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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

London, 1743

Chap. 31. That a Man is to judge soberly of Divine Ordinances.

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Halves were begging at their Doors, lean, and half-starv'd with Hunger and Poverty; and thought it strange, that these necessitous Halves were able to suffer so great an Inequality and Injustice, and that they did not take the others by the Throats, or set Fire to their Houses. I talk'd to one of them a great while together, but I had so ill an interpreter, and that was so perplex'd by his own Ignorance, to apprehend my Meaning, that I could get nothing out of him, of any Moment. Asking him, what Advantage he reapt from the Superiority he had amongst his own People? (for he was a Captain, and our Mariners call'd him King,) he told me, to march in the Head of them to War; and demanding of him farther, how many Men he had to follow him? he shewed me a Space of Ground, to signify, as many as could march in such a Compass: Which might be four or five thousand Men; and putting the Question to him, Whether or no his Authority expir'd with the War? he told me this remain'd; that when he went to visit the Village of his Dependance, they plain'd him Paths through the thick of their Woods, through which he might pass at his Ease. All this does not sound very ill, and the last was not much amiss; for they wear no Breeches.



C H A P. XXXI.

That a Man is soberly to judge of divine Ordinances.

THings unknown are the principal and true Subject of Imposture, forasmuch as, in the first Place, their very Strangeness lends them Credit, and moreover, by not being subjected to our ordinary Discourse, they deprive us of the Means to question, and dispute them. For which Reason, says *Plato*, it is much more easy to satisfy the Hearers, when speaking of the Nature of the Gods, than of the Nature of Men, because the Ignorance of the Auditor affords a fair and large Career, and all Manner of

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Liberty

Liberty in the handling of profane and abstruse Things; and then it comes to pass, that nothing is so firmly believ'd as what we least know: Nor any People so confident, as those who entertain us with fabulous Stories, such as your Alchymists, judicial Astrologers, Fortune-tellers, and Physicians, *Id genus omne*; to which I could willingly, if I durst, join a Sort of People, that take upon them to interpret and controul the Designs of God himself, making no Question of finding out the Cause of every Accident, and to pry into the Secrets of the divine Will, there to discover the incomprehensible Motives of his Works. And although the Variety, and the continual Discordance of Events, throw them from Corner to Corner, and toss them from *East* to *West*, yet do they still persist in their vain Inquisition, and with the same Pencil to paint Black and White. In a Nation of the *Indies*, there is this commendable Custom, that when any Thing befalls them amiss in any Rencounter or Battle, they publickly ask Pardon of the Sun, who is their God, as having committed an unjust Action, always imputing their good or evil Fortune to the divine Justice, and to that, submitting their own Judgment and Reason. 'Tis enough for a Christian to believe, that all Things come from God, to receive them with Acknowledgment of his divine and inscrutable Wisdom, and also thankfully to accept and receive them, with what Face soever they may present themselves: But I do not approve of what I see in use, that is, to seek to continue and support our Religion by the Prosperity of our Enterprises. Our Belief has other Foundation enough, without going about to authorise it by Events; For the People accustomed to such Arguments as these, and so proper to their own Taste, it is to be fear'd, lest when they fail of Success, they should also stagger in their Faith: As in the War wherein we are now engag'd, upon the Account of Religion, those who had the better in the Business of *Rochelabeille*, making great Brags of that Success, as an infallible Approbation of their Cause, when they came afterwards to excuse their Misfortunes of *Jarnac*, and *Moncontour*, 'twas by saying, they were fatherly Scourges and Corrections; if they have not a People wholly at their Mercy, they make it manifestly enough to appear, what it is to take two Sorts of Grievance out of

of the same Sack, and with the same Mouth to blow hot and cold. It were better to possess the Vulgar with the solid and real Foundations of Truth. 'Twas a brave naval Battle that was gained a few Months since against the *Turks*, under the Command of *Don John of Austria*; but it has also pleased God at other Times to let us see as great Victories at our own Expence. In fine, 'tis a hard Matter to reduce divine Things to our Balance, without Waste, and losing a great deal of Weight. And he that would take upon him to give a Reason, why *Arius*, and his Pope *Leo*, the principal Heads of the *Arian* Heresy, should die at several Times of so like and strange Deaths, (for being withdrawn from the Disputation, by the Griping in the Guts, they both of them suddenly gave up the Ghost upon the Stool,) and would aggravate this divine Vengeance by the Circumstances of the Place; might as well add the Death of *Heliogabalus*, who was also slain in a House of Office. But what? *Irenæus* was involved in the same Fortune; God being pleased to shew us, that the Good have something else to hope for; and the Wicked something else to fear, than the Fortunes or Misfortunes of this World: He manages and applies them according to his own secret Will and Pleasure, and deprives us of the Means, foolishly to make our own Profit. And those People both abuse themselves and us, who will pretend to dive into these Mysteries by the Strength of human Reason. They never give one hit, that they do not receive two for it; of which *St. Augustin* gives a very great Proof upon his Adversaries. 'Tis a Conflict, that is more decided by Strength of Memory, than the Force of Reason. We are to content ourselves with the Light it pleases the Sun to communicate to us, by Virtue of his Rays, and who will lift up his Eyes to take in a greater, let him not think it strange, if for the Reward of his Presumption, he there lose his Sight. *Quis hominum potest scire consilium Dei? Aut quis poterit cogitare, quid velit Dominus*? Who amongst Men can know the Counsel of God? Or who can think what the Will of the Lord is?*

* *Sapien. Cap. ix. v. 13.*