

1962 the Rousseau year [Conclusion]

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1962 THE ROUSSEAU YEAR

St. Peter's Island in the Lake of Biene

THE FIFTH STROLL

By JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

(Conclusion)

As evening drew nigh, I would abandon the island's heights, preferring to sit in some hidden retreat by the shore. Here, the sound of the waves and the movement of the waters banishing all other thoughts from my mind, I became immersed in delightful reveries, oft awaking to find that darkness was upon me. The water's ebb and flow, its ceaseless murmuring, at times amplified, monopolized my eyes and ears and replaced the thoughts and feelings that had been extinguished by my reverie, while serving as a pleasant reminder of my existence without actually forcing me to think. Occasionally, my mind would engender some faint and fleeting thought about the instability of the things of this world, whose reflection could be seen on the water's surface; but soon these volatile impressions were absorbed by the uniform, continuous movement by which I was lulled and which, without the active participation of my mind, kept me so entranced that even when called by a special signal at a prearranged time, I could not tear myself away without great effort.

After supper, if the evening was fine, we would all go for a stroll along the terrace to enjoy the air and freshness of the lake. Sometimes we rested in the pavilion, chatting, laughing or singing those old songs that are worth more than all the involved modern harmonies put together. Finally, we would go home to bed, well satisfied with our day and wishing for nothing more than that the morrow might be its replica.

Apart from unheralded and unwelcome visits, that was how I spent my time on the island. Looking back, it is hard to explain why those days were sufficiently attractive to leave in my heart a pang so keen, so tender, so enduring, that even after the lapse of fifteen years I cannot think of that beloved place without a tremor of longing.

Throughout the vicissitudes of my many years, I have observed that my most joyful memories have not been derived from moments of exquisite pleasure. Such flashes of passion, however intense they may be, are, by their very vivacity, like rare points of brilliance along the path of life. They are too infrequent, too ephemeral to constitute a state of being. The happiness which my heart yearns for is not one composed of fugitive instants, but a simple and lasting condition, lacking in intensity, but whose duration enhances its charm to the point of extreme bliss.

Everything in earth is in a continuous state of flux. Nothing is constant or immutable, and our affections are as fluctuating as the exterior objects to which they become attached. Always behind or ahead of us, they invoke the vanished past or anticipate a future which often fails to materialize. In this world there is no anchor for the soul and hardly a pleasure that does not fade. I doubt that we know such a thing as lasting happiness. Even in our greatest joys is there a point at which we can truly say "I wish this moment would last forever"? And how can we grace with the name of happiness a transient condition

in which our heart remains troubled and empty, in which we regret something that has gone or desire something still to come?

But if there exists a state in which the soul can find repose and sustenance without recourse to memory or anticipation, where time is meaningless and the present eternal, timeless and unaffected by sequence, where we feel neither privation nor enjoyment, pleasure nor pain, desire nor fear, unless they affect our present moment of existence — and if this feeling alone dominates the soul, then, while this condition lasts, whoever is subjected to it may truly claim to be happy. His will not be the imperfect, relative enjoyment such as one derives from worldly pleasures, but rather a happiness that is full, satisfying, perfect and untainted by desire. I was frequently in this state of mind while on the isle of Saint Pierre, when musing in solitude, either lying in my boat adrift on the water, sitting by the lake in stormy weather, or basking on the bank of some murmuring stream.

What is it that one enjoys in such a situation? Nothing outside oneself, nothing but one's own feelings, one's own existence; on these occasions one is self-sufficient, like God. This heightened consciousness, devoid of all exterior impressions, would in itself bring all the peace and contentment needed to make life precious, if only we could resist those sensual, earthly influences that incessantly distract us and trouble our repose. But most men, being moved by constant passions, rarely experience this condition and, having known it but briefly and imperfectly, they retain only a blurred impression of it, insufficient to make them appreciate its full charm. Indeed, as the world is constituted, it would not be a good thing, if, craving these inner joys, they were to become disgusted with the active life to which their insatiable appetites condemn them. However, if we take an outcast, divorced from human affairs, who can no longer do anything of use to himself or others, such a man can find in this condition a substitute for human joys, which neither fate nor society can steal from him.

True, this form of happiness cannot be appreciated by every mind, nor can it be felt in every situation. The heart must be attuned to it, at peace and untroubled by passion. Exterior influences must also play their part. There must be neither complete calm nor undue agitation, but a uniform, moderate stirring without interruption or sudden change. Without movement life is mere lethargy. But if movement is unequal or too violent, it awakens us and, by connecting us with the outer world, destroys the charm of our reverie. Rudely wrenched from our inner self, we are again at the mercy of the world and aware of our servitude. Being the reflection of death, absolute silence engenders melancholy; in order to bear it one needs a cheerful imagination, but he who is blessed with this needs hardly invoke it. A stirring within our soul then makes up for the lack of motion. Thus, there

is perhaps less repose, but our enjoyment is increased when our roving fancy ruffles the surface of the mind without agitating its depths. One needs, therefore, just enough peace for one to be aware of one's own existence whilst forgetting one's ills. This kind of reverie can be enjoyed in any quiet place, and I have often thought that I might have dreamed the time away pleasantly enough in the Bastille or in some dungeon devoid of any object capable of distracting me.

Nevertheless, I must confess that it was easier and more agreeable to day-dream on a lonely and fertile island, naturally separated from the world, in charming surroundings, with nothing to encourage sad memories, where the few inhabitants were gentle and attractive but not so interesting as to monopolize my attention, and where I could indulge in my favourite hobbies all day long or be perfectly idle, as the fancy took me. This was the ideal life for one able to create his own dream world even among the most unpleasant surroundings, and with time at his disposal to dream to his heart's content, aided by whatever appealed to his senses.

Emerging from a long and sweet reverie to find myself amidst verdure, flowers and birds, and gazing across a wide expanse of scintillating water to the distant, romantic shores of the lake, I allowed all this beauty to merge with my dreams. Upon regaining full consciousness, I was unable to discriminate between fiction and reality. Thus did everything contribute to my enjoyment of the solitary, retired life I was leading in this delightful retreat. Could I but return to that life and end my days on my beloved island, nevermore to leave it, nevermore to see any inhabitant of the outside world who might remind me of the manifold calamities to which men have subjected me for so many years! I should soon forget the rest of mankind, and though men might not forget me, it would matter little provided they lacked access to me and the means to disturb my peace. Delivered from all earthly passions born of the tumult of society, my soul would rise above the atmosphere to communicate with those celestial intellects whose throng it would soon join.

Society will doubtless deny me so sweet a refuge, having already chased me from it. Nevertheless, I cannot be prevented from returning to it daily on the wings of imagination and enjoying, if only for the space of a few hours, the pleasures that were mine when I lived there. Were I there in reality, my favourite pastime would be to muse at my ease. And am I not precisely doing this while dreaming that I am there? Indeed, I am achieving even more: by recalling their enlivening setting, whose details often escaped me during my reveries, I enhance the pleasure of abstract and monotonous thoughts. Now, the deeper my reverie, the more distinct becomes its former background. I see it more vividly, and with even greater pleasure, than when it was palpably around me. The pity of it is that, as my imagination weakens, these visions come to me more fitfully and with greater effort on my part. Alas, the closer we are to leaving our mortal frame, the more it hampers us!

The Fifth Stroll from The Reveries of a Solitary Stroller is published by the Swiss National Tourist Office on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great philosopher and citizen of Geneva, who was one of the first to sing the praises of Switzerland's charms and the benefits of the Return to Nature. It is dedicated to the young people of all nations. English adaptation by F. R. Pickering.

GENEVE A FETE ROUSSEAU

28 juin. Genève est en fête. De grands drapeaux flottent aux tours de la cathédrale. En bas, à l'endroit où renaît le Rhône, le pont du Mont-Blanc arbore son grand pavois multicolore, et partout les vives couleurs des bannières et des oriflammes claquent à l'appel de la brise qui anime cette journée splendide.

28 juin. Genève est en fête. Dans les rues matinales s'affaire une foule heureuse. Venant de la haute ville, on entend les échos d'une fanfare qui fait vibrer les vieux murs et se répercute au long des ruelles: c'est aujourd'hui, tout en même temps, Genève fête ses enfants et son enfant, le plus turbulent et le plus célèbre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, né il y a deux cent cinquante ans.

28 juin. Genève est en fête. De toute l'Europe, d'est en ouest, sont venues d'éminentes personnalités, écrivains et professeurs, savants et penseurs, apporter leur hommage à celui dont on célèbre la naissance dans une petite maison de la Grand-Rue, tout proche de l'Hôtel de Ville. L'Académie française, dont pourtant il ne fût point, est représentée par M. Jacques de Lacretelle et M. Jean Guéhenno, et il fallait bien ces deux charmeurs pour qu'il y eut Jean et Jacques à l'anniversaire de Jean-Jacques.

28 juin. Genève est en fête, Genève fête ses enfants. C'est la grande journée des "promotions" enfantines. Après-midi, un grand cortège partira de la promenade du Lac, cet ancien jardin anglais, traversera toute la ville au milieu d'une foule aussi compacte qu'heureuse, pour gagner la promenade des Bastions où aura lieu la fête. Ils seront plus de quatre mille, garçons et fillettes, dans leurs atours les plus frais — au départ! — admirés, surveillés, entourés, choyés... et fêtés, comme si toute la ville vivait pour eux ce jour-là. Et c'est bien le cas. Aussi adorables que leurs petites créatures, les mamans heureuses transforment la sille en un vaste parcours d'élégance, de charme, de bon goût et de beauté. Que ne ferait-on pour ces petits? Même la circulation qui sera interrompue, cette sacrosainte circulation pour laquelle, les trois cent soixante-quatre autres jours de l'année, on sacrifie tout: aujourd'hui c'est la fête des enfants, c'est la joie et le bonheur dans tous les cœurs.

Et voilà que ce 28 juin, où Genève est en fête pour ses enfants, c'est aussi la fête de ce vieil enfant pénible, geigneur, souffrant de la maladie de la persécution, mais qui a provoqué une véritable révolution dans la reconnaissance de la valeur de l'enfant, qui a exalté le rôle du citoyen — il est né à deux pas de l'Hôtel de Ville — et fut le père du roman et de l'autobiographie modernes. Genève est en fête pour ses enfants, et Rousseau est l'un de ceux-ci. Devant sa maison natale, le matin, on répétera son éloge et l'on apposera une nouvelle plaque rappelant qu'il vit le jour en ce lieu. Puis, descendant dans "son" île, celle qui porte son nom et qui abrite son monument, la foule des autorités et du peuple de Genève ira lui dire sa reconnaissance au son des discours et des musiques, tandis que des enfants déposeront des fleurs à ses pieds. Et le soir enfin, une solennelle séance académique célébrera l'apothéose de ce 28 juin où Genève avait fêté ses enfants.

L'hommage de la République de Genève fut apporté par le président de son gouvernement, M. Emile Dupont, tandis que M. Bouffard offrait celui de la ville natale. La France avait délégué, en plus des représentants de l'Académie, M. Henri Guillemin, et l'Université genevoise se fit entendre notamment par MM. Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel Raymond.

(*"Genève" Magazine.*)