

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MEN

By G. I. Gurdjieff

REVIEWED BY TERRY WINTER OWENS

MANY HAVE SOUGHT TO KNOW the sources of G. I. Gurdjieff's teachings and to uncover the facts of his life. Both those who have worked with him, and those whose contact with him was but momentary, alike shared a curiosity and mystification. So deep was the impression that Gurdjieff made upon others that many people of stature and discrimination have given statements proclaiming him to have been the most remarkable man they have ever encountered. It is little wonder that they wished to know what factors had combined to produce such a colossus.

Gurdjieff's *Meetings With Remarkable Men* contains autobiography, covering Gurdjieff's youth and the most mysterious period of his life spent in search of esoteric knowledge in the Near and Far East. But if Gurdjieff concedes this much to curiosity about himself, it is only a small concession. The author had an altogether different purpose than autobiography in mind. His aim is to tell us not about himself but about the men he has known who have proved themselves remarkable — by their courage and endurance, their intelligence and ingenuity, their steadfastness of purpose and perseverance in face of insuperable difficulties. In the end, it becomes clear his primary purpose is not to tell us about remarkable men as mere biography, but to use this biographical form to elucidate the answers to many profound and difficult questions and to validate the principles of his philosophy and teachings in concrete examples.

This, then, is the history of a rare adventure with treasures to be unearthed at every turn of the road. It is an adventure based on his search through remote and uncharted regions for those ancient truths which might serve to develop the consciousness of contemporary man. It receives its substance from the exciting and

often deeply moving accounts of those who reared and trained him, and of those who shared his unusual journey. It is an adventure of the mind — growing, being formed, setting out after inner knowledge, discovering it and putting it to the test of practice.

Those who have read Gurdjieff's first work, *All and Everything: Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson*, will recall that the author in that book aimed at the "merciless destruction of beliefs rooted for centuries in man." Here, in this second book, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Gurdjieff turns from destruction to construction. He proves that it is possible for man to attain a certain stability and higher level of consciousness in life based on objective values. Gurdjieff's remarkable men did not cast off their everyday lives but used them as the very material for creating within themselves a new level of Being. Their resourcefulness, ingenuity and perseverance in this unusual task uncover the means for man to actualize his full potential. Throughout the book he illuminates a world of possibilities for man which will be utterly new to most readers — possibilities tailored for the man determined to live, grow and develop in a complex and demanding world — not in a remote monastery or ivory tower.

Those who are acquainted with *All and Everything* will immediately be aware of the stylistic contrast between that book and the new one. The first was very difficult to read, the second is eminently readable. The two books can be linked to a favorite saying of Gurdjieff's father: "Without salt, no sugar."

It is appropriate that Gurdjieff's father is the first of the remarkable men. What good fortune to be the son of such a man! He was one of the last *ashohks* or bards who transmitted ancient stories and legends orally from generation to generation and he lived by principles not founded on conventional ethics or morals but on a wisdom issuing from his own highly developed state of being. His insistence on obeying his own commandments, even in a world which was in many ways counter to such a mode of life, inevitably produced hardships which he met with singular courage. Of him, Gurdjieff remembers:

... all the grandeur of my father's calm and the detachment of his inner state in all his external manifestations, throughout the misfortunes which befell him.

I can now say for certain that in spite of his desperate struggle with the misfortunes which poured upon him as though from the horn of plenty, he continued, then as before, in all the difficult circumstances of his life, to retain the soul of a true poet. (p. 42).

And he instilled in Gurdjieff a deep love of high ideals such as:

To be outwardly courteous to all without distinction, whether they be rich or poor, friends or enemies, power-possessors or slaves, and to whatever religion they may belong, but inwardly to remain free and never put much trust in anyone or anything.

To love work for work's sake and not for its gain. (p. 39)

The next masterful man, Dean Borsh, was Gurdjieff's tutor; a man "distinguished by the breadth and depth of his knowledge." His philosophy of education was a most unusual one — and Gurdjieff credits him with being "... the founder and creator of my present individuality, and so to say, the third aspect of my inner God."

The other remarkable men were related to Gurdjieff by a profound thirst for truth. Despite the diversity of their backgrounds and nationalities, a bond was formed among these men as though they were magnetically attracted by the one paramount aim. They accompanied Gurdjieff on one or more of the rewarding odysseys made to the Near and Far East.

There was Bogachevsky who (Gurdjieff says) is still alive and in a monastery of the Essene Brotherhood near the Dead Sea. Gurdjieff deems him to be

...one of the first persons on earth who has been able to live as our Divine Teacher Jesus Christ wished for us all. (p. 77).

There was Captain Pogossian who, upon completion of theological studies, embarked on a career in the engine room of a ship and went on to amass a huge fortune as a shipping magnate. Pogossian had a unique characteristic; one which makes his seemingly fantastic accomplishments quite believable.

Pogossian was always occupied; he was always working at something.

He never sat, as is said, with folded arms, and one never saw him lying down, like his comrades, reading diverting books which give nothing real. If he had no definite work to do, he would either swing his arms in rhythm, mark time with his feet or make all kinds of manipulations with his fingers.

I once asked him why he was such a fool as not to rest, since no one would pay him anything for these useless exercises.

'Yes, indeed,' he replied, 'for the present no one will pay me for these foolish antics of mine — as you and all those pickled in the same barrel of brine think they are — but in the future either you yourself or your children will pay me for them. Joking apart, I do this because I like work, but I like it not with my nature, which is just as lazy as that of other people and never wishes to do anything useful. I like work with my common sense.

'Please bear in mind,' he added, 'that when I use the word "I", you must understand it not as the whole of me, but only as my mind. I love work and have set myself the task of being able, through persistence, to accustom my whole nature to love it and not my reason alone.

'Further, I am really convinced that in the world no conscious work is ever wasted. Sooner or later someone must pay for it. Consequently, if I now work in this way, I achieve two of my aims. First, I shall perhaps teach my nature not to be lazy, and secondly, I will provide for my old age. As you know, I cannot expect that when my parents die they will leave me an ample inheritance to suffice for the time when I will no longer have the strength to earn a living. I also work because the only real satisfaction in life is to work not from compulsion but consciously; that is what distinguishes man from a Karabakh ass, which also works day and night.' (p. 107).

Then there is Yelov, an Aisor bookseller who felt the same way about mental activity as Pogossian felt about physical activity. He became a phenomenon in the knowledge of languages. Gurdjieff, who then spoke eighteen languages, felt a greenhorn next to him. Another was Prince Yuri Lubovedsky, a man of incredible tenacity. After forty-five long years in a fruitless search for the meaning and aim of his life, he remained undiscouraged. In his persistence, he was finally taken to a monastery in which ancient truths were preserved in an unusual system of sacred dances.

Professor Skridlov comes next, animated by his love of archeology. He engaged in excavations in the ruins of ancient Egypt hoping to find the road to self-realization. Together with Gurdjieff, he came to his greatest findings in the teaching of Father Giovanni.

'Faith cannot be given to man, Faith arises in a man and increases in its action in him not as the result of automatic learning, that is, not from any automatic ascertainment of height, breadth, thickness, form and weight, or from the perception of anything by sight, hearing, touch, smell or taste, but from understanding.

'Understanding is the essence obtained from information intentionally learned and from all kinds of experiences personally experienced.

'Understanding is acquired, as I have already said, from the totality of information intentionally learned and from personal experiencings; whereas knowledge is only the automatic remembrance of words in a certain sequence.

'Not only is it impossible, even with all one's desire, to give another one's own inner understanding, formed in the course of life from the said factors, but also, as I recently established with certain other brothers of our monastery, there exists a law that the quality of what is perceived by anyone when another person tells him something, either for his knowledge or his understanding, depends on the quality of the data formed in the person speaking.' (p. 240)

Others whom Gurdjieff tells about include Soloviev who retrieved himself from a state of dissipation and went on to become a much loved companion of the truth seekers. Another was Ekim Bey who had an avid interest in hypnotism and everything related to it. Tormented by inner conflict, he sought for knowledge that would enable him to "acquire the being worthy of man." He ultimately found this guidance in the counsel of a venerated Persian dervish to whom, almost at the eleventh hour, he was able to lay bare his deepest question.

The milieu of the book seems beyond classification. Certainly it is an exotic one; a world into which we are given a glimpse of fascinating customs and beliefs of peoples largely unknown in the West. For example, the Yezidi, a sect living in Transcaucasia sometimes called the "devil worshippers."

... if a circle is drawn around a Yezidi, he cannot of his own volition escape from it. Within the circle he can move freely, and the larger the circle, the larger the space in which he can move, but get out of it he cannot. Some strange force, much more powerful than his normal strength, keeps him inside. I myself, although strong, could not pull a weak woman out of the circle; it needed yet another man as strong as I.

If a Yezidi is forcibly dragged out of a circle, he immediately falls into a state called catalepsy, from which he recovers the instant he is brought back inside. (p. 66)

Gurdjieff's masterful ability as a story teller produces a whole spectrum of colors; from profound seriousness to brilliant humor. One of the most outstanding shades on his palette is that of sheer excitement. In one episode Gurdjieff and Soloviev are taken to a hidden monastery having given their solemn oath never to reveal its location.

Throughout the whole of our journey, we strictly and conscientiously kept our oath not to look and not to try to find out where we were going and through what places we were passing. When we halted for the night, and occasionally by day when we ate in some secluded place, our *bashliks* were removed. But while on the way we were only twice permitted to uncover our eyes. The first time was on the eighth day, when we were about to cross a swinging bridge which one could neither cross on horseback nor walk over two abreast, but only in single file, and this it was impossible to do with our eyes covered.

From the character of the surroundings then revealed to us we deduced that we were either in the valley of the Pyandzh River or of the Zeravshan, as there was a broad stream flowing beneath us, and the bridge itself with the mountains surrounding it was very similar to the bridges in the gorges of these two rivers.

It must be said that, had it been possible to cross this bridge blindfold, it would have been much better for us. Whether it was because we had gone for a long time before that with our eyes covered or for some other reason, I shall never forget the nervousness and terror we experienced in crossing this bridge. For a long time we could not bring ourselves even to set foot on it.

Such bridges are very often met with in Turkestan, wherever there is no other possible route, or in places where to advance one mile would otherwise require a twenty-day detour.

The sensation one has when one stands on one of these bridges and looks down to the bottom of the gorge, where there is usually a river flowing, can be compared to that of looking down from the top of the Eiffel Tower, only many times more intense; and when one looks up, the tops of the mountains are out of sight—they can only be seen from a distance of several miles.

Moreover, these bridges hardly ever have a handrail, and they are so narrow that only one mountain packhorse can cross at a time; furthermore, they rock up and down as if one were walking on a good spring mattress — and I will not even speak about the feeling of uncertainty as to their strength.

For the most part they are held in place by ropes, made from the fiber of the bark of a certain tree, one end attached to the bridge and the other fastened to some near-by tree on the mountainside or to a projection of rock. In any case, these bridges are not to be recommended even to those who in Europe are called thrill-chasers. The heart of any European crossing these bridges would sink, not into his boots, but somewhere still lower. (pp. 149-150)

As these stories unfold, Gurdjieff undertakes the task of answering the nine questions which were most often put to him in the course of his teaching:

What remarkable men have I met?
 What marvels have I seen in the East?
 Has man a soul and is it immortal?
 Is the will of man free?
 What is life, and why does suffering exist?
 Do I believe in the occult and spiritualistic sciences?
 What are hypnotism, magnetism and telepathy?
 How did I become interested in these questions?
 What led me to my system, practised in the Institute bearing my name? (p. 30)

As though that in itself was not already a fascinating set of themes, Gurdjieff also imparts to the reader seven sayings handed down from antiquity, each of which formulates one aspect of objective truth.

Each chapter is a mixture of adventure, philosophy, and biography. Although it is far from being an autobiography, it gives a marvelous insight into the nature of the man and some idea of those forces that helped to shape him. This vivid and stimulating picture is probably the only information available about Gurdjieff's early life and the sources of his knowledge.

But whatever else this book may be, at its foundation is the expression of an extraordinary system of esoteric ideas dealing with the spiritual growth of man. The principle goal of this system is the development of man's latent psychological possibilities. Gurdjieff's remarkable men, to one extent or another, either

exemplify such a development or uncover the means for actualizing such possibilities. Their search on the road to fulfilment, their discoveries and the subsequent philosophies which they formulate reveal a great deal of the material on which the Gurdjieffian system is based. But this is no cerebral psychological thesis; here these ideas are put forth in a setting as adventuresome and exciting as the system itself implies them to be. Gurdjieff gives us a picture of what could be, not through theory or advice, but by example.

In Gurdjieff's father, for instance, one sees the realization in man of an "I" — a permanent, reliable and enduring entity — an attribute which is one of the ultimate aims in the system. Through Bogachevsky, who formulated a code for Objective Morality, is revealed principles to guide the man seeking to acquire higher states of consciousness. Vitvitskaia, who at one point stood on the brink of moral ruin but nevertheless developed into a woman "such as might serve as an ideal for every woman," is a beautiful illustration of the fact that this system does not call for improvement of earthly values of man but rather the creation of a spiritual existence independent of one's station in life. And Karpenko, whose aim was to be able to live "as designed from Above and as is worthy of man," exemplifies worthiness of a supra-normal nature. Through this book is revealed a vista for aspiration rarely paralleled in fact or fiction.

Still, without question, the most remarkable man is Gurdjieff himself. Not that Gurdjieff uses his writing for self-aggrandizement. On the contrary, he goes to great lengths to give credit where credit is due and invariably credits others with the responsibility for his own achievements. Nevertheless he appears as a paragon of great resources, intelligence and imagination. Because of his flexibility, talent and untiring ambition, we see him cast variously as carpenter, gunsmith, railroad stoker, engineer's overseer and interpreter, guide at the Egyptian pyramids, and on and on. In the epilogue, the Material Question, Gurdjieff tells how he financed the operation of his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. We see Gurdjieff almost singlehandedly running a most unique enterprise.

Gurdjieff had unflinching willingness to hazard any and all conditions to bring his search for objective knowledge to fruition. Through his toils and sacrifices, Gurdjieff became a channel through which sacred knowledge from antiquity reached the twentieth century. In his role as a teacher, Gurdjieff used the knowledge which he codified from many sources to synthesize a system which provides the means for man's development of Being, a permanent "I," higher states of consciousness, and all that these imply. Gurdjieff

has composed a mighty structure by augmenting these beautiful stories with this counterpoint of esoteric ideas.

This book provides indubitable testimony that there is a summit of achievement towards which man can strive. When a man as remarkable as Gurdjieff writes about men he considers remarkable, the results are wondrous.

From my point of view, he can be called a remarkable man who stands out from those around him by the resourcefulness of his mind, and who knows how to be restrained in the manifestations which proceed from his nature, at the same time conducting himself justly and tolerantly towards the weaknesses of others. (p. 31)

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