

The Plumtree.

It was a large tree, with over grown branches badly in need of pruning, but Ethel could not bring herself to have it butchered.

It was also a very beautiful tree. Smothered with white blossom in the springtime that blew down onto the green grass beneath covering it like a carpet of snow flakes. The dappled sunshine danced through its leaves making them shine like stars. Birds nested and sang their songs in year after year.

Yet in all the ten years that Ethel had lived in the house it had born fruit but once, and then in such abundance that the branches were bowed down with the golden-yellow fruit, sweet and delicious. But the effort of producing this one bumper crop was all too much for it to deal with, for it never happened again. The blossom came and went, the tree leafed, the branches and twigs grew strong, creaking in the rough winds. Eventually the plum tree grew too wide; it was hanging over the neighbour's garden; so Ethel called in a tree surgeon for advice.

"It's a beautiful tree!" he said "but it is on its way out. It will not fall on your head, but it is finished as far as fruit is concerned. It would be better to have it pruned as soon as the leaves have fallen."

Ethel agreed. After that, she often heard the plum tree sighing and gently creaking in the wind as she wandered up and down the garden. She would stand beneath and look up into the heart of it while she leaned against its trunk. She felt she had to touch it as she passed by. It seemed to bend its branches towards her, as if it wanted to touch her, or shelter her from the wind and rain. Sometimes she spoke to it, then laughed at herself for being so childish. She had end of her linen line tied to one of the lower branches which swung and lifted as the breezes blew them, making the little birds that sat on the line clutch tightly to the swaying line that threatened to hurl them in all directions, to the four winds.

Came the autumn and the tree surgeon with his electric saw. He removed all the dead wood and some of the more untidy branches. As Ethel heard the saw biting into the wood she thought she heard the tree groan as the branches fell to the ground, she felt the pain of the tree. She could not go out into the garden for several day afterwards for the pity of it.

Then winter came with its snows and frosts. The tree stood firmly and bravely up during the rough weather waiting for the spring, which brought a day when Ethel was looking out into the garden and thought how light the garden was now. She knew she had done the right thing by having the plum tree pruned and began to have to feel the pleasure of the garden once more, but she was puzzled by the grass that used to grow under the tree. It was turning brown and soft as she walked over it. Where ever her foot went, so the grass withered and disappeared after a while.

When May came and more time was spent in the garden, she fancied the groans and creeks of the plum tree seemed unusually loud as it swayed in the wind. Several large twigs fell around her as she passed under the tree to get to the bottom of the garden. One twig fell one day catching the back of her leg as it did so. A slight trickle of blood ran down her leg and, although it was only a superficial wound, it stung her enough to make her cry out and hit the tree with both hands.

"Oh, dear! You would do that! Why can't you be more careful?"

She looked up at the tree with an angry tilt of her head.

"You are on your way out, and one word from me!"

The tree became very still. Although there was a breeze, not a leaf stirred in its branches. Even the birds fell silent save for a few gentle twitterings. There was a silence and a stillness

around the tree. A warmth seemed to radiate from its trunk which was ragged and peeling away in places where the squirrels scrambled up and down through the branches.

Ethel went into the house to change her tights which happened to be a new pair put on that morning. These that were ruined were the last pair left in the shade of "Jasmine" left to wear. She grumbled to herself and glared balefully out of the window as she peeled the ruined tights from her legs. Changing into another pair, she ran downstairs again. She stood in the doorway of the kitchen looking out into the garden, feeling there was something she ought to do about the plum tree but did not know what it was she was supposed to do. She walked down past the tree to the bottom of the garden. The delicate, pale green leaves on the smaller branches and twigs turned in her direction fluttering gently like fingers waving "goodbye" to an old friend. As she came back again up the garden path towards the house they turned to her; when she was under the trees they were over head; but as she moved nearer the house they turned again in her direction. The tree groaned and creaked loudly, which so startled Ethel that she ran into the house closing the door and locking it behind her. She sat down on the nearest chair, her hands and legs shaking.

"This will not do!" she said to herself "A tree is only a tree. The twigs falling on my leg is just one of many things that could have happened to me in the garden....!"

But she could not explain the stillness of the tree, the quietness of the birds, the lack of movement in the garden in spite of the now fresh wind blowing. She felt cold and very tired. She made herself a cup of coffee and went into the dining room to drink it. She could not keep her eyes off the plum tree. The notches in the wood became gaping mouths that opened and closed as if calling for help.

The branches began to cling together as if to gain comfort and support in their pain and loss. Ethel called through the glass of the window to the tree,

"I am so sorry but I did what I thought was best for you. If I had not had your useless limbs removed, the rest of you would have had a very short life. Oh, don't you see that! You would have died!"

The plum tree stood very still for a while then it started to sway in the wind. The boughs bent and dipped to and in their effort, so she thought, to communicate with her. They creaked and groaned. The birds flew out from their green hiding places, circled round and flew in again only to be danced up and down by the roughly swaying antics of the plum tree.

Ethel stood as if transfixed. Then she managed to pull herself together.

"It can't be true! It isn't happening! It can't be!"

Then, as quickly as it had started, the garden became quite still once more. The wind dropped, the sun shone brilliantly, and the birds began to twitter in the leaves.

Ethel opened the kitchen door and stepped out into the warm air. For a while she stood with her back leaning on the brickwork of the house studying the plum tree. It was rather overgrown even now, after it had been pruned. It spilled over into the garden next door and although the neighbours were very nice about it, Ethel felt sure they would be far happier if all the overhanging branches had been removed as well.

"As soon as autumn comes again, I will have all those boughs off. It will make the tree look rather odd, but it must be done."

The plum tree gave a faint moan and swayed slightly towards to house.

Ethel had by now recovered from the scratches on her leg but still felt angry and resentful over the torn tights. She fetched a hand fork and her kneeling pad and began to pull up the weeds that grew round the path at the foot of the tree. A blackbird hovered near her as she worked waiting for her to turn up some grubs. She spoke to it as she worked. It seemed very unafraid but she avoided making any sudden movements to scare it away. She even began to hum to herself. Things were so peaceful, that she forgot the feelings of tension and worry she had earlier. The garden was filled with tranquillity. She looked up into the foliage of the tree and wondered what it was that made her feel so uneasy.

"You are a fool! It is a good thing that trees can't talk, or I would be in for a trouncing from this one!"

As she said this the plum tree started to rustle its leaves and bend its twigs slightly. Very gently at first so that Ethel was hardly aware of any change at all. Then came movement in the boughs like some one shivering with ague as the leaves trembled and shivered, so Ethel trembled and shivered. She could not keep her hands steady. She tried to stand but the effort was too much for her. She lost her balance and fell against the plum tree which seemed to engulf her, drawing her into the soft, fruity-smelling pappy mass that was its trunk. Little slivers of wood pricked and clawed at her body. She protected her head with her left arm and beat on to the pulp of the trunk with her right hand which still held the small gardening fork. The plum tree creaked and moaned and shuddered. The wind through the leaves whispered to her,

"Tooth-to-oo-th to-oo-ooth". It hissed it at her

"I am sorry, I am sorry," she said fearfully. The tree sighed." Eye-eye-eeeyee-eye. Too-oo-oth".

Ethel felt she had no more fight left in her. As she sank to the ground at the bottom of the tree she weakly called out in a pleading voice,

"Help me! Oh, please, please, I won't hurt you any more!".

Her hand hurt her and she felt sore all over. Some one whispered in her ear yet the sound was deafening.

"Ethel! Ethel! Are you alright?"

Hands were gently lifting her to her feet. For a moment she could neither stand or see. Then her vision cleared and she saw neighbours were bending over her and trying to get her to stand. Strong arms supported her until she could stand alone.

"Ethel! You nearly 'had it'! This plum tree tried its best to pin you to the ground but you managed to roll over out of its way. Then you got entangled in the sheets hanging on the line as it fell with these branches."

It was then that Ethel saw the plum tree. It was still standing proudly up, its pale, green leaves gently fluttering in the breeze like hands waving "goodbye" to an old friend. The two boughs that had been overhanging the neighbour's garden had cracked and fallen into her garden breaking her fence, pinning her to the ground by its topmost little twiglets, not hurting her at all, save a scratched hand.

"It could have been much worse." said the neighbour. "You had better have that old plum tree cut right down in the autumn!"

"Yes," she answered, "I must think seriously about it."

She thought she heard the tree muttering,

"Eye-for-eye-for-too-oo-ooth".

Then the birds twittered and whistled.

"Tooth-too-th-too-oo-tooth"!

"Yes, I will have it cut down in the autumn. It is dangerous."

Ethel stuck the small hand fork into the tree, turned and left it quivering there. The tree groaned, then was silent.