

# **MAX BEERBOHM IN PERSPECTIVE**

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Max Beerbohm in perspective by Bohun Lynch

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**BOHUN LYNCH**

**MAX BEERBOHM  
IN PERSPECTIVE**





MAN MINTHUS

# MAX BEERBOHM IN PERSPECTIVE

BY  
BOHUN LYNCH

WITH A PREFATORY LETTER BY M. B.

*ILLUSTRATED*



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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN



## PREFACE

EGGED on by people who know as well as I do that such wine needs no bush that I can hang, but who were good enough to believe that a book of this nature might be found excusable, I began my research and made a full confession to Mr. Beerbohm. I suggested that he might lend me a page of his corrected MS. to reproduce in facsimile. (To show readers how an author goes to work may not be strictly relevant to an appreciation of that work's result, to be sure, but it is legitimately interesting.) I urged that, probably, there were in his possession caricatures as yet unpublished and unexhibited which might be published here; finally—and how well he must have known that this was coming—I asked him whether he would make a caricature of himself, special to the occasion, for a frontispiece.

This was his reply:—

VILLINO CHIARO, RAPALLO.

June 18, 1921.

DEAR BOHUN LYNCH,—*The sky is very blue here this morning, as indeed it usually is, and your letter came like a bolt from it. After I had read the first 2 or 3 lines I instinctively sat down, somewhat blasted. I then read the whole letter manfully. And now I take up my pen. But I don't (it is a sign of the condition to which you've*



## PREFACE

*reduced me) know what to do with it. I don't quite know what to write. You are a much younger man than I am, and I think you might have waited for my demise—instead of merely hastening it. Had you said you thought of writing a little book about me, I should have said simply "Don't!" But as you give me to understand that you intend to write a little book about me and have already been excogitating it, what shall I say? I know, at any rate, what I shan't say. I shan't say "Do!"*

*I shan't offer you the slightest assistance—except of the purely negative and cautionary kind that now occurs to me. I won't supply you with any photograph of myself at any age, nor with any scrap of corrected MS., nor with any caricature of myself for a frontispiece (you yourself have done several brilliant caricatures of me, and I commend these to your notice), nor with any of the things you seem to think might be of interest. You must forage around for yourself. I won't even try to prevent you from using anything you may find. I eschew all responsibility whatsoever. I disclaim the horrid privilege of seeing proof-sheets. I won't read a single word till your book is published. Even if modesty didn't prevent me, worldly wisdom would. I remember several books about men who, not yet dead, had blandly aided and abetted the author; and I remember what awful asses those men seemed to me thereby to have made of themselves. Two of them were rather great men. They could afford to make awful asses of themselves. I, who am 100 miles away from being great, cannot afford such luxuries. My gifts are small. I've used them very well and discreetly, never straining them; and the result is that I've made a*

## PREFACE

*charming little reputation. But that reputation is a frail plant. Don't over-attend to it, gardener Lynch! Don't drench and deluge it! The contents of a quite small watering-can will be quite enough. This I take to be superfluous counsel. I find much reassurance and comfort in your phrase, "a little book". Oh, keep it little!—in due proportion to its theme. Avoid such phrases as "It was at or about this time that the young Beerbohm" etc. My life (though to me it has been, and is, extremely interesting) is without a single point of general interest. Address yourself to my writings and drawings. And surtout pas de zèle, even here! Be judicial. Make those reservations without which praise carries no weight. Don't, by dithyrambs, hasten the reaction of critics against me. Years ago, G. B. S., in a light-hearted moment, called me "the incomparable". Note that I am not incomparable. Compare me. Compare me as essayist (for instance) with other essayists. Point out how much less human I am than Lamb, how much less intellectual than Hazlitt, and what an ignoramus beside Belloc; and how Chesterton's high spirits and abundance shame me; how unbalanced G. S. Street must think me, and how coarse too; and how much lighter E. V. Lucas' touch is than mine; and so on, and so forth. Apply the comparative method to me also as caricaturist. Tend rather to underrate me—so that those who don't care for my work shall not be incensed, and those who do shall rally round me . . . But I seem to be becoming guilty of just what I swore to avoid: I'm offering "positive" advice—and at such a length! Still, the advice is good; and the letter, tho' it will bore you in the reading, will save you trouble some day.*

## PREFACE

*Some day, if your future novels are as beautifully-done as your past ones (and if our civilization persists), you'll get a letter from a young man announcing that he is going to write a book about you ; and then you will but have to post him this very screed, writing across it in blue pencil "Certainly, but please follow advice herein given" by your long-winded friend*

MAX BEERBOHM.

Well, I must be as obedient as possible. I will forage around for myself. I must accept the responsibility all of which, whatsoever, he eschews. I will not send proof-sheets to Mr. Beerbohm. His rejection in writing of my proposal in regard to a page of corrected MS. will remind readers of the celebrity whose stock reply to requests from autograph-hunters for his signature was a (signed) refusal to supply it. But to reproduce his letter would be, perhaps, to take a mean advantage. So, the MS. of his actual work, however legitimately interesting, must be taken on trust. (I can assure the reader that all of it is exquisitely neat, legible, in bulk beautiful, but that all corrections are blotted out by black impenetrable lakes of ink, so that no one shall ever know whether his second thoughts are really better than were his first.)

Fortunately I do not need to be supplied by him with photographs. I will make it as little a book as possible ; maintaining, however, my own convictions about the "due proportion to its theme." As to Mr. Beerbohm's life, I had, in my letter, already assured him that his views and mine would not violently clash. I gave him