

Some Memories of the Prieuré

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Reminiscing during a visit to Paris in 1949, Dr. Bell sketches her visits to the Prieuré between December 1923 and September 1924.

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My readers I hope will not expect from me anything profound and indeed, I shall try only to paint lightly some of the happenings in our life at Le Prieuré in 1923. The story, though, really begins on Christmas Day, 1922, when I went over for a week.

Picture to yourselves a long, gaily decorated table, with a bottle of wine in front of each guest—Mr. G. is seated in the middle of one side of the table, with his Mother and family round him.

The guests are mainly Russian refugees and English. The meal begins with vodka and sardines, and some care is needed to avoid catching the eye of any Russian—for if you meet Mr. So and So's eye, he will promptly rise in his seat and toast you: and courtesy demands that at each toast you empty your glass.

It gave the Russians great amusement to try and make the English drunk. The food consisted of Russian dishes—but Mr. G. had told four of the English, under the guidance of Lady Rothermere, to make a Christmas pudding. The materials were there in abundance: but how to cook it? The array of copper saucepans that decorated the kitchen did not meet with their approval, and *faute de mieux*, they cooked the pudding in copper.

After the meal, Mr. Page, a sedate, awkwardly moving city man gave us, involuntarily, a marvellous exhibition of co-ordinated muscular movements. Having honourably drunk his bottle of wine, he threw his handkerchief on to the floor, placed the empty bottle upright on his head, and, without mishap, picked up the handkerchief in his teeth.

At that time the study house had not been acquired, and the evenings were spent in the large salon of the chateau, a spacious room with a beautiful parquet floor. And yet there was no sense of incongruity when the door opened and a bewildered day old calf pushed its head in, gently propelled from behind by Mr. G. It was in that salon that I first heard the moving music for the "Initiation of a Priestess," with lovely Mme Ostroffsky, Mr. G.'s wife, as Priestess and Peropontoff as Priest.

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When I returned in March the Study House was being erected. It was an old hangar. Passing through a small lobby, one entered an almost square space with a low stage thrown out at the further end. Against the walls were couches for any who wished to rest, and a six foot foyer to which strangers were admitted; but the centre portion, divided from the foyer by a low partition, was reserved for the pupils alone. Against the partition were slightly raised seats, each covered by a goat-skin, which were allocated to the pupils, men on the right and women on the left. Mr. G's seat was a tented Divan on the right side of the entrance into the Central Square. The floor of the square was covered with Eastern rugs, and in the centre was a fountain with a slowly revolving disc of many coloured glass and the colour of the water appeared to change from minute to minute. The piano was in the foyer at the left of the stage. The stage was raised about fifteen inches and covered with linoleum, and the front sloped in a gentle curve to the floor. Again there was no sense of incongruity when a kid, that was being brought up in the kitchen came to the Study House one evening and, having discovered the slope, spent a happy hour slithering down it again and again.

The roof was covered with gaily painted cloths, interspersed with sayings from Eastern literature, also painted in large Arabic characters on cloth. All these were the work of pupils, carried out during a period of intensive work, and the thousands of sequins used in the decorations glittered continually in the changing lights of the fountain.

About nine o'clock Mr. G. entered the Study House, where the pupils were already quietly seated after their hard day's work, and the activities would continue until about 2 a.m. Mr. de Hartmann was at the piano. Many evenings we began with the six Obligatory Movements, after which the programme was very varied. The various large groups might be danced—the Initiation of a Priestess, The Dervish dance, the Big Prayer, the Little Prayer, the Enneagram—or there might be Eastern country and occupational dances. Or the evening might be devoted to the working out of new Movements.

At other times the activities took place in the centre. Seated on the floor we would learn the most complicated exercises, involving in one exercise the simultaneous

use of legs, arms, heads, expression of emotions and one or more sequences of words in any language.

On occasion ten or twelve of us would be picked out, and, seated in the middle of the floor, we had to memorise words in any language supplied to us by the others. We began with ten and chanted them from 1 to 10 and 10 to 1 until we knew them, and then another ten was added, and then another ten and so on, until at the end of an hour, chanting up and down the whole time, we had memorised a list of seventy or eighty words.

We had to learn a sign language of numbers, so subtly constructed, that when skilfully done we could communicate numbers to one another in the middle of a large crowd without being observed, and in connection with this language, we memorised, during our daily occupations, a list of 100 names of animals in Russian, with their numbers in the list, and also 100 operas in the same way. We also learnt the Morse Code. All these were subsequently used for the bewilderment of the large number of people who came down from Paris and other places, by invitation, on Saturday evenings to see the performances. They would be told that if they selected an animal from the list, or an Opera, by the power of the pupils' concentration, the choice would be communicated to Mr. de Saltzmann, seated with his back to the audience before a black board on the stage, or to Mr. de Hartmann at the piano, and the animal would be drawn or the opera played. In reality, Mme de Hartmann, at the back of the Study House, communicated the numbers by signs to a watcher, usually Mr. Tchekovitch, who was perched on a ladder in the dark outside the window of the stage, and he signalled it back to Mr. de Saltzmann or Mr. de Hartmann. The Morse Code had, I think, an even more striking use. One of the audience selected from a list the name of a pupil, which was passed on to Mr. de Hartmann, and the audience were told that Mr. de Hartmann's impressionist improvisation on the pupil selected would be so marvellous that the rest of us would know without doubt who it was. But again we must look for the reality. Interspersed in the short improvisation, accentuated notes in Morse Code soon told us the name of the pupil, and with Mme de Saltzmann often in the lead, we called it out to the astonished audience. Before leaving the Study House, I must speak of one last most beautiful memory.

We were told to run or walk and "stopped." Within my line of vision I saw Vladush, a Polish boy of about sixteen. He was not very tall and his face was pale and aquiline in cast, and that evening he was wearing an embroidered Russian costume with jewelled cap. The beauty of his pose, with one foot forward for the next step, with head erect and relaxed arms, was so striking that Mr. G. told us all to come and look at him.

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As regards the daily occupations, most people were allocated to their work, but some were left to choose. As a broad division, the Russian women did the cooking and housework, while all the men and the Englishwomen worked out of doors. Miss Merston and Miss Gordon were in charge of the garden. Miss Potter undertook the laundry. Miss Crowdy at first got up daily at six to milk the cows, but was subsequently put in charge of stores. Then there were the geese and chickens and goats, not to mention the mule—and the men did all the heavy work, the building and wheelbarrowing and felling of trees. The work was always there to be done, but ordinarily we were not driven; if we chose to slack it was our own loss, but during periods of intensive work, which might last for two or three hours when a garden path was chosen for urgent hoeing, or for days when the Study House was being decorated, or orchestral parts were needed for the Paris Orchestra before the first demonstration in Paris, the drive was intense, and “Skurra, Skurra, Skurra” resounded through the grounds. But always, after the spell, came the welcome words “Go, rest.” We were soon taught that pointless, slogging work was of no avail. As Mr. Gurdjieff pointed out to Mr. Pindar when barrow-loads of stones were being moved from one part of the grounds to another, “One stone consciously moved is worth all this pile.”

To prevent idle talk and wandering thoughts, and the wise-acring that inevitably occurs when pupils try to discuss subjects they don't yet understand, great use was made of memory work and lists of words, and three or four people hoeing close together would almost certainly be helping one another to memorise the words.

The great identification with one's work also brought its own reward. A superfine dinner would be ordered, but when it was prepared, there was no one to eat it, and when the flowerbed round the large lawn in front of the Château was at its best four or five calves were carefully driven along a section of the bed. I think I am right in saying that inertia over one's work was also deliberately prevented. One day when we were decorating the Study House, we had all been working for some time very peacefully when Mr. G. appeared. He made one short quiet remark in Russian, and in a second the place was like the parrot house at the Zoo.

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The fast excited us a great deal. It was voluntary, but scarcely anyone refused to undertake it. The first two days we were allowed water, but the third day not even that; the fourth day the juice of one orange, and of two on the fifth. Some of us, to our disappointment, were put on to food again at the end of a week, others fasted for three weeks. It was part of my work to weigh everybody and take the pulse rate two or three times each day. Approximately speaking, people lost a kilo a day for the first four days, after which some remained stationary, and some put on a small amount of weight. We had to prepare ourselves for the fast with enemas, and I am sure that that accounted for the fact that most of us suffered very little from hunger or desire for food. I could sit

and talk with equanimity to people eating the well-known English dish of eggs and bacon. Throughout the fast physical work and exercises in the Study House were carried on as usual. At the end of the fast the intake of food during the first twenty-four hours was carefully restricted. One of my memories of the fast is of vastly improved complexions.

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The food was very variable—sometimes, especially in the summer time when there were a good many visitors we lived well—at other times we did not. There were curious restrictions—the English were allowed three lumps of sugar with their tea or coffee—the Russians only two. And although nearly 2,000 lbs. of tomatoes were picked in the garden, we never could understand why so few appeared on the table. I think the bulk of them were made into jam and chutney. The surplus milk from the cows was made into soured milk (Prostock vacha?) and butter, and the goats' milk into cheese. For some time before Easter even the butter, milk and eggs were, if I remember right, cut off and saved for the Easter Feast—and the kitchen was scrubbed from ceiling to floor for the cooking of the Feast. This wonderful Feast, which began at midnight on the morn of Easter Day, was eaten seated on the floor of the Study House, and is notable in my memory for the beautiful singing of the Easter Mass by the Russians. So many of their men had such lovely voices. Then they suggested that the English should sing part of their Easter Service. The effect was deplorable. None of the English could sing, we had no hymn book, and our memory of the words was very hazy.

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As well as the pupils there were two or three patients. Katherine Mansfield, who was dying of phthisis [phthisis pulmonalis or tuberculosis], spent the last month of her short life there. Mr. G. had great belief in the efficacy of the breath and aroma of cows in the healing of chest complaints, and had the hay-loft above the cow-stalls converted into a lounge with couches, where patients could rest. In order to wile away the tedium, the ceiling had been decorated by Mr. de Saltzmann, with portraits of the people. I always regret that I was not there in time to be included, but I well remember Mr. de Hartmann, a gentle-faced man, with a very noticeable nose, portrayed as a Toucan, and Dr. Jimmy Young as an ape.

There were also notable visitors, the Grand Duke Michael lunched with Mr. G. one day, and Algernon Blackwood came to inspect us and Middleton Murry was also there.

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In September occurred what I think must have been the first of the trips to Chamonix. The car-load consisted of Mr. G., Mdme Ostroffsky, Mme de Hartmann and myself, Dr. Kessiloff, Dr. Maurice Nicoll and Vladush, the Polish boy. We left the Prieuré at

midnight, and at 3 a.m. were seated on the grass by the side of the road, under a glorious, starlit sky, supping off sardines and vodka, goat and beet root etc. The journey was broken for coffee at an inn about breakfast time, and for lunch with a rest afterwards by the roadside, after which we pushed on to La Feucille in the Jura mountains where we slept, continuing the comparatively short run to Chamonix the next day. Never shall I forget the taste of the trout at dinner: one has to have undergone a long period of somewhat monotonous living in order to savour the full flavour of trout. We started back next morning and reached La Feucille in heavy rain. But nothing deterred the indomitable driver. Coming down the Juras, the car skidded. It shot to the right almost on the mountain railway by the side of the road—it was jerked round and went headlong for the precipice on the other side—and when it finally came to rest it was facing up the hill—and a small voice—Vladush's from the back of the car said, "I don't think I was really afraid." Later we stopped at an inn and Mme Ostroffsky lost her heart to a black and white puppy—Philos. It was brought out to the car, apparently surreptitiously, wrapped up in a rug. Dr. Nicoll and I were quite sure it had been purloined. I, personally, would not have been surprised if it had been, after all the tricks we'd been taught! Dr. Nicoll, however, went into the inn and paid for it again. The rest of the journey was uneventful, except that I sometimes wondered whether the various level-crossing gates would give way before the charge that seemed imminent, and we reached the Prieuré at 6 a.m.

In the late autumn, Mr. G., after a demonstration in Paris, took about fifty of the pupils to America to demonstrate the Movements, and I had left the Prieuré before his return.

