

In the Beginning

The Nesting Instinct

In the beginning, the ancestors of man and apes lived in trees. Since then many, but not all, of both species have come down to earth. Certain chimpanzees make simple nests in the branches, day nests and night nests, and just as fashion-conscious ladies would never dream of being seen in the same dress twice, these apes never return to the same nest. Their day nests are reserved solely for siestas as most apes, like many humans, enjoy a two-hour nap between 9.30 a.m. and 3 p.m.

One of the most elaborate nests of the ape family is built by the nocturnal lemur. It cuts up twigs and carries them aloft, where it weaves them into a globe-like nest high in the treetops. The nests are completely roofed over and have a small side entrance and a floor lined with shredded leaves. There is generally room for one adult.

Li Chi, the ancient book of Chinese ritual, claims that in remotest antiquity, 'The people had no houses. In winter they lived in caves which they had excavated and in summer they lived in nests in the trees, which they built on frames.'

When Captain Cook discovered Australia, he found to his surprise that the Aborigines in Tasmania (now extinct) lived in treetops 'like fauns and satyrs'. This habit was widespread among certain South Sea islands. The nests were thatched with crude shelters, and the inhabitants lowered themselves to the ground in large baskets woven from supple shoots and coconut matting. This is depicted in the drawing from *Tienshih chai hua-pao* on p. 26.

The tree-dwelling habit was not confined to the southern



Nest-dwellers on a South Sea island, an old engraving from Tien-shih chai hua-pao. Note the use of baskets to get up and down - perhaps tree-dwellers were the inventors of the first lift?

oceans. The Roman historian Tacitus records in his *Germania* that the Fenni (today's Lapps) ' . . . lived in astonishing barbarism and disgusting misery. They had no fixed houses, nor had their infants any shelter against wild beasts and rain except the covering given by a few intertwined branches.'

After Christopher Columbus opened the way for exploration of the Americas, there were various reportings of human tree-dwellers. Sir Walter Raleigh in *The Discovery of the Empire of Guiana* relates how a tribe along the Orinoco delta, called the *Tiñitiñas*, were 'A very goodlie people. Dwell upon the trees where they build very artificial towns and villages.'

There was a good and practical reason for this. Quite apart from offering protection from raiding tribes, it enabled them to escape the worst of the swarms of mosquitoes that emerge from the forest at nightfall. Mosquitoes cannot fly far over water.

Sir Walter Raleigh was not the only one to discover people living in trees in that region. Engravings in Erasmus Francisci's *Lustgarten* (1668) identify Spanish invaders attacking the natives, besieged in their tree 'nests'. As the print shows, so long as their ammunition of rocks and coconuts, spears and arrows lasted, the tree-dwellers were in an advantageous

position. Unfortunately for them, the Spanish conquistadors protecting themselves with boards from the rocks raining on them, got to work with axes. Having felled the trees and tree nests, they put the tree-dwellers - including women with babes in arms - ruthlessly to the sword. Other tree nests were bombarded with flights of spears - however, the cunning tree-dwellers are shown catching some of these and hurling them back.

To this day there are tribes living along the periodically flooded riverlands in the Amazonian rainforests who escape floods and bugs by building simple platforms among the trees. In the river deltas of Venezuela they often use the Itá palm trunks as supporting posts for the platforms, a lower one to cook on, an upper serving as a roof. Hammocks for sleeping are strung between the trees.

One of the earliest pictorial examples of treehouses surviving in England is shown on the Bradford Table Carpet - a tapestry screen made for the Earl of Bradford between 1605 and 1615. It was designed to depict stages in man's relationship to nature. As Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of the Empire of Guiana* was first published in 1596, it is quite likely that this had some influence on the tapestry.



*Tree-dwellers on the Orinoco river, Venezuela. From Hulsius's
Fünffte kurtze wunderbare Beschreibung*



A nineteenth-century engraving showing the airy dwellings in the Orinoco Delta where the Itá palm forms solid posts for platforms and roofs

Treehouses of the Roman Empire

In England, as we shall see later, tree bowers first became widely popular in Tudor times, but the earliest historical evidence of treehouses as venues of entertainment comes from the Roman Pliny the Elder, writing in his *Natural History*, 1,500 years earlier. He records that in the Roman province of Lycia there was a huge hollow plane tree beside the road, close to a cool spring. The space inside was so big that Licinius Mucianus, who was consul for the province, ‘once held a banquet in it with eighteen members of his retinue’. According to Pliny, ‘He enjoyed himself more among the foliage than amid the splendours of marble halls.’

Plane trees (*Platanus*) grow to immense size in Greece and southern Italy, where they shade many a village square. Pliny also mentions that the Emperor Caligula had on his estates a plane tree of such breadth and size that benches were arranged on the branches and a banquet was held up in the tree, in a ‘dining-room’ large enough for fifteen guests plus their servants. It was pleasantly shady, and Pliny cattily adds that



A Persian painting of a seat in the branches of a tree

much of the shade was cast by Caligula himself, who was fat enough to block out the sun.

In those days the main meal would have been taken in mid-afternoon. One can picture Caligula's guests reclining on couches up in the tree attended by servants who replenished their silver drinking bowls with honeyed wine, and even washed their hands between courses. Roman feasts are well recorded. Extracts from a menu by Apicius include such appetizers (gusti) as sow's udder stuffed with salted sea urchins, followed by the main course, which hosts went to great lengths to make as exotic as possible and which might include boiled ostrich with sweet sauce, turtle dove boiled in its feathers, roast parrot, dormice stuffed with pork and pine kernels, flamingo boiled with dates. No wonder Romans frequently were sick during the meals! Accompanying all this gormandizing, Caligula's treehouse echoed to the sweet music of strummed lyres while the guests were beguiled by professional entertainers - jugglers, acrobats and Nubian dancing girls.

Oriental Treehouses

In Persia treehouses were very popular from the seventeenth century. Old paintings show platforms set up in trees with stairways leading to them. Some of these 'houses' were most elaborate - richly decorated with gold and silver. They even had running water and fountains playing! Up here, in their leafy platforms, catching the most of any breeze, the Persian nobility enjoyed themselves, feasting and relaxing.

In India, where the tree was frequently symbolized as the pillar of the universe, the Mogul emperors sometimes sat in tree thrones, set amongst the lower branches, while their ministers attended below. Hindu monks and hermits frequently lived in hermitages up among the boughs of the 'sacred' Oriental plane tree, their minds freed from earthbound considerations.

The Japanese constructed platforms and walkways on tall bamboo scaffolding that raised them up into the branches. From time immemorial they built these structures in their gardens but rarely used them for entertaining. They were chiefly regarded as viewing platforms, a means of enjoying the garden and the foliage from a 'bird's-eye' view.