

THE [SONG OF
ROLAND]

★

TRANSLATED BY

Dorothy L. Sayers

PENGUIN BOOKS

PQ 1521 E5 S3

THE SONG OF ROLAND

I

CARLON the King, our Emperor Charlemayn,
Full seven years long has been abroad in Spain,
He's won the highlands as far as to the main;
No castle more can stand before his face,
City nor wall is left for him to break,
Save Saragossa in its high mountain place;
Marsilion holds it, the king who hates God's name,
Mahound he serves, and to Apollyon prays:
He'll not escape the ruin that awaits.

AOI

2

Marsilion sat in Saragossa town,
He sought an orchard where shade was to be found,
On a bright dais of marble he lies down;
By twenty thousand his vassals stand around.
He calls before him all his dukes and his counts:
"Listen, my lords, what affliction is ours!
The Emperor Charles that wears fair France's crown
Invades our country our fortunes to confound.
I have no host but before him gives ground,
I find no force his forces for to flout;
Wise men of wit, give counsel to me now,
Save me from death and loss of my renown."
There's ne'er a paynim utters a single sound,
Till Blancandrin, Valfonda's lord, speaks out.

l. 8 *Apollyon* (Apollo) - see Introduction, p. 20, and cf. l. 1392.

3

Blancandrin's wise amid the paynim horde;
 He was for valour a mighty knight withal,
 And fit of wit for to counsel his lord.
 He tells the king; "Be you afeared for naught,
 But send to Charles in his pride and his wrath
 Your faithful service and your friendship henceforth.
 Promise him lions and bears and hounds galore,
 Sev'n hundred camels and a thousand mew'd hawks,
 Four hundred pack-mules with gold and silver store,
 And fifty wagons, a wagon-train to form,
 Whence he may give his soldiers rich rewards.
 Say, in this land he has made enough war;
 To Aix in France let him go home once more;
 At Michaelmas you'll follow to his court,
 There you'll submit unto the Christian law,
 And be his man by faith and fealty sworn.
 Hostages too, if for sureties he call,
 You'll let him have, ten maybe or a score;
 'Twere good we send the sons our wives have borne:
 I'll send mine own, though he should die therefor.
 Better by far the heads of them should fall
 Than we should lose honour, estate and all.
 And be reduced to beggary and scorn."

AOI

L. 31 *mew'd hawks* - hawks which have got over their moult, and are consequently in good condition.

L. 34 *soldiers* - these are the mercenaries, who received their pay (*solde*) directly from the King in cash, as distinct from the feudal vassalage, who were maintained by their respective lords (see Introduction, p. 31sq). Many of them were knights-errant, without territorial attachment, who wandered about offering their services to whoever would employ them.

L. 36 *Aix* - Aix-la-Chapelle was the imperial city of Charlemagne, who rebuilt its palace and chapel and granted it many special privileges. He was reputed to have been born there and certainly died and was buried there in 814.

4

Quoth Blancandrin: "I swear by my right hand
 And beard that flutters about my girdle-span,
 Straightway you'll see the Frenchman's host disband:
 They'll hurry home to France, their native land,
 When each within his favourite haunt is back,
 Charles in his chapel at Aix will take his stand,
 And there he'll hold high feast at Michaelmas.
 The time will pass, the trysted hour elapse:
 No news of us, no message will he have.
 Fierce is the king, a cruel-hearted man;
 Our sureties' heads he'll smite off with the axe.
 Better their heads should fall into their laps
 Than that fair Spain should fall from out our hands,
 And we should suffer grave losses and mishap."
 The Paynims say: "There is some truth in that."

5

The King Marsile had ended the debate;
 He calls before him Clarin of Balagate,
 Estramarin, and Eudropin his mate;
 And Garlon Longbeard and Priamon he names,
 And Machiner and his uncle Matthay,
 Johun of Outremer, and Malabayn,
 And Blancandrin; these ten make up the tale,
 Ten matchless villains, to whom he's said his say:
 "Barons, my lords, get you to Charlemayn,
 Who sits at siege, Cordova town to take.
 Bear each in hand an olive-branch displayed;
 Peace and submission are signified that way.
 If you contrive this treaty to arrange,
 Of gold and silver I'll give you goodly weight,

And lands and fiefs as much as heart can crave."
The Paynims answer: "That will be ample pay."

AOI

6

Marsile the king his conference had ceased.
He tells his men: "My barons, go with speed;
Bear in your hands boughs of the olive tree.
On my behalf King Charlemaïn beseech,
For his God's sake to show me clemency.
Say, this month's end in truth he shall not see
Ere I shall seek him with thousand vassals leal.
The law of Christ I'll then and there receive,
In faith and love I will his liegeman be.
I'll send him sureties if thus he shall decree."
Quoth Blancandrin: "Be sure he'll grant your plea."

AOI

7

Marsilion sent for ten mules white as snow,
(A gift that erst Suatilia's king bestowed),
Their saddles silver, their bridles all of gold.
Now are they mounted, the men who are to go;
All in their hands the olive-branches hold.
They came to Carlon that hath France in control;
They'll trap him somehow, for it is fated so.

AOI

8

The Emperor Charles is glad and full of cheer.
Cordova's taken, the outer walls are pierced,
His catapults have cast the towers down sheer;
Rich booty's gone to all his chevaliers,
Silver and gold and goodly battle-gear.

In all the city no paynim now appears
Who is not slain or turned to Christian fear.
The Emperor sits in a great orchard near,
Having about him Roland and Olivere,
Samson the duke, and Anseis the fierce,
Geoffrey d'Anjou the King's gonfalonier,
And Gerin too, and with him too Gerier;
And where these were was many another fere -
Full fifteen thousand of France the fair and dear.
Upon white carpets they sit, those noble peers,
For draughts and chess the chequer-boards are reared;
To entertain the elder lords revered;
Young bachelors disport with sword and spear.
Beneath a pine beside an eglantier
A faldstool stands all of the red gold clear;
Of fairest France there sits the king austere.
White are his locks, and silver is his beard,
His body noble, his countenance severe:
If any seek him, no need to say, "Lo, here!"
From off their steeds lit down the messengers,
Well did they greet him with shows of love sincere.

9

Before them all Blancandrin forward stood;
And hailed the King: "God give His grace to you,
The glorious God to whom worship is due.
Thus speaks the king, Marsilion, great in rule:
Much hath he studied the saving faith and true.
Now of his wealth he would send you in sooth
Lions and bears, leashed greyhounds not a few,
Sev'n hundred camels, a thousand falcons mewed,

L. 108 *fere* - companion.L. 114 *eglantier* - wild-rose bush.

And gold and silver borne on four hundred mules;
 A wagon-train of fifty carts to boot,
 And store enough of golden bezants good
 Wherewith to pay your soldiers as you should.
 Too long you've stayed in this land to our rue:
 To Aix in France return you at our suit.
 Thither my liege will surely follow you,
 [And will become your man in faith and truth,
 And at your hand hold all his realm in feu!"]
 With lifted hands to God the Emperor sues;
 Then bows his head and so begins to brood.

AOI

IO

The Emperor bode long time with downcast eyes;
 He was a man not hasty in reply,
 But wont to speak only when well advised.
 When he looked up, his glance was stern and high.
 He told the envoys: "Fair is your speech and fine;
 Yet King Marsile is foe to me and mine.
 In all these words and offers you recite
 I find no warrant wherein I may confide."
 "Sureties for this", the Saracen replies,
 "Ten or fifteen or twenty we'll provide.
 One of my sons I'll send, on pain to die;
 Others, yet nobler, you'll have, as I divine.
 When in your palace high feast you solemnize
 To great St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide,
 He'll follow you, on that you may rely,

L. 152 *St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide* - ("St M. in periculo maris"). The name was originally given to the monastery built on the great island rock called Mont St Michel, off the coast of Normandy. Later it came to be applied to the Archangel himself, "*St Michel del Peril*".

And in those baths God made you by His might
 He would turn Christian and there would be baptized."
 Quoth Charles: "He yet may save his soul alive."

AOI

II

Fair was the ev'ning and clearly the sun shone;
 The ten white mules Charles sends to stall anon;
 In the great orchard he bids men spread aloft
 For the ten envoys a tent where they may lodge,
 With sergeants twelve to wait on all their wants.
 They pass the night there till the bright day draws on.
 Early from bed the Emperor now is got;
 At mass and matins he makes his orison.
 Beneath a pine straightway the King is gone,
 And calls his barons to council thereupon;
 By French advice whate'er he does is done.

AOI

I2

The Emperor goes beneath a tall pine-tree,
 And to his council he calls his barony:
 There Duke Ogier, Archbishop Turpin meet,

L. 154 *baths* - the curative mineral springs for which Aix is still celebrated, and which were held to be of miraculous origin.

L. 161 *sergeants* - the word "sergeant", meaning primarily "servant", was applied generally to almost any man, under the rank of knight, who exercised any kind of office in a lord's household or on his estate. In military use, it denoted a tenant doing military service, especially one who was in attendance on a knight in the field. The "sergeant" marched and fought on horseback, but was more lightly armed than the "chevalier".

L. 170 *Ogier the Dane* - this semi-historical hero boasts a *Chanson de Geste* devoted to his exploits, and figures in many others.

Richard the Old and his nephew Henri,
 Count Acelin the brave of Gascony,
 Miles, and his cousin the Lord Tibbald of Rheims,
 Gerin likewise and Gerier are convened;
 And Count Roland, there with the rest came he,
 And Oliver, noble and good at need;
 All French of France, thousand and more, maybe;
 And Ganelon that wrought the treachery.
 So starts that council which came to such sore grief.

A O I

I 3

"Barons, my lords", began the Emperor Carlou,
 "From King Marsile come envoys, seeking parley.
 He makes me offers of treasure overpassing:
 Of lions and bears and hounds to the leash mastered,
 Sev'n hundred camels, and falcons mewed and hearty,
 Four hundred mules with Arab gold all chargèd,
 And fifty wagons well-laden in a cart-train.
 But now to France he urges my departure,
 And to my palace at Aix he'll follow after,
 There change his faith for one of more advantage,
 Become a Christian and of me hold his marches.
 But his true purpose - for that I cannot answer."
 The French all say: "We'd best be very guarded."

A O I

I 4

The Emperor Charles had finished all his speech.
 The Count Roland, who fiercely disagrees,
 Swift to oppose springs up upon his feet:

L. 171 *Richard the Old* - his historical prototype is Richard I of Normandy, who lived (943-996) later than Charlemagne's time, but has been attracted into the Carolingian cycle by the natural tendency of epic to accumulate famous names regardless of chronology.

He tells the King: "Nevermore trust Marsile!
 Seven years long in land of Spain we've been.
 I won for you both Noples and Commibles,
 I took Valterna, the land of Pine I seized,
 And Balagate, and Seville and Tudele.
 Then wrought Marsile a very treacherous deed:
 He sent his Paynims by number of fifteen,
 All of them bearing boughs of the olive tree,
 And with like words he sued to you for peace.
 Then did you ask the French lords for their rede;
 Foolish advice they gave to you indeed.
 You sent the Paynim two counts of your meinie:
 Basan was one, the other was Basile.
 He smote their heads off in hills beneath Haltile.
 This war you've started wage on, and make no cease;
 To Saragossa lead your host in the field,
 Spend all your life, if need be, in the siege,
 Revenge the men this villain made to bleed!"

A O I

I 5

The Emperor Charles sat still with his head bended;
 He stroked his beard and his moustaches gently;
 Nor good nor ill he answers to his nephew.
 The French are silent, Guènes alone excepted;
 But he leaps up, strides into Carlou's presence,
 And full of pride begins thus to address him.
 He tells the King: "Trust not a brawling fellow,
 Me nor another; seek only your own welfare.
 If King Marsile informs you by this message
 He'll set his hands in yours, and fealty pledge you,
 And hold all Spain from you, at your good pleasure,
 And to that faith we follow give acceptance,

L. 205 *rede* - counsel.

The man who tells you this plea should be rejected
 Cares nothing, Sire, to what death he condemns us.
 Counsel of pride must not grow swollen-headed;
 Let's hear wise men, turn deaf ears to the reckless."

AOI

16

Naimon at this stood forth before them all:
 No better vassal was ever seen in hall.
 He tells the King: "Well have you heard, my lord,
 The arguments Count Ganelon sets forth.
 There's weight in them, and you should give them thought.
 The King Marsile is vanquished in the war,
 You've taken from him his castles and his forts,
 With catapults you've broken down his walls,
 You've burned his cities and his armies outfought.
 Now that he comes on your mercy to call
 Foul sin it were to vex him any more.
 Since he'll find sureties his good faith to support,
 We should make haste to cut this great war short."
 The French all say: "The Duke speaks as he ought."

AOI

17

"Barons, my lords, whom shall we send anon
 To Saragossa, to King Marsilion?"
 "I, by your leave," saith Naimon, "will begone,
 Therefore on me bestow the glove and wand."
 "You are my wisest", the King makes answer prompt:
 "Now by the beard my cheek and chin upon,
 You shall not go so far this twelvemonth long.
 Hence! sit you down, for we summon you not!"

L. 247 *the glove and wand* - (see Introduction, p. 32).

18

"Barons, my lords, whom shall we send of you
 To Saragossa, the Sarsen king unto?"
 "Myself", quoth Roland, "may well this errand do."
 "That shall you not", Count Oliver let loose;
 "You're high of heart and stubborn of your mood,
 You'd land yourself, I warrant, in some feud.
 By the King's leave this errand I will do."
 The King replies: "Be silent there, you two!
 Nor you nor he shall on that road set foot.
 By this my beard that's silver to the view,
 He that names any of the Twelve Peers shall rue!"
 The French say nothing: they stand abashed and mute.

19

Then from their ranks arose Turpin of Rheims;
 He tells the King: "Leave your French lords at ease;
 Full sev'n long years in this land have you been,
 Much have they suffered of perils and fatigue;
 Pray you then, Sire, give wand and glove to me;
 The Saracen of Spain I'll seek and see,
 And in his looks his purpose will I read."
 The Emperor answers with anger in his mien:
 "On that white carpet sit down and hold your peace;
 Be still, I say, until I bid you speak."

AOI

20

The Emperor said: "My free and knightly band,
 Come choose me out some baron of my land
 To bring my message to King Marsilion's hand."

L. 253 *Sarsen* - Saracen.

Quoth Roland: "Guènes my step-sire is the man."
 The French all say: "Indeed, he is most apt;
 If he's passed over you will not find his match."
 Count Ganelon is furious out of hand;
 His great furred gown of marten he flings back
 And stands before them in his silk bliaut clad.
 Bright are his eyes, haughty his countenance,
 Handsome his body, and broad his bosom's span;
 The peers all gaze, his bearing is so grand.
 He says to Roland: "Fool! what has made thee mad?
 I am thy step-sire, and all these know I am,
 And me thou namest to seek Marsilion's camp!
 If God but grant I ever thence come back
 I'll wreak on thee such ruin and such wrack
 That thy life long my vengeance shall not slack."
 Roland replies: "This is all boast and brag!
 Threats cannot fright me, and all the world knows that
 To bear this message we must have a good man;
 I'll take your place if the King says I can."

AOI

21

Quoth Ganelon: "My place thou shalt not take;
 Thou'rt not my vassal, nor I thy suzerain.
 Charles for his service commands me to obey.
 I'll seek Marsile in Saragossa's gates;
 But rather there some deadly trick I'll play
 Than not find vent for my unbounded rage."
 When Roland heard him, then he laughed in his face.

AOI

22

When Ganelon sees Roland laugh outright
 He's fit to burst for anger and despite,
 And very nearly goes clean out of his mind.
 He tells the Count: "I love you not, not I;
 You've picked on me unfairly, out of spite.
 Just Emperor, here I stand before your eyes,
 Ready to do whatever you think right."

23

To Saragossa I see that I must shift me;
 There's no return for him that journeys thither.
 Bethink you well that my wife is your sister,
 A son she bare me, fairest of goodly children,
 "Baldwin" (quoth he) "and a champion he will be.
 To him I leave all my lands and my living;
 No more I'll see him; take care, Sir, of your kinsman."
 Quoth Charles: "Your heart is too tender within you;
 Go now you must, for even so I bid you."

AOI

24

Then said the King: "Stand forward, Ganelon,
 Here at my hand receive the glove and wand;
 You've heard the French - you are the man they want."
 "Messire," said Guènes, "Roland hath done this wrong!
 I'll never love him the whole of my life long,
 Nor Oliver his friend and fellow fond,
 Nor the Twelve Peers by whom he's doted on;
 Sire, in your presence I defy the whole lot."
 Then said the King: "Your passion is too hot;
 I bid you go and so you must begone."

"Well may I go, but safeguard have I not,
Basile had none, nor Basan none, God wot."

AOI

25

The King holds out to him his right-hand glove;
Fain would Count Guènes be an hundred miles off!
When he would take it, it fell into the dust.
"God! what is this?" cry all the French at once;
"For sure this message will bring us great ill-luck."
"My lords," quoth Guènes, "you'll know it soon enough."

26

"Sire, give me leave" quoth Guènes, "hence to hie;
Since go I must, it boots not to abide."
"Go", said the King, "by Jesu's leave and mine."
With his right hand he's absolved him and signed,
And to his care letter and wand consigned.

27

Guènes the Count to his lodging makes speed,
Of his array he setteth him to seek
The best he has to serve him for this need.

L. 340 *absolved him and signed* - i.e. pronounced the absolution over him, making the sign of the cross. Some commentators have seen here a relic of the very ancient popular conception of the priest-emperor, preserved in the legend of Prester John. But there is, I think, nothing in the line which necessarily ascribes *sacerdotal* status to Charlemagne, however sacred his person and function. What is probably intended is the *prayer* of absolution, frequently called simply "the Absolution" (as in the Book of Common Prayer) which can be pronounced by, for example, an abbot, or indeed any other lay person. It would be some such formula as "The Lord bless you and keep you, deliver you from all your sins, and bring you to everlasting life."

His golden spurs he buckles on his heels,
Girds to his side Murgleys his brand of steel,
And mounts him up on Tachëbrun his steed;
His stirrup's held by Guinëmer his eme.
Then might you see full many a brave knight weep,
Saying to him: "Woe worth your valour's meed!
In the King's court these many years you've been,
A noble vassal by all were you esteemed.
He that named you for this gear by his rede
Charlemayn's self shall not save him nor shield:
No right had Roland to have contrived this scheme;
For you're a man sprung of a noble breed."
Then they said, "Sir, take us with you, we plead."
Guènes replied: "God forbid it should be!
Best die alone nor slay good knights with me.
Sirs, you'll return to fair France presently:
On my behalf my wife I bid you greet,
And Pinabel that is my friend and peer.
Baldwin my son, whom you know well, I ween,
Him shall you help and accept for your liege."
Then he sets forth and on his way goes he.

AOI

28

Under tall olives the County Guènes rides;
The Paynim envoys he's caught up in good time,
And Blancandrin drops back with him behind.
Now each to other begins to speak with guile.
Blancandrin says: "Charles is a wondrous wight!
Pulia he's ta'en, Calabria likewise,
And unto England passed over the salt tide

L. 348 *eme* - uncle.