



A Partnership Larger Than Marriage: The Stunning Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell

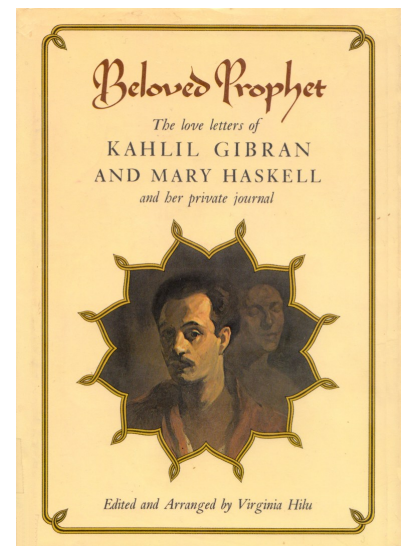
“You are like the Great Spirit, who befriends man not only to share his life, but to add to it. My knowing you is the greatest thing in my days and nights, a miracle quite outside the natural order of things.”

BY MARIA POPOVA

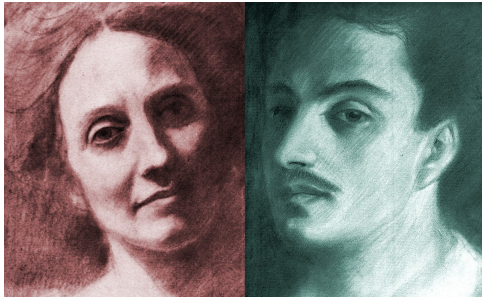
Nearly a century after his death, the Lebanese-American painter, poet, and philosopher **Kahlil Gibran** (January 6, 1883–April 10, 1931) endures as one of humanity’s most universally beloved voices of truth and transcendence. But there would have been no Gibran as we know and love him without the philanthropist and patron of the arts Mary Elizabeth Haskell — his greatest champion, frequent collaborator, and unusual beloved.

Haskell and Gibran met on May 10, 1904, at a friend’s studio. He was twenty-one and she nearly thirty-one. Impressed with his art, Haskell soon offered to send Gibran to Paris to study painting, with a stipend of \$75 a month, equivalent to about \$2,000 today. He accepted. In a letter to a friend written shortly before he departed for Paris in 1908, Gibran described Haskell as “a she-angel who is ushering me toward a splendid future and paving for me the path to intellectual and financial success.” Shortly after arriving, he wrote: “The day will come when I shall be able to say, ‘I became an artist through Mary Haskell.’”

But the open hands of Haskell’s generosity branched from an equally open heart, from some



larger kindness of which Gibran soon became enamored. He came to see her as more than a benefactress — a kindred spirit, a woman of uncommon tenderness, and, above all, a person willing to descend into the deepest trenches of his psyche and climb to its highest mounts in order to understand him, which he considered the greatest measure of love. It was through her generosity that he survived as an artist, and it was through her selfless love that he found himself as a man.



Mary Haskell and Kahlil Gibran. Portrait and self-portrait by Gibran.

Their relationship, like that of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, defies classification and the containment of simplistic labels, but one unquestionable postulate radiates from the dazzling richness and complexity of their decades-long emotional entanglement: the enormous and eternal love they had for one another, which blooms to life in **Beloved Prophet: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell, and Her Private Journal** (public library).

In one of his first letters to Haskell from Paris, Gibran captures what is perhaps the greatest gift of love, whatever its nature — the gift of being seen by the other for who one really is:

When I am unhappy, dear Mary, I read your letters. When the mist overwhelms the “I” in me, I take two or three letters out of the little box and reread them. They remind me of my true self. They make me overlook all that is not high and beautiful in life. Each and every one of us, dear Mary, must have a resting place somewhere. The resting place of my soul is a beautiful grove where my knowledge of you lives.

On Christmas Day that year, he writes:

I think of you today, beloved friend, as I think of no other living person. And as I think of you Life becomes better and higher and much more beautiful. I kiss your hand, dear

Mary, and in kissing your hand I bless myself.

Over the year that followed, their relationship intensified. Haskell records the pivotal sequence of events in her journal the day before her thirty-seventh birthday in 1910:

Kahlil spent the evening. Told me he loved me and would marry me if he could, but I said my age made it out of the question.

“Mary,” he said, “whenever I try to get nearer to you in speech, to be personal at all — you fly up into remote regions and are inaccessible.” “But I take you with me,” said I. And I said I wanted to keep our friendship enduring, and feared to spoil a good friendship for a poor love-affair. This was after Kahlil had explained what he meant.

The next afternoon Kahlil was here a while and I told him yes.

But the following spring, their relationship took its single most defining and transcendent turn — the decision, absolutely radical at the time, not to get married after all but to remain each other’s most intimate partner in life. The reason for it, which Haskell articulates with remarkable poeticism in another diary entry from April of 1911, was her grandest gesture of magnanimity:

It seemed to me that it was the moment of the opening of the door between Kahlil and the world that shall love him and into whose heart he shall surely feel he is pouring his work. *I think* his future is not far away now!

And so I made up my mind to follow what seems to me the final finger of God — I put definitely to myself the possibility of being his wife. And though every waking hour since has been drenched with inner tears, I know I am right, and that the tears mean joy, not pain, for the future. My age is simply the barrier raised between us and the blunder of our marrying. Not my age constitutes the objection — but the fact that for Kahlil there waits a different love from that he bears me — an apocalypse of love — and that shall be his marriage. His greatest work will come out of that — his greatest happiness, his new, full life. And it is not many years distant. Toward the woman of that love, I am but a step. And though my susceptible eyes weep, I think of her with joy — and I don’t want to have Kahlil, because I know she is growing somewhere for him, and that he is growing for her.



Kahlil Gibran, "Four Faces," heavily inspired by Haskell.

The following day, Haskell delivered her emotionally ambivalent yet intellectually firm decision to Gibran and said to him, "My heart longs to be overpersuaded. Still I know in the end I should not be persuaded." She reports his response in her diary:

He wept and I got him a handkerchief. But he could not speak. Near the beginning in one of my many pauses he said brokenly, "Mary, you know I cannot say things, when I am this way," and hardly another word. The only comment he made was to love me. When it was over I opened my arms to him — but he soon had me in his, and the heart is not flesh that would not have been comforted.... When it grew late I put his right palm to my lips — and then indeed the tears came — but they drew me simply nearer to him. I kissed that wonderful hand as I have often longed to do, but as I have not before, because a mere touch on it moves him so. It answered like a heart... Again at the door I cried a little — while he wiped my eyes, saying only, "Mary — Mary — Mary." And as he went he said as well as he could, "You've given me a new heart tonight."

Upon my tears after I went to bed it was suddenly as if a great peace and light broke — and he and I were in it — so that I cried, "Thank you, God, thank you!" again and again. I was so ineffably happy. That I have given him up I realize. But it has not parted us — it has brought us even much nearer together.

"I've always known our relation was permanent," Haskell would later reflect on the decision. *"I wanted continuity of conscious togetherness."* This notion, arising from the enormous magnanimity of her nonpossessive love, would eventually lead Gibran to his superb and timeless advice on healthy relationships.

A month after the decision against marriage, Gibran channels precisely such a "continuity of

conscious togetherness” in a letter to Haskell from New York:

Just came from the museum. O how much I want to see these beautiful things with you. We must see these things together someday. I feel so lonely when I stand alone before a great work of art. Even in Heaven one must have a beloved companion in order to enjoy it fully.

Good night, dear. I kiss your hands and your eyes.

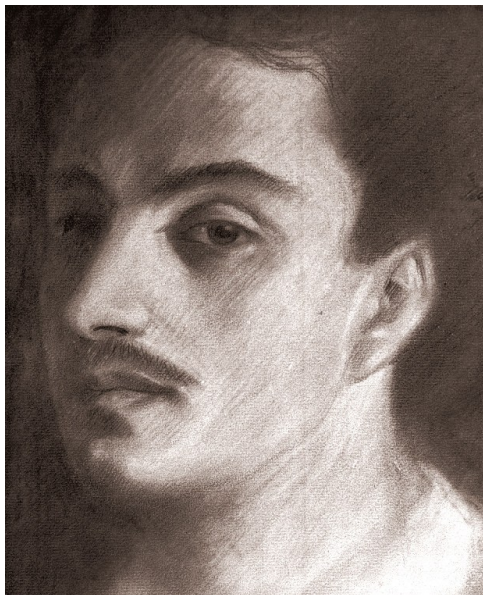
Kahlil

Bedridden in June with one of his frequent bouts of illness, he writes to Haskell, who spent her summers in solitude in the mountains of the West:

Now, Mary dear, I am going to rest. I shall close my eyes and turn my face to the wall and think and think and think of you — you the mountain climber — you the life hunter.

Good night, beloved.

Kahlil



Kahlil Gibran, self-portrait

As the months wear on, his letters grow more and more animated by that uncommon blend of

infatuation's restless longing and the solid togetherness of an unperturbable partnership. He writes to her on October 31, 1911:

Your last letter is a flame, a winged globe, a wave from That Island of strange music.

[...]

Do you not know what it is to burn and burn, and to know while burning, that you are freeing yourself from everything around you? Oh, there is no greater joy than the joy of Fire!

And now let me cry out with all the voices in me that I love you.

Kahlil

Alongside Gibran's passionate proclamations is a calm bellowing tenderness emanating from the depths of his being, which he articulates beautifully in a letter from early January of 1912:

Now I will say goodnight, as any other time. I kiss you and then I say goodnight and then I open the door and then I go out to the streets with a full heart and a hungry soul. But I always come again to kiss you and to say goodnight and to open the door and to go out to the street with hungry soul and full heart.

With equally poetic passion, Haskell writes to Gibran the same week:

Dear Hand, dear Eye, dear Thought, dear Fire, dear Love —

[...]

All I am ever finally impelled to say, rather than *not* say, to you of yourself seems resolvable into, "Kahlil, you are in my heart — you are in my heart, Kahlil." When I look back over the years, it seems always to have been that — with changes only of depth and heat of your heart-place.

The following month, she writes:

God lends me His heart to love you with. I asked for it when I found my own was too small, and it really holds you, and leaves you room to grow.

In the spring, Haskell writes to Gibran in New York, channeling her unselfish love and her

longing in parallel in a letter that could well be a poem:

What are you writing — and how does it go? And what are you thinking about — and how does it go? And what do you want to talk with me about? — and how do *You* go?

And why aren't your arms six hours long to reach to Boston?

[...]

And when will *You* come to me in a dream and make night sweeter than night?

That October, Gibran repays the “continuity of conscious togetherness” that Haskell had always trusted would bloom between them even though, and perhaps precisely because, they chose not to marry:

The most wonderful thing, Mary, is that you and I are always walking together, hand in hand, in a strangely beautiful world, unknown to other people. We both stretch one hand to receive from Life — and Life is generous indeed.

In another letter, he captures one of the small enormities that define love:

I love to be silent with you, Mary.

A few days later, responding to Gibran's concern that his physical illness and its attendant creative block might disappoint her, Haskell sends the most beautiful and generous assurance a person who is loved could hope for:

I don't even want you to be a poet or painter: I want you to be whatever you are led or impelled to become.

[...]

Nothing you become will disappoint me; I have no preconception that I'd like to see you be or do. I have no desire to foresee you, only to discover you. You can't disappoint me.

The following year, as Gibran continues to struggle, she grants him the ultimate gift of love — the equal embrace of his inner darkness and his inner light:

Your *work* is not only books and pictures. They are but bits of it. Your work is *You*, not less than you, not parts of you... These days when you “cannot work” are accomplishing

it, are of it, like the days when you “can work.” There is no division. It is all one. Your living is all of it; anything less is part of it. — Your silence will be read with your writings some day, your darkness will be part of the Light.



Kahlil Gibran, “Spirit of Light”

With a sensitivity to Gibran’s growing mastery of English, she adds:

It is like the resolution of greatest dissonances in great music. You know the use of that word *resolution* in music, don’t you? — so deep and beautiful. — And it is like the reconciliation of life. And do you know *Reconciliation* used in that way? To me it is one of the profoundest and fullest of our words.

A few months later, having pushed through his creative and spiritual stagnation, Gibran attempts to put words around the immensity of his gratitude for this supreme gift of being seen, and loved, in his wholeness:

I wish I could tell you, beloved Mary, what your letters mean to me. They create a soul in my soul. I read them as messages from life. Somehow they always come when I need them most, and they always bring that element which makes us desire more days and more nights and more life. Whenever my heart is bare and quivering, I feel the terrible

need of someone to tell me that there is a tomorrow for all bare and quivering hearts and you always do it, Mary.

Four years before the American publication of Gibran's slim masterpiece *The Madman*, in which he wrote, "I have found both freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us," he sees Haskell as the sole counterpoint to that conviction and writes to her in the summer of 1914:

You have the great gift of understanding, beloved Mary. You are a life-giver, Mary. You are like the Great Spirit, who befriends man not only to share his life, but to add to it. My knowing you is the greatest thing in my days and nights, a miracle quite outside the natural order of things.

I have always held, with my *Madman*, that those who understand us enslave something in us. It is not so with you. Your understanding of me is the most peaceful freedom I have known. And in the last two hours of your last visit you took my heart in your hand and found a black spot in it. But just as soon as you found the spot it was erased forever, and I became absolutely chainless.

The hundreds of letters collected in **Beloved Prophet** are a transcendent read in their entirety. Complement them with Gibran on the seeming self vs. the authentic self and the difficult balance of intimacy and independence in love, then revisit the stirring love letters of Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, John Keats, Albert Einstein, John Cage, Franz Kafka, Frida Kahlo, Hannah Arendt, James Joyce, Iris Murdoch, Margaret Mead, Charlotte Brontë, Oscar Wilde, Ludwig van Beethoven, and James Thurber.

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