

Paris

1st November 1949

My dears

Mr. Gurdjieff died at 11 o'clock on Saturday the 29th October. I had last seen him the previous Sunday when he sent for me after having slept most of the day. To give you the full story I must go back a few weeks. We realized since the summer that he had been terribly tired: Mme. Salzmann had warned us again and again that it could not continue. But we were so confident of the unlimited power he had over his own body, that we thought that any moment, he could put things right.

Even when he had to change all his customary diet and stop drinking alcohol a fortnight ago, we still did not take the position seriously. Moreover he gave us many indications. When his daughter Sophia was betrothed to Alfred, he made Mr. and Mrs. King act as "parents", on his behalf. He gave her his mother's wedding ring, which had always worn round his neck since she died in 1926, and told Mme. S, that later she would know why. Also he has many times spoken to us of his 'disappearance' when Beelzebub is published and when we said that we would follow him wherever he went, he said "you will not easily find me."

At the same time, he also mystified us by saying most categorically that he intended to live another twenty years, and watch over the spreading of his ideas in the world. He also often told people to come back to him in one, two or even seven years.

So you can understand that no one was prepared for the sudden change. When I came back to Paris on Friday ten days ago, I knew he was very ill and left Mrs. B. behind. To my great surprise, I saw him in the Rue des Acacias buying fruit at his greengrocers: as I went up he bought a huge bunch of bananas saying to Bernard Courtenay Mayers who was with him "Pour les Anglais"—a little joke of his to the effect that we have no bananas in England and are always hungry for them. We then went together to his cafe and all the morning there was a stream of his pensioners—Russian, Armenian, Jewish, French—all receiving large or small sums of money. He was very tired but they took no notice, and all made their demands of him. He was patient and gay with them all.

He seemed so much better that I went off him as soon as I left him and telephoned to Mrs. B. to come over by the next plane. That night at dinner I was Director for the last time. Although he seemed better, he was, for the first time, a frail old man, very shrunken and very tired.

On Saturday we were told he was much worse and would stay in bed. Mrs. B, Elizabeth and I went out to do some shopping. We were going

back when I suddenly decided to go down the Rue des Acacias to buy Mrs. B. some warm shoes. Then I began to hurry ahead with the extraordinary feeling that he needed me. I found him at his café all alone. His car was opposite, but he was so weak that he could not reach it—and from the swelling of his legs, he could not enter it alone. He insisted on driving back so I made the last journey with him that he made in a car and was the last person with him in his café, which had always been the focus of his external life.

The journey back was terrifying: he was so weak that he could scarcely control the car, and twice had to brake suddenly to avoid a lorry. I returned to Mrs. B. and Elizabeth overwhelmed with an entirely new realization. I said to them “He no longer intends to live, but has become quite indifferent to what happens to his body. In every way, it was the antithesis of the experience after his accident last year—when he was equally weak and terribly injured. Then he used the whole of his inner power to make his body live. This time I could see perfectly clearly that his higher consciousness was absent. I was talking to one body only. His higher part—or at least the body of his consciousness and will—was absent and indifferent.

That evening we decided (that is Mrs. B., Bernard, Elizabeth, Tilley and I) to go to his flat even if he did not come in for dinner. In fact he did come, Page was Director. That was the last meal—and I suppose the end of the Science of Idiotism, which he has used so wonderfully as a means of teaching people.

Most of Sunday he slept, but as I said, he woke at seven o’clock and sent for me. I told him all about England and he evidently wanted to hear it all. I had the impression that for him this was a great final experiment. He had steadfastly refused to come to England himself and had left it to Mme. Salzmänn helped by the rest of us to put the work there on its feet.

I must here digress and tell you of a wonderful event on Monday, Sept. 26th That weekend we had read only the Third Series, and by Monday we were due to finish the Introduction. This contains all Mr. G.’s plans for the spreading of his ideas, by publishing Beelzebub and having readings of the Second Series in the “great centers of population in corresponding places like clubs only different because they will be devoted to serious discussions, reading, music and movements.” All that I was reading (it referred to the seven sacred powers starting I CAN, I WISH, I REMEMBER.) was so intensely real to me that I read as never before or since. He went out for a moment at the very end and came back and stood at the door listening. His face was radiant and there was so much power coming from him that everyone present

noticed and felt it. To me he seemed to be glowing with a light of his own. He said “Vraiment you read ideal, Such reading I never hear—from where did you get it?” And he turned and said the same in Russian to Mme. Salzmänn. Afterwards at lunch with several of his American group present, he said that if he had twenty people who could read as I did the world would listen. Anyhow, the important thing to me was that I knew he was seeing the vision of what his work could become. And when I was speaking to him in his bedroom four weeks later, I knew that he looked upon what had happened in England as the first assurance that this will indeed come about.

The very last words I spoke to him were about the future. I said that next year would be unique in history and that one day people would again number the years from the year when Beelzebub appeared. He looked very long into my eyes and said “All will be different; maybe as you say.” These were the last word he spoke to me because just then he was overcome by an acute attack and I left the room to make way for his old friend Gabo to help him—and never returned there. Indeed I did not seem again until after his death.

We returned to England on Monday morning, leaving Elizabeth to keep us constantly informed. Dr. Welsh flew from America on Tuesday arriving on Wednesday night—took him at once to the American Hospital on Bd. Victor Hugo—drained 12 liters of fluid from his abdomen—gave him intravenous glucose (for three days he had eaten nothing). He recovered sufficiently to have a last talk with Mme. Salzmänn. On Thursday and Friday his strength slowly ebbed away. On Saturday Elizabeth phoned that it was a matter of hours. We flew straight over and arrived an hour or so after his death. He had quite left his physical organism after his last talk with Mme. S.

When we saw him in the Chapel at 3.00 pm he looked most beautiful. I sat by his head for half an hour without any wavering of inner or outer attention. When I first went in, I (unexpectedly to myself) quite broke down and had to go out for a minute. I was simply overwhelmed by the immensity of the event. But as I sat by him I grew stronger and above all more cheerful. In the end, I felt myself possessed by a kind of conscious wellbeing that was almost gay. It came from a sense of the immense power of his being. He lay there as if he had chosen consciously to put his body just there and just like that.

I went back later with Mrs. B. and Elizabeth and an old man came to take his death mask. Something seemed to go and I could not bear to wait. I went off and had dinner with the others—still very cheerful. At 4.00 am I walked back there alone. There were several of the French group including his son Michel Salzmänn sitting by the bier. This time

all was utterly changed. He could not by any means have been less there. The body was more dead than any body I have ever seen. I sat for three hours struggling with all my might to get close to him or if that was impossible to experience something. But it was as if I were in a vacuum. I finally went away in despair—and feeling that we were quite bereft.

But as I was walking back in the early twilight, I reflected on his own teaching. Of course, this was just how it had to be. If his consciousness were wholly transferred to his highest being body—then nothing whatever must remain. I remembered the words of Buddha—“that after passing away from which nothing remains.” and I realized that he had entirely and for ever quitted this planet and nothing would touch him. I realized even how strangely reminiscent this all was of the death of Gotama—even to the extent of the relatively short-lived “presence” around the body.

Then I thought also of all he has done during this past year. We only now realize how terribly his body must have suffered and how great a sacrifice it has been for his consciousness to remain associated with it. A little time ago he said at one meal “I now not have pain—this very seldom is.” But even to the last he was joking. Mme. Salzmann says that when she last spoke to him he said to her “Jeanne—you know what are galoshes. Now I put you in the biggest galoshes that ever existed.” I expect that you all know that “old Jewish galoshes” is one of his favorite expressions for being in serious trouble. Dr. Welsh said that he thoroughly enjoyed the complicated “amenities” of the American Hospital with the lever by which he could tilt his own bed and so on. He wanted to have the American treatment for cirrhosis, saying that he knew all the old remedies and how useless they are, but this might be interesting.

Indeed I think that all his talk about living many years has been to deflect our attention from the seriousness of his condition so that we could all be natural with him and he could continue to teach us.

The prodigious effort he has made in these twelve months is beyond description. Nearly two hundred people have received personal help and teaching from him—French, English, American Dutch, German, Italian Russian. Each one he studied and for each he created personal conditions in which they could see something necessary for themselves. Sometimes the conditions were extremely complicated, involving the lives of several people and each being made to create a special problem for the others. He used many special exercises and tasks—sometimes given to a whole group at once (as he did in New York at the New Year with all present at the feast) but far more often individually—leaving it to Mme. Salzmann to give detailed explanations. Then after 3 or 6 months—“examination”—new study—new tasks. All this combined with teaching of new

movements—here we might well have seen the warning sign. He said he would give forty movements in all —of the Mesoteric series 37 and of the Esoteric series 3. He struggled at the very end to get to the Salle Pleyel to give No. 39—a movement entirely concerned with inner work. So far as I know, No. 40 remains with him—unless it is a last problem he has set us—to find for ourselves what it means. It even flashed through my mind that this might be his last joke —it happened when his French group came to the Chapel from the movements on Saturday night and I saw Solange kneel beside the bier and the others behind—with the grace and collectedness of one of the set movements. It was then I thought—“is this perhaps No. 40 for which we have been waiting?”

Then there has been all the work of publication—four languages—huge sums of money to be collected. Then came provision for his family—once more a warning sign!—a little hotel in the country for his sister—a practice for his son—a home for an unmarried niece—his daughter betrothed to his best teacher of the movements.

As we look back today we can see the completeness of his preparations, hidden beneath apparent disorder and confusion.

And so we look towards the future. He has left in Mme. Salzmann a disciple who has been close to him for thirty-one years. She understands what we need above all —his methods for teaching people about their inner work. She is the best pupil that he ever had for the movements. To all of us she is the one person in whom we can put our full trust. She proposes to bring half a dozen people drawn from the three countries where the work is most active in the West—France, U.K and U.S.A. The publication of Beelzebub in England and America is assured. Little more remains to be done in France, Germany and Austria. Ouspensky’s book is already out in New York. In London we have combined groups corresponding very closely to what should be done.

And above all, we know that there is one task we all share, that is to work on ourselves. You, in South Africa, know only too well how all good intentions and all plans founder on the rocks of ignorance, self-love and passion—if we do not work on ourselves. It is the only foundation at present. We are united in our thoughts and our feelings, but no unity can survive without the utmost inner effort. Moreover, those of us who have had this unbelievable opportunity of learning during this year of most intensive inner work, have a responsibility far beyond our own salvation. We owe it to all the hundreds who would have taken the opportunity at least as well as we have, to share with them what we have received. But we cannot do this, unless we go forward with our own inner work.

Something like fifty people have come to Paris from England, America, Germany Switzerland. Now we are all together. Soon we shall disperse.

Yesterday we read Purgatory together. He called it the heart of all his writings. You can picture to ourselves the force with which this chapter came to us again at such a moment. But we all know only too well that feelings, however intense, do not last. Only one thing lasts and that is understanding and the Faith which only understanding can give.

Soon we shall go back to our own countries. The task before us is as clear as it can be. The means of executing it he has left in our hands. Your part in it is the same as it is for all of us: to work to destroy in yourselves the consequences of the organ Kundabuffer transmitted by heredity and arising by our own past actions in this life. You know well enough what this means. —it is the struggle with just those things which spoil our lives together, and spoil our inner life, and spoil our attempts to be useful to the task before us. We send you this letter from Paris with our love. You can help us now—more than ever by achieving unity. We shall be grateful to you for this, not only because it is a practical necessity—but most of all because it will demonstrate the power of the work.

J.G. Bennett