

Meetings with Remarkable Men Study Guide

Meetings with Remarkable Men by G. I. Gurdjieff

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Plot Summary

G. I. Gurdjieff (January 13, 1886? - October 29, 1949) explains that this book is a continuation of an earlier work, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, and also a segue to a planned third work, all of which he intends to publish in order to give to the world his complete set of ideas, insights, wisdom, and directions for humankind to live better lives. His followers published this book ten years after his death.

This book is about the remarkable men that Gurdjieff has met throughout his life. Each man's story illustrates at least one major point in Gurdjieff's teaching through the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

Gurdjieff's father lays the proper, according to the author, foundation for a successful man in business and life in general. Additionally, the father allows the tutoring of Gurdjieff rather than forcing him to remain in the regular schools. The idea here is that with the proper upbringing, children grow into responsible, independent, and caring adults.

Dean Borsh is Gurdjieff's first and primary tutor. The Dean is also an ordained priest who lives much more simply than other priests. He teaches Gurdjieff that humility is an important virtue when seeking the truth, and to dismiss the strange things that Gurdjieff encounters in his life. Gurdjieff still seeks answers to these mysteries, such as why psychic predictions come true. Bogachevsky, also known as Father Evlissi, reinforces Gurdjieff's curiosity about the spirit world and tells him about objective and subjective morality.

Captain Pogossian is Gurdjieff's model for the perfect businessman who also has his soul together. Pogossian at first aspires to become an ordained priest but discovers that his heart is not in it. Upon Gurdjieff's suggestion, Pogossian works for the railroad and later accompanies Gurdjieff on an expedition to Egypt. Along the way, Pogossian becomes interested in a steamship engine room. He stays on with the ship to eventually become a rich man in the steamship transportation and shipping business. The primary message is that a man can be both spiritual and material concurrently, and should also follow his heart's desire, not what parents or society desire for him.

Abram Yelov is another model for the perfect businessman, but in a different sense. Yelov's first love is of knowledge and philosophy, which happen to be found in ancient literature. He becomes very proficient with the bookseller's business and helps Gurdjieff find the volumes he desires. Yelov later becomes a successful bookstore owner in Russia but must move to North America after the Russian Revolution. He again prospers in his new home. This illustrates how following one's passion in life leads to success, and that the success does not depend upon time or place.

Prince Yuri Lubovedsky searches for a way to communicate with his wife who died while giving childbirth. He becomes a close friend of Gurdjieff, as they share many common interests. Lubovedsky ultimately fails to find a way to communicate with the dead, but



he does find peace in a remote monastery. He dies there, spending his last years with Gurdjieff. The quixotic quest has value despite the impossibility of ever reaching the goal. The journey is more important than the destination.

Ekim Bey wants to seek the truth with Gurdjieff and his other friends, but he ends up using his knowledge to make money. This, according to Gurdjieff, is the wrong way to use wisdom and truth. Money should be made in the usual business ways, not by trying to sell spiritualism. This ultimately becomes a sham and is self-destructive. However, shams are a regular part of doing business the usual ways, as Gurdjieff has practiced in his businesses.

Piotr Karpenko and Gurdjieff are rivals for a young girl's attention while they are still boys. They end up risking their lives over her in a live practice artillery bombardment. Afterwards they become fast friends and vow never to do such a foolish thing again. The lesson they learn is that oftentimes competition is silly and not worth the fight. Only friendship has value over the long haul. Karpenko dies from gunshot wounds while on an expedition with Gurdjieff, which shows how quickly life can be snuffed out.

Professor Skridlov dedicates his life to seeking out ancient artifacts, whether or not the seeking brings any wisdom or truth. Upon meeting Gurdjieff and going on a particular expedition with him, the Professor discovers the deep meanings of life from a priest in a monastery. Both Skridlov and Gurdjieff's lives change during this time, taking on the depths that bring tears to Skridlov's eyes every time he sees the magnificence of creation, such as on a mountain top. Where Gurdjieff had sought this revelation all his life, Skridlov stumbles upon it. Both ways lead to the same place.

At the end of the book, Gurdjieff explains how he makes money to keep the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man going. His students put this chapter together ten years after his death. It reveals the details of how the Institute got started, how it expanded, and much of what Gurdjieff thinks regarding business, the modern world, and also the rude American who posed the initial question that sparked the long dissertation.



Chapter 1, Introduction

Chapter 1, Introduction Summary and Analysis

G. I. Gurdjieff (January 13, 1886? - October 29, 1949) explains that this book is a continuation of an earlier work, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, and also a segue to a planned third work, all of which he intends to publish in order to give to the world his complete set of ideas, insights, wisdom, and directions for humankind to live better lives. His followers published this book ten years after his death.

A highly opinionated man, Gurdjieff extols the virtues that he has discovered over many years of living and traveling the lands of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Egypt, Georgia, and various others, including Europe and the United States. He has deep contempt for the minds of modern man, but he maintains that we all feel certain things universally. An example of this is the terror of facing death as the decades roll by toward the inevitable experience that all those born into this world are destined to experience at one point or another. Not a teetotaler, the author enjoys his alcoholic beverages, especially while recovering from an auto wreck that nearly took his life. This time of convalescence also gives him an opportunity to become a writer, albeit one that might be overly self-aggrandizing and a teller of tall tales. The twinkle in the author's eyes can be felt as he constructs his stories with a deeper intent than simply providing entertainment: "Before pronouncing this verdict on my personal guilt, one must finally take into account that from the very first day I changed my custom of drinking armagnac from what are called liqueur glasses and began drinking from what are called tumblers. And I began to do so instinctively, it seems to me—obviously so that, in the present case also, justice might triumph" (p. 3).

The style is reminiscent of other writers, such as Cervantes of the sixteenth century and Twain of the eighteenth century. The skill of telling stories in the oral tradition shines through with all the embellishments of imagination and delays used to make the point or punchline. Another skill in the oral tradition involves the memorization of ancient tales that are handed down, verbatim, from generation to generation. Gurdjieff makes no attempt at creating this type of tradition; instead, he merely frames many of the principles in his own words and stories for the improvement of modern humankind, which is to say he reminds humankind that the ancient ways are better than the modern ways to a large extent.

A primary theme comes through in one of these ancient wisdoms that men, and the author considers men to be not superior to women but very different, have both the wolf and the sheep as parts of their beings. A good man controls the wolf and keeps the sheep from dominating the personality. Thus, a good man is both bold and compassionate, decisive and gentle, a peacemaker first and a fighter when challenged or while defending the weaker amidst the societies and wildernesses encountered. The author refers to the role of women as being equal in the world but different, a strong hint toward the Eastern concept of yin and yang. Men and women need each other to live



good lives, meaning lives that bring them to a strong sense of spirituality and preparation for the next existence, upon which Gurdjieff does not expound. He does strongly imply that the afterlife not only exists, but exists as the primary goal of life on earth. He sees this as a common idea among the world's religions.

On modern literature the author has nothing good to say. He thinks that all the science literature is just repackaged ancient knowledge. Novels strike him as particularly useless works, while travel stories are penned by those who have not experienced anything in their journeys worth writing about. To Gurdjieff, journalists are in the business of lying. He does think that his writing is worth his effort and the world's attention, unsurprisingly.

Gurdjieff claims to know many foreign languages and makes the point that some concepts that are simple in one language become inexpressible in others, or worse, distorted in translation. His main attention focuses on the difficulty of expressing Persian ideas in the Russian language, which is what he uses for composing this book. He sums up his take on the modern world by saying, "I cannot find better words to describe it than the expression 'it has no soul'" (p. 14).

His answer to this is to use his storytelling abilities to tell anecdotes and proverbs he has learned along his way through life. This takes more time, but he assures the reader that if looked into closely, the true meanings will be discovered even if not translated in their poetically brief original versions. Gurdjieff tells a Persian story about two sparrows that, accustomed to feeding off the droppings of animals in a town, poison themselves by trying to eat the petroleum drippings from automobiles. His point is that modern life is not an improvement over ancient life and is actually killing the human race. Not only this, but the modern life of Europeans attempts to encroach on the ancient life of Asia, which at the time of writing is simply ignored by the people of Asia, having lost interest in the false and hollow modern ways.

After giving accounts of sausage poisoning, a bad modern art painter, a terrible actress, a young European couple that commits suicide over a book deal gone bad, the young and poor journalistic writers considering themselves poets, and bombastic false introductions of men only great in their mutual agreement to self-delusions, Gurdjieff tells his brave readers that his intention is to answer all the silly questions put to him over the years in both this book and the next in the series. These questions involve the remarkable men the author has met, what marvelous things he has seen in the East, whether man has an immortal soul and free will, why suffering exists in this world, the occult and spiritual sciences, and other such subjects. A great concern for many is his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man and its funding. The author promises to answer all these question, but the reader may need to look for the answers within the text. Gurdjieff is not going to just give the answers away without insisting on efforts from the reader.

The author presents himself as a curmudgeon toward modern thinking, society, and spirituality in one way and a crafty fox of a writer in another. The anticipated effect in his readers is to bring them into the subsequent stories either through enthusiastic curiosity,



or by way of engendering a seething anger to prove him wrong and a charlatan. Either way, Gurdjieff pulls his reader along. If people improve themselves from the reading, the author achieves his goal. If not, he has at least made them look and consider the validity of what he offers.



Chapter 2, My Father

Chapter 2, My Father Summary and Analysis

Gurdjieff describes his father as being an ashokh, a name given to men in Turkey who tell or sing the old traditional stories of the culture. Even during Gurdjieff's youth the ashokhs were becoming scarce, and he reports that nobody has carried on the ashokh tradition since his father's generation. However, his father did take him to ashokh contests, and these greatly impressed Gurdjieff. Among the stories told included the legend of Gilgamesh from ancient Babylon, the importance of which Gurdjieff does not realize until much later in life.

His father and his future tutor, Dean (also Father) Borsh, often carried on long conversations and debates regarding philosophy, especially along theological paths, Gurdjieff remembers. He also remembers the talks having greater meaning for him later on in life and thinks of his father as an older brother, not a parent, who instilled high ideals on Gurdjieff while he grew into adulthood.

The author traces his family's movements from Turkey to Georgia and back to Turkey. A disease epidemic takes out the family's herd of dairy cattle, which puts the family into poverty. His father takes to woodworking and carpentry, which does not raise the family back to its former level, but provides enough. The family moves to the booming Turkish town of Kars, which is where Gurdjieff experiences most of his childhood. Here he spends time with his father in the workshop making various things for his friends, including guns and pencil boxes. The demand grows for his goods, and Gurdjieff starts making money from the sales. He thanks his father for teaching him how to work, take the hard knocks in life with courage and faith, and can only fault his father for being too honest. This is why Gurdjieff's father never did well in business.

Due to the political upheavals that went on before and during World War I, Gurdjieff never had a chance to visit his father's grave. They had last been together when his father was eighty-two years old. Most of the memorable things from his father, including gramophone recordings of songs and stories, had been lost in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. As an understandable result, Gurdjieff has nothing bad to say about his father other than the one fault of being too honest for business. This suggests that Gurdjieff allows himself an amount of truth-stretching or taking advantage of human foolishness when dealing with other businessmen, and in this book the foreshadowing follows true to this characteristic of the author.



Chapter 3, My First Tutor

Chapter 3, My First Tutor Summary and Analysis

Having a good voice in his childhood, Gurdjieff joins the cathedral choir and meets Dean Borsh. The Dean takes a special interest in Gurdjieff and becomes his first tutor. Liking his father, the Dean becomes a friend of the family. A tall, thin man of seventy years, Dean Borsh, also a priest in the church, has ideas that are considered odd for the townspeople. He keeps to himself mostly and prefers modest quarters over the more lavish surroundings that the other priests enjoy. Much of his time he spends on the study of astronomy and chemistry. Father Borsh also enjoys composing music, some of which becomes well known in Russia.

Dean Borsh recognizes the brilliance in young Gurdjieff and offers to take him out of the municipal school for special tutoring, some with the Dean's guidance and some with other teachers. Gurdjieff studies geography, history, scriptures, the Russian language, anatomy, physiology, mathematics, and several other subjects. When not studying, Gurdjieff spends his time traveling to the various teachers for his lessons.

The relationship between student and teacher develops into a friendship between mutually respecting equals, except that Dean Borsh continues to guide the young Gurdjieff toward a good adulthood. Understanding that adolescence is a difficult time, Dean Borsh advises Gurdjieff to avoid giving into his lust, as this will reduce his value as an adult. This ties into a greater view of how humans develop, where youth is not responsible for its mistakes, but that once an adult, the responsibility becomes of great importance. Dean Borsh thinks that the age of responsibility comes to males between the ages of twenty and twenty-three, and for females between fifteen and nineteen. He also sees that the modern era has lost this wisdom, allowing children to grow into irresponsible adults, and attributes this to the modern education systems.

Father Borsh believes that males and females have types, and that these types should be matched up by adults who know better how relationships between the sexes work. He refers to how the ancients prearranged marriages when boys were seven years old and girls only one year old.

The ten principles that Dean Borsh believes should be taught to children as they develop are:

""Belief in receiving punishment for disobedience.

Hope of receiving reward only for merit.

Love of God—but indifference to the saints.

Remorse of conscience for the ill-treatment of animals.



Fear of grieving parents and teachers.

Fearlessness towards devils, snakes and mice.

Joy in being content merely with what one has.

Sorrow at the loss of the goodwill of others.

Patient endurance of pain and hunger.

The striving to earn one's bread" (p. 57).

Gurdjieff does not have the honor of visiting Dean Borsh during the last few days before his death. Years later he comes back to the town to pay respects to the gravesite and arranges for a full funeral ceremony, much to the amazement of the townspeople. A powerful message about how necessary funeral services are to the living carries through, even long after the actual death of the loved one.



Chapter 4, Bogachevsky

Chapter 4, Bogachevsky Summary and Analysis

Gurdjieff meets Bogachevsky, also known as Father Evlissi, after Bogachevsky graduates from the Russian Theological Seminary and arrives in Kars to be ordained into the priesthood. He takes some of the teaching responsibilities for Gurdjieff's education, during which time the young student benefits from the many meetings and discussions with Bogachevsky's friends, all learned men.

During one of these discussions, an army engineer brings up the phenomenon called "table turning", or where people place hands on a table and it bumps out answers with one of its legs. The engineer believes that this involves spirits. The group gathers around a three-legged table, and by placing their hands on it in a certain way, the table begins to tap out answers after several minutes. The group asks about the age of each member, and the table correctly answers. Gurdjieff finds this fascinating, especially after the recent death of one of his sisters. He wants to believe in spirits.

Putting the question to Father Borsh, the Father responds that this is complete nonsense and irrelevant to what Gurdjieff needs to learn about spirituality. Father Borsh says that if spirits have the ability to bump the leg of a table, then they should also have the ability to communicate with humans in better ways. He thinks the bumping of a table leg is simply too absurd of a communication medium. Gurdjieff doubts the Father's answer but has no time to investigate the problem further. He still wants to believe in spirits.

Some time later Gurdjieff moves to Alexandropol (modern Gyumri in Armenia), where he makes money by repairing a diversity of items, a skill he has developed since his early childhood days in his father's carpentry and woodworking shop. He knows how to fix locks and watches, how to make a stove out of stone, and even how to embroider fabrics. Gurdjieff considers himself to be a master of all trades.

While staying with his uncle and aunt in Alexandropol, Gurdjieff's aunt warns him to be careful around firearms. This comes from a psychic reading that a half-witted man named Eoung-Ashokh Mardiross had given her. Many of the predictions had come true, and she is worried about this part of the reading coming true as well. Gurdjieff learns that one of the predictions had involved a sore on his right side, which had indeed happened, and he had not told anybody about it. He dismisses his aunt's warning about firearms because he does not believe in fortune-telling. A few weeks later, while duck hunting with friends, Gurdjieff suffers a gunshot wound to the leg. The prediction seems to have come true, and so he seeks out the fortune-teller. Gurdjieff receives his psychic reading, and many of the predictions come true in his later life.

He witnesses another peculiar incident while in Alexandropol. He hears the screams of a child, and running to investigate, he sees the child within a circle drawn in the sand



and other children teasing the child to come out of the circle. The child cannot until someone brushes away the part of the line, thus opening up a door. Gurdjieff discovers that these people, the Yezidi, are considered devil-worshippers and believe that a circle drawn around them keeps them captured within the circle. He also learns that adults believe this so strongly that if dragged out of the circle, they go into a deep, death-like trance. Gurdjieff questions many people about this, but they cannot give a satisfactory answer. The observation of the Yezidi and the strangeness of psychic predictions coming true puzzle Gurdjieff. He cannot reconcile what he has learned in books with what he experiences in life, and supposedly learned men cannot answer his questions. He is "gnawed at by the worm of curiosity" (p. 70).

Another not so mysterious event happens. A young police guard falls from his horse, is proclaimed dead and subsequently buried in a shallow grave, which is the customary way for the region. The young man reappears in town and is considered a gornakh, a type of evil spirit that sometimes inhabits the bodies of the dead. These spirits often take revenge on the living, and with this in mind, someone slits the gornakh's throat. Gurdjieff takes this situation with a huge pinch of salt. The young man had been buried alive, and apparently this is not an uncommon thing for the time and place. That people who are buried alive may have a bad attitude afterward is understandable, and perhaps finishing the job is the only safe way to handle this, from the viewpoint of those who had made the mistake.

Bogachevsky explains his ideas on morality as being in two categories: the objective and subjective. Objective morality is absolute and never changes, such as the Ten Commandments, and is the basis for human conscience. Subjective morality is invented by the laws of men, and so is relative to time and place. Subjective morality can change and does so often. He uses as an example the difference between Muslim and Russian women. The Muslim women must cover their faces, while the Russian women have no such restriction. In another example, two soldiers react to debt, one by committing murder and the other by suicide. Bogachevsky sees this as the murderer being a bad person trying to jilt a boot maker out of the charge for having made new boots for the soldier, and the other soldier as committing suicide out of shame imposed upon him by society. His advice to Gurdjieff is to not let the rules of men supersede the laws of nature and God. Gurdjieff takes this lesson to heart and also respects Father Evlissi, who is still alive at the time, as a rare and true follower of Jesus Christ.



Chapter 5, Mr. X or Captain Pogossian

Chapter 5, Mr. X or Captain Pogossian Summary and Analysis

Although Gurdjieff hears of Sarkis Pogossian while living in Kars, he does not meet the man until going to Echmiadzin on a quest to learn more about the supernatural and to find answers to his many questions. He remembers witnessing a faith healing near the village of Diskiant, and a special church service to bring rain to Kars, which seemed to have worked. Gurdjieff selects Echmiadzin because it is the spiritual and cultural center for Armenia.

Upon arriving in town, Gurdjieff seeks out Pogossian to deliver a parcel of linen from his parents. The two young men discover that they have many common interests, including many questions about the supernatural, and Pogossian invites Gurdjieff to stay with him, which Gurdjieff accepts. Although nearing the end of his studies at the Theological Seminary, Pogossian's heart is not in becoming a priest. They explore the town together and share many of their experiences and insights into the questions that both have. In the end though, nothing is answered. Gurdjieff leaves disillusioned, but did find a good friend in Pogossian.

Two years later, Pogossian comes back to Kars, where he is expected to be ordained. Upon Gurdjieff's suggestion, knowing how he feels about this, Pogossian instead takes a job as a locksmith with the railway where Gurdjieff works. After a period of time, both make enough money to take time off and pursue their mutual interests in the supernatural. Having come across a collection of ancient Armenian books, they decide to travel to Alexandropol where they can study among the ancient ruins.

The ruins consist of churches built between 1000 and 1215 which were destroyed during a 1313 earthquake. Gurdjieff and Pogossian find many underground passages in which they explore and dig out the rubble that has filled parts of them. They discover a pile of parchments during one of the digs. After puzzling over the ancient Armenian language, unintelligible to both men, and finding help in Alexandropol, they discover a reference to an esoteric school that had links to ancient Babylon and had existed between the cities of Mosul and Urmia in northern Iraq. The two men decide to mount an expedition to find the school run by the Sarmoung Brotherhood.

Pogossian works his political magic in Armenia to include him and Gurdjieff on a government mission that will caravan to a point near to their destination. They travel with the caravan until coming to a point that they need to take a different route. After crossing the river Arax, they disguise themselves as Caucasian Tartars due to the animosity toward Armenians in this region. Two months later they arrive at a road that leads to Kurdistan, along which they hope to find the ancient school. Pogossian suffers a potentially fatal insect sting, which causes Gurdjieff to quickly cut off a large portion of



the stung man's calf. The injury is so bad that they must wait for Pogossian to heal, and a local priest takes them under his care.

The priest shows Gurdjieff an old map of Egypt, for which a prince had once offered a large amount of money. The elderly priest had refused to part with the map, so the prince paid half the amount offered to make a copy. Gurdjieff, not having the money to pay for a copy, makes one on the sly while the priest is away from the house. After Pogossian heals enough, they buy horses and head toward Syria.

Four months later they arrive at the town of Smyrna (modern Izmar in Turkey), where they visit a Greek restaurant. Here a fight breaks out among sailors who had been drinking. Gurdjieff and Pogossian, a little drunk themselves, join in the fight with the smaller group of sailors. A military patrol comes by and breaks up the fight. Gurdjieff, having been given a black eye, and Pogossian complaining about a mighty pain in his side, make their way back to their lodging.

The next morning the two men decide to hasten their trip to Egypt by sea and go to the harbor to arrange passage on whatever ship they can find. They meet the sailors they had fought beside the day before, who turn out to be English. The English sailors talk their captain into taking the two men along to Egypt, being as they had fought so well.

During the trip, Pogossian works in the engine room and becomes very good at it. He decides to stay with the ship once they reach Alexandria, but Gurdjieff continues on his journey, now modified after copying the priest's map. He remembers his friend fondly as a man who always worked at something, which results in Pogossian becoming a rich man in the shipping business and the owner of several steamships.



Chapter 6, Abram Yelov

Chapter 6, Abram Yelov Summary and Analysis

Upon returning from Echmiadzin, Gurdjieff meets Abram Yelov in Tiflis while researching ancient literature. Yelov sells books of all sorts and knows where to find just about any work that attracts Gurdjieff. Through a mutual interest in books and philosophical questions, the two become friends.

Gurdjieff at first buys books from Yelov, and then goes to exchange them. The two spend many hours going through stacks of books around the town and discussing philosophy. Gurdjieff learns that Yelov is of the Aisor people, most of whom have a reputation as rogues. Some become self-ordained priests, which was an easy thing to do at that time, and sell phony relics to the visitors at religious shrines. From this practice the Aisor priests become known as steelers of crosses, which has special meaning regarding the goods they sell: "Among these relics were fragments of the true cross on which Christ was crucified, hair of the Virgin Mary, finger-nails of St. Nicholas of Myra, the tooth of Judas, which brings good luck, a piece of the horseshoe of the horse of St. George, and even the rib or skull of some great saint" (p. 114).

One day, Yelov comments to Gurdjieff that a local seller of cast plaster figurines, busts, and boxes makes better money than any of the booksellers, which gives Gurdjieff an idea. He secures employment in the plaster merchant's factory and pretends to be a slow person. His employer allows Gurdjieff to view how the plaster casts are made, and Gurdjieff picks up all the tricks to avoid faults like bubbles in the plaster. Gurdjieff takes his newly found skills and starts his own plaster casting factory, with Yelov helping. Soon they have cornered the local market in plaster casts.

Gurdjieff remembers Yelov as always being respectful to his mother, having a quick and hot temper but never keeping a grudge about anybody. He likes people and also likes to play with his friends with faux insults and barbs, which he expects in return. Yelov has a knack for picking up languages, reads continually, and prefers the work of the mind to physical labor. He eventually becomes a wealthy book and stationary store owner, but the Russian Revolution sweeps all his riches away. He moves to a city in North America and builds a comfortable life there.



Chapter 7, Prince Yuri Lubovedsky

Chapter 7, Prince Yuri Lubovedsky Summary and Analysis

Yuri Lubovedsky, a wealthy Russian prince, loses his young beautiful wife when she dies while giving birth to her first child. This crushes the prince so much that he turns to spiritualism to gain contact with his wife on the other side. His search takes him to Egypt where he meets Gurdjieff, who is working as a guide.

While Gurdjieff works for a Russian archaeologist named Skridlov, the prince approaches, being familiar with Skridlov. The two Russians speak in their native tongue, unaware that Gurdjieff understands every word quite well. The conversation involves who is more foolish: the man who digs for artifacts from a long-dead society, or the man who seeks a truth probably invented by ancient insane bums.

A few days later, Gurdjieff is sitting at the foot of a pyramid and looks at his copy of the old priest's map when the prince approaches. Lubovedsky recognizes the map as the same one that he had copied for a high price. The two men learn that they have much in common, and this leads into a thirty-five-year friendship.

Gurdjieff agrees to take a young Polish woman named Vitvitskaia from Constantinople to Russia upon the prince's request. The prince had seen Vitvitskaia in the company of a known dealer in the white slave trade while on a ship headed for Ceylon. Through conversation with the woman, he understands that she is to take a job with the Alexandria consul, and suspecting that this is just a story, Lubovedsky wires ahead to confirm the claim. By the time the ship anchors at Salonika, the prince knows the truth: Vitvitskaia is to be sold into the white slave trade. He decides to take her to Constantinople and offer her a better life in Russia.

After escorting the woman to the prince's family in Russia, Gurdjieff finds himself in Rome where he shines shoes for a living. To increase his customer flow, he customizes his shoeshine chair with small attached tables to hold wine and bread, plus a gramophone with a headset made of rubber tubing. His business flourishes. During this time, Vitvitskaia comes by with the prince's sister. Gurdjieff and Vitvitskaia are reunited. Having gone from a life of prostitution to the security of Lubovedsky's family, Vitvitskaia tells Gurdjieff about her interest in and talent for music. This had led to experiments with the effects of music on people. She had attempted to create a consistent response in all people to any particular piece of music. These experiments turned out to be failures. No matter how hard she tried to evoke consistent responses, people insisted on behaving however they felt, some sleeping through the performance after a hard day's work.

As the years go on, Gurdjieff and the prince correspond regularly. Vitvitskaia takes ill on a journey and dies in Samara. The prince visits Ceylon, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Kafiristan, and suddenly the letters stop coming. Gurdjieff's last meeting with Yuri



Lubovedsky takes place in Central Asia while Gurdjieff travels with a man named Soloviev.

Gurdjieff moves to New Bukhara, where he sets up a shop to make paper flowers, which sell very well during the Easter season. He also discovers that he can capture and sell dyed living sparrows as exotic birds in cages. These sell very well too. While playing billiards, Gurdjieff sees four men beating a single young man. Disgusted with this display of cruelty, Gurdjieff runs out of the billiard hall and uses his martial arts knowledge to chase away the bullies. The man he saves from the beating is Soloviev, a drunken bum at the time, and Gurdjieff takes him in.

On Easter day, Gurdjieff buys the makings for a feast and returns home to find Soloviev still asleep. Soloviev wakes up and is astounded by the amount and variety of food spread across the table. Gurdjieff pours two glasses of vodka, and to his surprise, Soloviev refuses to drink. Something had affected Soloviev to give up the drink that had ruined his life. He had once been a postal worker and a soldier, but also an irresponsible person throughout his childhood and into adulthood. Soloviev had lost everything shortly before Gurdjieff had come to his aid.

Soloviev becomes Gurdjieff's assistant, and they grow fond of each other like good brothers. A dervish friend of Gurdjieff's comes to visit with news that a holy man at a monastery somewhere in the heart of Asia wants Gurdjieff to visit and knows quite a bit about him. Gurdjieff asks the dervish to arrange the meeting and to ask if Soloviev could come along. The dervish agrees, as long as both take an oath never to reveal the exact location of the monastery. Gurdjieff and Soloviev leave for the monastery on horseback.

The journey brings them to rough mountain country where narrow bridges without handrails cross deep gorges, usually with rivers running through them. On the first one, Gurdjieff and Soloviev look at the bridge for a long time before attempting to cross. They make it without incident other than extreme vertigo. The paths are marked with high poles from which many offerings flutter in the wind, and sometimes natural landmarks that are also similarly decorated. They finally arrive at the monastery, where they are welcomed in and fed. They stay for two days without anybody coming to visit, but on the third a boy delivers a message from Yuri Lubovesky that invites Gurdjieff to visit him.

Having been disillusioned with his seeking of supernatural knowledge and contacting his dead wife's spirit, the prince had decided to retreat into the monastery to contemplate things in a quiet and peaceful place. They meet the monastery leader and witness the training of temple dancers. The dances have a language of their own that tell the old fables through body movement and music, but not one word. The prince learns that he only has a few more years to live and asks that Gurdjieff stay until the end. Gurdjieff agrees. Three years later Yuri Lubovesky dies.

Soloviev joins the Seekers of Truth, along with Gurdjieff. They work on perfecting themselves and go on numerous expeditions, one of which involves crossing the Gobi Desert in a unique way. The group takes enough sheep to carry water, provide food, and when tied together, carry the party members. In addition, one member of the group

experiments to find a way to keep on moving even in sand storms. The solution is for everyone to walk on stilts that elevate them above the storm, about twenty-five feet. However, along the way, a wild camel kills Soloviev by biting him viciously in the neck.



Chapter 8, Ekim Bey

Chapter 8, Ekim Bey Summary and Analysis

Gurdjieff meets Ekim Bey while both are still young men and staying in Constantinople. They cross paths after Gurdjieff becomes ill and ends up being cared for in Bey's house by way of circumstance involving the diving for tossed coins from steamers. Gurdjieff had retrieved a valuable item accidentally dropped by Bey's father from a steamship.

Four years later, Bey shows up at the town of Suram, where Pogossian, Yelov, Karpenko and Gurdjieff live. All become good friends and share many quixotic ideas. They hear of an expedition that Prince Yuri Lubovedsky plans and decide to join him. While on their way, they hear about a dervish who is purportedly very wise. They decide to make the side trip to meet this man.

The dervish notices the Gurdjieff seems to be a practicing yogi and proceeds to tell him how wrong he is to follow this path. The dervish thinks that the natural ways of eating, breathing, and getting exercise work the best. He argues that the body knows what it needs to do without conscious attention. The party stays in the vicinity of the dervish for a week, learning about the practical ways of life that are uncomplicated with unnecessary rituals, yet based on solid and ancient spiritual principles. Gurdjieff does not go into detail just what these principles are, reserving that information for his planned third book.

Bey studies hypnotism, the human psyche, and how to work certain kinds of magic tricks based on how people respond in subtle ways. He works the crowds to build his reputation and develops a following. While waiting for money to be wired to them in Taskhent, Gurdjieff and Bey decide to make money through this kind of trickery, being that they are nearly broke. They obtain permission from the police, advertise, and present in a rented hall. The response is so good that they soon become local celebrities and no longer need the wired money.



Chapter 9, Piotr Karpenko

Chapter 9, Piotr Karpenko Summary and Analysis

The friendship with Piotr Karpenko begins while Gurdjieff still resides in Kars and studies with his tutors. Karpenko is one of his childhood acquaintances, but not yet a close friend. A jealous rivalry brings them together.

Both like a neighborhood girl and vie for her attentions. They fight over her and decide that the only proper thing to do is to have a duel. However, they cannot obtain the customary weapons of swords or pistols, so they decide, with the help of their other friends, that they will occupy shell holes in the artillery range while the soldiers practice firing in the evening. Gurdjieff and Karpenko are to stay in their shell holes until a predetermined time after the soldiers finish their bombardment.

The boys sneak onto the field and take their shell holes. The bombardment starts, and great fear clutches at Gurdjieff as shells explode all around him. He is certain that death is inevitable and curses himself for doing this foolish thing. After a period, he settles into the situation so well that he falls asleep. The shelling stops and his friends come by to see if he is still alive. They at first think he is dead, but then Gurdjieff wakes up.

They all go to check on Karpenko. He still breaths but will not wake up, being in shock from a shrapnel wound to the leg. The boys carry the injured Karpenko to the river and wash the wound. One of the boys runs to town to fetch an assistant surgeon, who revives Karpenko and dresses the wound, which is bad but contains no remaining shrapnel. From that day forward, Gurdjieff and Karpenko become good friends who swear never to fight over any girl ever again.

Karpenko graduates with a degree in engineering, and having taken an interest in Gurdjieff's studies and experiments, joins the Seekers of Truth. He accompanies the Seekers on several expeditions. Gurdjieff tells the story of an expedition that crosses the Himalayas, which results in Karpenko's death.

While crossing the Himalayas, the group encounters an avalanche that kills one of the party members and their guide. The surviving men wander about the mountains, depending upon maps that are not very accurate. The group stumbles upon a surveying camp, where one of the party members knows the colonel in charge. Gurdjieff witnesses first hand how the maps become inaccurate as one member of the surveying team makes an inaccurate drawing but is too tired to fix it.

The party comes upon a river and starts following it downstream. They reach an impassable spot by land and decide to build a raft. In order to do this, hardwood trees must be found to survive the big rocks in the river, but none seem to be in the area. Locating a small group of natives, Gurdjieff asks their spiritual leader where there might be the right kind of tree growing. The old man agrees to show them a grove of cherry



trees that are appropriate for the raft. While the work goes on, the old man performs what seem like miraculous cures for the local people and members of the party. Gurdjieff learns that the old man had once been a military leader in Afghanistan but had decided to work on his soul for the remainder of his life.

The raft built, the party heads downstream. Along the way a band of natives shoot at the raft and wound Karpenko. Two days later he dies.



Chapter 10, Professor Skridlov

Chapter 10, Professor Skridlov Summary and Analysis

When Gurdjieff meets Yuri Lubovedsky in Egypt, he works as a guide for Professor Skridlov. After the first journey taken with Lubovedsky, Gurdjieff ends up in Thebes, where he again meets Skridlov. They decide to excavate a tomb together, during which time they become good friends. They decide to take a long journey together to the source of the Nile, on into Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), through Syria, and then to the ruins of Babylon.

Through the years they take other expeditions together, sometimes bumping into each other by accident. One of these accidental encounters is while on a train in Russia. Skridlov is going to the resort city of Pyiatigorsk to see his youngest daughter. Gurdjieff and Skridlov decide to meet at a predetermined place and enter the city of Bukhara, a center of Islam and Iranian culture, but this presents a problem. Both men appear too European, and Europeans are hated in the region. They decide to spend a year at the ruins of Old Merv, doing excavations and growing out their beards. The plan is to pose as holy men, and thus be accepted by the tribes around Bukhara. They also spend this time memorizing religious verses.

After a year, when both men decide that they look and sound holy enough, they head toward their goal by the Central Asiatic Railway and by steamboat up the Amu Darya River. The river bottom changes continually as the currents shift sands from and back onto the banks, and thus the steamboat often runs aground. The passengers—a mixture of races, cultures, professions, relations, religions, and ages—make the best of the groundings by having picnics and mingling with one another, a rare situation.

While traveling overland, Gurdjieff sings religious verses while Skridlov keeps time, more or less, with a tambourine. People put alms into the tambourine after their performance, and in this manner they make a little money to keep going. They come upon Father Giovanni in the town named Afridis. Giovanni recognizes the Greek heritage in Gurdjieff, and they have a conversation in the Greek language. Later, Giovanni invites both Gurdjieff and Skridlov to a monastery run by the World Brotherhood, a group with four monasteries in the eastern part of Asia that consists of people from many of the world's religions, united into a single quest for the monotheistic deity that these religions share in common.

Father Giovanni speaks of how faith must develop in each person and that it is an impossible task to instill faith into those who do not understand. Gaining this understanding is what the World Brotherhood is all about, and so everyone helps each other out while on the path toward faith. He tells of his past as a Catholic priest and how he left the Church to seek the faith that he lacked. Upon learning that Gurdjieff and Skridlov are actually in disguise and on a different kind of quest, Giovanni helps them



anyway because the knowledge that they seek could aid his fellows in the World Brotherhood while on their paths toward faith.

During their six-month stay at the monastery, Gurdjieff and Skridlov make many friends and talk endlessly about spirituality, archeology, history, and just about every subject of curiosity. Their minds full to bursting with great wisdom, they abandon their journey to Bukhara. Everything they had wanted to discover there they found in the monastery, so the two travelers return to Russia and their families.

Some years later, Gurdjieff and Skridlov climb a nearby mountain to take a break from the humdrum of city life. The ascent is considered by the locals to be difficult, but after having trekked through the rough Himalayas and other mountain ranges, the two friends easily reach the summit. They sit and look over the majestic views. Gurdjieff looks at Skridlov, who is weeping for joy. The professor cannot help but be overwhelmed with emotion every time he sees such a display of the creation, and refers to himself as "an hysterical woman" (p. 245).

Gurdjieff reflects on what he had learned with Skridlov while at the monastery. The main lesson was to stop thinking in self-centered ways that involved only concentrating on his and his family's needs: "The meeting with Father Giovanni killed all this, and from then on there gradually arose in me that 'something' which has brought the whole of me to the unshakable conviction that, apart from the vanities of life, there exists a 'something else' which must be the aim and ideal of every more or less thinking man, and that it is only this something else which may make a man really happy and give him real values, instead of the illusory 'goods' with which in ordinary life he is always and in everything full" (p. 246).



Chapter 11, The Material Question

Chapter 11, The Material Question Summary and Analysis

During the opening of an Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man branch in New York City, a question comes to Gurdjieff about how the Institute makes money and the approximate amount of the annual budget. Gurdjieff responds with a long narrative which his students include in the book, partly from memory and partly from a stenographer's shorthand notes.

He begins by mentioning some of the ridiculous speculations about receiving money from occult sources, the Bolsheviks, or some kind of black magic, including the philosopher's stone purported to turn base metals into gold. Gurdjieff dismisses this all as being the stupidity of idle people. He goes on to give a serious answer to the question, which up until this time he has avoided.

The short answer is that Gurdjieff is a better businessman than most, including most Americans, who are considered the best in the world. In the longer explanation that ensues, Gurdjieff attributes his business acumen to the early teachings of his father for his manual skills and the teachings of his tutors for his intellectual skills. He learned to always try new things and keep an impartial attitude. This led Gurdjieff upon a path of constantly changing occupations and thinking processes, which in turn brought a nose for profitable business transactions.

However, Gurdjieff only made enough money for his immediate needs while young. He had no desire to amass wealth until later on when the idea of the Institute came to him, and this idea formed from his travels and exposure to many different philosophies and cultures.

He relates a story about making money with an old Edison gramophone and another about a traveling repair shop. Both enterprises made significant money, albeit for pure entertainment with the gramophone and exploiting the foolishness of people with the repair shop. The gramophone had been quite a novelty at the time. As for the workshop, people would buy all sorts of gadgets that would break or become useless due to the owners' ignorance. Gurdjieff could always come up with a solution for whatever problem he found. In a particularly lucrative transaction, Gurdjieff fixes an army officer's typewriter, and it only needs a spring to be rewound. This leads to fixing the typewriters in the entire fort, which numbered in the hundreds. Not aware that Gurdjieff is not the genius on the typewriter repairs that they think he is, the entire military force pays their respect to him. The point that Gurdjieff makes is that with a little bit of showmanship and by allowing people to give them their money while satisfying their needs, he becomes a successful businessman.



On another venture, Gurdjieff notices that the current fashion in Paris is toward short corsets. He figure out how to take the old-fashioned long corsets and convert them to the fashionable trend. Then he buys up all the old-fashioned corsets he can find and starts a conversion factory, complete with employees. When word gets out about what he had done, the merchants who sold him the corsets are amazed at his ingenuity and jealous of his success.

Through such dealings, Gurdjieff does amass quite a pile of money, and begins considering the foundation of some kind of school to teach the great knowledge he had gained in his travels. However, World War I intervenes, during which the government of Russia confiscates virtually everything that Gurdjieff has acquired. Nevertheless, he arranges for an archaeological expedition past the war zones. While crossing the war-torn borders, all sides in the struggle help him and his fellow knowledge-seeker to make their goal even though the supplies that they carried were in high demand. Gurdjieff appreciates that even when all seems to have fallen apart in wartime, people still support those with the courage to seek new knowledge.

After the war, Gurdjieff attempts to again start his school, which he names the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. For a period things go well, but then his family appears from Russia, destitute from the war. He must now support them as well as his budding school, and to make ends meet, he starts a business in new and antique carpets. This does well enough to keep everyone's noses above water. The trouble is that rampant inflation makes the local currencies worthless. Frustrated with the aftermath of war, Gurdjieff travels all through Europe looking for a likely place to continue the Institute. He at first likes Germany but then decides on Paris. He sees the place as the capital of the entire world.

Gurdjieff finds Paris to be a very hospitable place for his Institute and a very easy city in which to make money. His feverishly works to build businesses and the Institute, which attracts many to its classes and demonstrations of dance and music. Exhausted, Gurdjieff then decides to cross the Atlantic to America, to take a rest and start another Institute with a group of his students. He sells a particularly valuable piece of very old jewelry to seed the effort, then finds willing investors. This takes the story of how Gurdjieff funds his Institute full circle back to the original question. The money comes from hard work and profitable business dealings. Regarding the yearly budget, that part is ignored as being too simple-minded or none of anyone else's business.

Gurdjieff wraps up his second book with his plans for the third, which will explain the principles about life that he has discovered in more detail. He wants to return to Paris and write there, plus work on several of his other ideas for the Institute and possibly build an extension to it.



Characters

G. I. Gurdjieff

G. I. Gurdjieff is a man of curiosity for the world and for spirituality. He witnesses several events in his youth that cannot be explained satisfactorily, such as the predictions of a half-wit man coming true. Gurdjieff seeks wisdom in ancient ruins, among old documents, and through the meeting of many spiritual leaders. He travels as far east as India and westward into Egypt. Born in Russia and raised in Turkey by a father who insisted on Gurdjieff learning to live self-sufficiently and without the usual fears people tend to have, the man becomes a creative entrepreneur to satisfy his immediate needs and the needs of others. Gurdjieff writes about the remarkable men with whom he travels and studies. Each contributes significant insights into the nagging questions about spirituality and why people are on the earth in the first place.

Gurdjieff's quest does not fail. He learns quite a bit in monasteries and while traveling. In Constantinople, he attempts to found his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Part of what the Institute does is perform demonstrations of dance and music, which attract quite a bit of attention. However, World War I starts and Gurdjieff loses all his assets in Russia. He must start anew elsewhere. After traveling through Europe, he thinks that Germany would be a good place. However, circumstances turn his eyes toward Paris, a city he considers the capital of the world. There he builds businesses to support the Institute and gains many students. With forty-eight of them, he goes to New York City to open a branch of the Institute in the United States.

Despite his contempt for modern thinking and especially for the overly materialistic American culture, Gurdjieff finds financial backing for his Institute. However, somebody asks about how the Institute is funded and what is the size of the annual budget. Unshaken by this brazen question, Gurdjieff goes into a long explanation on how he has acquired superior business acumen along the way, starting with the manner in how his father had raised him. The answer is simply that he knows how to make money by taking advantage of situations that present themselves. Some of his methods may be considered less than completely honest, but that is the nature of business. For Gurdjieff to admit this demonstrates a high level of honesty that most people never attain.

Gurdjieff's Father

Gurdjieff's father has one fault that blocks him from ever becoming a successful businessman—he is too honest. On the other hand, he is also a very good and wise father who teaches Gurdjieff everything he needs to know to make his way successfully in the world from the materialistic point of view. His father encourages the boy to try many different things, which makes Gurdjieff a master of all trades. These skills serve to make enough money to get by and at times very large amounts when some business venture takes off.



Known as an ashokh, Gurdjieff's father sings and recites the ancient oral-tradition literature, including the legend of Gilgamesh from Babylon. He enjoys talking for hours with Dean Borsh while Gurdjieff listens and absorbs what the men say. Gurdjieff remembers his father fondly and is sorry that he could not attend his father's funeral.

Dean Borsh (Father Borsh)

Dean Borsh is Gurdjieff's first tutor. Gurdjieff had at first attended the regular school, but he shows too much promise for the standard classes. Dean Borsh suggests that he leave the school to be taught by Borsh and other accomplished teachers. Gurdjieff studies his subjects very diligently, learning all he can from books, Dean Borsh, and the other teachers. However, the book learning only goes so far. Gurdjieff must explore the real world to find the answers to his vexing questions. When Dean Borsh dies, Gurdjieff cannot attend that funeral either. Years afterward, Gurdjieff returns to Dean Borsh's grave site and arranges for a formal funeral service, much to the amazement of the local people.

Bogachevsky (Father Evlissi)

Bogachevsky is one of Gurdjieff's other teachers while he studies under Dean Borsh. Gurdjieff gives Bogachevsky credit for exposing him to the idea of spirits. Still grieving the recent death of a sister, Gurdjieff wants to believe that spirits exist. Dean Borsh tells the boy that if spirits can communicate to the living, they would do it in ways other than simply bumping the leg of a table. While thinking about Bogachevsky, Gurdjieff relates two stories related to psychic phenomena, one a reading from the half-wit man Eoung-Ashokh Mardiross and another about a young soldier who had apparently been buried alive.

Captain Pogossian (Sarkis Pogossian)

Captain Pogossian becomes a good friend of Gurdjieff's when they meet in Echmiadzin while Gurdjieff delivers a bundle of linen from Pogossian's parents. They discover a mutual curiosity about spirituality and end up working together on the railroad. The two come across ancient Armenian texts and decide to study ancient ruins near Alexandropol. They then set out to find the remains of an esoteric school in northern Iraq. Along the way they make a copy of a map of ancient Egypt. While traveling by ship to Egypt, Pogossian works in the engine room and becomes very interested in steamships. He stays with the ship while Gurdjieff goes on into Egypt. Pogossian later becomes a very rich man who owns several steamships.

Abram Yelov

Abram Yelov sells books in Tiflis while Gurdjieff researches ancient literature. Yelov has a knack for picking up languages and knows books very well. He helps Gurdjieff find



books of interest and becomes a good friend. One day, Yelov comments to Gurdjieff that a plaster cast manufacturer in town makes more money than all the booksellers put together. This prompts Gurdjieff to learn how to make plaster casts from the manufacturer and set up his own shop. Soon Gurdjieff, with Yelov working with the plaster casts too, corners the market. Yelov eventually becomes a wealthy book and stationary store owner, and after the Russian Revolution, he moves to North America where he again becomes successful.

Prince Yuri Lubovedsky

Prince Yuri Lubovedsky is a man interested in contacting the spirit world after his wife's death in childbirth. He meets Gurdjieff in Egypt while Gurdjieff works for Professor Skridlov as a guide. Lubovedsky asks Gurdjieff to escort a woman named Vitvitskaia from Constantinople to Russia, which he does. Afterwards, Gurdjieff receives word from Lubovedsky to come visit him in a monastery located in the middle of Asia. Gurdjieff traverses the Himalayas and finds the monastery. He stays there for three years until Lubovedsky dies.

Soloviev

Soloviev accompanies Gurdjieff while they traverse the Himalayas. Gurdjieff first meets Soloviev while four men are beating him up, and Gurdjieff comes to the man's aid. Soloviev had ruined his life through drink and irresponsible behavior. He turns this around with the help of Gurdjieff. They both decide to join the Seekers of Truth and attempt to cross the Gobi Desert on an expedition. Along the way a wild camel kills Soloviev.

Ekim Bey

Ekim Bey is a young man that Gurdjieff meets in Constantinople. Bey later accompanies Gurdjieff and his friends on an expedition with Prince Yuri Lubovedsky. In later life, Bey makes of himself a celebrity by using hypnotic tricks and phony psychic powers. Gurdjieff and Bey put together an act like this in Tashkent while waiting for money to be wired to them. Gurdjieff thinks that Bey is in good shape physically, but not so good spiritually.

Piotr Karpenko

A jealous rivalry develops between Piotr Karpenko and Gurdjieff over a girl. They both hang around with the same group of friends, and the group decides that they must fight a duel to the death. Not having the customary swords or pistols for a proper duel, the boys decide that spending an evening on a live artillery range will decide if one or the other, or neither, gets the girl. After this harrowing experience in which Karpenko is wounded but not seriously, he and Gurdjieff become fast friends and they both swear off



fighting over girls forever. Karpenko accompanies Gurdjieff on several expeditions. On one while negotiating the Himalayas, Karpenko dies by hostile native gunfire.

Professor Skridlov

Professor Skridlov first employs Gurdjieff as a guide in Egypt. They later share their interest in ancient ruins, artifacts, and wisdom by excavating a tomb together. During this time they become good friends. They journey to the source of the Nile River together, and from there eventually to the ruins of Babylon. They go on many expeditions together over the years, and on one they decide to disguise themselves as holy men. While on the expedition and in disguise, they meet Father Giovanni, who lives in a monastery for the World Brotherhood, a group of men who seek faith. Father Giovanni imparts so much wisdom to Professor Skridlov and Gurdjieff that the two men abandon their expedition.

Father Giovanni

Father Giovanni teaches great wisdom to Gurdjieff and Professor Skridlov over their six-month stay at a World Brotherhood monastery. One of the biggest insights that Father Giovanni offers is that concerns about the self and family are less important than concerning self with values gained from the seeking of true faith. The impact of Father Giovanni's teachings stay with the men all through life, and even brings tears to Professor Skridlov as he looks over the magnificence of creation from a mountain top with Gurdjieff.

Vitvitskaia

Vitvitskaia is a woman saved from a life in the white slave trade by Prince Yuri Lubovedsky. Gurdjieff escorts Vitvitskaia from Constantinople to Russia upon the request of Lubovedsky. Gurdjieff at first does not like the woman, knowing of her sordid past. He warms up to her later when they are reunited in Rome and Vitvitskaia displays a new cultured grace learned from Lubovedsky's family. She is especially talented in music and tries to capture the essence of the underlying laws. Her experiments are not successful. She dies from an illness while traveling.

Eoung-Ashokh Mardiross

Eoung-Ashokh Mardiross is a half-witted man who gives psychic readings. Gurdjieff's aunt is impressed with the accuracy of the predictions and warns her nephew to be careful around firearms, as this is one of the predictions. Gurdjieff becomes interested in the psychic after he is injured by gunshot while duck hunting. Mardiross gives him a reading, much of which eventually comes true in Gurdjieff's life. This is one of the early experiences that sparks the interest in spirituality for Gurdjieff.



Objects/Places

Ancient Texts

Gurdjieff and others search through ancient texts to find wisdom. The texts sometimes help but are more useful for finding the right kinds of people who currently live.

Kars

Kars is the childhood home of G. I. Gurdjieff. His father teaches him the manual skills for life here, while his tutors prepare his mind.

Turkey

Turkey is the country that Gurdjieff considers his home, although he is actually part Russian and Greek. The ways of the Turkish people are comfortable for the author.

Georgia

Georgia is Gurdjieff's Russian home. He spends quite a bit of time in Georgia during World War I and launches an expedition from there.

Alexandropol (Gyumri)

Gurdjieff also spends much time in Alexandropol, partly because the place is a center of culture and religion. His interest in the mysteries of spirituality grows in this place.

Echmiadzin

Captain Pogossian and Gurdjieff meet in Echmiadzin when Gurdjieff delivers a bundle of linens from Pogossian's parents. They become friends while exploring questions of the spirit together.

Smyrna (Izmar)

Smyrna is where Gurdjieff and Pogossian help a group of English sailors fight off a bigger group of sailors while everyone is fairly drunk. The English sailors arrange for the two men's passage by military steamboat to Egypt.



Tiflis

Gurdjieff meets Abram Yelov in Tiflis. The two share a mutual love of ancient books, explore philosophical ideas together, and start a successful plaster casting business.

Egypt

Gurdjieff meets Prince Yuri Lubovedsky in Egypt while working as a guide for Professor Skridlov. Gurdjieff has a copy of the same map as Lubovedsky that lays out the ancient burial places.

Constantinople

Gurdjieff meets Ekim Bey in Constantinople, escorts Vitvitskaia from there to Russia, and begins his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in the city.

New Bukhara

Gurdjieff meets Soloviev in New Bukhara. He also sets up shop to make paper flowers for Easter and to sell exotic birds that are actually dyed common sparrows.

Gobi Desert

Along with Seekers of Truth, Gurdjieff and Soloviev try to cross the Gobi Desert. A wild camel kills Soloviev along the way.

Himalaya Mountains

Gurdjieff and the Seekers of Truth cross the Himalaya Mountains but lose their guide in an avalanche. Piotr Karpenko dies on the way down a river from hostile native gunfire.

Afridis

Afridis is where Gurdjieff and Professor Skridlov meet Father Giovanni in a monastery. Father Giovanni gives them very much wisdom about how spirituality works.

Paris

Gurdjieff decides to try starting his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Paris. He succeeds in building the Institute to the point where he wants to expand it.



New York City

Gurdjieff goes to New York City to open a branch of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man with forty-eight of his students. A question there leads to a long dissertation on how Gurdjieff raises money.



Themes

Friendship

G. I. Gurdjieff treasures the friendships he makes along his life journey. He never seeks out the superficial acquaintances that sometimes pass for friendship. His friends come to him as fellows curious enough about the world and life to ask the deep philosophical questions and travel the world in search of the answers. One friend takes a superficial angle at the whole idea and makes money off of it, which Gurdjieff considers not the best and probably the worse way of handling spirituality. Gurdjieff joins in briefly and sees the humor in it, but his way is to eventually found the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

The friends that impress him the most are learned men who tutor him in childhood and guide him in adulthood. He also likes those who go adventuring with him over mountains, deserts, and seas. A good and fearless fighter, Gurdjieff appreciates an ally when a fight ensues, although he does not dwell much on these triflings.

Gurdjieff's book is a combination of a memoir and a teaching instrument. Each of his friends contribute something to what his Institute attempts to teach, although the author does not often come right out and say what the lesson might be. Instead, the actions and thoughts presented point to a grander philosophical idea or set of ideas. Overall, his message is that one cannot do this alone. It takes true and deep friendships to gain a full understanding of life and its purpose.

Truth Seeking

Mysteries attract Gurdjieff, and the questions they bring up will not leave him alone. He is not the type of man who just brushes the deep questions of life aside. He must understand it all fully. This becomes a major quest of his through his youth, into young adulthood, and into middle age. He travels with the Truth Seekers on many expeditions in search of the answers, but does not find them until meeting Father Giovanni. Just what these answers are is not revealed in this book. However, understanding that leads to true faith is at the core of the answers.

A highly implied part of this whole process is the seeking of truth itself. This action alone builds character and exposes one to the unexpected mysteries of life that can go unnoticed while rooted in a single place, people, and culture. Something has to shock the mind alert, such as becoming lost in the Himalayas or crossing deep gorges on swaying rope bridges. Seeing how other truth seekers try to reach their goals also stimulates the mind. Gurdjieff at first thinks the way of the yogis is good, but an old wise man explains how this is unnecessary and in fact harmful to the body.

Ultimately Gurdjieff gains enough security in his knowledge that he starts his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man and attracts many students. Some may argue



with the truths that Gurdjieff expounds as being tied to place and time, or even as the con game of a shrewd businessman. Nevertheless, the man has an interesting story to tell of seeking truth from the ancients and the contemporary wise men.

Education

Gurdjieff has no time for modern education. He does not see any worth in it whatsoever. He feels that his father had brought him up in the correct way, teaching him manual skills that come in handy for making money later on and for allowing his special tutoring in the skills of the mind. Additionally, his father taught his son how to live in the world without fear or shyness. Life can get tough, so get tough with it.

The author definitely has a narrow view of education. There is only one right way, and that is his way. The idea of learning styles or self-directed learning does not enter into his views, although he practices a certain type of learning style—read about things, discuss them and then do something with the knowledge—and he is undeniably self-directed.

Gurdjieff's primary strength is in having respect for those accomplished in the ways of a truth seeker and the ability to listen without prejudice. He gives everyone a chance to say something wise, something that might change his world views. He stumbles a bit with science, considering that study to have nothing new to contribute. Had he grown up in the modern age and attended MIT or Stanford, his views about science would doubtlessly be more positive. Science had yet to discover such things as space flight, nano technology, genetic engineering, and the plethora of innovations that have come from the computer. But then again, he might decide that traversing the Himalayas far surpasses reading about them, which points to the possibility of Gurdjieff as a field scientist if he were to be alive today.

Business

As for his approach to business, Gurdjieff holds strongly to the idea that a sucker is born every minute and that a fool and his money are soon parted. He uses the general ignorance of how things work to make money as a repairman and tackles any and all challenges brought his way. On the ruthless competition side, he pretends to be slow-witted to gain the trust of a man who makes plaster casts. Gurdjieff learns all the secrets of the craft, then goes out and starts his own plaster casting business, which corners the market and drives his competitor downward. In today's parlance, he did corporate espionage and stole business secrets. Apparently during his time, this was not illegal and perhaps not considered unethical.

However, the man is also capable of highly ethical dealings. He simply does not take any of this to be of much importance. He makes enough money for his needs and the needs of those around him, which is sufficient. If money comes storming in like a stampede of wild camels, all the better. Gurdjieff only hits high gear for making money when the idea of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man comes to him.

Then he works so hard at starting business after business that his health suffers. Still, the point is not to simply make money, but to build the Institute.



Style

Perspective

Gurdjieff writes a memoir about his own life, and that always makes the author the definitive expert on the subject. Yet memoirs are not always, and not usually, strictly factual. Authors embellish the truth; if not consciously, then unconsciously by the effects of time on memories. With Gurdjieff's storytelling style, probably influenced by his father's singing of the oral traditions and his sharing of stories with his friends along the way, everything has its embellishments. This is sometimes done for humorous or dramatic impact, although the style oftentimes has obviously exaggerated language. A few scenes defy common sense, such as crossing a rope bridge that has no hand holds with pack horses. However, the reader has no way of verifying this claim. A skilled memoir writer will always only stretch those truths that cannot be verified. However, Gurdjieff has a tendency of asking for more credulity than is reasonable. Some stories take on a tallness that is simply unbelievable.

But like his business dealings, Gurdjieff does not really care if anyone believes him or not. The purpose of the book is to reveal the truths he has learned for the use of his students and potential students. In a way, he tells parables that have metaphors that his students and potential students will understand on at least a novice level. It matters not if he actually crossed the Gobi Desert riding on a rigging of cattle, wood, and cloth, or walked above a sandstorm on stilts twenty-five feet high. The innovative use of the materials at hand is the core idea.

Tone

Gurdjieff's tone is dismissing of the modern world, even to the point of disgust. He reveres the ancient ways of humankind, going all the way back to the beginning of civilization. His approach appeals to those who are unsatisfied with modern life and yearn for something more substantial and meaningful. This is probably done on purpose as part of his sales scheme for the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

On another level, Gurdjieff becomes an honoring admirer of family and friends. When he likes someone, there are not enough praising words to drizzle and plop into the prose. The style is considered too ornamented today, but the reader can imagine the author's mind searching his internal thesaurus for just the right baubles and bangles with which to laden the tree. He creates a kind of mandala with his description of Vitvitskaia, starting out with a strong dislike and coming to a central core of high admiration.

The author displays no false modesty and generally comes out the hero on top of the situations. When he must skip town quickly, he admits to it in case his fake exotic birds decide to take a bath and wash off the dye. Traveling in disguise happens at least twice



in his life—once for survival and another time to penetrate a forbidden place. These adventure story plot clichés may or may not be fabricated, but in any case the hero always gets away with his ruses.

Structure

The book is split into chapters dedicated to each of the remarkable men. Other people enter into the narrative while Gurdjieff remembers them as associated in some way with the main person. The final chapter is written by Gurdjieff's students ten years after his death, and describes how the man makes enough money to build the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

This is a fairly unique way to do a memoir and accomplishes something that good memoirs need to do—focus not so much on the author as on the people around the author. The structure builds this focus immediately, obviously, and unforgettably. These are all remarkable men and one remarkable woman, Vitvitskaia. Each person encompasses at least one very important point that Gurdjieff is making, whether it be the controlling of alcoholism or the exploration of the impossible question. Vitvitskaia wants to make music that effects every person in exactly the same way, which cannot ever be done. She tries anyway. Prince Yuri Lubovedsky tries for a good portion of his life to contact his dead wife on the other side. He fails at this but does learn something about himself.



Quotes

"In the present civilization, as in former civilizations, literature exists for the purpose of the perfecting of humanity in general, but in this field also—as in everything else contemporary—here is nothing substantial for our essential aim. It is all exterior; all only, as in the tale of the old sparrow, noise, rattling, and a nauseous smell." p. 16

"One of the most striking of these persistent pursuits of his, which later produced in me an indisputable beneficent result, acutely sensed by me and noticeable also to those with whom I came in contact during my wanderings in the various wilds of the earth in search for truth, was that during my childhood, that is, at the age when there are formed in man the data for the impulses he will have during his responsible life, my father took measures on every suitable occasion so that there should be formed in me, instead of data engendering impulses such as fastidiousness, repulsion, squeamishness, fear, timidity and so on, the data for an attitude of indifference to everything that usually evokes these impulses." p. 44

"This incident completely stupefied me. How could I explain it to myself? What did I know? I looked round me. Gathered at the corner where my uncle, the esteemed Giorgi Mercourov, and his son, who had nearly finished school, and a police official, all talking about this [a supposedly dead young man who walked into town after being buried]. All were generally respected; all had lived much longer than I and surely knew many things that I had not even dreamed of. Did I see in their faces indignation, grief or astonishment? No; they even seemed to be glad that somebody had succeeded this time in punishing the evil spirit [slit his throat] and warding off its mischief." pp. 71-72

"From the moment I had this treasure—so full of mystery and promise [a map of ancient Egypt]—securely and unnoticeably sewn in the lining of my clothes, it was as if all my other interests and intentions evaporated. An eagerness which was not to be restrained arose in me to reach at any cost and without delay the places where, with the aid of this treasure, I could at last appease that desire for knowledge which during the past two or three years had given me no rest, gnawing me within like a worm." p. 100

"I [Vitvitskaia] devoted myself very zealously to studying the theory of music, not only because I wished to please my benefactress but also because I myself had become greatly attracted to this work, and my interest in the laws of music was increasing from day to day. My books, however, were of no help to me, for nothing whatsoever was said in them either about what music is, or on what its laws are based. They merely repeated in different ways information about the history of music, such as: that our octave has seven notes, but the ancient Chinese octave had only five; that the harp of the ancient Egyptians was called tebuni and the flute mem; that the melodies of the ancient Greeks were constructed on the basis of different modes such as the Ionian, the Phrygian, the Dorian and various others; that in the ninth century polyphony appeared in music, having at first so cacophonous an effect that there was even a case of premature delivery of a pregnant woman, who suddenly heard in church the roar of the organ playing this music; that in the eleventh century a certain monk, Guido d'Arezzo, invented solfege,



and so on and so forth. Above all, these books gave details about famous musicians, and how they had become famous; they even recorded what kind of neckties and spectacles were worn by such and such composers. But as to what music is, and what effect it has on the psyche of people, nothing was said anywhere." p. 130

"I did not risk a long stay in Samarkand. I was afraid that the devil would play a joke, and that my sparrows [dye'd to appear exotic] might suddenly get wet in the rain or that some American canary in its cage might take a fancy to bathing in its drinking trough, and then indeed there would be a great uproar, as my American canaries would be turned into disfigured, clipped and miserable sparrows. So I hastened to get away with my skin whole." p. 138

"We spent almost the whole of those last three days together and talked of everything and anything. But all the time my heart was heavy, especially whenever the prince smiled. Seeing his smile, my heart was torn, because for me his smile was the sign of his goodness, love and patience." p. 164

"I wish to devote this chapter to my reminiscences of another man whom I consider remarkable [Ekim Bey], and whose manner of life in his later years, either by the will of fate or thanks to the laws operating a 'self-developed individuality', was arranged down to the smallest detail like my own. At the present time this man is in good health from the ordinary point of view, but according to my view, and speaking between ourselves, only his physical body is in good health." p. 177

"After a lengthy dispute, called by us a debate, during which it turned out that several of the boys present were on my side and several on the side of my rival—and which debate at times developed into a deafening din and brought us perilously near to throwing each other down from the top of the bell-tower—it was decided that we must fight a duel." p. 202

"Here is a Persian, a merchant of dried fruits; here an Armenian going to buy Kirghiz rugs on the spot, and a Polish agent, a cotton-buyer for the firm of Posnansky; here is a Russian Jew, a buyer of caracul skins, and a Lithuanian commercial traveler with samples of picture frames in papier-mache and all kinds of ornaments of gilt-metal set with artificial coloured stones." p. 233

"What I have already told you is, I think, sufficient for you to have some idea of what I wished to make clear by this story: namely, that the specific feature of the common psyche of man which is an ideal for you Americans and which you call the commercial fibre, may also exist—and be even more highly developed—along with other fibres which you Americans do not have, among people living on other continents." p. 266

"The local Turks and Greeks, who assembled in large numbers to watch these demonstrations, showed a great interest in the movements and in the music which I had composed specially for them, as well as in the various activities carried on by my people in preparation for the future work of the Institute in Germany; and I received an ever-growing number of requests from the visitors to be allowed to take part. At the same



time the generally unstable situation in Europe continued to threaten all my projects, since the mutual distrust between governments made the obtaining of visas for foreign countries very difficult, and there were also great fluctuations of the rates of exchange from day to day." p. 283



Topics for Discussion

What motivates G. I. Gurdjieff to write this book?

How does the author claim to raise the substantial money needed to fund his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man?

What admirable qualities does the author see in men?

What admirable qualities does the author see in women?

Why does the author seek wisdom and truth?

Describe the personality of G. I. Gurdjieff.

What does the author find wrong with Americans?

Profile three of the major parts of the world that the author visits.

How does World War I and the Russian Revolution effect the author?