

Of Revenge

by Francis Bacon

(1561-1626)

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it offends only the law; but the revenge of that wrong goes past the law.

Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon. And Solomon, I am sure, said, "It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence. That which is past is gone, and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do with things present and to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves that labor in past matters."

No man does a wrong for the wrong's sake, but wrongs to purchase himself profit, or pleasure, or honor, or the like. Therefore why should I be angry with a man for loving himself better than me? And if any man should do wrong, merely out of ill-nature, why, yet it is but like the thorn or briar, which prick and scratch, because they can do no other.

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy; but then let a man take heed, the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; else a man's enemy is still before hand, and it is two for one. Some when they take revenge desire the party should know from where the revenge came. This is the more generous. For the delight seems to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent.

But base and crafty cowards are like the arrow that flies in the dark. Cosmus, duke of Florence, had a desperate saying against perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable; You shall read (says he) that we are commanded to forgive our enemies; but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends. But yet the spirit of Job was in a better tune: Shall we (says he) take good at God's hands, and not be content to take evil also? And so of friends in a proportion. This is certain, that a man that seeks revenge keeps his own wounds green which otherwise would heal over and do well.

Public revenges are for the most part fortunate; as that for the death of Caesar; for the death of Pertinax; for the death of Henry the Third of France; and many more. But in private revenges, it is not so. No, rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches who, as they are mischievous, so they are unfortunate in their death.