

GETTING THE LAMBS TO GAMBOL

*Some of the greatest journalism has been produced by a single photograph. Yet the camera can deceive just as much as the written word; and deception is characteristic of certain brands of popular photo-journalism as **HUGH CUDLIPP** describes*

THEY tell me, but who really knows, that Frank Charman died in East Molesey. It may have been West Molesey, or North or South Molesey, or some place miles away. He died in January 1985, so they say. You could never tell with Charman; he orbited in a darkling world where fact was twinned with fiction and the counterfeit was indistinguishable from the genuine.

He proved the camera can lie, and I mean bloody lie. Somewhere or other there should be one of those white-and-blue plaques commemorating his birth or death, preferably in Dayglo in the newspaper office darkroom where he practised his art of artifice, or alchemy. To put it bluntly, our Frankie aimed to achieve the sort of perfection in his photographs that God might Himself have achieved had He not worked to rule on the seventh day.

In Frank's pictures flowers bloomed where they had never bloomed before, rivers flowed from estuary to source, the hands of village clocks that had tick-tocked and tolled the hour trouble-free for decades denoted the time that suited Charman.

But Charman was increasingly unfulfilled. "Hugh," he said to me one Tuesday when the rest of the staff were composing their expenses, "I want to come off the art editor's f***ing rota. I want to range around. To be a creative photographer, working on my own ideas, bringing in my own work direct to you every Saturday without anyone telling me what to do."

No doubt about it, he became a creative photographer with the addiction of a serial killer. When the paparazzi were snapping the newsworthy wedding couple from the front as they left the cathedral, Charman would be operating furtively in the rear, producing a shot of the bride scratching her bottom. You could see Her Majesty the Queen waving to the crowds in any old newspaper, but in the Charman exclusive there were additionally two Welsh miners being sick in the gutter or a mongrel pissing on a lamp-post. I began to wonder why Frank was always there when it happened; later I began to suspect why it always happened when Frank was there.

He took to ordering the provincial weeklies, ripping out promising items and stuffing them in his pocket. Legless men marrying stringbean women. Parrots

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I took Frank aside one day and explained that though I was philosophically in sympathy with his urge for creative photography, we were producing a Sunday family newspaper and not a sleazy sideshow in Coney Island, USA; maybe he could upmarket his creativity, or something.

He responded beginning with Spring, the front-page Spring-is-here-at-last picture, a mandatory ingredient of popular newspapers. "This year gambolling lambs are out," I said. "Too comy. Lambs have been gambolling on our front page for years. Something new."

"Thank God," he said, "getting the sods to gambol when you are ready with the camera isn't easy."

Getting the sods to gambol? Somewhere, faintly, an alarm bell was ringing; it was my mission as Saint Francis of Assisi's stand-in to monitor Charman's metamorphosis into creative photography with something more cautionary than a cry of hosanna every Saturday when he delivered the precious goods, especially when the four-legged or two-winged were in the cast. A shriek from a copse, a growl in the zoo, or a yelp of instant pain at Crufts might have signalled yet another Charman scoop.

"I know," said Frank, "you said so, gambolling lambs are out. How's about this?" Perfect. Two sprightly bright-eyed tortoises weaving their front claws through stems of a clutch of giggling daffodils, with a wispy Spring sky in the background. It had been raining most of the week but miraculously he had captured one of the few rays of sunshine which had eluded the weather forecasters.

"Frank," I said, "you're a genius." Later that night when we were having a congratulatory drink together, the creative photographer and the creative editor, I said: "How did you manage to find not one but two tortoises with their eyes wide open as early in the year as this? I've a tortoise in our garden, name of Sam, and the bugger's still hibernating." He fidgeted with his tie. "Hugh," he said, "if you want Sam to wake up sooner than he or God intends, just pop him in the oven, a slow

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oven I advise. He'll be wishing you a Happy Easter in no time at all."

Admittedly, the first tortoises in history to make the front page were Sam's kith and kin, but there were reasons why I could not afford to be over-hasty in probing just where in Charman's pictures creativity began and reality was given the golden handshake. His weekly contributions were invaluable and, after all, he wasn't pinching money from the pension fund.

He was compassionate towards those who lost their loved ones. In the same way that mourning became Electra, bereavement brought out the best (or worst) in Frank Charman. Widows played a role as "props" in his creative photography similar to the conspicuous boy cripples and co-operative mules in the crowd scenes in Zefferelli's filmed operas, notably *Carmen* with Domingo; one gets to know the mule quite well as the passion and violence among the humans escalate.

Charman's affinity with widows was exhibited to advantage, I'm not sure whose advantage, in a masterpiece of creative photography arising from a fishing boat tragedy, I think in Comwell. A number of men were drowned, some of them sadly from the same family. "See you Saturday morning," said Frank, which he did.

There was the silver-haired widow all right, looking wistfully out of her cottage window to the hazy sea horizon in the distance. By her side was a rocking chair and on the mantelpiece, framed, a miniature Wayside Pulpit text: *Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted*. By its side was a vase containing dark tulips, languidly curtsying towards the widow, an effect that could, I suppose, be produced by depriving them of water. On the back of the photograph Charman had scrawled *The Empty Chair*.

"The rocking chair adds to the pathos," he said as I was scrutinising the picture with some suspicion. "See what I mean?" I saw what he meant. No picture in any other newspaper could portray the poignancy of the event and its aftermath with more sincerity than Charman's muted masterpiece. "Great," I said, "it will be the splash on the double-spread. Get me a bigger print, quick."

In a letter to the editor the bereaved lady expressed her appreciation of Mr Charman's courtesy and requested a copy of his "beautiful photograph" which I duly despatched in a silver frame with my sympathy.

On Frank's expense account were three interesting items: "Donation to vicar of St Giles Church to acquire Wayside Pulpit text, £10. Hire of antique rocking chair, £25. Spring flowers, £4." Of course, the tulips. I do not know how many widows he charmed in that seaside village before he found a widow with a window with a view and space for the chair.

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A final example from the creative portfolio. Two young RAF pilots were killed in a mid-air crash not far from London during a training exercise. "Back Saturday," said Frank half-way through the week. Unless he sought my opinion I did not ask him to discuss the assignment he selected, what it was, where it was, or who it was; perhaps just as well. The pilots had been friends and were buried in adjacent graves. When Frank returned to the office, a little flustered and later than usual, he said: "Sorry I'm running late. It will be with you in an hour, guaranteed. I've some work to do in the darkroom."

I had already surveyed with chagrin the Saturday morning offering presented by the art editor, a few expensive "exclusives" and the daily paper left-overs: another view of Betty Grable's legs and *derrière*, a Siamese mother who had given birth to two sets of Siamese twins, a Hamburg circus trainer with his head in a forest-bred lion's mouth (the drugged King of the Jungle obviously more terrified than the trainer), a 100-year-old biddy who cooked muffins for Baden-Powell the day Mafeking was relieved, the mandatory fat baby with a conical paper-hat inscribed "Kiss Me Quick", the young American lovers married underwater in goggles, flippers and aqualungs with a dolphin as best man. The *pièce de résistance* was two copulating Indian elephants I had rejected several times before (too early for that sort of thing — they had to hold it until they could copulate in colour a few decades later in an Endangered Species Issue of one of the upmarket weekend mags.) Then in rushes Charman intoning: "Think you'll like it." Good old Frank, just in time. I chucked the randy elephants into the basket and got to work with my self-adjusting ruler and Black Prince pencil.

The photograph was in his idiom, as instantly identifiable as a Rembrandt or a Van Gogh. The mourners in dark suits or black dresses and the priest in a white surplice were receding in the background of the village cemetery towards the Norman church where the service had been held. The young widows, chestfallen but radiant and serene, were standing each at the head of her husband's grave, smartly saluting. Above in a cloudless sky two RAF planes were streaking ahead of their slipstreams.

It crossed my mind that to achieve the co-operation required to depict it all in one moving picture Frank had casually mentioned that he had served in the Air Force himself. On the back was scribbled *The Last Farewell*, in case I didn't get the idea. His virtuosity at being in the right place at the right time, or the harrowing place at the harrowing time, again aroused envy on the editorial floor when the first edition materialised. Who else could have captured the pathos and the inspiring loyalty of *The Last Farewell* in one

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magical shot? Were we paying him enough? Was he under contract? Would some other Sunday paper bribe him away?

I was soliloquising over the indispensability of the creative photographer when the news editor informed me that an irate gentleman describing himself as the father of one of the widows was demanding to speak to me.

“Sir,” he said, “I am phoning to protest about the abominable behaviour of your cameraman at the funeral this morning. My daughter has just told me what happened. He lured them back to the graveside on the pretext of taking a tasteful photograph of them together which they could treasure all their lives, or some bloody nonsense. He then asked them to imagine that an RAF plane was flying overhead and persuaded them to salute. All this disgusting charade took place in the pouring rain, etc. etc.” I assured him I would look into the matter and return his call late that night.

Pouring rain? The sky in Charman’s picture was clear. Asked them to imagine that an RAF plane was flying overhead? In the picture there were two. Hadn’t I seen those two planes before, possibly in a fly-past viewed by the Royals from Buck House balcony? Was it really a Norman church in that cemetery or a Victorian monstrosity Frank didn’t fancy? Were the other mourners receding in the background as the widows saluted, or was that scene from an earlier shot, or from some other funeral?

In the final edition, fortunately the one delivered where the families lived, the copulating elephants still didn’t make it but the under-water wedding with the attendant dolphin was substituted for *The Last Farewell*, and I informed the father that the photograph had been removed.

Charman left the office an hour before I launched a search; he had told the art editor he had caught a chill on the morning assignment. “Frank,” I said when he reported back for duty the following Tuesday, “no more funerals. Except, of course, your own.”

When they buried him in East, West, North or South Molesey in 1985, I wondered who was really in the coffin. ●

LORD Cudlipp — Baron Hugh Cudlipp of Aldingbourne — was editor of the Sunday Pictorial (now Sunday Mirror) from 1937 to 1940 and again from 1946 to 1949. He was chairman of Daily Mirror Newspapers Ltd 1963-1968, deputy chairman of International Publishing Corporation (IPC) 1964-1968 and chairman from 1968-1973. This piece was first published in the British Journalism Review.



FROM July, the *Rhodes Journalism Review* will have a new editor in Charles Riddle, a lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies and the design and production function will fall to Jane Burnett, a fellow lecturer in the department.

Advertising will be the responsibility of Chloë O’Keefe, administrator in the department.

The journal will continue to be published twice a year as usual, in July and December each year.

Members of the new editorial team can be contacted at Rhodes University’s Department of Journalism and Media Studies on the telephone number: RSA(0461) 22023.

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