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**A View Of Society In Europe, In Its Progress From  
Rudeness To Refinement: Or, Inquiries Concerning The  
History Of Law, Government, And Manners**

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**Edinburgh, 1778**

Section I. An Idea of the Feudal Militia.

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## CHAPTER III.

### Of the Military Power of a Feudal Kingdom.

#### SECTION I.

##### *An Idea of the Feudal Militia.*

**W**HEN the feudal association was cordial, there existed no necessity for the knight's fee. The vassals of a chief gave with pleasure their assistance. When this association was discordant, different interests actuating the superior and the vassal, art and policy were to prescribe the exact service to be performed. Nothing was to be left to friendship and cordiality. A rule, certain and definite, pointed out the duties of the vassal. This rule was the tenure of knight-service.

A duchy, barony, or earldom, were the estates possessed by the nobles; and, being divided into fees, each of these was to supply



ply its knight. A tenant of the crown, who was not created into nobility, but enjoyed a grant of land, furnished also his knights in proportion to his fees. The nobles and the gentry of a feudal kingdom were thus its defenders and guardians. And they granted out territory to persons inferior to them in the divisions of fees, and under the burden of knights. In proportion, therefore, to the extent of its lands, there was, in every feudal state, an army, or a body of militia, for its support and protection.

But, while a force, numerous and sufficient, was, in this manner, created, a care was also bestowed to hold it in readiness to take the field. The knights, who were to appear in proportion to the fees of each estate, were bound to assemble at a call, in complete armour, and in a state for action (1). The feudal militia, of consequence, could be marched, with expedition, to defend the rights of its nation, to support its honour, or to spread its renown.

The usual arms of a knight were the shield and helmet, the coat of mail, the sword, or the lance (2). It was, also, his duty to have a horse. For, a growing luxury, and the passion for show, encouraged by torneaments, had brought discredit to the infantry, which had distinguished the barbarians in their original feats, and facilitated their victories over the Romans (3). The horsemen were called the *battle*, and the success of every engagement



gement was supposed to depend upon them. No proprietor of a fee, no tenant by knight-service, fought on foot. The infantry consisted of men, furnished by the villages and the towns in the demesnes of the prince or the nobles. The bow and the sling were the arms of these; and though, at first, of little consideration, they were to grow more formidable (4).

During the warmth of the feudal association, the military service of the vassal was every moment in the command of the superior. When their association was decayed, it was not to be depended on, and, when afforded, was without zeal, and without advantage. The invention of knight-service, which was to recover, in some degree, the vigour of this connection, while it ascertained the exact duty to be rendered, was to fix its duration. Each possessor of a fee was, at his own expence, to keep himself in the field during *forty days* (5). To this obligation, the great vassals of the crown were bound, and inferior proprietors were to submit to it. When a single battle was commonly to decide the fates and the disputes of nations, this portion of time was considerable and important. And, if any expediency demanded a longer duty, the prince might retain his troops, but under the condition of giving them pay for their extraordinary service (6).

Such was the military system which, during a long period of time, was to uphold the power of the monarchies of Europe; a system,



system, of which it was the admirable consequence, that those who were the proprietors of the land of a kingdom, were to defend it. They were the most interested in its welfare and tranquillity; and, while they were naturally disposed to act with union and firmness, against a foreign enemy, they were induced not less strongly to guard against domestic tyranny. Their interest and happiness, their pleasure and convenience, urged them equally to oppose invasions from abroad, intestine commotions, and the stretches of prerogative. A strength, so natural, and which could never be exhausted; a strength, in which the prince was to have less authority than the nobles, and in which the power of both was checked by the numerous class of inferior proprietors; a strength, which had directly in view the preservation of civil liberty, seems, on a slight observation, the perfection of military discipline.

But, with all its appearance of advantage, this scheme of an army was incompatible with refining manners; and, in pointing out the causes of its weakness, we may see the symptoms of refinement they are to exhibit. A double curiosity is thus to console with its charms the anxiety of inquiries that are irksome.

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