

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 23

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Various Events Sharing the Same Premise

Jacques Amyot, grand almoner of France, one day related to me this story, much to the honor of a prince of ours (and ours he was upon several very good accounts, though originally of foreign extraction), that in the time of our first commotions, at the siege of Rouen, this prince, having been advertised by the queen-mother of a conspiracy against his life, and in her letters particular notice being given him of the person who was to execute the business (who was a gentleman of Anjou or of Maine, and who to this effect ordinarily frequented this prince's house), discovered not a syllable of this intelligence to any one whatever; but going the next day to the St. Catherine's Mount, from which our battery played against the town (for it was during the time of the siege), and having in company with him the said lord almoner, and another bishop, he saw this gentleman, who had been denoted to him, and presently sent for him; to whom, being come before him, seeing him already pale and trembling with the conscience of his guilt, he thus said, "Monsieur," such an one, "you guess what I have to say to you; your countenance discovers it; 'tis in vain to disguise your practice, for I am so well informed of your business, that it will but make worse for you, to go about to conceal or deny it: you know very well such and such passages" (which were the most secret circumstances of his conspiracy), "and therefore be sure, as you tender your own life, to confess to me the whole truth of the design." The poor man seeing himself thus trapped and convicted (for the whole business had been discovered to the queen by one of the accomplices), was in such a taking, he knew not what to do; but, folding his hands, to beg and sue for mercy, he threw himself at his prince's feet, who taking him up, proceeded to say, "Come, sir; tell me, have I at any time done you offense? or have I, through private hatred or malice, offended any kinsman or friend of yours? It is not above three weeks that I have known you; what inducement, then, could move you to attempt my death?" To which the gentleman with a trembling voice replied, "That it was no particular grudge he had to his person, but the general interest and concern of his party, and that he had been put upon it by some who had persuaded him it would be a meritorious act, by any means, to extirpate so great and so powerful an enemy of their religion." "Well," said the prince, "I will now let you see, how much more charitable

the religion is that I maintain, than that which you profess: yours has counselled you to kill me, without hearing me speak, and without ever having given you any cause of offense; and mine commands me to forgive you, convict as you are, by your own confession, of a design to kill me without reason. Get you gone; let me see you no more; and, if you are wise, choose henceforward honest men for your counsellors in your designs."

The Emperor Augustus, being in Gaul, had certain information of a conspiracy L. Cinna was contriving against him; he therefore resolved to make him an example; and, to that end, sent to summon his friends to meet the next morning in counsel. But the night between he passed in great uneasiness of mind, considering that he was about to put to death a young man, of an illustrious family, and nephew to the great Pompey, and this made him break out into several passionate complainings. "What then," said he, "is it possible that I am to live in perpetual anxiety and alarm, and suffer my would-be assassin, meantime, to walk abroad at liberty? Shall he go unpunished, after having conspired against my life, a life that I have hitherto defended in so many civil wars, in so many battles by land and by sea? And after having settled the universal peace of the whole world, shall this man be pardoned, who has conspired not only to murder, but to sacrifice me?" — for the conspiracy was to kill him at sacrifice. After which, remaining for some time silent, he began again, in louder tones, and exclaimed against himself, saying: "Why livest thou, if it be for the good of so many that thou shouldst die? must there be no end of thy revenges and cruelties? Is thy life of so great value, that so many mischiefs must be done to preserve it?" His wife Livia, seeing him in this perplexity: "Will you take a woman's counsel?" said she. "Do as the physicians do, who, when the ordinary recipes will do no good, make trial of the contrary. By severity you have hitherto prevailed nothing; Lepidus has followed Salvidienus; Murena, Lepidus; Caepio, Murena; Egnatius, Caepio. Begin now, and try how sweetness and clemency will succeed. Cinna is convict; forgive him, he will never henceforth have the heart to hurt thee, and it will be an act to thy glory." Augustus was well pleased that he had met with an advocate of his own humor; wherefore, having thanked his wife, and, in the morning, countermanded his friends he had before summoned to council, he commanded Cinna all alone to be brought to him; who being accordingly come, and a chair by his appointment set him, having ordered all the rest out of the room, he spake to him after this manner: "In the first place, Cinna, I demand of thee patient audience; do not interrupt me in what I am about to say, and I will afterward give thee time and leisure to answer. Thou knowest, Cinna, that having taken thee prisoner in the enemy's camp, and thou an enemy, not only so become, but born so, I gave thee thy life, restored to thee all thy goods, and, finally, put thee in so good a posture, by my bounty, of living well and at thy ease, that the victorious envied the conquered. The sacerdotal office which thou madest suit to me for, I conferred upon thee, after having denied it to others, whose fathers have ever borne arms in my service. After so many obligations, thou hast undertaken to kill me." At which Cinna crying out that he was very far from entertaining any so wicked a thought: "Thou dost not keep thy promise, Cinna," continued Augustus, "that thou wouldst not interrupt me. Yes, thou hast undertaken to murder me in such a place, on such a day, in such and such company, and in such a manner." At which

words, seeing Cinna astounded and silent, not upon the account of his promise so to be, but interdict with the weight of his conscience: "Why," proceeded Augustus, "to what end wouldst thou do it? Is it to be emperor? Believe me, the Republic is in very ill condition, if I am the only man betwixt thee and the empire. Thou art not able so much as to defend thy own house, and but t'other day was baffled in a suit, by the opposed interest of a mere manumitted slave. What, hast thou neither means nor power in any other thing, but only to undertake Caesar? I quit the throne, if there be no other than I to obstruct thy hopes. Canst thou believe that Paulus, that Fabius, that the Cossii and the Servilii, and so many noble Romans, not only so in title, but who by their virtue honor their nobility, would suffer or endure thee?" After this, and a great deal more that he said to him (for he was two long hours in speaking), "Now go, Cinna, go thy way: I give thee that life as traitor and parricide, which I before gave thee in the quality of an enemy. Let friendship from this time forward begin betwixt us, and let us show whether I have given, or thou hast received thy life with the better faith"; and so departed from him. Some time after, he preferred him to the consular dignity, complaining that he had not the confidence to demand it; had him ever after for his very great friend, and was, at last, made by him sole heir to all his estate. Now, from the time of this accident which befell Augustus in the fortieth year of his age, he never had any conspiracy or attempt against him, and so reaped the due reward of this his so generous clemency. But it did not so happen with our prince, his moderation and mercy not so securing him, but that he afterward fell into the toils of the like treason, so vain and futile a thing is human prudence; throughout all our projects, counsels and precautions, Fortune will still be mistress of events.

We repute physicians fortunate when they hit upon a lucky cure, as if there was no other art but theirs that could not stand upon its own legs, and whose foundations are too weak to support itself upon its own basis; as if no other art stood in need of Fortune's hand to help it. For my part, I think of physic as much good or ill as any one would have me: for, thanks be to God, we have no traffic together. I am of a quite contrary humor to other men, for I always despise it; but when I am sick, instead of recanting, or entering into composition with it, I begin, moreover, to hate and fear it, telling them who importune me to take physic, that at all events they must give me time to recover my strength and health, that I may be the better able to support and encounter the violence and danger of their potions. I let nature work, supposing her to be sufficiently armed with teeth and claws to defend herself from the assaults of infirmity, and to uphold that contexture, the dissolution of which she flies and abhors. I am afraid, lest, instead of assisting her when close grappled and struggling with disease, I should assist her adversary, and burden her still more with work to do.

Now, I say, that not in physic only, but in other more certain arts, fortune has a very great part.

The poetic raptures, the flights of fancy, that ravish and transport the author out of himself, why should we not attribute them to his good fortune, since he himself confesses that they exceed his sufficiency and force, and acknowledges them to proceed from something else than

himself, and that he has them no more in his power than the orators say they have those extraordinary motions and agitations that sometimes push them beyond their design. It is the same in painting, where touches shall sometimes slip from the hand of the painter, so surpassing both his conception and his art, as to beget his own admiration and astonishment. But Fortune does yet more evidently manifest the share she has in all things of this kind, by the graces and elegances we find in them, not only beyond the intention, but even without the knowledge of the workman: a competent reader often discovers in other men's writings other perfections than the author himself either intended or perceived, a richer sense and more quaint expression.

As to military enterprises, every one sees how great a hand Fortune has in them. Even in our counsels and deliberations there must, certainly, be something of chance and good-luck mixed with human prudence; for all that our wisdom can do alone is no great matter; the more piercing, quick, and apprehensive it is, the weaker it finds itself, and is by so much more apt to mistrust itself. I am of Sylla's opinion; and when I closely examine the most glorious exploits of war, I perceive, methinks, that those who carry them on make use of counsel and debate only for custom's sake, and leave the best part of the enterprise to Fortune, and relying upon her aid, transgress, at every turn, the bounds of military conduct and the rules of war. There happen, sometimes, fortuitous alacrities and strange furies in their deliberations, that for the most part prompt them to follow the worst grounded counsels, and swell their courage beyond the limits of reason. Whence it happened that several of the great captains of old, to justify those rash resolutions, have been fain to tell their soldiers that they were invited to such attempts by some inspiration, some sign and prognostic.

Wherefore, in this doubt and uncertainty, that the shortsightedness of human wisdom to see and choose the best (by reason of the difficulties that the various accidents and circumstances of things bring along with them) perplexes us withal, the surest way, in my opinion, did no other consideration invite us to it, is to pitch upon that wherein is the greatest appearance of honesty and justice; and not, being certain of the shortest, to keep the straightest and most direct way; as in the two examples I have just given, there is no question but it was more noble and generous in him who had received the offense, to pardon it, than to do otherwise. If the former miscarried in it, he is not, nevertheless, to be blamed for his good intention; neither does any one know if he had proceeded otherwise, whether by that means he had avoided the end his destiny had appointed for him; and he had, moreover, lost the glory of so humane an act.

You will read in history, of many who have been in such apprehension, that the most part have taken the course to meet and anticipate conspiracies against them by punishment and revenge; but I find very few who have reaped any advantage by this proceeding; witness so many Roman emperors. Whoever finds himself in this danger, ought not to expect much either from his vigilance or power; for how hard a thing is it for a man to secure himself from an enemy, who lies concealed under the countenance of the most assiduous friend we have, and to discover and know the wills and inward thoughts of those who are in our personal service. 'Tis to much

purpose to have a guard of foreigners about one, and to be always fenced about with a pale of armed men; whosoever despises his own life, is always master of that of another man. And moreover, this continual suspicion, that makes a prince jealous of all the world, must of necessity be a strange torment to him. Therefore it was, that Dion, being advertised that Callippus watched all opportunities to take away his life, had never the heart to inquire more particularly into it, saying, that he had rather die than live in that misery, that he must continually stand upon his guard, not only against his enemies, but his friends also; which Alexander much more vividly and more roundly manifested in effect, when, having notice by a letter from Parmenio, that Philip, his most beloved physician, was by Darius's money corrupted to poison him, at the same time he gave the letter to Philip to read, drank off the potion he had brought him. Was not this to express a resolution, that if his friends had a mind to despatch him out of the world, he was willing to give them opportunity to do it? This prince is, indeed, the sovereign pattern of hazardous actions; but I do not know whether there be another passage in his life wherein there is so much firm courage as in this, nor so illustrious an image of the beauty and greatness of his mind.

Those who preach to princes so circumspect and vigilant a jealousy and distrust, under color of security, preach to them ruin and dishonor: nothing noble can be performed without danger. I know a person, naturally of a very great daring and enterprising courage, whose good fortune is continually marred by such persuasions, that he keep himself close surrounded by his friends, that he must not hearken to any reconciliation with his ancient enemies, that he must stand aloof, and not trust his person in hands stronger than his own, what promises or offers soever they may make him, or what advantages soever he may see before him. And I know another, who has unexpectedly advanced his fortunes by following a clear contrary advice.

Courage, the reputation and glory of which men seek with so greedy an appetite, presents itself, when need requires, as magnificently in cuerpo, as in full armor; in a closet, as in a camp; with arms pendant, as with arms raised.

This over-circumspect and wary prudence is a mortal enemy to all high and generous exploits. Scipio, to sound Syphax's intention, leaving his army, abandoning Spain, not yet secure nor well settled in his new conquest, could pass over into Africa in two small ships, to commit himself, in an enemy's country, to the power of a barbarian king, to a faith untried and unknown, without obligation, without hostage, under the sole security of the grandeur of his own courage, his good fortune, and the promise of his high hopes.

Habita fides ipsam plerumque fidem obligat.

Trust often obliges fidelity. • LIVY, 12.72

In a life of ambition and glory, it is necessary to hold a stiff rein upon suspicion: fear and distrust invite and draw on offense. The most mistrustful of our kings established his affairs principally by voluntarily committing his life and liberty into his enemies' hands, by that action

manifesting that he had absolute confidence in them, to the end they might repose as great an assurance in him. Caesar only opposed the authority of his countenance and the haughty sharpness of his rebukes to his mutinous legions in arms against him:

*Stetit aggere fulti
Cespitis, intrepidus vultu: meruitque timeri,
Nil metuens.*

He stood on a mound, his
countenance intrepid, and merited
to be feared, he fearing nothing. •
LUC., 5.316

But it is true, withal, that this undaunted assurance is not to be represented in its simple and entire form, but by such whom the apprehension of death, and the worst that can happen, does not terrify and affright; for to represent a pretended resolution with a pale and doubtful countenance and trembling limbs, for the service of an important reconciliation, will effect nothing to purpose. 'Tis an excellent way to gain the heart and will of another, to submit and intrust one's self to him, provided it appear to be freely done, and without the constraint of necessity, and in such a condition, that a man manifestly does it out of a pure and entire confidence in the party, at least, with a countenance clear from any cloud of suspicion. I saw, when I was a boy, a gentleman, who was governor of a great city, upon occasion of a popular commotion and fury, not knowing what other course to take, go out of a place of very great strength and security, and commit himself to the mercy of the seditious rabble, in hopes by that means to appease the tumult before it grew to a more formidable head; but it was ill for him that he did so, for he was there miserably slain. But I am not, nevertheless, of opinion, that he committed so great an error in going out, as men commonly reproach his memory withal, as he did in choosing a gentle and submissive way for the effecting his purpose, and in endeavoring to quiet this storm, rather by obeying than commanding, and by entreaty rather than remonstrance; and I am inclined to believe, that a gracious severity, with a soldierlike way of commanding, full of security and confidence, suitable to the quality of his person, and the dignity of his command, would have succeeded better with him; at least, he had perished with greater decency and, reputation. There is nothing so little to be expected or hoped for from this many-headed monster, in its fury, as humanity and good nature; it is much more capable of reverence and fear. I should also reproach him, that having taken a resolution (in my judgment rather brave than rash) to expose himself, weak and naked, in this tempestuous sea of enraged madmen, he ought to have stuck to his text, and not for an instant to have abandoned the high part he had undertaken; whereas, coming to discover his danger nearer hand, and his nose happening to bleed, he again changed that demiss and fawning countenance he had at first put on, into another of fear and amazement, filling his voice with entreaties and his eyes with tears, and, endeavoring so to withdraw and secure his person, that carriage more inflamed their fury, and soon brought the effects of it upon him.

It was upon a time intended that there should be a general muster of several troops in arms (and that is the most proper occasion of secret revenges, and there is no place where they can be executed with greater safety), and there were public and manifest appearances, that there was no safe coming for some, whose principal and necessary office it was to

review them. Whereupon a consultation was held, and several counsels were proposed, as in a case that was very nice and of great difficulty; and moreover of grave consequence. Mine, among the rest, was, that they should by all means avoid giving any sign of suspicion, but that the officers who were most in danger should boldly go, and with cheerful and erect countenances ride boldly and confidently through the ranks, and that instead of sparing fire (which the counsels of the major part tended to) they should entreat the captains to command the soldiers to give round and full volleys in honor of the spectators, and not to spare their powder. This was accordingly done, and served so good use, as to please and gratify the suspected troops, and thenceforward to beget a mutual and wholesome confidence and intelligence among them.

I look upon Julius Caesar's way of winning men to him as the best and finest that can be put in practice. First, he tried by clemency to make himself beloved even by his very enemies, contenting himself, in detected conspiracies, only publicly to declare, that he was pre-acquainted with them; which being done, he took a noble resolution to await without solicitude or fear, whatever might be the event, wholly resigning himself to the protection of the gods and fortune: for, questionless, in this state he was at the time when he was killed.

A stranger having publicly said, that he could teach Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, an infallible way to find out and discover all the conspiracies his subjects could contrive against him, if he would give him a good sum of money for his pains, Dionysius hearing of it, caused the man to be brought to him, that he might learn an art so necessary to his preservation. The man made answer, that all the art he knew, was, that he should give him a talent, and afterward boast that he had obtained a singular secret from him. Dionysius liked the invention, and accordingly caused six hundred crowns to be counted out to him. It was not likely he should give so great a sum to a person unknown, but upon the account of some extraordinary discovery, and the belief of this served to keep his enemies in awe. Princes, however, do wisely to publish the informations they receive of all the practices against their lives, to possess men with an opinion they have so good intelligence that nothing can be plotted against them, but they have present notice of it. The Duke of Athens did a great many foolish things in the establishment of his new tyranny over Florence: but this especially was most notable, that having received the first intimation of the conspiracies the people were hatching against him, from Matteo di Morozzo, one of the conspirators, he presently put him to death, to suppress that rumor, that it might not be thought any of the city disliked his government.

I remember I have formerly read a story of some Roman of great quality who, flying the tyranny of the Triumvirate, had a thousand times by the subtlety of as many inventions escaped from falling into the hands of those that pursued him. It happened one day that a troop of horse, which was sent out to take him, passed close by a brake where he was squat, and missed very narrowly of spying him: but he considering, at this point, the pains and difficulties wherein he had so long continued to evade the strict and incessant searches that were every day made for him, the little pleasure he could hope for in such a kind of life, and how much better it

was for him to die once for all, than to be perpetually at this pass, he started from his seat, called them back, showed them his form, and voluntarily delivered himself up to their cruelty, by that means to free both himself and them from further trouble. To invite a man's enemies to come and cut his throat, seems a resolution a little extravagant and odd; and yet I think he did better to take that course, than to live in continual feverish fear of an accident for which there was no cure. But seeing all the remedies a man can apply to such a disease, are full of unquietness and uncertainty, 'tis better with a manly courage to prepare one's self for the worst that can happen, and to extract some consolation from this, that we are not certain the thing we fear will ever come to pass.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Livy	Livy, <i>History of Rome</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>