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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. 33. The Story of Spurina.

urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53407



CHAP. XXXIII.

The Story of Spurina.

Hilosophy thinks the has not made an ill use of her Talent, when she has given the Sovereignty of the Soul, and the Authority of restraining our Appetites to Reason. Amongst which, they who judge that there are none more violent than those which spring from Love, have this Opinion also, that they seize both Body and Soul, and possess the whole Man; so that even Health itself depends upon them, and Medicine is sometimes constrained to pimp for them. But a Man might on the contrary also say, that the Mixture of the Body brings an Abatement and Weakning; for fuch Defires are subject to Satiety, and capable of material Remedies. Many being determined to rid their Soul from the continual Alarms of this Appetite, have made use of Incision and Amputation of the rebelling Members. Others have subdued their Force and Ardour, by the frequent Application of cold Things, as Snow and Vinegar. The Sack-cloths of our Ancestors were for this Purpose, which is a Cloth woven of Horses Hair, of which some of them made Shirts, and others Girdles to torture and correct their Reins. A Prince not long ago told me, that in his Youth, upon a folemn Festival in the Court of King Francis the First, where every Body was very finely dress'd, he would needs put on his Father's Hair Shirt, which was still kept in the House; but how great soever his Devotion was, he had not Patience to wear it till Night, and was fick a long time after, adding withal, that he did not think there could be any youthful Heat so fierce that the use of this Receipt would not mortify, and yet perhaps he never eslay'd the most Violent; for Experience shews us, that such Emotions are often seen under rude and slovenly Clothes, and that a Hair Shirt does not always render those chaste that wear it. Xenocrates proceeded with greater Severity

The Story of Spurina. 457 in this Affair, for his Disciples to make trial of his Continency, having flipt Lais, that beautiful and famous Courtexan into his Bed quite naked, excepting the Arms of her Beauty, and her wonton Allurements, her Philters, finding, that in Spight of his Reason and Philosophical Rules, his unruly Flesh began to mutiny, he caus'd those Members of his to be burn'd that he found confenting to this Rebellion. Whereas the Passions which wholly reside in the Soul, as Ambition, Avarice, and the rest, find the Reason much more to do, because it cannot there be reliev'd but by its own means; neither are those Appetites capable of Satiety, but grow harper and increase by Fruition. The sole Example of Julius Cafar may suffice to demonstrate to us the Disparity of those Appetites; for never was Man more addicted to amorous Delights than he: Of which the delicate Care he had of his Person, to that degree of Esseminacy, as to make use of the most lascivious means to that end, as to have the Hairs of his Body pluck'd off certain Parts, and larded all overwith Perfumes, with the extreamest Curiofity, is one Testimony; and he was a Beautiful Person in himself, of a fair Complexion, tall and sprightly, full Fac'd, with quick hazel Eyes, if we may believe Suetonius; for the Statues that we see at Rome do not in all points answer this Description. Besides his Wives which he four times changed, without reckoning the Amours of his Childhood with Nicomedes King of Bythinia, he had the Maiden-head of the Renowned Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt; witness the little Cæfario that he had by her. He also made Love to Eunoe, Queen of Mauritania, and at Rome, to Posthumia, the Wife of Servius Sulpitius, to Lollia, the Wife of Gabinus, to Tortulla, the Wife of Crassus, and even to Mutia, Wife to the Great Pompey: Which was the Reason the Roman Historians say, that she was repudiated by her Husband, which Plutarch confesses to be more than he knew. And the Curios, both Father and Son, afterwards reproach'd Pompey, when he married Cafar's Daughter, that he had made himself Son-in-Law to a Man who had made him a Cuckold, and one that he himself was wont to call Ægystus. Besides all these, he entertain'd Servillia, Cato's Sister, and Mother to Marcus Brutus, from whence every one believes, proceeded the great Affection he had to Brutus, by reason that he was born in a Time when it was likely it might be

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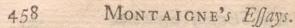
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his Son. So that I have Reason, methinks, to take him for a Man extremely given to this Debauch, and of a very amorous Constitution. But the other Passion of Ambition, with which he was exceedingly infected, Cæfar very arifing in him to contend with the former, Ambitious. it was foon compell'd to give way. And here calling to mind Mahomet, who won Constantinople, and totally exterminated the Grecian Name; I do not know where these two Passions were so evenly balanc'd, equally an indefatigable Letcher and Soldier, but where they both meet in his Life, and justle one another, the quarrelling Ardour always gets the better of the amorous Paffion. And this, though it was out of its natural Season, never regained an absolute Sovereignty over the other, till he was arriv'd at an extreme old Age, and unable to undergo the Fatigues of War. What is related for a contrary Example, of Ladiflaus King of Naples, is very Remarkable; that being a great Captain, Valiant, and Ambitious, he propos'd to himself for the principal End of his Ambition, the Execution of his Pleasure, and the Enjoyment of some rare and excellent Beauty. His Death feal'd up all the rest: For having by a close and tedious Siege, reduc'd the City of Florence to so great Distress, that the Inhabitants were compell'd to Capitulate about Surrender; he was content to let them alone, provided they would deliver up to him a Beautiful Maid he had heard of in their City. They were forc'd to yield to it, and by a private Injury to divert the Publick Ruin. She was the Daughter of a Famous Physician of his Time, who finding himself involv'd in so foul a Neceffity, refolv'd upon a high Attempt; for as every one was laying a Hand to trick up his Daughter, and to adorn her with Ornaments and Jewels, to render her more agreeable to this new Lover, he also gave her a Handker chief most richly wrought, and of an exquisite Persume, (an Implement they never go without in those Parts) which the was to make use of at their first Approaches. This Handkerchief, empoisoned with his chiefest Art, coming to be rubb'd between the chaf'd Flesh and open Pores, both of the one and the other, fo suddenly infus'd the Poifon, that immediately converting their warm into a cold Sweat, they prefently died in one another's Arms. But I return to Cæfar. His Pleasures never made him steal one Minute

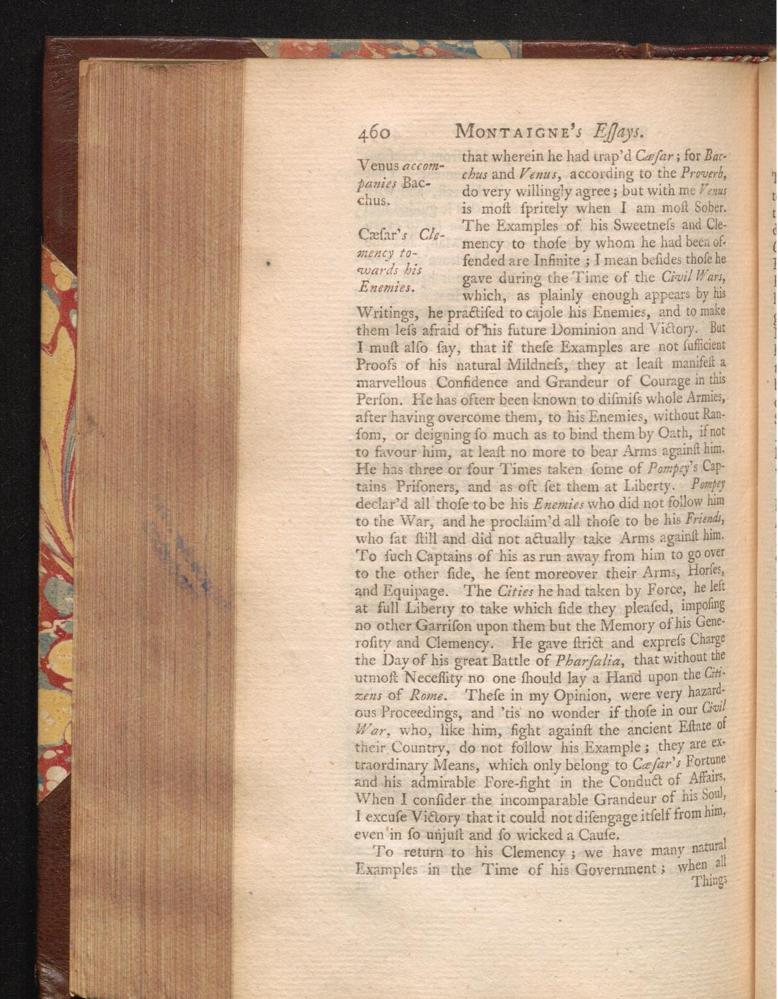
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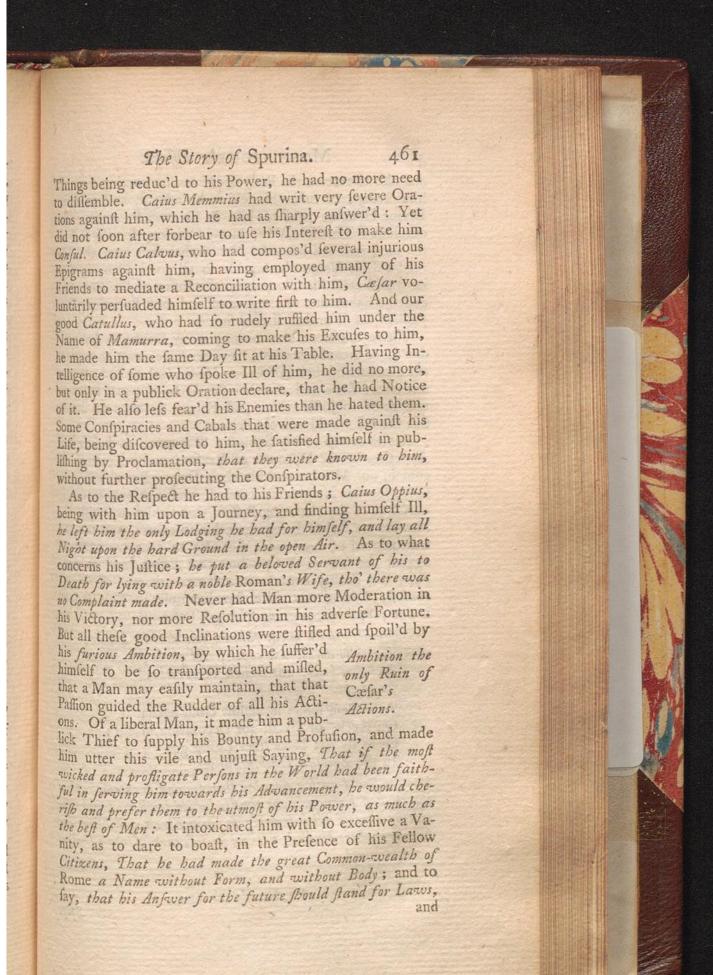
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Minute of an Hour, nor step one Step aside from Occasions that might conduce any way to his Advancement. Paffion was fo fovereign in him over all the reft, and with ho absolute an Authority possess his Soul, that it guided him at Pleasure. In reality, it troubles me when (as to every thing else I confider the Greatness of this Man, and the wonderful Parts wherewith he was endued, learn'd to that degree in all Sorts of Knowledge, that there is hardly any one Science of which he has not written: He was so great an Orator, that many have preferr'd his Eloquence to that of Cicero; and he, I conceive, did not think himself inferiour to him in that Particular: For his two Anti-Catos were chiefly writ to counterbalance the Elocution that Giver had expended in his Cato. As to the rest, was ever Soul so vigilant, so active, and so patient of Labour as his? and doubtless it was embellish'd with many rare Seeds of Virtue, I mean innate and natural, and not put on. He was fingularly Sober, fo far from being delicate in his Diet, that Opius relates, how that having one Day at Table Physical instead of common Oyl, in some Sawce set before bim, he did eat heartily of it, that he might not put his Intertainer out of Countenance. Another time he caus'd his Baker to be whip'd for ferving him with a finer than ordipary fort of Bread. Cato himself us'd to say of him, that he was the first Sober Man that ever made it his Business to run his Country. And as to the same Cato's calling him one Day Drunkard, it fell out thus: Being both of them in the Senate, at a Time when Cataline's Conspiracy was in Question, for which Cæsar was suspected, one came and brought him a Ticket feal'd up: Cato believing that it was lomething the Conspirators gave him notice of, call'd to him to deliver it into his Hand, which Cafar was constrain'd to do to avoid further Suspicion. It was by Fortune a Love-letter that Servilia, Cato's Sister, had written to him; which Cato having read, he threw it back to him, faying there Drunkard. This, I say, was rather Cæsar called a Word of Difdain and Anger, than an Drunkard. express Reproach of this Vice, as we often rate those that anger us with the first injurious Words that

tate those that anger us with the first injurious Words that come into our Mouths, tho' nothing due to those we are offended at. To which may be added, that the Vice which Cato cast in his Dish is wonderfully near a-kin to

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and also to receive the Body of the Senate coming towards him fitting; to suffer himself to be ador'd, and to have Divine Honours paid to him in his own Presence. To conclude: This sole Vice, in my Opinion, spoil'd in him the most rich and beautiful Nature that ever was, and has render'd his Name abominable to all good Men, in that he would erect his Glory upon the Ruins of his Country, and the Subversion of the greatest and most flourishing Republick the World shall ever see.

There might on the contrary many Examples be produc'd, of great Men whom Pleasures have made to neglect the Conduct of their Affairs, as Mark Anthony and others; but where Love and Ambition should be in equal Balance, and come to justle with equal Forces, I make no doubt

but the last would win the Prize.

But to return to my Subject: 'Tis much to bridle our Appetites by the Discourse of Reason, or by Violence to contain our Members within their Duty: But to lash ourselves for our Neighbours Interest, and not only to divest ourselves of the charming Passion that tickles us, with the Pleasure we feel of being agreeable to others, and courted and beloved of every one; but also to conceive a Hatred against the Graces that produce that Effect, and to condemn our Beauty because it inslames others; of this, I confess, I have met with sew Examples: This indeed is one; Spurina, a young Man of Tuscany,

Qualis gemma micat fulvum qua dividet aurum, Aut collo decus, aut capiti, vel quale per artem Inclusum buxo, aut Ericia Terebintho, Lucet ebur *.

As a Gem shines in yellow Gold enchac'd, On Neck, or Head, for Decoration plac'd; Or as by Art Iv'ry does Lustre get In the Erician Terebinthus set.

being endow'd with a fingular Beauty, and so excessive, that the chastest Eyes could not chastly behold its Rays; not contenting himself with leaving so much Flame and Fever as he every where kindled, without Relief, enter'd into a furious

* Aneid. lib. 10.

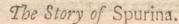
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Spite against himself, and those great Endowments Nature had so liberally conferr'd upon him; as if a Man were responsible to himself for the Faults of others: And purposely halb'd and disfigur'd, with many Wounds and Scars, the perfect Symmetry and Proportion that Nature had so curioully imprinted in his Face. To give my free Opinion, I more admire than honour fuch Actions: Such Excesses are Enemies to my Rules. The Defign was Confcientious and Good, but certainly a little defective in Prudence. What if his Deformity ferv'd afterwards to make others guilty of the Sin of Hatred, or Contempt, or of Envy, at the Glory of to commendable an Action, or of Calumny, interpreting this Humour a mad Ambition! Is there any Form, from whence Vice cannot, if it will, extract Occasion to exerale itself one way or other? It had been more Just, and also more Noble, to have made of these Gifts of God a Subject of regular and exemplary Virtue. They who retire themselves from the common Offices, from that infinite Number of Vices, and manifest Rules that fetter a Man of exact Honesty in the Civil Life, are in my Opinion very Discreet, what peculiar Sharpness of Constraint soever they impose upon themselves in so doing. 'Tis in some fort a kind of dying to avoid the Pain of living well. They may have no other Reward, but the Reward of the Difficulty I fancy they can never have, nor that in Uneafiness there can be any thing beyond keeping himself upright in the Waves of the World, truly and exactly performing all Parts of his Duty. 'Tis peradventure more easy to live clean from the whole Sex, than to maintain a Man's felf exactly in all Points in the Society of a Wife. And a Man may more incuriously slip into Want than Abundance duly difpens'd. Cuftom, carried on according to Reason, has in it more of Sharpness than Abstinence. Moderation is a Virtue that has more Work than Sufferance. The well-living of Scipio has a thousand Fashions, that of Diogenes but one. This as much excels the ordinary Lives in Innocency, as the most accomplish'd excel them in Utility and Force.

CHAP.