Michel de Montaigne

# Essays

**Book 1 · Chapter 6**

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# The Dangerous Hour of Parley

a Yet, not long ago, in Mussidan, not far from where I live, I saw that those who were forced out of there by our army,[1] and others on their side, protested that it amounted to treachery that, during treaty negotiations, with discussions still ongoing, they were attacked by surprise and massacred. Although perhaps, in the past, this would have been regarded as such, as I have just explained, our methods are no longer bound by these rules. One party should not expect to trust the other until every last document is signed and sealed. Even then there is still much to take care of.

c And it has always been a dangerous proposition to entrust a victorious army with the enforcement of a deal made with a town that has just safely and peacefully agreed to surrender, and to let soldiers in right from the battlefield. L. Aemilius Regillus, a Roman praetor who had wasted his time trying to take Phocaea by force, so well defended was it by the unusual valor of its inhabitants, made a deal with them to treat them as friends of the Roman people and enter as he would an allied town, thus allaying all fears of hostility. But when he entered with his army, so that he could parade therein, he was not able to restrain his people, no matter what he tried, and so witnessed the plundering of most of the city, the logic of greed and revenge superseding his authority and military discipline.

a Cleomenes used to say that, in war, whatever wrong we may do the enemy is out of justice's reach and not subject to it, be it before gods or people. And so, after he called a seven-day truce with the citizens of Argos, he attacked them on the third night while they were asleep, and won against them by arguing that he had never mentioned nights in his truce. But the gods did redress this faithless deception.

c The city of Casilinum was taken in a surprise attack when its people let their guard down during negotiations. When officers were most honest and the Roman army at its finest, no less! After all, no one will argue against taking advantage of an enemy's foolishness every now and then, as we do of their cowardice. And, yes, war is naturally granted many

reasonable privileges at the expense of reason; and in that case, the rule ceases to apply, *neminem id agere ut ex alterius praedetur inscitia*.

Let no one behave in such a way as to profit from the stupidity of another • Cic., Off., 3.72

c But I am surprised by how accepting Xenophon is of them, both in the words and in the various deeds of his perfect emperor. He is so wonderfully weighty an author in such things for having been a distinguished leader and a philosopher among the first disciples of Socrates. Still, I do not approve of his wholehearted acceptance of them in everything and everywhere.

a When Sir Bernard of Aubigny was laying siege to Capua,[2] and after he had relentlessly bombarded it, Lord Fabrizio Colonna, officer of the town, began negotiating from up on a tower. His people relaxed their guard below, and ours managed to take and destroy it. More recently in Yvoy, Lord Julián Romero made that rookie mistake of coming out to parley with the constable only to find on his return the town already taken.[3] But let us even things out: when a deal was so nearly made between the marquis of Pescara, who was attacking Genoa, and Duke Ottaviano Fregoso, who was defending it under our protection, to the point where it was considered done and only needing to be finalized, the Spaniards, who had infiltrated the town, turned it into a complete victory.[4] And since then, in Ligny-en-Barrois, where the count of Brienne was in charge and the emperor himself was laying siege, after Bertheuille, lieutenant of the count, left to parley, the town was taken before they came to an agreement.[5]

a *Fu il vincer sempremai laudabil cosa,*
*Vincasi o per fortuna, o per ingegno,*

Victory is ever worthy of praise, whether obtained by luck or ingenuity. • Ariosto, 15.1

a they say. But Chrysippus, the philosopher, would have disagreed, as would I. For he used to say that those who run a race should run as fast as they can but are in no way allowed to lay their hands on their opponents to stop them or to stick out a leg to trip them.

b And more magnanimously still, the great Alexander, to Polyperchon, who was making the case for taking advantage of the dark of night to attack Darius: "Never!" he said. "I am not one to seek a stolen victory: *malo me fortunae paeniteat, quam uictoriae pudeat.*"

I would rather curse my luck than be ashamed of my victory. • Curt., Hist., 4.13

b *Atque idem fugientem haud est dignatus Oroden*
*Sternere, nec iacta caecum dare cuspide uulnus*
*Obuius, aduersoque occurrit, seque uiro uir*
*Contulit, haud furto melior, sed fortibus armis.*

Throwing Orodes down the moment he ran off or stopping him in his tracks with a lucky throw of the spear was inconceivable. He ran up to him and faced him man to man, to best him not with a stunt but in combat. • Verg., Aen., 10.732

## Notes

1 In April 1569. Mussidan is about 30 miles from Montaigne's estate in Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne.

2 In 1501.

3 This took place in Dinant, not Yvoy, in 1554. "Iullian Rommero" — in the original French — is Julián Romero de Ibarrola, and the constable is the grand constable of France, Anne de Montmorency. According to Paradin, Montaigne's likely source for this story, Montmorency sent a message to Dinant while Romero was with him to inform those who had stayed behind that Romero was only negotiating his safe exit. Feeling betrayed, Romero's people surrendered to the French.

4 In 1522. The marquis of Pescara is Fernando d'Ávalos.

5 Ligny-en-Barrois was taken by Ferrante Gonzaga in July 1544. The emperor is Charles V, and the count of Brienne is probably Antoine II de Luxembourg.

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**Montaigne's Sources**

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|---|---|
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| Cic., Off. | Cicero, *On Duties* |
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| Du Bellay, Mem. | Du Bellay, Martin, *Mémoires* |
| Guicciardini, SdI | Guicciardini, Francesco, *History of Italy* |
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