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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. 9. Of the Arms of the Parthians.

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The tempted Ivory pliant grows, and now,
Under his wanton Touch, does yield and bow.



C H A P. IX.

Of the Arms of the Parthians.

TIS an ill Custom, and a little unmanly, which the Gentlemen of our Time have got, not to put on their Armour, but just upon the point of the most extreme Necessity; and to lay it by again as soon as ever there is any Shew of the Danger being a little over; from whence many Disorders arise: For every one bustling and running to his Arms, just when he should go to charge, has his Cuirass to buckle on, when his Companions are already put to rout. Our Ancestors were wont to give their Heads, peice, Lance and Gauntlet to carry, but never put on their other Pieces so long as there was any Work to be done. Our Troops are now cumber'd and render'd unfitly, with the Clutter of Baggage and Servants, that cannot be from their Masters by reason they carry their Arms. *Titus Livius*, speaking of our Nation, *Intolerantissima Laborum Corpora vix Arma Humeris gerebant* *. Their Bodies were so impatient of Labour, that they could scarce endure to wear their Arms. Many Nations do yet, and did anciently go to War without defensive Arms; or such, at least, as were of very little Proof.

Tegmina queis Caputum raptus de Subere Cortex †.

For Helmets they their Temples only bind
With a light Skull, made of the Cork-tree Rind.

Alexander, the most adventurous Captain that ever was, very seldom wore Armour; and such amongst us as slight it, do not by that much harm the main Concern; for we see some kill'd for want of it, there are few less who the Lumber of Armour helps to destroy, either by being

* *Liv. lib. 5.*

† *Æneid, lib. 6.*

over-burden'd, crush'd and cramp'd with its Weight, by a rude Shock, or otherwise. For, in plain Truth, to observe the Weight and Thickness of that which we have now in Use, it seems as if we only pretend to defend ourselves, and that we are rather loaded than secur'd by it. We have enough to do to support its Weight, being so manacled and immur'd, as if we were only to contend with our own Arms; and as if we had not the same Obligation to defend them that they have to defend us. *Tacitus* gives a pleasant Description of the Men at Arms of our ancient *Gauls*; so armed, as to be only able to move, without Power to offend, or Possibility to be offended, or to rise again when once beaten down. *Lucullus* seeing certain Soldiers of the *Medes*, that made the Front of *Tiganes's* Army, heavily armed, and very uneasy, as if in Prisons of Iron, from thence conceiv'd Hopes, with great Ease, to defeat them; and by them began his Charge and Victory. And now that our Musqueteers are come into Credit I believe some Invention will be found out to immure us for our Safety, and draw us to the War in Sconces, such as those the Ancients loaded their *Elephants* withal. This Humour is far differing from that of the Younger *Scipio*, who sharply reprehended his Soldiers, for having planted *Caltrops* under Water, in a Graff, by which those of the Town he held besieged might fall out upon him; saying, *That those who assaulted should think of attacking, and not to fear*; suspecting, with good Reason, that this Stop they had put to the Enemies, would make them less vigilant upon their Duty. He said also to a Young Man, shewing him a fine Buckler he had, that he was very proud of, *It is a very fine Buckler, indeed; but a Roman Soldier ought to repose greater Confidence in his Right-hand than his Left.* Now 'tis nothing but the not being us'd to wear them, that makes the Weight of our Arms so intolerable,

*L'husbergo in dolle haveano, & l'elmo in testa,
 Due di quelli guerrier di quali, je cante.
 Ne notte o di doppo ch'entraro in questa
 Senza, gl'haveano mai mesi da canto,
 Che facile a portor comme la vesta
 Era lor, perche in uso l'avean atton*.*

* *Aristo. Cant. 12.*

Two of these Heroes, that I name, had on
 Each his bright Helm, and strong Habergeon,
 And Night nor Day, not one poor Minute's Space,
 Once laid them by, whilst here they were in Place.
 These heavy Arms, by a long Practice, were
 So very easy grown, and light to bear.

The Emperor *Caracalla* was wont continually to march
 on Foot, compleatly arm'd, at the Head of
 his Army. The *Roman* Infantry always
 carry'd not only a Morion, a Sword and a
 Shield; for as to Arms, says *Cicero*, they
 were so accusom'd to have them always on,
 that they were no more Trouble to them
 than their own Limbs: *Arma enim, membra militis esse
 dicunt* †; but moreover, fifteen Days Provision, together
 with a certain Number of Piles, or Stakes, wherewith
 to fortify their Camp to sixty Pounds Weight. And *Mari-
 rius's* Soldiers, loaden at the same rate, were inur'd to
 march in Battalia five Leagues in five Hours; and sometimes,
 upon an urgent Occasion, six. Their Military Discipline
 was much ruder than ours, and accordingly produced much
 greater Effects. The Younger *Scipio* reform'd his Army in
Spain, order'd his Soldiers to eat standing, and nothing that
 was drest. The Jeer that was given a *Lacedæmonian* Sol-
 dier, is marvellously put upon this Account, who, in an
 Expedition of War, was reproach'd to have been seen un-
 der the Roof of a House: They were so inur'd to Hard-
 ship, that, let the Weather be what it would, it was a Shame
 to be seen under any other Cover than the Roof of Heaven.
 We should not march our People very far at that rate. As
 to what remains, *Marcellinus*, a Man bred up in the *Ro-
 man* Wars, curiously observes the Manner of the *Parthians*
 arming themselves; and rather, for being so different from
 that of the *Romans*. They had, says he,
 their Armour so artificially woven; as to have the
 Scollups fall over one another like so many
 little Feathers; which did nothing hinder the Motion of the
 Body, and yet was of such Resistance, that our Darts hitting

† *Cicero, Tusc. lib. 2.*

upon it would rebound: Which were the Coats of Mail our Fore-fathers were so constantly wont to use.) And in another Place; They had, says he, strong and able Horses, cover'd with thick tann'd Hides of Leather, and were themselves armed Cap-a-pe with great Plates of Iron, so artificially order'd, that in all Parts of the Limbs, which required bending, they assisted Motion. One would have said, that they had been Men of Iron; having Armour for the Head so neatly fitted, and so naturally representing the Form of a Face, that they were no where vulnerable, save at two little round Holes that gave them a little Light; and certain small Chinks about their Mouth and Nostrils, thro' which they did, with great Difficulty, breathe.

*Flexilis inductis animatur lamina membris,
Horribilis visu, credas simulacra moveri
Ferreæ, cognatoque viros spirare metallo.
Par vestitus equis, ferrata fronte minantur,
Ferratosque movent securi vulneris armos*.*

Stiff Plates of Steel over the Body laid,
By Armorers Skill so flexible were made,
That dreadful to be seen, you would think these
Not living Men, but moving Images:
The Horse, like arm'd, Spikes wore in Fronts above,
And fearless, on their Iron Shoulders move.

A Description very near resembling the Equipage of the Men at Arms in France, with their Barbed Horses. Plutarch says, That Demetrius caus'd two compleat Suits of Armour to be made for himself and for Alcimus, a Captain of the greatest Note and Authority about him, of six Score Pounds Weight each, whereas the ordinary Suits weigh'd but half so much.

* Claud. in Ruff. lib. 2.