

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 45



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On the Battle of Dreux

OUR battle of Dreux is remarkable for several extraordinary incidents; but such as have no great kindness for M. de Guise nor much favour his reputation, are willing to have him thought to blame, and that his making a halt and delaying time with the forces he commanded, whilst the Constable, who was general of the army, was racked through and through with the enemy's artillery, his battalion routed, and himself taken prisoner, is not to be excused; and that he had much better have run the hazard of charging the enemy in flank, than staying for the advantage of falling in upon the rear, to suffer so great and so important a loss. But, besides what the event demonstrated, he who will consider it without passion or prejudice, will easily be induced to confess that the aim and design not of a captain only, but of every private soldier, ought to regard the victory in general; and that no particular occurrences, how nearly soever they may concern his own interest, should divert him from that pursuit.

Philopœmen, in an encounter with Machanidas, having sent before a good strong party of his archers and slingers to begin the skirmish, and these being routed and hotly pursued by the enemy, who, pushing on the fortune of their arms, and in that pursuit passing by the battalion where Philopœmen was, though his soldiers were impatient to fall on, he did not think fit to stir from his post nor to present himself to the enemy to relieve his men, but having suffered these to be chased and cut in pieces before his face, charged in upon the enemy's foot when he saw them left unprotected by the horse, and notwithstanding that they were Lacedæmonians, yet taking them in the nick, when thinking themselves secure of the victory they began to disorder their ranks; he did this business with great facility, and then put himself in pursuit of Machanidas. Which case is very like that of Monsieur de Guise.

In that bloody battle betwixt Agesilaus and the Bœotians, which Xenophon, who was present at it, reports to be the sharpest that he had ever seen, Agesilaus waived the advantage that fortune presented him, to let the Bœotian battalions pass by and then to charge them in the rear, how certain soever he might make himself of the victory, judging it would

rather be an effect of conduct than valour to proceed that way; and therefore, to show his prowess, rather chose with a marvellous ardour of courage to charge them in the front; but he was well beaten and well wounded for his pains, and constrained at last to disengage himself, and to take the course he had at first neglected; opening his battalion to give way to this torrent of Bœotians, and they being passed by, taking notice that they marched in disorder, like men who thought themselves out of danger, he pursued and charged them in flank; yet could not so prevail as to bring it to so general a rout, but that they leisurely retreated, still facing about upon him till they had retired to safety.