

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

Translated by Blanchard Bates

OF CANNIBALS

WHEN KING PYRREUS passed over into Italy, having observed the formation of the army the Romans sent out to meet him, he said, "I do not know what kind of barbarians these are" (for so the Greeks called all foreign nations), "but the disposition of this army that I see is not at all barbarous." As much said the Greeks of the army which Flaminius brought into their country, and likewise Philip, viewing from a knoll the order and distribution of the Roman camp in his kingdom under Publius Sulpicius Galba, spoke to the same effect. That is how we should take care not to cling to common opinions, and how we should judge by the way of reason, and not by common report.

I had with me for a long time a man that had lived ten or twelve years in that other world which has been discovered in our century, in the place where Villegaignon landed, which he called Antarctic France.¹ This discovery of so vast a country seems worthy of consideration. I do not know if I can be sure that in the future there may not be another such discovery made, so many greater men than we having been deceived in this. I am afraid our eyes are bigger than our bellies and that we have more curiosity than capacity. We grasp at all, but catch nothing but wind.

Plato brings in Solon, relating that he had heard from the priests of Saïs in Egypt that of old, before the Deluge, there was a great island called Atlantis, directly at the mouth of the Strait of Gibraltar, which contained more countries than Africa and Asia put together, and that the kings of that country, who not only possessed that isle, but extended their dominion so far

¹ Brazil, where he arrived in 1557

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into the continent that they held the breadth of Africa as far as Egypt and the length of Europe as far as Tuscany, attempted to encroach upon Asia and to subjugate all the nations that border upon the Mediterranean Sea, as far as the gulf of the Black Sea; and for this purpose overran all Spain, Gaul, Italy, as far as Greece, where the Athenians stopped them; but that some time after, both the Athenians, and they, and their island were swallowed by the Flood.

It is very likely that this violent inundation of water made amazing alterations in the habitations of the earth, as it is said that the sea then cut off Sicily from Italy,

These places, shaken once by a vast quake,
Were split asunder, when they both had been
Before one single land;²

Cyprus from Syria, the isle of Euboea from the mainland of Boeotia; and elsewhere united lands that were separate by filling up the channel between them with sand and mud,

A marsh long barren, only fit for boats,
Feeds near-by towns, and feels the heavy plow.³

But there is not much likelihood that this isle was this new world that we have just discovered; for it almost touched upon Spain, and it would be an incredible effect of an inundation to have thrust it far off as it is, more than twelve hundred leagues; besides, our modern voyages have already almost discovered it to be no island, but mainland joined to the East Indies on one side and to the lands under the two poles elsewhere; or, if it is separated from them, it is by so narrow a strait and interval that it does not deserve the name of an island for that.

It seems that in these great bodies there are two sorts of motions, the one natural, and the other feverish, as there are in ours. When I consider the inroads that my river, the Dor.

² Virgil, *Aeneid* ³ Horace, *Ars Poetica*

dogne, is making in my lifetime into the right bank in its descent, and that in twenty years it has gained so much and made away with the foundations of so many houses, I clearly see that it is an extraordinary disturbance; for, had it always gone on at this rate, or were hereafter to do it, the aspect of the world would be totally changed. But rivers are subject to changes, sometimes overflowing on one side and sometimes on the other, and sometimes keeping the channel. I do not speak of sudden inundations, the causes of which we understand. In Médoc, by the seashore, the Sieur d'Arsac, my brother, sees an estate of his buried before his eyes under the sands which the sea vomits before it; the tops of some houses are yet to be seen; his rents and domains have been converted into very thin pasturage. The inhabitants say that for some time the sea has been pushing so strongly towards them that they have lost four leagues of land. These sands are her harbingers; and we see great dunes of moving sand that march half a league before her and take possession of the land.

The other testimony from antiquity to which some would attach this discovery of the new world is in Aristotle; at least if that little book *Of Unheard-of Miracles* be his. He there relates that certain Carthaginians, having crossed the Atlantic sea outside of the Straits of Gibraltar and sailed a very long time, discovered at last a great and fruitful island, all covered over with woods and watered by broad and deep rivers, far remote from any continent, and that they, and others after them, allured by the goodness and fertility of the soil, went thither with their wives and children and began to dwell there. The lords of Carthage, perceiving their country little by little becoming depopulated, issued an express prohibition, that no one, upon pain of death, was any longer to travel there; and they drove out the new inhabitants, fearing, it is said, lest in the course of time they should so multiply as to supplant themselves and ruin their state. This relation of Aristotle does no more agree with our new-found lands than the other.

This man that I had was a plain ignorant fellow, which is a condition fit to bear true witness; for your sharp sort of men are much more curious in their observations and notice a great deal more, but they gloss them; and to give the greater weight to their interpretation and make it convincing, they cannot forbear to alter the story a little. They never represent things to you simply as they are, they slant them and mask them according to the aspect they saw in them; and to give authority to their judgment and to attract you to it, they are willing to contribute something there to the matter, lengthening it and amplifying it. We should have a man either of irreproachable veracity, or so simple that he has not wherewithal to contrive and to give a color of truth to false tales, and who has not espoused any cause. Mine was such a one; and, besides that, he has divers times brought me several seamen and merchants whom he had known on that voyage. I do, therefore, content myself with his information without inquiring what the cosmographers say about it.

We need topographers to make a detailed account for us of the places where they have been. But by having this advantage over us of having seen the Holy Land, they want to have the privilege of telling us stories of new things from all the rest of the world. I would have everyone write what he knows, and as much as he knows, not in this only, but in all other subjects; for such a person may have some particular knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or of a spring, who as to other things knows no more than what everybody does. Yet to make this little fragment circulate, he will undertake to write the whole body of physics. From this vice arise many great disadvantages.

Now to return to my subject, I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation according to what I have been told, except that everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not according to his usage; as, indeed, we have no other criterion of truth and reason than the example and pat-

tern of the opinions and customs of the country wherein we live. There is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the perfect and accomplished usage in all things. They are savages in the same way that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her ordinary course; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order. In the former, the genuine, most useful, and natural virtues and properties are vigorous and active, which we have degenerated in the latter, and we have only adapted them to the pleasure of our corrupted palate. And yet, for all this, the flavor and delicacy found in various uncultivated fruits of those countries are excellent to our taste, worthy rivals of ours. It is not reasonable that art should gain the point of honor over our great and powerful mother, Nature. We have so loaded the beauty and richness of her works with her inventions that we have entirely smothered her. Yet wherever she shines in her own purity, she marvelously disgraces our vain and frivolous undertakings,

And ivy comes up better by itself;
More fair in lonely caves, arbutus springs;
More sweetly sing the birds from lack of art.⁴

Our utmost endeavors cannot succeed even in imitating the nest of the smallest bird, its contexture, its beauty and its convenience: not so much as the web of a wretched spider. All things, says Plato, are produced by nature, or by chance, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by one or the other of the first two, the least and most imperfect by the last.

These nations then seem to me to be barbarous so far as having received very little fashioning from the human mind and as being still very close to their original simplicity. The laws of Nature govern them still, very little vitiated by ours; but they are in such purity that I am sometimes troubled by the fact

⁴ Propertius

that we were not acquainted with these people earlier when there were men who would have been better able to judge of them than we are. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato had no knowledge of them; for it seems to me that what we now see by experience in those nations does not only surpass all the images with which the poets have adorned the golden age and all their inventions in imagining a happy state of man, but also the conception and even the desire of philosophy. They were incapable of imagining so pure and so simple an innocence as we by experience see it; nor were they capable of believing that human society can be maintained with so little human artifice and sorder. I should say to Plato that it is a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or of political superiority; no use of servitude, riches or poverty; no contracts, no successions, no dividing of properties, no employments, except those of leisure; no respect of kindred, except for the common bond; no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wheat or wine. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard of. How far distant from this perfection would he find the republic he imagined: *Men fresh from the hands of the gods.*⁵

These were the manners nature first bestowed.⁶

For the rest, they live in a very pleasing and very temperate country, so that, according to what I have been told by my witnesses, it is rare to see a sick person there; and they assured me that they never saw any of the natives either palsied, blear-eyed, toothless, or crooked with age. They are located along the coast and are inclosed on the side towards the land with great and high mountains, having about a hundred leagues in breadth in between. They have great store of fish and flesh that have no resemblance to ours, and they eat with

⁵ Seneca, *Epistles* ⁶ Virgil, *Georgics*

out any other artifice than that of cooking them. The first that rode a horse there, though in several voyages he had contracted an acquaintance with them, put them into so terrible a fright in that posture that they killed him with their arrows before being able to recognize him.

Their buildings are very long and capable of holding two or three hundred people, covered with the bark of tall trees, the sections fixed to the ground at one end and leaning against and supporting one another at the peak like some of our barns, of which the covering hangs way to the ground and serves for the side walls. They have wood so hard that they cut with it and make out of it their swords and grills to cook their meat. Their beds are of cotton weave, swung from the roof like those in our vessels, each one having his own; for the women lie apart from their husbands.

They rise with the sun, and as soon as they are up, eat for the whole day, for they have no other meal than that. They do not drink then, as Suidas reports of some other people of the East who never drank at their meals; they do drink several times a day, and a great deal. Their liquor is made of a certain root and is the color of our claret. They never drink it except lukewarm. This drink will keep only two or three days, has a somewhat sharp taste, is not at all heady, is wholesome to the stomach, laxative for those who are not used to it, and a very pleasant beverage to such as are accustomed to it. Instead of bread they make use of a certain white matter like preserved coriander. I have tasted of it; the taste is sweet and somewhat insipid.

The whole day is spent in dancing. The youngest go hunting after wild beasts with bows. Some of their women are employed in heating their drink meanwhile, which is their chief duty. Some one of the old men, in the morning before they fall to eating, preaches to the whole barnful in common, walking from one end to the other and several times repeating the same sentence until he has finished the round (for these buildings are

a full hundred paces long). He recommends to them only two things: valor towards their enemies and love for their wives. And they never fail to note, as their refrain, this obligation, that it is their wives who keep their drink warm and seasoned.

The fashion of their beds, ropes, wooden swords, and the wooden bracelets with which they cover their wrists when they go to fight, and of their big canes, open at one end, by the sound of which they keep the cadence of their dances, is to be seen in several places, and among others at my house. They are close shaven all over, and much more closely than we, without any other razor than one of wood or of stone. They believe the immortality of the soul, and that those who have merited well of the gods are lodged in that part of heaven where the sun rises, and the accursed in the west.

They have some kind of priests and prophets that very rarely present themselves to the people, having their abode in the mountains. At their arrival there is a great feast and solemn assembly of many villages (each lodge, as I have described it, makes a village, and they are about a French league distant from one another). This prophet declaims to them in public, exhorting them to virtue and to their duty; but all their ethics consist in these two articles: resolution in war and affection for their wives. He also prophesies to them events to come and the results they are to expect from their enterprises; he prompts them to, or diverts them from, war. But it is on condition that, when he fails in his divination and anything happens otherwise than he has foretold, he is cut into a thousand pieces, if he is caught, and condemned for a false prophet. For that reason, the prophet who has once been mistaken is never seen again.

Divination is a gift of God, that is why it ought to be punishable to abuse it. Among the Scythians, when their diviners failed to strike it right, they were laid, bound hand and foot, upon carts laden with firewood and drawn by oxen, on which they were burned. Those who handle things subject to the conduct of human capacity are excusable in doing the best they

can. But these others that come to delude us with assurances of an extraordinary faculty beyond our understanding, ought they not to be punished for the temerity of their imposture and for not making good their promise?

They have wars with the nations that live farther inland beyond their mountains, to which they go quite naked and without other arms than their bows and wooden swords pointed at one end like the points of our spears. The obstinacy of their battles is wonderful; they never end without slaughter and bloodshed; for as to running away and fear, they know not what it is. Everyone for a trophy brings home the head of an enemy he has killed and fixes it over the door of his house. After having a long time treated their prisoners well and with all the luxuries they can think of, he to whom the prisoner belongs forms a great assembly of his acquaintances. He ties a rope to one of the arms of the prisoner, by the end of which he holds him some paces away for fear of being struck, and gives to the friend he loves best the other arm to hold in the same manner; and they two, in the presence of all the assembly, dispatch him with their swords. After that they roast him and eat him among them and send some pieces to their absent friends. They do not do this, as some think, for nourishment, as the Scythians anciently did, but as a representation of an extreme revenge. And its proof is that having observed that the Portuguese, who were in league with their enemies, inflicted another sort of death on them when they captured them, which was to bury them up to the waist, shoot the rest of the body full of arrows, and then hang them; they thought that these people from the other world (as men who had sown the knowledge of a great many vices among their neighbors and were much greater masters in all kind of wickedness than they) did not exercise this sort of revenge without reason, and that it must needs be more painful than theirs, and they began to leave their old way and to follow this. I am not sorry that we should take notice of the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am sorry that, seeing so

clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead, in tearing by tortures and the rack a body that is still full of feeling, in roasting him by degrees, causing him to be bitten and torn by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not among inveterate enemies, but among neighbors and fellow-citizens, and what is worse, under color of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.

Chrysippus and Zeno, chiefs of the Stoic sect, were of opinion that there was no harm in making use of our dead carcasses in any way for our necessity, and in feeding upon them too; just as our ancestors, being besieged by Caesar in the city of Alésia, resolved to withstand the famine of this siege with the bodies of their old men, women, and other persons who were incapable of bearing arms.

'Tis well known that the Gascons once employed
Such food in order to prolong their lives.'

And physicians are not afraid of employing it in all sorts of ways for our health, applying it either inwardly or outwardly. But there never was any opinion so irregular as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our common vices.

We may, then, well call these people barbarians in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who, in all sorts of barbarity, exceed them. Their warfare is in every way noble and generous and has as much excuse and beauty as this human malady is capable of; it has with them no other foundation than the sole jealousy of valor. Their disputes are not for the conquests of new lands, for they still enjoy that natural abundance that supplies them without labor and trouble with all things necessary in such abundance that they have no

'Juvenal

need to enlarge their borders. And they are still in that happy stage of desiring only as much as their natural necessities demand; all beyond that is superfluous to them.

Men of the same age generally call one another brothers; those who are younger, children; and the old men are fathers to all. These leave to their heirs in common the full possession of their goods, without any manner of division, or any other title than that pure one which Nature bestows upon her creatures in bringing them into the world. If their neighbors pass over the mountains to come to attack them and obtain a victory, all the victors gain by it is only glory and the advantage of having proved themselves the better in valor and virtue; for otherwise they never meddle with the goods of the conquered, and they return to their own country, where they have no want of any necessity, nor of that great good, to know how to enjoy their condition happily and be content with it. These in their turn do the same. They demand of their prisoners no other ransom than the confession and acknowledgment that they are overcome. But there is not one found in a whole century that will not rather choose to die than either by word or look to recede one bit from the grandeur of an invincible courage. There is not a man among them who would not rather be killed and eaten than so much as request not to be. They treat them with all liberality in order that their lives may be so much the dearer to them; and they usually entertain them with menaces of their approaching death, of the torments they are to suffer, of the preparations that are being made for that purpose, of the cutting up of their limbs, and of the feast that will be made at their expense. All this is done for the sole purpose of extorting some weak or submissive word from them, or to make them want to run away, so that they may obtain the advantage of having terrified them and shaken their constancy. For indeed, if rightly taken, it is in this point only that a true victory consists:

No victory is complete,
But when the vanquished own their just defeat.⁸

The Hungarians, very bellicose fighters, did not of old pursue their advantage beyond reducing the enemy to their mercy. For, having wrenched this confession from them, they let them go without injury or ransom, except, at the most, to make them give their word never to bear arms against them again.

We get enough advantages over our enemies that are borrowed advantages, not truly our own. It is the quality of a porter, not of valor, to have sturdier arms and legs; agility is a dead and corporeal quality; it is a stroke of fortune to make our enemy stumble or to dazzle his eyes with the light of the sun; it is a trick of art and science, which may happen in any cowardly blockhead, to be a good fencer. The worth and value of a man consists in the heart and in the will; there his true honor dwells. Valor is strength, not of legs and arms, but of the heart and the soul; it does not lie in the goodness of our horse, or of our arms, but in our own. He that falls firm in his courage, *if he has fallen, he fights upon his knees.*⁹ He who, despite the danger of death near at hand, abates nothing of his assurance; who in dying still looks at his enemy firmly and disdainfully; he is beaten, not by us, but by fortune; he is killed, not conquered. The most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate.

So there are triumphant defeats rivaling victories. Those four sister-victories, the fairest the sun ever beheld, of Salamis, Plataea, Mycale, and Sicily, never dared oppose all their united glories to the single glory of the discomfiture of King Leonidas and his men at the Pass of Thermopylae.

Whoever ran with a more glorious and ambitious desire to the winning of a battle than Captain Ischolas to defeat? Whoever set about with more ingenuity and care to assure his safety

⁸ Claudian, *De Sexto Consulatu Honorii* ⁹ Seneca, *de Providentia*

than he did to assure his ruin? He was ordered to defend a certain pass in the Peloponnesus against the Arcadians. In order to do this, finding himself quite powerless in view of the nature of the place and the inequality of the forces, and concluding that all who presented themselves to the enemy must certainly be left upon the place; on the other hand, considering it unworthy of his own virtue and magnanimity and of the Lacedemonian name to fail in his charge, he chose a middle course between these two extremes, in this manner: the youngest and fittest of his men he preserved for the service and defense of their country and sent them back; and with the rest, whose loss would be of less consideration, he resolved to hold the pass, and by their death to make the enemy buy their entry as dearly as he could. And so it turned out. For being presently encompassed on all sides by the Arcadians, after having made a great slaughter of the enemy, he and his men were all put to the sword. Is there any trophy dedicated to conquerors which would not be more due to these vanquished? True victory has as its rôle the struggle, not the coming off safe; and the honor of valor consists in combating, not in beating.

To return to our story. These prisoners are so far from submitting in spite of all that is done to them that, on the contrary, during the two or three months that they are kept, they bear a cheerful countenance; they urge their masters to make haste to bring them to the test; they defy them, rail at them, and reproach them with cowardice and the number of battles they have lost against those of their country. I have a song composed by a prisoner in which there is this thrust, that they come boldly, all of them, and assemble to dine upon him, for they will be eating at the same time their own fathers and grandfathers, whose flesh has served to feed and nourish his body. "These muscles," says he, "this flesh and these veins are your own, poor fools that you are. You do not recognize that the substance of your ancestors' limbs is here yet; savor them well, and you will find in them taste of your own flesh."

An idea that does not smack at all of barbarity. Those that paint these people dying and reproduce the execution depict the prisoner spitting in the face of his executioners and making faces at them. In truth, to the very last gasp they never cease to brave and defy them both by word and gesture. In plain truth, here are men who are real savages in comparison with us; for either they must be absolutely so, or else we are savages; there is an amazing difference between their character and ours.

The men there have several wives, and the higher their reputation for valor, the more wives they have. It is a remarkably beautiful aspect of their marriages that the same jealousy our wives have to hinder us from the affection and good graces of other women theirs have to acquire them for them. Being more solicitous of their husband's honor than of anything else, they seek and are anxious to have as many companions as they can, inasmuch as it is a testimony of their husband's valor. Ours will cry out, "Miracle!" It is not so. It is a properly matrimonial virtue, but of the highest order. And in the Bible, Sarah, Leah, and Rachel, and the wives of Jacob gave their beautiful handmaids to their husbands; and Livia seconded the appetites of Augustus to her own disadvantage; and Stratonicé, the wife of King Deiotarus, not only lent for her husband's use a very beautiful young chambermaid who was in her service, but carefully brought up the children he had by her, and assisted them in the succession to their father's estates.

And that it may not be supposed that all this is done through a simple and servile bondage to their common practice and under the weight of authority of their ancient custom, without reasoning or judgment, and from having minds so stupid as not to be able to take any other course, I must give some examples of their capacity. Besides the example that I have just quoted from one of their songs of war, I have another, a love song, that begins thus: "Adder, stay; stay, adder, that from the pattern of your markings my sister may draw the fashion and work of a rich girdle that I may present to my beloved; so

may your beauty and the pattern of your scales be forever preferred to all other serpents." This first couplet is the refrain of the song. Now I am familiar enough with poetry to judge thus much: that not only there is nothing barbarous in this fancy, but that it is perfectly Anacreontic. Their language, moreover, is a soft language, agreeable in sound, resembling Greek in its endings.

Three of these people, not knowing how costly their knowledge of the corruptions of this part of the world will one day be to their happiness and repose, and that from this intercourse will spring their ruin, which, I suppose, is already advanced (miserable men to let themselves be deluded with desire of novelty and to have left the serenity of their own sky to come and gaze at ours!), were at Rouen at the time that the late King Charles the Ninth was there. The king talked to them a good while; and they were shown our fashions, our pomp, and the form of a fair city. After that someone asked their opinion and wanted to know what they had found most to be admired. They mentioned three things, of which I have forgotten the third, and I am very sorry for it, but two I still remember. They said that in the first place they thought it very strange that so many big men wearing beards, strong and well armed, who were about the king (it is likely they meant the Swiss of his guard) should submit to obey a child, and that they did not rather choose one from among them to command; secondly (they have a way in their language of calling men the halves of one another) that they had observed that there were among us men full and crammed with all kinds of good things, while their halves were begging at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these needy halves were able to suffer such an injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.

I talked to one of them a long while, but I had an interpreter who followed so badly and whose stupidity hindered him so from taking in my ideas that I could scarcely get any satis-

faction out of him. When I asked him what advantage he received from the superiority he had among his own people (for he was a captain and our mariners called him king), he told me that it was to march foremost in war. How many men followed him? He showed me a space of ground to signify as many as could be contained in such a space, which might be four or five thousand men. Did all his authority expire with the war? He said this much remained, that when he visited the villages that depended on him, they cleared him paths through the underbrush by which he might pass at his ease.

All this is not too bad. But hold on! They don't wear breeches.