

ROSS HALL



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During Jean-Jacques Rousseau's stay at Wootton Hall in Staffordshire, where he spent a little over a year between 1766 and 1767, the local population, unaccustomed to French surnames and how to pronounce them, called him "Ross Hall". In June 1840 the writer William Howitt travelled to Wootton in search of any traces of Rousseau's sojourn there. In his book, published later that year, Howitt recounts meeting various residents of Wootton who had heard of Rousseau, as well as a few elderly men and women who, as children, had seen him with their own eyes. He records meeting James Robinson, "a blithe old fellow of about ninety": "When I asked if he knew the Frenchman who once lived at Wootton Hall, he replied, 'What, owd Ross Hall? Ay, know him I did, well enough. Ah've seen him monny an' monny a time, every dee welly, coming and going in's comical cap an' ploddy gown, a'gethering his yarbs.'" Rousseau cut a strange and exotic figure in this remote region, but was still remembered decades later as being very kind to the poor.

SNOW, STILL. Standing outside the coach, salt-grey clouds low above, stopped by a fallow field, a howling and bitter wind, a few flecks whirling around me, my robe hitched to my waist, desperate, desperate, straining to relieve some of the ruinous pressure in my bladder, my teeth chattering, mucus beginning to stream from my eyes and nose, ears and skull aching as if in a vice, straining, willing with all the energy I can muster, urging more than just a few drops of urine to spill on the ground. The briefest trickle stains the grey snow dark brown, almost red. A moment of relief; a shooting pain through my kidneys, but no worse than the desperation before. No worse, just different. I drop my robe, my legs numb from the cold. I rush back to the coach. I feel better. I sit. I exhale and rub my hands together to warm them. I pull the squirrel-fur cap down over my ears. I think I see Thérèse smile across at me, but it's dark, even though it must only be mid-

morning. She says nothing. Sultan rests his head on my lap, his breath forming small clouds. The relief lightens my spirits and I start to hum the melody I've been working on since Môtiers. The coachman shouts and the wheels turn. On. I feel hopeful, for a moment. And then, as soon as this scant minute of hope apportioned to me is over, the old pressure returns, the ache, the restlessness, the need to disburden myself. My urethra stings. My lower back feels as if it had a knife in it. I squeeze my legs together and close my eyes. This ailment has been with me my entire life and it always reduces me to feeling like an infant, a young boy, needing to piss but not being allowed, the sad pathetic desperation of holding yourself together, the humiliation of incontinence. How often I've felt my cheeks blaze from the shame. I can't ask to stop the coach again, not so soon. It is difficult making myself understood to the driver, who doesn't share my language. Further humiliations. I couldn't relieve myself in the coach even if I wanted to. The strain required to squeeze little more than a teaspoon out of myself is too much to repeat more than once every twenty minutes, though the urge is there. I am exhausted. The returning pressure makes me want to weep. I want my mother, who I never knew, and I want Maman, who served as my mother when I was a lost adolescent, my first lover, my true friend. Sultan dozes on my thigh and breathes a deep sigh. I squeeze my eyes shut, clamp my legs tight. I rock back and forth a little, trying to breathe deeply and to calm myself. The wheels

of the coach churn in the mud outside, the snowfall gets heavier, I can feel every passage and tube in my body taut in the icy cold. I am in England. I am going to be alone, finally. Finally, alone.

The wheels churn in the mud and the coach rolls forward. It snows. The snows started in October and haven't stopped since, no matter where we go. Now it is March, and I am further north than I have ever been before. When it doesn't snow, it rains; a constant stream of moisture, never heavy, usually just drizzle, soft, just as the snow is never particularly heavy here. There is a constant dampness in the air. We have been travelling for a few days now, stopping as infrequently as possible; I am eager to reach the house as soon as we are able. The horses have to rest, of course, and so does the driver, but I am forced to be attentive when we do stop, to make sure neither the driver nor Thérèse drinks too much at the inns. At our last stop – I don't know the name of the village, the inn had a sign painted with a fox and three ducks – I went upstairs to try to steal some sleep in a bed for a few hours and came downstairs to find our driver slouched drunk and snoring in front of the fire, an empty vessel broken at his feet, with Thérèse in stilted but flirtatious conversation with a man who appeared to have no teeth in his skull. We must move on. The feelings I have about the journey are ameliorated by the great relief I feel at leaving London: too much activity surrounded me in the city; I found myself overwhelmed, incapable of

snatching any time to myself, away from the hordes of people attracted by my name. Of course this is flattering, but I am suspicious and leery of too much attention. Hume has done a lot, both to protect me from the mob and to introduce me to the worthwhile people in the city, but I feel most grateful to him for his arranging my stay in the country, away from all the people with designs on my time, out of the clamour and filth of London which, like Paris, resembles nothing more than it does an open sewer. Yes, David has shown himself to be a true friend already; he has expended a lot of time and energy to help me – after all, I was a stranger to him only a few months ago. He can't hope for much reward from his good actions, but I can repay him to some degree with my respect and my love, and by showing him the high regard in which I keep him in my heart. He is a good man, surely one of the best in Europe. If the house he has arranged for me lives up to its promise, then I'm quite sure that I will be happy there for many years to come. This country feels unpeopled: it seems like for days now I have seen nobody outside the coach window, just endless dark-brown fields with patches of dirty snow, some crows. Occasionally we might pass a man, ragged and bent, perhaps with a load on his back, slowly making his way in the same direction as us, surrounded on all sides by grey, black, brown shades, shivering in the snow, an apparently unending trudge onwards, back to some hole. These sights depress me greatly; so different from the images of the rustic and joyful

country life which I retain from the other places I have lived, particularly from my childhood. The peasants of the Vaud, for instance, strong, hearty, open in their hearts and expansive in their generosity, framed by deep, lush greens and bright blue skies. Naturally I exaggerate, the Vaud is dismal in winter, like anywhere else; it is too easy to let nostalgia and fondness for those people carry me away, now that I have been forced to seek asylum overseas, jettisoned and expelled out of my homeland, which I can never hope to see again, or enjoy as a free man, the citizen I once was. I might only return again as a corpse, if ever I do at all.

It was still cold when we reached the house, isolated, not very large – smaller than I had expected – but well-maintained. The trip had increasingly taken us through valleys and over hills, through darkening landscapes. Endless drystone walls divide the fields. In London they had told me that the countryside was not unlike that surrounding Geneva. I wasn't quite convinced. But it seemed nice enough, other than the cold and the rain. Pleasant, gentle. The house is halfway up a valley. Various even promenades have been built, surrounding the accommodation, ranging up and down the slope, with some really wonderful lawns, some of the finest, most beautiful lawns I have ever seen – even in the unflattering and dull light of a late winter's day. The view from the front lawn of the house extends for some miles. More fields, divided by

stone walls, scattered farms, some slightly more ornate houses dotted here and there, I imagine inhabited by bluff and cheerful country squires. My host has not told me much about my neighbours. Some copses, some larger woods. The horizon is ringed by gloomy and lofty slopes; dark brown, nearly black towards the summits. I am told that in summer they will be purple with heather, but now they look as though nothing could live on them. The surrounding landscape is full of rabbits, apparently, and some pasture, mostly sheep. There is a heavy sense of sparseness here. The wind howls down the valley, rattling the windows of the house. Bitter. Allegedly it will be calmer in summer. Yes, it seems fine here. I feel some hope. We were greeted at the house by a few servants. I have no idea how we will communicate, since Thérèse and I do not speak English, and the local dialect is so murky and opaque that even if I were fluent I should think I would never be able to understand them here. They, of course, know no French. But we smiled at each other readily, and they greeted us kindly, with real warmth, as though they were pleased to have guests on whom to tend. Thérèse was also pleased. The only stain on our arrival was the lingering matter of the carriage. Davenport and Hume had both insisted that it would be returning here anyway, and so the matter of payment was irrelevant. Of course, I saw this as a deception. There is a kind of politeness and generosity at work in my host which I cannot stand; I have to refuse it. I have agreed to pay Davenport for the use of the

house. I pay him rent, I am his tenant. I have also refused to receive my letters here, because of the costs, and Davenport has agreed to bring them when he visits in a few months. Good. He knows my financial situation, but he knows too that I pride myself on my independence. I must insist to him again that I pay for our transportation. What seem to be the kindest gestures are always snares with which they hope to entrap you. Friendships based on gifts cannot be true friendships. They become sour. Business transactions. Give me nothing and I'll give you nothing in return – nothing other than myself, as open and as honestly as I can render myself. A gift, especially one of money, is an obligation I cannot repay, and one I must refuse to accept. I refuse to be indebted to any one. I refuse, I refuse. I must strive to maintain my own independent position. Davenport must be made to understand this. I don't suppose that he intends any thing sinister behind his kindnesses; neither he nor David mean to make me feel trapped. I suppose I am too sensitive. As I alighted from the post-chaise I tried to press some money into the driver's hands. After all, despite his drinking, he had kindly stopped so many times because of my indisposition, and it had been a long and uncomfortable journey. He looked pained and tried to give me back some coins. Clearly he had his instructions. One of the servants stepped forward, they exchanged some words off to one side. Thérèse looked irritated. I immediately felt again as if I were a small child; one who had committed some offence, the

nature of which I did not understand. After some further discussion between them, the driver came to me, hat in hand, and gave me the money back. He said something I didn't catch, bowed slightly and returned to the vehicle, where he busied himself with the horses. I looked to the servant for an explanation, but he merely smiled, and began to usher me indoors. I looked back at the driver, but it was too late. I must write to Davenport immediately.

The snow will not melt. I try to walk out in the country, but the lanes are impassable, the wind is too cold, and after hardly any time at all I am forced to turn back, exhausted from tramping through the mulch and the deep banks of snow. The house is dark and silent, the ticking of a clock, some panes of glass rattling or cracking, branches tapping against windows, floorboards creaking, a slight murmur coming from the servants' quarters or the kitchen, Sultan yawning and padding about the room, logs crackling. All day long the sky is dark; we have to have candles even at mid-day; everyone is wrapped up in many layers, it is cold, biting. The earth seems to be dead though the first flowers should be blooming. Apparently I am too late for the snowdrops and the crocuses – there should be daffodils and bluebells by now, but of course I can't get out to see them. The trees are skeletal. It is as if I am in some cold antechamber, waiting for something to happen, for an appointment that has been delayed. All that I can do is remain where I am, hoping that sooner

or later I will be summoned to wherever it is I am supposed to be going, to whatever appointment I have been waiting for, and that I will be seen by the judge that has summoned me. After the panic and activity of the journey here, my flight from Switzerland, my time in Paris, in London, I was at first glad for the opportunity of some peaceful idleness, but this staying interminably inside is beginning to feel like imprisonment; I feel that I am being held in abeyance, that a judgment is about to fall on me from some unknown and unknowable authority, that I must remain still, with no news from the outside world, while those who wish me ill, the Inquisition out there, are free to manoeuvre and to scheme, to advance their plot against me. I am out of the world and they are in it, and I can garner no advantage from my isolation if I cannot manage to distract myself, if I am held hostage by the terrors of my own imagination and the febrile business of an inactive mind – flickering between wild illusion and the boredom of total stasis. I sometimes sit at the spinet, but the notes I play seem to disturb the dark stillness of the house too violently, and feel as if I am imposing on the gloom.

Some of the neighbours have heard of our arrival. Despite the lingering snow and the harsh wind, they have made their way over to the house. At first I welcomed them when they came, hoping for friendly distractions – if not for me, then at least for Thérèse – but I was quickly disappointed. They are typical representatives

of the grasping middle classes, tenant farmers who have made enough money to no longer have to dirty their own hands with harvesting the crops or tending to the sheep. Middlemen, only interested in accumulation. They gawp at my attire, they snub Thérèse – most of them can barely communicate with us, speaking our language haltingly and with many errors. I might perhaps be capable of understanding them better if I had a reason to make the effort; but luckily I can use the fact that I have almost zero knowledge of their language as a barrier, as an excuse to keep them away from me. I have stopped admitting them. I doubt that Davenport will mind, since I believe he is of the genuine aristocracy of the country, or is rich enough to be, and would have no dealings with them himself – of that I'm certain. I would gladly make friends with the genuine working people of the area, if only we could talk to each other. I'm sure that if we shared a language we would like exactly the same things. I have simple tastes. On an attempt at an excursion the other day, I watched the workers leaving the nearby lead mines, just a short distance from the house. They were walking home after work, breath freezing in front of them in the cold air, and I longed to speak to them, to offer to share a ready and easy meal of bread, cheese and beer with them perhaps, but I was too shy. Perhaps soon I will be brave enough to talk to them, emboldened by the lack of other company. But finally I have the solitude I have yearned for, which I have needed for so long, and so I will keep to myself and my own company for the foreseeable

future. That class of improving mediocrities who think they have elevated themselves, who seek to domesticate nature only to wrench some extra profit from her – those people can mean nothing to me. And likewise: what can I be to them, other than some freakish entertainment sent to amuse them; some foreign eccentric, some exiled lunatic.

I am settling in. A routine has started to establish itself. Since I receive no correspondence here I feel in fact quite free. Davenport will come at the end of next month, six or seven weeks perhaps, and until then no letters. Here I am left to myself. Though the house receives a few of the newspapers from London, which Mr Walton, Davenport's agent – who administers the estate here – leaves around for me to look at. My name appears more frequently than I would have expected, though not always in a kindly light. When I first arrived here the papers were full of acclaim for me and my name. What accounts for this change? Outside, the weather is still bad: bitter winds which cut the face. Every room in the house feels damp. But I don't mind too much. Thérèse likes our situation less than I do. She throws open the windows to try to air out the rooms, and is forced to close them again immediately when the wind comes in. Often it rains. The variety of rains feels unlimited, but really it just oscillates between two modes: heavy downpours that lighten to a misty drizzle, into which one is absorbed fully, before the intensity picks up again and the drops fall

like lead. The snow is gone now, at last, and sometimes I can go out further into the hills. Not as often as I would like, but sometimes. I am pleased with the countryside around here now that I have started to get to know it. The lichens and mosses are especially delightful. The restriction of my mental horizon to the microcosmic beauties of plant life is one of the few consolations left to me on this earth, and I hope to spend my last years focused on my botanical studies, which never seem to progress, which move about in circles of forgetting and remembering, rotating on the same spot, without utility or value to any one else, but which for that reason are all the more precious to me. If I follow the banks of the stream as it winds away from the house there are various nooks in which one finds the most wonderful specimens. Yes – this is all I want from life now, to be out of the world and free to roam about among the plants. I would rather live in one of the rabbit warrens in the countryside here than in the most luxurious apartment in London. It is important that while I am here I continue to work on the manuscript of my memoirs. I have given up on all other projects now, after my last abandoned attempts to develop a system of legislation for the Corsicans. I no longer want to be seen as a writer or a philosopher in the eyes of the world, and maybe if I complete my recollections of the life I have led I will at last be able to quench this compulsion to write things down, and finally be granted by God the quietness of mind that I will need to enjoy my last years on this earth. I had

thought briefly of writing a compendium of plants, a botanical encyclopaedia, but the task is too great for me to complete, my knowledge is inadequate. But I hope while I'm here to be able to expand that small knowledge somewhat, to collect specimens of the local flora. If I can divide my time between revisiting the happy hours of my youth and walking the hills and collecting plants, then I'm sure I will be quite content here, even in spite of the weather. The foreignness of the language, the removal from the world, those elements of this situation which would be offputting to others, are what suit me best about this place. Yes, I think that I might indeed be quite comfortable and satisfied here, and I must write again to David to thank him for his efforts in finding such a suitable residence for my wants.

The boundaries marked by the stone walls are relatively recent, I am told. Yes, Mr Walton and I have our small conversations: he speaks passable French, but can't get too far into any thing. And our distance in social position, he being employed by my host, keeps us from any real intimacy. I asked him about the walls, some of which are unfinished, large piles of small rocks standing abandoned out in the country. A new series of gridlines cut through the landscape, curving off gently into the horizon. The sheep here, instead of roaming where they want accompanied by some bare-foot shepherd, are lodged within one stone boundary until they have cleared the ground of every morsel,

then they are moved to the next section within the network of walls to repeat the experience. This land is all owned by someone or other now, the old customs of commoning understood as inefficient ways of tending to it, much more can be wrenched from nature this way. Well, it's a surprise to me that those who once had their own small flocks of sheep grazing here, before these walls, have allowed these changes to happen; but the whole thing is beyond my capacities at the moment – I cannot hope to comprehend it. The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying, This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him – he was the founder of civic society. I was right when I wrote that. The hatred I feel, provoked by the ruination of the people through the greed of their lords, the injustice of it, to partition things in this way, without realising the truth: the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself belongs to nobody. I spent some time today watching a man build one of the walls – skilled and ponderous work, slow-going, but rhythmic – perhaps if I were stronger, it would be the kind of work I might like to have done, deliberate, methodical, precise. But no. I wouldn't want to be the one who erects the boundaries in the landscape, I would be the one to tear them down, to knock the walls apart.

I will describe the room in which I write. It is a sandstone cave, underneath one of the terraces on the western side of the house. It is small, a few paces in