

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 1 · Chapter 23

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Divers events from one selfe same counsell

JAMES AMIOT, great Almoner of *France*, did once tell me this storie, to the honour of one of our Princes. (And so he was indeed by very good tokens, albeit by ofspring he were a stranger) that during our first troubles, at the siege of *Roane*, the said Prince being advertised by the Queene-mother of a conspiracie and enterprise, that should be attempted against his life, and by letters particularly informed him of the partie that should performe it, who was a gentle-man of *Aniow*, or *Manse*, and who to that purpose did ordinarily frequent the said Princes court; he never imparted that secret or communicated that warning to any man, but the next morrow walking upon Saint *Catherins* hill, whence our battery played against the towne (for it was, at what time we laid siege to *Roane*) with the said Lord great Almoner, and another Bishop by his side, he chanced to descree the said gentleman, whom the Queene-mother had described unto him, and caused him to be called, who being come before his presence, said thus unto him, perceaving him alreadie to waxe pale, and tremble at the alarums of his conscience: *Maister, such a one, I am fully perswaded you foreimagine what I will charge you with, and your countenance doth plainly show it, you can conceale nothing from me: for I am so well instructed of your businesse, that would you goe about to hide it, you should but marre all, you have perfect knowledge of this and this thing,* (which were the chiefest props and devises of the secretest drifts of his complot and conspiracie) *faile not therefore as you tender your life, to confesse the trueth of all your purpose.* When the silly man sawe himselfe so surprized and convicted (for the whole matter had beene discovered unto the Queene by one of the complices) he had no other way, but to lift up his handes, and begge for grace and mercie at the Princes handes, at whose feete he would have prostrated himselfe, but that he would not let him: thus followeth his discourse. *Come hither my friend,* said he, *Did I ever doe you any displeasure? Have I ever through any particular hatred, wronged or offended any friend of yours? It is not yet three weekes since I knew you, what reason might move you to conspire and enterprise my death?* The Gentleman with a faint-trembling voyce, and selfe-accusing looke answered him, that no particular occasion had ever moved him to that, but the interest of the generall cause of his faction, and that some of them had perswaded him, that to roote out, and in what maner soever, to make away so great an

enemy of their religion, would be an execution full of pietie, and a worke of supererogation. Then saide the Prince, *I will shew you how much the religion which I professe is more milde, than that whereof you make profession: yours hath perswaded you to kill me, without hearing me, having never bin offended by me: and mine, commaundes me to pardon you, convicted as you are, that you would so treacherously and without cause have killed me. Goe your way, withdraw your selfe, let mee never see you heere againe, and if you be wise, hence-forward in your enterprises take honest men for your counsellors, than those of your religion.* The Emperour Augustus being in Gaule, received certaine advertisement of a conspiracie, that L. Cinna plotted against him, whereof he purposed to be avenged, and for that purpose sent to all his friends against the next morrow for advise and counsell, but passed the fore-going night with great anxietie and unrest, considering that following his intent, he should bring a young Gentleman, well borne, of a noble house, and great Pompeys nephew, to his death: which perplexitie produced diverse strange discourses and consideration in him. *What?* said he unto himselfe, *Shall it ever bee reported, that I doe live in feare, and suffer mineemie to walke at his pleasure and libertie? Shall he then goe free, that hath attempted and resolved to deprive me of my life, which both by sea and land I have saved from so many civill warres, and from so many battels? And now that I have established an universall peace in the world, shall he be absolved and goe unpunished, that hath, not only determined to murther, but to sacrifice me?* (For, the complot of the conspiracie was to murther him, when he should be at sacrifice.) After that, having taken some rest with himselfe, he with a lowder voyce beganne to exclaime and cry out against himselfe, saying, *Why livest thou, if the lives of so many depend on thy death? Shall thy vengeance and cruelties never have an end? Is thy life of that worth, as it may countervail the sundry mischiefs that are like to ensue, if it be preserved?* Livia his wife being in bed with him, perceiving his agonie, and hearing his speeches, said thus unto him: *And may not womens counsels be admitted? Doe as Physitians are wont, who when their ordinarie receipts will not worke, have recourse to the contrarie. Hitherto thou couldest never doe any good with severitie: Lepidus hath followed Savidienus, Murena Lepidus, Scipio Murena, Egnatius Scipio, beginne now to proove what good lenitie and clemencie will doe thee. Cinna is convicted, pardon him: To annoy or hurt thee now, he is not able, and thou shalt thereby encrease thy glory.* Augustus seemed very glad to have found an Advocate of his humour, and having thanked his wife, and countermaunded his friendes, whome hee had summoned to the Counsell, commaunded Cinna to be brought before him alone. Then sending all men out of his chamber, and a chaire prepared for Cinna to sit in, he thus bespake him: *First Cinna, I require to have gentle audience, and that thou wilt not interrupt my speech, which ended, I will give thee time and leasure to answer me: Thou knowest (oh Cinna) that when I had taken thee prisoner in mine enemies campe, who wast not only become, but borne my foe; I saved thee, then put thee in quiet possession of thy goods, and at last, have so enriched thee, and placed thee in so high a degree, that even the conquerours are become envious over the conquered. The Priests office, which thou beggedst at my hands, I freely bestowed on thee, having first refused the same to others, whose fathers and friendes had in many battells shead their bloud for me: After all which benefites, and that I had in duetie tied thee so fast unto me, thou hast notwithstanding undertaken to kill me. To whome Cinna replied, crying alowde, That he had never so much as conceived so wicked a thought, much lesse entertained the same. Oh Cinna, this is not according to thy promise, answered*

then *Augustus*, which was, that thou wouldst not interrupt me: What I say, is true, thou hast undertaken to murder me, in such a place, on such a day, in such a company, and in such manner: and seeing him so amazed in heart, and by his evidence stricken domb, moved thereunto, not by the condition of his promise, but by the guilt of his selfe-accusing conscience; why wouldst thou doe it, replied he, is it because thou wouldst be Emperour? Truelie the common wealth is but in hard condition, if none but my selfe hinder thee from the Empire. Thou canst not so much as defend thine own house, and didst but lately loose a processe, only by the favor of a seely libertine. What? hast thou no meane or power in any other matter, but to attempt *Caesars* life? I quit it, if there be no man but my selfe to empeach thy hopes. Supposest thou that *Paulus*, that *Fabius*, that the *Cossenians* or the *Servillians* will ever permit thee? And so great a troupe of noble men, noble, not onely in name, but such as by their vertues honour their nobilitie, will ever suffer it? After many other such like discourses (for he talked with him more than two houres) he said unto him; Away, oh *Cinna*, that life which once I gave thee, as to an enemy, I now give thee againe, as to a traitour, and a patricide: let a true friendship from this day forward beginne betwene us, let us strive together, which of us two with a better faith shall out-goe the other, and whether I have given thy life, or thou hast received the same with great confidence: and so left him. Shortly after he gave him the Consulship, blaming him that he durst not ask it of him. And ever after held him as his deere friend, and made him alone, heire and executor of his goodes. Now after this accident, which hapned to *Augustus* in the xl. yeere of his age, there was never any conspiracy or enterprise attempted against him; and he received a just reward for his so great clemency. But the like succeeded not to our Prince, for his mildenesse and lenitie, could not so warrant him, but that afterward he fell into the snares of the like treason: so vaine and frivolous a thing is humane wisdom: and contrary to al projects, devises, counsels, and precautions, fortune doth ever keep a ful sway and possession of all events. We count those Phisitians happy and successefull, that successefully end a desperate cure, or come to a good issue: as if there were no other arte but theirs, that could not subsist of it selfe, and whose foundations were too feeble, to stand and relie upon hir owne strength: and as if there were none but it, that standes in neede of fortunes helpe-affoording hand, for the effecting of hir operations. My conceit of it, is both the worst and the best a man may imagine: for thanks be to God, there is no commerce betwene us: I am contrary to others; for I ever despise it, and when I am sick, in stead of entring into league or composition with it, I then beginne to hate and feare it most: and answer such as urge mee to take Physicke, that at least they will tarie till such time as I have recovered my health and strength againe; that then I may the better be enabled to endure the violence and hazard of their potions. I let Nature worke, and presuppose unto my selfe, that she hath provided hir selfe, both of teeth and clawes, to defend hir self from such assaults as shal beset hir, and to maintaine this contexture or frame, whose dissolution it so much hateth. In lieu of bringing helpe unto hir, when shee most striveth, and is combated by sicknesse, I greatly feare lest I bring succor unto hir adversarie, and surcharge her with new enemies. Now I conclude, that not only in phisicke, but likewise in sundry more certaine artes, fortune hath great share in them. The Poeticall furies, which ravish and transport their Author beyond himselfe, why shall we not ascribe them to his good fortune, since himselfe confesseth, that they exceede his strength and sufficiencie, and

acknowledgeth to proceede from elsewhere, then from himselfe, and that they are not in his power, no more than Orators say to have those strange motions and extraordinary agitations, that in their art transport them beyond their purpose? The like wee see to bee in painting, for sometimes the Painters hand shall draw certaine lines or draughts, so farre exceeding his conception or skill, that himselfe is forced to enter into admiration and amazement. But fortune yet doth much more evidently shewe, the share shee hath in all their workes, by the graces and beauties that often are found in them, not only beyond the intent, but besides the very knowledge of the workman. A heedy Reader shall often discover in other mens compositions, perfections farre-differing from the Authors meaning, and such as haply he never dreamed of, and illustrateth them with richer senses, and more excellent constructions. As for military enterprises, no man is so blinde but seeth what share fortune hath in them: even in our counsels and deliberations, some chance or good lucke must needs be joyned to them, for whatsoever our wisdom can effect, is no great matter. The sharper and quicker it is, more weakenesse findes it in it selfe, and so much the more dooth it distrust it selfe. I am of *Sillaes* opinion: and when I nearest consider the most glorious exploits of warre, me thinkes I see, that those who have the conduct of them, employ neyther counsell nor deliberation about them, but for fashion-sake, and leave the best parte of the enterprise to fortune, and on the confidence they have in her ayde, they still goe beyond the limits of all discourse. Casuall rejoycings, and strange furies ensue among their deliberations, which for the most induce them to take the counsell least grounded upon apparance or reason, and which quaille their courage beyond reason; whence it hath succeeded unto diverse great Captaines, by giving credite to such rash counsels, and alleaging to their souldiers, that by some divine inspiration, and other signes and prognostications, they were encouraged to such and such enterprises. Loe here wherefore in this uncertainty and perplexitie, which the impuissances and inabilitie dooth bring us to see and chuse what is most commodious, for the difficulties which the diverse accidents and circumstances of everie thing drawe with them: the surest way, if other considerations did not invite us thereto, is, in my conceit, to followe the partie, wherein is most honestie and justice; and since a man doubteth of the nearest way, ever to keepe the right. As in these two examples I have lately mentioned, there is no doubt, but that it was more commendable and generous in him, who had received the offence, to remit and pardon the same, then to have done otherwise. If the first had but ill successe, his good intent is not to be blamed; and no man knoweth, had he taken the contrary way, whether he should have escaped the end, to which his destinie called him; and then had he lost the glorie and commendations, of so seld-seene humanitie. Sundry men possessed with this feare, are read-of in auncient Histories; the greatest parte of which have followed the way of fore-running the conspiracies, which were complotted against them, by revenge or tortures, but I see very few, that by this remedy have received any good; witnesse so many Romane Emperours. Hee that perceiveth himselfe to be in this danger, ought not much to rely upon his power, or hope in his vigilancie. For, how hard a matter is it, for a man to warrant and safeguard himselfe from an enemy, that masks under the visage of the most officious and heartie-seeming friend we have? And to knowe the inward thoughts and minde-concealed

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Moreover that continuall suspition, which makes the Prince to mistrust every body, should be a wonderfull vexation to his minde. And therefore when *Dion* was advertised that *Callippus* watched to kill him, could never finde in his heart to informe against him: affirming; *He had rather die once, than ever live in feare and miserie, and to garde himselfe not onely from his enemies, but from his very friends.* Which thing *Alexander* presented more lively and undantedly by effect, who by a letter of *Parmenio* having received advertisement, that *Phillip* his neerest and best regarded Phisitian, had with mony beene suborned and corrupted by *Darius*, to poyson him, who at the very instant that he gave *Phillip* the letter to reade, swallowed downe a potion he had given him: was it not to expresse his resolution, that if his friends would kill him, he would not shunne them, but consent to their treachery? This Prince is the Sovereigne patterne of hazardous attempts: yet know I not whether in all his life, he shewed an act of more resolute constancie, then this, nor an ornament so many wayes famous. Those which dayly preach and buzze in Princes eares, under colour of their safetie a heady defiance and ever-warie distrustfulnesse, doe nought but tell them of their ruine, and further their shame and downefall. No noble act is atchived without danger. I know one by his owne complexion of a right martiall courage, and readie for any resolution, whose good and hopefull fortune is dayly corrupted by such verball perswasions; as first to keepe close with his friends; never to listen to any reconciliation with his old enemies: to stand upon his owne garde; never to commit himselfe to any stronger then himselfe, what faire promise soever they make him, or whatsoever apparant profit they seeme to containe. I also know another, who because he did ever follow the contrary counsell, and would never listen to such schoole-reasons, hath beyond all hope raised his fortune above the common reach. That boldenesse wherewith they so greedily gape after glory, is alwayes at hand, when ever neede shall be, as gloriously in a dublet as in an armor; in a cabinet as in a campe; the arme held downe, as lifted up. A wisdom so tenderly-precise, and so precisely-circumspect, is a mortall enemy to haughty executions. *Scipio*, to sound the depth of *Siphax* intent, and to discover his minde, leaving his armie, and abandoning the yet unsetled country of *Spaine*, which under his new conquest of it, was likely to be suspected, he I say, could passe into *Affrike* onely with two simple ships or small barks, to commit himselfe in a strange and foe-countrie, to engage his person, under the power of a barbarous King, under an unknowne faith, without either hostage, or letters of credence, yea without any body, but onely upon the assurance of the greatnesse of his courage, of his successefull good fortune, and of the promise of his high-raised hopes. *Habita fides ipsam plerumque fidem obligat. Most commonly trusting obligeth trustinesse.* To an ambitious and fame-aspiring minde, contrarywise, a man must yeeld little, and cary a hard hand against suspitions: Feare and distrust draw on offences and allure them. The most mistrustfull of our Kings established his affaires, and settled his estate, especially because he had voluntarily given over,

abandoned and committed his life and libertie, to the hands and mercy of his enemies: Seeming to put his whole confidence in them, that so they might likewise conceive an undoubted affiance in him. *Cæsar* did onely confront his mutinous legions, and oppose his hardly-ruled Armies, with the minde-quelling authoritie of his countenance, and awemooving fiercenesse of his wordes: and did so much trust himselfe and his fortune, that he no whit feared to abandon and commit himselfe to a seditious and rebellious Armie.

*stetit aggere fulti
Cæspitis, intrepitus uultu, meruitque timeri
Nil metuens.*

*He on a rampart stood of turfe uprear'd,
Fearelesse, and fearing none was to be fear'd.*

True it is, that this undaunted assurance can not so fully and lively be represented, but by those in whom the imagination or apprehension of death, and of the worst that may happen, can strike no amazement at all: for, to represent it fearefully-trembling, doubtfull and uncertaine, for the service of an important reconciliation, is to effect no great matter: It is an excellent motive to gaine the heart and good will of others, for a man to go and submit himselfe to them, provided it be done freely, and without constraint of any necessitie, and in such sorte, that a man bring a pure and unspotted confidence with him, and at least his countenance voide of all scruple. Being yet a childe, I saw a gentleman, who had the commaund of a great Citie, and by a commotion of a seditiously furious people greatly put to his plunges, who to suppress the rising-fire of this tumult, resolved to sally out from a strongly-assured place, where he was safe, and yeeld himselfe to that many-headed monster mutinous rowt: thrived so ill by it, that he was miserably slaine amongst them: yet deeme I not his oversight to have beene so great an issuing out, his memorie being of most men condemned, as because he tooke a way of submission, and remissenesse, and attempted to extinguish that rage and hurly-burly, rather by way of following, then of guiding, and by requiring sute, then by demonstrative resolution: and I deeme a gratioously-milde severitie, with a militarie commandement, full of confidence and securitie, beseeming his ranke, and the dignitie of his charge, had better availed him, had beene more successefull, at least with more honour, and well seeming comlinesse. There is nothing lesse to bee expected or hoped for at the hands of this monstrous-faced-multitude, thus agitated by furie, then humanitie and gentlenesse; it will much sooner receive reverence, and admit feare. I might also blame him, that having undertaken a resolution (in my judgement, rather brave then rash) to cast himselfe inconsiderately, weake and unarmed, amidst a tempestuous Ocean of sencelesse and mad men, he should have gone through-stitch with it, and not leave the person he represented in the briers, whereas, after he had perceived the danger at hand, he chanced to bleede at the nose; and then to change that demisse and flattering countenance he had undertaken, into a dismaide and drooping looke, filling both voyce and eyes with astonishment and repentance: and seeking to squat himselfe, hee the more enflamed, and called them upon him. It was determined, there should be a generall

muster made of diverse troupes of armed men (a place fittest for secret revenges, and where they may safest be achieved) there were most apparant reasons, that the place was very unsure, or at least, to be suspected, by such as were to have the principall and necessary charge to survey them. Diverse counsellis were proposed, sundry opinions heard, as in a subject of great difficultie, and on which depended so many weightie consequences. My advise was, they shoulde carefully avoyde to give any testimonie of suspition, or shew of doubt, and that our troupes should be as full as might be, and the Fyles orderly ranked, and every Souldier shewe an undanted carriage, and undismaied countenance, and in stead of keeping some of our forces backe (which thing most opinions aymed at) all Captaines should be put in minde to admonish their Souldiers to make their sallies as orderly and as strong as might be, in honour of the assistance; and spare no powder, which would serve as a gratification toward these suspectfull troupes, which afterward caused a mutuall and profitable confidence. I finde the course that *Julius Cæsar* held, to be the best a man may take: First he assayed by clemencie to purchase the love of his very enemies, contenting himselfe in the conspiracies that were discovered unto him, simply to shewe they were not unknowen to him, but had perfect notice of them. That done, he tooke a most noble resolution, which was, without dread or dismay, or any care-taking, to attend whatsoever might betide him, wholly abandoning and remitting himselfe into the hands of the Gods and of fortune. For certainly, it is the state wherein he was, when he was murthered in the Senate. A stranger having published every where, that he could teach *Dionisius* the tyrant of *Siracusa*, a way to understand and discover the very certaintie of all the practises, his subjects or any else should practise against him, if he would bestowe a good summe of mony upon him: *Dionisius* being thereof advertised, sent for him, to discover the secret and understand the truth of so necessarie an arte for his preservation: the stranger tolde him, there was no other skill in his arte, but that he should deliver him a talent, and then boast hee had learned the use of so unvaluable a secret of him. *Dionisius* allowed of his invention, and forthwith caused sixe hundred crownes to be delivered him. It is not likely that ever he would have given so great a summe of monie to an unknowne man, but in reward of a most profitable instruction; for by way of this reputaion he kept his enemies still in awe. And therefore doe Princes wisely publish such advertisements as they receive of the plots conspired, and treasons, practised against their lives and states, thereby to make men beleieve, that nothing can be attempted against them, but they shall have knowledge of it. The Duke of *Athens* committed many fond oversights in the establishing of his late tyrannie upon the Florentines, but this the chieftest, that having received the first advertisement of the Monopolies and Complots the Florentines contrived against him, by *Mathew*, surnamed *Alloroza*, one of the complices, thinking to surprise this warning, and conceale that any in the Cittie were offended at him, or grudged at his rule, caused him immediatly to be put to death. I remember to have heretofore read the storie of a Romane (a man of speciall dignitie) who flying the tyrannie of the *Triumvirate*, had many times by the sotteltie of his invention, escaped those who pursued him. It fortun'd upon a day, that a troupe of horse-men, who had the charge to apprehend him, passing alongst a hedge, under which he lay lurking, had well nigh discovered him; which he perceiving, and considering the

dangers and difficulties he had so long endured, thinking, to save himselfe from the continuall and daily searches that every where were made after him, and calling to minde the small pleasure he might hope of such a life, and how much better it were for him to die once, then live in such continuall feare and agonie, himselfe called them, and voluntarily discovered his lurking hole, and that he might ridde them and himselfe from further pursuite and care, did willingly yeeld unto their crueltie. For a man to call his enemies to aide him, is a counsell somewhat rash, yet thinke I, it were better to embrace it, then remaine still in the continuall fit of such a feaver that hath no remedie. But since the provisions a man may apply unto it, are full of unquietnes and uncertaintie, much better is it with a full assurance to prepare himselfe, patiently to endure whatsoever may happen, and drawe some comfort from that, which a man is never sure shall come to passe.