



DESIDERIUS ERASMUS: THE HEN THAT LAID THE EGG OF LUTHER

JULY 10, 1520. CALAIS.



FLAGS FURLED AND snapped above the tents as raindrops spurted from the gray skies. On one side of the camp, banners identified the rain-stained tents of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. On the opposite side flew the emblems of Henry VIII, King of England. Between them on the hill stood a large square tent, one side rolled up into a wide entrance.

Inside stretched a long table. King Henry, tall and barrel-chested, sat at one end, facing the slim young Emperor Charles. At the emperor's elbow stood a middle-aged man in a black cloak and cap. He listened quietly, his broad lips pressed together in concentration. His gaze remained fixed on the counselor at Henry's side, who stood straight and tall with his hands clasped behind him.

The talks had come to a successful close. Both rulers set their seals on the treaty before them. Rising, they shook hands and exited the tent, departing in opposite directions. The soldiers and members of their courts filed out behind them.



Soon the two legal advisors were alone in the big room, the wet canvas flapping in the wind outside.

"It has been a long time!" cried Henry's advisor, Sir Thomas More, pulling his friend into a hearty embrace.

"Far too long," agreed the black-capped Desiderius Erasmus, his voice vibrating as Thomas thumped him on the back. "But what happy circumstances bring us together now!"

"Peace is a worthy legacy, eh, my friend?"

"For peace, I will venture even into this rain. God must have provided it so you would not be homesick for England."

Thomas laughed. "Do you not miss our English rains?" He carried a chair from one end of the table to the other and they sat down together.

"My days in England are among my fondest memories, but the rain I can do without."

"My home is at your disposal anytime you can visit." Thomas pulled a bundle of paper from inside his vest. "Here. I had started a letter to you when I received word we would meet on this field."

"Thank you. Are you still collecting coins?" asked Erasmus.

"Of course."

"I acquired these from a friend." He produced a silk pouch from the pocket tied inside his robe and emptied six Roman coins into Thomas's hand.

"Ah! They're exquisite!" Thomas beamed at him. "How thoughtful of you."

Erasmus leaned forward with a look of conspiracy. "So. I understand this was not your first treaty in this field."

"Your source is correct," said Thomas, chuckling. "We met with King Francis near here only a month ago. But it is no secret, even if the rumors are a bit outlandish."

"Some say the two kings were so happy to see each other that they danced through the field," said Erasmus, leaning back in his chair.

Thomas laughed. "Like I said, the rumors exaggerate!"

"But it was more than a simple treaty talk," insisted Erasmus. "The meeting is being called the Field of Cloth of Gold."

Thomas nodded. "It was full of pomp and extravagance, all Cardinal Wolsey's idea. Our good friend John Fisher believes he could find at least two sermons' worth of material from the excesses displayed there! I've never seen so much feasting, jousting, and dancing. Both kings nearly went bankrupt showing off their treasures. They even had a man who could put both legs behind his head and walk on his arms."

Erasmus rolled his eyes with disdain. "Some people pick strange careers."

Thomas leaned in. "The secret is that the meeting was an expensive failure. Wolsey tells the story differently, of course, but the truth is that Francis challenged Henry to a wrestling match." He paused for effect. "Henry lost more than his temper."

Erasmus's eyebrows shot up. "It would take a powerful man to out-wrestle Henry! What happened?"

"Sorry, I am sworn to secrecy," Henry grinned. "You know how it is for us royal counselors." But his smile quickly faded. "However, there is something pressing we must discuss."

Erasmus shuffled in his chair. "You speak of Luther."

"Yes. The monk who will be the death of us all." Thomas shook his head in disapproval. "It is always the monks who cause trouble."

"I was a monk," reminded Erasmus.

"You make my point!" said Thomas, grinning again. "You hated being a monk, but you're still a troublemaker. Your most recent book does nothing but mock the monastic orders."

"Monasteries are full of hypocrites and greedy fiends," declared Erasmus, jabbing a finger in the air for emphasis.

"Well, yes, and I've had plenty of letters from monks asking me never to associate with you again."

"I do hope you don't listen to them."

"I do not," assured Thomas. "But if you put your support behind this Luther, you put yourself at risk. He is seeking your support, isn't he?"

"He is," Erasmus admitted. "And he's sharp. But he is not as bad as people say. He just wants to reform the church as many of us do."

"My friend, I know that you desire reformation in the church more than most, but you do not want to be entangled with this rebellious man. The pope has issued an edict against him!"

"I read it," said Erasmus, rolling his eyes again. "The pope calls him 'a wild boar invading the vineyard.' Colorful language indeed."

"Your name is being associated with his. If you are not careful, you could find yourself facing the pope's anger, too."

"My edition of the Greek New Testament was dedicated to the pope," reminded Erasmus. "He won't soon forget that."

"The pope has a short memory for those who oppose him."

"You have to admit that Luther is right in many ways," insisted Erasmus. "He is pointing the church back to the gospel and away from corruption and political ambitions. He teaches faith in Christ alone. How can we argue with that?"

Thomas squinted at him. "Are you a Lutheran?"

Erasmus stood abruptly. "I am a Christian. I cannot help it if Luther has found my appeals for change helpful to his cause. But I do not claim to agree with everything he says or does. I believe in the unity of the church first. Truth must be spoken, but the way it is spoken is just as important. I recently told Luther's friend Melancthon that I pray Christ will temper Luther's pen. He has a lot of good to say, but his emotions get in the way."

"I mean no harm with my questions, Erasmus," said Thomas, rising and putting a hand on the other man's shoulder. "I simply do not wish to see you dragged into this mess. I'm afraid one of these days you will be asked to choose a side on the Luther matter."

Erasmus shrugged. “I can’t imagine why my opinion on Luther counts in the first place.”

“Don’t underestimate your influence. Your opinion on everything counts to many powerful people.”

Erasmus adjusted his cap and turned to the tent flap. “I must return to the university tomorrow, but it has been good to see you, my friend. We must talk again.”

“Indeed.” Thomas smiled and raised a hand in farewell.

The mud squished under his boots as Erasmus made his way back to Charles’s camp. As he descended the hill, a boy approached with a message. “The emperor calls for you, Master Erasmus.” He followed the messenger to the emperor’s tent.

Charles looked up with a smile as he entered. “Come in, my friend.”

The counselor shook the rain from his cap and drew near the emperor’s writing table. Maps and military rosters and the newly-signed treaty were spread out across the smooth surface.

Charles was only nineteen when he became emperor a year ago, and Erasmus was not afraid of him. Oh, he had no doubt about the emperor’s absolute power—Erasmus knew he was capable of dangerous things—but he also knew that Charles acted out of youthful conviction. He sought the approval of the pope and grew more zealous for the church every day. The church’s assistance would be indispensable in restoring the old Roman empire.

“Today we have signed a treaty with England,” said Charles with a toss of his dark curls. “Now the French have even more reason to reconsider war with the empire. Thank you for your counsel in these matters.”

Erasmus bowed. “I am pleased to be at your service, Sire. It is a privilege to help maintain the peace of the empire.”

“You do despise war, don’t you?”

“I believe in the unity of the church and the nation. Wars are for those who cannot persuade with the mind.”

“Good,” the emperor nodded approvingly. “I didn’t think you would disrupt the peace of the church by helping the cause of that heretic Luther.”

Erasmus was silent.

Charles rose and came around from behind his desk, leaning against it and crossing his arms. His riding breeches and boots were spattered with mud. He had tossed his cloak over his chair, but still wore an embroidered vest, and under it, a high-collared blouse with full sleeves.

“I am aware that you are being pressured from both sides to decide where you stand on this reformation business,” he said evenly. “I want you to know that I believe you will stand with the church.”

Erasmus squared his shoulders. “I have always stood with the church, even as I have sought reform.”

“Everyone wants some kind of reform, but this radical monk Luther is out to destroy the divinely established order of the church of Christ!”

“You have my word that I seek no such thing.”

Charles studied the face of his counselor and then turned away, apparently satisfied. “You are returning to the Netherlands? Back to Louvain?”

“My university duties await—unless Your Highness requires my further service.”

The emperor waved a hand and returned to his seat. “I will send for you when I have need. But, Erasmus—” His eyes were serious again. “You are far more brilliant than Luther. Consider your decisions carefully. He has been excommunicated and I am about to call a hearing in Saxony at the request of his protector, the Elector Frederick. I would not like your name to be involved.”

Erasmus bowed a second time. “I hope that your hearing will result in a fruitful discussion and a peaceful solution, my lord.”

“Good day, Master Erasmus.”

Back at his university office a few weeks later, Erasmus brushed the dust from his chair and sorted through the pile of letters that had arrived while he was away. A publisher in Venice wanted to publish his next manuscript. A French bishop thanked him for loaning him a book and wondered if he could send another. The headmaster of a school in Germany sought his advice. He stacked the letters on a corner of his desk to reply later.

But there were more letters to open. Three were from scholars at other universities calling on him to write against the Lutheran teachings. Two others demanded that he use his political influence to defend Luther. The last one was from someone he had never met, declaring that if he joined Luther in overthrowing the pope, he would also join Luther in eternal condemnation!

“Thomas More is right. This monk is going to be the death of us all!” he muttered, and shoved the whole pile of letters off the desk. A puff of dust swirled up from the floor. He watched it spin in the morning sunlight slanting from the window.

Getting down on the floor, he reached into the shadows under his desk and pulled out a box. It was full of letters. The ones on top were dated several months ago. The ones on the bottom were dated several years ago. Each page was written in the same angular handwriting, and at the close of each was the same signature—Martin Luther.

He rifled through the letters. Luther wanted to know how he interpreted a passage of Scripture. Luther wanted him to explain why he written something in one of his books. Luther wanted him to be more vocal in calling for reform.

“Why do I even keep these letters?” he asked himself.

Perhaps he could convince the monk to be more careful for everyone’s sake. He slid the box back under his desk and sat down again. Opening a jar of ink and dipping in his pen, he began to write across a clean sheet of paper.

August 1, 1520. To the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther: Greetings. You have asked my opinion on recent matters, but there are better persons in this world to give you advice. The king of England once asked me what I thought of you. I told him that I had far too little learning to judge a scholar of your caliber. He told me that he wished you wrote with more moderation of temper. All of us who agree with your purpose wish you would follow that advice. It is a serious matter to challenge men who can only be overthrown by violence, and I fear that blood will be shed because of you. You would do well to focus your writings on Scripture and keep your personal feelings out of them. Farewell, dearest brother in the Lord.

He snatched up his cap and hurried out to send the letter.

Summer wore on. Erasmus spent most of his time studying the books of Hebrews and James, editing a new edition of the works of Saint Augustine, and replying to the stacks of mail that arrived every week. He hoped to hear that Luther had taken his advice.

Instead, he received a package of pamphlets Luther had written criticizing priests and urging German nobles to stand up to the pope. Erasmus shook his head sadly. It was only a matter of time now, he knew. The empire stood on the brink of war.

Early one evening in the fall, he was hunched over his desk when he heard hoofbeats clattering across the courtyard outside his window. Moments later, an urgent knock came at his door. He heard the knock repeated across the hall.

He threw open the door. A student was already down the corridor knocking at another office.

“What is all the commotion?” he demanded.

“I beg your pardon, Master Erasmus. Girolamo Aleandro is here. The faculty are asked to meet him downstairs.”

Erasmus started. “Did you say Aleandro?”

“Yes. The pope’s messenger says he has an important message for the university.” The boy continued down the corridor, pounding on doors.

Erasmus withdrew to his office and put a hand over his eyes. “This

whirlwind of Luther will destroy everything in its path!" He pulled on his overcoat, shut his door firmly, and marched down the stairs.

Daylight was fading in the courtyard, the university walls casting broad shadows on the cobblestones. Several of his colleagues were clustered around the visitor.

He slowed his pace, frowning, and turned when he heard rapid footsteps behind him. He ran into the shoulder of Nicolaas Egmondanus, a fellow faculty member.

"Excuse my haste," said Nicolaas. "I hear Aleandro brings a message from the pope."

Erasmus just nodded.

"Weren't you once friends?" Nicolaas prodded. "I find it curious that your former friend is now a trusted representative of the pope even as the pope questions your loyalty."

Erasmus glared at him. Nicolaas made a habit of taunting him.

"Oh, come now, surely the great Erasmus doesn't hold grudges?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be talking to you." He turned away.

Nicolaas followed him. "I hear the pope is excommunicating Luther and sent Aleandro here to ask for our support. I would be prepared. The faculty are likely to condemn Luther and support the pope."

"They would support the devil if he wore flowing white robes," Erasmus muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you smell like a sheep herder," he said louder. "Think about it, Nicolaas. Threats and even death did not silence Wyclif and Hus. Why would they silence this monk?"

"Luther will be stopped!" Nicolaas charged off to meet Aleandro.

Erasmus shook his head at the men gathered in the gloomy courtyard. "Slaves to their own self-advancement," he said to himself. "If they loved the peace of the church, they wouldn't run

headlong into war with Luther.” He decided to go back to his office. There was no point in having words with Aleandro tonight.

Over the next few days Aleandro held meetings with the professors at Louvain. By the end of the week, the faculty had agreed to stand against Luther—except for Erasmus—which meant they would be standing against Erasmus, too. They burned Luther’s books in a large bonfire in the courtyard that night.

Luther’s whirlwind had struck Louvain.

For the next month, Erasmus kept to himself. He rarely left his office, let most of his mail pile up, and said little to his fellow professors. “Very busy,” he said quickly as he passed them in the corridors. “Working on a new book.” He spent all of his time bent over the papers on his desk.

One Sunday morning in late October, Erasmus entered the church quietly just as the service was about to begin. He spotted an empty seat at the back and took it. Then he noticed that Nicolaas Egmondanus was seated up front near the pulpit.

“He’s preaching today?” Erasmus thought with dismay. Well, he wasn’t going to abandon the worship of the Lord today just because he didn’t want to hear Nicolaas preach. So he settled into his chair and prayed along quietly with the bishop in Latin. But when Nicolaas went to the pulpit, he let his mind wander back to the Luther problem.

He was thinking of a letter he might write to Luther’s friend Melanchthon when he was startled to hear his name shouted from the pulpit. He suddenly realized the other worshipers were staring at him.

Nicolaas swaggered behind the pulpit. “Erasmus is the hen that laid the egg of Luther!” he shouted, thrusting a pointed finger in the air. “Erasmus has been demanding changes in the church for a long time, and has even published an unnecessary new translation of the New Testament. This Luther has fallen for his novelties. But you, people of God, should hold fast to the ancient gospel the

church has preserved.” He leaned across the pulpit and lowered his voice dramatically. “If these two don’t end their challenges to the church, both of them will find their last messages written with the torch!”

Erasmus snatched up his cap and marched out of the church. He was burning with anger. The chilly breeze outside took his breath away, but he set out for a long walk to clear his head.

His fellow professors were publicly denouncing him now. That meant his teaching position was at stake. Thomas More had been right. They were going to force Erasmus to choose a side on the Luther matter. “Why must I be involved?” he shouted to the empty road.

He was glad he was leaving in a few days to attend the emperor’s coronation in Cologne. “I have no reason to stay here,” he decided. “It is a blessing that my leave is coming so soon. Maybe in a few months this will all be over and I can return in peace.”

He went back to the university and slipped up to his office to pack for his journey.

Within a month, he was in Cologne for the coronation. The city was full of feasting and tournaments. Buglers and marching flag-bearers announced the ceremony. Erasmus looked around at the crowd of dignitaries. Everyone was there in their finest clothing to pay their compliments to Charles. All the German princes were there, including Elector Frederick the Wise, Luther’s protector. Aleandro was there, too. Erasmus avoided him.

When he went back to his guest room at Count von Neuenahr’s house later that night, he had an idea. “I am here with some of the most powerful men in the empire,” he thought. “This may be my only chance to persuade them to bring the Luther matter to a peaceful end.”

He set a candle on the writing desk by his bed and began to draft a plan. “The key to the solution is getting the three most powerful rulers—Emperor Charles, England’s King Henry and

France's King Louis—to consider the matter together. If each sent respected scholars, neutral on the matter, to talk with Luther, the pope would have to listen to them. I know if they just talked to him they could work it all out.”

His heart began to race with excitement as his pen flew across the page. But then he realized that if he proposed this plan, they would believe he was a supporter of Luther. Nicolaas's threat might come true. Suddenly he felt paralyzed. The moment of decision had come, as Thomas had warned him.

“What is my duty as a Christian?” he asked himself. “My security, or the peace of the bride of Christ?” The answer was clear. He set his pen firmly to the paper again, and took comfort that he was staying true to his conscience. “This will be my peace treaty, for the good of the church and the lives of innocent people!”

He spent the next two days circulating his plan among the royalty. If they would support it, it might be possible. He soon heard that the German princes were interested in his plan.

On the second night, he returned to his room late. Aleandro was sitting at his desk.

Erasmus suddenly felt sick to his stomach. A visit from the pope's legate rarely meant good news. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Aleandro stood and unrolled a sheaf of papers in his hand. “Do you know what this is?”

Erasmus glanced at the top page. “It is a proposal for peace,” he replied. “You might have heard of the concept if you weren't so busy starting your own personal wars.”

Aleandro gave a hard laugh. “Erasmus, wit has always been your strong point, but politics is mine.”

“Surely you agree that peace is better for the church.”

“You are proposing that these independent scholars instruct the pope,” said Aleandro, now pacing the room. “Instruct the pope!”

“Receiving wise counsel does not lessen the pope's authority

any more than when you give him advice yourself.”

Aleandro stopped pacing. He loved to hear others acknowledge his importance.

“Look, Aleandro. I know how serious this matter is. If the pope concedes to other scholars on some points, it will make him look reasonable,” Erasmus argued. “More importantly, it will advance the truth and peace of the Christian world.”

Aleandro re-rolled the documents. “The pope has already spoken on this issue. He has declared Luther a heretic and excommunicated him from the church. There is nothing more to be said.”

“Are you so bound to the pope that you cannot do the right thing?”

Aleandro flung the door open. “Face it, old man, you just wish you had his ear as I do!”

Erasmus ran out after him. “If you’d give him back his ear, maybe he could listen to reason!”

He turned to go back into his room. But then he noticed a tall man standing in the shadowy corridor a few paces away. Erasmus started to say something, but the man raised a finger to his lips. They waited for the ringing of Aleandro’s footsteps to fade. Then the stranger motioned for Erasmus to follow him.

“Now what?” Erasmus wondered. It had been a long night already. But he had a strong feeling he should go with this man.

He followed him to the end of the corridor, down the stairs, and out of the house through the servants’ entrance. They cut through the kitchen garden, where frost-damaged vines lay curled and silent in the darkness. An iron gate opened onto a narrow street. The stranger moved quickly past stone walls and several gates like the one they’d exited. He stopped abruptly in front of one, swung it open noiselessly, and they were in another garden. A dim light burned in a first floor window as they approached a house. Erasmus suddenly found himself in an empty room.

“Wait here,” the man said, and vanished.

Immediately Erasmus regretted following him. "This is it!" he thought. "Luther's enemies are going to kill me. Why do I let my curiosity get the better of me?"

A door on the other side of the room opened, and he could see into a connecting room lined with books. A figure stepped into the doorway. He had a full head of white hair and a fur cloak around his shoulders. Erasmus recognized him at once.

"Welcome, Master Erasmus. I trust Chancellor Spalatin did not frighten you?"

"It is an honor to meet Elector Frederick the Wise, protector of Martin Luther."

The old man chuckled. "I prefer to think of myself as the protector of all Saxony. But, of course, Luther has made himself require more protection than my other subjects!" He gestured for Erasmus to follow him into the inner room, and they sat down before a modest fireplace.

"Tell me," said the elector, settling his cloak around him. "Did you have a good discussion with Aleandro? I assume he was strutting his feathers everywhere?"

"That is what he does best, good prince."

Frederick smiled, but his eyes grew serious. "I find myself in a predicament. But I have the good fortune to be visiting the same city as the emperor's counselor. Perhaps you would indulge me with a bit of advice?"

Erasmus nodded.

"No one likes men like Aleandro. He thinks he runs the world, but the truth is that the world is running him. He has lost his conscience."

"Indeed."

The elector picked up a sheet of paper from the table beside his chair and handed it to his visitor. "Before I arrived here for the coronation, Aleandro intercepted my caravan to deliver this letter from the pope. He's demanding that I turn over Luther to Rome

immediately and that I burn all of his books in my territories.”

Erasmus scanned the document quickly.

“If Luther steps foot in Rome, he will never return to Saxony. I know in my heart they will have him killed without a trial.”

Erasmus handed the letter back. “I’m afraid you may be right.”

Frederick looked at him to continue.

“Luther is a good man,” said Erasmus. “The problem is not what he says, but how he says it.”

“He’s a firebrand, there is no doubt. But I have read your proposal. You must not believe that his words are worthy of death.”

“Luther sinned gravely by striking out against the crown of the pope and the bellies of the monks. Many of us seek reform in the church, but we do not declare our leader the antichrist!” Erasmus sighed. “But I do find the bull of excommunication against Luther quite out of keeping with the gentle character of Christ’s vicar. And Luther has asked only for a fair trial and open discussion about what he has written. Why should he not be granted that?”

“It seems it would be best for all of us, including Emperor Charles, if this matter could be settled peacefully.”

“I have already said as much to the emperor. But all I can do is give advice. I do not have the power of a prince to make it happen.”

“I cannot stop this revolution any more than you can. But a man’s life and the peace of the church is at stake. I must be responsible for the little part God calls me to play.” The elector’s eyes glittered. “Aleandro may have the pope, but I have Luther.”

“What will you do about the pope’s letter?”

“I’m going to decline his invitation to Rome.”

“I don’t believe it was an invitation.”

“My dear Erasmus,” said Frederick with a smile, “you have a lot to learn about politics.”

Erasmus shook his head. “You are the second person to tell me that tonight!”

Frederick stood and reached out to shake his guest's hand. "It has been good to talk to you. You are the wise man others say you are."

The tall figure of Chancellor Spalatin appeared in the doorway.

"Spalatin will escort you back to the count's house. No one will know about our meeting tonight." The elector put a hand on Erasmus' shoulder and guided him toward the outer room. "Know this," he said as they parted. "I am loyal to the emperor. But I will do everything in my power to protect Luther's life for as long as God allows."

Erasmus bowed respectfully.

As he followed the silent Spalatin back through the dark maze of gardens, he considered the elector's words. The empire was on the threshold of a bloody revolution that could not be stopped. But at least he had helped save one man's life.

Shortly after his meeting with Frederick in Cologne, Erasmus returned to the university in Louvain. He supported Luther as much as he could without supporting what he believed would lead to the disunity of the church and war. His fellow professors harassed him for being a supporter of Luther, while Luther accused him of loving peace more than truth! He chose his words carefully and kept writing theology books. He died in July 1536, believing there was nothing more he could do to direct the Reformation toward peaceful ends.