

Selections from *The Song of Roland*,
translated by Charles Scott Moncrieff.

LXXIX

Ready they make hauberks Sarrazinese,
995 That folded are, the greater part, in three;
And they lace on good helms Sarragucese;
Gird on their swords of tried steel Viennese;
Fine shields they have, and spears Valentinese,
And white, blue, red, their ensigns take the breeze,
1000 They've left their mules behind, and their palfreys,
Their chargers mount, and canter knee by knee.
Fair shines the sun, the day is bright and clear,
Light bums again from all their polished gear.
A thousand horns they sound, more proud to seem;
1005 Great is the noise, the Franks its echo hear.
Says Oliver: "Companion, I believe,
Sarrazins now in battle must we meet."
Answers Rollanz: "God grant us then the fee!
For our King's sake well must we quit us here;
1010 Man for his lord should suffer great disease,
Most bitter cold endure, and burning heat,
His hair and skin should offer up at need.
Now must we each lay on most hardily,
So evil songs neer sung of us shall be.
1015 Pagans are wrong: Christians are right indeed.
Evil example will never come of me."

AOI.

LXXX

Oliver mounts upon a lofty peak,
Looks to his right along the valley green,
The pagan tribes approaching there appear;
1020 He calls Rollanz, his companion, to see:
"What sound is this, come out of Spain, we hear,
What hauberks bright, what helmets these that gleam?
They'll smite our Franks with fury past belief,
He knew it, Guenes, the traitor and the thief,
1025 Who chose us out before the King our chief."
Answers the count Rollanz: "Olivier, cease.
That man is my good-father; hold thy peace."

LXXXI

Upon a peak is Oliver mounted,
Kingdom of Spain he sees before him spread,
1030 And Sarrazins, so many gathered.
Their helmets gleam, with gold are jewelled,
Also their shields, their hauberks orfreyed,
Also their swords, ensigns on spears fixed.
Rank beyond rank could not be numbered,
1035 So many there, no measure could he set.

In his own heart he's sore astonished,
 Fast as he could, down from the peak hath sped
 Comes to the Franks, to them his tale hath said.

LXXXII

Says Oliver: "Pagans from there I saw;
 1040 Never on earth did any man see more.
 Gainst us their shields an hundred thousand bore,
 That laced helms and shining hauberks wore;
 And, bolt upright, their bright brown spearheads shone.
 Battle we'll have as never was before.
 1045 Lords of the Franks, God keep you in valour!
 So hold your ground, we be not overborne!"
 Then say the Franks "Shame take him that goes off:
 If we must die, then perish one and all."

AOI.

LXXXIII

Says Oliver: "Pagans in force abound,
 1050 While of us Franks but very few I count;
 Comrade Rollanz, your horn I pray you sound!
 If Charles hear, he'll turn his armies round."
 Answers Rollanz: "A fool I should be found;
 In France the Douce would perish my renown.
 1055 With Durendal I'll lay on thick and stout,
 In blood the blade, to its golden hilt, I'll drown.
 Felon pagans to th' pass shall not come down;
 I pledge you now, to death they all are bound.

AOI.

LXXXIV

"Comrade Rollanz, sound the olifant, I pray;
 1060 If Charles hear, the host he'll turn again;
 Will succour us our King and baronage."
 Answers Rollanz: "Never, by God, I say,
 For my misdeed shall kinsmen hear the blame,
 Nor France the Douce fall into evil fame!
 1065 Rather stout blows with Durendal I'll lay,
 With my good sword that by my side doth sway;
 Till bloodied o'er you shall behold the blade.
 Felon pagans are gathered to their shame;
 I pledge you now, to death they're doomed to-day."

LXXXV

"Comrade Rollanz, once sound your olifant!
 1070 If Charles hear, where in the pass he stands,
 I pledge you now, they'll turn again, the Franks."
 "Never, by God," then answers him Rollanz,
 "Shall it be said by any living man,
 1075 That for pagans I took my horn in hand!
 Never by me shall men reproach my clan.

When I am come into the battle grand,
 And blows lay on, by hundred, by thousand,
 Of Durendal bloodied you'll see the brand.
 1080 Franks are good men; like vassals brave they'll stand;
 Nay, Spanish men from death have no warrant."

LXXXVI
 Says Oliver: "In this I see no blame;
 I have beheld the Sarrazins of Spain;
 Covered with them, the mountains and the vales,
 1085 The wastes I saw, and all the farthest plains.
 A muster great they've made, this people strange;
 We have of men a very little tale."
 Answers Rollanz: "My anger is inflamed.
 Never, please God His Angels and His Saints,
 1090 Never by me shall Frankish valour fail!
 Rather I'll die than shame shall me attain.
 Therefore strike on, the Emperour's love to gain."

LXXXVII
 Pride hath Rollanz, wisdom Olivier hath;
 And both of them shew marvellous courage;
 1095 Once they are horsed, once they have donned their arms,
 Rather they'd die than from the battle pass.
 Good are the counts, and lofty their language.
 Felon pagans come cantering in their wrath.
 Says Oliver: "Behold and see, Rollanz,
 1100 These are right near, but Charles is very far.
 On the olifant deign now to sound a blast;
 Were the King here, we should not fear damage.
 Only look up towards the Pass of Aspre,
 In sorrow there you'll see the whole rereward.
 1105 Who does this deed, does no more afterward."
 Answers Rollanz: "Utter not such outrage!
 Evil his heart that is in thought coward!
 We shall remain firm in our place installed;
 From us the blows shall come, from us the assault."

AOI.

LXXXVIII
 1110 When Rollant sees that now must be combat,
 More fierce he's found than lion or leopard;
 The Franks he calls, and Oliver commands:
 "Now say no more, my friends, nor thou, comrade.
 That Emperour, who left us Franks on guard,
 1115 A thousand score stout men he set apart,
 And well he knows, not one will prove coward.
 Man for his lord should suffer with good heart,
 Of bitter cold and great heat bear the smart,
 His blood let drain, and all his flesh be scarred.
 1120 Strike with thy lance, and I with Durendal,

With my good sword that was the King's reward.
 So, if I die, who has it afterward
 Noble vassal's he well may say it was."

LXXXIX

From the other part is the Archbishop Turpin,
 1125 He pricks his horse and mounts upon a hill;
 Calling the Franks, sermon to them begins:
 "My lords barons, Charles left us here for this;
 He is our King, well may we die for him:
 To Christendom good service offering.
 1130 Battle you'll have, you all are bound to it,
 For with your eyes you see the Sarrazins.
 Pray for God's grace, confessing Him your sins!
 For your souls' health, I'll absolution give
 So, though you die, blest martyrs shall you live,
 1135 Thrones you shall win in the great Paradis."
 The Franks dismount, upon the ground are lit.
 That Archbishop God's Benediction gives,
 For their penance, good blows to strike he bids.

XC

The Franks arise, and stand upon their feet,
 1140 They're well absolved, and from their sins made clean,
 And the Archbishop has signed them with God's seal;
 And next they mount upon their chargers keen;
 By rule of knights they have put on their gear,
 For battle all apparelled as is meet.
 1145 The count Rollant calls Oliver, and speaks
 "Comrade and friend, now clearly have you seen
 That Guenelun hath got us by deceit;
 Gold hath he ta'en; much wealth is his to keep;
 That Emperour vengeance for us must wreak.
 1150 King Marsilies hath bargained for us cheap;
 At the sword's point he yet shall pay our meed."

AOI.

XCI

To Spanish pass is Rollanz now going
 On Veillantif, his good steed, galloping;
 He is well armed, pride is in his bearing,
 1155 He goes, so brave, his spear in hand holding,
 He goes, its point against the sky turning;
 A gonfalon all white thereon he's pinned,
 Down to his hand flutters the golden fringe:
 Noble his limbs, his face clear and smiling.
 1160 His companion goes after, following,
 The men of France their warrant find in him.
 Proudly he looks towards the Sarrazins,
 And to the Franks sweetly, himself humbling;
 And courteously has said to them this thing:

1165 “My lords barons, go now your pace holding!
 Pagans are come great martyrdom seeking;
 Noble and fair reward this day shall bring,
 Was never won by any Frankish King.”
 Upon these words the hosts are come touching.
 AOI.

XCII

1170 Speaks Oliver: “No more now will I say.
 Your olifant, to sound it do not deign,
 Since from Carlun you’ll never more have aid.
 He has not heard; no fault of his, so brave.
 Those with him there are never to be blamed.
 1175 So canter on, with what prowess you may!
 Lords and barons, firmly your ground maintain!
 Be minded well, I pray you in God’s Name,
 Stout blows to strike, to give as you shall take.
 Forget the cry of Charles we never may.”
 1180 Upon this word the Franks cry out amain.
 Who then had heard them all “Monjoie!” acclaim
 Of vassalage might well recall the tale.
 They canter forth, God! with what proud parade,
 Pricking their spurs, the better speed to gain;
 1185 They go to strike,— what other thing could they? —
 But Sarrazins are not at all afraid.
 Pagans and Franks, you’d see them now engaged.

XCIII

Marsile’s nephew, his name is Aelroth,
 First of them all canters before the host,
 1190 Says of our Franks these ill words as he goes:
 “Felons of France, so here on us you close!
 Betrayed you has he that to guard you ought;
 Mad is the King who left you in this post.
 So shall the fame of France the Douce be lost,
 1195 And the right arm from Charles body torn.”
 When Rollant hears, what rage he has, by God!
 His steed he spurs, gallops with great effort;
 He goes, that count, to strike with all his force,
 The shield he breaks, the hauberk’s seam unsews,
 1200 Slices the heart, and shatters up the bones,
 All of the spine he severs with that blow,
 And with his spear the soul from body throws
 So well he’s pinned, he shakes in the air that corse,
 On his spear’s hilt he’s flung it from the horse:
 1205 So in two halves Aeroth’s neck he broke,
 Nor left him yet, they say, but rather spoke:
 “Avaunt, culvert! A madman Charles is not,
 No treachery was ever in his thought.
 Proudly he did, who left us in this post;
 1210 The fame of France the Douce shall not be lost.

Strike on, the Franks! Ours are the foremost blows.
For we are right, but these gluttons are wrong.”

AOI.

XCIV

A duke there was, his name was Falfarun,
Brother was he to King Marsiliun,
1215 He held their land, Dathan's and Abirun's;
Beneath the sky no more encrimed felun;
Between his eyes so broad was he in front
A great half-foot you'd measure there in full.
His nephew dead he's seen with grief enough,
1220 Comes through the press and wildly forth he runs,
Aloud he shouts their cry the pagans use;
And to the Franks is right contrarious:
“Honour of France the Douce shall fall to us!”
Hears Oliver, he's very furious,
1225 His horse he pricks with both his golden spurs,
And goes to strike, ev'n as a baron doth;
The shield he breaks and through the hauberk cuts,
His ensign's fringe into the carcass thrusts,
On his spear's hilt he's flung it dead in dust.
1230 Looks on the ground, sees glutton lying thus,
And says to him, with reason proud enough:
“From threatening, culvert, your mouth I've shut.
Strike on, the Franks! Right well we'll overcome.”
“Monjoie,” he shouts, 'twas the ensign of Carlun.

AOI.

XCV

1235 A king there was, his name was Corsablix,
Barbarian, and of a strange country,
He's called aloud to the other Sarrazins:
“Well may we join battle upon this field,
For of the Franks but very few are here;
1240 And those are here, we should account them cheap,
From Charles not one has any warranty.
This is the day when they their death shall meet.”
Has heard him well that Archbishop Turpin,
No man he'd hate so much the sky beneath;
1245 Spurs of fine gold he pricks into his steed,
To strike that king by virtue great goes he,
The hauberk all unfastens, breaks the shield,
Thrusts his great spear in through the carcass clean,
Pins it so well he shakes it in its seat,
1250 Dead in the road he's flung it from his spear.
Looks on the ground, that glutton lying sees,
Nor leaves him yet, they say, but rather speaks:
“Culvert pagan, you lied now in your teeth,
Charles my lord our warrant is indeed;
1255 None of our Franks hath any mind to flee.

Your companions all on this spot we'll keep,
I tell you news; death shall ye suffer here.
Strike on, the Franks! Fail none of you at need!
Ours the first blow, to God the glory be!"
1260 "Monjoie!" he cries, for all the camp to hear.

XCVI
And Gerins strikes Malprimis of Brigal
So his good shield is nothing worth at all,
Shatters the boss, was fashioned of crystal,
One half of it downward to earth flies off;
1265 Right to the flesh has through his hauberk torn,
On his good spear he has the carcass caught.
And with one blow that pagan downward falls;
The soul of him Satan away hath borne.

AOI.

CXL

Rollant regards the barren mountain-sides;
 Dead men of France, he sees so many lie,
 And weeps for them as fits a gentle knight:
 "Lords and barons, may God to you be kind!
 1855 And all your souls redeem for Paradise!
 And let you there mid holy flowers lie!
 Better vassals than you saw never I.
 Ever you've served me, and so long a time,
 By you Carlon hath conquered kingdoms wide;
 1860 That Emperour reared you for evil plight!
 Douce land of France, o very precious clime,
 Laid desolate by such a sour exile!
 Barons of France, for me I've seen you die,
 And no support, no warrant could I find;
 1865 God be your aid, Who never yet hath lied!
 I must not fail now, brother, by your side;
 Save I be slain, for sorrow shall I die.
 Sir companion, let us again go strike!"

CXLI

The count Rollanz, back to the field then hieing
 1870 Holds Durendal, and like a vassal striking
 Faldrun of Pui has through the middle sliced,
 With twenty-four of all they rated highest;
 Was never man, for vengeance shewed such liking.
 Even as a stag before the hounds goes flying,
 1875 Before Rollanz the pagans scatter, frightened.
 Says the Archbishop: "You deal now very wisely!
 Such valour should he shew that is bred knightly,
 And beareth arms, and a good charger rideth;
 In battle should be strong and proud and sprightly;
 1880 Or otherwise he is not worth a shilling,
 Should be a monk in one of those old minsters,
 Where, day, by day, he'd pray for us poor sinners."
 Answers Rollant: "Strike on; no quarter give them!"
 Upon these words Franks are again beginning;
 1885 Very great loss they suffer then, the Christians.

CLXVIII

Then Rollanz feels that death to him draws near,
 2260 For all his brain is issued from his ears;
 He prays to God that He will call the peers,
 Bids Gabriel, the angel, t' himself appear.
 Takes the olifant, that no reproach shall hear,
 And Durendal in the other hand he wields;
 2265 Further than might a cross-bow's arrow speed
 Goes towards Spain into a fallow-field;
 Climbs on a cliff; where, under two fair trees,
 Four terraces, of marble wrought, he sees.
 There he falls down, and lies upon the green;
 2270 He swoons again, for death is very near.

CLXIX

High are the peaks, the trees are very high.
 Four terraces of polished marble shine;
 On the green grass count Rollant swoons thereby.
 A Sarrazin him all the time espies,
 2275 Who feigning death among the others hides;
 Blood hath his face and all his body dyed;
 He gets afoot, running towards him hies;
 Fair was he, strong and of a courage high;
 A mortal hate he's kindled in his pride.
 2280 He's seized Rollant, and the arms, were at his side,
 "Charles nephew," he's said, "here conquered lies.
 To Araby I'll bear this sword as prize."
 As he drew it, something the count descried.

CLXX

So Rollant felt his sword was taken forth,
 2285 Opened his eyes, and this word to him spoke
 "Thou'rt never one of ours, full well I know."
 Took the olifant, that he would not let go,
 Struck him on th' helm, that jewelled was with gold,
 And broke its steel, his skull and all his bones,
 2290 Out of his head both the two eyes he drove;
 Dead at his feet he has the pagan thrown:
 After he's said: "Culvert, thou wert too bold,
 Or right or wrong, of my sword seizing hold!
 They'll dub thee fool, to whom the tale is told.
 2295 But my great one, my olifant I broke;
 Fallen from it the crystal and the gold."

CLXXI

Then Rollanz feels that he has lost his sight,
 Climbs to his feet, uses what strength he might;
 In all his face the colour is grown white.
 2300 In front of him a great brown boulder lies;
 Whereon ten blows with grief and rage he strikes;
 The steel cries out, but does not break outright;

And the count says: "Saint Mary, be my guide
 Good Durendal, unlucky is your plight!
 2305 I've need of you no more; spent is my pride!
 We in the field have won so many fights,
 Combating through so many regions wide
 That Charles holds, whose beard is hoary white!
 Be you not his that turns from any in flight!
 2310 A good vassal has held you this long time;
 Never shall France the Free behold his like."

CLXXII

Rollant hath struck the sardonix terrace;
 The steel cries out, but broken is no ways.
 So when he sees he never can it break,
 2315 Within himself begins he to complain:
 "Ah! Durendal, white art thou, clear of stain!
 Beneath the sun reflecting back his rays!
 In Moriane was Charles, in the vale,
 When from heaven God by His angel bade
 2320 Him give thee to a count and capitain;
 Girt thee on me that noble King and great.
 I won for him with thee Anjou, Bretagne,
 And won for him with thee Peitou, the Maine,
 And Normandy the free for him I gained,
 2325 Also with thee Provence and Equitaine,
 And Lombardie and all the whole Romaine,
 I won Baivere, all Flanders in the plain,
 Also Burguigne and all the whole Puillane,
 Costentinnople, that homage to him pays;
 2330 In Saisonie all is as he ordains;
 With thee I won him Scotland, Ireland, Wales,
 England also, where he his chamber makes;
 Won I with thee so many countries strange
 That Charles holds, whose beard is white with age!
 2335 For this sword's sake sorrow upon me weighs,
 Rather I'd die, than it mid pagans stay.
 Lord God Father, never let France be shamed!"

CLXXIII

Rollant his stroke on a dark stone repeats,
 And more of it breaks off than I can speak.
 2340 The sword cries out, yet breaks not in the least,
 Back from the blow into the air it leaps.
 Destroy it can he not; which when he sees,
 Within himself he makes a plaint most sweet.
 "Ah! Durendal, most holy, fair indeed!
 2345 Relics enough thy golden hilt conceals:
 Saint Peter's Tooth, the Blood of Saint Basile,
 Some of the Hairs of my Lord, Saint Denise,
 Some of the Robe, was worn by Saint Mary.
 It is not right that pagans should thee seize,

2350 For Christian men your use shall ever be.
 Nor any man's that worketh cowardice!
 Many broad lands with you have I retrieved
 Which Charles holds, who hath the great white beard;
 Wherefore that King so proud and rich is he."

CLXXIV

2355 But Rollant felt that death had made a way
 Down from his head till on his heart it lay;
 Beneath a pine running in haste he came,
 On the green grass he lay there on his face;
 His olifant and sword beneath him placed,
 2360 Turning his head towards the pagan race,
 Now this he did, in truth, that Charles might say
 (As he desired) and all the Franks his race; –
 'Ah, gentle count; conquering he was slain!' –
 He owned his faults often and every way,
 2365 And for his sins his glove to God upraised.

AOI.

CLXXV

But Rollant feels he's no more time to seek;
 Looking to Spain, he lies on a sharp peak,
 And with one hand upon his breast he beats:
 "Mea Culpa! God, by Thy Virtues clean
 2370 Me from my sins, the mortal and the mean,
 Which from the hour that I was born have been
 Until this day, when life is ended here!"
 Holds out his glove towards God, as he speaks
 Angels descend from heaven on that scene.

AOI.

CLXXVI

2375 The count Rollanz, beneath a pine he sits,;
 Turning his eyes towards Spain, he begins
 Remembering so many divers things:
 So many lands where he went conquering,
 And France the Douce, the heroes of his kin,
 2380 And Charlemagne, his lord who nourished him.
 Nor can he help but weep and sigh at this.
 But his own self, he's not forgotten him,
 He owns his faults, and God's forgiveness bids:
 "Very Father, in Whom no falsehood is,
 2385 Saint Lazaron from death Thou didst remit,
 And Daniel save from the lions' pit;
 My soul in me preserve from all perils
 And from the sins I did in life commit!"
 His right-hand glove, to God he offers it
 2390 Saint Gabriel from's hand hath taken it.
 Over his arm his head bows down and slips,
 He joins his hands: and so is life finish'd.

God sent him down His angel cherubin,
 And Saint Michael, we worship in peril;
 2395 And by their side Saint Gabriel alit;
 So the count's soul they bare to Paradis.

CLXXVII

Rollant is dead; his soul to heav'n God bare.
 That Emperour to Rencesvals doth fare.
 There was no path nor passage anywhere
 2400 Nor of waste ground no ell nor foot to spare
 Without a Frank or pagan lying there.
 Charles cries aloud: "Where are you, nephew fair?
 Where's the Archbishop and that count Oliviers?
 Where is Gerins and his comrade Gerers?"
 2405 Otes the Duke, and the count Berengiers
 And Ivorie, and Ive, so dear they were?
 What is become of Gascon Engelier,
 Sansun the Duke and Anseis the fierce?
 Where's old Gerard of Russillun; oh, where
 2410 The dozen peers I left behind me here?"
 But what avail, since none can answer bear?
 "God!" says the King, "Now well may I despair,
 I was not here the first assault to share!"
 Seeming enraged, his beard the King doth tear.
 2415 Weep from their eyes barons and chevaliers,
 A thousand score, they swoon upon the earth;
 Duke Neimes for them was moved with pity rare.

CLXXVIII

No chevalier nor baron is there, who
 Pitifully weeps not for grief and dule;
 2420 They mourn their sons, their brothers, their nephews,
 And their liege lords, and trusty friends and true;
 Upon the ground a many of them swoon.
 Thereon Duke Neimes doth act with wisdom proof,
 First before all he's said to the Emperour:
 2425 "See beforehand, a league from us or two,
 From the highways dust rising in our view;
 Pagans are there, and many them, too.
 Canter therefore! Vengeance upon them do!"
 "Ah, God!" says Charles, "so far are they re-moved!
 2430 Do right by me, my honour still renew!
 They've torn from me the flower of France the Douce."
 The King commands Gebuin and Otun,
 Tedbalt of Reims, also the count Milun:
 "Guard me this field, these hills and valleys too,
 2435 Let the dead lie, all as they are, unmoved,
 Let not approach lion, nor any brute,
 Let not approach esquire, nor any groom;
 For I forbid that any come thereto,
 Until God will that we return anew."

2440 These answer him sweetly, their love to prove:
 “Right Emperour, dear Sire, so will we do.”
 A thousand knights they keep in retinue.
 AOI.

CLXXIX

That Emperour bids trumpets sound again,
 Then canters forth with his great host so brave.
 2445 Of Spanish men, whose backs are turned their way,
 Franks one and all continue in their chase.
 When the King sees the light at even fade,
 On the green grass dismounting as he may,
 2450 He kneels aground, to God the Lord doth pray
 That the sun’s course He will for him delay,
 Put off the night, and still prolong the day.
 An angel then, with him should reason make,
 Nimbly enough appeared to him and spake:
 “Charles, canter on! Light needst not thou await.
 2455 The flower of France, as God knows well, is slain;
 Thou canst be avenged upon that crimeful race.”
 Upon that word mounts the Emperour again.
 AOI.