

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 21

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Against idleness, or doing nothing

THE EMPEROUR *Vespasian*, lying sicke of the disease whereof he died, omitted not to endeavour to understand the state of the Empire; and lying in his bed, uncessantly dispatched many affaires of great consequence; and his Phisitians chiding him, as of a thing hurtfull to his health; he answered, *That an Emperour should die standing upright*. Loe here a notable saying, fitting my humour, and worthy a great Prince. *Adrian* the Emperour used the same afterward to like purpose. And Kings ought often to be put in minde of it, to make them feele, that this great charge, which is given them of the commandement over so many men, is no idle charge; and that there is nothing may so justly distaste a subject from putting himselfe in paine and danger for the service of his Prince, then therewithst to see him given to lazinesse, to base and vaine occupations, and to have care of his conservation, seeing him so carelesse of ours. If any shall goe about to maintaine, that it is better for a Prince to manage his warres by others, then by himselfe; Fortune will store him with sufficient examples of those, whose Lieutenents have atchieved great enterprises; and also of some whose presence would have beene more hurtfull, then profitable. But no vertuous and coragious Prince will endure to be entertained with so shamefull instructions. Under colour of preserving his head (as the statue of a Saint) for the good fortune of his estate, they degrade him of his office, which is altogether in militarie actions, and declare him incapable of it. I know one, would rather chuse to be beaten, then sleepe whilst others fight for him; and who without jelousie never saw his men performe any notable act in his absence. And *Selim* the first had reason to say, that *he thought victories gotten in the maisters absence, not to be compleate*. So much more willingly would he have said, that such a maister ought to blush for shame, who onely by his name should pretend any share in it, having thereunto employed nothing but his thought and verball direction: Nor that, since in such a busines, the advises and commandements, which bring honor, are only those given in the field and even in the action. No Pilote exerciseth his office standing stil. The princes of *Otomans* race (the chefest race in the world in warlike fortune) have earnestly embraced this opinion. And *Baiazeth* the second with his sonne, who ammusung themselves about Sciences, and other private home-matters, neglected the same, gave divers prejudiciall blowes unto their Empire. And *Amurath* the third of that name, who now

raigneth following their example, beginneth very well to feele their fortune. Was it not the King of *England*, *Edward* the third, who spake these words of our King *Charles* the fifth? *There was never King that lesse armed himselfe; and yet was never King, that gave me so much to doe, and put me to so many planges.* He had reason to thinke it strange, as an effect of fortune, rather then of reason. And let such as will number the Kings of *Castile* and *Portugall* amongst the warlike and magnanimous conquerors, seeke for some other adherent then my selfe; forsomuch as twelve hundred leagues from their idle residence they have made themselves maisters of both *Indias*, onely by the conduct and direction of their factors; of whom it would be knowne, whether they durst but goe and enjoy them in person. The Emperour *Julian* said moreover, that a Philosopher and gallant minded man ought not so much as breathe; that is to say, not to give corporall necessities, but what may not be refused them; ever holding both minde and body busied about notable, great and vertuous matters. He was ashamed, anie man should see him spitte or sweat before people (which is also said of the *Lacedemonian* youths, and *Xenophon* reporeth it of the *Persian*) forasmuch as he thought that continuall travell, exercise and sobrietie should have uncocted and dried up all such superfluities. What *Seneca* saith shall not impertinently be alleaged here; That *the ancient Romanes kept their youth upright, and taught their children nothing, that was to be learned sitting.* It is a generous desire, to endeavor to die both profitably and manlike: But the effect consisteth not so much in our good resolution, as in our good fortune. A thousand have resolved to vanquish or to die fighting, which have missed both the one and other: Hurts or emprisonment, crossing their desseigne and yeelding them a forced kinde of life. There are diseases which vanquish our desires and knowledge. Fortune should not have seconded the vanitie of the *Romane* Legions, who by othe bound themselves, either to die or conquer. *Victor, Marce Fabi, reuertar ex acie: Si fallo, Iovem patrem Gradiumque Martem aliósque iratos inuoco Deos. I will, O Marcus Fabius, returne conqueror from the armie. If in this I deceive you, I wish both great Jupiter and Mars, and the other Gods offended with me.* The *Portugalles* report, that in certaine places of their *Indian* conquests, they found some Souldiers, who with horrible execrations had damned themselves, never to enter into any composition, but either they would be killed or remaine victorious; and in signe of their vowe wore their heads and beards shaven. We may hazard and obstinate our selves long enough. It seemeth that blowes shunne them, who over-joyfully present themselves unto them; and unwillingly reach those that overwillingly goe to meete them and corrupt their end. Some unable to loose his life by his adversaries force, having assaied all possible meanes, hath beene enforced to accomplish his resolution, either to beare away the honor; or not to carie away his life and even in the furie of the fight to put himselfe to death. There are sundrie examples of it; but note this one. *Philistus*, chiefe Generall of yong *Dionisius* his navie against the *Siracusans*, presented them the battle, which was very sharply withstood, their forces being alike; wherein, by reason of his prowesse he had the better in the beginning. But the *Siracusans* flocking thicke and threefold about his gally, to grapple and board him, having performed many worthie employtes with his owne person, to ridde himselfe from them, disparing of all escape, with his owne hand deprived himselfe of that life, which so lavishly and in vaine he had abandoned to his enemies hands. *Moley Moluch*, King of *Fez*, who not long since obtained that famous victorie

against *Sebastian King of Portugall*; a notable victorie, by reason of the death of three Kings, and transmission of so great a Kingdome to the crowne of *Castile*, chanced to be grievously sicke, at what time the Portugales with armed hand entred his dominions, and afterward, though hee foresaw it, approaching nearer unto death, empaired worse and worse. Never did man more stoutly, or more vigorously make use of an undanted corage, than he. He found himselfe verie weake to endure the ceremonious pompe which the Kings of that Country at their entrance into the Camp, are presented withall, which according to their fashion is full of all magnificence and state, and charged with all maner of action; and therefore he resigned that honour to his brother, yet resigned he nothing but the office of the chiefe Captaine. Himselfe most gloriously executed, and most exactly perfourmed all other necessarie duties and profitable Offices. Holding his body laid along his cowch, but his minde upright and courage constanted, even to his last gaspe; and in some sort after. He might have undermined his enemies, who were fond-hardily advanced in his dominions: And was exceedingly grieved, that for want of a litle longer life, and a substitute to manage the Warre, and affaires or so troubled a state, he was enforced to seeke a bloody and hazardous battell, having another pure and undoubted victory in hand. He notwithstanding managed the continuance of his life ¹ so miraculously, that he consumed his enemy, diverted him from his Sea-Fleete, and Maritime places, hee helde along the Coaste of *Affricke*, even untill the last day of his life, which by designe he reserved and emploied for so great and renowned a fight.

He ranged his battell in a round, on ev'ry side besieging the Portugals army, which bending round, and comming to close, did not onely hinder them in the conflict (which through the valour of that yong-assailant King was very furious) since they were to turne their faces on all sides, but also hindered them from running away after the rowte. And finding all issewes seized, and all passages closed, they were constrained to turne upon themselves: *coaceruanturque non solum cæde, sed etiam fuga. They fall on heapes, not only by slaughter, but by flight.* And so pel-mell to heape one on anothers neck, preparing a most murthrous and compleat victory to the Conquerours. When he was even dying, hee caused himselfe to be carried and haled, where-ever neede called for him; and passing along the files, hee exhorted the Captaines, and animated the Souldiers one after another. And seeing one wing of the fight to have the worst, and in some danger, no man could hold him, but he would needs with his naked-sword in hand get on hors-backe, striving by all possible means, to enter the throng; his men holding him, some by the Bridle, some by the Gowne, and some by the Stirrops. This toyle and straining of himselfe, made an end of that litle remainder of his life: Then was he laid on his bed: But comming to himselfe again, starting up, as out of a swowne, each other faculty failing him he gave them warning to conceale his death (which was the necessariest commandement he could give his Servaunts, lest the souldiers hearing of his death, might fall into dispaire) and so yelded the Ghost, holding his fore-fingers upon his mouth; an ordinary signall to impose silence. What man ever lived so long and so neere death? Who ever died so upright and undaunted? The extreamest degree, and most naturall, couragiously to manage death, is to see or front the same, not only without amazement, but without care; the course of life continuing free, even in death. As *Cato*, who ammuzed himselfe to studie

and sleepe, having a violent and bloody death, present in his hart, and as it were holding it in his hand.

NOTES

- 1 The word *life* is a mistake. Florio used the correct translation, *sickness*, in later editions.