in the tree with her friend Bianca. Bianca was a grown-up. The two of them had both got tired of living in the city, in an ordinary house. So they decided to join forces: they went to look for a suitable tree and, once they'd found one, moved in.

At the top of the trunk, where the branches divided, there was a platform made from planks and surrounded by a parapet. You couldn't see it from the ground, because the leaves were so thick. In the middle of the platform there was a trapdoor through which you could run a rope down to pull anything up into the tree – a basket of food, or a piano, if you wanted one.

To get higher up, there weren't any more stairs: you had to climb from branch to branch. The tree was so tall it never seemed to stop. If you stood in the field and looked at it, it just seemed an ordinary tree – tall but not very tall. At a certain point there were no more branches, but only the sky above them.

But if you climbed up inside the tree, you wouldn't believe it – you went on climbing, up and up until you

felt giddy if you looked down at the field far below. But Bianca and Aglaia had never reached the top.

They had decided to build their house on a couple of sturdy branches, just a few feet above the platform. They'd worked all summer building it, busy with saws and hammers.

And they'd built a really beautiful house. It was very large, though you'd never have guessed it was there looking up from the field. It didn't have a proper plan, in the sense that the arrangement of the rooms was permanent. Only the floor and part of the roof were fixed in place. There were walls and canopies made out of leaves woven together, and you could move them about as you wanted to – depending on the sun, the wind, the heat, on whether the two of them wanted to be together or on their own, or if they needed to check what was on the horizon...

Normally, whenever the weather was fine, they rolled up the walls and put them in a corner, and the house was open on all sides.

They had all the furniture they needed: not too much, not too little. And the same was true for the other things they needed. On the other hand, there was a huge number of games and books, and whenever they ran out of space to keep them, Aglaia would tie them with string onto nearby branches.

Her bed too hung from a branch just outside the house. It was a kind of Eskimo cradle; it looked a bit like a silkworm's cocoon, or one of those bird's nests that are enclosed and woven tight. It was lined with fur and swayed to and fro whenever there was a breeze.

Bianca, however, was worried about getting rheumatism – and also suffered from seasickness – so she slept in a sleeping bag inside the tree trunk, in a little recess near the spiral staircase. “I feel safer sleeping near the door,” she would say. “If a fire broke out, I could let the firemen know immediately. And if thieves tried to break in, I could stop them.”

But, you must be wondering, if neither of them slept in the house, what did they use the house for?

They used it to welcome their friends who came to visit, to hold big parties, to put on plays, to do the housework and to cook. They had a beautiful kitchen, full of pots and pans, made of metal and earthenware.

Then there was a music room with all the instruments of an orchestra; a studio for painting, with coloured paints and pencils and huge sheets of paper; there was even a greenhouse. A greenhouse in a tree? Yes, that's right, a greenhouse! Actually, it was more than a greenhouse: it was a laboratory for botanical experiments. Bianca had had the idea of making their tree contain all the kinds of fruit trees that existed. Up



and down the branches she would go the whole day long making grafts. Everywhere you could see those funny-looking bandages wrapped round the branches that had been cut into, where little twigs from different types of trees had been inserted. At first all their friends laughed and said it was a crazy idea, but when Bianca started to achieve her first results they stopped criticizing.

The tree was an oak tree, so it produced acorns. But with the first grafting, one of its main branches became a walnut tree – and so, when the autumn came, Aglaia could pick fresh walnuts by leaning out of her window. Then on another branch a chestnut tree had been grafted. Higher up, Bianca had grown apple and pear and apricot trees. There was also a small cherry tree, as well as one bearing plums and another one peaches. Aglaia had begged Bianca to graft a mulberry tree, even just a small branch, and this had succeeded as well.

Then Bianca decided she'd undertake a more difficult task. Up until then she had only grafted fruit trees that were native to the place where they lived. Now she wanted to try and grow tropical plants. And after a few attempts, she succeeded in growing dates and bananas and coconuts, and then mangos and papayas, pineapples and even breadfruit.

Now they had everything, and they no longer needed to shop in a supermarket.

The best thing was that the fruit ripened in different seasons. So, at every time of the year, some branches were in blossom and some bare, others just coming into leaf and bud, while others were laden with fruit of all different colours...

“What a beautiful tree,” sighed Aglaia as she stared up at it. But no one knew that she lived in a house in its branches. This was a secret shared between her, Bianca and Mr Beccaris Brullo.