THE SONG OF ROLAND

Translated by
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And he can bear a greater load in sport
Than four pack mules when they are burdened down.
The land he comes from, so the people say,
Has never seen the sun, and no grain grows;
No rain falls there, nor dew upon the earth,
And every single stone is black as pitch.
Some folk declare it is the haunt of fiends.
Chernubile said: 'I have my good sword girt,
Which I shall turn crimson at Roncevaux.
If I find gallant Roland on my way
And don't attack him, then my word is false.
My sword will win the match with Durendal,
The French shall die, and France will be bereft.'
At this the pagans gather all twelve,
With them a hundred thousand Saracens,
Who hasten eagerly to join the fray,
And in a pine-wood go to don their arms.

The pagans put Saracen hauberks on,
Most of them reinforced with triple mail;
They lace the splendid Saragossan helms,
Gird on their swords wrought of Viana steel,
Then they forsake their palfreys and their mules,
Mount on their steeds, and ride in close array.
Bright was the day and radiant the sun;
All their equipment glitters in its rays.
A thousand bugles sound a flourish forth:
Great is the clamour, and the Frenchmen hear.
Said Oliver: 'Sir comrade, I believe
We may do battle with the Saracens.'
Roland replies: 'And may God grant it so!
Our duty bids us stand firm for our king:
A man should suffer hardship for his lord,
Endure great heat and bear with bitter cold,
And be prepared to lose both hair and skin.
Now let each man take care to deal great blows,
So that no song of shame be sung of us!'
Friend Roland, I beseech you, sound your horn!  
Then Charles will hear; the army will turn back.'  
Roland replies: 'Should I act like a fool  
And lose my fame and honour in fair France?  
No! I shall strike great blows with Durendal,  
Stain it with gore up to its golden hilt.  
The pagan knaves shall rue their coming here,  
For this I pledge: each one is doomed to die.'  

Companion Roland, sound your oliphant!  
The king will hear as he goes through the pass;  
And then, I pledge, the Franks will turn about.'  
Roland replies: 'May God not please His angels  
To have me sound my horn for infidels!  
Never shall my kinsmen bear that reproach.  
When I am fighting in the great fray,  
I'll strike seven hundred and a thousand blows.  
Durendal's steel you shall see stained with gore.  
Stout are the French, valiantly they will strike:  
Never shall those from Spain escape their death.'  

Said Oliver: 'I see no blame in it;  
For I have seen the Saracens from Spain:  
They cover both the mountains and the vales,  
Swarming on hillsides and throughout the plains.  
Huge are the armies of the foreign folk,
Archbishop Turpin is not far away. 
Spurring his horse, he gallops up a hill, 
Summons the French, and speaks these solemn words: 
‘My lords and barons, Charles has left us here, 
And for our king we should in duty die. 
Lend aid now to maintain the Christian faith! 
You’ll join in battle, as you know full well: 
Before your eyes you see the Saracens. 
Say your confessions, for God’s mercy pray! 
I will absolve you to secure your souls. 
If you die, blessed martyrs you will be 
And have your place on high in Paradise.’ 
The French dismount and to the ground they fall 
For the archbishop’s blessing in God’s name. 
As penance he commands that they strike hard.

The French rose up again upon their feet, 
Truly absolved and pardoned for their sins 
And signed by the archbishop with God’s cross. 
At this, they mounted on their speedy steeds 
In arms and armour fitting for true knights, 
And with their battle-gear all well equipped. 
Count Roland then called upon Oliver: 
‘Companion, sir, as you are well aware, 
We have all been betrayed by Ganelon, 
Who has been paid in money, wealth and gold: 
The emperor should take vengeance for us. 
Marsile the king has bartered with our lives; 
But with our sword-strokes he shall have his price!’ AOI.

Roland has ridden to the Spanish pass 
On Veillantif, his good swift battle-steed, 
And bearing arms as fine as was his due. 
His spear the noble knight goes brandishing, 
Turning the tip upwards towards the sky; 
And there a pure white gonfalon is tied, 
With golden streamers hanging to his hand. 
Handsome he is, with laughter in his eyes.
The Song of Roland

He rides with his companion at his heels,
Hailed as protector by the men of France.
Proudly he gazes at the Saracens,
But on the French with mild humility;
Them he addresses with true courtesy:
'My noble lords, go gently, do not haste!
On savage slaughter these pagans are bent.
Today our booty will be rich and rare,
More precious than French king has ever won.'
He spoke these words, and then the armies clash. A01.

Said Oliver: 'I have no time for words.
You did not deign to sound your oliphant,
And so of noble Charles there is no trace.
For he knows nothing, and no guilt is his;
And those men with him are not to be blamed.
Ride forward then yourself with all your might!
My lords and barons, strive to hold the field!
And in God's name, I beg you well attend
To dealing blows: you'll give, and you'll receive!
Let's not forget the battle-cry of Charles.'
When the French hear these words, their shouts ring out.
If you had heard them cry aloud 'Monjoie!'
Well you would call to mind true vassalage.
Then they ride on, oh God! in such great pride,
Drive in their spurs to go more quickly still,
And so press on to strike their blows—what else?
The Saracens were not in dread of them:
Pagans and Franks, see them now come to grips!

King Marsile had a nephew, Aeloroth,
Who on his own rode at the army's head.
He hurls his insults in our Frenchmen's teeth:
'You felon French, you'll joust with us today.
By your protector you have been betrayed;
Mad is the king to leave you in the pass.
Today fair France shall forfeit its repute,
And Charlemagne will lose his own right arm!
When Roland heard him, God! what grief was his.
He spurs his steed on to a frantic pace;
On the count drives, to strike with all his might.
His shield he shatters and his hauberk rends,
Cleaves through the breast and shivers all his bones,
Sunders in twain the spine within his back:
So with his spear he puts his soul to flight;
He thrusts well home and topples down his foe,
Hurls him at lance’s length dead from his horse
With his neck broken in two equal parts.
Still he will not forbear to rail him:
'Charles is not mad, you blackest-hearted rogue,
And never was a friend of treachery.
Callant he was to leave us in the pass:
Fair France shall not today lose iti repute.
Have at them, Franks, for this first blow is ours!
We’re in the right, these villains in the
wrong.'  AOI.

A duke was there whose name was Falsaron,
And he was brother to Marsile the king,
Ruler of Dathan and Abiron’s land,
As foul a felon as is found on earth.
So broad his brow was spread between the eyes
That one could measure there a full half-foot.
Much grieved was he to see his nephew slain.
He leaves the safety of the serried throng
To shout the war-cry of the Saracens
And at the Frenchmen hurl his mocking words:
'Fair France shall lose its honour on this day!'  Oliver hears him and is filled with wrath.
He pricks his charger with his gilded spurs
And goes to strike him as a baron should.
His shield he shatters and his hauberk rives,
Plunges his pennant’s streamers in his breast,
Slays and unsaddles him at lance’s length.
Down on the ground he sees the scoundrel lie,
And he addresses him with these proud words:

'Your menaces, you rogue, mean naught to me,
Have at them, Franks, for well we’ll vanquish them!
He shouts ‘Monjoie!', the battle-cry of Charles.  AOI.

A king is there whose name is Corsablix:
He is a Berber from a foreign land;
And he calls to the other Saracens:
'This battle can be won by us with ease,
For of the Frenchmen there are very few.
Those who are here we should hold in contempt.
Not one of them is to be spared for Charles:
This is the day when they all needs must die.'
Archbishop Turpin clearly hears these words:
No man on earth has roused his hatred so.
He pricks his horse with his spurs of pure gold
And with great vigour goes to strike at him.
His shield he shatters and his hauberk splits,
And through his body drives his mighty spear;
He thrusts well home and topples his foe dead,
At lance’s length hurls his corpse to the ground.
He looks behind and sees the villain sprawl,
And he will not forbear to call to him:
'Ignoble pagan, you have told a lie,
For Charles my lord will always ward us well;
And since our Frenchmen have no mind to flee,
All your companions we shall force to stay!
I’ve news for you: you all must suffer death.
Have at them, Franks, let none of you relent!
For this first blow is ours, thanks be to God.
'Monjoie!' he shouts, and so he holds the field.

Then Gerin strikes Malprimis of Brigal,
Whose good shield is not worth a penny piece:
The crystal boss in many fragments flies;
Full half of it he knocks down to the earth
And bursts his hauberk open to the skin,
Then plunges his good spear into his breast.
To the ground falls the pagan in a heap,
And Satan comes to carry off his soul.  AOI.
Ride onward then! Why do you hesitate?
Our fatherland lies very far ahead.' AOI.

Count Roland's mouth runs red with his own blood,
And at the temple he has burst his skull.
He sounds the oliphant with toil and pain.
Charles hears it, and his Frenchmen listen too.
Then said the king: 'How long this horn-blast holds!'
Duke Naimes replies: 'A baron's effort, this!
I do not doubt in battle he's engaged,
Betrayed by him who bids you stay your hand.
Arm then, and shout aloud your battle-cry
And go to aid your noble company!
You hear full well: Roland is desperate.'

The emperor has had his own horns sound.
The Frenchmen all dismount and arm themselves
With helms and hauberks and their gilded swords.
Fine are their shields, and long and stout their spears,
With gonfalon of crimson, white and blue.
Then all the army's barons mount their steeds
And through the pass's length spur on with zest.
Not one of them but to his neighbour said:
'Should we see Roland while he's still alive,
We would deal mighty blows there at his side.'
To what avail? Too long they have delayed.

The day draws on, bright is the evening sky.
The arms they carry gleam against the sun,
The hauberks and the helms seem all ablaze,
The shields too with their richly painted flowers,
And all the spears and gilded gonfalon.
The emperor rides onward full of wrath,
The Frenchmen full of bitterness and grief.
Not one of them but weeps and loud laments
Praying to God that He keep Roland safe
Until together they have reached the field;
Then they will all strike truly at his side.
To what avail? Nothing can help them now.
Too long they've tarried to arrive in time. AOI.

Onward with mighty rage rides Charles the king,
His white beard lying on his byrnie's breast.
Each one of the French barons spurs with zest;
No single man but gives vent to his ire
Not to be there at captain Roland's side
As he fights with the Saracens of Spain.
With such a wound, I think, his soul scarce stays.
But God, what sixty men are in his band!
No king or captain ever had their like. AOI.

Roland looks to the mountains and the steeps,
Sees there so many men of France lie dead.
He mourns them like the true-born knight he is:
'My noble lords, may God His mercy show
And grant His Paradise to all your souls.
The Song of Roland

And give them rest amid celestial flowers!
I never saw better vassals than you.
So long you have served me with constancy,
And conquered such great lands in Charles's name!
The emperor retained you for your woe!
Oh realm of France, how fair a land you are,
Laid waste today by such calamity!
French lords, on my behalf I see you slain:
I cannot shield you or protect you now,
So may God help you, who was ever true!
Oliver, brother, you I must not fail.
From grief I'll die, if from no other blow.
Companion, sir, let us set to again!

Count Roland has gone back onto the field,
And wielding Durendal strikes valiant blows.
Faldrun of Pui he has there split in twain,
With him two dozen of the very best:
Never will man thirst for his vengeance more.
Just as the stag takes flight before the hounds,
So before Roland all the pagans flee.
Said the archbishop: 'You do splendid deeds!
This is such valour as a knight should show
Who bears his arms astride a sterling steed:
In battle he should be both strong and fierce,
Or else four penny pieces are worth more;
And he should be a cloistered monk instead
And ever after pray for all our sins.'
Roland replies: 'Strike on, no quarter yield!
Hearing these words, the Franks set to once more,
Yet what does this avail? Marsile is fled,
But Marganice his uncle is still there;
Carthage he holds, Alfrere and Garmalie,
And Ethiopia, a land accursed,
Peopled by black men, whom he holds in fee:
Wide are their ears, and broad their noses are;
They number more than fifty thousand strong.
Ferociously and full of wrath they ride,
Then call aloud the pagan battle-cry.'

When a man knows no captive will be made,
Then stout is his defence in such a fray;
And so like lions the Franks fiercely fight.
See now Marsile make his lordly approach!
He sits astride the horse he calls Gaignon,
Digs in his spurs and goes to strike Bevon,
Who was the lord of Beaune and of Dijon.
He has lost so much blood his strength is gone. 
Before a man could go an acre's breadth 
His heart fails, and he topples on his face; 
His own death-pangs now have him in their grip.

Roland the count recovers from his swoon, 
Climbs to his feet despite his great distress, 
And then he turns his gaze both up and down. 
Beyond his comrades, there on the green grass 
He sees the noble baron lying still. 
The good archbishop, God's servant on earth, 
Who, eyes upturned, confesses all his sins; 
With both his hands joined and to Heaven raised, 
He prays to God to grant him Paradise.

Turpin is dead, Charles's great warrior. 
And ever, in fierce fray and sermon fine, 
True champion against the infidel. 
May God grant him His holy benison! Aoi.

Count Roland sees the archbishop lie there, 
With all his entrails spilt upon the ground 
And his brains gushing forth below his brow; 
Beneath the collar-bone, upon his breast 
His hands are crossed, so delicate and white. 
Roland laments him in the Frankish way: 
'Ah, noble man, knight of high lineage, 
To God above I commend you this day. 
No man will ever serve Him with more zeal; 
Since the apostles no prophet has lived 
Who won more men for the faith he maintained. 
May your soul never lack for anything, 
But find the gates of Paradise stand wide!' 

Now Roland feels that his own death is near, 
For from his ears his brains are running forth. 
He prays to God to summon all his peers, 
Himself invokes the angel Gabriel. 
To keep from blame, he took the oliphant, 
And he seized hold of Durendal his sword 
And further than a crossbow's shaft can fly
The Song of Roland

‘Ah,’ said the count, ‘sweet Mary, help me now!
Ah, my good Durendal, alas for you!
With life, I’ll leave my mastery of you.
With you I’ve won such battles in the field,
And so many vast lands I’ve brought to heel
That are now held by hoary-bearded Charles!
May no man own you who would flee in fight!
So fine a vassal held you for so long!
In blessed France your like will not be found.’

Roland strikes hard on the sardonyx stone;
Loud grates the steel, but does not break or notch.
Then, when he saw he could not shiver it,
Soft to himself he started this lament:

‘Ah, Durendal, how fair and bright you shine,
And with what fire you glitter in the sun!
Charles once was in the vales of Maurienne
When, through an angel He sent from above,
God bade him give you to a captain count:
The great and noble king girt you on me.
With you I conquered Anjou, Brittany,
With you I won for him Poitou and Maine
And for him conquered Normandy the free
And overcame Provence and Aquitaine.
The whole of the Romagna, Lombardy,
And won all Flanders and Bavaria,
Burgundy and Apulia entire,
Constantinople that he held in fee,
And Saxony, where he does what he will;
With you I won Scotland and Ireland too,
And England, which he held as his domain;
With you so many lands and realms I’ve won
That now white-bearded Charles holds in his sway.
Sorely I grieve and sorrow for this sword:
I’d die to save it from the infidel.
Our Father, God above, spare France this shame!’

Roland strikes hard upon a swarthy stone,
Cuts more of it away than I could tell.
Loud grates the sword, but does not break or snap:
Instead it flies rebounding to the sky.
When the count sees he cannot shatter it,
In soft tones to himself he makes lament:
'Ah, Durendal, holy and fair you are!
Relics in plenty fill your gilded hilt:
Saint Peter's tooth, some of Saint Basil's blood,
Hairs from the head of my lord Saint Denis,
Part of a garment blessed Mary wore.
For infidels to wield you would be wrong:
Your service is for Christian men alone;
And may no craven coward take you up!
So many vast lands I have won with you
That now are held by grizzle-bearded Charles
And bring the emperor riches and might.'

Now Roland feels that death closes its grip,
Descending from his head down to his heart.
Running, he makes his way beneath a pine,
And on the green grass he prostrates himself,
Placing beneath him sword and oliphant.
His head he turns towards the infidel,
Because he wishes from his very soul
That Charles and all his company shall say:
'This noble count has died a conqueror!'
Then beating many times upon his breast,
He offers for his sins his glove to God. AOI.

Now Roland feels his life is at an end.
Upon a steep hilltop he faces Spain,
And with his hand he beats against his breast:
'God, I confess my sins before your might.
Forgive me for the faults both great and small
That I've committed since I first drew breath
Until this day, when I am stricken down!'
Then his right glove he held aloft to God.
Angels descend from Heaven to his side. AOI.

Roland the count lies there beneath a pine;
His face he's set toward the realm of Spain.
His mind began to turn on divers things:
The many lands he had with valor won,
Fair France, the men of his own lineage,
And Charlemagne, his patron and his lord.
He could but weep and sigh with heavy heart;
But he was not forgetful of himself
And begged God to have mercy for his sins:
'Our rightful Father, fountain of all truth,
Who from the dead raised holy Lazarus
And guarded Daniel in the lions' den,
Protect my soul from every peril now
And from the sins committed while I lived!'
Then his right glove he offered up to God:
Saint Gabriel received it from his hand.
He held his head bowed down upon his arm,
Folded his hands, and went to meet his end.
To him God sent His angel Cherubim
Together with Saint Michael du Peril;
And with them both there came Saint Gabriel
To bear the count's soul up to Paradise.

Roland is dead, his soul with God in Heaven.
The emperor is come to Roncevaux.
There is no way there and no single track,
No open ground, no yard or even foot
Where neither infidel nor Frenchman lies.
Charles calls aloud: 'Fair nephew, where are you?
Where the archbishop, where Count Oliver?
Where are Gerin and his comrade Gerier?
Where is Oton, and where Count Berengier?
Where Yvon and Yvoire so dear to me?
And where is old Gerard of Roussillon?
Where then are these twelve peers I left behind?
What use to ask, when none can make reply?
'God,' said the king, 'how dire is my dismay
Not to have been here to begin the fray!'
He plucks his beard like a man racked with grief;
Tears fill the eyes of all his baron knights.

Together twenty thousand swooning fall.
Duke Naimes is filled with pity for their sake.

There is no knight or baron on the field
But, pricked by pity, weeps abundantly.
They mourn their nephews, brothers, and their sons,
And all their friends and their liege lords besides;
And most of them fall swooning to the ground.
But then Duke Naimes showed his true gallantry
And spoke the first words to the emperor:
'Look over there, two leagues ahead of us!
See on the highways how the dust-clouds rise:
Great numbers of the pagan folk are there.
Ride on, and take revenge for our distress!'
'Oh God,' said Charles, 'They are so far away!
But grant that honour and justice be done!
They plucked from me the flower of fair France!'
The king commands Geboin and Oton,
Tedbald of Rheims, and with him Count Milon:
'Guard well the field, the mountains and the vales,
And let the slain lie there just as they are,
Untouched by lion or by any beast,
And undisturbed by any squire or knave!
I bid you see that no man touches them
Until, please God, I come back to the field.'
'Just emperor, dear lord, this we will do.'
With them they keep a thousand of their
knights. AOF.

The emperor then has his bugles sound
And forward with his great host nobly rides.
Now they have made the Spaniards turn their backs,
And all together join in the pursuit.
But when the king sees that the evening falls,
Dismounting on a verdant meadow's grass
He lies down on the ground and prays to God
That for him He may make the sun stand still,
Make the day linger and the night delay.
An angel then, with whom he often spoke,
Appeared to him and gave this prompt command:
'Ride on, then, Charles: the daylight shall not fail! God knows you've lost the finest flower of France: You may avenge them on the felon folk.'

For Charlemagne a mighty miracle
God wrought, and stayed the sun there where it stood.
The pagans flee; the Franks hotly pursue,
Catch up with them in the Val Tenebros,
Chasing them hard toward Saragossa's walls,
Slaying them as they go with mighty blows.
They block their roads and cut off their main routes.
The Ebro's waters flow before them now,
Rushing and terrible and wondrous deep;
There is no ferry, barge or galley there.
The pagans call to their god Tervagant,
Then they leap in; but there is no escape.
Those who are fully armed weigh heaviest,
And many of them sink down in the depths;
The rest, who float, are swept down with the stream,
And the more fortunate have drunk so much
That all are drowned with dreadful suffering.
The Frenchmen shout: 'Alas, Roland, for you!'

When Charles sees all the infidels are dead,
Many slain by the sword, but still more drowned,
Leaving behind great booty for his knights,
The noble king, dismounting from his steed,
Lies on the ground and gives his thanks to God.
When he rose to his feet, the sun had set.
The emperor said: 'It is time to camp:
Too late now to return to Roncevaux,
For all our steeds are flagging with fatigue.
Unsaddle them! Loose the reins from their heads,
And let them rest and graze among these fields!'
The Franks reply: 'What you have said is right.'

The emperor has now set up his camp.
In open country all the Franks dismount,