

CONSOLIDATIO N AND DECLINE

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Consolidation and decline by Charles Neeld Salter

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CHARLES NEEDL SALTER

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BY

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UNIV. OF
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CHAPTER I

CIVILISATION AND THE COSMOS

AT the stage of development that has now been reached, an opportunity is afforded to review the events that have taken place in the past, and discover the principles by which their course has been governed. In earlier times sufficient material had not been accumulated to support any certain conclusions, but at present it is the abundance rather than the want of it that causes perplexity. While they are unclassified and disconnected, the events of the past seem unintelligible; but if they were reduced to some arrangement, they would acquire a meaning and interest. The conditions which now exist are not altogether new, but have existed before and been reproduced after a long interval of barbarism

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and confusion. They will appear in their proper light, therefore, when a bridge has been built over the gulf that lies between ancient and modern times.

That the work may be carried to completion a wide retrospect is required. As the foundation must be laid before the superstructure can be raised, it is necessary to revert to antiquity in order to arrive at a clear understanding of modern times. The relations of the parts to each other do not become clear until a comprehensive view has been taken of the whole, and when the intermediate period is excluded, what is ancient no longer appears old in comparison with what is modern; as is noted by Bacon, whose words are even more appropriate now than when they were written: "To speak the truth, antiquity is the youth of the world. These are the ancient times when the world is ancient, and not those which are accounted ancient by computing backwards from the present." On the other hand it is useless to inquire into remote ages as to which there are no reliable records. The statements that are made concerning prehistoric periods do not merit serious attention. As there is no way of verifying them, they can neither be refuted nor accepted. But by getting a grasp of ascertained facts, it

would be possible to escape from the sea of vague opinions and occupy a position on firm ground. The mist in which the past is enveloped would then be dispersed, and its meaning be clearly seen; "for after all," to use Ibsen's words, "there must be a meaning in it. Life, existence, destiny, cannot be so utterly meaningless;" though, before events have been connected and governing principles discovered, it is not unnatural to think that "perhaps the whole thing goes simply by haphazard, taking its own course, like a drifting wreck without a rudder."

At the beginning of the creation, according to old national traditions, there existed in the north an abode of cloud and cold which was called Niflheim, and in the south an abode of fire and flame which was called Muspellheim, and between them lay a yawning chasm called Ginunga-gap. This was the primæval chaos, out of which the cosmos, that is to say the world, afterwards arose. The sea, earth, and sky, which are the three great divisions of nature, were not then clearly distinguished, and there was no way of getting across the intermediate gap. But when cosmos has appeared, chaos has vanished. Uniformity is displaced by diversity, and dis-

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tance is no longer an obstacle. In the natural revolution of time, things which seemed to be far apart are brought near together. It is the work of creation, therefore, to bridge over the yawning chasm, and establish communication between the one side and the other. With this end in view, Ovid, when he is about to describe the many transformations wrought in the course of time, first makes mention of the formless mass out of which they were all produced, speaking of it as follows: "Before the sea, earth, and sky, which covers all things, nature had everywhere one aspect, which was called chaos." While the work of creation was proceeding, and new forms were being brought into existence, there were no signs of decline. But when everything that was latent has become apparent, opposite processes, that were formerly held in check, begin to operate. The revolving cosmos, having been circumnavigated and thoroughly explored, does not remain for ever the same. For that which produces nothing that is free from decay cannot be free from decay itself. After the climax of development has been reached, it manifests a tendency to dissolution, and begins to relapse into the primæval chaos. It does not possess a perfect circle, but is subject to the