

CHAPTER SIX

THE INCOMPARABLE MR. G.

OUSPENSKY RETURNED to Russia in November 1914, disappointed by his fruitless search for schools. An international journalist, he must have known that war was on its way. Yet like so many others, he had tried to avoid facing its reality. Now that was impossible. “All the mud was rising from the bottom of life,”¹ he said, as the serenity he had found in the sapphire gaze of the Buddha was replaced by the wild rhetoric of war. The culture of barbarism was triumphant, and the fragile threads he had drawn across the globe, linking himself and the bearers of the new consciousness, were severed. All bets were off and everything was thrown into disorder.

“Why on earth did I ever go to India?” he asked Anna when, once again, they began daily appointments at Phillipoff’s Café. “I found nothing there that I have not read before in books, or heard rumored in some way . . . nothing new, *nothing*.”² His personal disappointment must have been great, and amidst the confusion and madness of war it must have seemed doubly painful. Here were the anti-values of barbarism, championed by newspapers and politicians, fueling the base passions of hatred, nationalism, and violence. And the one way out of the history of crime, the one escape route from the insanity, seemed closed to him. Did it ever exist? he must have asked himself. Wasn’t it, like so much else he encountered on his journey, an illusion? Wasn’t he simply

believing in lies, like the rest? Different lies, certainly, but stories, myths, fantasies all the same?

It would have been easy to drift into cynicism. But Ouspensky's conviction that the only way out of "the labyrinth of contradictions in which we live" was via some "entirely new road, unlike anything hitherto known or used by us," was too great. "Beyond the thin film of false reality" there was "another reality"—there was, as he and Anna had told each other time and time again, the miraculous.³ If nothing else, the failure to find what he was looking for in India allowed him to finely tune his requirements. All that was "fantastic" in his thoughts about schools had now evaporated. Ideas about "non-physical contact"—the possibility of communicating with schools in the ancient past or on some other plane—dissolved. He discarded all such dreams and fantasies as signs of weakness, and recognized them as "one of the principal obstacles on our possible way to the miraculous."⁴ If he was going to find a school, it was going to be real, solid, concrete, and its teachers, however knowledgeable, would be flesh and blood, just as the teachers of any ordinary school would be.

In the event, the ordinariness of the surroundings in which Ouspensky eventually did find his "school" would prove one of the strangest and most unusual things about it.

He was not, however, entirely free from the normal human reaction to bruised dreams. In the late winter of 1915, during the "generally catastrophic conditions of life in the midst of which we have to live and work,"⁵ Ouspensky gave public lectures on his travels at the Alexandrovsky Hall of the Petersburg Town Duma. These were well attended; more than a thousand people came to each lecture, among them, as we've seen, members of the Russian avant-garde. The talks seemed to serve two purposes: to distance Ouspensky from the still-prevalent notions that the key to solving the spiritual dilemma of the West could be found by foraging in the East, and to sever

his ties with the Theosophical Society. By all reports, he was successful. In its review of Ouspensky's lectures, the leading Russian Theosophical journal reported:

P. D. Ouspensky's three lectures attracted a huge audience, but they evoked perplexity. The lecturer promised to talk about India. In fact he talked only about his disillusionment in seeking the miraculous and about his understanding of occultism at variance with its understanding by Theosophy and the Theosophical Society. With indignation he said that the Theosophists selected ethics and philosophy, not occultism, as their field of effort, and that ethics and philosophy are unnecessary to the Society and unrelated to occultism . . . He also accused the Theosophical Society of arrogance and sectarianism.⁶

It wasn't only in his search for schools that Ouspensky found India wanting. Hunting for material to fill his newspaper column, he tried to track down evidence of some of the well-known, though less edifying, "miracles" that the mystic East was famous for. But here too he drew a blank. Of the legendary rope trick, for example, in which a fakir throws a rope into the air upon which a young boy climbs, he could find no trace at all. Not only did he find it impossible to locate a fakir capable of such a feat, Ouspensky was unable to find a single traveler who had seen it in person: everyone he questioned knew of it only by hearsay. Even reports from the educated Hindus whom he spoke with about it were not to be believed, not because they wanted to deceive, but because they were reluctant to disappoint yet another European in search of Indian magic. That a phenomenon with *no basis in fact* should command belief by numbers of otherwise intelligent people suggested to Ouspensky that human beings have a propensity

to accept a lie because doing so is easier than seeking out the truth. Ouspensky, however, constantly submitted himself to the acid bath of experiment and observation. His decision to search for a teacher who could lead him to the miraculous was motivated, he admitted, by a desire to avoid what he considered “amateurish attempts at ‘work on oneself.’”⁷ As Leslie White announced, “I cannot deceive myself anymore, nor do I want to.” Although he believed in the miraculous, Ouspensky wanted facts.

It isn’t surprising, then, that while in Moscow in December and January of 1914–15 Ouspensky cast a bemused eye at a curious advertisement he had found in a newspaper. Doing editorial work for a journal he had written for while in India, Ouspensky spied a notice for a ballet entitled “The Struggle of the Magicians.” The title itself would have caught his attention. Even more intriguing, its author was a “certain ‘Hindu,’” and the performance promised to present a complete picture of all that Ouspensky had just failed to find on his journey. Set against the backdrop of India, the ballet would include fakir miracles, sacred dances, and much more. Having just discovered the “truth” about India, Ouspensky was critical of the advertisement’s claims. But the irony of the coincidence must have amused him. Acknowledging that Hindu ballets were something of a rarity in Moscow, he decided to include the notice in the next issue of his paper, adding to it the caveat that the ballet would provide all that is unavailable in India, but which travelers journey there to see.

Ouspensky’s St. Petersburg lectures had been successful enough that he was able to repeat his performance in Moscow. In India, he told his audience, the miraculous was not sought where it should be sought. The known ways were useless. The miraculous passed us by and we did not notice it. The miraculous, when it appears among ordinary humanity, always wears a mask, and only the very few succeed in penetrating it.

One wonders if Ouspensky was speaking to himself. For as fate would have it, he was about to have an opportunity to put his theory into practice.

During his Moscow lectures Ouspensky was approached by two men, Vladimir Pohl, a musician, and Sergei Dmitrievich Mercourov, a sculptor. They told him of an occult group to which they belonged, and which, oddly enough, was led by the “certain Hindu”—actually a Caucasian Greek—responsible for the ballet scenario “The Struggle of the Magicians,” the notice for which Ouspensky had come across a few months earlier. They spoke of the work the group was engaged in, and of “G’s”—the Greek’s—aims. To Ouspensky it seemed heady, confused, and extremely doubtful material. As a noted journalist, highly successful lecturer, and author of a popular and influential book—which was about to go into a second edition—Ouspensky had heard it all before. Tactfully he listened, but no doubt looked for a polite way to escape. By now Ouspensky had had enough of the kind of self-hypnosis associated with all such occult groups. People, he ruefully reflected, “invent miracles for themselves and invent exactly what is expected of them.”⁸ It was all a brew of “superstition, self-suggestion and defective thinking,” and Ouspensky, having just returned from a long, profitless journey, wanted no part of it.

Mercourov, however, was persistent, and it was more than likely out of the desire to quiet his entreaties than out of any real interest that Ouspensky finally broke down and agreed to meet the mysterious Mr. G.

It was, without doubt, the most fateful decision of his life.

“Georgei Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was born . . . and here all pretensions to accuracy stop.”⁹ So begins James Webb’s exhaustive biography of the man Ouspensky was about to meet. What proves a nightmare for a biographer is a godsend for someone set on presenting himself as an enigma. As with many gurus, mystic teachers, and occult masters, Gurdjieff’s

past is, as the cliché goes, shrouded in mystery. Up until 1912 or 1913, all that we know of him comes from his own hand, and even the most devoted follower must admit that what Gurdjieff tells us about himself is at the very least open to multiple interpretations. Our sources for material on Gurdjieff's early years are his autobiographical account, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*; the unfinished *Life Is Real Only Then, When I Am*; and an earlier effort that, if nothing else, must go down as one of the strangest publications ever to see the light of print, *Herald of Coming Good*.

Ouspensky's early years are difficult to piece together, but the difficulty arises out of the normal ravages of time and the dispersal of material: a diligent researcher, armed with patience and a command of Russian, could burrow through the Moscow and St. Petersburg periodical archives and more than likely uncover a great deal of interesting material about Ouspensky's days as a journalist. The same cannot be said of Gurdjieff. He invented and reinvented himself so many times, left so many false trails, and encouraged so many myths and mistakes about exactly who he was that uncovering the truth about his past would take a lifetime. And very likely the whole dizzying business would leave even the most tenacious researcher wondering if it was not in some way planned. Gurdjieff is a man with no loose ends. There is, it seems, no way *into* him as there is into Ouspensky or other mystic figures of the Golden Age of Western Occultism, like Madame Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley. Both Crowley and Blavatsky were fond of creating myths about themselves, but these amounted to tall tales and improbable claims, often made with tongue in cheek. Gurdjieff had his share of these, but something more was added: a sense that he wanted, and exerted, an absolute control over his identity. As he once told an impressionable student, C. S. Nott, "the sign of a perfected man . . . must be that in regard to everything happening outside him,

he is able to . . . perform to perfection externally the part corresponding to the given situation; but at the same time never blend or agree with it.” Gurdjieff had worked hard and long at so “perfecting” himself, and we are left to wonder exactly when the separation between his inner and outer worlds that he deemed so important began. And unless, like William Patrick Patterson, we accept every word of Gurdjieff’s as holy writ and see him as a “Messenger from Above,” with all the religious overtones such a belief implies, we are also left asking why. Why did Gurdjieff cover his tracks so efficiently? Why was it so important to reach a state where nothing from “outside” could touch him internally? And what does this tell us about him?

The Gurdjieff story, however, is this:

We have, to date, three candidates for the year of Gurdjieff’s birth: 1866, 1872, and 1877; this would make him either twelve, four, or only one year older than Ouspensky. As Gurdjieff himself destroyed all his private papers and documents, including birth certificates and passports, on the eve of a trip to America in 1930, there is no concrete evidence for any one year being accurate. The year 1877 has acquired a certain preference, since it is the date on Gurdjieff’s passport. All the evidence, however, suggests that Gurdjieff could fake a date on a passport, so while official recognition of 1877 gives it some weight, there’s still no guarantee that it’s accurate. The day of his birth accepted by his biographers is December 28, although followers of the Fourth Way celebrate his birthday on January 13, making allowances for the Old Russian calendar.

The ambiguity over the year of Gurdjieff’s birth makes his nationality equally ambiguous. Depending on which year we accept, Gurdjieff was either Turkish or Russian, as the place of his birth in the Caucasus was either called Gumru, and was under Turkish rule *before* 1877, or Alexandropol, and was under Russian rule *after* that year. His parents’ nationality is clearer: his father was Greek, his mother Armenian. In 1878, a

year (or more) after his birth, his family moved to Kars, a nearby town. Captured by the Russians in 1877, most of its Turkish population had been slaughtered. When it became Russian, a large flood of Russians arrived, while the remaining Turks left. Colin Wilson makes the point that Gurdjieff grew up in an ethnic melting pot, in a society that was by necessity multicultural. While the young Ouspensky suffered personal loss but lived in an ethnically and culturally, if not politically, stable world, Gurdjieff grew up in a world with few or no boundaries and nothing like a Western sense of order. The unpredictability of his surroundings taught him to think on his feet—a lesson that, years later, he would try to pass on to his students.

Gurdjieff's father was a carpenter whose real love was poetry and storytelling, and Gurdjieff would listen while his father recited from memory one of the epics of the past. He was a bard, and Gurdjieff was impressed when he read in a magazine that archaeologists had recently discovered ancient tablets containing fragments of the epic *Gilgamesh*; this was one of the traditional tales that Gurdjieff's father had memorized and often recited. Gurdjieff's father had been taught *Gilgamesh* by another bard, who had learned it from one before him, and so on, going back countless generations. This notion of the reality of an ancient oral tradition kept alive for centuries would later play a major part in Gurdjieff's own teaching.

At an early age Gurdjieff showed a fascination for the occult. Early on, he witnessed a variety of strange phenomena: table-rapping, fortune-telling, faith healing, even vampirism. The death of his sister raised questions about life beyond the grave. When he was around eleven years old (accepting 1877 as the year of his birth), he witnessed a remarkable sight. The sound of screaming brought him to a group of children. There he saw a young Yezidi boy standing within a circle that had

been drawn on the ground. The Yezidis are a religious sect—erroneously considered devil worshippers—and are prone to an inexplicable phenomenon: if placed within a circle they are unable to leave it. The young boy was screaming, trapped within the ring the children had drawn around him. When Gurdjieff rubbed out part of the circle, the boy fled. Inquisitive, Gurdjieff asked everyone he knew about the experience, but no one could explain it. Years later he experimented himself, drawing a circle around a Yezidi woman. She too was unable to leave it, and when Gurdjieff and another man finally pulled her from it, she collapsed into a state of catalepsy.

Meetings with Remarkable Men is filled with other, equally unusual experiences. The young Gurdjieff investigated each one, trying to find an answer to its mystery. He read all he could get his hands on and questioned everyone. Finally, he concluded that although human beings seem to understand themselves and the world, they are almost totally lacking in knowledge of either. Just as Ouspensky would conclude years later, Gurdjieff realized that laziness and lack of curiosity allowed people to accept whatever story seemed simplest and freed them from seeking the truth.

Gurdjieff studied for the priesthood, and as the head of his school insisted that all students have medical training, he also studied medicine. Gurdjieff soon manifested a remarkable talent for mechanical work; he was a natural “Mr. Fix It.” He spent a great deal of his adolescence taking things apart and putting them back together. Often times he would see how some machine or tool could be improved and would make the necessary adjustments. As we will see, his later life centered around fixing “machines” as well. As his family was poor, for a time he earned money as a traveling repairman.

Religious questions, the paranormal, and mechanical skills informed Gurdjieff’s early years. To these were added an

enviable knack for making money and a cheerful disregard for the legalities involved. As a teenager he worked for a railway company, surveying a proposed route between Tiflis and Kars. He knew in advance which towns were slated for a station, and would approach the town elders suggesting that, for a price, he could arrange for the train to stop there. Naturally the city fathers were pleased, and Gurdjieff's pockets were filled. On another occasion, Gurdjieff caught sparrows, dyed them different colors, and sold them to gullible customers as a rare breed of "American canary"—making his escape quickly, before a sudden shower washed the dye off. In later years this talent for making money was applied to diverse activities, from selling carpets and curing drug addicts to running cinemas and restaurants.

With a friend, Sarkis Pogossian, Gurdjieff spent long evenings discussing the central questions of human existence. They visited "sacred sites" and through their reading became convinced a "hidden knowledge" existed. They also believed that traces of this lost wisdom could be discerned in the relics of the past—a belief, we know, that Ouspensky had absorbed from Theosophy. After they made enough money to give up their jobs—Pogossian, too, worked for the railway—the two purchased a library of ancient Armenian texts, then moved to the ancient city of Ani. Here they built a hut and plunged into their studies and explorations of the ancient Armenian capital.

They discovered a monk's cell in an underground passage. Within it were old parchments inscribed in ancient Armenian. They brought these to Alexandropol, hoping to decipher them. It turned out that the parchments spoke of an ancient secret society, the Sarmoung Brotherhood, and they recalled the name from one of the texts in their library. This brotherhood, it seemed, flourished in about 2500 BC; the parchments dated to around 600 AD. Gurdjieff and Pogossian

concluded that remains of the Sarmoung Brotherhood might still be found in an area about three hundred miles south of present day Mosul (Iraq). Convincing a society of Armenian patriots to finance their expedition, they embarked on their own quest for the miraculous.

They seemed to be in luck. An Armenian priest who housed them mentioned a map he had in his possession. A Russian prince, he said, had wanted to purchase it, but the priest wouldn't sell it and only allowed the prince to make a copy. He showed Gurdjieff the map; it turned out to be of "pre-sand Egypt." Understandably, Gurdjieff was excited by the discovery and, when the priest was out, made a copy of the map. The Russian prince had paid for this privilege, but as Gurdjieff would later tell Ouspensky, it is sometimes necessary for a seeker to "steal" knowledge.

A series of events brought Gurdjieff to Alexandria (Pogossian abandoned the quest along the way). From Egypt he went to Jerusalem, where he worked as a tourist guide. Gurdjieff fails to tell us whether he had discovered any evidence of the Sarmoung Brotherhood or what he made of the map of pre-sand Egypt. But back in Egypt, Gurdjieff sat by one of the pyramids studying the map. A man approached and, peering down at him, with great emotion asked how he had come across it. This, it turned out, was the same prince who had tried to buy the map from the priest.

At this point Gurdjieff became involved with a group of questers, the Seekers of Truth, whose leader was the Russian prince. Their adventures took them to several sites in Asia, some inaccessible to Europeans, where they discovered the "hidden knowledge" the existence of which Gurdjieff had suspected years before. Gurdjieff tells us that he did eventually make contact with the present-day Sarmoung Brotherhood, spending time at their monasteries in the Himalayas and Turkistan. It was there that he learned the ancient secrets of

human existence and the methods of achieving a higher state of consciousness.

All of which makes for a wonderful story, the reliability of which is difficult to corroborate.

Gurdjieff's account of his formative years can be read on a variety of levels: metaphor, allegory, pure tall tale, metaphysical fiction, autobiography, or simply invention. Given the milieu in which he surfaced in Moscow, it's understandable that he would want to present himself as a mysterious figure with a series of mystical adventures under his belt. He had other accomplishments as well: during this period he may have spent some time as a secret agent working for the Russian government during their political chess match with the British known as the Great Game.¹⁰ He also worked for a period as a professional hypnotist and wonder-worker—a kind of traveling magician, the equivalent today of a television psychic. But the Gurdjieff who targeted Ouspensky and sent his students to draw him in was determined to present himself as one thing and one thing only: a man who *knows*.

It seems likely that in St. Petersburg in 1913 he presented himself as a certain "Prince Ozay" and made the acquaintance of the Englishman Paul Dukes, a twenty-four-year-old traveler and musician. The friend of Lev Lvovitch—significantly, a professional healer and hypnotist—Dukes, who later knew Ouspensky, was informed that Lvovitch had met the Prince while on military service in Central Asia. The Prince, Lvovitch told Dukes, was a man like no other. Upon meeting him, Dukes had to agree. At a house not far from Nikolaevski Station—a short walk, we know, from Ouspensky's own apartment—Dukes was led to a large and sumptuously appointed room. Oriental carpets adorned the walls, the windows were covered in rich curtains, and wrought-iron lamps fitted with colored glass hung from the ceiling. The atmosphere was appropriately exotic and oddly reminiscent of the magician's

room in Ouspensky's novel. A hole in Dukes's sock prompted the Prince to remark on the virtues of ventilation: "Good thing—nothing like fresh air." It's the kind of thing Gurdjieff would say. But more commanding evidence are the occult lessons that Dukes received from the Prince. Most seem to have concerned diet, breathing, sex, and other standard fare in mystical disciplines. The Prince told Dukes the musician that he was a musical instrument and spoke of the importance of being "in tune." This suggests both Gurdjieff's later use of musical terms like "octave" and his tendency to approach each student through a subject familiar to them.¹¹

But before appearing as Prince Ozay—if indeed he and Gurdjieff were one—Gurdjieff had already made forays into the occult milieu of *fin de siècle* Russia. Writers on Gurdjieff's life suggest that by 1909 or 1910 he was ready to make his mark on the world; the only question seemed to be where. From Central Asia he could have gone to Constantinople, where he knew people, knew the language and where—as Ouspensky had found on his first journey to the East—a living spiritual tradition still existed. Instead he chose Russia. Some commentators argue that this is because going to Russia was the greater challenge. Perhaps. But Moscow and St. Petersburg were the most European of Russian cities, and Gurdjieff more than likely aimed at eventually bringing his work to Europe. It's also true that, as we've seen, Russia at that time had a thriving occult market, and devotees of a variety of teachings filled the major cities. Gurdjieff had already tested himself in the spiritualist and Theosophical circles of cities like Tashkent. Like Ouspensky, Gurdjieff had little good to say about his mystical competition, though it's clear he borrowed liberally from their work. The knowledge that Gurdjieff would present to Ouspensky was without doubt impressive and, in the form Gurdjieff gave it, unique. But it was not absolutely original.

In Tashkent, Gurdjieff's success as an occult master was considerable. He tells us that within six months he "succeeded not only in coming into contact with a great number of these people ('occultists'), but even in being accepted as a well-known 'expert' and guide in evoking so-called 'phenomena of the beyond' in a very large circle."

No doubt Gurdjieff, with his deep desire to get to the bottom of life, found that many in these circles were simply sensation seekers and bored dilettantes, eager for some distraction. He spoke of the occult hysteria of the time as a psychosis, simply another manifestation of the laziness common to human beings. He also confirmed this in practice; part of his success, he tells us, involved his "skill in producing tricks," which suggests that he wasn't above sleight-of-hand when necessary. His aim in infiltrating these circles was to acquire a group of serious students upon whom he could test the knowledge he had acquired during his search. As he himself admitted, he needed guinea pigs.

In Tashkent the types available weren't sufficient, and his experiments demanded work with a much wider variety. So he moved to Russia after closing down his groups as well as the considerable business ventures he was involved in at the time, the liquidation of which netted him a million rubles. He first went to St. Petersburg where, decked out in the appropriate Oriental garb, he met the world, perhaps as Prince Ozay. Then, for reasons best known to himself, he went to Moscow. Here, too, Gurdjieff looked for types—new guinea pigs—but also for something else. Unlike Madame Blavatsky, or the highly successful Rudolf Steiner, Gurdjieff was apparently uncomfortable presenting himself to the world at large: his predilection for disguise suggests this.¹² But for a man eager to make his mark on the world—and this certainly was Gurdjieff's intention—a good presentation is a necessity.

What better candidate for the position of Gurdjieff's public relations man than a well-known, highly respected, supremely talented writer, journalist, and lecturer?

When Ouspensky agreed to the meeting, he had no idea who "G" was. The same was not true of Gurdjieff. He knew precisely who Ouspensky was, and it's likely he placed the notice for his "Hindu ballet" in the hopes that it would attract Ouspensky's attention. Certainly he sent Pohl and Mercourov to Ouspensky's lectures with the express purpose of enticing him to a meeting. Gurdjieff had paid particular attention to Ouspensky's writings, reading his books and following his articles about his experiences in the mystic East. The papers had made much ado about Ouspensky's trip, and as he would soon tell Ouspensky, Gurdjieff had even given his pupils the task of reading Ouspensky's books to *determine who he was*. In this way, Gurdjieff said, they would know in advance exactly what Ouspensky would find when he got to India. Ouspensky doesn't tell us what Gurdjieff's pupils had to say on this matter; as he himself believed he had found nothing, he may not have raised the question. Of the journey to the East itself Gurdjieff had little to say. "It is good to go for a rest, for a holiday," he told Ouspensky. "But it is not worth going there for what you want. All that can be found here."¹³

"Here" meaning Russia and Gurdjieff himself.

"This is not an exotic city," Ouspensky had told Anna. "But there must be *someone* here of the kind that I am seeking."¹⁴ Writing sixty years after the fact, it's understandable that Anna might arrange the pieces of the puzzle so that they fit together more neatly than they may have at the time. But apocryphal or not, Ouspensky's remark was soon proved true.