The following is extracted from pages 29-38 of the PdF of *Georges BARBARIN, Le Protecteur Inconnu (Notes autobiographiques) GB 63 Copyright 2006 by les AMIS de Georges BARBARIN. Translated from the French by ChatGPT (OpenAI), based on the original text.*

The Invisible Monastery

Whoever acquires an old religious property has a solemn duty not to fundamentally alter its appearance and, above all, not to change its spirit. The arrangement of the gardens and buildings followed a special rhythm that one does not find in ordinary constructions. In short, there was an atmosphere in these places that called for respect.

From what I know now, I believe there is a visible Priory and an invisible one—one doubling the other, or rather, both interpenetrating to such a degree that they cannot be separated. This is why, upon entering, one is seized both in body and soul, ready to perceive things from another perspective. The estate is not large, and even its park is modest in size.

It is almost entirely surrounded by walls that ensure its peace. The main house is simple but possesses great character. The western façade opens onto a terrace where moss grows between bricks laid on edge. A wide lawn extends beyond, at the center of which stands a majestic *pinsapo* (Spanish fir).

Behind lies the inner courtyard, shaded by a gigantic chestnut tree. When the sun blazes, a coolness surrounds the sculpted well. No outside noise reaches here, except the nearby church bells, which drop their festive chimes and funeral tolls alike into this sanctuary. The cloister runs alongside with its arcades and vaults, and finds a natural extension in the gardens.

It is here, at the entrance to the park, that a winding, mystical path begins—its linden trees trimmed into an arching canopy. The rhododendrons form walls of prayer, and from so many fragrant flowerbeds rises a natural incense. Beyond, the park opens into various solitary paths. Invisible monks circulate there, praying in inaudible voices.

Miss Gassette

That is more or less what I saw during my first visit in a caravan, lost among an archaeological group led by the then-owner, the American Grace Gassette.

She was wearing a reseda-colored dress, one of those light greens she was fond of and considered favorable to ample vibrations. A gardener's hat shaded her bony face, colored like that of an old sachem. It was some time later that I came into contact with her. She approached me on the road and then came to see me in my peasant's room. I have recounted the nature of our discussions elsewhere, but that is not the subject of this book. Let it suffice to say that a great spiritual friendship was born from them.

Miss Gassette was a sort of Himalaya, with peaks and abysses, lights and shadows, smooth slopes and rough edges. Fascinating and exhausting like a mountain range, she had both its allure and its challenges.

She expressed herself in a subtle gibberish and grasped the slightest nuances of our language. Her verbal authority was great, and a kind of magnetism surrounded her. When I met her, the American stock market crash of 1929 had completely ruined her. Of the twelve servants who had once waited on her, only one remained—acting simultaneously as doorman, valet, cook, and gardener—and Grace Gassette bore with ease a poverty she saw as a gift from the heavens.

Grace often visited us in our retreat. At other times, we went to the Priory. The "lady-hermit," as she was called by some neighboring castle-dwelling mediums, received us in the dining-hall-refectory, with its fragrant wooden beams. Massive blocks of oak burned in the enormous hearth but failed to overcome the monastic chill of the season. No retreat could have suited Grace better than this old convent, one of the most harmonious dwellings of old France, where everything seemed inhabited by holy presences and the trees murmured with mysterious tremors.

For years, Miss Gassette worked to restore the Priory to its former state. She arranged the gardens and the park, uncovered the original stonework and antique woodwork. Then, nothing was more evocative than the great hall with its fireplace adorned with sculpted medallions, the austere kitchen, the small oratory lined with smooth, honey-colored wood, the staircase with exposed beams—each turn marked by the glow of matins' lamps, each step worn by Benedictine feet.

Miss Gassette's life was a daily miracle. In the evenings, after her day's efforts, she would sometimes evoke the memory of her father, who had catapulted her toward the Divine. But one had to extract the days of her past one by one, for she did not offer her secrets to indifferent ears. Grace belonged to the American high society, which she had to rejoin in 1941 under the threat of the occupying forces. Her father held a prominent position there. She herself, in her youth, told me she had received advice from Judge Landis and President Theodore Roosevelt.

In France since 17 years before the declaration of war in 1914, Grace Gassette, who was then involved in art and painting, went fundraising for us in America and brought back more than a million gold francs to our country. She then offered her services to the American Hospital in Neuilly, where, for lack of a better position, she was put in charge of the linen room. It was in this humble role that she found her spiritual path.

Double Vision

During surgery on a severely wounded man with multiple fractures in his thigh, the surgeon hesitated—and a mocking laugh was heard behind him. The surgeon turned around and saw Miss Gassette watching him.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"Because what you're doing doesn't seem to me the best possible solution."

One can imagine the reaction of a French surgeon in such a situation. The American merely said:
"What would you do in my place?"
"I don't know yet," she replied, "but I'll think about it tonight."

The next day, she presented the surgeon with an improvised model of a splinting system meant to support the injured limb. The professional looked at it, tried it, and asked her to make more.
"I'll think about that too," said Grace, "because just as there are many cases, there must be many devices."

This incident marked the beginning of an intrusion—by a clairvoyant amateur—into the field of scientific prosthetics. It eventually led the medical services to place Grace Gassette in charge of the workshop on Rue Boissonnade, from which thousands of devices for complex fractures emerged, to the astonishment of technicians. These devices, once widely used in surgical departments across the world, still bore her name.

Miss Gassette refused to draw any profit or pride from this. She gave of herself without counting the cost during the First World War and only stepped down after the Armistice—half-blind and worn out by four years of crushing effort. The French government awarded her the Legion of Honor in 1917 in recognition of the ten thousand French and Allied soldiers saved from lifelong disability thanks to her work. I myself held in my hands brochures from international technical associations that paid tribute to the discoveries of this improvised prosthetist.

Once, I asked her where this anatomical foresight came from.
"I don't know," she said. "I just immediately saw what was needed. Almost always my recommendations were confirmed by X-rays. When there was a disagreement, the radiograph was redone—because it was always the X-ray that was wrong."

American surgeons, with their opportunistic pragmatism, accepted any effective help without batting an eye, no matter where it came from. French surgeons were more resistant—some even recoiled at the illogical collaboration of a woman outside their profession. Yet, in the most difficult cases, they went to seek out Miss Gassette. Empiricism prevailed over laboratory science. Amateurism triumphed over professional orthodoxy.

But Grace rarely liked to speak of that past—it was dead to her. Deeply attached to France, she dreamed of a great spiritual awakening for the country.

Mysticism and Communism

Never did I enter the grounds of the Priory without being overwhelmed by memories of the past, which, like a prayer shawl, draped my soul in its silent folds. A vast peace, a vast serenity—composed of the peace and serenity of nine centuries—inhabits those leaves and stones, those rooms draped in "oremus."

I remember one evening, just before midnight, when Grace was walking us back in the moonlit silence. We were leaning on the stone sundial, and the steeple of the old church glowed in the night. The whole village was asleep. The countryside was dreaming among the slumbering trees. And yet, an incessant presence swarmed around us.

I never returned to that castle of premonitions, with its drawbridge of mystery—and I am told that it now serves as the summer headquarters of the Communist Party, and that Maurice Thorez was its principal occupant.

It's not without curiosity that I wonder how dialectical materialism managed to coexist with invisible choirs and the flights of seraphim.

VII. THE KEY

When Miss Gassette, after that first encounter on the road, decided to come visit us in our little cottage, I didn't immediately give in to her entreaties. To speak frankly, my concerns at that time were far from spiritual. I was focused solely on succeeding in my new career, and I wrote several comedies during that period which failed to arouse much interest. My work was prosaic, sometimes even frivolous. In short, I was far from being the ideal collaborator Grace might have dreamed of.

From the start, she delivered to me such speeches that I labeled them incoherent, especially since her vocabulary added to their obscurity. What she said was so contrary to ordinary logic that I couldn't stop contradicting her and trying to demonstrate the futility of her ideas. She, no less determined, set out to show me the weakness of my reasoning—and, something that just months earlier I would have considered entirely impossible—she gradually shook my skepticism to the point that we grew steadily closer.

The Invisible Influence

I had changed apartments and now enjoyed, in one of the new buildings in Paris, a bright space partly overlooking the Montrouge cemetery, which gave us a wide open view, plenty of light, and great tranquility.

The nature of my work gave me a good deal of freedom, since I could pursue it in the city or in the countryside. Around that time, my daughter's health also required that she spend as much time as possible in fresh, brisk air.

When we were away from Paris, the apartment on Rue Albert Sorel was at Grace Gassette's disposal. She often spent the night there, lying on the entryway divan, and felt quite at home. She would draw freely from my library to occupy her sleepless nights, and this is how she discovered a book by Stefan Zweig about Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. The success that Christian Science had in the United States and the audience it found among the American people is well known. Grace, who thought big and far ahead, believed she could achieve the same success in France and already pictured herself, like the Christian Scientists, in possession of a skyscraper, multiple branches, and a major daily newspaper.

I had to bring her back down to earth—more precisely, down to French soil, where Cartesian minds do not so easily allow themselves to be indoctrinated. It took considerable effort to convince her to temporarily let go of a project that was beyond our means—and perhaps my own lack of faith was the main obstacle to her ambitions.

Nevertheless, Miss Gassette impressed me enough that I agreed to work with her. She had in mind a book destined for wide recognition. I gladly agreed to write it based on a few notes she had prepared, most of which came from readings of *Unity* magazine. That respectable movement, led in the U.S. by the Fillmore couple, continues to exert a beneficial influence even in our country.

I suggested the title: *The Key to Life*.
In her practical American way, she replied:
"No. Let's just call it *The Key*."

And with that, she designed a stylized key with a hermetic look, diagonally crossing the cover, all in Prussian blue—a design that remains to this day.

I have recounted at length in *The Invisible and Me* how, in a truly miraculous way, a man and a woman without financial means—she was burdened with debt, and I was just getting by—managed to pull off the feat of publishing a book, without a publisher to fund it and no one to cover the printing costs.

Grace assured me that faith was enough, and that publishing *The Key* was no more difficult for her than lifting a mountain. To tell the truth, I found both feats equally hard.

My collaborator gave me an English book by Dr. Alexander Cannon: *The Invisible Influence*, which dealt with yogis and Tibetan secrets.
"Translate it," she told me. "That's what will open the way."

Indeed, I translated it and offered it to Pierre Audiat, literary director at *Paris-Soir*. He didn't keep it for his newspaper but advised me to show it to Yves Krier, editor-in-chief of *Paris-Midi*, who accepted it immediately—but asked me to break it into a series of articles to be published over several months. Thinking it could wait, I postponed the work, since it wasn't scheduled to run for a while. But Grace insisted I do it immediately, sensing it was absolutely necessary.

So I did—and it was the right move. *Paris-Midi* needed the series much earlier than expected due to the sudden unavailability of one of their regular contributors.

The amount I received for that series—which was very well received by readers—allowed us to fund the printing of *The Invisible Influence*, which in turn sold just enough to cover the estimate for *The Key* at the printer's.

From that moment on, I truly began to believe in a different kind of invisible influence—one that had nothing to do with the world of fakirs. Indeed, every door opened before us with disconcerting ease. And when a door opened, Grace made sure we walked fully through it.

Despite her slightly awkward gait and her eccentric way of dressing, there was a majesty about Miss Gassette that overcame even the most reluctant souls. She always insisted on speaking personally with the highest authority, disdaining subordinates who, in her view, generally lacked decisiveness. I saw her literally "put in her pocket" several highly placed directors or officials, whom she subdued with a few direct words and who always saw her off with great respect.

She was born to lead, persuade, and teach—and her Priory became the center of gatherings based around *The Key*.

A Book That Makes Its Own Way

My wife and I had resolved to claim no royalties and to devote ourselves entirely to the distribution of the book. And indeed, for more than a year, we applied ourselves wholeheartedly to this task. May would visit Parisian bookstores and arrange small, temporary deposits. Protestant bookstores rejected the book because it seemed to them to be of Catholic inspiration, while Catholic bookstores refused it for seeming too Protestant in nature.

Nonetheless, *The Key* made its way entirely on its own—without advertising, without patrons, without an agency—solely by virtue of the force within it. That always surprised me, even now, because the Anglo-Saxon imprint often carries a certain pragmatism, and some of the imagery suggested to me seemed incompatible with the temperament of my country. I was wrong, since *The Key* gained the support of all social classes—those considered upper, the middle classes, and even the working class. Only, with rare exceptions, the rural population remained unresponsive—perhaps because they did not see themselves directly reflected in it.

Everywhere else, an effective word-of-mouth campaign took place, almost secretly. Few books have been passed from hand to hand so extensively. I was told of one practitioner in the capital who kept a stack of them in his consultation room. When he had a patient in the chair, he would quietly assess their spiritual receptivity, and if he found them open to certain ideas, he would offer them a copy of *The Key*.

None of my later works ever benefited from such enormous momentum—except perhaps *The Secret of the Great Pyramid* (published by Editions Adyar), though for very different reasons, which I will address in another chapter. Only *The Friend of Difficult Hours*, now in its fifth edition, enjoyed similarly modest favor. Its publisher, Niclaus—later succeeded by Madame Bussière—told me of a day when a customer came in asking for ten copies of the book.

"You're a bookseller, I assume?" he asked.
"No, just a reader," came the reply. "I'm buying them to give away."

And Mr. Niclaus added:
"In all my career, it was the first time I'd seen anything like that."

So Be It!

At the end of 1935, it became clear that Grace Gassette and I were heading down diverging paths. The pragmatism I spoke of earlier came with occasional ventures into commercial territory. Among Americans, there is no aversion to mixing the spiritual and the material. Money is not viewed as an obstacle to the soul's aspirations. So I gradually withdrew from the Priory.

It wasn't that Grace was personally interested in wealth. On the contrary, she was an incredibly generous person and bore her recent poverty without shame. But she saw financial success as a powerful tool to spread her teachings, and she envisioned starting a monthly magazine to expand and support the *Key* movement.

I proposed to transfer to her the *Editions du Prieuré de Bazainville*. This displeased her, but I pointed out that I needed to earn a living, and that I intended to write a book on the Pyramid of Cheops. It was Grace herself who had first drawn my attention to the subject by sharing Davidson's work with me—a topic I'll discuss later.

And so we parted ways at that time, each taking on their own responsibilities and direction. It was undeniable that Grace Gassette had arrived at a decisive crossroads in my life and that I owed her the radical transformation of both my sentiments and ambitions. I've remained deeply grateful to her, even as time and events separated us. When she returned to America under the threat of the Gestapo, we continued to exchange warm, affectionate letters.

A Shrewd Businessman

At the time of *The Key*'s launch, we had made an agreement with a large provincial printer who maintained offices and a representative in Paris. After I parted ways with Grace Gassette, this representative—a clever man who knew my collaborator was detached from material concerns—gradually took over the entire affair and eventually treated it as his own, since it was highly profitable.

Thus unfolded the curious spectacle of a middleman who had no legal rights to *The Key* beyond that of a printer with unpaid invoices, and who, ceasing even to issue those invoices—which were incomprehensible to Miss Gassette—effectively seized the work for his own benefit. I was only informed much later, along with the staggering revelation of the book's print runs. It was said that the print numbers reached such heights that one of the printing plates had worn out—representing some fifty thousand copies.

To maximize profit, the printer eventually used a sort of grayish paper, full of impurities. With Grace Gassette gone, the way was entirely clear for profiteers, who acted without concern. I was informed of the situation, and some were indignant at the scandal—that all the profit went to a third party while Grace lived in poverty. I replied that while we might still be judges of the work, we were no

longer stakeholders—and in any case, since we had placed ourselves financially outside the equation, the important thing was that the book continued to sell.

And who better to manage the book than the person who, by assuming exclusive ownership, had become its most effective distributor?

All things considered, we could only bless Providence for having provided us with such an efficient, self-interested promoter.

However, after the war, I asked a spiritual friend of Miss Gassette—who was now living in hardship in America—to get in touch with her and ask for her legal authorization. With my approval and moral support, he succeeded in removing *The Key*'s administration from the greedy printer and, on my advice, entrusted future editions to an honest publisher, the Librairie Astra.

A Change of Life

In 1935, *The Key* had plowed deep into my soul. We truly *lived* it, with incredible intensity. It called for a complete reversal of my previous life, and I joyfully ceased to be the man and writer I had been.

I gave up all my former collaborations that conflicted with my new way of living, and I destroyed manuscripts and plays I judged useless or harmful. I resolved to conform, as best I could, to the principles I had newly embraced. I didn't become temperate—since I had always been by nature—but I developed a deep respect for animal life and became nearly fully vegetarian.

I tested *The Key*'s power in my own environment and was increasingly surprised to find that these seemingly simple ideas had a powerful and practical effect. This required a total abandonment of old logical methods in favor of what I later called *experimental mysticism*. For while it is noble to offer suffering, anxious, or dissatisfied people purely mystical reasons to believe, it is essential that such distressed individuals also find real possibilities for transformation.

And it is undeniable that those who read *The Key* and applied its principles to their daily lives reaped immense and tangible benefits.

A growing stream of correspondence, which has become a lasting testimony, has repeatedly confirmed this beyond doubt.

At the time, I had many connections across various circles—and I must admit that most prided themselves on their strict positivism. Or so they believed. But I later disabused them, for far from being ashamed of my transformation, I declared it proudly to all. I honestly informed my friends of the path I had taken, and, as I wrote in another work, I was surprised to find that far from ridiculing me or adopting a mocking skepticism, they seemed more shaken than confused.

We know what Parisian life is like—its superficiality, its glossy but fleeting brilliance, its lightness, its lack of interiority. So I stirred these artificial beings for a moment—but I did not change them. They

soon returned to their comfortable materialism, their empty speculations, their herd-like conformity, and so, little by little, I drifted away from them and never saw them again.