

A Modern Prophet from Lebanon

By Claude Bragdon



The Great Mother

REMEMBER! Only my first meeting with Khalil Gibran. It occurred at one of those cultural tea parties so dear to the heart of the average American woman, and so abhorrent to husbands, men and Jews. As a result the atmosphere was pleasantly, even agreeably, feminine. In fact a sportive mood prevailed to the physical sensation of immersion in warm water of the feet of an old-fashioned English bath. In the waning afternoon he said I saw the deep two men emerging, which may be the reason why, notwithstanding speaking, we sat on the carpet's heels.

I do not think that at that time I had really "seen" him, though I probably pretended that I had done so, as he seemed somewhat lost to me. The same by me. But this proved to be a matter of no importance, we came together like lightning and so quickly that we spoke in much the same language that there was scarcely need of speech at all.

In that first meeting I saw him as I now see him, all later encounters having only deepened and intensified the impression wrought then. There were three other men: artist, poet, prophet, though they should be only one word, but like the English language fails to furnish terms.

Gibran is a native of Lebanon. Now Lebanon, like Palestine, is a holy ground, a source of exiles, one of those places where the sacred flame has never been permitted to smolder out. The Lebanese, I see him, are an offshoot from other Syrians as the Syrian highlands is different from the highlands—more so indeed, because they are fertile, and not of Semitic stock. His was what is called in the book a "cultural" birth, for he was brought up in an atmosphere of love, beauty and abundance. But only were his people affluent and cultured, but his mother's family, from far away, was the most trained in all the country.

The boy was extraordinarily precocious, drawing, painting, modeling and writing with such absorption and quality that his parents used to try vainly to bring him to sleep. When he was only eight, the same conversation in books and prints of the whiter spirits of Michelangelo and Leonardo stamped themselves indelibly upon his consciousness—was to remain and unable to retain. At the age of twelve his parents brought him to this country. He returned and obtained a Syrian culture at Syracuse and a law, but a number of years thereafter convinced of him as young and coming between Europe and America, passing time enough in Paris to learn drawing as practiced in the Beaux Arts. He was always in active exercise of his beautiful foot and perfect intelligible eye.

His earlier works were written in Arabic—poem poems:



Hidden Face of God

"Hidden Face," "Spiritual Rebellion," and a number of others. These were published in the United States, Egypt and Spain, and some made him known to the entire Arabic world, which extends—effortlessly and spontaneously—from China to Spain. The character and depth of his influence upon that world may be inferred from the fact that it gave rise to a new word: Gibranism. Just what this word means Gibran's English readers will have no difficulty in drawing spiritual vision, mystical beauty, a simple and fresh approach to the so-called "prophetic" art.

About ten years ago, in this land of his adoption, he began to write exclusively in English, and these ten years have been sufficient for him to create a corresponding impression upon the Anglo-Saxon world as well. The books he is known by to this world are "The Madman," "The Forerunner," "The Prophet," "Mind and Matter," which must be added "Jesus, the Son of Man," his latest, and a collection of his early drawings without loss.

These books are spoken from one very kind, parts of one coherent structure, the concrete presentation of a spirituality—a pantheism which has by no means come to an end. For Gibran's most widely known poem, "The Prophet," which deals with man's relation to his fellow-men, is the first of a trilogy, to be followed by "The Christ of the Future," having for its theme the relationship between man and nature, and "The Death of the Prophet," the relationship between man and God. It is not possible to "kill" Gibran without some sense of these organic relations, any sense then it is possible to sense the vast range of Michelangelo's genius by looking at the Divine ceiling, paved by gold, through an open glass.

I do not propose to analyze Gibran's work, nor even discuss them; there they are, and each reader must interpret them as he may please. Gibranism? I have in the first person said, protest and to come. Some come—concepts that is implied in the works of every mystic—and Gibran is a mystic—but I am so much interested in common-conceptions that in common-sense—which they greatly resemble—and neither, I venture to say, he, except to say he is more such kind of an inner pattern may help him to particularize the particular kind of beauty of which he is in search.

But in an open country, not celebrating this year the other jubilee of Gibran's spiritual writing. His first book, "The Prophet," written in Arabic twenty-five years ago, has been translated into twelve languages. Spain considers it an inspired work. Ministers of the Crown will gather on his birthday, January 4, in Madrid, and in the United States South American countries to celebrate this anniversary and to



"Jesus, Son of Man"



Khalil Gibran's Drawings Are Reproduced from "Jesus, the Son of Man," and "The Prophet," by Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf



The Above World

have public readers from "The Prophet" and "The Son of Man."

A privately-accepted or unaccepted—in to the author with dramatic opportunity to the painter, or to the builder, the poet, or the writer, through the consciousness of his humanistic conceptions, motives and ideals alike—each one a child of time or nature, in which some sort of spirit is infused, or on which it breathes an aura of citizen ship.

The cumulative effect of this method—the same that pervades in "The King and the Fool"—is revolutionary, and all of the books written about Jesus, this, one, if only for this reason, may be said to be unique. It is distinguished also by the varied beauty of its prose and form, and its dramatic intensity. Though not cast in the form of a play, it shows Gibran's power of emotional situations and creative characters which combine by their truth to human nature and their ability to life. One wishes that all men knew that he would admit the American Jesus most cordially. He would want that President—how few men! When I was asked to write the article I read through the lens of "individualism" Gibran, and so wrote him that most honest and broader of all the interviewer's questions, his "response" of America, just to see what he would say. He answered me after this fashion:

"Consider of the world as a manebank in a ship-ground, with ricks and rickshaws for the masses. Some flourish, some others the peak and falling, here one is witness and just before it, where one was a great and hearted blessing, only an empty state remains to tell the tale. Now in this material America represents the best just passing at its death, just ready to blossom; still black, still green, and not yet formed, and someone and full of life."

Beauty is to him more than a word, more than a thing, it is a being, one which may be made manifest, materialized through the magical power of the combined action of the hand and the brain. He believes that Beauty brings him the makes it that manifest, and the sense of the poet's action between "the unknown, the real that passes not away" and its shadow on the-gone, the possibility—the translated into the terms of his own experience in the following way:

"If I remember a beautiful face on the instant my eyes are shut, my spirit created, and I want to know that beauty she with my hands, and with my hand—I want to draw it, and if by chance I am able, I participate in it, I become part of it, and it becomes part of me. That's what always happens to me—the artist—the time I was writing 'The

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Rising Out of the Dead

of this process and its results he chooses Jesus as the great example not he is an eager that his readers should both see and understand him, that he admits the voice of speaking Jesus, as to speak, through the consciousness of his humanistic conceptions, motives and ideals alike—each one a child of time or nature, in which some sort of spirit is infused, or on which it breathes an aura of citizen ship.

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