

ARTICLE IV.

THE LIFE OF ERASMUS.¹

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SEVERAL memoirs of Erasmus were written within a century after his death, as those of Rhenanus, Merula, Mercier, Birardiere, Bayle, in his Dictionary, and Du Pin, in the fifth volume of his Ecclesiastical History. At later periods, his life has been written by Knight, Beauignny, Le Clerc, Jortin, Hess, and Adolph Müller. The memoir by Le Clerc is prefixed to his complete edition of the works of Erasmus, and of this the volumes of Jortin are little more than a translation. They are written in the form of annals, showing where Erasmus was, and what he did, and what befel him from year to year. Large portions of them consist of extracts from his letters, interspersed with explanatory and critical remarks. The memoir proper is followed by a copious appendix, and by an extended review of Erasmus's character and works. The work of Jortin is called by Johnson "a dull book," but we have not found it so. To be sure, it is not written in an easy, flowing style, — the plan of the author forbade it; but it is agreeable, instructive, full of anecdote and interest, touching upon the characters and works of the friends and correspondents of Erasmus, who were the most distinguished men of his age. It can hardly be called, however, a *life* of Erasmus. It is rather *remarks* upon his life, than a continuous biography. In the following sketch, we shall be guided chiefly by the volumes of Jortin, assisted occasionally by other writers, and especially by a very instructive monograph in the London Quarterly Review for July 1859.

¹ The Life of Erasmus. By the late Rev. John Jortin, D.D., Archdeacon of London, etc. Three vols. 8vo. London. 1808.

Erasmus lived at a most exciting and critical period of the world's history. He preceded the Reformation by almost half a century, and was one of those learned, gifted, laborious men who, without knowing exactly what they were doing, prepared the way for it. It was continually in the mouths of the monks, while the Reformation was in progress, "Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it." To this Erasmus, who did not quite like the compliment, replied: "I laid a hen's egg, but Luther hatched some other kind of brood."

Not only did Erasmus prepare the way for the Reformation, he lived through the most tumultuous and critical period of it. The Reformation may be said to have commenced in the year 1517, when Luther published his theses against indulgences; Erasmus died almost twenty years later, in 1536.

The circumstances of Erasmus's birth and early education, and indeed we may say of his whole life, were against him, and yet, to his credit it should be said, he so grappled with them and rose above them as to be justly regarded the most distinguished literary character of his age, and perhaps of any age. His favor was courted by popes and prelates, emperors and kings. He corresponded familiarly with all the distinguished men, both of church and state, at the period in which he lived; and his letters, which were all in Latin, fill one of the folios of his works.

The year of Erasmus's birth is not certainly known. He did not know it himself, and his biographers are not agreed respecting it. It is quite certain, however, that he was born at Rotterdam, on the twenty-eighth day of October, in the year 1465 or 1467.

His father, whose name was Gerard, resided in Torgau, and made proposals of marriage to Margaret, the daughter of a physician of Sevenbergen. The relatives of Gerard, who intended him for a priest, were so violently opposed to the connection, that the young couple concluded to marry themselves. They solemnly plighted their faith to each other, and lived together for some years as husband and

wife. The result of their union was two sons, the youngest of whom was the personage of whom we write. He took the name of his father Gerard, which in Dutch signifies *desirable, amiable*. In Latin, this is equivalent to *Desiderius*, and in Greek to *Erasmus*. Hence, in subsequent life he chose to be called *Desiderius Erasmus*.

After the birth of the youngest son, the father was sent away by his relatives to Rome, where he employed himself in transcribing ancient authors. Ere long they informed him that Margaret was dead, which so deeply affected him, that he concluded to take orders and become a priest. Upon his return to Holland he found that he had been imposed upon, and that his beloved Margaret was yet alive. Still, he dared not violate his vow of celibacy, nor could Margaret think of marrying any other person. Henceforth they lived separate, and devoted themselves to the care of their children.

Little Gerard was sent to school when only four years of age, and soon after became a singer in the cathedral church of Utrecht. At the age of nine he went to Daventer, where he had for a school-fellow Adrianus Florentius, afterwards Pope Adrian VI. Here his progress in knowledge was surprising. He went rapidly through the whole course of scholastic training,—logic, physics, metaphysics, morals, as taught at that period, seeming to apprehend almost intuitively whatever was taught him; and so remarkable was his memory that he could repeat verbatim the greater part of Terence and Horace. Zinthius, one of the masters of the school, is said to have predicted at this time that Gerard would one day become the envy and the wonder of Germany.

At Daventer Gerard boarded in the same house with his mother, who followed him there that she might be near him. After about four or five years, she died suddenly of the plague, and he who should have been her husband was so much affected by her death, that he soon followed her to the grave; leaving his son and his property to the care of three executors, by whom the boy was hardly used.

Erasmus was now of an age to be sent to the university; but to this his guardians would not consent. Their plan was to thrust him into a convent, and share his patrimony among themselves. They first placed him in a convent school at Balduk in Brabant, where he passed, or as he says, lost, three years of his life. As he utterly refused to renounce his liberty, and take upon himself the vows of the order, he was removed by his guardians to another religious house near Delft; and afterwards to a third at Stein, near Torgau.

It may help to illustrate the spirit and practices of the age, to show how much solicitude was manifested, and what artifices were resorted to, to induce young men, and even boys, to commit themselves to conventual life. Even at Daventer, says Erasmus, "the master of the school used every endeavor to induce me to become a monk. Though of a pious disposition, I was wise enough to plead my youth, and the anger of my parents if I should do anything without their knowledge. When the good man saw that nothing else would prevail, he brought forth a crucifix, and, while I burst into tears, he said with the look of one inspired: 'Do you not acknowledge that Christ suffered for you?' I told him that I did most fervently acknowledge it. 'By him, then, I adjure you that you suffer him not to have died for you in vain. Obey my counsels, and seek the good of your soul, lest in the world to come you perish everlastingly.'"

The same course of measures, and even severer ones, were pursued at Balduk. The slightest breach of discipline was threatened with, and often followed by, a cruel punishment. The young Erasmus was once flogged for an offence of which he was not guilty, which threw him into a fever, and permanently injured his health. The most frightful stories were told him of the wickedness of the world, and the lamentable fate of young men who had withstood the admonitions of pious monks, and left the safe seclusion of the cloister. One had sat down on what seemed to be the root of a tree, but proved to be a huge serpent, which

swallowed him up. Another had no sooner left the walls of the monastery than he was devoured by a raging lion.

At Stein a false friend achieved that for Erasmus, which the importunity of his guardians and the terrors and persuasions of monks and friars had urged in vain. Cornelius Verder, whom he had known and loved at Daventer, was at Stein before him. He described the convent school as a quiet paradise for a man of letters. His time was his own, books in abundance were at his command, accomplished teachers would encourage and assist his studies, all was pure, sober enjoyment,— a pious, intellectual luxury. Erasmus listened, and, after some hesitation, entered on his probation. All passed along pleasantly for the time. He had much opportunity for study; the discipline was made easy to him; he enjoyed the society of his friends; they were even indulged in occasional pastimes, in which the good elder brothers of the convent condescended to mingle. But as the fatal day of profession approached, the courage of Erasmus began to fail him. He sent for his guardians and begged to be released. His health, he said, was feeble, and required a generous diet. He had no taste for monastic exercises. His whole heart was upon letters, according to the new light which was now dawning upon the world. But his entreaties and arguments availed nothing. All around him were hard, inexorable, and cunning. He was coaxed, flattered, threatened, compelled. St. Augustine (for they were Augustinian friars) would avenge himself on the renegade from his order. God himself would punish him who had put his hand to the plough, and turned back. Verder, too, was there with his bland and seemingly friendly influence, unwilling to lose his companion and his victim.

Erasmus could no longer resist. He took the desperate, fatal plunge. He made the vow. But his eyes were soon opened. He began to realize the consequences of the step he had taken. The quiet, the indulgence, the unbroken leisure were gone. He must submit to a harsh, capricious discipline; to rigid but not religious rules; to companion-

ship no longer genial or edifying. He was in the midst of a set of coarse, vulgar, profligate, unscrupulous men; zealots, and at the same time debauchees; idle, and tainted with all the vices which usually follow in the train of idleness. Erasmus confesses that his morals did not altogether escape the general corruption; though his feeble health, his lack of animal spirits, or his better principles, kept him back from the more shameless practices. His greatest consolation was in his books. He pursued his studies with less freedom indeed than formerly, but yet with industry and success. He here wrote a little work on "Contempt of the World," in which he denounces not only the wickedness of the world, but much more severely the ignorance, the indolence, and profligacy of the cloister. This work was published at a later period. He read with much admiration the writings of Laurentius Valla, an Italian critic, who had exposed most successfully the forgeries and impositions of Rome.

In the convent at Stein Erasmus remained about five years, dissatisfied with the greater part of his associates, and they as much dissatisfied with him. He was one among them, but not of them. He did not enjoy their society, nor they his.

At length the happy moment arrived when he was to be released. Henry à Bergis, bishop of Cambray, was projecting a visit to Rome in the hope of obtaining a cardinal's hat, and he wished some one to accompany him who could speak and write Latin easily and well. He had heard of the learning of Erasmus, and he applied both to the bishop of Utrecht and to the prior of the convent, to let him go. They gave their consent, and Erasmus went with the bishop to Cambray. But the bishop's prospects in Italy vanished, and the plan of going there was abandoned; so Erasmus remained with the bishop at Cambray, where he entered into holy orders.

During a residence here of about five years, Erasmus pursued his studies with diligence and profit. Still he was not satisfied with his situation. He longed for admittance

to some one of the great universities of Europe; and, at length, that at Paris seemed to open its gates to him. The bishop not only consented to his going, but promised him a pension for his support,—a promise which he was too poor, or too parsimonious, to fulfil. The eager student obtained what may be called a *bursary* in Montague College, but this proved altogether inadequate to his support. He had no money to pay fees for lectures, or to purchase books,—nothing but food and lodging, and these of the most miserable kind. “Our sleeping rooms,” he says, “were on the ground floor, with mouldy plastered walls, full of vermin, and in close proximity to filthy and pestilential latrine. In the depth of winter, we had only dry bread, to be washed down by fetid and unwholesome water. I saw there many youths of high hopes and promise, some of whom actually died, and others were doomed for life to madness or leprosy.”

But though in deep poverty, forsaken of friends, and suffering from harsh and unworthy treatment, the light of Erasmus could not be hid. He was gradually forcing his way to celebrity and usefulness. Even in Paris, the young scholar began to be known, and he was able to replenish his scanty resources by the instruction of private pupils. Some of these were from England, the sons of noble and wealthy parents. Among them was William Blunt, Lord Mountjoy, who removed his teacher from the pestilential precincts of the college to a purer air and better accommodations, and afterwards bestowed on him an annual pension of a hundred crowns. He continued to be his friend and patron as long as he lived.

While at Paris, Erasmus had the offer of a more noble pupil, the son of James Stanley, Earl of Derby, and son-in-law to the king's mother. The young man was soon to be made a bishop; and Erasmus was applied to, to instruct him and prepare him for his bishopric. For this service he was to receive a hundred crowns, with the promise of a benefice, and the loan of three hundred crowns until the living was bestowed. But from a love of inde-

pendence, or thinking, perhaps, that he might employ his time better than in teaching an unpromising pupil, Erasmus declined the flattering offer. He would not, he says, for all the wealth in the world, be so hindered in prosecuting his studies.

In the year 1497, Erasmus left Paris, on account of the plague, and visited the Low Countries. He here made the acquaintance of a noble lady, the Marchioness of Veré, who settled a pension upon him, and more than once assisted him in his necessities. In return, he instructed her son, Adolphus de Veré, and wrote for him the little treatise, "*De Arte Scribendi Epistolas.*"

In the following year, at the request of Mountjoy, Erasmus made his first visit to England. He was at once an object of general respect and esteem, and was welcomed by some of the highest and most gifted in the land. He commenced, almost immediately, his life-long acquaintance with Sir Thomas More, with Colet, afterwards Dean of St. Paul's, and with Grocyn and Linacer, professors of Greek at Oxford. His first impressions of England were flattering in a high degree. "You ask me," he writes to Piscator, alias Fisher, "how I am pleased with England. If you will believe me, dear Robert, nothing ever delighted me so much. I have found the climate most agreeable and healthful; and then there is so much civility and learning, and that not trite and trivial, but profound and accurate, so much familiarity with the ancient writers, Latin and Greek, that, but for the sake of seeing it, I should hardly care to visit Italy. When listening to Colet, I seem to hear Plato. And then who would not admire Grocyn's vast range of knowledge? What can be more subtle, more deep, more fine, than the judgment of Linacer? Did nature ever form a disposition more gentle, more sweet, more happy, than that of Thomas More?"

Of his host, Mountjoy, Erasmus speaks in the highest terms, and Mountjoy was equally attached to him. He was never easy, it is said, unless he was in his company. Even after his marriage, this noble lord would leave his

family, and go to Oxford, that he might pursue his studies under the direction of Erasmus.

And yet during his first visit to England Erasmus was rather a pupil than a teacher. He was already a perfect master of Latin, but not of Greek. In Oxford he found that instruction in the Greek Language which, if Paris could have furnished, he had been too poor to buy. Under Grocyn he made rapid progress, and soon became sufficiently acquainted with the language to commence his translations from ancient authors. It was by his continued translations that he perfected himself in the knowledge of Greek.

During his stay in England, Erasmus went, with Sir Thomas More, to Eltham, on a visit to the royal family. He saw here all the children of King Henry VII., with the exception of Prince Arthur, the eldest. He had much pleasant intercourse with them, more especially with Henry, afterwards Henry VIII., and left with them, at parting, a Latin ode.

Before the end of the year 1498, Erasmus returned from England to France. The next seven or eight years he spent chiefly in France and in the Low Countries, pursuing his studies with great diligence, and publishing several important works. One of those was his *Adagia*, a collection of miscellanies, of proverbs, of wise and witty sayings, of remarkable incidents, displaying an amount of research and learning at which the literary world was astonished. Another of his publications at this period was his "Enchiridion Militis Christiani," which he wrote, he tells us, "not for the sake of showing his eloquence, but to correct the error of those who make religion to consist in rites and ceremonies, to the neglect of piety and true virtue." Such a work, in those days, was "New Divinity," which exposed its author to the censure of the monks.

During this interval Erasmus was oppressed with deep poverty, as, indeed, he was through the greater part of his life. He was continually making literary presents to his wealthy friends, and soliciting aid from them, which came

always in stinted measure, and frequently not at all. He supported himself, in part, by teaching in a private way; and what money he received he expended, first, as he tells us, "in the purchase of Greek books, and afterwards of clothes." His health, too, was precarious and low. For several years he had an annual attack of fever, from which he was relieved through the intercession of St. Genevieve, though not without the aid of a skilful physician.

Erasmus's second visit to England, in the year 1506, was short. He was introduced to Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom he presented, with a Dedicatory Epistle, his translation of the Hecuba of Euripides. The archbishop received him with great kindness, made him a small present, and continued to be his friend and patron so long as he lived.

The following year Erasmus visited Italy, having under his care and instruction two young men. He had expected to find Italy the pleasant and peaceful sanctuary of arts, letters, and religion; but instead of this, he found the whole country convulsed and desolated with war. Julius II. now occupied the pontifical throne, whose whole ambition was to lead an army, and extend his dominions by conquest and blood. Erasmus first stopped at Turin, where he remained several months, and where he received a doctor's degree. He passed on to Bologna, but had scarcely arrived there, when the city was besieged by the pontiff's soldiers, with Julius himself at their head. He retired to Florence, but returned to Bologna just in time to witness the triumphant entrance of the pope into the captured city. From Bologna he made an excursion to Rome, where he again witnessed a gorgeous ovation of the martial pontiff. The effect of all this on the mind of Erasmus was anything but agreeable. He could not help contrasting it with what he knew to be the peaceful spirit of the gospel; and he poured forth his feelings in a dissertation, which was published in the next edition of his *Adagia*.

While Erasmus was at Bologna, the plague broke out here, and the physicians and those who nursed the infected

persons were required to wear a white cloth over their shoulders, that they might be known and avoided. This white cloth looked very much like the white scapular which Erasmus still wore, as the badge of his monastic order. In repeated instances he was mistaken for an infected person, and, as he came among the people, was mobbed and stoned. To prevent such occurrences in future, he got permission from the pope to change his friar's habit for that of a common priest.

From Bologna, Erasmus removed to Venice, where he superintended the publication of several of his works. We next hear of him at Padua, where he found a natural son of James IV., of Scotland, a youth not yet twenty years old, but already Archbishop of St. Andrews. Erasmus took him under his charge, and instructed him in rhetoric, Greek, law, divinity, and music. He is represented as a youth of singular beauty, and of a sweet disposition. He afterwards fell, at his father's side, in the battle of Flodden Field.

Erasmus now went to Rome a second time, where he was received with open arms by the literati of the city, among whom were the Cardinal St. George, the Cardinal of Viterbo, and the Cardinal de Medici, afterwards Pope Leo X. He describes, in one of his letters, his interview with the Cardinal Grimani, who displayed not only the courtesy of a high-born and accomplished churchman, but a respect, amounting to deference, for the poor, adventurous scholar. "He received me," says Erasmus, "with the utmost courtesy, as if I had been a cardinal, conversed with me two hours upon literary subjects, and would not suffer me, all the while, to uncover my head; and upon my offering to rise when his nephew, an archbishop, came in, he ordered me to keep my seat, saying that it was but decent that the scholar should stand in presence of his master. In the course of our conversation, he earnestly entreated me not to think of leaving Rome, and offered to make me partaker of his house and fortunes. At length, he showed me his library, which was full of books, in all languages, and is

esteemed the best in Italy, except the Vatican. If I had known Grimani sooner, I certainly should not have left Rome; but I was under engagements to return to England, which I could not break."

Even Pope Julius II. condescended to notice Erasmus at this time, and offered him the rank, the office, and emoluments of one of his penitentiaries. The Pope, who was just entering upon a war against the Venetians, also put the scholar upon a singular test. He commanded him to declaim one day against the Venetian war, and the next day in its favor. Erasmus complied with the injunction, and although, as he tells us, he argued much more strongly against the war than for it, still the conflict went on.

In April, 1509, Henry VIII. ascended the throne of England. In the previous year, he had written to Erasmus, expressing an earnest desire to see him. Mountjoy, also, wrote him from the court at Greenwich, urging him to return to England, holding out the certain favor of the king, and promising him the patronage of Archbishop Warham, who sent him five pounds towards the expense of his journey. Erasmus commenced his journey without delay, crossing the Rhoetian Alps, and passing down the Rhine into the Low Countries, from whence, after a short respite at Louvain, he went over to England. On his way to London, he was shown all the treasures of the church of Canterbury. He mentions — not without a covert sneer — the amount of relics collected there, — "the bones, skulls, chins, teeth, hands, fingers, arms," etc., — all which he was permitted to handle and to kiss. But he was frightened at the profaneness of one of his companions, who, instead of kissing the holy relic, made "a most unseemly noise at it with his lips."

In London, Erasmus took up his lodgings in the Augustinian convent, where his expenses were paid by his friend Mountjoy. His promises of promotion and patronage by the young king were not fulfilled. His promises, too, from Cardinal Woolsey were no better than the wind. They were large in words, but in fulfilment they came to nothing.

He found a more reliable friend in Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and Chancellor of the University at Cambridge. Fisher was an open advocate of the new learning, and was resolutely determined to emancipate Cambridge from the scholastic trammels in which it had been so long confined. Through his influence Erasmus was called to the university, and constituted professor of Greek. He had his lodgings in Queen's College, where his rooms were long after shown, and where a walk is still called by his name.

At first, his scholars were but few, and his income small, and his friends were under the necessity of soliciting aid for him from other sources. But after two or three years, his prospects brightened, and he became more reconciled to his situation. Archbishop Warham's liberality was free and unremitting, and the gratitude of Erasmus was in due proportion. Warham gave him the living of Adlington, near Ashford, in Kent, to which he was collated in March, 1511. He resigned it, however, before the end of the year, and from motives which did him honor: "I cannot pretend to feed a flock of whose language I know nothing."

Erasmus had no love for modern languages, and neglected them almost entirely. He never learned English or Italian. The French, notwithstanding his long residence at Paris, he spoke but imperfectly, and the same may be said of the Dutch, his mother tongue. He thought, spoke, and wrote in Latin, caring to associate only with the literati of different countries, to whom this language was familiar.

During his sojourn in England, of about four years, Erasmus became exceedingly attached to a few select friends, such as More and Warham, Colet and Mountjoy. It was at the house of More that he wrote his "Encomium Moriae," or "Praise of Folly," in which he lashed the fooleries and superstitions of the monks in a manner which they could never forgive or forget. He did great service to Colet's school at St. Paul's, in composing hymns and prayers for the pupils, and preparing for their use a grammatical work, "De Copia Verborum."

Still, it is doubtful whether Erasmus was ever thoroughly pleased with England. In several of his letters, he speaks rather severely of the English character and habits. Thus, in writing to his friend Ammonius, he instructs him how to make his fortune in England: "First of all," says he, "be impudent. Thrust yourself into all affairs; elbow those who stand in your way; neither love nor hate any one in good earnest, but consult your own advantage; give away nothing without a sure prospect of gaining by it; and be of the opinion of every one with whom you have to do." Erasmus was too frank and honest to descend to such courses as these, and hence he had little prospect of becoming a great man in England.

Erasmus complains also of the filthy habits of the English people, to which he ascribes the frequent prevalence among them of the plague, the sweating sickness, and other mortal disorders. "The streets," he says, "are filthy, and the floors of their houses, which are commonly of clay, are strewed over with rushes, under which lies, unmolested, any quantity of slopped beer, grease, fragments, bones, spittle, excrements of dogs and cats, and everything else which is odious and intolerable." Let us be thankful for the improvements which have taken place in the new world, upon the modes of living among our English ancestors of the fifteenth century.

Induced by what he conceived to be more flattering prospects, Erasmus left England, in the year 1514, and returned to the continent. Charles of Austria (afterwards the Emperor Charles V.) had appointed him an honorary counsellor, with a pension of two hundred florins. The Cardinal de Medici, who had showed him so much kindness at Rome, and who he hoped would now increase his favors, had been elected pontiff, with the title of Leo X. A bishopric in Sicily was also held out to him, which, however, he failed to receive. In addition to all the rest, his old convent of Stein, wishing to share in the fame of the great scholar who had been permitted to leave its walls, urged upon him a request to return. The answer of Erasmus to

this request sets forth, in the strongest terms, his objections to monastic life. "What," he exclaims, "can be more corrupt and wicked than these relaxed religious houses? Consider even those which are in the best repute, and you will find in them nothing which resembles Christianity, but only cold, Judaical observances. Upon these the religious orders value themselves, and by them they judge and despise others. Would it not be better, according to the doctrine of our Saviour, to look upon all Christendom as one house, one family, one monastery, and upon all Christians as one brotherhood? Would it not be better to regard the sacrament of baptism as the most sacred of all vows, and never trouble ourselves where we live, if we only live well?"

For the next six or seven years Erasmus seems not to have cared much where he lived. We find him in Flanders, at Basle, at Brussels, and in several other places, always busy, always poor, and ever complaining of feeble health. He wrote many letters, made many valuable acquaintances, and published some of the more important of his works, particularly his New Testament, in Greek and Latin, and his valuable edition of the works of Jerome. These were printed at Basle, by Frobenius, who was ever afterward the friend of Erasmus, and aided him in most of his publications.

In the year 1515, Martin Dorpius published strictures upon Erasmus's "Encomium Moriae," or "Praise of Folly." He is said to have been the first who ever wrote against him. But from this time onward his adversaries multiplied thick and fast, and too much of his time was taken up in replying to them.

We have now pursued the history of Erasmus to the opening of the Reformation from Popery. A poor, friendless boy at the first,—a wanderer, for most of the time, from one country to another, and dependent entirely on his own efforts and on the charity of friends,—he now stood before the world as one of the first scholars and theologians in Europe. Reuchlin, alias Caprio, was his superior in Hebrew and Oriental learning, to which Erasmus made no

pretensions ; Budaëus was thought to excel him in Greek ; the Ciceronians of Italy might surpass him in the purity and elegance of their Latin ; but he was more than their equal in the command of a free, vigorous, idiomatic style. In wit and satire he had no rivals, unless it were in the author of the "*Epistolæ Obscurorum Virorum*," which were persistently, though falsely, ascribed to him.¹

Nothing can more clearly show the position of Erasmus at this time, than the earnest desire of the great potentates of Europe, civil and ecclesiastical, for the honor of his residence in their dominions. Charles V., both before and after his advancement to the empire, had shown him distinguished honor. Francis I. had repeatedly urged him to take up his abode in France, and become connected with the University of Paris. Henry VIII. had with reluctance allowed him to depart from England, and would have welcomed him back on almost any terms. The Archduke Ferdinand of Austria had paid him the highest court. The Elector of Bavaria made him splendid offers to undertake the Presidency of his University of Ingolstadt.

There may be ostentation in some of the epistles of Erasmus, in which he recounts the letters, the invitations, and the magnificent presents which he had received from different prelates and potentates. "From the Emperor Charles V.," says he, "I have many letters, written with so much affection and esteem, that I prize them even more than his

¹ These once celebrated Letters purport to have been written by monks, in which they discourse together, in their barbarous Latin, of the affairs of the times, and of religious subjects. They address to one Eratius, their correspondent at Cologne, the most trivial and senseless questions. They discover, with the utmost simplicity, their gross ignorance, credulity, and superstition ; their low and vulgar spirit ; and at the same time their pride, and their fanatical and persecuting zeal. They relate to him many of their low adventures and debaucheries, and the scandalous conduct of some of their leaders. These Letters are so much to the life, that many of the monks were completely duped by them. They thought them to have been written in the interest and for the defence of their order. A prior of Brabant is said to have bought a large number of copies, to be distributed among the Dominicans.

In his paroxysms of laughter over these letters, Erasmus is said to have broken a painful abscess on his face, which the physicians were about to open.

kindness to me ; to which I owe a great part of my fortune. From King Ferdinand I have as many not less friendly, and always accompanied by some honorary gift. How often, too, have I been invited, and on the most liberal terms, by the king of France? The king of England, by frequent letters and unsolicited presents, is always declaring his singular good will. His Queen Catharine, the best of women in this age, vies with her husband in this respect. Sigismund, the king of Poland, sent me a letter with a royal gift. The Duke of Saxony often addresses letters to me, and never without a valuable present."

Leo X. was among the correspondents and patrons of Erasmus, and accepted the dedication of his New Testament. Adrian VI., who had been his school-fellow at Daventer, offered him a deanery, which he thought proper to decline. Clement VII. sent him a present of two hundred florins, and made him still greater promises, which were not fulfilled. Near the close of his life, Paul III. offered him the provostship of Daventer, worth six hundred florins a year, and had serious thoughts of making him a cardinal. We might proceed, and fill a page with distinguished names, cardinals, bishops, and men of letters, all of whom had correspondence with Erasmus, and deemed it an honor to be reckoned among his friends.

It may be inquired here: How had Erasmus, the poor, friendless scholar, achieved so lofty a position? What had he done to attract the notice and admiration of Christendom, and make kings and princes, popes and prelates, so anxious to be near him, and to enjoy his friendship? The answer to these questions must be sought in the circumstances of the times, and in the indefatigable and highly successful labors of Erasmus for their development. The darkness of the Middle Ages was now passing away; the light of sound learning was beginning to shine; and those who labored successfully for its diffusion were greater celebrities at that period than they could have been at almost any other. Besides, the distinguished men of that age felt their indebtedness to Erasmus; they felt under obligations to him for

what he had done; and this sense of obligation they were led to manifest in ways such as have been mentioned.

In the first place, Erasmus had been the chief promoter of *polite literature* and of *classical learning*, in central and western Europe. By his translations of the Greek, and his improved editions of the Latin classics,—to say nothing of his own merely literary publications,—he had awakened an interest in subjects of this nature, and opened a new world to the gaze and the admiration of future explorers.

Then he was the declared enemy of the dominant scholasticism, monkery, and other superstitions of the Middle Ages, of which the world was becoming weary—which were “waxing old, and ready to vanish away.” He knew what monkery was, for he had been forced into it in early life; and he lost no opportunity to avenge himself of it in maturer years. And the more his works on this subject were opposed, the more they circulated. Of his “Praise of Folly,” twenty-seven editions were published during the lifetime of the author. His “Colloquies” were in every library, and in almost every school. Not less than twenty thousand copies were sold by a single publisher.

Erasmus may also be regarded as the father of true *Biblical criticism*; which was another reason for his extended fame. By his publication of the New Testament, and by his Notes and Paraphrases on the sacred writings, he introduced a new era in sacred learning, and gave the Bible to western Europe. It is said that there was never a Greek Testament in northern and western Europe until that of Erasmus was published. The Latin Vulgate was the standard in the whole Romish church, as it is to this day.

Still another reason for the extended fame of Erasmus grew out of his new and corrected editions of the early Fathers. Among these were the works of Jerome, his first and favorite author, of Cyprian, of the pseudo-Arnobius, of Hilary, of Irenaeus, of Ambrose, Augustine, and Lactantius. He published parts of the works of Athanasius, of Basil, and of Chrysostom, and at the time of his death

had advanced far in preparing for the press the entire works of Origen. When we think that these works were in many folios, and closely printed, we are amazed at the industry of the compiler and commentator, and do not wonder at the eminence to which he attained. It was by means of these volumes, in great measure, that he supplanted the scholasticism of the previous ages, and brought back the world to the purer and more practical theology of primitive times.

At the period to which we have now arrived, we behold Erasmus at the summit of his glory and influence. Had he died at this time, it might have been happier for himself and his reputation. The world would have lost some of his valuable publications, but it would have been spared others which certainly add nothing to his fame.

A new era was now beginning to open. A new character was coming upon the stage, whose name had already filled the whole Western horizon. From the proceedings and discussions of Luther at Wittenberg, from the embers of the papal bull which he had openly burned there, arose the Reformation. That Erasmus had done much to prepare the way for it was undeniable. Shall he now welcome it, cast in his lot with it, and labor shoulder to shoulder with the brave men who are straining every nerve to push it forward; or shall he cling to the church in which he has always lived, to which all his noble, royal friends and patrons are attached, and where all his interests seem to lie; or shall he attempt to maintain a stately neutrality, approve each party so far as it is right, condemn it where it seems to be wrong, and endeavor to bring about a reconciliation? These were hard questions for Erasmus in that trying day; questions which he knew not how to solve; and which neither party would allow him to solve according to his unbiassed judgment. For each was using every means in its power to compass the invaluable proselyte, and bring him over to its own side.

Erasmus had been chiefly a man of letters, and was constitutionally a man of peace. He desired a reformation, and had labored to accomplish it, but he hoped to bring it

about in a peaceful way. He had hoped that the progress of learning would soften and enlighten the general mind; that by the diffusion of knowledge the prevailing superstitions would be overthrown; that biblical studies would of themselves promote a truer and purer religion; that perhaps Leo X., the patron of arts and of letters, might become the great reformer of the church. That such were the anticipations of Erasmus at this critical period, there can be little doubt, and that they were entirely futile and fallacious, is equally clear. He understood not the nature of the questions at issue, nor the magnitude of the interests which were depending on either side, nor the strength with which the advocates of the old religion would cling to their favorite superstitions, nor the deadly strife which would be necessary in order to tear them away. The times that were coming were emphatically such as to try men's souls; and the event proved that the soul of Erasmus was not equal to the trial.

In the early part of the Reformation, Erasmus contrived to stand pretty well with both parties. The monks, indeed, and the inferior catholic clergy hated and denounced him, but the pontiff, the cardinals, and the more distinguished prelates treated him with honor and respect.

Of Luther, at this period, Erasmus was accustomed to speak with reserve, but not in terms of hostility or reproach. Thus, in a letter to Melanchthon, in 1519, he says: "All the world is agreed in commending the moral character of Luther; but as touching his writings, there are various opinions. I have not as yet read his works. He hath given us good advice on certain points. God grant that his success may be equal to the liberty he hath undertaken."

The same year, Luther sent a very courteous and civil letter to Erasmus. He took it for granted that Erasmus was on his side, because he had declared himself so strongly against the monks. Erasmus replied, calling Luther "his dearest brother in Christ," and informing him of the excitement which his works had occasioned at Louvain. "As to

myself," says he, "I told the divines of the university that it would be better for them to publish a solid answer to your works, than to rail at you before the populace, especially as no objections could be raised against your moral character. I have read portions of your Commentary on the Psalms, and like it much, and hope it may do great good." Erasmus goes on to tell Luther that many persons in England and in the Low Countries approved of his writings. He exhorts him to moderation in his language, and to content himself with attacking, not the persons of popes and kings, but rather those evil counsellors who imposed upon them, and made a bad use of their authority.

But, notwithstanding all these kind and civil expressions, Erasmus was not prepared to go all lengths with Luther, or to commit himself to the support of his cause. He hated strife; he hated controversy, and preferred rather to surrender some portion of the truth, than, in maintaining it, to disturb the peace of the world. Besides, he had not the courage or the spirit of a martyr. He confesses as much as this in a letter to the Dean of St. Paul's, written in 1521. "Wherein could I have assisted Luther," says he, "if I had declared myself for him, and shared the danger along with him? Only thus far, that, instead of one man, two would have perished. It is true that he has given us many a wholesome doctrine, and many a good counsel; and I wish that he had not defeated the good effects of them by his insufferable faults. But if he had written everything in the most unexceptionable manner, *I had no inclination to die for the sake of the truth. Every man has not the courage to be a martyr, and I am afraid if I were put to the trial of Peter, that I should imitate him in his fall.*"

It was well that the world, at that period, had men of sterner stuff than this; men who dared to stand up on God's behalf; who counted not their lives dear unto themselves, that so they might finish their course with joy. Still, "we must not judge too severely those timid spirits who are not endowed with this sublimer virtue." Erasmus desired a reformation, while he unwittingly shrunk from the

only method in which, as things then were, a reformation could be accomplished. He still pleased himself with the hope of a tranquil reformation, carried on and consummated by princes and prelates, popes and kings. As one well expresses it, "he dreamed that the clergy of that day, corrupt as most of them were to the very core, could be persuaded to forego all those accumulated superstitions on which their power and influence rested, and become mild, holy, self-denying pastors; that sovereigns like Charles V., and Francis I., and Henry VIII., each a bigot in his way, might forget their feuds, and conspire for the reëstablishment of a pure and apostolical church; that popes like the voluptuous Leo X., or the cold and narrow Adrian, or the worldly and intriguing Clement VII., should become the apostles of a simple, evangelical creed; that the edifice of sacerdotal power and authority, which had been growing up for centuries, would crumble away before the genial influence of learning and persuasion. Erasmus, we repeat, may have dreamed of such a thing, and for a time directed his course accordingly; but, as might have been expected, the progress of events soon spoiled the dream, and dissipated the delusion.

Erasmus's controversy with Hutten was a disgrace to both parties. Hutten had undertaken to drive Erasmus from his position of neutrality, and compel him to take sides with Luther. For this purpose he had, in his letters, expostulated with him, had entreated him, reproached and warned him: "Will they who have condemned Luther be induced to spare you? No; fly while you can, and preserve yourself for us. Fly to some place of refuge, where the vengeance of *your* enemies, and of *ours*, cannot overtake you."

From this time, Erasmus did reside chiefly in the Protestant city of Basle; not, however, as *he* would allow, from a regard to his personal safety, but for the more convenient publishing of his works. Here Hutten came to make him a visit, but Erasmus refused to see him. On retiring from Basle, Hutten sent back what he called his "*Expостulatio*,"

which, "in fury of invective, in bitterness of satire, and in the mastery of vituperative Latin," is said to have exceeded everything which that age of violence had before produced. In none of these properties, however, did it exceed the reply of Erasmus, which, under the title of "The Sponge," he immediately hurled back. Luther had often been censured for intemperance of language in his controversial papers, but he had never descended to the style of either of these wretched publications. He is said to have "stood aghast at them," and to have expressed his grave and sober condemnation of them both.

It was too late, after this, for Erasmus to think of acting as mediator between the two contending parties. He had forfeited his position of neutrality, and turned away from the side of the reformers. And subsequent events soon drove him still further away. The peasant war broke out in 1525, desolating southern Germany with atrocities which were surpassed only by the atrocities resorted to to support it. And this was soon followed by the uprising and extravagances of the Anabaptists. Although Luther denounces these proceedings with all the vehemence of which he was capable, inculcating an absolute submission in things temporal, to the higher powers, still his enemies laid hold of them, and endeavored to turn them against the Reformation. "See what your agitation and opposition to the established order of things has resulted in! We told you in season towards what your efforts were tending, but you would not hear. Nought remains, but you must now eat the fruit of your own way, and take the consequences of your folly."

Erasmus was shocked with these new commotions, and was more than ever disposed to stand aloof from the reformers. He was half persuaded to listen to the entreaties of his Catholic friends, and take up his pen in their defence. At this juncture, Luther wrote him a long and friendly letter, the principal object of which was, not to induce him to espouse his cause, but to hold him back from open opposition. "I never wished," says he, "that, forsaking or neg-

lecting your own measure of grace, you should enter our camp. You might, indeed, have aided us much by your wit and your eloquence ; but, since you have not the disposition and the courage for this, we would have you serve God in your own way. Only we feared, lest our adversaries should entice you to write against us, and that necessity should compel us to oppose you to your face. If you cannot, dear Erasmus, assert *our opinions*, be persuaded to let them alone, and treat of subjects more suited to your taste."

Erasmus must have been moved by this friendly and gentle entreaty ; and yet he was too deeply committed, or too far advanced in his work, to be deterred from the fatal step. A book must be written against the Lutherans ; and on what subject shall he write ? He selects a subject quite remote from the great controversy in hand, one which long had been, and still was, debated in the Romish church,—the question respecting what had been called by Augustine, and was called by Luther, *the bondage of the will*. This question did not relate, as some have supposed, to *the free, responsible agency of man*. Luther believed in free agency as fully as Erasmus. But the question turned rather on *the natural and entire depravity of man*,—on what Paul calls "*the bondage of corruption*,"—by which the human will is enslaved. It belonged rather to the Pelagian controversy, than to the great struggle of the Reformation.

And yet Erasmus did not so conceive of it. He did not correctly understand it. He wrote a long and wordy "*Diatribes de Libero Arbitrio*," elegant in style, but lacking in point and substance, which neither convinced the Lutherans, nor satisfied those of the other party. In his reply to the "*Diatribes*," Luther admits that the composition is very elegant, but insists that the matter is contemptible, comparing it to "an excrement in a golden dish." Erasmus rejoined, in a work entitled "*Hyperaspistes*;" but the controversy gained him little favor with the Catholics, and added nothing to his fame.

From this time, Erasmus became, in his sympathies,

more and more a Papist, though he never regained the confidence of the high papal party. At Paris, his books were burned, and, what is worse, his friend Berquin was burned for translating and circulating them. Still, Erasmus clung to the persecuting church, and even framed an apology for it in the case of Berquin. "It is better to err in this way," says he, "than to permit the unbridled license which prevails in some parts of Germany, where the pope is antichrist, the cardinals the creatures of antichrist, the bishops monsters, the clergy swine, the monasteries conventicles of satan, and the princes tyrants."¹

The revolution which took place in England, in the year 1533, also had an effect to prejudice Erasmus the more against the Reformation. The king divorced his wife Catharine, renounced the pope, and constituted himself the head of the English church. And not only so, he commenced persecuting, with fire and sword, all who would not admit his supremacy and sanction his violent proceedings. Among the sufferers were two of Erasmus's most valued English friends, Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and Sir Thomas More. More, like Erasmus, had been growing more papistical with advancing years. In his later writings, he had showed himself the determined apologist of all the abuses of the old system, — pilgrimages, image-worship, purgatory, monkery, — things at which he had laughed, with Erasmus, twenty years before. He had learned even to connive at palpable persecution; and now the measure which he was prepared to mete to others was meted out to him. For denying the king's supremacy, he was beheaded on Tower Hill, July 5, 1535.

The last dozen years of Erasmus's life were spent almost wholly at Basle. He had many invitations to visit Rome, and other Catholic cities and countries, but he always excused himself on the ground of ill health. The probability is, that, Catholic as he was, he dared not trust himself among bigoted Catholics.

¹ Erasmus came, at last, to advocate deadly persecution in certain cases. In his tract against the Evangelicals he maintains that some heretics may lawfully be put to death, as rioters and blasphemers.

He had long suffered from a disease of the kidneys, inducing gravel, or the stone, but his last sickness was dysentery. He was sensible that he was going, several weeks before his death, and spoke of his departure with entire composure. He died in a Protestant city, July 12, 1536, without craving or receiving any of those rites which Romanists think so important at the last. He was buried in the cathedral church at Basle, where his tomb, with a Latin inscription, remains to this day.

In person, Erasmus is represented as small in stature, but well shaped, of a fair complexion, with light hair, blue eyes, a cheerful countenance, and very neat in his apparel. He had a feeble constitution, a prodigious memory, and an ease and fluency of expression which rendered him a most agreeable companion. He was remarkable for his wit, of which his earlier writings furnish many examples. Some of his sarcastic and witty expressions have been often quoted, and will be long remembered. Thus, when inquired of by the Elector of Saxony in regard to Luther and the Reformation, with an affected gravity, he replied: "Luther has committed two unpardonable offences. He has touched the pope's crown and the monks' bellies."

When informed, at a later period, of Luther's marriage, he exclaimed: "This is just as I expected. The tragedy has ended, like a comedy, with a wedding."

In his note to Archbishop Warham, who had sent him a horse, Erasmus says: "I have received your horse,—a good creature, free from all the mortal sins, except gluttony and laziness. He has some of the qualities, too, of a holy father confessor, being modest, humble, chaste, peaceable, and never bites or kicks."

During the greater part of his life, as we have seen, Erasmus was poor and dependant. At some periods, he seems to have been a persistent beggar. But in his last years, owing to diminished expenses, or to a larger income from his works, he was enabled to lay by a comfortable estate. He left property to the amount of more than seven thousand ducats, the most of which he ordered to be dis-

tributed, to relieve the poor and the sick, to furnish marriage dowers to deserving young women, and to assist young men of good character in entering upon the business of life.

The first edition of the works of Erasmus was published at Basle, by Frobenius, in 1540, in nine folio volumes. A second and more complete edition was published at Leyden, in 1706, in ten volumes folio, under the care and inspection of Le Clerc.

As to the character of Erasmus, it is needless to offer much additional remark. He was early enlightened as to the spiritual nature of religion, and the futility and danger of most of the popish ceremonies and superstitions. He opposed and ridiculed them as heartily as Luther. He loved the Bible, and spent much of his time and labor in the study of it, and in making it accessible to others. Still, he could not separate himself entirely from the church of Rome. There were ties binding him to it which he could not sever. And when he was charged with cowardice, with treachery to his own convictions, and with the vain attempt to steer between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, he indignantly repelled the charge. "I am not trying," he said, "to steer between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, but rather between Sylla and Charybdis."

We do not say that Erasmus was not a Christian, even in the best sense of the term. We hope and trust that he was. But he had many infirmities, which require to be overlooked, — *faults*, even, for which we search in vain for a sufficient apology. He is chiefly to be respected as a man of *letters*, who, in the great period of dawning intellect, stood first among the foremost, tearing away the rubbish of the Middle Ages, and preparing for the triumphs which were soon to follow. If not directly connected with the Reformation, he was the *forerunner* of it, commissioned, like the Nazarite of old, to prepare the way of the Lord.