



ELEANOR
— OF —
AQUITAINE



THE MOTHER QUEEN *of the* MIDDLE AGES

DESMOND SEWARD

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Preface to the New Edition

Eleanor of Aquitaine is rightly acknowledged to be one of the great feminist icons. Born in 1122, dying in 1204, she lived at a time when men treated women as chattels and only a few, like Abbess Hildegard of Bingen or Eleanor's mother-in-law Empress Matilda, managed to assert themselves as people in their own right. However, Hildegard did so in a nunnery and Matilda failed to win the English throne. Queen Eleanor alone lived in the world as she wished, enjoying unqualified respect.

The richest heiress in Europe, she lost her inheritance when she married Louis VII of France and then Henry II of England. After she ceased bearing children Henry sent her home to Poitiers, to rule Aquitaine (southwestern France)—and to make way for her rival Rosamund Clifford. Eventually, she persuaded her four sons to revolt. Captured (dressed as a knight, in armour) she was imprisoned for fifteen years when the revolt was crushed. Unbroken, when Henry died, as effective regent she saved England and the Plantagenet lands in France for her son Richard the Lionheart while he was away on Crusade. She was largely responsible for her youngest son John succeeding him as king instead of her grandson Arthur and so long as she lived Aquitaine stayed loyal to John. Both Richard and John were not only devoted to their mother but had the deepest admiration for her.

The troubadour poets who surrounded Eleanor praised her good looks and her generosity to the skies—although a far stronger, more powerful personality, she was the Princess Diana of her day—yet forgot to praise her many other gifts. At the end of the twelfth century, when by the standards of the time she was a very old lady indeed, the Winchester monk Richard of Devizes called her 'incomparable' in his chronicle. He adds that she is not only beautiful but gracious, strong but kind, unpretentious but wise, 'an unusual combination in a woman'—a tribute that neatly conveys the bias against her sex.

She showed her awareness of the bias, in the gifts that from her twenties she lavished on the new abbey and religious order of Fontevrault, among whose key goals was improving women's status and protecting them. Its members included priests and nuns, but the superior was always an abbess who had to be a widow. Most of the nuns were great ladies, widowed, cast-off or unmarriageable, while many of the lay sisters had also escaped from an intolerable existence. It is not too much to call Fontevrault a refuge for battered women. Eleanor was such a keen supporter that she not only endowed it, magnificently, but persuaded her menfolk to do so. In equal measure. She went to the abbey to die and was buried there.

Brave, glamorous and brilliantly intelligent, throughout her glittering, turbulent career Eleanor of Aquitaine demonstrated that even during the twelfth century, an age of the most barbarous chauvinism, a really determined woman could triumph over every obstacle and live the life that she wanted for herself.

—DESMOND SEWARD
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Contents

Foreword

- 1 Aquitaine and the Troubadours
 - 2 Queen of France
 - 3 The Crusader
 - 4 The Divorce
 - 5 Duchess of Normandy
 - 6 Queen of England
 - 7 The Angevin Empress
 - 8 The Court at Poitiers
 - 9 Eleanor's Sons
 - 10 Eleanor's Revolt
 - 11 The Lost Years
 - 12 Queen Mother
 - 13 The Regent
 - 14 Richard's Return
 - 15 Fontevrault
 - 16 The Death of Richard
 - 17 King John
 - 18 The Grandmother of Europe
 - 19 The Murder of Arthur
 - 20 The End of the Angevin Empire
- Select Bibliography
- Index

For Elisabeth Pollington

Foreword

‘With him along is come the mother queen,
An Até, stirring him to blood and strife.’

Shakespeare, *King John*

When Eleanor of Aquitaine died in 1204 her long career had been the most colourful and the stormiest of any English queen consort before or since. No other English king has possessed so formidable or so lavishly gifted a wife as Henry II. In her day the greatest heiress in Europe, she became in turn queen of France and queen of England, and among her sons were Richard the Lion-heart and king John. It is not a vulgar exaggeration to call her the sex symbol of her age, for she was as beautiful as she was regal, and universally admired. Splendid in person, in rank and fortune, and in adventure, when young she was the idealized and adored lady for whom troubadours wrote their songs—and whom disapproving chroniclers compared to Messalina.

At the same time Eleanor’s story is a family saga. She was very much the royal matriarch who, if not exactly a Livia, ruthlessly dominated her children and turned them against their father. It seems more than likely that her extreme possessiveness helped to bring out their evil qualities, and it may well have been largely responsible for Richard’s homosexuality. She feuded bitterly with at least one daughter-in-law and contributed towards the destruction of her own grandson.

The first ‘modern’ historian to give Eleanor her due as a politician was bishop Stubbs at the end of the nineteenth century. ‘This great lady who deserves to be treated with more honour and respect than she has generally met with’, he writes of her. The bishop considers that ‘she was a very able woman of great tact and experience, and still greater ambition; a most important adviser whilst she continued to support her husband, a most dangerous enemy when in opposition’.

Undoubtedly the key to Eleanor is her thirst for power. She was not prepared to be a mere transmitter of her inheritance to a husband, son or son-in-law, like every other woman in that masculine age. A great independent ruler in her own right, she lost her power when she married Louis VII of France, and later forfeited even her influence over him because of his dependence on monkish advisers and because she failed to bear him an heir. She retrieved neither power nor influence by her second marriage, despite marrying a man more than a decade younger than herself; when she intrigued against Henry she was imprisoned for fifteen years. She at last regained some power as unofficial regent for her son Richard when he was a prisoner in Germany, and then—when a very old woman— even more as the ally of her son John. She had connived at John’s succession, bypassing her young grandson Arthur (who was eventually murdered), because John guaranteed her power. As Shakespeare’s principal authority for English history, Holinshed, explained in the sixteenth century, ‘Surely, queen Eleanor, the king’s mother, was sore against Arthur ... for that she saw, if he were king, how his mother Constance would look to bear the most rule within the realm of England’.

Shakespeare paints a truly appalling portrait of Eleanor in *King John*. Describing John’s arrival in France to fight the French king, he says:

With him along is come the mother queen,
An Até, stirring him to blood and strife.

Até was a Greek goddess of discord, of criminal folly. Shakespeare stresses John’s dependence on his

aged mother's strength and cunning, and shows her scheming against Arthur, so 'That yon green boy shall have no sun to ripe', only too pleased to see him in John's murderous hands. She is called 'a canker'd grandam' and 'a monstrous injurer of heaven and earth', and has 'a sin-conceiving womb'. Indeed Shakespeare's 'Queen Elinor', though only a minor character in the play, is one of his most terrifying women, no less evil than Lady Macbeth.

Yet the Elinor of *King John* is only a caricature of one side of a fascinatingly complex personality. When she was young, men worshipped her, and not merely because of her beauty or rank; when she was old, her children venerated her. She could be generous on a truly regal scale. Emerging at Henry II's death from her long confinement as the all-powerful queen mother, she immediately issued an order for the release of prisoners throughout England because, in her words, 'by her own experience prisons were hateful to men and to be released from them was a most delightful refreshment to the spirit'. She also patronized and cultivated the great abbey of Fontevrault, helping to make it a refuge for battered noblewomen fleeing from brutal husbands.

Nonetheless Eleanor has always been overshadowed by her menfolk. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising, with a husband who murdered archbishop Thomas Becket, a son who was the hero of the crusades, and another son who granted Magna Carta. Moreover any heiress would have been dwarfed by so vast an inheritance as Eleanor's duchy; it was the foundation of the Anglo-French empire of the Plantagenets and the origin of the Hundred Years War. The greatest beauty of her age has dwindled into Henry II's rich old wife—remembered for murdering Fair Rosamund, a crime she never committed—or Shakespeare's Elinor and the virago of popular films and television serials. Her loveliness and glamour, her patronage of poets, her throwing-off of the constraints with which convention shackled women in the twelfth century, are all forgotten, as are her very real gifts as a politician and a ruler.

Usually it is all but impossible to write a flesh and blood biography of any figure from the high Middle Ages, especially a woman, because of the lack of sources. But Eleanor so impressed her contemporaries that there is an abundance of material. This book is an attempt to do justice to a magnificent woman and a magnificent life.

I particularly wish to thank Elisabeth, Viscountess Pollington for reading the typescript and for many useful suggestions. I am also grateful to Mr D.N. Steward and to the Reverend Geoffrey Webb, who gave me valuable advice on certain aspects of the period—the former on the troubadours, and the latter on the abbey and order of Fontevrault. I must thank too Mr Christopher Manning, who read the proofs.

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1 Aquitaine and the Troubadours



‘Aquitaine, abounding in riches of every kind.’

Ralph of Diceto

‘Her passions are made of nothing but the finest parts of pure love.’

Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

Eleanor of Aquitaine was born in 1122, either at Bordeaux or at the nearby castle of Belin. She was the daughter of the future William X of Aquitaine and his wife Aénor of Châtellerauld, and grand-daughter of the duke of Aquitaine then reigning, William IX.

In the twelfth century, France was a geographical expression rather than a country, divided between several peoples who spoke different languages. As yet the Capetian dynasty had little real power. The king was a titular monarch who ruled scarcely more than the neighbourhood around Paris—the Ile de France (so-called because it was almost surrounded by rivers)—together with the Orleanais and Bourges. He enjoyed considerable prestige and moral authority, but he was still no more than the first among many great nobles; although they were his vassals, they nevertheless ruled vast territories as independent princes. The duchy of Aquitaine was the largest of these fiefs. It had passed by inheritance to the counts of Poitiers, and the count-dukes ruled almost the whole of south-western France from the river Loire to the Pyrenees.

Aquitaine proper—roughly the *ancien régime* provinces of Guienne and Gascony—had all the ingredients of a separate nation, and was no less of a country than Brittany. Geographically it was unified by the winding river Garonne and its tributaries, and by such natural frontiers as the Atlantic, the Pyrenees and part of the Massif Central. It possessed racial unity, its people being basically Latinized Basques who had little in common with the Northern French, and its own distinct temperament, which was—and still is—an explosive compound of vivacity and pride. Moreover, it was not merely self-supporting but enviably rich. ‘Aquitaine, abounding in riches of every kind’, Ralph of Diceto called it, and another chronicler speaks of ‘opulent Aquitaine’. From its capital, Bordeaux, wine merchants sailed to England, Germany and Scotland, and from Bayonne men went out to hunt the whale. It was a country of many landscapes, the heaths and sandy wastes of Gascony and the mountains contrasting with flat, lush plains and impenetrable woodland. There were yellow-walled and red-roofed towns, Romanesque cathedrals and rich abbeys. There were also many lordly castles, which were much more comfortable than the chilly keeps of the north, for in the south the tradition of the Gallo-Roman villa had never quite died out.

To the north of Aquitaine was the county of Poitou. Besides its capital of Poitiers, it contained other almost equally fine towns, and La Rochelle was nearly as prosperous a port as Bordeaux. The countryside was an attractive mixture of oak *bocage*, flat farmland—the *plat pays*—and deep pine forest. The Poitevins spoke a dialect of northern French, which to some extent separated them from the Aquitainians.

For the people of Aquitaine, including its rulers and Eleanor herself, spoke a tongue very different from that of Northern France. All the southern French used a number of dialects nowadays known collectively as Provençal, or *langue d’oc*, as opposed to the *langue d’oïl* of the north. One of these dialects, the *Lemosin*, became a written literary language. It was the remarkable achievement of Provençal to create the first vernacular lyric poetry of any merit—with the exception of Irish—in Western Europe since classical times. ‘Twelfth century Provençal, softer than sleep’, Helen Waddell says of it. She adds that ‘Provençal poetry demands no other intellectual background than that of its century, a May morning, the far-off singing of birds, a hawthorn tree in blossom, a crusade for the holy sepulchre. It is the Middle Ages in the medium of a dream’.

The poems of the troubadours were written as songs with lute accompaniment. They might tell of war, politics or rivals, or they could be satirical—as in the form known as the *sirventès*—but usually they were about ladies. A new and widespread devotion to the Virgin Mary had induced something of a reverence for women in general. The troubadours developed a cult of platonic love (*amor de lonh*, love from afar) and sang of an impossible passion for some unattainable noblewoman, invariably

married and a great lady, declaiming how lovely she was and how despite her scorn they would continue to adore her. Women of rank—~~young or even not so young~~—were surrounded by retinues of sighing troubadours, mostly impoverished petty nobles. In theory, at any rate, physical love played a very small part; a troubadour was expected to think himself well rewarded for ten years of devotion by the gift of a single rose, though he would drop heavy hints for largesse.

This idealization of women, however artificial or exaggerated, brought about a considerable improvement in their status. Whereas in the barbarous north ladies were all too often little more than mere child-bearers, kept in strict seclusion and beaten by their husbands as a matter of course, in the south they enjoyed genuine liberty and mixed freely with the other sex. They were even educated and taught to read, if not to write. The personality of Eleanor—or Aliénor, as she called herself—clearly owed much to the unusually civilized atmosphere of Aquitaine.

The earliest troubadour known by name is Eleanor's grandfather, the fascinating William IX, *Guilhem lo trobador*, who ruled Aquitaine and Poitou from 1086 to 1127. He was the outstanding figure of her early childhood, the first truly big man in her life, and a hero who must have made an enormous impression upon her, even though he died when she was only five. He was a man of extraordinary complexity, alternately idealistic and cynical, ruthless but impractical. He was no statesman and, though aggressive and pugnacious, a notably incompetent general. He failed in one scheme after another. He claimed Toulouse as his wife's inheritance, invading it while its count was away on a crusade, but the invasion ended in disaster and humiliation. In 1101 he himself took an army to the Holy Land; it was cut to pieces near Heraclea and he escaped with difficulty—he may even have spent some time as a prisoner of the Saracens. In 1114 he made another attempt on Toulouse, occupying the county for several years, but he was eventually driven out. In 1119 he went on an expedition to Aragon, helping its king to defeat a multitude of Moors but receiving little reward. He was always in trouble with the Church, and once threatened a bishop with his sword. His private life made a scandalous contrast with his ideals as a troubadour. His most lurid affair was with the dauntingly named Dangerousa of Châtelleraut, whom he carried off from her husband, seduced, and then kept in the Maubergeon tower of his palace at Poitiers (from whence she became known as *La Maubergeonne*); and his son rose up in arms at such an insult to his mother. William IX died excommunicated in 1127. For all his talents and his energy, none of his ambitious plans had succeeded. Nevertheless contemporaries undoubtedly respected him as a mighty prince and a brave knight. He successfully cowed and kept in subjection some of the most turbulent vassals in France and he was able to bequeath an undiminished inheritance. Furthermore, even a hostile critic of his own time had to admit that the duke was one of the most courteous people in the world.

Both his age and posterity have been baffled by William IX. First there is his unexpected gift of versifying, in a mixture of Lemosin and Poitevin. He may have been inspired by Arab songs; his father had fought in Spain and brought back Moorish slave girls, and William himself knew Syria as well as Spain. Whatever his inspiration, he was unquestionably a most competent poet, eleven of whose pieces have survived; some are unashamedly licentious, although one, *Pos de chantar m'es pres talenz*, pays a melancholy farewell to earthly joys:

Since now I have a mind to sing
I'll make a song of that which saddens me,
That no more in Poitou or Limousin,
Shall I love's servant be....

But the originality of a great lord turning troubadour was accompanied by less admirable eccentricities. In one of the earliest known examples of heraldry he had his concubine Dangerousa's likeness painted on his shield, explaining repeatedly that he wanted her over him in battle just as he

was over her in bed. He announced his intention of building a special whore house for his convenience, just outside Niort, in the shape of a small nunnery. His frivolity, his satirical wit and his cynicism disturbed contemporaries. ‘Brave and gallant but too much of a jester, behaving like some comedian with joke upon joke’, Orderic Vitalis says of him, and Orderic is supported by William of Malmesbury, who speaks of the duke as a giddy, unsettled kind of man ‘finding pleasure only in one nonsense after another, listening to jests with his mouth wide open in a constant guffaw’. Although never a clown herself, Eleanor took after this grandfather in her sarcastic wit and in the frivolity of her early years.

There was an uncomfortable legend about William IX that Eleanor seems to have remembered. A holy hermit came to him, protesting in God’s name at the rape of Dangerousa. He was received with the duke’s usual mocking banter. The hermit thereupon laid a curse on William; neither he nor his descendants, whether through the male or the female line, would ever know happiness in their children. When Eleanor was old, bishop Hugh of Lincoln (St Hugh) often told this story, saying that he had heard it from her husband, Henry II, and the king must have heard it from Eleanor herself.

Duke William X, Eleanor’s father, was almost as cultured as William IX, just as colourful and still more pugnacious. He was a patron of poets and there were many troubadours at his court, including foreigners from Aragon, Castile and Navarre, and from Italy, and there was even a Welshman called Bledhri. When this duke died, his Gascon friend Cercamon wrote a lament that mourned his passing and the end of his munificence. However, William X was better known for quarrelling than for verse. A man of huge physique and enormous strength, he was an outsize personality in every way. He was said to eat enough for eight ordinary mortals at each meal. He was unwise enough to involve himself in the Church schism that began in 1130, supporting the anti-pope Anacletus against Innocent II; he menaced prelates and ignored excommunications and interdicts that stopped the bells ringing in entire dioceses. He was completely undaunted by the threats of divine punishment that issued from the redoubtable abbot of Clairvaux, St Bernard, and refused to remove a schismatic bishop. When Bernard deliberately entered his territory and publicly celebrated mass at Parthenay, the duke burst into the church in full armour, to teach the infuriating monk a lesson. However, William had met his match. Bernard advanced on him, holding up the consecrated Host, and spoke to such effect that the duke fell to the ground rigid with fear and foaming at the mouth. But although he had lost his battle with the Church, William in no way abated his quarrelsomeness when dealing with his vassals; only his death prevented the whole of the Limousin from rising in revolt.

Very little is known of Eleanor’s mother, Aénor. She was the daughter of the viscount of Châtellerauld and his wife Dangerousa—William’s IX’s concubine, the *Maubergeonne*. Aénor had three children: William Aigret (who died when still a boy), Eleanor of Aquitaine and Petronilla (who is sometimes called Aélith). There is a whimsical legend that the name Eleanor—in Provençal, *Aliénor*—is derived from the Latin pun *Alia Aénor*, i.e. ‘Another Aénor’. The duchess Aénor appears to have obtained the appointment of her uncle as bishop of Poitiers, perhaps because he was a supporter of Anacletus, and she was probably excommunicated with her husband as an adherent of the anti-pope. The one other detail to survive is that she died at Talmont, about the year 1130, when Eleanor was only eight years old.

William X seems to have been noticeably fond of his eldest daughter, making her his constant companion. In consequence, Eleanor’s childhood was passed under many roofs. Like all rulers of the high Middle Ages, her father was perpetually on progress—administering justice and bringing rebellious vassals to heel—and Eleanor went with him. Inside the Roman city walls of Bordeaux she lived in the Ombrière palace with its tall keep, the ‘Crossbowman’, although she must also have stayed at the rambling old Tutelle palace just outside. When at Poitiers she inhabited the splendid Maubergeon Tower, which had once housed her grandfather’s ladies. There were similar keeps and

palaces at Limoges, Niort, St Jean d'Angély, Blaye, Melle, Bayonne and other towns, together with the fortresses of the vassals. In addition there were many rich abbeys that frequently had the expensive honour of entertaining the ducal household. There were also particularly favoured residences belonging to the duke, such as Belin (near Bordeaux) and Talmont, a castle and hunting lodge on the coast of Poitou.

Eleanor's education was by no means confined to needlework. She was taught to read Latin: first, the prayers and services of the Church, then the Bible, the writings of the fathers and Ovid. She learned to such effect that later she was able to enjoy Latin comedies when they were performed before the court, and it is likely that she could speak the language. She was certainly able to write it, a rare accomplishment for a member of the laity. She was also taught to read and write Provençal, acquiring an expert knowledge of the *gai saber* (joyous art), as the troubadours termed their craft.

Eleanor may well have picked up more than *gai saber* from the troubadours. Many came from the county of Toulouse, which (especially the town of Albi) was the centre of a new religion, a form of Manichaeism. The romantic history of the Albigensians has obscured the nature of their beliefs; they held all matter to be evil, procreation being the ultimate sin. But such views intrigued poets who practised platonic love. Moreover the integrity of the Albigensian ministers contrasted favourably with the corruption and sloth of all too many of the Christian clergy. Whole districts of southern Aquitaine became Albigensian. Although not even the chroniclers accuse Eleanor of being an Albigensian, there must have been plenty of them at her father's court and it is impossible that she did not know a good deal about their creed.

Obviously Eleanor matured early, partly from being constantly in her father's company. One may guess how much she regretted not having been born a boy and how this regret, together with the freedom bestowed by her position and by Aquitanian court life, made her determined to do just what she pleased and careless of convention. Nevertheless, although she was independent and strong-willed, she was much too feminine ever to be a tomboy; but later she was credited with wearing armour like a man, and she may have displayed a certain casualness in sexual matters.

By this date the Capetian monarchy was at last beginning to assert itself and think of expansion. Louis VI was accused, with justice, of making a god out of his belly, and by his mid-forties he was too fat to mount a horse, yet for all his gluttony he was determined to be more than just 'duke of the Ile de France'. After enforcing strict law and order for the first time throughout the Capetian domains, by military skill and sheer force of character, he then made even his greatest vassals defer to him as a judge and arbitrator, as in the disputed succession to the lordship of Bourbon. By 1124 his vassals had grown dutiful enough to help him fight off an invasion by the emperor Henry V and the English king Henry I. Louis also found other sources of support by issuing to town communes throughout France (though seldom in his own territory) charters to set up corporations, which freed them from feudal obligations to their local lord. Understandably, *Louis le gros* cast greedy eyes on Aquitaine and its heiress. With such a king, Eleanor would have to give priority to a Capetian suitor. In any case, should her father die, the wardship of herself and of her fief would fall to the king.

On Good Friday 1137, despite his strength, duke William X died at Compostella, where he had gone to pray to St James the Apostle, and was buried under the high altar at Compostella. Eleanor had no other course than to turn to king Louis. Although a woman could inherit a fief, receive homage from its vassals, and lead them to war, it was also true that under feudal law any ruthless suitor might seize her, force her to marry him, and enjoy her inheritance. It is not known whether William had expressed any wish that his daughter should marry Louis's son but it is more than likely that he had recognized Louis's right to be her guardian. Eleanor was speedily betrothed to *Louis le jeune*, who was Louis VI's only surviving son. Even before the marriage, the fat monarch made his son formally claim Poitiers and Aquitaine and receive the homage of his new vassals at Limoges on 29 June 1137.

The future Louis VII was now sixteen. Originally he had been destined for the cloister and had spent his early years as a 'child monk' at the monastery of Saint-Denis under the benevolent eye of abbot Suger. However, when he was nine his elder brother Philip's horse had been frightened by a runaway pig, giving its rider a fatal fall, whereupon Louis became heir to the throne and was crowned joint-king according to Capetian custom (to ensure an undisputed succession). But the memory of his pious childhood and his affection for monks never left him; he continued his sacred studies and sometimes wore a coarse grey gown and sandals like a simple brother. In appearance he was well built, but not overweight like his father, with long yellow hair and mild blue eyes. His strangest characteristic was his humble, unworldly manner, which none the less gave him a naive charm. Yet he was more intelligent than he seemed at first, and far from ineffectual. His worst faults were an appallingly violent temper—his rages were terrible—and a paralysing sense of sin and guilt.

Louis took over a month travelling from Paris to his wedding, riding by night to escape the heat. He was accompanied by his old friend abbot Suger, who was also his father's trusted minister, by the bishop of Chartres and other prelates, and by an imposing escort of great vassals that included count Thibault of Champagne and count Raoul of Vermandois (a pair of whom Eleanor would later hear a good deal). Naturally he brought sumptuous presents.

Even the monkish young king must have been dazzled by his lavishly gifted bride, when at last he met her. Quite apart from her great possessions, Eleanor was very desirable in herself. So far as one may judge from the contemporary sources and the ecstasies of even the most grudging clerical witnesses, at fifteen she was a beauty—tall, with a superb figure that she kept into old age, lustrous eyes and fine features. (It is likely that her hair was yellow and her eyes blue, as at that time these were considered indispensable for truly remarkable good looks.) Obviously she had inherited the splendid constitution of her father and grandfather. In manner, as befitted a lady who claimed descent from Charlemagne, she was gracious and regal. She must have been far more adult than her bridegroom. Even then she was probably already a protector of troubadours, especially of those fleeing from the irritation of their adored ones' menfolk. (She was to be no less noted for sympathy with her own sex in trouble; her concern for wives who had run away from brutal husbands was later evident in her patronage of the abbey of Fontevrault, which served as a refuge for them.) She was indeed a girl of extraordinary promise.

On Sunday 25 July 1137 the couple were married in the cathedral of Saint André at Bordeaux, by archbishop Geoffrey of Loroux, in the presence of the lords spiritual and temporal of Gascony, Poitou and the Saintonge. Afterwards, at the nuptial banquet in the Ombrière palace, Louis wore the ducal coronet of Aquitaine. Then they went on progress, the wedding night being spent at the castle of Taillebourg.

A fortnight later another ceremony took place in the cathedral at Poitiers. On 8 August Eleanor and Louis were consecrated duke and duchess of Aquitaine with a sacramental rite modelled on that of the service for crowning a king of France. During the banquet in the Maubergeon that followed, abbot Suger brought them the news that Louis VI had died a week earlier, killed by gluttony. For the next fifteen years Eleanor was to see little of Aquitaine.



*'Les prêtres ne pourraient souffrir aux sacrifices
L'audace d'une femme.'*

Racine, *A thalie*

*'To live with a woman without danger is more
difficult than raising the dead to life.'*

St Bernard, *Sermons on the Canticles*

On Christmas Day 1137, Eleanor of Aquitaine was crowned queen of France at Bourges. Louis also received the sacrament although he had already been crowned. He was infatuated with his beautiful wife, who returned his affection, being only too thankful to be safe from importunate and ruthless suitors. To begin with the couple showed no signs of incompatibility, and for the next few years Eleanor gave herself up to the enjoyment of a court that she made the gayest and most splendid in western Christendom.

Paris, which was to be her principal home, was largely unwalled and unpaved, and many of the ruins of the old Roman city were still standing. Its heart was the walled Île Saint Louis in the middle of the river Seine, where three centuries before the inhabitants had taken refuge from the Vikings, an island which was dominated by the palaces of the king (the *cit * palace) and of the bishop (where Notre Dame now stands). On the right bank the bridge over the Seine was defended by the *Grand Ch telet* (great castle) and on the left by the *Petit Ch telet* (little castle). On the left bank stood the ancient Roman palace of the *Thermae* (baths), a vast rambling edifice whose massive but crumbling masonry had been patched up over the centuries by Merovingians, Carolingians and Capetians in their turn, like so many of the city's buildings. On the north bank a growing community of tradesmen, merchants, artisans and money changers had established itself in a semi-rural area covered by vines, orchards, market gardens and even small farms. Paris was far from being the glorious Gothic capital that it became in the following century, and as yet was probably no more impressive than the queen's own cities of Poitiers and Bordeaux.

Nevertheless, for so intelligent a woman as Eleanor, Paris and its neighbours must have been extraordinarily stimulating. 'Paris, queen among cities, moon among stars, so gracious a valley, an island of royal palaces', wrote Guido of Bezoches in an often quoted passage, 'and on that island hath philosophy her royal and ancient seat: who alone, with study her sole comrade, holding the eternal citadel of light and immortality, hath set her victorious foot on the withering flower of the fast aging world'. For what has been called the twelfth-century renaissance was at its height. There was not yet a university of Paris, but schools of theology and philosophy had sprung up amid the religious houses on the left bank, attended by students from all over the world (including, at that date, an Englishman called Thomas Becket). Currently they were full of Peter Abelard's 'heresies' about individual judgment; in his letters, Abelard claims that ladies of rank were coming to his lectures. It is likely that the queen knew of his ideas, and she may well have heard him speak. Similar schools existed at Orleans, Chartres and Tours, where there were lectures on Plato and Aristotle, the latter only recently re-discovered by scholars travelling in Moorish Spain. Orleans was a stronghold of humanism. The poetry of antiquity was enjoying a new vogue; men were learning to appreciate Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Martial. The twelfth century was also the classic century of the mediaeval Latin lyric. Moreover the troubadours of southern France were echoed in the north by the *trouv res*, who wrote in the *langue d'o il*, and composed not only love songs but also the epic *chansons de geste*. As for the visual arts, the invention of the pointed arch was about to launch France on the first and most beautiful wave of Gothic architecture. At the deepest level, there was also a spiritual revolution, expressed in the foundation of new religious orders—Cistercians, Carthusians, Premonstratensians, Fontevrault.

Although the queen had Latin plays performed before the court and filled it with troubadours and *trouv res*, her amusements were on the whole far from cerebral. She introduced Provençal verse and all the elegancies of Aquitaine, including respect for ladies—much to the scandal of churchmen and, no doubt, of northern husbands. The north was equally scandalized by the southern fashions that came with her—the curled beards and short mantles of the men, and the elaborate head-dresses of the ladies.

Although besotted with his beautiful wife, the young king's excessive piety could not be repressed.

Eleanor's often frivolous mind can hardly have relished Louis's monkish behaviour—fasting and other austerities, and taking his place in the choir stalls to sing the office with his spiritual brethren. She may have taken more interest in his studies, as she later showed a knowledge of Aristotelian logic and knew how to use the syllogism in argument. She may well have enjoyed the learned dissertations and disputations that the king arranged in the palace gardens. At this date Louis shared some of his wife's pleasures too, and he seems to have been fond of hunting and the tournament. Deeply in love, he spent a good deal of his time with her and it is possible that he shared at least a little of her taste for poetry. They toured her duchy together, holding court in the great cities.

In those early days Louis VII was full of energy and self-confidence. His asceticism saved him from his father's greed and girth. He had begun well with a marriage that had trebled his domains, and there was every hope that his reign would be a glorious one. He felt himself a match for any of his vassals, and there was no one abroad to threaten him; Germany was torn by disputes over an imperial election, and England was distracted by the miseries of king Stephen's anarchic rule.

Honourable and straightforward to the point of naivety, Louis was becoming renowned for his courtesy, his kindness and generosity, and his simplicity. Once he lay down to sleep in a wood, guarded by only two knights, and when the count of Champagne chided him for his rashness, he replied 'I can sleep alone in complete safety as I have no enemies'. In later life he showed an attractive unworldliness when talking to the Englishman Walter Map about the wealth of kings. Louis said that the monarchs of the Indies possessed jewels and lions, leopards and elephants; the rulers of Byzantium and Sicily had wonderful silks and precious metals; the German emperor commanded fine soldiers and war horses; and the king of England 'lacks nothing—he has gold and silver, precious stones and silk, men and horses, all of them in abundance'. But as for the king of France, 'We have nothing but bread, wine and contentment'.

Louis has his modern admirers. Professor Fawtier tells us that 'historians have been surprisingly slow to appreciate Louis VII at his true worth; and yet his saintly character strongly reminds us of his great-grandson St Louis', and goes on to claim that he was essentially a realist. But on some occasions Louis was far from being either saintly or realistic. It is true that he continued his father's policy with considerable success, eventually establishing complete and lasting control of the He de France; he also carried on the extension of the royal authority throughout France by issuing charters to the towns. Nevertheless, despite all his honesty and genuine benevolence Louis had a savage temper and a curiously unbalanced streak that on occasion affected his judgment disastrously.

Masterful and fiercely energetic, Eleanor soon established almost complete control over her husband. Her first trial of strength when she came to Paris was with her mother-in-law. Adelaide of Savoy did not take to her youthful supplanter and soon retired to the estates in Champagne that had been her dowry. It is a testimony to the fifteen-year-old queen's force of character that the battle was won so quickly. Adelaide consoled herself by marrying the lord of Montmorency and passed into obscurity.

Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis was a different sort of adversary, all the stronger for his disarming kindness. This frail little monk of humble origin, who was both an aesthete and a mystic, had been the friend and counsellor of Louis VI and continued to advise Louis VII. He showed unusual compassion for the poor and their sufferings at the hand of rapacious lords. His influence showed in the king's behaviour: building a hunting lodge at Fontainebleau Louis appropriated a peasant's field by mistake when he learned the truth, he ordered the manor to be demolished and returned the field. Perhaps from Suger too came Louis's tolerance of Jews. But the abbot was also a gifted statesman, anxious to extend Capetian territory and good government. He regarded Aquitaine as a heaven-sent acquisition and did his best to encourage good relations between the king and queen.

Nevertheless Eleanor managed to take his place, sending Louis on expeditions that can hardly have

had Suger's entire blessing. When, in the year after their marriage, the bourgeoisie of Poitiers repudiated all feudal obligations to her and set up a corporation or 'commune', Louis and his knights at once stormed the presumptuous city; he then rounded up the sons and daughters of its leading citizens in the square outside the Maubergeon with the intention of taking them back to Paris as hostages. Their frantic parents sent a message to Suger, begging him to intervene. The abbot came as quickly as he could and, with some difficulty, persuaded the king to release the children. It has been plausibly suggested that this merciful act turned the queen against Suger; she did not like people meddling in affairs that directly concerned her. Louis was far from merciful when, shortly afterwards he had to deal with certain of her vassals who, led by the lord of Lezay, refused to pay homage and stole some valuable gerfalcons from her hunting lodge at Talmont; he cut off their hands with his own sword. In 1141 the king led an expedition against Toulouse, claiming the county for his wife. He achieved nothing and was soon forced to retreat, but Eleanor, who was obviously delighted, gave him a magnificent present—a vase of crystal mounted in gold and set with rich jewels (which can be seen in the Louvre today).

Nevertheless, Louis still retained his interest in ecclesiastical matters. In May 1140, in Sens cathedral (the cathedral church of the primate of France), the king—together with the papal legate and numerous bishops and clergy—presided over the disputation between St Bernard and Peter Abelard. Bernard, who liked to take his sacred texts literally, was infuriated by Abelard's advocacy of examining the scriptures and the writings of the fathers in the light of reason and by his claim that, because logic and philosophy must inevitably be on the side of truth, a sceptical approach was a virtue. In horrified tones, the saint read to the assembly seventeen carefully chosen passages from Abelard's writings that, out of context, sounded damning; the shocked assembly immediately condemned the author without allowing him to defend himself. Later, however, when Abelard went to Rome and appealed to the pope, he was at once absolved of any heresy. Bernard of Clairvaux was a ruthless enemy, as Eleanor was to discover to her cost.

Ironically, the next unfortunate incident in which Louis was involved began with a Church matter. He insisted on appointing his chancellor Cadurc as archbishop of Bourges, despite the fact that Pierre of Le Châtre had been canonically elected and had even received the *pallium* from the pope. The king refused to allow Pierre to enter Bourges, whereupon Innocent II placed France under an interdict; he also sent Louis a stern letter telling him to stop acting 'like a silly schoolboy'. The king's reaction was to take a solemn oath to keep Cadurc as archbishop. Meanwhile Pierre had taken refuge with count Thibault II of Champagne, with whom Louis was already in conflict.

Eleanor's younger sister Petronilla had eloped with count Raoul of Vermandois, who was the king's cousin and grand seneschal of France. Although Raoul was married and much older, the queen gave Petronilla her complete support. Raoul persuaded his brother the bishop of Noyon and two other prelates to annul his marriage on grounds of consanguinity and then married Petronilla with royal approval. Horrified, St Bernard protested to the pope, who excommunicated the bishop of Noyon and ordered Raoul to return to his first wife. No one took any notice.

The countess of Vermandois took refuge with her uncle, Thibault of Champagne, and begged him to help her. Thibault's territory surrounded the Capetian domains; besides being count of Champagne he was also count of Brie and count of Blois. His attempts to intervene and his protection of Pierre of Le Châtre infuriated the king who, in 1142, invaded Champagne and laid it waste far and wide. The campaign reached its climax in 1143, when royal troops set fire to the town of Vitry-en-Perthois and over a thousand refugees—mainly women and children—perished when the church was burnt to the ground. (The town has been known as 'Vitry-le-Brulé' ever since.) Louis, who was there, was appalled, but no doubt more by the sacrilege than by the slaughter.

The king now received terrible letters from St Bernard, whose abbey of Clairvaux was in

Champagne. He was accused of 'slaying, burning, tearing down churches, driving poor men from the dwelling places, consorting with bandits and robbers', and warned that he was in imminent danger of being punished by a wrathful God. The abbot then visited Louis at Corbeil but the interview ended in one of the king's terrible fits of rage. Even so, Louis was overwhelmed by guilt, and badly shaken by the grim monk.

Bernard of Clairvaux had dominated western Christendom—and French public opinion in particular—for many years. When he joined the new Cistercian order in 1113, it possessed only one monastery; at his death, in 1153, it had nearly 350, and the expansion was almost entirely due to his genius as a publicist. From his tiny cell under a staircase at Clairvaux he continually sent out a stream of letters and pamphlets on almost every secular and spiritual issue of the day. In appearance he was like some Old Testament prophet, very tall and emaciated, with a ghastly pallor and white hair, caused by austerities that had aged him before his time. His voice terrified even the bravest opponent. It was inevitable that Louis would give way in the end, but he held out for a surprisingly long time.

Eleanor realized that Louis must be reconciled with Bernard, even though she herself must have been a little afraid of the alarming abbot. The opportunity came at the dedication of Suger's new abbey church at Saint-Denis on Sunday, 11 June 1144. This was the realization of the amiable Suger's dearest dream, the glorification of God by a tangible beauty. This was the first great Gothic church in France, and made full use of the revolutionary pointed arch and rib vault. It was a treasure house, lit by gem-like stained glass and filled with sacred vessels of precious metals studded with rare jewels; the altar furnishings included a gold cross twenty feet tall, and the reliquary of St Denis was cased entirely in silver. Every noble in the realm had contributed some costly ornament, and one of Louis's presents was the crystal vase that the queen had given to him. The crowd was so dense that it was said that inside the church a man might have walked over their shoulders without touching the ground. Everyone of note was there. Among them—perhaps a little surprisingly—was Bernard; he would not tolerate gold and jewels, or even coloured glass, in his order's bleak churches. King and saint were both deeply moved by the ceremony, and exchanged friendly words.

Bernard's meeting with the queen was less successful. It was inevitable that he should disapprove of her: he would not allow his monks to see even their own mothers or sisters, so fearful was he of feminine charms. In a letter intended for the nuns of his order he referred to the devilish vanity of court ladies in their rich dresses made from 'the toil of worms' (i.e. silk), and deplored the painted faces that they removed at night. He had obviously observed these ladies at close hand with shocked fascination: 'Their arms are weighed down with bracelets, and from their ears dangle pendants containing precious stones. For headdresses they wear kerchiefs of fine linen that they drape around their neck and shoulders, a corner falling over the left arm. This is their wimple, usually fastened to their foreheads by a wreath, band or circlet of carved gold.' He must have unsettled his nuns still further by his description of the ladies walking 'with mincing steps, busts thrust forward, garnished and decorated in a fashion more fitting for temples, pulling trains of rich materials after them to raise clouds of dust'. He speaks of some who are not so much ornamented as laden with gold and silver and jewels and 'everything else that accompanies queenly splendour'. One cannot help suspecting that the last phrase refers to Eleanor herself. Apart from her appearance, there was a good deal else that he detested about the queen: her troubadours for example, and her reputation for luxury and frivolity. She did not come of a family that inspired confidence. Her father and mother had been excommunicated, supporters of an anti-pope; as well as being a scourge of bishops and dying outside the church, her grandfather had been a byword for loose living; and her grandmother was the whore and concubine *Dangerosa*.

To Eleanor, Bernard must have seemed an horrific figure, a white bird of ill omen. Yet she was not shaken. Bernard grumbled that the queen had more power over Louis than anyone else. Later he

accused her of meddling, and told her to stop interfering with matters of state. But she persuaded the king to talk to the abbot and to accept a qualified peace with the pope and the count of Champagne. What seems to have enraged Bernard was the suspicion that Eleanor was telling her husband to make conditions rather than to surrender abjectly. The king agreed to withdraw his troops from Champagne but only if the interdict was lifted.

The queen was sufficiently impressed by the saint to request his prayers in the matter of her barrenness. Apart from one early miscarriage she had not conceived in all her seven years of marriage. Bernard replied: 'Work for peace in the kingdom and I tell you that God of His great mercy will grant your request.'

Peace did not come at once. The new pope, Celestine II, refused to lift the interdict and fighting broke out once more. Finally Bernard persuaded Celestine to remove the interdict, but in return Louis had to install Pierre of Le Châtre as archbishop of Bourges. Bernard and Suger then reconciled the king with Thibault of Champagne. The pope eventually recognized the marriage of Petronilla and Raoul of Vermandois. Eleanor must take a good deal of the blame for this war.

As Bernard had promised, the queen gave birth to a child as soon as there was peace. Unfortunately it was a girl. She was christened Marie and was one day to marry Thibault's heir and become countess of Champagne.

About this time there occurred the first suggestion of incompatibility between Eleanor and her husband. Although chroniclers and popular historians have accused her of promiscuity, even comparing her to Messalina, nowadays few serious authorities believe that she was physically unfaithful to Louis. On the other hand it is more than likely that she enjoyed flirting. Moreover her frivolity and luxury, her taste for romantic poets, her amusing (and probably frequently erotic) conversation and her sympathy for lovers—e.g. during her sister's elopement—understandably aroused suspicion in monastic minds. The puritanical king himself may well have suspected her, as in the Marcabru affair. The queen had invited this famous Gascon troubadour to Paris; a pupil of her father's favourite Cercamon, his verses were sung and admired throughout the Provençal-speaking world. Marcabru immediately developed the obligatory platonic passion for his beautiful patron, expressing it in songs that were sung everywhere. King Louis took violent exception and angrily banished the all too eloquent poet. (Ironically, most of Marcabru's other poems show a marked contempt for women.)

With hindsight one can see that Eleanor's marriage, which had begun so well, was now threatened from many directions. Louis had suffered a severe nervous crisis during the Champagne war and it is likely that in some way he blamed his wife. She had made a most dangerous enemy in St Bernard, who regarded her as an unsuitable consort for a Christian king. And she had failed to produce an heir to the throne, the first duty of every queen. However, Louis still seemed besotted with her.



'Dans l'Orient désert quel devint mon ennui!'

Racine, *Bérénice*

*'Debates already 'twixt his wife and him
Thicken and run to head; she, as 'tis said,
Slightens his love and he abandons hers.'*

Ford, *Tis Pity She's a Whore*

On Christmas Eve 1144, Edessa (the capital of a Latin county on the far side of the Euphrates) fell to the Saracens. Christendom was appalled; it seemed that the Holy Land, won back at so much cost only a generation before, might again be lost. After much thought the new pope, Eugenius III, decided that the only way to save it was by a second crusade. In December 1145 he sent a bull to Louis VII, calling upon the king and his vassals to launch an expedition with every resource at their command; in return they would receive forgiveness for all their sins. Later the pope sent a similar bull to the emperor in Germany, Conrad III.

Louis was delighted by the idea. No doubt he sincerely believed that every Christian had a duty to save the land of Christ and His mother from the infidel; and he continued to feel guilty about the holocaust at Vitry, which still had to be expiated by a suitable penance. Eleanor was equally enthusiastic; not only did the prospect appeal to her vigorous and imaginative spirit, but it would provide the change of scene that might well save her threatened marriage, and might even bring down a blessing to end her barrenness. However, Louis's vassals, assembled at Bourges during Christmas, were lukewarm in their response. No king in Christendom—or at least in western Europe—had ever gone to Syria before; and although the First Crusade had been successful, thousands of those who had taken part had perished. Abbot Suger spoke out publicly against the project, expressing his alarm at the thought of the king being so long out of his kingdom. It was a long time before Louis was able to muster sufficient support.

Pope Eugenius therefore turned to his fellow Cistercian, St Bernard, and with Louis begged the eloquent abbot to preach a crusade. The king summoned another assembly to meet at Easter 1146 at Vézelay in Burgundy so that Bernard could appeal to them. It was the last day of March but the weather seems to have been fine. The beautiful Romanesque basilica (for which the town is still famous) was too small to hold the vast multitude that had gathered, so the abbot addressed them from a high makeshift pulpit in the fields nearby. His sermon has not survived, but his burning eloquence had a magical effect. Soon his hearers were shouting 'crosses, give us crosses!' So many wished to sew them onto their clothes in token of their vow that they quickly used up every bit of white cloth available and Bernard had to sacrifice his own white Cistercian choir mantle. Not only the great vassals joined their king in taking the vow, but simple folk in vast numbers also swore an oath to go on crusade. The abbot reported without false modesty to pope Eugenius: 'You ordered and I obeyed; the authority of him who gave the order makes fruitful my obedience; I opened my mouth and I spoke and the crusaders at once multiplied into infinity. Villages and towns are deserted and you will scarcely find one man for every seven women. Everywhere you will see widows whose husbands are still alive.' Bernard then went to Germany, where at Speier, just after Christmas, he shamed the unwilling emperor Conrad into taking the cross.

One woman who was not among the widows made by the abbot's eloquence was Eleanor. She vowed to go to the Holy Land and to pray at Christ's sepulchre in Jerusalem. After all, princesses had accompanied their husbands on the First Crusade: Ida of Austria was believed to have ended her life in a harem. Eleanor had personally sworn on her knees to Bernard that she would bring her vassals, a summons that was her prerogative alone in feudal law, and it would have been impossible to stop her. In any case Louis would not leave her behind; William of Newburgh tells us that he was too jealous of his beautiful wife to do so. She was joined by other great ladies including the countess of Flanders, Torqueri of Bouillon, Faydide of Toulouse and Florine of Burgundy. Indeed William of Newburgh grumbles at the number of female crusaders, and one may suspect that their motives were not always entirely spiritual; tales of the fabulous luxuries of Outremer (as the French then called Syria and Palestine) were alluring. But not even the chroniclers question Eleanor's sincerity.

The next months were spent preparing for the expedition. A heavy tax was imposed throughout France to raise funds, causing much hardship. Eleanor's officials mulcted her domains with particular ferocity. She herself was busy summoning her chivalry, and among those who promised to come were the lords of Lusignan, Thouars and Taillebourg. Troubadours also responded to her summons, including Jaufré Rudel, who was not to return, and Marcabru, who wrote some crusader songs. The queen made provision for her soul in case she should not come back, endowing abbeys and convents so that they would pray for her—the first evidence of orthodox religious sentiment on her part. Among these was Fontevrault.

The preparations took over a year. Louis appointed Suger as his regent, an inspired choice: the abbot kept excellent order and re-organized the royal finances without increasing the burden on the poor. The king held a final assembly at Etampes in February 1147, debating such matters as the route that the crusaders should take. The lords who attended this council included the counts of Flanders, Toulouse, Dreux and Nevers, the lord of Bourbon and the heir of Thibault of Champagne. In the spring pope Eugenius came to speed the French on their way, meeting the king at Dijon in April. Finally Louis took the oriflamme—the red banner made from St Denis's cloak, which was unfurled only against the enemies of Christ and of France—and after receiving the pope's personal blessing left Saint-Denis on 8 June. Eleanor rode with him.

The French army had assembled at Metz and, having been joined by the king and queen, marched by way of Bavaria and Hungary into the Balkans. The author of the *Gestes de Louis VII*, who was there, writes: 'Anyone watching this multitude of knights, with their shields and helmets gleaming in the sun and their banners waving in the breeze, must surely have believed that they were going to subdue every enemy of the cross and conquer the lands of all the east.' But it was an army of waggons and camp-followers as well as of soldiers, laden with baggage and provisions. The queen and her ladies proved to be an encumbrance, even to the point of demoralization. They had brought with them a horde of maidservants who were an irresistible temptation to the troops: chroniclers grumble at the licence and lechery of the French encampments. Eleanor obviously made her presence felt, to judge from the Greek chronicler Nicetas Choniates, who seems to refer to her when describing women in the French army, 'clad as men, riding horses and armed with spears and battle-axes, and who looked like soldiers, as fierce as Amazons'. He says that at their head rode one to whom he gives the strange title 'lady of the golden boot'. There are similar tales of Amazon-like activities on Eleanor's part to be found in popular western histories—she is even said to have jousted with her ladies—and although they are almost certainly untrue, they do give some idea of her panache.

Eleanor must have had an anxious and far from comfortable journey through the Balkans. The emperor Conrad and his German crusaders had travelled the same road only a few weeks before; their ravaging and plundering had made the population extremely hostile, and food was in very short supply. Nevertheless, the French kept good discipline and, crossing the Danube at Branitchevo, proceeded to Adrianople and thence to Constantinople, which they reached almost without incident on 4 October.

Eleanor and Louis were first installed at the Blachernae Palace on the shore of the Bosphorus, the principal imperial residence, although later they were moved to the Philopatium just outside the city walls. The emperor Manuel Comnenus exchanged the kiss of peace with the French king. According to the latter's chaplain, Odo of Deuil, who was present, they seemed like brothers, as they were about the same age and the same height; but one may guess that the Greek in his purple and gold made a strange contrast to the Frenchman in his grey pilgrim's habit. The crusaders were dazzled by the splendour of the imperial palace: the throne of gold, the columns coated with gold and silver, the pavements of precious marble and the gleaming mosaic pictures. They must have been still more astonished by the ceremonial banquet that followed Manuel's welcome. They tasted for the first time such delicacies as

caviar, and they must have been amazed by the profusion of sauces made with rarities such as sugar, pepper and cinnamon. Above all they had to use such unfamiliar implements as wine glasses and forks. The days that followed were spent in similar banquets, in tours of the fabled city and its palaces and churches and in hunting expeditions on which the Greeks employed tame leopards. The markets, with Chinese and Indian silks, Arabian oils and perfumes, Persian carpets, Russian furs, and every other luxury then known, were overwhelming. Manuel and his lords personally conducted the French leader. Some time was spent in haggling about the future of any likely crusader conquests, but Louis was too charmed not to agree to hand over any former Byzantine territories that he might capture.

The Greek emperor was carefully attentive towards Eleanor, who was also fêted by the empress Irene. The latter was a German lady originally called Bertha of Sulzbach, noted for her boast that she stemmed from 'an unconquerably warlike breed'; one suspects that Irene was something of a frump. It must have been a humiliation for the French queen to meet with a refinement of manners and elegance that were beyond her dreams; for this was a city where the material civilization of ancient Greece and Rome had never come to an end, where there was still scientific medicine, plumbing and drainage, and central heating, and where ladies had never ceased using cosmetics. Eleanor acquired a taste for Byzantine clothes and it was probably she who brought back to France such fashions as bulbous turbans, tall pointed hats, and shoes like the beaks of birds.

Despite his amiable reception, Manuel wanted to be rid of his French guests as quickly as possible. He genuinely liked westerners, even if they sometimes attacked his empire. But he could hardly be expected to welcome rapacious troops who terrorized his subjects and upset relations with his Turkish neighbours—relations that depended on a complex and subtly balanced diplomacy. He was therefore pleased to be able to tell Louis that he had just heard of a glorious victory won by the emperor Conrad in which many thousands of Turks had fallen. Anxious to share in his fellow crusader's triumph, the king left Constantinople after three weeks, no doubt much to Eleanor's regret. The French army crossed the Bosphorus, camping at Chalcedon before marching on to Nicaea, which they reached in early November.

Frightening news awaited them. Contrary to Manuel's information, the Germans had suffered a terrible defeat and had been reduced to a tenth of their original strength. The two armies joined forces and, instead of taking the direct route through Cappadocia as they had originally planned, marched down the Anatolian coast inside Byzantine territory and within reach of ports. The French went first, some of them shouting insults at the German remnants who formed the rearguard. Conrad's health had broken down, so he and his lords sailed back from Ephesus to Constantinople, where he was nursed by Manuel himself.

The French crusaders and the Germans whom Conrad had left behind struggled on, their discipline deteriorating in the winter weather. Eleanor and her ladies travelled in horse-drawn litters whose curtains probably protected them to some extent, but they must have been miserably uncomfortable. On Christmas Day, which was being spent at Decervium, a combination of rain and floods destroyed their tents and baggage and killed many men and horses. Shortly afterwards they began to be attacked by Saracens—Turkish bowmen on fast ponies, who shot from the saddle before closing in with *yataghans* (short sabres). At Pisidian Antioch the heavily armoured French and German knights fought their way across the bridge with difficulty. They were now making for Laodicea in the Phrygian mountains, hoping to shorten the distance to Antioch. In January they found themselves in bleak hill country, the Turks watching from the peaks ready to gallop down and pounce on stragglers. Odo of Deuil tells us that 'the road had become so rugged that sometimes the helmets of the knights touched the sky while sometimes their horses' hooves trod the very floor of hell'. Constant harassment by the enemy, winter storms, shortage of food and suspicion of Byzantine guides were breaking down the crusaders' morale.

Near Attalia there was almost a disaster that might have destroyed the entire Christian army. One evening, instead of obeying Louis's orders to camp on the crest of the pass through which they were travelling, the French advance guard went on down into the less exposed valley. (Not at Eleanor's suggestion, as some contemporaries seem to have suspected.) This enabled the Turks to get between the advance guard and the main body of the army, which—after seizing the high ground of the pass—they at once attacked. Desperately the knights charged uphill at them but were beaten back in confusion. Louis had his horse killed beneath him and was surrounded by the enemy; he saved himself by climbing onto a rock and, with his back to the mountain, managed to parry the *yataghans* of the exultant Turks until he was rescued. Probably he owed his life to his plain armour, which prevented the enemy from recognizing him. Many of the crusaders were slain, their comrades being saved only by the onset of darkness.

Next day Louis gathered his battered army together and handed over command to a really experienced soldier, the Master of the Knights Templar, whose contingent was the only one that had kept its discipline. The Templars brought what was left of the army safely down to Attalia. It proved to be a poor place without enough food, and the king decided that his only hope of reaching the Holy Land was by sea. He had to spend more than a month hiring ships, during which time the Turks raided the neighbourhood around the town relentlessly. When the fleet was ready, there was no room for the infantry or the pilgrims, so Louis abandoned them to struggle on by land as best they might, and set sail with his chivalry.

It was a dreadful voyage, made terrifying by seasonal storms. Amid the howling wind and the high waves Eleanor may even have wished herself back in her jolting litter being shot at by Turks. To convert them into horse transports, the ships had had great doors cut in their hulls, which were caulked before sailing, and there was a constant danger that they would be stove in. A century later another crusader, Joinville, wrote: 'For what voyager can tell when he goes to sleep at night whether or not he may be lying at the bottom of the sea the next morning?'

After three weeks the storm-tossed fleet eventually reached Saint Symeon, the northernmost port of the Latin principality of Antioch, on 19 March 1148. As they disembarked, the French king and queen were greeted by priests singing the *Te Deum* and by the prince of Antioch and his entire court, who escorted them back to the capital. Their arrival at Antioch was celebrated by tournaments, banquets and pageants. It was the brief but enchanting Syrian spring, with gardens and hillsides a mass of flowers, and the sunlight gentle but clear. Antioch, on a mountain slope above the river Orontes, had eight miles of walls, 360 bastions, and countless villas, palaces, and terrace gardens, and was still almost the glorious city of antiquity.

For the crusaders, Outremer must have been no less dazzling than Constantinople. The Latin settlers dressed like Saracens in silken turban and burnous, their ladies' painted faces veiled against the sun. To a visitor from the primitive west the luxury of their villas seemed sinful; outside there were courtyards, rooftop gardens and fountains and wells with water piped from mighty aqueducts; inside there were mosaic floors, carpets on which to sit, tableware of gold, silver and faience, coffers inlaid with ivory and sandalwood, sunken baths, and beds with sheets. Among the novelties were soap, sugar, spices, fruits—lemons, oranges, pomegranates, persimmons—fabrics such as cotton and muslin, and the miracles of oriental medicine. Obviously the queen enjoyed it all immensely.

During her ten days at Antioch, Eleanor's dangers and hardships were amply recompensed by such entertainments as picnics on the banks of the river Orontes, with delicacies such as snow-cooled wine and gazelle hunts with falcons. Her pleasure must have been increased by meeting many Aquitainians among the leading settlers; even the patriarch came from Limoges. But Eleanor's chief diversion was the prince of Antioch himself, her long-lost uncle Raymond of Poitiers, who was still only in his forties.

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