

SECTION V

Feudalism saved France from the consequences of the breaking up of Charlemagne's empire; it brought order out of disorder; it bound man, by certain clearly defined duties, to his fellow-man. — RAMBAUD.

THE FEUDAL SYSTEM — THE COMING OF THE NORTHMEN (814-987)

33. Beginning of a New Period; Charlemagne's Idea of Freedom versus the Germanic Idea. — We have thus far traced the history of France through four periods, — Barbarism, Roman Imperialism, Barbarism or Semi-Barbarism again, followed by the Imperialism of Charlemagne. We are now about to enter a fifth period, wholly unlike all that preceded it, but one that was inevitable — that was in fact salutary, because it was the natural and necessary product of the age.

Charlemagne's empire broke to pieces at last because his ideas of political liberty were not in harmony with the times. Though he was a German, he did not have the German idea of liberty, but the old Roman conception. Cæsar considered a man free if he was a citizen of Rome or of some city under Roman protection; Charlemagne, applying this principle on a broader scale, considered him free if he was a legal subject of his empire.

But the Germans had an entirely different notion of freedom. With them it did not depend in any way on where a man lived or to what community he belonged, but simply and solely on what he was in himself. If he was able to defend himself and his possessions by the strength of his own right arm, then they

recognized him as both free and noble; if he could not, he speedily became a slave.

Again, Charlemagne, like Cæsar, made everything center in himself as supreme ruler; but the natural tendency among the Franks was not to have one ruler, but many, each tribe choosing its own.

34. Origin and Development of the Feudal System. — Thus, when the Franks first invaded Gaul, every marauding band was distinct from every other; often, indeed, it was hostile to every other. When a band gained a victory, whatever plunder was taken was divided by lot, the chief, of course, getting the largest share. Later, when instead of raiding the country they settled in it, they divided the land in the same way. As the chief had rewarded his favorite followers with gifts from his share of the plunder, so now he gave them land. At first no condition seems to have been attached to such gifts, which were for life only; but later, military service was required by way of rent. Eventually these grants with their obligations came to be regarded as hereditary, so that they regularly descended from father to son.¹

The example set by the chiefs was followed by the leading men. As they accumulated more land than they could profitably use, they in turn made grants of it on similar conditions. In this way they made sure of military followers, just as the chief had made sure of their services. This service, too, was highly honorable and marked the difference between the freeman and the man who was not free.

But these two classes did not constitute the entire population. Besides the greater and lesser landholders, bound together by pledges of assistance in time of war, or by other conditions, there were the small holders who had received a few acres as their rightful and unconditional share after some battle, but

¹ It was in 877, under Charlemagne's successors, that this principle of hereditary feudal descent became definitively established.

who for some reason had not increased their estates. They, of course, were independent, and owed no service for their possessions; but they soon found out that such independence was as precarious as it was dangerous.

That was an age when to a great extent might made right. War and pillage were going on continually, and every man's home had literally to be his castle. If a stronger neighbor happened to covet the particular piece of land which the small independent farmer owned, there was nothing to prevent him from seizing it. The owner then had his choice of turning outlaw or serf.

If he chose the first, he went into the woods and became a robber like Robin Hood in "Ivanhoe"; if the last, he sank into a condition but one remove from that of a slave. The only safety for a man so situated was to surrender his possessions to some powerful chief or lord, and receive them again on the mutual condition that he, on the one hand, should perform some service for them, and that the lord, on the other, should protect him in the enjoyment of his property.¹

There was still another class; namely, the serfs. These were in most cases the natives of the country. When they had been conquered their possessions had passed to the victors, and the original owners were forced to remain and cultivate the soil for their masters. This class had certain legal rights. They could not be bought and sold like slaves, who constituted the lowest class of all; but they were bound to the soil and went with it. When, therefore, a man acquired an estate, he got its serfs with it as much as he got the trees that grew on it.

¹ This practice was called "commendation," because the person asking protection commended himself to the other's care. The ordinary feudal grant was termed a "benefice"; that is, a benefit or advantage. A man commended himself to a superior by kneeling before him, placing his hands in his, and swearing to become "his man"; in other words, to serve him faithfully. The lord, on the other hand, reinvested him with his land and solemnly promised to protect him.

Here, then, was a mighty social pyramid. At the top stood the chief or king. Next came the great lords, who were practically almost as much kings as their chief, though of course the prestige of his name counted for something. Then came the small landholders; then the serfs. The absolute slaves need not be counted, since they had practically no legal rights.

This system was called "feudalism," from the word *feudum*, meaning landed property.¹ Its maxim was, "No land without a lord; no lord without land." It was, as we have seen, a contract of mutual obligation. It meant that if you will do something for me, I will do something for you—if you will fight my battles, I will fight yours. Every man from the serf up owed service to some one above him; every man from the king down owed protection to some one beneath him. Finally, this system extended to all men and all institutions; even the Church held its possessions on feudal conditions and had to fight or pray for every acre of ground it owned.

This system, which eventually became established throughout Europe, had already made some progress when Charlemagne came to the throne. He labored not to regulate it, but to supplant it, by endeavoring to establish one central supreme power; but though he succeeded for a time, yet he really accomplished nothing. After his death the local order and stability which he had built up gave feudalism new life and more complete organization, so that Charlemagne, instead of destroying it, may be said to be its real founder.²

35. Good Results of Feudalism; Order; Mutual Dependence; Elevation of Woman.—Feudalism was attended with terrible abuses and revolting tyranny. Yet with all its evils, it was far better than warring, restless, destructive barbarism on the one

¹ The late Latin word *feudum* is derived from an Old High German word meaning cattle. Later it was applied to the land on which the cattle grazed, and so gradually came to mean property in general.

² See on this point Gibbon and Guizot.

hand, or Roman despotism on the other. Without it Europe would surely have been torn to pieces by ferocious hordes of robbers.

Feudalism established a certain degree of order.¹ It gave to every man his due place and rank. If he was able, he rose to the top; if he was incapable, he sank to the bottom. It enabled society to hold a fixed territory and to improve it. It cultivated habits of fidelity on the part of the vassal or dependent toward his lord; it bound the lord by ties of honor to his vassal.

Finally, feudalism gave to woman a better position than she had ever had before. Generally she had been either a plaything or a drudge; but to the baron in his castle she became a true domestic companion. His very isolation necessarily brought this about. His castle was his only place of security. From it he sallied out on expeditions of war. To it he returned after victory. Every one else was his inferior; but his wife and children were his equals. Their interests and his were one. No matter, therefore, how low, how brutal he might be, he could not escape the gentle and refining influence of home; nor could he fail to see that it was the wife and mother who made that home.

36. Feudal France. — We have seen that the Treaty of Verdun made France a separate kingdom.² But it was not a kingdom in the modern sense of the word, but simply a group of feudal states governed by dukes and counts, one of whom held the royal title. Thus at the close of the ninth century France consisted of twenty-nine such divisions, answering, we may say, to our counties, while a century later there were no less than fifty-five.

The rulers of these provinces were literally monarchs of all they surveyed. Each one lived in a castle, which was but

¹ Feudalism was theoretically a fixed state, but in fact was often the reverse.

² See Paragraph 31.

another name for a fortress. He had hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of armed retainers who were bound to fight under his banner under all circumstances; even, in fact, if he resisted the commands of the king. On his vast estates he had multitudes of serfs laboring to support him and his fighting men.

On his domains no man could gainsay him. He declared war or peace. He administered justice, sending the culprit to the gallows or the dungeon, as he thought best. He levied taxes and coined money. He, in short, was absolute; and although theoretically bound to serve the king, yet as a matter of fact he rarely did unless the king made it for his interest to do so, or could raise a force that could compel him to obey.

37. Invasion of the Northmen. — Late in the ninth century an event occurred which was destined to have an important influence on all northern France. It will be remembered that Charlemagne had predicted¹ that the day would come when the Danes and Norwegians would ravage the country. Shortly after his death the long, light vessels of these sea robbers made their appearance at the mouths of the Loire and the Seine.

They were filled with the same dauntless rovers who had invaded Russia, Italy, Spain, and England; they had pushed out into the broad Atlantic, that Sea of Darkness as it was then called, and had discovered and settled Iceland, planted colonies on the bleak shores of Greenland and, five centuries before Columbus, had penetrated the forests of the New World.²

So great was the terror which these freebooters inspired, that in the lower river valleys the laborers did not dare to cultivate their corn or gather the grapes in their vineyards: everywhere near the coast there were burning villages and slaughtered peasants. Later, the Northmen grew still bolder, and advancing up the Seine, threatened Paris itself.

¹ See Paragraph 28.

² See The Leading Facts of American History in this series.

They were no longer content to plunder, but purposed seizing the land and holding it as their own. This, however, was no easy undertaking, for the barons, sallying out from their strongholds with their armed followers, repeatedly drove them back, sometimes with heavy loss.

38. Rollo attacks Paris.—In 885, Rollo, a gigantic Norse chief, whom it was said no horse could carry, resolved to conquer the country.¹ He sailed up the Seine to Paris with seven hundred vessels and thirty thousand warriors, and besieged it for a year and a half. But thanks to the city's strong walls and stout hearts, it did not surrender. Then Rollo fell back on Rouen,² a city on the lower Seine, which he had previously captured. Making that his chief center of operation, he proceeded to get possession of the country round about.

Meantime, on the death of Charles the Fat, the empire, temporarily restored, had again broken up, this time permanently, into the three kingdoms of Italy, France, and Germany (887). Count Eudes, the valiant defender of Paris, was chosen king by an independent party of lords. His real power, however, was confined to Paris and northern France. A few years later Eudes was succeeded by Charles the Simple, who had been previously chosen king by the party who clung to the degenerate Carolingian line.

Charles, finding that he was no match for the Northmen, prudently resolved to make a virtue of necessity, and by giving Rollo the territory he had occupied, he hoped to gain his allegiance. Alfred the Great, of England, had already set the example of making such a treaty, and had virtually given half his kingdom to the Danes or Northmen, on condition that they should leave him in undisturbed possession of the remainder.³

¹ In the reign of Charles the Fat, under whom the three kingdoms of France, Italy, and Germany, into which Charlemagne's empire had broken up, were once more united for a short time.

² Rouen (roo-ŏn').

³ See *The Leading Facts of English History* in this series.

The negotiation with Rollo was carried on through the medium of the Church. The Archbishop of Rouen was empowered to offer him the king's daughter in marriage, and a territory of over ten thousand square miles in extent, having Rouen for its capital. The only condition imposed by Charles was that, in accordance with feudal custom, Rollo should duly acknowledge him as sovereign. To this the Northman made no objection, knowing that he possessed the power of keeping or breaking his oath of allegiance as might be most convenient.

He received the province from Charles in a great assembly (911-912). The grant was made in solemn feudal form on the monarch's part, and that ceremony over, Rollo was informed that nothing now remained to complete the transfer but the act of homage, by which he was to kneel and kiss the king's foot. "Never," answered the barbarian fiercely. "I will bow the knee to no one, much less will I kiss any man's foot."

Finally, after much persuasion from the bishop, he agreed to perform his part by proxy, and accordingly ordered one of his warriors to do what was required. The man obeyed; but instead of kneeling, seized the king's foot, and lifted it so vigorously and so high that his majesty was thrown sprawling backward on the ground, amid shouts of laughter from many of the spectators, who fully appreciated this part of the ceremony.

The discomfited king recovered himself as best he could, without daring to expostulate. Though he had sacrificed his dignity he had gained peace, for it was now for the interest of the robber chief to make the most of his newly conferred domain, and defend it against such marauding bands of his own countrymen as might attempt to land on the coast or sail up the river.

The new settlers soon showed that though they came as barbarians, they had no intention of remaining such. They

accepted the Christian faith, rebuilt the burned churches and monasteries, and adopted the French tongue and the feudal system.

In time their province became the most civilized and the most prosperous portion of France. The name of Northmen, once a terror, was softened to Norman, and the district they held called Normandy. The pirate Rollo became the founder of a long line of chiefs, or rulers, who took the title of Dukes of Normandy, and one of whom, as we shall see, six generations later, not content with his French possessions, crossed the Channel and added England to them by conquest.

39. Summary. — Feudalism reconstructed society on the only basis then possible. It was a bridge from barbarism to monarchy. The invasion of the Northmen, though seemingly a calamity, was really a benefit. They brought fresh, vigorous life. Their courage and their energy gave the country a new and needed impulse in progress and in civilization.

SECTION VI

When the last day of the tenth century and the first of the eleventh were past, it was like a general regeneration . . . and the work was begun of rendering the Christian world worthy of the future. — GUIZOT.

FROM THE ACCESSION OF HUGH CAPET TO THE CONQUEST OF ENGLAND (987-1066) — THE BEGINNING OF THE TRUE FRENCH MONARCHY — THE END OF THE WORLD — WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

HUGH CAPET, 987-996.

HENRY I, 1031-1060.

ROBERT THE PIOUS, 996-1031.

PHILIP I, 1060-1108.

40. Hugh Capet begins the Line of French Kings. — Peace had been made with the Northmen, but now another serious question came up. Should the feeble descendants of Charlemagne be allowed to continue to rule by virtue of their descent, or should the feudal lords of France choose one of their own number as sovereign?

This contest for supremacy was well represented by the feeling that then prevailed between the rival cities of Laon¹ and Paris. Laon, in the northeast of France, was the capital of the Carolingian kings, and was much more German than French. Charles the Simple and his successors made this city their principal residence. They refused to speak any language but German, and would not identify themselves with the French further than necessity compelled. In case of any difficulty with

¹ Laon (lä-ôn).