

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book I · Chapter 12

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Of Constancie

THE LAW of resolution and constancie implieth not, we should not, as much as lieth in our power shelter our selves from the chiefes and inconveniences that threaten us, nor by consequence feare, they should surprise us. Contrariwise, all honest meanes for a man to warrant himselfe from evils are not onely tolerable, but commendable. And the part of constancie is chiefly acted, in firmly bearing the inconveniences, against which no remedie is to be found. So that there is no nimblenesse of bodie, nor wealding of hand-weapons, that we will reject, if it may in any sort defend us from the blow, meant at us.

Many most warlike nations in their conflicts and fights, used retreating and flight as a principall advantage, and shewed their backs to their enemy much more dangerously than their faces. The Turkes at this day retaine something of that humour. And *Socrates* in *Plato* doth mocke at *Laches*, because he had defined fortitude, to keepe herselfe steadie in her rancke against her enemies; *What*, saith hee, were it then cowardise to beat them in giving them place? And alleadgeth *Homer* against him, who commendeth in *Aeneas* his skill in flying and giving ground. And because *Laches* being better advised, avoweth that custome to be amongst the Scythians, and generally amongst all horsemen, he alleageth further unto him the example of the Lacedemonian footmen (a nation above all other used to fight on foot) who in the batteile of *Plates*, unable to open and to put to rowt the Persian Phalange, advised themselves to scatter and put themselves backe, that so by the opinion of their flight, they might if they should pursue them, rush in upon them, and put that so combined-masse to rout. By which meanes they gained the victorie.

Touching the Scythians, it is reported, that when *Darius* went to subdue them, he sent their King many reproachfull speeches, for so much as hee ever saw him retire and give ground before him, and to avoid the maine battaile. To whom *Indathirsez* (for so was his name) answered, that *They did it not for feare of him, nor any other man living, but that it was the fashion of his nation to march thus: as having neither cities, nor houses, nor manured land to defend, or to feare their enemies should reape any commoditie by them.* But if hee had so great a desire to feed on them, he might draw neerer to view the

place of their ancient Sepulchers, and there hee should meet with whom to speake his belly-full.

Notwithstanding when a man is once within reach of cannon-shot, and as it were point-blanke before them, as the fortune of warre doth diverse times bring men unto, it ill beseemeth a resolute minde to start-aside, or be daunted at the threat of a shot, because by the violence and suddennesse thereof wee deeme it inevitable: and there are some, who by lifting up of a hand, or stooping their head have sometimes given their fellowes cause of laughter: yet have we seene in the voyage, the Emperour *Charles* the fifth made against us in *Provence*, the Marquis of *Guasto*, being gone out to survey the citie of *Arles*, and shewn himself out of a winde-mill, under colour of which he was come somewhat neere the Towne, he was discovered by the Lord of *Bonevall*, and the Seneshall of *Agenois*, who were walking upon the Theatre *Aux arenes* (so called in French because it is fall of sand) who shewne him to the Lorde of *Villiers*, Commissarie of the Artillerie, he mounted a culverin so levell, that had not the Marquis perceived the fire, and so started aside, it was constantly affirmed, he had bene shot through the body. Likewise not many yeares before, *Lorence of Medici*, Duke of *Vrbin*, and father to the Queene-mother of *France*, besieging *Mondolphe*, a place in *Italie*, in the province named *Vicariate*, seeing fire given to a piece that stood right upon him, stooped his head, and well befell him that hee plaide the ducke, for otherwise the bullet, which went right over, and within a little of his head, had doubtlesse shot him through the paunch. But to say truth, I will never thinke these motions were made with discourse, for what judgement can you give of an ayne, either high or low, in a matter so sodaine? It may rather be thought that fortune favoured their feare: and which an other time might as well bee a meane to make them fall into the cannons-mouth, as to avoid the same. I can not chuse, if the cracke of a musket do sodainly streeke mine eares, in a place where I least looke for it, but I must needs start at it: which I have seene happen to men of better sort than myselfe.

Nor doe the Stoickes meane, that the Soule of their wisest man in any sorte resist the first visions and sodaine fantasies, that surprise the same: but rather consent that, as it were unto a naturall subjection, he yeelds and shrinks unto the loud clattering and roare of heaven, or of some violent downfall; for example-sake, unto palenesse, and contraction. So likewise in other passions, alwayes provided, his opinion remaines safe and whole, and the situation of his reason, admit no tainting or alteration whatsoever: and hee no whit consent to his fright and sufferance. Touching the first part; the same hapneth to him, that is not wise, but farre otherwise concerning the second. For the impression of passions doth not remaine superficiall in him: but rather penetrates even into the secret of reason, infecting and corrupting the same. He judgeth according to them and conformeth himselfe to them. Consider precisely the state of the wise Stoicke:

Mens immota manet, lacrymæ volvuntur inanes.

*His minde doth firme remaine,
Teares are distill'd in vaine.*

The wise Peripatetike dooth not exempt him selfe from perturbations of the minde, but doth moderate them.