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THE MAN WHO INVENTED HIMSELF

by John Hersey

The author reviewed: *Robert Capa*

His book: *Slightly Out of Focus*

-the first of six pages-

CAPA, the photographer who is credited by his colleagues and competitors with having taken the greatest pictures of the second World War, does not exist. Capa is an invention. There is a thing in the shape of a man—short, swarthy, and carrying itself as if braced for something, with spaniel's eyes, a carefully cynical upper lip, and good luck in the whole face; and this thing walks along and calls itself Capa and is famous. Yet it has no actuality. It is an invention all the time and in all respects.

Capa was invented in 1935. In that year, in Paris, a certain Andrei Friedmann was a photographer in one way: he owned a camera. Mostly he carried this instrument—a Leica, with one lens and one button to push—to and from a pawnshop. The camera spent three weeks in pledge at the shop to each week it spent in Friedmann's hands. To facilitate the camera's commutation, the obscure photographer rented an office adjacent to the pawnbroker's; this took what little money he had but simplified the hocking and unhocking. These transactions became monotonous. One evening Friedmann and his sweetheart, a girl named Gerda, had an idea.

Andrei and Gerda decided to form an association of three people. Gerda, who worked in a picture agency, was to serve as secretary and sales representative; Andrei was to be a darkroom hired hand; and these two were to be employed by a rich, famous, and

• Slightly Out of Focus, *to be published this month by Henry Holt & Co., is a collection of war photographs with personal narrative by the man who took them.*

talented (and imaginary) American photographer named Robert Capa, then allegedly visiting France. The "three" went to work. Friedmann took the pictures, Gerda sold them, and credit was given the nonexistent Capa. Since this Capa was supposed to be so rich, Gerda refused to let his pictures go to any French newspaper for less than 150 francs apiece—three times the prevailing rate.

The strikes and civil disturbances associated with the growing Front Populaire afforded the unreal American and his darkroom man opportunities to make amazing pictures, and for a few months there was a kind of Capa craze. Money poured in. The association was happy, for Capa loved Gerda, Gerda loved Andrei, Andrei loved Capa, and Capa loved Capa. (The fourth of these attachments, incidentally, has persisted as one of the most wholesome and fruitful romances of the Twentieth Century.) Whenever Capa failed to get an important picture, Gerda made excuses to the editors. "That bastard has run off to the Côte d'Azur again," she would say, "with an actress." Once, when things grew dull, Gerda wrote to an American photographic agency that Capa was a rich, famous, and talented *French* photographer, and soon, in return for his pictures, checks began arriving from the United States.

Late that spring, at a meeting of the League of Nations in Geneva, the freshly beaten Negus of Abyssinia was permitted to speak to the world for the last time. While he was speaking, a dozen Italian correspondents in a balcony at some distance from the speaker began to make loud and insulting noises. A scuffle took place. Most of the photographers were satisfied with pictures taken from far away. When the Italians were finally and roughly ejected by some Swiss policemen, the great American photographer Capa was naturally on hand at the doorway to get the only close-ups of the day. What the great American photographer did not know was that, at the moment of ejection, M. Lucien Vogel, editor of the French illustrated periodical *Vue*, was standing there watching the whole thing. *Vue* was Capa's principal outlet. Three days later, when the close-ups reached M. Vogel's desk, the editor picked up his phone and called Gerda.

Gerda said, "Mr. Capa says the Geneva picture will cost 300 francs."

"This is all very interesting about Robert Capa," Vogel said, "but please advise the ridiculous boy Friedmann who goes around

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shooting pictures in a dirty leather jacket to report to my office at nine tomorrow morning."

That was the end of a certain amount of Capa. But not all. The Spanish Civil War broke out. Vogel hired a special plane in which to fly down from France, and he took the ridiculous boy and Gerda with him. At Barcelona the plane crashed, and Vogel broke his collarbone; the boy and Gerda broke nothing. First the photographer and Gerda, who were now married, went to the mountains of Catalonia; and then to Andalusia, where, in August, the first real battles of the war took place. During one of them, the photographer was in a trench with a company of Republican volunteers, fanatical but ignorant fighters, who shouted, "*Viva la República!*," jumped up over their parapet, and charged toward a professionally-emplaced Fascist machine gun. Capa stayed behind; many were killed; the rest came back. The survivors took some pot shots with their rifles in the general direction of the machine gun, and because it did not answer they decided they had knocked it out. They cheered, jumped, and charged again, with exactly the same results.

They repeated this gallant and ingenuous procedure several times, until finally, as they charged, the photographer timidly raised his camera to the top of the parapet, and without looking, but at the instant of the first machine-gun burst, pressed the button. He sent the film to Paris undeveloped. Two months later he was notified that Capa was now in truth a famous, talented, and nearly rich photographer; for the random snapshot had turned out to be a clear picture of a brave man in the act of falling dead as he ran, and it had been published, over the name Capa, in newspapers all over the world. From then on Friedmann *was* Capa.

Gerda and Capa covered Madrid through the winter; and in the spring they went to the Asturias and stayed with the encircled Basque Republicans until the army was nearly pushed into the sea. Gerda was killed in the battle of Brunete. Capa went to China.

In China, that summer of 1938, Capa found bureaucrats, restrictions, and very little fighting. He met two remarkable American military men—Stilwell and Evans Carlson. The latter led Capa on foot for eleven days until they reached a town called Taierchwan, where they observed the only significant Chinese victory of the entire war.

In time Capa learned that Capa, because of his pictures of this victory, had become a famous *international* war photographer.

He returned to Europe and to Spain, where he stayed until the end of the civil war, in January, 1939. For a short time after that, there were no wars at all. When Hitler's war broke out, Capa discovered that his corporeal reality, Andrei Friedmann, had been born

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on the wrong side, in Hungary. For this reason, the French government took his cameras away from him. He went to America and bought new cameras. America got into the war and took the new ones away from him. But still he managed, by various means, to be sent out as a war correspondent with the American forces. By this feat he invented the first and only enemy alien Allied war correspondent; and this invention took the superb pictures and had the bizarre adventures in Capa's book.

After the war ended, he invented still another Capa, a Hollywood moving picture director, whose principal reality was a weekly paycheck from Universal-International Pictures with the words Robert Capa on it; this charade was quite convincing until Capa's first option came up. He next invented a movie actor—an Egyptian pimp's servant in a movie called *Temptation.* Capa then invented Capa the writer; in this contrivance he will have been found out the minute *Slightly Out of Focus* is read.

Capa is so thoroughly an invention himself that no one can tell a story about him without adding the fabrication which is due him. Even the true stories about Capa have a fictional quality. There was the time, for instance, in March, 1945, when Capa was "sealed" at an airbase near Arras along with other famous correspondents, just before an operation by the 17th Airborne in which Capa was to participate. Capa appeared at the base public relations office and announced that he wanted whiskey. The public relations officer said that whiskey was not permitted on the base for twenty-four hours before a mission. Capa asked to use the telephone. The P.R.O. threatened to pull the phone out of the wall if Capa reached for it; the base was under a blanket of absolute secrecy. Capa left. A few minutes later he returned and said casually, "I found a telephone."

A couple of hours later the chief public relations officer from the headquarters of Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton landed at the field; his errand was to unload a case of whiskey for Capa. A couple of hours after *that,* a silver plane circled the field and landed, and General Brereton himself stepped out, brushed past the nervous commanding officer of the base, greeted Capa, and asked him if he'd got his whiskey all right.

Capa is not so perfectly invented that he escapes making mistakes. One of the qualities Friedmann devised for Capa was that of absolute nonchalance. Toward the end of the war, having seen terrible wartime sights in Spain, China, Spain again, France, the London blitz, North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France again, and Germany, he wanted above all things to cover the Armistice. "To me," he had said, "war is like an aging actress —more and more dangerous and less and less photogenic;" he wanted to take photographs of peace. One night he was playing

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poker at SHAEF headquarters while waiting for the Armistice assignment. A P.R.O. came in and said cryptically, "I've got a little job for you, Capa." "*Little* job?" said Capa. "Don't bother Capa. Capa is playing cards." The P.R.O. gave the "little job" to another photographer, and Capa missed the Armistice.

It took no invention, only his experiences, to give Capa one attribute which lends universality to his work. Capa is really international. One evening, at a party in New York, Capa was entertaining everyone with his sparkling epigrammatic fictions, and he spoke seven or eight languages, all of them—including his supposedly native tongue, Hungarian—with atrocious accents. At last the photographer, David Scherman, asked him, "Capa, what language do you *think* in, anyhow?" This question not only baffled Capa; it seemed to depress him. He retired to a corner, and said nothing more all evening. For two days no one saw him. Finally David Scherman received a phone call from an elated Capa. "Now I know!" Capa said. "I think in pictures."

Despite all his inventions and postures, Capa has, somewhere at his center, a reality. This is his talent—which is compounded of humaneness, courage, taste, a romantic flair, a callous attitude toward mere technique, an instinct for what is appropriate, and an ability to relax. At the very core, he even has modesty. He has the intuition of a gambler: on Omaha Beach, while crouching terrified behind a tank, Capa suddenly realized he would be far safer on the open sand than behind such a target, and he moved out into the clear. His courage is partly this apprehension of the odds, and partly innate; one of the finest tributes he ever got was from an enlisted parachutist of the 82nd Airborne, who, a moment before jumping into battle from his plane, in which Capa was taking pictures, said, "I wouldn't have your job for anything—too damn dangerous."

Capa has humor. He has a clear idea of what makes a great picture: "It is a cut out of the whole event," he says, "which will show more of the real truth of the affair to some one who was not there than the whole scene."

Above all—and this is what shows in his pictures—Capa, who has spent so much of his energy on inventions for his own person, has deep, human sympathy for men and women trapped in reality. . . . Because of all these things about Capa, real and unreal, *Slightly Out of Focus* will very

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likely remain as the greatest one-man portfolio of photographs ever assembled of World War II. The text is just the inventor's inventions about himself.

END

'47 *Pre-print*

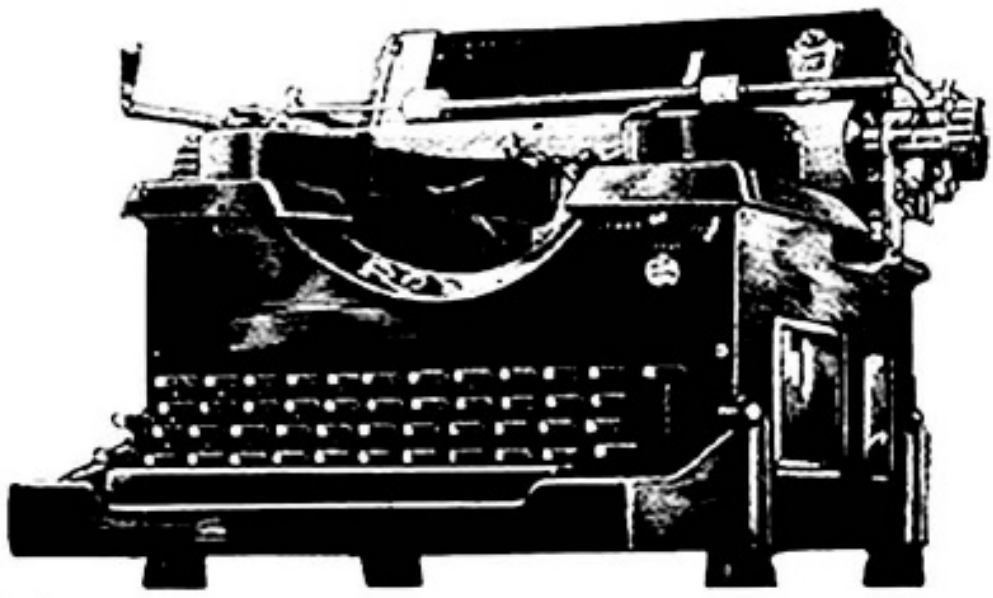
Left-Handed Literature

After a series of severe attacks of writer's cramp, the author wrote:

I had to learn to write with the left, not so irksome to me as it would be to most, for I am naturally left-handed (and still kick with the left foot) . . . Nevertheless, there is not the same joy in writing with the left hand as with the right. One thinks down the right arm, while the left is at best an amanuensis. The right has the happier nature, the left is naturally sinister. I write things with the left, or to put the matter I think more correctly, it writes things with me that the right would have expressed more humanely. I never, so far as I can remember, wrote uncomfortable tales like *Dear Brutus* and *Mary Rose* till I crossed over to my other hand. I could not have written these, as they are, with my right hand any more than I could have written *Quality Street* with my left.

—J. M. Barrie

From *Letters of J. M. Barrie*, edited by Viola Meynell (Scribner's), to be published this month.



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