



The Hanseatic League

Helen Zimmern

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There is scarcely a more remarkable chapter in history than that which deals with the trading alliance or association known as the Hanseatic League. The League has long since passed away, having served its time and fulfilled its purpose. The needs and circumstances of mankind have changed, and new methods and new instruments have been devised for carrying on the commerce of the world. Yet, if the League has disappeared, the beneficial results of its action survive to Europe, though they have become so completely a part of our daily life that we accept them as matters of course, and do not stop to inquire into their origin. To us moderns it seems but natural that there should be security of intercourse between civilized nations, that highways should be free from robbers, and the ocean from pirates. The mere notion of a different state of things appears strange to us, and yet things were very different not so many hundred years ago.

In the feudal times the conditions of life on the continent of Europe seem little short of barbarous. The lands were owned not only by the kings who ruled them with an iron despotism, but were possessed besides by innumerable petty lordlings and princelets, who on their part again exercised a rule so severe and extortionate that the poor people who groaned under it were in a condition little removed from slavery. Nay, they were often not even treated with the consideration that men give their slaves, upon whom, as their absolute goods and chattels, they set a certain value. And it was difficult for the people to revolt and assert themselves, for however disunited might be their various lords, in case of a danger that threatened their universal power, they became friends closer than brothers, and would aid each other faithfully in keeping down the common folk. Hand in hand with princes and lords went the priests, themselves often worldly potentates as well as spiritual rulers, and hence the very religion of the carpenter's son, which had overspread the civilized world in order to emancipate the people and make men of all nations and degrees into one brotherhood, was—not for the first time in its history—turned from its appointed course and used as an instrument of coercion and repression...

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