

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 12

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Of Constancy

THE Law of Resolution and Constancy does not imply, that we ought not, as much as in us lies, to decline, and to secure our selves from the Mischiefs and Inconveniences that threaten us; nor consequently, that we shall not fear lest they should surprize us: on the contrary, all decent and honest ways and means of securing our selves from Harms, are not only permitted, but moreover commendable, and the Business of Constancy chiefly is, bravely to stand to, and stoutly to suffer those Inconveniences which are not otherwise possibly to be avoided. There is no motion of Body, nor any guard in the handling of Arms, how irregular or ungraceful soever, that we dislike or condemn, if they serve to deceive or defend us from the Blow that is made against us; insomuch, that several very warlike Nations have made use of a retiring and flying way of Fight, as a thing of singular Advantage, and by so doing have made their Backs more dangerous than their Faces to their enemies. Of which kind of Fighting, the *Turks* yet retain something in their Practice of Arms to this day; and *Socrates*, in *Plato*, laughs at *Laches*, who had defin'd Fortitude to be a standing firm in the Ranks against the Enemy. *What* (says he) *would it then be a reputed Cowardice to overcome them by giving Ground?* urging, at the same time the Authority of *Homer*, who commends in *Aeneas* for his Skill in running away. And whereas *Laches*, considering better on't, justifies his first Argument upon the Practice of the *Scythians*, and in general all cavalry whatever, he again attacks him with the Example of the *Lacedæmonian* Foot, (a Nation of all other the most obstinate in maintaining their Ground) who in all the Battel of *Platea*, not being able to break into the *Persian* Phalanx, unbethought themselves to disperse and retire, that by the Enemy supposing they fled, they might break, and disunite that vast Body of Men in the Pursuit, and by that Stratagem obtain'd the Victory. As for the *Scythians*, it is said of them, that when *Darius* went his Expedition to subdue them, he sent, by a Herald, highly to reproach their King, *That he always retir'd before him, and declin'd a Battel*; to which *Indathyrsez* (for that was his Name) return'd Answer, *That it was not for fear of him, or of any Man living, that he did so, but that it was the way of Marching in practice with his Nation, who had neither till'd Fields, Cities, nor Houses to defend, or to fear the Enemy should make any Advantage of: but that if he had such a Stomach to fight, let him but come to view their ancient places of Sepulture, and there he should have his Fill.* Nevertheless as

to what concerns Cannon Shot, when a Body of Men are drawn up in the Face of a Train of Artillery, as the Occasion of War does often require, 'tis unhandsome to quit their Post to avoid the Danger, and a foolish thing to boot, forasmuch as by reason of its Violence and Swiftnes we account it inevitable, and many a one, by ducking, steping aside, and such other motions of Fear, has been sufficiently laugh'd at by his Companions. And yet in the Expedition that the Emperor *Charles* the Fifth made into *Provence*, the *Marquis de Guast* going to discover the City of *Arles*, and venturing to advance out of the Blind of a Wind-mill, under favour of which he had made his Approach, was perceiv'd by the Seigneurs *de Bonneval* and the *Seneschal* of *Agenois*, who were walking upon the *Theatre Aux arenes*,¹ who having shew'd him to the *Sieur de Villiers*, Commissary of the Artillery, he travers'd a Culverine so admirable well, and levell'd it so exactly right against him, that had not the *Marquis*, seeing Fire given to it, slip'd aside, it was certainly concluded, the Shot had taken him full in the Body. And in like manner, some Years before, *Lorenzo de Medici*, Duke of *Urbino*, and Father to the Queen-Mother of *France*, laying Siege to *Mondolpho*, a Place in the Territories of the *Vicariat* in *Italy*, seeing the Cannoneer give Fire to a Piece that pointed directly against him, it was well for him that he duck'd, for otherwise, the Shot, that only raz'd the top of his Head, had doubtless hit him full in the Breast. To say truth, I do not think that these Evasions are perform'd upon the account of Judgment; for how is any Man living able to Judge of high or low Aim on so sudden an Occasion? And it is much more easie to believe, that Fortune favour'd their Apprehension, and that it might be a means at another time, as well to make them step into the danger, as to teach them to avoid it. For my own part I confess, I cannot forbear starting when the Rattle of a Harquebuze thunders in my Ears on a sudden, and in a place where I am not to expect it, which I have also observ'd in others, braver Fellows than I; neither do the Stoicks pretend, that the Soul of their Philosopher should be proof against the first Visions and Fantasies that surprize him; but as to a natural Subject, consent that he should tremble at the terrible noise of Thunder, or the sudden clatter of some falling Ruine, and be affrighted even to Paleness and Convulsion. And so in other Passions, provided a Man's judgment remain sound and intire, and that the Site of his Reason suffers no Concussion nor Alteration, and that he yields no consent to his Fright and Discomposure. To him who is not a Philosopher, a Fright is the same in the first part of it, but quite another thing in the second; for the Impression of Passions does not remain only superficially in him, but penetrates further, even to the very Seat of Reason and so, as to infect and to corrupt it. He judges according to his Fear, and confirms his Behaviour to it. But in this Verse you may see the true State of the wise Stoick learnedly and plainly express'd:

Mens immota manet, lachrymæ volvuntur inanes.

*The Eye perhaps frail, fruitless showers rains,
Whilst yet the Mind firm and unshook remains.*

The wise Peripatetick is not himself totally free from perturbations of Mind, but he moderates them by his Wisdom.

NOTES

- 1 A Theatre where publick Shews of Riding Feceing, &c. were exhibited.