

22: THE WINGS OF STONE

The preceding essay is about a half-built house upon my private horizon; I wrote it sitting in a garden-chair; and as, though it was a week ago, I have scarcely moved since then (to speak of), I do not see why I should not go on writing about it. Strictly speaking, I have moved; I have even walked across a field--a field of turf all fiery in our early summer sunlight--and studied the early angular red skeleton which has turned golden in the sun. It is odd that the skeleton of a house is cheerful when the skeleton of a man is mournful, since we only see it after the man is destroyed. At least, we think the skeleton is mournful; the skeleton himself does not seem to think so. Anyhow, there is something strangely primary and poetic about this sight of the scaffolding and main lines of a human building; it is a pity there is no scaffolding round a human baby. One seems to see domestic life as the daring and ambitious thing that it is, when one looks at those open staircases and empty chambers, those spirals of wind and open halls of sky. Ibsen said that the art of domestic drama was merely to knock one wall out of the four walls of a drawing-room. I find the drawing-room even more impressive when all four walls are knocked out.

I have never understood what people mean by domesticity being tame; it seems to me one of the wildest of adventures. But if you wish to see how high and harsh and fantastic an adventure it is, consider only the actual structure of a house itself. A man may march up in a rather bored way to bed; but at least he is mounting to a height from which he could kill himself. Every rich, silent, padded staircase, with banisters of oak, stair-rods of brass, and busts and settees on every landing, every such staircase is truly only an awful and naked ladder running up into the Infinite to a deadly height. The millionaire who stumps up inside the house is really doing the same thing as the tiler or roof-mender who climbs up outside the house; they are both mounting up into the void. They are both making an escalade of the intense inane. Each is a sort of domestic mountaineer; he is reaching a point from which mere idle falling will kill a man; and life is always worth living while men feel that they may die.

I cannot understand people at present making such a fuss about flying ships and aviation, when men ever since Stonehenge and the Pyramids have done something so much more wild than flying. A grasshopper can go astonishingly high up in the air, his biological limitation and weakness is that he cannot stop there. Hosts of unclean birds and crapulous insects can pass through the sky, but they cannot pass any communication between it and the earth. But the army of man has advanced vertically into infinity, and not been cut off. It can establish outposts in the ether, and yet keep open behind it its erect and insolent road. It

would be grand (as in Jules Verne) to fire a cannon-ball at the moon; but would it not be grander to build a railway to the moon? Yet every building of brick or wood is a hint of that high railroad; every chimney points to some star, and every tower is a Tower of Babel. Man rising on these awful and unbroken wings of stone seems to me more majestic and more mystic than man fluttering for an instant on wings of canvas and sticks of steel. How sublime and, indeed, almost dizzy is the thought of these veiled ladders on which we all live, like climbing monkeys! Many a black-coated clerk in a flat may comfort himself for his sombre garb by reflecting that he is like some lonely rook in an immemorial elm. Many a wealthy bachelor on the top floor of a pile of mansions should look forth at morning and try (if possible) to feel like an eagle whose nest just clings to the edge of some awful cliff. How sad that the word "giddy" is used to imply wantonness or levity! It should be a high compliment to a man's exalted spirituality and the imagination to say he is a little giddy.

I strolled slowly back across the stretch of turf by the sunset, a field of the cloth of gold. As I drew near my own house, its huge size began to horrify me; and when I came to the porch of it I discovered with an incredulity as strong as despair that my house was actually bigger than myself. A minute or two before there might well have seemed to be a monstrous and mythical competition about which of the two should swallow the other. But I was Jonah; my house was the huge and hungry fish; and even as its jaws darkened and closed about me I had again this dreadful fancy touching the dizzy altitude of all the works of man. I climbed the stairs stubbornly, planting each foot with savage care, as if ascending a glacier. When I got to a landing I was wildly relieved, and waved my hat. The very word "landing" has about it the wild sound of some one washed up by the sea. I climbed each flight like a ladder in naked sky. The walls all round me failed and faded into infinity; I went up the ladder to my bedroom as Montrose went up the ladder to the gallows; sic itur ad astro. Do you think this is a little fantastic--even a little fearful and nervous? Believe me, it is only one of the wild and wonderful things that one can learn by stopping at home.