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THE RELATION OF ERASMUS TO THE  
REFORMATION

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I. HISTORICAL SKETCH

Men of the present time are all too prone to look back upon the Middle Ages through the deceptive glamour which four centuries have cast over it. Not until the happenings of that era are seen through the eyes of contemporaries is one enabled to perceive clearly what was actually taking place then in Europe. And not until those events are considered in their relationship to some central happening can they be clearly understood.

1. *Early Life.*

On October 28, 1467, at Rotterdam was born an individual, one Gerrard, through whose discerning eyes all succeeding generations have been able to look back upon those chaotic times, and about whose eminent figure whirled much of the turbulence which preceded the beginnings of our own modern age.

Born a Gerrard, he soon changed his name into its Latin equivalent, Desiderius, and its Greek one, Erasmus. As Desiderius Erasmus he has come down to modern times, and under that name he shall go throughout this sketch.

Little definite information is to be had of the birth and early life of Erasmus. Much of what is written of that period is legendary. Certainly too much so to furnish the basis for its use in this story. Erasmus' own letters show that his father was at some time a monk. Of his mother little

is known except that she hoped that her youngest son might become a chorister.

Whether the point that the lad had little or no real talent along the line of singing, or that he detested it as then done, has most bearing on it, the fact remains that the chorister plan was early abandoned, and he was entered as a day pupil at a school at Deventer. There the boy, who was naturally studious, showed marked talents along other lines. He early memorized Horace and Terence, wrote verses of his own, held impromptu debates and devoured every available book. And there he was associated with many notables of the following years, among them Adrian of Utrecht, who was finally to become Pope during the dispute with Luther.

Erasmus held no exalted opinion of his master at Deventer, although he was a friend of his father's. Since this is a characteristic attitude of men of genius for those who have attempted to mold them into the common pattern, and since the friendship of the two older men continued, this fact may not mean as much as he would have it. Certainly a knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of Erasmus' later years causes one to believe that there may have been two sides to the matter.

When Erasmus was about eleven both his father and mother died. He and Peter, his older brother, were left under the joint guardianship of three of their father's friends, a banker, a schoolmaster at Goude, and a burgher, who soon died of plague. Whether their funds were dissipated through rascality or negligence, one does not know, but the boys were soon practically penniless.

Years later, in a letter<sup>1</sup> to Lambert Grunnius, an official in the Pope's court, Erasmus tells of what happened when this discovery was made. He writes vividly of existing conditions where immature children were kidnaped into religious orders, or forced by various means to take the vows. He tells of how he and Peter resisted both the pleas and the threats which were used to induce them to enter a monastery. Finally Peter gave in and left Erasmus to battle for himself

<sup>1</sup>J. A. Froude, *Life and Letters of Erasmus*, pp. 5-6, and 173-177.

in the support of his convictions and in his efforts to maintain his independence. Knowing that his health was delicate and that his constitution would not be able to bear the rigors of monastic life, even if his desires had been in that direction, Erasmus continued to hold out against it in the face of the strong efforts made to break his will.

Harassed on every side, Erasmus happened, so he thought, to call upon an acquaintance who had taken vows in a convent near Deventer. After a talk with him, Erasmus was persuaded to try a few months as boarder in an Augustinian house. This was just what the monks had been striving for. They left the boy to read undisturbed in their library, there was no fasting or other duties for him, and only the brighter side of monastic life was exposed to his view. Erasmus buried himself in his studies and forgot the troublesome question before him until time came around for him to take a novice's dress or leave the monastery.

Here Erasmus would have left, and did try to do so, but his guardians plainly showed him that he had nothing and that their responsibility for him was at an end. His friends were all against him. There seemed no place to turn but back to the monastery. Hoping that something would happen to change matters before it was too late, he became a novice. Again the monks treated him with every consideration, but there was no way to hide many of the things which so grated upon the sensibilities of the youth. Nor would his health stand the life. When he would have drawn back before taking the final vows, he was made to feel that he would be eternally disgraced and damned unless he went on. The pressure brought to bear was too much for the seventeen year old lad. He became an Augustinian monk in 1492.<sup>1</sup>

Had the prior of the convent not seen what was happening and been roused to use his influence to gain the attention of the Bishop of Cambrai for Erasmus, he would have been broken over the wheel. High-strung lad that he was, he could never have sunk to the level of the monastery brutality

<sup>1</sup>J. A. Froude, *Life and Letters of Erasmus*, chapter II.

and immorality which he later described in the above mentioned letter to Grunnius.

The Bishop of Cambrai asked the Pope to let him have the youth for his secretary. A dispensation for temporary absence was granted the boy and, in 1493,<sup>3</sup> he was taken into the household of the Bishop. This began another epoch in the life of Erasmus.

## 2. *Later Study.*

Perhaps the Bishop of Cambrai aided the young Erasmus in his escape from the convent because of altruistic motives. Perhaps he was impelled by his wish to triumph over the monks by snatching one of their most promising members from their clutches. Whatever may have been the reason, the result was a step in the achievement of the liberty toward which Erasmus always strove.

However, being a member of the Bishop's household, whether as companion, secretary, or valet, was not a bed of roses for one who rebelled at even a suspicion of restraint. Had Erasmus been of a different temperament, his story might have read far differently. Had he proved docile to the wishes of the autocratic and demanding bishop, he might have stayed in his household instead of being allowed the coveted study of theology in Paris.

This last had been the goal of all the young man's dreams since, as a youth, he had tried to persuade his brother to stand out against entering a monastery and to go instead to Paris for study. He, who had so hungered after knowledge that he had consented to the first entry into the convent as a boarder because of its library, departed for Paris full of enthusiasm for the new life.

It is true that he must still wear his monastic dress. That had been one of the provisions under which he received his dispensation to be released from residence. But his scapulary was to be worn underneath his cloak. In a letter<sup>4</sup> to Lambert

<sup>3</sup>Taylor's, *Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>Froude, J. A., *Life and Letters of Erasmus*, p. 173.