

That our actions should be judged by our intentions

(Edited)

DEATH, it is said, releases us from all our obligations. But I know some who have taken this saying in a special sense. King Henry the Seventh of England made an agreement with Don Philip, son of the Emperor Maximilian - or, to give him a higher title, father of the Emperor Charles V - that the said Philip should deliver into his hands his enemy the Duke of Suffolk, who had fled for refuge to the Netherlands, but this on condition that Henry should make no attempt on the life of the said Duke. But when the English king came to die, he commanded his son in his last will to put Suffolk to death immediately after his decease.

Death did not, in my opinion, excuse the English king from his promise. We cannot be held responsible beyond our strength and means, since the resulting events are quite outside our control and, in fact, we have power over nothing except our will; which is the basis upon which all rules concerning man's duty must of necessity be founded. The English king, having deliberately gone back on his word, cannot be excused merely because he postponed the performance of his treachery till after his death, any more than can the King of Egypt's mason in Herodotus, who kept the secret of his master's treasure faithfully so long as he lived, but revealed it to his children at his death.

I have known several men in my own time whose consciences have pricked them for retaining other men's property, and who have attempted in their wills to set things right after their decease. But it will not help them; no attempt to redeem an injury at so small a cost and sacrifice to themselves will be of any avail. They owe something of what is really their own. The more distressing and inconvenient the payment, the more just and meritorious is the restitution. Penitence must be felt as a weight.

It is even worse when a man who has concealed some spiteful feelings against a neighbour for the whole of his life gives vent to them in his last will. He is showing little regard for his own reputation in thus rousing the injured man's anger against his memory, and still less regard for his conscience in this failure to stifle his malice even in the presence of death, and in extending its life beyond his own. It is an unjust judge who postpones his judgments until the case is outside his jurisdiction.

I shall see to it, if I can, that my death makes no statement that my life has not made already.