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A HISTORY OF THE PLANTAGENETS

The Magnificent Century

By THOMAS B. COSTAIN

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CHAPTER ONE

A Boy Is Crowned King

OCTOBER 19, 1216. King John was dead. The storm which roared about the towers of the Bishop of Lincoln's castle at Newark and tore at the windows of the room where the royal body lay was sweeping over most of England like a messenger of doom. The people of England, who had been despoiled and torn by civil war as long as John lived, were in an even more sorry plight now that he was dead.

To make clear the difficulties of the situation into which the country had been plunged by the passing of the bad King it will be necessary to cast back and tell briefly what had been happening in the island kingdom. When the united barons forced John to sign Magna Charta at Runnymede on June 15 of the previous year that stubborn monarch had seemed reconciled to his surrender of dictatorial powers. Outwardly compliant, he had been filled, nevertheless, with rage and hate and a determination to undo everything at the first opportunity. For some time thereafter he remained in seclusion, spinning his plans and waiting for the messengers he had sent to the Continent to gain him the assistance he needed. Some of them had carried a highly colored version of Runnymede to Pope Innocent III. Others had been instructed to find mercenaries to fight in the King's behalf and were recruiting professional soldiers at Rouen, Ghent, Cologne, Naples. The Pope,

easy to convince because John had made England a fief of Rome and had been ruling, supposedly, as the representative of the Vatican, decided that Magna Charta was wrong and declared it null and void. Stephen Langton, the great Archbishop of Canterbury who had been chiefly instrumental in organizing the baronage against kingly aggression and had been the real leader of the movement, went to Rome to argue for the popular cause. Sitting in the Vatican like a wrathful god, his hands filled with thunderbolts, Innocent refused to listen to Stephen Langton and even forbade his return to England. Without the sagacious prelate to hold them together, the barons failed to present a concerted front when John came raging out of the West with his well-trained mercenaries and proceeded to spread death and desolation.

The barons then took a step which showed the depth of their desperation: they sent a deputation to Paris and offered the crown of England to Prince Louis, the heir to the throne of France, who had married Blanche of Castile, a granddaughter of Henry II. Philip Augustus, the King of France, was a shrewd and ambitious man who had already taken Normandy and Brittany and the Angevin possessions from John, thereby doubling the territory over which he ruled. He was a powerful king, the ruler who paved the streets of Paris and started its great markets and was responsible for its medieval grandeur. Some further explanation of this man should, however, be made. He was the bitterly resentful prince who had circumvented the old lion, Henry II, and had goaded him at Colombières when he was dying in grief and defeat; the same King of France, moreover, who had deserted Richard at the Crusades and had conspired to keep the lionhearted monarch in his German prison; a man of harsh moods and contemptuous tongue, portly and florid now, and still filled with hatred for England and her Angevin kings. Nothing would have suited Philip Augustus better than to scoop the island into the Capetian bag (the inevitable result of the proposal made by the desperate barons), but he was bound by the terms of the treaty of Chinon and did not find himself at this juncture in a good position to oppose that man of equally iron will, Innocent III. The result was that Philip Augustus openly opposed the idea while secretly conniving with his son to organize an army for the invasion.

The ports of northern France were soon filled with transports. The services of Eustace the Monk were secured to di-

rect the naval operations, and this was considered almost a guarantee of success. Eustace, born near Boulogne of a family of the lesser nobility, had entered a monastic order at Saumur but had left the abbey to demand satisfaction from the Count of Boulogne against the murderer of his father. Failing in this, he had broken his vows permanently and had turned to piracy with a small band made up at first of his brothers and friends. They were so successful that disaffected men from all parts of the Continent began to join them, and they soon became the terror of the Channel. Merchant captains sighed with relief when they reached their destination without having sighted the sails of the dreaded Eustace on the sky line. The pirate leader grew to such stature, in fact, that kings bid against each other for his services, and he waxed fat in body and purse. At one time he served John and was rewarded well enough to set up an establishment of his own at Winchelsea. He was a rambunctious fellow, barrel-like in build, as ready to spill blood as to down a flagon of malvoisie. The news that he had thrown in his lot with the French sent a shiver along many a spine in the train of the vengeful John.

The French army landed without any serious opposition and advanced to London. The citizens of that most independent of cities, hating John and all his works, gave nevertheless no more than a guarded and watchful support to Louis. The Cinque Ports did not resist, however, and so the French gained a firm grip on the coast except for the castle at Dover, where Hubert de Burgh held out boldly. Hubert was destined to prove a continuous thorn in the side of Gallic operations.

John, when hard enough pressed, had the Angevin capacity for generalship and he proceeded to take wise measures. He scattered his forces along a line from the coast through Oxford and into the midlands to confine the invaders in the southeast corner of the country. His ablest mercenary captains were placed in command of the forts which made up this line; Engelard de Cigogni at Windsor, Falkes de Bréauté over the shires stretching northward, Peter de Maulay at Corfe Castle in Dorset. Confident that Louis would not be able to break through, John then set about the task of cutting communications between the French and the barons of the North, who were John's most determined foes.

In this plan to check the French the King was greatly aided by a comparatively unknown knight who proceeded to make things hot for the invaders on his own account. He was called

William of Kensham and sometimes William of Cassingham. History is full of such men, unsung heroes who play conspicuous parts in great events but are overshadowed by the leading characters on the stage. William of Kensham organized a band of guerrilla fighters and took the Weald as his base of operations. The Weald was a dense strip of forest, high above the chalk escarpment, which ran dark and forbidding from the western portion of Kent across the whole of Sussex, a barrier of trees, mostly oak, whose roots were sunk deep in soil made up of Wealden clay, Hastings sand, gault, greensand, and chalk. A few industrious husbandmen were scattered through it, striving to turn its occasional open strips of sandy soil known as denes into farming land and pitting it with holes sunk to get at the marl they needed to fertilize the land; subsisting, without a doubt, on the very edge of starvation. A few winding roads cut through it and a number of rather turbulent rivers, but it was difficult of access. The Weald served, in fact, as an almost impenetrable curtain, cutting London off from the southwestern ports.

Little is known about this bold leader except that he was bailiff over the courts of the Seven Hundreds of the Weald, which he held at the usual farm fee of one hundred shillings a year, and so belonged to the ranks of the minor nobility. It is not known where he learned the art of guerrilla fighting, but he soon proved himself a master hand at that kind of warfare. He would issue suddenly from the Weald and demolish a party of French knights, retiring then into the dark depths of the forest, to attack the next day a castle, leaving wherever he went the bodies of Frenchmen dangling from trees. In time he came to command a force of one thousand men, mostly archers. He was a passing cloud of dust, a quick glint of metal among the trees, death riding on the wind. The dread he caused was so great that the French troops refused to venture out on the roads to the south and west, preferring to stay safe behind the walls of London. Louis could do nothing about this fast-riding, hard-hitting guerrilla captain and left him in full possession of the forest barrier.

The people of England, always looking for a hero to take to their hearts and preferring one of relatively humble birth, fixed their attention on William with all the enthusiasm they would show later for Robin Hood and Adam Gurdon and John Ball. He became Willikin to them, Willikin of the Weald.

It was while engaged in his northern operations that John

died at Newark. It seemed at first that his death would make no difference. Louis declared that he had no intention of letting it interfere with his claims on the English throne. The barons supporting him swore openly that they would not accept any of the brood of the hated King as ruler of the land. Actually, however, the passing of the tyrant made an immediate change in the situation. There was now no need for foreign intervention in the civil war. The men who had ridden to Runnymede and put civilization in their debt by forcing from John that great guarantee of the rights of man, Magna Charta, were in a serious dilemma. Bound to the French prince by their oaths, they were realizing that they had sold themselves to a master as autocratic and unyielding as the dead John. The austere and humorless Louis was letting them see already that he despised them as traitors to a royal suzerain and that they would have gained nothing if their efforts placed him in John's place. He did not hesitate to dispose of their lands and castles to the French knights he had brought over with him.

The barons knew also, as did all England, that the invitation to Louis had been based on a false premise. If John had forfeited the throne by his conduct as King and his children were to be barred from the succession, the right did not pass to Blanche, the wife of Louis. There was a candidate who had a better claim than Blanche of Castile, better moreover than John's right had been.

In the southern part of Dorset, in what was known as the Isle of Purbeck, stood a tall chalk range, and in the middle of it there was a gap, looking as though a tooth had been yanked from the jaw of some prehistoric giant. This was called Corfe Gate, and back of it, like a sentry guarding the open space, stood a hill two hundred feet high. Perched on the summit of the hill was the formidable Corfe Castle, a natural stream forming a moat about its base, its strength so great that no man seriously considered the possibility of storming it. Corfe Castle was so strong, in fact, that John had used it always for the custody of his most important prisoners.

At the time of his death the castle in the gap held the most important prisoner ever entrusted to it, a young woman of great beauty, dark of eye and hair, haughty of temperament, but the possessor of so much charm that she was a favorite with the garrison and with the other prisoners at Corfe. She was not held in the close confinement of a single cell but was

allowed such liberty as lay within the high walls. She lived in the Gloriet Tower, which had been added in John's time, taking her meals in the Long Hall and being allowed to walk along the walls. She never failed to take advantage of the privilege thus extended to her, pacing the ramparts around the three baileys, back and forth, back and forth, from the Butavant Tower to the Plakement, from the Plakement to the Gloriet, her somber eyes fixed on the southern horizon beyond which, she knew, lay Brittany.

If the law of primogeniture had been faithfully adhered to, this young woman would have been sitting on the throne of England instead of pacing endlessly the ramparts of Corfe and sighing for her freedom. She was the Princess Eleanor, sometimes called the Fair Maid, more often the Pearl of Brittany.

Eleanor of Brittany was a tragic figure. She was the daughter of Geoffrey, the fourth son of Henry II, who had married Constance, the hereditary Duchess of Brittany. Geoffrey was the handsomest of the Plantagenets, the possessor of a figure of elegant symmetry, and a man of the most winning manners. His early death in a tournament in France had been deeply mourned. Eleanor resembled him closely, inheriting from both parents a high temper and a royal share of determination. During the early years, when it seemed certain that her younger brother, Prince Arthur, would succeed the childless Richard as King of England, she was one of the most sought after princesses in Europe. When Richard was in Palestine he offered her in marriage to Saphadin, brother of Saladin, if the Moslem leader would make the pair King and Queen of Jerusalem. Saladin's brother, however, showed no inclination to embrace Christianity, which was a part of the bargain, and so this scheme fell to the ground. Later, when negotiating his release from a German prison, Richard promised as part of the ransom treaty to give the little princess of Brittany in marriage to the son of Leopold of Austria, his archenemy. She accompanied Richard's mother to Germany when that indomitable lady of seventy-two made the journey from England to be sure that nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the unshackling of her son. There is some doubt as to whether the marriage took place and was broken immediately thereafter or whether the plan was abandoned before the nuptials were solemnized. Certainly, however, the young Eleanor accompanied her grandmother back and was restored to her family in Brittany. A few years later she was

offered by Richard to his rival, Philip Augustus, as a wife for the latter's son Louis (the same prince who now sat in London and planned the conquest of England), and the idea was favorably received. It was assumed at the time, however, that Arthur of Brittany would succeed to the throne of England. When Richard decided instead that John should follow him, the French King broke off the negotiations on the ground that the alliance would not now be sufficiently important and brilliant for the heir of France.

The poor little Pearl of Brittany had seen two royal husbands slip through her hands, not to mention the dusky Saphadin, but the greatest misfortune was still to be encountered. When her brother Arthur, contending with John for the crown of England, was captured by the latter at Mirabeau and carried off into the captivity which ended with his murder, Eleanor was sent to England with the Breton knights who had been taken prisoners in the fighting around Mirabeau. With them she was imprisoned in the castle of Corfe. She must have known of the sad fate of her companions in misfortune, all but one of whom starved to death; and their fate served, no doubt, as a final proof of the malignant nature of the man who had shut her off from the world. She was still there when John died at Newark, a woman of perhaps thirty years, still beautiful, still rebellious of spirit. The news of the King's death may have revived her hopes of release, but more likely she had long since come to realize the nature of the trap in which she was caught. The very validity of her claim to the throne made it certain that she would never be allowed her freedom. No matter who might be King of England, it would be deemed necessary, if peace were to be maintained, to keep her buried away. The secret of her whereabouts was so closely held, in fact, that the people of Brittany did not know she was at Corfe. For many years all legal enactments in Brittany were made subject to change in the event of the missing heiress being found.

She had plenty of company at Corfe. Two Scottish princesses, who were being held as hostages for the good behavior of their brother, King Alexander, were there also, and there is evidence that the trio were much together. They were treated with decent respect and were allowed to ride out on occasions, under the strictest guard, of course. It is clear from a succession of items in the royal accounts that they were provided with clothes in keeping with their rank. There is mention of

bolts of fine silk and lengths of samite and yards of velvet. Eleanor was allowed robes of dark green with capes of cambric and hats trimmed with miniver. It is on record that she was given "one saddle with gilded reins and scarlet ornaments." There is an item also of a hundred pounds of figs being ordered for the three royal captives. But fine silks and satins and all the figs in the world could not compensate the beautiful Pearl of Brittany for the freedom denied her. No youth came courting her, it being necessary above everything else that the line of Geoffrey should die out and no longer complicate the question of succession. The taste of power, so dear to all Plantagenet palates, was never on her tongue. She ate her heart out on the battlements of Corfe, from which she could see nothing but the green of Dorset meadows and distant hills on the horizon, hoping and praying for freedom, for revenge, for the chance to live a normal life.

Before John had set out on his last campaign he had sent all his children, saving Henry, the heir, to Corfe for safekeeping. Richard, the second son, who was seven years old, was there, a lad of such shrewdness that he was destined to grow into the richest prince in Europe and to buy for himself an imperial title. The two youngest daughters were there also: Isabella, who would marry the Emperor of Germany, and the baby of the family, little Princess Eleanor. Although still in her first year, Eleanor was showing signs already of having inherited some at least of the enchanting beauty of her mother, Queen Isabella. She was an engaging and willful child and a general favorite. Keep her in mind, this little Princess Eleanor: she will play an active part in the drama of the next fifty years.

But not for the Pearl of Brittany any further part in the affairs of England. She was removed soon thereafter to Bristol, and there she died in 1241. What little is known of her character leads to the conviction that she was brave and defiant of her fate to the end.

That she was alive when John died should have rendered the claim of Blanche of Castile to the throne invalid, but the point does not seem to have been raised seriously. It was generally accepted that the issue lay between Blanche's husband as the candidate of the barons and Henry, the youthful son of John.

To complicate matters further, John had made England a fief of Rome during his struggle with the barons. The new Pope, Honorius III, considered the country as under his juris-

diction. The papal legate in England, Gualo Bianchieri, would be the power behind the throne no matter what form of government was set up. He had already excommunicated Prince Louis and all who supported him. This mass banning added to the doubts of the sorely tried English barons.

2

When word came that the heir to the throne, John's nine-year-old son Henry, was being brought by his mother from the doubly stockaded castle of Devizes where the King had left him, William the Marshal rode out to meet them. The latter was drawing close to the end of his days and knew it quite well, and it was in his mind that this would be his last official act. He wanted to spend the few years left him in the company of his children and his young wife, who had been the heiress of Pembroke and had made him a faithful and loving companion in spite of the disparity in their years. He was filled with a fiercely intense longing for the peace of Pembroke Castle, which looked across the waters at Milford Haven, and the easy life of his extensive Irish estates, where a gentle sun came out between showers and everything was lovely and green. The incomparable old knight had fallen into the habit of claiming eighty years. Actually he was seventy-two; a long time to spend in fighting; in the Crusades, in the continuous wars, in the five hundred tournaments which he had won without a single upset.

The desire for comfort which comes with the years had caused him to discard his armor, and he wore instead a padded and gaily colored tabard, which was especially designed for use ahorse, being split on both sides from the armpits down. It was habit perhaps which had induced him to keep under his hat of soft cloth a *coif de fer,* the skullcap of steel which knights wore beneath their helmets. His bearing was still martial and, when the plains were reached from which a glimpse could be had against the sky line of the bell tower of the Abbey of Malmesbury, his eyes were keen enough to catch the first sight of the royal party in the distance.

As soon as she heard of her husband's death Queen Isabella had ridden from Exeter to Devizes to get the youthful heir. She had not been allowed any active part in public affairs while John was alive, but she was to display in every phase of her life from this point on both ambition and energy and, certainly, a taste for mischief. She was riding beside Henry when

the two parties met on the plains outside Malmesbury and, despite the interest felt in the new King, it was on the lovely Isabella that each eye rested first. It was customary for ladies of high rank in France to don white for mourning, but those of royal blood were allowed a license in the matter of color and were prone to use black trimmed with yellow or ermine. It is probable, therefore, that Isabella was in black when she met the old marshal; it is certain that she was beautiful to behold, being in her early thirties and at the height of her dazzling charm. She was slender and, as she had stripped off her gloves and tucked them in her belt in the style of the moment, it could be seen that her hands were small and white.

The young prince was riding on the front of the saddle of an old retainer, Ralf of Saint-Samson. The marshal dismounted and went down on one knee.

"Welcome, sir," piped Henry in a high, boyish voice. "I commit myself to God and to you. May God give you grace to guard us well."

It was well spoken. Perhaps he had been rehearsed in what he was to say by his mother or his tutor, Philip d'Aubigny. More likely, however, the salutation was his own thought, for even as a boy Henry had persuasiveness and tact. He had as well the golden hair of the Plantagenets and his mother's high coloring and he was altogether a handsome lad with one physical flaw only, a tendency in one eyelid to droop. William the Marshal was delighted with his good looks and the gentility of his manner, happy to find him so polite and so very unlike the raucous, cruel, tricky, whisker-twitching youth his father had been; a sweet prince indeed to offer the people of England.

"Sire," said the marshal with tears streaming down his seamed and sunken cheeks, "on my soul I will do everything to serve you in good faith as long as I have the strength."

Everyone wept at this, the young prince loudly, the old warrior with the sadness which the sight of youth can induce in the aged, the beautiful Queen with well-bred restraint, the knights in both trains, and the servants who brought up the rear.

Realizing the need for haste, they then fell into line and set out at a sharp pace for Gloucester. Most of the advisers of the late King were there when the royal party arrived. It was decided that, in spite of the difficulties which stood in the way of a proper coronation, the boy should be crowned without any delay. The difficulties were technical and yet of the kind to