The Feudal System

Introduction.

There are many principles and forms connected with the governments of mankind, that have appeared in the World's History, which are regarded by vast numbers of people to be void of good. Feudalism is certainly not the least of these, but probably the greatest.

Humanity is prone to the error of looking at events with only one eye open and thinking it obtains a comprehensive view of the whole range of objects, that would naturally fall within its vision, when both eyes were exerting their every function.

It judges of the Feudal System, but overlooking the central thought, that all government and rule is but a single part of the one great government, that has existed since
the foundation of the world and has constantly tended toward the ideal.

He cannot judge of this system correctly, except we 1st retrace our steps into the region from whence it sprung and there note carefully the cause; 2nd take an impartial view of it at the time of its existence; and 3rd pursue forward into the period after its decline and there unravel the web it has spun, by lending its institutions and immortal principles to succeeding governments.

My first formed opinion of Feudalism was, that it was a slavery of the basest kind, transmitting through its gloom not a single ray of light, for the enlightenment of man's pathway to a higher life.

The study of History of Civilization and Constitutional History, however, have corrected my views to such an extent, that I am convinced there was good in it, and this good has survived the mere form of Feudalism and lived to throw splendor and glory on succeeding
government, when the system itself lay dead.

My object and intention is not to write a history of the Leidal System, nor am I worthy of such an undertaking, but rather to note briefly its principal characteristics, its cause and what it has done to aid the progress of civilization.

We will confine its effects principally to France.
The Feudal System.

Feudalism is a regulated system in which one individual parcels out to others the landed property which he possesses; in return for which, service or produce of lands is required.

The person giving land in fief was termed a "feudal lord"; while the person upon whom the land was conferred, was known as his "vassal."

The conditions on which lands were given in fief, that is, the kinds of tenure were principally three:
1st Tenure in free socage. The Germanic of England held their land by this tenure.
2nd Tenure in villeinage. The members of this class constituted the working servile occupants of soil.
3rd Military tenure. This was the highest form of
tenure and the one considered most honorable.

The obligation of those holding lands by this tenure was to render military service. Unlike the other kinds of tenure it depended on the integrity and loyalty of the vassal for the fulfillment of the duties laid upon him and yet afforded him complete security and safety.

The oath of fealty was the tie that bound lord and vassal together.

Protection from mistreatment and safety and security of life were the rights enjoyed by vassals under this system, while the lord received from his vassals all the support necessary for the protection and relief of his domain.

The taking of the oath of fealty was accompanied and made forcibly by three ceremonies: homage, fealty and investiture. The vassal expressed his submission and loyalty to his lord by kneeling at his feet and placing his hands in those of his lord.
by acknowledging the superiority of his lord by repeating the oath. The lord then invested his newly sworn vassal, either with his actual fief or a symbol of the same.

Thus lord and vassal were bound by an oath of loyalty and sacredness, a tie that could be severed only at the failing of either party to fulfill its requirements.

The system I have been describing was the Feudal System in its simplest form. Any man having a considerable amount of land in his possession, could parcel it out in this manner and thus become a feudal lord.

In consequence of this, arose the process of subdivision. The king held immediately all the lands in his kingdom, which he divided among his friends, the lords, barons &c. These in turn divided their domains among others and still these among others and so on, until France was under a regularly constituted form of government, of which both the meanest vassal and the King
were alike members.

Having stated in brief of what feudalism, as it existed during the Middle Ages consisted, we will now attempt to speak of the time and circumstances of its introduction.

One writer has stated that it is the natural result of conquest, having its origin in the first conquest made in the world. The Greeks of the heroic age were not ignorant of feudalism, nor were the Spartans, for it is said that military tenure then existed, and it was by this tenure all her lands were held.

It made itself felt in the great empire of Rome and both Annibale and Augustus lived under the shadow of its existence.

In Persia it was uncontrolled, necessarily it appeared, prevailed and sank into oblivion at an early day.

The period of its more immediate adoption and its beginning as it existed during the Middle Ages
was the 5th century A.D., when the whole European continent was overrun and conquered by the vast hordes of barbarians, known as the Goths, Vandals, Franks, Burgundians, Suevi &c.

For four centuries it lived in almost a dormant state, exerting no influence. Barbarism existed during all these centuries, rendering the nations and governments weaker and weaker. Chaos and confusion seemed to hold the reins of government. Feudalism appeared, with all its faults and weaknesses and saved Europe from final destruction.

It was the reign of the emperor Charlemagne in the ninth century that hurried on its introduction as a system of government, although this was not fully effected until the tenth century. Charlemagne was a powerful, far-seeing ruler, and by his foresight and wisdom was arrayed the scepter that ruled numerous sovereignties. From the mode of government, adopted by him, was evolved a
system weaker than Charlemagne had ever dreamed of.

He checked the internal dissensions and external invasions that were then prevalent in the kingdom. The natural outcome of this was fixedness of habitation, a leading characteristic of the Feudal System.

It was by the Teutonic invaders, that poured in upon the European territories, that the principle of the system was put into practice. They invaded these territories, not so much on account of booty (for such the invasions of their ancestors had been made) as to acquire landed property. The spirit of restlessness had subsided and a desire for possession had superseded it. This may rightly be termed the cause of feudalism.

That it was the necessary and inevitable outgrowth of surroundings is proved by the fact that it was universally adopted.

It penetrated into all governments, either in form or in principle, until there was no existing institution which it did not reach and in some way influence.
Natural, indeed, it was, that the chief and soldier, who had fought together and had exposed both life and body to cruel war, should alike enjoy the property and spoils taken.

This was the case; each soldier obtained a share of the conquered territory, while large territories, called "fiscal lands," were held by the king. Thus was inaugurated the system that was destined to rule during the darkest period of the world's history.

Feudalism was the child of Barbarism, consequently it inherited some of the mother qualities. It was, however, a first step toward civilization, and through all the numerous cycles since its taking, the world has steadily progressed.

According to ancient Teutonic customs, it was considered an honor to be the follower of a distinguished chief and fight under his banner. In return for his military service, he received the approbation of his leader.
The system could not have been exercised with very great oppression since history affirms, that many possessing freehold property gave it up to a lord to receive it back on feudal conditions.

Much of the corruption, exhibited in its practice, was due rather to circumstances than the system as such. A people, without an educational or a moral training, could not know true liberty. In noting its effects, therefore, we will consider it as a system and not its rule, hampered by the weaknesses of individuals.

The adoption improved both the condition of France itself and the condition of the Barbarians, who invaded it. At the beginning of its career, France was in a state of confusion and disturbance, that placed every man's life in great peril. Peace and freedom were impossible and the nation seemed to be fast relapsing into Barbarism.

The preservation of the integrity of France, at this
period, was effected by the "feudal laws." They prevented her dismemberment and to-day her national honor and glory are indebted to them.

The condition of the roving, adventurous, shiftless Barbarians, who established this system, compared with their condition after they became settled in their feudal homes, shows a marked development in character and mode of life.

The predominant principle of the Feudal System was liberty, a gem of that which exists to-day, "Liberty enlightening the World."

Knight has spoken of this liberty as consisting of six essentials, which in substance are as follows.

The foundation stones of the structure were freedom of thought and freedom of action. The feudal contract was made at the consent of vassal as well as lord; likewise the obligations of the one party, and the control and protection of the other ceased when either party violated the trust conferred upon him.
Soon after the adoption of the system, fiefs began to be hereditary. The son inherited the property his father had held. This principle was first developed in the Feudal System, and has proved itself to be the natural and right mode of dispensation of property. If God has made the son the inheritor of his father's possessions or character, should not justice and law make him the inheritor of his worldly possessions? Is it true that in the Feudal System only the oldest son inherited from his father, but today it has come to be extended to all sons alike.

"Upon the fact," that fiefs were inherited, says Guizot, "rests the connection of generations among themselves, the perpetuity of the social order, the progress of civilization."

There was a law of the system that denied to the "Feudal lord" the right of imposing any new charge or law upon his vassal, without the consent
of the latter. This law was sometimes violated, though unlawfully, just as laws even of the present day.

The inhabitants of communities were allowed the privilege of taking part in the administration of justice. Despotism did not rule. The mode of trial was "judgment by peers." Numerous conjectures have been offered concerning the impracticability of this plan. There has never yet been offered, however, another that could fill its place and perform its duties, consequently, we still live under and are judged by a feudal institution.

The fifth characteristic of this liberty was right of resistance, and the last which has been mentioned before, either party had the right of dissolving the contract. To avoid confusion and to preserve loyalty, the party dissolving the contract must have a good reason for so doing. These were in substance
The laws of liberty under the Feudal System exert great influence on the morals of her people. There is an institution, however, that exerts vastly more influence in this direction than law can possibly. It is constantly making itself felt, either for better or worse. This institution is that of the family. The "feudal family" consisting of husband, wife, children and perhaps a few freemen dwelt in the strongly fortified castle. It was here their sorrows and joys were mutual; here grew up that warm family love. Here domestic manners became refined. Here the shackles and fetters, that had bound woman so long, were let fall and her career of influence in the world began.

The vassals dwelt in small dwellings, situated around the castle on the domain of their lord. Necessarily they became drawn into
relationship. It would be contrary to the laws of human society for it to have been otherwise.

They looked to their lord as their protector, leader, and superior. The spirit of military patronage grew out of this condition of affairs.

Feudalism was ill-adapted to the life and growth of the military system as an organization of a people around one central ruler and chief. Since, however, the feudal system was prevalent, in so many countries adjoining each other, there was little necessity for such a system. Probably it is due to these circumstances, that these countries were not subdued, and exposed to the dangers of an universal monarchy.

These are only some of the characteristics and beauties of Feudalism, when viewing it on the bright side. To say it had no degrading tendency would be mere fiction. Perhaps the good was balanced by the evil.
As the idea of one ruler developed, as the lower classes were elevated in mind and spirit, the Feudal System declined. This gradual decline and the steady growth of centralization ran parallel courses in the History of France. At the death of Feudalism, centralization, the child she had nourished, now grown to manhood, steps in to assume her vacant seat. Out of the darkness of the Middle Ages has come Modern Europe with all its grandeur of civilization and development.

Feudalism was not a system that could live always. Human beings are beings of development and progress. Since the foundation of the world, the mind of the human race has ever been widening. Each succeeding generation abandons its old surroundings for temples nobler than the last.

In the onward rush of civilization, Feudalism
perished and to-day, scarcely a vestige of its form remains; but much of its spirit lives for our enjoyment and elevation. So this we have attempted to do honor.

"The only things that are never permanently obscured in history, although our eyes may be darkened to them for generations, are the providence of God and human progress."

Russ Sim.