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Lords and Ladies

By Sharon Fabian

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Europe wasn't divided into countries as it is today. Smaller areas were each controlled by the leader of the tribe that had conquered the area. Eventually, some tribal leaders became more powerful than others, and the land that they controlled became larger and larger. When their land became very large, it became known as a kingdom, and the tribal leader became known as the king.

It was too difficult for the king to oversee everything that went on in his kingdom. He needed help. So he subdivided his land into smaller parcels and named a ruler for each part. These rulers, who were next in charge after the king, were known as lords, and their wives were known as ladies.

This system of sharing the power worked out well for the lords and also for the king. The lords gained a large piece of land, known as a fief, and the power to rule it. The king, in return, received a pledge of loyalty from his lords. This method of ruling the land and its people became known as the feudal system.

Under the feudal system, every lord pledged loyalty, or homage, to the king. He agreed to always support the king; he agreed to provide troops of knights ready to fight when needed; and he promised to do a good job of governing his part of the kingdom.

These pledges put a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the lords.

Having a large group of knights ready to fight at all times was a big job. The knights had to be trained, and they had to stay in practice. Their horses and equipment had to be kept ready. The lord was in charge of overseeing all of these activities.

Governing his estate was also a big job. Many peasants worked on the land. Many more worked in the shops and in the lord's castle. The lord was the manager of it all. He had to make sure that everything got done and that all of the people were taken care of.

Sometimes problems arose on the estate. Then, the lord acted as a judge, holding court to settle the disputes.

When the king called, the lord had to drop everything else and go to serve his king. When this happened, his wife, the lady of the castle, stepped in to manage the estate. She governed while the lord was away.

The lady of the castle had other duties too. She cared for her children and taught them while they were very young. Sometimes she oversaw the care and education of children from other noble families who were sent to stay on her estate. She entertained guests when they came to stay at the castle. She also was in charge of the household at all times, managing the kitchen, the meals, and the family accounts. Some ladies were even called on to lead their subjects in defending the castle if it was attacked while the lord was away.

The children of the lord and the lady had a much different life than children today. Often, they were sent away to another castle to be educated. Children were not expected to stay at home and be spoiled after the first few years of their life. They had to be educated and learn to deal with the world early on, because childhood lasted only a short time in medieval society. Many children were already engaged to be married before their teenage years. Most were married by the age of twelve to fourteen. Once they were married, it was time to take on adult responsibilities. Since the fiefs were passed down from fathers to sons, the boys would one day soon be rulers of their own land. The girls would marry the sons of other nobles and become the ladies of their own castles.

The feudal system lasted throughout the Middle Ages. Under this system, the peasants could feel a little bit safer within the walls of their lord's castle, and the king could feel a little bit safer too with his lords and knights always at the ready. In an uncertain time like the Middle Ages, the feudal system provided some welcome security.

