THE KNIGHTLINESS OF PHILIP GIBBS

By Grant Overton

THEN one said: "Rise, Sir Philip —" but the terms in which the still young man received ennoblement were heard by none; for all were drawn by his face in which austerity and gentleness seemed mingled. A pale young man with a nicotine stained third finger whom Arnold Bennett had once warned authors against (he asks you to lunch and drives a hard bargain over the coffee). A good reporter for Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe. A war correspondent with seven league boots. A man standing on a platform in Carnegie Hall which rings with riot "looking like a frightfully tired Savonarola who is speaking in a trance". His thin, uncompromising nose; the jut of the chin; the high cheekbones and the hollow cheeks; long upper lip and mouth with drawn in, straight corners (yet a compassionate mouth); the deep set eyes; the ears placed so far back; and the raking line of the jaw — if these were all he might be nothing better than a fine breed of news hound with "points". They are nothing; but the clear shine of idealism from eye and countenance is the whole man. Great Britain had knighted a reporter, but Philip Gibbs had been born to knighthood.

For when chivalry would have died, he first succored and then revived it; when men wished to forget, he compelled them to remember. He actually proves what men have forgotten how to prove, and so have turned into a copybook maxim. Perhaps the reason his pen is mightier than any sword is because he wields it as if it were one.

In the eyes of the world he is the D'Artagnan of Three Musketeers who are also three brothers. They are Philip (Hamilton) Gibbs, Cosmo Hamilton (Gibbs), and A(rthur) Hamilton Gibbs, the mutations of name arising from choice and even from a certain literary necessity; for an author's name should be distinctive and is usually better when not too long. The father, Henry Gibbs, was an English civil servant, a departmental chief in the Board of Education. The mother had been Helen Hamilton. The family at one time consisted of six boys and two girls. Henry Gibbs had "a delicate wife, an unresilient salary, and his spirit of taking chances had been killed by heavy responsibility, the caution and timidity growing out of a painful knowledge of the risks and difficulties of life, and the undermining security of having sat all his working years in the safe cul-de-sac of a government office".* It was the office in which Matthew Arnold worked and in which an obscure temporary clerk, W. S. Gilbert, stole moments to compose verse called "Bab Ballads".

Philip Gibbs was educated privately and was an editor before he was twenty one. He was, in fact, only nineteen when he became "educational editor" for the large English publishing firm of Cassell at a salary of a hundred and twenty pounds a year. "With five pounds capital and that income, I married"— Agnes Rowland, daughter

*Unwritten History. By Cosmo Hamilton.

of the Reverend W. J. Rowland — "with an audacity which I now find superb. I was so young, and looked so much younger, that I did not dare to confess my married state to my official chief, who was the Right Honorable H. O. Arnold-Forster, in whose room I sat, and one day when my wife popped her head through the door and said 'Hullo!' I made signs to her to depart.

"'Who's that pretty girl?' asked Arnold-Forster, and with shame I must confess that I hid the secret of our relationship."*

He was both timid and bashful; yet like many men of his stamp, he was to show on numerous occasions a lionlike courage. A hundred and a thousand times he was to pass as close to death as a man may pass and yet live; in general, he was to be quite as badly scared as a chap can be in such circumstances; and without exception he was to persist in what he was doing, for there was and is in him something stronger than fear.

Philip Gibbs's earlier career differed little from that of Arnold Bennett or the first years of dozens of Englishmen who have made their start in Fleet Street. After several years with Cassell, he applied for and got a job as managing editor of a large literary syndicate. In this post he bought Bennett's early novel, "The Grand Babylon Hotel", and other fiction and articles to be sold to newspapers in Great Britain and the colonies. While with Cassell he had written his first book, "Founders of the Empire", an historical text still used in English schools. As a syndicate editor he wrote articles on every conceivable subject, particularly a weekly essay called "Knowledge Is Power". But his job was outside of London, for which he hankered; and finally he wrote to Alfred Harmsworth, who was later to become Lord Northcliffe and who had founded the "Daily Mail". The result was a job under a brilliant journalist, Filson Young, whom Gibbs succeeded a few months later as editor of Page Four in the "Mail" (devoted to special articles). Here he learned all about the new journalism and had a chance to observe Northcliffe closely. In the seventh chapter of his "Adventures in Journalism", Philip Gibbs gives a brief but well etched portrait of the man who transformed the character of the English newspaper. Northcliffe's genius, his generosity, his ruthlessness — which was often the result of indifference and sometimes sprang from fatigue and bad temper — are conveyed in a half dozen pages. Gibbs suffered the fate of nearly all this man's temporary favorites. When he was dismissed from the "Daily Mail" he went for a few months to the "Daily Express" before beginning what was to be a long association with the "Daily Chronicle".

His connection with the "Chronicle" was broken by the sad experiment of the "Tribune", a newspaper founded by a melancholy young man named Franklin Thomasson as a pious carrying out of his father's wishes. As literary editor of this daily, Philip Gibbs bought work by Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Gilbert K. Chesterton, but the paper as a whole was dull and doomed. When it went down, Philip Gibbs thought he saw a chance to throw off the bondage of offices. He took his wife and little son and retreated to a coast guard's cottage at Littlehampton. "There, in a tiny room, filled with the murmur of the sea, and the vulgar songs of seaside Pierrots, I wrote my novel, 'The Street of Adventure', in which I told, in the guise of fiction, the history of the Trib-

*Adventures in Journalism. By Philip Gibbs.

une newspaper, and gave a picture of the squalor, disappointment, adventure, insecurity, futility, and good comradeship of Fleet Street." There was need of money, but the novel cost Gibbs more than it earned. His narrative had not disguised sufficiently either the newspaper or members of its late staff. The point is a little difficult for American readers to take in, and rests on English libel law, which is quite different from the American. In England, "the greater the truth, the greater the libel". A libel action was instituted, and although it was finally withdrawn, the bills of costs were heavy and the sale of the book had been killed. But when published in the United States after the war, "The Street of Adventure" had a very good success.

I knew after that the wear and tear, the mental distress, the financial uncertainty that befell a free lance in search of fame and fortune, when those mocking will-o'-the-wisps led him through the ditches of disappointment and the thickets of ill luck. How many hundreds of times did I pace the streets of London in those days, vainly seeking the plot of a short story, and haunted by elusive characters who would not fit into my combination of circumstances, ending at 4,000 words with a dramatic climax! How many hours have I spent glued to a seat in Kensington Gardens, working out literary triangles with a husband and wife and the third party, two men and a woman, two women and a man, and finding only a vicious circle of hopeless imbecility! At such times one's nerves get "edgy" and one's imagination becomes feverish with effort, so that the more desperately one chases an idea, the more resolutely it eludes one.*

Yet he counts himself, on the whole, to have been lucky. He was able to earn a living and to give time and labor to "the most unprofitable branch of literature, which is history, and my first love". Years later he was to have a thrill of pleasure at seeing in the windows of Paris bookshops his "Men and Women of the French Revolution", magnificently illustrated with reproductions of old prints. He wrote the romantic life of "George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham", and discovered in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury "a plot with kings and princes, great lords and ladies, bishops and judges, poisoners, witch doctors, cutthroats and poets", the incomparable material for his "King's Favourite". These books brought him only a few hundred dollars apiece, though perhaps more in reputation and friendships.

He returned to journalism, eventually, as special correspondent and descriptive writer for the "Daily Chronicle". He was rather frequently in charge of the Paris office and had all sorts of adventures in that city, both those derived from saturating himself in French history and others incident to his daily work. After the Portuguese revolution he was sent to Portugal to explore the condition of the political prisoners, some of whom the adherents of the republican cause had interred alive. His greatest feat was the revelation of Dr. Cook's fraud in claiming the discovery of the North Pole. This was a triumph of sheer intuition, in the first instance, and both dogged persistency and remarkable courage were necessary before Philip Gibbs could be proved right.

It began with a late start, twenty four hours behind the other correspondents. When Gibbs got to Copenhagen, the vessel bringing Dr. Cook had not arrived, owing to fogs. Through a chance meeting in a restaurant with Mrs. Rasmussen, wife of the explorer, Gibbs got to Elsinore and aboard a launch which was putting out to meet the delayed ship. Thus he was the only English speaking person present at the first interview, on shipboard. As it happened, Dr. Cook had not yet acquired that magnificent poise and

*Adventures in Journalism.

aplomb which he was to display from the moment he set foot ashore. His eyes evaded Gibbs, he explained that he had no papers to prove his claim and not even a diary, and when pressed for some sort of written record or notes he exclaimed: "You believed Nansen and Amundsen and Sverdrup. They had only their story to tell. Why don't you believe me?" Later Cook had a moment of utter funk, hiding in his cabin. It passed quickly and after that he was outwardly all that a hero should be.

But Gibbs had had his chance. His seven column story to the "Daily Chronicle" caused him to be denounced everywhere and even put him in jeopardy of his life in Copenhagen; yet a few weeks were to show it to be one of the greatest exclusive newspaper stories, "beats", or "scoops", ever written.

In September, 1912, war started in the Balkans. Gibbs went as a correspondent and this experience, lamentable and laughable, comical and extremely repellent, was his first direct preparation for work soon to follow. The year after he had occasion to go to Germany and study the state of mind, popular and official, toward England. He was, therefore, exceptionally well fitted to be a correspondent at the front when the world war began. It would be impossible as well as improper to try to abbreviate here the story of his experience told so brilliantly and with so much movement (and with far too much modesty) in "Adventures in Journalism". At the outset of the war no newspaper man had any official standing. The correspondent was unrecognized — or it would be more accurate to say that he was recognized only as a dangerous nuisance, subject to arrest at sight. Gibbs and two other very distinguished newspaper men, H. M. Tomlinson and W. M. Massey, worked together for weeks and months and were three of a small group of correspondents who risked their lives constantly in the war zone, and their liberty on every occasion when they stepped out of it. There came a time when the game seemed to be up. "I had violated every regulation. I had personally angered Lord Kitchener. I was on the black books of the detectives at every port, and General Williams solemnly warned me that if I returned to France I would be put up against a white wall, with unpleasant consequences." The solution came with the appointment of five official war correspondents, of whom Gibbs was one from first to last. These men covered the war, not for one newspaper but for the newspapers of Great Britain and America. They were attached to General Headquarters, and among the men of distinction who were assigned to them as friends, advisers, and censors was C. E. Montague, editor of the "Manchester Guardian" and author of "Disenchantment", "Fiery Particles", "A Hind Let Loose", etc., a meditative writer of exquisite prose who, at the outbreak of the war, had dyed his white hair black, enlisted as a private, served in the trenches, reached the rank of sergeant, finally surviving when the dugout which sheltered him was blown up. . . .

After the war the five correspondents received knighthood, and Philip Gibbs is properly Sir Philip Gibbs, K. B. E. On journalistic commissions he visited Ireland and Asia Minor and revisited most of the countries of Europe, including Russia. He came to America twice to lecture on the war and conditions resulting from it, and his book, "People of Destiny", is a critical but admiring account of America as he

found it. Pope Benedict XV, against all precedent, accorded Gibbs an interview on the reconstruction of Europe and this interview was printed in all the principal newspapers of the world. He had become, more truly than any other man has ever been, more fully than any other man is, the world's reporter. His title was splendidly established by his summarizing book on the war, "Now It Can Be Told", and was strikingly reemphasized with his novel, "The Middle of the Road", concerning which a few words are in order.

Although Philip Gibbs had published in 1919 a novel, "Wounded Souls", which contains much of the message of "The Middle of the Road", the world was not ready for what he had to tell. He therefore set to work on a canvas which he determined should include all Europe. His visits to Ireland, France, Germany, and even Russia had placed at his disposal an unparalleled mass of authentic first hand material. He knew, better than most, what existed, and what lay immediately ahead. Using fiction frankly as a guise to present facts, both physical facts and the facts of emotion and attitude, he wrote his story.

When the novel was published in England and the United States at the beginning of 1923, it leaped into instant and enormous popularity. This was partly the result of prophetic details, such as this speech of one of the characters:

> "France wants to push Germany into the mud", said Dorothy. "Nothing will satisfy her but a march into the Ruhr to seize the industrial cities and strangle Germany's chance of life."

When the novel was published the French invasion of the Ruhr had begun.

There was a sense of larger prophecy that hovered over the story. But even more of the instant success of the book was due to the terrible picture it painted, minute yet panoramic, ghastly but honest. People sat up, literally, all night to finish the book. People read it with tears running from their eyes, with sobs; they went about for days afterward feeling as if a heavy blow had stunned them, a blow from which they were only slowly recovering. Although every effort was made in advance of publication to insure attention for the book, it is doubtful whether such effort counted at all in the book's success. For none who read it failed to talk about it in a way that fairly coerced others to become Philip Gibbs's readers. Month after month the sale of this book rolls on. It is not, as a piece of literary construction or considered as literary art, a good novel; it is something much bigger than that — a piece of marvelous reporting and a work of propaganda charged to the full with humane indignation and pity and compassion.

As if he had found his field at last in the roomy spaces and manifold disguises of the novel, Philip Gibbs followed "The Middle of the Road" with a very keenly observed study of young people. "Heirs Apparent" deals with the generation which was too young to take any active part in the world war but which has come to a somewhat unformed maturity since. The gaiety of the novel does not prevent the author, with his usual thoroughness, from presenting the more serious aspects of his young people's misbehavior. There is incidentally an exactly drawn study of that newer, sensational journalism which Philip Gibbs tasted under Northcliffe and which is familiar enough, though on the outside only, to most Americans. But the delightful thing about "Heirs Apparent" is the au-

thor's unfailing sympathy with his youngsters; and the optimism of the ending — the book closes with a character's cry: "Youth's all right!" — is the sincere expression of Philip Gibbs's own perfect faith.

In fine, a bigger man than any of his books. One of the greatest reporters the press has ever had, one of the half dozen — if so many — best masters of descriptive writing now alive. A chap who suffered nervous breakdowns prior to 1914 and who turned to iron in the moment of crisis. A militant pacifist because he has really seen war waged. A lover and fighter for justice, and a preacher of mercy. There is about him, despite the abolition of miracle and the rapid transformation of the world into a factory and a machine, some of that lost radiance of a day when men set forth to conquer in the name of their faith, or to spread a gospel which might redeem the world.

Bibliography

FICTION

1908 *The Individualist.*
1908 *The Spirit of Revolt.*
1909 *The Street of Adventure.*
1910 *Intellectual Mansions, S. W.*
1911 *Oliver's Kind Women.*
1912 *Helen of Lancaster Gate.*
1913 *A Master of Life.*
1914 *Beauty and Nick* (in England, *The Custody of the Child*).
1920 *Wounded Souls* (in England, *Back to Life*).
1922 *Venetian Lovers.*
1923 *The Middle of the Road.*
1924 *Heirs Apparent.*
1924 *Little Novels of Nowadays* (autumn).

HISTORICAL

1899 *Founders of the Empire.*
1906 *The Romance of Empire.*
1906 *Men and Women of the French Revolution.*
1908 *The Romance of George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham.*
1909 *King's Favourite.*
1912 *Adventures of War with Cross and Crescent.*
1915 *The Soul of the War.*
1917 *The Battles of the Somme.*
1918 *The Struggle in Flanders* (first title, *From Bapaume to Passchendaele*).
1919 *The Way to Victory* (in England, *Open Warfare*).
1920 *Now It Can Be Told* (in England, *Realities of War*).
1920 *People of Destiny.*
1921 *More That Must Be Told* (in England, *The Hope of Europe*).
1924 *Adventures in Journalism.*

ESSAYS

1903 *Knowledge Is Power.*
1905 *Facts and Ideas.*
1913 *The Eighth Year: A Vital Problem of Married Life.*
1913 *The New Man: A Portrait of the Latest Type.*

References

"Adventures in Journalism" is autobiographical in the best sense of the word, and needs only to be supplemented by the formal particulars in Who's Who. There are interesting references in Cosmo Hamilton's "Unwritten History". For a not wholly friendly reference, see Clement K. Shorter's page in "The Sphere" for October 6, 1923. Mr. Shorter was one who believed himself libeled in "The Street of Adventure".