An Evening with Crespi

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Summoned to Crespi’s house for what he likes to call “an evening of talk” (which is purely euphemistic, since it is invariably, on my part, an evening of listening), I arrived at the appointed hour full of amused anticipation. Crespi loves to read me his writings, although I am not a professional critic. I should say he loves to read me them because I am not a professional, since Crespi does not want to be told where his stories succeed or fail in terms of plot, form, structure, meaning, etc. He wants, usually, merely an ear into which he may confide certain bashful secrets of how he came to write it thus, and what the girl in the diner said that made him wonder, and what o’clock it was when suddenly it came to him.

I like Crespi. And I like the literary impulse. Maybe one day I will write something of my own. But until I do, it contents me to listen to Crespi’s work and then argue with him about its plausibility.

The wine bottle was already on the coffee table, which told me this was to be no leisurely night of modest feints and slow approaches. Crespi was burning with something, and I geared myself to be bombarded with truth and fiction in practically indistinguishable guises.

“Now,” he said, leading me in, “Now,” as if we had already spent a conventional time in preambling, and were at last getting down to the meat of the matter. “This,” he said, burning and glittering-eyed, “This is a new one. Finished today. Tell me what you think.”

It is part of my appeal for Crespi that I refuse to be rushed. I do not plunge, pell mell, into literature. I take a bite and chew it well. Then take another. This gives him the maximum amount of eager anticipation that may be wrung from any given encounter, and allows him to watch my reaction, paragraph by paragraph. I took up the manuscript and began.

Crespi, the eager servant to my endeavor, made himself unobtrusively useful. He poured my wine. He put ashtrays within reach. He stole glances at my face without seeming to. He would not risk the prolonged stare that he desired, for fear of distracting me.
As I read steadily but slowly, he relaxed enough to gulp his own wine and light his own cigarette. He considered the ceiling. He wrapped his arms around himself and drifted in thought. If I so much as raised my eyes to check the direction of an ashtray before tapping my ashes, he sprang alert and encouraged me with rapid nods.

The reading took ten minutes, and when it was finished, I laid the manuscript on the coffee table and leaned back. Crespi clutched his knees and searched my face. I pursed my lips, then took up a cigarette and searched vaguely for matches. He thrust a flame eagerly toward me. I puffed and took a long inhale, and let it out in a pensive stream. He hugged his knees tighter and snuffled.

I picked up the manuscript and looked at the first page, frowning, then laid it down again. Crespi exhaled audibly. I opened my mouth, then closed it again and reached for my glass. Crespi snatched the bottle and poured me more wine, slopping some over in his nervousness.

I took a meditative sip and, holding the glass toward him, unwound my index finger and pointed it at Crespi. “There’s no reality in it,” I said. “No sense of reality at all.”

Crespi turned slowly red, and speech rose foaming in his throat. “Reality! Good God, it’s nothing but reality!”

“Not at all,” I answered, and sipped. “It’s what you would like reality to be. But not what it is.”

“Reality,” he said with infinite disgust. “If it’s reality you want to discuss . . . What the hell has reality ever done for me? Except frighten me to death or bore me to tedium?”

“Very well,” I said soothingly. “Very well. Granted that reality is a bore or a horror. That proves my point. What you’ve got here . . .” I waved a deprecating hand over his typescript, “. . . is obviously a fraud. Why, the thing’s entertaining! It’s . . . It’s . . .” I searched for a sufficiently descriptive word, “. . . it’s positively dramatic! I hate to say this, old man, but the bare truth is that it has impact.”

“Oh God,” moaned Crespi, clutching his head. “As bad as that?”

“Come,” I said sympathetically, “drink your wine.”

Crespi emptied his glass, and gazed into its depths with haunted eyes. “I’ll tell you the truth,” he said hoarsely. “I knew all along it wasn’t going right. All the time I was writing it, I could tell. Things kept sneaking in . . . change-of-pace, form, meaning. I tried to tell myself they were only incidentals, that the reader wouldn’t notice . . . but I . . .” He raised pleading eyes to my face. “Do you think, if I rewrote it?”

“Crespi,” I said, “I’m not going to treat you like a child. I venerate
your true gifts too much for that. Let's look at it analytically." I picked up the manuscript. "Here, for instance, on the very first page—this woman Polly. To be blunt, it seems obvious practically from the first mention of her that she is—how shall I say it?—fascinating."

"Oh," said Crespi tremulously. "Does she really come across like that? I had hoped that character had overtones of . . . well, of mediocrity, at least. Not an overpowering mediocrity, of course; I don't claim that. But . . . I don't know . . . the way she was pictured in my mind . . ."

"That's the razor's edge," I smiled. "To get the character across as he is pictured in the mind of the writer. There is where nine out of ten fail, my friend. A writer may have any number of marvelous ideas and impressions in his mind, but, believe me, old man, if it's not boring on paper, it's not boring."

"I see," he said humbly.

"But even that," I went on, "is not the principal failing of this particular character. You start her out fascinating, but that might be rescued by the remainder of the story if it weren't for the fact, that, as things progress, she actually grows in character! She makes decisions, old man. She resolves."

Crespi took my words without flinching, but I could see the anger in his eyes, struggling for release.

"Look here," I said, "I hope you don't take any of this personally. I mean, surely you know I'm not trying to wound you?"

"No," he said, biting his underlip. "No, no, of course not. I want you to criticize exactly as you see it. If I've failed—well, I want to know it. Better to get it from a friend than from some impersonal stranger."

"Good man," I said admiringly. "As for the rest of it—there is, as far as I can tell in one reading, a total lack of monotony. Certain passages could be much more static than they are. There is a lamentable over-all tendency to amuse—I might even say, interest, the reader. You ought to watch that, by the way—I've noticed it in some other of your work."

"I'll make a note of that," he said, searching his pockets for a pencil.

"In short," I said, shaking my head hopelessly, "I don't think, if I were you, that I'd attempt to revise or rewrite this particular piece. Simply chalk it up to experience. Put it aside and go on to other, more well conceived pieces."

Crespi lit a fresh cigarette with agitated hands. He blew a shaft of smoke and faced me squarely. "Tell me one thing:—do you think I ought to give up writing entirely?"
"Oh, good heavens," I laughed. "There's always room for improvement. You mustn't despair."

"But this story," he said in utter defeat, "This story was my best, I thought. I still don't see quite how it could have failed so miserably."

I put out my cigarette and stood up. "The problem is one of reality. If you aspire to write passages so marked by a sense of the real, so permeated with life as it actually is, that the reader will find himself living your work, caught up wholly in the monotony and sterility of your images—then, my friend, you must give up your vivid mental world. Get out of that closed chamber of dynamic emotions and colorful incidents."

"I understand," breathed Crespi. "I think I've gotten a glimmer of the real thing at last! God, what an inspiration you are! This is what I'll do: I'll burn all these thought-provoking books of mine, to begin with. I'll shun the printed word, and the company of learned men. I'll take a job somewhere... bag-boy in a super market!"

"Now you're on the track," I exclaimed.

"Yes," he went on. "Nights I'll go home to a cold-water flat with cockroaches on the walls. I'll give up bathing, develop a speech impediment, practice nose-picking."

I grasped his hand and shook it warmly. "Crespi," I said, with tears starting in my eyes, "I feel I've been privileged to be present at the birth of an artist. I really feel that."

"Don't do me too much credit at first," he said emotionally. "Wait until I produce something really worthwhile. And it will come, I promise you. When I'm good enough."

We walked to the door in silence. "Well," he said shakily, "now the test begins."

"And remember," I said softly, "if it isn't boring on paper, it isn't boring." I opened the door and went out into the starry night.