

## Saint Radegonde, Queen of France

BY LAVINIA L. DOCK.

In the act of looking up the histories of dead and gone people who have done worthy deeds, one becomes quite attached to the figures whose lives one is searching into, and so, having pored over many tomes to learn something of Radegonde, a one-time Queen of France who was a famous nurse in the Sixth Century, she seemed so real to me and I felt so deeply interested in her that when I got into France nothing would have kept me from getting to Poitiers where she lived a long time and founded her great convent of noble ladies.

The ancient town of Poitiers is full of interest and charm for persons of many diverse interests. Those who love the Picts, the Romans, the Merovingians can find them all here, piled one on top of the other. The cellars of houses are full of old walls, remnants of subterranean passages, caves where French dragons once lived in Roman diggings, and all sorts of such relics. Above ground, sad to say, most of the beautiful and picturesque fifteenth century houses have been pulled down and the actual present main streets show little of the architecture of the past, but in the side streets and out-of-the-way alleys and winding ways there is a great treasure of interesting corners, picturesque old gardens, and general old-timeyness, though one is conscious of a certain squalor which is not entirely definable. People who understand architecture find the old churches here extremely fascinating and remarkable, and even a tyro can see that they are so. But, after all, Radegonde is the most interesting relic of Poitiers—alone well worth a visit, though the beauty of the old town's situation and environment is not to be forgotten.

Radegonde was a German princess of Thuringia, born a heathen, who, at the age of twelve years, having seen all her elders and relations murdered and their lands stolen in the good old-fashioned way, was taken a captive into France, in the year 529 A.D. King Clotaire, though a detestable person, still has this to his credit, that, intending to marry the little princess when she grew older, he provided masters for her who gave her a very admirable and extensive education. Radegonde learned Latin and Greek, was converted to Christianity, and developed a high and queen-like character. The legends say that she abhorred the thought of marrying Clotaire and tried to escape when the time came. The country people cherish the story of a cave where she hid, and where a miraculous spring

appeared; of a rockbed that became soft as Clotaire's horse galloped over it when he was pursuing her, so that the horse's hoofs sank in, when it immediately hardened again; and like tales. Nevertheless, she had to marry him, and again we must give him this credit, that he endowed her liberally with lands and wealth. But he was brutal, greedy, and un-intellectual. Radegonde stifled in the atmosphere of his court, and to solace herself and employ her energies she built a hospice for poor and sick women on her estate at Athies, and spent most of her time in working there as a nurse, making beds, cleansing and dressing ulcers and wounds, bathing lepers, consoling the dying, and dressing the dead for burial. King Clotaire grew more and more unpleasant, and she finally left him altogether, and, as a protection against him, commanded one of the high priests of the church to consecrate her to religion. It was after this that she came to Poitiers and founded the extensive abbey of Sainte-Croix, built churches, established hospitals, trained two hundred religious sisters, and devoted herself to a life of humble service to the poor and the sick.

She came to Poitiers about 558 A.D. It was a proud day for the city when Queen Radegonde entered it with her noble train of followers, and to-day, even it is full of memory of her, in the names of streets, church, and parts of the town. The extensive domain where she held sway is now built over, new streets run where the old convent walls stood, her own special church has been so often rebuilt and repaired that only a couple of the original stone carvings are left, but still the memory of Radegonde is fresh, green, and tenderly cherished because of her services to the miserable and afflicted.

Some remains of the ancient abbey and of the town of Radegonde's time existed up to a late day. Her own especial cell near the church, now called by her name (which she had built under the name of "St. Marie-beyond-the-Walls"), was only destroyed in 1795. The greater part of the domain had been sold in 1791, for the benefit of the State. As late as 1904, in filling up parts of the town that were built over old ruins, an ancient Roman subterranean passage was filled in which, according to the superstitions of Radegonde's age, was inhabited by a dragon who devoured any of the nuns that were rash enough to try to pass that way, and in 1905, the last remnants of an old Roman tower were cleared away, in which her companions and followers had stood to watch her funeral procession go by, and from the little window of which they had thrown flowers upon her

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)