

ELIZABETH BRUYÈRE

A CHARACTER SKETCH

by

VIVIA FITZ-GREY

OTTAWA - MCMVIII



*Votre tante Stevanie
mein Bräuer*

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To those
who knew and admired
The Original
this little sketch is dedicated
with respect

Ottawa, August, 1908



ELIZABETH BRUYÈRE

ELIZABETH Bruyère was twenty-seven years of age when named head of the little colony of Grey Nuns sent out from Montreal to settle in Bytown—now Ottawa, the capital of the Dominion.

The year was 1845.

For thirty years—that is, as long as she lived—she governed the colony which at her death had expanded into half a score of houses along the banks of the Ottawa River and the northern borders of New York State, the institutions of learning known as the Rideau St. Convent at Ottawa and Holy Angels' Academy at Buffalo, leading in importance from the first.

The chroniclers of this period tell us that under God's providence much of the success which has visibly characterized the work is directly attributable to the foundress's personality.

The beauty of her character seems indeed to have been great. She was noble, generous, lofty of aim. Intellectually her gifts were of a high order, as can still be attested by the writings she has left, typical among which stands her last letter, addressed to the different houses of the order, which is really a model of close thinking, fluent expression, and virile affection for those from whom she knew she was about to separate, the strong point of it being an elevated exhortation to respect for the hierarchy of the church. This love of the church was one of her prominent characteristics, the trials of the church and of the Sovereign Pontiff being for her a source of solicitude and of prayer. For many years, in fact, the daily recitation of the Rosary, prescribed by the rule, was offered for the intention of Christ's Vicar upon earth.

Her charity was tender and universal. She simply could not view suffering unmoved; and if her sympathy knew preferences it was for the most

needy, the most abandoned, or the most sensitive. In several cases it happened that persons who had known better days were silently suffering the pangs of actual want, when Mother Bruyère, being acquainted of the painful circumstances, came to their relief with a secrecy as delicate as it was absolute.

In the typhus epidemic incident on the exodus from Ireland following the famine of 1847, and which in itself would make an historic monograph charged with tragic pathos, Mother Bruyère and her co-workers heroically devoted themselves to the sufferers cast ashore on the banks of the Ottawa, until each member of the Order including Mother Bruyère herself fell ill of the disease—the death-dealing fever of which the author of "Lisheen" says, speaking of Maxwell's attack of rheumatic fever in the Irish peasant's cabin: "The terror of the famine times and the dread typhus is in the hearts of the people still."

To face such peril as this means the

bravery of the battlefield without the pageantry of war.

If her love for her fellow-men in need was sincere and generous as evinced to strangers, so was it tender, watchful, unremitting towards those of her own household. Did any one of hers manifest symptoms of failing health, the mother's practised eye at once detected it and at once sought relief. And in this there seems to have been, personal sympathy apart, a lurking element of justice. She argued that one cannot stipulate to do what one is not able to do—physically, intellectually, morally—without flagrantly violating honesty.

The piety which characterized her life was of the most trustful nature. Her favorite maxim—that which serves as inscription on her tomb—might very well be taken as the epitome of her normal spiritual attitude: "Cast all thy care on God; he will sustain thee and relieve thee in thy sorrows."

At times, too, she rose to heights of contemplation in which her soul seemed rapt in God. On one occasion, the

members of the order being gathered together in the chapel for prayer, which at the moment consisted in certain set invocations to the Eternal Father, Mother Bruyère burst forth into most beautiful impromptu paraphrasing, which the few remaining veterans of her time now describe as having heard, gazing with awed faces on what they considered their Mount Thabor.

In the hour of supreme trial, to which she in common with other *elite* souls was no stranger, she stood firm and unflinching, trusting to Him who wills that not a hair of our head shall fall without his knowledge, for deliverance, for redress.

In truth, it was largely because of this fashioning on affliction's anvil that she was so often able to be to others "The cup of strength in some great agony."

She had a deep and abiding sense of gratitude. Unceasingly she insisted that benefactors, those even who had ever done the order, or any individual

member of the order, a kindness, should be constantly remembered with grateful prayers.

Perhaps the very uprightness of her intentions, the singleness of her purpose, left her open to imposition. She was guileless and unsophisticated in the ways of the world to a degree which, no doubt, may at times have made her a prey to deception. But this was what might be termed her extreme "other-worldliness," or was merely the conclusion—faulty, of course—drawn from the premises of her own candor and simplicity.

Elizabeth Bruyère was, it must be repeated, a woman of high ideals. In all her undertakings she aspired to the best, and this inevitably made her exacting and at times severe.

But there was no chilliness, no sluggishness in her temperament; on the contrary, her soul's wings seemed "flame-tipped." And so imbued was she with the spirit of her work that when, as was frequent with her, she assembled the members of the order

to convey to them her ideas of the duties of their calling, every heart was kindled at the sound of that low, sweet voice setting forth her beautiful ideals of what the woman should be who is consecrated to the service of others by so large a charity as the teaching and upbringing of the young, the tending and watching of the sick, the caring and comforting of the aged, the visiting and consoling of those in prison—to enumerate the main lines of the plan of her work.

What she wished to teach and to emphasize was not merely that these things should be done: but above all how they should be done: personal appearance, neatness of attire, strength of character, sympathy of feeling, urbanity of manner, sincerity of speech and disinterestedness of service being among the factors she strove to incorporate in her ideals.

As regards observance of the proprieties, she seems to have thought, with Coventry Patmore, that "There is nothing comparable for moral force to

the charm of truly noble manners." She may be said, indeed, to have been a stickler³ for social conventionalities, although detesting martinetism; and frequent were the individual rehearsals of forgetful junior members in the art of low, graceful bowing, for her never obsolete.

Her own manners were distinguished—the slightest service being always rewarded with a gracious word of appreciation. If a favor had to be requested of her inferiors in rank or age, it was couched in such condescending terms as to make the granting of it an eager pleasure.

In appearance she was good to look upon, not indeed for perfection of feature and delicacy of color, but because of that expression of soul which lighted up her face with varying evidences of intelligence and emotion. In person she was tall, and in later years inclined to an obesity which in amplifying her form lent to it a matronly dignity. Her eyes were gray, large, full; the brow broad, benevolent; her

smile was of the rarest sweetness. The whole countenance breathed an agreeable sanctity. At all times there was discernible in her bearing the distinction of command.

In conversation she was brilliant; French literature, history, and the relations of Christ's Church as the informing idea of all, being pleasant and instructive to hear from her particularly in the tones of that winning voice.

Some travel abroad had served to widen her horizons and to add to her position and pronouncements the prestige of superior advantage.

She had a ready wit whose sallies the foibles of others often evoked. It is related that on one occasion a certain member of the community not remarkable for her elocutionary powers was, nevertheless, called on to read aloud to the sisters assembled. The consciousness of her short-coming stung her pride and goaded her to a displeasure that loosened her vocal organs into a rattling pace. The affair becoming something of a John Gilpin

exploit; such trifling guide-posts as commas, periods and the like meeting simply with a fine scorn. On and on she sped an unimpeded way until reaching a sentence with some such construction as this: "And the Sea of Chinnereth, now known as the Lake of Gennesaret, lay to the north of the Kingdom of Israel." The unusual proper names glaring out at the excited reader proved a staggerer; she faltered, floundered, stopped. Whereupon, Mother Bruyère who had all this time been an amused auditor exclaimed, "How fortunate, you met a lake!"

And this wit had its trenchant edge as the transgressor well knew. Still, though she could on occasion "speak poniards" and let "every word stab," no festering was suffered to follow; her larger womanly sympathies and kindly human instincts serving the antiseptic purpose of the Biblical oil and wine.

She possessed in a remarkable degree that penetration of mind so essential to one engaged in directing others; her skill in employing this rare quality

being most profitably manifested in her masterly manner of diagnosing a recruit, and in her power of discerning the potentialities of those with whom she had intimately to deal.

She knew that in order to govern others with success one must be absolutely impartial, and this without at all applying the levelling-down principle.

With something of that astute statesmanship characterizing the builders of the ancient Roman Empire and revived in the present American Commonwealth, she planned extension wherever it might be secured and desired the assimilation of every element at all transformable into her ideal type. Her mind soared naturally above and beyond provincialism. She was cast in too noble a mould to think of sacrificing progress to the pettiness of party or racial aggrandizement.

In outlining these traits of hers one thinks instinctively of Madam Barat—tactful, learned, holy woman, ideal superior of a religious community,

already brevetted Saint by the church.

Elizabeth Bruyère was one of the pioneer religious educators of Upper Canada, where indeed the United Empire Loyalists had firmly implanted their noble and sturdy traditions, and where the descendants of Scotch Covenanters had transplanted to New World soil the hardy tenacity of their native hills, but where likewise the "Exile of Erin" and the loyal lover of the *fleur-de-lys*, anxious to amass for their heirs a heritage of supernatural faith, demanded for their daughters, particularly, the advantage of that careful educational training—character-building under organized, gentle, consecrated womanly influence—which they knew was necessary to this end.

Perhaps it will count among the discoveries of this psychologic age that the church has always had in practice what the most thoughtful educators of the present day augur in the signs of the times. Witness an eminent authority in a recent number of an educational organ, predicting that the education

of the future "will focus upon the feelings, sentiments, emotions and try to do something for the heart, out of which are the issues of life." And Dr. Henry Van Dyke: "Surely it would be a good thing, if, in our schools, it could be recognized that a child would far better grow up thinking that the earth is flat, than to remain ignorant of God and moral law and filial duty. And it would be a still better thing, if, in all our homes, there could be a sincere revival of household piety,—piety in the old Roman sense, which means the affectionate reverence of children for parents,—piety in the new Christian sense which means the consecration of the heart to God,—for this would rekindle the flame of devotion upon many a neglected altar, and shed a mild and gracious light through many a gloomy home, making it the brightest, cheerfulest, holiest place on earth."

Such consummation as this the religious teaching orders have always aimed at; and such ideals as these, of beautiful conduct and beautiful living,

Mother Bruyère and her auxiliaries inaugurated at Ottawa in the first half of the century just gone by.

In her attitude towards the public she seems to have been actuated by Plato's principle, "The government is for the people;" she believed that the *raison d'être* of an active body is the public need, rather than that body's personal emolument, or rather, even than the exclusive exigencies of rules. And this without detriment to the primal aim of personal sanctification, in fact, as an interpretation of that aim.

There existed, therefore, between her and the society with which she was brought into contact most marked relations of mutual esteem, understanding, sympathy, assistance and harmony.

Since the advent to Ottawa of the colony headed by Elizabeth Bruyère in 1845 it is no exaggeration to say that hundreds of thousands of souls have come under the control of the order which she conducted thither, and the impulse of the movement is

still going on. The rude and humble inception of the work has taken on proportions of considerable magnitude to which are not wanting lines of admirable beauty.

The unseen good accomplished by the order must be quite inestimable; its equivalent value has, no doubt, safe storage beyond the reach of moth and rust and thief.

The visible good lies all about us. Like a clothing of the word, to him who may see, these ideals re-appear in the form of the cultured, charitable, home-loving matron: the refined, amiable, pure-hearted maiden. In the various walks of life these types of excellence may be met; abundantly at the "Washington of the North,"—the stronghold of the work—and with an agreeable frequency at the "Queen City of the Lakes", as well as at less populous and conspicuous centres, not omitting the *odd ones* to be found almost everywhere, not within the Dominion only but far beyond its confines also.

If many of the ideals after which Mother Elizabeth Bruyère strove certainly hold still, others, perhaps of less loftiness, may in some instances be found in the seats of the mighty; but it can not be gainsaid that zeal and self-sacrifice are now as then passing strong in the order, and seem destined to abide with it a possession for ever.

There is probably no other religious community existent where the power driving duty's wheels has its capacity so strained to meet the demand: whether this be owing to the multifariousness of undertaking, or, to an over-application of energy to the means rather than to the end.

Would it not be a pity if the strenuousness of the present obliterated the memories of the past?

To squander these memories—these good ideals of perfection—is to invite spiritual penury; to cherish them is to become possessed of capital bearing generous dividends of respect, appreciation, honor, success.

No man may traverse life for fifty years without somewhere falling on evil days.

In this Mother Bruyère was not an exception. Her life's sunset was not marked by that melancholy glory which so often crowns the dying day. Sorrow, disappointment, misunderstandings closed in from every direction—disguised messengers, doubtless, of Resignation coming to assist her to lay down willingly the burden of her earthly pilgrimage.

Here again she was true to herself. Dignified, trustful, loving to the end, "she underwent the ceremony of death."

To view the period of her headship of the order at this distance, through the atmosphere of tradition, it looks like the Golden Age.