

**LA BRUYÈRE AND  
VAUVENARGUES; SELECTIONS  
FROM THE CHARACTERS,  
REFLEXIONS AND MAXIMS**

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La Bruyère and Vauvenargues; Selections from the Characters, Reflexions and Maxims by Jean de La Bruyère & Elizabeth Lee

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**JEAN DE LA BRUYÈRE & ELIZABETH LEE**

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SELECTIONS FROM THE CHARACTERS,  
REFLEXIONS AND MAXIMS OF  
LA BRUYÈRE AND OF VAUVENARGUES

LA BRUYÈRE AND  
VAUVENARGUES

Selections from the Characters

Reflexions and Maxims

Translated with Introductory

Notes and Memoirs by

ELIZABETH

LEE

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

" There are two kinds of wisdom : in the one, every age in which science flourishes, surpasses, or ought to surpass, its predecessors ; of the other there is nearly an equal amount in all ages. The first is the wisdom which depends on long chains of reasoning, a comprehensive survey of the whole of a great subject at once, or complicated and subtle processes of metaphysical analysis ; this is properly Philosophy. The other is that acquired by experience of life, or a good use of the opportunities possessed by all who have mingled much with the world, or who have a large share of human nature in their own breasts. This unsystematic wisdom, drawn by acute minds in all periods of history from their personal experience, is properly termed the wisdom of ages ; and every lettered age has left a portion upon record."—J. S. MILL.



T is the unsystematic wisdom, as contained in "Characters" and "Maxims," that we offer in this volume of selections from La Bruyère and Vauvenargues. Philosophy, properly systematic, is, to the most of men, a sealed book, which they have neither the leisure nor the inclination to open. But as the years pass by and bring with them their varied experiences of mind, heart and action, men form for themselves, in many cases almost insensibly, a kind of rough philosophy of life that becomes their guide. Thus the unsys-

## LA BRUYÈRE AND VAUVENARGUES

Introduction thematic philosophy which has found literary expression appeals to and interests all those who, without being students of systems of philosophy, have observed men and manners and given heed to all sorts of human experience. Let that fact then serve as an *apologia* for presenting these samples of two of the greatest unsystematic philosophers the world has known.

### II

"We know nothing, or almost nothing, of the life of La Bruyère. . . . If there is not a single line of his unique book, which since the first moment of publication did not come into the full light and remain there, there is, on the other hand, scarcely a single well-authenticated detail known about the author. All the light of the age fell upon each page of the book, but the countenance of the man who held it open in his hands is hidden."—SAINTE-BEUVE.

"I live in the world rather as a spectator of mankind than as one of the species."—ADDISON.

Any attempt, however modest in aim, to write a biography of La Bruyère bristles with difficulties. His latest editor, M. Servois<sup>1</sup> owns that La Bruyère, the man, is the most unknown of all the great writers of his epoch. His life, it seems, was hidden even from his contemporaries, and the information that they have to give us is vague and scanty. We are thus compelled to construct the man's personality from his work,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Œuvres de La Bruyère par M. G. Servois*. 3 vols. Paris 1885.