



Broderick Crawford:

“IT’S A HELLUVA LIFE”

BY TURNLEY WALKER

What goes on inside a man who approaches acting with a scalpel, but attacks life with a bludgeon? A sensitive author, probing deep, strikes gold

■ PEOPLE EVERYWHERE eye the morning papers with sullen expectation of catastrophe and scandal, and their sullenness increases if they are disappointed.

The headline bleeds down into the page . . . HOLLYWOOD STAR ARRESTED. . . .

Midnight long past, a quiet residential street, a sleeping house, the doorbell ringing, ringing, until the owner of the house rouses and stumbles toward the door, still too drowsy to feel more than aimless irritation. He fumbles the door open and stares out at a bulky figure which seems to fill the entryway, and now, too late, fear squirms in him. He tries to shut the door, but the visitor's foot intervenes.

"I'd like to use your phone." A familiar voice. "I need a cab."

Hesitation. The visitor moves into the hall. Frantic fingers flip on the light.

"Why . . . you're the man on television . . . Highway Patrol . . . the cop . . . !"

"Sorry to disturb you this way . . ."

"You're *Broderick Crawford* . . . !"

Behind them violence appears to be moving inward from the street, curses, growls and a turbulence of bodies.

"What's going on out there, officer . . . I mean, Mr. Crawford?"

"Some friends of mine. The phone . . . ?"

The resident points shakily to a nearby stand, thinking . . . *Broderick Crawford*, the TV and movie star, not a policeman, actually, forget that . . . always something in



Photographs of
Turnley Walker
interviewing
Crawford by
Nolan Patterson

smart and expensive apartment building housing Broderick Crawford, a bachelor via legal separation from his wife. A courteous doorman, the elevator sliding upward many floors, the apartment door ajar.

I went in.

"Crawford . . . ?"

The living room was carelessly furnished, rather bare, the emptiness of the habitation of a man alone. Only two items of decoration stood out: an oldtime vaudeville poster announcing the appearance somewhere of the star act CRAWFORD AND BRODERICK—"A Smile Or Two," and the framed photographs of two handsome children, male.

"Hullo there . . ." A heavy voice, with accents familiar to a sizable portion of the world's population.

Broderick Crawford swung through the kitchen doorway, six feet tall, built like a truck, an effortless, swift-moving truck. I took his considerate handgrip and felt the power back of it, and glanced over the blunt-nosed fighter's face, the eyes wide-spaced, warmly intelligent, holding mine with candor's special steadiness.

I sat down. He had iced coffee for me, in case I wanted it. I did. He lounged back on the low settee, sleeveless shirt and slacks of fine, almost exquisite material, loosely cut around his burly frame. Beyond the high window the human desolation of the Los Angeles coastal valley faded away in smog.

"I haven't seen you on the front pages in quite a while now."

"I'm a quiet-living man," said Crawford, smiling.

"No story out of Rome, Havana, or even here."

"Same work, same fun. No

the papers about the guy in real life . . . drunk and getting into trouble . . . but not drunk now, doesn't look it anyway. . . .

He follows the heavy, graceful figure with his eyes, feeling a thrill of terror and anticipation, as the violence outside swerves inward and a body seems to slam against the house.

And minutes later the real police are there, called by some disturbed neighbor, and Crawford is roaring out of the house, enraged because the cops are manhandling his friends, and collides, himself, with the most serious arrest of all, and the next morning the headline bleeds down into the front-page story . . . HOLLYWOOD STAR, BRODERICK CRAWFORD . . . and half the world reads and nods with some blend of satisfaction.

And occasionally, perhaps, the thoughtful question: what manner of man is this?

The *Strip*, a snake-looping section of Sunset Boulevard connecting Hollywood with Beverly Hills, the white thrust of the Sunset Towers, a

changes." He leaned over the table in front of him and riffled a stack of television scripts marked *Highway Patrol*. "Got to knock off a dozen of these, then a feature picture coming up somewhere."

"You just got the Billboard Award, for Highway Patrol, best syndicated TV series, best actor."

"Not bad, eh, for a bum like me?"

"The money's good these days?"

"The part of it I get."

Like a stage cue, the phone rang, and Crawford passed along the information that his lawyer was after him again. The conversation was swift, joking, friendly. He hung up.

"He's going to tell me later today about the new way they're going to cut me up. I spend more time in court than in bed."

"Pretty aggravating."

"We've all got problems."

"They say you've got into enough trouble to wreck three careers."

"Who says?"

"Everybody."

"Only a few people know anything about me. I'm accident-prone. They misspell my name at the Italian Labor Bureau when I'm over in Italy to make a picture, and I land in jail for breaking some law. Who says you can get by without an interpreter?"

"You laid hands violently on some L. A. policeman not long ago."

"I don't like unreasonable people. I got impatient."

"The Crawford temper."

"Oh yes, that very well known bum." He grinned and took a gulp of coffee, finishing it, chewing a chunk of ice.

"You don't look worried."

"I'm a happy fella. I work, I play. I do what I want to, practically. I

like a few people very much. I like to roam around with them. Very much. A few bucks in my pocket, the phone rings, off we go. The bull-fights in Tijuana, Vegas, the beach. I like all kinds of exercise. There are games a guy can play for years and years."

"I saw you as Lennie in *Of Mice And Men* on Broadway."

His brows peaked quizzically above the fighter's face, jaws chomping on another chunk of ice.

"Why'd you bring that up?"

"I think you're one of the most talented actors we've got."

"That sounds very, very square." He smiled warmly at me. "Maybe you mean it."

"I do."

"That's why it sounds so square. It's tough to say the things you mean." His eyes had never left mine, serious, direct, enquiring. "Thank you," he said. "A man tries to mean something. I'm an actor."

A few questions brought quick, sometimes profane, always vivid pictures of his background. Born in 1911, the only child of vaudeville troupers, his mother, Helen Broderick, to become one of the great comedienne of her day. An early love of show people, "the brightest, sweetest, most interesting people in the world . . . my world." Scattered, turbulent years of schooling, playing on every athletic team, a high school education finally, and then, "I came to New York and bought a hat and became an actor and began looking the girls over. My God, the girls were beautiful back in those days, depression or not . . . I'd have married any one of a dozen, if my mother hadn't made me laugh with her impressions of 'em. Nothing malicious.

They were good. Good idea. Gave me time to grow up."

He had brought us more iced coffee while he was talking, and now he took several smiling sips as his blue eyes lazed across his memories.

"How'd you make a living?" I asked.

"In radio, as a funnyman. I was Helen Broderick's son, and a lot of show people said she was the cleverest comedienne in her line."

"Gene Fowler says that."

"You know Gene?"

I nodded, and Crawford's hand came out to take me by the shoulder, pleasure flaring in his eyes.

"That man . . . that big man . . . he understands you've got to have fun as you go along, not silly stuff, not gags, but moving around with men you like, getting pretty drunk and going where you want to . . ."

"Adventuring . . ."

"Well, things do happen . . . like the time I invited four bankrobbers to dinner in Rome, quite an evening, before the cops showed up . . ."

Crawford laughed and got up and stretched and laughed again. Then his eyes grew serious.

"I'm not trying to find excuses for the way my marriage broke up. But I've got to roam around and sometimes get drunk and lively with my friends."

"Trouble, headlines in the paper . . ."

"Accidents, people interfering . . . my God, there's more lawyers than people . . .!"

"Actors' careers have been wrecked that way."

"What can you do," sighed Crawford, the innocence in his eyes not quite innocent. "We're up in Stockton, making *All The King's Men*,

and a bunch of us decide to run a hurdle race over a lot of ash cans set out in one of the main streets, very late at night. I've always liked games and exercise. A thing like that can get pretty noisy, when a few beers have thrown your timing off. Pretty soon the whole official part of town begins to try to get things back in shape . . . and it was a lot different in the morning papers."

"Picture producers get upset . . ."

"Oh there're a few nervous guys in any business. What you've got to do is work hard, and stay out of conferences."

"Did you work hard in the beginning?" I asked.

"I moved around, got in a lot of plays, mostly for fun. Once, in London . . ." He eyed me owlishly. "I roomed, by mistake, of course, in a whore house, with Joshua Logan, big director now." He chuckled delightedly. "Josh ought to do a play about it sometime."

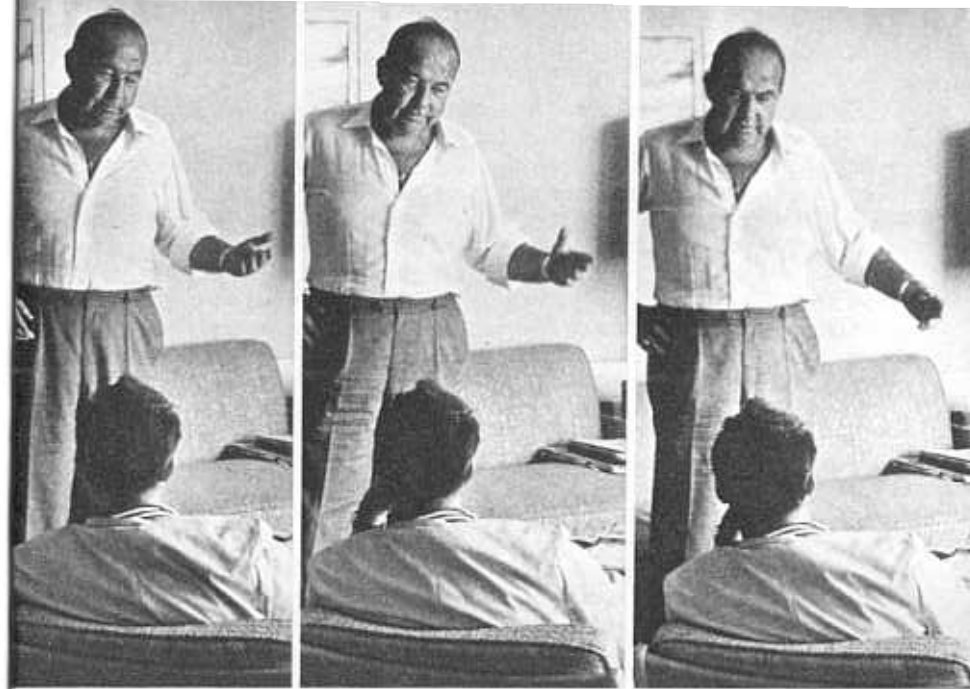
But slowly through those wild young years, a serious feeling about his work was gathering.

"Something was stirring in me, I suppose, reaching out. I wanted to do better work, deeper, something more for me. And that's not easy anywhere in show business when you've got a beatup mug like mine and over 200 pounds of sloppy muscle. I began to read, anything that might be made into a play. And one day . . ." His eyes widened in a gentle, smiling way. "Lennie walked in and sat there looking at me, the poor, sad, dreadful bastard . . ."

"Lennie?"

"The character I played in Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men*."

"Oh yes."



"A baby with the body of a full grown gorilla. He scared me, broke my heart. I wanted to make people understand him, in a play. I found out that George Kaufman was going to make a play of the novel.

He got to his feet.

"Kaufman was in Hollywood. I went there. He was back in New York. I reversed my field. Then he was in Hollywood for sure. I flew back, and found him in the Garden of Allah . . . that's a gilded flop-house down the street . . . Scott Fitzgerald died there . . . always something going on . . ."

"I know."

"Kaufman was giving readings to half the actors in Hollywood. I gave the lousiest reading anybody ever heard. I can't read a part that way. I don't see the words, I see the

character and hear him, and I'm not ready to do what has to be done . . ."

"What did Kaufman say?"

"He told me to stop trying to read and tell him what I thought of Lennie. I tried to tell him that Lennie was like a little child sitting at the breakfast table, not liking the food and trying to get his own way. I got to talking about cereal and the terrible way it feels in the mouth of a little child who doesn't like it, who hates it, who knows it's going to make him sick . . . make him puke . . ."

Crawford slouched forward, his eyes veiled and inward-staring.

"Who can talk about things like that? You *feel*. Understanding of the character is just starting in you, growing, choking out the words. Words are a long way off . . ."

"And Kaufman?"

"He told me to go away for a while. I guess he wanted to think. Then he called me back and said, 'Okay, you're Lennie.'"

"We worked . . . Then, opening night . . ."

He went quietly to the window and back again, and it seemed to me I could see a glimpse of Lennie's strange, childlike movements.

"For a little while, I was Lennie . . . then the play was over, the curtain came down, went up again. There wasn't a sound, not a sound from the audience. They just sat there, and my guts were full of ice because I thought we'd failed, I'd failed . . . and then it began in the audience, the sounds, the murmurs, coming together into a roar of applause, and I knew we'd hit 'em so hard that they'd recovered slow . . . and I felt . . . I felt . . ."

He sat down deliberately. His hands were clenched together, the heavy head was down.

"That was a big time in my life, those few minutes, maybe the biggest. I knew I'd earned my money, done my job."

We sipped our coffee. He reached out to adjust the frames which held the photographs of the two handsome children.

"Yours?" I asked.

"My boys," he said, and gave the frames another slight adjustment.

"Any other highpoints, like the opening night?"

He looked at me and then away.

"Once, when I was doing practically nothing in a flop play, Ethel Barrymore climbed four flights to my dirty little dressing room to tell me that she thought I was an actor, a good actor."

He got slowly to his feet. He was a man who had to move around. He looked down at me, smiling, yet his expression sadly thoughtful.

"I can still feel the warmth of that great lady . . . see her face . . . hear her words . . ."

He moved quietly about the room.

"You get lost for years inside this business. You watch people making mistakes about you and there's nothing you can do about it. They told me out here I wasn't the type to play Lennie in the picture, so I became a B-picture thug at Paramount, for years, working with Lloyd Nolan and J. Carrol Naish who were also lost, who were as talented as actors get, and who cared?"

"The war came in there somewhere . . ."

He turned toward me.

"Then in a novel called *All The King's Men* I found a poor, sad, violent, complicated bastard called Willy Stark, or Huey Long, or whatever."

"Willie won you the Academy Award."

"A ceremony. My work was over."

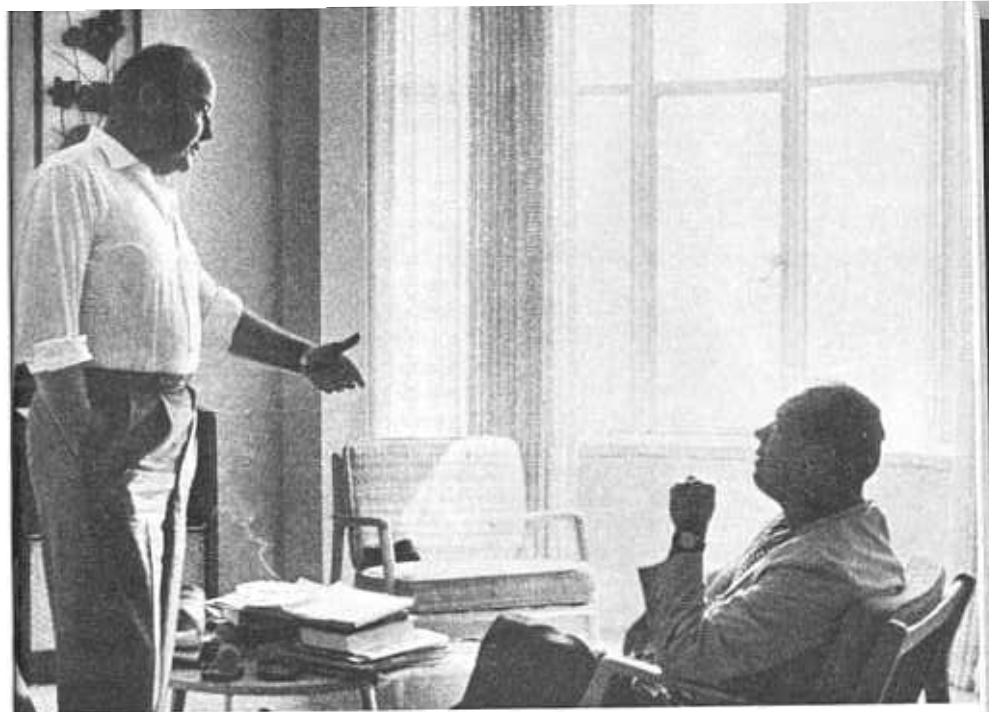
He crossed the room slowly. His eye caught the photographs of his children, and he stopped.

"You don't live with them anymore."

"No. Nobody's fault, not even mine. We were married 15 years. I just couldn't be regular and quiet enough. Her nerves wouldn't stand it, and I couldn't change. We have a legal separation. The lawyers keep arguing and cutting me up one way, then another. I see the children a lot. They're good boys. Kim's nine. Kelly's five."

"What do you want for them?"

"I hope they do what they want



to do. Work hard. Never hurt anybody on purpose."

"You think some of your adventures might disturb them?"

His eyes glinted humorously around at me.

"They'll understand in time."

"Those bankrobbers in Rome caused quite a stir."

He grinned and then laughed.

"It was quite a night, but not the way they wrote it up. How can you explain? Why bother? Another accident. These guys turn up and we go out on the town. I have no idea that they've robbed a bank in the States, in Queens, for God's sake, just before they hop the boat. People remember my gangster parts and think I'm a mastermind of crime. What can you do?" He sighed. "We had fun that night in Rome."

"What about the time you started a riot in the streets of Havana?"

"The only mixup there was that I hadn't been in Havana since 1934. They didn't reach me for this fact until there'd been a couple of days of headlines, so people weren't much interested in what I had to say."

"There was a studio worker killed during a wild party. You were implicated."

"Shows what can happen. I was 3,000 miles away at the time. I knew the guy, and for some reason the last words he said on this earth were Brod Crawford. He was a nice guy. It was a sad accident."

"I guess there's no point in mentioning the minor episodes . . ."

"Well, there's an angle that might interest somebody. A guy like me, with a fairly well known face, goes



fits to clown around. *Confidential* prints the picture for a story they call something like . . . 'What Hollywood Stars Do On Their Nights Off . . .'

He sighed in a different way, and the deadliness of his expression did not change.

"They're not real people," he said gently. He sighed again, and his expression cleared "Real newspapermen never irritate me."

"What about those stories not long ago? You said you were trying to get a cab . . ."

"Sure . . . we left this party, some friends of mine, a fine actor from New York, too drunk to drive: I stopped his car for him and threw the keys into the bushes and went into this house to phone a taxi. He and my other friends got out to find the key, and got sort of wild about it, and when I came out of the house, the cops were all over the place, with this friend of mine, a little guy, handcuffed to the car. I explained to the cop that there was no need to treat him that way. We disagreed. I got pretty impatient and I guess we moved around a little, but nobody got hurt bad. I paid the fine and let the stories go the way they printed 'em, though on this one night I was sober as a judge, which I told the Judge, without impressing him at all."

He laughed and went to get more iced coffee for us. He came back, tinkling the ice, moving with his peculiar massive grace.

"My friends and I'll have to route ourselves further from this town when we're rambling around."

His eyes held mine.

"What kind of thing you want to write about me, anyway?"

into a bar late at night with a couple of friends and gets off by himself in some corner. I always like to get off by myself with my back to the wall from past experience. And pretty soon some unknown character weaves up and says, 'So you're Brod Crawford, the big movie tough guy . . . well, I don't think you're so tough . . .' And you've got to move fast, because this skinny little monkey is already throwing a punch, for the entertainment of his friends, and sometimes you don't move fast enough and he clips you and you might just be impatient enough to clip him back, before you think it over, and then all his friends are screaming, and it's pretty hard for newspapers to get a true story."

"You're never really critical of the newspapers."

He shrugged. "You do something, they take your picture. They're not trying to ruin you."

He looked at me, his expression chilling in a swift, deadly way.

"On the other hand," he said softly, "there's a magazine called *Confidential*. I go with Red Skelton to do a benefit for the City of Hope. We dress up in women's out-

"The magazine wants my impressions of you, a kind of biography."

"How's it going?"

"Maybe I'll give them some idea. Are you lonely?"

He glanced around the emptiness of the big cluttered room, high in the Sunset Towers within the choked wilderness of the coastal valley dying under smog.

"I miss my home. I can't have everything. I try to keep a lot of work lined up."

"I haven't asked you about your acting technique."

"No theory, no school of acting. I watch people everywhere I go, try to understand."

He gestured impatiently.

"It's harder to watch people than it used to be. They know my face now and the atmosphere changes, the naturalness goes out of it. But back in the days when I was really learning my trade, I could ride on the subway and study people for a day at a time, and remember the little things, movements and moods that made me understand some man I'd never see again. All that went into my memory, and I could call it up when I needed it. That may be a kind of technique. And the rough time you have when a character is soaking into you, and making you inarticulate, heavy, dumb, until he grows big and firm enough inside you to take over. I work that way. I'm one man, one actor. I do the best I can. I try to earn my money."

A few minutes more, then he went down with me in the elevator and we said goodbye in the smog-muted sunlight of the entrance to the building. His eyes were warm with unobtrusive friendliness. We shook hands. He moved back to-

ward the basement garage for his trip to his lawyers for yet another conference.

I picked up my wife in Beverly Hills where she had been shopping and we drove toward our house.

"How's Broderick Crawford?"

"I like him," I said.

"Did he tell you about the little boy he adopted?"

"No."

She told me. I was deeply moved. She had learned of this from a close friend of his. Very few people knew. He never talked about it.

When I got home, I waited until he had time to get back from his lawyer's office, then phoned him. I told him that I had learned that his oldest boy, Kim, was adopted, that he had taken the boy although he was crippled and disfigured.

"Where'd you hear that?" he asked.

I told him, and that I'd like to use the information.

He didn't speak. I waited.

"Let me get the phone in the other room," he said.

I waited. He picked up another phone.

"Close that door," he said to someone. I heard the door close.

At first he said he'd rather I didn't write about Kim, but then, after some discussion, he said that maybe I could write it in a way that would help other kids in Kim's kind of trouble. But he didn't want people to get the idea that he was quite a guy, something special, because of what he'd done for Kim.

"Just tell me," I suggested.

"We wanted a baby, and figured at the time we'd have to adopt one. Jim Cagney helped us. He's Kim's

godfather. Well . . . when I saw Kim the first time, his eyes were all pulled in, really cross-eyed, and he had two club feet. I didn't have any big struggle with myself, like in the women's magazines, I just figured I wanted to take him because maybe some people wouldn't. The doctor said he might never walk very well, but I figured I was big enough to carry him around. I might as well do something with all this sloppy muscle, so we took him home, and got doctors to help him. . . .

"Before long I knew how lucky I was to have him. I could make him laugh and have a good time almost from the beginning, the only time I felt I was a fairly good funny man. The doctors kept operating on his eyes and finally got them straightened out. I spent a lot of time with him. It wasn't any strain. I enjoyed it. He was my son, you know . . .

". . . I carried him around. There were several years when I carried him everywhere, and we had some great times together. He was full of energy and curiosity, but he couldn't walk, so he just climbed on me, and it didn't feel like extra weight. I'd get wild when he'd discover something for the first time, and we'd laugh together and have a time. . . .

". . . I took him to Europe and carried him all over. I'll never enjoy a trip like I did that one. He was all eyes and energy and curiosity, and a boy doesn't really have to walk if he's got a big bum like me to lug him. . . .

". . . The doctors kept working on his feet, and they improved. I always knew they would. Faith is a thing you've got to have to stay

alive, and it was easy with this son of mine. When he began to walk, I made a game of it, and made it funny when it was tough for him. He was the best audience I ever had. Hell, he wasn't an audience, he was my son. . . .

". . . I could tell he was going to grow up the way a boy should: no fear. I'd have killed any monkey that gave him any fear. He kept improving. He always wanted to have shoes like mine. Well, this summer when I went up to see him in his camp with the other kids, I brought him a pair of shoes like mine. I put 'em on him. 'Hell, Kim,' I said to him, 'someday you'll probably carry me.' He gets a kick out of the old man. I make him laugh. I guess that's the only time I'm up to being Helen Broderick's son. . . .

". . . That's all there is to it. If you use it, play it down about me, and try to let people know that they shouldn't turn away from any little baby that's in trouble that way. Not because you want to feel noble about something. But because a baby like that can give you a lot more. Any grown man can carry a baby around until he gets strong enough to walk for himself, maybe later, like Kim. And, Kim's eyes are straight now, he looks right at me."

"What do you suppose he sees?" I asked.

The telephone line was silent for a long minute, then I heard his deep voice chuckling softly. I could see the heavy fighter's face, the intelligent eyes glancing happily.

"The way I am," he said. "He'll understand."

"One of the few people."

"I'm satisfied," said Crawford. "Who needs a crowd?" ■■

