

# THE SKETCH BOOK

## CANDID CRITICS

By Archibald Marshall

THE author reads a few chapters of his new novel to his assembled family.

AUTHOR: Now listen carefully, and make any criticisms that may suggest themselves to you. I'm sure you will like it: it's the best I've written so far. But I want to get it absolutely right. Anything you think is wrong, don't hesitate to say so. You are in the position of the public, and I've got to please the public.

*Family puts itself into position of public. Author reads.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER: I don't think she would have worn a frock exactly like that on that occasion.

AUTHOR: Well now, that's just the sort of thing you can put me right on. I wasn't quite certain about it when I wrote it. Let's get that right.

*Frock discussed and settled. Family, gratified, again takes up position of public. Author prepares to resume reading. Youngest Daughter comes in.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER (*in aggrieved voice*): Mother, you said I might have an egg for my supper. Ellen won't boil me an egg.

*Situation discussed by family. Youngest Daughter asked for reasons of refusal, as stated by Ellen, who is under suspicion of "temper". Reason elicited. No eggs in house. Youngest Daughter driven out of room and told to shut door and not interrupt again. Author has taken no part in discussion, but sat with manuscript on knee and*

*air of weary patience. Prepared to read again.*

WIFE: I can't understand why there are no eggs in the house.

*Question rediscussed. Author resumes air of weary patience.*

WIFE: Please go on. I'm longing to know what is going to happen.

*Author reads several pages, in which nothing particular happens. Family listens respectfully, but with no comment. Author hurries on to humorous dialogue, and is soon rewarded by laugh from Eldest Daughter. Author reads more brightly. Wife laughs.*

SECOND DAUGHTER: Is Sir Reginald going to be funny?

AUTHOR (*brought to a sudden stop*): Why don't you listen? That's a silly question.

WIFE: Yes, it's a very silly question. Can't you see that he is meant to be funny?

*Author, after a thoughtful pause, resumes reading. Family laughs frequently. Scene goes well. Author modestly gratified, and stops at the end of it to point out various excellences. Family sympathetic, but ready to go on before he is. He is about to resume reading. Youngest Daughter comes in.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Mother, Ellen says I must have a bath. I had a bath this morning. I don't want a bath this evening.

*Author resumes air of weary patience. Question of bath settled, and Youngest Daughter routed. Reading begins again and goes on for some time. Author pauses for comment.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER (*without enthusiasm*): Jolly good, I think. But I don't quite understand why he—

*Author explains with some irritability "why he—", and says he should have thought anybody could see that. Eldest Daughter says she sees now.*

SECOND DAUGHTER: Which is he going to marry?

*Second Daughter snubbed by family, author keeping silence, with air of superiority. Author reads another chapter and awaits comment.*

WIFE (*dutifully*): I think it is splendidly written.

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Jolly good, but—

SECOND DAUGHTER: Was it summer or winter?

AUTHOR: What a ridiculous question! Weren't they having tea out of doors?

SECOND DAUGHTER: Yes, but when he went in he burned the letter. Where did he burn it?

AUTHOR: H'm! Ha! Yes, I'm glad you pointed that out. Wouldn't do. He musn't burn it.

SECOND DAUGHTER (*encouraged*): Couldn't he burn it in the kitchen fire? *Second Daughter sat on.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Isn't it better to make people do or say things instead of talking about them?

AUTHOR (*grudgingly*): Well, I've often told you that, of course, but here—

*Goes into long explanation of why he hadn't done it.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER (*courageously*): I think the whole chapter is a little dull.

*Author explains carefully that whatever chapter may be, it is not dull.*

WIFE: Well, perhaps you are right. Do go on. I want to know what is going to happen.

*Author prepares to go on. Youngest Daughter comes in.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER (*in voice of strong complaint*): Mother—

*Youngest Daughter told that if she*

*interrupts again she shall have a good whipping, which—as threat has often been made and never yet carried out—fails to intimidate her.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER (*insistently*): But Mother, Ellen says—

*Youngest Daughter routed, with complaint unventilated. Reading resumed.*

SECOND DAUGHTER (*interrupting*): What does obsessed mean?

AUTHOR (*impatiently*): I wish you would wait until I come to the end of a passage. It means—it's plain enough what it means, from the context. Look it up in a dictionary.

SECOND DAUGHTER: I only ask because you have used it seven times on that page.

AUTHOR: Oh, well, I'll make a mark. Now I think you'll like this bit that's coming. It's rather pathetic.

*Reads to end without interruption. Family quite silent. Author looks round.*

AUTHOR (*not entirely destitute of humor, in hurt voice*): Well, I think you might have sobbed a bit!

WIFE (*with handkerchief to eyes*): Oh, it's beautiful!

ELDEST DAUGHTER: I could easily have cried if I had wanted to.

SECOND DAUGHTER: Could she throw herself on his breast if he was kneeling by her bed?

*Effect of pathos completely spoiled. General irritation directed against Second Daughter, who sticks to point, and is pacified by promised interpolation. Youngest Daughter comes in in dressing gown.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Mother, Ellen says—

*Youngest Daughter once more routed with ignominy. Reading resumed.*

WIFE (*at end of chapter*): Yes, it's very good. I always like your quiet, reflective bits. But—

AUTHOR (*on defensive*): Well, what?

WIFE: I don't think it's quite as good as the rest.

*Author explains that it is the best chapter in the book.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Of course, it is good; but I think it hangs up the action a little.

*Author explains that it is meant to hang up the action. You must have breathing space. Any sensible persons would give themselves up to a quieter mood and enjoy that chapter before getting into action again.*

ELDEST DAUGHTER: Yes, perhaps so. It's awfully well written. Still, I do think it retards the action.

*Author gets irritated and explains further.*

SECOND DAUGHTER (*breaking in*): I don't like that chapter. I thought you were going to tell us whether she was really dead or not.

*Author exhibits extreme irritation and asks whether it is worth while going on at all. Youngest Daughter comes in.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Mother, Ellen says —

*Youngest Daughter, fallen upon, holds ground for a moment, then bursts into howls.*

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: Ellen says — boo hoo — nearly eight o'clock — boo hoo — must lay the table.