

ELEANOR: TWICE A QUEEN

By W. T. TOWNSEND

IT was a warm day in June, 1137 A.D. The peaceful villages of Aquitaine were aroused from their summer lethargy by the spectacle of a cavalcade of some five hundred knights with the shrewd old Abbé of Saint Dennis, Suger, at their head. Their itinerary brought them to the east bank of the Garonne where they pitched their tents opposite the city of Bordeaux.

Perchance from a casement window overlooking the river, the lovely Princess Eleanor, but fifteen years of age, was able to glimpse across the river the slight lad with whom her destinies were to be forever mingled. For the beautiful young girl had just become heir to the vast estates of the Count Guillaume, who a short time before, had died on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint James of Compostella in Spain.

The King of France at that time was Louis VI (The Fat) old before his time. He knew he had not long to live. His elder son, Philip, had been groomed to take his place on the throne. His second son, Louis, was being trained for the Church. Then misfortune struck, Philip was killed in a hunting accident and Louis was hastily called from the convent where he was preparing for Holy Orders. and named heir to the throne. Throughout all his reign more monk than king, Louis VII (*Dieu-Donné*) was indeed a strange mate for the vivacious, high-spirited Princess of Aquitaine.

That statesman king, the shrewd old Louis (The Fat), now contemplating death at Béthizy, was, more's the pity, little interested in so unimportant a matter as the compatibility of his son Louis (*Dieu-Donné*) and the Princess Eleanor as the future king and queen of France. His thoughts concerned rather the vast estates of the Princess to whom he aspired to affiance his heir.

Eleanor's upbringing differed greatly from that of most high born ladies of her day. Hers had been anything but a sheltered life. She had been accustomed to accompanying her widowed father in his travels through that wild yet magnificent countryside. She had sat in the great halls of half-barbarian barons listening to grim tales of raids and slaughter. She knew well the songs of battle and love, sung by the troubadours in their soft southern dialect.

Such was the girl that high diplomacy was to wed to the half-monk, future king of France. Strange indeed that so shrewd

a man of the world as the Abbé Suger could not foresee the explosive qualities of such a union.

Following their marriage by the Bishop of Bordeaux, Louis and Eleaonr departed immediately upon their dangerous journey to the north. Road travel was hazardous in those days in France and inevitable delays impeded the journey of the newly-wed couple to the capital. When they arrived it was to discover that Louis (The Fat) had already gone to his reward. Eleanor rode into Paris as Queen of France.

It was inevitable that the young King Louis VII, well named *Dieu-Donné*, church trained as he was, would be fired with wild enthusiasm when the Abbé Bernard preached the second crusade. Truly astonishing, however, was the response of his youthful queen, whose imagination responded to the call of adventure and who, taking the cross, pledged her vassals to the expedition. Yet little wonder, for Eleanor, accustomed to riding over the dangerous mountain trails and the wild hinterland of her father's domain, must have felt almost a prisoner within the confining castle walls in the *Cité*. Here again was opportunity for high adventure.

When the assembled chivalry of Western Europe set out for the Holy Land, it is safe to hazard a guess that none was more excited at the prospect than the lovely queen of France.

The story of that sad adventure has been told and retold. Mostly a man's tale, the role of Eleanor and her reaction to the experience has been passed over rather lightly by the historians. As the weary, hazardous days of travel wore on, forcing her into closer association with her husband, she came to despise, indeed almost to hate, the ultra-religious king; for religion sat lightly on Eleanor except where matters of high policy were involved. In this respect she much resembled Elizabeth, a queen of later time.

Tragedy and disaster dogged the footsteps of the magnificent army which Louis VII led eastward on the second crusade. In the mountains of Paphlagonia in Asia Minor, however, occurred the incident that later cost Eleanor dearly in prestige. One of her vassals disobeyed an order and in the ensuing struggle the brave troops of France were practically cut to ribbons. Only the vassal's noble birth saved him from execution and he was sent home in disgrace.

The incident created an insurmountable barrier between the king and queen and their incompatibility soon became plain

for all to see. It needed but a spark to precipitate the inevitable clash of wills.

We move forward to the time when the royal couple arrived at Antioch in Syria. Here at least their pilgrimage had brought them to the Holy Land. But a mere handful of the splendid cavalcade that has set out with them from Paris remained. The hour of decision was at hand. Against what forces should the pitiful remnants of Louis's army be led? Raymond, Prince of Antioch and uncle of the queen, had a plan. If Antioch was to be held, he argued, Louis's forces must first recapture the city of Edessa, a strategically indispensable outpost. Raymond's soft southern dialect found favour with Eleanor. She grasped enthusiastically the high adventure of impending battle. Romantic and happy, she sided with her uncle in the plan of campaign.

King Louis, however, thought otherwise. Unable to forget his monkish past, he refused to allow military considerations to interfere with his determined purpose which he had cherished from the moment the crusade set forth, to go to Jerusalem to do penance for his sins. Raymond was furious, but it was the queen who expressed the sentiments of her southern countrymen. Her eyes blazing with anger, her beauty ravishing, she came before Louis, determined in her stand.

"Go to Jerusalem if you wish with all the priests and monks you love so well, but I will not stir one foot from Antioch. I shall stay with my countrymen. I hereby renounce your crown and all it stands for. I am sick to death of a husband who is half a monk."

No less an authority than the Abbé Bernard himself, she reminded Louis, had declared that they were related within the degrees forbidden by the Church.

Eleanor, however, was too valuable a queen on the chess-board of Europe to allow Louis and his advisers to give consideration to such a quarrel. For was it not she who had added to the small kingdom of the Ile de France the vast estates of Aquitaine?

Raymond's plan to recapture Edessa was abandoned, the queen was seized on Louis' orders, and the French army moved out of Antioch by night, carrying Eleanor with them to Jerusalem. It is not hard to imagine the cold fury which Louis's action engendered in her heart.

The crusade's disastrous fate had a shattering effect on the

king's popularity when the tattered remnants of the once proud army returned to Paris.

Eleanor's unhappiness grew. Her need for a confidant to whom she could unburden her sentiments and frustration was unbounded. Little wonder, then, that soon after their return to Paris, Eleanor should have found in Henry, the handsome son of Geoffrey, the fair Count of Anjou who was staying with his father in Paris, someone to whom she could unburden her heart.

"I thought to have married a king", she said, "but I find myself mated to a monk."

About this time Eleanor gave birth to her second child, another daughter. Her failure to provide a male heir for the French crown did not increase her popularity in the *Ile de France*.

In March Eleanor was divorced from Louis; or rather, in the language of the Church, the marriage was annulled. The two daughters who remained with their father were declared legitimate.

Shortly thereafter (it must have been all pre-arranged), Eleanor married Henry, who, now that his father Geoffrey was dead, had become Count of Anjou and also Duke of Normandy. Eleanor was thirty and Henry eighteen; but the prospect of a marriage which promised to unite an empire extending from the borders of Scotland to the Pyrenees and to put Henry on the English throne was such that they could afford to laugh at such trifles as a twelve year difference in ages.

The troubadours of the twelfth century enjoyed high favour in court circles throughout western Europe. It is no accident that the greatest singers sprang from among the people who spoke the soft dialect of Aquitaine. They sang of war and of love, but chiefly of love. The days of the '*Chanson de Roland*' were past. Minstrels now sang of Arthur and Guinevere, of Tristram and Ysolt. Chivalry had assumed a softer and more delicate hue. Jousts and tournaments there still were, but no knight of that age would dream of entering the lists without the favour of his lady fair wound about his helmet. It was her honour and beauty that were at stake as much as his knightly prowess.

For one of Eleanor's temperament, the age of chivalry offered a constant challenge. She and her daughter Marie, born of the ill-fated union of Louis VII, and now Countess of Champagne,

surrounded by a coterie of lovely ladies, established at Poitiers the strangest court recorded in all history—"The Court of Love."

To this court perplexed and disappointed lovers brought their problems to be solved. Marie, Countess of Champagne, and her ladies-in-waiting sat as judges in the many affairs of the heart that came before them.

A classic case to come before the Court of Love was brought by a knight who, through an advocate, sought to discover whether love can survive marriage. The Countess Marie ruled that ideal love cannot exist between a married couple. Dissatisfied with this finding, the knight insisted that the case be carried higher to Queen Eleanor herself. The ruling which she handed down reflects her own experience in striking fashion, for she declared that while it is praiseworthy that a wife should find love in her husband, in the main, the decision of her daughter's court, that love cannot survive marriage, was essentially correct.

Eleanor's historic decision reflects not only the experiences of her own life but the customs and attitudes of the age, for marriage in the twelfth century was a matter of diplomacy. An heiress was just another pawn on the feudal chessboard. Love as a human sentiment seldom, if ever, entered into marriage arrangements. Men sought the outlet for their emotions outside the family circle.

Eleanor's second husband, Henry, now for some years king of England was no exception. He had married Eleanor in order that he might rule a great empire. For her part, she had fulfilled the obligation of marriage in bearing him sons—something that she had not been able to do for Louis. Daughters, too, were born of their marriage, but their sons were what mattered. Having done his duty as a father and a king in providing heirs for his empire, Henry, according to the custom of his time, sought love outside the family circle.

Those who have visited the university city of Oxford, will recall having pointed out to them *Rosamonde*, the secluded bower of the beautiful 'Rose of the World.' Here the king sought that affection and solace which he looked for in vain in a queen so much older than himself.

Eleanor, it might be imagined, would have been content to abide by the customs and traditions of the twelfth century and to be governed in her attitude toward her husband by the well established precedents of her own Court of Love and to have accepted the king's conduct as something quite natural

and to be expected. Theory, however, is one thing, practice another. Rosamonde found in the queen all the fury of a woman scorned. One legend has it that Queen Eleanor offered her the choice between a dagger and a bowl of poison. The truth is, however, that Rosamonde died while still young and beautiful and, as the Middle Ages record of those who wrap themselves in their last hours in the robes of a religious, 'in the odor of sanctity.'

Henry's indifference toward his queen was now complete. Well past middle life, she held little attraction for him. Despite the fact that he no longer loved Eleanor, however, his feelings had not changed toward her broad estates. Never would he allow her to walk out of his life as she had out of Louis', taking with her her great possessions. The simple solution he thought would be quietly to divorce her and then make her an abbess of some convent. Eleanor, unfortunately, refused to co-operate. She found it impossible to picture herself in a religious habit. The best the king was able to do was to confine her to one of his English castles. The imprisonment it is true, was not strict, but a jail is no less a jail even if the bars are of gold. The years between 1176 and the death of her husband formed the blackest span in Eleanor's long life.

For a time it must have looked like the end. A neglected and imprisoned queen, she had reached the age which in the twelfth century would have been regarded as old. Nothing remained but for her to devote her life to those good works which she had neglected in her youth. Thirteen years of imprisonment, however, did nothing to dampen the consuming fire of her ambition. History had destined her for great things yet to come.

Two of Henry's four sons preceded him to the grave. He himself died in 1189, leaving as his heir Queen Eleanor's favourite, Richard the Lion-Hearted (*Coeur-de-Lion*). It was she who had brought him up to succeed her in Aquitaine. A Southerner in speech and thought, he was no mean troubadour and some of his songs have survived to the present day, beautiful in their native dialect but defying the translators' efforts. Little wonder that so romantic a figure should be fired with the spirit of adventure to set forth on his way to the crusades. Together with King Philip Augustus of France, Richard the Lion-Hearted led a well-equipped army on the third, crusade.

During his absence, Queen Eleanor at long last came into her own as ruler of her son's vast empire. Despite the fact

that she was nearing three score years and ten, her energies showed no abatement. Nevertheless, the responsibilities of the reigning sovereign of so great an empire in such troublesome times was a grave burden for her to shoulder. That task was made the heavier by Richard the Lion-Hearted's capture by the Emperor of Germany, who held him prisoner, demanding an enormous ransom.

Richard's fate provided Philip of France with the opportunity to fulfill his own long cherished ambition of conquering and seizing Richard's continental possessions. John, Richard's brother, plotted with Philip to wrest his empire from him and was promised England as his reward. Both Philip and John, however, reckoned without Eleanor. Not only did she successfully hold them both at bay but was able to raise the huge ransom necessary for Richard's release. On his return to England in 1194 she was able to present him with his empire still intact.

History records the names of few women who have accomplished tasks and overcome difficulties as great as those which confronted Eleanor between 1190 A.D. and 1194 A.D.

The five years of Eleanor's life that followed her son's release from his imprisonment in Germany were the happiest of her life. Her favorite son was back. His mother shared his triumph as the greatest knight of his time dispersed and scattered his enemies. It seemed almost as if the old queen's romantic and colourful career was to close in glory. The fates, however, decreed otherwise. In 1199, when besieging a small castle belonging to one of his vassals, Richard was struck in the shoulder by a chance bolt. The wound proved mortal.

Eleanor lived on for five more years. Despite the fact that she had never trusted John, nevertheless, now that he was king, she lent him her support. Happily, she did not live long enough to witness the ruin that he was destined to bring upon the Angevin Empire, but she saw enough and could foresee the rest.

Her death at the great age of eighty-two, in 1204 A.D., marked the end of the life of one of the most remarkable women ever to touch upon England's romantic history.