

Edwin Wolfe

Episodes with
Gurdjieff

At the Prieuré

One morning, shortly after I arrived at the Prieuré, I was coming from the terrace into the main hall of the chateau. Once inside I stopped dead. Standing in the hall in a little half-circle was a group of women in work clothes. Facing them was Mr. Gurdjieff. Evidently they had made some serious mistake for he was shouting at them. His black eyes were flashing, his face and unshaved head were red with fury. He gesticulated angrily and shook his finger at the women time and again. They all seemed terrified at this intense scolding.

In a flash Mr. Gurdjieff stopped everything. Totally. Gently he lowered his hands to his sides. With a smile and a soft wave of his hand he dismissed the women. Then slowly and quietly he walked up the wide staircase toward his room.

I was overwhelmed by what I had seen. I knew

that Mr. Gurdjieff had felt no anger, or fury at all. This was indeed conscious acting.

It was the first of a series of vivid experiences I had with Mr. Gurdjieff that I shall never forget.

At the Prieuré

It was probably my second Saturday night at the Prieuré when Mr. Gurdjieff and all the men were in the hot room of the steam bath. Mr. Gurdjieff, a towel wrapped round his head like a turban, lay on his side on a sort of low couch in a corner of the room. He faced us naked like all the rest of us.

He had been speaking about Little Mister. This subject he obviously enjoyed speaking about for he embellished his talk with broad smiles and large descriptive gestures.

I thought I understood what he meant, but I wanted to be sure. I turned to the man sitting next to me and asked. He pointed down to between his legs.

Mr. Gurdjieff was now saying that often Little Mister was much more powerful than Big Mister. His influence over Big Mister was really impressive. In fact, Little Mister was often the real Boss.

When Mr. Gurdjieff stopped speaking there was a certain amount of rather subdued laughter. Then silence. Suddenly I broke this silence by speaking. I was sitting on a bench directly in front of Mr. Gurdjieff. And I spoke with an extraordinary intensity.

“A man could make a very good thing out of a place like this, couldn’t he, Mr. Gurdjieff?”

Something like a stream of fire spat out of my eyes directly at Mr. Gurdjieff.

He smiled at me.

“Ah,” he said in a low voice, “dangerous kind.”

From that moment on, all the time I was at the Prieuré he called me “Dangerous.”

When he came to New York in late 1928 he gave me a new name. He called me “Mr. Bear.”

On his last visit to New York he called me “Ange, Ange.”

New York

Near the end of 1928 Mr. Gurdjieff and some of his people came to New York. We promptly named those who came with him, “His Tail.” This was Mr. Gurdjieff’s first visit to America since his automobile accident in the summer of 1924.

For the first week or so of this visit Mr. Gurdjieff lived in a furnished apartment on the corner of 7th Avenue and Central Park South. Below the windows on the 7th Avenue side was the marquee of the Al Jolson Theatre. The building was owned and the apartments furnished by the Shubert Theatre Corporation. The furnishings in the apartment occupied by Mr. Gurdjieff, the rugs, drapes, and wall decorations looked like a conglomeration of stuff left over from some long ago Shubert theatrical disaster.

On one of the first evenings here some lady had sent Mr. Gurdjieff a large and rather showy bouquet of

American Beauty roses. When I walked into the room for a meeting I saw the roses arranged in a tall glass vase on the grand piano.

Shortly after all the members of the group had arrived and were seated, Mr. Gurdjieff came into the room.

As he came in some woman said, "Oh, Mr. Gurdjieff, those roses are so beautiful!"

"Such thing not beautiful," Mr. Gurdjieff said scornfully. "Such flower not even lawful."

"Oh, but Mr. Gurdjieff, she meant well. She has a good heart."

"No, not good heart," Mr. Gurdjieff said. "Never can have good heart when send such thing. This for titillation."

New York

During the winter of 1928-29 when there was a meeting or a reading from *Beelzebub* in manuscript or an evening of music, Mr. Gurdjieff himself sometimes opened the door to admit people. As some of us came in he would say, as if he could not believe it, "Ah, you here?" You felt as if someone had told him you had died since the last meeting.

We all felt that Mr. Gurdjieff had a work of his own. But we could think of no way to really learn what it might be. One evening he came into the room and sat on the couch as he always did. And this evening we noticed a rosary in his right hand. It was about three inches in diameter and was strung with fairly large brick-colored beads.

As he listened to the reading that evening, he occasionally moved a bead as if doing some kind of inner work.

New York 1928-29

Daly King and I often spoke together about how certain things in the group were going. We had the impression that in some way all of us were wrong in the way we were doing self-observation. We finally decided to ask Mr. Gurdjieff himself about this.

One night Daly and I went to the apartment for a meeting and saw as soon as we walked into the room that we were the first to arrive. As we came in, Mr. Gurdjieff was on his way to the kitchen. I whispered to Daly, "We'll never have another chance like this again." He nodded.

I stopped in the kitchen doorway and said, "Mr. Gurdjieff, Mr. King and I wish to ask you, please, a question about self-observation."

Mr. Gurdjieff looked at me but said nothing. Nor did he nod his head or indicate in any way that I should speak further.

But I did, because in some subtle way I felt that he was waiting to hear more. "We feel that there may be something wrong in the way we are doing self-observation. Are we wrong, Mr. Gurdjieff?"

"Never you do self-observation," he said forcefully. "You do mind observation. Mind observation you do. Can even make psychopath."

*A Statement
First Heard in 1929*

At one meeting a man who had just started coming to meetings said, "Mr. Gurdjieff, what are you trying to do?"

"What I try do?" Mr. Gurdjieff replied, "I try show people when it rains the streets are wet."

That struck me so strongly that I have never forgotten it.

When Mr. Gurdjieff was here on his last visit to New York in 1949, I happened to be alone with him one afternoon in his apartment at the Wellington. In the course of a brief conversation I said to him, "Mr. Gurdjieff, years ago a new man in a group asked you what you were trying to do. You said, 'I try show people when it rains the streets are wet.'"

"I say this?" he asked me as if with great surprise.

So there is the first unforgettable remark and an addition equally unforgettable.

*An Evening
in the Early Thirties*

My wife, Dorothy, and I heard that Mr. Gurdjieff was having some very special people come to an apartment he now used for all meetings. Apartment Q, an inside apartment that looked out on a narrow areaway. Mr. Gurdjieff was to meet late in the evening with a group of American intelligentsia. They were being invited chiefly by William Seabrooke. He was an American writer who had had a quite sudden success with a book on voodoo in Haiti and later a second book on witchcraft.

No one in the group that Dorothy and I belonged to was to come to this special evening. It was absolutely and strictly forbidden. So Dorothy and I went.

When we arrived about eleven-thirty in the evening, we found a young girl, a member of Mr. Gurdjieff's Tail, sweeping the well-worn floor covering with a carpet sweeper. Two other people were

setting steel-framed folding chairs in rows. They faced a shabby brown covered couch with sagging cushions. This is where Mr. Gurdjieff always sat whenever we met with him in this apartment Q.

An open arch separated the living room of the apartment from a small bedroom that was rarely used. Dorothy and I went into this room and kept out of sight.

Before long people began to arrive. Two women in their fifties came in. They were rather grande dame, dressed elegantly in evening gowns under mink coats. Soon after them a few men wearing black ties came in. The room was not yet completely arranged; furniture was being moved and a table dusted. All these richly dressed visitors stood looking at each other and at the apartment as though they felt they must surely be in the wrong building.

In about twenty minutes the room was filled with men and women, many in their thirties, some older. Probably the oldest man in the room had soft white hair and was in full evening dress. A red ribbon was stretched across his stiff white shirt front. He came in alone.

Most of these invited guests, American intelligentsia, were writers, musicians, philanthropists, painters and journalists. Among them was William

Seabrooke himself, somewhat fortified for the evening ahead. Sitting in the front row directly opposite the couch was John B. Watson. His book on behaviorism had made him and his group of researchers in this newest psychological science really famous in this country. Behaviorism was the burning question with the intelligentsia.

At last Mr. Gurdjieff came in. He walked slowly to the brown couch and with a sigh sat down. He smiled at his guests as he toyed with a heavy gold watch chain strung halfway across his abdomen from a buttonhole to a vest pocket.

By this time many of his guests were rather uncomfortable in those wobbly folding chairs with hard seats. Many were obviously puzzled. Some were frowning. It is possible that Seabrooke to induce them to come had assured them that they would meet a "Master," in an apartment breathtakingly beautiful in its oriental splendor.

"So," Mr. Gurdjieff began, "who will read my book? I write book, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. But who here can read?"

Cautiously I stuck my head around a corner of the arch.

He saw me.

"Ah, you maybe," he said. "Come. Maybe you be so kind, read."

I walked to a chair near the end of the couch and sat down. One of the Tail came from the rear of the room and handed me the manuscript.

"Now, read America Chapter from beginning," Mr. Gurdjieff said. "Slowly and loudly. Read."

"Chapter 42, 'Beelzebub in America,'" I began. I read for at least a full hour when Mr. Gurdjieff stopped me. "Enough, enough. We rest."

From the kitchen several members of the Tail came in to serve the guests. They were offered Spanish melon on cheap white plates with a small fork beside the melon. Coffee was served.

John B. Watson moved from the front row to sit alongside Mr. Gurdjieff. "I enjoyed very much hearing your book read, Mr. Gurdjieff," he said. "And by way of appreciation I wish to send you a copy of my book, *On Behaviorism*."

Mr. Gurdjieff smiled and nodded pleasantly. Then he waved a hand toward the grand piano. The top was closed and spread out on it was a formidable array of glasses and liquor in a variety of bottles.

People began at once to gather around the piano. The party became more relaxed, and far more animated. A few of the guests stayed in their seats but

most of them grouped around the piano.

After a fairly long "rest" Mr. Gurdjieff spoke. "Now we read some more."

Someone told the people near the piano and they hushed their laughter and talking. Some hastily poured a final drink and went to their chairs with it. When all were silent, Mr. Gurdjieff said, "We read more America Chapter from where stop."

I resumed reading. I read and read and read. By this time it must have been at least three o'clock in the morning. At last almost in a whisper Mr. Gurdjieff said, "Enough, enough."

I stopped reading.

"Oh, no, please," said the elderly man with the red ribbon across his shirt front. He stood up. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"Please let him go on," he pleaded. "That part about bread, Prosporo you called it, is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. Please let him read. Please."

"No, no," Mr. Gurdjieff said quietly. "We stop."

Before long Seabrooke, Watson and all the others were gone. Some said goodbye to Mr. Gurdjieff, others simply left without a word.

When they were all gone he told his Tail to come and sit down. Dorothy came out of the bedroom

and sat with the others. I moved from the chair where I had read to a folding chair in front of Mr. Gurdjieff.

"You see," he said, "what called intelligentsia in America. Can you imagine? Such empty thing. Intelligentsia they called. Such nonentities."

No one said a word.

"Go, go," he said softly, "all kinds."

As we moved toward the kitchen to do the wash-up, Mr. Gurdjieff got up, walked to the door, opened it, and went out closing it quietly behind him.

Another Episode in the Early Thirties

This was following a meeting in a dance studio in Carnegie Hall.

I watched Mr. Gurdjieff walk out to the elevator alone. He pressed the button and in a moment the elevator doors slid open. He stepped in, the doors closed and the elevator went down.

After waiting for a few moments, I rang. When the elevator doors opened, I saw that it was the same one Mr. Gurdjieff had gone down in. I stepped in alone and the car started down.

The operator of the elevator was a young negro probably about twenty years old. I said to him, "That gentleman you just took down. What do you make of him?"

He thought for a long time, then said in a quiet voice, "He knows something."

A Final Word

In the spring of 1932, Daly King and I with several others in our group were with Mr. Gurdjieff in his daytime office at Child's Restaurant on Columbus Circle. He had told us this was his final visit to America.

He stood up as if to leave.

"Mr. Gurdjieff," I said, "you said this is your last visit to America. You are not coming back. There will be no more group meetings, or readings, or anything. Orage has moved to England. We'll be all alone now. What can we do, Mr. Gurdjieff? Please tell us something."

He looked at all of us slowly.

He touched the back of his head. "You keep here," he said. "You not forget. Keep here."

For the next seven years, until he came again in 1939, we tried to "Keep here" in back of head.

In 1939

I went to Mr. Gurdjieff's rooms in the hotel one day with a small pan from our own kitchen. He needed this to heat water for some purpose. I knocked, he opened the door and I walked in. I saw at once that he was all alone. He told me to put the pan on top of the dresser near his bed, which I did.

By this time he had gone to the bed and stretched out on it. I saw no chair in the room. So I gingerly sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Get up," he roared, "get up!"

I hastily stood up.

"This holy place you sit," he said. "America man boor. Look what," he pointed to a cup and saucer on the dresser. "Man before you put cigarette ash, cigarette end in cup, in saucer. This for drinking. This not ashtray. Truth, America man boorish."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gurdjieff," I said. "There's no chair

in the room so I . . . ”

“Then bring from other room, idiot! Never sit on bed other man. This I tell, holy place for me.”

A Visit in 1939

The rather young son of a former member of the Orage group asked me to get permission for him to speak with Mr. Gurdjieff about something personal. When I told Mr. Gurdjieff about this he nodded, yes, bring him.

The next evening I took the youth up to Mr. Gurdjieff's suite in the Hotel Wellington. After greetings, the young man said, “Mr. Gurdjieff, my grandmother gave me some money not long ago. I'm going to buy a small piece of land in the country with it. I'll build a log cabin and I'll put in a vegetable garden so I can grow all my own food. I'll live there like that. So I wanted to ask you, would that be a good thing for me to do? Is that a good life?”

“Yes,” Mr. Gurdjieff answered, “that good life. For dog. For man, no. You eat, you sleep, live in dream. How could this ever be life for man?”

In 1939

I was alone with Mr. Gurdjieff at a table in Child's Restaurant on Fifth Avenue near 57th Street. It was almost dusk of a winter day. This Child's Mr. Gurdjieff called his night office. Another Child's over on Columbus Circle was his day office.

We sat for awhile in silence. He seemed to be looking out the front window at the people passing by in the waning light. It was beginning to snow.

"Wolfe," he said, "tell. How your handkerchief?"

"Mr. Gurdjieff," I said, "I'm going to ask you not to speak about Dorothy like that. We are trying to live a good life together. A decent life. We are even trying to learn how to love one another. So, please, don't call her my handkerchief. Please."

"I not promise," he said.

But he never called her that again.

Paris in 1948

On two different occasions at the supper table, Mr. Gurdjieff said something extraordinary. He was speaking of the days long ago, not only of the Institute but even before all that. He said in speaking of those far away days, "Before I too heavy."

The other time he was speaking of men on earth who work on themselves. "Many man on earth more than me," he said. "I have long way to go."

In 1948

A few days before Christmas in 1948, someone brought a copy of the enneagram made out of light metal. They hung it on the wall of the living room of the suite, opposite the small couch where Mr. Gurdjieff usually sat. Where the lines crossed on the symbol there were tiny electric lights that were lit up at night. Beneath this symbol stood a living room table about four feet long. Dorothy and I decided to bring something to decorate this table for Christmas.

For years we had been collecting tiny angels. Some carried little Christmas trees, others had lambs in their arms, one pulled a little sled with a Christmas tree on it. Over the years we had added a Madonna. We always stood her on the top of a series of round gold steps at one end of the display. We had many small dogs, cats, mice, horses, reindeer, squirrels,

a quartette of angel carol singers, a group of small seated snowmen with red caps.

Every Christmas we set up all these figures on a table in our living room. We had all the creatures facing the Madonna with the tiny Child in her arms. On each of the four round gold steps, where the Madonna stood at the top, we set a small gold candle-holder each with a slender small candle. Just behind the tiny mouse at the foot of the steps, we set a little female figure dressed in red.

For that Christmas in 1948 we carried all these figures over to Mr. Gurdjieff's living room. We set them up on the table under the enneagram.

When we had all the figures in place, Mr. Gurdjieff happened to come out of his bedroom. He came over to look at what we were doing. He stood for some time looking at this Christmas parade of angels and animals. His face broke into a wide smile. Then like a happy child he said, "Where you find such thing?"

*A Moment
in His Final Visit in 1949*

He called one of the men in the group "Camel." One afternoon Camel and I were alone with Mr. Gurdjieff at the hotel. "Camel," he said, "I tell now for you. Never you find door. In all years you not find." He nodded towards me. "He find. From beginning you better chance have than him. But he find door. You not." And he moved his head as he always did when he was disappointed in someone or something.

An Evening in 1949

Camel and I were with Mr. Gurdjieff at his night office in Child's. A Saturday evening. "Who have idea for night?" Mr. Gurdjieff asked.

I ventured an answer.

"There's a Chinese Theatre in New York we might go to. I've never been there. But it might be something different."

"We go," Mr. Gurdjieff said.

On the sidewalk I hailed a taxi and we three got in. "The Chinese Theatre," I told the driver. "It's somewhere down near Chatham Square."

We rode the entire way, a rather long distance, in silence.

At the theatre, I paid the taxi fare. I was then Mr. Gurdjieff's Minister of Finance. For various expenses he gave me from time to time a bundle of ten

and twenty dollar bills.

I bought three orchestra seats at the box office and we walked into a quite large auditorium. All the electric lights in the place were turned on. They were so bright they almost hurt your eyes.

We found seats on the aisle about halfway up from the stage. All around us the theatre was filled with Chinese men wearing hats, caps and winter overcoats. There were no women.

The Chinese orchestra sat on kitchen chairs grouped on the left side of the stage itself. Each man's shirt was open at the throat, and his sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. They were bareheaded. For a Chinese group their instruments were unusual. They played saxaphones, violins, trumpets and clarinets. One musician played a small snare drum with gongs.

The curtain was up. On the stage the drama was being played by two Chinese male actors in elaborate make-up and costume. The actor playing the female role wore a kind of dirty white robe with a floral design. On his head he wore a large headdress sparkling with jewels. There was a lot of movement, some pantomime and occasional dialogue in Chinese. The orchestra joined in to accentuate parts of the dramatic action with loud Western sounds from their jazz band instruments. The audience watched the

play in total silence. I did not see a change of facial expression at any time on any Chinaman around me.

It was probably about a half an hour when Mr. Gurdjieff said, "We go."

Out on the street he said, "You see how is. Pseudo. All pseudo. Now necessary eat. Where we go?"

I mentioned a good Chinese restaurant near by. We climbed the stairs to the second floor where a head waiter ushered us to a large black table inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Camel and I ordered from the big menu a main dish. It started with chicken soup.

"For me bring chicken soup also," said Mr. Gurdjieff. "For begin."

Presently the waiter set a bowl of chicken soup in front of each of us. Camel and I picked up our small porcelain soup spoons and began sipping our soup.

Mr. Gurdjieff sat motionless. "This soup," he began, not having taken a drop, "this soup made from head and feet chicken. Can poison even, such chicken soup." He turned to the waiter. "Bring onion quickly. Raw. Big."

The waiter left.

"Onion," Mr. Gurdjieff said, "perfect food for man. Have everything he need. Can even keep from

poison such chicken soup make.”

He cut up the big onion, handed us each a slice to eat with our meal. He ate a piece himself, but nothing else.

We left the restaurant and walked down the stairs. On the street, he looked into the window of a Chinese store. After a moment he went in. We followed him.

In the store Mr. Gurdjieff selected boxes and boxes of litchi nuts, Chinese cookies, sweetmeats and a variety of gifts.

Out on the sidewalk it was something of a problem getting ourselves and all this merchandise into the taxi. I gave the driver the uptown address of the Wellington Hotel and we started.

“I buy such thing,” Mr. Gurdjieff said, “for all idiots expect me bring such. For myself not bring. But for them I bring. They expect.”

An Episode in the Barber Shop

In the days of Mr. Gurdjieff's last visit to America I was not only his Minister of Finance. He gave me a second title. I was his Minister of Bath. This involved my paying for all the bath tickets for Mr. Gurdjieff, myself and all the men who went along on Saturday nights. In addition there were many tips for various services the attendants had given us.

I always arranged with the desk clerk to get Mr. Gurdjieff a dormitory bed and clothes locker at the end of a row next to the window. This gave him privacy. And made it easier for him to get at his clothes when dressing. For I always got a clothes locker with a door that swung away from the bed. Many did not and they were a nuisance.

In the hot room on these Saturday nights I always spread thick towels on the back, seat and arms of

the wooden seat for Mr. Gurdjieff. When all this was arranged he sat down.

One night he sat down and immediately got up again. He walked out of the hot room. I followed him to the elevator where he rang. The door opened and we got in. We rode to the lobby floor. When we got out he said, "I go barber."

There were no customers in the shop when we went in. Only the head barber was there. Mr. Gurdjieff sat in the first chair in a row of three. I sat against the wall not far away.

When the barber had put a sheet around Mr. Gurdjieff, I thought I heard Mr. Gurdjieff say something in Russian. The barber began shaving Mr. Gurdjieff's head. Once in a while I heard a few words spoken between them. But these remarks were brief and there were only a few.

When the barber had finished shaving, he took off the sheet and dropped it on a nearby chair. Mr. Gurdjieff got up and stood by the chair. As he did, the barber moved in front of Mr. Gurdjieff and with reverence leaned forward and kissed Mr. Gurdjieff's left and then right shoulder. With that done, he stepped back a short distance, folded his arms on his breast and stood there motionless with his head bowed low.

Mr. Gurdjieff walked slowly out of the shop and I followed him.

For myself I could not believe what I had seen. It seemed incredible. I had not the slightest idea of what Mr. Gurdjieff had said to the barber in the few times he had spoken. I was deeply moved to have seen this barber's reverence there in that little shop on West 46th Street in New York City.

Later, when Mr. Gurdjieff and all the men were back at the hotel about to go into supper, Mr. Gurdjieff said, "Poor Wolfe. He not have bath today. You all must pity him."

I kept silent, still moved by the astonishing event I had so recently witnessed.

The Day of Departure 1949

During the days of Mr. Gurdjieff's last visit to New York he had made me his Minister of Finance. I bought many, many things and did many errands for him. These included purchases in shops, taxi fares, tips, tickets for the Turkish bath, and for the theatre. Now and then he would ask me to get something for him. He usually took a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off several twenties and tens, and handed them to me. When the next occasion for buying something came along, he again peeled off several large bills which I immediately put in my wallet.

On the afternoon of his last day in New York, I happened to be alone with him for a little while in his hotel living room. I took several large bills from my wallet and held them out to him.

"Money for me?" he said greatly surprised.

"Yes, Mr. Gurdjieff," I said, "I didn't spend all

the money you gave me. This is what's left over."

"You first Minister Finance ever give money back," he said. "Truth! Others always come for more. But you give back."

And he made that slight wave of his head, that characteristic gesture I had seen whenever he was surprised.

A Strange Impression

From time to time I would walk with Mr. Gurdjieff from Child's on Fifth Avenue along 57th Street to his hotel on 7th Avenue.

He wore a long, black overcoat with frogs. The coat had an astrakhan collar and the hat he wore was of peaked-shaped astrakhan fur. His skin was very dark, his eyes were black and his large, curled moustache very white. He walked with an incredible ease and always slowly, his hands in his pockets. He was a striking figure, completely different from any other man on the street. And yet no one looked at Mr. Gurdjieff at any time on this rather long walk.