A painter who could not pay his debts once borrowed money from a friend and left him his palette as a pledge. The friend, tempted by his new possession, tried his hand and became a painter himself. The same is supposed to have happened when a type-writer was delivered to a wrong address. After recovering from his surprise, the recipient proceeded to become an author. Whether the newly created artists ever achieved anything outstanding is not stated in either of the stories.

In the present case the same story took the following form. One day—to be exact, shortly after the First World War—a tired and discouraged young German turned his back on his country and settled down in Amsterdam. When he had found his feet there, he decided to take over a leather goods shop in the Kalverstraat. An inspection of the premises revealed that the door leading to a room above the shop had been barred up. He had the door opened, entered the room, and found himself in a fully equipped photographer’s dark-room, which the previous owner of the business had had installed. Some time later it occurred to him to make a trial with photography himself, and in the first pride of the amateur he exhibited his portraits of women beside the leather goods in his shop window. The photographs served their purpose. They attracted passers-by, and the turnover of the business rose. But it also happened more and more frequently that people in the street, surprised by the rare individuality of the photographs, came into the shop and asked for the name of the photographer, so that they could go to him to have their portraits taken.

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for it was he who owned the shop, now began to combine his trade with his hobby, and as the latter flourished the former was pushed into the background.

The extraordinary personality of his work soon carried the amateur’s name as a photographer beyond the Dutch frontiers. In Paris, where Charles Peignot was collecting the best photographers in the world in the albums of Photographie, he now began to attract notice. Photographie published a few of his studies and thus introduced his name not only to the professional world but to everybody interested in photography. But the hobby was now becoming a passion. The amateur photographer gave up his leather trade, closed the shop in the Kalverstraat and went to Paris, where he settled in the Montparnasse quarter. He worked there for three years, astonishing the photographic world again and again with his wealth of ideas and with brilliant productions fathers by an innate flair for experiment.

About ten years have passed since Blumenfeld, without any professional training and impelled simply by casual curiosity, first began to photograph. In these ten years the unknown amateur has become one of the most outstanding and—a point which is at least worthy of note—one of the best-paid photographers in the world.

But the aim which characterized his work at the very outset is today still the mainstay of his art: the aim of exploring the infinite possibilities of photography and of harnessing them to the interpretation of nature which is his real interest. The continuous progress of the optical and chemical industries, the scientific revelations of technicians and research workers, are not for him useful incidentals, but the starting-point of his art. His photographs bear the stamp of his personality because he handles them from beginning to end according to his own tastes and standards, and never according to prescribed formulae. They are the products of untiring work, often extending over several days, and of extreme patience. At the same time Blumenfeld does not allow his interest in the phenomena of photography to guide him or, worse still, to misguide him. In no case will he attempt to hide the poverty of a photograph behind complicated processes or make use of protracted technical treatments purely for the sake of effect. Partial or complete solarisation, the combination of negative and positive, network or crystal phenomena (the latter obtained by putting the moist negative in a refrigerator to dry) are methods he employs only after having decided from the outset on the laboratory work required to enhance the expressive power of a study. Sometimes as many as sixty exposures are needed, every negative being individually handled and developed, before he arrives by examination and selection at the final expression of his idea.

Routine or indifference are to him foreign conceptions. Blumenfeld believes in the future possibilities of photography. The photographs he has made in the last few years, including his very latest work and his colour photography, will be published shortly in album form and will be a highly important contribution to the history of photography. With its rich and detailed technical data, this album will not only be a stimulus for all photographers but will in addition bring strong support to Blumenfeld’s contention that photography, including the handling of the film in the laboratory, still holds unsuspected possibilities and is far from being—as many disciples of realism sometimes argue—at the end of its historical development.

H. W. Allen