

CONTINUING THE STAR'S TRIBUTE TO THE BRITISH MONARCH AT 60

THE QUEEN'S GREATEST CRISIS: HER SISTER'S FORBIDDEN ROMANCE

□ In the conclusion of the STAR magazine's exclusive series on Queen Elizabeth at 60, noted American author RALPH G. MARTIN recalls the most painful personal crisis of Elizabeth's reign: when her duty as queen clashed with the desire of her beloved sister, Princess Margaret, to marry a forbidden man. Among Martin's previous best sellers about the British royal family are biographies of the Duchess of Windsor and the love story of Charles and Diana.

THE middle-aged but still handsome man talked sadly about a woman he admired. As a young man, he said, he had gone to the same nightclub that Princess Margaret frequented.

She would sit there alone at her usual table with a bottle of Scotch in front of her. In the course of the evening, she would occasionally invite a young man at a nearby table to join her for a drink or for the evening.

"A bunch of us used to joke as to who would be Margaret's young man that night. It's a tragedy because she's such a fine person with a lot of spirit and a lot of fun, and now she's alone so much of the time."

The "tragedy" began with the Peter Townsend affair. It was the first family crisis Elizabeth faced when she became queen at 25. The protagonists were her equerry and her sister.

Princess Margaret had been Elizabeth's closest friend and confidante, even though she was almost five years younger than the queen. The two could not have been more different: Elizabeth, outwardly proud, serious, calm; Margaret, a feisty peppercorn, fun-loving, spontaneous, almost irreverent.

The Townsend crisis, however, was not funny.

Wing Commander Peter Townsend was a slim man who had been equerry to King George VI. Equeries are royal aides usually picked for their family connections, but Townsend got the job because he was a war hero who had downed the first German bomber on British soil.

In 20 months of combat as a fighter pilot, Townsend was shot down twice. He had been hospitalized several months with a nervous breakdown. As he himself put it: "I saw myself crashing over and over again to a horrible death."

He was married, the father of two sons — King George VI himself was godfather to the second child. The king offered Townsend a royal cottage by the Thames, near Windsor Castle. Townsend's original equerry assignment with the king was for three months, but it lasted more than nine years. He then stayed on with Elizabeth when she became queen.

Townsend had a square-cut face and dark, wavy hair. He was 16 years older than Margaret. "When he first appeared, I had a terrific crush on him," she later admitted. "But there

was no question of a romance until much later — he was a married man."

By 1947, Margaret was 17 — "willful and headstrong," according to her governess. The princess had her own fast set who toured the nightclubs. Margaret had a good, strong singing voice, played a hot piano and was a marvelous mimic who could make anybody laugh.

During a long South African tour that year, Margaret spent some 35 nights on a train — and Townsend was there, too. Her infatuation intensified. When Elizabeth married, Margaret felt a heightened loneliness, as well as envy.

At 20, Margaret was a nightclub favorite. She made good newspaper copy and photographers followed her everywhere. She was invited to play piano onstage, danced the rumba and was courted by a string of suitors. She was generous and charming, and her friends called her "Ma'am darling."

Townsend later recalled, "What ultimately made Princess Margaret so attractive and lovable was that behind the dazzling façade, the apparent self-assurance, you could find, if you looked for it, a rare softness and sincerity."

He also recalled a royal family picnic when he stretched out to doze. He suddenly became aware that Margaret was carefully covering him with a coat. As she bent over, he said quietly to her: "You know, your father is watching us." She simply laughed.

Townsend's world soon crumbled. He sued his wife for divorce, charging her with adultery, and in 1953 was awarded custody of their sons.

The romance with Margaret now blossomed.

Peter and his princess were photographed snuggled closely together, her head on his chest. "We had known each other for nine years," said Townsend later, but he still found it "incredible" that he was "the man of her choice."



Princess Margaret was just a teenager when she became infatuated with Peter Townsend (above). The queen mother (left), between daughters Elizabeth and Margaret) was fond of Townsend.

Queen Elizabeth was delighted with her sister's happiness. The queen genuinely liked Townsend. So did the queen mother. As for Philip, he and Townsend often played squash and badminton.

But the royal world is not that sim-

ple. The Royal Marriage Act of 1772 specifically states: "No descendant of George II shall be capable of contracting matrimony without the previous consent of the king."

Any royal under 25 had to get the queen's permission. And the queen, ▶