

CHOISE LITERATURE.

THREE STEPS DOWNWARDS.

I am quite sure that Harry Kramer did not realize what a very foolish and very wicked thing he was doing when he yielded to the persuasions of his schoolmate, Bob Ellis, and consented to run away from his comfortable home and loving parents.

This is how it all happened.

Harry lived in a great city, where thousands of ships were always coming and going, and, like most boys, he loved to haunt the wharves where they were moored, and watch the loading and unloading of the steamers and sailing vessels.

He went to school, of course, and so it was only after study hours and on holidays that he slipped off to the wharves. I say "slipped," because his parents did not approve of the kind of companions he found there, and so had forbidden his going; but still he did so secretly, while pretending that he was obedient to his father's commands. That was Harry's first step downward, he hesitated a while before taking it, but when he had once yielded it seemed easy enough, for you know it is always the first step that is the hardest to take; after that, one slips down, down, down, faster and faster.

Harry's next downward step was to continue his friendship with his schoolmate, Bob Ellis, after his parents had told him how bad a boy he was, and how unfit for him to associate with. He promised not to have anything more to do with Bob, but the very next day he stole off with him down to their usual haunts, the wharves, where the schooner of which Bob's father was captain was moored.

Deep down in his heart, Harry knew very well that he did not care for Bob himself, but it was such fun to be allowed to race all over a real, sea-going vessel, and to know a real live captain; that was the secret of Bob's influence over Harry, for while Bob seemed to enjoy doing wrong, Harry did not, and felt ill at ease, although he was not brave enough to stand up firmly and say "No!" to the tempter.

At last matters came to a crisis; Harry's father discovered his deception, and determined to remove his son from evil influences, by sending him to a boarding school out of the city, whereupon Harry rebelled, and started off to the wharves to tell his grievance to Bob Ellis.

For Bob had left school only a few days before, and was now about to start on his first voyage with his father. Harry knew that the "Speedwell" was loaded, and was to sail that very morning for Havana, and he ran until he was out of breath, lest he should miss the chance of hearing Bob join him in abusing the good, kind father whose loving heart his disobedience was grieving so sorely.

The "Speedwell" was getting ready to be towed out into the bay, so that she might get out from the midst of the crowd of other ships, and then use her sails; and Bob Ellis, who felt rather lonely at having to part from all his school-fellows, eagerly urged Harry to take revenge on the father who wished to send him to boarding school, by sailing far away with him.

Harry's good angel stood at his side, and beckoned him to turn his back on the evil tempter, but Bob laughed when he hesitated, and ridicule acted on him as it does on all weak persons; it decided him to do what he knew to be very wicked; he feared the ridicule of a fellow-creature more than God's anger.

So he allowed Bob to smuggle him into the hold of the "Speedwell," and in a few hours more he was tossing about on the great ocean.

And oh! how he repented already of this, his third step downward!

He had gone into the dark, close hold, smelling of foul bilge water, so that the captain might not discover and send him back; but by the time the vessel began to roll on the waves he would have been glad to go on deck, so that he might be sent ashore on the pilot-boat that he knew was alongside.

But now he could not; he could only lie down on the hard planks, among the barrels and boxes, feeling deathly sick, and more miserable, body and soul, than he had ever been before, and crying silently and alone for the dear, kind father and mother, and the cosy little room at home.

Even so early was Harry Kramer beginning to find out that "the way of the transgressor is hard."

Bob had been at sea before, so the plunging of the schooner did not make him sick, and he was able to look after his unhappy friend. For two days Harry lay moaning in the hammock Bob contrived to rig up for him in a dark corner, but on the third day he felt so much better that he ventured to go on deck and meet the captain.

Harry shrank from that, and no wonder, even though he knew that Bob had told his father of his presence on board. We need hardly say that in doing this, he was careful not to tell of his own share in tempting Harry to so sinful an act as he had committed.

So when our runaway crept on deck, pale, weak, and dejected, he received a severe reprimand from Captain Ellis, and the next day was set to work helping the cook in the hot little galley where the ship's provisions were prepared for the table.

This was not at all the kind of life at sea that Harry had dreamed of, or read of either, in the books of sea-tales he was so fond of; it was not much fun to stay by a hot stove, and pare potatoes, cut up onions, and wash dishes.

But it was in vain that he pleaded for some other kind of work; Bob laughed at his distress, and his father frowned.

"No, my boy," said the latter, "you chose to steal on board my ship to please yourself, and now you must work your passage as it pleases me. I am king here. It is real good fun to run away from a nice home to cook at sea—isn't it, Harry?"

And then he walked off, chuckling at Harry's dejection; for the truth was, that Captain Ellis, being as good a man as his son was a bad boy, had resolved to punish Harry so severely for his disobedience and ingratitude that he would

never be apt to rebel again; so he made his position as disagreeable as he could.

So several days passed away, and the "Speedwell" proved true to her name, running swiftly down the Atlantic coast; but one morning there came a change. The sun rose behind dark, angry-looking clouds that soon shut out its rays entirely, and at the same time the breeze died away, and there fell upon the bosom of the great, heaving ocean a hot, still, sultry air, in which it seemed almost impossible to breathe.

The captain ordered the sails to be furled, and the hatches battened down, so that if the waves should sweep over the deck, they could not get below and sink the ship; and then, everything being in readiness for the storm, he noted the barometer anxiously, while the sailors watched the clouds, shaking their heads, and whispering to the pale, frightened boys that there was a terrible cyclone coming.

"Go down below, boys," said Captain Ellis, "and don't you dare to come on deck again till I give you permission. Go at once, if you don't wish to be swept overboard."

So with a last frightened glance at a leaden huge ripple that was sweeping down towards them, the boys went down the ladder, and just as they reached the cabin floor, the wind struck the schooner, laying her over on her side, and rolling them over and over, among the chairs, and tables, and sofas.

Then the "Speedwell" righted herself, and like a startled deer, sprang away over the now foaming sea, the terrible power of the wind urging her on so rapidly, even with only her bare masts opposed to the storm, that each moment it seemed that she must plunge, head-foremost, down beneath the great waves that came dashing towards her.

All day long the good ship fought a fierce battle with the wind and waves, ay, and all night, too, with the added horrors of inky blackness, broken in upon now and then by vivid flashes of forked lightning, and fierce, deafening peals of thunder.

And down in the cabin the two boys, white, trembling, bruised, and sore, from being tossed about by the rolling ship, clung with all their strength to the legs of the heavy table that was screwed to the floor.

Ah! how bitterly Harry Kramer repented of his rebellion; more bitterly than ever, now that he felt that he would never more see his loving father and mother, or ever be able to ask their forgiveness.

He had no one to speak words of hope or comfort to him. Captain Ellis was on deck constantly, and his son, as might have been expected of such a boy, was wild with fear at the danger that threatened him, and could only sob and cry by the hour.

No, there was no comfort for Harry, until he bethought him of his dear mother's teachings, and then, kneeling, as he held fast to the table, he prayed as he had never prayed before, and as he asked God's pardon for his wickedness, and begged the Good Father to comfort his pa-nts when they should hear that their boy was drowned at sea, a peaceful feeling stole over him, and his fear of death departed.

Then he tried to cheer and calm his friend, but Bob only swore at him, and scoffed at the idea of prayer.

Day dawned soon after this, and just as a dim light began to creep into the cabin there came a fearful crash and a shock, that threw both the boys prone on the floor, and sent them rolling like bales of carpets, until the ship's side brought them to a violent stop.

The next moment Captain Ellis, white and haggard, came down the ladder, half slipping, half falling.

"Boys," he said hoarsely, "the ship has struck! Put on these life preservers and hurry on deck. She will go to pieces in a few moments. Hurry, hurry, Bob. Come quick, I'll help you up."

On their hands and knees the two boys managed to crawl to the foot of the ladder, and there Captain Ellis buckled around them each a cork jacket, and then, with the assistance of a sailor, helped them to clamber up to the deck.

The ship had struck on the Florida coast, and while the cruel waves ever and anon lifted and then dropped her down heavily on the sands, straining and shattering her stout timbers, the sailors hastily cast loose from its lashings a life-raft.

Then Harry and Bob were fastened to it, so that they might not be swept off, and the seamen and their captain followed, after placing the raft so that the next large wave that swept over the deck would carry it away on its crest, for even now the smaller waves were sweeping over the doomed vessel, and the groaning of her timbers gave notice that very soon she would go to pieces.

"Hold on all!" shouted the captain, and Harry, though he was securely lashed, instantly grasped one of the iron rings of the raft, as a huge wave came rushing along, and rising over the stern went dashing over the deck, uplifting and bearing far shoreward the buoyant life-raft.

Harry was never able to remember what happened after this, until he roused up to find himself lying in a nice, cosy bed, in a strange place that he had never seen before; only bending over him were two faces that were not at all strange, for they were those of the dear father and mother he had so wronged.

When he was able to listen, he was told how the raft had been tossed about by the fierce breakers, and at last landed high on the beach.

And then, when the kind people who lived near the shore came down to their rescue, they found alive, though insensible, only Harry, Captain Ellis, and two sailors; all the rest were either dead on the raft, held there by their lashings, or else had been swept away; among these latter was Bob Ellis.

When the captain recovered his senses, he did not forget, in his own grief, to send a message of comfort to Harry's parents, and so, while he lay tossing in the delirium of fever, they hastened to his side, and joyfully granted his prayer for forgiveness.

Harry is a grown man now, with children of his own, and he often tells them of his three steps downward, adding,

"And I thank our loving Father in Heaven that He

punished me so quickly and severely, and checked my wicked course. I bless 'the rod that smote me.'—*Hills Harcourt, in N. Y. Christian Weekly.*

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM.

Constitutionally inclined to peaceful pursuits, and keenly relishing the quiet efforts of literary toil, Erasmus would have shrunk from the eager controversies which raged with virulent intensity during the Reformation period. Though conscious that by disposition he was unfitted for becoming a hero in the strife, he was often reluctantly drawn into the polemics of the time. The leaders of the Reformation and the Papal authorities were alike anxious to enlist him under their respective banners. With more or less success, however, he inclined to a middle course—one at all times of considerable difficulty, but peculiarly hazardous when opposing parties are engaged in the struggle for very existence. His life-work was incomparably more favourable to the cause of the Reformers than any direct services undertaken on behalf of the Papacy ever benefitted that system. His bold alliance with the friends of the Renaissance, his unsparing exposures of the corruptions of priests and monks, his publication of the revised text of the Greek New Testament, gave a powerful impetus to the cause of the Reformation. There is considerable truth in the contemporary saying: "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched." Yet he never withdrew his allegiance to Rome. When Luther was in the thick of the fight with Papal, Imperial, and Regal foes, Erasmus suffered himself to be inspired by the Vatican to enter the lists against his former friend. His famous *De Libero Arbitrio* was the result of Papal persuasion. At the time of its publication he occupied the highest eminence in the world of letters. He wielded an almost undisputed supremacy, being the arbiter to whom the scholars of the day deferentially appealed. Yet the contest with Luther was not lightly undertaken. He was more concerned about the opinions of the leader of the Reformation than he was about those of all other critics beside. When Luther's rejoinder, *De Servo Arbitrio*, made its appearance, though decided on account of the bitterness of its tone and its stinging home-thrusts, the recluse of Basle, contemporaries inform us, winced under the castigation he had needlessly provoked. That controversy, over and done with long ago, was mainly concerned with the interminable dispute in which sages, and others not so sage, have—

"Reason'd high

Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate;

Fix'd fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute;

And found no end in wandering mazes lost."

It has long been the fashion to give the laurel of victory to Erasmus in this contention. Let it, however, be remembered that the contestants approached the subject from somewhat different standpoints. Erasmus treats the freedom of the will more in the light of a philosophical speculation; Luther discusses it as a practical theological question. It is significant to observe that German philosophical divines are now inclining favourably to Luther's views, as the best approximation to a partial solution of a probably insoluble difficulty.

No sooner had the illustrious scholar come forth from the contest with the no less distinguished Reformer, than he had to confront more virulent, though far more dangerous, assailants. Because Erasmus identified himself with the scholarship of the age the monks regarded him with implacable hatred. They eagerly awaited the opportunity to show their feeling, which during the captivity of Francis I., after the disaster of Pavia, they thought had arrived. The nascent reform in Paris had been well-nigh crushed out. The spirit of persecution had gained the ascendancy. Lecturier, a Carthusian, commenced a furious onslaught on Erasmus, which was participated in by the more influential, though not less bigoted, Beda. So vigorous was the attack, and so speedily did his enemies avail themselves of the opportunity to strike, that the danger to Erasmus was imminent and menacing. He set himself with all his accustomed energy and concentration to avert it. He addressed earnest remonstrances to the ablest men of the Sorbonne, to the captive Francis I., and to Charles V. By the interposition of these powerful friends the storm was allayed, and the scholar was permitted to return to his peaceful pursuits.

On the other hand, the progress of the Reformation again temporarily disturbed the repose of Erasmus. He now feared the opponents of Rome. The intrepid Farel and the milder Ecolampadius had been steadily proclaiming the doctrines of Evangelical Christianity in Basle. Between these leaders of Church reform and the prince of scholars there was no bond of sympathy; on the contrary, there was unhappily mutual distrust. Towards the close of 1528 a strong popular movement secured the overthrow of Roman Catholicism in Basle, and the result sadly discomposd Erasmus. He resolved to quit the city, and for a time made his residence in Friburg. When popular feeling in Basle partly subsided, the exiled scholar returned to his wonted occupations and to his former friendships. Thereafter the years glided more peacefully away, but the harassing labours and the conflicts of those stirring days had told on a frame never robust. Great as were the eminence and the influence to which he had attained, his later years were clouded with unavailing regrets and querulous complainings. He grew aged before his time. His enfeebled health became increasingly burdensome to him. The genial summer with its perennial beauty returned, but it did not bring healing to Erasmus. Surrounded by his friends and solaced by their devoted care, he passed away on the 12th July, 1536, in the sixty-ninth year of his age. In those days of strong partisanship it was customary to represent the death-bed scenes of the distinguished in the most contradictory manner, but it is tolerably certain that though Erasmus did not repudiate the Church of Rome, he entirely disowned its gross abuses and superstitions, and died in the hope of a glorious hereafter.

History reveals to us the passions and conflicts of that eventful age, but the same influences that wrought with such intensity then, are, under various modifications, still