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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

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Chap. 19. Of Liberty of Conscience.

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C H A P. XIX.

Of Liberty of Conscience.

'T IS usual to see good Intentions, if carry'd on without Moderation, push Men on to very vicious Effects. In this Dispute, which has at this Time engag'd *France* in a Civil War, the better and the foundest Cause, no Doubt, is that which maintains the ancient *Religion* and *Government* of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, amongst the good Men of that Party (for I do not speak of those that only make a Pretence, either to execute their own particular Revenges, or to gratify their Avarice, or to pursue the Favour of Princes; but of those who engage in the Quarrel out of true Zeal to *Religion*, and a virtuous Affection to maintain the Peace and Government of their Country) of these, I say, we see many whom Passion transports beyond the Bounds of Reason, and sometimes inspires them with Counsels that are unjust and violent, and moreover inconsiderate and rash. It is true that in those first Times, when our *Religion* began to gain Authority with the *Laws*, Zeal armed many against all Sorts of *Pagan Books* *, by which the Learned suffer an exceeding great Loss. A Disorder that I conceive did more Prejudice to *Letters* than all the Flames of the *Barbarians*. Of this *Cornelius Tacitus* is a very good Testimony; for tho' the Emperor *Tacitus*, his Kinsman, had by express Order furnish'd all the Libraries in the World with it, nevertheless one entire Copy could not escape the curious Examination of those who desir'd to abolish it, for only five or six idle Clausess that were contrary to our Belief. They also had the Trick easily to lend undue Praises to all the *Emperors* who did any thing for us,

* *Plaut.*

and univerſally to condemn all the Actions of thoſe who were our Adverſaries, as is evidently manifeſt in the Emperor *Julian*, ſurnam'd the *Apoſtate*; who was, in Truth, a very great and rare Man, a Man in whoſe Soul *Philofophy* was imprint- ed in the beſt Characters, by which he pro- feſs'd to govern all his Actions; and, in Truth, there is no Sort of Virtue of which he has not left behind him very notable Examples. In *Chaſtity* (of which the whole Courſe of his Life has given manifeſt Proof) we read the ſame of him that was ſaid of *Alexander* and *Scipio*, that being in the Flower of his Age, for he was ſlain by the *Parthians* at One and Thirty, of a great many very beautiful Captives, he would not ſo much as look upon one. As to his *Juſtice*, he took himſelf the Pains to hear the Parties, and although he would, out of Cu- rioſity, enquire what *Religion* they were of, nevertheleſs the Hatred he had to ours never gave any Counterpoize to the Balance. He made himſelf ſeveral good Laws, and cut off a great Part of the Subſidies and Taxes im- poſed and levied by his Predeceſſors. We have two good Hiſtorians who were Eye-witneſſes of his Actions; one of which, *Marcellinus*, in ſeveral Places of his Hiſ- tory, ſharply reproveth an *Edict* of his, whereby he inter- dicted all *Chriſtian Rhetoricians and Grammarians* to keep School, or to teach; and ſays, he could wiſh that *Act of his had been buried in Silence*. It is very like- ly, that had he done any more ſevere Things againſt us, he, ſo affectionate as he was to our Party, would not have paſſed it over in Silence. He was, indeed, ſharp againſt us, but yet no cruel Enemy: For our own Peo- ple tell this Story of him, *That one Day, walking about the City of Chalcedon, Maris, Biſhop of that Place, was ſo bold as to tell him, that he was impious, and an Enemy to Chriſt; at which, ſay they, therein af- fecting a Philoſophical Patience, he was no farther mo- ved than to reply, Go, Wretch, and lament the Loſs of thy Eyes; to which the Biſhop replied again, I thank Jeſus Chriſt for taking away my Sight, that I may not ſee thy impudent Face*. So it is; that this Action of his favours nothing of the Cruelty he is ſaid to have exerciſed towards us. He was (ſays *Eutropius*, my other

The Character of the Emperor Julian, the Apoſtate.

other Witness) *an Enemy to Christianity, but without putting his Hand to Blood.* And to return to his *Justice,*

His Justice. there is nothing in that whereof he can be accused, the Severity excepted he practised in the Beginning of his Reign against those who had followed the Party of *Constantius,* his Predecessor. As to his

His Sobriety. *Sobriety,* he liv'd always a Soldier's kind of Life; and kept a Table in the most profound Peace, like one that prepar'd and inur'd himself to the Austerities of War. His *Vigilancy* was such

His Vigilancy. that he divided the Night into three or four Parts, of which, always the least was dedicated to Sleep, the rest was spent

either in visiting the Condition of his Army and Guards, in Person, or in Study; for, amongst other extraordinary Qualities, he was very excellent in all Sorts of Learning. 'Tis said of *Alexander the Great,* that being in Bed, for fear lest Sleep should divert him from his

Thoughts and Studies, he had always a Bason set by his Bed-side, and held one of his Hands out with a Ball of Copper in it, to the end, that, beginning to fall asleep, and his Fingers leaving their hold, the Ball by falling into the Bason might awake him. But the other

had his Mind so bent upon what he had a mind to do, and so little disturb'd with Fumes, by reason of his singular Abstinence, that he had no need of any such

His Military Experience. *Invention.* As to his *Military Experience,* he was excellent in all the Qualities of a great Captain, as it was likely he

should, being almost all his Life in a continual Exercise of War, and most of that Time with us in *France,* against the *Germans* and *Francks:* We hardly read of any Man

that ever saw more Dangers, or that made more frequent Proofs of his personal Valour. His Death has something in it parallel with that of *Epaminondas,* for

he was wounded with an Arrow, and try'd to pull it out, and had done it, but that being edg'd, it cut and disabled his Hand. He incessantly call'd out, *That they*

would carry him again in this Condition into the Heat of the Battle to encourage his Soldiers, who very bravely disputed the Battle without him, 'till Night parted the

Armies. We stood oblig'd to his *Philosophy* for the singular

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gular Contempt he had for his Life and all Human Things. He had a firm Belief of the Immortality of the Soul. In Matter of Religion, he was vicious throughout, and was firnam'd the *Apostate*, for having relinquish'd ours: Though, methinks, 'tis more likely, that he had never thoroughly embrac'd it, but had dissembled out of Obedience to the Laws, 'till he came to the Empire. He was in his own so superstitious, that he was laugh'd at for it by those of the same Opinion of his own Time, who jeeringly said, *That had he got the Victory over the Parthians, he had destroyed the Breed of Oxen in the World to supply his Sacrifices*: He was, moreover, besotted with the Art of Divination, and gave Authority to all Sorts of Predictions. He said, amongst other Things, at his Death, *That he was oblig'd to the Gods, and thank'd them, in that they would not cut him off by Surprize, having long before advertised him of the Place and Hour of his Death; nor by a mean and unmanly Death, more becoming lazy and delicate People; nor by a Death that was languishing, long, and painful; and that they had thought him worthy to die after that noble Manner, in the Progress of his Victories, in the Flower of his Age, and in the Height of his Glory.* He had a Vision like that of *Marcus Brutus*, that first threatned him in *Gaul*, and afterward appear'd to him in *Persia* just before his Death. These Words, that some make him say when he felt himself wounded, *Thou hast overcome Nazaren; or, as others, Content thyself, Nazaren;* would hardly have been omitted, had they been believ'd by my Witnesses, who being present in the Army, have set down to the least Motions and Words of his End, no more than certain other Miracles that are recorded of him. And to return to my Subject, *he long nourished, says Marcellinus, Paganism in his Heart; but all his Army being Christians, he durst not own it. But in the End, seeing himself strong enough to dare to discover himself, he caused the Temples of the Gods to be thrown open, and did his utmost to set on Foot and to encourage Idolatry: Which the better to effect, having at Constantinople found the People disunited, and also the Prelates of the Church divided amongst themselves, having con-*
veen'd

The remarkable Death of the Emperor Julian.

seen'd them all before him, he gravely and earnestly admonish'd them to calm those civil Dissentions, and that every one might freely, and without Fear, follow his own Religion. Which he did the more sedulously solicit, in hope that this Licence would augment the Schisms and Faction of their Division, and hinder the People from reuniting, and consequently fortifying themselves against him by their unanimous Intelligence and Concord; having experimented by the Cruelty of some Christians, that there is no Beast in the World so much to be fear'd by Man, as Man. These are very near his Words, wherein this is very worthy of Consideration, that the Emperor Julian made use of the same Receipt of Liberty of Conscience to enflame the civil Dissentions, that our Kings do to extinguish them. So that a Man may say on one Side, *That to give the People the Reins to entertain every Man his own Opinion, Liberty of Conscience.* is to scatter and sow Division, and, as it were, to lend a Hand to augment it, there being no Sense nor Correction of Law to stop and hinder their Career; but on the other Side, a Man may also say, *That to give People the Reins to entertain every Man his own Opinion, is to mollify and appease them by Facility and Toleration, and dull the Point which is whetted and made sharper by Variety, Novelty and Difficulty.* And I think it is better for the Honour of the Devotion of our Kings, that not having been able to do what they would, they have made a Shew of being willing to do what they could.



C H A P. XX.

That we Taste nothing pure.

THE Imbecility of our Condition is such, that Things cannot in their natural Simplicity and Purity fall into our Ute; the Elements that we enjoy are chang'd, even Metals themselves, and Gold must in some sort be debas'd