

CHAPTER V

FEUDALISM

ONE of the most characteristic products of the Middle Ages was Feudalism : in fact mediæval history might almost be described as the story of the rise and fall of Feudalism. Like all great social systems it arose to meet a pressing need ; like many others it survived long after it had served its purpose and the need which gave it birth had disappeared. For a time it lingered on, a hindrance to the progress of civilisation, and at last gradually died away as new social forces gained strength.

What, then, were the circumstances under which Feudalism arose? What were the social needs that gave it birth? What were the benefits which it conferred on society?

The rise of Feudalism can be traced to the latter half of the ninth century and the beginning of the next,—to that dark period when Central Europe was the prey of marauders, when Northman, Saracen and Magyar swept over the land, plundering, burning and killing. It was not only on account of the personal febleness of the rulers, of the weakness of the central government, and of the constant civil wars, that so little was done to resist the invaders. It was extremely difficult for the central government to do anything to check the attacks of such quickly-moving foes, whose

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