Heart of a Lion

A Short Story of Reimagined History

By Maryanne Peters

Who was he, my master and Lord of my Heart? Richard the first of his name King of England, Duke of Normandy, and of Aquitaine, and of Gascony, Lord of Cyprus. Count of Poitiers, and of Anjou and Maine and Nantes, Overlord of Brittany, Richard Coeur de Lion – the Lionheart.

Everybody knows that he was born in England, and lived there as a child, but that he spent most of his life at war in other countries. He led his first army in battle as Prince Richard in Poitou when he was barely 16 years old, and he led them as if he was a giant. Nobody questioned his bravery or his decisiveness. The troubadour called him “Richard Oc-e-Non” – “Richard Yes or No”.

Richard took his crown by force, subduing his father and his brothers through an alliance with Philip II King of the Franks. The alliance was cemented by the words that “Richard and Philip shared a bed that night” said to be nothing more than a political statement. But I know my master well enough to guess that he mounted the King of the Franks that night – it was his nature.

Richard was a man with the drives of a man, but without much care about who or what was being driven. In those early days such details were of little importance, but as he came to set off for the Third Crusade to the Holy Land the question of sin became more relevant. He petitioned the Pope and admitted to sodomy to clear his soul, but he swore to a life of piety and to seek pleasure only with women.

It has been said of Richard that he was “one of the immense cohort of sinners” and that he was particularly prone to the sins of lust, pride, greed, and cruelty. I would only disagree with greed. From the moment that he committed to the Crusade he was always short of money. He knew how to wage war and how much it cost, so he would always have the money to pay for a battle before he marched into it. He raised what he called “the Saladin tithe” naming the general of the heathen army as his target.

“If you are truly a Christian you will pay with joy to free the Holy City from this monster!”

As for the sin of pride, he wanted to be famous for his prowess, and what better way to become famous than to win back Jerusalem for Christendom. He would never achieve that, but he was convinced that he must try. It was not in his nature to be pious and introspective, but he would not receive the patronage of the Pope without renouncing past sin.

I was Martin of Cognac born into a family of lesser nobility in that part of the Duchy of Aquitaine. I was one of the young men who joined the crusade as a squire in the service of one of the greater nobles of that region. I was young, and said to be handsome. King Richard called me “Temptation in Boots”. By the time we were campaigning in Sicily (largely to raise more money) he had taken me as I might have taken a woman, in time.

There was constant tension between King Richard and King Philip at this time. I knew that Richard had no regard for Philip but what puzzled me was that Philip, an avowed lover of only women, should appear jealous when I was present. I put it down to the power of the Lionheart. Before him it seemed that all men would rather be women. That was how it was for me.

By the time we reached Cyprus word had got out that King Richard had relapsed into sin. But the solution had already been found. The King’s sister Joan brought to the Mediterranean a bride for my master – Berengaria, the first-born daughter of King Sancho of Navarre. It was a good alliance and my king knew the value of that, and I am no fool to believe that a king may not take a wife.

The King had been promised elsewhere, but the presence of the princess seemed to solve the present danger in allowing the joint leader of the crusade to put behind him all questions of sexual perversion.

As he told me, when King Richard was younger he had attended a tournament in Navarre and before the adoring eyes of the young princess he had vanquished all. She loved him, but he could never return that love. The truth is that he preferred my burrow to her “foul smelling damp cavern”.

She was to travel with our army to Acre but when the trials of the Holy Land soon became apparent, it was decided that Berengaria should be returned to England, which is what she did. But before that happened it was determined to be a better thing that all those present believed that King Richard’s wife was to remain at his side. That was why I received a summons to attend upon my master and his wife.

“You see how fair this boy is. Hardly the face of a man at all!” the king bellowed, to her but in front of me. It was clear that the new queen had no idea that I knew her husband well, in the Biblical sense. She asked me whether I was prepared to do such a thing as proposed.

“You have me at a disadvantage, Madam. I do not believe that I know what is proposed,” I said honestly.

“Why, you are to be me, and I am to show you how,” she said with a smile that charmed me. I still had an attraction to the opposite sex. Perhaps I even might have preferred them, but nothing could be preferred over the Lionheart – that was special.

I could see him grinning at me, as if to say – “Once again a stroke of my own tactical genius has won the day”. He was a man of many victories, and more were to come.

“I live to serve.” I dropped to one knee.

I had been proud to be a man. Accordingly to tradition I would become a knight. I did my service as page and as squire, but then I would rise to the pinnacle of manhood and I would take the lance and use it as a man should. I should have known that the Lionheart would change all of that. From the moment he lanced me I was less than a man, and with every time that followed and all the joy feeling his power within me, I became less of a man. Now he smiled at me and seemed to called for me to give up the whole idea.

I would do anything for him. I am not alone in that. Ask any man who served under him. We saw his cruelty, but we saw it only as the power that is shown by total ruthlessness. We all loved him, I was just one of the special ones who was loved back.

Berengaria took me into her chamber and introduced me to her life. It seemed clear to me that she was not happy that King Richard was not paying her the attention due to a wife, but he had told her that he had taken an oath to forswear from acts of sex until Jerusalem was recovered from the Saracens. I knew that to be a lie. Such acts with me were many times a day.

The king would keep his wife with him until the day that he could consummate the marriage and create his heir.

“Your role is simply to pretend to be me until that say,” said Berengaria. “At least as far as the army is concerned. As for myself, I cannot stand this place. I would rather go back to Spain to await his return but I must go to England, and wait there.”

For Berengaria who was dark, body hair was an enemy, and I was told I must make it mine. As for the hair on my head, that was long for a squire, and Berengaria said that I must color it black and pin it up, with bundles of extra hair that she had to appear as mine. I needed to darken my eyes too, and add color to my cheeks and lips.

As for my body, she had garments that would help. In her natural state Berengaria was large and would use a girdle to appear of smaller frame. She had extra undergarments for me, and plenty of outer garments too.

“When I return to France and England I will have so many nicer things to wear,” she said. “I am Queen of England and half of France, after all. And in the Holy Land, you will be that too.”

It meant nothing to me. I only wanted to be Richard’s queen.

“Let me show you how a queen should walk and hold her hands, and how she should speak, and when,” she said. She was a good teacher, and I was a good learner.

She left Acre with other woman and with some knights too badly injured to continue. Nobody knew it was her. I stood with my king and master at the dock as the boat left.

“Well, well, here you are my Queen,” Richard whispered in my ear. “If you are to mother my son then I must put even more seed inside you.” The very thought made some of my own issue forth despite the constraints of a woman’s undergarments.

The King had been injured and fallen ill during the battle for Acre but what followed later in the year was a great victory at the Battle of Arsuf. Then the Jaffa fell to the Crusader forces in November, as the weather grew colder. We were only 12 miles from Jerusalem but whether forced us to remain in Ascalon and to fortify and provision that city.

Richard was for marching on while the enemy was at a low ebb, but there was more than one king in this crusade, and politics was to attack my master. Due to the support of the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans, Conrad of Montferrat was elected King of Jerusalem. It was a slap in the face of the Lionheart. Conrad was killed by “the assassins” a Saracen band of killer only a few days later, but there is a rumor that my master and a few others did the job in Saracen clothing.

It was not until the summer of 1192 that the crusader army made another advance on Jerusalem, but once again it was argument among kings that saw the claiming of the prize delayed. King Richard and others who were concerned that the city was to strong, favored an attack on Egypt to draw out Saladin to defend his source of power. But others believed that God would provide victory in a frontal assault.

“Wife,” he said to me, as he had becomes accustomed to teasing me. “These men are fools. I will not lead such a doomed attack, but I will serve as a common soldier if it is to proceed.” That is the man I adore – clever but committed and courageous. If ever I asked myself as I combed my growing hair or oiled my soft feminine body – “How can you have allowed yourself to become this?”, then I need only look at him to understand. He is a lion, and I am a lamb – but his lamb.

The attack did not proceed. It was determined that Ascalon should be abandoned and destroyed and the crusader army should retreat to the coast and that there should be negotiations with Saladin as the leader of the Saracen army.

A truce was agreed to. Saladin would allow pilgrims access to the City of Jerusalem. It would last for three years. King Richard and King Philip would return home. Berengaria would leave with the army but would miraculously appear in England having lived there already for the better part of a year.

It was I who asked if I might continue the voyage home in the guise of a woman. Perhaps I had become used to it. Perhaps I saw shame in Martin of Cognac suddenly reappearing as the plucked and softened ageless pageboy, nothing like the hardened soldiers who stood on either side. Perhaps the luxury of being a queen was too hard to abandon, even though from the day I left the Holy Land I could be nothing more than an unnamed widow of an unnamed knight lost in a battle in the desert.

“I look after widows,” bellowed King Richard. “Stay in my bed and serve your king.” That was my ongoing purpose and joy.

But the journey home would become as much of a trial as the crusade itself. Bad weather forced our ship to put in on the Island of Corfu which was part of lands held by the Byzantine Emperor. The Emperor had lost Cyprus to King Richard and so had reason to hate him. He arranged to seize the ship.

My master claimed that all aboard were Knights Templar rather than royalty, and in that guise he along with two other attendants and me as a maiden in their protection, left Corfu and proceeded overland to the North bound for England by the most direct route possible.

It turned out that King Richard had enemies throughout Central Europe including Leopold of Austria whose men recognized the Lionheart and had him arrested. Leopold accused King Richard of the murder of Conrad of Montferrat who was his cousin. I was the only one who stepped forward to say that I was in the Holy Land at the time and it was “the Assassins” who had done that deed.

“Fair Lady,” said Leopold to me. “You are loyal to your king, so take news of his fate to England in the company of your knights in escort.” Which is what we did.

It is well known that King Richard remained a prisoner for some time, but by all accounts he was a difficult one. He never bowed his head for a minute, so it was said.

When asked to show deference to the Holy Roman Emperor the Lionheart famously said – “I am born of a rank which recognizes not superior but God”. Sometimes it surprises me that he gave to the Creator that concession.

The Emperor demanded as a ransom an amount equal to all the money the King had raised for his crusade. It was a huge amount seemingly beyond the capacity all his dominions, but for the hero that was Richard the Lionheart it was raised from churches and villages within his many states. His brother John of England was said to offered a lesser sum to the Emperor to keep him prisoner and Philip of France offered to pay towards that too. Richard was to hear and not forget.

After I took my message to England, with those same attendants I was returned to France and to Cognac. There I learned of the death of my younger sister in childbirth in a nunnery, the victim of some local rake. As her sister Maria I claimed the child as my own and named him Philip. I was later to say that when I was the mistress to Richard the Lionheart in Acre this was the child conceived of that union, King Richard’s bastard son. To me the child was to be the proud link to my king and master.

I chose the name Philip with not a trace of irony because I did not hate the French King. It seemed to me that he spent his life fighting to free himself from the power of the Lionheart, where I just gave in, and was happy to do so.

I was aware that King Richard would become locked in a war with Philip of France, and it was to be the bloodiest yet. As I said King Philip seemed to hate Richard above all things, while at the same time nursing some strange love for his enemy deep within. Surely the mind is a maze. I learned to love the fact that I had been made nothing but the vessel of my master, to receive what drops he would deign to gift me. On the other hand, what was done to King Philip seemed to feed his fire of hate, even as a little love burned within.

But my master was once again at war and in total command. That is his proper place. From there he defeated the forces of Philip again and again – at Freteval, Courcelles and Limousin. But in that last battle he was pierced through by a bolt from a crossbow held in the hands of a mere boy - he died from poisoning of the blood a few days later. It was said that “The Lion was slain by the Ant”.

And what of me? What am I without my Lord and Master?

I have made myself a mother. My son Philip of Cognac has both the gift and the burden of being the son of the Lionheart. In truth he is doing well. He is married and has children. They are of my blood to some extent, but not the blood of King Richard. My son is a man among men. Richard the Lionheart was never that. He was a man above men – above all men. He was loud and he was proud. He had a power in his arm and in his lions, but most of all in his mere presence. Only those who met him could attest to that.

If he had a weakness, it was that he could not love women. Perhaps he felt that they were all too fragile to take him inside them. There was only one woman in his life and it was not his widow Berengaria, it was me.

I could never leave the sex he had me become. To do that would seem to betray his memory. He must forever be remembered as the most courageous and ruthless warrior king to have ever lived, and who is not know by his name but by his character – the Heart of a Lion.

The End