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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

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Chap. 27. Cowardice the Mother of Cruelty.

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*Sed nec vocibus excitata blandis,
Molli pollice nec rogata surgit*.*

It was at Rome a Signification of Favour to deprefs and clap in the Thumbs ;

Fautor utroque tuum laudabit pollice ludum †.

Thy Patron, when thou mak'it thy Sport,
Will with both Thumbs applaud thee for't.

and of Disfavour to elevate and thrust them outward :

———— *converso pollice vulgi
Quemlibet occidunt populariter ‡.*

The Vulgar with reverted Thumbs,
Kill each one that before them comes.

The Romans exempted from War all such as were maim'd in the Thumbs, as having no more sufficient Strength to hold their Arms. *Augustus* confiscated the Estate of a Roman Knight, who had maliciously cut off the Thumbs of two young Children he had, to excuse them from going into the Armies: And before him, the Senate, in the Time of the Italick War, had condemn'd *Caius Valienus* to perpetual Imprisonment, and confiscated all his Goods, for having purposely cut off the Thumb of his Left-hand, to exempt himself from that Expedition. Some one, I have forgot who, having won a Naval Battle, cut off the Thumbs of all his vanquish'd Enemies, to render them incapable of Fighting, and of handling the Oar. The Athenians also caused the Thumbs of those of *Ægina* to be cut off, to deprive them of the Preference in the Art of Navigation. And in *Lacedæmonia*, Pedagogues chastiz'd their Scholars by biting their Thumbs.



C H A P. XXVII.

Cowardize the Mother of Cruelty.

I Have often heard it said, that Cowardize is the Mother of Cruelty: And I have found by Experience, that that malicious and inhuman Animosity and Fierceness is

† *Mart. l. 12. Epig. 99.*

† *Hor. l. 1. Ep. 18.*

‡ *Juven. Sat. 3.*

usually accompany'd with a Feminine Paintness. I have seen the most cruel People, and upon very frivolous Occasions, very apt to cry. *Alexander*, the Tyrant of *Pheres*, durst not be a Spectator of *Tragedies* in the *Theatre*, for fear lest his Citizens should see him weep at the Misfortunes of *Hecuba* and *Andromache*; who himself caused so many People every Day to be murther'd without Pity. Is it not Meanness of Spirit that renders them so pliable to all Extremities? *Valour* (whose Effect is only to be exercised against Resistance)

Nec nisi bellantis gaudet corvix juvenci *.

—neither unless he fight,
In conquering a Bull does take Delight.

stops when it sees the Enemy at its Mercy; but *Puſillanimity*, to say that it was also in the Action, not having dar'd to meddle in the first Act of Danger, rushes into the second of Blood and Massacre. For the Execution in Victories is commonly perform'd by the Rascality and Hangers on of an Army, and that which causes so many unheard of Cruelties in Domestick Wars, is, that the hottest of the People are flush'd in being up to the Elbows in Blood, and ripping up Bodies that lie prostrate at their Feet, having no Sense of any other *Valour*.

*Et lupus, & turpes instant morientibus urſi,
Et quæcunque minor nobilitate fera est* †.

None but the Wolves, the filthy Bears and all
The baser Beasts, will on the Dying fall.

Like Cowardly House-curs, that in the House worry and tear the Skins of Wild Beasts they durst not come near in the Field. What is it in these Times of ours that causes our mortal Quarrels? and that whereas our Fathers had some Degree of Revenge in their Days, we now begin with the last in ours, and that at the first meeting nothing is to be said but *Kill*: What is this but *Cowardise*? Every one is sensible, that there is more Bravery and Disdain in subduing an Enemy, than in cutting his Throat; and in making him yield, than in putting him to the Sword; Besides that, the Appetite of Revenge is better satisfy'd and

* *Claud.*

† *Ovid. Trist. lib. 3. Eleg. 5.*
pleas'd,

pleas'd, because its only Aim is to make itself felt. And this is the Reason why we do not fall upon a Beast or a Stone when they hurt us, because they are not capable of being sensible of our Revenge; and therefore to kill a Man, is to defend him from the Injury and Offence we intend him. And as *Bias* cry'd out to a wicked Fellow; *I know, that sooner or later thou wilt have thy Reward, but I am afraid I shall not see it.* And as the *Orchomenians* complain'd, that the Penitence of *Lyciscus* for the Treason committed against them, came in Season, because there was no one remaining alive of those who had been interested in the Offence, and whom the Pleasure of this Penitency should affect: So Revenge is to be repented of, when the Person on whom it is executed is depriv'd of Means of suffering under it; for as the Avenger will look on to enjoy the Pleasure of his Revenge, so the Person on whom he takes Revenge should be a Spectator too, to be afflicted, and to repent. He will repent it, we say; and because we have given him a Pistol-shot thro' the Head, do we imagine he will repent? On the contrary, if we but observe, we shall find, that he makes a Mouth at us in falling: And so far from Penitency, that he does not so much as repine at us. And we do him the kindest Office of Life, which is to make him die insensibly, and soon. We are afterwards to hide ourselves, and trot from Place to Place, from the Officers of Justice, who pursue us whilst he is at Rest. Killing is good to frustrate an Offence to come, not to revenge one that is already past: And more an Act of Fear than Bravery, of Precaution than Courage, and of Defence than Attempt. It is manifest, that by it we quit both the true End of Revenge, and the Care of our Reputation; we are afraid if he lives he will do us another Injury as great as the first; 'tis not out of Animosity to him, but Care of thyself, that thou ridd'st him out of the Way. In the Kingdom of *Narsingua* this Expedient would be useless to us, where not only *Soldiers*, but *Tradesmen* also end their Differences by the Sword. The King never denies the Field to any that will fight; and sometimes when they are Persons of Quality, looks on, rewarding the Victor with a Chain of Gold; but for which any one that will may fight with him again: By which Means,

Duels common in the Kingdom of Narsingua.

by having come off from one Combat, he has engaged in many. If we thought by Virtue to be always Masters of our Enemies, and to triumph over them at Pleasure, we should be sorry they should escape from us as they do, by dying: But we have a Mind to conquer more with Safety than Honour, and in our Quarrel more pursue the End than the Glory.

Afinius Pollio, who, for the being a worthy Man, was the less to be excused, committed a like Error, who having writ a *Libel* against *Plancus*,

forbore to publish it 'till he was first dead: Which is to bite a Man's Thumb at a blind Man, to rail at one that was deaf, and to wound a Man that has no Feeling, rather than to run the Hazard of his Resentment. And it was also said in his Behalf, *that it was only for Hobgoblins to wrestle with the Dead*. He that stays to see the Author die, whose Writings he intends to question, what does he say, but that he is foolish and troublesome? It was told *Aristotle*, that some one had spoken Ill of him: Let him do more, said he, let him whip me too, provided I am not there. Our Fathers contented themselves to revenge an Injury with a Lye, the Lye with a Box of the Ear, and so

*The Lye re-
venged with
a Box of the
Ear.*

forward; they were valiant enough not to fear their Adversary both living and provok'd: We tremble for fear so long as we see them on foot. And that this is so, does not our noble Practice of these Days equally to prosecute to Death both him that has offended us, and him we have offended, make it out? 'Tis also a Kind of Cowardize that has introduced the Custom of Seconds, Thirds and Fourths in our Duels. They were formerly Duels, they are now Skirmishes, Rencounters and Battles. *Solitude* was doubtless terrible to those who were the first Inventors of this Practice. *Quum in se utique minimum fiducia esset. They had little Confidence in themselves.* For naturally any Company whatever is comfortable in Danger. Third Persons were formerly call'd in to prevent Disorder and foul Play only, and to be Witness of the Success of the Combat. But since they have brought it to this Pass that they themselves engage, whoever is invited cannot handsomely stand by as an idle Spectator, for fear of being suspected either of Want of Affection or Courage.

Besides

Besides the Injustice and Unworthiness of such an Action, of engaging other Force and Valour in the Protection of your Honour than your own; I conceive it a Disadvantage to a brave Man, and who only relies upon himself, to shuffle his Fortune with that of a Second; since every one runs Hazard enough in himself, without hazarding for another, and has enough to do to assure himself in his own Virtue for the Defence of his Life, without intrusting a Thing so dear in a Third Man's Hand. For if it be not expressly agreed upon before to the contrary, 'tis a combin'd Party of all Four, and if your Second be kill'd, you have Two to deal withal with good Reason. And to say, *that it is foul Play*; it is so indeed, as it is well-armed to charge a Man that has but the Hilts of a broken Sword in his Hand, or clear and untouched, a Man that is desperately wounded: But if these be Advantages you have got by Fighting, you may make use of them without Reproach: The Disparity and Inequality is only weigh'd and consider'd from the Condition of the Combatants when they begun; as to the rest, you must take your Fortune: And tho' you had alone three Enemies upon you at once, your two Companions being kill'd, you have no more Wrong done you, than I should do in a Battle, by running a Man thro' I should see engag'd with one of our own Men, with the like Advantage. The Nature of Society will have it so, that where there is Troop against Troop (as where our Duke of Orleans challeng'd Henry King of England an Hundred against an Hundred: Three Hundred against as many, as the Argians against the Lacedæmonians; and Three to Three, as the Horatii against the Curiatii) the Multitude on either Side is consider'd but as one single Man, the Hazard every where, where there is Company, being confus'd and mix'd. I have a domestick Interest in this Discourse; for my Brother, the *Sieur de Matecoulom*, was at Rome intreated by a Gentleman, with whom he had no great Acquaintance, and who was Defendant, and challeng'd by another, to be his Second. In this Duel he found himself match'd with a Gentleman much better known to him, where, after having Dispatch'd his Man, seeing the two Principals still on Foot and sound, he ran in to disengage his Friend. What could he do less? Should he have stood still, and if Chance would have order'd it so, have seen him he was

come thither to defend, kill'd before his Face, what he had thitherto done signified nothing to the Business, the Quarrel was yet undecided. The Courtesy that you can, and certainly ought to shew to your Enemy, when you have reduc'd him to an ill Condition, and have a great Advantage over him, I do not see how you can do it, where the Interest of another is in the Case, where you are only call'd in as an Assitant, and the Quarrel is none of yours. He could neither be just nor courteous at the Hazard of him he was to serve; and was also enlarged from the Prisons of *Italy* at the speedy and solemn Request of our King. Indiscreet Nation! We are not content to make our Vices and Follies known to the World by Report only, but we must go into Foreign Countries, there to shew them what Fools we are. Put three *Frenchmen* into the Desarts of *Libya*, they will not live a Month together without fighting; so that you would say that this Peregrination were a Thing purposely design'd to give Strangers the Pleasures of our Tragedies, and for the most Part such as rejoice and laugh at our Miseries. We go into *Italy* to learn to fence, and fall to practise at the Expence of our Lives before we have learn'd it; and yet, by Order of the Discipline, we should put the *Theory* before the *Practice*. We discover ourselves to be but Learners.

*Primitivæ juvenum miseræ, bellique futuri
Dura rudimenta* —————*.

Of Youth the first Instructions painful are,
And hard the Rudiments of future War.

I know Fencing is an Art very useful to its End, (in a Duel betwixt two Princes, Cousin-Germans in *Spain*, the *Elder*, says *Livy*, by his Skill and Dexterity in Arms, easily surmounting the greater and more awkward Strength of the Younger) and of which, the Knowledge, as I experimentally know, hath inspir'd some with Courage above their natural Talent: But this is not properly Valour, because it supports itself upon Address, and is founded upon something besides itself. The Honour of Combat consists in the Jealousy of Courage, and not of Skill; and therefore I have known a Friend of mine, fam'd for a great Master in this Exercise; in his Quarrels make choice

* *Æneid*. l. 11.

of such Arms as might deprive him of this Advantage, and that wholly depended upon Fortune and Assurance, that they might not attribute his Victory rather to his Skill in Fencing than his Valour. When I was young, Gentlemen avoided the Reputation of good Fencers, as injurious to them; and learn'd with all imaginable Privacy to fence, as a Trade of Subtilty, derogating from true and natural Virtue.

*Non schivar, non parar, non ritirarsi,
Voglior cosson, ne qui destrezza ha parte,
Non danno i colpi finti hor pieni, hor scarfi,
Toglie l'ira e il furor l'uso de l'arte,
O di le spade horribilmente urtarsi
Amezzo, il ferro, il pie d'orma non parte,
Sempre è il pie fermo, è la man sempre in moto,
Ne scende taglio in van ne punta à voto*.*

They neither shrunk, nor Vantage sought of Ground,
They travers'd not, nor skipt from Part to Part,
Their Blows were neither false, nor feigned found,
The Night their Rage would let them use no Art.
Their Swords together clash with dreadful Sound,
Their Feet stand fast, and neither stir nor start,
They move their Hands, stedfast their Feet remain,
Nor Blow, nor Foin they strook, or thrust in vain.

Butts, Tilting and Barriers, the Images of warlike Fights were the Exercises of our Fore-fathers: This other Exercise is so much the less noble, as it only respects a private End, that teaches us to ruin one another, against *Law* and *Justice*, and that every Way always produces very ill Effects. It is much more worthy and becoming, to exercise ourselves in Things that more strengthen than weaken our Governments, and that tend to the Publick Safety and Common Glory. *Publius Rutilius Consus* was the first that taught the Soldiers to handle their Arms with Skill, and join'd Art to Virtue: Not for the Use of private Quarrel, but for War, and the Quarrels of the People of Rome. A popular and civil Art of Defence. And besides the Example of *Caesar*, who commanded his Men to shoot chiefly at the Face of *Pompey's* Gen's-d'arms in the Battle of *Pharfalia*; a Thou-

* *Tasso. Can. 12.*

find other Commanders have also bethought them to invent new Forms of Weapons, and new Ways of striking and defending, according as Occasion should require. But as *Philopæmen* condemn'd *Wrestling*, wherein he excell'd, because the Preparatives that are therein employ'd were differing from those that appertain to Military Discipline, to which alone he conceiv'd Men of Honour ought wholly to apply themselves; so it seems to me, that this Address to which we form our Limbs, those Writings and Motions young Men are taught in this new School, are not only of no Use, but rather contrary, and hurtful to the Manner of Fight in Battle: And also our People commonly make use of particular Weapons, and peculiarly design'd for Duel. And I have known when it has been disapprov'd, that a Gentleman, challeng'd to fight with Rapier and Poignard, should appear in the Equipage of a Man at Arms; or that another should take his Cloak instead of a Poignard. It is worthy of Consideration, that *Laches* in *Plato*, speaking of learning to fence after our Manner, says, *That he never knew any great Soldier come out of that School, especially the Masters of it*: And indeed, as to them, our own Experience tells us as much. As to the rest, we may at least conclude, that they are Qualities of no Relation nor Correspondence. And in the Education of the Children of his Government, *Plato* interdicts the *Art of Cuffing*, introduced by *Amicus* and *Epeius*, and that of *Wrestling* by *Autæus* and *Cecyo*, because they have another End than to render Youth fit for the Service of the War, and contribute nothing to it. But I see I am too far stray'd from my Theme. The Emperor *Maurice*, being advertised by Dreams and several Prognosticks, that one *Phocas*, an obscure Soldier, should kill him, question'd his Son-in-Law *Philip*, who this *Phocas* was, and what was his Nature, Qualities and Manners; and so soon as *Philip*, amongst other Things, had told him, *That he was cowardly and timorous*, the Emperor immediately thence concluded, *that he was then a Murderer and cruel*. What is that that makes Tyrants so bloody? 'Tis only the Solitude of their own Safety, and that their faint Hearts can furnish them with no other Means of

The Art of Cuffing interdicted by Plato.

Cowards naturally cruel and bloody.

Education of the Children of his Government, Plato interdicts the Art of Cuffing, introduced by Amicus and Epeius, and that of Wrestling by Autæus and Cecyo, because they have another End than to render Youth

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of securing themselves, than in exterminating those that may hurt them, even so much as to Women, for fear of a Scratch.

Cuncta ferit, dum cuncta timet *.

He strikes at all, who every one does fear.

The first Cruelties are exercised for themselves: From thence springs the Fear of a just Revenge, which afterwards produces a Series of new Cruelties, to obliterate one another. *Philip*, King of *Macedon*, who had so much to do with the People of *Rome*, agitated with the Horror of so many Murthers committed by his Appointment, and doubting of being able to keep himself secure from so many Families, at divers times mortally injur'd and offended by him, *resolved to seize all the Children of those he had caused to be slain, to dispatch them daily one after another, and so to establish his own Repose.* Fine Discourses are never impertinent, however plac'd, and therefore I, who more consider the Weight and Utility of what I deliver, than their Order and Connexion, need not fear in this Place to bring in a fine Story, tho' it be a little by the bye; for when they are rich in their own native Beauty, and are able to justify themselves, the least End of a Hair will serve to draw them into my Argument. *Amongst others condemn'd by Philip, Herodicus, Prince of Thessaly, had been one. He had, moreover, after him caused his two Sons in Law to be put to Death, each leaving a Son very young behind him, Theoxena and Archo, were their two Widows. Theoxena, tho' highly courted to it, could not be persuaded to marry again: Archo married Poris, the greatest Man of the Ænians, and by him had a great many Children, which, she dying, left in a tender Age. Theoxena, moved with a Maternal Charity towards her Nephews, that she might have them under her own Eyes, and in her own Protection, married Poris: When, presently comes a Proclamation of the King's Edict. This brave spirited Mother suspected the Cruelty of Philip, and afraid of the Insolence of the Soldiers towards these fine and tender Children, was so bold as to declare, that she would rather kill them with her own Hands, than deliver them. Poris, startled at this Protestation, promised her to steal them away, and to transport them to*

* *Claud.*

Athens

Athens, and there commit them to the Custody of some faithful Friends of his. They took therefore the Opportunity of an Annual Feast, which was celebrated at Ænia, in Honour of Æneas, and thither they went. Having appear'd by Day at the publick Ceremonies and Banquet, they stole the Night following into a Vessel laid ready for that Purpose, to escape away by Sea. The Wind prov'd contrary, and finding themselves in the Morning within Sight of the Land from whence they had launch'd over Night, were made after by the Guards of the Port: Which Poris perceiving, he labour'd all he could to make the Mariners do their utmost to escape from the Pursuers. But Theoxena, frantick with Affection and Revenge, in pursuance of her former Resolution, prepar'd both Arms and Poison, and exposing them before them; Go to, my Children, said she, Death is now the only Means of your Defence and Liberty, and shall administer Occasion to the Gods, to exercise their sacred Justice: These sharp Swords, and these full Cups will open you the Way into it: Courage, fear nothing. And thou, my Son, who art the Eldest, take this Steel into thy Hand, that thou may'st the more bravely die. The Children having on one side so powerful a Counsellor, and the Enemy at their Throats on the other, ran all of them eagerly upon what was next to Hand, and half dead were thrown into the Sea. Theoxana, proud of having so vigorously provided for the Safety of her Children, clasping her Arms with great Affection about her Husband's Neck, Let us, my Friend, said she, follow these Boys, and enjoy the same Sepulchre they do: And so embrac'd, threw themselves Head-long over-board into the Sea; so that the Ship was carried back empty of the Owners into the Harbour. Tyrants, at once both to kill and to make their Anger felt, have pump't their Wit to invent the most lingering Deaths. They will have their Enemies dispatch'd, but not so fast that they may not have Leisure to taste their Vengeance. And therein they are mightily perplex'd, for if the Torments they inflict are violent, they are short; if long, they are not then so painful as they desire; and thus torment themselves in contriving how to torment others. Of this we have a thousand Examples of Antiquity, and I know not whether we unawares do not retain some Traces of this Barbarity: All that exceeds a simple

ple Death appears to me absolute Cruelty ; neither can our Justice expect, that he, whom the Fear of being executed by being beheaded or hang'd, will not restrain, should be any more aw'd by the Imagination of a languishing Fire, burning Pincers, or the Wheel. And I know not in the mean Time, whether we do not throw them into Despair ; for in what Condition can the Soul of a Man, expecting four and twenty Hours together to be broke upon a Wheel, or after the old Way, nail'd to a Cross, be ? *Josephus* relates, that in the Time of the War the Romans made in *Judea*, happening to pass by where they had three Days before crucified certain Jews, he amongst them knew three of his own Friends, and obtain'd the Favour of having them taken down ; of which, two, he says, died, the third liv'd a great while after. *Chancondilas*, a Writer of good Credit, in the Records he has left behind him of Things that happen'd in his Time, and near him, tells us, as of the most excessive Torment, of that the Emperor *Meckmed* very often practised, of cutting off Men in the Middle by the Diaphragma with one Blow of a Scymitar ; by which it follow'd, that they died as it were two Deaths at once, and both the one Part, says he, and the other were seen to stir and strive a great while after in very great Torment. I do not think there was any great Sufferance in this Motion. The Torments that are most dreadful to look on, are not always the greatest to endure ; and I find those that other *Historians* relate to have been practised upon the *Epirot* Lords, to be more horrid and cruel, where they were condemn'd to be stead alive by Pieces, after so malicious a Manner, that they continued fifteen Days in this Misery. As also these other two following ; *Cræsus*, having caused a Gentleman, the Favourite of his Brother *Pantaleon*, to be seiz'd on, carried him into a Fuller's Shop, where he caused him to be scratch'd and carded with Cards and Combs belonging to that Trade till he died. *George Jechel*, chief Commander of the Peasants of *Poland*, who committed so many Mischiefs under the Title of the *Crusado*, being defeated in Battle, and taken by the *Waywod* of *Transilvania*, was three Days bound naked upon the Rack, exposed to all sorts of Torments that any one could contrive against him ; during which Time, many other Prisoners were kept Fasting ; in the End, he living and locking on, they made his beloved Brother *Lucat*, for whom he only entreated,

entreated, taking upon himself the Blame of all their evil Actions, to drink his Blood, and caused twenty of his most favoured Captains to feed upon him, tearing his Flesh in Pieces with their Teeth, and swallowing the Morsels. The Remainder of his Body and Bowels, so soon as he was dead, were boiled, and others of his Followers compelled to eat them.



C H A P. XXVIII.

All Things have their Season.

SUCH as compare Cato the Censor, with the younger Cato that kill'd himself, compare two beautiful Natures, and much resembling one another. The First acquir'd his Reputation several Ways, and excells in Military Exploits, and the Utility of his publick Vocations; but the Virtue of the Younger, besides, that it were Blasphemy to compare any to him in Vigour, was much more pure and unblemish'd. For who can acquit the Censor of Envy and Ambition, having dared to jostle the Honour of Scipio, a Man in Worth, Valour and all other excellent Qualities, infinitely beyond him, or any other of his Time? That which they report of him, amongst other Things, That in his extreme Old Age, he put himself upon learning the Greek Tongue with so greedy an Appetite, as if to quench a long Thirst, does not seem to make much for his Honour; it being properly what we call being twice a Child. *All Things have their Season*, even the best, and a Man may say his Pater-noster out of Time; as they accused T. Quintus Flaminus, that being General of an Army, he was seen praying apart in the Time of a Battle that he won.

Imponet finem sapiens, & rebus honestis.*

The wise Man limits even decent Things.

Eudemondas, seeing Xenocrates, when very old, still very intent upon his School-Lectures, *When will this Man be*

* *Juven. Sat. 6.*