

**DAYS OF GLORY: THE
SKETCH BOOK OF A
VETERAN CORRESPONDENT
AT THE FRONT**

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Days of glory: the sketch book of a veteran correspondent at the front by Frederic Villiers & Philip Gibbs

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FREDERIC VILLIERS & PHILIP GIBBS

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
PHILIP GIBBS



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A SALUTE TO FREDERIC VILLIERS

By PHILIP GIBBS

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friend!"

"Advance, friend, to be recognized!"

"Frederic Villiers, war-correspondent."

"Pass, friend! All's well!"

The last time I saw my old friend Frederic Villiers, in February of 1919, he "advanced to be recognized" (according to the old challenge of the British sentry) as my chairman before a great audience in New York. He was "recognized" with an ovation of applause, by many people who, as boys, and lovers of adventure, had thrilled to his name when they saw it written across the corner of a sketch sent back from some distant battlefield, or at the end of a dispatch describing some exciting scene in history of which he was eye-witness, artist, and chronicler.

On that evening in New York, Frederic Villiers spoke of my work as a war-correspondent, with a fine, large-hearted generosity of soul, as an old warrior giving the accolade to a new knight. I was proud of that. I am proud now that such words should have been spoken of me by the greatest of the Old Guard, the last, almost, of those adventurers with pen and pencil who set out from Fleet Street, London (to which I dedicated a book called "The Street of Adventure"), in search of the latest war—wherever it might be in the world. In this preface I am delighted now to salute the gallant spirit of that older knight-errant, whose achievements in fields of strife have been of infinite variety in years that belong to history.

As a war-correspondent and war-artist (for it was to make sketches for *The Graphic* that I went out to the Balkan war in 1911, just as Frederic Villiers went for the same paper in 1876!) I belonged to the New School, and I confess that I was a very raw recruit when I set out for Bulgaria with but a vague idea of what war was like, and not guessing then that in a few years I should see the greatest of all wars from first to last, in its length and breadth and depth, of human agony and slaughter, with all its heroism and all its tragedy. The New School of war-correspondents travelled in motor-cars, sent back their dispatches from military telegraph offices, had a headquarters of their own with telephones in touch with army staffs, and dispatch-riders to carry back their narrative from any part of the front. They were recognized as a unit of the great machine of war, and its mechanism was at their service as far as food and transport, maps and "intelligence" reports, soldier servants, and billeting authority could help any officer to do his job. We did not have to forage around for the wherewithal to live. We did not have to buy horses or camels at enormous prices in cut-throat competition with rival correspondents—the adventure of the old game (of which I had a taste in the Balkans) had quite disappeared by the time I put on khaki as an official correspondent with the British Armies in the Field, and all the adventure we had was of a different kind. It was the unpleasant adventure of walking in the ways of death under harassing shell-fire, of studying life in front-line trenches, in dugouts, and the ruins of French towns, and the desolation of great battlefields upheaved by the ploughing of a thousand guns. We watched the drama of big battles—the preliminary bombardments, the turmoil of advance, the backwash of wounded and prisoners—without any sense of personal adventure beyond that of some personal danger, which in itself became familiar and abominable, as befell every human ant in that vast upturned ant-heap of France and Flanders.

When Frederic Villiers began his career it was a different way of life. War was always terrible, but not so mechanical as

this last war; and the war-correspondent was a more romantic figure, more dependent on his own resources, initiative, daring, imagination, and audacity. He suffered often from hunger and thirst. He had to ride far to send his news to the paper and the world. He pitched his tent in strange places. By bribes and by threats he had to make his way among native peoples unsupported by British Armies. His comrades were also his rivals, each man a law unto himself and eager to steal a march and gain a world-wide "scoop." It was a sporting life and a hard one. There was romance in it, and the hunter's instinct. It was the life of the Wandering Men, true descendants of the troubadours and of such chroniclers as Sir John Froissart and Philip de Comines.

I remember as a boy how thrilled I was when in Trafalgar Square my father took me by the arm and said "Look! . . . There is Frederic Villiers, the war-correspondent!" Before I was born he had seen the Turkish atrocities in Serbia, and was with the Russians in Turkey, and saw the passage of the Danube, the capture of Plevna, and the battle of the Shipka pass. He was at Tel-el-Kebir in 1882; at Moscow for the coronation of the Czar in 1883; in the Eastern Soudan, where he saw the "Broken Square" at Tamai, in 1884; and in the same year went with Sir William Hewitt on his mission to Abyssinia; and up the Nile for the relief of Khartoum. In 1885 he was at the battles of Abu Klea and Gubat, and next year with the Serbians invading Bulgaria. In 1887 he was in Burma, and after many journeys about the world was with the Japanese army in 1894 and saw the taking of Port Arthur. In 1897 he was with the Greek Army in the war with Turkey, and next year again joined the Sirdar's army on its march to Omdurman. After a tour in Australia he left with the Colonial contingent for South Africa and saw the occupation of Pretoria. In 1904 he went to the Far East and was the only war artist at the siege of Port Arthur. In 1911 he joined the Italian army on the invasion of Tripoli; and, in the following year I met him, this veteran with a boyish love of adventure, this artist of history to whom the drama of life was never stale—in

the filth and squalor of the Bulgarian war. What a wonderful career!

In talking to Frederic Villiers as often I have talked to him over a cup of coffee or a bottle of French wine, one hears the inside of the world's history for half a century, anecdotes as strange as the Arabian Nights' tales, tales of terrible, fantastic things, of wild passions and crimes, and massacres, of heroism and gallantry and human love—in the strange hotch-potch which men and women make of life.

It was right, though wonderful, that Frederic Villiers should be in the last war of all, the Great European War, from which the world is now healing its wounds. The British military authorities treated him badly, as it treated others of his craft in early days, not having the imagination to realize that when England was raising volunteer armies, a body of war-correspondents and war-artists with the "Old Contemptibles" would have been worth an army-corps in rousing the spirit of the people. Like all of us at first Frederic Villiers had to go out as a "free lance," dodging staff officers, subject to arrest, and insults and many hardships. But he succeeded in getting to the British front, and afterwards to the French front; and the pictures in this book prove that he made good use of his eyes, and still kept the magic of his touch.

I find many of these sketches very valuable as historical documents, and strangely interesting as records by an eye-witness of the early phases of the war. They reveal many details of our methods of attack and defence and depict many historic places and scenes which were never captured by the camera (admitted later to the war-zone) and changed afterwards when new weapons were introduced, and when intensity of gun-fire altered the look of many landscapes. But for the observation, courage, and craftsmanship of Frederic Villiers these things would not be recorded in pictorial history.

Thus he gives a vivid picture of the way in which rifles were linked together and fired together in trench warfare to act as machine guns at a time when we were grievously weak in that

weapon. He gives another sketch of the little trench mortars called "crapauds" or "crapillots" (toads, as we should say) improvised by the French, as I saw them being touched off by the burning end of a cigarette held by a French officer in the spring of 1915. He shows the old "curtain" loopholes in the trenches, afterwards abandoned because the enemy snipers used to plug them too easily, and the bottle trails used to guide men through woods in darkness until the woods themselves disappeared under tempests of fire. I saw such a trail in the Bois de Bouvigny on Notre Dame de Loretta before we took it over from the French. His study of Ypres takes my mind back to the days of 1915 when the ruins of that dead city were still substantial, before they left but a few tatters of masonry standing above the cratered earth and rubbish-heaps during the bombardment which lasted three years more. Here are pictures of scenes which to me and to many others are reminders of days when victory was but a mirage, tempting the weakness of one's soul: that strange, first Christmas day of war when out of the slimy trenches of Flanders British soldiers and German soldiers met in No Man's Land and said, with the ironical laughter of men living in the same Hell together—"A Merry Christmas!"; and that jolly scene in the Jute factory near Armentières (at the Pont de Nieppe) where splendid boys who had been vermin-eaten in the filth of the trenches, stripped themselves and plunged into hot tubs, and splashed each other like schoolboys, and shouted joyful words at being clean again. I can vouch for the truth of that picture, for I was there, as in many other places, drawn so finely, with such true detail by my old friend.

Another picture has a value in history. It is the storming of Loos by British infantry (Londoners and Scottish in September, '15) with the "Tower Bridge" in the centre of the struggle. There are not many men alive who saw those steel towers above a mine shaft which used to stand at Loos, but I saw them several times before they fell under storms of high explosives. I saw the "going-up" of the great mine crater of La Boiselle, on the first